

MONSTROUS: BOOK SEVEN

LOR

LILY MAYNE

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Beta-reading and editing by [Kate Wood Proofreading](#)

Warning: This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and is not suitable for young readers. It also contains non-human genitalia, mentions of a past familial death, grief, depression, attempted murder, depictions of injury and violence, themes of inequality and prejudice, and brief mentions of homophobia.

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CHAPTER ONE

Lor

Around Ten Years Before the Monster Apocalypse
(Sometime in the late eighties)

“What is it?” I asked blankly, staring at the tiny speck of black suspended in the air, sparks occasionally flying off it and fizzing away to nothing.

Lyri shrugged carelessly beside me, tossing a dagger in his hand. “Maid noticed it. Said she walked into it and it shocked her.”

“Walked *into* it?” I gestured at the odd little speck. “It’s just a... piece of dust. You mean she walked through it?”

Through the piece of dust that was somehow staying still in mid-air. Sparking.

“No, she said she walked *into* it.” Lyri finally put his dagger away to cross his arms, gazing at the speck with a mildly interested expression. “She said she felt it... pulling at her skin. There’s a little hole in her cheek now.”

“What?” I glanced at him incredulously. “Like it cut her?”

“No, like it sucked a tiny piece out of her face.”

I turned to stare at my brother, who continued eyeing the speck like he wasn’t all that bothered by it, despite what he’d just said.

“*Sucked* a tiny piece out of her face?” I peered closer at his face, so like mine. Narrow and sharp, royal dark blue skin matte and flawless. His silver eyes looked clear, but I asked, “Are you still drunk, Lyri?”

He snorted, shoving my arm before walking closer to the speck. I resisted the urge to grab his sleeve and pull him back, eyeing that strange floating dot warily.

Before I could tell him not to go near it, he was raising a gloved hand and bringing a fingertip closer to the speck. It sizzled the moment the leather touched it, sparks flying and popping in a flurry. As he jerked his hand back with a chuckle, I saw a small hole in the leather.

“Lyri, don’t touch it, you dolt.” Grabbing his shirt, I tugged him back.

“It feels like...” His head cocked, long grey hair falling over his shoulder. “Like wind rushing through the smallest hole. Pressure. Like a vacuum, almost. I could feel it trying to pull me in.”

“Pull you in?” I dragged him back another step, eyeing the speck with alarm.

Lyri had always been the reckless one, so I supposed it was lucky I’d been born first to become Moric when our mother died.

My fiefdom wasn’t all that vast, but I didn’t really care about that. I didn’t lust for power and land like some other Morics—I could barely be bothered with the land and subjects I already had dominion over—but I was still the more responsible brother of the two of us.

I spent most of my time making sure Lyri didn’t accidentally get himself killed, or beaten by others he’d cheated in a game or bet. Or fall over the wall surrounding the hyll while drunk and plunge to his death in the sea below. His favourite party trick when we had guests was doing backflips on that damn wall.

I had been almost as reckless and free-spirited as him when we were children, though a touch more reserved. But I’d had to rein it in when I became Moric.

Being the Moric made life fairly dull.

And now there was a strange little speck sucking holes out of people in my hyll. I exhaled and glanced around the room. It had appeared in a guest chamber that was rarely used—I didn’t like guests—so at least it wouldn’t get in my way.

“I’ll close the room off and get some guards posted outside to keep everyone out,” I said woodenly.

For the first time in years, something had actually happened that was outside of my endless cycle of council meetings, listening to my councillors tell me I had to find a spouse and listening to simpering noble visitors try to convince me why their adult child would be *perfect* for me.

But it was just a dot. It wasn’t anything remotely exciting. I was already bored of looking at it, so I pulled Lyri closer to the door as he spluttered indignantly.

“You’re just going to close the room off?” He stared at me like I was mad. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

“It is a speck, Lyri.”

“A speck that can tear into your skin!” He shook his arm free. “Look at it! That’s not normal, Lor.”

“What exactly am I supposed to do about it?”

“I don’t know! Poke something in there?” He snickered, which made me roll my eyes.

“We can come back and look at it tomorrow, if you are really so interested.” I opened the door and stared at him pointedly until he huffed and slunk out of the room. “Do *not* sneak back in here and poke it with something. Especially not your bloody finger again.”

I followed him out, spotting our two personal guards, Gryf and Seis, lounging against the wall and talking quietly together. They straightened up at the sight of us, towering well over our heads, their forms hulking and muscular. The royal guards wore dark blue vests and trousers emblazoned with the Moric’s insignia on the breast, and they kept their long, dark manes—which extended down their backs—neatly groomed.

“Seis, can you get two guards to stay at this door until further notice?” I asked my personal guard. “And allow no one to enter this room. *No one.*”

He gave a swift nod. “Of course, Moric.”

“Thank you.”

They waited until Lyri and I had begun walking down the corridor to follow, staying silent.

“Fairly sure they’re fucking,” Lyri muttered to me, but not quietly enough. I heard one of the baregh behind us cough awkwardly.

I side-eyed my brother, ears twitching with embarrassment. “I thought you and Gryf were... doing that.”

Lyri had managed to... be *intimate* with every personal guard he’d had since he came into adulthood. Changing them often hadn’t helped in the slightest, so I’d given up several years ago. Gryf had been his personal guard for a long time now.

He waved a hand. “We do occasionally. He is very good.”

One of them coughed again. I sighed, falling silent as we wandered through the vast hyll toward the main hall.

“Fancy a drink?” Lyri asked cheerfully, winking at *another* guard we passed. The big baregh blushed, his grey cheeks going ruddy.

“I can’t,” I said, my voice already flat with boredom at the prospect of the rest of my day. “Meeting with the council.”

Lyri grunted. “Another one? What’s this one about?”

“I don’t know. Taxes, I think.”

“Sounds riveting.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “I’m going to do some sword practice.”

I eyed the twin swords crossed over his back. “Why? You’re already an expert.”

He shrugged. “Always room for improvement.”

“It’s not like the royals still lead their armies into battle, Lyri.”

As Verin, Lyri was technically my general, controlling Thinir’s small army. But after several royal families were wiped out when Morics across our vast island combined forces to drive the eyriads underground, leaving many fiefdoms without rulers, it had been decided that the Verin’s role would just be ceremonial. We now had a baregh general who Lyri worked closely with—not that anyone had tried to attack our small city in centuries.

“You really think if we ever get attacked, I *won’t* be out there showing everyone how good I am with my swords?” he drawled.

“No. You will not.”

I knew he was capable—an excellent fighter, a good leader. He was too wily and quick to ever get hurt or captured for leverage. But he was my brother. The only family I had. And he had been through much to become the man he was. I wasn’t going to let him cut his life short for showmanship, and I had no doubt whatsoever that Lyri would show off if he was ever actually on a battlefield.

He rolled his eyes and said nothing, knowing my refusal came from a place of worry, not lack of belief in his skills or prowess. Giving my cheek a pat, he turned to walk off to the training ring at the back of the hyll, his guard Gryf bowing shallowly in my direction before following.

Letting out a quiet exhale, I nodded at Seis and we started making our way to the council room, a chamber as dull and dim as the conversations that took place in it. I stepped into the circular space and saw my council already waiting in their seats. Ten wizened old vints, their ears so long they folded over on themselves so the pointed tips hung limply. Their once rich, deep skin tones—black and grey—were now faded and wrinkled.

They all shuffled to their feet at my arrival, wooden chairs scraping back and their heads dipping into bows. I gave them a slight nod, crossing the room to my imposing throne at the head of the table.

“Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon, Moric.” Raynir, the head of the council, sat once I had, the rest of the advisors waiting until we were both settled. “We would like to discuss with you the taxes imposed on the salyik population in Thinir,” he continued, his voice raspy with age. Long, thin fingers tipped with striated, curling brown claws trembled slightly as he opened his ever-present ledger, wrapped in ancient leather. “Their numbers are growing again. Many young being born—”

I couldn’t help it—I tuned out almost immediately, already bored. Nodding every now and then to try and appear as though I was listening, I leaned my elbow on the armrest of my throne and rested my cheek in my hand. My fingers drummed over my cheekbone until I forced them to stop.

As Councillor Raynir’s dull voice droned on, my mind drifted to Lyri, outside in the sun practising with his swords. He was always in a good mood, whether he was busy dallying every guard in the hyll or drinking himself stupid in the town or getting punched in the face by an angry gambler he had cheated out of their money.

We were similar. We had always been similar. Both full of too much energy as children, restless and fidgety when we were being forced to sit still and take our lessons with the royal tutor. We were twins, though I had been born minutes before him, which meant I had always been destined to become Moric when our mother died.

I didn’t feel bitter. There was no point. I’d always known this was my fate, while Lyri would get to live his life as he pleased. Never settling down if he didn’t want to. Enjoying the privileged life we both had. But even though he was carefree and reckless, he still took his duties seriously—more seriously than I wanted him to. Probably more seriously than I took mine.

I didn’t let myself envy him. That his life was exciting and full of pleasure, while mine was

unspeakably dull and weighed down by the duties of the Moric.

I pictured that tiny, strange speck in the guest chamber. Maybe it *would* bring something interesting to the hyll, something to break up the monotony of my life. But I doubted it.

It was just a speck.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day, the speck had grown.

Only the tiniest amount, but Lyri noticed the instant we stepped past the guards posted at the door and entered the guest chamber.

“Alright, we *have* to poke something in there now.” He started walking closer until I grabbed the back of his shirt and tugged him away.

But I was curious too. The speck was about the size of my little fingernail now, a black hole suspended in the air, its edges still sparking and blurring.

Giving Lyri a stern look to make sure he stayed where he was, I slowly walked around the strange dot to the other side. It almost... flattened when I was beside it, becoming nearly invisible except for a slight distortion in the air. Then it reappeared when I was standing opposite Lyri on its other side.

“Let’s just see what happens.” He walked to the chest of drawers and plucked a dried stem of dolna from the cluster in a vase, filling the room with the musty floral scent.

I sighed but didn’t stop him. I *was* curious to see what would happen—whether the stem would pass through the little hole and reappear out the side I was facing.

“Be careful,” I blurted when Lyri walked up to the speck.

He rolled his eyes. “I will, you old worrywart.”

I sniffed, lifting my chin as I smoothed a strand of deep grey hair back into my intricate braid, dotted with the jewels and beads that never came out. “I am *minutes* older than you. And I don’t have any warts.”

Lyri didn’t bother to answer, already bringing the end of the stem to the speck. It fizzed wildly before the stem shot out of Lyri’s hand, getting sucked into the tiny hole. All the dried buds on the head fell to the floor, getting stripped from the stem as it vanished.

It didn’t come out the other side.

Lyri laughed in disbelief, peering around the floating black speck. “Where did it go?”

“I don’t know.” I stared at the hole, frowning heavily.

“It just disappeared. It was like something grabbed on to it and pulled it through.”

“Or it... burned up the moment it touched it. Turned into nothing,” I said cautiously, because I could already see Lyri’s eyes sparking with intrigue.

He looked around the room. “Let’s try again.”

“I don’t think—”

But he was already grabbing another dolna stem and lifting it to the hole. I walked quickly around it, giving it a wide berth, and stared as the stem got sucked in the moment the end touched it.

“It’s like a void.” Lyri’s throaty voice was filled with fascination. “What do you think would happen if I put my little finger in ther—”

“We are *not* going to find out.” I gripped his shoulder and forced him back a step. “It might strip the skin from your bones. It might cut your finger clean off. We have no idea what it is or what it does, Lyri.”

“Well, we *have* to find out.” He turned to face me, a wide grin stretching his mouth and showing off his sharp teeth. “Come on, Lor, this is the most interesting thing that’s happened here in *years*. Well, except for the delightful night I had with Gryf and three other guards last wee—”

“How are we meant to find out without someone getting hurt?” I cut him off before he could elaborate further. “We can’t just keep shoving things in there to see what happens.”

He snickered, making me huff and release his shoulder after giving it a gentle push.

“We can just keep an eye on it for now,” he said, gaze already darting back to the hole. “It’s already grown bigger. Maybe it will keep growing. If it gets big enough, I could poke my head through to see what’s—”

“You are *not* poking your fool head into a black hole that tears the skin off people,” I gritted out.

“But it might not do that—there’s less pressure now it’s bigger,” he insisted. “The pull didn’t feel as strong this time. Like the more it grows, the less... intense the vacuum gets.”

“Still. It’s not safe.”

He snorted. “So?”

“It might rip your head clean off!” I gestured at the hole, which was still sparking but less frantically now that we weren’t messing around with it. “It might... crush your skull into nothingness, and I will have to stand here and watch my brother’s headless body collapse onto the floor.”

His eyes softened, and he gave my cheek a gentle pat before his sly gaze returned to the hole. “Or there *might* be something on the other side.”

“What could possibly be on the other side?”

He shrugged, gazing at the speck thoughtfully as he said, “Somewhere else.”

I stared at him. “What? There is nowhere else, Lyri.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” he insisted. “Remember the legends about the salyik chieftain’s strange mate? The unknown creature that appeared from nowhere? They had to have come from *somewhere*. Why not some... other world?”

I grunted. “They were probably just from a secretive tribe that hides from civilisation. It is preposterous to think—”

“No, they were *other*.” His eyes were lively with excitement. “They were so strange that everyone else shunned the salyik, remember? So they *had* to have been... some unknown creature.”

“The salyik were shunned because that is just what happens. Mass hysteria or—There is always a group on the bottom of the pack, Lyri. That is just life—”

“That is utter bollocks,” he interrupted, a touch of anger furrowing his brow. “And *you* do nothing to help them. They live in squalor because of the way you allow them to be treated.”

“What?” I drew back. “That’s not true. I don’t treat them any differently to—”

“Then why do you tax them more than everyone else in Thinir?” he asked, frowning at me now. “Why do you keep the conditions so poor in their district?”

I stiffened with offence. “I do no such thing—”

“Yes, Lor.” He shot me a look that made my gut clench, like he was disappointed in me. “Your council charges them more for everything. There are some items that they aren’t allowed to have in their district, for some reason. They’re not permitted to rent shop or market space in the main part of the city. They pay more tax to us than all the others, so they have no hope of ever pulling themselves out of poverty.”

“I—” My heart was beating harder, sweat beading on my brow. “I never allowed that—”

“You know as well as I do that you don’t listen in your council meetings.” He shook his head, looking away from me to face the speck again. “But don’t you ever even *look* at Raynir’s stupid ledger?”

“B-but—” I spluttered, heat making my scalp prickle. “Why would the council want to keep them in poverty?”

Lyri shrugged, still gazing at the speck and not me. “There are a lot of them. And they reproduce fairly quickly. Perhaps to stop a revolution? Keep their spirits broken by giving them no hope? They

have kept their tradition of being fine metalworkers and jewellery crafters alive. They could easily thrive in that market if people actually bought their goods.”

He shot me a quick look, one fine grey brow raised. “Doesn’t Tildr on the council have a stake in the royal jeweller’s business? It’s her daughter, isn’t it? And Raynir’s family has owned the city’s metalsmith for centuries.” He shrugged. “Or maybe it’s just simple prejudice. Despising them for what they are. No deeper reason.”

I stayed silent, humiliation making my skin hot. I had no idea what to say—how to stop my brother being disappointed or angry at me.

“I...” I licked my lips, my voice hoarse. “I will speak to them—the council. I will tell them it must stop.”

He gave a stiff shrug, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. “Good.”

I resisted the urge to fiddle with my cuffs, because Raynir had already told me that the nervous habit made me appear weak.

“I didn’t know,” I mumbled eventually. “If you knew, why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

He sighed, finally turning to face me and pat my hot cheek affectionately. “I know you don’t pay attention to those old vints, but I thought you at least had *some* idea about what happens in your fiefdom.”

I looked away quickly, embarrassment making me want to shrink back. He was right. I should have known. I should have paid more attention, not just let the council make all the decisions while I lounged around the hyll as nothing more than a figurehead.

“I’ll put a stop to it,” I said quietly, resisting the urge to clutch his sleeve like I always had when we were children. I was the older one, but he had always been the first to run into trouble or some new adventure. I’d clung on to keep up.

But as I looked at him, I found myself wondering if perhaps he *would* have made the better Moric, despite his wild streak. At least he actually cared. At least he still had the fire to enact change, to stand up to the council. It felt like that fire had been doused in me the moment the royal Moric beads and jewels had been wound into my hair.

“I’m sorry, Lyri,” I croaked, finally giving in to the urge to reach out and clutch his sleeve. I couldn’t bear the thought of him being disappointed in me.

He snorted, pulling me into a hard hug and slapping me on the back. “Emotional fool. You have no need to apologise to me, Lor. I know you’re a good person. It just takes time to get the hang of the title. You’ve only been Moric for twenty years.”

I cringed. It wasn’t long, but it *sounded* it. Evidently, a lot could change in twenty years. A Moric’s entire rule could be wiped over, shunted aside to make room for new laws and different ways of life. Although, the salyik had lived in the poorest part of Thinir for as long as I could remember. It wasn’t like they had been shoved into poverty solely under my rule. Perhaps that meant I had time to revoke the unfair changes imposed on them by the council. Perhaps I could do some good.

“Now what about this speck?” Lyri asked cheerfully, releasing me to face it again.

I sighed, reaching up to rub my brow. Now that I actually wanted to *be* Moric—to play the part properly—I didn’t have time to worry about a miniscule void in the middle of one of my guestrooms.

“We’ll keep an eye on it,” I said absently. “But we will not touch it. We will not be poking any body parts into it.”

“Are you going to tell the council?” Lyri asked cautiously, glancing at me.

I pursed my lips, staring at the speck. I wondered what they would do. If they’d even think it was worth worrying about.

But I couldn't just keep passing all my problems on to them, letting them deal with them in the way they saw fit—which was evidently not the right way.

“No.” I drew myself up taller. “If anything comes of it, we will deal with it. It's in our hyll. It's not like it's anything that affects the fiefdom. It's none of their business.”

Lyri gave me an impressed look, brow quirking, then he clapped his gloved hands together and rubbed them gleefully.

“Jolly good.” He nudged me with his elbow. “Twin pact? It can be our secret?”

My mouth twitched. I stepped closer, throwing my arm around his shoulders to gently knock my temple against his. “Yes. Alright.”

“Excellent. I *will* be poking more things in there though.”

“Lyri—”

“No body parts, I promise.” He stared at the speck. “I hope it keeps growing. I want to see what's on the other side.”

I rolled my eyes, turning us to the door. “There's nothing on the other side. It's just a... void. A strange anomaly. It will probably go away on its own.”

CHAPTER THREE

It didn't go away.

Over the next several months, the speck grew. And grew. Every time Lyri and I stepped into the guestroom, it was bigger, until it almost touched the floor.

After widening to roughly the span of my shoulders, it started lengthening. Almost like someone was slowly ripping a sheet of parchment down the middle.

And it was no longer a black void. Now, colours wavered in the air—hazy greens and browns with flashes of blue, distorted, blurry shapes that hurt my eyes if I tried to focus on them. A low, rumbling hum came from it, a deep sound that felt like pressure on my eardrums.

Lyri and I went to look at it every day. I didn't let him get close—I absolutely did *not* let him poke his head through, even though he was now convinced that there was something, somewhere, on the other side.

“Look at it,” he exclaimed one afternoon when we were standing there yet again, just staring at it. “That’s a *place*, not just a void.”

I huffed, crossing my arms. “That doesn’t look like any place I have ever seen. The colours are wrong.”

“Because it’s *somewhere else*.” Lyri’s fingers twitched with the urge to touch it, to get closer. I grabbed the back of his shirt before he could.

“Why are you obsessed with the thought of there being somewhere else?” I jerked my chin at the window, where we could just see the winding streets of the city of Thinir descending sharply from the hyll. The sea glimmered in the distance under the pink sky, and even from up here, the sounds of the docks reached us. Sea-hunting folk shouting to one another, merchants unloading their wares, the faint creak of a ship rocking in port.

“Is here not enough for you, Lyri?” I tried not to let bitterness colour my tone. My brother was free to go wandering, if he wanted—to leave Thinir, to leave the fiefdom, to travel anywhere. I wasn’t.

He huffed in irritation, shoving my arm. “I’m not saying that here isn’t *enough*. But how are you not intrigued by this? This is not *normal*, Lor. There is a... a great unknown rip in the air in your hyll. A... portal or something.”

I scoffed. “It is not a portal.”

“Yes, it *is*!” He insisted, flinging an arm toward it. “Look at it! There is something there.”

“Even if that is true, we cannot do anything,” I snapped, growing tired of this argument now that we had had it many, many times. “You are *not* sticking your head through. It is dangerous, Lyri.”

He grunted. “Might not be.”

“I am not willing to find out,” I said through gritted teeth, clamping a hand on his shoulder and steering him toward the door. “I have a meeting to attend. Do you promise me you won’t come in here and stick something in the hole?”

He snorted, but refrained from whatever dirty quip he’d been about to make when he glanced at me and saw how hard I was frowning at him. Sighing, he reached over and patted my cheek.

“I promise, you old bore.”

My face grew hot. “I am not a bore.”

“Mm.” Lyri quirked a brow at me before opening the door and slipping out.

Our guards obviously knew there was something odd going on in this room, but they never asked and we didn’t tell them. Baregh were terrible gossips, and some in my employ weren’t particularly

subtle. If word spread among the guards, it would only be a matter of time before the council caught wind of the strange void. I had no idea what they would do.

I shut the door behind me, refusing to glance back, and hurried to catch up with Lyri.

"I am *not* a bore!" I hissed, hoping Seis and Gryf hadn't heard. "I just... I have to think of everyone's best interests. It wouldn't be in Thinir's best interests if our Verin got his head ripped off by a strange void in the guestroom!"

"Alright, I'm sorry. You're not a bore." I saw Lyri's silver eyes roll in my periphery as we walked down the corridor. "Although I'm struggling to remember the last time you did anything remotely fun. Why don't we go into the town tonight? Have a few drinks?"

I balked, hand reflexively rising to smooth back my hair, fingers bumping over the stones threaded through it. "I cannot go drinking in the town."

"You could if you wanted."

"No, I couldn't," I hissed, glancing back at the two silent baregh behind us. "The people can't see their Moric drunk, for Mabs' sake!"

"Alright," Lyri said, undeterred. "How about some drinks here then? A bit of gambling with some of the off-duty guards? They're a fun lot. And you know they won't breathe a word of seeing their Moric a bit tipsy."

He nudged me with a little grin, but the smile I returned was brittle. "I don't think so, Lyri."

He sighed. "Alright then. Just me and you? We'll play some cards. Get the cook to make us some ude the way Mama always used to."

I felt my mouth soften with a wistful smile. "With stewed wanuk meat mixed in?"

"And roos leaves." Lyri threw his arm around my shoulders. "How about it then?"

Yearning for a simple evening in the company of my brother twisted at my insides, but just then a guard strode past us as we made our way into the front hall. After bowing at me, he shot Lyri a sly grin that clearly held a *secret meaning*.

"Are you sure you want to spend your evening with your *bore* of a brother?" I couldn't help but ask, my voice gruff. "You must have better things to do."

Or guards.

"Oh, shut up." Lyri released me to shove my side. "So I'll come to your quarters at dinner?"

I nodded, trying not to grin too wide with pleasure. "Alright. Yes."

"Jolly good." He slapped my side again and jerked his chin at his guard. "Come on, Gryf, let's go prowl around town for a while."

"Why?" I asked immediately, fidgeting in place and trying not to feel envious as I watched the pair of them head for the wide front doors.

Lyri shrugged, shooting me a grin over his shoulder. "Why not? See how the citizens are faring. Maybe get a drink or two."

Gryf stiffened, eyes darting to me before he muttered something to Lyri.

"Gryf won't drink, obviously," my brother said too quickly, pursing his lips to fend off a smile. I rolled my eyes but played along.

"Of course he won't," I deadpanned. "Alright then. Well... see you later."

"Have fun at your meeting!" Lyri called with sardonic cheer as the posted guards heaved open the front doors and he and Gryf disappeared outside.

Once the doors were shut again, blocking out the bright sunlight and the faint sounds of the city below, I sighed and turned to Seis. "Ready, Seis?"

"Yes, Moric." He inclined his head, but a tiny, sympathetic smile tilted his tusked mouth.

“Perhaps, if it doesn’t take too long, we can go for a walk around the grounds after your meeting. Get some fresh air.”

“The council always takes too long,” I muttered, wishing for a weak moment that he would fall into step beside me rather than remain a respectful pace or two behind. Lyri was the only person in the world who actually walked by my side—even the council members hovered a step back if they continued trying to talk my ear off as I left another endless meeting.

I had been trying to pay more attention. I’d asked to see Raynir’s ledger, though he was still coming up with excuses not to hand it over yet. I’d questioned why the salyik were being taxed more, though I’d felt woefully inadequate and painfully naïve even bringing it up when I hadn’t seen that damn ledger and knew nothing about it. It made me feel like it was obvious how little I’d listened in the past—how little interest I’d taken in the running of my fiefdom.

The condescending looks on those old vints’ faces didn’t help, every time I actually tried to interject in our tedious council meetings. The last time I had asked for a list of the tax rates imposed on citizens, Raynir had inclined his head and told me, “Do not trouble yourself with the minutiae, Moric. That is what we are here for.”

I didn’t trust them much anymore, but I had no idea how I was supposed to go about it. The Moric had been advised by the council for centuries. Millennia. That was the way it had always been done. The council ran everything past their ruler, but *they* were the ones who went out and did the work. They were the ones with the true knowledge. I couldn’t get *rid* of them. I had absolutely no idea how to run a fiefdom alone, and it wouldn’t be possible anyway.

The best I could do for the time being was to actually listen, and slowly try to learn—to try and work out why they were ensuring the salyik were treated so badly, and to find out if they were doing the same to any of my other subjects. Then I had to try and fix it. Somehow. To unpick eons of legislation and law and systemic prejudice.

I was supposed to be the most powerful being in this entire fiefdom, but I was quickly growing to realise just how powerless the Moric truly was. Nothing more than a figurehead. Never actually making decisions, just waving them through and allowing the council to do whatever they wanted. Though I didn’t know if I had fostered that culture since taking the throne from my mother, or if it had always been that way.

Not for the first time since it had appeared, the strange void in my guestroom seemed like the least of my issues.

CHAPTER FOUR

Despite my newfound attentiveness, the meeting turned out to be nothing but a longwinded run-through of the Valor of the Morics, even though it was still months away—and even though the proceedings never, ever changed. They had stayed the same for centuries.

The Valor of the Morics was a day to remember when Morics across the land had united to take down the eyriads, a race of conquering warlords who had run rampant, pillaging, destroying cities, and murdering Morics to take their thrones.

It was supposed to symbolise the day that peace returned to our fiefdom—and all others around it—but mostly, the people just saw it as a day to not work. As Moric, it was my duty to address my subjects from the speaking balcony that overlooked the gardens at the front of the hyll. Then I was to witness a re-enactment of the final battle between the eyriads and the lost race of the isdernucs, who had joined forces with the Morics' armies when they had failed to drive back the warlords alone.

Now, the isdernucs were gone, though it hadn't been that final battle that had wiped them out. It had been years later, their numbers growing smaller and smaller in the forest they inhabited in the neighbouring fiefdom, until the last remaining tribe site of the isdernucs had been found rampaged and ripped apart, nothing more than rotting corpses left behind.

There were still rumours to this day that one had survived whatever fate befell them that day. Travelling folk insisted on seeing a lone isdernuc wandering the lands, sometimes in the company of one of the telyths—the ghoulish creatures from a forgotten age.

Despite the majesty of both the isdernuc and eyriad forms, the tawdry costumes worn by the performers cheapened the entire thing, in my opinion. And the re-enactment of that final battle—no doubt bloody and frightful when it had truly happened—did not grow any more interesting to watch year after year.

The whole ordeal was painfully dull.

Raynir spent most of the meeting going through the events of the day in his droning voice. Just like he had done the year before. And the year before that. Honestly, sometimes I swore the council called these meetings in an attempt to bore me to death and nothing more.

By the time it finally drew to a close, I was restless and barely stopping myself from fidgeting in my chair. I nodded at the councillors and stood, striding quickly to the door.

“Moric.”

I was just able to stop my shoulders from hunching up when Raynir's grating voice came behind me. For such an old vint, he could move quickly when he wanted to.

I grunted noncommittally in response, eager to get to the privacy of my rooms and have a bath before Lyri turned up for the evening.

Raynir was undeterred, following me out of the chamber. “Councillor Tildr and I would be delighted if we could join you for dinner. We have a... somewhat delicate matter to discuss.”

I frowned, not slowing my steps as I strode into the front hall. “I'm having dinner with my brother tonight. Can it wait?”

“Of course,” he said smoothly. “In fact, it may not be a matter worth troubling you over. The council can deal with it as we see fit—”

“No.” I forced myself to interject, finally stopping to face him with a frown. “Whatever it is, I want to know about it before any decisions are made. Another time? Or is it urgent?”

“Not urgent,” Raynir said after a pause, his lined face creasing into a simpering smile. “It can

certainly wait, Moric, though not for too long. Whispers have come from the salyik district—”

The salyik *again*? I was all the more convinced that the council had a personal vendetta against the salyik population in Thinir, or at least some insidious reason to tread them into the mud.

“No decisions regarding the salyik will be made without my full involvement.” I frowned at Raynir, trying to appear imposing and in control. “Is that clear?”

He blinked, only just managing to hide his surprise as he inclined his head. “But of course, Moric. No decisions are made without your approval.”

That just made me nervous about how many “decisions” I had approved while barely listening. Resisting the urge to squirm at the thought, I gave him a cool nod and turned away.

“Safe journey home, councillor.”

I could feel him watching me as I retreated, Seis quietly following a few paces back. When we entered my private quarters, he stepped closer.

“Are you alright, Moric?”

I drew to an abrupt stop. Turning to face him, I took a breath. “Do you pay attention to what is said in those meetings, Seis?”

His eyes averted uncomfortably. “Guards are taught to close our ears to private matters, Moric.”

“I know.” I waved an impatient hand. “But *do* you? Or do you listen to what those councillors are saying?”

He shifted on his big feet. “Well, I... The decisions made in that chamber *do* pertain to me. I’m a citizen here as much as anyone else.”

“You’re not in trouble, Seis,” I said, giving him a small smile. I felt my face darkening with heat as I admitted, “I’m afraid I have not listened much, and now I am... anxious about what decisions have been made under my rule.”

Seis watched me, his face calm and non-judgemental. “The councillors do make the information extremely dull.”

“Yes, but I still...” I looked away. “I should have listened.”

Seis was quiet for a few moments before he took a small step closer. “You came onto the throne very young, Lor. And the councillors gave you no time to adjust—to grieve. You were just thrown into making decisions and expected to know how a fiefdom should be run. It takes time to learn those things.”

When I said nothing, he hesitantly added, “If I may say so, it does seem like some of the choices the council make hold no true... justification. Like they have their own agenda.”

“Yes,” I murmured. “Exactly. But what?”

“Greed,” he said flatly. “It is always greed and clinging to power. They were the same with your mother, but...” His cheeks darkened with a ruddy flush. “Apologies, Lor, but your mother was perhaps... a touch better at keeping them in line.”

My own face flared with heat, but I felt no anger. He was right, and Seis was one of only two people who were ever actually frank with me—Lyri being the other.

“I will rectify my mistakes.” I lifted my chin and gave him a tight smile. “I’m determined.”

He gave me his crooked smile back, one tusk peeking up. “I’m glad to hear it, Moric.”

“Lor.” I waved a hand as I turned to continue walking toward my bedchamber. “You know it’s just Lor when we are in private, Seis.”

He chuckled, but said nothing until we reached the antechamber that led to my bedroom. “You’re in for the evening?”

“Yes.” I felt my shoulders slump with relief as I shrugged off the embroidered jacket over my

tunic. “You’re relieved for the night. Go and relax.”

“Thank you, Moric. Have a good evening.”

“Wait.” I turned and saw him pause in the doorway. Trying not to fidget with embarrassment, I asked, “What do you... do? With your evenings? How do you... enjoy your time?”

Seis looked a little startled by the question. “Well, I... You know that baregh are quite social, so those of us off duty tend to congregate in the guards’ common room. To drink and play cards. Nothing too outrageous.” He coughed awkwardly. “Most of the time.”

“Cards?” I took a step forward. “What card games do you play?”

“Oh, all kinds. Mostly to gamble.” He chuckled. “Or we go into the town, though not too many of us at once or the tavern owners complain about us taking up too much space.”

“What do you do in town?” I asked eagerly. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d been out into the city in a non-official capacity. It must have been when Lyri and I were still teens—when our mother had still been alive and Moric.

“Drinking,” Seis admitted with a rueful smile. “Or to see a show.”

“What kind of show?”

His cheeks turned ruddy again. “Just... different kinds.”

I wondered if they went to see some of the bawdy shows. I’d heard of them, but never seen one for myself. Lyri and I had been too young, and then I had become Moric before I even reached adulthood. The Moric couldn’t be seen at a bawdy show.

I nodded, giving him a faint smile. “Does Lyri join you often? In the common room or out in town?”

“Yes, quite often,” he said slowly.

Envy curled through my gut and tightened my chest. I couldn’t imagine being able to spend my days and evenings just doing what I wanted, not worrying about how it would come across, not having to think about all the things a Moric couldn’t be seen partaking in for the sake of *dignity*.

I spent most evenings alone in my private quarters. Reading or pampering myself or picking at food as I gazed out the windows at the city beneath the hyll.

“I don’t mean to keep you,” I said when I realised Seis was still hovering uncertainly by the door. Flustered, I shooed him away with my hands. “Go. Enjoy your evening.”

He nodded and turned for the door again, but paused. “You know you are always welcome to join us, Lor,” he said carefully.

I snorted. “You don’t want me there. A Moric’s guards can’t relax when their Moric is present.”

“Well, perhaps not *every* night, but... now and then, we would be happy to have your company.”

I was sorely tempted—embarrassingly so. The longer I had been Moric, the lonelier and more isolated I felt. When we were younger, I had thought I would never need anyone but Lyri as a friend. We had played with other children—those of visiting dignitaries or noble vints in Thinir—but Lyri and I had been so close, so alike, that he was the only one I’d cared about.

And now he really was the only friend I had. Seis and I were friendly, but he was my guard first and foremost. I was his Moric. I knew he wouldn’t *truly* be comfortable having me with him on his evenings off—his evenings off from spending all day with me.

“No, no, your evenings are your time away from me.” I gave him a dry smile. “Now go. Get some dinner and a drink. You had to endure that awful meeting just as I did.”

He smiled and finally left, closing the door behind him. I stayed still at first, listening to his heavy footfalls slowly grow fainter, before sighing and sitting down on the narrow bench to tug off my boots. I tucked them away before dragging my feet into my bedchamber.

The room was dark and sombre, as was befitting a Moric, but I found it comforting. Maybe that was because it had been my mother's room before, though her bed had been taken down to the undercroft with the rest of her personal belongings not long after she died. It would have been too uncomfortable and painful for me to sleep every night alone in the bed that had been my mother's—the bed Lyri and I had curled up in when we were tiny and wanted her comfort.

Staff had already been by to light the fire and the many candles dotted around the room. The drapes on the bed had been drawn back, the sheets fresh and neat. I sat down heavily on the edge of it, making the beads draped over the canopy tinkle together. Strings of precious gems and beads adorned the entire room, hanging from the ceiling and over the thin curtains so the sun shone through them each morning, casting shards of colour across the dark floorboards.

Aside from the bed, all the furniture in here was ancient. Relics from past Morics, a mishmash of different styles from different ages that didn't quite fit together, but all were clearly vint-made—sharp corners interspersed with overly ornate, hand-carved swirls and patterns.

Curling my toes into the thick rug beneath my feet, I allowed myself a few moments to sit in silence, to try and unwind after the crushing boredom of yet another day. It didn't help much. It never did. The room was too quiet save for the crackling of the fire, just setting me even more on edge, so I got up and went into the waterchamber to start running a bath.

After stripping out of my clothes, I carefully pinned my hair up onto the top of my head so it wouldn't get wet. My face looked like a mask as I gazed at myself in the mirror. Blank and wooden. Expressionless. Almost dead. It had been drilled into me the moment I became Moric. *Show nothing*, Raynir had said repeatedly. *You are above wild emotions*.

It made the habit hard to break even when I was alone or with Lyri, though my brother always succeeded in drawing smiles and laughs out of me. The prospect of the evening ahead cheered me up, and I washed quickly in the bath before redressing in a fresh tunic and trousers, then carefully sorted out my hair so it was back in its ornate style, the top half's countless beaded braids wound together in the expected fashion that had taken me months to master.

My stomach was rumbling with hunger by the time Lyri's familiar knock came at the door. I smoothed back my hair as I called out for him to come in, wandering into the bedroom just as the door opened.

He chuckled. "Still fussing over your hair? It's just me."

I glared at him, my hand jerking with the repressed urge to reach up and fiddle with the braids again. "I wasn't *fussing*. It just has to look a certain way."

Lyri rolled his eyes. "Are you expecting any other visitors this evening?"

I gasped in outrage at the suggestion that I would be entertaining visitors in my *bedroom*. "Of course I'm not!"

"So what does it matter what your hair looks like?" Lyri waved a hand and flopped down onto the bed. "Not that it *ever* matters to anyone but those stupid old vints on the council."

"It's just... the way it's done."

"I say you shave all your hair off." He shot me a mischievous grin.

I let out an incredulous laugh. "Shave it *off*? You're mad, Lyri."

"That would show them that it means fuck all. It's just pomp for the sake of it. And then you wouldn't have to have all those uncomfortable beads permanently stuck on your head."

"If you're such a rebel, why don't *you* shave all your hair off?" I grumbled, perching on the edge of the bed as Lyri heaved himself up onto an elbow.

"Because I like my hair." He shrugged, but then his eyes gleamed as he added, "I like getting it

pulled.”

I made a sound of disgust in the back of my throat, reaching over to shove his shoulder. “You’re a beast.”

Lyri chuckled. “That’s what the guards tell me.”

Ears heating with embarrassment, I hurried to change the subject. “Ready to eat?”

That got Lyri jumping up off the bed. “Yes, I’m famished. I got Gryf to ask the cook to make us some ude when we got back from town.”

“Oh, good. I forgot to ask,” I admitted, following him to the door. “I was stuck in another pointless meeting all day.”

“They’re all pointless meetings,” Lyri muttered as we made our way across the hall to my private dining room.

I didn’t disagree, but I stayed silent as the two servers paused in the middle of placing our dinner on the table to bow. Lyri gave one of them a friendly slap on the back as he made his way to the other end of the table, pulling out his chair and sitting before the server could do it for him. I went to do the same, but one of the servers practically tripped in their haste to get there first.

I gave them a nod in thanks, feeling uncomfortable like I always did, and politely folded my hands on my lap as they finished placing our dinner on the table. Two huge bowls of steaming ude were set in front of us, more dishes placed in the centre. A shallow bowl of pickled jakma, a glass dish of jellied chilt meat, a loaf of traditional vint bread and several carafes of wine.

Lyri cheerfully thanked them as they bowed and exited the room, already reaching for the wine. I held my glass out when he gestured for it.

“How was town today?” I asked as I watched the deep green liquid slosh against the sides of the pale blue crystal.

Lyri shrugged, sitting back and pouring his own glass. “Alright. Went for a stroll along the docks.”

A little yearning sound rose from the back of my throat before I could stop it. “I haven’t been to the docks in *ages*.”

“You were there last year, remember? To commemorate the new merchant ship that had been built.”

My mouth pinched, so I looked down and stirred my spoon through my ude as I muttered, “I wasn’t actually allowed near the water, though. I had to stay on that stupid little platform they built especially for me.”

Lyri chuckled, shoving in a mouthful of ude and speaking around it. “Yes, you did look wildly uncomfortable up there in all your finery.”

“Shut up.” I ate a spoonful myself, comfort blanketing me from the familiar tastes. It wasn’t *quite* like Mama’s—cook had stewed the wanuk meat in slightly different spices—but it reminded me of being little. She had made it specially when one of us was feeling poorly, shooing cook out of the kitchen to do it herself.

“That old vint Haknir still works on the docks,” Lyri said after a few moments of quiet eating. “Do you remember him? He always used to fry us up some posk when we played down there.”

My mouth tipped into a fond smile as I nodded. Lyri and I used to tear up and down the docks as children, getting underfoot and trying to sneak onto the boats. The merchants and sea-hunting folk weren’t afraid to shout at us for being terrors even though we were the Moric’s children, and Haknir had always managed to get us to sit still for just a few minutes by giving us fried posk fresh from the sea, stuffed into a split-open sweet bun.

“Yes, I remember.” I grinned at Lyri. “He must be ancient by now. He seemed it when we were

young.”

“Everyone seems ancient when you’re young.”

I *mmm*’ed in agreement, wondering if I seemed old to the children in Thinir. Lyri and I were still very young in terms of vint lifespans, but I *felt* old. Weighed down. I probably looked it too, always adorned in the stuffy, overly ornate clothing befitting a Moric. Not that anyone in the city ever saw me much, given that I was sequestered away in the hyll most of the time.

Remembering Seis describing how he spent his free time, I cleared my throat and asked, “Do you often join the guards in town in the evenings?”

“Yes.” Lyri cocked his head as he reached for the pickled jakma, shoving three straight in his mouth and crunching down. “You know I do. Why?”

I shrugged, the tips of my ears growing uncomfortably hot as I looked down at my bowl. “Do you often... Do you go to shows a lot?”

When Lyri chuckled, I felt myself grow even hotter. I wasn’t sure why I was fixating on those shows, except I couldn’t even picture what might take place in them. Did people actually... *fornicate* on stage? Or was it something else?

We’d accompanied Mama to the theatre before—formal productions of long, boring plays with lots of singing. We’d both always started fidgeting within minutes, and Mama had had to shush us constantly throughout, even though she’d been suppressing laughter at how unruly we were. At least we’d been in the private box above the rest of the audience, so we hadn’t disturbed anyone else.

Somehow, though, Lyri knew I wasn’t referring to those kinds of shows. Probably because he knew I was fully aware he’d never subject himself to them now he didn’t have to.

“Curious about the bawdy shows?” he asked lightly, chuckling again when I shot him a fierce glare.

“No. Of course not.” I reached for my wine and gulped it down.

“Well, I would offer to go with you, but I don’t think that would be much fun for either of us.” He paused as my face flamed darker, surely a deep black by now. “But you could cover up and go with Seis or Gryf. They’d be happy to take you. Most theatres have private boxes, so you wouldn’t be spotted. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

I almost choked on a breath at the thought of asking one of the guards to accompany me to a bawdy show.

“Might do you some good.” Lyri reached for his glass, silver eyes fixed on me over the rim as he took a sip. “Or at least, it might show you if it’s something you’d be interested in.”

I spluttered. “*Interested* in? I am not going to become a patron of a theatre that specialises in bawdy shows, Lyri.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

If any more blood rushed to my head, I was going to faint. I had never... been with someone in that way. Intimately. By the time I became an adult, I was already Moric. And there were things that a Moric just didn’t do, which included fornicating with whoever they wanted. There were rules. And there were *always* people with their own agendas, parading their grown children in front of me to try and gain a firmer foot in the hyll door.

I didn’t have the luxury of pursuing who I wanted like Lyri did. I didn’t have the freedom to have... casual intercourse with no repercussions. I was sure there were Morics in the past who had secret consorts, but that didn’t overly interest me.

Lyri had never tried to pressure me into a union with someone like the council did. He hardly ever mentioned my lack of... romantic pursuits, except to ask me in the past if I had any questions, and to

tell me that there was nothing wrong with not wanting sex or romance at all.

Except I did. I wanted both of those things. I didn't want to be alone forever.

"Yes, well." I cleared my throat, scraping up the last of my ude. "I wasn't—I'm not interested in going myself. I was just... wondering."

Lyri watched me for a few moments before shrugging and setting down his glass. "I can tell you what they're like, if you want."

I didn't think I wanted to hear my brother describing the activities that took place in those shows, so I quickly said, "No, no, that's alright. I'm... Are you finished?"

"Yes." Lyri pushed his empty bowl away and drained the last of his wine. "That was good."

"It was," I agreed, carefully folding my napkin into a neat square before placing it beside my bowl. "I'll send cook a note to say thanks."

"So, cards?" Lyri smiled at me, crumpling his napkin on the table and standing. "Shall we go into the sitting room?"

I followed him up, toying with the hem of my sleeve. "You don't really have to spend the whole evening here, Lyri. I'm sure you have more interesting things to do."

"What?" He slapped me on the back when he reached me. "Don't be silly. I want to spend the evening with you. You're not up for some cards?"

"No, I want to," I said quickly as I followed him out of the dining room. "I just don't want you to be bored."

"I won't be bored, dolt." He stopped and turned to face me, eyes gleaming. "But why don't we go look at the void first?"

"What? Why?" I stared at him, then rolled my eyes. "You are obsessed with that bloody void."

"Yes, because it is a mysterious *void*." He gripped my shoulder and spun me toward the door that led out of my private quarters. "Come on, just a quick peek and then I'll thrash you at cards."

I grumbled under my breath, but let him lead me out past the stationed guards outside the doors, and down the wide hallway. When we emerged into the front hall, Seis and Gryf were making their way out of the barracks, laughing together.

They stopped at the sight of us, both dipping into brief bows.

"Moric." Seis inclined his head politely when Lyri steered me over to them. "Verin. Are you heading out for the evening?"

"Just to the guest quarters," Lyri said cheerfully.

Seis and Gryf exchanged a look. They had accompanied us there many, many times, but had never gone into the room. We had never told them directly about the void, but they knew there was something odd going on—of course they did. Why else would Lyri and I be constantly visiting an empty guestroom in a largely unused part of the hyll?

Like good guards, however, they had never asked. They simply accompanied us whenever we went, just as Seis offered to do now.

"We will join you, Moric."

I flushed. "No, Seis, you don't have to—"

"I'm your guard." He gave me a tiny smile. "It's my duty."

Well, now I just felt bad for spoiling their evening. I opened my mouth to protest, but Lyri was already steering me toward the wing that housed the guest quarters.

"Jolly good," he said cheerfully. "We won't be long, and then you can get back to your evening. Off out?"

"Yes." Gryf's deep voice came from behind us as we made our way down quiet corridors to the

guest quarters. “Just for a quiet one, though.”

No bawdy shows? I wanted to ask, but didn’t dare.

There were two guards already stationed in the hallway, and I heard Seis greet them before saying they could take off now that he and Gryf were there. I already felt guilty about my order to have guards posted here at all times—it wasn’t like anyone ever came to this area.

Seis and Gryf dutifully took up posts a short distance from the guestroom doorway when we reached it. Neither of them said a word as Lyri opened the door a crack and we slipped through, but as I glanced back, I saw them exchange a wary look. I wondered if they thought we were doing something dangerous in here.

When I closed the door behind me and turned, the void looked as it always did. It didn’t seem to have grown any more, but it was harder to tell now.

I sighed, raising a brow at Lyri. “Satisfied? Still here. Still just a void. Nothing at all interesting to look at.”

Before he could answer, the void began sparking wildly. The air within it shimmered, like the surface of a lake when it had been disturbed. The low, rumbling hum that always came from it grew louder, throbbing in my eardrums.

And then a creature tumbled out of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lyri and I stared in shocked silence at the groaning lump on the floor and its tangle of long, unnaturally pinkish limbs dusted with golden hair—a wild mop of the stuff on its head that grew longer at the back, like a shorter version of the bareghs’ manes, which trailed all the way down their spines.

It was wearing some kind of strange armour—small and brightly coloured, barely covering anything. I tensed, eyeing the luminous pink scrap on its hips, the loose white chest plate that kept its midriff bared. Was this... a fearsome warrior? Was its armour designed to show how little protection it needed from blades and other weapons? To make it stand out on a battlefield?

“What the fuck is *that*?” Lyri spluttered, causing the creature’s head to snap up.

“*Waddafuk*.” The sound burst from it as it scrambled back, drawing my gaze down to its strangely pink mouth.

Its face looked... somewhat similar to ours, but odd enough to make me recoil. Broader and softer, with none of the sharp lines that made vints so beautiful to look at. And its ears were *tiny*. Rounded at the top. I eyed them in alarm. Had someone maimed it? How cruel.

It was scrabbling back across the floor, long legs kicking out. Part of its body—an arm or front leg, I had no idea if it walked on all fours or not—came into contact with the void and... vanished. The limb went wavy and distorted, like it was being sucked through. The creature made a strange barking sound.

Before I could react, Lyri lunged forward and grabbed one of its white foot coverings, hauling it away from the void. The creature yelled again, kicking out, but Lyri whipped a sword off his back and pointed it at the creature’s face.

“What are you doing?” I asked in horror.

“We can’t let it go!” Lyri was grappling with it, tugging it away from the void as it thrashed, trying to yank its leg free from his grip.

“*Ztahp!*” The creature’s strange, bright blue eyes were wide with alarm. “*Gittovmee!*”

“What language is that?”

“It’s a language?” I asked doubtfully. “It’s just... loud yappy noises. I think you’re hurting it, Lyri.”

“I’m not *hurting* it, it’s just...” He huffed, grabbing back on to the creature’s leg and tugging again. “Squirmy.”

“It’s scared!”

“Well if it stopped wriggling about so much, I wouldn’t have to—” Lyri succeeded in flipping the creature onto its belly and pinned its front legs together behind its back. “There.”

“Can its legs bend that way?” I asked, horrified.

He shrugged, grinning up at me. “Looks like it.”

“*Gittovmee!*” the creature was screaming, trying to buck Lyri off. “*Gittov—Omigawdwaddafukwaddafuk.*”

“Do you think that’s its... war cry?” Lyri asked, cocking his head as he stared down at the creature. “Or a distress call?”

Alarm tightened my gut. “It could be. What if more come?”

“Well, it doesn’t seem too fearsome...” Lyri poked at the creature’s bare skin beneath its chestplate with a finger. It immediately started squirming, barking in fear again. “It’s quite soft. Doesn’t seem to have any weapons. Where would it even store them?”

“That doesn’t mean anything!” I spluttered. “It could... spit venom! Or breathe fire!”

Lyri snorted. “Then why isn’t it?” Crouching over the creature’s body, he leaned down and tapped it on the spine. “Come on then, beast, do your worst.”

“*Gittovmee!*” it screeched, frantically wriggling on the floor again. “*Omigawd, omigawd, mgunadye.*”

“Moric?” Seis’ deep voice came through the door, tense and wary. “Are you alright in there?”

“Fine!” I barked in panic. “We’re fine.”

“We heard a strange—”

“He was just singing,” Lyri called with a snicker, which made me glare at him as my face heated.

“I don’t sound like that,” I hissed, gesturing at the creature still squirming frantically in Lyri’s hold.

“Close enough,” he muttered, then tapped the creature again—this time on the back of the head.

“Are you going to calm down now, beast? We won’t hurt you if you don’t give us reason to.”

“I don’t think it can understand you.” I stared at the creature, which was now breathing hard and fast like it was struggling to suck in enough air. “I think you’re just scaring it more.”

“Ugh, for Mabs’ sake.” Lyri planted his boots firmly on the floor and heaved the creature up. It towered over him, but couldn’t break free from the iron grip around its wrists no matter how hard it struggled. It seemed to stand steady on its hind legs, telling me perhaps it was bipedal like us.

Its face was even pinker now, blue eyes wide and terrified as they locked onto me. It babbled something else, stomach heaving beneath its white chestplate from its hectic breaths, which drew my gaze down. It had a navel. For some reason, that made it seem more... familiar.

“We won’t hurt you,” I told it, trying to make my voice calm and confident.

“We might.”

“Shut up, Lyri,” I hissed, then took a hesitant step closer. The creature recoiled in alarm, but that just made it bump into Lyri at its back, so it let out a tiny scream and shifted again.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” I amended, because Lyri was right. If this creature *did* have some hidden tricks up its sleeve and tried to attack us, we would have to.

It didn’t matter how I worded it, anyway. The creature clearly couldn’t understand us, not reacting to my words at all, just staring at me with wide, horrified eyes.

“Lyri,” I muttered, not taking my eyes off the creature. “Is there a reason we are holding it captive?”

“Uh, *yes*. To figure out what it is and where it came from. To make sure it doesn’t go back and return with an army. To stop it roaming loose in our hyll. Should I keep going?”

“Alright, fine,” I gritted out, then tried to smooth my face into a pleasant smile.

Its eyes darted down to my sharp teeth and grew wider. It let out a little whimpering sound.

I huffed in irritation. “How are we meant to find out anything when we can’t understand it and it can’t understand us?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Lyri said cheerfully. “Minor details. Now, where should we put it?”

“*Put* it?”

“I guess it’ll have to be in the dungeon so it can’t escape.”

I swallowed, gut cramping with unease. “That seems somewhat... unjust. It hasn’t actually *done* anything. And it’s clearly scared already.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” Lyri said impatiently. “Do you want it in your room barking and thrashing around?”

“*Pliz*,” the creature rasped, making us both fall silent. It was still breathing too fast, shaking hard

in Lyri's grip. "*Aiwon tel enniwun. Ai—Ai—*"

Lyri grunted. "I think it might be *somewhat* intelligent." He peered around its big body, eyes sparking with intrigue that, for some reason, made me glare at him. "Looks male."

I followed his gaze down to the prominent mound under the creature's strange short leg coverings. Yes, it... it did indeed appear to be male. Clearing my throat, I averted my gaze quickly as my cheeks grew hot.

"Well then, perhaps we should stop referring to him as *it*," I said stiffly. "And perhaps we should not throw him in the dungeon with undue cause."

"Such a stick in the mud," Lyri muttered. "We'll make sure he's comfortable. Give him some blankets. Food and wine, if he wants it." His eyes turned hard as he looked at me. "But you know it wouldn't be wise to just let him go, Lor. We have no idea what is on the other side of that void. How many more there are. Can you imagine if a legion of these things started pouring into your hyll?"

"So you're suggesting we just... keep him here?" I spluttered, gesturing at the rip in the air, which made the creature's gaze snap over to it. His eyes grew so wide I thought his eyeballs were going to fall right out of his head. "Not let him go back to wherever he came from? What—forever, Lyri? Keep him as our prisoner *forever*?"

"No, not forever," Lyri grumbled. "Just until we can figure out what he is and where he came from. If you're so opposed to the idea, I could just stick my head through like I've been saying for—"

"No," I barked, making the creature jump violently.

Lyri sighed and jerked his chin at the door. "Is there a reason you stopped Seis and Gryf from coming in?"

"Yes, because—I don't know, I panicked!" I snapped. "There was a strange creature flopping around on the floor!"

"Well, we're going to need them to get him down to the dungeon without any staff seeing." Lyri shot me a sharp look. "All the councillors are gone, yes? None of them are staying?"

"No, they're gone." I licked my lips, fidgeting anxiously with my cuff as I eyed the strange creature. He was still breathing hard and fast with fear, but seemed frozen in place, like he didn't want to draw any attention to himself. His eyes kept darting between us as we spoke, but it was clear he couldn't understand a word of what we were saying.

He knew it was about him though. I could tell that much.

"Maybe it would be better to involve the councillors—" I began, but Lyri glared at me, cutting me off as my face heated.

"This is nothing to do with them, Lor."

"It could be!" I protested, gesturing at the void, which made the creature's eyes dart over to it. "You said it yourself—what if more come through? What if an *army* comes through? What if Thinir is attacked?"

"Then Iorn and I will deal with it," Lyri said calmly, referring to the baregh general he worked alongside. "It's not like those crumbling old vints would be any help whatsoever if that *did* happen."

He was right. I knew he was. But this all... this all felt far too overwhelming for me to deal with on my own. The void was one thing—a strange, shimmering rip in the air that didn't move, didn't do anything, didn't affect our day-to-day lives. I'd almost grown used to it, even as it had gotten bigger. It couldn't *harm* us if we didn't go near it, so I'd been able to process its presence.

But there was a living creature here now. Something I had never seen before. Something that did not look like it had come from this world. Some kind of... otherworldly monster, with his strange pinkish-white skin, glaringly bright armour and frantic barking language.

His eyes were unnerving as I looked into them. Bright blue, surrounded by white, not black. The colour of his skin made me wonder if he was ill. There were two bright pink splotches on his cheeks, and his strangely full mouth was trembling.

“*Pliz*,” he blurted when he saw me looking at him. “*Juzpliz lehmigoh. Pliz, pliz, pliz—*”

“He’s chanting something.” Lyri sounded wary. “What is it? A curse? Is he cursing us? Stop it!” He poked the creature’s bare side again, making him jump with a scream.

“I think... I think he’s just scared.” I tried to smile at him once more, to show him we wouldn’t hurt him, but he just stared at my teeth again and looked even more horrified.

Exhaling in defeat, I scrubbed my face and headed for the door, mumbling, “I’ll get Seis and Gryf.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Admit it, Jugs, you totally have a crush on Becky.” April nudged my side, swaying into me as she gestured with her beer can. “I can see you staring at her. You’re being, like, *totally* obvious.”

My mouth tipped into a tight smile, but I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t Becky I was staring at from across the campfire. It was the guy she was talking to. Todd. Beautiful, unattainable Todd, who was flirting his ass off with Becky, telling me the odds of him liking me back were far, far slimmer than I’d hoped when I first met him.

Not impossible, though. That was what made me keep sneaking glances at him as he sipped his beer, laughing at something Becky said and sheepishly running his hand over his flat top.

God, he was just so *awesome*. Super friendly and good at everything—including getting the kids at camp to actually take part in the scheduled activities and enjoy them.

I was good at that too, to be fair. People liked me. All the other camp counsellors liked me. All the kids liked me. The organisers of Camp Wynsome liked me, which was why they’d asked me to come back for three years in a row.

Dad hated it—said I was an embarrassment for still spending my summers doing this. He said I needed to join the family firm, to stop wasting my time and his money, to start growing up.

I didn’t *wanna* grow up yet. I didn’t want to join his super-boring investment firm in some super-boring, low-paid intern role and spend the rest of my life working my way up to the top like he did.

Honestly, I didn’t have any clue what I *did* want to do. I just knew it wasn’t that. I knew I didn’t want to turn into my dad—eye-wateringly rich but totally distant and too busy to ever spend time with his family. I didn’t want to get married and end up with an unhappy wife who drank too much to fill her days and spent all her time lunching with other rich moms.

I didn’t want a wife, *period*.

Right now, spending my summers at this little camp just north of New York City was the only thing making me happy anymore. A lot of my friends had moved away after high school to go to college. My dad had been furious when I told him I didn’t want to go. I could still remember how purple his face had gotten. In the end, desperate to get away from the argument, I’d appeased him by saying I’d think about joining his firm instead.

“Want another beer?”

April’s perky voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I blinked, my eyes watering a little from the smoke streaming from the campfire, and gave her a tiny smile. “I’m good, thanks.”

“You okay, Jugs?” April leaned over to the cooler, shoving Mike’s arm off it to snag another can from inside. “You’re quiet.”

“I’m rad,” I said woodenly, back to furtively watching Todd and Becky as I sipped my lukewarm beer.

“Aww.” She cracked open her beer and leaned heavily into my side. “I’m sure if you told Todd to back off, he would. You’re buddies, right?”

I’m not interested in Becky! I wanted to yell, but I just gave her another small smile.

My entire body went stiff when I felt delicate fingertips trailing up my thigh. My shorts were already pretty short, but the way I was sitting on the ground cross-legged meant they were *really* short. April’s fingers skimmed higher, uncomfortably close to my junk.

“We could make her jealous,” she murmured in my ear, voice just a little slurred.

I scrambled up, spilling half my beer over the campfire, which hissed and sputtered as more

smoke poured out. Todd and Becky looked up, coughing and wrinkling their noses as they waved the smoke away.

“What’s wrong?” April was staring up at me, eyes wide and a little bloodshot.

“N-nothing,” I stammered. “I just—I need to take a leak.”

“Oh.” She gave me an overexaggerated wink. “Okay. Hurry back.”

“Uh-huh,” I mumbled noncommittally, grabbing my flashlight before turning away from the campfire.

All the camp counsellors had trekked out into the woods after dark for a little party. Some of them weren’t old enough to be drinking, but Mike had picked up several six-packs and didn’t care who was guzzling down the beer.

I had just turned twenty-one, so I could drink, but I’d been nursing the same beer for hours, not really wanting to party. Too busy still thinking about the sharp words my dad had said before I left for camp, about how I’d never amount to anything if I continued this way, how embarrassing it was for him to have a son who still went to summer camp every year like a little kid.

Plus, the guy I’d been fooling around with—the *only* guy I’d ever fooled around with—had called things off just before I left. Which meant, if I went back to work at the movie theatre after the summer, it was going to be hella awkward. Assuming Greg still worked there by then.

I’d tried not to let any of it get to me. That was part of my charm—rolling with the punches, never getting beaten down, always being fun and up for anything. And when I’d got to camp and seen Todd standing outside one of the cabins, his white teeth flashing as he laughed at something April was saying, I’d thought, *Maybe this summer won’t be so bad after all.*

And then he’d started flirting with Becky.

Whatever, I thought bitterly, stomping between the trees away from the campfire, my flashlight beam swinging over thick trunks and leaf-littered forest floor. *I’ll find some other hot guy. One who actually likes guys.*

I’d just wanted to get away—from the loud talking and laughter of the others, from April and her grabby hands, from Todd leaning too close to Becky—but now that I was out here, I realised I actually did need to piss.

Glancing back, I could still see the others sitting around the campfire between the trees, so I walked a little farther so no one would stumble across me while my dick was out. I cringed at the thought of Todd and Becky sneaking off to be alone together. God, this whole night just *sucked*.

Once I was a respectable distance, I fumbled with my shorts and pulled out my dick, aiming it at a tree trunk. Something crawled up my bare calf, so I lifted my other foot and brushed it away with my sneaker, accidentally spraying pee everywhere as I hopped to stay in place.

It was cold away from the fire, my shorts and cropped tee not really covering much. I’d been *trying* to entice Todd by dressing a little more freely while the kids were all asleep, tucked up in their bunks back at the camp, but it obviously hadn’t worked.

Shivering a little, I tucked my dick back into my shorts and grabbed my flashlight from where I’d stuffed it under my armpit while I peed. With a sigh, I turned to start heading back, wondering if they’d all think I was totally lame if I said I was going to bed.

I wasn’t paying attention to where I was stepping, figuring I was just following the path I’d taken to get here, but a sudden dip in the forest floor made my ankle roll outward and my leg buckle. I tried to right my footing, but my sneaker was caught under a tree root or something, and instead I stumbled to the side.

I had a split second to hope that I wasn’t about to smash my head against a tree trunk before I just

kept tumbling, the ground sloping down, twigs and dry leaves scratching my bare legs and stomach. I dropped my flashlight and flung my hands out in panic to try and halt my descent, but my fingers just scrabbled over more leaves and dirt.

It was too dark for me to see how big this dip was—if I was tumbling off a weird mini cliff in the middle of the forest—and an awful feeling overcame me as I kept rolling. Like all my insides were getting sucked out, like I turned to nothing for a few seconds, before I slammed to a stop.

I groaned, my face pressing into hard ground. *Weirdly* hard ground. Almost like... floorboards that smelled a bit of varnish. Beyond my closed eyelids, soft light glowed—not just the impenetrable dark of the forest. The scents of wood and dirt and leaves were gone, replaced by something almost like incense, smoky and fragrant. And it was warm. And quiet. I could no longer hear the sounds of the others talking and laughing, the crackling of the campfire, the rustling of the trees.

When a raspy voice spoke in a foreign, lilting language, my head snapped up.

I stared at the two people in front of me. No, not people. They weren't people. Their skin was a deep blue, their ears were gigantic and pointed, and their eyes were black orbs with eerily silver irises that almost glowed.

“What the fuck?” I croaked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My limbs kicked out as I desperately tried to get away from the creatures, scrabbling back across the hard floor. I was too panicked to take in many details, but I could see that I was suddenly in a room of some kind, *not the fucking forest*.

Had I blacked out? Been kidnapped?

By *monsters*?

Oh my god, this was what I got for going to camp every summer. This was what happened. Young camp counsellors thinking everything was peachy and they could just party and have fun and make out with each other, and instead they ended up getting picked off one by one by a terrible monster.

And I was the first one to go! The first one to go was always the loser—the one no one cared about dying. What the *hell*?

Even though they were terrifying, I couldn't bring myself to look away from them as I scrambled back across the floor, but I felt my arm hit something intangible and that cold tingling feeling returned, the one I'd felt as I was falling, like I was getting sucked through something. I yelped in terror, then yelped again when one of the monsters lunged forward and grabbed my sneaker, hauling me toward them.

Ohmygod. This was it. I was going to die. I was the first to get picked off and then they'd go and chase down all the others.

I was frantically trying to get my foot free from the monster's impossibly tight grip, kicking out and yelling, but then they whipped a sword—a freaking *sword*—off their back and pointed it at my face, rendering me totally still and silent in an instant.

The other monster in the room spoke, saying something in that strange flowy language that was just gibberish to me. The one pointing a sword at my face grabbed my leg again and yanked, kickstarting me back into squirming and trying to get free. They huffed and dropped the sword to grab my flailing arms, saying something back.

“Stop!” I shouted in terror, knowing it was totally pointless. *I'm going to die*. “Get off me!”

The two monsters were talking to each other as I desperately tried to get free. The one grabbing at me suddenly heaved me over onto my belly. My chin hit the floor with a painful thud, and my heart went nuts when I felt them yank my arms behind my back and pin my wrists together tight.

“Get off me!” I screamed again. I could feel the monster crouching over my prone form, so I bucked to try and tip them. “Get off—Oh my god what the fuck what the fuck.”

Terrified tears pricked at my eyes. The monster was pressing me hard into the ground, compressing my chest and making it hard to breathe as I started to hyperventilate with panic. Then they poked my side with a bony finger, making me scream again as a jolt of terror whited out my vision.

What were they going to do to me? Oh my god, oh my god, stuff like this wasn't meant to actually *happen*. It was just in movies. Monsters weren't *real*.

The monster poked me again, this time in the spine, and they sounded closer when they spoke. Somehow, I could tell they were addressing me directly this time, and it just made me even more terrified.

“Get off me!” My brain was stuck on that one phrase, as if it would help. “Oh my god, oh my god, I'm gonna die,” I sobbed.

Another voice came from somewhere—muffled, but deep and growly. Oh my freaking god, there

were *more of them*?

One of the monsters in the room called something back, then the other spoke before letting out a strange, raspy hissing sound, almost like a laugh. They were *laughing*. They were going to horrifically, brutally murder me and they were *laughing*. I started squirming again, my body still fighting to get away even though my brain knew it was fruitless. I couldn't break the clawing grip around my wrists, even though the monsters hadn't looked all that tall. I was *bigger* than them and I couldn't overpower them.

I was fucked.

I screamed when the monster tapped me on the back of the head and said something. My chest heaved against the warm wooden floor, lungs hitching as I fought to hold back my sobs of terror. I knew I should've been fighting harder to get away, but the overwhelming fear was making me weak, making my limbs tremble uncontrollably.

Suddenly, I was being hauled to my feet—somehow with ease by the little monster behind me. They kept my wrists pinned at my lower back, my arms aching and shoulders twinging with sharp pain. My knees shook wildly, and no matter how hard I tried to rip my hands free, I couldn't.

The other monster was staring at me. Their hair was long and flowy, a deep grey, but they didn't look old. Their face was all sharp planes and angles, their ears freaking *huge*, but they appeared young. Strange gems and beads in their hair glimmered in the light, and focusing on them allowed me to suck in a few trembling breaths.

But then the monster spoke. To me.

The one restraining me said something as well, and the monster in front of me took a step closer, which immediately made me jerk back in terror. I bumped into the monster at my back and screamed, trying to get away from them too.

The monster spoke again, but I was frozen in place. Their language was like nothing I'd ever heard before, lilting and musical but interspersed with harsh hisses. When I did nothing, they spoke again, and the one at my back answered.

Whatever they said made the monster smile—a terrifying, ominous smile, their mouth filled with sharp white teeth. I whimpered. *What are they saying? What are they going to do to me? Why are they smiling?*

The pair started conversing again, the one in front still staring at me even as they spoke to their companion. Oh my *god* what were they planning what were they going to do—

“Please,” I croaked, shaking wildly, in one last desperate, pointless attempt. “I won't tell anyone. I—I—”

The one at my back grunted something and suddenly appeared in my periphery, making me jump. Long grey hair swept down in a curtain as they peered at me. Dread made my stomach roil when their silver gaze fixed on my crotch and they said something else.

The other one's eyes drifted down too. They were both staring at my dick. *What the fuck what the fuck—*

Pure terror made me start to hyperventilate again. I was only faintly aware of them still talking as my blood rushed through my ears, but then one of them barked out a sharp sound—“*Rai*”—which made me jump out of my skin.

My eyes darted between them as they kept talking—kept discussing how they were going to murder me—until the one in front swept his arm out to the side. My gaze automatically followed, and I felt my eyes almost bulge out of my head when I took in the weird shimmering thing in the air, blocking out part of what looked like a bedroom.

It was like a... portal. A jagged rip in the air with impenetrable darkness in the middle and its edges sparking with light, like electricity was running through it.

Oh my god, were these... were these *aliens*? Had they portalled me out of the forest to abduct me and *experiment* on me? Was that why they were looking at my dick? Were they going to experiment on my *dick*?

“Please,” I burst out, wishing I could cup my hands protectively over my junk. What were they going to do to my dick? “Just please let me go,” I whimpered. “Please, please, please—”

The one restraining me barked something harshly and poked my side, making me scream. Then the one in front gave me that terrible smile again—wide and sharp, like they were already looking forward to slicing off my dick to experiment on.

The smile fell from their face when I gave them no reaction, just stared at them in utter terror. They scrubbed a long, bony-fingered hand over their cheek and suddenly moved, turning toward what looked like a wooden door.

This is a weird spaceship, I vacantly thought, but then two werewolves walked in, and I passed out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The creature went floppy in Lyri's grip as Seis and Gryf walked into the room. Lyri had just enough time to grab him and prevent him from smacking hard into the floor, grunting under the dead weight.

"What..." Seis' mottled, red-and-brown-pupiled eyes were wide. "What is that?"

"We don't know," Lyri grunted, heaving the limp creature up. Gryf quickly stepped forward to take him, carefully slinging him over his shoulder.

My eyes snagged on the strange pink leg coverings—not that they concealed *any* part of his legs. The creature's backside was barely covered by them, his long, gold-dusted legs hanging limp down Gryf's back. I looked away again quickly.

"What is *that*?" Gryf asked, pointing at the void with his free hand.

"We don't know," I echoed Lyri, standing up straight and smoothing back my hair, trying to appear calm and in control. "We have been monitoring it, but nothing has... nothing came through it until now."

"This came *through* it?" Seis asked incredulously. "So it... it leads to somewhere else?"

"This is what I've been saying," Lyri muttered, but huffed and fell silent when I glared at him.

"It appears that it leads to somewhere," I said, my voice coming out nowhere near as evenly as I wanted it to. "This... creature just came through it."

The two baregh were silent for a moment, gazing between the unconscious creature slung over Gryf's shoulder and the shimmering, distorted void in the middle of the guestroom.

Then, as any good guard should, Seis simply accepted it and asked, "What would you like us to do, Moric?"

No, you tell me! I wanted to shout. *Don't make me decide!*

I cleared my throat, lifting my chin. "Best to put him in the dungeon for now until we figure out what... he is and why he is here."

I tried to make my tone authoritative, as if that had been my idea and not Lyri's. Fortunately my brother stayed silent. He was a menace, but he wouldn't ever try to undermine me.

"But make sure that he is comfortable," I added quickly, a flash of guilt knotting my gut as I darted a glance at the creature. Now that he was no longer thrashing about—or awake—he appeared almost... vulnerable.

I didn't think the tiny clothing was designed to make him seem like a fearsome, formidable warrior that needed no added protection. I didn't think he was a warrior at all.

"Please keep this to yourselves," I told the two baregh. All the guards were terrible gossips, but Seis and Gryf were mine and Lyri's personal guards—they could be trusted. "There is no reason to cause undue alarm until we understand more about... all of this."

Seis nodded, frowning at Gryf. "We can get it—him—down to the dungeon using one of the back staircases. But there might be some staff still up..."

"I'll go ahead and clear the hallways." Lyri nodded at me and slipped through the door.

I listened to Lyri's quick footsteps retreating as the room fell into awkward silence. Shifting uncomfortably, I tried not to stare at the creature as he hung limply over Gryf's shoulder.

Vints were hairless everywhere except for our heads and eyebrows, but this creature had fine golden hair dusted over his forearms and legs. White socks with strange black stripes were pulled up over those odd white foot coverings, which looked almost like boots. They had foreign markings on them, and it appeared as though someone had... stabbed tiny holes in neat rows along the toes and

sides. Why would they do that? Wouldn't that just let water in?

Those obscenely tiny leg coverings—which, again, did *not* cover any part of the creature's legs—were a glaringly bright pink, a colour I had only seen on the flowers of the layth vines at the sacred hot springs in my fiefdom. Mama had taken us there many years ago on a royal visit to bathe in the healing waters.

But this material was like nothing I'd ever seen before. It looked almost... slippery. Shiny. Heat crept into my face when I noticed the slits up the sides, edged in white—two flaps of fabric that had parted and showed me the very top of the creature's thigh. It was... it was almost like he wasn't wearing anything at *all*.

And most of his torso was bare to our gazes thanks to that tiny scrap of fabric that was supposed to be a shirt. Its hem was ragged, like it had been cut, and I could remember seeing a strange emblem on the front of it over his chest, but it was hidden now against Gryf's wide torso, and I'd been too shocked to take it in before.

His arms were dangling over Gryf's front, some of his strange shaggy gold hair falling in his face. It was shorter at the sides, but hung quite far down his nape. It really *did* look like the baregh's manes, though not a colour I had ever seen on them.

Before I could stop it, my gaze was travelling back to those pink coverings. There were two little dimples at the base of his spine, just above the waistband. Vints didn't have tails, so it wasn't shocking to see him without one. My eyes drifted over the creature's distractingly round rump before trailing back down his legs. He had long legs. He had been taller than both Lyri and me when he was upright, though certainly not taller than the baregh.

What is he?

"He's certainly a strange thing to look at."

Seis' gruff voice snapped me out of my gawking, and I forced back the heat in my cheeks when I realised he was watching me with a wry smile.

"Quite," I said, clasping my hands behind my back and squeezing my fingers together tight. I tried to watch the door for Lyri's return, but my gaze snapped back to the creature.

"Got some decent weight on him," Gryf commented, though he didn't appear to be under any kind of strain keeping the creature draped over his shoulder. Baregh were unfathomably strong, hence why they made excellent guards.

"Lyri kept him easily restrained," I said coolly, not wanting them to doubt my brother's strength.

Gryf chuckled, voice affectionate and a little raspy—which made me *wildly* uncomfortable—when he said, "Oh, I don't doubt it."

Lyri returned then, pushing open the door and jerking his chin at us. "All clear."

Seis and Gryf dutifully waited for me to step forward and leave the room before following. We walked to the back staircase that allowed the staff to tend to the guest quarters. There was no one around, but I was tense, gaze darting to shadowy corners as if I thought someone would jump out at us.

I pictured Councillor Raynir leaping out of the darkness and pointing an accusing finger at me, shouting, "Look at this mess you have allowed under your rule! We're being invaded by strange creatures from another world and you did nothing to stop it!"

Cringing, I glanced back to make sure Gryf and Seis were just behind. Gryf was between me and Seis, with the creature slung over his shoulder and a huge hand resting on that strangely pale skin below the hem of his ripped shirt to keep him steady. My eyes lingered on it before I almost stumbled and quickly faced forward again.

We walked in silence down a long, dimly lit corridor that I had only faint memories of from when Lyri and I were children—when we would run wild in the hyll, hiding in the staff areas to escape our grumpy old tutor and get out of lessons for the day.

I hadn't been to these parts of the hyll in years. It wasn't appropriate for the Moric to wander in the areas reserved solely for the staff, to see the frantic goings-on that kept the hyll running smoothly every day, where they prepared our meals and cleaned our bed linens and clothes.

The corridor was empty now, and it wasn't long before we were descending another dark staircase to the deepest level of the hyll, buried in the rock that the vast building sat upon. It was cold and dank down here, despite the torches flickering in their wall sconces. My gut clenched with guilt at leaving the creature down here when he hadn't actually *done* anything, but Lyri was right—there was nowhere else to put him until we could ascertain that he wasn't a danger. Until we figured out what he was and why he was here.

And where, exactly, he had come from.

"The cell at the end is the least unpleasant," Gryf said quietly as Lyri unlocked the heavy door that led to the dungeon. "It's dry and the stone stays warm from the hot spring under the hyll."

I nodded, stepping to one side to allow him to pass me and deposit the unconscious creature inside. Fiddling anxiously with my cuff as Gryf gently set him down on the paltry straw mattress, I blurted, "I—We should get him some blankets. And maybe... some food and water..."

"I will get them, Moric," Seis said calmly.

Flustered, I shook my head. "No, Seis, you don't have to—"

"Gryf and I will go and get some things." Lyri cheerfully slapped his guard on the back as Gryf stepped out of the cell. None of us locked it behind him. "You two wait here with our otherworld guest."

He passed me the thick ring of gaoler's keys and squeezed my shoulder before walking back down the dank stone corridor. Once they were gone, I saw Seis glance over at me.

"Otherworld," he rumbled, running a hand over his shaggy mane. "He is from somewhere else, then? Not just another place, but another..."

"Not necessarily," I said quickly. "We don't know. We..."

My shoulders slumped as I let out a sharp breath, scrubbing my hands down my face. "By the Mabs, Seis."

He chuckled, shifting closer to give my back a gentle pat. Seis was unfailingly deferential and respectful while we were in public, but the times when we were alone or just with Lyri and Gryf, he was far more casual in the way he spoke and treated me. I lapped it up like a neglected little folna pup. Aside from my relationship with my brother, those easier moments with Seis were the only instances of true friendship I ever experienced.

"You don't have to trouble yourself with this if you don't want, Lor," he said in a low voice. "You have enough on your plate. Lyri seems eager to unravel this mystery, anyway. Gryf and I can help him —,"

"No," I blurted, not quite sure why. My eyes locked onto the otherworld creature, still unconscious on the straw mattress in his cell. His legs were splayed wide, one arm dangling over the side of the raised bed. His pale stomach rose and fell with even breaths.

Forcing my gaze away, I looked at Seis and gave him a tight smile. "No," I repeated, calmer this time. "I need to know what is... what he is and where he comes from. That thing, that void, is in my hyll."

"Mm." Seis folded his huge arms and eyed the creature, one tusk worrying his upper lip. "I could

travel through the void to see what is on the other side.”

“No,” I repeated, horrified. “No, I won’t risk you for that. We have *no* idea what is through it. Where he”—I nodded at the creature—“came from. For... for all we know, he came through to escape something awful. Or he is a scout for an army set to destroy us.”

Except I didn’t think that last bit could be true. He didn’t seem like any kind of warrior. He had seemed scared.

And we had made it worse.

“I don’t think we should keep him down here,” I croaked. “It doesn’t seem very... fair. It makes me feel like a tyrant.”

“It is the safest thing for now, Lor.” Seis jerked his chin toward the door at the end of the hall. “And Lyri is your general. Technically, this falls under his jurisdiction. It affects your safety.”

I scoffed at that, waving a hand. “I am in no danger.”

“Perhaps not, but it’s still Lyri’s decision. Unless you overrule it, of course.” When I said nothing, Seis added, “Lyri isn’t cruel or unjust, but I think he would agree that keeping the creature here is the best course of action. We don’t know what he is capable of.”

We both looked at the unconscious creature in the cell. He looked... very young. His strange face was soft, cheeks still flushed but no longer worryingly high with colour. Strands of golden hair brushed over his forehead, hanging in his eyes.

But then my gaze dipped lower. His body certainly wasn’t young. No, it was... robust. Strong and toned, but not intimidatingly muscular like Seis’. His shoulders were wide. Stomach flat. Thighs thick and dusted with that intriguing smattering of hair.

I tore my gaze away when the door at the end of the hall opened, Lyri and Gryf appearing with their arms full.

“We brought some food, but what if he can’t eat it?” Lyri handed me a basket when he reached us, juggling a stack of thick blankets and furs. “What if his kind eats... I don’t know. Rocks or sand or something?”

Seis chuckled, taking the blankets from him. “He’s not big enough to be a behamot.”

I shuddered, thinking about those hulking beasts that inhabited an empty stretch of my fiefdom in the jagged cliffs by the sea. They were meat-eaters, but were known to chew rocks or sprinkle sand and pebbles over their food.

“Well we can’t let him starve!” I snapped, feeling even more guilty when I darted another look at the unconscious creature.

“I know,” Lyri said easily, taking the basket back and grabbing the thick glass bottles of water Gryf held out to him.

He carried them into the cell and set them on the ground next to the bed, which made me fidget again.

“Perhaps a table—”

“Would you like us to furnish his cell with all the accoutrements befitting a Moric?” Lyri raised a brow at me as he strode back. “He will be fine, Lor.”

“He’s not an animal!” I didn’t think, anyway. “He should at least have somewhere to sit.”

“He can sit on the bed.” Lyri took a step closer to me as Seis and Gryf went into the cell to deposit the other items. My brother’s voice lowered as he clamped a hand on my shoulder, brows pulled into a frown. “I know you’re not happy with this, Lor, but I’m not risking your safety. We know nothing about this creature.”

“But what is even the *point* in keeping him here?” I thrust a hand toward the cell. “We cannot

understand him. He cannot understand us. How are we supposed to find out *anything* from him?"

"I'll manage." Lyri's voice brooked no argument as he released me and took a step back.

I stared at him in horror. "You're not—you're not going to *torture* him—"

"Of course not." Lyri snorted. "I don't need to resort to torture to get information out of people."

"You can't understand a word he says, Lyri!" I hissed, hands clenching into fists.

"Minor details." He waved a hand and turned to face the cell. "I'll figure something out."

I stared at the back of my brother's head, silently fuming, before bursting out, "I want to be here whenever you try and speak to him."

He glanced back to eye me oddly. "Why?"

My face heated. "I—Because I am the Moric, and the void he came through is in my hyll. That's why."

Seis and Gryf were silent, hovering awkwardly at the edge of the cell, as Lyri slowly turned to face me again. His brows pulled into a hard frown, but I could see a flash of hurt in his silver eyes.

"You don't trust me?"

"Of course I bloody trust you," I snapped, not sure why I was getting so worked up. "It's not about *trust*. I just want to be here. I want to... I want to find out more, just as you do."

All three of them were gazing at me in silence, making me flush. Clearing my throat, I stood up straighter and smoothed back my hair, trying to regain my composure.

"We will wait here for him to wake up," I said, aiming for a confident, in-control tone. And failing. "All of us. Perhaps... perhaps when he wakes up, he will be calmer. Perhaps he will be able to speak to us."

CHAPTER NINE

I started screaming the moment I came to.

The first things I saw were the big, eerie silver eyes of those two blue-skinned monsters as they peered at me—from behind bars.

Wait, *I* was the one behind bars. I scrambled upright, my head swimming, and realised I was in some kind of medieval-looking cell with stone walls. I was lying on a mattress that felt stuffed with straw, but several furs and blankets slipped onto my lap as I sat up.

Huddling into the corner of the bed, I wrapped my arms around my knees to make myself as small as possible. My terrified yells tapered off into hitching whimpers, chin wobbling as I tried not to cry.

One of the monsters snapped something, their tone angry, but they were looking at their companion, not me. It was the one with all the beads and gems wound into their hair, I realised. The one who had given me that terrible, bloodthirsty smile like they just couldn't wait to mess around with my junk—and not in a good way.

My breath caught, and my hands shot down to cup my cock and balls protectively through my shorts. I let out a sigh of relief to feel them still there.

The one with the adorned hair gave me a wide-eyed look at the action, while the other snorted and muttered something, their own sharp teeth peeking out as they grinned. Whatever they said made their companion glare at them, the expression strangely human.

“Le no faya, Lyri,” they said in that strange, melodic language.

The other one huffed. *“Amo!”*

They pulled the two gleaming swords off their back, making me whimper in terror and try to press harder into the warm stone wall behind me. But they proceeded to chuck them away from the cell. I heard metal skittering over stone as they vanished from sight.

“Amo?” they repeated briskly, but in a question this time—directed at me. They gestured at the discarded swords. *“Ka no pinya-ra. Ta no jul.”*

I stared at them, mute with fear. And not knowing what the fuck they just said.

“Jul,” the other one burst out, making me jump. They gripped the bars and nodded at me in what seemed like encouragement, but their mouth stretched into a sharp-toothed grin again. *“Ta no jul. Ya niri-ra kime ta.”*

I tried to take a steadying breath to clear my head. They had locked me in a cell, but they'd also covered me in blankets, and they... they weren't trying to hurt me. *Yet.*

They were trying to talk to me.

“I...” I licked my dry lips nervously, my voice hoarse from screaming. *“I can't understand you.”*

“Pre?” the one who'd thrown the swords muttered, glancing at the other with furrowed silver brows. They let out a rapid string of more words before stiltedly uttering, *“Eyekaan derrstah yoo.”*

I sat up straighter, gripping the mound of furs in my lap with sweaty fingers. *“Yes. I can't understand you. C-can... can you understand me?”*

When the two monsters—aliens? I'd lost track—just stared at me, I deflated.

“Look, p-please just l-let me go.” My chin wobbled again, and I couldn't stop the hot tear dripping down my cheek when I blinked. *“Please. Please don't k-kill me. I w-won't tell anyone this h-happened. I won't... I won't tell anyone that aliens or m-m-monsters or wh-whatever you are exist. I p-promise.”*

They both continued to stare at me, their expressions growing alarmed when I blubbered and more

tears fell. I swiped at them redundantly, feeling like a total loser.

A new voice spoke, and I went faint when one of those werewolf creatures stepped forward from the shadows behind the two blue monsters. Although, now that I wasn't passing out in terror at the sight of them, I realised they didn't *quite* look like werewolves. They didn't have long snouts like a wolf, and some parts of their skin weren't covered in hair, but there were thick brown manes trailing from their heads all the way down their backs, disappearing under the strange vests they were wearing.

Tusks peeked up from between the monster's lips when he spoke again. He seemed male—his body was huge and hulking, and there was a definite, prominent bulge in his trousers. His voice was deep and growly.

Darting a look at the two blue monsters, I realised they both seemed male too. They were much smaller and lither than the big, muscular one, and their voices weren't as deep but still raspy and masculine.

Their faces were sharp and angular, their features inhuman, but they were almost... beautiful. I realised that I couldn't stop staring at them—particularly the one with all those beads and gems woven into his long hair, which was styled in a complicated looking half-updo with lots of braids. Two thinner braids framed his face, hanging in front of those impossibly huge, pointed ears that reached the top of his head.

His deep blue skin was flawless. It looked soft and almost gleaming in the flickering firelight coming from torches mounted on the stone walls. For some dumb reason, I felt a wave of self-consciousness over my own appearance. I knew my face would already be splotchy and bright red from crying. My hair was probably a mess. Even though this cell was somewhat warm, goosebumps prickled over my exposed skin. I huddled deeper into the corner of the bed, tightening my arms around my legs.

"*Ya niri-ra kime ta,*" the one with the gems in his hair said, his voice almost gentle. Then he gestured at something in the cell, making my head snap around as he spoke again.

I stared at the basket of what appeared to be food sitting on the cell floor next to three big glass bottles. There was something that looked like bread, but it was a deep green colour and the dough had been braided together before being coiled up. Next to it were several balls that might have been fruit, but their purplish-brown skins were covered in bumpy warts. They didn't look very appetising.

There were also several long, thin sticks of pale blue things that looked almost like carrots, except they were bulbous on either end. Tucked next to them was a jar made of sea green glass, the contents of which weren't visible.

They had... given me food? And drink? I glanced warily between the items and the monsters outside the cell, not knowing what to think. Was it a trick? But why bother? I was helpless. I'd passed out. They could have done whatever they wanted to me.

Focusing on their faces again, I realised they were watching me with undisguised curiosity. But it didn't look malicious or gleeful, like they couldn't wait for me to stupidly eat something and die an awful death from poison or whatever.

They looked as confused about me as I was about them.

Maybe... maybe they'd been just as shocked as I had when I fell into their room. Maybe I'd startled them—two monsters having a quiet evening, getting ready for bed, and then a human fell out of a weird hole in their bedroom.

Maybe they didn't know what to do with me.

"I... Um... Thanks for the food," I said slowly, figuring it would be safer to be polite to my

captors even if they couldn't understand me. Maybe they weren't planning to hurt me *right this second*, but they'd still thrown me in a... a dungeon or something.

When none of them reacted—a second non-werewolf had joined the first behind the two blue monsters, and both were standing in identical poses with their thick arms crossed and their heads cocked—I pointed at the basket. “Food?”

“*Malu*,” the blue monster with the gems said immediately, smiling at me again. It didn't look so threatening this time. I thought... I thought maybe he was trying to make me feel better. “*Birime go ta. Ri no jul.*”

“Um”—I scrubbed at my face anxiously—“thanks.”

“*Tenkz*,” the other blue monster tried to mimic me, then rattled out more foreign words to his companion.

“*T-tings*,” the beautiful one said, and his cheeks darkened to near-black in what might have been a blush when the other hissed out a laugh and nudged him with his elbow. He glared at him and tried again. “*Tengs.*”

I was guessing they struggled with the “th” sound. A watery, tentative smile played on my lips at their efforts though.

It dropped just as fast when I shivered and glanced around my cell. “Wh-what are you going to do to me?” I asked, my voice filled with dread.

All four monsters just stared at me in silence. Right. They couldn't understand me.

“Uhh...” My voice shook, and my arms were trembling when I raised them to gesture around at the cell. Four pairs of eyes followed my movements. I pointed at myself, shrugged, then gestured again.

The blue monster who had thrown away his swords cocked his head. His hair was also long and grey, but styled much more simply, and it fell over his shoulder in a wave at the movement.

“*Ta no jul*,” he told me. His voice was raspier and harsher than the other one, who had a softer and more refined tone. He said more words that all blurred together as I stared at him, then grunted in frustration and muttered something.

“*Ka mitlay ta*,” the other one snapped, glaring at him. He gestured at me and said more words, and I kind of got the impression that maybe he was the one in my corner. He seemed to be... defending me.

When he held up an old-fashioned ring of heavy keys and gestured at me again, I perked up. Was he... was he arguing to let me out? Let me go?

“*Rai*,” the other one barked, more words tumbling out of his mouth as he gestured at the one with the keys, at me, at the two non-werewolves.

The two blue monsters devolved into a bickering match. They were almost identical, except the one with the beads in his hair looked... less harsh. Like he was the softer and more composed of the pair. And his clothes and hair were far more intricate and detailed than what any of the other monsters were wearing, almost like he was in a position of power, even though he was being berated by his companion.

Eventually, the other one threw up his hands and said something in an exasperated tone. He pointed one sharp, bony finger at me, making me jolt back and huddle under the blankets, then held out his hand. For the keys.

The beautiful one lifted his chin, looking so regal and perfect in an otherworldly way that I stared at him, dumbstruck for a second.

“*Rai, Lyri*,” he said, then stuffed the keys in the pocket of his black tunic. “*Ka niri ro terris.*”

“*Perrka lis*,” the other one snapped, shoving his hair back from his face. Then he muttered

something else that made the beautiful one's cheeks darken again, before grabbing the front of one of the non-werewolves' vest and hauling him away.

Once they had gone, the other non-werewolf stepped forward and said something in his deep, growly voice. The blue monster sighed wearily, gazing at me in the cell, his expression miserable. My eyes filled up with tears again. Were they going to leave me in here? Was I trapped here forever? I didn't even know where I *was*.

"Pl-please." I sniffled, wiping my runny nose. "Please let me go."

The blue monster's mouth turned down, brows creasing as he stared at me. But then he turned, mumbling something to the non-werewolf, and the pair of them slowly walked away until I was alone in the cell with nothing but weird white and purple furs draped over my lap and a basket of alien food.

I let out a weak sob and buried my face in my hands.

At least my dick is still attached to me, I guess.

CHAPTER TEN

Guilt gnawed at my insides as Seis and I left the dungeon. Left that poor creature alone down there.

He was clearly intelligent. He had tried to communicate with us—he'd done a better job of it than we had, as well.

I didn't want to leave him, but there was nothing to achieve if I stayed. He couldn't understand us. We couldn't understand him. I had argued with Lyri about how pointless it was keeping him here, how we should just let him go back through the void in the guestroom, and Lyri had argued back.

He'd wanted me to give him the keys. I'd refused. Then he'd snapped that he was sick of arguing about this, said he was tired and wanted a fuck before going to sleep, and dragged Gryf out of the dungeon.

I felt even worse as I locked the dungeon door behind us. It was cold and damp down there—not pleasant conditions at all. The creature hadn't even done anything wrong. He had *cried*, for Mabs' sake—wept with fear at waking up locked in a cell, being gawked at by beings he clearly wasn't familiar with. Wherever he had come from was... other. Not here. Not this world. I could glean that much.

The thought was utterly terrifying. There was another world somewhere, and there was a *portal* to it in my guestroom. How many of those creatures lived on the other side? How many of them were going to start pouring through into my hyll?

I understood Lyri's reluctance to let him go before we knew more, but I still wasn't happy about it. I didn't think that creature was here on a scouting mission for an invading army, or to do anything nefarious whatsoever. I thought he had stumbled through the void by accident. I thought he was as confused and shocked as we were.

Anxiety made my gut cramp as Seis and I walked through the quiet hyll to my private quarters. By the Mabs, what was I supposed to do? There was an otherworldly creature locked in my dungeon, scared and crying. I'd meant what I said to Seis—I felt like an awful tyrant. A power-mad Moric who locked creatures up just for being different.

How did Lyri expect to get *any* information from him when we couldn't understand each other? How long did he mean us to keep him here? And what would happen when we let him go?

My head was starting to hurt as Seis and I entered the antechamber to my bedroom, my ears twitching as pain throbbed at my temples.

"Would you like me to stay with him, Moric?" he asked as I reached up to rub my forehead. "With the otherworlder?"

It didn't seem fair to make Seis do that, especially as he needed rest, even though the thought of the poor creature being even more scared while he was alone made me miserable. But if I said yes, I would have to give Seis the gaoler's keys. I trusted Seis with my life—he was my personal guard—but for some reason, I was very reluctant to let go of those keys.

"No, Seis." I looked over to give him a weary smile. "Go and sleep. Your evening has already been ruined."

"I wouldn't say ruined," he mused, scrubbing a hand over the top of his mane with a sheepish chuckle. "I daresay it's been the most interesting evening I've had for years."

"Mm. Quite," I mumbled, staring vacantly at the wall as I pictured the creature's tear-stained face again.

"You must sleep yourself, Lor," Seis said gently. "He is as comfortable as he can be. He has food

and water and bedding. He will be fine until morning.”

“He’s not comfortable. He’s scared. Petrified.”

“Well...” Seis lifted his huge shoulders in a helpless shrug. “I’m afraid there’s not much more we can do to alleviate those fears for the time being.”

I pursed my lips, then stiffly walked to the ornate bench and sat down to pull off my boots. My voice was tight when I said, “We could let him go.”

Seis was silent for a moment, which meant my shoulders hunched up with apprehension when he carefully said, “I know you are unhappy with this, Lor, but... I agree with Lyri. You said it yourself. We have no idea what’s on the other side of that void. What he might do if we let him go back.”

Realising I wasn’t going to get support from Seis’ corner, I sighed and gave a tight nod. “Well, let’s just see what tomorrow brings. Goodnight, Seis.”

He hovered for a moment before turning for the door. “Goodnight, Moric.”

“Lor,” I corrected, and heard him huff in amusement.

“Lor,” he amended with a tiny bow of his head. “Goodnight.”

Then he was gone, closing the door behind him and leaving me in silence. I finished tugging off my boots, leaving them neatly tucked under the bench, and padded through to my bedroom. My mind stayed fixed on the creature as I undressed for bed, pulling on a loose nightshirt and trousers made from delicate myrix silk.

It stayed fixed on him as I cleansed my teeth and carefully unpinned all the braids in my hair so they fell loose around my shoulders, still riddled with the Moric’s beads and gems.

It stayed fixed on him as I extinguished the candles and lanterns and climbed into bed, pulling across the drapes to block out the light from the fireplace. I stared up at the canopy, stiff and tense under the luxurious gysian sheets. The Moric’s beads dug into the back of my head against the pillow, just as they did every night.

I forced myself not to reach up and fiddle with them—another nervous habit Raynir had scolded me for. They had felt heavy at first, like the weight of our mother’s presence was trapped in them. I still remembered having to stand there and watch the royal deathlayer gently thread them out of her hair while she lay, still and lifeless, on her catafalque. I had flinched from the sound of each one hitting the ceremonial metal dish, the jewels and beads gleaming bright in its shallow black belly.

It was tradition for the heir to watch the royal jewels be removed from the deceased Moric’s hair. Lyri hadn’t had to watch with me, and I remembered my hand clenching repeatedly into a fist as I stood there silently, staring at our dead mother, wishing he was with me.

She had looked much the same as in life. Beautiful and elegant, her skin still a rich royal blue, though that had been paint to cover death’s pallor. Her grey hair had been loose for once so the gems could be removed for the first time in two hundred years, since she had become Moric after our grandfather died.

Lyri and I had been just seventeen when she passed. When I became Moric. Not yet adults. Our mother had been a good ruler—strong-willed and caring and fair. She had died too young, and we still didn’t know what had taken her, what had made her so weak and lifeless in those final months.

At least she had been here to almost witness her sons reach adulthood. At least she had gotten to see Lyri shape his body into the man he had always been. She had immediately called for the royal healthkeeper when he finally told her, years after he had told me, his hand sweating in mine the night we had gone to her chamber for him to finally tell her that he was her son, not her daughter.

She had hugged him tight—hugged both of us. It was one of the only three times I had seen Lyri cry since we were tiny—the second had been when he woke up from his surgery and looked down at his

flat chest for the first time. Mama and I had paced the hallway outside the room until we were finally allowed in and rushed to his side.

The third had been when she died.

She had ordered for the import of an exotic plant that she had heard rumours of having the ability to alter one's body, to give Lyri the other things he had always dreamt of. A deeper voice, denser muscles, a more angular jaw like mine.

She had been a wonderful mother, even while she had grieved for our father, who had been thrown from his morke on the road to Ayivis, the capital of the neighbouring fiefdom, to represent her at a diplomatic dinner. Lyri and I had been too young to truly remember him, but I did remember how long it had taken the sorrow to leave her silver eyes.

She had been snatched from us too soon. Far sooner than any of us had ever anticipated—vints lived for centuries, and she should have had another few before age took her away. But that was life. Cruel and unfair and confusing. Not even the crystallised flowers of the layth vines had helped her. Whatever had killed her had been invisible, unexplainable. It had happened, and there had been no stopping it.

And now I was Moric, but in that moment, as I rolled onto my side and curled up into a ball, I felt like a little boy again. I wanted my mama here to make everything better—to deal with all these problems. The way the council was treating the salyik. Whatever else they might be doing behind my back. The otherworldly creature I had locked away in the dungeon like a cruel tyrant.

Mama would have known what to do. Mama would have dealt with it all with poise and grace, like she'd dealt with everything. I felt like an untrained child playing make-believe, wearing the Moric's clothes and beads.

I didn't feel strong enough to handle any of this.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Several hours later, I was still awake and thinking of the creature.

Was he still crying? Had he tried any of the food? Had he drunk some water?

Or did he think we were trying to poison him or make him ill?

What if his kind had a very specific diet? What if Lyri had been right—what if he required something we didn't even consider food to survive? And what if he needed it often—every hour or so? We had no idea how to care for him. He was something I had never seen before. Something *none* of us had ever seen.

What if he was already dying?

Horror made me wrench up in bed and fling back the covers. Oh Mabs, what if we went down to the dungeon in the morning and the creature had *died*? I would never forgive myself.

Yanking back the drapes, I scrambled out of bed and shuffled into my embroidered slippers, then hurriedly shrugged on my robe and belted it. Snatching up a lantern containing a dawn-shard from the Amaranthine Forest, I tapped on the glass to make it flare to life.

The weak pink light cast an eerie glow over my otherwise dark bedroom, the fire burned too low now to provide any light of its own. My heart was thundering as I slipped through the antechamber and into the hall, then paused and doubled back to pick up a decorative dagger displayed in a glass case. I was useless with the thing, and my gut roiled at the thought of wielding it against the creature, but... I was going down there alone. If I got myself killed, I was fairly sure that Lyri would find a way to bring me back to life just to murder me himself for my stupidity.

I hesitated before leaving again, staring at the ring of gaoler's keys on my bedside table. I wasn't... I wouldn't let him out behind my brother's back, but it made sense to take them. If he was ill, or dying, he would need help.

My fingers trembled lightly as I slid the heavy keyring into my robe pocket, its heft weighing down the flimsy material. Clutching the dagger—still in its sheath so I didn't accidentally stab myself out of carelessness—I slipped back into the hall and hurried toward the double doors at the end.

Drawing to an abrupt stop just in front of them, I fidgeted anxiously as I listened to the muffled, rumbling voices of the guards' posted on the other side, chatting casually to each other to no doubt alleviate the boredom of standing watch all night.

It wasn't seemly for anyone to see the Moric in his nightclothes. It also probably wasn't particularly seemly for the Moric to be wandering through the hyll in the dead of night, clutching a dagger and sweating through his silky shirt and robe.

Was there another way for me to reach the dungeon? By the Mabs, this was *my* hyll and I felt trapped in my own quarters! Backing away from the doors, I turned and hurried back down the corridor. There was the staff staircase. I could use that and just hope I didn't get lost—or spotted—wandering around the largely unseen parts of the hyll. Glancing through the window at the end of the hall, I could see the sky just beginning to turn a deep pink on the horizon of the sea, signalling the approach of dawn. Honestly, I had no idea what time staff began rousing to start their chores for the day. Surely not before dawn? If they did, I'd have to put a stop to that. I shuddered at the thought of getting up before dawn every day.

My feet were sweating in my delicate slippers as I crept down the plain staircase, cushioned only by thin carpeting over stone. Nothing like the sumptuous rugs dotted around my private rooms. I wondered when they had last been replaced—if all the staff areas had such thin and coarse floor

coverings.

Before I had even reached the bottom step, I heard voices beyond the wooden door in front of me. I panicked, plastering myself to the wall as if that would stop them seeing me should they come through the door. I didn't even know why I was so nervous. It *was* my hyll. I could go where I wanted.

Maybe I should have gotten properly dressed.

Well, it was too late to turn back now. I had to make sure the creature was alright—that he hadn't already died because we had neglected him, because we had failed to realise that he needed... I don't know, boiling water to drink, or he only ate live insects, or he required submerging in acid every two hours to keep his strange pink colouring. We didn't know *anything* about him, and we had left him locked up with some measly blankets and food that appealed to *our* palettes. It was grossly unfair.

The voices behind the door faded, but I stayed still for another few moments to make sure they didn't return. Then I slowly eased the door open, wincing when it let out a great creak, and practically ran down the dim corridor.

“Oi!” A gruff voice shouted from behind me, making my pulse leap with fright. “Who the fuck are ___”

They cut themselves off with a choked gasp. “Hag's balls, it's—I mean, M-Moric. Can I... help you in any way?”

Breathing hard, I came to a stop and let out a quiet, strangled sound, squeezing my eyes briefly closed. Lifting my chin, I turned and eyed the vint gawping at me with as much dignity as I could muster while standing in my nightclothes with my hair wild and loose. Clasp my hands together behind my back, I squeezed the dagger hilt tight.

“Yes, you can.” I sniffed, hoping my face wasn't too shiny from nervous sweat. “Perhaps you can direct me to the...” I frantically tried to remember what other rooms were near the dungeon, then blurted, “The undercroft! I'd like to... I'd like to visit the undercroft.”

I knew where the undercroft was, despite it not being an area of the hyll that a Moric ever visited. Lyri and I had spent hours playing in the draughty, vaulted space beneath the main floor of the hyll when we were children, hiding from each other among the crates and trying on the armour and unfashionable clothing of Morics from the past.

The vint stared at me with an odd expression. “You... The undercroft, Moric? Why do you—”

He stopped, cheeks darkening when I forced myself to lift a stern brow. I despised lording over the staff—over anyone—but I didn't want him asking any questions.

Although, the staff were no doubt as gossipy as the guards. I was sure he'd immediately run and tell whoever else was up—*why* were they up so early?—that he had seen the Moric in a dishevelled state, running through the staff quarters on a wild quest to reach the undercroft at this ungodly hour.

“There is an item of my mother's I wish to retrieve.” I felt awfully guilty using Mama as a lie, but we absolutely could *not* have the staff suspecting something and poking around that area of the hyll. What if the creature started screaming in distress? They'd hear it. They'd *know*.

“Of course,” the vint hurried to say, taking a hesitant step forward. “I could... I would be happy to accompany you or fetch a guard—”

“No need.” I lifted my chin further and tried to ignore the messy braid tickling my cheek. “If you could just point me in the right direction.”

“Yes, of course,” he repeated, dipping into a slight bow before taking another step, then another bow, like he was as flustered as I felt. “It's—You just follow this corridor to the end, then take the last door on the right. That will lead you to the undercroft. But it's... it's rather unpleasant down there. Are you sure you wouldn't rather I—”

“I’m quite fine going myself. Thank you.” I gave him a slight nod and turned to stride confidently away, shoving the dagger under the folds of my robe so he wouldn’t spot it. One of my slippers almost fell off, making me stumble, but I quickly righted my footing and continued as if it hadn’t happened.

I could feel the vint still staring at me until I located the correct door and opened it, trying not to look too horrified by the dingy stone-walled corridor I revealed. Scurig webs hung from the ceiling, thick with dust, and detritus littered the dirty floor, though the light from my lantern was too weak to pick out exactly what I would have to step over to get to the undercroft.

The vint was still watching me, so I lifted my chin and stepped into the narrow hallway, letting the door swing shut behind me and plunging me into near darkness. I tried not to squeal when a web brushed over my face, frantically smacking at my ear and cheek, convinced I could feel legs skittering over my skin.

I scrunched up the silky fabric of my sleeping trousers, wrinkling it terribly, so that the hems didn’t drag over the filthy floor. Tiptoeing over indeterminate shapes, I shuddered when the pink light from my lantern slid over a small pile of bones. Then something *moving*.

The air smelled awful in here, nothing like the sweet herbal fragrance from the dried dolna stems that were dotted around my quarters. I sucked in a horrified gasp when something chirped in the darkness ahead of me, many tiny legs scrabbling over stone.

It hadn’t been this frightful when Lyri and I were children, had it? Or perhaps it had and I just hadn’t cared. We’d spent most of our days filthy with mud and grass stains anyway. And Lyri would have never cared about scurig webs. He used to let those awful critters crawl over his hand when we were playing in the gardens. He also used to shove them in my face to make me scream.

I *despised* insects. By the Mabs, I hoped the otherworld creature didn’t require insects to eat. I wouldn’t be able to watch him crunching down on bristly little things with wings and pincers and too many legs.

I sighed in relief when I emerged from the dank corridor into a small, rounded vestibule. Setting down the lantern, I frantically brushed my hands over my hair and face and robe, making sure no critters were clinging onto me.

The doorway we had used earlier in the night was to my left, and three other doors led off from there. One was to the undercroft, one to the casemate—where weaponry from times of battle was stored—and the last to the dungeon.

I’d forgotten that I’d locked this door to the dungeon, so it was lucky I had brought the keys anyway. I fumbled with them, trying to stay quiet, but they clanged against the side of my lantern before I slipped the correct key into the lock. I winced, turning it slowly and hearing a clank.

Now that I was here, I was horribly nervous about being alone with the creature. No Lyri or Seis to make me feel safe. Mabs, was I being a complete fool? What if the creature had merely been acting helpless? What if the moment he saw me alone, he spat acid or breathed fire or shot deadly quills from under his skin?

I froze as the door creaked open with a groan, revealing the dark staircase leading down to the dungeon. No sounds came from within. I couldn’t even hear the creature breathing. That hurried me into action and I began gingerly creeping down the stairs, still trying to keep the hems of my sleeping trousers clean.

Ara, give me wisdom. I said the old prayer in my head. *Hag, give me courage.*

Mabs, please don’t let me die a terrible death at the hands of this mysterious otherworldly creature.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The torches were still lit down here—we hadn't left the creature in total darkness—and the pink glow from my dawn-shard lantern slid over the white firelight flickering across the stone walls, illuminating the wide walkway between the cells.

I heard the creature suck in a sharp, fearful breath at my approach, which just made me feel even worse. I hurried down the walkway, no longer caring about my sleeping trousers getting filthy from the dusty floor, but before I reached his cell, I carefully tucked the sheathed dagger into the waistband at the back of my trousers. I didn't think the sight of it would make him trust me.

My heart was pounding as I reached his cell and held up the lantern to see him better. He was still sitting in the exact same place as earlier, huddled against the wall in the corner of his bed, the furs drawn up over his raised knees.

His tear-streaked face was so pale—paler than before—and his strange eyes were rimmed in red and looked puffy. The only blot of colour on his face was his nose, now a bright pink, and as he stared at me, he sniffed wetly and wiped at it.

The guilt made my knees almost buckle.

"I'm sorry," I croaked, knowing it was pointless. He couldn't understand me.

The food basket and water were untouched, but at least he was still alive. Though I had no idea if crying meant the same thing for his kind as it did for us—perhaps he wasn't sad. Perhaps he was... leaking out all his internal fluids because he was dying.

Panic made me set down the lantern and fumble in my robe pockets. The belt had come loose while I ran through the staff quarters, and one side of the silky robe was being dragged down by the heavy set of gaoler's keys in the pocket. But in the other, I found my embroidered handkerchief.

"H-here." I hesitantly held it out between the bars, my chest constricting with yet more guilt over the performative action. If he truly was leaking to death, a damn handkerchief wasn't going to help.

He didn't move to take it anyway. He stared at it, then at me, and stayed frozen on his awful bed. But at least he had stopped crying—or leaking—as if shock had halted the flow of tears from his eyes.

My face flaming with heat, I drew my hand back and cleared my throat, reaching up to fiddle with the beads in my loose hair. That drew his gaze up to them, and I could have sworn his tense shoulders unclenched just a little. Perhaps he... perhaps he recognised me from earlier, then.

"*Arryoo gunuh keel mee?*" he mumbled.

Not knowing what he'd said nor how to answer, I swallowed thickly and pointed at the basket and bottles. "Do you want to eat? Or drink?"

He looked over at them, gaze growing wary. He didn't trust us then. Of course he didn't. Lyri had wrestled him to the ground the moment he appeared, and then we had thrown him in the *dungeon*.

"I'm sorry," I blurted again. "We just—We didn't know what to do."

He was eyeing me with that same wariness now, his pink mouth trembling but thankfully no more tears leaking from him. His eyes looked big and watery, the sheen of tears making the blue of them even brighter, like the crystals that lined river edges and jutted out from waterfalls.

I found myself staring at him, taking everything in. His nose was fairly big, and more rounded than the sharp edge of a vint nose. His jaw was wider too, and his pink lips were full in a way that was oddly distracting.

I grew sad yet again at the sight of those rounded off ears. Was he born like that, or had someone disfigured him? What odd, tiny little ears. His stuck out quite far, like the handles of a pot, and I

noticed he had a gold hoop through one lobe, which intrigued me. Vints pierced our ears too. It was purely decorative, but other piercings were customary for certain milestones in a vint's life, and the royals were more pierced than anyone else.

We stared at each other in silence for a long time. I could see his gaze roaming over my face, taking in all the differences between us like I had done with him. It made me self-conscious in a way I hadn't felt in years. People didn't much *look* at me anymore—they bowed at the sight of me and kept their heads deferentially lowered, eyes averted out of respect. To boldly stare back at a Moric was regarded as insolence.

But this creature was openly gazing at me, actually *seeing* me. He didn't know I was a Moric—he probably didn't even know what a Moric was. I was just a strange creature to him, as he was to me.

When a low gurgling sound came from the cell, his face flamed pink and he looked away quickly. But I recognised the noise for what it was—a hungry belly. For some reason, that mundane sound chased away some of the fear that still lingered in the back of my mind. Maybe we weren't all that different. Parts of him seemed... familiar, in a way. His navel. His pierced ear. His rumbling stomach, telling me he needed food.

But he wasn't eating. Maybe he *couldn't* eat it, or maybe he was too scared to try. And I had no way to reassure him that it was safe. Unless...

"W-will you... will you share a meal with me?" I slowly lowered myself to the ground, sitting back on my heels. My robe and night clothes would be frightfully filthy, but I didn't care. Alright, I cared a little. But I was more concerned with trying to make sure the creature was as comfortable as possible.

When I had been the one to lock him up in a cell.

He didn't move, so I tried giving him a little smile and pointed at the food and water again. When he still didn't move, I mimed breaking the loaf and nibbling on it, then pointed again.

He shook his head, which made me sit up straighter. Did that mean the same thing that it did for us? Was he saying no?

"*Aiduno wutitt iz,*" he mumbled, huddling deeper under the furs. "*Mnaht gunuh eeditt.*"

We lapsed back into silence as I fiddled anxiously with the handkerchief in my lap. His eyes drifted down, so I followed his gaze to stare at my own hands. Had he never seen someone with skin the colour of mine before? Truthfully, many from *this* world had never seen a royal vint. We were the only ones with this deep, rich blue tone. All other vints had black or grey skin, which grew paler with age.

There were tiny barbells embedded across the backs of all my fingers between my first two knuckles. The Moric's heir was pierced there when they came into adulthood, so that our hands could be adorned with thin chains that wound up our arms at ceremonial events. I had received mine early, when my mother died, so that I could be properly adorned for my enthronement.

When I flexed my fingers, I could feel the metal shifting under my skin. The ceremonial garb and chains I'd had to wear to be officially named Moric had tugged painfully at the fresh piercings, but they were long since healed now.

When the creature's stomach gurgled again, I looked up and gazed at him miserably. "Please eat," I begged. "It's safe, I promise you."

"Sssafe," he repeated cautiously, and I lurched up to grip the bars as my eyes widened. "*Yooall kepp sayindatt urrleer. Sa-aafe. Wuduz it meen?*"

"Yes, yes." I nodded at him encouragingly. "Safe. It's safe. You are safe."

"Ssafe," he said again, watching me suspiciously. But then he sighed and slumped back, turning his

face away and drawing the furs up to his chin.

I slowly sat back, mouth pulling down into a miserable frown. This was impossible. It was *pointless*. It wasn't like Lyri would be able to produce a magic potion to make us suddenly understand one another.

There was no point keeping this poor creature here. We were acting like monsters. And I didn't want him to think I was a monster.

"I will free you," I croaked, jerking my gaze down to my robe pocket, trying to get rid of the image of Lyri's furious face when he found out what I was about to do. Mabs, my brother was going to be so angry with me.

As I pulled the heavy ring of keys free from my pocket, I sensed the creature go very still and he sucked in a sharp breath. Glancing up, I tried to give him a smile as I rose on shaky legs. The dagger was still tucked against my back, the leather sheath warmed from my skin.

Would I be able to use it if he attacked me?

Fiddling with the keys, I gazed at him anxiously. I wasn't Lyri. I wasn't a fighter. I was awful at swordplay. And my body was softer and weaker from doing very little but sitting in dull meetings and moping in my quarters. Nothing like Lyri's strong, wiry frame.

"I will t-take you back to the void," I told him, then mimed unlocking the cage and used two fingers to portray us walking back through the hyll to the guestroom.

"*Yur leddin meegoh?*" The creature sat up straight, the furs slipping into his lap and showing me his pale stomach beneath the short, ragged hem of his shirt.

I tried to make sense of the emblem on the front of it, but I simply couldn't. A strange image with indecipherable markings above it. Dragging my gaze away, I forced myself to stare at him intently and mimed the actions again, then pointed at him and me.

He nodded quickly—I just had to hope it meant the same thing for both of us—and scrambled off the bed. I could see his knees trembling, the fine hairs on his long legs standing up and his skin prickling from the cold. It only reinforced that my decision was the right one. We couldn't leave him down here. It was wrong. So wrong.

"Please, by the Mabs, don't kill me the moment I open this damned cell," I muttered to myself as I located the correct key on the ring and reached out for the lock with trembling fingers.

The creature stayed well back, wrapping his arms around himself and watching me in silence. My pulse thrummed in the hollow of my throat as the lock clanked and the door swung open.

Neither of us moved. I licked my lips nervously and pocketed the keys, then flushed when I realised how filthy the front of my trousers was. Hurriedly trying to brush away the dirt, I took a step back, then picked up the lantern.

"W-we... we will have to be very quiet. And careful." I pressed three fingers over my mouth, the non-verbal sign for "*sssst*"—to stay silent—and prayed he understood.

After a few seconds, he nodded slowly. He didn't make a sound as he took one step closer, then another. He was trembling wildly, as if *he* was the one afraid of being hurt. That relaxed me just a touch, allowed me to give him an encouraging smile.

I didn't think this creature was dangerous at all.

He still looked petrified, especially as I gestured for him to follow me and started walking away from the cell. Then I realised how much Lyri would scold me for having him at my back, so I stopped and waited for him to catch up.

He was frozen in place, trembling just outside of his cell. I took a tiny step closer and gestured for him to follow me again.

He didn't. Instead, he swallowed and croaked, "*Arryoo gunuh egzpurmen onmai dik?*"

I could hear the question in his voice. I stood there staring at him helplessly, wishing I could understand him—that I could alleviate his fears. I just wanted to *help* him.

"We must go." I took another step closer, hoping my pleading tone was obvious to him. "Please. We must hurry. Everyone will be waking soon."

He stared at me, chin trembling again, which alarmed me to no end. Oh Mabs, was he going to start crying again? I couldn't bear it.

"Please," I repeated. "You are safe. I promise. I won't hurt you."

"Safe," he echoed, though I knew he was just mimicking me and didn't really understand the word. I nodded anyway, hoping to soothe him.

After a few more seconds, he let out a hard breath and looked around. I could see some kind of resolve settle over his interesting features before he gave me a tight nod and started walking forward.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I waited until he was beside me, my eyes widening as I looked up at him. He was much taller and broader than me. And this close, I could... I could smell him. The tang of fear-sweat was there, but it wasn't unpleasant. And underneath it was something warm and soft, something that made me want to draw his scent into my lungs and hold it there. It reminded me of *lokl*, a dessert that was always served in the colder months in Thinir, made of fruit stewed in aromatics and piled on top of a light doughy cake studded with chunks of candied salted meat. It was my favourite.

He stared back down at me, his gaze a blend of fearful and curious. Realising I was wasting precious seconds, I looked away and started walking again.

He followed me in silence out of the dungeon and up the stairs to the vestibule. I froze, wondering which route to take. I didn't know how to get to the guest quarters through the route I'd taken just now, but I could just about remember the way that we had come to bring him down here in the night.

I didn't know how long I'd been down in the dungeon, but I hoped no more staff were up yet. The hyll still sounded quiet, and it couldn't have been much past dawn. Still, before leaving the vestibule, I shrugged off my robe and awkwardly held it out to the creature.

"To hide your... your face," I whispered, blushing furiously as my gaze swept down his half-bared frame. "So you are not quite as conspicuous."

He stared at the robe in my hands, then slowly reached out to take it. Luckily, it was designed to be big and flowy, so it fit over his wide shoulders and the sleeves covered his strange pale pink hands. The bottoms of his legs were still visible, but that couldn't be helped.

With trembling fingers, I reached up and lifted the hood over his golden mane. He stared down at me, strands hanging in his bright crystal blue eyes.

They are strange but lovely eyes, I thought absently, then felt my face heat further, so I stepped back quickly.

"Come." My voice was a hoarse whisper as I crept to the door and pressed my ear to it, making sure no one was lurking on the other side. When nothing but silence greeted me, I eased it open and stuck my head out.

The corridor was empty. It was another staff corridor—the route we had taken to bring the creature down here—and I wondered why that loudmouthed vint from earlier hadn't sent me *this* way and not through that awful dank hallway to the undercroft.

I quickly realised why when we started hurrying down it. It led to a different part of the hyll, away from my private quarters, and I wondered if there was a separate part of the staff area reserved solely for tending to the Moric. That seemed rather wasteful.

I couldn't hear any staff at all in the rooms leading off from this corridor, which I supposed made sense—we had no guests, so no one needed to be here to tend to the guest quarters. But as we were nearing the end of the hall, where I knew the staircase was, two voices rang out from the other end.

"Hag's balls!" I hissed, immediately blushing as the vulgar phrase popped out of my mouth. Thank the Mabs he couldn't understand me. I would've been mortified.

Without thinking, I grabbed the creature's wrist and dragged him into the nearest room. It turned out to be a small store cupboard or larder of some kind, wooden shelves stacked with dusty crates lining the tiny space.

I crowded the creature up against the far wall in the shadows, instinct guiding me to keep us hidden. His breathing had sped up, and I could feel his heart pounding in his chest as I squeezed

between the shelves with him and tapped on my lantern to get the dawn-shard's light to fade away.

Two vints were approaching, ambling slowly down the corridor and chatting between loud yawns. My heart was slamming against my ribs, and I was convinced they'd be able to hear it. Weak morning light from the hallway filtered into the cupboard, but we were tucked in the shadows, and unless they came in, they wouldn't spot us.

Thankfully, the creature stayed silent in front of me. We were squashed together awkwardly, bodies pressed in a way that made my throat and ears grow incredibly hot. The voices in the hallway got louder as the vints neared, and I frantically tried to think about what I'd say if they saw us. This was all very unseemly—the Moric, dirty and dishevelled in his nightclothes, hiding away in a staff cupboard with a half-dressed otherworldly creature. And he was wearing my *robe*, for Mabs' sake—what would they think?

One of the vints chuckled and said, "The amount of sheets those guards tear up while they're fucking. What I wouldn't give to experience a night with a baregh."

"What?" the other blurted with a horrified laugh. "They'd tear you in half, Mayri!"

"Oh no, they're meant to be *exceptional* lovers." I could hear the smirk in their voice. "Haven't you heard about the knot they have at the base of their cock? If they can get it to fit inside you, it locks you together while they're coming."

"Really?" The other vint sounded more intrigued than horrified now. My face burned, and I tried very, very hard not to picture the ever-prominent bulge in poor Seis' trousers.

"Mmm, and apparently that's when their claws come out. If they can knot you, it makes them come so hard they don't stop for a minute straight at *least*. They go wild. All the while you're just"—the vint sighed dreamily—"pinned beneath them on their huge cock."

My entire body was hot with utter embarrassment. Thank the Mabs the otherworlder couldn't understand this vulgar conversation. Were all the staff this *open* about such things? I supposed they probably were. Lyri was, and he was a royal like me. But Lyri was a terror, although he hadn't ever told me *that* aspect of his dalliances with the baregh guards.

The other vint was quiet for a moment, before clearing their throat. "Maybe I... maybe I *will* help you clean the barracks today."

There was a bark of laughter, which made both me and the creature jump. "Oh, so *now* you want to skulk around the guards' bedrooms. Alright, you can help, but first we need to find those extra sheets."

Oh Hag's balls, were the sheets in this cupboard? *Please don't let the sheets be in this cupboard.*

"They're in here."

My vision whited over with terror until I realised they weren't entering this cupboard—they were opening another door on the other side of the corridor.

"Should we really be using the guest sheets to replace the guards'?" one of the vints asked doubtfully. I could hear the rustle of fabric as they piled folded linens into their arms.

"The Moric isn't one for guests, which I'm thankful for," the other said. "Hate those snooty nobles. We'll let the seneschal know so he can put in an order for more linens, but we can't leave the guards without bedsheets."

"Alright."

There was the creak of a door being shut, then their footsteps retreated down the long corridor. I didn't move, ears twitching as I strained to keep listening, to make sure they were truly gone.

The creature was unmoving against me, but I could feel a faint tremor still running through his big body. His fear-sweat scent had sharpened, and he felt very warm through my silky nightclothes.

I was still pressed to his front, far too close for propriety, but I... couldn't bring myself to move. I

was a head shorter than him, and I gazed in the darkness at the prominent bump in his throat, resisting the strange urge to reach up and feather my fingertips over it, especially when it dipped as he swallowed.

Realising the corridor had been utterly silent for long seconds now, I stepped back hurriedly and turned to hide my burning face.

“We are nearly there,” I whispered pointlessly, peeking out of the cupboard to check the corridor was empty.

The creature followed me in silence as we slipped out and hurried down the hallway to the staircase at the end. When we reached the guest quarters, I glanced back to make sure that he was alright.

He was staring around with wide eyes, looking somewhat dazed. I tried to see what had unnerved him so much. It was just a corridor, the walls panelled in gleaming iridescent wood from the Amaranthine Forest, the curtains made from a unique kind of gysian that shimmered white.

I didn’t much like the décor of the guest quarters. It was very gaudy and ostentatious, designed to make any guests feel *important*. I much preferred the muted jewel tones of my own quarters.

The door to the guestroom with the void was unguarded, making me pause until I realised we had sent them away last night. Well, it worked in our favour now. I was so close to letting the creature go back to... wherever he came from.

Suddenly, a wave of despair overcame me. Which was ridiculous. He was an otherworldly creature. He couldn’t stay here. I shouldn’t *want* him to stay here. And he was clearly scared and uncomfortable. He needed to eat.

He needed to go.

Why did the thought make my shoulders slump as I opened the door and revealed the void—the thing that had started all of this? Why was I feeling... sad about never seeing this creature again? I couldn’t understand him. I had no idea what he was or where he came from. His clothes were strange and very revealing, and his features were soft and rounded, not sharp and beautiful like a vint’s. His skin was still splotchy from crying, his hair a tangle on the top of his head. He shouldn’t have been at all pleasing to look at, but as he followed me into the room and I turned to face him, I couldn’t look away.

He was staring at the void, terror bleaching his already pale features further. He took a step back and shook his head.

“*Ai dunwunnuh goh froodat fing.*”

“This is what you came through,” I told him gently, gesturing at the void. It had been nothing but black when the creature tumbled through it last night, but now the colours had returned—browns and greens and flashes of blue, paler than his eyes.

It made me wonder just what was on the other side. Did all creatures there have blue eyes like him? Were those flashes of blue the eye of some... gigantic version of the being in front of me, peering into the void, waiting for him to return?

“This is how you go back,” I said, nodding in encouragement at the void. But I understood his apprehension—I wouldn’t want to step through that thing either.

And it confirmed what I suspected—that he hadn’t come here to spy or scout for an army. He had fallen through the void in his world by accident. It seemed like he had indeed literally *fallen* through it, landing in a heap on the guestroom floor.

And we had locked him up in a cell.

My mouth trembled, and I took a step closer, starting to speak even though he couldn’t understand

me.

“I’m sorry for how we treated you,” I croaked, gazing up into his strange crystal eyes. “I’m sorry we locked you up and tried to make you eat food you aren’t familiar with. I’m sorry my brother threw you to the ground and pinned your arms behind your back when you were just... scared and confused. We were—Well, Lyri probably wasn’t scared, but I was scared too. I didn’t—I’ve never... We have never seen anything like you before.”

He didn’t say anything back. Of course he didn’t. He just stared down at me, blue eyes wide.

“I-I hope you are able to get back to your home safely. And fill your belly with food you enjoy.” Without thinking, I reached out and touched my fingertips to his bare stomach, then immediately drew my hand back as I choked on a humiliated breath. Mabs, what was *wrong* with me?

The creature had gone still, his stomach dipping under my brief touch. He was still staring down at me, but he seemed calmer now. His chest rose steadily, and his eyes weren’t quite so wide.

Slowly, his pink mouth tipped up into a tiny, watery smile. My pulse leapt at the sight of it, gaze fixing on his lips. When something hot and sweet pierced through my belly, I stepped back in a flustered rush and averted my eyes.

“I’m—I hope this doesn’t traumatise you too much and you are able to go back to your life,” I mumbled, uncomfortable now as I tried not to look at his big body under my robe. Mabs, there really was something wrong with me. The way I was feeling was... not natural. He was an unknown creature. This was *perverse*.

“Please, you must go,” I croaked, gesturing at the void again. “I’ll be expected to get up and start my day soon. There will be pandemonium if the staff or my guard find me missing from my rooms.”

Even though he didn’t know what I’d said, he let out a breath and took a step closer to the void. Then he turned to look at me, lips curving into another tiny smile again, making my breath catch.

“*Tengyoo*,” he said, voice still unsteady but much, much calmer. “*Ai dun—Ai dunnoh waddafuk izgowen onbut... tengyoo fur leddinmee goh.*”

My chest ached with the desire to know what he had just said—to understand him. And not just because he was an anomaly, a fascinating creature from another place, a mysterious stranger who had fallen into my hyll. But because, for some reason, it felt like I needed to understand *him*.

I stood in silence, not quite sure why my throat was closing up with sorrow, as I watched him step through the void and vanish forever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I wasn't sure which was more terrifying—coming face to face with those monsters or having to knowingly step through a portal.

The sensation was horrible, but thankfully brief. For a second or two, it felt like my organs were getting all scrambled up and sucked out through my bellybutton, before I stumbled onto ground that rustled and crunched in a familiar way.

And promptly fell flat on my face.

Spluttering to get the dirt and old leaves out of my mouth, I lifted my head and peered blearily around. Relief made my entire body sag into the ground. I was back in the forest.

Quaking wildly, I clawed at the earth to hoist myself higher up the slope before standing up on unsteady legs. In front of me, I could see the wide divot in the forest floor, the path I had carved out as I'd rolled down the gentle incline like a total idiot.

Not sure I really wanted to see, I forced myself to peer back. The sun was rising, filling the forest with hazy light and allowing me to see the near-invisible shimmering rip in the hollow of a fat tree trunk. It was barely wide enough for me to get through, which meant it had been my own sheer dumb luck that had caused me, in this great big forest, to trip and fall directly into the portal to another freaking *world*.

I almost couldn't believe it. Had I actually smacked my head and dreamed the whole thing while unconscious? That would—obviously—make far more sense. But as I lifted a hand to shove my tangled hair back from my face, I froze when I saw the dark, silky sleeve covering my arm.

The... the monster—the beautiful one with the beads in his hair—had given me his robe. And I was still wearing it. I stared down at the fabric, which was jet black with a strange iridescent sheen, the colour shifting into deep purples and golds when I moved my arm.

He'd come back to free me. My chin trembled as my eyes grew hot, and I vacantly realised I was in some kind of shock. I couldn't just stand here. I had to get back to the camp—the other counsellors had probably freaked out when I never returned from taking a leak. They might have told one of the organisers. The kids would be scared.

Sneakers slipping over damp leaves, I made my way up the incline, shivering in the cold morning air. Wrapping the silky robe tighter around me, I walked in silence through the forest, past the remnants of last night's campfire and all the beer cans still littering the ground, before emerging on the edge of the camp.

The first thing I spotted was all the cars. Panic made my lungs stutter when I saw the sheriff's car from the nearby town of Linden Falls parked outside the main office. Oh my god, was I gonna get arrested for something?

I stepped out of the forest and stopped dead, clutching the robe tighter around me. The sheriff was talking to one of the camp organisers, Stan, a thick moustache hiding his grim mouth and aviator sunglasses over his eyes. Parents were ushering sniffing kids into their cars, and some of the other camp counsellors stood clustered together, talking with worried expressions on their faces.

No one noticed me at first, until April glanced over and shrieked.

"Jugs!" She started running toward me, so I slowly walked forward on shaky legs. When she reached me, she threw her arms around my neck and squeezed hard. "Oh my gawd, are you okay? We were so worried about you!"

"I'm... I'm okay," I heard myself say, my voice vacant.

“What happened?” Her small hand slipped into mine, and she started leading me toward the camp. Stan’s wife Mindy had joined him and the sheriff, and the three of them were striding across the grass to meet us.

“Jugs, oh my goodness, are you okay?” Mindy pulled me into a hug before stepping back, her hands on my shoulders. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“I’m okay,” I repeated, shivering uncontrollably under the thin robe.

“Do you want to tell us what happened, son?” The sheriff’s gruff voice made panic stab through my chest. He was staring at me, and I could see my pale, dazed face in the reflection of his aviators.

I stared back at him, my mouth opening and closing wordlessly. What the hell could I tell him? That I’d fallen through a portal into a monster world? They’d all think I’d taken drugs or something.

“I got lost,” I croaked. “We were... we were hanging out in the woods and I wandered off to pee and... I got lost.”

“What?” April was staring at me. “But we looked for you for hours. We were calling for you.”

“I guess I didn’t hear,” I mumbled, wanting to shrink back under the gazes of everyone around me.

The sheriff’s moustache twitched, a dark brow peeking up from behind his sunglasses. “Were you drinking, son?”

“Jugs only had one beer.” April went red, darting a nervous glance at Mindy and Stan. “And, um, only a couple of people were drinking. No one underage.”

Mindy sighed and looked at Stan, who was frowning at me.

“Did you take anything else, Jugs?” he asked. “You can tell us. It’s okay.”

“No!” I blurted. “I didn’t—I didn’t take anything, and April’s right, I wasn’t drunk. I swear.”

“Then how come you didn’t hear your friends calling for you?” the sheriff asked in a stern voice.

I swallowed and croaked, “I don’t—I don’t know. I must’ve... wandered off too far.”

“That was really dangerous, Jugs.” Now Mindy was frowning at me too.

To my utter mortification, my chin began to wobble and my eyes got hot. I was exhausted and still in shock from everything that had happened. My body had been clenched up in terror for the last however-many hours, and now everyone thought I’d taken drugs and passed out in the forest.

“I didn’t take anything,” I said tearfully. “I just got lost.”

“Okay, it’s okay.” Mindy stepped forward and wrapped her arm around my shoulders. “You need to rest. I’ll make you some cocoa. Jugs is a good kid, sheriff,” she added. “I don’t think he would’ve taken anything.”

The sheriff grunted, placing his hands on his hips. “Alright. Be more careful next time, okay? You scared a lot of people here.”

I sniffled and nodded, letting Mindy lead me toward camp as April trailed beside us and Stan stayed behind to talk to the sheriff. I felt April’s hand slip back into mine and squeeze, so I clutched it tight, needing the comfort as the big crowd of people outside the camp all stared.

Parents eyed my dishevelled appearance with alarm and ushered their kids faster into their cars. The other counsellors were watching with anxious eyes, and my face flushed with embarrassment at being seen in such a state. My hair was a wild mess, my face was splotchy from crying, eyes puffy and nose no doubt bright red. Dirt streaked my bare shins from where I’d fallen back into the forest, and I was still wearing the monster’s weird silky robe over my shorts and tee.

“Wh-why are there parents here?” I asked, spotting a cluster of small suitcases piled up outside the office.

Mindy sighed. “When April and the others told us you were missing, we called the sheriff. His kid is here for the summer, and so is the deputy’s. I guess... I guess word spread quickly in town. A lot of

the parents started showing up to collect their kids, because we... um..."

"We thought you'd been murdered," April blurted. "We thought some crazy psycho had grabbed you in the woods and dragged you away."

"April," Mindy muttered, then exhaled heavily. "So, yeah, looks like the camp will be closing early."

I sniffed wetly, reaching up to scrub my eye with a trembling hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," she said, but I could hear the edge beneath her words, and I knew I wasn't gonna get invited back as a counsellor next year. Not after this.

I let out a weak sob, the horror of the whole night converging on me in a rush. Coming face to face with terrifying monsters. Being tackled to the ground and thinking I was going to die. Waking up in a cold, dark cell, scared and confused and shivering.

"Oh, Jugs." April squeezed my hand. "I'll go get you some blankets. You're shaking."

She ran off as Mindy led me into the office, which was blessedly empty. After depositing me on the chair behind her desk, she crouched in front of me.

"Tell me the truth, Jugs." She gazed up at me with stern eyes. "Did you take something? I won't tell the sheriff. But I need to know if there are any drugs in the camp."

"I didn't," I insisted tearfully. "I swear. I've never taken drugs. I wouldn't even know how to *get* drugs."

She exhaled. "Were any of the others taking anything?"

I shook my head, scrubbing my nose. "No, they were just drinking."

"Well that's not great on its own," she muttered, standing up and wiping her forehead. "Don't think many parents will be too happy about sending their kids to a camp with underage counsellors getting drunk."

"I'm sorry," I blubbered, even though I hadn't been the one to buy the beer, and I'd barely drunk any.

She looked at me sharply. "Did you buy the beer?"

"No!" I blurted, frantically shaking my head. "No, I swear, and I wasn't drunk. I didn't even have half a can!"

"Then who bought it?"

I went silent, huddling under the robe. I wasn't gonna throw any of the other counsellors under the bus. What would be the point?

When I didn't say anything, Mindy sighed. "I'll go make you some cocoa."

She disappeared into the small kitchen attached to the office, and a few seconds later April burst in clutching a blanket. I managed to give her a watery smile as she wrapped it over my shoulders and rubbed my arms briskly to help warm me up.

"Where'd you get this?" she asked, nodding at the robe. "You weren't wearing it last night."

"Um, um..." I panicked, not knowing what to say. "I... found it. I was cold, so..."

"Oh, Jugs." She knelt in front of me, and I tried not to flinch when she placed her hands on my bare, trembling knees. "We were so worried about you. We found your flashlight, and we looked for you for *hours*."

"Sorry." I hurriedly scrubbed the tears off my cheeks.

"Don't be sorry." She gave my knee a soothing rub. "You must've been so scared."

That made me start crying again, my mouth trembling wildly as I choked out, "I was. I was so scared."

"How did you wander off so far? We were, like, literally screaming your name."

I was in another world locked in a dungeon, so I didn't hear you.

"I d-don't know," I blubbered. "I'm sorry."

Mindy reappeared holding a steaming mug, so I repeated, "I'm sorry. I'm s-sorry I sc-scared the parents. And the k-kids. Are they all... Are they going home?"

"Yeah," Mindy said grimly as she set the mug down beside me on the desk. "Didn't take long for word to spread that a counsellor had gone missing in the woods. They started showing up before dawn."

"S-so the camp's c-closing for the summer?"

"Yeah." April shot me a sad smile. "We're all going home. My parents are on their way."

That made me look up at Mindy, her dark ponytail hazy in my tear-blurred vision. "D-did you call my parents?"

She grimaced, looking uncomfortable. "Yeah, of course we did. Um... a maid or someone answered. She said your mom was... asleep, and your dad had already left for the office, so..."

I nodded, not voicing the fact that Mom being 'asleep' probably meant she'd passed out. "D-did you manage to get hold of my dad? Is he on his way?"

"Uh..." Mindy glanced at April. "We couldn't... get hold of him."

I tried not to let it hurt. It wasn't like I thought he really cared about me, and Mom didn't care about much at all, but surely the news that their son was *missing* would've at least made Dad leave the office for once? On a weekend, especially?

"You can stay with me if you want, Jugs." April squeezed my knee, her eyes pitying, making me duck my head. "My parents won't mind. Um, maybe."

"No, it's okay." I straightened up and scrubbed my face again, sniffing. "I'm—I have my car. It wouldn't've made sense for Dad to drive all the way up here anyway."

My voice was wooden, and I saw April and Mindy exchange a look.

"He'll be so happy to know you're alright," Mindy said, her tone gentler now.

He was probably going to be more furious that I had caused a scene than anything else. But I didn't say that.

I gave the pair of them a watery smile and reached for the mug, letting it warm my hands. "Thanks for the cocoa. I'm—I'm so sorry for causing all of this."

April made a soft sound. "Oh my gawd, Jugs, you're like, the sweetest guy ever." She squeezed my knee again and stood. "Want me to go pack up your stuff for you?"

"It's okay. I'll do it." Dread churned in my belly at the thought of going home early and having to answer to my father—to try and explain why I'd wandered off in the woods at night and got the whole camp closed down.

It wasn't like I could tell him the truth. He'd probably lock me up somewhere for the rest of my life—hide me away like a shameful family secret.

I managed a gulp of burning hot cocoa before standing up unsteadily, clutching the blanket over my shoulders. Without saying anything, April took me out the back door of the office and across the short distance to the counsellor cabins so I wouldn't have to see all the people congregated out front. My mouth trembled again.

"Thank you," I told her tearfully, feeling grateful for her friendship even though she had made me a little uncomfortable the night before. But she'd been tipsy, and she didn't know that I... didn't like girls. She was a good friend and a nice person.

"I just wish we'd found you so you didn't have to spend all night scared and alone in the forest." She squeezed my hand and led me into the cabin for the male counsellors. I was relieved to see it

empty, and I dropped her hand to pull my duffle out from under my bed.

“Are the kids okay?” I mumbled as I stuffed my clothes haphazardly into the bag.

“They don’t know what happened, but I think a few of them got upset about going home.”

My gut cramped with guilt. “I feel so bad.”

“Hey, it wasn’t like you got lost on purpose.” She rubbed my back and started folding up my T-shirts for me. “And there’s always next year, right?”

“I don’t think Mindy and Stan are gonna want me back next year,” I mumbled miserably, grabbing my flipflops and shoving them in the bag.

My shoulders hunched when I heard the cabin door open, followed by Mike’s drawling voice.

“Yo, Jugs, what the hell happened, man?”

“You okay?” Todd appeared beside me, his dark eyes concerned as he gripped my shoulder.

I gave him a tiny smile, wishing I didn’t look like total shit. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Do you need help getting home?”

“No, it’s okay,” I said quickly. “Thanks. I have my car here, so…”

“Your dad sounds like a total asswipe, man.” Mike appeared, crossing his arms. “I heard Mindy telling Stan she left a message with him about you going missing and he isn’t even here.”

“Mike,” April hissed as my shoulders hunched up further. I bent my head over my bag to keep packing in silence.

“Um…” Todd sounded uncomfortable. “Why don’t I drive you home? One of my buddies can come get your car and take it to your house. You… you don’t look like you should make a long drive, man.”

“I’ll be fine.” I lifted my head to give him a falsely bright smile. “Seriously, I’m good. Thank you.”

I just wanted to be left alone. I didn’t want to have to keep making up lies about where I’d been. I didn’t want to have to keep pretending I was okay when internally I was freaking the fuck out about falling into another world and coming face to face with monsters.

I was still wearing the robe. The one the blue monster with beads in his hair had given me before letting me go.

For some reason, I didn’t want to take it off.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The drive home was awful.

I had to pull over three times to have a mini freakout at the side of the road, my heart racing too fast and sweat beading on my forehead as the night replayed in my mind.

I hadn't even bothered to get changed before getting into my car and taking off, wanting to be as far away from that camp, that forest, as possible. April had given me my flashlight and scribbled down her number on a scrap of paper before I left, telling me to call her if I needed anything.

I didn't feel in the right frame of mind to speak to anyone. I needed to somehow process what had happened, even though that felt impossible.

Unfortunately, it looked like I would *have* to speak to someone, because when I eventually pulled into the drive of my parents' house, my dad's sports car was parked haphazardly out front.

I kept the engine idling, gripping the steering wheel tight as I stared at it, considering just turning around and driving back off. Going anywhere else. He'd surely got the message by now that I'd gone missing—and the other one Mindy said she'd left him telling him I was alright—but I was under no illusions that I'd walk inside and he'd pull me into a hug and tell me how happy he was that I was okay.

Maybe he won't even talk to me, I thought as I finally killed the engine and grabbed my duffle from the passenger seat. He was probably in his home office, even though it was a Saturday, so maybe I'd be able to sneak inside and up to my room without him hearing me. Our house was stupidly big, and his office was way on the other side.

I didn't get so lucky. The front door flew open before I'd even reached it, and my dad was standing there frowning heavily at me. I didn't look much like my dad—his hair was dark, though turning grey at the temples now, and his nose was small. I was pretty sure I'd inherited my ears and nose from my mom, but I didn't look much like her anymore either apart from the blond hair. I remembered her coming home from a “spa vacation” when I was six with black eyes, a swollen face and a thick cast over her nose, and I'd seen the tiny scars behind her ears from where she'd gotten them pinned back.

“What's this I hear about you going missing all night?”

My shoulders hunched up as I stopped on the front porch, staring at my dad's shoes so I wouldn't have to look him in the eyes. “I—Uh...”

“What the *hell* are you wearing? Is that a *woman's* robe? Get inside before the neighbours see you,” Dad hissed, stepping back and holding the door open.

I kept my head ducked as I hurried in, heading straight for the stairs, but Dad's stern voice stopped me dead.

“Living room, Michael.”

Cringing, I turned and dragged my feet into the living room, setting my bag down by the door and hurriedly moving out of the way as my dad strode in behind me.

“Sit.”

At least my mom wasn't here as well, though I doubted she would've contributed much to the conversation. I didn't let myself feel hurt that she hadn't even come to see if I was okay.

Once I'd perched uncomfortably on the edge of the couch, my knee bouncing up and down with anxiety, Dad loomed over me with his arms crossed.

“You think I don't know what's going on?” he barked, and that made me lift my head and stare at

him incredulously. How the hell could he know what had happened to me?

“You think I haven’t read about this in the papers?” He waved a hand at me, lip curling with disgust. “Teens sneaking off into the woods at night to worship the devil and hold ritualistic sacrifices and... and have *orgies*?”

I gaped at him in shock. “Wh-what?”

“Is that what that thing is?” He pointed at the silky black robe. “The robes you all wear for your satanic rituals?”

“S-satanic rituals?” I echoed, blinking fast. “What—I’m not a satanist, Dad!”

“I’ve heard you up in your room listening to that awful heavy metal music.”

“I’m *not a satanist*!”

“Then what the *hell* were you doing out there all night?” he hissed. “Why did I get a message saying my son had vanished in the woods and managed to get an entire *camp* closed down because of his utter stupidity?”

I shrank back, wanting to wrap the robe tighter around myself. “I... I got lost.”

“Were you doing drugs?”

“No!”

“Were you drinking? Do *not* lie to me, Michael—that camp organiser said the other counsellors were drinking.”

“No, I-I had hardly any, and I’m old enough to drink anyway!”

“You know I think that ridiculous summer job is a complete waste of time, but at least it’s *a* job,” he snapped. “And you managed to screw it up by getting drunk and wandering off into the forest like a buffoon!”

“I wasn’t drunk!” I blinked rapidly when my eyes started to grow hot.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Michael,” Dad snarled. “Do you know what an embarrassment it is to be told that *my* son got an entire kids’ camp closed down? Some of my colleagues’ kids were *at* that camp. Do you know how much of a laughingstock I’m going to be at work on Monday?”

“I didn’t—” My chin wobbled. I should’ve been used to my dad by now, but a childish part of me still wished he would ask, just once, if *I* was okay after what had happened to me. “I’m sorry.”

He let out a disgusted sound and turned away. “Go to your room and get out of that ridiculous robe. Clean yourself up. And don’t think you’re just going to spend the rest of the summer lounging around the house like a layabout. Find a new job or I’ll put in the paperwork for you to start as an intern at the firm. I’ll have to smooth things over so they’ll even consider hiring someone dumb enough to do what you did, but at least you’d be doing *something* worthwhile.”

I stood up off the couch and quickly moved to the door, grabbing my bag on the way. My shoulders hunched up to my ears when my dad spoke from behind me.

“You need to start being a man at some point, Michael. No more kids’ camps. No more dead-end, minimum wage jobs. No more getting drunk in the woods at night with your friends. For god’s sake, do something worthwhile with your life. Be a *man*.”

I said nothing, hurrying out of the room and up the stairs two at a time, desperate to get away from him. That talk with him had done one good thing, at least. It had chased away some of the dazed shock and replaced it with burning anger. I didn’t hate my dad—I didn’t think I had it in me to hate anyone—but I didn’t like him. He was a bad father and a cold person.

That didn’t stop me wishing he loved me though.

Once I was in my room, I finally took off the robe and stared down at it. It had been real, then. All of it. The portal. The blue-skinned, sharp-toothed monsters and huge, hulking non-werewolves. The

dungeon.

One of the blue monsters, the one with the beads in his hair, coming back to free me and take me to the portal. Giving me his robe. Speaking to me in his strange, flowy language, his voice anguished, a lantern with glowing pink crystals inside clutched in his long-fingered hand.

If I thought about any of it for too long, I started to feel faint. So I carefully set the shimmering black robe down on my bed and walked to the bathroom on unsteady legs. I turned on the shower and stripped off my dirty clothes as the water warmed up, and when I stepped under the spray, the hot steam made my head swim with exhaustion.

Curling up on the floor of the bathtub, I cried as the shock finally overcame me. Water plastered my hair to my head and streamed down my cheeks alongside my tears, and I didn't move until the shower went cold.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I spent the day wallowing and hiding from my brother.

I wasn't even sure why I was so sad. I had done a *good* thing. I had let the creature go back to where he came from, and he had seemed grateful—assuming smiles meant the same thing for him as they did for us. He *had* seemed rather afraid of me when I had smiled at him at first, but then his teeth had been blunt and straight, not sharp like mine. Perhaps my sharp teeth had scared him.

I couldn't stop picturing him. His unusual face, soft and pale. His wild golden mane that had been sheared at the sides but long at the front and back. His pink mouth that had drawn my gaze like a beacon. His crystal blue eyes fringed in long golden lashes. The dip of his navel. His long, hair-dusted legs.

Every time I thought of him, I grew hot and flustered under my stuffy clothes.

I had no meetings with the council today, and for once I wished I did. I wanted something to distract me from these perverse thoughts about the creature, and to chase away the churning nerves over how furious Lyri would be when he discovered what I had done.

I had managed to avoid him all morning by mostly hiding in the library, using the opportunity to see if there were any books at all that mentioned strange, pink-skinned creatures that appeared through voids. There weren't. Or at least none that I could find.

I was morosely browsing a shelf of books about exotic plants when I heard the library door get flung open. A second later, Lyri's harsh voice barked my name.

Cringing, I ducked down and looked around wildly, wondering if I would be able to hide. Boots strode briskly across the floorboards, and as I was considering whether the gap beneath the bookcase was wide enough for me to crawl under, my brother appeared at the end of the row.

I jumped back up, reflexively smoothing back my hair and trying to appear calm. "Oh, hello, Ly—" "What did you do, Lor?" Lyri's voice was low and menacing—the calm, authoritative tone he used when training his army in the courtyard at the back of the hyll.

I cringed, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm... I—"

"You let the creature go?"

"Yes!" I burst out. "It was wrong of us, Lyri. He was terrified. He wasn't *dangerous*—"

"How in Ara's name do you *know* he wasn't dangerous?" Lyri shot back. "He could be on the other side of that void amassing an army as we speak!"

"If he came here to scout for an army, why did he have no weapons? He was barely dressed! And he—he didn't try to attack me when I let him out. *He* seemed scared of *me*—"

Lyri cut me off with a strangled sound, shoving a hand through his hair. "You can be so naïve sometimes, Lor. Alright, maybe he wasn't a scout. But he was still from *somewhere else*. What if he tells someone about what he found, what he saw? What if *they* come through? Or what if *they* tell someone and a whole crowd of creatures start pouring from that void? It is in our *hyll*, Lor, and there is nothing we can do to get rid of it. We're vulnerable. *You're* vulnerable."

"Well what's to say that wouldn't have happened anyway?" I forced myself to look him in the eyes. "If *he* found the void on his side, what's to say others won't? And keeping him here would have achieved nothing, Lyri. We couldn't understand him."

"We could have found a way! A way to communicate with him to find out more, to find out what he wanted."

"He didn't *want* anything!" I was growing as frustrated as Lyri appeared to be, his narrow face

tense with anger. “He fell through the void. He was scared. It was just a—a freak event for all of us.” I swallowed, and my throat ached with sorrow when I added, “I am quite sure he was too petrified to ever want to come back through that void. He will probably avoid it for the rest of his life.”

Lyri growled in frustration. “Well, we’d best hope that he and however many others there are do exactly that. But I am not willing to just sit and wait to see if anything else ever comes through that void. I’m going through it myself.”

I choked on a breath, hurrying forward to grip his sleeve. “*No*, Lyri. It could be dangerous.”

He raised a brow at me as if to say, *I know, that’s what I’ve been telling you*. I flushed, clinging to his arm, not willing to let go as if he was about to rush through the hyll and vanish into that void right that instant.

“Please,” I croaked. “Please don’t. What if—what if you can’t get back? What if it closes up—”

“I assume the creature went back through it fine.”

“Yes, but he—I—” I gripped his sleeve tighter. “Please don’t, Lyri. Please.”

He tugged his arm free, eyes firm with resolve. “I’m not risking your safety, Lor.”

“I’m not in danger!” I spluttered. “And what about *your* safety?”

He shrugged. “I can handle it.”

Panic gripped me as he turned and started walking for the door. I stumbled after him.

“You don’t know what is on the other side! You don’t *know* if you can handle it!” Guilt made it hard to breathe. I had made everything so much worse, and now my brother was hellbent on disappearing through that void. “Please, Lyri, please don’t. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I let him go, I just—I felt so awful. So guilty. He hadn’t done anything wrong—”

Lyri sighed and stopped, turning to face me. Some of the dread in my belly eased when I saw his eyes soften.

“I know you were just doing what you thought was right. But this is what I think is right. I’m not leaving it to chance, Lor. I am not risking my brother and everyone else in this hyll—in this whole city. I’ll just go through to see what is on the other side—to see how likely it is that the creature returns, or others come through.”

I could tell that I wasn’t going to change his mind. And even if he assured me he wouldn’t go through, Lyri did what he wanted. There was nothing stopping him from sneaking into the guestroom while I was asleep or stuck in a meeting.

My chin wobbled, terror for my brother flooding through me. He made a little sound in the back of his throat and stepped closer to give my cheek a gentle pat.

“I’ll be careful, Lor. I promise.”

“What if you don’t come back?” I asked tearfully, clutching his arm. “What if something awful happens? What if you get stuck?”

“I won’t get stuck. I will step through, look around and come back.”

“B-but what if—what if you step out into the middle of a city? What if someone grabs *you* the moment you go through, like we did with him?”

Lyri snorted, the idea of someone managing to capture him obviously amusing. It wasn’t amusing to me.

“That won’t happen,” he said dryly, but patted my cheek again. “But if it makes you feel better, I’ll take Gryf.”

I chewed on my lip, staring at him with wide eyes. “Take—take several guards. At least ten.”

He chuckled, stepping back. “I won’t be very inconspicuous with ten baregh at my back.”

“You won’t be inconspicuous anyway!” I gestured at him. “The creature had pink skin and—and

he looked nothing like a vint!”

“I’ll wear a cloak. Gryf can wear one too.”

I didn’t think a measly cloak would be able to disguise the sheer size and bulk of a baregh. The creature had *fainted* at the sight of Gryf and Seis. Surely that meant they looked like nothing he had ever seen. Lyri and Gryf would stick out like sore thumbs if they went through the void.

“I hate this,” I mumbled. I hated all the more that I had caused it. “Can’t we—can’t we just forget all of this ever happened? In the months since the void appeared, only *one* creature has tumbled through it.”

“Well, maybe that means it is in a remote place on the other side.” Lyri shrugged. “Which means there should be no issue with Gryf and I going through to look around.”

Before I could argue any more, he turned and opened the library door. Seis straightened at the sight of us, gaze wary as he looked between Lyri and me. I had told Seis what I had done in hushed whispers when he came to my quarters that morning, and he had promised not to tell Gryf or Lyri, but had grimly added that Lyri would find out soon enough. Especially as I had left the dungeon door unlocked in my haste to get the creature back to the void.

Gryf was waiting on the other side of the library door, and the two baregh followed us in silence as Lyri strode down the hall and I trailed behind him.

“Gryf, can you get your cloak?” Lyri asked without stopping. “And weapons. Lots of weapons. Meet us in the guest quarters.”

“Of course, Verin.” Gryf peeled off to head for the barracks without another word.

“Moric...” Seis sounded uneasy.

“Lyri is being a behamot-brained rockhead and insisting on going through the void himself,” I hissed, glancing back in time to see Seis’ eyes widen.

“Perhaps... Why don’t Gryf and I go through—”

“No, Seis, it’s quite alright.” Lyri’s tone was cheerful, but I could hear the steely determination still in it. “Gryf and I will manage. We’re just going to take a look.”

I could sense the discomfort rolling from Seis in waves, but he stayed silent as we followed Lyri into his private rooms—specifically to the room with all his countless weapons on display. I watched, silently panicking, as he pulled on two holsters, one over his chest and one on his thigh, then strapped on several knives, a handful of curved throwing blades and a tiny quiver of needle-sharp lanceheads that I knew were designed to fit through the eye slits of a helmet. Then he unravelled a length of garrotting wire and tested its strength before coiling it back up and tucking it into a pocket.

I felt quite faint. “Wh-what are you anticipating?”

“Would be foolish to anticipate anything when we have no idea what’s through there.” He shrugged, reaching for a long cloak hung up by the door. “Just being prepared.”

He threw on the cloak, then strapped another holster to his back for his twin swords. Turning to face me, he grinned, expression almost excited. “Right, that should be enough.”

“Don’t be foolhardy,” I begged as Seis and I trailed after him out of the room. “Don’t run *into* danger. If—if you see any more creatures, just hide.”

Lyri grunted noncommittally. “We’ll see.”

“No, Lyri.” I grabbed his arm and forced him to face me, my mouth pinched with anger. “You will *not* pick fights. You said you were just going to look around. And if—The creature was unarmed and harmless anyway. Maybe they all are. You should have no reason to fight anyone.”

“I promise I will only fight if I have to, Lor.” He peered back at me seriously. “If Gryf or I are in danger. I’m not just going to kill defenceless creatures.”

“And if you... if you see the creature”—my gut clenched—“promise me you will not drag him back here to interrogate him. You must leave him alone.”

Lyri rolled his eyes. “I won’t drag him back here. Although I *am* very interested—”

“No, Lyri!”

“Alright, fine.” He patted my cheek and turned to keep walking, leading us out of his rooms and in the direction of the guest quarters. “Are you not the least bit intrigued by him though?” he asked over his shoulder, keeping his voice hushed. “He was so strange. I wonder if they all look like him, wherever he came from.”

“That doesn’t mean we get to lock him up and study him!” I hissed. “He was an intelligent being. He has a life. Family. We cannot just spirit him away from his home because we are *intrigued* by him.”

We fell silent as some staff hurried past us in the main hall, dipping into deep bows before continuing on their way. Gryf was already waiting for us outside the room with the void when we reached the guest quarters, wearing a grey cloak with the hood up over his mane. His favoured axe was strapped to his hip, as well as several daggers.

“Fancy joining me for a little jaunt through the void, Gryf?” Lyri asked cheerfully, slapping his thick arm when we reached him.

Gryf looked a little nervous, but he dutifully nodded and said, “Of course, Verin.”

“I’ll suck your cock later to make it up to you.” Lyri smirked at him, then made a face. “Well, unless we get ambushed and killed by an army of otherworlders.”

I pressed a hand to my forehead, feeling faint for multiple reasons. “Lyri.”

“Oh, I’m just joking, worrywart. We’ll be fine.” He gave me a brief hug before opening the guestroom door.

We all braced, as if we were anticipating a pile of otherworlders collapsed on the floor in front of the void. But the room was empty, the void as it always was—a softly humming rip in the air with sparking edges. I said a quick prayer in my head for my brother, asking the Mabs to watch over him in this strange otherworld.

Seis was muttering something to Gryf, gripping his shoulder, but Lyri was already stepping closer to the void.

“Wait,” I blurted, halting him in his tracks. “What if—what if the air is poison there? Or the rain is toxic?”

Lyri looked doubtful. “The creature seemed to breathe fine here, so the air can’t be *that* different. And if it is, we will just come straight back through.”

“What if—What if—”

“Look, if it makes you feel better, why don’t I do this?”

Before any of us could react, Lyri raced to the void and stuck his head through.

I let out a shriek of panic, rushing forward until Seis’ big hand on my shoulder brought me to a gentle stop. Gryf strode to the void, his face tight with worry, but before he could reach him, Lyri’s head reappeared as he straightened.

“Hag’s balls.” He shook his head like a wet folna pup. “It is *strange* through there.”

“What did you see?” Gryf asked immediately, staring at him in awe.

“Looks like a forest. But everything is... The colours are so unnatural. The sky is *blue*.”

“*Blue*?” I repeated in shock, picturing the creature’s crystal blue eyes. He had eyes the colour of his sky.

Lyri nodded, looking excited. “And the trees are all brown and green. The ground, too.”

“Maybe I’d blend in better without the cloak,” Gryf said uncertainly.

“Did you see any otherworlders?” Seis asked. “Is the creature there?”

I tried to ignore the disappointment that washed over me when Lyri shook his head.

“No, there was no one. I couldn’t hear anything either.” He grinned at Gryf. “Ready?”

The big baregh chuckled warily. “I suppose.”

“Good sport.” Lyri reached up and patted his cheek with a grin, before murmuring, “And you know I’m a man of my word. Once we’re back, I’ll—”

“Lyri.” My ears twitched and heated with embarrassment.

He chuckled, lifting the hood of his cloak over his head. “We won’t be long.”

“Be careful,” I blurted, my stomach twisting into tight knots as the pair of them stepped up to the void.

I shuffled closer to Seis, wringing my hands together as I watched my brother step through the void and vanish, just as I had watched the creature do hours earlier.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“How long has it been?” I barked at Seis, pacing the guestroom.

“Just a few minutes, Moric.”

“I thought they weren’t going to go far from the void.” I wrung my hands together. “What if they stumble into a settlement of some kind? What if they’ve been attacked?”

“I’m sure they’re fine, Moric,” Seis said calmly.

“Lor,” I corrected absently, still pacing.

“Lyri is extremely capable, Lor. And Gryf is his guard. He will protect him with his life.”

“Lyri wouldn’t let Gryf die to protect him,” I muttered. They weren’t romantically involved, but they were very close friends who... dallied sometimes. Often, by the sounds of it. And I knew Lyri didn’t regard his life as any more important than his guard’s—than *any* of the guards.

We fell silent as I continued to pace the length of the room, saying silent prayers to the Mabs to bring my brother and Gryf back safely from this mysterious other place. I asked them to show me why this void had appeared in my hyll. What it meant.

It felt like eons later when the void start sparking madly, its surface rippling like disturbed water. I almost tripped in my haste to reach him when Lyri appeared, grinning widely. Gryf followed behind him a second later, face stoic as usual.

I threw my arms around my brother’s neck, squeezing him tight. “Are you alright?”

He chuckled, hugging me back and pulling us away from the void. “Yes, perfectly fine.”

I drew back, flushing and smoothing my hands down my tunic. “And you, Gryf?”

“I am well, thank you, Moric.”

“What happened?” Seis asked, stepping closer. “What did you see?”

“The void leads to a forest, and it looked the same in every direction. Just strange-coloured trees. Gryf scaled one to see further though, and said there were some odd-looking buildings in the near distance. Not many.”

“Buildings?” Worry stabbed through my gut. “Like a settlement?”

Lyri shrugged. “If it was a settlement, it was very small. And we saw no otherworlders. We *did* find something, though.”

He reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out a strange object. It was squat and looked like it had been cylindrical, but one side was crumpled in on itself. The flat top and bottom were bright silver, but there was a wide band of red covered in strange markings across its centre.

“We came across a small campfire—recent, by the looks,” Lyri said as I stared at the thing in his hand. “These were left on the ground all around it. Look, there’s a hole at the top.”

He handed it to me, and I realised the item was made of a thin metal of some kind. It depressed easily under my fingertips, and I touched the strange silver loop on its top next to the hole Lyri had mentioned.

“Is there anything in it?”

“When I picked it up, a trickle of yellow liquid came out.” Lyri snickered. “I sniffed the hole. It smells a bit like ale.”

I stared at him, horrified that he had *sniffed* it. But the item was so strange, so intriguing, that I found myself raising it to my nose to do the same.

The scent was sharp and tangy. Lyri was right—it smelled a bit like the dark ale that some noble guests from other fiefdoms favoured when they visited the hyll. My nose wrinkled and I pulled the

object away quickly.

“So it... it contained a drink of some kind?” How odd. Why give yourself such a tiny hole to drink out of? And the edges of it appeared sharp. The otherworlder’s lips had looked... soft. Wouldn’t this cut their mouths?

“Possibly,” Lyri said. “Perhaps the creature was from a band of travellers who had set up camp for the night in the forest. Perhaps he was drunk when he stumbled through the void.”

“He didn’t seem drunk,” I said doubtfully, but then again, we had no idea how the creatures on the other side of that void *usually* acted.

“So you saw no otherworlders?” Seis asked. “You didn’t see the creature?”

“No, we didn’t see anyone.”

I kept looking down at the object in my hands to hide my confusing disappointment. Shouldn’t I be *pleased* that the creature had made it back safely to his world—his home?

Did he live in the tiny settlement Gryf had spotted in the distance?

“What’s your assessment on the risk of anyone else coming through the void?” Seis asked, focusing on the right things while I stood there silently wallowing about never seeing the intriguing creature again.

Lyri exhaled, glancing at Gryf and crossing his arms. “Impossible to say, really. If the otherworlder lives at the settlement Gryf saw, he could go back and tell everyone. Show them where the void is.”

“It isn’t easy to spot though,” Gryf added. “It is in the hollow of a tree.”

“We almost lost it for a few minutes,” Lyri said with a chuckle, making my head snap up with a horrified expression. “We didn’t though,” he added quickly, side-eyeing Gryf again.

“The settlement looked very small,” Gryf said. “Not many buildings. There can’t be too many of them living there, unless otherworlders all like to cram together in... nests or something. I could only see the roofs, but my ears didn’t pick up any voices.”

“I didn’t hear any either,” Lyri said, which relaxed me just a little. Vints had the best hearing of everyone.

“Perhaps the settlement is deserted then,” I said uncertainly. “We had no one come through the void for months. Surely if people lived nearby they would be foraging and hunting in the woods often.”

“Yes, excellent point.” I flushed from Lyri’s praise. He continued, “We still don’t know what the otherworlder has done since going back though. We shouldn’t assume he won’t come back or tell others how to get here. We’ll have to keep watching the void.”

“Perhaps Gryf and I can go through to explore the settlement,” Seis offered. “Make sure it really is deserted.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lyri said eagerly, grinning at Gryf before nodding at the metal thing in my hand. “Maybe we’ll find more of those things. Full ones. We can try some.”

I stared at him in alarm. “You can’t eat and drink things over there! What if they are poison to you? What if they make you ill? The otherworlder didn’t touch any of the food and drink we gave him. Maybe he knew he couldn’t have it.”

Lyri let out a noncommittal grunt. “A tiny sip shouldn’t hurt.”

“Lyri!” I placed a palm on my forehead, feeling faint. “You are giving me palpitations.”

He laughed, stepping forward to slap me on the back. “So dramatic. If we go back to explore the settlement, I promise we won’t eat or drink anything. But if we find weapons, we *will* be bringing them back to study them.”

“Weapons,” I echoed faintly. “You can’t be thinking of starting a *war* with them.”

Lyri snorted. “Of course I’m not. I’m trying to *prevent* a war. We don’t know for certain that the creature wasn’t a spy or a scout.”

Gryf grunted, crossing his arms. “If he was, he was a shit one.”

My mouth pinched, a flash of defensive anger rising on behalf of the creature. “I don’t believe he was either of those things.”

“Yes, you’ve made that quite clear, Lor,” Lyri deadpanned. “Seeing as you let him go.”

I flushed, standing up straighter and lifting my chin. “I stand by my decision.”

“And I stand by mine to go through and see what is on the other side.” Lyri jerked his chin at the void. “I feel much better knowing there isn’t a swarm of those creatures living around the void.”

“Yes, that is a relief,” I admitted, but my mind returned to the creature with the blue eyes and golden mane.

It seemed like he was long gone. No doubt he would never return.

I looked down at the metal object. I was actually holding something from his world. I clutched it tighter, the thin metal crumpling under my fingers. I didn’t want to let it go.

I cleared my throat, looking at Lyri. “May I keep this?”

Lyri slapped me on the back again and headed for the door. “Of course. It’s a rare treasure from another world. It’s only fitting that our Moric gets to keep it.”

I flushed with pleasure, smiling down at the item. “Thank you.”

“Now, I want to divest myself of all these weapons and get something to eat. And I have a promise to keep.” He opened the door and glanced back at Gryf with a smirk. “Coming, Gryf?”

My ears heated with embarrassment as Gryf grinned wide, his tusks peeking up, and eagerly followed Lyri out of the room.

Seis cleared his throat, trying not to smile as he asked, “Would you like me to fetch some guards to keep watch, Lor?”

My mind raced. I wanted to stay here. And I knew I would come back many, many times to watch the void, though not for the same reasons as Lyri.

I wanted to see if the creature would return.

But if he did and there were guards right outside, guards who weren’t Gryf and Seis... They might hurt him. They might hear something and burst into the room to defend me, scaring the creature away.

“Let us have some guards stationed at the entrance to the guest quarters,” I told Seis. That way they wouldn’t be right outside this door, and I could come and go freely through the staff area with minimal suspicion. “The staff have no reason to come to this area of the hyll, so it should be fine.”

“I can get a lock fitted on the door.”

I nodded. “Good idea, and have enough keys made for the four of us. No one else.”

“Of course, Lor.”

I gazed at the void again, still clutching the metal drinking vessel. Had it been his? Had he drunk from this himself?

“What would you like to do now, Moric?” Seis asked politely when I didn’t move.

I had no reason to stay here. Lyri would probably return after his... activities to keep an eye on the void. And I couldn’t just spend all my time sitting in an empty guestroom, staring at a wavering void in the air.

“I will retire to my quarters so that you can see to the lock,” I told Seis, taking a reluctant step toward the door.

He nodded, holding the door open for me then following me out and closing it behind him. I tucked

the drinking vessel under my embroidered jacket as we walked through the hyll to my quarters, and Seis left me at the door to my sleeping rooms with a shallow bow.

I didn't even bother to take off my boots as I walked through the antechamber to my bedroom. Placing the vessel reverently on the chest of drawers, I stared at it. This was a priceless object from another world. Yes, it looked crumpled, but perhaps... perhaps it was designed in that shape to aid the otherworlders in drinking out of the tiny hole.

Even if it was a little ruined, it was still a rare treasure. I wanted to keep it safe—to keep it on display so I could gaze at it often and remember the surreal night that a mysterious creature fell into my hyll.

Striding to the enormous sideboard that housed many rare items gifted to Morics over the years, I crouched to open the cupboard doors with the aim of finding something to preserve such a unique treasure. I didn't know if it would erode in the air, so it needed to be protected, like the huge crumbling tome that had been gifted to a past Moric by the knowledge-seeking aytorin people from the south. That rested under a glass cloche on the sideboard, its pages faded with age.

I couldn't find anything fitting in the cupboard, so I stood and wandered into my dressing room. Huge wardrobes lined the walls, and I had no use for several of them, so there was a chance that other items had been stored in them—perhaps some delicate cloth that I could wrap the vessel in. My mother had favoured robes with long trains that trailed over the floor behind her, whereas I preferred simpler, tighter-fitting tunics and trousers with neat, embroidered jackets, so my clothes took up far less space than hers had.

Mama's robes had been carefully preserved and stored in the undercroft, so the wardrobe I opened was largely empty save for several swathes of gysian cloth stacked neatly on the wardrobe floor. I crouched to rifle through them, but something winked in the darkness at the back of the wardrobe, making me pause.

Leaning in, I peered at the wooden back of the wardrobe. Was that... a latch?

I reached out and felt over the metal fixture, jumping when something depressed under my fingers and the back of the wardrobe swung out. Like a door.

Standing up slowly, I stared into the darkness. I couldn't see anything beyond the false wardrobe back, so I turned and hurried into my room to snatch up a lantern, tapping on the glass to wake up the dawn-shard as I walked unsteadily back to the wardrobe.

Lifting it, I peered in. The weak pink light illuminated a dark, narrow tunnel that looked purpose-made. The stone walls were smooth and uniform and the floor was covered in a long, thin rug. This had been put here intentionally.

How had I not known that there was a secret passage in my chambers? What was it for? Where did it lead? I considered getting Seis so he could explore it for himself, but then I gripped the lantern handle tighter as resolve settled over me. I couldn't keep getting others to deal with things on my behalf. And Seis was busy carrying out the orders I'd given him.

I was the Moric. I could explore this secret passage for myself. It *was* in my dressing room.

Stepping gingerly onto the wardrobe floor, I ducked my head and entered the tunnel. The air was stagnant and musty, like it hadn't been disturbed for a very long time. But it was dry and somewhat warm, and there were no dead things littering the ground like in that awful corridor to the undercroft.

I walked in silence, following the corridor as it turned sharply on my right, then again. At one point, I thought I could hear faint voices muffled through the thick stone—loud, rambunctious laughter that made me think there were perhaps some staff quarters on the other side.

Then it fell silent again. Eventually, the passageway ended at what initially appeared to be a blank

wall, but as I lifted my lantern higher, I saw another latch.

Heart pounding, I fumbled with it and jumped back as the door swung inward, revealing more darkness. Then I realised it had opened into another wardrobe, and I stepped forward to push the wardrobe doors open.

I emerged into another dressing room, this one much smaller than my own, and dark. Blinking in surprise, I tentatively walked toward the arched doorway and saw that I was in one of the finer guestrooms, this one sumptuously decorated in dark, romantic colours, with the Moric's royal blue everywhere, including on the enormous four-poster bed with deep blue drapes pulled back.

I may have been awfully inexperienced in all things to do with lust and romance, but even I could glean why there was a secret passage between the Moric's chambers and this sensuously decorated bedroom. It had no doubt been where a past Moric had stashed away their secret consort, able to visit them freely without rousing suspicion.

By the Mabs, how *sordid*. My ears twitched as I tiptoed across the room to the door, opening it and peeking my head out. The corridor was empty, but I could immediately tell that I was near the room with the void. My gaze locked on that closed door at the other end of the hallway.

A secret little thrill raced up my spine. What a find! Now I could visit the void as often as I wanted without alerting the guards posted at the main doors to the guest quarters. Without having to have the embarrassing conversation with Lyri about why I wanted to come here so often.

I grinned gleefully, stepping back and softly closing the door, then turned to hurry into the dressing room and back through the tunnel. I realised there was no latch on this side of the false wardrobe back when I reached the end of the passageway, which relieved some of the gnawing worry in my stomach that an intruder could make their way into my rooms as I slept. Only the Moric could enter the passage at this end or allow someone into their chamber.

And I could come and go freely to watch the void in secret. To wait and see if the creature would ever return.

For the first time in years, I wasn't worrying about doing something that could risk my reputation. I wasn't thinking about how I could be the best, most graceful Moric.

How wickedly thrilling.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

What are you doing?

I ignored that sensible voice in my head—honestly, it had never been all that loud anyway—as I drove down the empty road, the forest looming on my left.

And the big Welcome to Camp Wynsome! sign just up ahead, barely visible in the dark.

Seriously, what are you doing?

I didn't freaking *know* what I was doing! All I knew was that I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. What I'd seen. Those monsters.

The monster with the beads in his hair, whose silky robe was beside me on the passenger seat.

Just because they didn't kill you last time doesn't mean they won't kill you if you go back.

Was I actually, seriously considering going back through that weird hole? Was I really *that* much of an idiot?

But I couldn't think about anything else. My concentration was pretty shitty at the best of times, but in the past few weeks, I'd been like a zombie. Lost in my own head, thinking about those blue-skinned monsters with the big pointy ears and silver eyes. The hulking non-werewolves wearing smart vests and pants.

The way the beautiful one had spoken to me before I'd returned to the forest, his big silver eyes anguished and his voice so soft and musical as he said incomprehensible words to me before he... he touched my stomach. Just a light brush of his long fingers, but it had made goosebumps break out all over me.

The robe didn't smell like him anymore, and how much of a weirdo was *I* to have sniffed it constantly until the scent had completely faded? I could still remember it though—smoky and herbal, like lavender on a bonfire.

It had brought back the memories of that place, and it wasn't like many of them were good. Being terrified, convinced I was going to die as I was pinned to the ground and threatened with a sword. Passing out at the sight of those non-werewolves and waking up in a dungeon.

But then I remembered the beautiful one returning. Speaking to me. Looking back, I got the sense he'd been... trying to comfort me. And then he had let me out of the cell and led me back to the portal. He'd let me go.

Before that though, when we'd had to hide from other monsters, he'd pressed his lithe body up against me in the dark, stiff and tense, but... I'd reacted. My body had reacted, heating up from the contact, my pulse thundering in my ears. I'd stared at the top of his head in the dark, at all those unusual gems and beads wound through the braids in his long grey hair. At the delicate rings and jewels studding his huge ears. The sharp slope of his nose and pronounced cupid's bow of his mouth.

He's not human! I chastised myself furiously, gripping the steering wheel tighter as I turned onto the track leading up to the camp gates. *You can't think about a monster like that. It's sick, dude!*

The campgrounds were completely dark and deserted beyond the closed gate. I still felt monumentally guilty about getting the camp shut down for the summer, all the poor kids having to go back home.

Pretty sure Mindy and Stan aren't going to invite me back as a counsellor next year, I thought glumly as I eased the car to a stop and killed the engine, plunging myself into total darkness.

My breaths shuddered out of me as I sat there, still gripping the steering wheel and staring at the dark forest beyond the camp gate. Was I actually going to do this? I didn't even really know what I

was here to do. I'd been at home, unable to sit still, pacing my bedroom and staring at the black robe on my bed, my thoughts consumed by everything that had happened.

The next thing I knew, I'd been climbing into my car and making the drive up here.

At least I was dressed a little more appropriately in a sweater this time, though I was still wearing shorts. I refused to wear long pants during the summer, even though the nights were never all that warm, especially out here.

I was still shivering uncontrollably as I collected the robe and my flashlight before getting out of the car. I glanced around warily as I locked it. I was pretty sure there was no one at the camp anymore, but I didn't know if the sheriff patrolled this road to make sure teens weren't throwing parties in the campgrounds or nearby woods when it was closed.

Well. Too late now. I stuffed the robe under my sweatshirt and gripped my flashlight in a sweaty hand as I climbed over the fence, scraping my knee on the way down. There wasn't a single light on in any of the camp buildings, but I still stuck to the perimeter of the grounds as I made my way around to where we'd entered the forest before to have our party.

You might not be able to find it again. You didn't even find it the first time. You just fell directly into it like a loser.

Maybe I just needed to see for myself that it actually existed—that I hadn't lost my mind or hit my head and dreamt it all. That I hadn't just found some weird old robe discarded in the forest and put it on in a stupor, then convinced myself a beautiful blue-skinned monster had given it to me.

I wanted to know that it had definitely been *real*. That I really had... gone to another world. Filled with monsters.

I'm not going to go back through, I told myself as I trudged along the treeline until I spotted the two logs that marked the start of the trail we'd used to make our way into the forest. *I'm just going to see if it's still there. See that it's real.*

Although... The reckless voice in my head—the one I admittedly listened to more than the sensible one—piped up. *You should really return the robe. It's only polite. He probably didn't mean for you to keep it.*

I chewed on my lip as I made my way deeper into the forest, my flashlight beam swinging back and forth. I *had* brought the robe. For some reason. I'd barely let it leave my sight since getting back, staring at it every morning and night, hardly doing anything else.

I knew I should've already gone to the movie theatre to see if I could get my job back. I was gonna need it now that I was spending the summer at home. I didn't want to rely on my dad any more than I already did—and I *was* still living in his house and eating his food. And driving his old car. But he had a shiny new one, so...

There were a lot more sensible things I could be doing than traipsing through the forest trying to find a portal to another world. A world filled with monsters.

But I kept going.

The remnants of our campfire were still there when I came across them, the beer cans littering the ground around it undisturbed. Shivering even harder with nerves, I followed the path I'd made to go and pee that night, walking very, very carefully so I didn't accidentally trip and fall right into the portal again.

It had rained up here at some point in the day, and the leaves on the forest floor looked glossy in the flashlight beam. The air smelled damp and earthy, the cold sneaking up my shorts and making my skin prickle.

I stopped and cast my flashlight beam around, trembling from more than just the chill as I stood all

alone in a dark forest. God, this was so *stupid*. I should've at least found somewhere to stay for the night and come here in the morning.

I didn't want to walk around too much in case I tripped and fell again, so I turned in a slow, tight circle, shining the light over everything around me. The portal had been in the hollow of a tree, down a narrow slope, barely visible. How was I even going to find it?

An owl hooted, making me jump out of my skin. My teeth were chattering as I stood there in the dark, legs bare and cold, the silky fabric of the robe sliding against my skin beneath my sweatshirt. I considered just turning back, but couldn't bring myself to. I *needed* to know that it had been real. That he had been real.

Hesitantly taking a step forward, I looked around again, trailing the beam over the forest floor. My pulse leapt when I saw a gentle slope to my left, and I crunched toward it without letting myself reconsider.

Oh my god, this was it! I peered down the incline to the tree at the bottom. Its centre looked split open and pitch black within, but when I shone my flashlight directly into it, I could see the air within rippling like smoke. Deep within the hollow, the edges of the portal sparked, illuminating the centre of the tree in faint flashes.

I stared at it for a long time, picturing what was on the other side. That strange bedroom with dark, iridescent wooden walls. The musty floral scent that had filled the warm air.

The monster with the beads in his hair and big silver eyes.

I rested my hand over the lump under my sweatshirt, shivering as the warmed silky fabric slid against my skin. I could... I should give the robe back. Throw it through the portal so he found it on the floor.

Exhaling shakily, I felt across the ground with the toe of my sneaker to make sure I didn't misjudge the slope and tumble down it again. Moving slowly and carefully, I made my way down, my feet slipping a little over the wet leaves. The moment I reached the tree I planted a hand on its trunk, above the hollow, to steady myself.

This close to the portal, I could see colours in it. Faint swirls of pale pink and blurs of deep blue. My heart thudded hard against my ribs. Was he there? On the other side?

I wasn't pulling the robe out from under my sweatshirt to throw it into the portal. I wasn't moving at all. I stared at the portal, hearing its low, faint hum reverberate inside the hollow of the tree. There was a whole other *world* through there. Could I really just throw the robe through and leave? Never come back?

Maybe I could just... stick my head through. See it one last time. Confirm to myself that it had been real. The more time that passed, the less real it had felt, which had filled me with a weird, despairing sense of sadness for some reason.

Fuck, was I really going to do this? I'd never been all that good at making the right decisions, and I guessed... I guessed the habit was continuing. Because I was already slowly leaning down, bringing my face closer to that hollow. The air felt charged, and the humming throbbed in my ears. It almost felt like it was pulling at me, *trying* to draw me in.

I grimaced when that awful sensation tingled over my face, but I persevered. Blinking hard, I tried to acclimate to the warm pink haze that suddenly clouded my vision. When it cleared a second later, I found myself staring at a deep blue face with wide silver and black eyes.

We both screamed. I jerked back, my heart pounding as I stumbled and fell on my ass on the wet forest floor, dropping my flashlight. Chest heaving, I stared at the portal. The swirls of dark blue were more prominent now, as if the monster had moved closer after seeing my disembodied head appear in

his bedroom.

I licked my dry lips, panting and clutching at the earth with trembling hands.

“C-can you... hear me?” I asked quietly. There was no answer.

But a few seconds later, something pierced the distorted haze of the portal. I stared, frozen in place as the tips of long dark blue fingers appeared, shaking as hard as I was.

Something inside me, hot and overwhelming, urged me to reach out and take that hand. More of it appeared until I could see those silvery-black barbells across the backs of his fingers—the ones I’d noticed before.

It was him.

The long, elegant fingers curled slightly, still trembling. When I still didn’t move, they flexed before starting to retreat, vanishing back inside the portal.

Panic streaked through me. *No*. He was leaving. He couldn’t... he couldn’t leave.

Was I doing this? Oh my god, I was doing this. Shaking hard from fear and terrifying anticipation, feeling like I might ralph, I reached up and curled my fingers around his.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I screamed in utter shock as a face appeared in the void.

I had been spending far too much time in here, just sitting in silence and staring at the void. Wondering what else was on the other side besides the strange forest Lyri and Gryf had briefly explored. Wondering where the creature was.

Gryf and Lyri had gone through again to spy on the tiny settlement they had seen, declaring it deserted when they returned. They had peered through the windows of the small, strange buildings and seen beds stacked on top of one another, strangely patterned mattresses stripped bare.

Lyri joined me sometimes in here, more to cautiously watch the void than mope like I did, with Seis and Gryf standing guard outside. Seis was out there now, seeing as it was only late evening and not the middle of the night—when I often snuck back through the secret tunnel to keep vigil alone. He burst into the room when he heard me scream.

“Are you alright, Moric?” he asked in a tight voice, looking around the room and gripping the hilt of the axe at his hip.

I panted weakly, still staring at the void. He was *there*. He’d *been there*. Urgency filled me, made me scramble up from the floor.

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, needing Seis to leave the room. “Just startled myself. Thank you, Seis.”

He hesitated for a moment before stepping back into the hall and closing the door. I walked unsteadily to the void, my heart pounding as I stared at it.

He’d come back.

I couldn’t resist reaching my hand out, feeling a strange sensation on my trembling fingertips as they met the void and vanished from sight. Was he still there?

I jumped violently when something touched my hand through the void, something damp and warm. For a brief moment, I considered calling Seis back as panic gripped me. What if it wasn’t him? What if I was about to get dragged through the void and kidnapped by otherworlders?

But then my hand was being drawn back toward me as something stepped through. My lungs stuttered, heart giving a mighty thump, and I stared in wide-eyed disbelief as the creature appeared in front of me.

My breaths were leaving me in shallow spurts. He was back. He was standing here in front of me, gazing down at me with wide, fearful eyes, his clammy hand still gripping mine. My fingers tightened in reflex as I stared back up at him, as if I was scared that he was going to rip his hand free and disappear again.

“Y-you’re here,” I heard myself breathe, unable to believe it.

He appeared much calmer than he had before, his strange mane neater, the earring winking in his lobe. His blue eyes looked dark in the weak light from my dawn-shard lantern, which was still resting on the floor behind me and bathing the room in muted pink.

“*Hoh-lee sheet*,” he croaked.

I wondered if it was a greeting of some kind. Lyri had laughed at my awful attempt to mimic the creature before, but I swallowed and timidly repeated, “*H-hoh-li sheet*.”

The creature stared down at me for a second, before snuffing out what I thought might have been a little laugh. His pink mouth curved up, and I found myself staring hungrily at it, at the flash of blunt white teeth.

I hesitantly smiled back, trying to hide my own sharp teeth in case they had scared him before. He

didn't seem too scared now, his gaze roaming over my face before dipping to my frame.

Thank the Mabs I was properly dressed this time in a tunic and trousers, not my nightclothes. I found myself looking him over too, trying not to acknowledge the stab of disappointment when I noticed that he wasn't wearing a shorn off shirt that exposed his pale belly this time. He was covered in a different kind of grey shirt that looked thick and soft, the cuffs tight around his wrists.

His non-leg coverings weren't a vibrant pink, but a dark fabric that was covered in a strange pattern, jagged lines and shapes in multiple colours. They almost hurt my eyes to look at.

I felt my ears heat as my gaze trailed down his long, bare legs to the white socks and strange boots that he had been wearing last time. Flustered, I finally uncurled my fingers from his and stepped back.

"*Ai, uhm...*" He went to reach for his shirt, but stopped as he stared at his hands, that intriguing pink staining his cheeks.

I followed his gaze and noticed smudges all over his palms. Lifting my own hand, I could feel something like dirt clinging to my fingers.

"*Zohree.*" He cleared his throat. "*Ai, uhm, ai fel owvurr.*"

Fumbling in my tunic pocket, I pulled out my embroidered handkerchief and held it out to him. After a pause, he took it and gave me a soft smile. My belly clenched at the sight of it.

"*Tenkz.*" He carefully wiped his hands, then looked around for somewhere to put the soiled handkerchief, face darkening with colour again.

I held my hand out for it and discreetly wiped the dirt off my own fingers as he reached under his shirt and... pulled out my robe. The one I had given him that morning to help him stay hidden.

"*Ai—ai, uhm, wunned too ruhtern dis.*"

Throat bobbing, I took it from him and stared down at it in my hands. It was crumpled up and no doubt creased beyond rescue, but it... it was warm from his skin. I barely resisted the urge to bury my face in it, to breathe him in. That warm, comforting scent like lokl.

Clearing my throat, I kept my head bent as I tried to smooth out the fabric. "Thank you." My voice was a little hoarse, and when I looked up, he was staring at me again.

We lapsed into silence as we stared at one another. It wasn't quite awkward—it was too surreal to be awkward—more like we were both getting used to each other's unusual presence. Eventually, he broke the gaze to glance around the room, brows pinching as he took it in.

Then he sighed, shoulders slumping, and gave me another tiny smile before glancing back at the void.

Panic flared. What if he had only come back to return my robe? What if he was going to leave again?

What if that would be it? I would never see him again, ever?

"Wait," I blurted, even though he couldn't understand me. "W-would you—W-will you stay? Just for a little while," I rushed to add, just in case he *could* magically understand me now and he thought I was going to lock him up again.

It was pointless to ask. Even if he *could* understand me, what would he stay for? I couldn't show him around my hyll—I dreaded to think what the staff and guards would do if they saw this strange, otherworldly creature. I could offer him food, but he had been reluctant to eat before, and maybe he couldn't eat food from this world. Maybe it would make him ill.

"*Mahn, ai wysh ai cud unner-stahn yoo.*" He gazed down at me, brows still pinched, then slowly lifted a hand to his chest. "*Aihm Juhgz. Juhgz.*"

I cocked my head, trying to work out what he was telling me as he patted his chest and repeated it.

"*Juhgz.*" He pointed at himself, then at me, watching me with a hopeful expression.

Juhgz. Was it... his name? Was he telling me his name? My heart leapt with excitement.

“Lor,” I told him. “My name is Lor. *Lor.*”

“Lyorrr.” He tried to mimic me, tried to roll his *Rs* the way I did, and I couldn’t help but laugh. He chuckled too, and the sight of his grin made my stomach flutter with exhilarating nerves.

“Lor,” I repeated, touching my chest, then somehow found the courage to reach out and touch his.

My fingertips rested against the warm fabric, and I could feel his heart pounding. “*Juhgz.*”

“*Yez, yez.*” He nodded excitedly and covered my hand with his, making my breath catch. “*Juhgz.*”

His name was *Juhgz*. What an odd name—so unusual and exotic. I wondered if it held any special meaning in his world, in his language. Maybe it was a noble name, like mine.

“*Wul, ai meen, evvree-wun kulls mi Juhgz, cuhzuv, uhh, mai eerz.*” He gestured at his sweetly protruding ears for some reason, his face turning pink again. “*Bud mainem iz atchli mai-kuhl. Ownli mai dahd kulls mi dat doh.*”

I stared at his mouth as it moved rapidly, not understanding a word of what he said but still utterly enthralled. His voice was smooth and animated, his language musical and full of jumps and dips between the words. Even though I desperately wished to understand him, it didn’t matter that I couldn’t in that moment. I still would have gladly listened to him speak for hours.

“*Uhm, enni-whey...*” He cleared his throat and gazed at me with wide, trepidatious eyes. “*Uhm, yoor nuht gunnuh keelmi rait? Juss... juss wunnuh geddat kleerd up.*”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” I told him helplessly. “I’m sorry.”

He let out a hard breath. “*Aihm nudal dat smuhrt, zoh aihm juss gunnuh assoom da bezt heeran gess datiff yoo wunned tukeel mi, yoo wudav bainow.*”

“I—” My ears twitched with embarrassment as I stared at him gormlessly, feeling useless.

After a second, he smiled at me. I immediately smiled back, hoping to help make him feel safe, but I saw his gaze dart down to my sharp teeth. I quickly looked down to hide them, an embarrassed flush spreading over my face.

“*Zohree,*” he said quickly. “*Ai juss... Yur teef ahreeli shahrp. Uhm, ai...*”

He reached out and gently touched my arm, jerking his hand back when my head snapped up.

“*Zohree,*” he repeated, face going pink again. “*Uhm, uhm... ai... aihm uh hoomun.*” He gestured behind him at the void, making my gaze dart to it. “*Hoomun.*” He gestured at himself, then at me.

“*H-hoo-mun,*” I repeated cautiously, wondering what he was trying to tell me this time.

“*Yez, aihm hoomun.*” He gestured at the void again. “*Frum, uhh, urf. Yoo... Yur naht hoomun, rait?*”

“*N-naht hoo-mun rait,*” I echoed hesitantly, no doubt mangling the words.

My belly warmed with pleasure when he chuckled, shooting me another brilliant grin.

“*Duzzen maddehr. Yur, uhm, kleeerli naht hoomun.*” He glanced back at the void again, taking a cautious step away from it. “*Wuddiz dat?*”

I could hear the question in his voice. I wondered if he was as perplexed by the void as we had been.

“It just appeared one day,” I told him. “A tiny dot that grew and grew. And then... and then you fell out of it.”

We stared at each other again, lapsing back into silence. I was still clutching my robe and the soiled handkerchief, and I realised I hadn’t even given him a chance to properly move away from the void. Feeling terribly self-conscious about my rudeness, I gestured at the bed.

“W-would you like to sit?”

He looked over at it, brows hiking up and vanishing under the golden hair hanging over his

forehead. The tips of my ears twitched and burned with embarrassment as I realised how that must have seemed—gesturing at a *bed*, for Mabs' sake.

Part of me was terrified that he would turn and sprint through the void if I moved away from him, but I forced myself to walk over to the bed and perch on its edge. I set the dirty handkerchief beside me but kept the robe clutched in my hands, not willing to relinquish it when it had been on his person—under his *shirt*—so recently.

Slowly, he walked over to join me. A thrill raced up my spine when our knees brushed as he sat down and glanced around warily. The room was dim, only the pink glow from my lantern on the floor casting hazy light over the wooden boards and along the bottom of the walls. It felt... terrifyingly intimate.

“*Diz duzzen fil reel.*” He chuckled and scrubbed a hand over his golden mane, ruffling the strands.

I gazed at his profile, at his small, rounded ears that stuck out from his head, the gold hoop pierced through his lobe, the closely shorn hair that turned into longer strands along the top of his head and down his nape.

He was just so fascinating to look at. His soft features and pale skin that seemed to flush pink so easily. His prominent nose and wide, full mouth. His crystal blue eyes that looked so much darker in the low light. Almost the colour of my skin.

When he glanced over at me, I blushed and averted my gaze.

“I’m sorry for staring.” Furtively, I looked over his body again, eyes drawn to his long, bare legs, his thick, hair-dusted thighs. When my gaze landed on the bulge under his non-leg coverings, my ears twitched and I looked away again quickly.

“*Uhm, deezarr inn-trestin.*”

I went very still when he reached over and lightly touched one of the barbells along the backs of my fingers. Tingles raced up my arm from the contact, and my fingers flexed before I straightened them out so he could examine them fully.

“*Derr rahd.*”

When I glanced up at his face, he smiled at me. I smiled back, gaze once again roaming greedily over his features.

“*Yoogott uhlodda pirr-senz.*” He nodded at my ear, making my hand fly up to it. When I felt all the jewels and hoops against my fingertips, I wondered if he was still talking about my piercings.

“Vints are heavily pierced,” I told him. “Royals more than anyone else. They... they symbolise certain things. Well, the ears are just for decoration, because we have the most prominent ears of any race.”

I was babbling, but he seemed rapt even though he couldn’t understand me.

“The, erm, the ones on my hands...” I ran my thumb over the piercings on my other hand. “They’re royal. I got them when I became Moric. But there are others we get. When, erm, when a vint wishes to join with another in union, they pierce their lip to symbolise how they will never speak ill of their betrothed or touch another’s, erm... b-body with their mouth.”

My ears were hot with embarrassment, even though he couldn’t understand a word I was saying. When I fell silent, he gave me a tentative smile.

Swallowing thickly, I reached up and touched a single fingertip to the hoop in his ear. “You’re pierced too.”

He chuckled, fingers bumping into mine when he lifted a hand to touch it. I quickly drew my hand back, flustered. “*Juss da wun fur mi. Goddit wenai ternd ay-teen. Mai dahd haydzitt.*”

“Does it... does it mean something?” I asked, feeling silly in case he had just told me that.

“Uhm...” He let out a little huff, giving me a rueful smile. “*Dissiz weerd raiht? Ai uhh, ai rili wysh ai cud unner-stahn yoo. Buhdai... ai gess ai shud bi gowen.*”

When he gestured at the void, my pulse leapt with panic. Was he leaving? No! No, he couldn't leave! He'd only just come back!

“Do you have to go?” I asked, my voice small.

He gave me a hesitant smile, not knowing what I'd said, and stood up from the bed. Oh Mabs, he really was leaving. I scrambled up after him, wringing my hands together as he crossed the room and stood in front of the void.

“Th-thank you,” I blurted, stepping closer. “Thank you for coming back. I'm so sorry for... I'm sorry for what happened before. I'm sorry for how we treated you. I've thought of little else, and... and it's a relief to see that you are well.”

“*Ai uhh, ai dunoh wut yoo sed buhdum... idwuz naihss too meet yoo proh-pehrli diss taihm. Uhh... ai gess...*”

He held it out his hand. I stared at it, nonplussed, until he chuckled and reached forward to gently take mine. I blinked in bewilderment as he moved our linked hands up and down for some reason.

He chuckled again, releasing me. “*Yeh, dat meks mi fil laik uh miduhl-ayj biznuhss mahn enni-whew.*” Lifting his hand so his palm faced me, he added, “*Hai-faihv inn-stehd?*”

Feeling somewhat foolish, I raised my hand to copy him. He laughed and slapped his palm against mine, making me jump.

“*Hai-faihv,*” he repeated, then his face went pink again. “*Itt cud, uhm, maybi itt cud bi howee zahy heh-loh. Ivyoo duhn maihn mi cuminbak. Wi cud hai-faihv.*”

“*Hai-faihv,*” I echoed, still holding my palm up.

He laughed and did it again, which made me grin. I slowly lowered my hand, wishing I could ask him to stay for just a little longer. Wishing I could ask if he was going to come back.

“Will you visit again?” I blurted anyway. Flushing, I tried to convey it without words by gesturing at him, then the void, then myself.

He nodded, making unbridled hope flare sharply in my chest.

“*Aihll cum bek zoon,*” he said.

Mabs, please let that mean he'll visit again.

“I—I hope you come back,” I croaked, fingers twisting together. After a nervous swallow, I smiled and added, “*Juhgz.*”

The grin that lit up his face was radiant, warm and bright and making my chest squeeze tight.

“Lyorrr,” he said back, reaching out and gently squeezing my hand. I tightened my fingers immediately, squeezing back. “*Aihl zeeyoo zoon, Lyorr.*”

I was reluctant to let go as he turned for the void, clinging on until the last second. He looked back at me one final time, giving me one more beautiful smile, before stepping forward and vanishing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I felt like I was floating the next day. The creature had returned. He had *touched my hand*. He had smiled at me and laughed and stayed to talk.

I was almost giddy with excitement over the thought of telling Lyri. He had been tense in the weeks since the creature went back, spending hours sitting in the guestroom fiddling with a dagger as he watched the void, waiting for something to come through it.

I didn't know if he'd be *quite* as excited as I was that the creature had returned, but I couldn't hide it from him. I didn't hide anything from my brother, and it was better to tell him that the creature had come back with no weapons, no army, no terrible motive, than have him burst into the room and find him there one day.

That was assuming the creature—Juhgz—visited again. I got the sense that he would. He had been calm. And friendly. He had told me his name.

He'd touched my hand.

I was stuck in a council meeting all morning, so I sent a message to Lyri to join me for lunch. I hadn't been able to sleep at all after returning to my room, lying there in the dark replaying the entire encounter with Juhgz, my stomach fizzing with breathless excitement.

It meant that I was tired and struggled to concentrate in the meeting, but thankfully it was just about a future visit from a diplomat in the neighbouring fiefdom. I was already dreading it, knowing Moric Oril would once again bring their adult child to parade in front of me. Oril had been eager to unite our fiefdoms for a while—no doubt to reap the benefits of our bustling port trade—and when I became Moric, they had seen their opportunity to do so by trying to unite me with their offspring.

Moric Oril was an ashara. Truthfully, the ashara unnerved me a little, with their blank, flat faces and enormous eyes. I had met Moric Oril's offspring, Atil, before, and they had towered over me, their body whip-thin and unnervingly still as they spoke to me.

I wasn't interested in forming a union with Atil, and I was already dreading their visit, knowing I would have to politely ward off veiled suggestions about how my fiefdom would be stronger if we joined forces. The council wanted me to, because they wanted better prices on imports from the Ayivis fiefdom, which contained the Amaranthine Forest. We imported much of our fruit from the Amaranthine Forest, as well as precious gems, rare furs and the dawn-shards that were used in lanterns throughout the city.

By the time the meeting ended, I was stifling my yawns, hoping there would be some molt tea served with our lunch. I didn't drink it often, but its spicy kick never failed to give me a boost for the rest of my dull day.

I had asked Lyri to join me for lunch in the gardens, because I was in such a marvellous mood and wanted to bask in the sun and fresh air for a while. Most of the hyll's gardens were open to the public, so they could enjoy the one true area of plant life in the otherwise built-up and crowded city of Thinir, but there was a small section at the back of the hyll that was private, reserved just for the royal family.

Thinir was built up the side of a mountain, the ground hard and rocky, so not much grew naturally here. The Moric's gardens had been a source of pride for eons, a stable of gardeners employed to lovingly tend to the plants that would otherwise struggle to grow here.

I didn't visit them often enough. As Seis and I stepped outside, I tilted my face up to the sun and enjoyed its warmth for a few moments. I could hear the faint sounds of the docks far below us, sea-

hunting folk shouting and the sea lapping against the hulls of boats. A fresh, salty tang filled the air, clean and sharp.

“Beautiful day,” Seis commented. My eyes popped open, and I grinned at him.

“Quite. Lunch should be nice.”

We began walking toward the table and chairs set up in the shade beneath ornate trellising dripping with bolska blooms, and I could see Lyri and Gryf already there—with Lyri, of course, already drinking the light sparkling wine that was usually served with lunch.

Gryf quickly stood at my approach, dipping into a shallow bow. I waved at him to sit back down, Seis and I taking our seats on the other side of the table.

When I couldn’t help but grin at Lyri, my insides bubbling with excitement over my news, he blinked and grinned back.

“You seem happy today, Lor.” He quickly poured me a glass of wine and held it out, as if he thought it would help continue my good mood and he didn’t want to see it fade.

I knew Lyri worried over how sombre and closed off I had grown since becoming Moric. He was always trying to get me to have fun, to join him in the city, to spend an evening getting uproariously drunk. I never accepted the offers, because I constantly worried about how it would seem to my subjects. And to the council.

“Yes, well.” I pursed my lips to try and contain my smile. “It’s a beautiful day and I am in good company.”

I heard Seis huff quietly in amusement beside me. The moment Juhgz had left the night before, I’d rushed into the hallway to excitedly tell him what had happened. He’d been alarmed at first, worrying over me, before I had assured him that the creature had been harmless—friendly—and that we had talked. In a sense.

Servers came out to deliver our lunch, a light dish of grilled posk that had no doubt been caught that morning and brought straight up to the hyll from the docks. Before they could leave, I asked for some molt tea to be delivered, knowing I would need it, because I already knew that I would be spending all night waiting in the guestroom again. Waiting to see if Juhgz came back.

Lyri, Gryf and Seis started wolfing down their lunch, but I picked at my plate, too excited to eat and trying to think of the best moment to reveal my news to Lyri. I managed a few bites of posk, which had been grilled to perfection and was still delicate and flaky, lightly crusted with herbs, before pushing my plate toward Lyri for him to finish.

“Not hungry?” he asked, polishing off my food in a few bites. He expended far more energy than me, his frame wiry and always moving, whereas I lounged around the hyll not doing much at all.

“Still full from breakfast.” I fell silent as the servers reappeared to clear the table and bring a fresh carafe of wine.

As Lyri topped up his glass and sat back with a contented sigh, I licked my lips and glanced at Seis.

“The creature came back last night.”

Lyri had just taken a sip of wine, and he proceeded to spray it over the table as he spluttered. Gryf slapped him on the back as he coughed, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“He came *back*?” His voice was hoarse from choking, and I felt a little thrill at having shocked him so thoroughly.

“Yes,” I said smugly. “He was very nice. We talked.”

“You *talked*?”

My ears twitched. “Well, I mean, we... communicated, in a sense.” I gazed at Lyri seriously. “He

is not a danger, Lyri. He is just curious about us, as we are about him.”

“Curiosity can be very dangerous, Lor.” Lyri was staring at me with hard, wary eyes. “You should have come and got me. Where were *you*?” he shot at Seis, worry for me making his voice flinty.

“Seis was in the hallway, where I had directed him to wait,” I said coolly. “He checked up on me, but there was nothing to worry about. The creature was... He was very kind. He returned my robe.”

“What?” Lyri shot me an odd look. “Why did he have your robe?”

“I... I gave it to him so he could cover up as I took him back to the void. In case anyone spotted us.”

Lyri stared at me for a moment longer before scrubbing a hand over his face. “Hag’s balls, Lor.”

“He is no threat, Lyri,” I insisted. “He is...” I could feel my expression turning dreamy, and I could do nothing to stop it. “His name is Juhgz.”

Lyri was staring at me in alarm when I glanced at him. My ears grew hot, so I looked down quickly to pour myself more molt tea.

“Are you *smitten* with him? With the otherworld creature?”

I choked on a breath, hands jerking and knocking the pot into my cup. “What? N-no, of course not!”

“You are.” Lyri laughed in disbelief, leaning back in his seat. “Look at you. Look at your face. You’re smitten.”

I glared at him. “My face is normal!”

“Well I for one have never seen *that* expression on it before. Have you, Seis? Gryf?”

The two baregh remained silent, shifting uncomfortably, not wanting to embarrass their Moric or disagree with their Verin.

I shot Lyri a weak glare. “Don’t try and drag poor Seis and Gryf into your cruel teasing.”

He sobered, leaning forward again. “I’m sorry, Lor, I wasn’t trying to embarrass you. I’m just... rather shocked. So he... he came back? Alone?”

“Yes, alone and unarmed,” I said primly, raising a brow at him. “He’s not dangerous, Lyri.”

He exhaled, wiping his face again and reaching for his wine to take a deep gulp. “And you... managed to communicate with him?”

“Well, in a sense,” I said hesitantly. “We couldn’t understand each other, but we found... common ground.”

Lyri watched me carefully before saying, “I’ve been researching ways to communicate with the otherworlders. In case more come through the void.”

I went still, my teacup halfway to my mouth. “Really? There’s a way to understand him—them?”

“Not necessarily.” He glanced at Gryf. “But there’s an old vint merchant who operates a tourist trap near the entrance to the city. We’ve heard whispers that it’s a front for black-market dealings. She might have something that can help.”

“Like what?” I asked, eagerly leaning forward.

It was Gryf who answered. “There’s rumoured to be a rare plant that grows in the south, close to the ruined city of the old ayturin people. The legend is that they used it to be able to communicate with other species—to absorb their languages quickly so they could learn more about them.”

“Merchants apparently use it as well,” Lyri added. “To be able to sell their wares in foreign lands. And to haggle effectively. To make sure they aren’t getting cheated.”

“Does it work? Can we get some? Does that merchant have it?”

Lyri chuckled at my eager questions. “Give me a bit more time. I’m busy building a rapport with Falnir—the merchant. She’s obviously not going to admit to the Verin that she deals in black-market goods. Not without proper incentive, at least.”

I faltered at the idea of Lyri trying to get his hands on black-market goods. If he managed to and the council found out that I had it in my possession...

“Why is it a black-market product?” I nibbled my lower lip. My voice lowered to a hushed whisper as I asked, “It’s illegal then?”

“Because it’s very rare,” Gryf answered with an easy shrug. “It’s not illegal, but the easiest way to get it is through a trader who deals in... questionable goods.”

“Can’t we just send some guards out to fetch the plant from the south?”

“It’s extremely hard to find, apparently. And that would take a very long time.” Lyri shot me a crooked grin. “Are you willing to wait that long to speak to your otherworlder if he returns?”

My breath caught at the thought of being able to actually speak properly to Juhgz—to truly converse with him, to *understand* him.

“What do you need to get the merchant on side?” I asked hurriedly. “Tell me and I will provide it. Coin? Expensive wine?”

Lyri burst out laughing, reaching across the table to give my arm an affectionate shove as he shot me an impressed smile. “Both of those will help, I think, but don’t worry, Gryf and I are sweetening her up.” His smile softened as he looked at me. “We will get it for you, Lor. So you can speak to him.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, unable to contain my huge smile. “Thank you, Lyri. Gryf.”

“I’d like to speak to him too,” Lyri added casually, topping up Gryf’s wine and then his own. “We still need to find out more about his world. How many there are like him.”

“How war-hungry his people are,” Gryf added.

I stiffened, unable to imagine sweet, smiling Juhgz as a bloodthirsty warmonger. “I am sure they are not war-hungry at all.”

“They *do* seem rather vulnerable,” Lyri said, cocking his head. “The creature’s skin was soft, and he had no natural defences that I could see. Even his teeth were all blunt. Didn’t even have a set of fangs.”

I quite liked Juhgz’ straight, blunt teeth. They had made his smile big and beautiful.

“That might just mean they have built impressive weapons to keep themselves safe,” Seis piped up, voice grim. “Or impenetrable armour to protect their fragile bodies. It does not necessarily mean they’re not a threat.”

I shot him a betrayed look, so he gave me a tiny smile and added, “But the creature did not seem dangerous. Though we should still... be on our guard.”

I pursed my lips, tossing back my hair. “Well, all the more reason to get our hands on this mysterious plant. Then we can speak to him and find out more about his world and his kind without having to make assumptions.”

“Mm.” Lyri quirked a brow at me with a smirk. “Because *that* is why you want to be able to understand him. Not so you can woo him with sweet words.”

“Shut up.” I glared at him, my ears burning and twitching madly.

But I was already breathless with anticipation, imagining what I would say to Juhgz if I could speak to him properly and have him understand me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Shifting anxiously from foot to foot, I dialled April's number into the phone in the hallway. As it rang, I peered back nervously to make sure our housekeeper, Jenny, was still busy washing dishes and humming to herself in the kitchen.

The phone clicked in my ear before a deep male voice said, "Hello?"

"Hi," I blurted. "Um, hello Mr—" I froze up when I realised I didn't know April's last name.

"Hello sir. Could I, um... Is April there?"

I heard a grunt. "Who's speaking?"

"Oh." I let out a nervous laugh. I didn't know why speaking to my friends' parents always made me so nervous. Maybe because of how nervous my own dad made me. "Um, I'm a friend from summer camp—another counsellor."

Another grunt. "I need your name, son."

"Oh, right. It's Ju—" I stopped abruptly, suddenly worried that April might have told her parents what happened and he wouldn't let me speak to her. "Michael. Um, Michael Pyne."

"Hold on. I'll see if she's available."

I heard him put the receiver down and call her name, telling her there was a boy on the phone.

"It's Michael from camp," he said.

"Michael?" She picked up the phone, sounding a little breathless as she said, "Mike?"

"April, hey. It's Jugs."

"Oh, *Jugs*!" She laughed. "I didn't know your name was really Michael. I thought Mike was calling me."

"Yeah." I let out a tight chuckle, glancing back nervously into the kitchen and lowering my voice.

"So, um, I was thinking about, uh, moving out of my parents' place. I was wondering if you have any friends who are looking for a roommate in town."

"You're moving to Linden Falls?" She squealed in excitement, making me wince. "Oh my gawd, we can hang out all the time!"

A tiny, genuine smile tilted my mouth. "Yeah, that'd be rad. So, um..."

"I think my brother's friend Anton might be looking for a roommate. His buddy just moved out of state."

"Oh, awesome." I perked up. "Would he... Do you think you could give him my number? And maybe, um, maybe tell him not to mention why he's calling if my mom or dad answer the phone."

I didn't know how my dad would react if he found out I was planning on moving out. He'd either be glad to see the back of me, or he'd be furious that I wasn't following his life plan for me to join the family firm.

And it wasn't like I could tell him the real reason. That I wanted to be closer to the portal. That I wanted to be able to go and visit Lyorr again. If I thought about what I was doing for too long, it seemed crazy, but I needed to move out at some point, and I did *not* want to join my dad's business. I may not have known exactly what I wanted to do in life, but I knew for sure that I wasn't going to follow in his footsteps.

"Sure, I'll pass your number on," April said.

"Thanks." I winced, scrubbing the back of my neck as I sheepishly added, "And, um... do you know if anywhere in town has any jobs going?"

"Ooh, yes!" I winced again at her loud, overexcited voice. "I got a job at the ice cream place in

town when camp closed, and Patty mentioned needing another person during the busier months. Do you want me to ask her tomorrow?”

“Yeah, please, that’d be rad.” I grinned, then nervously peered back at the kitchen again. “Thank you so much, April.”

“Of course. You’re my buddy.” She paused, then asked, “How are you feeling now? After, um... everything.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. “All good. Totally fine.”

I heard the tap of my mom’s heels coming down the stairs, so I hurriedly thanked April again, told her I had to go and recited my number before hanging up.

“Hey, Mom,” I said, shuffling away from the phone as she strode to the coat cupboard, fiddling with an earring.

“Hi, Michael.” She retrieved her handbag and opened it, pulling out a tiny bottle of perfume to dab behind her ears. Her voice was absent, barely interested when she asked, “How come you’re not at work?”

I paused. “Um, I was meant to be working at the camp over the summer, remember? But it... it closed early.”

“Oh. Yes.” She peered through the window beside the front door. “My car’s here. I’m off to lunch with the girls.”

“Okay,” I said woodenly, watching as she opened the front door. “Have fun.”

Once she was gone, I exhaled and turned to go upstairs, glancing at the phone and wondering how long it would take for Anton to get in touch with me about a potential room for rent.

“Want me to make you some lunch, hun?”

Jenny was standing in the kitchen doorway, a dish towel slung over her shoulder and a sympathetic smile on her face that made me flush.

“I’m okay, thanks.” I smiled at her and made my way upstairs, retreating to my bedroom.

I flopped down on my childhood bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering if I was totally crazy to uproot my whole life just to be closer to a strange world through a portal in a forest. But in the week since I had gone back—since I’d talked to Lyorr, kind of—I hadn’t been able to think of anything else.

I wanted to go back. I wanted to see more of that place.

I wanted to see him again.

I wished I hadn’t given his robe back so I still had something of his. Something to prove that it had been real. That *he* was real.

I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Every time I pictured his face, my gut went all weird and tight. Kind of how I’d felt when I’d started working at the movie theatre and realised that Greg was interested in me the way I’d been interested in him. The way I’d felt the first time he’d pushed me into the supply closet and kissed me.

But this was *more*. This was more than the soul-affirming, exhilarating rush of finally finding out what it was like to be with a guy. More than wanting to hook up with someone just because I was ridiculously horny. I hadn’t even liked Greg all that much—he’d been kind of boring when we weren’t feverishly getting each other off in secret.

Lyorr didn’t seem boring. Lyorr was the most interesting person I’d ever met in my life. Well, I mean, he wasn’t... human, so of course he was. But it wasn’t just that. Even though we couldn’t understand each other, he’d seemed... sweet and gentle. A little shy. Effortlessly refined in the way my mom tried hard to emulate, even when he’d come back to free me in his pyjamas with his hair half loose in its wild beaded braids.

I was still lying on my bed, lost in thought again, when I heard the phone ring downstairs. Jerking up, I scrambled off the bed as Jenny called up the stairs that I had a call.

“Thanks, Jenny,” I said breathlessly as I clattered down the stairs, picking up the receiver and waiting until she’d gone back into the kitchen to bring it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, is that Jugs?” The drawling voice was unfamiliar. “Uh, this is Anton. April’s brother Johnny said you might be interested in a room?”

“Yeah, hey, yes. Yeah. Thanks for calling.” I glanced back to make sure Jenny was still in the kitchen. “Um, I’m hoping to move up to Linden Falls.”

“Well, the room’s available now if you want it.” I could hear him snapping gum down the phone. “My buddy moved out a couple days ago. It’s not all that big, but we have a sweet set-up in the living room.”

“I don’t need a big room,” I said eagerly, then hesitated. I’d always lived at home, so I didn’t really know what the procedure was. “Um, do you need... references or something?”

Anton chuckled. “Nah, April vouched for you. Said you were awesome. That’s good enough for me, and I can’t afford this place on my own. When are you looking to move up here?”

“Um, well, I need to get a job.” I winced, wondering if I was screwing this all up by admitting that. “But April said she was gonna ask her boss tomorrow about a position.”

“Yeah, Johnny mentioned that you worked at the camp with her, but it closed early? Bummer.”

I let out a tight chuckle, feeling wildly uncomfortable. “Yeah. So, um... do you need a deposit to hold the room until I get a job?”

“Nah. It’s a small town and I haven’t had any other offers. Room’s yours once you find a job. Just call me to let me know when you’re moving in.”

“Sweet.” I was grinning wide, gripping the phone tight. “Thank you so much.”

After he told me how much the rent and bills were, I scribbled down his number and said I’d be in touch as soon as I had a job.

The next afternoon, April called and asked if I wanted an interview at Patty’s Sweet Palace, the local dessert and ice cream place in Linden Falls. The following morning, I drove up and met the owner, Patty, a sweet plump lady with a blonde ponytail and dimples. She offered me the job there and then and said I could start next week.

By the weekend, I was all packed and ready to move out. I’d called Anton and told him I’d be moving in over the weekend. April had called to confirm my first shift at work. I’d withdrawn some of my savings to pay Anton the first month’s rent up front—I still got an allowance, but I was pretty sure that was going to end soon.

All that was left to do was tell my parents.

They were hardly ever home, especially both of them at the same time. But that Friday night, I managed to catch them on their way out to dinner.

“Hey, Dad? Mom?” I stopped halfway down the stairs, curling my toes into the carpet as I watched my dad help my mom into her stiff-shouldered blazer. “Can I... um, can I talk to you real quick?”

“What is it, Michael?” Dad’s voice was bored as he turned to the mirror in the hallway to adjust his tie. “We’re on our way out.”

“I know, it won’t take long,” I rushed out, rubbing my socked foot along the back of my calf. “I just, um, I wanted to let you know that I’m... I’m moving out.”

Mom glanced over as she rummaged through her bag, pulling out a lipstick. “Moving out, Michael?”

She took Dad's place in front of the mirror as he turned to frown up at me.

"How can you afford that?"

"I got a job."

His lips thinned. "Where?"

"In Linden Falls." I cleared my throat, trying not to fidget under the weight of my dad's stare. "I'm moving up there."

"To Linden Falls?" He scoffed. "What's up there besides that little camp? What's the job?"

My face burned. "It's just—It's at the ice cream parlour in town."

"*Ice cream* parlour? Michael—"

"Well done, darling." Mom snapped her lipstick shut and pursed her lips, inspecting them in the mirror before fluffing her hair and glancing at Dad. "Are you ready?"

Dad was still frowning up at me. "Michael, I've had enough of you acting like you're still a kid. You're a *man* now. You can't work at a damn ice cream parlour. You need to get a real job."

My face burned. "It is a real job."

"I don't understand why you're being so difficult. First refusing to go to college, then spending every summer at that damn kids' camp, and now this? You need to start acting your age."

"I am!" I protested. "I got another job. I found somewhere to live. I'm moving out."

He scoffed. "And where are you planning to live? Some run-down shack filled with vagrants?"

"No, it's a normal apartment with a normal guy!"

"And I bet you expect me to pay your way, don't you?"

"No!" I burst out, ears getting hot. "That's why I got a job!"

"Don't raise your voice at me." Dad pointed a sharp finger at me. "Don't think you'll still get an allowance if you do this, Michael. I've offered you plenty of opportunities to start making an actual career for yourself and you've refused every time. I'm not going to keep supporting you when you insist on throwing your life away."

"I'm not *asking* you to! That's why I got a job and found somewhere to live myself!"

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down, and looked at my parents. Mom was fiddling with her jacket cuff, looking impatient to leave. Dad's face was purple with rage.

"I'm moving out," I told them, voice wavering. "This weekend. Tomorrow."

Dad made a frustrated sound and waved his hand dismissively, turning away. "Fine. But don't expect any help from us."

"I won't." My voice wobbled, so I bit down on my lip as I watched them leave without another word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

He isn't coming back.

I stared miserably at the void, curled up at the foot of the guest bed with a fur thrown over me. It had been almost three weeks since Juhgz had returned, and nothing at all had come through the void since.

I was beyond glad that I had found the secret passage to the guest quarters, because I was spending an embarrassing amount of time in here just watching and waiting.

But I was starting to give up hope that he would ever return.

My gaze drifted to the small wooden box sitting beside the vase of dried dolna stems on the chest of drawers across the room. Lyri had managed to procure the strange plant from the old vint merchant in town after many, many evenings spent drinking and gambling with her.

Nami weeds, they were called. Thin yellow stems that grew only in a tiny patch of drylands near the aytorin people's ruined city. A rare and little-known secret, one we had paid a vast sum from the hyll's coffers to get our hands on.

Lyri had even tested it, bribing a drunkard he'd been gambling with one night to eat a stem and see if he could suddenly understand the bareghs' native tongue. Lyri had chuckled as he recounted how wide the usho's already bulbous eyes grew when Gryf had spoken to him in baregh and he could eventually, miraculously understand every word.

We didn't know how it worked. Gryf said he'd had to repeat everything he said before the usho could understand him, almost like his mind had needed to hear the foreign words once, to record them, before the weed's properties had allowed him to translate them into his own tongue.

And now it was all for nothing.

Lyri was still delighted with procuring the rare plant. We'd paid the merchant more—much, much more—for a rooted cutting, which Lyri had given to the head gardener to plant in the private gardens so that we would have an endless supply, assuming it could thrive in the conditions here.

I didn't care about having an endless supply. I only cared about being able to speak to *one* otherworlder, and it seemed that I would never get the chance again.

The guest area was eerily quiet beyond the closed door, but I was used to that, spending much of my time alone in my own empty quarters. It was dark beyond the closed drapes—the middle of the night when I should have been sleeping. But Juhgz had come through both times at night. Perhaps his kind were nocturnal, like many here. I didn't want to risk missing him if he *did* come back.

Sighing, I huddled deeper under the fur, curled up in a ball on my side so I could watch the void. Its edges sparked softly in the weak light from my lantern, the dark mass within its centre calm and undisturbed.

I had to give up hope at some point. It was foolish to even care this much. I had met Juhgz *twice*, and he was... he was a strange creature! From another world! My interest in him should extend no further than curiosity over our differences, not this... this aching pressure in my chest. This desperate *need* to see him again. To hear his musical voice. To simply be near him.

I had finally found someone who made my chest flutter with sweet, breathless anticipation, and he was a mysterious being from another world. He couldn't be more unattainable if he tried—which he might have been doing. Perhaps he didn't want to see me again. Perhaps I had scared him.

Perhaps he found me frightful to look at, repulsed by my blue skin and enormous ears and silver eyes.

They were all things that other vints could only dream of having—ears as magnificently large and pointed as the royals. Skin such a deep, noble blue. Eyes that gleamed like valuable coins.

But perhaps to Juhgz, they were things that he found disgusting. Perhaps he had thought me ugly.

I didn't think he was ugly. Not at all. I found his soft features fascinating to look at. His full pink mouth had kept drawing my gaze, for some reason. His small, rounded, sweetly protruding ears had made my chest ache. His blue eyes were like stunning water crystals, glittering in the sun. And his long, bare legs... My gut clenched at the memory of them, and I was mortified when my cock twitched beneath my sleeping trousers.

I jumped when the void's edges started sparking wildly. Flinging back the fur, I scrambled to my feet and hurriedly smoothed down my nightshirt before fiddling with my hair, making sure the braids hadn't gotten too mussed while I'd been lying down.

My breath caught when Juhgz appeared, my eyes greedily taking him in. He was dressed in another pair of those delightful non-leg coverings, these ones a bright yellow, and the same thick buttonless shirt with tight cuffs as before.

There was something in his hand, and it shone a strange yellow beam of light across the room. It was so bright that it made my eyes hurt, and I took a fearful step back, wondering if it was a weapon, suddenly terrified that I had been all wrong and he was really here to hurt me. Us.

Then I heard something click, and the light disappeared. I blinked rapidly, readjusting to the pink glow from my lantern, and saw Juhgz grinning at me.

“Yur heer.”

When he didn't move, didn't try and blind me with his strange light, I relaxed a little. Licking my lips, I stepped forward and resisted the urge to fuss with my hair again.

“You're—you're back.” I gave him a tiny smile. *“I wasn't sure if you'd return.”*

He crouched to set the thing on the floor before taking a step closer and lifting his hand. *“Uhm, hai-faihv? Too sehy heh-loh?”*

I remembered this! Grinning, I quickly raised my palm and felt a little thrill when he smacked his against it. Perhaps this was how his kind greeted one another.

“H-hai-faihv,” I said shyly, my belly swooping with pleasure when he laughed.

“Yoo ruh-memburrd! Datz rahd.” Scrubbing a hand through his golden mane, he smiled at me again. *“Uhm, zohree iz taykuhn mi zohlong too cumbek. Ai moovdan stuhrted uh nyoo jahb soh-izzbin uhlidel hek-tik.”*

Practically vibrating with excitement, I held up a finger and raced for the box on the chest of drawers. My hands trembled as I opened it and plucked out a stem of nami weed, stuffing it in my mouth and chewing fast. I couldn't wait any longer. I wanted to speak to him properly, to understand him and have him understand me.

Unfortunately, the weed tasted vile. My mouth twisted as the bitter flavour coated my tongue, and I heard Juhgz chuckle warily.

“Dat duzzen luk laihek it tests gud. Uhm, zohree iffai inntuhrup-tesd yur dinnehr.”

Despair filled me as I swallowed and stared at him. Had it not worked? Or perhaps it... perhaps it needed a few seconds to kick in.

Then I remembered—Gryf had said he'd needed to repeat everything before the usho understood him. Licking my lips and grimacing from the bitter taste on them, I said, *“Will you speak again?”*

Juhgz just stared at me before letting out a big sigh, glancing around the room. *“Duhn zuh-powz dehrz uh mohn-stehr too in-glysh dikshuhnerri ahrown heer.”*

I squinted and cupped a hand behind my ear, trying to act like I hadn't heard him so he'd repeat it.

But he just chuckled and shook his head.

“Nehv-urr maihnd.”

Mabs, this was never going to work! Casting about frantically for a solution, I pointed at the strange light-giving object he had placed on the floor and gave him a questioning look.

“Oh, diss?” He bent to pick it up. *“Izz juss a flahsh-laiht. Zoh I cahn see-in duhdahrk.”*

Wait. Wait. I’d almost missed it, but there had been two words in there I understood. He’d said “a” and “I”, and even though I knew he’d been speaking in his tongue, my mind had somehow translated them.

It had worked!

Maybe. It was too soon to tell, and infuriatingly, Juhgz didn’t seem to be repeating many words.

Biting back my growl of frustration, I pointed at the object again and raised my brows questioningly. Juhgz cast it an uncertain look, but held it out to me.

“Flashlight,” he said.

“Hag’s balls,” I blurted, then clapped a hand over my mouth as my ears heated. Thank the Mabs he couldn’t understand me yet.

I didn’t know what a flashlight was, but I’d understood the words! I’d understood him!

“Wuzz rong?” Juhgz sounded alarmed, blue eyes darting down to the flashlight in his hand. *“Oh. Sheet. It’s nuht a whep-uhn, I prohmizz. See?”*

He fumbled with the flashlight, and there was a click before the painfully bright white light returned. I squinted and turned my head sharply, so he hurriedly made the light go away again.

“Shit, sorry.”

“It’s alright, I just need you to keep talking,” I blurted. “So I can understand you. Please. Erm, erm...”

Flustered, I reached out and touched his shirt, giving him another questioning look. He looked down at my hand.

“Mai swett-shurt?”

“M-mai zwwet...” I tried to mimic him, hoping it would prompt him to repeat it.

“Sweatshirt,” he said, and my heart gave a mighty thump before the word actually registered and made me cock my head. His... sweat shirt? Was it... designed to make him sweat? He didn’t look as though he was sweating.

It didn’t matter. The weed worked! I grinned at him, clutching the box as I bounced on my toes.

“You must take this.” I plucked a stem from the box and held it out to him. “And then we can understand one another.”

Juhgz gave the stem a wary look, shifting back a step. “Um, I don’t *theenk...*”

“Please,” I blurted, understanding enough to know he was apprehensive. “Please.”

When he didn’t move, I hurriedly tucked the box under my arm and gestured at my mouth, then his, then the nami stem. I gave him a bright smile and an encouraging nod, holding the stem out again.

Juhgz stared at me, shoulders slumping in despondence. “I don’t *unner-stahn wut* you’re *zai-in. Aihm* sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I rushed out. “Don’t be sorry.”

I lifted the stem to my mouth and mimed biting down, then said, “We will be able to talk,” before holding it out to him. He stared at me, then the nami weed, then scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Wayht...” Reaching out, he hesitantly took the stem and stared at it. *“Ahr yoo* saying this *wyl leht mi* understand you?”

“Yes!” I shouted, then went hot with embarrassment. I cleared my throat and repeated more calmly,

“Yes.”

Nodding furiously, I gestured at the stem again. Juhgz stared at it.

After a few long, fraught seconds, he exhaled heavily and mumbled, “What the *hel*.”

My belly lurched with excitement when he stuffed the stem into his mouth and chewed, grimacing just as I had from the awful taste. I closed the box with trembling fingers and set it back down on the chest of drawers, then took a step closer, my heart pounding.

“Can you understand me?” I asked, then quickly repeated it, tripping over the words in my haste to get them out.

Juhgz’ crystal blue eyes grew painfully wide as he swallowed with a loud gulp. His pink mouth opened and closed wordlessly for a few seconds, before he croaked, “*Hoh-lee* shit.”

Hysterical, nervous laughter burst from me, so I clapped my hands over my mouth. “By the Mabs, it works.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I was still reeling over the fact that I'd just understood him when Lyorr started speaking again, babbling out a long stream of words that were once more totally foreign to my ears.

But then he took a breath and spoke again, and for some weird-as-balls reason, this time I understood him.

"We must say everything twice at first. I'm not sure why but that is how the plant works."

"Huh?" I gawked at him, the words taking a few seconds to register. Whatever I'd just eaten tasted like shit, but I was pretty sure he wasn't trying to poison me or anything. I felt fine, and he'd eaten it as well. I was just... struggling to keep up.

Lyorr looked beyond excited, his silver eyes flashing and sharp white teeth all on display in his wide grin. He reached out and grasped my arm, fingers trembling.

"We must say everything twice at first." More foreign words, and then, "Until we have said all the words and can understand each other completely."

"All the words?" I echoed in alarm. When Lyorr just looked at me expectantly, I flushed and repeated, "All... all the words?"

"*Malu*. Yes." He looked so happy that my own mouth curved up into an answering smile. It finally started to register that I could understand him, and my belly fluttered with excitement.

"Okay. Okay. Um..."

"*Ganig we janiv*? Sit? Shall we sit?" Lyorr asked, pointing at the bed.

"Um, okay," I mumbled, suddenly feeling shy as I followed him to the bed and perched on its edge.

Lyorr clambered on, sitting back on his heels facing me, his mouth still stretched into a joyful grin. I grinned back, turning to rest a knee on the bed so I could see him better.

But as I stared at him, nerves rose to the surface. God, what if he thought I was a total idiot? I wasn't very smart, and he seemed... super refined and elegant. My gaze darted nervously to the portal. What if he wanted to talk about... physics or whatever? Discuss the portal? I didn't know anything about that stuff.

He said something, then repeated, "I was so hoping you would come back."

Flushing with pleasure, I gave him a shy smile. "Really? Um, really?"

Lyorr's big ears twitched, his cheeks turning a darker shade. He sounded a little shy himself when he said, "Yes. I have *tarya lomis*. I... I have been waiting."

Butterflies swarmed in my belly, and I felt my face get red as I smiled at him. "I'm... I'm sorry it took me so long to come back. I moved to be closer to—Um, I moved and started a new job, so I've been super busy."

I repeated it so he would understand, and he gave me a solemn nod and spoke.

"Yes, of course, I understand. I'm just so happy you're here."

I bit my lip, grinning so wide my cheeks hurt. "I'm happy I'm here too."

I said it again so he'd understand, my face on fire. It was super awkward to repeat everything, but it was somehow working. He asked me what happened the night I first came through the portal, and I recounted the embarrassing ordeal of tripping and falling. Then he told me about how the portal—he called it a void—had appeared one day and grown until I had tumbled through it. He apologised profusely for his brother pinning me to the ground, but said they were just so shocked and hadn't known if I was a scout for an army or here to hurt them.

It explained a lot. They'd never seen a human before—he repeated the word hesitantly when I told

him that was what I was. He told me that he was a *vint*.

"I'm so sorry for scaring you, Jugs." He said my name a little awkwardly, the inflection wrong, and when I smiled he pursed his lips. "Am I saying that wrong? I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I was probably saying your name wrong too. Lyorr?"

His sharp teeth flashed in an adorable little smile. "It is Lor."

"Lor," I repeated, my face burning as I said, "It's pretty."

"It is what?" He cocked his head.

I cleared my throat. "Um, pretty. Your name is pretty."

"Oh." His hand fluttered up before dropping again, ears twitching. "Th-thank you. So is yours. So unusual. Is it a *meaanya* name? A noble name?"

I snorted, shaking my head and pointing at my ear. "No, it's 'cause of these."

He hesitated. "Your... *pikni*? Your ears?"

"Yeah." I chuckled. "Jug ears. They stick out far. My friends started calling me Jugs in seventh grade."

After I repeated it, he drew back with an indignant look on his face.

"I like them," he told me imperiously, then reached out and lightly touched my pierced lobe. "So small and *kaamy*. Dainty."

My ears had never, ever been called *dainty* before. I blushed furiously, fidgeting with the hem of my shorts. "Thanks."

"It is not your name then? Just what your *hakima* call you?"

"My real name is Michael. But no one calls me that except my parents."

I said it again so he'd understand, and Lor gazed at me in silence for a moment before declaring, "I like Jugs."

I grinned, shifting to face him better on the bed. "Thanks."

I don't know how long we sat there talking. He asked me about my world, which took a while, but he seemed rapt as I explained cars and TV and junk food. He asked about the camp—he called it a settlement—explaining that his brother and his guard, Lyri and Gryf, had gone through the void briefly to look around. So I explained that too, flushing as I admitted that I'd gotten the camp closed early for the summer by vanishing all night and freaking out all the parents.

Lor appeared stricken. "I'm so sorry, Jugs."

He reached over and clasped my arm, his fingers so long and dark against my grey sleeve. My belly fluttered from the contact, and I hesitantly covered his hand with mine, wondering if he'd pull back.

"It's okay. You didn't know. It was a crazy night for all of us."

He was staring down at our overlapped hands. I felt his fingers flex beneath mine, and panic made me start to pull back, but before I could, he flipped his hand and gripped mine tightly.

"I am... I am so glad I met you, Jugs." Big black and silver eyes peered shyly into mine. "Will you come back again?"

"Yes," I blurted, praying my palm didn't start sweating too much against his. "Yes, I really want to. Do you... do you mind? I don't want to keep invading your bedroom."

After I'd repeated it, Lor paused and let out a tinkling laugh. "Oh, no, this isn't my bedroom. This is a *digir* room. A guestroom."

"Oh, okay." I resisted the ludicrous urge to ask to see his bedroom. He was holding my hand, and he kept staring at me, at my mouth, but... maybe his kind was just more touchy-feely than humans generally were. It didn't necessarily... mean anything. "So you... you don't mind if I come back?"

He gazed at me, gripping my hand tighter. I saw his throat bob. “I want you to come back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I knew I should have told my brother that Jugs had returned, but I also knew that the moment I did, he would set up post in the guestroom and refuse to budge until he'd had a chance to speak to Jugs himself. To *interrogate* him.

So I said nothing, and I avoided him, because it was impossible to wipe the dreamy smile off my face and he would know instantly that something had happened. It wasn't hard to keep away from him anyway, seeing as I was stuck in a council meeting all morning, and by the time it ended, Seis told me that Lyri and Gryf had gone into the city for the afternoon.

For once, I wasn't jealous of my brother's freedom to come and go as he pleased. I didn't *want* to leave the hyll. I could hardly wait for the day to be over so that I could return to the guestroom and see Jugs again.

He'd promised to come back tonight before he'd left as the sun was rising. We were both yawning loudly by then, but he had seemed as unwilling as I was to stop talking. Gradually, the foreign words had cropped up less and less, and we'd been able to stop repeating whole sentences at a time.

I had gone to bed at dawn giddy with excitement, my belly fluttering madly at the thought of seeing him again. Never had a day dragged by so slowly, and I hadn't been able to pay attention at all in my meeting with the council, utterly consumed by thoughts of Jugs.

Jugs, with his beautiful golden hair and crystal blue eyes. Jugs and his strange talking box that showed moving illustrations of people, and his big metal casket that he climbed inside and somehow rode to other places without any morkes reined to the front. Jugs and his "cheeseburgers" and "fries" that magically appeared through a window if he rode his metal casket up to it.

His world sounded unbelievable. I was too scared to step through the void and see it for myself, but Jugs seemed eager to come back here anyway. I was desperate to show him more of my hyll, but that wasn't possible. There would be pandemonium if I started parading a strange, otherworldly creature around. Word would spread quickly. The council would find out.

I didn't know how the council would react to Jugs.

I could take him through the secret passageway to show him my quarters. My ears burned furiously at the mere thought. No one went into my quarters—let alone my *bedchamber*—except Lyri and Seis and the few staff who tended solely to my rooms. What would Jugs think if I took him directly to my bedroom? He'd surely be horrified. He seemed to... like me, but he was a different species. He was... *human*. There was no way he could ever think of me in that way, and a part of me felt almost perverted to think of *him* in that way.

But I did. My chest grew tight every time I thought about him, and as I had lain in bed after he left at dawn, my cock had become achingly stiff when I pictured his pink mouth and big body and long, bare legs.

I'd thrown back the covers and hurried to the waterchamber, running a cool bath to try and calm my body down. I touched myself often as I was sure many people did, but it had never been one specific person that I had pictured in the past. It felt perverse to picture sweet Jugs and... do that, so I didn't let myself.

But it had taken a long time for my cock to go down.

After the council meeting, I ate a quick lunch with Seis in the private garden before telling him that I would be retiring to my quarters for the rest of the day, and he was free to do as he wished. I hadn't told him about Jugs returning either, and it was thrilling to have such a secret.

I was starting to understand why a past Moric had had that clandestine tunnel constructed.

After Seis left me at the door to my quarters, I took a long, hot bath with my favourite sweet-smelling oils. I washed my hair and carefully oiled my beaded braids so they were smooth and neat. I needed to let my hair dry before I styled it in the usual fashion, so I wandered into my dressing room to pick my clothes.

After settling on an ornately embroidered jacket and my most flattering tunic and trousers, all in black—all of my clothes were black—I checked them over for any marks or loose threads. I had been in my nightclothes the night before, and while they were made from the finest myrix silk, I wanted to look my best for Jugs.

To that end, I went back into the waterchamber and perused the shelf lined with finely made crystal jars and dishes that contained various mixtures and concoctions for my skin and hair and nails. Settling on the tiny jar of soliri cream, I took it down and pulled out the stopper.

It was the most expensive face cream I owned, made from the scales of the rare soliri creatures that inhabited a small stretch of warm beach on an island far, far to the north, many fiefdoms away. The marin people spent hours combing the sands once the soliri had retreated into the water, searching for the beautiful, iridescent scales they naturally shed when they came on land to sunbathe.

Soliri scales were believed to have youth-giving properties. They were carefully melted down and mixed with pama jelly, a thick, milky substance that the small pama sea critters left behind on rocks.

The whole process took months, the ingredients were ludicrously expensive, and the cream smelled rather unpleasant, but it always left my face feeling as soft and smooth as myrix silk. I smoothed a tiny dab of it over my skin then peered at my ears in the mirror. I had more expensive jewels I could put in my piercings, but... I didn't want to appear to Jugs that I was trying to seem better than him. I hadn't told him that I was Moric yet—what it meant here—and... I quite liked just being a normal person for once. No more interesting to him than the fact that I was not human like him, and not because of my title.

I had spent the entire afternoon pampering myself like a spoiled Moric, but for once, I didn't feel guilty. My dinner was delivered to my private dining chamber, and I only managed half of it, too excited and nervous to eat. After returning to my bedchambers, I scrubbed my teeth vigorously and spent a long time pinning up my beaded braids into their intricate style, before brushing the rest of my hair that hung loose down my back until it gleamed. Then I carefully dressed in the clothes I had laid out earlier.

Thank the Mabs the secret tunnel was mostly clean so that I wouldn't get dust on my fine jacket as I made my way through it. I locked my bedchamber door before leaving, just in case, and picked up a dawn-shard lantern before making my way to the wardrobe in the dressing room, my stomach already jittery.

As I walked quietly through the hidden passage, I wondered what Jugs would be wearing tonight. His kind seemed to only wear those delightful non-leg coverings that displayed his long legs, which I was already infatuated with. But he hadn't worn another shorn off shirt like that first night, and I secretly hoped he would so that I would get to see his pale stomach and strong arms again. The thought made my ears twitch furiously.

After emerging from the wardrobe at the other end of the tunnel, I hurried through the romantic guestroom and peeked my head out into the hallway. It was empty. There were two guards posted at all times at the entrance to the guest quarters, and the staff had been informed that they didn't need to tend to this area of the hyll even for upkeep for the time being, seeing as we had no guests.

Clutching my lantern, I walked down the corridor. This area was quite cold when it wasn't in use, and the hallway was dim, with no wall torches lit and the sky through the long windows already dark. After fumbling in my tunic pocket for the key, I unlocked the new lock that Seis had had installed on the guestroom door.

The void greeted me when I opened it—a softly humming black mass suspended in the air beside the bed. Setting my lantern down on the chest of drawers, I locked the door behind me and nervously smoothed down my jacket, making sure no dust clung to the fine black material. Then I forced myself to cross the room and perch on the end of the bed to wait for Jugs.

Long minutes later, the void's low hum turned into a more unsteady rumble. I jumped to my feet just as its edges began sparking wildly, and a second later, Jugs stepped through clutching a different item in his fist this time—a bag of some sort with two handles. His non-leg coverings were pale blue today, and he was once again wearing the sweat shirt, not a shorn off shirt that exposed his belly. I tried not to feel too disappointed.

“Jugs,” I breathed, forcing my hands to remain at my sides and not rise to fiddle anxiously with my hair. I stepped forward and lifted a palm in greeting. “*High-five.*”

He gave me a brilliant, beautiful grin and set down the strange bag, crossing the room to smack his palm against mine. “Hi.”

Hi? I thought high-five was his people's greeting. Perhaps hi was a shortened, casual version, reserved only for friends and close acquaintances. My stomach fluttered with pleasure.

“How has this day treated you, Jugs?” I forced myself to ask the standard nicety out of politeness, even though my gaze kept darting down to the strange bag. Had he brought something to show me? Something else from his world? Perhaps something as precious and interesting as the strange drinking vessel that was in my bedchamber.

He blinked, looking a little startled by the question. “Um, fine I guess. I had work, so it was pretty boring.”

I didn't really understand how something could be “pretty boring”—did he mean his place of work was dull but pleasant to look at? It didn't matter. I smiled at him and asked, “What is your work?”

“I work at an *aihyz-krim* place.”

“*Aihy...*”

“Ice cream.” He grinned at me. I blinked in confusion. *Iced cream? Why would they freeze cream?* “We sell ice cream and other *duh-zehrts*. Desserts.”

I perked up. “Desserts? I like desserts. Do you have *lokl*?”

“Um... no. What's that?”

“Oh, it's a speciality in my—in this city. It is fruit stewed in spices and served on top of a cake with sweet-salted meat.” I repeated my words so he'd fully understand, then shyly added, “It's... it's my favourite.”

“Oh. *Nahrr-li.*” Jugs chuckled warily. “We, um, we tend to eat meat as a *sehvuhrri*—savoury—meal. Not really in desserts. But... I'd love to try it. If it's your favourite.”

He gave me a sweet smile, and my heart practically burst.

“I will bring some on your next visit,” I told him, smiling so wide my face hurt. “We will share a meal together.”

“Okay, that sounds nice,” he said shyly, fiddling with the hem of his grey sweat shirt. “And, um, I could bring some ice cream from work for you to try too.”

I managed not to wrinkle my nose, instead giving him a polite smile. “I'd be... delighted.”

He chuckled, somehow sensing my apprehension. “It's good, I promise.”

“I believe you.” I gestured at the odd bag on the floor by the void. “What... what is that?”

“Oh!” Jugs looked excited, and he turned to grab the bag then brought it over to the bed, sitting on the edge with one knee resting on the mattress.

My ears went ridiculously hot as I tried not to stare at the soft-looking, hair-dusted skin of his inner thighs, visible almost all the way up to the crease of his groin. When my cock twitched in my trousers, I hurried to join him and crossed my legs tightly.

“I had an idea.” Jugs grasped a tiny metal thing and dragged it across the bag, a loud *zzzt* sound filling the air as a row of shiny teeth split open along the bag’s centre. I blinked in utter shock, but he was already pulling something out.

It was a black and silver box, slightly bigger than his hand, with a row of black bumps along the top. There was a tinted clear pane in its centre, and I could see two flat circles within.

It was the strangest thing I’d ever seen.

“It’s my *cuh-ssehtt play-ehrr*,” Jugs said as I stared at it. “Cassette player. I went to the *trr-iffd* store—um, thrift store—in town on my *lunnsh brehk* to find some cassettes that will help you learn English.”

He pulled out more objects. A strange, thin curve of stiff black with two bulbous discs on either end in bright orange. A vine or thick thread of some sort trailed from one of them. Then he revealed a stack of boxes, these ones much smaller than the *cassette player*, and made of a strange clear glass that didn’t sound like glass when they knocked together, letting out more of a hollow noise.

“*Hehd-fownz*. Headphones.” He pointed at the strange curve with the fat discs before holding up one of the small boxes, grinning excitedly. “I bought a load of cassettes. The *lay-di* in the thrift store said this should be the *cohm-pleet* set of *ehnsaih-kloh-peedee-ahz* on *tayp*, but I mean, there might be a few missing.”

“I’m... I’m afraid I don’t understand,” I admitted, feeling embarrassed by my ignorance.

“No, of course, sorry, I’m just excited.” Jugs picked up the silver and black box and pressed one of the bumps. I jumped when it split open and he pulled out a flat grey rectangle from its belly. “Here, I’ll show you.”

He chuckled sheepishly, holding up the rectangle. “This one won’t help you much. It’s just *keehss*. Um, *rahd bahnd* though.”

He shoved it in his bag and split open one of the smaller boxes, revealing another grey rectangle which he proceeded to slot into the big box before snapping its front shut. I glanced at him uncertainly, wondering what in the Mabs he was doing.

After picking up the curve with the discs—the *headphones*—he slid the end of the vine into a hole in the big box. Then he held the headphones up to my face, making me stiffen warily.

“Can I put them on you?” he asked with a shy smile. Staring back at him, I slowly nodded, flinching when the soft, fat discs settled over my ears. The black curve pressed into the tops of my ears uncomfortably, but I didn’t move even as the sound of Jugs’ voice grew muffled.

“Okay, I’m gonna press *plai*. I’ll turn the *vohl-yoom* right down ’cause I’m, uh, I’m guessing your hearing’s pretty good.”

He fiddled with the big box, then pressed one of the bumps. I jumped violently when a deep voice suddenly sounded in my ears, and I almost ripped the headphones off in panic.

“It’s okay, it’s just a tape,” Jugs said quickly, brows pinching with worry over my startled expression. “A *ruh-kohr-din*. Recording. You play the tapes in the cassette player.”

My pulse was racing, but I didn’t want to disappoint Jugs, and he had brought this cassette player to show me, so I forced myself to calm down and listen to the voice in my ears. I realised I could

understand every few words, and an awed grin spread slowly over my face as I gazed at Jugs.

He was so clever! If I listened to this recording, I would understand so many more words when he next visited. And he had brought many, many of the tapes that slotted into the box, which meant there would be many, many words to listen to.

“Jugs, this is wonderful.” I carefully pulled the headphones off my ears and heard the words from them stop when he pressed another button on the box. “I have never seen anything like it.”

“I mean, *seedeez* are better but the tapes were *cheep* at the thrift store.” He chuckled. “And I can’t *uhff-ohrd* to buy the whole encyclopaedia on CD. I thought this would work great to help you learn.”

“It is an excellent idea.” I gazed at him. “You are so smart, Jugs.”

His face went that wonderful shade of pink, and he looked down quickly to start stacking the tapes into a neat pile on the bed. “Oh, no, I’m really not. Barely *grahd-oo-ayteh* from high school.”

I didn’t really understand what he’d said, but he looked embarrassed, so I reached over and clasped his hand. “You are very smart.”

He looked up, cheeks still pink as he gave me a small smile. “Thanks.”

His gaze drifted down to my mouth, so I quickly made sure my teeth were hidden in case they unnerved him. Neither of us moved for a long moment, and when his pink tongue darted out to lick his lips, for some reason my pulse fluttered wildly.

Jugs cleared his throat as he finally broke his stare, but his face went even pinker as he mumbled, “You, um, you look really nice today. I mean, you always do, but I, um, I mean...”

I flushed with pleasure, my ears twitching from the praise. “Thank you. You... So do you. Is it... is it custom for your people to keep your legs bare?”

I repeated it so he’d understand, and Jugs glanced down at his bare legs and chuckled. “Oh, not custom, really. I just always wear *shohrdz* in the summer.”

“*Sh-shohrrrz*,” I repeated hesitantly, and he grinned.

“Shorts.”

I nodded, my ears twitching again as I admitted, “I like them very much. I... I liked the pink ones. That you wore the first time you came through the void.”

“Yeah?” His gaze flickered down to my mouth again, and he leaned in very slightly. I found myself mirroring him, growing breathless. “I’ll wear them next time I visit then.”

“When are you coming back?” I blurted, already dreading him leaving again for an entire day if not longer. “Tomorrow?”

He nodded, back to gazing at my mouth, making my stomach twist into knots. “Yeah. Tomorrow. I’ll bring ice cream for you to try.”

I smiled, squeezing his hand. “And I will bring *lokl*. We will share a meal together.”

I couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The dull human voice droned on in my ears, no more interesting than it had been when I started the tape even though I could now understand many of the words being said. This voice wasn't musical and interesting like Jugs'. It was flat and monotonous. But it was teaching me all the words, and that was what mattered.

I didn't understand much of what the voice was actually *talking* about, but I didn't care about that. I wanted *Jugs* to teach me about his world anyway. And once I knew all the words, he would be able to tell me everything with ease.

I paced up and down my bedchamber, my belly rumbling with hunger, but I refused to take off the headphones for even a few minutes. I wanted to learn as much as possible before I saw Jugs again tonight.

Besides, I didn't want any dinner. I had asked the cook to make a big bowl of lokl for Jugs and me to share, and he was bringing his iced cream. I was apprehensive about trying it, but I would for him.

The cassette player was clutched in my hand. Jugs had shown me how to use it, explaining the different symbols on the buttons so I would know which ones to press to stop the tape, "rewind" it and play it again for a second time. My ears were starting to hurt, all my piercings digging into the back of my head from the pressure of the headphones, but I was determined to keep listening until the very last minute before I saw him again.

"Lor."

The voice didn't register at first as I paced back and forth, but when it rang out again over the dull human voice in my ears, I jumped violently and reached up to tug off the headphones. My brother was standing at the door of my bedchamber, one hand still on the handle.

"Lyri," I blurted, fumbling with the cassette player, quickly pressing the Stop button to turn the voice off. "What—"

"What the fuck is *that* thing?"

I cleared my throat, carefully gathering the headphones with the cassette player. "Jugs gave it to me."

"What? You didn't tell me he gave you anything when he came back. What is it? What does it do?"

"It—" I didn't really know how to explain the cassette player to my brother, and I also didn't want to. If he realised what it was, what it did, he would want it for himself to learn everything he could about the other world. And it was *mine*. Jugs had given it to *me*. "It is just a trinket."

Lyri grunted, crossing his arms as his lip curled. "A thing to wear on your ears? It doesn't look very comfortable."

I carefully placed the cassette player and headphones on a side table, then smoothed back my hair as I turned and raised a brow at Lyri. "Is there a reason you burst into my room unannounced?"

He huffed. "Yes, *actually*. I heard you'd asked the cook to make lokl for dinner. Dessert for dinner, my dear brother? Someone's feeling rebellious. I wanted to join you."

"Bloody gossiping guards," I muttered. I'd sent Seis to pass the message on to cook. He'd no doubt mentioned it to Gryf, who'd no doubt mentioned it to Lyri. They were all as bad as each other.

Eyeing Lyri, I sniffed and tossed back my hair. "Well, I'm afraid you can't have any."

"Why not?" Lyri sounded offended.

"Because it—" I swallowed nervously, but lifted my chin and stared him down. "It is for Jugs and me. To share. We have arranged to share a meal together."

Lyri gawped at me. “*What?* He came back? He’s been back *again* and you didn’t tell me? You sneaky little shit.”

“Only a couple more times,” I said quickly, flushing. “I was going to tell you—”

“A *couple* more times? What the fuck, Lor!”

“I was going to tell you!” I protested, suddenly feeling terribly guilty about my secret. “I’m sorry, I just—I just wanted to get to know him before you scared him away with your aggressive interrogating —”

Lyri snorted. “I’m not going to *scare* him away with a few simple questions.”

I gave him a look, and he rolled his eyes.

“You *know* we need to find out more, Lor. And I doubt you’ve asked him too many questions that would be useful to us, if you’ve been too busy wooing him. Evidently, he is doing the same,” he added in a mutter, eyeing the cassette player with suspicion.

“He is not *wooing* me,” I snapped, though I wished he was. “He is just being kind. He is... he is wonderful, Lyri, and he has been so open with me about his world—”

“So you’ve talked to him then? Properly?” Lyri cut in sharply. “The nami worked?”

“Yes, it worked. Yes, we have talked.” I smoothed down my tunic and cleared my throat. “And he will be returning soon to share a meal, so if you don’t mind...”

“I’ll come with you.” Lyri grinned at me wickedly. “Meet your *Jugs* properly.”

“No, you will not!” I spluttered, pointing a finger at him. “Don’t you *dare* interrupt our meal, Lyri. I mean it.”

“Ugh, fine. I will leave you and your otherworlder to your romantic dinner. But I *will* be speaking to him at some point, Lor.”

My stomach twisted into nervous knots. “I will ask Jugs if he is happy to speak to you. But I really must go, Lyri. I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

“Alright, alright. Can’t keep the strange otherworlder waiting. Don’t forget your lokl. It’s in the dining room.”

I fussed with my hair as I followed him out of my bedchambers and across the hall to the dining room. Lyri picked up the tray holding a big shallow dish of lokl and a stack of smaller eating bowls and handed it to me, eyeing it with undisguised yearning.

I sighed, holding it out. “Go on, dish yourself up a bowl. There’s more than enough.”

He grinned, already grabbing a spoon and bowl. “Thanks.”

After he had carved out a big chunk of the cake topped with stewed fruit and plopped it into his own bowl, he didn’t move except to stuff a giant spoonful into his mouth.

I stared at him expectantly. “Well?”

“Well what?” he asked through a mouthful. “Aren’t you going?”

“Yes.” He still didn’t move, so I huffed. “Why aren’t *you*?”

He stiffened in offence, his cheeks bulging with lokl. “What, I can’t even walk you to the guest quarters?”

“I’m not—I’m not quite ready yet. I need to... sort out my hair first.”

Lyri rolled his eyes, but finally turned for the door. “Your hair is fine, Lor.”

“Enjoy your lokl, Lyri,” I said firmly as I followed him into the hall and waited, watching as he swaggered to the main doors and left with a brief wave.

Once he was gone, I hurried back into my bedchambers and to the wardrobe in the dressing room, carefully stepping into the secret tunnel with the tray. When I reached the guestroom, I arranged the tray on the small table between the two plush armchairs, deciding it would be the nicest place for us

to eat in here.

Before Jugs arrived, I rushed over to the mirror to make sure I looked alright. I peered at my teeth and smoothed down my beaded braids, then ran my fingers through my loose hair to get rid of any tangles.

When I heard the hum of the void change, I spun and hurriedly straightened my tunic and jacket. My mouth was already stretching into a wide smile before Jugs appeared, once again holding the bag he had told me was called a *backpack* the night before.

And he was wearing the pink shorts.

“Jugs.” I stepped closer and held up my palm. “*High-five*. Hi,” I added shyly, hoping he considered me a close enough friend to use such a casual greeting with.

“Hi, Lor.” He smacked his palm against mine after setting down the bag, then bit down on his lower lip. “Hey, um... there is actually another way humans greet each other.”

“Oh?” I stepped forward eagerly. “What is it?”

“We, um, *huhg* sometimes. Hug. Do you do that?”

“Oh, yes!” I grinned at him. “We hug those we are close with. So you... also do that?”

“Yeah.” He gave me a shy smile. “Do you maybe, um, wanna do it?”

“Yes,” I said instantly, already breathless over the thought of being that close to him.

We both stepped forward awkwardly, but the moment his arms went around me, I melted. My face was tucked against the front of his shoulder, and I tried to subtly breathe in his scent. It was so much better than lokl. Just as warm and comforting, but... deeper. Uniquely him.

He was so big and warm, his sweat shirt incredibly soft under my cheek. His back felt strong and wide under my hands, and I shivered when the hair on his bare legs rasped against my trousers.

When he eventually pulled back, his cheeks were pink. He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck, then gestured at his bag. “I, um, I brought the ice cream.”

I felt hot and flustered, my ears twitching, so I turned to reach for the lokl to hide my reaction to the hug. “Oh, lovely. I brought the lokl.”

I glanced back to gesture him over to the chairs, but Jugs had already sunk to the floor and was sitting cross-legged, pulling a crinkly white sack out of his bag. After hesitating, I picked up the tray and carried it over, sitting down opposite him and setting it on the floor between us.

“Oh, rad.” Jugs looked at the gently steaming dish of lokl. “That looks... um, nice.”

“It really is very good,” I insisted, watching avidly as he revealed a stack of white covered vessels. They looked like bowls, but made from a flimsy material. He pulled the top off one, uncovering a pile of... pink dripping balls.

“They’re *mehll-tin* a little.” He chuckled. “Melting. But they’ll still be good.”

“I...” I began faintly. “They look... very nice.”

He laughed, uncovering the rest of the vessels, revealing more balls in brown and white and pale green.

“Okay.” He arranged the four vessels in a neat line, then nodded at the lokl. “Shall we try yours first?”

“Alright,” I said, though I would have preferred to try the iced cream first so I could use the lokl to get rid of the taste after. But I picked up a spoon and passed it to him, saying, “Make sure you get a bit of everything. The fruit and the cake, with at least one chunk of meat in it.”

Jugs swallowed, expression adorably apprehensive as he carefully cut through the side of the doughy cake and lifted it from the bowl. I pursed my lips to suppress my smile, leaning in when he brought the spoon to his lips, hesitated, then ate the mouthful.

“Do you like it?” I asked, my belly warming when he gave me a surprised, impressed look.

“I actually do.” He covered his mouth with his hand as he spoke around the mouthful, then swallowed and grinned at me. “The savoury works really well with the sweet.”

“Yes, exactly!” I beamed at him. “It balances well. It is my favourite for that reason.”

“Um, maybe the ice cream will be too sweet for you...” He looked down at it uncertainly.

“No, I want to try,” I rushed out, picking up a spoon. “Which one should I try first?”

“Um, well, there’s *pisst-ashyoh*.” He pointed at the green balls, then the pink. “*Strahh-behri. Vuh-nilah* and *shok-litt*.”

I still didn’t understand the meaning of the words even when he repeated them, so I gave him a helpless look. He chuckled and picked up the bowl with white balls. “Let’s start with the vanilla. It’s the mildest flavour.”

I licked my lips nervously and scraped a tiny amount onto the spoon, staring at the melting white mush before taking a deep breath and licking it off. It was tooth-achingly sweet, but... not bad. I grinned at Jugs, who was watching me intently.

“I like it.”

He swallowed, eyes darting down to my mouth before he looked down to pick up another pot. “A-awesome. How about strawberry?”

I scraped off a little more this time and licked it off the spoon, smiling at Jugs until I noticed that his cheeks were flushed and his breaths were a little unsteady. “Are you alright, Jugs?”

“Yep, I’m fine,” he croaked, picking up the pot with green balls this time. “Try this one.”

I did, liking this one the most. It wasn’t as sweet, and mild in a different way from the white balls. I licked the spoon clean, but went still when Jugs croaked, “Lor.”

Lowering the spoon, I looked at him and realised he was leaning closer, staring at my mouth. I did the same, noting his pink cheeks and quick breaths.

“Jugs?” I murmured. For some reason, the way he was looking at me was making my pulse flutter wildly. Our faces were very close together now, but I didn’t want to move away and I didn’t know why.

He let out a sharp exhale, blue eyes flicking up to briefly meet mine. Then they dipped back down to my lips, and he leaned forward in a rush, getting *very* close to my mouth.

I jerked my head back, startled. “What... what are you doing?”

Was it customary for humans to watch someone eat very, very closely? That seemed rather disgusting, but I wouldn’t dare say that and offend Jugs.

His cheeks had gone bright pink, and he was frozen in place, staring at me with a horrified expression.

“Shit,” he croaked, leaning back and covering his face with his hands. “Oh my god. Oh my god. I’m so sorry.”

“What? Why?” I clasped his wrist and gently tugged a hand away from his face. “Why are you sorry? What... what were you doing?”

“I was... I was trying to kiss you.” His entire face was deep pink now. “Oh my god, I’m such an *ihd-yuht*.”

I blinked at him in alarm, wondering if he had suddenly fallen ill. *Kiss*. I understood the word, which meant he’d said it before. But when? And what did it mean?

“What is kiss?” I asked, wondering why he seemed so embarrassed.

His head jerked up, and he stared at me in disbelief. “You don’t... Your kind doesn’t kiss?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted uncertainly. “I don’t know what it means.”

“Oh *jeehz*,” he mumbled, rubbing his flushed face. “It’s—Um—It’s... it’s where you press your mouths together.”

“Press them... together?” I stared at his pink mouth, my belly tightening for some reason. “Humans do this? What is its purpose?”

“It’s—It’s—Y-you do it with someone you... really like. A lot.” He hunched his shoulders. “*R-roh-mahntik-li*.”

“*Roh*...”

“Ohmygod,” Jugs mumbled, then repeated, “Romantically.”

My breath caught in my throat. I stared at him, my heart beginning to pound hard and fast in my chest. “Romantically. You... you like me romantically?”

“I’m so sorry,” he croaked, voice strangled. “I shouldn’t have... I don’t even know if you have that here. Two guys or girls who... A lot of people in my world don’t like it, b-but—”

“Don’t like what?” I asked, thoroughly confused.

“Don’t like it when two men or women are... together. Romantically.” He looked at me uncertainly. “Do you... have that here?”

“Of course we do.” I didn’t understand. “Why do people in your world not like it? That seems like a ridiculous thing to care about.”

Some of the tension eased from his shoulders as he stared at me, a relieved, joyous smile tilting his lips. He shrugged. “*Beehtz* me. Some people think it’s wrong or unnatural. But... it’s not unnatural to me. I only, um, I only like other guys.”

I didn’t understand what could be considered *unnatural* about two people wanting each other romantically, but that wasn’t what was consuming my mind in that moment. “And you... you like me. R-romantically.”

Jugs went bright pink again. “I—Y-yeah, I do. Do you... do you like other guys too? Other men?”

The look he gave me was filled with such fragile hope that my chest burned with the urge to send an army of baregh through the void to hunt down any humans who had made him feel like his desires were wrong or unnatural.

I forced myself to focus on his question, pursing my lips as I considered it. “Well, I have never been with another... *romantically* before, but I—”

“Wait.” Jugs looked stricken as he stared at me. “You... you *are* an adult, right?”

I laughed. “Yes, of course I’m an adult. But being the Mo—But I... I’ve never found someone who I feel that... strongly about.”

“Oh.” He looked down, fiddling with the hem of his shorts as his shoulders hunched. “Okay. I understand.”

I shook my head, reaching out to clasp his hand.

“No, I worded that poorly. I meant *before* now.” My ears burned, but I forced myself to look him in the eyes. “I feel that way about you too, Jugs. I—I like you. Very, very much. Romantically.”

“R-really?” he breathed, gazing at me.

I nodded, unable to stop myself from staring at his mouth. “And I would... I would like to do the kiss. To press our mouths together.”

It seemed like a very strange thing to do. I knew that vints licked and bit and sucked during... intimacy, but we didn’t press our mouths together.

But if it was a human custom, a way to show romantic affection, I wanted to do it. I wanted Jugs to have no doubt how I felt about him.

“Um, okay.” Jugs looked nervous. “We’ll stop if you don’t like it.”

I nodded, because I had no idea what to expect. Having my face so close to another would be... very odd. But it was Jugs. I was *desperate* to be close to him.

"You usually close your eyes while you're, um, kissing."

I slammed my eyelids shut and heard him snuffle out a little laugh.

"Okay. Um, just... just follow my lead, I guess."

I sat perfectly still with my eyes closed, waiting. I heard Jugs let out a sharp breath before fabric shifted as he leaned closer, until I could feel the weight of his presence right in front of me.

Soft lips pressed to mine. Unimaginably soft and plush, pursing a little to tug lightly at my lower lip. My breath hitched, and I almost opened my eyes to protest when he pulled back, but then he did it again.

I could smell his warm scent. I could feel the tip of his nose brushing lightly over my cheek. Hesitantly, I tried to mimic him, moving my lips slightly to press them tighter against his.

It felt so... *intimate*. My hands twitched on my knees, the strange urge to grab his face and pull him closer rising inside me. I obviously didn't do it, holding perfectly still, our mouths the only parts of our bodies touching as we leaned over the bowls of dessert on the floor between us.

I made a soft sound of protest when Jugs eventually pulled back, blinking my eyes open to see him still close, his cheeks sweetly flushed and blue eyes much darker than usual.

"How was that?" His voice was hoarse.

I touched my mouth, which was tingling. "I liked it."

He gave me a crooked grin, gaze drifting down to my lips again. "Yeah?"

I nodded, still leaning forward. "May we... Could we do it again? Or is it something you only do once?"

He swallowed thickly and croaked, "No, we can do it as much as we want. B-but there's... there's another way to kiss when you... *really* like someone."

"Is there?" I eagerly leaned even closer. "How? Can we do that?"

"You, um... you use your *tungz*. Um, tongues." His face was bright pink again.

"Tongues?" My stomach clenched, gaze fixed on his mouth. "You... lick each other's mouths?"

"Um, no, it's more like you... you rub your tongues together. It doesn't sound all that nice when you explain it, b-but it... it feels really good." White teeth sank into his lower lip. "When you do it with someone you really like."

"I want to do it," I said immediately. "I really like you, Jugs. Can we do that?"

"S-sure, I really want to as well, but um... Are your... are your teeth gonna cut me?"

My hand flew up to my mouth, ears twitching with embarrassment. The flesh inside a vint's mouth was still soft, but tough to protect it from our sharp teeth. Jugs' teeth were blunt, so I doubted the inside of his mouth was similar.

"We don't have to," I blurted. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No." Jugs reached over and gripped my hand, pulling it away from my mouth. "I want to. We'll just be careful. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel *selv-kohn-shuss*."

Before I could ask him to repeat that word, he darted forward and pressed a soft kiss to my mouth.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled again, lips still aching close to mine, his unsteady breaths hitting my cheek. "Do you still want to?"

"Yes," I breathed. "I'll be careful."

He was still holding my hand as he kissed me again, but he let go to rest his palm on my knee. I shivered from the contact, kissing him back more confidently this time. I felt his lips part a little, so I copied him. Then a little more, so I copied him again.

And then wet warmth touched my lower lip, and my pulse began to hammer in my throat. I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do with my tongue, so I kept it still as I opened my mouth a little wider.

Jugs' tongue dipped briefly between my lips before retreating, then dipping in a little further, almost as though he was trying to coax mine out as well. Timidly, I touched the tip of my tongue to his, and then suddenly our lips were opening wider and our tongues met fully in a slow glide.

My body reacted in the most mortifying way, ears twitching madly as I went hot all over. It was the strangest sensation, his tongue soft and slick against mine, but it made my prick wake up and start to stiffen painfully fast.

I felt lightheaded, almost floaty. When Jugs' warm hand suddenly cupped my jaw, his thumb stroking over my cheek, I sagged forward and let out a desperate sound of pleasure against his mouth.

Could we touch more than just our mouths, then? My hands shot out to clutch his knees, fingers flexing from the feel of firm, warm skin and coarse hair. The kiss was slow, but it was making me shudder with pleasure as my cock throbbed in my trousers, harder than it had ever been before.

I wanted to beg him not to stop when he pressed one last kiss to my mouth before pulling back. I was breathing too fast, my ears twitching madly, the tips burning hot. I stared at him, panting, as he licked his lips and shot me a nervous smile.

"Did you... did you like it?"

I didn't answer, my gaze wild as I stared at him. Then I lunged forward to kiss him again, wrapping my arms around his neck so he couldn't get away. I felt my knee land in one of the flimsy iced cream vessels, crushing it completely, and the shallow dish of lokl tipped over as I scrambled closer, soaking my trousers in warm stewed fruit.

I didn't care. Jugs let out a muffled sound of surprise against my lips, but he was kissing me back as he lost his balance and tipped backward, grunting when I landed on top of him. Our legs tangled, the desserts getting everywhere, but he seemed to care as little as I did, his tongue sliding more aggressively against mine now.

I moaned into his mouth as my throbbing cock pressed tight against his hip, and I could feel something hard and hot against my thigh through his shorts. Did humans have cocks like some people here? What did they look like? I wanted to find out. I wanted to see Jugs' cock and touch it and find out if he liked my tongue there as much as he seemed to like it in his mouth—

"What in Hag's balls are you doing to my *brother*?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

My eyes popped open at the sound of the door flying open and the loud, harsh voice. Lor's head jerked back, his chest heaving against mine, and over his shoulder I saw a furious deep blue face with flashing silver eyes.

"Oh crap," I croaked as Lor tried to scramble up, his boots slipping in the melted ice cream all over the floor.

"Lyri!" He managed to get to his feet, sliding a little before steadying himself as he frantically tugged down his tunic. Ice cream dripped down the front of his pants. "You cannot just burst in here! I *told* you I was—"

"Yes, yes, I gave you time for your romantic little meal with the otherworlder." He waved a hand, eyes still murderous and fixed on me as I scrambled to my feet and tried to cover my erection with my sweatshirt. "And instead I find him... attacking your *face*."

"He was not!" Lor's ears twitched, but he raised his chin and shuffled to stand in front of me. Which did *not* seem good. "We were... we were kissing, if you must know."

Oh my god, this was so freaking embarrassing.

"What the *perrk* is *kissing*?" Lyri narrowed his eyes at me in suspicion.

"It is a human custom, and it is none of your business."

I went a little faint when one of the non-werewolves appeared behind Lor's furious brother. *Baregh*, Lor had told me they were called. The guy was enormous, thick with muscle with a mohawk-looking train of fur running over the top of his head. Tusks peeked out from his mouth when he spoke in a deep, rumbling voice.

"What is a *hoo-mun* custom?"

"Fuck knows," Lyri snapped. "Something called *kissing*. It looked messy."

"It is actually very pleasant." Lor stood up straighter, reaching back to fumble for my hand and squeezing tight. That eased some of the panic tightening my chest, and I shuffled closer to him, then gulped when Lyri's silver eyes snapped back to my face.

He stared at me in silence for a long moment, making me want to shrink back and hide behind Lor. Then his gaze flicked back to his brother.

"Why are you covered in food?" He jerked his chin at Lor's legs. "Is this part of the *kissing*?"

"No, it—I was clumsy and spilled it. Jugs brought some iced cream for me to try. It was very nice."

The big baregh guy perked up. "What is it?"

"It's, um..." My voice shook with nerves, and I darted a glance at Lor. "It's a dessert from my world."

The two monsters just stared at me blankly. Lor squeezed my hand and murmured, "They cannot understand you. Are you quite done, Lyri?" he added in a louder voice. "You are ruining our evening together."

"Ruining your *kissing*, you mean. I didn't *intend* to interrupt any weird *perrinya* practices your Jugs is teaching you. I just wanted to speak to him myself." He shot me a wide, sharp-toothed grin that did not make me any less nervous.

Lor's brother was *nothing* like Lor. He seemed brasher, rougher. Frankly, he was scarier than the big baregh at his back. My gaze shot down to the dagger at his hip. I gulped, the blood draining from my face.

“You are *not* going to interrogate Jugs,” Lor said firmly.

My gut squeezed with terror. Interrogate me? Why? Oh my god, was he going to throw me in the dungeon again? Surely Lor wouldn’t let him.

“We need to find out more about his world. His people.” Lyri strode to the small wooden box on the dresser and opened it, plucking out two stems of the yellow plant I’d eaten to understand Lor. He stuffed one into his mouth and chewed rapidly, handing the other to the baregh.

“You don’t need to interrogate me,” I blurted, clutching Lor’s hand tighter. “I’ll tell you whatever you want.”

“Again, otherworlder.” Lyri snapped his fingers at me impatiently. “Say it again.”

“Don’t be so rude!” Lor turned to shoot me an apologetic smile, squeezing my hand. “I’m sorry, Jugs. He won’t let up until he gets his way.”

“I... I don’t mind.” I nervously glanced at Lyri over his shoulder. “I don’t mind,” I repeated for his benefit, because I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t cooperating.

“Excellent.” Lyri took a step forward, which made me take a step back, and gestured at the portal. “How many are there like you? How many live through there?”

“How *many*? You mean like in the whole world?” I glanced between him and Lor anxiously. “Um, um, I think I read somewhere that there are like, maybe five billion people? Five billion,” I repeated quickly so he’d understand.

Lyri staggered back a step, his hand shooting out to clutch the front of the baregh’s vest. “F-five *billion*?” he echoed faintly.

Even Lor was staring at me in horror. The baregh looked equally as shocked. I fidgeted anxiously, my voice timid as I said, “I... I think?”

“We cannot defend ourselves against five *billion* otherworlders.” Lyri turned to face the baregh, both hands now fisting the front of his vest and unsuccessfully trying to shake the giant monster. “Five *billion*, Gryf.”

“Defend yourselves?” I repeated in alarm. “No, no, that’s over the whole *world*. And you don’t need to—No one wants to *attack* you. I don’t think anyone else even knows the portal—um, void—exists.”

Lor quickly repeated my words so the other two would understand, his shoulders relaxing.

“See? I told you,” he added. “Only Jugs knows about the void, and he has told no one. You can trust him, Lyri. *I* trust him completely.”

I couldn’t help but smile at him, wishing I could kiss him again. But that would *not* be happening in front of his ornery brother.

“Yes, well, you would,” Lyri muttered. “You’re *lominas* with him.”

“He’s... he’s what?” I asked.

“Don’t repeat—”

“Smitten, otherworlder,” Lyri spoke loudly over Lor. “He is smitten with you. Because you are showing him your strange human sexual ways. And bringing him odd gifts,” he added, gesturing at the melted ice cream all over our legs and the floor.

I went red as Lor snapped, “That is enough.”

Lyri blinked at him in shock. The baregh—Gryf—shifted uncomfortably, coughing and averting his eyes.

“You do not speak to him that way.” Lor’s sharp teeth flashed, his expression furious—and a little scary. “You will not come in here and insult him. Now get out, Lyri, and leave us alone.”

All the anger drained from Lyri’s face, anguished guilt pinching his grey brows. “Lor—”

“Apologise to Jugs this instant and *leave*. I do not want to see you any longer. You have treated him terribly when he has done *nothing*.”

I could tell that Lor rarely, if ever, spoke to his brother so angrily. Guilt churned in my belly at being the cause of it. I even felt a little sorry for Lyri, because he looked so devastated.

“I’m sorry, Lor, I didn’t mean—”

“Not to me.” Lor stood taller, squeezing my hand hard. “To Jugs.”

Lyri’s ears twitched, his cheeks turning an even darker shade of blue. He cleared his throat, crossing and uncrossing his arms before glancing at me through dark eyelashes.

“Sorry,” he mumbled gruffly, casting Gryf an embarrassed look.

“Good,” Lor said primly, then turned to face me, his voice and expression much, much softer when he asked, “Are you alright, Jugs?”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. “Honest. I—I don’t think Lyri was trying to—”

“Lyri is an overbearing oaf who is *far* too used to getting his own way.”

“I was only concerned for your safety!” Lyri protested, then pinched his mouth shut when Gryf gave him a nudge and a subtle headshake.

“See?” I gave Lor an unsteady smile. “He’s just being a good brother. I—I understand wanting to know more about where I come from. I’m a total stranger from another world. But I’m sure we’ll... get along great once we get to know each other.”

Finally releasing Lor’s hand, I wiped my clammy palms on my shorts and stepped forward to hold my hand out to Lyri. “It’s—it’s nice to meet you properly.”

Lyri stared at my hand, then at Lor, then at Gryf. Slowly, he reached out and poked the tip of my middle finger.

“Uh... greetings?”

“It is called a handshake, Lyri.” Lor sounded a little smug to know this already. “Grasp his hand and move it up and down.”

“Why the fuck would I do that?”

“Because it is *polite*,” Lor snapped. “It is a human custom. So *do it*.”

“Alright! Hag’s balls, no need to shout.”

Lyri snatched my hand up in his and squeezed it painfully tight, pumping our arms up and down vigorously. “Greetings, *human*. I am Lyri. Lor’s twin brother and the *Verin*.”

I tried to smile through my wince as he almost wrenched my shoulder out of its socket. “H-hi. Greetings. You’re the... the what?”

“The *Verin*.” He released my hand and jerked his chin at Lor. “Lor’s *mikril*. General.”

“G-general?” I glanced uncertainly between them. “Why does Lor need a general?”

Lor’s face had gone a very, very deep blue. His ears twitched wildly, and he suddenly wouldn’t look at me.

Lyri shot me an odd look. “Because he is the *Moric*. Our ruler.”

I wavered on my feet, suddenly feeling lightheaded. “He’s the... he’s the what now?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lor looked distraught as he stared at me. I stared back, eyes wide and unblinking, as I slowly came to the realisation that I'd just had an intense make out sesh with a monster world *ruler*.

"Well." Lyri sounded extremely uncomfortable, and in my periphery I saw him shoving Gryf through the door as he let out an awkward cough. "I can see that's... news to you. So perhaps we'll just..."

The door closed behind them, leaving us in silence except for the frantic whispering outside that gradually faded. Lor's throat bobbed, his ears still twitching. He took a single step closer and croaked, "Jugs—"

"You're a... you're a *ruler*? What, like a king?" I shoved a hand through my hair. "You're a *king*?"

"I don't kn-know what that—" Lor stammered, shifting from foot to foot and fiddling with his jacket cuff. "I am the... I am the ruler of this part of the world. It's—it's not a very *big* area..."

"Holy crap," I croaked, scrubbing both hands over my face.

"I'm sorry, Jugs." Lor sounded anguished. "I'm so sorry, I—"

"Wait, what?" I lowered my hands to stare at him. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because I didn't tell you." His chin trembled, black and silver eyes turning glassy. "I just—I just didn't want you to think of me any differently. I liked just being *me*, not... not the Moric."

"Oh my god, Lor." I strode forward to wrap him in a tight hug, dipping my head to bury it against his neck. "I'm not *mad*. I'm just shocked. Like... *hella* shocked."

He fisted the back of my sweatshirt, clinging on tight as he buried his face in my throat. "You're not angry?"

"Of course I'm not." I screwed up the courage to place a gentle kiss on his neck and felt him shudder against me. Leaning back, I grinned shyly down at him. "I can't believe I just made out with a king."

"Moric," he corrected, pursing his lips to fend off a smile even as he cocked his head. "Made... out?"

"Kissed." My smile turned a little salacious as I added, "Like, super-hot kissing."

Lor's beautiful silver eyes gleamed and grew hooded, his gaze dipping to my mouth. My breath caught when he lifted a hand to run a fingertip over my lower lip. "I liked kissing you."

"Me too," I said hoarsely, heat flooding my face when my cock twitched, pressed up against him.

Lor was still tracing my lips with his finger, breaths coming a little faster. "What else do humans do?"

I swallowed thickly. "H-huh?"

"What else do humans do with those they like romantically?" His ears twitched, cheeks darkening as he met my gaze and hesitantly asked, "Do you... f-fuck?"

Holy crap.

"Y-yeah." My voice cracked. Surely he could *definitely* feel my burgeoning erection now. "We... we fuck."

I let out a shuddering breath, trying not to picture Lor completely naked, stretched out on the bed to our left, his long grey hair wild over the pillows and silver eyes flashing with pleasure as I kissed my way down his body. Or Lor on top of me, his head thrown back and hands on my chest as he—

"Jugs." Lor interrupted my train of thought, which was lucky because my cock was now throbbing in my shorts. "May I... May I kiss you again?"

“Yes,” I croaked straight away, already dipping my head.

He let out a muffled sound of pleasure as our lips met. His mouth was still endearingly clumsy, but he was so sweet and eager that it didn’t matter in the slightest. And when his tongue glided hungrily against mine, I shuddered with pleasure, feeling those slight ridges I’d noticed before.

My hands were resting lightly on his back, and I could feel him trembling. I couldn’t stop myself from pulling him even closer, and my dick bucked in my shorts when I felt the hot, hard length of him against my thigh.

Shit, if we kept this up, I was pretty sure we were going to fuck *right now*. And if he’d never been with anyone before, I didn’t want to rush him. He was probably overwhelmed by discovering kissing for the first time, and he seemed to *really* like it. I didn’t want to ruin everything by freaking him out with too much at once. Besides, I had never actually... fucked someone before. Greg and I had done almost everything else, but not that. And I was *super* nervous.

Plus, I couldn’t shake off the nagging feeling that Lor’s brother might burst back into the room at any moment.

I allowed myself a few more long, indulgent moments of kissing Lor before slowly pulling back. His teeth hadn’t been a problem in the end, though I’d felt their sharp edges scrape lightly against my tongue a few times. Weirdly, it had only made me more into it.

“So, um...” I felt oddly shy as we stepped back, Lor’s ears twitching as he straightened his tunic. “Did you listen to any of the tapes?”

“Yes, I did.” He smiled at me, gaze darting to my mouth and away again. “Only one. It was quite long.”

“Did it help?”

“Yes, I learned many new English words. A lot of them I didn’t understand the meaning of, but you can teach me.”

I chuckled nervously. “Rad.”

He glanced over at the mess on the floor—stewed fruit and cake and melted ice cream everywhere. “I’m sorry I ruined our meal.”

“It’s okay.” The make out sesh was *way* better than ice cream. “I can bring more next time if you want.”

“The green one?” he asked hopefully.

I grinned. “Sure.”

“When...” He fidgeted, toying with the cuff of his jacket. “When will you come back?”

“Um.” I went pink, hoping he wouldn’t think I was a total loser as I asked, “Tomorrow? If that’s okay?”

“Yes.” He nodded frantically, reaching out to tangle his long fingers through mine. “Please. You don’t have to bring the green iced cream, I just... I want to see you again soon.”

My heart gave a mighty thump. I clutched his hand tighter, croaking, “Me too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Aww shit, the player returns!”

My shoulders hunched as I stepped through the door to my apartment and saw Anton scrambling up off the couch, dropping the controller in his hands.

“My *man*, who’s the lady friend you keep sneaking out to spend the night with?” He draped an arm around my neck and tugged me away from the door, then brought us to a sudden stop. “Oh shit, is it April? I swear I won’t tell Johnny, man.”

I chuckled sheepishly, letting him pull me over to the couch. “Um, nah, it’s not April.”

He’s not a girl. Or a human.

“So who is it? C’mon, bro, spill.”

I sat down on the couch beside him as he flopped back, trying to furtively rub a smear of dried ice cream off my shin. “Um...”

“I know everyone in this town. Just stop me when I say the right name. Jamie-Lynn? Heather? Tiffany?” He went still, then gave my shoulder a gentle shove. “Oh shit, is it an *older* lady? A mom? There are some hot moms around here, not gonna lie—”

“It’s not a girl,” I heard myself blurt, then went hot all over.

I had no idea why I’d just said that. Before Lor, I’d never, ever told anyone that I was gay—I mean, Greg obviously knew—and I’d only known Anton for a few weeks. In the ensuing silence, I stared in dazed shock at the coffee table, which was littered with empty beer cans and pizza boxes. Anton was a bit of a wastoid, but he always cleaned up after himself, and he seemed like a cool dude. But...

“That’s cool, man.” He shrugged, picking his controller back up. “Still gotta dish though. Who’s the hot bro?”

I slowly turned my head to stare at him in disbelief. “Uh...”

“I mean, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want. I just like knowing my buddy is getting some. Sow those wild oats, you know? Or, I mean, not so wild, if you’re in a committed relationship. Sow those committed oats, my man.”

“Uhh, he...” My voice shook a little, my entire body still tingling from the shock of what I’d just done. “He’s not from here.”

That was an understatement.

“Well, you know he’s welcome to stay here if you want him to.” Anton leaned in and gripped my shoulder, his brown eyes solemn as he stared at me with a meaningful look on his face. “I hereby give you permission to use the box of condoms in the bathroom cabinet, bro. Just check they’re not expired first.”

“I... Th-thanks,” I stammered, trying to keep up. “Um, uh... What are you doing up so early, anyway?”

He shrugged, slouching back into the couch cushions. “Got toasted last night, haven’t gone to bed yet. I’m not working today, so I’ll sleep it off in a while and veg out for the rest of the day. You got work?”

“Yeah.” I heaved myself up off the couch, knees still trembling wildly from adrenaline. “Need to go take a shower.”

“Don’t burn out, bro. Spending your nights romancing your boyfriend and working all day? You gotta take some time for yourself. Recharge those batteries.”

Honestly, I *was* getting pretty tired from driving out to the camp and spending hours with Lor every night after work, but it was worth it.

“Yeah, I will.” I smiled at him, then cleared my throat awkwardly. “And hey, um... thanks. F-for being cool.”

“Fuck anyone who makes you feel like shit for who you are, man,” Anton said with surprising vehemence. “You gotta live your life how you’re meant to live it. That’s all any of us can hope to achieve, right?”

I was pretty sure he was still a little stoned—his bong was resting on the coffee table—but then I was pretty sure Anton was *always* a little stoned. I grinned at him, my jittery insides finally calming as he smiled lazily back.

“Yeah. You’re right. You’re a good guy, Anton.”

“That’s what my grandma tells me,” he said cheerfully, waving a hand in my direction. “Go take a shower and have a power nap before you start work. There’s ice cream stains all over your shorts, by the way.” He wagged his brows at me. “Wild night?”

I snorted, wondering if he’d react so calmly to me telling him I’d travelled through a portal to spend the night kissing a beautiful, blue-skinned man with sharp teeth and giant pointed ears.

“Something like that,” I said as I turned to head for the bathroom.

After a shower to get rid of the ice cream and fruit all over my legs, I took a nap before dragging myself out of bed to get ready for work. The uniform for Patty’s Sweet Palace was a little dorky, but I didn’t mind it. At least I still got to wear shorts, though these were white and I was prone to spilling stuff a lot, so I had to be super careful.

Tugging down my pink and white striped shirt, I walked into the living room to see Anton passed out on the couch, snoring loudly. He’d managed to clean up first though, so I couldn’t be mad at him. Not that Anton ever gave me a reason to get mad, especially not after this morning.

I felt lighter as I left for work. Our place was in town above a hardware store, so I didn’t take my car, and as I walked down the street, I found myself smiling a lot at nothing. It was late morning, so the sun was already high in the sky and the air was baking hot. When I stepped into Patty’s Sweet Palace, the blast of cold air from the fridges and ice cream counter made my skin prickle.

“Hey, Jugs!” April gave me a perky wave from behind the counter, her puffed up bangs bouncing with the movement.

“Hi, April.” I pulled my uniform hat out of my backpack as I rounded the counter to head to the back office.

She followed me, chattering away about how Patty had the day off so we’d be closing up on our own, and that she and her friends were thinking of going to a party this weekend, and how her mom had totally pissed her off last night by telling her that she had to babysit her little brother after work.

“Oh my god, how do you manage to make this dorky uniform look so cute?” she asked as I adjusted the baby pink cap on my head after stowing my backpack away. “I look so totally grody in this thing. The first time Patty showed it to me I was like, *ugh*, gag me with a spoon.”

I chuckled, glancing at her as we made our way back to the counter. “You look nice.”

She beamed at me, then leaned in to nudge my arm with her shoulder. “So, Mr Jugs, I called you last night to make sure you knew what time you were supposed to start today and Anton told me you *weren’t in*.” She nudged me again, wagging her eyebrows. “Where were you, huh?”

“Oh. Uh...”

I liked April a lot, but there was no way I could bring myself to tell three people in one day that I was gay. I’d already told Lor and Anton. I couldn’t go from saying it exactly zero times in twenty-one

years to *three times* just hours apart. I was pretty sure I'd ralph all over the ice cream counter from nerves.

"Ohmygawd, did you move up here for someone? That is *so* romantic."

My face burned, because I actually... kinda had. I'd wanted to get away from my dad, get out of my parents' house, and I liked Linden Falls. The town was nice and pretty quiet, and I liked that. But... meeting Lor had definitely been what prompted me to actually get off my ass and do it. God, he'd probably think I was a total loser if he knew.

"Um... kinda," I admitted to April, keeping my head bent as I checked to make sure none of the ice cream flavours needed refilling. "But it's, um, it's pretty new, so..."

"Your secret's safe with me, buddy." She held out her pinky, so I huffed a laugh and hooked mine around it.

"Thanks, April. Um, so, do you... Are you dating anyone?"

"Ugh, not right now. Mike's being a total asshole."

I blinked at her in surprise. "Mike from camp?"

Mike was an okay guy, but more of a wastoid than Anton was. I was pretty sure he'd only gotten the job at camp because he was Stan's nephew.

"Yeah," April said glumly, wiping down the counter. "He keeps messing me around. He's the worst. But he's just *so* hot."

"Yeah, he—" Freezing up in panic, I blurted, "Yeah, he is the worst. Um, you could do way better, April."

She laughed. "I know I can. He *can* be kinda sweet sometimes. But... um, Jugs? I've been meaning to say..."

Stiffening, I warily turned to face her. She'd gone pink and was giving me a nervous smile.

"I think I might have... flirted with you a little during that party at camp. When you... Um, anyway. I was a little drunk and was just trying to piss off Mike and um... I don't..."

"It's totally cool, April." I smiled at her, cheeks getting hot. "Seriously. And you were... You've been a really good friend to me."

Fidgeting, she darted forward to hug me. "I'm so glad you moved up here, Jugs. We should hang out more. Johnny won't let me go to Anton's place because he says he's a total wastoid, but maybe we could catch a movie sometime?"

I was pretty sure I was going to be spending every spare evening I had in another world filled with monsters, but I smiled at her as we pulled back. "Sure. That sounds nice."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lor was already in the room waiting for me when I went through the portal that night, just as he usually was.

My breath caught at the sight of him. I always seemed to forget just how inhuman he looked until I saw him again—saw the midnight blue skin and huge pointed ears and silver irises in solid black eyes.

He always seemed to wear his hair in the same style—the top half tied back in a complicated, intricate pattern, with all those beaded braids twisted together except for the two that hung in front of his ears. He never seemed to take the beads out, so I wondered if they meant anything. I'd noticed that his brother didn't have any beads or gems in his hair.

The rest of Lor's long grey hair hung down his back in a smooth curtain, over all the delicate embroidery stitched onto his black jacket. All his clothes seemed to be black, and they all looked finely made, fitting his lithe body perfectly.

He had been pacing the room, but he stopped at the sight of me, a huge smile stretching his mouth and showing off his gleaming, pointed white teeth.

I grinned back. "Hi, Lor."

"Jugs." He stepped forward and raised his palm, then held out his arms, then stepped back, his ears twitching and face flustered. "I am... not sure how we are supposed to greet anymore. *High-five* or hug or—or..."

I swallowed, gaze darting to his mouth. "We can greet however you want."

He fiddled with his jacket cuff. "I... I like all of them."

I chuckled, setting down my backpack to step closer and hold up my hand. "Then we can do all of them."

He grinned, smacking my palm with his and saying, "*High-five*. Hi."

Before I could tell him he didn't *actually* have to say high-five every time, he was flinging his arms around my neck and tugging my head down to smush his mouth to mine. I smiled, gentling the kiss as I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him closer.

Lor made a soft sound into my mouth, one that sent blood immediately rushing to my cock, and prodded the seam of my lips with his tongue. I knew it would take a while for him to get used to kissing, and I *totally* did not mind being the guy he practised on.

When our tongues met, he shivered and fisted the back of my mullet, long fingers brushing over my nape and making my scalp tingle with pleasure. His lips were firm, and the inside of his mouth felt slightly textured, as did his tongue, which had smooth bumps or ridges over it and was more pointed than mine.

His breaths were shallow when he broke the kiss, silver irises thin rings as his pupils swallowed them up. "Y-you kissed my neck yesterday. Does that mean we can kiss in other places?"

My dick twitched in my shorts, making heat flood my face. I stammered, "Y-yeah, humans—um—humans kiss in o-other places too."

His gaze roamed over my face greedily. "Anywhere?"

"Yeah," I croaked, going a little lightheaded. "Anywhere you want."

He grinned, sharp teeth flashing white in the midnight blue of his face, then pressed another kiss to my mouth before beginning to pepper kisses all over my chin and cheek and jaw. My breath shuddered out of me when he used his grip in my hair to tilt my head to the side and tugged on my

pierced earlobe with his lips, then kissed his way down.

I clung onto his back, breathing faster as his silky grey hair brushed my chin. My eyes darted over to the closed door, a stab of worry cutting through the haze of pleasure.

“Y-your brother’s not gonna come back again tonight, right?” I asked as Lor attacked my neck, tongue darting out to taste my skin and making me shudder.

He paused, and my fingers tightened on the back of his jacket when he pulled back to glance over his shoulder at the door. “I locked the door. But... he *does* also have a key.”

When he faced me again, his cheeks were flushed an even darker blue, and I saw his throat bob. “We could... We could go to my quarters. He doesn’t have a key to my bedroom door.”

My cock bucked in my shorts, and I knew Lor felt it pressed against him, because his eyes flared. Heat flooding my face and intense nerves swirling in my belly, I croaked, “O-Okay.”

“You will be the first to see the secret I discovered.” He grinned up at me, looking excited, and pressed one last kiss to my chin before pulling back to tangle our fingers together. “Come.”

Chuckling in wary confusion, I grabbed my backpack and let him pull me to the door. “So does it... does it not matter if someone sees me?”

I really, *really* didn’t wanna get thrown in a dungeon again, and Lor had hidden me from those two other monsters before, when he was leading me back to the portal. Judging by the reaction his brother had had to me, I was guessing my presence here would be... shocking.

“No one will see us.” Lor unlocked the door and peeked his head out. After grabbing his lantern and tugging me out of the room, he locked the door behind us while I stared down the long, wide hallway lined with doors.

Lor had said this was just the guest area. If this was just the guest area, how big was the freaking house? I knew I’d walked through some of it before, but I’d been too scared and dazed and exhausted to really take it in.

He took my hand again and led me down the hallway, opening a random door on our right and pulling me in. It was another bedroom, this one much bigger than the one with the portal, and it was decorated in darker colours and lots of flowy fabrics. The bed was enormous.

We didn’t stop in there. Lor pulled me across the room through an arched doorway into a smaller room with wardrobes and a vanity with a huge mirror. He opened one of the wardrobes’ doors and reached in, and a second later I heard a tiny click.

Grinning at me, he stepped into the wardrobe and pulled me in after him. I gawked at the tunnel leading from the back of the wardrobe, which had swung in like a door.

“A secret tunnel that leads to my bedchamber,” Lor whispered, holding up the lantern so we could see. “It’s how I’ve been coming to see you without my brother knowing. Well, mostly. He always ends up finding out everything,” he added in a grumble.

“Holy shit, this is gnarly,” I breathed, watching as he closed the wardrobe doors behind us before latching the secret door shut, locking us into the tunnel. Its walls gleamed in the pink light from the lantern, smooth and black.

“I found it quite recently,” Lor whispered as he started pulling me down the tunnel. “No one else knows about it.”

“Why is it here?”

He glanced back at me, silver eyes flashing in the dim pink light from his lantern, making my breath catch. He looked... so inhuman, his deep blue skin gleaming, the jewelled piercings winking in his huge, pointed ears. But he was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

“I imagine a past Moric had a secret lover that they stashed away in the guestroom.”

The air suddenly felt very charged as he gazed back at me, leading me by the hand through the secret tunnel to his bedroom.

But then he stumbled, seeing as he wasn't watching where he was going, and quickly faced forward again. I was starting to realise that his ears gave away when he was embarrassed or flustered, and they twitched wildly now. I pursed my lips to suppress a smile, squeezing his hand.

The passageway was completely silent, but at one point Lor glanced back and pressed three fingers to his mouth. I vaguely remembered him doing the same thing when he was freeing me from the dungeon. I was pretty sure it was his version of "shh", so I kept quiet, wondering if his huge ears were picking up sounds through the walls that I couldn't hear at all.

Eventually we came to the end of the tunnel, and when Lor stepped forward with his lantern, I realised there was a door propped open by a weird clay figurine on the floor. He picked it up and pulled the door open fully, allowing us both to step into another wardrobe.

After locking the secret door behind us, he gave me the "shh" gesture again and whispered, "I just have to make sure there are no staff in my room."

I nodded, staying quiet as he slipped through the wardrobe door and vanished. Fidgeting anxiously, I glanced at the false wardrobe back. Would I have time to unlock it and run if another monster flung open the doors?

After less than a minute, Lor returned and gave me a bright smile. "I have locked the bedroom door. We are alone."

"C-cool." I nodded at the squat figurine still in his hand as I stepped out of the wardrobe. "What is that?"

"Oh." He chuckled sheepishly. "It is a token to the *Mabs*. I probably shouldn't use it to prop open the door but it was the first thing I grabbed."

"The *Mabs*?" I repeated the word hesitantly.

He spouted off some foreign words then repeated, "Living gods. They reside in a huge fortress south of my fiefdom. Their battles shake the land."

Battles? Fortress? *Living* gods?

"Oh," I said faintly, trying to get my head around that. "Um... your room is nice."

The walls were dark and gleaming, most of the furniture made of black wood. Candles with flickering white flames dotted the surfaces, as well as a few glass wall fixtures that contained more of those glowing pink crystals like the ones in Lor's lantern. They seemed to... hover, floating perfectly in the centre of the glass.

Lor laughed, setting down the token and taking my hand again. "This is just the dressing room."

He led me through a big arched doorway into another room—this one *huge*. My mouth opened and closed wordlessly as it took it in. There was an enormous four-poster bed against one wall, with deep blue sheets and drapes pulled back, glimmering gems and beads cascading from the canopy.

More strings of beads dangled from the dark curtains—which were drawn—and a huge lit fireplace faced the bed on the opposite wall, a thick, dark rug covering the black floorboards in between.

All the furniture had spindly legs and intricate swirly carvings, and weird objects littered the room. Almost everything was black or silver or deep blue, except for something on the dresser that caught my eye thanks to its bright red colour.

"Is that... a beer can?" I asked in disbelief, recognising the brand from the six-packs Mike had bought for the camp counsellors' little party in the woods.

"A what?" Lor turned to follow my gaze. "Oh! Lyri found it in your world and brought it back for

me to keep.” He faced me again with a winning smile. “I am so lucky to have such a rare treasure. Something from your world.”

I bit my lip as I stared down at him, not sure I had the heart to tell him that it was worthless. It wasn’t even a full one—someone had crumpled it in their fist after draining it.

“I’ll bring you other things,” I told him hoarsely, wanting to crush him in my arms because he looked so proud to own an empty beer can. “Whatever you want.”

His eyes flared with excitement, but he leaned into me, placing his hands on my chest as he said, “You don’t have to bring me anything, Jugs. Just as long as you keep coming back.”

I was already trying to figure out what I could bring him—something actually good—but his words made my heart thump hard against his palm.

“I’ll keep coming back,” I croaked, unable to stop myself from leaning down to kiss him.

Lor sagged against my chest, kissing me back eagerly as his long fingers tightened on my sweatshirt. I reached up and cupped the back of his head, sliding my fingers through silky soft hair, and he made a tiny sound of pleasure against my mouth.

Oh my god, I wanted to hear him make that sound more. But louder. Unrestrained. My dick perked back up in my shorts, and I plunged my tongue into Lor’s mouth, our shared breaths growing hectic.

Nerves churned in my belly. Holy crap, were we going to fuck *right now*? Tonight? He’d brought me to his bedroom, and he’d locked the door so we couldn’t be disturbed. His gigantic bed was right there, and the dark blue sheets looked super soft and luxurious. Even if we didn’t have sex, I wanted to climb into that bed and bury myself under those sheets. That was where Lor slept every night.

Did he sleep naked?

No, no, of course he didn’t. I’d seen him in his fancy-ass pyjamas, but for some reason, picturing him in those—picturing him slowly taking them off in front of me, or me tearing them off myself—was even hotter than the image of him sliding under the sheets already naked.

My dick was throbbing from my thoughts, and I didn’t want to freak him out in case the suggestion of coming here had been entirely innocent on his part, so I gave him one last kiss before pulling back and smiling down at him.

He blinked his eyes open, looking a little dazed, but gave me a dreamy smile in return. My throat ached with want.

“Your room is super nice,” I told him, voice raspy with lust.

His hands slowly slid off my chest as he stepped back and looked around, expression growing a little disinterested. “Well, it’s the Moric’s room. Not really mine.”

“But I thought you were the... Moric.”

He shrugged. “I am, but it has been this way for a very long time. Nothing changes. Most of these things aren’t really mine.”

“Well, it’s still cool to have all this stuff from, uh, past Morics, right?” I looked around, spotting a huge sideboard next to a window, covered in weird stuff. “What’s all this?”

Lor followed as I made my way over and stopped in front of it, not daring to touch anything. Some of this stuff looked old. *Hella* old.

“Priceless items gifted to Morics.” Lor didn’t sound all that interested, his voice turning a little flat. But not in a spoiled way, like he was so used to receiving gifts that they meant nothing to him. More like he was uncomfortable about it. Maybe even a little resentful.

“Do you... not like being Moric?” I asked awkwardly. Lor cocked his head.

“It’s not that I... don’t like it.” He sounded uncomfortable, and he shot me a stiff smile. “But I became Moric when my *vinnir* died. My mother.”

“Oh. Shit. I’m sorry, Lor. We don’t have to—”

“It’s alright. I always knew I would take over after her, but... she died young, and I wasn’t an adult yet. So it was... difficult.”

“I can’t imagine,” I murmured, reaching over to take his hand.

“Everything changed after that,” he continued hoarsely. “I had to... grow up very fast. But at the same time, it feels like I haven’t had a chance to grow up at all. Like I’m still a boy and I don’t know what I’m doing. I feel like I am just pretending to be the Moric. Like I shouldn’t be wearing these beads or sleeping in this room.”

He gestured at his head, making my eyes dart up to the gems and beads wound into the braids that were intricately styled into the top half of his hair.

“I feel like that too,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “I don’t know what I’m doing pretty much *all* of the time. My dad hates it. But... I bet most people feel that way. It’s not only you. And me.”

I gave him a tiny smile, and after a few seconds he smiled back. But then he made a face and said, “Lyri *always* knows what he’s doing.”

I cleared my throat. “Lyri seems... uh. Confident.”

Lor burst out laughing, the sound raspy and a little hissy, but I loved it. I grinned at him as he tossed back his hair and squared his shoulders, clearly trying to compose himself after his brief moment of vulnerability.

“Now, what would you like to know about?” He nodded at the sideboard in front of us.

“Oh, um...” I looked over the items, my gaze immediately zeroing in on the yellow-tinted glass jar that seemed to contain... eyeballs suspended in liquid. “Uh, that?”

“Ah.” Lor picked the jar up. “The eyes of an old vint seer who worked for a past Moric. Moric Timir. She asked for him to keep them upon her death, believing she would be able to continue watching over him and guiding his future even once she was gone. They do unnerve me a little,” he admitted, putting the jar back down.

Oookay, moving on. “How about those?” I asked, pointing at a pair of animal horns mounted on a gleaming copper plaque. They were black and curved with five red metal rings piercing each horn down its length. I wondered if that was how they marked cattle here.

“The horns of one of the last *eyriads* to roam these lands.”

“Oh no, did they go extinct?”

“Oh. No. The eyriads were—” He devolved into a long string of words that I mostly didn’t understand, then repeated, “The eyriads were a warmongering people who conquered any settlement or city that they came across. Many, many years ago, the Morics joined forces to drive them back. The last remaining hordes were banished underground, where they have remained ever since.”

I blinked at him, trying to process that. “Oh right,” I croaked, sweeping my gaze over the shelves again to quickly move on.

Try and pick something that isn’t a body part this time.

“How about this?” I hurriedly pointed at a thick book under a glass cloche, figuring a book *had* to be safe.

“An ancient book gifted by the knowledge-seeking *aytorin* people from the south. Very valuable.”

I nodded as he said something else I couldn’t translate, relieved he hadn’t told me it was, like, bound in the skin of—

“It is apparently bound in the skin of one of their Matriarchs. The highest honour that can be bestowed upon their kind—their bodies used to immortalise words.”

“Okay, maybe that’s enough looking at stuff for now,” I said with forced cheerfulness, turning

away from the sideboard filled with grody artifacts.

“Oh, shit,” I blurted when I spotted my backpack on the floor. “I forgot I brought you more pistachio ice cream. It’s probably melted by now.”

“The green one?” Lor asked hopefully from behind me as I walked over to the bag and picked it up. I chuckled, unzipping it to pull out the cardboard container.

“Yeah, the green one.” Popping open the lid, I winced at the melted mess inside. “Yep, it’s melted. Sorry.”

“I don’t mind.” Lor strode over to peer down at it. “I’d still like some. If I can eat it this way.”

“Sure you can. It’ll still taste good.”

Lor grinned, grabbing my free hand and dragging me over to... his bed. I gulped, clutching the container of ice cream.

As Lor clambered on and sat back on his heels, I quickly toed off my sneakers before joining him, settling down cross-legged facing him.

“Um, I forgot a spoon,” I said sheepishly.

Lor took the container from me. “Can I drink it from the bowl?”

“Sure.” I chuckled, watching as he lifted it to his lips and took a small sip. “Good?”

He smiled at me, eyes gleaming over the lip of the bowl. As he took another sip, I furtively glanced around. His bed was huge, and the mattress felt super comfy under my ass. The sheets were smooth and soft against my bare legs, and the drapes along the canopy trapped the heat from the fire in here, like a cosy little nest.

“It sure does get a lot warmer in here than the other room, huh?” I chuckled, reaching up to pull off my sweatshirt.

When my head emerged from the fabric, Lor had gone very still, the container raised halfway to his lips. He was staring at my midsection, so I glanced down uncertainly at my cropped tee and bare stomach.

Maybe he... Maybe it was rude to show your stomach here? He’d been interested in my shorts, so maybe his kind covered up completely at all times. I flushed.

“Sorry, do you want me to put the sweatshirt back o—”

Lor dropped the container, spilling melted pistachio ice cream all over his fancy blue sheets, and lunged at me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

My tongue was already in Jugs' mouth before his back even hit the mattress, toppled over from the force of me launching myself at him.

I just hadn't been able to stop myself when he pulled off his sweat shirt and revealed his bare, pale stomach. So much of him was on display—his long legs and arms and belly. I had to touch him. I had to kiss him wherever he would let me kiss him.

He'd said anywhere before. Did he mean it? Could I pull up his shorn off shirt and kiss his chest? Could I kiss his belly? Could I tug down his tiny shorts and kiss his—

"L-Lor," Jugs panted against my mouth, hands clutching the back of my jacket, which suddenly felt even more stifling than normal.

"You're so beautiful," I mumbled between kisses, my fingers burrowing under the loose hem of his short shirt to palm his chest. "I want to kiss you all over, Jugs."

I couldn't quite believe I was saying such things, but they poured from my mouth unbidden. And when I felt his cock buck under his shorts, pressed against the front of my thigh, my fingers splayed out over his chest and flexed in reaction.

His chest was so wide and firm and... *meaty*. I shuddered at the feel of supple skin under my palms, and my fingers brushed over two stiff little nubs. He had nipples like a vint did. When I brushed my thumbs over them again, he groaned into my mouth as his hips twitched.

I lifted my head, panting as I stared down at him. My ears twitched with embarrassment when I stroked his nipples again and asked, my voice deeper and throatier than normal, "Can I kiss these, Jugs?"

I had played with my own nipples before, and the rings piercing them made them so sensitive. Jugs' weren't pierced, but I wanted to find out if he gleaned the same pleasure from them. He certainly seemed to, judging by the way his cock was throbbing against my thigh. A shiver ran up my spine from the feel of it. I had never felt another's body in this way before. It was terrifying and thrilling all at once.

"Oh my god," Jugs croaked. He said that often. Nodding frantically, he rasped, "Um, y-yeah, if you w-want to."

I sat up, already tugging his shirt higher. He lifted his arms to help me take it off, breathing fast, and my cock pulsed madly in my trousers as I stared down at his chest.

"Mabs, you're... you're so big," I breathed, reverently splaying my hands back over his chest and squeezing the firm mounds.

Jugs' already flushed face turned even pinker, and he let out a sheepish chuckle. "Yeah, that's, uh, that's the other reason people call me Jugs. When I started working out a lot in high school, um..." He gestured at his chest. "These got pretty big."

I didn't understand what *working out* meant, or why having such a big, beautiful chest warranted the name *Jugs*, but in that moment, I didn't care to ask. His nipples were hard points poking into my palms, and I wanted to feel them under my tongue.

Shifting my hands down to his stomach, I dipped my head and brushed my lips over the centre of his chest. There was a smattering of fine golden hair there, and a ragged groan burst from my throat as I rubbed my nose in it and breathed in his scent.

Kissing my way across one firm mound, I shivered with pleasure when the stiff peak of his nipple brushed against my lips. A hoarse sound came from above as I kissed it, pursing my lips and tugging

gently before releasing it.

When I kissed it again, open-mouthed this time, Jugs jerked beneath me as my tongue swirled around the tiny point. I didn't really know what I was doing, letting instinct guide me, but it appeared to be working, because Jugs was clutching the back of my jacket and panting beneath me.

My eyes slid shut with bliss as I licked again. It always felt good when I tugged on the tiny hoops piercing my nipples, and I wondered if I could replicate that sensation for him with my mouth. Enveloping his nipple, I sucked, wanting to grin in triumph when a ragged sound burst from Jugs' mouth and his hips strained up.

"Lor," he panted, a hand sliding through my hair to cup the back of my head, as if he didn't want me to stop.

I sucked again, flicking my tongue, moaning at the taste of his warm skin. I might have sucked a touch too hard, because when I eventually pulled back to give the other the same treatment, his nipple was a bright, angry pink, the skin around it flushed against his usual pale colouring.

"Did I hurt you?" I breathed, but I was already kissing across his chest to his other nipple.

"No way," he croaked instantly, clutching the back of my head, urging me to move faster. "K-keep going."

I lavished just as much attention on his other nipple, licking and sucking feverishly as he trembled beneath me. I couldn't quite believe that *I* was the one causing such a reaction in him. In the beautiful, mysterious Jugs, who came from another world and had taught me so much and displayed his big, handsome body in such tiny clothing.

He felt like a gift. A treasure. I wanted to show him off to the entire fiefdom, to show them how lucky we were that out of the many, many people in his world—five *billion* of them—it had been Jugs who'd stumbled through the void to come here. But at the same time, I wanted to keep him hidden away, safe from the council and any others who wouldn't understand. Just him and me, in our own new little world that we had forged with pieces of the different places we came from.

"Lor," he breathed as I sucked hard on his nipple, making my cock begin to leak in my trousers.

I tamped back the urge to bite down, to graze him with my teeth, not wanting to hurt his soft skin. Panting, I kissed my way lower, finally abandoning his perfect nipples to make my way down his stomach, dipping my tongue briefly into his navel.

"Oh f-fuck," he croaked, which made me lift my head in alarm. Perhaps he had not meant *anywhere* then. Perhaps humans didn't kiss each other on this part of their bodies.

"N-no, I didn't mean stop," he said hurriedly, but movement under his shorts was already drawing my wild gaze down.

I stared at the outline of his hard cock through his pale blue shorts, a long bulge that stretched toward his right hip. There was a spot of wetness seeping through the shiny fabric, which made me go hot all over and start sweating under my stuffy jacket and tunic.

Reaching down, I reverently palmed the stiff length, teeth sinking into my lower lip when it bucked against my fingers and Jugs groaned. His chest was heaving, blue eyes wide when I lifted my gaze to look at him.

My ears twitched madly as I asked, "C-can I kiss you here, Jugs?"

"Oh my god," he croaked, the sweet flush staining his cheeks extending all the way down his throat to his chest. His nipples were still stiff and bright pink, making me wish I could have my hands and mouth on every part of him at once.

"I w-want you to." He manoeuvred himself up onto his elbows. "Like, really, really bad. But... you haven't done this before, right?"

“I’ll be careful,” I blurted, wanting to cover my mouth so he wouldn’t see my sharp teeth and change his mind. “I promise.”

His face softened, and he reached up to stroke my cheek. “No, I didn’t mean that, Lor. I don’t care about that. I just... I kind of want to do it to *you* first. Let you experience it first.”

My breath caught, one of my hands twitching with the urge to palm my own length through my trousers as it throbbed wildly. “You... You w-want to kiss my cock?”

“Not just kiss.” His voice was deeper, raspier. He was staring right at the outline of my prick as I knelt over him on the bed. “But yeah. I do. So bad.”

By the Mabs, this was happening. Nerves suddenly rose, making my pulse flutter in my throat. I would have to... take my *clothes* off in front of him. I had never been completely naked in front of another before.

And his mouth—his soft pink mouth—would be between my legs. On my cock, which only my hand had ever touched.

The thought almost made me come on the spot, my stiff prick rubbing against the front of my trousers, the fabric hot and damp with the fluid leaking from the tip.

“I want you to do that,” I told him hoarsely. “But I... I still want to see you first.”

“Okay.” He swallowed, gaze flickering down my frame. “Do you... do you wanna take off your clothes too?”

I hurriedly tugged off my jacket, but that was all I had the patience for. Curling my fingers under the crinkled, stretchy waistband of his shorts, I glanced up to make sure he was certain. When he nodded, licking his lips and staring at my hands, I started to pull them, and another layer of white fabric beneath, down over his hips.

A nest of golden curls was revealed first, darker than the mane on his head. I stared in fascination, wondering why he had hair here, but the sight of it was making my prick pulse even harder.

I almost jumped when his cock popped free and swung up to smack against his lower belly. Hag’s balls, it was... so big. And thick. I couldn’t take my eyes off it as I hurriedly tugged his shorts down his legs and over his socked feet.

By the Mabs, Jugs was naked beneath me. Well, except for his socks, but I didn’t care about those. His cock was flushed a deep pink with a rounded, slightly bulbous head, not tapered like mine. I couldn’t see a place for his extrusion to come out, but there were several thick veins winding up the length. As I stared, it pulsed and a bead of clear fluid appeared from a tiny slit on the tip, making my tongue press hard to the roof of my mouth.

“Oh my,” I breathed, placing my hands on his spread inner thighs to frame the flushed, slightly wrinkled twin orbs below that wonderfully thick pink length. My ears twitched as I admitted, “You’re m-much bigger than me.”

He swallowed, brows pinching as he fisted the sheets either side of his hips. “Who cares about that?”

That made me smile at him, but my gaze was almost immediately drawn back down to his cock. I swallowed thickly. “Are you sure I can’t kiss you here first?”

My thumb stretched out to brush over his sac, which was bigger and more textured than mine, sprinkled with more of that dark golden hair. Jugs let out a strangled whimper, thighs twitching under my hands.

“A-and here?”

“Oh my god, Lor.” He scrubbed a hand through his golden mane. “You’re killing me here.”

“What?” My head snapped up in horror, but he quickly scrambled up to cup my face and kiss me.

“It’s just an expression.” He kissed me again, then trailed his lips across my jaw to my neck.

I let out a shuddering breath, tilting my head and trying to peek down at his hard cock jutting almost obscenely between us. Mabs, I wanted to touch it. Why hadn’t I touched it yet? I started reaching down to curl my fingers around the thick length, but before I could, I felt Jugs gently tugging up my tunic.

“I want to see you too, Lor,” he mumbled against my neck, finally lifting his head to gaze at me with crystal blue eyes.

I licked my lips and nodded, helping him pull my tunic off. Resisting the ingrained urge to fold it neatly—now wasn’t the time—I dropped it on the bed and looked at Jugs, trying not to appear so nervous.

“Oh wow,” he breathed, reaching up and brushing his fingers over the tiny hoops in my nipples, making my belly clench. “These are so hot.”

They felt a normal temperature to me, but I stayed quiet as I glanced down to follow his gaze. The silvery-black hoops each had a tiny blue jewel that could be popped free and swapped for more intricate body jewellery. Vints got their nipples pierced when they reached adulthood, and delicate chains were commonly worn across the chest when a vint was courting another—a practice based purely in vanity, designed to stir up lust and attract someone’s interest and attention.

But I didn’t think Jugs was interested in vint culture at this moment, so I didn’t tell him any of that, instead cataloguing our differences as we knelt opposite each other on the bed. My body was much slimmer than his, and my nipples were black, unlike his eye-catching pink. There was another tiny hoop at the bottom of my navel, and my stomach quivered with sensitivity when Jugs brushed a fingertip over it.

He swallowed, gaze meeting mine as his fingers slowly trailed down to brush over the front of my trousers. Over my straining cock. I couldn’t move, trembling with anticipation, my breaths fast and shallow as I stared at him.

“Do you want to take these off?” he whispered.

I nodded, throat bobbing with a nervous swallow as I brought my trembling fingers to the delicate black buttons on the front of my trousers. I wasn’t sure how to take them off gracefully while I was kneeling on the bed—plus, I was still wearing my boots—but then Jugs leaned in and kissed me softly.

“Can I do it?”

Relief eased my chest as I nodded. For some reason, having him do it felt less frightening. I had already gotten the buttons undone, so once Jugs had urged me to lean back against the headboard, propped up by several thick pillows, he started gently tugging my trousers down my legs.

I fisted the sheets either side of me, suddenly terrified that he would be repulsed by the differences between us. And not just because I was much smaller than him—my cock was tapered, without the bulbous head that topped his, and the dark blue sheath of skin covering it pulled back when I was erect, revealing the paler, more tender tissue beneath.

What if he didn’t like it? And what if he noticed the tiny slit at the base for my extrusion and asked what it was? He didn’t seem to have anything similar, and it might be too much for him—it might make him remember that he was with someone who wasn’t human like him and make him stop.

He... he didn’t seem repulsed though, I realised as I looked fearfully down at him while he tugged off my boots to get my trousers over my feet. The bump in his throat was jumping as he stared between my legs, and his cock was drooling a thin thread of clear fluid onto the sheets.

Nerves had made my erection flag a little, but when he gently spread my thighs and moved his big

body between them, it grew painfully stiff again, standing up straight and pointing at the canopy, not resting against my belly like his had. Perhaps that was because of the sheer weight of Jugs' cock. It looked... *hefty*.

I stared down between us at his cock jutting out, that flushed pink head breathtakingly close to my narrow tapered one. His sac hung lower between his legs than mine ever did, and he appeared to have two orbs beneath the wrinkled skin, not just one. My sac was smoother and smaller, tucked tighter to my body.

Neither of us had spoken in a while, and we were both breathing fast. My legs shifted anxiously, draped over his thick thighs, and I shivered at the feel of hair-roughened skin.

Jugs looked up at me, his chest heaving and his cheeks flushed a deep pink. His voice was hoarse when he asked, "Can I suck your *dik* now, Lor?"

My cock pulsed uncontrollably, fluid leaking from the tender, exposed tip. "Y-you're going to suck my cock?" I asked in a low voice that didn't quite sound like mine.

I wasn't sure why I asked—I knew vints sucked each other there. But I hadn't known that *humans* did too. I'd thought he would perhaps kiss and lick my cock like I had done to his nipples.

The idea of Jugs' soft pink mouth wrapped around my prick almost made me come there and then. I felt my extrusion shift under my pubic mound, threatening to slide free already. I had never done this before—I wouldn't be able to stop it from shooting out when I neared release, and the fear that it would scare or disgust Jugs when it happened made my breath catch with panic.

"W-wait," I stammered, pressing a hand to my lower belly and covering the tiny hole for my extrusion with a fingertip, nestled just above my cock and framed by another delicate curved barbell piercing my skin. "Th-there is something you might not... like."

Jugs was staring at my cock, his crystal blue eyes dark and filled with hunger. He croaked, "Trust me, I like it."

"B-but I have... I have something that you don't seem to have. I don't want it to startle you."

Sensing my nerves, Jugs took a deep breath and sat back on his heels, giving me a soft smile. "I'm sure it won't. But do you... want to show me?"

"I can't really control it," I blurted, ears twitching madly. "I have an... an extrusion that emerges when I am nearing release."

I repeated it so he would understand all the words, and Jugs cocked his head. "An extrusion?"

Face flaming, I nodded and shifted my finger to the side. Jugs leaned forward to look down at the tiny slit I had uncovered.

"It emerges from here. All vints with cocks have it." I pushed through my embarrassment to explain. "And we have to learn how to control it when we start h-having sex, but I never have before, so I haven't..."

"What's it for?" Jugs asked, and I was relieved to hear that he merely sounded interested, not disgusted or unnerved.

"Impregnation." I gestured at my cock. "The fluid we release from our cocks cannot impregnate on its own. The extrusion releases a different fluid, and when they mix, it can cause conception. Not always, but vints with cocks learn to control it, to stop the extrusion coming out, so there are no accidental pregnancies."

"Oh." Jugs sounded intrigued, and he shot me a crooked smile. "Well, you can't get me pregnant anyway. Especially not through a *bloh-jahb*."

"No, I know," I rushed out, even though I hadn't known that for certain. "But it will... it will come out when I'm about to c-come. I didn't want it to scare you. I've n-never learned how to control it."

My face burned at the admission. Vints with cocks learned quickly how to control their extrusion once they started having sex, and most vints started having sex very soon after reaching adulthood. I felt embarrassingly childish admitting that I still hadn't learned such a basic bodily function.

"I could plug it," I blurted, sitting up to scramble off the bed. That was the common practice to stop a vint's extrusion emerging before they had full control over it. I'd heard that it wasn't very comfortable, but I was more than willing to do it for Jugs.

He frowned, gently pushing me back down into the pillows. "No, you don't have to do that. You've explained it to me, so I know what to expect now. It's totally cool, Lor. And... I kinda want to see it." He gave me a shy smile. "Um, what does it look like?"

"It's... it's long and thin." Swallowing, I lightly dragged my fingertips over the tender, exposed tip of my cock, which was a pale grey like the inside of my mouth. "The same colour as this."

I tried not to shudder with pleasure at the feel of my fingertips sliding against the slick tip, but I failed when Jugs let out a low groan and slid his big hands up my inner thighs, squeezing tight.

"Okay, I know what to expect. It'll come out when you're about to come. C-cool." He swallowed, breaths ragged as he lifted his wild gaze from my cock to look at me. "Can I *please* suck your dick now?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Some of the anxiety tightening my chest eased, allowing me to smile at Jugs as I gave him a shy nod.

I was still incredibly nervous. I couldn't believe that I was completely naked in front of him, my legs splayed wide and my hard cock pointing obscenely at the canopy between us.

I clutched the sheets, staring at Jugs' mouth as he licked his lips. It had felt incredibly soft against my tongue, but what if... what if it felt uncomfortable around my cock? What if my extrusion shot out when I started to come and it jabbed him in the eye or went up his nose? Mabs, I'd be utterly humiliated. I'd never be able to look at him again.

I was trembling wildly against the bed from a disconcerting blend of lust and nerves. Jugs gave me a soft smile and leaned forward to kiss me. I gasped when his cock brushed against mine, thighs twitching and arms shooting up to wrap around his neck so he couldn't pull away.

"I'm nervous too," he told me, then pressed another kiss to my cheek. "I, um, haven't done this all that much, and I've never actually... like, full-on fucked before."

"Really?" I gazed up at him, fiddling with the trail of hair over his nape. For some reason, that... that made me less anxious. "But you have... you have sucked a cock before?"

He grimaced. "Yeah, a few times. But I don't wanna think about that right now. And it wasn't like yours." He bit his lip around a little grin. "I really like yours."

I slowly grinned back, ears twitching wildly from pleasure at his words. And they helped. This was new to both of us. We would find out everything together.

Lunging up, I pressed my mouth to his. He kissed me back, tongue sliding into my mouth as he shifted closer. We both moaned when his hard cock slid against mine, and he broke away to start trailing frantic kisses along my jaw and down my neck.

"Jugs," I breathed, fisting his hair and lifting my head to gaze down the length of his wide back, the cleft of his rounded backside just visible. The sight of it made my teeth sink into my lower lip, but then his cock brushed against mine again, and my eyelids fluttered as my head fell back into the pillows.

His nipples scraped down my chest to my stomach as he made his way lower. I was breathing faster now, feeling flushed all over as soft lips trailed over my skin until he reached a nipple. He sucked it into his mouth, tongue flicking the piercing.

"Ah!" I squirmed beneath him, clutching his hair too tight, hips straining up to press my cock into his belly. I shuddered at the sensation, part of me terrified that I was going to come before he got anywhere near it.

The suction around my nipple was the best thing I'd ever felt, his mouth warm and wet, tongue firm as it circled and flicked at my piercing. I mourned its loss when he pulled back, releasing me with a loud pop, but he quickly moved over to the other.

A distant part of my mind was horrified by the guttural, animalistic noise that escaped my throat as he flicked his tongue over my other nipple. My leg snapped around his back, keeping him pinned to me so I could rut my cock against his belly. I was acting like a... like a wild *beast*, clenching his hair too tight, writhing beneath him, my chest heaving against his mouth as he tormented me.

I was sure that I was going to come the moment he got anywhere near my cock, but as he started pressing feverish kisses down my stomach, I couldn't bring myself to tell him to stop. I was too desperate to feel it, all my hesitancy gone. My thighs shook wildly as I splayed them wider, allowing his wide shoulders to fit between them.

Jugs moaned hoarsely as he plunged his mouth over my cock and started to suck, his full lips tight around my length and tongue mind-numbingly soft and slick as it slid up and down. The shock of pleasure was so intense that I cried out, back arching off the bed, one hand releasing its clawing grip on his hair to cover my mouth in an attempt to muffle the sounds escaping me.

His big hands were splayed over my inner thighs, pressing them so wide it almost hurt, but I couldn't focus on anything but the overwhelming, terrifying pleasure of the suction on my cock. It was almost too much, but I didn't want it to stop. My sac bunched up so tight that it almost vanished completely, the tiny slit above my cock tingling as my extrusion prepared to emerge.

A constant stream of moans poured from my mouth, still muffled by my hand. I was so hot and flushed that strands of hair stuck to my damp temples, the back of my head pressing hard into the pillows as I fought his hold to arch my hips.

Once I started, I couldn't stop, bucking my hips up again and again to plunge my cock into the hot suction of his mouth. He choked a little as his nose pressed against my pubic mound, and when I felt his upper lip brush against the tiny slit there, my eyes rolled back in my head as I shook wildly.

Jugs seemed to notice, because he moaned and slid a hand higher to frame the base of my cock, his thumb stroking over my tight sac. As he sucked back up my length, I felt a fingertip hesitantly rub back and forth over the hole for my extrusion.

I squealed against my palm, shaking hard as my eyes squeezed shut. I could hardly suck in a full breath as tremors of pleasure coursed through my whole body, getting stronger and stronger, making my limbs tingle. I could feel my extrusion beginning to uncoil under the skin of my pubic mound, and I knew I had only seconds before it would start pushing out insistently against Jugs' fingertip.

His head was still bobbing feverishly over my cock, and he sucked even harder with a hoarse groan as he felt it grow painfully stiff. His hand vanished, and I lifted my head to stare down the length of my body through bleary eyes, finally sliding my palm off my mouth to clutch the sheets tight.

When I saw Jugs stroking his own cock between his legs as he sucked me, I couldn't control my body anymore. My extrusion shot out, and I heard Jugs let out a muffled sound of surprise as it coiled around my length and squirmed its way between his lips. Feeling him sucking both at once made my head crane back into the pillows, a raw cry exploding from me as I started to come.

My toes flexed so hard they cramped. I might have heard the sheets tearing from where I was pulling at them so forcefully. My legs shook, heart pounding so hard that I could hear nothing else for endless seconds as the hot suction around my cock and extrusion drew long spurts of release from me until my body felt drained and weak.

I collapsed back on the mattress, panting as though I had run the entire length of the hyll, my arms and legs useless as they flopped onto the bed. I blinked in a daze up at the canopy, my vision still winking.

"Are you okay, Lor?" Jugs' voice was deep and throaty, but I could hear the hint of nerves in it.

It sent enough strength through my trembly limbs to let me struggle up, my legs still splayed obscenely wide and my cock slowly softening as my extrusion retreated.

"I'm... I'm very well, th-thank you," I said shakily, which made him snort with laughter.

Shoving back my wild hair with a weak arm, I grinned at him. Then the smile slid off my face as my gaze turned dreamy.

Lyri was right. I was smitten. Completely, utterly smitten.

And not just because he'd sucked my cock until I came so hard I almost lost consciousness. I stared at him, at his mane of golden hair, now wild and dishevelled from my grasping hands. His crystal blue eyes, dark with lust. His flushed cheeks and sweetly protruding ears and full mouth,

which was even pinker than normal from what he'd just done.

My chest squeezed achingly tight, and I worried that I was going to say something that would make me look a complete fool, so I let my gaze trail down his big body—over his meaty chest and flat belly—to his straining cock, which was leaking profusely and flushed almost as dark as the red drinking vessel on my chest of drawers.

My belly clenched, arousal flaring back to life.

“Now you,” I rasped, scrambling up onto unsteady knees. “Now I get to do that to you. Please.”

“Oh my god,” Jugs mumbled, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t—I don’t think I’ll last very long.”

I shot him a prideful grin, knee-walking closer to press myself against him as I wrapped my arms around his neck. His cock bucked against my stomach, leaving a wet smear.

“Who cares about that?” I repeated his words from earlier, and Jugs smiled at me.

After giving him a long kiss—the taste of myself on his tongue made my cock start to rise again—I urged him onto his back, my hands trembling with lust and excitement. Jugs leaned back on his elbows, shifting sheepishly away from the big puddle of green iced cream soaking into the sheets, and bit his lip as he gazed up at me. His chest was rising quickly and his long legs were splayed either side of me as I sat back on my heels.

I stared down at his hard cock, now resting over his lower belly, the twin weights below pulled up tighter than before. Trailing my fingertips through the fine golden hair on his inner thighs made him shudder, hips twitching and causing his cock to buck over his belly.

I was desperate to return the pleasure he had given me, but I didn’t want it to be over too soon. Feathering my fingers over his tight sac, I looked up at him as he bit his lip and let out a muffled whimper.

“I—I know you only sucked me, but... can I kiss you here as well? And lick?” I asked, wanting to kiss every inch of him.

Jugs let out a strained chuckle, fisting his hands by his sides. “Y-yeah, I kinda just went to town on you, huh? I’ll—I’ll go slower next time. But um, y-yeah, you can... you can do whatever you want.”

Whatever I want. I wanted to do *everything* with him.

And not just in terms of sex. I wanted to eat all my meals with him. I wanted to walk around the hyll’s gardens with him, showing him all the plants that would no doubt be unusual to a human. I wanted to climb into bed together every night and pull the drapes shut so that we could hide away until morning, just the two of us.

But we couldn’t have those things, because he wasn’t from this world. He would have to go back very soon, and then I would have to wait another long, agonising day until I could see him again.

At least he was here now. At least I could share this with him—something I’d never shared with anyone else. Lowering my head, I pressed a kiss to his belly and felt it dip under my lips as Jugs let out a shuddering breath. One hand rose to hesitantly thread through my hair, being careful to avoid the ridiculous beaded braids piled on the top of my head.

I nuzzled my way down, something more than just lust guiding my actions. When Jugs’ cock brushed against my cheek, I turned my head to kiss the smooth length, my breaths shallow with nerves.

I wanted to be good at this. I wanted to make him feel as wonderful as he had me. But a tiny, wicked part of me also wanted to see if I could make him as mindless as I’d become. I wanted to see Jugs writhing and panting and crying out beneath me.

Kissing my way down his cock, I kept his thighs spread wide so I could reach everything. His sac felt hard under my lips, the skin wrinkled from where it had tucked up closer to his body. The

sprinkling of coarse hair teased my lips, and I inhaled deeply as my nose pressed against the base of his shaft. The scent of his skin was stronger here, but there was a deeper layer to it. Something more intimate and primal.

Did he taste different here too? I darted my tongue out to lick, and Jugs' breath caught above me, his cock lifting off his belly to smack back down.

Ooh, I liked that reaction. I licked again, trying not to grin with pride when Jugs let out a low, guttural groan and fisted my hair tighter.

It was fascinating to play with him here. He *did* have two orbs in his sac, not just one, and they felt weightier than mine. As I lapped at them, my licks growing longer and slower, one of my hands crept up his inner thigh to brush my fingertips over them.

Lifting my head, I stared in fascination as the two orbs rolled under my fingers. They were still firm and tight, but there was some give to them beneath the thin, wrinkled skin. Gently, I cupped them in my palm and grinned up at Jugs. His face was tight with tension, blunt white teeth sunk into his lower lip.

"Your sac is so big." The words came out in a purr that I had never heard in my voice before. I hefted the twin orbs in my palm and gave them a gentle squeeze.

"Th-thanks." Jugs' voice was strained, and his chest heaved as he stared down at my hand on him. His cock bucked again, drooling clear fluid onto his belly and immediately drawing my gaze.

Dipping my head back down, I let my fingers stay on his sac, playing with it lightly as I pressed my lips to the base of his cock. It jerked again, straining under my mouth, hot and hard and silky. My tongue was pressing into the roof of my mouth, desperate to come out and lick all the way up the long, flushed length, but I had told him that I would kiss him here first, and I wanted to. So badly.

Dropping soft kisses all the way up the length, I made my way to the rounded head. It seemed he also had thin skin that covered his shaft, but it was pulled right back from where his cock had grown. There was a tender-looking join where the bulbous head met the shaft, and I pressed my lips to it reverently, which made Jugs let out a muffled whimper, his teeth still clamped on his lower lip.

His scent was stronger here, and as I let my lower lip drag up to the tip of his cock, I felt wetness. I licked my lips in reflex, my own cock straining as I tasted him. I had tasted my own release before out of curiosity, and Jugs didn't taste like I did, but there was the same underlying hint of salt.

Already addicted, I kissed the tip of his cock again, then timidly lapped up the fluid that had spilled on his belly, flicking my eyes up to gauge his reaction. Jugs' hips twitched as he let go of my hair and fisted the sheets either side of him, lips parted now around his panting breaths.

"Is it... okay?" he asked, voice strained. "D-do you like it? You can stop if you don't—"

"I like it," I whispered, then touched the tip of my tongue to the tiny slit on his cockhead.

Jugs let out a strangled sound, his trembling thighs spreading wider. That gave me the confidence to slide my fingers around the base of his cock and tilt it up off his belly so that I could twirl my tongue around the tip, licking up all the fluid spilling from him.

"Oh c-crap." Jugs was panting, the muscles under his stomach dancing as he seemed to try and keep his hips still. "I th-think—I think I'm gonna come soon."

What? But I had done hardly anything! I wasn't ready to stop yet, my own cock now straining between my legs from the taste and feel of him against my tongue.

"Not yet," I begged, hurriedly lapping at his cockhead to get as much of him as possible before it ended. My fingers squeezed the base of his shaft, and I realised it somehow felt even harder than before. Jugs was shaking, clawing at the bed, his head tipping back as his chest heaved.

But I had wanted to kiss and lick every inch of him first! Panicking that I wouldn't be able to, I

slid my tongue down one side of his length and back up the other, wanting to taste all of him, moaning at the feel of thick veins pulsing under my tongue. More fluid had leaked from the head, so I hurriedly lapped at it, the tip of my tongue flicking over the tender arrow joining it to the thick length.

Closing my lips carefully around the very tip, I gave it a soft suck, groaning raggedly at the feel of him just inside my mouth. Jugs choked on a gasp, thighs quaking either side of me.

“F-f-fuck, I’m coming.” His hips jerked, pressing the tender tip of his cock against the front of my teeth. I pulled back quickly, not wanting to accidentally hurt him. “I’m c-coming—I—”

His cock grew impossibly hard in my fist, and I moaned low as I licked the head just as it began spurting thick streams of white. My fingers dug into his thigh as they landed on my tongue, which rubbed lightly against that tender arrow every time his cock flexed.

Jugs was shaking, the prominent bump in his throat jumping as he tipped his head back and let out hoarse groans with every spurt onto my tongue. I felt my own cock burst with a mini release, over too quickly for my extrusion to even begin emerging, but still so intense that it made me shake.

His release didn’t seem to last as long as mine had before, but he was still trembling wildly when it ended, sucking in shaky breaths as his elbows gave out and he collapsed back onto the bed. I swallowed the thick fluid coating my tongue then sucked lightly on his cockhead for the rest, making his hips twitch.

“Oh my god,” he mumbled, wiping a trembling hand over his flushed face.

I wasn’t willing to stop yet, so I trailed kisses down the length of his shaft to his sac, nuzzling him there.

“Can we do that again, Jugs?” I mumbled against him, turning pleading eyes up to his face.

He choked on a breath, struggling back up onto his elbows. His cock was slowly softening, but it twitched against his belly. “Um, s-sure. I just need a bit of time to recover first.”

He bit his lip, staring down at me between his legs, and croaked, “Probably won’t need all that long though.”

I grinned up at him, ears twitching with pleasure and my body still slowly calming. But I wanted to do it again soon. I wanted to gorge myself on him while I had him here with me.

Sliding up the length of his body, I pressed my cheek against the front of his shoulder and tucked one of my legs between his splayed thighs.

“How long can you stay for?” I mumbled, stretching my fingers out over his pale chest.

“Definitely a few more hours.” He lifted his arm and peered at a strange bracelet on his wrist.

I was too sated and boneless to ask him to explain what it was, so instead I nestled my cheek against his chest and tightened my arm around him.

“When will you come back?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Tomorrow?” Jugs pressed a kiss to my braids as his hand slid down my spine. “If you... if you want me to.”

“I want you to,” I said immediately, squeezing my eyes shut and breathing him in. “Please don’t stop coming back.”

Even as I said it, I worried that I was being too demanding, expecting too much from him.

He had his own life through the void. Work and family and friends. A weak shard of grief stabbed through my chest over the knowledge that I would likely never get to share any of it with him. That one day, Jugs might simply stop coming back, never again stepping through the void from his world.

And I would wait, and wait, haunting an empty guestroom in my hyll, praying to the Mabs for just one more chance to see him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I almost fell asleep tucked against Jugs' side, our bare limbs twined together, but I forced myself to stay awake. I didn't want to waste a single moment that I had with him.

We were lying diagonally near the foot of the bed, so as I stood up and reached for my robe, I told him to get under the covers and wait for me while I went into the dining room to get us some water. There was always a full carafe on the sideboard in there.

After unlocking my bedroom door, I darted across the hall to fetch the water and carried it back with two glasses. Jugs was sitting up against the headboard, the sheets over his lap and all his clothes still strewn over the bed and the floor. I grinned, climbing up and sitting back on my heels as I poured him a glass.

"Oh wow, that's uh... crisp." He licked his lips after taking a sip.

I was gulping down my own glass, my mouth so dry it was as though Jugs had sucked all the fluids out of my body through my cock. After draining it, I wiped my mouth and said, "We steep our water with herbs. This is tilik-steeped. My favourite."

As I set down my glass and the carafe on the bedside table, Jugs took another sip.

"I like it." He smiled at me. "Tastes kinda like *laihm*."

I didn't know what *laihm* was, but I grinned at him, watching avidly as he drank a bit more before leaning over to put down the glass. The sheets slipped down, revealing the curve of his backside and the top of his thigh. Hunger tightened my belly, but before I could move, he was reaching out to snag my hand and urge me closer.

I knee-walked forward, my breath catching as I settled over his lap, the sheets and my bunched-up robe between us. But I could still feel the hard length of him pressing into me, and he gave me a wicked grin.

"I've recovered."

I leaned closer, hips shifting as my prick started to harden fast. Sliding my hands up and down his big chest, I asked, "Does that mean I can lick your cock again?"

The cock in question jerked beneath me, and even through the layers of fabric, the feel of it against my sac made my hips start to rock. Jugs' throat bobbed with a swallow, blue eyes darkening and drifting down my body.

"Only once I've licked yours." He reached for my robe and fumbled with the tie, sliding his hands in once it had fallen open.

I shivered, wrapping my arms around his neck as his big hands stroked up and down my sides before dipping lower to palm my backside. My cock twitched, standing straight out between the open sides of my robe, the sheath of skin pulled back to reveal the pale grey tip.

Jugs was already staring at it, eyes dark with hunger. He started sliding lower on the bed, until he was almost flat on his back and I was straddling his chest. I blinked down at him, but before I could ask what he was doing, he used his grip on my backside to tug me closer.

When his pink tongue emerged to lick the exposed tip of my cock, my hand flew up to cover my mouth and muffle the shocked whimper that escaped me.

He tormented me this time. Kissing and licking over every inch of my cock, twirling his tongue around the tapered tip. He urged me even higher to suck my sac into his mouth, which made me cry out against my palm and press closer, my hips rocking to heighten the slick friction of his tongue.

When he finally sucked my cock into his mouth, I cried out again as my hips snapped forward, one

hand still covering my mouth and the other gripping the headboard so tight my fingers ached. I was no longer in control of my body, and I rutted into his mouth like an animal. A slew of desperate sounds poured from me, growing increasingly louder. Jugs choked a few times, his throat tightening around the tip of my cock, but he was moaning as I... as I *fucked* his mouth, my thighs trembling wildly either side of his head.

I tipped forward as I started to come, biting down on my palm and squeezing my eyes shut. My cock was buried completely in Jugs' mouth, so when my extrusion shot out, I felt its sensitive tip bump his nose as he grunted in surprise. But I was too far gone to be embarrassed, sobbing with pleasure against my palm as my backside clenched under his hands and my cock spurted into his throat. The seal of his lips was too tight for my extrusion to wriggle its way in, and I felt it quivering against his cheek, pumping fluid down the side of his neck.

I sagged against the headboard as it ended, gasping for breath. My palm was wet with drool when I pulled it away from my mouth, so I hurriedly wiped it on a pillow as my ears twitched with embarrassment. Jugs moaned beneath me, gently urging my hips back as he sucked all the way up my cock, making me whimper as my whole body twitched with oversensitivity.

My legs shook uncontrollably as I climbed off his face. Jugs was already kicking down the covers, his chest heaving as he let his knees fall open wide and gripped his stiff cock.

"F-fuck, I need to come so bad." He started stroking recklessly fast, his other hand dipping to heft his heavy sac.

I stared greedily, still trembling from my release. I wanted to lick him again, but... I also wanted to see this. To see him make himself come.

The milky fluid from my extrusion was dripping down his cheek and neck. Belly fluttering, I leaned down to lick it up, moaning at the taste of it combined with his skin. Before I could sit back up, Jugs turned his head and lunged for my mouth, moaning mindlessly as he thrust his tongue against mine.

I could feel the bed moving as we kissed, his hips rutting up into his pumping hand. When Jugs' moans grew sharper against my mouth, his breaths quickening, I pulled back to watch as his body stiffened.

He let out a long, guttural groan, head craning back into the pillows and thighs twitching as his cock spurted white ribbons all over his belly. His hand tightened around his sac, rubbing the tight orbs before it slid onto his inner thigh as the tension eased from his big body.

"Fuuuck," he groaned, hand still sliding slowly up and down his cock, squeezing like he was massaging out the last weak trickle of fluid that dripped onto his stomach.

I was ready to go again after watching him do that, but I forced myself to lean down and press a soft kiss to his lips.

"Jugs," I mumbled. I could smell myself all over him, and something sharp and possessive flared in my chest.

It didn't matter that he wasn't from here. He was mine. And if he wanted me in the same way, I was going to do everything in my power to keep him coming back again and again. I wasn't going to let anyone stop us from being together, even if the void was discovered or a thousand other humans started pouring into the hyll.

Eventually, we heaved ourselves out of bed so I could show him the waterchamber to clean up. He seemed shocked by its size, commenting on the enormous sunken tub in the centre of the room, but his beautiful features were soft and hazy with satiation, and soon we were climbing back under the sheets.

They were an utter mess, ripped from my frantic pulling, dotted with bodily fluids and a big puddle of green iced cream soaking through the dark blue fabric. I flushed at the thought of the staff coming in and discovering them in the morning, but I couldn't bring myself to care for too long.

We nestled close together in the bed, talking quietly until Jugs was yawning and the first rays of the rising sun sent splashes of colour over the floorboards from the beads showering down the thin curtains.

When Jugs eventually said that he'd better go and rose to get dressed, I followed him up and put on proper clothes so I could see him to the guestroom. We walked hand in hand through the secret tunnel, and my gut clenched with misery when I unlocked the guestroom door and the low hum of the void greeted us.

After giving me one last long kiss and telling me he'd be back tonight, Jugs stepped through the void and vanished. I stayed where I was, staring at it for a long time, my body still loose and boneless from the unimaginable pleasure we had shared.

For a wild, foolish second, I considered following him. Going through the void myself, seeing his world, just so I could stay with him for a bit longer.

But I couldn't. There would be chaos if I vanished from the hyll. Lyri would no doubt think Jugs had kidnapped me and start a war with all five billion otherworlders that existed through there.

Eventually I turned and made my way alone back to my chambers. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep, so I ran myself a bath, even though I wanted to keep the scent of Jugs on my skin for a bit longer. But it was an unnecessary risk. Baregh had an excellent sense of smell.

My hair was a wild mess from Jugs' hands and from rubbing against the sheets in feverish desperation, so after my bath I sat down and spent a long time smoothing it out and pinning my braids up into their usual style.

As I stared at myself in the mirror, I realised my features looked softer than they had in a very long time. I had a council meeting after breakfast, and Raynir had drilled into me that I should show no emotion, and I especially didn't want to show any in front of *him*. He still hadn't handed over his thick ledger, and I trusted him less and less every day.

Exhaling, I schooled my face back into its blank, polite mask before rising to get dressed. My tunic and jacket felt even more stifling after spending so long with my nude body pressed against Jugs', and I fiddled restlessly with my cuffs as I stepped into the hallway and across to the dining room.

I sat and ate the breakfast already waiting for me in silence. Was Jugs doing the same? Or was he sleeping before he had to work at his iced cream place?

I wanted to see him asleep. Perhaps that was a strange thing to long for, but I wanted to see his face soft and relaxed and vulnerable. I wanted to hear his steady breaths as he slept beside me. I wanted to tuck myself into his big body and be surrounded by him, rather than sleeping alone in a vast, empty bed.

Would we ever get to? Our time together was short, and I was loath to waste any of it sleeping when I could be speaking to him, gazing at his beautiful face, discovering things from his world, kissing him. Sharing pleasure with him.

Seis arrived for the day just as I was rising from the table. I managed to give him a brief smile, but it dropped as he asked me if I was ready for my meeting with the council. He followed a respectable pace behind me as I left my quarters and made my way through the hyll.

Why was I feeling like this? I shouldn't have been sad after the night I'd shared with Jugs. I should have been euphoric and a little smug for finally getting to experience mind-numbing pleasure with another person. But I hadn't even felt that way when he'd been here—I'd simply felt content down to

my bones. I'd felt *right*, like he was supposed to be beside me. It hadn't just been about experiencing sex for the first time. I knew I wouldn't have felt that way if it had been with anyone other than him.

I wished he didn't have to go. It made me feel almost vulnerable to be parted from him after what we had shared. What if, over the course of the day, he realised that he *didn't* like the differences between our bodies? What if he saw other humans and remembered how different I looked and decided he didn't ever want to touch me again?

What if he came back tonight to tell me that it was the last time—that he was never going to return?

I didn't feel in control of much in my life, despite being Moric, and this was a new aspect that I had never experienced before. I couldn't force Jugs to stay here. I couldn't force him to accept me and my body and my life and how different it all was to his. I couldn't force him to keep coming back. I just had to pray that he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

The councillors all rose from their seats as I entered the chamber. I was in a thoroughly sour mood, all the boneless satiation from earlier gone, my body clenched up with tension at the thought of another endless meeting with these stuffy old vints.

I gave them a brief nod and strode to my throne, my posture stiff and uncomfortable as I sat. Seis silently took up his place behind me, slightly to my left.

"Good morning, Moric." Raynir's hands trembled from age as he opened his ledger, drawing my gaze to it immediately.

"I'll be taking that after the meeting today, Councillor," I heard myself say, my tone curt.

He froze, blinking at me with milky eyes. "I'm sorry, Moric?"

"I have been asking to see your ledger for weeks." I jerked my chin at it. "I've waited long enough. Or is there a reason you don't want me looking at it?"

I saw Raynir's gaze dart to someone across the table. Turning my head, I watched as Councillor Tildr quickly looked away.

"Of course, Moric." Raynir's voice trembled with age, but the tone was wheedling. Almost condescending. "I was merely making sure that it contained everything you need to... Forgive me, but I can't quite remember why you want to see it. Old age." He let out a raspy laugh.

I let my gaze go cold and flat as I stared at him. It wasn't hard. I was in a foul mood, knowing I would be stuck in here for hours and it would be even longer before I could see Jugs again.

"I just want to see it," I said in a quiet, emotionless voice. "I trust that isn't a problem."

"Of course not, Moric. You may have it the moment this meeting is over."

Sitting back, I drummed my fingers on the armrest. "Shall we begin, then?"

The other councillors moved as one, shuffling papers and opening notebooks. My gut clenched with anxiety as I watched them. Should I bring a book to write down what was said in these meetings? Had my mother? I frantically tried to remember if I'd ever seen her coming out of this chamber with any kind of notebook, but then Raynir spoke.

"You may remember me asking many weeks ago for a moment of your time to discuss a somewhat delicate matter, Moric."

I stiffened, detecting the condescending edge to his raspy voice. I vaguely remembered his request for a private dinner with Councillor Tildr, but it had been the evening I'd already planned to spend with Lyri.

And then Jugs had appeared.

"I've been busy," I said curtly, willing my ears not to twitch.

"Of course," he said immediately in the same tone. "Well I'm afraid in the interim, the issue has... deteriorated."

When he fell silent, I clenched my jaw and asked, “And what is the issue?”

“We have heard reports of a salyik stirring up dissent within their district. A salyik by the name of...” He leaned forward to peer at his ledger. “Malomar in’ya Konikt. They have been seen in the district square, preaching nonsense to anyone who will listen.”

I frowned. “What nonsense?”

Raynir waved a hand, his thin lips curling with disgust. “Drivel about inequality and poor living conditions. They are trying to plant fanciful ideas in the salyik people’s heads that they are the *rightful rulers* of Thinir.” He sneered the words.

My fingers tightened on the armrests. “I see.”

“Thinir and this fiefdom have been under vint rule for millennia,” Tildr piped up, her voice dripping with just as much disdain. “This land hasn’t belonged to the salyik since the last age.”

My gaze snapped over to her. “So it once did, then?”

I heard Raynir smother a chuckle, and my face heated.

“I know it has been some years since your schooling, Moric, but surely you remember the history of your fiefdom?”

My ears twitched, so I arranged my face into an even colder mask, but I couldn’t look any of the councillors in the eye. I felt like a child as I sat there, all their wizened faces watching me. Acknowledging my ignorance.

Why in Ara’s name were Lyri and I so determined to avoid our lessons as children?

“The ancient salyik tribes *did* reside in these lands during the Astorine Age,” Raynir said when I didn’t speak. “But that time is long over. The old races are almost gone. The last telyths hide away in their mountains and valleys. The aytorin try to cling on to their old ways of life in their ruined city, the eyriads are banished beneath our feet, and the isdernucs have been wiped out entirely. The only reason the salyik are still here is because they... leach from the prosperity of the mighty vint people. They are no better than parasites.”

I stared at him in shock. His wrinkled face was twisted with pure loathing, and I could see several heads around the table nodding in agreement.

“I...” How would my mother have dealt with such acidic sentiment spat toward a group of people just trying to live? Survive? “They are not parasites. They are not that different to us.”

“Not that different,” someone scoffed. I looked over quickly to see Councillor Gimir sneering. “They are primitive. Clinging to old beliefs. They lurk in the city’s main market every day trying to cheat your subjects out of their money with claims that their poorly crafted trinkets have *powers*.”

“Powers?”

Raynir wheezed a nasty laugh. “The ability to travel great distances in the blink of an eye. Confinement curses. Cures for diseases and good luck charms.”

“If they can craft such things, why do they all live in squalor?” Tildr interjected smugly. “Surely a race with the ability to create such *magical* items would be thriving above all others.”

Remembering what Lyri had told me a while ago, I said, “Perhaps they cannot because of the way they are treated.” I nodded at Raynir’s ledger. “I trust that will detail the tax rates imposed on the salyik population? And the restrictions placed on their district?”

“Restrictions?” Raynir asked after a pause, his tone guarded.

“Perhaps they are unable to procure the tools and materials they truly need to craft such items.” I sat up and held out my hand for the ledger. “I think it would be best to reschedule this meeting until I have had a chance to read your ledger in full, Councillor.”

“If... that is what you wish, Moric.” Raynir glanced at Tildr again. “But we were actually

discussing the issue of the lone salyik causing trouble in their district, not the entire salyik population ____”

“No decisions will be made regarding *any* salyik until I have read your ledger,” I interrupted through gritted teeth. “Is that clear?”

The chamber fell silent. Someone coughed awkwardly at the other end of the table. Raynir was watching me, his filmy eyes narrowed.

“Quite clear, Moric,” he said after a moment, his tone now cool, no longer wheedling.

His curved brown nails rasped against the cover of his ledger as he closed it and slid it across the table toward me. I forced myself to pick it up calmly, and all the councillors shuffled to their feet as I rose from my throne.

“Councillors.” I nodded at them and strode from the room, keeping my chin tipped up and my posture straight even as my knees trembled with adrenaline.

“Well done, Lor,” Seis whispered to me once we had left the chamber.

I managed a brief smile as I clutched the damn ledger, but I felt no satisfaction at finally taking charge. The look on Raynir’s face as I had picked up his precious book filled me only with worry.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Lyri found me later that afternoon in the private garden, my head bent over the ledger laid out on the table, a full pot of molt tea beside it.

I'd decided to sit out here to try and cheer myself up and make my reading less mind-numbingly dull, but it wasn't working, even though the air smelled sweet from the bolska blooms, and I could hear the faint sounds of the docks far below.

"Alright, twin?" Lyri said cheerfully as he plopped down into an empty seat, immediately reaching out to pour himself a cup of tea. "I see you finally got your hands on Raynir's book."

"Yes," I muttered, rubbing my cheek. "He records *everything*."

Lyri chuckled. "And he *is* the most boring vint alive, so I doubt it makes for very enjoyable reading."

"No, it does not." I sighed and finally lifted my head, reaching back with a wince to rub my sore neck. "How has your day treated you?"

He shrugged, pouring me a cup of tea before sitting back and sipping his own. "Went into the city for a while."

I cradled my cup between my hands, watching the steam curl up into the air. "Did you visit the salyik district?"

Lyri made a face. "No. We tend not to go there. They're not all that receptive to vints invading their district, especially not royal ones."

"In my meeting this morning, Raynir said there is a salyik preaching in the district square."

He cocked his head. "Preaching about what?"

"About the way they are treated." My face grew hot. "And that they are the rightful people of these lands."

Lyri exhaled a slow breath. "Well. That could go one of two ways."

"Which way do you think is likely?" I asked, anxiously chewing on my lip. "From what you've said, they are not wrong. And I'm trying to find out for certain, but..."

"The salyik find safety in conformity." Lyri met my gaze, his expression grim. "It is how they've survived here. Never stirring up trouble, never giving reason for harsher conditions to be imposed on them—not that it's helped them much," he added in a mutter.

"So what... what do you think..."

"If there is a lone salyik drawing the eye of the council, they may deal with the problem themselves. To stay safe. To avoid unwanted attention."

"Deal with it how?" I asked apprehensively.

"Shun the salyik who is preaching." Lyri shrugged. "Kick them out of the city themselves. Or... they start listening. They realise how great their numbers are. There are enough of them to cause far-reaching problems if this salyik stirs up a revolution."

"What kind of problems?" I flushed with embarrassment. I should have been the one to know all this, although Lyri was the expert in all things regarding the safety and defence of our fiefdom.

His mouth pinched into a grim line. "The kind that end up with this hyll being invaded and our heads on spikes by its front gates."

I stared at him in horror, my hand fluttering up to my neck. "S-spikes?"

Lyri nodded. "We are the establishment, Lor. We are who they will come for if there is a revolution. Us and the council. But *you* are the ruler. The figurehead. You are the one whose demise

would send a powerful message.”

“B-but I... I’m not the one treating them this way.”

“No, but...” He shifted uncomfortably. “You *have* allowed it, Lor.”

“I didn’t know,” I blurted, the guilt mingling with terror at the thought of the entire salyik population storming the hyll and cutting off our heads. “I didn’t—”

“It won’t happen, Lor.” Lyri gentled his voice, sitting forward to clasp my hand. “I won’t let it. You know I would never let anything happen to you.”

I clutched his hand too tightly. “H-how do we stop it from happening?”

“Well, you’ve already made a start.” He nodded at the ledger open on the table. “And Gryf and I will visit the salyik district. See how many of them are actually paying attention to this preacher.”

“You can’t go there.” I gazed at him fearfully. “Wh-what if they cut your head off the moment you step foot in their district?”

He chuckled, giving my hand a squeeze. “They won’t.”

“I would never let them, Moric,” Gryf piped up from where he was standing by the door with Seis.

Lyri snorted. “I keep you around for your cock, baregh,” he called teasingly. “Not your fighting skills.”

I heard Gryf chuckle, but I was too tense to even chastise Lyri for his vulgar language. Not that I could judge him for that. I had said frightfully lewd things to Jugs just hours ago.

“Don’t worry, Lor.” Lyri squeezed my hand again. “We will deal with this before it becomes a problem. I promise.”

“Alright,” I said faintly, my hand trembling slightly as I picked up my teacup.

Lyri sat back and nodded at the ledger. “Found anything interesting in there?”

“Not yet. It’s painfully dull,” I admitted.

He chuckled. “Well, will you at least get to see your Jugs tonight as a reward for your hard work?”

My belly clenched, and I was terrified Lyri would be able to see all over my face what I had done with Jugs, so I gave him a faint smile. “Hopefully.”

“Has he been back since the night we found you *kissing*?” Lyri paused, quirking a brow at me. “Actually, you never told me what that was.”

I took the opportunity to avoid telling Lyri that Jugs had been back—and in my bedchambers—the night before. “It’s a human custom, done between those who feel romantically for one another.”

“So it *is* a sex thing.”

My ears twitched madly. “N-not necessarily... sex. It is a way to show romantic affection. You... you press your mouths together.”

Lyri was staring at me blankly. “Why?”

“Because it feels very nice.” My tone was prim to mask my embarrassment. “And you also... rub your tongues together. Which also feels...”—I swallowed thickly—“very nice.”

“Tongues?” That roused Lyri’s interest. He perked up in his seat, side-eyeing Gryf by the door, then called, “Gryf, show me your tongue.”

My face flamed with heat, and I kept facing forward so I wouldn’t have to see my brother’s guard sticking his *tongue* out at him.

Lyri grunted, rubbing a thumb over his lower lip with a thoughtful expression. “He *does* have a nice tongue.”

“Lyri.” I shot him a weak glare.

He didn’t even look at me, still staring off to the side. At Gryf. Then he scrambled out of his seat

and strode toward the two barehanded guards by the door.

“Come on, Gryf.” I heard the door open. “Let’s go... discuss weaponry.”

I heard Gryf snickering before their footsteps retreated. Ears twitching with embarrassment, my whole body aware of Seis standing silently behind me, I fiddled with my teacup before closing the ledger and rising from my seat.

“I think I’ll retire to my quarters, Seis,” I said, trying to hide how flustered I was.

“Of course, Moric.” His face was carefully blank as he opened the door for me, but I could see a touch of amusement playing at the corners of his tusked mouth.

“Is the otherworlder returning tonight?” he asked in a hushed voice as we made our way inside.

“I—Y-yes, I do believe we made plans to see each other tonight,” I said, trying to make my voice carefree—and failing, I suspected.

“Would you like me to accompany you to the guest quarters this evening?”

“No, that’s quite alright, Seis,” I said quickly. “I’m not sure what time... I will make my way there later this evening. I’d like you to have the rest of the day off. I’ll stay in my rooms until... until then. And it is just a short walk to the guest quarters. No need for you to escort me.”

I forced myself to stop babbling, and was relieved when we reached the doors to my quarters. After saying goodbye to Seis, I hurried inside and went into my study—a room I shamefully never used—to place Raynir’s ledger on the desk.

Noticing the sinking sun through the window, I went into my bedchambers to start getting ready to see Jugs. My belly tightened with anticipation as I washed myself quickly with a warm, wet cloth, flushing madly when I carefully cleansed between my legs.

Would we do it again tonight?

Lust and nerves and sweet, heady excitement managed to chase away some of the gut-churning worry caused by the events of the day. Raynir’s veiled look as I picked up his ledger. Lyri’s terrifying words about a salyik revolution. I tried to force them all to the back of my mind, not wanting to spoil my time with Jugs, and by the time I was dressing in a clean tunic and trousers, I was giddy with anticipation over seeing him again.

After checking my hair and making sure my skin was smooth and unblemished, I picked up my lantern and went into the dressing room. I said a quick apology to the Mabs as I once again used their token to keep the hidden door in the wardrobe propped open, and soon I was making my way through the secret passage, my steps lighter than they had been all day.

As I was passing through the section of the passageway where I often heard loud, rambunctious voices muffled through the wall, I paused when I heard the word “Moric”.

It wasn’t unusual for the hyll staff to be discussing me, but panic gripped me as I wondered if they somehow knew about Jugs. Shuffling closer, I pressed my ear up against the wall. Vints had excellent hearing, the royals more so than any others.

“What’s so interesting about the Moric’s sheets that you just *had* to tell us you changed them this morning?” I heard, faint but scoffing.

“Because they were ripped and there was a strange green stain all over them,” someone replied. “Hag knows what he’s been doing in there.”

My ears twitched with embarrassment, and I went hot all over when the vint continued.

“Maybe our uptight Moric has finally found something *interesting* to do to pass the time alone in his chambers.”

I pulled a face at the wall as they snickered, indignation flaring hot. *I have, actually!* I wanted to shout through the wall. *Just last night I had my cock sucked by a beautiful otherworld creature.*

Twice! That doesn't sound very uptight, does it!

When they started making vulgar remarks about how *they* had spent their night, I pulled back and hurried down the passage.

Once I had reached the guestroom, I didn't have to wait long until the void started sparking madly and the cadence of its low hum changed. When Jugs stepped through, dressed in his tiny shorts and a shorn off shirt—no sweat shirt tonight—my mouth stretched into a wide grin, my first true smile since I had been with him this morning.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“I don’t understand why they are called chips.”

I chuckled, glancing over at Lor. Despite his confusion, he didn’t seem to have any issue with crunching down on the potato chips I’d brought as he lounged beside me in the bed. His hair was mussed from my hands, slender chest on display and those tiny blue jewels winking in his black nipples.

“I dunno.” I leaned over to kiss his bony shoulder. “I just know they taste good.”

He grinned at me, his sharp teeth crunching easily through another chip. “They do. They taste a bit like pickled *jakma*.”

I didn’t know what *jakma* was, but I said, “Well I guess that makes sense. These are salt and vinegar, and we use vinegar to pickle stuff too.”

“All your food and drink is stored in such brightly coloured vessels.” He smoothed out the empty chip packet carefully. “I will keep this. Soon I will have a glorious collection of otherworld artifacts.”

My chest ached at how sweet he was. “You don’t have to keep it. It’s just trash.”

He gasped. “It is not *trash*! It is from your world, and you gave it to me. Therefore it is precious.”

Swallowing thickly, I reached over and squeezed his thigh through the sheets. Lor leaned in and kissed the bend of my neck, his lips a little greasy from the chips.

“Now my mouth is dry.” He slid out of bed and reached for his robe. “I will get us some water.”

I stared at him, my cock twitching beneath the sheets. He was just so beautiful. He was small and slender, his deep blue skin smooth and matte and unblemished. The many piercings on his body winked in the firelight, that tiny, curved barbell on his pubic mound gleaming as he shifted to pull on his robe. The hole for his extrusion was too small for me to really see from this distance, but my belly still clenched at the thought of that unusual appendage.

His cock was smaller when soft, and the dark blue sheath of skin covered it fully, hiding the tender pale grey underneath. I wanted to take him into my mouth and feel him stretch and harden against my tongue, but he was already belting his robe and shielding his body from view.

After carefully placing the empty chip packet beside the beer can on his dresser, he padded out of the room. I glanced at my watch, cringing a little at the time. It was only 1 a.m., so I could stay here for several more hours. My shift at work didn’t start ’til the afternoon anyway, so I’d be able to sleep first once I got back.

I ran my fingers over the soft sheets, wondering what it would be like to sleep here. With Lor. Would he want that? He was probably too busy to sleep all morning. He *was* a king—Moric—which was totally trippy to think about.

Lor’s face was tight with worry when he came back into the room clutching an ornate metal jug to his chest. I sat up immediately. “What’s wrong?”

“There was someone in the dining room.”

“What?” I scrambled out of bed. “Are you okay?”

“No—Yes, it—it was just a member of staff, but...” He glanced back at the door, sharp teeth worrying his lower lip. “She said she was just replacing the water for me, but I don’t know why she would be doing that at this time of night.”

He faced me again, silver eyes wide with panic. “What if she heard us?”

“Um...” I scrubbed a hand through my hair, glancing at the closed door. “Are you... not allowed to

have people in here?”

“No, I—I am, I suppose, but...” He took a stilted step closer, sloshing water over his robe as he gazed at me worriedly. “I don’t know what will happen if anyone discovers you, Jugs. The staff are all terrible gossips and if—if the council finds out about the void...”

He’d told me a little about the council that helped to rule his fiefdom, saying they were all stuffy old vints who held prejudiced, outdated views. Unease tightened my chest as I glanced warily at the door again. Would they lock me in the dungeon if they found out about me? Would they block off the void so I couldn’t come and see Lor?

I suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable, standing here naked in a bedroom in another world filled with strange creatures who didn’t know what I was or where I came from. Here, *I* was the monster. The thing to fear. The thing that wouldn’t be understood.

“Um, I can go—” I began, rubbing my arms anxiously.

“No,” Lor blurted, hurriedly putting the water jug on the nightstand, spilling even more, before darting forward to wrap his arms around me and press his cheek into my chest. “Please don’t go, Jugs. Please.”

Shivering as the wet patch on his robe pressed into my sternum, I wrapped my arms around him and kissed the top of his head, hard beads and gems digging into my lips. “Okay, I won’t go. I just don’t want to get you in trouble, Lor.”

“You won’t.” He pulled back, splaying his hands over my chest as he gazed up at me. “The door is locked. No one can come in.”

I nodded. “Maybe you could also order your staff to stay out of your, um, quarters at night?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I admit the thought of them creeping around while I sleep, even if you are *not* here, is quite unnerving.”

“Yeah, that’d freak me out too.”

His fingertips sifted through the light smattering of hair on my chest. “I’m sorry for panicking and ruining our night.”

“You didn’t ruin anything.” Cupping his angular face, I leaned down to kiss him. He sagged against my front with a soft sound, fingers tightening on my chest.

Once we pulled back, I licked my lips and nodded at the beer can and chip bag on the dresser. “But, um, if you need to keep me a secret, maybe you should hide that stuff. It doesn’t look like anything else in here.”

“Oh.” Panic flared again in Lor’s eyes as he stared at the items. “I hadn’t thought of that. The staff come in here to clean and light my fire. They might have already noticed them.”

“Well, you can just say they came from a distant land.” I gave him a wry smile. “It’s not like they’ll be able to read what’s on them or anything.”

He nodded distractedly, shifting his big black and silver eyes back up to my face.

“I wish I didn’t need to keep you a secret,” he whispered, fine brows pinching with anguish. “I want to show you everything here. I want everyone to see how beautiful you are.”

I flushed, resisting the urge to rub my nose or tug at my ear. “I’m... I’m not really beautiful. By human standards.”

“Yes, you are,” Lor said vehemently, reaching up to touch my pierced lobe. “Your dainty ears and proud nose and full mouth. You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, Jugs.”

My throat closed up as I stared down at him. I could almost hear my dad’s voice in my head, scoffing and declaring that men couldn’t be *beautiful*. That they shouldn’t want to be. If I called another guy beautiful in my world, especially without knowing whether he liked men or not, I’d

probably get punched in the face.

“So are you,” I croaked, smoothing my thumbs over Lor’s sharp cheekbones. “You’re perfect, Lor.”

I wasn’t just referring to his looks. He was kind and sweet and so gentle. He was refined and always dressed immaculately, but he never tried to flaunt his obvious wealth and status. And I got the sense that he was fragile and a little sheltered. He’d given me some insight into how he felt about being the Moric before, but he’d still taken on the role as a kid when his mom died and was trying his best. Even though I got the feeling that being the Moric was... kind of lonely.

He lunged up to kiss me, long fingers curling into the back of my hair. When I reached down and gripped his ass to heft him into my arms, he whimpered against my mouth, lithe legs snapping tight around me. His silky robe fluttered against my calves as I turned to carry him back to the bed.

“Jugs,” he breathed as I laid him back against the rumpled sheets, but my mouth was already too busy to answer him as I tugged open his robe and kissed my way down his chest and belly, greedily breathing in the warm scent of his skin.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I fidgeted restlessly as Seis stepped forward to rap on the royal tailor's door, poking his head in and rumbling, "The Moric is here for his fitting."

I despised getting new clothes fitted, but preparations for the Valor of the Morics had already begun and for some reason I was expected to wear a new outfit every year, even though they all ended up looking largely the same.

"Yes, yes, of course," I heard from within the room, Fadmir's voice jumpy with nerves. "Please do come in, I'm all ready for him."

Seis pushed open the door fully and stepped to one side, holding it open for me. Fadmir swept into a deep bow as I entered the chamber, her shock of white hair falling over one shoulder.

"Moric." She straightened and gave me a tiny smile. "I hope this day has treated you well so far."

I smiled back politely. "Quite well, thank you."

Truthfully, it had been a terribly dull morning, just like every other morning for the last few weeks. I had gotten into the habit of sleeping for a few hours after Jugs left at dawn before reading Raynir's ledger in my study. It was slow, because it was so painfully dull, but I had quickly realised that the pages and pages of notes in his tiny scrawl were a confusing mix of official council business and his own private dealings. He simply recorded *everything*. Every item of clothing he bought for himself. Every bottle of wine. Every private social visit he had with friends or family.

It had made me worry over whether I'd had any right to demand to see it. Did I need to apologise to him? I hadn't realised it was his personal journal as well as his business one, though I *did* think it was somewhat unprofessional to have his private dealings muddled in with official council business.

The worst part of reading it though, was having to see my mother's name over and over. This journal—I suspected he had many, many more from his long tenure on the council—began roughly midway through my mother's rule. It was painful to read about her as if she was still alive—more painful than I suspected it should have been twenty years after her death.

I believed Seis was right in what he'd said a while ago. I hadn't had a chance to properly grieve. I had been immediately thrust into the role of the Moric, my fingers pierced and all my clothing destroyed to fill my new wardrobes in my new rooms with garments befitting a Moric. Within a day of her death, I had been shunted out of my childhood bedroom beside Lyri's in the royal family's quarters and forced to sleep in my dead mother's room, in her bed, until a new one had been made for me.

I had been terrified and distraught. And I had survived it by allowing Raynir to guide me—control me. Tell me exactly what I needed to do, how I had to act. It seemed the habit had become ingrained at some point, and I suspected that Raynir was perturbed by the fact that I was now actually trying to use my brain and be the Moric properly.

"If you'd just step up, Moric."

Fadmir's voice pulled me out of my thoughts, and I flushed as I stepped up onto the platform so she could begin taking my measurements. She bustled around in front of me, dressed in sharp dark green trousers and a long-sleeved tunic with silver accents. Her pointed ears dripped with long, thin chains that tinkled together with her movements.

Her hands were always brisk and impersonal as she stretched her standard length of thin black rope up the inside of my leg, down my arm, around my chest and stomach and shoulders. Between each one, she would move over to her vast workbench and hold the string against the markings etched

into the wood to scribble down the measurement on a piece of parchment.

“I will pass the relevant arm measurements on to the jeweller,” she told me, which made me fiddle with the piercings across the backs of my fingers.

She had noted the length of my arm from my shoulder to those barbells, and the royal jeweller would craft dozens and dozens of fine chains to drape from the armholes of my tunic and attach to my hand piercings. They always tugged uncomfortably, but the effect was admittedly impressive, if not somewhat ostentatious.

The thought of standing in front of the entire city in all my finery made my stomach twist with nerves. It always made me anxious, and it had never gotten any easier, but I knew that this year, when I took to the speaking balcony on the day of the Valor of the Morics, I would be even more conscious that there could be hundreds of salyik out there baying for my blood.

After taking a few more measurements—around my neck, wrists, ankles and the top of my thigh—she told me that she had everything she needed. I stepped off the platform quickly, relieved that it was over. I had never enjoyed having her hands so close to me, but after being with Jugs—having him touch nearly every part of me—it felt even more uncomfortable and wrong.

“You have your appointment with the healthkeeper now, Moric,” Seis told me as we left the tailor’s chamber and made our way down the hall.

My shoulders hunched up. So I would have to have *another’s* hands on me today. I was required to visit the royal healthkeeper, Lilimar, every few months to ensure that I was still in good health, and she was extremely strict about sticking to the appointments after my mother’s slow, inexplicable deterioration.

While I didn’t enjoy them, I liked Lilimar. She had become the healthkeeper here not long after my mother’s enthronement, and the two of them had been good friends. She had overseen the birth of Lyri and me. And she had worked tirelessly to try and find a cure for my mother’s mysterious illness, blaming herself when nothing had helped.

Lilimar’s chamber was at the back of the hyll, and opened onto a private medicinal garden. Many vints were keen botanists—though I had never picked up the hobby—and there was a long history in our culture of discovering and collecting plants across the world that held a medley of healing properties.

None of them had saved Mama, though.

“Ah, Moric,” Lilimar said cheerfully as Seis opened the door for me. “This shouldn’t be a long visit. You’re looking in fine health.”

I gave her a polite smile. “Thank you, Lilimar. How has this day treated you?”

“Oh, very well.” She patted the cushioned bench in the centre of the room as Seis stepped outside and closed the door behind him. “I’m working on a new salve that can speed up the healing of a fresh piercing.”

My mouth quirked as I took off my jacket and sat down. “Vints everywhere will thank you for it.” She chuckled. “Indeed. Now, any changes in hunger or thirst?”

“None.”

“And your skin and hair?”

“The same as always.”

After checking my vision, she looked over my teeth and peered into my ears—which always made me uncomfortable—then felt around my neck before politely asking me to remove my tunic. I pulled it off and neatly folded it, then sat very still as Lilimar listened to my heart and pressed cold fingers into my stomach and lower back.

“Any changes in excreta?” she asked as she made notes in her ledger.

My ears twitched with embarrassment. “No, all normal.”

She gave a brisk nod. “Sexual organs all working nicely? No pain when your extrusion emerges during release?”

Heat flooded my face. “No pain at all. All—all fine.”

“Good.” She made a final note and snapped her ledger shut, lifting her head to give me a smile.

“Just a sample of your blood then, if you don’t mind, Moric.”

I nodded, already lifting my hand for her to prick the tip of my forefinger. Lilimar took blood from Lyri and I at every visit, to check that whatever had killed our mother wasn’t lurking within us as well.

I watched impassively as my dark blood dripped into the tiny vial she held beneath it. After pressing gauze to it to staunch the blood flow, she smoothed a salve over the pinprick and gave me a smile.

“Unless there’s anything you may have noticed since your last visit, you’re all done, Moric.”

I slid off the bench and reached for my tunic. “Thank you, Lilimar.”

“Unless you’d like any new piercings while you’re here?” She gestured at a roll of black cloth, which I knew from experience contained her piercing needles in varying sizes.

I gave her a faint smile as my head emerged through the neck of my tunic. “Perhaps when your salve is ready.”

She laughed. “The Verin said the same thing at his recent health check. He is as fit and healthy as always,” she added with a reassuring smile. “Despite how much that terror drinks. And gets into fights.”

I huffed as I smoothed down my tunic. “He tries to keep up with the guards.”

“And he succeeds for the most part, by the sounds of it, if not outright surpasses them.” She gestured at the door. “I won’t keep you. It was good to see you, Moric.”

“Lor,” I insisted as I always did, ears twitching. It felt uncomfortable to have the vint who’d helped birth me calling me that.

She inclined her head in a graceful nod. “Enjoy your evening, Lor.”

“And you.” I pulled open the door, giving Seis a brief smile as he straightened up from the wall.

“You’ve received a message, Moric.” He held out a slip of paper. “Councillor Raynir has requested the honour of a private dinner with you this evening.”

His voice was carefully emotionless, but we shared a look as I took the paper and unfolded it to read. I had always jumped to accommodate Raynir in the past, no matter how short notice, because I thought that it was the right thing to do for the head of the council.

But now I was starting to see that it was all a game of veiled insults and control tactics. *I* was the Moric, but he had always been the one directing our interactions.

“Will you find the messenger and ask him to tell Councillor Raynir that while I would be delighted”—we shared another look—“I am otherwise engaged tonight, and perhaps making such requests with more notice would be of greater benefit to all parties in the future.”

Seis’ mouth twitched. “Of course, Moric.”

“Thank you, Seis.”

As we started walking away from Lilimar’s chamber, he said, “You have no more appointments today, Lor. Perhaps you would enjoy a stroll through the gardens to relax after being poked and prodded all afternoon.”

I huffed in amusement, glancing outside as we passed a window. It was late afternoon, so there

were still several more hours before Jugs arrived. “Yes, alright, Seis.”

We emerged into the main hall in time to see Lyri and Gryf coming in through the front doors, chuckling together about something. Lyri sobered when he saw me, his strides quickening as he made his way over.

“Got a minute?” he asked, smiling as he gave my cheek an affectionate pat.

“Of course. We were just going for a walk in the gardens.”

“Can we join you?”

I raised a brow. “Asking instead of just doing it? Someone is feeling polite today.”

He laughed, bumping my shoulder with his as we started walking back toward the front doors.

Seis called out for four more guards to join us, seeing as the gardens were open to the public.

“Been into town today?” I asked, nodding at the guard who held the door open for us.

“Yes.” Lyri glanced around and lowered his voice as we stepped out into bright late afternoon sun.

“Gryf and I visited the salyik district. We’ve been lurking around it for a few weeks, watching them come and go, but today we went in.”

My belly tightened with apprehension. “Oh? And did you... did you see the preacher?”

“No, but we asked around about them. Most of the salyik we spoke to couldn’t tell us fast enough that they don’t listen to them. That the community has largely decided to ignore the preacher when they stand in the square, hoping that eventually they will realise and stop on their own. But I think knowing they have caught the attention of the hyll has made them nervous,” he added, voice grim. “They might decide to deal with the problem quickly.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, unable to take in the vines and trees dripping with blooms around us as we slowly made our way through the gardens. “You don’t think they’ll kill the preacher, do you?”

“No, probably not. The salyik aren’t a bloodthirsty people. But they might get them to leave by shunning them.”

“Where would they go? If they left Thinir?”

Lyri shrugged. “Who knows? Perhaps they’d start a new settlement on their own. They might have some followers and those I spoke to were just too scared to tell me. Maybe a group of salyik will leave and form a new community somewhere else in the fiefdom. Or further.”

“Would that cause problems for us?” I murmured, as we passed a trio of usho out for a stroll in the public gardens. They all bowed deeply at the sight of me.

“Unlikely. But I will keep an eye on the district, and I will tell the guards who work the city gates to keep me updated on any comings and goings.” Lyri gave me a reassuring smile. “Gryf and I will also go back in a few days to try and see this preacher for ourselves.”

“Be careful,” I said worriedly. Lyri chuckled.

“I always am.”

I gave him a look. “You *know* that is a lie, Lyri. You are rarely careful.”

“I am when it comes to your safety,” he said curtly. “Speaking of which, when do I get to interro—ask Jugs some simple questions again?”

“There is absolutely no need.” I lifted my chin. “He has told no one about the void. He is completely trustworthy. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.”

Lyri side-eyed me. “*He* may not, but that’s not to say that a different otherworlder couldn’t discover the void by chance and come through. Someone who isn’t quite as trustworthy as your Jugs.”

“You said it was in a remote forest on the other side.”

“But there *was* a settlement.”

“Jugs explained the settlement to me. He said it was a camp for children, and that it was closed

until next year anyway.”

“Children?” Lyri wrinkled his nose. “So next year we might get a gaggle of small pink otherworld children falling through the void?”

“No, he said the children are not allowed into the forest unsupervised,” I said smugly. “And the void is not on any of the paths they take.”

Lyri grunted. “Alright, fine. I *would* still like to get to know him though, Lor. Seeing as he is... important to you. Maybe I can join you both next time you share a meal together.”

My ears twitched madly, and I kept my eyes fixed on a display of large marast trees that had been trained to twist around each other in decorative patterns. Over the last few weeks, Jugs had visited every night. And while we still talked for hours, we also spent much time... doing other things.

I didn’t know if Lyri could somehow see that on my face, because he slyly said, “Unless you no longer talk or eat and instead just spend all your time mashing your mouths together.” He nudged me, then added, “We tried it, by the way. Gryf and I.”

Oh Mabs. “Tried what,” I asked apprehensively.

“Kissing. Took us a while to get the hang of it. Gryf’s tusks kept getting in the way.” Lyri chuckled. “But you were right. Feels good.”

I glanced at him. “It’s *supposed* to be done between those who feel romantically for one another. I didn’t think you and Gryf... felt that way.”

“We don’t,” Lyri said cheerfully. “But we’re *obviously* going to try a weird new sex thing that we learned about from another world. Who wouldn’t?”

Secretly, I couldn’t disagree. I knew I’d be willing—and eager—to try any strange sex thing that Jugs told me about. And I adored kissing him, so the likelihood was that I would enjoy anything else.

Maybe I would ask him tonight. We sucked and touched each other almost every single night he visited, and last week he had pinned our lengths together and stroked us as one. It had felt unimaginably good.

I was getting better at sucking his cock, not just licking and kissing it. I knew to tuck my lips against my teeth so the sharp edges didn’t get anywhere near him, although I still couldn’t fit much of him in my mouth. He always seemed to enjoy it immensely though, hands shaking in my hair and desperate sounds ripping from his throat.

But maybe tonight we could try something new. Something else humans did, or perhaps something vints did. My mind suddenly flashed to the display of priceless jewellery in my dressing room, most of which I rarely wore.

Jugs seemed to like my piercings. He often spent a long time playing with the hoops in my nipples, driving me mindless with lust. Perhaps he would... perhaps he would like it if I adorned myself for him. It was part of my culture, not his, but I wanted to share it with him. I wanted to see his eyes flare with heat when I revealed myself.

A secret thrill went up my spine as Lyri chattered beside me about a card game he had won the night before, despite being horrendously drunk. I was suddenly desperate to get back to my rooms, but I forced myself to walk slowly around the gardens with him, catching up on his wild antics.

The moment he said that he was going to get something to eat, I jumped at the opportunity to take my leave. Seis escorted me to my quarters and, after saying goodbye, I hurried to my bedchambers to start getting ready, my stomach quivering with nervous excitement.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I could tell Lor was nervous about something the moment I stepped through the void. I was getting pretty good at working out the meanings of the different expressions on his beautiful, inhuman face.

And tonight, he looked hella nervous.

“You okay?” I asked worriedly, returning his high-five before dipping my head to kiss him when he tilted his chin up, hands settling over my chest.

“I am very well, thank you.” He swallowed, but shot me a soft smile. “I just missed you.”

God, he always made my heart go nuts when he said things like that. A lump forming in my throat, I kissed him again and croaked, “I missed you too.”

Stepping back, he smoothed down his tunic, hands fussing nervously. “How has your day treated you?”

I’d already worked out that this was basically the vint version of ‘how’s it going?’ so I briefly told him about my boring shift at work, then asked, “How about you?”

He waved a hand, looking flustered. “Terribly dull Moric duties. I wouldn’t want to bore you with any of it.”

“I’m interested,” I protested, but he shook his head sharply.

“I don’t want to think about all that now.” He took my hand, lifting it to his mouth to kiss my knuckles. Now that Lor had discovered kissing, he liked to kiss every part of me that he could. “Shall we go to my quarters?”

His expression had grown nervous again, voice trembling a little. I gripped his hand and nodded, staying silent as he led us out of the guestroom and down the hall.

Had he changed his mind? Was he going to tell me that he didn’t want me coming back anymore?

My throat bobbed repeatedly as we made our way into the tunnel. I was too nervous to speak, and we usually stayed silent as we walked through the secret passage anyway, but my palm was beginning to sweat against his as I wondered why he seemed so anxious—what he was going to tell me.

In the muffled quiet of the tunnel, I realised I could hear a... faint tinkling sound coming from Lor. Specifically from his tunic. I peered at the back of his jacket in the low light from his lantern. It looked the same as the ones he usually wore, but maybe it was a different design with some fancy adornments or something?

When we stepped out into his dressing room, the bedroom through the archway looked much darker than normal. As I followed Lor through, I realised it was because only the fireplace was lit, all the candles and lanterns extinguished.

And the drapes were drawn across the bed. The air smelled stronger and headier than normal, like sweet smoke, and I realised there was a bundle of sticks that looked kind of like incense hanging from the mantel of the fireplace, smouldering from the sparks.

Um... what was going on? I looked at Lor, who had stopped by the bed. His hands were clenching repeatedly into fists, big ears twitching like they did when he was embarrassed or nervous.

“I... I have something to show you.” He licked his lips, silver irises almost glowing in the dark. “Will you wait here until I tell you I am... r-ready for you to see?”

“Um...” I looked around again, as if I might be able to spot a clue among all the weird stuff in here. “Yeah, sure. Of course.”

Lor exhaled a sharp breath, then walked around the bed until he was shielded from view by the drawn drapes. I heard the dual thuds of his boots hitting the floor, before fabric rustled and the

bedframe creaked as he climbed on.

Oh shit, was this a sex thing? My cock certainly seemed to think so, because it was already perking up in my shorts. I stared at the dark blue drapes hiding Lor's bed—and Lor—from view, my heart beginning to pound faster.

"Alright," I heard him say softly, what felt like years later. "I'm—I'm ready."

My legs were a little unsteady as I approached the bed, having no idea what I'd find but with my body already fully on board. I cautiously tugged back one of the drapes and heard myself suck in a gasp.

Lor was kneeling on the bed, naked, bathed in soft pink light. The tiny blue gems on his nipple rings had been swapped for bigger, pale grey jewels that had delicate, gossamer-thin chains attached. They draped over his flat chest, attached to both gems, a light silver waterfall that cascaded over his deep blue skin in a gentle curve.

There was another thin chain around his neck, with an even bigger grey jewel that nestled in the hollow of his throat, and attached to that were several other chains that draped under his arms and directly down the centre of his chest to join with a belly chain and another jewelled ring in his navel.

The piercing on his pubic mound had been swapped for a bigger barbell with round gems on either end instead of plain metal balls. Even more chains hung from them, framing his cock and tight sac to loop loosely around the tops of his thighs. Kind of like a garter belt.

His cock was only half hard, just the very tip peeking out, and I suspected that was because he was so nervous I could see his slender thighs trembling as he knelt on the bed.

My mouth had gone completely dry, and my throat clicked when I swallowed. "Y-you look..."

"It is a vint courting tradition." His voice shook. "But I can take them out if you don't like them—"

"I like them," I croaked, my cock straining in my shorts. "I really, really like them, Lor."

Some of the tension eased from his shoulders, and he shot me a shy smile as he fiddled with the chain snaking down his belly before extending an elegant, long-fingered hand. "Will you join me, Jugs?"

I hopped in place to tug off my sneakers and socks, heart pounding as I placed a knee on the mattress and took his hand. A faint shimmering from above drew my gaze up, and I realised where the pink light was coming from.

Tiny shards of glowing crystals—possibly hundreds of them—hung from the thick fabric draped over the canopy, affixed by tiny metal chains that gleamed. They cast a hazy, electric pink glow over the enclosed space, which felt weirdly futuristic yet old-fashioned at the same time.

I tugged the drape closed behind me, hiding us away in this alien but romantic little nest. Lor was already cupping the sides of my neck and tugging my head down to kiss me, and I moaned against his mouth as my hands settled lightly on his sides.

It was only seconds before our tongues were thrusting hungrily together. I was already lightheaded with lust, and hearing the delicate chains all over his body tinkling together only made it worse. Oh my god, he'd been wearing all of this under his clothes when he'd come to meet me at the void. The thought made my cock pulse uncontrollably, already leaking into my briefs.

I *needed* to be naked against him, to feel all those chains and jewels on my skin. Our mouths parted only for the second it took me to whip my T-shirt off before they were crashing back together, our breaths hectic.

I felt Lor's trembling fingers tugging down my shorts and briefs, and a shaky groan left me when they wrapped around my dick. God, I was already so hard it hurt. I wasn't willing to stop kissing him as I awkwardly pulled my shorts down my legs, lifting my knees one at a time to shove them off.

“I want this.” His breaths shuddered against my lips as he squeezed my cock, making it throb in reaction.

Oh fuck. I pulled back, shaking with lust, my hands moving feverishly all over him. The thin, delicate chains tickled the backs of my fingers, warm from his skin.

“Y-you...” I licked my lips, trying to calm my thundering heart enough to concentrate. “Do you mean...”

He nodded between frantic kisses, sliding his hand down to cup my balls. My hips twitched as I grunted, a trickle of pre-cum meandering down my length.

Oh my god, he wanted to fuck? I was down—so, so down—but I was also pretty sure I’d come the moment I got anywhere near his ass. I briefly considered making myself come first so I could last—I was positive that it would only take a few pumps of my fist for me to explode all over the chains glistening on his body—but he’d done all this to make it special.

He was kissing me so sweetly, so eagerly, his hand shaking against my sac. I didn’t want to ruin it by making him wait. He’d never done this before either.

“Do you want to, Jugs?” he asked uncertainly, gazing up at me with big eyes.

“Yes,” I croaked, unable to stop my hands from sliding down to his ass and giving it a squeeze. “But I’m really nervous.”

That seemed to make him relax a little. He gave me a shy smile and shifted on the bed to lie down, his long grey hair a halo around his head on the pillows. The chains tinkled together, draped over his lean chest and belly.

“I’m nervous too,” he whispered, taking my hand and urging me closer. His cock twitched, standing straight up as I settled between his spread thighs and leaned over him.

I could feel the chains looped around his upper thighs catching on my hair-roughened skin. I shuddered when my cock slid against his tight sac, but then Lor was cupping my face and pulling my head down to kiss me, his tongue gliding into my mouth.

I couldn’t stop my hips from starting to rock, grinding my cock against his. Soon we were kissing with messy desperation, hectic breaths clashing as our tongues thrust together. Lor’s legs shifted anxiously against mine before spreading wider as he broke the kiss to gaze up at me with lust-dazed eyes.

Taking one of my hands, he brought it to his face and kissed my palm, then sucked my middle finger into his mouth.

My teeth sank into my lower lip to try and muffle the groan that left me. His lightly ridged tongue slid over my finger as he sucked, before drenching it in saliva. Without saying a word, he released me and dragged my trembling hand down his body, tilting his hips up to slide my slick finger over his hole.

“Oh fuck,” I croaked, instinctively taking over the movement to circle his tiny, tight rim. I’d seen flashes of it while sucking him, and knew the puckered skin here was a deeper shade than his rich blue.

Lor released my wrist to skim his fingertips up his stiff cock, lightly jerking it. The sheath of dark blue skin shifted up and down with his movements, revealing more of the tender pale grey underneath.

I stared as I stroked his hole, my nuts drawing up tight to hug the base of my cock. When I crooked my finger to start sliding the tip inside him, Lor gasped as his cock twitched and pulsed out a drop of clear fluid.

Holy shit, he was *so tight*. How the hell was I going to get inside him without hurting him? He seemed to be enjoying it so far, at least, his hole twitching around my finger as it slowly slid deeper.

He let out a desperate sound, still playing with his cock as his other hand skimmed up his belly and chest to toy with a nipple ring, tugging on it. Crap, I was gonna come so fast if he kept touching himself. Watching his eyes get hazy and heavy-lidded, his lips parted around panting breaths, was the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

My knuckles finally met his ass, and I held my finger there to let him get used to the feel. I was guessing he might have played with himself here before, because he was already straining his hips with impatience, head arching back into the pillows.

As I started to pull out, I felt my fingertip drag over a raised bump. Lor squealed and abandoned his nipple to clamp a hand over his mouth, silver eyes growing wide and reflecting the pink glow from above. His cock twitched, spilling more pre-cum down the backs of his fingers.

Oh my god, was this like a prostate? I'd found my own prostate before, but it had felt much smaller and subtler than this. Lor's legs started to shake uncontrollably, draped over the backs of my thighs, as I carefully stroked it, my fingertip hypersensitive to its softly ridged texture.

He was whimpering continuously against his palm, brows pinched and eyes wide and desperate. His hips writhed, bumping my fingertip against his prostate—or his version of one—again and again. He abandoned his cock to clutch the sheets, twisting the material in a tight fist.

He was definitely about to come. His cock was jerking wildly, pouring pre-cum down onto his pubic mound and the jewelled piercing there. Sliding my hand up his quaking inner thigh, I circled the base of his cock with my thumb and used the fluid to slickly stroke the hole for his extrusion with the pad of my forefinger, making the piercing just above shift beneath his skin.

Lor's eyes rolled back in his head before his spine arched off the mattress, pressing my finger harder into his prostate. The cry that left him was strained and muffled by his palm, and the chains around his thighs rattled wildly as he shook and his extrusion pressed insistently against my fingertip. I quickly moved it out of the way and stared as it shot out.

I'd already seen it several times, but I still found it fascinating. It was long and thin, the same pale grey as the tip of Lor's cock. As his clear cum spurted into the air from his cock, I could see it quivering—almost vibrating—as it pumped milky fluid all over the chains draped across his belly.

I heard the sheets rip as he twisted them tighter in his fists, shaking so hard I could feel it through the mattress. When his cock finally stopped spurting, his extrusion went limp over his belly. Before, it had always retreated back inside quickly after he came, but this time it didn't.

Lor's chest was heaving, and his hand dropped limply off his face as I carefully slid my finger free. His prostate was still throbbing, and I realised he felt way slicker there now—more than from his spit. My cock was drooling onto the bed, and it jerked when a tiny trickle of liquid followed my finger as I pulled it free of his body.

Oh fuck, I wasn't going to survive this. Unable to stop myself, I sank two fingers back inside him and realised his hole was softer now, more relaxed, and he was slick and even hotter inside. Groaning desperately, I stroked my fingertips over his swollen prostate and felt a fresh trickle of fluid coat my fingers. Lor let out a strangled gasp, hips straining up.

“*Nnngh*—yes, yes,” he panted, clutching at the sheets and tipping his head back. “D-don't stop. Please.”

His cock was still just as hard as before, despite his orgasm, and I could see his extrusion stiffening, rising up off his belly. His skin shimmered with a sheen of sweat, the hazy pink light from the crystals above making him look even more beautiful and inhuman.

“J-Jugs, please.” Lor's shaking hands found my knees and squeezed hard. “I n-need you to—I need—Please. Please, please.”

Oh god, okay, this was happening. And I was going to come the moment I put my dick anywhere near his hole. Trying to think of anything but what I was about to do, to calm down just a little, I carefully slid three fingers inside him to make sure he was relaxed enough. I couldn't bear the thought of hurting him at all, even if he was too worked up to care. He was so sweet and desperate and beautiful beneath me, giving himself over completely. He'd done all this for me. No one had ever, ever done anything like this for me.

I wrapped my arm around his thigh, hoisting it higher so I could dip my head and press my lips to the inside of his knee. "Lor."

Pulling my fingers free, I circled them over his hole. It was too dark in our hidden nest to see, but it felt softer and a little swollen. My three fingers slid back in easily. He was ready.

I gulped. Shit, I didn't think I was.

My hand shook as I scooped up the thick release pooling on his belly, the two different fluids marbling together. My hips spasmed when I used it to slick up my cock, which was agonisingly hard and gave a hearty throb in my fist. I had a brief flash of worry over our lack of protection, but I'd gotten checked out after things ended with Greg, and Lor had never been with anyone. Besides, we'd already sucked each other off, and who even knew if we could contract diseases from each other?

Lor clutched my knees tighter as I shuffled forward, his legs coming up to rest his feet on the fronts of my shoulders. I clutched the base of my cock, trying not to come, and looked up at him as my chest heaved with my shuddering breaths.

"Are you—are you sure—"

"Yes," he cried out, hands restlessly grabbing at my thighs, trying to tug me closer. "Yes—please—please—"

Letting out a helpless groan, I pressed the tip of my cock to his hole. Lor was already straining up, trying to work my cock inside him. I had to clamp my hands around his hips to hold him still, my thighs quaking as I slowly eased forward. He let out a strangled sound when the head of my cock popped inside, stiffening up, his hands squeezing my thighs so hard I knew he'd leave bruises.

Shuddering from the overwhelming pleasure of the hot, slick pressure around my cockhead, I forced myself to stay perfectly still.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I can—"

"No." Lor shook his head frantically, sharp teeth digging into his lower lip until he released it to exhale a slow breath. I felt his hole relax a fraction around me. "I'm alright, Jugs."

He gentled his clawing grip on my thighs and took another shaky breath, then smiled up at me. "Please don't stop."

Swallowing, I sank a little deeper, then a little more. I was sweating with the effort of holding back my orgasm, damp hair hanging in my eyes. When my cock slid against his swollen prostate, Lor's whole body twitched, his toes curling against my shoulders.

A ragged groan burst from my throat when my hips finally met his ass. I didn't move except to slide my hands up his thighs, desperately trying not to come as he clenched around me with a moan.

"Mabs, you're so big," he whispered, features tight but slowly growing blissed out as he adjusted to the feel of me inside him.

I huffed a laugh, but it turned into a groan when he clenched around me again. My dick wasn't actually *all* that big—though it was bigger than average, seeing as I was a big guy—but Lor was small. Almost delicate. He'd still taken all of it, and a euphoric smile was slowly tilting up his mouth.

His lower body shifted, and he let out a shuddering breath as he slid on and off my cock just an inch. I choked and immediately pinned his hips down again.

“W-wait.” I shook my head, struggling to breathe. “I’m—I’ll c-come. Just give me a minute.”

Lor whined with impatience, so I reached around his thigh to pin his cock and extrusion together in my fist to distract him. Both were slick from his earlier release, so I started stroking them slowly, hoping it would help take away any lingering pain while also giving me time to get my body under control so I could actually fuck him and not just bury my dick inside him without moving.

“Ah!” He stared down at my hand with wild eyes, legs starting to shake again as his hips strained up. His extrusion was a touch longer than his cock, and the end of it curved around to tease his tip, making me wonder just how much control he had over that thing.

None of this was helping me, though. I couldn’t stop my hips from beginning to rock, grinding into him with short strokes at first, until I slid my cock halfway out and grunted from the slick drag of him around me.

Lor cried out when I sank back inside, his cock jerking in my fist and growing even stiffer. I didn’t want him to come again so soon, worried he’d grow too sensitive, so I let go and palmed the fronts of his thighs at the crease of his groin. The delicate chains teased my fingers, making me grip harder with a groan as my hips started moving in earnest.

Moaning with every panting breath, Lor reached up and clutched at the pillows around his head. The chains all over his body shifted and tinkled in time with my thrusts, creating a soundtrack to our fucking that was weirdly sexy. His feet shifted restlessly on the fronts of my shoulders before they slid around my neck and he crossed his ankles at my nape. For a split second, I had the wild thought that he was about to pull some hardcore wrestling move and fling me to the side.

“L-Lor,” I gasped out, unable to stop my hips from moving faster. And faster. It felt too good. He was so tight and hot, the bulge of his prostate sliding over my sensitive cockhead.

“Yes,” he panted, his silver eyes, so heavy-lidded, fixed on my face as the pink glow from above danced over his deep blue skin and the silver chains draped over him.

Oh my god, he looked too hot, and this felt too good, and I knew I wasn’t gonna last. I was totally shocked that I’d even lasted *this* long. I’d imagined what this would feel like, but the real thing was *spectacular*. Especially because it was Lor.

“F-fuck,” I choked out, shuddering hard as my cock bucked inside him, my nuts drawing up tighter. I had to stop, or at least slow down, or I would blow in seconds.

Slowing my frantic pace, I slid my hands up his smooth thighs and turned my head to kiss his calf. My cock glided in and out of him so easily now, but he was still clenching me tight, like his body was trying to keep me in.

Gently untangling his ankles from behind my neck, I leaned forward and groaned helplessly when his knees slipped into the crooks of my elbows and his lower back arched off the mattress, allowing me to press even deeper inside him. Lor gasped before I crushed my lips to his, thrusting my tongue inside, trying to distract myself from the hot, slick pressure around my reeling cock.

His hands fisted my hair, holding my mouth to his as our tongues slid together feverishly. Before I even realised I was moving, my hips were grinding back into him—short, pressing thrusts at first, until they got longer and faster and less controlled.

I tore my mouth free to gasp for breath, hips pounding frantically into him now. “F-fuck,” I croaked, burying my face in his neck. “I c-can’t—”

“Don’t stop,” he panted, wrapping his arms around my neck and clutching my hair. “Don’t stop—Jugs, Jugs—”

The chains on his body bounced wildly between us, urging me to move even faster, to make the music of them even more frantic. With the drapes drawn around the bed, the air quickly grew almost

unbearably hot in our little nest, dampening my hair and making Lor's knees slip in the crooks of my elbows.

I couldn't believe how hard and fast I was fucking him, and a distant part of my brain worried that I should have been going slower, maybe making this more romantic. But Lor seemed to like it. He was clutching me to him tightly, crying out with every manic thrust, his stiff cock sliding over my belly as I pressed as close as possible.

"It f-feels... so good," he hitched out, his fast breaths ruffling my hair. "Pl-please don't stop—Don't stop—"

Oh god. I *was* gonna be stopping soon, and there was nothing I could do about it. The orgasm was barreling down on me, tightening my lower back, drawing my nuts up to hug the base of my shaft. They smacked against him with every pounding thrust, sending shards of pleasure fanning out into my lower belly.

I lifted my head but only managed to give him one deep, tongue-tangling kiss before I gasped against his mouth, my cock growing even stiffer inside him. "I'm—Fuck, I'm gonna come."

"Yes," he breathed, clasping my face between his hands, gazing up at me with thin rings of gleaming silver in the depths of his black eyes. His nose bumped mine, tongue darting out to brush between my lips. "Inside me. Give it to me, Jugs."

Oh my god, I deserved a freaking medal for lasting this long when I was fucking the hottest, most beautiful creature in the entire universe. As I kissed him again, thrusting my tongue deep, I had just enough sense left to tunnel my shaking hand between us and fist his cock, my fingers fumbling to pin his extrusion as well. Lor squealed into my mouth, hips jerking, his lithe body growing tighter and tighter as I stroked him off recklessly fast, desperate to finish him before I exploded.

He tore his mouth from mine to crane his head back, the chains rattling as his body shook. He was crying out with every frantic breath, getting louder and louder until he loosed a ragged shout, arms snapping around my neck, body curling inward to cling on as he buried his face against my chest.

In the ring of my fingers, I could feel his cock throbbing, his extrusion almost vibrating as they both pumped fluid all over our stomachs until it dripped down my knuckles. The scent of it made me groan gutturally, and when he finally stopped coming I planted my hands on the mattress and let loose.

Lor's whole body jerked beneath me from my pounding thrusts as he shuddered, twitching with aftershocks, whimpering against my collarbone. My cock grew agonisingly stiff before it started throbbing wildly, and tingles raced across my entire body as I slammed as deep as possible and shouted out a hoarse sound when I started to come.

"Fffffuuck," I strained out into his neck, hips twitching with every forceful spurt of cum. I'd never come so hard in my life. My scalp went numb, white noise filled my head and my thighs shook wildly as my cock flexed inside Lor's hot body.

I almost collapsed on top of him when it ended, but I didn't want to crush him, so I found the strength to stay propped up, my arms trembling as they held my weight. I panted into his neck, our fronts slick with cum and sweat as they slid together with our heaving breaths.

Lor's long fingers trailed soothingly over my sweat-damp shoulders before tunnelling through my hair. He let out a shaky, contented sigh, turning his head to nuzzle my temple. When his ass clenched around my sensitive cock, I shuddered and pressed my lips to his neck.

His throat vibrated with a drowsy moan, and then he was drawing my head up to kiss me, our breaths still heavy but slowing as our heartbeats calmed. The sensation of his tongue gliding against mine made my spent cock twitch, and Lor moaned again at the feel. One of his hands slipped between our bodies, and I started to pull out in case he was getting uncomfortable, but then his long fingers

were circling the base of my shaft.

My hips jerked as I loosed a clipped, muffled moan against his mouth. Lor broke the kiss to grin up at me, eyes sparkling in the pink glow.

“If I could keep you here forever, I would.” He kissed me again, fingers trailing lower to stroke my drained nuts.

I chuckled, tipping my hips back to let my cock slip free from his body. “You mean inside you or here in your world?”

“Both,” he said softly, sliding his hand around my hip.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, letting go of his legs so he was no longer bent in half. He wrapped them around my hips, hands sliding over my biceps and shoulders, like he wanted to touch every part of me.

“I...” I didn’t know how to answer him. Part of me—a very large part of me—yearned to stay with him as well. To say *fuck it, sure, I’ll stay in this world*. But of course I couldn’t. “Well, the void isn’t going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.”

Lor smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yes, without that void, we would have never met.”

That was kind of a terrifying thought. The idea of having *never* met Lor was unimaginable now. I’d never really given much thought to fate, but... what were the odds of the void appearing in Lor’s guestroom? And what were the odds of me stumbling and falling through it to meet him?

Maybe it was all just chance. Luck. Maybe if I’d never fallen into this world, I would’ve eventually found someone else who I felt like this about. Maybe Lor would have found someone too.

But I didn’t think so. Something within me strained for him, and only him.

I didn’t think it was chance. I thought we were always meant to meet, despite being different species and living in different worlds. I thought... I thought something had brought us together. And I wasn’t going to let him go.

I’d spend the rest of my life travelling back and forth through the void if I had to.

Something sweet and hot pierced my chest as I stared down at him. How could I ever want anyone else? I would never, ever find someone else like him, and not just because he wasn’t human. He was so sweet and gentle, fragile in some ways—ways that made me want to keep him close and safe even though he was a big, powerful ruler of some kind here.

But I didn’t care about that. I didn’t care that he lived in this giant palace with a million rooms and a bedroom bigger than my entire apartment. If I’d fallen through that void and met him in a run-down shack, it wouldn’t have made a difference.

Dipping my head, I pressed my lips to his in a soft kiss. Lor kissed me back sweetly, cradling my face and breathing my name when we finally parted.

“Was it okay?” I asked with a blush. “I kind of... Sorry if I was too, um, rough.”

“You weren’t.” He smiled up at me. “It was wonderful.”

“Yeah, it was,” I croaked. I was so, so glad I hadn’t ever done that with Greg—not that the supply closet at the movie theatre was a good place to fuck. But this had felt... special. For both of us.

“I might take these chains off now.” Lor gave me a sly grin, darting up to kiss me again. “But I will wear them for you again.”

“Yes please,” I said hoarsely, my cock stirring with renewed interest when I lifted myself off him and saw his lean body dripping in chains—and cum. Holy crap, that looked amazing.

Collapsing onto my back with a groan, my whole body loose and boneless, I watched as Lor pulled back the drapes and slid out of bed. He made a face, ears twitching madly and legs tensing, before dashing into the bathroom accompanied by the sound of tinkling chains.

I bit my lip to smother my chuckle even as my cheeks heated, figuring out why he'd made such a hasty exit. I knew I had to go clean up as well, but I was content to lie there and gaze up at the softly glowing pink crystals showering from the canopy.

When Lor reappeared, he was sliding on his silky black robe, the chains gone and his usual piercings back in his nipples and pubic mound. "I will get us some water."

"Oh, yeah. That'd be rad." My throat was painfully dry. Even with one of the drapes pulled back around the bed, it was like a sauna in here thanks to the body heat we'd generated.

When he left the room, I got up and quickly cleaned up in the bathroom before returning to the bed. Settling back against the mound of pillows, I let out a deep sigh as my body relaxed. The sheets smelled so good—like Lor—and this was the softest, comfiest bed I'd ever been in. Maybe we could nap before fucking again—assuming Lor wasn't too sore.

Maybe... maybe sometimes I could stay for longer than a night. If I had a couple days off work, I could just tell Anton that I was going away or visiting my boyfriend. I mean, he *did* know I had a boyfriend. He just didn't know my boyfriend wasn't human and lived in another world.

Would Lor like that? Or would he be too busy during the day? He *was* a king—Moric—so I figured he had to have a lot to do. And it wasn't like I could just go wandering around his palace or the town. I was pretty sure that would cause total pandemonium.

Was this all we'd ever get? Secret nights together, never really sharing the rest of our lives?

Before my thoughts could grow too despondent, Lor reappeared clutching two jugs of water and two glasses. He beamed at me.

"The staff left a different kind of water, so I thought you might want to try it." He set them all down on the nightstand, then picked up one of the jugs to pour me a glass. "This is yavra-steeped. I don't like it, but you might."

I accepted the glass with a grin, cautiously taking a sip. "Ooh, it's nice. It tastes like mint."

"Like what?" Lor was pouring himself a glass from the other jug.

"Mint. It's a herb." I perked up. "I'll bring you mint choc chip ice cream one day so you can try it."

His eyes brightened over the rim of his glass as he gulped his water. Pulling back with a sated gasp, he eagerly asked, "Is it green?"

I burst out laughing. "It actually is, but it doesn't taste anything like pistachio."

"I'm sure I'll still like it." After setting his glass down, he climbed onto the bed with an eager bounce, his silky robe fluttering around his legs.

I drained my water and set my glass down, grinning as Lor clambered onto my lap and wrapped his arms around my neck.

"How much longer can you stay?"

"Ages," I said without even checking my watch. Untying his robe, I slid my arms under the fabric to wrap them around him and pull him closer. Nuzzling his prominent collarbone, I breathed him in and let my eyes slide shut.

I didn't ever want to leave.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Am I ever going to see you without those moon eyes again?”

My head jerked up at the sound of Lyri’s voice, ears already twitching with embarrassment. “What *moon eyes*?”

“Like the only thing going through your head is *Jugs, Jugs, Jugs*.” Lyri thumped down into the seat beside me beneath the bolska blooms, jerking his chin at the open ledger on the table with a sly grin. “Unless Raynir’s detailed description of what he ate for breakfast fifty years ago has got you feeling all aflutter.”

I tried not to blush. Perhaps my mind *had* drifted once or twice whilst reading Raynir’s terribly dull scribbles, but I was not *moon-eyed*.

“So he’s still visiting, is he?” Lyri nudged me with his elbow as he leaned forward to steal my cup of tea. “Have you *kissed* again?”

Heat flooded my whole body, and I bent my head back over the ledger as though deep in concentration. We had certainly done more than just *kissed*. Over the past few weeks since that wonderful night, I had had some part of Jugs inside me almost every single night. His fingers, his cock. His tongue in my mouth, when we kissed for long, long moments. He’d even dipped the tip of his tongue into the tiny hole for my extrusion a few times, which always made me writhe and shake uncontrollably.

“Well, well,” Lyri said slyly when I didn’t respond. Warily, I lifted my head to eye him. “You’ve done *more* than kissing, have you?” He went still with the cup raised halfway to his mouth, silver eyes flashing and growing hard. “He hasn’t made you do anything you don’t want to, has he?”

I huffed in irritation, reaching over to take my cup back. “Of course he hasn’t. Jugs is the most gentle person I have ever met.”

I was usually the one who threw myself at him, attacking him with my lips and tongue, hurriedly trying to tug the clothes from his body. Jugs was always gentle with me—well, until he was buried deep inside me. Then the pleasure got too much, and he fucked me so hard and fast that I could do nothing but take it. I shivered with lust, wishing he was here so that I could drag him back to my bedchambers for a while.

“Well, I wouldn’t know, seeing as you keep him all to yourself,” Lyri muttered. “I just want to *meet* him, Lor. Especially now that you’re...” He wiggled his fingers in my general direction. “You know.”

I cleared my throat, taking a sip of tea. “You *have* met him.”

“Well I didn’t exactly get to *talk* to him, did I?” Lyri spluttered indignantly. “I couldn’t understand him for most of it!”

I rolled my eyes. “You just want to question him on human weapons and armies and wars.”

“No,” Lyri said steadily. “I want to get to know the person my brother is besotted with. *Actually*.”

I sighed, shooting him a tiny smile. I couldn’t deny it, and I didn’t want to lie to Lyri anyway. I *was* besotted. I hadn’t known I could feel like this about another person. I finally understood.

The idea of going a single day without seeing Jugs—without touching him or kissing him or hearing his wonderful voice, just being near him—was unthinkable.

“Well, I will ask Jugs this evening if he’d like to share a meal with us. Perhaps with Seis and Gryf too.”

Lyri grunted, stealing my cup again to gulp down my tea. “He’s coming tonight, is he?”

I flushed, looking away quickly to fiddle with the corner of the ledger. Yes, I was sure Jugs would most certainly be *coming* tonight.

“How’s the reading going?”

Clearing my throat, I flipped absently through the pages. “Alright. Still terribly dull, but I’m starting to find useful information at least.” Nodding at a second notebook on the table, I added, “I’ve begun jotting down some ideas for how we can improve conditions for the salyik population.”

“Splendid.” Lyri pulled Raynir’s ledger closer, flicking through with a bored expression on his face. “I had an idea as well. When you’re ready to go to the council with a list of changes, maybe we could ask a salyik representative to speak with you.”

I pursed my lips, shaking my head. “I don’t think the council would be amenable to that so soon—”

“No, I mean without the council.” Lyri lifted his gaze from the book to look at me. “Just you and a salyik representative. To show them that you aren’t under the council’s thumb. And to ask them directly what they need.”

Nerves made me fiddle with my jacket cuffs. To go behind the council’s back? But... what if they found out? What if Raynir found out? Could they... punish me in some way for conducting city business without their input?

As if he knew what I was thinking, Lyri said, “*You* are the Moric, Lor. Your word is law. The council is *meant* to exist to represent the people of Thinir, to help guide you in ruling the fiefdom. But they don’t, do they? They’re not interested in bettering things for anyone but themselves. Their own families.” He grunted. “Maybe they care a bit about the vint population as a whole, but vints aren’t the only ones who live here.”

“You’re right,” I said anxiously, nibbling my lower lip. “Maybe... maybe that’s a good idea. Speaking to a salyik representative myself. Finding out what they need.”

Lyri nodded. “Gryf and I can approach them, ask them to pick someone they’d be happy representing them. And that alone will go a long way in quashing any potential support the preacher might be getting in the district. If they know the Moric is taking an active interest in their wellbeing, they’re less likely to follow the ramblings of a lone salyik raving about a revolution and pushing them to try and overthrow the hyll themselves.”

“What if the council find out?” I asked worriedly.

“They won’t. You think any of those snooty old vints go anywhere *near* the salyik district? Or even anywhere lower than the rich part of the city?” Lyri snorted. “They go home every night to their big fancy houses near the hyll and look down their noses at everyone beneath them.”

I sighed, pulling Raynir’s ledger back to me as I gave Lyri a look. “*We* live in the biggest, fanciest house of all of them, Lyri. Above even them. We’re not exactly in a position to judge them for that.”

He made a face. “Yes, I suppose, but—Wait.” Stilling my hand, he nodded down at the ledger. “Why are some pages missing?”

“What?” I followed his gaze, flicking back through the pages filled with Raynir’s tiny script.

“There.” He slapped his hand down to stop me flicking past, then ran a fingertip along the inner seam of the book. “Look, see? Some pages have been cut out.”

I peered closer, finally noticing the thread-thin lines of paper tucked between others. Like several pages had been carefully sliced away with a very sharp knife.

Lips thinning into a grim line, Lyri asked, “What’s on the pages either side?”

I scanned them quickly, my stomach twisting with unease. “They are... This section is toward the end of Mama’s reign.”

Lyri’s eyes hardened as he stared at the ledger. “Well, that’s unsettling.”

My fingers twisted together. “Perhaps... perhaps they were just personal things that he didn’t want me to read.”

My brother stared at the open book in silence for a few moments, then grunted and sat back. He sounded doubtful when he said, “Maybe. Mabs, I hate that old bastard.”

“Lyri,” I muttered, glancing around in case any staff were nearby.

“He’s a sneaky little shit. I don’t trust him. And he treats you like a child, Lor.”

“Well, he...” I flushed, because Lyri was right. “He does know more about everything than me—”

“Because he’s a *million* years old!” Lyri exclaimed. “He’s not fit to be on the council anymore. None of them are. They’re relics with outdated, harmful views.”

“I know,” I whispered hurriedly, glancing around again. “But how would I... We do *need* a council, Lyri. And they have been the council for years. It’s not like we can just... throw them off it.”

“Why not?” Lyri asked bluntly, staring at me. “You’re the Moric. Form a new council. Other fiefdoms do it. Their councils change regularly so younger faces sit on it.”

“Am I even allowed to do that?” I asked doubtfully. “It has been this way in Thinir for as long as ___”

“*Lots* of things have been the same way in Thinir for a long time, Lor,” Lyri interrupted impatiently. “That doesn’t mean they’re right.”

“No, I know,” I mumbled, but the thought of stepping into that chamber and telling all the councillors that I was... simply getting rid of them was terrifying. I wasn’t strong enough to do that. I doubted they would even listen to me—Raynir would probably just let out his condescending chuckle and tell me not to worry myself about it, then move on to that day’s pointless agenda.

At times like this, I wished Lyri had been born first. I wished he was the Moric. Although that would have made me Verin, and I would have been an even more terrible Verin than I was a Moric. I wasn’t strong like Lyri. I wasn’t brave.

I was quite certain that I was useless at everything, actually.

“I’m... I will start with the changes for the salyik,” I mumbled, wanting to cringe at how weak and uncertain my voice came out. “They are the most in need.”

“Of course.” Lyri leaned forward to clasp my arm. “You’re doing well, Lor. Don’t give up. Change can’t come all at once. I know I sound impatient, like I’m trying to push you to reform everything immediately, but I know that’s not really the way it works.” He chuckled. “I’m not the Moric. You know better than me about these things.”

But I didn’t. I didn’t think I knew anything. Except that Lyri would have made a much better Moric than me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The old-fashioned bell above the door chimed, drawing my gaze up just as Patty bustled in from the back office tying on her apron.

I smiled at the mom who stepped into the parlour with a baby carrier in one hand and a little boy clinging to the other. She looked a little frazzled, but smiled back before saying, “Okay, Will, you can get two scoops.”

The little boy, dressed in red shorts and a white T-shirt, rushed to the counter and immediately pressed his hands and nose to the glass, big dark brown eyes blinking at the rows of ice cream flavours.

“Will, get off the glass,” the mom scolded, approaching the counter with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, he’s been asking all morning for ice cream.”

“Oh, that’s what it’s there for.” Patty waved a hand, leaning forward to peer at the baby. “Isn’t she just precious?”

The lady smiled, shoving back curly dark hair. “She is when she’s sleeping, at least.”

“Momma, does Cat get ice cream too?” the little boy said without taking his eyes off the display in front of him.

“No, baby, Catherine’s too young to have ice cream.”

“Maybe we can get her some anyway just in case, and I don’t mind eating it if she doesn’t want it?”

I chuckled as Patty laughed and the mom rolled her eyes.

“Maybe you can pick one extra scoop in a flavour you think your sister will like, and you can let her know what it tastes like.” Patty smiled at the mom. “On the house.”

“Oh lord, he’ll be hopped up on sugar all afternoon,” she groaned good-naturedly. “But thank you so much.”

“Are you new in town?” Patty asked as she moved over to the coffee pot and poured some into a takeaway cup—her standard practice any time frazzled moms came in.

“Yes, just moved here from St Louis.” The mom set down the carrier and gratefully reached for the cup when Patty slid it across the counter. “My husband got a new job, so here we are.”

As Patty started talking to her about the town, the little boy—Will—looked up at me with big, solemn eyes and said, “I’ve decided.”

I smiled, picking up a napkin-wrapped cone. “What’ll it be, little man?”

“One scoop of bubblegum, one scoop of vanilla and one scoop of strawberry. Please,” he lisped.

“Rad choices.” I picked up the scoop and dried it off, frowning when I noticed my hand trembling slightly. Giving him another smile, I asked, “Which one’s for your sister?”

“Well momma says she’s too young so I’ll have to eat it for her,” he told me gravely. “But I think she’d like bubblegum.”

The way he was eyeing the bright pink scoop I carefully placed in the cone made me think that maybe *he’d* really like bubblegum, but I pursed my lips as they twitched and cleaned off the scoop before leaning in for the vanilla.

The scoop rattled against the edge of the metal container as my hand shook again. Pulse leaping, I tried to steady it and finished Will’s ice cream cone. But as I leaned over the counter to give it to him, my hand spasmed. The cone tipped, three fat balls of ice cream landing on the counter with a splat.

“Shi—Sugar.” Flustered, I set the cone down and reached for a wad of paper towels. “Sorry,

buddy, let me just clean this up and get you a new one.”

Will stared at the mess, brown eyes wide, before gazing up at me imploringly. I felt Patty’s hand on my back, her voice concerned as she said, “Jugs, what’s wrong? You’re trembling.”

“You look pale, honey.” Will’s mom gave me a sympathetic smile. “Maybe you should sit down.”

“Honestly, I’m totally fine.” I made my voice extra cheerful, not wanting to freak out Will. “Never better. I’ll just get Will a new ice cream cone and clean this up—”

“No, you go and sit down.” Patty pushed me out from behind the counter. “Once Will’s got his ice cream, I’ll get you some water.”

“Honest, Patty, I’m—”

“Sit.” She pushed me down into a chair with surprising strength, then patted my cheek before bustling back around the counter.

I sheepishly wiped my hands over my shorts, then reached up to tug off my cap and wipe my forehead. I felt weirdly hot, and after Patty brought over a glass of water, my throat kept convulsing long after I’d drunk some.

“Hope you feel better, honey,” Will’s mom said with a smile as she opened the door, ushering out Will, who was happily munching on his ice cream cone.

“Thank you.” I smiled back, throat still bobbing.

“Okay.” Patty came out from the back office. “April’s on her way to cover your shift. You’re going home to rest.”

“I’m okay, Patty—”

“You’re pale.” She rested her hand on my forehead. “And hot. Go home and sleep, sweetie.”

“Are you sure?” I asked anxiously, fiddling with the cap in my hands as I stood.

“I can’t have you passing out face first into the ice cream,” she said cheerfully, urging me into the back office. “Plenty of fluids and sleep. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said shakily between swallows. My heart gave an uneasy thump. Maybe I was just run-down from not sleeping enough and spending most of my nights up with Lor.

After collecting my backpack, I said bye to Patty and left, making the short walk home. Anton was at work, so the apartment was quiet when I stepped inside.

I went into my bedroom and took off my work uniform, then climbed into bed. My throat had stopped spasming at least, and when I lifted my hands, they were steady. Maybe my blood sugars had just dipped or something. Rolling over onto my side, I managed to nap for a few hours, and when I woke up, I felt totally fine.

I took a shower and dressed in my pink shorts—because I knew Lor liked them—and a white cropped T-shirt. By the time I’d made and eaten some pasta for dinner, the sun was setting, so I stuffed the cookies and soda I had bought for Lor to try in my backpack and left the apartment.

My belly was fluttering with familiar excitement by the time I parked up outside the Camp Wynsome gates. I hated not being able to speak to Lor at all during the day, knowing I was so far away from him. In another world. But at least I’d get the whole night with him. I felt fresh and well-rested from my nap, my weird turn at work completely gone.

The walk through the forest was so familiar to me now that I could do it with my eyes closed. I was grinning when the hidden void came into view, tucked into the hollow of the tree, just visible in the dying light peeking through the leaves above. Scrambling quickly down the slope, I stepped through, and my grin widened when I saw a familiar head of long grey hair and beautiful, deep blue skin.

Then it dropped in an instant, my belly clenching with a sudden flurry of nerves. Lor’s scary

brother looked up from his relaxed slouch against the wall opposite the void. He was still flipping a dagger deftly in his hand as he gave me a wide, sharp grin.

“Hello, old sport.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I smoothed back my beaded braids with one hand as I hurried down the corridor, clutching my lantern in the other. Every day apart from Jugs felt endless, but it was dark now, which meant he'd be here soon. My pulse fluttered with excitement, especially when I thought of the gift waiting for him in my bedchamber.

But as I was approaching the guestroom door, I heard voices, drawing me to a sharp stop. Panicking, I hurried forward to peer down the narrow corridor that led to the staff area. Seis had locked that door so that no staff could get in, but perhaps someone had found another key for it?

Then I realised the voices were coming from the guestroom with the void. My vision whited out with terror. Had someone other than Jugs come through? Would I find two other humans in there? What if Jugs had already been waiting and someone had hurt him?

I stumbled toward the door, preparing to use my lantern as a weapon to protect Jugs—even though a lantern was a terrible weapon, and I was *awful* at wielding anything—before I heard a snort that sounded suspiciously like my brother.

“You’re making that up.”

Oh Mabs, that *was* Lyri. Was he interrogating Jugs? He was going to scare him off!

I flung open the door just as I heard Jugs chuckle and say, “I’m not! Seriously. You throw a really heavy ball down this super slippery lane and—Hi, Lor.”

He gave me a sweet grin as I stared in horror. Jugs was sitting cross-legged on the floor by the bed, and Lyri was slouched back against the wall with his forearms draped over his raised knees. He grinned up at me slyly.

“Alright, twin?” He gestured at Jugs. “I was just getting to know Jugs here.”

“You—you—” I felt my ears twitch madly as I tried to compose myself. “You didn’t tell me you would be coming here.”

Hag’s balls, what had he said to Jugs? He had probably told him terribly embarrassing stories from when we were children. Like when I’d cried because my hair had gotten tangled in a mass of marast thorns and I had to have a big chunk cut out. Or when I’d been chasing Lyri through the hyll because he’d stolen my boots, and my socked feet had slipped out from under me and I’d skidded on my belly across the great hall just as Mama and the council were leaving a meeting.

“Well I just thought I’d try and catch Jugs before the pair of you were *busy* for the evening,” Lyri said with a teasing smirk.

I glared at him, hovering uncertainly as Jugs went pink. Tugging on my tunic, I lifted my chin. “Yes, well. We—we had no firm plans, so I suppose...”

“No, no, I’ll leave you to it.” Lyri got deftly to his feet and grinned at Jugs. “I’ll bring my cards next time, and you bring those strange treats from your world. We’ll gamble for them.”

Jugs chuckled, standing up as well. My ears twitched when I realised he was wearing his pink shorts.

“Sounds rad. I’ve never gambled before though, so go easy on me.”

I eyed Lyri in alarm. That was the *worst* thing Jugs could have possibly said. My brother’s mouth stretched into a wicked grin as his eyes gleamed.

“Will do, old sport,” he said demurely, clapping me on the shoulder as he turned and left the room. I cleared my throat after he’d shut the door behind him. “Sorry.”

Jugs laughed, crossing the room and holding up his hand for a high-five. “No, he’s great.”

“He’s a menace,” I muttered, high-fiving him back before tipping up my chin for a kiss.

I sagged against Jugs’ chest as his lips settled over mine, slipping my arm around his back to slide my palm up his spine and under his shorn off shirt. The lantern in my other hand knocked against his bare leg as he wrapped me in his arms, trailing kisses across my jaw and down my neck.

“I missed you today,” he mumbled, squeezing me tighter.

The lantern almost clattered to the floor as my fingers twitched with the urge to clutch him closer. To ask him to stay with me for longer this time—not just a night. To stay for days. Weeks.

To never go back.

But of course I didn’t. I couldn’t ask that of him. He still had his own life, even though it felt like mine revolved around him and him alone more and more each day.

“I miss you every day,” I told him hoarsely, nuzzling the short golden hair above his ear. “Every hour you are not here.”

He shivered, lifting his head to kiss me. It was sweet and desperate, our lips parting to glide our tongues together. The feel of doing this with him would never stop being wondrous. I already knew it wouldn’t, no matter how much time we ended up having together.

When he eventually pulled back, I licked my lips and smiled up at him. “To my quarters?”

“Yeah.” He kissed me again before stepping back to pick up his bag. “I brought some more snacks for you to try tonight.”

My face brightened. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as we left the guestroom and made our way down the empty hall. “The cookies I told you about, and a can of *sowduh*. Soda.”

“What is soda?”

“A drink. It’s really sweet, so you might not like it.”

“I still want to try,” I said eagerly, before we fell silent as we entered the secret passageway and made our way through it.

When we emerged into my dressing room, Jugs’ gaze was immediately drawn to the mannequin in the corner draped in my outfit for the Valor of the Morics. It had been delivered this morning in preparation for the event, which was just a few days away.

“What’s this?” he asked with interest, walking over to it.

“There is a... ceremonial event coming up two days from now,” I told him, eyeing the gaudy outfit as I stopped by his side. “I’m required to dress up like a fool and address the city.”

He laughed, reaching out and lightly touching one of the many, many thin chains draped from the armholes of the embroidered black tunic. “It’s *super* fancy.” Side-eyeing me with a grin, he added, “You’ll look really hot.”

I flushed with pleasure, ears twitching as I gave him a teasing nudge. “Perhaps I shall leave it on for you to see, then.” Grimacing, I added, “Although we have dignitaries visiting for the day and I’ll be required to join them for dinner. It will probably be quite a late night. Perhaps... perhaps it’s best if you don’t visit that evening. I wouldn’t want to keep you waiting.”

I already despised the thought of going a whole night without seeing Jugs. I could tell he was just as reluctant, because he pulled a face, making my belly flutter.

“I don’t mind waiting.” Eyes flaring, he turned and gathered me into his arms. “Maybe I could wait in here for you.”

My breath caught at the thought of returning to my room to find Jugs already here. Preferably in bed. Preferably completely nude.

“I like that idea,” I breathed, gazing up at him. “Do you remember how to get to the tunnel?”

He chuckled. "I've done it every single night for weeks now, so yeah. I remember."

"It's not really safe to leave the door to the guestroom unlocked, but... I could ask Seis for his key and leave it in there for you. Somewhere hidden." I grinned up at him slyly. "And I will keep the wardrobe door in here propped open for you."

His expression turned uneasy. "Is that safe? For you? What if someone else—"

"No one else knows about the tunnel." I stretched up on my toes to kiss him. "And it's just for one night. Will you..." Lowering my gaze, I shyly traced a fingertip over his bare stomach. "Will you wait for me in bed?"

Jugs' breath hitched, and his voice was huskier when he said, "Heck yes, I will."

I grinned up at him, ears twitching. "Naked?"

"Obviously."

Laughing, I lunged up to kiss him again, throwing my arms around his neck so I could play with the train of golden hair over his nape. When we pulled back, I grinned again and told him, "I have something for you."

"You do?"

Jugs watched as I crossed the room to my dressing table and picked up a tiny wrap of cloth. My pulse sped up as I returned to him, ears twitching with nerves.

"I—It's just a small thing." My face grew hot. "But I want you to have it. If you'd like it."

I passed Jugs the little fabric parcel, watching anxiously as he unwrapped it and revealed a single hoop earring studded with a tiny, deep blue jewel.

"It... it was the first earring I ever wore. My first piercing." I touched my lobe and smiled up at him uncertainly. "Mama got it for me."

"Lor." Jugs' throat bobbed, once, twice. "This is..."

"Do you like it?" I asked nervously. "It's alright if you don't—"

"I love it." He crashed his lips to mine, kissing me hard. "I love it. This is the best thing anyone's ever given me."

His breath shuddered out of him, touching the tiny gem with a single fingertip. "Thank you so much, Lor," he croaked, then looked up at me with a wobbly smile. "Can I put it in now?"

I nodded breathlessly, watching as he crossed to the mirror and fiddled with the gold hoop in his ear. Once it was out, he carefully slotted mine into the piercing. My throat ached at the sight of it in his lobe. Now he could carry a piece of me whenever we were apart.

Jugs' throat bobbed several times as he looked at it in the mirror, before picking up his old hoop and turning to face me.

"Will you... will you keep mine?" he asked shyly.

"Yes," I breathed, staring at it in his palm. "Please."

Once he'd handed it to me, I rushed to the mirror to take out the jewel in my left lobe. After sliding in Jugs' hoop, I stared at it. A single flash of gold amid all the silver-and-black metal and muted jewel tones.

Now I would carry a piece of him too.

CHAPTER FORTY

The day of the Valor of the Morics dawned bright and crisp, and for once, I was excited.

Not about the events of the day, or Moric Oril's visit with their unsettling offspring. But for what would come after, when Jugs was here.

I hated the pomp of it all, but I knew I still had to look my best, so I took a bath and spent a long time fussing with my hair, making sure it was perfect, before smoothing a dab of soliri cream over my face.

Going into my dressing room, I swapped out most of my earrings—except the one from Jugs—for my most expensive jewels, then hesitated as I eyed my collection of body chains. I wanted to wear them for Jugs again, but they would be uncomfortable under my stuffy clothes all day, and others might hear them tinkling as I walked. Mabs, that would be frightfully embarrassing. Everyone would know I was adorned beneath my clothes, which meant only one thing in vint culture. Moric Oril might think I'd worn them for their offspring, the thought of which made me shudder.

My tunic and trousers were black, obviously, but the tunic was embossed with a subtle pattern that would make it shimmer purple and gold in the sunlight. I would wear no embroidered jacket today so that the chains hanging from the tunic's armholes could be seen, but my trousers had some embroidery down the sides—delicate patterns of leaves and vines and sprays of purple to symbolise the sea.

By the time I was smoothing down the front of my tunic, the chains all still hanging loose on my arms, there was a knock at the door. I knew it would be Lyri, here to help me attach them to my finger piercings, so I called out for him to come in.

"Alright?" he asked cheerfully, sauntering into the room in his official Verin uniform. Sleek black trousers tucked into tall boots, and a tunic and fitted jacket with embroidery over the shoulders and down the arms.

His hair was much neater than he usually wore it, the top half pinned back and two thin braids framing the sides of his face like mine, except his were free of any beads.

"You look nice," I said, fiddling with the countless chains dangling over my arms.

He grunted. "Already looking forward to taking it all off. At least I won't be rattling around the hyll like you."

I shot him a weak glare as he grinned at me, already reaching for one of the chains. It was a tedious affair, unscrewing the ends of my barbells to attach the tiny ones on the chains, but Lyri did it without complaint, just like he did every year.

"At least it's nearly over for another year," he said, frowning in concentration as he fastened each chain to my finger piercings. They were long enough that I could move my arms freely, but it was still uncomfortable.

I sighed. "Yes."

His eyes flickered up to me. "Still hate it? Addressing the city?"

"Yes." I cringed. "I don't know how Mama always did it so calmly. It didn't faze her at all."

Lyri shrugged. "She had a long time to prepare for what was expected of her. You didn't."

That was true, but I still felt like a failure. Surely public speaking shouldn't be so hard. Most of them wouldn't even be able to *hear* me, which made the whole thing seem even more pointless. But I hated it. I just hoped I didn't sweat too much with nervous fear this year.

The thought of coming back to my room later and finding Jugs here chased away some of the anxiety churning in my stomach. If I just got through the day, I would have all night with him. For the

first time, I wouldn't be coming back to an empty room after a long day of being surrounded by others, being deferred to and doted on, but feeling isolated.

I had politely asked Seis for his key to the guestroom the day before, giving no reason for the request. He'd frowned at me and asked why, so with twitching ears I had calmly told him that I was asking for it as his Moric. I despised wielding the power of my title over him, but it had worked. He'd sighed and handed it over, staying silent as I tucked it into my pocket and smiled at him, pretending I didn't see his suspicious look.

I'd given it to Jugs this morning before he left, excitedly telling him that I would see him tonight in my room, adding that I would be most pleased if he was waiting for me—nude—in bed. He'd laughed and kissed me, murmuring, "Of course, *Moric*," against my mouth, which had... for some strange reason, made my cock twitch.

"Right." Lyri fastened the last chain and stepped back. "Ready? Have you had breakfast?"

"No." I made my way over to the mirror to peer at my reflection. The delicate chains shifted against my arms, already warm from my skin, some of them dotted with tiny deep blue gems down the lengths. I could already feel the uncomfortable pull of them against my fingers, especially when I tugged on the hem of my tunic to straighten it.

"You should eat something," Lyri said with a frown as he took his sleek black gloves out of his jacket pocket and pulled them on.

I shook my head, pressing a hand to my fluttering belly. "I'm too nervous to be hungry. And you know the feast tonight will be even more extravagant than usual, seeing as Moric Oril will be attending."

"Oh. Yes." Lyri wrinkled his nose. "Are they bringing their offspring?"

My shoulders hunched up. "Yes."

"So it'll be a long night of Raynir trying to convince you to form a union with Atil." He snorted in derision. "I can't think of anything worse than spending my life with that dead-eyed ashara."

I squirmed and admitted, "Atil does make me rather uncomfortable."

"You and me both." He patted my cheek gently and smiled. "You look very handsome. Mama would be proud."

He said it every year, and it always made me flush with pleasure. "And you, Lyri."

He snorted, turning to leave the dressing room. "She'd be fully aware that I am just waiting for the moment I can put on a loose shirt and get drunk."

"Well, yes, probably." I followed him out my bedchambers and into the corridor, where Seis and Gryf were waiting for us. Their manes were neatly tamed, tusks gleaming white, vests and trousers fitted nicely over their bulging muscles.

We made our way to the front hall, Lyri commenting on the crowd already gathering in the public gardens, which made me feel a little sick.

"Are there many salyik?" I asked apprehensively. Seis spoke up from just behind us.

"Some, but they will remain at the very back of the crowd."

Of course they would. No one would allow a salyik to stand in front of them. I frowned as we made our way through the hyll to the rarely used suite of ceremonial rooms, which included the speaking balcony I would have to stand on to address the city. Sweat bloomed on my scalp.

"Chin up," Lyri murmured when the gaggle of councillors came into sight, lounging on the delicate vint-crafted sofas and armchairs dotted around the bright, airy room that led to the balcony.

Outside, I could hear the steady, rapping beat of the ceremonial drums, accompanied by the ethereal lilt of the flutes that formed the basis of most vint music. This whole day was a strange

perversion, in my eyes—supposed to honour the Morics who had joined forces to drive back the eyriads, but it wasn't even the Morics and their armies who had defeated them in their final battle. It was the isdernucs who had come to their aid at the final hour, many of them losing their lives in a war that didn't overtly benefit them.

And it was *supposed* to celebrate the fiefdom and the city of Thinir as a whole—all its citizens—but the day was largely based on vint culture. The music, the outfits, the decorations and bunting strung up through the town, the feast that came after. It didn't really celebrate anyone else.

"Moric." Raynir approached, dipping his head in a slight bow. All the councillors were in their ceremonial robes, a deep blue to show respect for the royal family. For a second, I wondered if Raynir actually *did* have any respect for me. I supposed I hadn't done much to earn it except be born into the 'right' family.

"Councillor." I nodded back, forcing my hands to stay still and not fiddle with the chains dangling from my fingers or fuss with my hair. I could already picture the reprimanding look he'd give me.

"Would you like a drink while we wait for the formal address to begin?"

My mouth was dry with nerves, but before I could even answer, he was turning to a member of staff standing silently at the side of the room.

"Some tilik-steeped water for our Moric," he barked, then turned back to me with a simpering smile. "I know it is the kind you favour, Moric."

I cleared my throat. "Thank you."

"I'll just get my own then," Lyri muttered from beside me, then murmured something to Gryf with a little chuckle as they walked off together.

I shifted on my feet, ears twitching with embarrassment. I despised being treated differently to my brother—being treated differently to anyone. I still wasn't used to it. Mama had tried to give us the most normal childhood she could, telling the staff and guards to chastise us like any other children when we misbehaved, letting us wander in the city and get up to mischief.

I appreciated it, but it had left me wholly unprepared for how instantaneous the change would be in how I was treated once I became Moric. Which, I supposed, was a very spoiled way to view it. I was uncomfortable with being deferred to? With being placed on a pedestal and spoken to in breathy, reverent tones?

Maybe it was because I felt entirely lacking. Like a fraud. Maybe it was because being treated in such a way made me feel guilty that I hadn't *earned* it. That all of this—the finest food and wine, the highest quality clothes, the most luxurious home and staff who did everything for me—was utterly undeserved.

Next to nothing was expected of me, yet I still begrudged this single day where most of the citizens of Thinir would get their only glimpse of me for an entire year. Many people were strangely enthusiastic about the royal family, clamouring to merely see me, like I was someone special. Someone better.

I wasn't.

I gave the staff member a smile in thanks when he approached with my water, dipping into a deep bow before retreating. Sipping it, I glanced nervously at the thick curtains hiding the speaking balcony from view. My stomach squeezed into a tight knot, and the rattle of my chains grew more pronounced as my limbs turned jittery.

"Still nervous after all these years?" Raynir asked with a raspy chuckle, but his filmy eyes were unnervingly intense as he watched me.

"Not at all," I forced myself to say, having another sip of water to try and wet my parched throat. I

didn't want my voice to crack while I was addressing the city, which had happened without fail in my first few years of doing this.

Raynir chuckled like he didn't believe me. "Ah, Moric, if I could take this burden from you, I would." He gestured at the rest of the councillors behind him, who were talking quietly amongst themselves. "The council is here to support you in all ways, but unfortunately this is one task that you simply have to do yourself."

On the surface, his tone seemed kind, but the words didn't feel it. They felt condescending, veiled, like he viewed me as nothing more than a child who he was magnanimously guiding to find their own way in the world. Or make their own mistakes.

"At least you look the part," he added with a fawning smile.

"He doesn't just *look* the part," Lyri interjected sharply as he returned with Gryf, who handed Seis a glass of water. "He is the Moric. He isn't a puppet to be carted out at formal events."

"Of course not, Verin," Raynir said smoothly without missing a beat. "And a fine Moric you are. Your mother would be most proud, I'm sure."

"Yes, she would." Lyri's voice was hard. "And Lor is fully aware."

I wanted to reach over and squeeze Lyri's hand in thanks, like we used to when we were children, but there was no way to do it subtly with these chains constantly tinkling together. It always made me anxious about gesturing as I addressed the city, worried my voice would be lost, which meant I knew I appeared overly stiff and formal when I spoke.

The drumbeat changed outside, pounding through my chest, and I heard the excited swell of the crowd gathered in the public gardens. Taking a slow, deep breath, I watched as all the councillors stood up lazily and made their way to the curtain, appearing entirely unbothered about standing in front of the entire city.

"Well, that is our cue." Raynir dipped his head. "Good luck, Moric."

I watched as he led the councillors through the curtain, which was being held back by a staff member. The noise of the crowd rose slightly before dipping again, and my hairline began to sweat.

"Chin up, old sport." Lyri bumped my shoulder with his before setting down his glass.

I managed a weak smile as he and Gryf made their way to the curtain and stepped out onto the balcony. There was a loud cheer from the crowd. The city adored Lyri, and I knew they found him far more approachable and welcoming than me, thanks to how often he mingled among them.

"Ready, Lor?" Seis' big hand rested briefly on my back in a comforting gesture, and I managed to smile up at him as we made our way to the curtain, which was now closed to hide me until I made my entrance.

"It doesn't get any easier," I admitted quietly, making sure none of the chains over my arms had gotten tangled.

"Public speaking isn't for everyone," Seis said easily. "It doesn't make you a failure."

I suppressed my wince. Sometimes, I thought Seis knew me far better than I realised—unless I was simply glaringly obvious in my insecurities to everyone. Raynir certainly always seemed to know right where to jab to make me feel like an ignorant youth.

The drums and flutes swelled in their music, growing more lively. My stomach clenched with nerves, and I prayed my face wasn't too shiny as the staff member tugged back the curtain again and bright sunlight made me wince.

A roar rose from the crowd as I stepped out onto the balcony, forcing myself to smile and lift a hand in formal greeting. The constant, overwhelming noise from the citizens hurt my ears, the crowd stretching all the way through the public gardens and down into the city proper. Vints, usho, baregh,

gaggles of excited tourists who had travelled here especially to witness this day. Barely visible, right at the back, was a large cluster of reserved salyik, their long white robes gleaming in the sun. None of them were cheering or gesturing, and they were too far for me to truly see their faces, but I felt the weight of all their eyes on me.

I made my way to the balcony railing and stopped, waiting for the crowd to quiet. The council stood together behind me, to my right, while Lyri, Gryf and Seis were on my left. But I stood all alone at the front, feeling small and entirely unworthy as thousands of people cheered for me.

What are you cheering for? I wanted to shout. *I haven't done anything!*

I kept the stiff smile fixed on my face as the crowd gradually quieted and the music drew to a meaningful stop. In the ensuing silence my palms began to sweat, chains tinkling as my fingers twitched.

“Today we pay our respects by remembering the struggles faced by those who came before us.” I simply couldn't make my voice loud enough to do this, no matter how much I tried to elevate it. Only the people at the very front of the crowd gave any indication that they could hear me. But I supposed it didn't matter—the words were the same every year, rendering them hollow and almost worthless.

“When fiefdoms across the lands united to defeat a shared threat, to keep our people safe, under fair and just rule.”

The words sounded even emptier this year as my gaze fixed on the cluster of salyik at the very back of the crowd.

“We mark this day as the Valor of the Morics, but it was all of us—all of our ancestors who gave their lives to banish the insidious threat of the eyriads. To ensure that the people of this world kept their freedom, their—their rights.” I cleared my throat when my voice cracked with nerves. “The Morics of the past—including my ancestor, Moric Tarin Foriyr Varis—led their people to victory, but we did not do it alone. We must remember those who fought alongside us. The mighty baregh, whose strength and numbers turned the war in our favour. The lost tribes of the isdernuc, who are no longer with us, but who succeeded in driving the eyriads back in our last push. This day is not just a day to rejoice in the prosperity of Thinir and this fiefdom, but to remember those who fought so hard to keep us free. And to remember what was lost in that fight for freedom. Our debts to those cut down by the eyriads will never be repaid.”

I allowed myself a quick breath, knowing my speech was almost over. My back prickled with sweat, droplets sliding down my spine, and the chains tinkled constantly as a low-level tremor remained in my whole body.

I hated public speaking.

“As is customary, we will remember those lost with a re-enactment of the final battle between the eyriads and the isdernuc.” I suppressed my cringe as I said it. I didn't think the clownish display that was held every year showed proper respect, but it was out of my control. “And as your Moric, I ask that as you celebrate your freedom today, and the freedom and prosperity of this great city, you pay your respects to all who sacrificed their lives to give it to you.”

A cheer began at the front of the crowd, rippling back until all but the salyik were whistling and shouting. Most of them hadn't heard a word I said.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” I asked Lyri anxiously as we slipped out of the great dining hall, the sounds of low, murmuring voices and clinking glassware drifting into the corridor.

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” He shooed me away impatiently. “I’ll keep Moric Oril and Atil entertained. Go and see your Jugs.”

I gave my brother a grateful smile. It had been a painfully long day and dull evening, the re-enactment of the last battle followed by an elaborate feast once Moric Oril from the neighbouring fiefdom, and their offspring Atil arrived. I had, obviously, sat beside Oril with Atil on their other side and Lyri on mine. He had kept the conversation flowing easily, despite how emotionless and stilted the two ashara were, and masterfully deflected any attempts by Raynir to steer the conversation toward strengthening our two fiefdoms with a union between myself and Atil.

After dessert, Lyri had casually asked if he could speak to me in private. When we rose from the table and made our way to the doors, he’d whispered with amusement that I hadn’t stopped fidgeting throughout the whole meal, and rightly guessed that I was waiting to see Jugs.

“Go,” he hissed now, shooting me a grin. “Go and kiss your Jugs.”

Mouth stretching into a wide smile, I nodded and hurried down the corridor, leaving the room filled with noble folk, councillors and guards behind. But I didn’t make my way to the guest quarters, as I knew Lyri would have expected. I walked quickly to my own quarters, hoping Lyri would tell Seis where I had gone so he wouldn’t worry.

At least Moric Oril and their offspring Atil wouldn’t be staying overnight—I would have never allowed Jugs to come through the void himself if there were others in the guest quarters. Ashara were a vespertine species, so they would be beginning the journey back to their fiefdom after the dinner and travelling through the night.

My insides were already jittery with excitement as I nodded at the guards who held open the doors to my quarters. Once inside, I strode quickly down the carpeted corridor, smoothing back my hair and fussing with the chains still draped over my arms. I hoped Jugs would like my appearance, but nerves made me duck into the sitting room and check my reflection in the large mirror over the fireplace, making sure my hair looked alright and my skin was still clear.

When I finally approached my bedchamber door and fumbled with the key in my pocket, my ears twitched as I picked up faint sounds inside. An intake of breath, sheets rustling, bare feet softly thudding onto the floor.

My cock was already filling in anticipation as I locked the door behind me and walked through the antechamber to my bedroom. The fire was unlit, seeing as I’d kept my door locked all day in preparation for Jugs’ arrival, but he had lit all the dawn-shard lanterns around the room, having watched me do it many times before.

Their soft pink light didn’t do much to illuminate the room alone, but enough for me to see Jugs stand up from the edge of the bed, completely naked. My breath caught, and I went still as I stared at him. Vibrant pink danced over his smooth, pale skin, washing his strong thighs, flat stomach and beautiful, soft face in a romantic haze. My throat went dry at the sight of his cock, already half hard. It swung as he made his way closer, cheeks flushed and expression shy.

“Hi,” he said quietly, tangling his fingers through mine before I could lift my hand for a high-five. “You look—you look beautiful.”

My ears twitched with pleasure, but I could only give him a brief smile before my gaze dropped

back to his bare body. “So do you,” I croaked, resting my free hand on his chest and curling my fingers in the golden hair there.

He chuckled, scrubbing a hand through his hair and shrugging sheepishly. “Felt kinda weird to wait in here naked, but, um, I said I would. Didn’t I, *Moric*?” he added in a teasing tone, shifting closer to wrap his arm around me.

I exhaled a sharp breath as my cock twitched, pressed against the front of his warm thigh. My lips parted to speak, but my mind had gone utterly blank. So instead, I slid my hand up his chest to cup his nape, tugging him down for a kiss.

Jugs made a soft sound into my mouth as our lips opened up immediately, tongues gliding together in a way that made me tug my other hand free and wrap my arms around his neck, keeping him as close as possible. The chains all tinkled together, sliding over my skin. His stiffening cock pressed into my belly, and his big, warm hands slid down my back to slip under the hem of my tunic, making me shiver as long fingers danced over my bare spine.

Lust was coursing through me, but being here with him filled my chest with a warm sense of simple rightness. This was how I wanted every day to end—with me coming back to my once lonely quarters to spend my nights with him. To eat with him and bathe with him and share all the parts of me that I didn’t share with anyone else. The soft, secret parts that made me feel vulnerable. The parts that made me feel *normal*, not like a ruler with the weight of an entire fiefdom on my shoulders.

Jugs was who I wanted to tell everything to. He was who I wanted to share my worries and successes and mundane stories with. But it felt unfair to pile that all on him when we had only a few short hours with each other every night. I didn’t want to weigh him down with my insecurities, even though I longed to give every part of myself to him—to let him see and know all of me.

This might be all we ever had, and I was reluctant to spend our time together focusing on the things that filled me with fear and worry. I wanted to savour every moment I had with him—to fill those moments with joy and pleasure and happiness. To forget everything else.

Our breaths had grown heavier as we kissed feverishly in my dark bedroom, clinging to each other with desperation. Jugs shivered when I threaded my fingers through his hair, slicking my tongue into his mouth again and again, unwilling to stop even for air. His hands slid down my spine to palm my backside, hefting me closer to his nude form.

I finally broke the kiss to gasp into his mouth when my cock rubbed against his thigh through my trousers. With a groan, Jugs pulled back to look down at me, one side of his mouth hooking up into a smile.

“You look so fancy.” His voice was rougher and deeper than normal, and his stiff, flushed cock rested against the front of my tunic. Trailing his fingers up the chains draped over my arm, he added, “These are hot.”

I shivered at the feel of his warm fingertips and the slide of the thin chains over my skin. “I—I’m glad you like it,” I said breathlessly, still not thinking all that clearly—still not thinking much at all.

“So is everyone celebrating right now?” he asked. I stared at him gormlessly for a few moments, wondering why in Ara’s name he wanted to talk *now*.

“I—Yes.” I pulled back to try and compose myself, my fingers trembling slightly as I smoothed back my hair. “It has been a long day of celebrating that will go on well into the night. People drinking and staying up very late.”

When I gestured vaguely toward the window, Jugs’ gaze perked up with interest.

“Can I take a peek out the window? The curtains are usually drawn when I’m here, and...” He gave me a shy smile. “I’d like to see your city.”

Unable to deny him anything, I nodded and tangled my fingers through his to pull him to the window, trying very hard to ignore my throbbing cock—and Jugs’, which jutted straight out from his hips.

When we reached the window, the city of Thinir glittered beneath us under the dark sky. I doubted Jugs would be able to hear the sounds my ears could pick up—singing, laughing, carousing, many of Thinir’s citizens getting in their last moments of celebration before their regular lives began again in the morning.

Jugs wrapped his arms around me from behind and rested his chin on my shoulder, but then he stiffened. “They can’t see us up here, right? I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“No, they can’t see us.” I leaned back into his bulk, placing a hand on the forearm looped over my middle. My eyes slid shut as I turned my head to nuzzle his cheek. I didn’t care about looking over my city. I wanted only to look at him, to drink him in while I had him here with me.

But Jugs seemed very interested, which made me wonder how different Thinir looked to the cities in his world.

“Does it look strange to you?” I asked in a murmur, trying to ignore the hard length digging into the small of my back. But I couldn’t help but nuzzle his neck, pressing a soft kiss there.

Jugs’ breath caught. He squeezed me tighter as he answered. “Well, it’s pretty dark, but it looks almost like... what I imagine a *mehd-ee-vuhl* town to look like. Medieval. Like, old. Really old.”

“It is a very advanced and prosperous city,” I rushed to clarify. “It’s small, but...”

“No, no, I’m sure it is.” Jugs kissed the shell of my ear, making me shiver. “I like it. It’s nice. It looks like... like it’s been built around nature. Not that nature has been removed to make room for it, which is what humans generally do.”

I nodded, but I decided that I had waited long enough to touch Jugs. As I answered, “Yes, we try not to disturb the land too much, instead using its strengths as our own,” I shifted slightly and reached back to fumble for his cock.

When my fingers wrapped around it, Jugs’ breath hitched, but before he could speak or move, I demurely asked, “What are cities in your world like?”

He struggled to answer at first, fingers gripping me tighter as his breaths sped up. A secret smile tilted my lips as I stroked his cock slowly, lightly. In this moment, I felt... strangely powerful, in a way that I had never felt simply from being the Moric.

“More built up than this,” Jugs eventually said, his voice strained now. His hips twitched, pushing his cock deeper through my fist. “And everything’s made of metal or—or...”

“Or...?” I asked innocently when he trailed off, tipping his forehead against the back of my head.

“Um, it’s—” He gasped when I circled the head of his cock with my thumb, spreading the trickle of slickness. “They’re—I don’t know.”

I laughed. “You don’t know?”

“I can’t think while you’re doing that,” he mumbled, fingers slipping under the hem of my tunic to trail up my belly. “Lor.”

“I thought you wanted to look,” I whispered. My wrist was aching from the awkward angle, but I was unwilling to stop as Jugs let out a breathy groan and arched his hips again. The chains attached to my finger piercings tinkled together in a delicate rhythm.

“I’m done looking,” Jugs croaked, his breaths heavy now as his fingers fumbled with the lacing of my trousers. My cock jerked in anticipation, and I moaned when his hand burrowed inside to grip me.

“Jugs,” I breathed, letting my head fall back onto his shoulder as he stroked me in his big fist. I was quite sure that no one would be able to see us, even if curious eyes were peering up at the hyll.

We were at the highest point in the city, and it was dark in the room and outside.

Still, if someone did spot us, how much would they see? The salacious thought made my cock buck in Jugs' fist.

I began to turn around, but Jugs stopped me by sliding his hands to my hips.

"No, wait." He kissed my neck. "I want to do something first."

I went still, breathlessly waiting as he pushed my trousers down over my hips, my insides tightening with anticipation when I sensed him kneeling behind me. He tugged off my boots and carefully pulled my feet free of my trousers, leaving me naked under my tunic.

My voice quivered as I bit my lip and breathed, "Jugs..."

"You're so beautiful," he mumbled, hands sliding up my outer thighs and over my hips, lifting the hem of my tunic up with them and exposing my backside. I bit my lip harder when I felt his warm breath fan over my skin.

I had been told all my life that I was beautiful—that Lyri and I were perfect examples of vint royalty, delicately handsome with the noble features of our mother. But when Jugs said it, I truly felt it, like he was actually seeing *me*, Lor, not just my royal heritage and immaculate clothing and perfectly groomed hair. He thought *I* was beautiful as a person. And I thought the same of him.

I sucked in a soft breath when I felt his warm lips press against my backside in a kiss. He did it again, still gripping my hips tight, and I heard him whisper, "Lean forward a little."

Legs trembling, I obeyed, leaning my upper body over the high window seat and placing my hands on the glass. The chains danced together, and my fingers flexed on the window, but not with nerves. I was so exposed to him—and perhaps to any prying eyes, my cock jutting out beneath the hem of my rucked-up tunic—but I felt only growing arousal and the affirming knowledge that it was Jugs' hands on me. It was Jugs seeing me like this. Vulnerable, the trappings of my title half stripped away.

I gasped when Jugs' hands shifted and his thumbs gently spread me open. And then a shocked whimper left me when soft, slick warmth trailed over my exposed hole.

"J-Jugs," I whispered, feet already shuffling out to widen my stance.

He moaned in response, licking me again, his prominent nose brushing over my skin as his tongue swirled around my hole. When I felt him kiss me softly there, I cried out before clapping a hand over my mouth.

His tongue flickered before laving me again, breath hot against my skin and nose pressing firmly into my cleft now as he groaned and licked more firmly, fingers biting into my cheeks.

My legs shook wildly but I managed to stay upright, my fingers pressing hard into the glass in front of me. My other hand still covered my mouth to try and muffle the constant slew of moans and whimpers that left me. This felt *glorious*. I already knew how sensitive I was there, but I hadn't known how indescribable the texture of a warm, wet tongue would feel. My nerve endings were singing with pleasure, and when the pointed tip of Jugs' tongue sank inside me just the barest amount, I had to bite down on my palm to muffle the guttural sound that escaped me.

Sinking further forward, still clutching the window, I panted heavily against my palm and cried out again when he slipped his tongue in deeper. I could feel myself clenching around it, trying to draw him in, and Jugs moaned hoarsely against me before burying his mouth even closer to lick and suck at me feverishly.

I finally released my mouth to reach back and fumble for his hair, fisting it tight. That made him moan again, his tongue somehow becoming even more frantic.

"Oh m-my—Jugs—" My hips had begun to rock back into his greedy mouth, my cock painfully hard and dripping onto the window seat and floor.

He groaned, ducking his head to lick my tight sac, which made me cry out. Then his mouth vanished for a moment, and I heard him suck on something before a wet fingertip circled my softened hole.

A strangled sound left me. “Yes, yes—”

Before I could even finish speaking, he sank his finger inside, groaning as my body sucked him in. I felt him kiss my backside before blunt teeth sank in gently. A heavy throb of lust shot through me, making me grunt like an animal and push back into him. I wanted him to bite me and lick every part of me and fuck me—

“More,” I heard myself rasp, rocking back feverishly onto his thrusting finger. He groaned and carefully sank a second inside, making my head arch back from the increased fullness. “Yes. Jugs—”

“God, Lor.” His voice was unsteady, and he pressed his face against my backside, lips pursing to give me a reverent kiss. “I lo—I want you so much.”

“I want you too,” I panted desperately. Something in my chest broke open, and words started pouring from me, and I was helpless to stop them. “I want you too, more than anything. I miss you every moment you are not here. I dream of you after you leave. I spend my days wishing you were beside me, wishing that I could have you here with me always.”

“Lor,” he croaked, fingers going still inside me as he pressed kisses all over my skin.

But I was too far gone to linger over my words, to feel any embarrassment for baring myself to him in that way. I grunted and pushed back against him, fucking myself on his fingers.

“Please, Jugs,” I gasped, hands pressed flat against the glass. “Please.”

He stood up hurriedly, sliding his hands up my sides to push my tunic out of the way. I felt him grip the fabric in one fist while the other guided his cock to my hole. His thick thighs quaked against the backs of mine as he began to push inside, so I quickly bore down and exhaled a long, shuddery breath.

A deep moan left me as he sank inside in short, tunnelling thrusts, his shaking hands once again cupping my waist to hold me steady.

“F-fuck,” he panted. I could feel his gaze on where our bodies joined. “You feel so good.”

Moaning, I pushed back until he was up to the hilt, but just as quickly I was sliding off his cock to shove back again. “Faster,” I gasped. “Please, Jugs.”

“I d-don’t want to hurt you.” Despite his words, he started thrusting into me—long, deep thrusts that pressed his hips flush against my backside every time.

A guttural groan left me at the feel of him so deep, his cock sliding over the spot inside me that made my extrusion threaten to uncoil and shoot out immediately.

“Yes,” I panted, my hips working as feverishly as his, slamming back into every thrust. The frantic smack of his hips against my backside filled the room, and the glass under my hands began to fog from my rising body heat. I was sweating under my tunic, but I wasn’t willing to stop to take it off. The sounds of the chains over my arms accompanied our movements, rattling and tinkling together in time.

“Fuck.” Jugs’ arms suddenly banded around my middle and cinched tight as he plastered himself to my back. His hips moved faster and faster, rendering me unable to do anything but moan with every gasping breath.

If someone looked up at my window now and managed to spot us, there would be no doubt about what we were doing. Jugs buried his face against my neck, moaning into my skin. My cock was jerking wildly with every thrust, flicking fluid over the window seat. Unable to stop myself, I reached down and palmed my tight sac before sliding my hand further back to feel him tunnelling inside me. The jolt of pleasure was so intense that my knees threatened to buckle.

I was already on my tiptoes, straining to take him as deep as I could. But when I fisted my cock

and began to stroke fast, Jugs moaned hoarsely and slowed his hips. Before I could protest, he pulled out and gently spun me to face him. I knew my gaze was wild and dazed as I stared at him, breathing hard.

“I want to see you,” he croaked, cupping my cheek as he leaned in to kiss me. I moaned into his mouth, already scrambling up onto the high window seat and twining my legs around his waist.

My back pressed against the window, and I gripped the edges of the seat as I watched him guide his cock back inside and sink to the hilt. Crying out, I gripped his arms as he held me in place, fingers biting into my hips.

I wanted him as deep as possible. Unclamping my legs from around his waist, I planted my feet on the fronts of his shoulders, my knees practically framing my ears.

“Oh my god,” Jugs croaked, staring down at his cock thrusting inside me, moving his hands to the backs of my thighs to keep me steady.

“Don’t stop,” I gasped, my whole body jerking on the window seat as I reached down to fist my cock again. Shoving my tunic out of the way with my other hand, I stroked so fast that the rush of bliss was almost painful, barrelling down on me with force.

“Jugs—” I panted, feet shifting restlessly against his shoulders. “Jugs, Jugs—”

His cock pummelled the spot inside me, making everything clench up. My hole spasmed around him, my prick grew painfully stiff in my fist, and my extrusion shot out so fast it shocked me, making me cry out as the orgasm ripped through me and my entire body began to shudder.

Fingers fumbling to pin my extrusion to my length, I kept stroking, drawing it out for as long as possible until I was twitching with oversensitivity. Jugs was panting my name, hips pounding into me, until he stiffened up in a rush and cried out, neck arching, the soft pink light behind him sliding over his golden hair.

I stared up at him in a satiated daze, breathing hard as I clutched my sensitive cock in my trembling fist. My release was all over the front of my tunic, streaks of white against the black fabric. I could feel the warmth of Jugs’ release seeping out around his cock, making me moan in utter contentment as my head tipped back against the window.

“Holy crap,” Jugs breathed, his voice rough. He carefully pulled out and immediately leaned down to kiss me, slipping his arms around my back and pulling me upright. “Are you okay?”

“I’m wonderful,” I mumbled, burying my face in his neck. I could feel his heart hammering against mine, his skin warm and damp against my rumpled tunic. My ears twitched with embarrassment when I felt myself leaking onto the window seat, but before I could stand up, Jugs hefted me into his arms and straightened.

Before he could take a step, he swayed and stumbled hard to the side, almost dropping me. Stomach dipping with panic, I quickly disentangled myself, my feet thudding to the floor. “Jugs?”

Blinking hard, he raised a hand to his forehead while the other reached out to steady himself against the wall. “Shit, sorry. Just went really *dihzee*.”

“*Dihzee*?” I repeated anxiously, gripping his sides to help keep him steady.

“Dizzy. Lightheaded.” He chuckled. “Probably just from coming so hard.”

But as I peered at him, I thought the sheen on his face looked clammy than the flush of exertion. And he was pale, like all the blood had suddenly drained from him.

“Sit down,” I said hurriedly, leading him over to the bed. My gut twisted with nerves when he stumbled again, swaying a little. “I’ll get you some water.”

“Okay.” He perched on the edge of the bed and exhaled, scrubbing his face. My brows twitched when I noticed a fine tremor in his hands. Before I could comment on it, he smiled at me and reached

out to cup my cheek. "I'm fine, Lor. Seriously."

I wasn't sure that I believed him, so I hurried back to the window to pick up my trousers, tugging them up my legs. Barefoot, I slipped into the antechamber and unlocked the door, then rushed across to the dining room to pour Jugs a glass of the yavra-steeped water he preferred—the one he'd said tasted like *mint* before.

By the time I got back into the bedroom, he looked better. There was some pink back in his face, and his hand was steady when he took the glass from me.

"Thanks."

As he gulped it down, I sat sideways beside him and smoothed my hand over his bare back. Leaning in to kiss his shoulder, I asked, "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Totally fine. Just a mild case of *vuhr-ty-goh*."

I was about to ask him to repeat that word, but something on his back made me pause. Lifting my hand, I traced lightly over the tiny cluster of white spots on his shoulder blade. They weren't raised, just flat patches of white. Had he had those before?

Before I could ask him, Jugs leaned over to set down the glass then turned to face me, gathering me into his arms.

"Much better." He grinned at me before lifting a hand to cup my cheek, smoothing his thumb delicately beneath my eye. "As much as I like the outfit, do you wanna take it off now?"

After gazing at him for a few more moments to make sure he was alright, I nodded and stood up to undress. "Shall we have a bath?"

"Heck yes. I love your fancy bathtub. It's huge." He bounded up and kissed my cheek. "I'll go start running it."

I watched him walk into the waterchamber, his steps steady and confident. The knot of worry in my chest loosened as I got undressed, and by the time I stepped into the waterchamber naked and saw Jugs perched on the edge of the tub waiting for me, pure happiness had chased out the last hint of unease and replaced it with warmth.

I grinned back at him, walking over when he beckoned me closer. And when he dropped to his knees and enveloped my relaxed cock in his mouth, making it start to twitch and fill rapidly, I forgot everything but the utter joy of being with him.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

I left the doctor's office in town feeling even more anxious than I had going in.

For several weeks now, I'd been having weird flashes of symptoms. My throat would spasm, making me swallow repeatedly. My hands would start trembling wildly. And yesterday morning, Anton had commented on a weird rash on my back as I'd been coming out of the bathroom after a shower.

I'd peered at my back in the mirror, staring at the white speckles fanning over my shoulder blades. Then I'd made an appointment with the local doctor.

He hadn't seemed very interested, telling me it looked like an allergic reaction to something. Which... maybe made sense? Maybe I'd brushed up against something in the woods while going to the void. Maybe I was reacting badly to something I'd eaten from Lor's world. But I didn't really eat any food there, because Lor liked to try stuff from my world, so we usually just ate the snacks I'd brought as we lounged in bed.

The doctor had prescribed me some steroid cream, told me to try taking antihistamines, and said to get some blood tests if it didn't clear up in a week or so. As I was getting up to leave, he vacantly added that I should call 911 if I started struggling to breathe when my throat went weird. That was it.

After filling my prescription at the pharmacy and buying antihistamines, I headed home. I wasn't working today, and I could feel my throat starting to spasm again, which made my heart pound with fear. What was wrong with me?

The cream and antihistamines will clear it up. It's just a reaction to something.

I tried to calm my breathing as I entered the quiet apartment, immediately filling a glass with water to help me swallow an antihistamine around my spasming throat. Then I went into the bedroom, pulled off my shirt and tried to smear the steroid cream over the weird pale rash on my back.

Were rashes ever pale? I thought they were always red and raised. These spots were flat, but completely white. Like all the pigment was gone from my skin.

My hairline was beading with sweat and I felt hot all over, so I climbed into bed and curled up on my side so I wouldn't get cream all over the sheets.

I hadn't told Lor about what was happening to me, not wanting to worry him. But maybe I should. Maybe it was some weird but totally common bug from his world and he'd tell me I'd be alright in a day or two.

Except it had been several weeks now, and I was pretty sure it was getting worse.

I managed to nap for a little while, and when I woke up, I was sweating despite only being in shorts. Struggling upright, I realised my hands were shaking uncontrollably when I shoved back my hair.

Biting my lip, I got out of bed and went into the living room to pick up the phone. My belly churned with nerves as I dialled the familiar number. I hadn't spoken to my parents since moving out. I'd called and left my new number with Jenny, but they'd never called me back. So I hadn't called them either.

I was shocked when my dad answered the phone, my convulsing throat aching at the sound of his voice. "Hello?"

"Hi, Dad," I croaked. "How are you?"

There was a pause. "We're fine, Michael."

"Good. That's good." I cringed, shivering as I stood there despite the sweat still pouring from me,

my hand clammy around the phone. “Um, I—I think I m-might be sick.”

“Sick how?” he said sharply.

“I don’t know.” My voice shook. “I have this weird rash and—and my throat keeps going crazy, and my hands—”

“Michael.” His hard voice cut me off. “Have you been taking something? Tell me. Tell me the truth.”

“I haven’t taken anything.” I tried to keep my voice calm and measured, but it still came out unsteady. “I swear, Dad. I don’t know what this is.”

“Have you been to the doctor?”

“Y-yeah.” I sniffed, trying to hide the wobble in my voice. “He prescribed me steroid cream but I—I don’t think that’ll help. I think... I think I might need some blood tests done or something, but...”

“Then get blood tests done.”

I cringed, clutching the phone tight to my ear. “Dad, I can’t afford hospital bills.”

There was silence for a long moment. Then, “So this is about money.”

“No, it’s not about money,” I said tearfully. “I’m just—I don’t know what’s happening, and—”

“You wanted to make your own way, Michael.” Dad’s voice was flat. “If you’d joined the firm you would have healthcare. Instead you decided to move out and get a job at a damn ice cream parlour.”

“I kn-know, but...” A weak sob tore from my throat before I could stop it.

“Pull yourself together,” Dad hissed. “What do you want, Michael? Do you want to be independent and treated like a man, or do you want me to treat you like a child?”

In that moment, I wanted him to treat me like a child. His child. I wanted him to tell me he’d look after me, that he’d make everything better. But he’d never been that kind of father. He wasn’t going to start now.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I wasn’t trying to—I just w-wanted to talk to you.”

I heard him sigh. “Try the steroid cream. If the doctor prescribed it, that’s what he thinks will work. There’s no need to overreact.”

I sniffed wetly, rubbing my eyes. “Okay.”

“Call me in a week if nothing’s changed. I’ll see what I can do,” he muttered.

“Okay. Thank you.” My chin wobbled. “Um—”

“I need to get back to work.”

“Oh.” I wiped my nose. “O-okay. Um—”

“We’ll speak soon, Michael.” He hung up.

I slowly lowered the phone and put it down. My hands weren’t shaking anymore, and at some point during the conversation my throat had stopped convulsing. That was what made it more confusing. It came and went. I could go hours at a time with none of it happening, then it wouldn’t stop for an hour solid.

My hand drifted automatically up to my earlobe, fingers fiddling with Lor’s hoop. My eyes filled with tears again. I wanted to be with Lor. I wanted to curl up in bed with him and breathe in his scent and be with someone who... who loved me. We hadn’t said it, and maybe it was way too early, but... it felt like he loved me.

I loved him.

Turning for my bedroom, I tried to scrub that awful phone call from my mind as I got dressed and grabbed my keys and backpack. Then I left the apartment and got into my car, not wanting to be here anymore. There was no point being here.

Lor wasn’t here.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“How does it feel, Lor?” Seis asked quietly as we reached my chamber doors, giving me a grin.

I grinned back, my legs still weak and trembling from adrenaline, but pride filled my chest. I had just come out of a council meeting where I had ordered drastic changes to be made to the taxes imposed on the salyik population, lowering them so they matched the other citizens in the city. I had ordered the restrictions placed on imports into their district to be abolished, and demanded that they were given rights to rent or buy market and shop space in the main part of the city to sell their wares.

“Rather terrifying, but good,” I told Seis, fiddling with my own ledger that I had brought this time with my list of demands. “Raynir looked as though he might expire on the spot.”

Seis chuckled, opening the door for me. “He did. But there is nothing he can do. The Moric’s word is law.”

I flushed with self-conscious pleasure, but it did feel good to finally use my status and title to enact real change in my fiefdom. Raynir had spluttered with indignation, ranting about the hyll’s coffers running out with fewer funds coming in, but I had already visited the treasurer to check and knew that they were obscene. It would be a long, long time before they ever ran out.

And even if they started to get low, there were things I could do. I didn’t need new outfits for every Valor of the Morics, for Mabs’ sake. I didn’t need the finest wine and most expensive ingredients in my meals. I refused to sit up in my hyll in luxury while people lived in squalor within my city. Not anymore. I had allowed it for too long, not paying enough attention, believing Raynir implicitly and allowing him to control everything because I had felt scared and ignorant and unqualified for my position.

I couldn’t wait to tell Jugs. He would be so proud of me. I had told him all about the struggles with the council and the salyik population, and while he’d said that he didn’t understand a lot of it, he had encouraged me to follow my instincts and deal with the issue.

I grinned up at Seis as we walked down the corridor to my bedchambers. “Take the rest of the afternoon off, Seis. I’m going to stay here and get ready to see Jugs later.”

His tusked mouth tipped up into a knowing smile as he side-eyed me before inclining his head. “Thank you, Moric.”

“Lo—” I began to correct, but cut myself off when I heard a sound from within my bedroom.

It was too quiet for Seis to hear, his ears not as good as mine, but when I stared up at him with wide eyes, he frowned and went stiff. “What’s wrong?”

“I think there’s someone in my bedroom,” I whispered.

Could it be Jugs? But he never visited this early. It was only mid-afternoon. He had work at this time, usually.

Seis’ face tightened, eyes darting to the closed door. “Wait here.”

He pulled his axe free and stepped forward, silently twisting the doorknob. Then he frowned back at me. “It’s locked.”

Relief flooded me as I fumbled in my pocket for the key. It had to be Jugs, then. No one else had a key to my room.

“It must be Jugs,” I whispered, stepping forward and unlocking the door.

Seis frowned again and gently pushed me back. “How can it be Jugs?”

I flushed. “Well, we—”

Another sound came from within. Seis pressed three fingers to his mouth and shook his head, then

silently padded into the antechamber. I stepped in behind him and waited anxiously, watching as he slowly twisted the bedroom doorknob and opened it a crack.

His wide shoulders relaxed. “Jugs.”

I rushed forward, slipping past him as a huge grin stretched my mouth. He had come early! I would get to spend even more time with him.

The smile dropped from my face the moment I saw him. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, clutching the sheets, his head drooping listlessly and his face terrifyingly pale.

He gave me a weak smile and croaked out, “Hi.”

“Jugs.” I stumbled forward and dropped to my knees in front of him, placing my hands on his bare thighs. They were trembling, and I could see his throat convulsing almost continuously.

“Sorry for coming early without telling you. I just—um...” His hands shook as he smoothed them over my arms, and my heart stuttered when his chin wobbled and his voice grew thick. “I think there’s something wrong with me.”

My breath caught, fingers digging into his thighs. “What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“I don’t feel good,” he mumbled, voice hitching between more throat spasms. His blue eyes grew glassy as they filled up with tears. “I went to the *dohk-tehrr* and they said it’s just an allergic reaction b-but I—I don’t think it is.”

I was too frantic with worry to ask him to repeat the word. I assumed it was the human version of a healthkeeper. Whipping my head around, I stared fearfully at Seis standing by the door. “Get Lilimar, Seis.”

“Is he ill?”

I’d forgotten that Seis couldn’t understand Jugs like I could—he hadn’t eaten the nami weed, nor had he spoken to him.

“Yes, there’s something wrong. Go, Seis. Please.” I picked up one of Jug’s trembling hands and pressed kisses all over it as I heard Seis leave the room. “Lilimar will look at you. She’s our healthkeeper. She will help, Jugs.”

“Is it safe for her to see me?” he asked, clutching my hand weakly. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I don’t care about that,” I choked out, pressing my mouth to the back of his hand. I tried to make my voice confident, but it still shook as I said, “She will help. She is the best healthkeeper in the entire fiefdom.”

He nodded, but his chin wobbled again before a tear spilled over and rolled down his cheek. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I just—I got scared and”—he sniffled—“I wanted to see you.”

“Jugs.” I lowered my head to kiss his thigh, breathing in his scent. Then I reached down to gently tug off his white boots. “Let’s get you comfortable. Seis will be back with Lilimar soon. She will help.”

I helped him get under the sheets, propping him up against the headboard with as many pillows as I could. His throat was still spasming, like he couldn’t control it, but he gave me a weak smile.

“I’m sure it’s just a bug or something.”

“A bug?” I repeated, alarmed. “You mean a bite or a sting?”

“No, like a stomach bug. A short illness that makes you feel like shit but then it passes.” He squeezed my hand. “I’ll probably be okay in a day or two.”

A hint of relief chased away the churning worry in my stomach, but I clutched Jugs’ hand tighter, not willing to let go of him until Seis returned with Lilimar.

A few minutes later, I heard the door creak open and Seis’ deep voice. “Moric.”

Giving Jugs' hand one more kiss, I stood and made my way over.

"I didn't know whether to let her straight in," Seis murmured, gaze flicking over my head to Jugs. "Or if you wanted to explain first."

Fear made my stomach spasm. I nodded, following Seis through the antechamber and into the hallway. Lilimar was waiting with her leather medical kit, face tense with worry. It eased a little when she saw me.

"You are well, Moric?" she asked, gaze tracking swiftly over my frame.

I didn't want to draw this out when Jugs was sick next door, so I asked, "Can I trust you to keep something to yourself, Lilimar?"

"Of course." She frowned. "You know nothing you tell me is ever repeated."

My gaze flicked to Seis. "Yes. Well, you are not here to see me. You are here to see my... guest, and he is... not from here."

"I see," she said slowly, looking between us.

"He does not look like anything you will have seen before." I stared at her hard. "And it is very important that no one else finds out that he is here."

A hint of trepidation filled her gaze, but she nodded. "Of course, Moric."

I did trust Lilimar, but I had no choice anyway. She needed to see Jugs.

"You won't be able to understand him," I told her as we entered the antechamber. "I will translate for him. He can understand you."

"Alright." She sounded wary.

"I can go to the—I can go and get the nami weed," Seis said quietly. "So both Lilimar and I can understand Jugs."

"Yes." My gut twisted with nerves, but I forced myself to say, "I will show you a quicker way, Seis."

"A quicker way?" he repeated slowly as we stepped into the bedroom.

Jugs smiled nervously at Lilimar, who had frozen in place and was gawping at him. But she quickly composed herself, striding toward the bed and setting down her bag.

"Hello, Jugs," she said pleasantly. "I'm Lilimar, Lor's healthkeeper. Lor would like me to check you over. Is that alright?"

"H-hi." His gaze flicked over to me. "Yeah, that's fine. Um, thank you."

She glanced over at me with a frown, so I quickly translated before ushering Seis to the dressing room.

"There is a secret tunnel," I told him, opening the wardrobe door. "It's how I've been visiting the void. It leads directly to a guestroom near the room."

Seis stared into the passageway when I pushed open the wardrobe back. Then he frowned down at me. "Lor, you should have told me this was here. This is dangerous. Someone could get in—"

"No one can get in from the tunnel on this end." I flushed and nodded at the Mabs' token propping the door open. "Though I do leave it open for Jugs."

"Lor," he gritted out, scrubbing a hand over his mane. "So this is why you took my key to the guestroom."

"You can scold me later," I rushed out, fishing my key to the guestroom out of my pocket and handing it to him. "Please go and get the nami, Seis. Lilimar will need it."

He let out a noisy breath and ducked his head to squeeze into the tunnel. "We will be discussing this later, Moric."

After checking the token was still in place to keep the door open for him, I hurried back into the

bedroom. Lilimar glanced over at me as she straightened from inspecting Jugs' back.

"I assume nods and headshakes mean the same thing?" she asked. I nodded, staring worriedly at Jugs as he leaned back against the pillows, looking flushed.

"He says his throat keeps convulsing and his hands won't stop trembling. Or at least, he nodded when I asked him after noticing."

"Is there anything else, Jugs?" I asked, walking quickly to the bed so I could sit beside him and take his hand.

"Um, I keep feeling kind of faint." His voice shook a little. "And hot. And there are those weird white spots on my back."

I had just finished translating for Lilimar when I heard, "Lor?"

Lyri's furious voice rang down the corridor a second before he burst into the room. He looked around wildly, blinking in surprise at the sight of Jugs in my bed. Then his gaze focused on me.

"Are you alright?" he demanded. "Gryf said he just saw Seis and Lilimar rushing to your quarters."

"I'm fine." I stood up quickly. "Jugs feels poorly. I asked Lilimar to check him over."

Lyri's shoulders relaxed slightly before he frowned at Jugs and stepped closer. "Alright, old sport? What's wrong?"

"I'm sure it's nothing." Jugs looked a little nervous as Lyri, Lilimar and I all stared at him in the bed.

"Well, you're in good hands." Lyri strode to the bed and sat on the end, reaching out to smack Jugs' calf through the sheets. His voice was cheerful, but I saw the concern in his gaze as it darted back to me. "Maybe you just had a touch too much to drink last night?"

Jugs snuffled out a laugh, but it sounded raspier than normal. My heart spasmed with fear.

"Nope, didn't drink at all last night," he said, shooting me a tiny secret smile. He'd been here last night with me.

As Lyri started chatting to him about how drunk *he'd* got the night before, Lilimar touched my shoulder and tilted her head toward the door.

I cleared my throat. "I'll just fetch you some water, Jugs."

He nodded at me with a smile, then went back to listening to Lyri as I followed Lilimar through the antechamber and into the hallway, my legs trembling. When we stopped and she turned to face me with a grave expression, my heart began a fast, sickly beat.

"I'm sorry, Lor." She swallowed. "This... this is how it started with your mother."

I blinked rapidly as I tried to process the words. No, that... that wasn't possible. Jugs wasn't from here. How could he have contracted the same unknown illness that took Mama?

I shook my head, licking my dry lips. "N-no, that—"

"I'm afraid it is." Lilimar's brows pinched. "I recognise it from when she first came to me complaining of the symptoms. Spasming throat muscles. Tremors in the hands. A rash manifested on her as pale spots, and there is something similar across Jugs' back."

My mouth trembled. I'd noticed them too—tiny white specks sprayed across his shoulder blades, like all the colour was being leached from him.

"It—It—" My throat bobbed convulsively. "What if it is just an allergic reaction to something? What if—"

"Has he eaten or drunk anything different recently? Anything new?"

Not wanting to admit it—as if it would let me cling to the weak hope for a little longer—I shook my head. I was struggling to hold on to my composure, my entire body trembling as my hands

clenched repeatedly into fists.

“I’m so very sorry, Lor,” Lilimar said when I stayed silent. She reached out and touched my arm, and I barely managed not to flinch. “I never stopped researching after your mother... I have kept looking for answers. I’ll do everything I can to try and figure it out for Jugs.”

The last weak thread of my control snapped.

“Please.” My voice broke. I stepped forward and gripped her wrists. “Please. I will do anything to—Whatever you need, however much money it costs. Just pl-please, Lilimar. Please.”

“I will do everything I can, Lor.” She gently extracted her arms from my clawing grip, then gathered my trembling hands between hers as she watched me with a sombre expression. “What is he?”

My heart was beating too fast. I could barely focus on her words, my blood rushing through my ears, skin prickling with cold sweat beneath my clothes. She had to repeat her question and squeeze my hands before my dazed eyes focused on her face again.

“He is—he is not from here.”

She said something else, but I couldn’t hear her anymore over the frantic pounding in my ears. I started to shake more violently, struggling to take in air.

“Lor.” Lilimar’s soothing voice cut through the noise in my head as a strong hand settled over my chest. “Breathe. Breathe.”

“Did I make him ill?” I heard myself croak, shuddering with horror. “Am I a carrier of whatever took Mama? Did I *give* it to him?”

“No,” she said immediately, voice firm. “I test your blood at every health check, remember? Something was infecting hers. There was nothing in yours. It is not a family illness, Lor.”

“Then what is it?” My voice shook. “What is it? What made her sick? What is making him sick?”

“I promise you, I am going to do all that I can to find out.”

But that meant nothing. Even if Lilimar did manage to work out what this unknown illness was, she still then had to find a cure. And what if the cure didn’t work on Jugs? He was human. He wasn’t vint.

Utter hopelessness threatened to drown me. I pushed it back as I heard Jugs’ sweet laugh—weaker and threadier now—through the door. I couldn’t crumble completely. It wasn’t fair to Jugs. He was the one who was ill, not me.

I wished it was me. I wished I could take this sickness from him and let it kill me instead.

“You must test my blood again,” I told her, voice unsteady. “To make sure.”

She nodded. “Alright. I don’t think it’s necessary, but yes. Best to be safe. For now, I think you should go back in to Jugs. Or... would you prefer that I tell him?”

My vision whited out with horror. We had to tell him. We couldn’t not.

He was going to hate me. This was my fault.

“I’ll tell him,” I heard myself say, my voice vacant.

She nodded again and gestured for the door. “I’m going to run and get my bloodletting kit from my chamber. I’ll return and take samples from both you and Jugs.”

“Yes,” I said in the same vacant voice, my gut hollowing out as I watched her turn and head for the door.

I didn’t move at first after she left. I was frozen in place in the hallway, the faint sounds of Lyri talking and Jugs’ weak laugh reaching me through the bedroom door.

Eventually, I turned and walked stiffly into the dining room to get Jugs’ water. My hands shook wildly as I tried to pick up the carafe, spilling it everywhere. I thumped it back down onto the sideboard as my chin started wobbling, sinking to my haunches and burying my face in my hands.

Once I let myself start crying, I couldn't stop. I wept into my hands, trying to stay silent so Lyri and Jugs wouldn't hear from the bedroom.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“I’ll see what’s taking that scoundrel so long.”

I jolted in panic at the sound of Lyri’s cheerful voice, rising to my feet and hurriedly trying to scrub the tears from my face. He appeared at the door a second later, going still when he saw me.

“What’s wrong?” His voice was hard as he rushed forward, the tone one he had always used when I was upset, as if he was already preparing to destroy anyone or anything that had hurt me.

I shook my head, unable to speak at first as my throat bobbed convulsively.

“Lor, what did Lilimar say?” Lyri gripped my shoulder tight, gaze tight and grim as he stared at me.

“H-h-he—” I wrapped my arms around myself, shaking uncontrollably. “He has it.”

“Has what?” Lyri’s fingers tightened painfully.

I swallowed, feeling like I might vomit. “What took Mama.”

Lyri stared at me, his face flitting from utter shock to disbelief to brows-drawn anger.

“No,” he bit out, shaking his head sharply. “She’s wrong. He can’t have it. She doesn’t even know what Mama *had*.”

“Sh-she said the symptoms are the same.” I let out a weak sob and covered my face again. “It’s my fault. It’s my fault.”

“How is this your fault?” Lyri said hoarsely, lifting his other hand to squeeze both my shoulders.

“I m-made him keep coming back,” I sobbed. “I was *intimate* with him. I must be a carrier. I must have given it to him.”

“No.” Lyri’s voice was harsh. “Lilimar tests our blood regularly. We don’t have whatever killed Mama. You didn’t give it to him.” I heard him swallow, his voice pained when he said, “Please don’t blame yourself for this, Lor.”

“Even if I’m not a carrier, I kept making him come back, Lyri.” I sobbed, hanging my head as my hands dropped. “I exposed him to it.”

“You didn’t *make* him come back, Lor. You couldn’t force him to come here. Jugs kept coming here because he wanted to. Because he wants *you*.”

“Then it is still my fault,” I snapped tearfully. “It’s my fault he was here and caught whatever this thing is. I shouldn’t have encouraged him. I shouldn’t have kept going to that room hoping to see him again.”

“Lor?”

We both froze at the sound of Jugs’ voice. Lyri stepped in front of me just as he appeared in the doorway, giving me a few seconds to hurriedly wipe my face and try to compose myself.

“Alright, old sport?” Lyri sounded cheerful, but I could hear the strain in his voice. “We’ll be back in in a minute.”

“Is... is Lor okay?”

Lyri glanced back at me with a pained frown, then let out a slow breath as he stepped to the side. As soon as Jugs saw me, he went even paler and rushed forward.

“Are you okay?”

That made me sob again, but I stayed stiff when he wrapped me in his arms. I couldn’t bring myself to hug him back. *I might have made him sick.*

“Lor, what’s wrong?” He pulled back and glanced at Lyri, who stood tense beside us. Swallowing, he gave me an uneasy smile. “Oh... geez. What, um, what did the doctor say? Is it—is it

bad?”

An ugly sound ripped from my throat before I could stop it. I was being horribly self-centred, blubbering and causing Jugs to try and comfort me when he was the one who... who...

“Jugs,” I sobbed, clinging to his shirt. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re... you’re kinda scaring me here.” His voice shook as he gently grasped my wrists. He looked at Lyri fearfully. “What’s going on?”

It shouldn’t be Lyri who told him—that wasn’t fair to either of them. And Lilimar would be back soon to draw his blood, which would make him even more scared if he didn’t know what was going on. But I couldn’t speak, my throat aching from the force of my tears.

Lyri cleared his throat. “Why don’t we sit down—”

“No.” Jugs’ voice was hard, making me flinch. “You need to tell me now. Right now.”

I forced myself to stop weeping. He was right. This wasn’t fair at all. Stepping back, I hurriedly wiped my wet cheeks and nodded. “Yes. I’m sorry. I...” Looking up into his face, my chin wobbled again. “Lilimar... Lilimar told me that she thinks—she th-thinks you are ill.”

Jugs went even paler. “Ill how?”

“It—” My voice cracked. “D-do you remember me telling you about our mother?”

I had told him one night when we were curled up in bed, my head on his chest as I recounted those awful months. When she had started getting ill, slowly weakening until she could no longer get out of bed. Until her chest barely moved before she slipped into unconsciousness and never woke back up.

Lyri hovered awkwardly beside us as Jugs stared down at me, his throat bobbing convulsively. The sight of it made my eyes fill up again, tears spilling, but I remained quiet.

“Yeah, I remember,” he croaked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to look into his eyes as I said, “She thinks you—She thinks you have what took Mama.”

There was a long, painful silence, broken only by the creak of Lyri’s leather gloves as his fingers curled and uncurled into fists, something he had always done when he was deeply uncomfortable. Jugs was staring down at me, his expression vacant, like he was still processing what I’d said.

Eventually he took a step back and shook his head, a hand reaching up to scrub his face. “I... What? I have what...”

“The illness,” I croaked, a fine tremor running through my whole body. My stomach roiled, threatening to expel its contents. “Whatever illness took her, Lilimar says you... you are displaying the same symptoms.”

After another pause, Jugs let out a noisy breath and thunked down into one of the dining chairs. “But I... H-how? How can I have... I’m not the same *species* as you.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, staring at him in anguish, not knowing if I wanted to wrap my arms around him or run away and hide, guilt threatening to drown me.

But then Jugs looked up at me, his eyes big and fearful, his expression utterly afraid. His big body seemed to shrink in on itself, and his voice was small when he whispered, “Am I going to die?”

A weak sob escaped me as I fell to my knees and clasped his thighs, wanting to beg for forgiveness. “Lilimar is going to do everything she can, Jugs. She—she—”

“B-but you... you couldn’t find a cure last time, right?” He wrapped his arms around himself, gaze darting between Lyri and me.

“That was a long time ago.” Lyri finally spoke up, his voice hard but edged with grief. “We have discovered more since then. Medicine is better. Lilimar is more experienced. Don’t give up, old sport,” he added hoarsely. “She—she might not even be correct. You’re not vint. There could be

another explanation for this.”

Jugs swallowed, then timidly nodded. “Yeah. Yeah,” he repeated, voice a little firmer. “You’re right. It’s p-probably something else that—that displays the same symptoms, right?” Squeezing my arm, he gazed at me imploringly. “Right?”

I couldn’t bring myself to agree. Mouth trembling, I lifted his hand and kissed the back of it, then stood up shakily to fetch him a drink when I noticed his throat still tightening convulsively.

“Here.” The carafe rattled against the glass as I poured Jugs some water, making sure it was the kind he preferred. “Drink.”

He took the glass and sipped, hand shaking. Clearing my throat, I said, “Lilimar is coming back to take a small sample of blood so she can check it. If you will allow her to.”

“Okay,” he said hoarsely, making me worry that he hadn’t fully processed what we had told him. What was happening to him. He seemed somewhat vacant still, like it hadn’t sunk in.

I felt sick. I didn’t feel old enough or wise enough or strong enough to handle this situation correctly. I wanted to turn to my brother and have him hug me and tell me everything would be alright. I wanted Mama here to bundle me up in her arms, enveloping me in her long, flowy robes, and whisper that she would look after everything. But of course she couldn’t. She had been taken from us.

And now Jugs was going to be taken from me too.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

I was still staring blankly at my untouched breakfast an hour after sitting down to eat. Jugs had left at dawn, assuring me he was already feeling better. His hands had been steady when he'd cupped my face and leaned down to kiss me.

Like a fool, I'd let myself hope as I watched him step through the void and vanish, taking my heart with him. After Lyri had left the day before, I'd curled up into Jugs' side on the bed and quietly wept until he shifted to face me, cupping my cheeks and telling me he would be fine. That Lilimar had probably misdiagnosed him because he was human, not vint, so he could be having similar reactions to something completely different.

He'd apologised for scaring me, and I couldn't bear it. Now that Lilimar had said that Jugs was ill with whatever had infected my mother, I could see it. I could recognise it. The clicking in his throat as it spasmed. The insidious tremble in his hands. I hadn't known about the white spots on Mama—she must have kept them hidden from us. Even so, guilt made it hard to breathe. I had *noticed* those spots on Jugs before. I'd *seen* them. How could I not have known something was wrong?

He had apologised to me when it was *my* fault. Even if I wasn't a carrier, I was still the reason Jugs was even here. In this world. I had exposed him to it.

I was the reason he was going to die.

As I sat staring at my congealing breakfast, I felt numb. Hollow. This was so much worse than when Mama had started getting ill. We had been so young then, and youth made you feel invincible. Untouchable. Horrible things happened to other people, but they wouldn't happen to *us*. We had already lost our father. I had foolishly thought that the Mabs wouldn't be so cruel as to also take our mother from us.

We had been scared, Lyri and I, when she started getting ill—of course we had. Scared for her. But there had always been the unspoken belief that she would get better. That Lilimar would be able to treat her and make her well. It was a belief I had desperately clung to until those final days spent at Mama's bedside, when she was no longer conscious. When her chest had barely moved.

Now, I was older. I was the Moric. I should have been able to protect Jugs. I should have been able to keep him safe here. And I could no longer cling to childish beliefs that everything would work out fine. I had seen for myself that they didn't.

I had condemned Jugs to death. Beautiful, vibrant Jugs who was so young and so full of life and so brave. He had come back all that time ago despite the awful way we had treated him. He had returned, and he had kept returning, to this world that was so foreign and unknown to him, just to see me. Just to be with me.

And look at what it had cost him. What *I* had cost him.

I would never forgive myself.

“Moric.”

My head slowly lifted at the sound of Seis' voice. I stared at him in the dining room doorway with dead eyes.

“The salyik representative is here,” he said quietly, glancing back over his shoulder. “Would you like to reschedule the meeting?”

I blinked at him. I had completely forgotten that Lyri had helped to arrange for a representative of the salyik people to visit me today. I had wanted to outline the new measures being put in place after my meeting with the council, and ask them to help guide me in whatever else they may need.

I could hardly remember how joyous I'd felt coming out of that meeting—how hopeful I'd been for the future. The future of my city and its people. The rest of my reign as Moric, where I could make a difference. My future with Jugs.

I'd been so naïvely hopeful for all of it.

I wanted to run to my bedroom and hide away from it all. Pretend that the weight of an entire fiefdom's wellbeing didn't rest on my shoulders. Pretend that yesterday had never happened, that Lilimar had never said those horrifying words to me, that Jugs hadn't appeared in my room looking weak and ill.

But I knew he would want me to keep going with the work I was doing. He had told me how proud he was of me when I'd tearfully recounted my meeting last night, trying to distract myself—both of us—from the unknown disease coursing through Jugs' body.

I wanted to run away from it all, but I couldn't. I was the Moric. I had to keep going for Jugs, for Lyri, for everyone here. For my mother.

"No," I told Seis, taking a breath as I folded my napkin and stood. "I will see them today as planned."

He nodded, frowning worriedly at me. "And would you still like to entertain them here? Is... Are you alone?"

We had planned for me to speak to the salyik representative in my quarters, where no one could overhear or spot us. Council members came and went from the hyll often, and I didn't want Raynir finding out about this meeting.

"Yes, I'm alone," I told Seis woodenly. I knew he was asking whether Jugs was still in my bedroom.

"I'll see them in, Moric." Seis paused. "Would you like me to be in the room for the meeting?"

I knew he was wary about leaving me alone with the salyik representative, but I shook my head. "I think they'll be more amenable without my guard watching their every move as if we suspect them of something nefarious."

Seis' face told me that was exactly what he suspected, but it felt wrong to be mistrustful of the salyik when they had truly done nothing. We couldn't blame the entire race for one lone preacher trying to stir up a revolution. It was the equivalent of measuring all vints by the example that Raynir and the rest of the prejudiced, outdated council set.

I moved my untouched breakfast to a side table so it would be out of the way as Seis left the room, then smoothed down my tunic and clasped my wrists together behind my back as I waited. At least I was dressed properly with my hair in the correct fashion. I had gone through my morning routine by rote after Jugs left, my face completely dead when I had looked at myself in the mirror.

Seis returned, holding open the door for the tall, slender salyik who entered the room. Without saying a word, they removed the heavy hooded cloak that had shielded them from view as they walked through the hyll and passed it to Seis, then looked at me. Their hair was white, like most salyiks', and the scales over their expressionless face were a pale purple, as were their eyes. Long, shimmering white robes covered their body, their arms tucked into the sleeves over their middle, and they inclined their head in a shallow bow after a few long seconds.

"Moric Lor."

Seis cleared his throat. "Talimuth an'ya Porril, representing the salyik people of Thinir, Moric."

"Talimuth is fine," they said, glancing around the room with blank eyes.

I stepped forward and dipped my head. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, Talimuth."

"We thank you for the opportunity."

Clearing my throat, I nodded at Seis, who quietly left the room. I knew he would be standing just outside, which made me feel a little better as I looked at Talimuth's blank, mask-like face. The salyik showed little emotion, like the ashara, and it had always unnerved me somewhat. Not that I had been around many salyik in my life, despite a glut of them living in my city. Shame made me flush, my ears twitching.

"Please take a seat." I gestured at one of the chairs. "I apologise for the informal setting, but I think it's best if we keep these meetings to ourselves until we can be sure that we are truly able to bring beneficial change to the salyik in Thinir."

"Yes," Talimuth said mildly as they settled in the chair, placing long, scaled fingers lightly on the armrests. "And to keep it from the council, I assume."

I pursed my lips, not knowing what I should and shouldn't say. To let Talimuth know that I was going behind the council's back was... perhaps not wise, but at the same time, it might allow them to trust me more.

"I believe we have a greater chance of success if fewer people are involved in these discussions," I said carefully. "If we are able to come to an agreement, I can go to my council with a list of orders ready to be enacted. Change can come much swifter."

"I don't disagree, Moric." Talimuth gave me a slight nod. "I—we all—appreciate the opportunity for a private meeting with you."

"I want to help," I said bluntly, then gestured at the carafes of water and pot of tea on the sideboard. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Please."

"Molt tea or water?"

"Water, please." Talimuth's voice never changed in inflection, which was a little unnerving.

Fidgeting with my cuffs, I nodded at the two carafes. "Would you prefer tilik-steeped or yavra?"

There was a pause. "Yavra."

I poured them a glass of the herb-spiked water that Jugs favoured and set it in front of them before taking my seat, smoothing down my tunic. Talimuth stared emotionlessly at the glass, before lifting it and sniffing the contents. I said nothing, watching warily as they carefully set the glass back down and lifted their head. Pale purple eyes fixed, unwavering, on my face, their expression blank.

"Did you invite me here to poison me, Moric?"

I stared at them in utter shock, my mouth going slack. "I'm—I'm sorry?"

"Many wouldn't be able to tell between yavra and saffin, but a salyik can." They nodded at the glass. "That is not yavra leaf. That is saffin. Poison. I'm afraid your plan isn't going to work."

"Wh-wh—" I stared in horror at the glass, shivers running up my spine as my skin prickled. "P-poison? I am not—I—Th—that is supposed to be simple yavra-steeped water."

"Well it is not." Their face remained blank, but their head cocked slightly as they watched me. "Were you hoping to send a message to the salyik people in your city?"

"I am not trying to *poison* you!" I flushed at my outburst. "Why in Ara's name would I invite you here to discuss your people's wellbeing just to *poison* you?"

Talimuth watched me in silence for long moments, gaze flicking down to my hands as they began to tremble. My mind was racing. Why was the water poisoned? No one knew Talimuth would be coming. Why would someone have poison in the hyll?

They delicately cleared their throat and pushed the glass further away from them with long, scaled fingers. "Then perhaps someone is trying to poison you."

My eyes snapped up to their impassive face. They gazed back blankly, the room falling silent as

we stared at each other. Then I looked over at the two carafes of water on the sideboard. One filled with the tilik-steeped water that I favoured—the only kind I drank. The other with the yavra-steeped kind that Jugs preferred and always drank when he was here.

The horrifying realisation thudded into the pit of my stomach.

Jugs.

Someone wasn't trying to poison me. They were poisoning Jugs.

I shot up, my chair tipping back and clattering to the floor. The sound made Seis burst into the room, one hand already on his axe hilt and eyes tense.

“What's wrong, Moric?”

“Jugs,” I rasped. “Someone is poisoning Jugs. Th-the water—Someone poisoned the water—”

“Jugs?” Talimuth asked with the barest hint of interest in their voice. I ignored them, turning to stare at Seis with horrified eyes.

“Jugs always drinks the yavra-steeped water, b-but it's not yavra. It's poison.”

“How do you know?” Seis asked warily, gaze flicking to the glass in front of Talimuth.

“I can smell it,” they said flatly. “It is almost undetectable to most, but my people come from the area in these lands where saffin grows. We know how to spot it. It grows only in the Crepis Flats to the north of here, and it looks, smells and tastes almost exactly like yavra.”

“Then perhaps it was collected in error,” I blurted, hands fisting the bottom of my tunic.

Talimuth cocked their head. “Perhaps. But yavra grows wild everywhere. There would be no reason to travel so far to collect it, and as I said, saffin only grows in that one place. It would appear that someone made a special journey to procure it.”

“Who?” I burst out, though it wasn't like Talimuth would have the answer.

“Who tends to your chambers, Moric?” Seis asked in a tight voice. “Who delivers your food and water?”

“I—I—” My heart was pounding hard, head spinning as I tried to sift through everything I had just learned and what it meant. “I don't know. I don't know their names.”

“I can find out from the seneschal.” Seis gave Talimuth a wary look, but continued, “Until then, you cannot eat or drink anything, Moric. Not until we have flushed out whoever is doing this.”

I gulped in air, almost ripping the hem of my tunic as I pulled on it. “I don't think it is for me, Seis. All the kitchen staff here know that I cannot stand yavra water. They... they kept bringing the kind I like, but a while ago they also started delivering a second carafe with what I *thought* was yavra leaf.”

“Which Jugs drank,” Seis guessed.

I started to shake. “Y-yes.”

“So someone knows about him.”

“Who?” I croaked again. “How? And why would they—Wh-why...”

Seis cleared his throat. “Perhaps I should see your guest out before we continue this conversation, Moric.”

Talimuth rose elegantly from their seat, tucking their hands into the sleeves of their robe. “Indeed. We can reschedule our meeting, Moric, if you are still interested in discussing the welfare of my people. But it appears you have more pressing matters to attend to.”

“N-no, wait,” I blurted, my head beginning to pound. If Talimuth went back and told the salyik that I had dismissed them without even discussing the salyik population's wellbeing, that might anger them further.

But I couldn't focus on anything but Jugs. Someone was poisoning Jugs.

Someone was trying to kill Jugs.

Talimuth inclined their head, face still expressionless as they said, “There is no ill will, Moric. I can see that this has shaken you somewhat. And I would personally prefer to visit your hyll when there are no longer members of staff trying to poison guests.”

“This will be resolved swiftly,” Seis said, his tone sharp and defensive. “The Moric takes excellent care of those employed by the hyll. We will be able to find whoever has the means and motive to do this.”

“Indeed,” Talimuth said vacantly, then gave me a shallow bow. “Moric. I wish you and... Jugs the best.”

“Wait,” I blurted again, stepping closer. “Please. If—if you know of this plant—this poison—what is the cure? Will the effects fade if he stops drinking the water?”

“It depends on how long he has been drinking it.”

I swallowed, my voice hoarse as I said, “Weeks.”

Talimuth’s expression changed minutely. “Then no.”

My knees almost buckled, and I had to reach out and grip the back of a chair to stay standing. “What about a cure?”

“I can ask my progenitor. They follow the old ways more closely than my generation. They might know of something, but as far as I am aware, the cure is unknown.”

I struggled to take in air. Gripping the back of the chair so hard my knuckles ached, piercings grinding under my skin, I tried not to break down entirely in front of Talimuth.

“We will speak again soon, Moric.”

They walked to the door as Seis looked at me intensely and said, “Wait here while I show Talimuth out, Moric. Do not let anyone in your quarters. Do not go anywhere.”

I didn’t answer, shaking as I tried not to collapse onto the floor. Someone had poisoned Jugs. And there was no known cure.

I was only vaguely aware of Seis returning, leading me out of the room and through the hyll to Lilimar’s chambers. She looked tired when she opened the door, as if she hadn’t yet slept since coming to my quarters the day before.

Seis quickly explained what we had discovered to Lilimar, and my wild gaze snapped to her when she choked out a single word—my mother’s name. “Valir.”

Her anguished eyes turned to me. “Someone killed your mother, Lor. It wasn’t just a sickness.”

I stared at her, my mind struggling to comprehend what she had said, until realisation slammed into me like a mighty wave crashing against the ancient rocks of Thinir.

Jugs had the same symptoms as Mama.

“S-someone poisoned her,” I rasped. “And now they are... they are poisoning Jugs.”

Mama had favoured yavra water too. It was why I couldn’t stand it—the smell and taste reminded me of her in a way that was painful.

“By the Mabs.” Lilimar clutched her throat. “It crossed my mind—of course it did. But her blood didn’t act or look as though she had been poisoned. I even started preparing her meals myself and only giving her water from my chamber, but it didn’t make a difference, so I thought...”

“Talimuth said once saffin has been ingested for a while, the effects are irreversible,” Seis said quietly. “So it was probably already too late.”

“And it is too late for Jugs,” I choked out, feeling Seis grab my arms to keep me upright as my knees buckled. “It’s too late for Jugs.”

Lilimar took a deep breath, scrubbing her face with her hands before standing up straight as

resolve settled over her tight features. “No, Lor, this is... this is good. We know what it is now. That means there is a much, much greater chance of finding a cure.”

“Talimuth said there is no cure,” I sobbed.

“No.” Seis shook his head calmly. “They said as far as *they* know, there is no cure. Their progenitor might know more.”

Lilimar nodded. “And now that we know it’s poison, it narrows down my research tremendously. I can try and adapt existing cures for different poisons, if the cure for saffin really hasn’t been discovered.”

I didn’t dare hope, but forced myself to ask, “What do you need?”

“Some saffin to study myself. Other known poisonous plants to discern their properties and see what is similar—it will help to narrow down any other cures that may work for saffin poisoning.”

“Whatever you need,” I rasped, voice thick with tears. “Anything.”

“I’ll see to it immediately, Lor.” Seis gently squeezed my arms.

Lilimar stepped forward to take my hand. She swallowed thickly, mouth trembling. “I’m so sorry, Lor, for both you and Lyri. This is a terrible thing to find out. But at least some good can come of it. We have a better chance of saving Jugs.”

My chin wobbled as I squeezed her hand back, head jerking in a stilted nod.

“I don’t think we can just rule out that Lor was the intended target,” Seis said, voice wary. “It’s pure luck that you haven’t been poisoned too—”

“It’s not luck,” I said hoarsely, wiping my eyes. “All the kitchen staff know I don’t drink yavra water. They never bothered to give it to me before, because they knew there was no point. I wouldn’t have drunk it.”

“So whoever is doing this took a gamble,” Lilimar guessed, frowning hard. “They already knew saffin would work and would go undetected because of Valir. They just had to hope Jugs would drink the poisoned water too.”

“But *why*?” I blubbered. “Why would someone want to poison Jugs? And how did they even know about him?”

“Are you *sure* none of the staff that tend to your quarters ever spotted him, Lor?” Seis turned me to face him, gripping my shoulders as he peered down at me intently. “If he has been coming to your bedroom, they may have seen or heard something.”

“I... I suppose they could have—” I stopped, reaching out to grip his vest. “Wait. I remember a while back, I went to fetch us some water while Jugs was in my room. There was a member of staff in the dining room, even though it was gone the middle of the night. I remember thinking it was strange.”

“That *is* strange.” Seis was frowning. “The staff aren’t permitted to enter your quarters once you have gone to bed until dawn. You should have told me.”

“I’m sorry.” My mouth trembled. “It just—It slipped my mind.”

“What were they doing?” Lilimar asked. “The member of staff?”

“They were—They said they were bringing fresh water. But it wasn’t yavra.” I shook my head. “I remember that. They started bringing that after.”

“After they realised there was someone sharing your bed.” Seis and Lilimar shared a look.

I spluttered. “Why would the staff care if I—if I had someone in my room with me?”

“Maybe it’s not the staff behind this,” Seis said grimly. “Maybe there is just *a* member of staff, one who has access to you, who is acting on behalf of someone else.”

I stared up at him in horror. “Who?”

Raynir.

It crossed my mind before I could stop it. Licking my lips fearfully, I looked at Seis and whispered, “The council?”

Seis’ lips thinned, his tusks peeking out. “That would be my guess.”

“But...” I swallowed, shaking my head. “Why would the council want to kill Jugs? Why—why would they have killed Mama?”

“Your mother was strong-willed,” Lilimar said. “She fought the council on their decisions constantly. She opposed many of their suggestions, but they still tried to sneak them through. Perhaps... perhaps they thought you would be easier to control, Lor. Perhaps they thought if they got rid of her and seated you on the throne while you were still just a boy, you could be easily moulded into the Moric that suited them.”

“And Jugs appeared just as you began standing up for yourself and opposing them,” Seis added grimly. “It was entirely coincidental, but maybe the council thought you had found a lover who was whispering in your ear, conspiring against them, so they wanted to get rid of whoever it was. To keep you isolated and easily controlled.”

I flushed with humiliation, because he was right. For twenty years as Moric, I had allowed the council to do whatever they wanted, assuming they were acting in the best interests of my fiefdom. I hadn’t opposed them. I had barely paid attention, trusting them just as I’d assumed Mama had.

“But the council has always tried to push me into a union,” I said faintly.

“A union they condone. A union that benefits them.” Seis’ voice was tight with anger. “They don’t want you thinking for yourself, Lor. If they know that you have found someone who isn’t in their plan for you...”

“B-but then why wouldn’t they just... kill me as they did Mama?” I didn’t understand. “If I was beginning to oppose them as she had...”

“The throne would fall to the Verin if you died,” Lilimar said. “And this entire fiefdom knows that Lyri could never be controlled.”

But I could. And I had.

I’d never felt more weak and useless. Pathetic. I hung my head in shame.

“I didn’t say that to be cruel,” she added gently. “You were just a boy when you became Moric, Lor. Of course you were going to let them guide you. Of course you were going to assume they knew what was best.”

“And that was their plan,” Seis said grimly. “Keep you on the throne as their puppet, isolated and without any unsanctioned outside influences.”

“What...” I pressed a hand to my forehead, feeling faint. “What am I supposed to do?”

“We need to confirm our suspicions first and foremost,” Seis said. “We need to find the member of staff who has been delivering the poisoned water.”

“And until then, you and Jugs must *only* drink the clean water that I deliver to your bedroom myself,” Lilimar added, voice hard. “Even if it is too late to reverse the effects of the saffin, potentially ingesting more will surely speed up Jugs’ deterioration.”

A weak sob tore from my throat as I covered my mouth with a trembling hand. *Jugs*. My poor Jugs.

“I’ll get a list of the names of those who tend to your quarters from the seneschal,” Seis said. “I’ll ask him who is charged with delivering your food and water. Would you recognise the staff member you saw in the dining room that night?”

“I... I don’t know.” I felt even more useless, ears twitching with humiliation. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright,” Seis said steadily. “We can’t alert them to the fact that we know anything anyway. They might run or tell whoever they’re working for. We will watch and see who brings the water up

to your quarters.”

“And then what?” I asked apprehensively. “Once we have found them, then what?”

Seis’ voice was hard and determined. “Then we get them to talk.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Telling Jugs that he was dying from a poison with no known cure was one of the worst moments of my life.

He cried for hours. His huge, gut-wrenching sobs rattled my chest as I cradled him in bed, tears streaming silently down my cheeks and dripping into his hair.

Telling Lyri that our mother had been killed, not just taken by some unknown illness, was almost as terrible. His chin had trembled before he took a slow breath, clenched his jaw and asked how he could help in our plan to find a cure for Jugs and discover who was behind all this. His eyes had been searing with vengeful rage.

In the days that followed, he despatched his soldiers to all corners of the world to collect every kind of poisonous plant that was known, so that Lilimar could study them for similar properties to saffin in the hopes of finding a cure that might work.

Lyri went himself, with Talimuth and Gryf, to collect saffin from the Crepis Flats further north. Lilimar visited the salyik district in secret to speak to Talimuth's progenitor, to try and find out more about the plant and whether there was anything that could slow down its effects to give us more time.

Seis procured the list of staff members who tended my quarters from the seneschal, and narrowed down the suspects by asking who, specifically, was in charge of delivering the Moric's food and water. He received four names. Ifmil, Jakir, Terinor and Polnir.

And I, the useless fool that I was, contributed nothing to our efforts, spending my days wallowing in despair and my nights desperately trying to comfort Jugs, who was retreating further and further into himself with every visit.

Seeing him in the grips of the poison's insidious effects was horrifying. His throat would spasm until he couldn't speak. His hands would quake wildly. He would grow hot and flushed, but shiver uncontrollably even as sweat poured from him and dampened my nightshirt as I clung to him in bed.

Every morning when he left, he looked worse. I begged him to stay, terrified that the poison would take him while he was in his world and he would simply never return. But he always gave me a weak smile and told me he couldn't just abandon his life completely. He acted like he was still hopeful that something would save him, but I could see the despondence dimming his eyes more and more every day.

Guilt wracked me. I could barely function. Every morning after he had left, I returned to my chambers and cried. I prayed to the Mabs to save him. I asked them to take me instead. I swore that if he survived, I would let him live his life in peace in his own world, in case this was punishment for me giving my heart to an otherworlder.

It would destroy me, but at least he would be alive. At least I would know that he was still out there, growing old and moving on, finding happiness with someone else. *Alive*.

In the days since finding out about the poison that had taken my mother and was now slowly taking Jugs, I'd had a council meeting. It had taken everything in me not to fly across the table and wring Raynir's thin neck. Not to snatch Seis' axe from his hip and bury it in the old vint's chest.

I had stayed quiet, watching all the council members as they droned on about the rent the hyll charged for stalls in the city's main market. How many of them were involved? All of them? Or was it just Raynir, and perhaps Councillor Tildr, who he seemed especially close with?

Had they really killed my mother just to control the city as they wished? Were they really killing Jugs just to continue controlling *me*? Because I had dared speak out in the salyik people's defence?

Because I was actually trying to be a true Moric and not just a figurehead who let them do whatever they wanted?

I eyed every member of staff I saw with distrust. I had wanted to stop them coming to my quarters completely, but Seis had told me we had to act as though everything was normal until we managed to catch the staff member who delivered my water. Whoever was doing it did so at odd times—no doubt to avoid detection—so it took a few days.

It was a morning when we finally managed it. Seis arrived early, just after Jugs had left, and we went into my dining room to wait long before I usually sat down for breakfast.

Soon after that, the door to the staff area opened, and a slender vint with long black hair stepped in carrying a tray with two carafes. She stopped dead at the sight of us.

“Oh.” Dipping into an awkward bow, she gave me a nervous smile before her eyes darted over to Seis standing silent by the door. “Good morning, Moric. You... you are not normally here quite this early. I’ll tell the cook to hurry your breakfast—”

“No need.” I watched as she took a stilted step forward, then seemed to recover and walked over to the sideboard to set down the tray. “Is that fresh water?”

She kept her head bent. “Yes, Moric.”

“Will you pour me a glass? I think I’ll have yavra-steeped this morning.”

Her hands spasmed, rattling the carafes on the tray. She didn’t move for a long moment, then slowly reached for a glass.

“I thought you favoured tilik water, Moric,” she said lightly, hand unsteady as it hovered over the carafe on the left. Seis and I exchanged a look, before he silently slunk across the room to lock the staff door.

“I’d like yavra this morning,” I said coolly, watching her back.

I heard her swallow. “Y-yes, of course.”

She poured a glass slowly, then jumped when she turned around and saw Seis by the staff door. Neither of us spoke as she approached the table and set the glass down in front of me.

Taking a step back, she fisted her apron and said, “I’ll just tell the cook to—”

“That’s alright,” Seis said, crossing his arms. “The Moric is in no rush this morning. I don’t believe we’ve spoken before. What is your name?”

She took another step back, quivering like a wanuk cornered by a hungry folna. “J-Jakir.”

“No need to be so anxious, Jakir,” I said lightly, reaching for the glass. “You’ve always done a fine job here.”

Her pale grey eyes tracked my hand, voice faint when she said, “Th-thank you, Moric.”

The room fell silent as I lifted the glass to my lips, trying to look calm and composed when inside, I was teeming with nerves at having poison so close to my mouth. The poison that had killed Mama. The poison that was killing Jugs.

But the plan worked. Before I could act as though I was about to take a sip, Jakir blurted, “Wait.”

I paused, quickly lowering the glass, wanting to throw it across the room. Instead, I carefully set it on the table and looked at her.

Her mouth trembled wildly, before she let out a weak sob and covered her face. “Don’t drink it.”

“Why not?” Seis asked mildly, still standing in front of the staff door. The main door to the dining room was already locked, the key in his pocket. She couldn’t escape.

Jakir collapsed to her knees, her apron billowing over her lap as she sobbed. “Forgive me, Moric. Forgive me.”

“Whatever for?” I slowly stood up and moved to Seis’ side as he approached.

“H-h-he said I needed to do it for the good of Thinir. And I—I cannot afford to lose my job, my father—”

“Who?” Seis barked. “Do what?”

Jakir let out a shuddering breath, dropping her hands to stare blankly at her lap. “Th-the water is poisoned.” She lifted her head to gaze at me beseechingly. “But it wasn’t for you, Moric. I swear. H-he told me that you would never drink it—”

“Who?” Seis demanded again.

Jakir pursed her trembling lips, eyes growing fearful. But she whispered, “C-Councillor Raynir.”

Seis slowly strode forward and crouched in front of her, resting one hand on his axe hilt. Jakir let out a terrified squeak, frozen in place.

“You will tell us everything,” he rumbled menacingly.

“I didn’t want to do it,” she burst out. “Any of it. But my father is destitute and my mother is gone and I am the only one who can support him. When the councillor came to me, h-he said I would be *dealt* with if I didn’t do what he said.”

“What did you do?” I asked tightly, gripping the back of my chair.

“I—” She let out a shuddering breath, hands fisting in her apron. “When I started working here, he tasked me with spying on you and reporting back anything unusual. S-so I... I took on more jobs that the others were supposed to do, like tidying your bedchambers and changing your sheets, s-so that I could look around your bedroom.”

My skin crawled. I remembered that muffled conversation I had heard weeks ago through the wall in the secret chamber—a member of staff commenting on the strange green stain left on my sheets after I had spilled iced cream over them when Jugs was here. And there would have been two water glasses left in my room that night. The treasures from Jugs’ world had still been out on my chest of drawers.

All signs of something *unusual*. All clues that I had, for the first time, not been alone in my bedchambers at night.

“Wh-when I told him that it appeared as though someone was sharing your b-bed, he gave me the saffin and told me to deliver it with your usual water, saying that you would never drink it because it would smell and taste like yavra leaf.” She gazed up at me with wide, tear-filled eyes. “H-he said you wouldn’t be hurt. He said it wasn’t for you.”

“But it was for my guest,” I got out, seething with fury. “Raynir wanted to get rid of my guest.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “B-but I don’t know why. I didn’t dare ask. I told him that I had never even seen them. Just... just heard another voice in your bedchamber one night when I came up here after I noticed strange objects in your room.”

So this vint had been snooping around my quarters at night, while I slept, while Jugs was here, to *spy* for Raynir. To keep an eye on me, to ensure I was still isolated and alone.

And when it became clear that I wasn’t, Raynir had enacted his plan to get rid of whoever was sharing my bed. To eliminate who he believed was influencing me and turning me against the council.

Seis slowly straightened, staring down at Jakir. “How long have you worked here?”

“Fifteen years,” she whispered, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. “I took over this position when my father was let go from the hyll.”

Seis and I shared a look. So she hadn’t been the one who delivered poisoned water to my mother then. But if her father was let go from the same position...

“Your father worked for Moric Valir?” Seis asked in a growl. “In the same position as you?”

“Yes,” she said tearfully. “He was let go when he s-started—He is no longer in his right mind. I

have to care for him.”

Mabs knew what Raynir had done to Jakir’s father then. Or perhaps he had gone insane with guilt from murdering my mother on Raynir’s behalf.

“And you have spied on the Moric for Raynir all that time?” Seis asked in a hard voice. “Since you started working here fifteen years ago?”

“Yes,” she whispered, bowing her head in shame.

It was horrifying to think about—horrifying to realise this had gone on for so long without us realising. But then, before Jugs, I had never done anything that the council wouldn’t approve of. I had, in their eyes, been the perfect Moric—ignorant and vapid and simply living in luxury in my hyll, never truly getting involved in their work.

“Who else?” Seis bit out. “Does anyone else on the staff work for Raynir?”

“N-not that I know of. None of the others who tend to the Moric’s quarters.” She gazed up at us fearfully. “I swear to you. None of them knew what I was doing. I w-would—I would bring up the carafe of saffin water in secret. None of them knew.”

“Why should we believe you?” I asked tersely.

“Please, Moric,” she sobbed. “Forgive me. I would never want to hurt you. He swore you wouldn’t get hurt. H-he—”

“But you were willing to hurt Ju—my guest.” I didn’t care that she was weeping pathetically on the floor. I didn’t care that she had been forced into this by Raynir. She had still condemned Jugs to death. “You were willing to *murder* someone.”

“I didn’t want to,” she whispered, shuddering with horror. “But I was so afraid of what Raynir would do to me or my father if I didn’t obey him. H-he—he owns the house my father lives in, and he threatened to kick him out if I didn’t. And I have never even *seen* who has been... v-visiting you. It was... It was easy to convince myself that it wasn’t really happening.”

Lifting her head, she gazed at me fearfully. “Are they... are they ill?”

“You know they are,” I shouted, trembling with grief and rage. She flinched. “You know they have been drinking it. That’s why you kept delivering it. You knew it was working.”

She buried her face in her hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Your remorse means nothing.” My voice shook. “You have already condemned an innocent person to death.”

“Moric,” Seis murmured, resting a gentle hand on my shoulder as I shuddered, looking away. “Did you speak to anyone else from the council about this?” he barked at Jakir. “Who did you meet with?”

“Just Councillor Raynir,” she whispered. “He would visit me at my father’s home.”

“Did he ever mention any of the other councillors?”

She shook her head silently.

“Why didn’t you just come to us?” I asked hoarsely. “Why not just tell me or Seis what he had asked you to do? Or the seneschal?”

Jakir’s ears twitched wildly as she averted her eyes. “He—he said that if I did, it would be pointless anyway. He said you are... w-weak and in his pocket. And that even if he was found out, h-he would still have ways to ruin my life.”

My face burned with humiliation, but I pushed past it to consider the rest of her words. So Raynir *was* working with someone else. Someone who would be able to continue carrying out his insidious plans even if he ended up in the city gaol.

I was certain it was Councillor Tildr, if not even more of those on the council. We had no idea how many of them were conspiring against me with Raynir. It could have been all of them.

“You will have time to tell us anything else you know in the city gaol.” Seis grasped Jakir’s arm and hauled her to her feet.

She sucked in a panicked breath, eyes darting. “C-can I—May I speak to my father first—”

“No.”

As he led her to the door, she twisted around to stare at me, her eyes streaming with tears. “I’m sorry, Moric. I’m sorry.”

I gazed back at her, the blank, emotionless mask that Councillor Raynir had always pushed me to don firmly in place. But for once, it felt fitting. I was numb. I had no pity. I didn’t believe her remorse. Raynir may have been the one to orchestrate Jugs’ death, but Jakir had been the hand that delivered it.

I hoped she rotted in gaol for the rest of her long life.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“Michael.”

My head jerked up at the sound of my dad’s voice. He was standing at the door to my hospital room, already frowning.

“Hi, Dad,” I croaked, fiddling with the thin sheet draped over my lap.

His gait was stiff as he walked into the room, his coat draped over his arm. He didn’t say anything as he slowly sat in the chair beside the bed, expression grave as he watched me.

“What’s this about, Michael?”

I stared at him. “I—I told you—”

“The doctor just told me you came in here saying you’d been *poisoned*?”

My face flared with heat. When Lor told me what he’d discovered—that someone had been poisoning me—I’d cried for hours, my head buried against his chest. Voice trembling, he’d said that Lilimar would do everything she could to find a cure. That he wasn’t going to give up until I was better.

But they hadn’t been able to find a cure for his mother, so I wasn’t holding out much hope there.

Over the last week since finding out I was sick, I’d tried taking aspirin, ibuprofen, paracetamol. I’d guzzled cough syrup. I’d taken laxatives and ipecac, thinking purging might help. I’d gone back to the doctor and told him I had an ear infection, hoping he would prescribe me antibiotics, but after looking he’d said that I was fine.

I’d tried everything I could think of, foolishly hoping that something simple—something they didn’t have in Lor’s world—would help. Nothing had.

“You said you’d been bitten by a snake, is that right?” Dad continued flatly. “And then when you couldn’t show them the bite mark, you said you’d actually eaten a plant you thought was poisonous. So which is it?”

“It—I—”

“And even when the tests showed absolutely no sign of anything wrong, let alone *poisoning*”—Dad’s face tightened with anger—“he said you still asked for treatment?”

“I—I—”

“You swore to me you weren’t on drugs, Michael,” he gritted out. “What the hell is this? You’re so desperate for drugs you don’t care what they are or how you get them? Or is it a cry for attention?”

“No,” I blurted. “It’s neither. I—I really thought I’d been p-poisoned.”

I knew I had. I just couldn’t tell them how.

“*Why*?” he snapped. “Why the hell would you think that?”

“I don’t—” I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t tell anyone. They wouldn’t believe me. “I don’t know,” I whispered.

“Well, if this was your attempt at getting my attention, you’ve succeeded.” His jaw clenched so hard I saw the muscle tic. “What do you want? Do you want to move back home but you’re too proud to say it? Do you want money?”

“No,” I got out, eyes filling with tears. “I’m s-s-sick. There’s something wrong with me.”

“The doctor said it sounds like panic attacks.” He waved a hand in my direction. “Hives brought on by stress. You need to start dealing with this like a man, Michael. Sort your damn life out.”

“It’s not panic attacks,” I sobbed, but my throat was starting to convulse again, making it hard to speak. “It’s n-n-n-not h-h-hives.” I clutched my neck, struggling to breathe. “I c-can’t—”

Dad shot up out of the chair, fear flaring in his eyes. He strode for the door and stuck his head out, shouting, "Nurse."

He stood back, staring as a nurse bustled in and came to my bedside, urging me to sit up as she rubbed my back.

"Breathe, Michael." She glanced back as Doctor Turner strode into the room. "Another panic attack."

"Th-th-they're n-not—"

"It's alright, Michael." He took my chart from the end of the bed and flipped it open. "You need to calm down. We ran tests and there is absolutely nothing wrong with you. I promise you, you're completely fine."

He glanced over at my dad, murmuring, "Has he always suffered from intense anxiety?"

Dad looked uncomfortable, shifting on his feet. He hadn't spent enough time with me to know.

"Not as far as I'm aware." He looked over at me as the nurse rubbed my back soothingly. "But he recently moved out. I think he's struggling to adjust."

"My sister gets panic attacks too." The nurse smiled at me kindly as I managed to suck in a full breath. "It can feel like you're dying, I know, but you're okay, honey. You're healthy. You're perfectly fine."

"I'm not," I sobbed, hands shaking as I clutched the sheets. "I'm not. Please. Please help me."

Doctor Turner and my dad exchanged a look, before the doctor strode closer and perched on the side of my bed. "Michael, stress manifests in lots of ways. I've seen this many, many times. You said you've been using a steroid cream to treat the hives, right? And taking antihistamines? I think you should keep using both. When the hives go away, I'm certain the other symptoms will fade."

I shook my head weakly, looking away when the nurse helped me lie back down. Tears dripped down my temple and onto the thin pillow, soaking the light blue fabric.

I heard Doctor Turner sigh. "You said you've been having these symptoms for a few weeks, right?"

When I nodded, he continued. "So if you'd ingested poison, something bad would've happened by now. You would've got worse already. I think the best thing for you is to go home and rest. Try and calm down. Keep using the cream and taking antihistamines for the hives, and like I said, I'm confident the other symptoms will fade once the hives are gone and you realise there's nothing wrong with you."

I shouldn't have expected this to work. For a brief moment, I considered telling them the truth. But I knew all that would do was get me sent to the psych ward.

Defeat settled over me like a thick storm cloud, heavy and oppressive. So that was it then. I wouldn't get help here.

I didn't want to be here anymore. If I was going to die, I wanted to be with Lor. And if I had any hope of being cured, I *needed* to be there. Whatever was making me sick had come from his world, which meant any chance of a cure would be there too.

Except they hadn't been able to save Lor's mother.

"Okay," I whispered, all the fight gone from me. "I'll keep using the steroid cream."

Suddenly, it felt like time was running out too fast. This had been my last attempt at trying to stop this thing, because I'd already known it would be next to impossible. I couldn't tell them how I'd been poisoned. I couldn't tell them what I'd been poisoned with. I couldn't tell them anything, because they'd think I was crazy.

There was nothing else I could do.

“Can I be discharged?” I croaked, gazing at the wall as hot tears streamed down my cheeks. I just wanted to be with Lor.

The doctor stood up slowly. “Yes. There’s no reason for you to be here. I assure you, Michael, you’re healthy. You’re going to be fine.”

To my surprise, Dad hung around, awkwardly hovering in the hall as the nurse helped me dress before I was discharged. He followed me out of the hospital and I heard him clear his throat over the sound of rain drizzling down and pattering on the concrete.

“How did you get here?”

“I drove,” I said woodenly. Then I forced myself to look at him, seeing as this might be the last time I ever could. “Thanks for coming. Sorry.”

“I’ll cover the bills,” he said gruffly, shifting from foot to foot, his polished shoes splashing in puddles of rain. “Michael, if you need to move back—”

“I better go.” I took a step back. “I’ve got work tomorrow, so I should probably get some sleep.”

Dad’s face twisted, before he let out a hard breath and schooled his expression. “Alright.”

“Tell Mom I said hi. And Jenny.” I turned and walked away, feeling his eyes on my back. But he didn’t stop me. He didn’t call out.

I got in my car and went home to pack all my clothes, then drove straight to the forest.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Jugs arrived that night through the void and never left.

He wasn't himself, that first night. It was like his body was with me, but his mind was somewhere else. Even when his symptoms flared up in the middle of the night as I clung to him in bed, he hadn't made a sound except for the frantic, uncontrollable clicking of his throat as it spasmed.

I'd felt weaker than ever before, not knowing what to do. Not knowing how to make him feel better. Resisting the urge to beg for forgiveness.

By the following morning, he seemed better. He smiled at me when he woke, and kissed me, and told me that he was staying with me—that was why he'd lugged a big, shiny box on wheels through the secret tunnel with him last night. It was full of his clothes.

I didn't know how to react. Part of me was elated that he wouldn't be leaving—that he would be here with me always. But all it meant was that I would have to sit and watch him get sicker and sicker. All it meant was that our time was running out, and we both knew it.

And I knew why he was staying. I could see it. He'd given up.

When he kissed me again and asked what we would do for the day, his eyes were overly bright—almost manic. His voice was too loud and enthusiastic, like he was pushing down all the fear and despair and grief to ignore it, to not acknowledge it any longer, to pretend what was happening wasn't really happening.

And I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do at all.

Did I go along with it, to try and suck up every last bit of happiness—even if it was forced—that we could get together? Did I help to take his mind off the fact that his time was agonisingly limited? Or did I force him—both of us—to acknowledge it, to process it, to come to terms with the fact that this was it.

The latter seemed selfish. I wasn't the one dying. I would have time to process it all when he was... gone. Even thinking it made me want to weep and never stop. And I knew—I already knew—that I would never be able to process it fully. I would never recover.

But again, I wasn't the one dying.

So I went along with it. I pretended with Jugs that nothing was wrong, that he was here simply because he wanted to be and not because we were desperately trying to cram in every minute together that we could before he was gone forever.

He couldn't leave my room, so I barely did either. I kept my door permanently locked except to let in Seis, Lyri and Gryf, and Lilimar with our food and water. Seis taught me how to clean and lay the fire. Lyri delivered fresh bedding and Jugs teasingly showed me how to make a bed, his eyes sparkling with mirth just as they always used to.

We took long baths together. We played card games with Lyri and Gryf and Seis. We talked for hours in bed. I showed him every artifact in the room, explaining them all in intricate detail. Anything to keep our minds off the truth.

Every night, we came together with almost feverish desperation. And every night, once Jugs' big body had relaxed on top of mine and I could feel his heart thundering against my chest, I wanted to cry. But I never did. Jugs never cried, so I didn't let myself.

We still had the issue of the council and Jakir to deal with, but I couldn't even be grateful for the distraction. I just thought about Jugs, stuck in my room for hours, every time I had to leave. Lyri often went and sat with him, talking and playing cards and doing a good job of cheering him up. They had

grown very close, which eased the ache in my chest just a little. But every time Lyri cheerfully said goodbye to Jugs when I returned to my room, I could see the tightness around my brother's eyes. The grim set of his lips. Jugs was deteriorating rapidly, the symptoms flaring up more and more often, his skin going pale and eyes becoming deeply shadowed. It was all far too familiar for both of us.

I knew Lilimar was working constantly to try and find a cure, but I had no hope. I had seen this before. I'd lived through it before. I knew what was coming.

Seis largely handled the matter of the council himself, coming up with a plan to arrest them all when they arrived for a meeting. We didn't know how many of them were involved, but with Jakir's confession, there was enough cause to protect the Moric's safety by questioning all of them.

The morning we put Seis' plan into action, Lilimar came and sat with Jugs, seeing as Lyri would be accompanying me as the Verin to oversee the arrests of the councillors. I had lent Lilimar my cassette player and tapes, so that she could listen to Jugs' language and learn it quickly, and perhaps find out anything useful that might help him.

Jugs wished me good luck as I kissed him goodbye, but his eyes looked haunted. He had quietly asked me what Councillor Raynir was like one night in bed. His voice was flat and wooden as he wondered about the man who had never seen him, never met him, barely knew of his existence, yet had still sentenced him to death for no reason.

"He is a disgusting, power-hungry monster," I had told him, my voice trembling. "He brings shame on all of us. And I will never forgive myself for letting him do what he has done."

Jugs had shaken his head and told me that it wasn't my fault, but then he'd quickly changed the subject, not wanting to think about it. Not wanting to acknowledge it, as we never did.

Now, he squeezed my hand and gave me a weak smile as I straightened from the bed and tugged down my tunic. I didn't want to leave him, but I had to. I wanted Raynir and whoever else was involved to be brought to justice while Jugs was still here. I wanted to tell him that I had achieved that much, at least, even if I had failed him in all other ways.

Lilimar gave me a tired smile as I turned to leave my bedroom. Her eyes were dull and her skin sallow, hair limp and scraped back. She looked exhausted, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her to rest. I may have had no hope—Jugs may have had no hope—but if I told her to stop looking, to stop trying to find a cure, it would weigh on my conscience forever.

Lyri's soldiers had begun trickling back from across the world with toxic plants for Lilimar to study. Lyri, Gryf and Talimuth had returned with saffin from the Crepis Flats, and Seis had delivered a message to Talimuth for me, thanking them and telling them that I would speak with them soon.

Perhaps if Lilimar had had more time to study the saffin and the other plants, I would have still felt some hope. But there wasn't enough time. I knew there wasn't.

"Alright?" Lyri asked me with a tiny smile as I stepped out of my bedroom and locked the door behind me. I gave him a ghost of a smile back, saying nothing as Seis stepped aside to let us make our way down the corridor.

I already felt like a husk. Pretending that everything was fine when I was with Jugs was draining me, mentally and physically. But how could I complain? How *dare* I even think it? Jugs was *dying*. He was trying his hardest to forget that he had only weeks—days—to live. I couldn't break down in front of him. I couldn't be that selfish.

But I couldn't let myself break down in front of anyone else either, not even Lyri. Because I knew that if I let myself, I wouldn't be able to claw my way back to some semblance of normalcy. I wouldn't be able to stop.

Raynir had taught me one good thing at least—how to hide everything I was feeling, to tamp it all

down and turn my face into an emotionless mask. I did it now as we left my quarters, even when I felt Lyri's hand creep into mine for a brief second to give it a comforting squeeze, just as he had when we were children.

I didn't let myself react, didn't squeeze back. I felt too brittle. I kept my gaze forward as we crossed the great hall to the council chamber, where the councillors were already waiting, having arrived for what they believed would be a typical meeting. Waiting in a nearby room were several of Lyri's soldiers, ready to arrest them all.

Seis opened the door to allow me in, and my gaze instantly fixed on Raynir's wizened face, with his long drooping ears, as he slowly stood from his seat along with the rest of the councillors. I saw his filmy eyes flare with some emotion when Lyri followed me in and stood to the side of the doors as Seis and I made our way to my seat at the head of the table.

"Moric." He inclined his head, but his eyes slid back to Lyri. "And Verin. What an honour that you are overseeing our meeting. I'm afraid we have no matters of warfare or bloodshed to discuss today." He let out a raspy laugh.

Lyri shot him a sardonic, tight-lipped smile as I settled stiffly in my seat. "The day is young, Councillor."

Raynir went still, his eyes darting across the table to Tildr as they all settled back into their seats. I wondered if he was suspicious that we knew anything. I wondered if he had heard that his spy Jakir was now sitting in the city gaol. Or perhaps he had tried to set up a meeting with her, and she had never responded.

"Yes, well." He appeared somewhat flustered as he reached for his ledger and opened it. "Let us hope that our day remains peaceful and free of any such carnage. Today's meeting is to discuss the upcoming shipment arrivals from the—"

"Actually, Councillor." Lyri's voice was carefully light as he opened the door behind him an inch and gestured to someone outside. "There's something else I'd like to discuss with you all today."

Raynir paused. "Oh?"

"Nothing too taxing," he said as soldiers began filing into the room. "Just the murder of the late Moric Valir, the spy you have employed in Moric Lor's staff, and the poison you have been delivering to his quarters."

The room was utterly silent as soldiers took their places behind each councillor, and two stood either side of Seis just behind me.

When Raynir said nothing, Lyri shot him another tight smile. "Well? Which one would you like to tackle first? Shall we take a vote?"

"I—" Raynir's eyes darted to Tildr. "I have no idea what you are talking about, Verin—"

"Shall we start with Moric Valir's slow, painful death from saffin poisoning?" Lyri's face was taut with fury, but his voice remained steady. "Ingested via water, disguised as yavra, and delivered by Jimir Garityni, whose daughter Jakir was—until recently—working in the same position and delivering the same poisoned water to Moric Lor's chambers."

Raynir's drooping ears were twitching wildly, but he forced out a raspy laugh. "Saffin? I have never heard of it. And—and you say someone has been *poisoning* our Moric?" He gestured at me with a trembling hand. "But he is clearly fine, Verin. In fine health. Young and—"

"The poison wasn't for him, was it?" Lyri interrupted flatly.

Raynir struggled to answer at first. "I'm not quite sure what I'm being accused of here, Verin. Delivering poisoned water to the Moric's chambers but *not* with the intention of poisoning the Moric? It sounds rather preposterous." More raspy laughter. No one else joined in, all the other councillors

frozen in their seats.

“Not for the Moric. For his guest.” Lyri waved a hand. “But it doesn’t matter if you’re confused, Councillor. You will have a very long time to get your bearings in the gaol. Perhaps after a little rest you will be able to sort through all these details in your head to share with us. It *must* be quite a muddle, hmm?”

Raynir’s lined face tightened with rage. “I will choose to ignore that blatant disrespect, Verin, in favour of professing my innocence. Poisoning the late, wonderful Moric Valir? Trying to poison our current Moric Lor? Having a *spy*? Just where, exactly, did these notions come from? On what basis are they founded? These are extremely damning accusations you are levelling at me in front of my peers.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Lyri said with forced cheerfulness, giving the nearest soldier a nod. “Your *peers* will be coming with you.”

As one, the soldiers stepped forward to grasp the arms of the councillors. Tildr’s eyes were wide, but she remained silent as she was tugged to her feet and arms were bound behind her back. Councillor Gimir, however, struggled wildly.

“Raynir and Tildr were the masterminds!” he blurted. “We knew none of the details—only that they were dealing with what they deemed an issue.”

“*They*,” Tildr snarled. “We *all* deemed it an issue.”

“We aren’t complicit!” he continued frantically. “We knew nothing of the methods they employed to—We didn’t know! We didn’t know about the poison!”

“You’ll have ample opportunity to tell us everything you *do* know.” Lyri stepped aside as the soldiers started filing out with the bound councillors, most of whom appeared dazed with shock. “Iorn and I will be visiting you at the city gaol shortly.”

“You are going to parade us through the city like this?” Tildr spat, furious gaze darting to Raynir, who had gone completely silent. But when his eyes flicked to me, I could see the frenzied calculation behind them as he tried to think of a way to wriggle out of this.

I stared back in silence, the mask he had taught me to wear firmly in place. But inside, I was seething with grief-fuelled fury. I wanted to *murder* him.

“Yes,” Lyri said with a wide non-grin. “Chins up, councillors. Or you’ll look rather guilty.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

In the days that followed, all the councillors pointed the blame at Raynir and Tildr and each other, but all knew some details about the murder of our mother and the poisoning of my “mysterious companion”.

It had been as Seis guessed. They had murdered my mother because she was too combative, too opposed to their views, and they had waited until I was of an age where I could legitimately take the throne but was still too young to truly grasp my responsibilities.

And when I had finally started to defy them and Raynir’s spy had passed along details of someone sharing my bed with me at night, they had decided to get rid of who they believed was conspiring against them.

None of them really knew about Jugs. Some of them even dared to ask Lyri and Iorn who it was that I had taken as a consort. Obviously, they told them nothing.

Now, I had my entire council—and Jakir and her father—sitting in the city gaol. When I told Jugs, he gave me a weak smile and said he was proud of me, but couldn’t muster up much more enthusiasm than that. It didn’t really change anything. I hadn’t really helped.

It brought me no satisfaction to know Raynir and the other councillors would rot in gaol for the rest of their lives. We didn’t execute our prisoners in Thinir, and their own damning statements against one another were enough to keep them there. But it hadn’t truly achieved anything. Jugs was still going to die.

I visited Lilimar every day, demanding to know of her progress. She said Talimuth’s progenitor had told her about a way to slow the poison’s effects, and she was working on it alongside trying to find a cure. Part of the public gardens had been turned into a display of all the poisonous plants Lyri’s soldiers had procured. There was nowhere else to put such a vast collection, and Lilimar didn’t want it anywhere near her medicinal garden for obvious reasons. Citizens who visited simply thought it was a new, thrilling display—a sign of Thinir’s might and wealth, to have such a frivolous collection of exotic plants from all corners of the world. None of them knew why they were really there.

The days passed with a speed that terrified me. The rash on Jugs’ skin spread further down his back and over his chest. His hands trembled almost constantly. He grew too hot at night, kicking off the covers in feverish sleep, his breaths escaping him in shallow pants. I lay awake beside him most nights, petrified that if I slept, he would be gone by morning.

I was exhausted and constantly on the verge of tears. I knew I should have been thinking about my fiefdom’s future—about forming a new council, about making good on my promise to improve conditions for the salyik—but I couldn’t. I was frozen in place, just waiting. Waiting. Spending every moment I could with Jugs, because he was getting weaker, and sicker, and the light was fading from his eyes more and more every day as he realised, even as he still tried to ignore it.

When he reached for me at night, it was the only time he allowed a hint of his despair to show. In the trembling of his whole body. In the desperate way he kissed me and buried himself inside me. In the hitching breaths against my throat once our bodies began calming, as if he was barely holding himself together.

I was no better. A few times, after he had dropped into feverish sleep, I crept into the secret passageway, curled up in a ball on the cold stone and wept. I felt helpless and useless and like I was doing everything wrong, or not doing enough, but I had no one to talk to. I couldn’t say any of it to Jugs. I wouldn’t allow myself to say any of it to Lyri. He was dealing with his own fresh grief over

our mother's death now that we knew it had been murder and not just illness that had taken her from us.

And this was all my fault. All of it. If I had paid more attention from the beginning, if I had *tried*, perhaps I would have spotted Raynir's deceit earlier. Perhaps I would have realised how truly corrupt the council was. Instead, I had done nothing, and in doing nothing, I had caused Jugs' death.

I remembered thinking, all that time ago when I had freed Jugs from his dungeon cell, that I didn't want him to think I was a monster. But I was. I was a selfish, lazy, ignorant monster who had cajoled Jugs into my life, my world, my bed, and put him in the hands of Raynir and the council.

It was ten days after Jugs came and never left that he finally stopped pretending everything was fine. We were lying in bed, his head on my chest, big body curled into my side, when I felt the hot splash of a tear drip onto my skin.

"I wonder if my parents even realise I'm gone," he whispered. "I don't know if my dad would've tried to call, but surely someone's told them by now. The police or... They will have found my car by now."

I pursed my trembling lips, then dipped my head to kiss his hair.

"I haven't—I haven't really thought about the fact that I'm never going back." His voice wavered, quiet in the dark bedroom, only the crackle of my poorly made fire filling the silence. "That I'll never see any of them again. My mom and dad or—or Jenny, or Anton or April..."

I didn't know what to say. In the end, my chest feeling like it was cracking open, I whispered, "You could still go back. If you want to be with them. But—but then Lilimar..."

"No." He sniffed wetly, more tears dripping onto my skin. "I don't think Lilimar will find anything, but I don't... I don't think I'm physically strong enough to go back now anyway. I can't even"—his voice hitched—"I can't even walk to the bathroom anymore without needing to rest."

My chin wobbled as I stared up at the canopy, tears dripping silently down my temples to soak the pillow beneath me.

"She'll find something," I got out, even though I didn't believe it either. "She will, Jugs."

He let out a low sob, but lifted his head to stare at me with tear-filled eyes. "She won't. Not in time. I can feel it... I can feel something happening." A tear rolled down his flushed cheek as his mouth trembled. "I'm scared, Lor."

"No," I choked out, clutching his face. "She will find something. She will. I w-won't let anything happen to you. Please don't be scared, Jugs." The words escaped me on a weak sob that I couldn't contain. "Please. I won't let it happen. I won't—"

"You can't stop it, Lor." He covered my hand on his cheek with his own. "It's not your fault."

"Yes it is," I wept, letting go of him to cover my face. "Yes it is."

"No, it isn't." He tugged my hands away, sniffing as resolve settled in his crystal blue eyes. "When I'm gone, I don't want you to blame yourself for this. It's *not your fault*. P-please don't—please don't feel guilty. Please don't—Just make sure you're happy, okay? Enjoy your life. Don't waste it."

He was crying, barely able to get the words out, but he leaned in and kissed my cheek.

"I love you," he said tearfully. "I want you to be happy after this."

"I won't be happy without you," I sobbed. "I won't be able to bear it."

"Yes you will." His mouth tipped into a wobbly smile even as tears continued to stream down his cheeks. "You've survived worse than this. Much worse. I'm just... some weird dude from another world who fell into your big palace one day."

"No," I choked, clutching his hand to press my mouth to his palm. "You are everything to me. I won't survive it, not as I am now. I won't." Releasing his hand, I splayed my trembling fingers over

his chest. “My heart is in here now. Not with me. I will be empty without you.”

“Don’t say that,” he croaked. “You’ll still have so much. Your brother and Seis and Gryf and Lilimar... You wanted to make all those changes here, right? You—you have work to do.” He gave me a weak, tearful smile. “I’m super proud of you. You’re so brave.”

“I’m not brave,” I wept.

“Yes, you are.” He gathered me into his arms and rolled us onto our sides. “You’re so brave, and clever, and you’re gonna help all those people you told me about, right? You’re gonna do so much good.”

“I don’t think I can,” I sobbed. “I’m not strong enough. I won’t be strong enough.”

“Yes you *will*.” He gave me a firm kiss, his lips tasting of salt. “And maybe you can put that beer can next to that old seer’s eyeballs on the shelf, and you can come in here and tell me what you’ve done each day.”

“But you won’t really be here.” I was crying so hard I could barely speak anymore.

“Maybe I will be, in a way,” he croaked. “Maybe she had it right. Maybe I’ll still be watching over you in some way. Because I only want to be here, Lor.” He cupped my cheek, hand quaking. “Even if I wasn’t sick, I’d only want to be here. With you. I just... I w-wish we’d had a bit more time.”

“Jugs,” I sobbed, feeling like I was going to be sick.

“But it’s okay,” he continued, determination edging into his unsteady voice. “Life doesn’t always work out the way you want it to. But at least we had a little time together, right? At least... at least we managed to meet, against all the odds. I’d say we did pretty well.”

I couldn’t answer, weeping uncontrollably, snot and tears soaking the pillow under my head. I felt Jugs gently thumb my wet cheek before he shifted closer. His face looked calmer now, like he had finally accepted his fate. It only made me cry harder.

He shouldn’t have to. He’s so young. He shouldn’t have to accept the fact that he’s going to die. It’s not fair.

“I haven’t really achieved much, but making the decision to come back here, to meet you properly, is the thing I’m most proud of in my life,” he told me quietly. “I love you, Lor. I don’t regret any of it. And that... that helps. It helps me accept what”—his breath shuddered out of him—“what’s going to happen. It was all worth it. I love you.”

They weren’t words that vints generally said, but I could hear—and feel—the meaning behind them. They were special. So I got enough control over myself to whisper back, “I love you, Jugs.”

He smiled, leaning in to kiss me. My lips clung to his, trembling, not willing to let go.

“And we still have a bit more time,” he said as he pulled back, smoothing my hair from my damp face. “Let’s do something fun tomorrow. Well, as fun as it can get in this room.” He chuckled.

“We’ll do whatever you want,” I whispered, twining our fingers together on the pillow between us and kissing his knuckles. “Anything. We will spend the whole day together.”

He smiled back drowsily, eyes already slipping shut, face lined with exhaustion after his emotional onslaught. “Sounds nice.”

The next morning, he didn’t wake up.

CHAPTER FIFTY

I ran faster than I ever had in my life through the hyll.

I was vaguely aware of passing Seis in the great hall, hearing him shout for me, his heavy footsteps thudding behind me as I ran and ran.

When I burst into Lilimar's chamber, she was already at her desk despite the early hour. Her head snapped up, showing me the sallowness around her eyes that told me she hadn't slept yet.

But I didn't care.

"He won't wake up," I got out just as Seis pushed open the door behind me. "He won't wake up."

Lilimar scrambled up, grabbing several items from her desk before striding to the door without a word. My knees buckled as I followed her, and only Seis' gentle grip around my arm kept me upright.

The moment Lilimar started running, I tore my arm free and took off behind her. I heard Seis grit out a curse and follow, and the staff members we passed stared in shock at our frantic dash through the hyll.

It felt like my heart was about to burst by the time we made it to the bedroom. I almost doubled over at the sight of Jugs on the bed, as still as he'd been when I woke up beside him. When I had sleepily shifted closer, my eyes still shut as I kissed his shoulder before almost drifting back off. Until something had made my heart lurch in my chest, a deep instinct telling me something was wrong. He had been too still. His chest rising far, far too slowly.

Lilimar knelt on the bed and shoved down the covers to expose his chest. I shuddered in horror at the sight of the pale rash now covering his entire front, tiny specks of white marring the pinkish hue of his skin.

Placing the narrow, tapered cone she used to detect heartbeats on his chest, Lilimar pressed her ear to the end. "Slow, but steady."

Lifting her head, she hovered a long-fingered hand over Jugs' mouth and nose. "He is breathing very, very slowly." Placing her hand carefully on his chest, she paused for a long moment. "But there is no death rattle."

Seis was holding me up again, my body shaking so hard I couldn't support myself. Lilimar looked over at me, her eyes grim but determined.

"This happened with your mother. She fell unconscious first."

"I know that," I snapped tearfully. Of course I knew that. I would never forget the days and days spent at her bedside, her body still, the life slowly draining from her.

"This means we still have time, Lor." She looked at Jugs. "We need to get him to my chamber."

"I can carry him." Seis cautiously let go of me and walked to the bed as Lilimar stood and pulled back the covers.

Jugs' nude body looked so small in Seis' arms. He cradled him gently to his chest, Jugs' head flopping lifelessly onto his shoulder. A hoarse sound tore from my throat, hands fisting the bottom of my nightshirt.

I felt useless as Lilimar carefully draped a sheet over Jugs, hiding him from view, just the tip of his proud nose and a shock of golden hair visible against Seis' front. I stumbled after them as they left the room, my legs shaking so badly I could barely walk.

Lilimar strode ahead and shouted at the guards posted at my door to clear the hallways. They rushed off to follow the order, but I didn't know if they achieved it. I was aware of nothing as I stumbled behind Seis. Nothing but the flash of golden hair under the blanket, the lifeless stillness of

the lump in Seis' arms.

I had already said my last words to Jugs. When the realisation hit me, I almost fell to my knees. Grief made it hard to breathe, my chest tightening and tightening until it felt like my ribs would burst through my skin.

When we reached Lilimar's chambers, she directed Seis through a door that I knew led to the Moric's private resting chamber—the place reserved for a Moric to recuperate during illness or after surgery. I knew the room well, because it was where Mama had been in her final days.

I barely noticed the strange structure now dominating the centre of the room. The bed Mama had died in was still tucked into the corner near the fireplace. Wide, bright windows let in the sunlight, which winked off the strange, huge glass case on a low stone pedestal.

Lilimar directed Seis to lower Jugs into it. The bottom was thickly lined with furs and woven blankets, and the top of the case swung back as Lilimar opened it, allowing Seis to gently place Jugs' still body within.

"What is that?" I burst out fearfully. "What are you doing to him?"

"This is what's going to keep him alive while I keep looking for a cure." Lilimar's voice was tight and brisk with concentration as she lowered the lid of the case and pulled up two heavy metal hinges that seemed to seal it until it was airtight.

"N-no—Wait—" I rushed forward. I hadn't even got to touch him one last time. I just needed to touch him, while his skin was still warm, while his heart was still beating, no matter how slowly. I needed—

"It is not worth the risk to wait even a second, Lor. I'm sorry." Lilimar was busy pulling over a strange contraption that looked almost like a distiller. A huge glass vat of pale green liquid sat over an unlit flame, and connected to the container was a thin glass tube that snaked directly into the case Jugs now rested in.

"Tell me what it is," I bit out, my voice near hysterical. "Tell me what you are doing to him."

"This is what Talimor showed me," she said, referring to Talimuth's progenitor, who she had visited to see if they knew any more about a cure or a way to slow the poison's effects. "This will place his body into a... a deep sleep of sorts. But it will also slow everything completely down—his body's aging, his organs. Even the growth of his hair and nails. But most importantly, it will slow down the effects of the poison ravaging his system."

She finally stopped bustling around and turned to face me, giving me a sad smile. "Essentially, we're preserving Jugs until we can cure him."

"P-preserving him?" My horrified gaze shot back to Jugs, who looked so small in that horrible glass box. "Like a... Like a *specimen*?"

"No," she said patiently, turning back to the distiller and lighting the fire under the vat of green liquid. "This gives us more time. As much time as we need."

"This is going to keep Jugs *alive*, Lor." Seis gently squeezed my shoulders, as if he was trying to get it to sink in. "He will remain alive while Lilimar searches for a cure."

My mouth trembled as I stared at Jugs in that glass box. Untouchable. Unconscious.

"B-but he's... he's not really alive, is he," I croaked, even as a part of me knew I was being unfair. A brat. This was better than I could have hoped for. But at the same time... "He's not really here. I can't... I can't speak to him. I can't even *touch* him."

"He *is* here," Lilimar said firmly. "More here than he would be if the poison simply killed him."

I flinched, the realisation finally sinking into the pit of my stomach like a heavy stone. They were both right. This was... something. Jugs wasn't going to die. Not yet. We had time.

We still had time.

My legs trembling wildly, I walked closer to the glass box. The sheet was still draped over Jugs' nude body, up to his shoulders. His eyes were closed, their crystal blue hidden forever. His pink lips were parted slightly, but the sheet barely moved with his agonisingly slow breaths.

My earring winked in his ear, making a weak sob bubble up my throat. I pressed my fingertips to the glass, tears streaming down my cheeks. At least... at least a part of me was in there with him. I hoped he remembered, wherever his mind now was—if it was even awake enough to think. I hoped he knew how much he meant to me. How happy he had made me.

How much I loved him, as he had told me just hours before he slipped into this awful sleep.

It was painful to look at him, but I forced myself to. I forced myself to take in every beautiful feature. His proud nose and long lashes and full lips. His sweet ears and soft golden mane.

Shuddering with grief, I finally turned from the glass case to see Seis and Lilimar watching me, expressions of concern and pity on both their faces.

Then Lilimar gave me a sad smile and nodded to the distiller. "It is already working. I promise you, Lor, this will keep him alive. It will even keep him as healthy as he now is—his muscles won't wither, his skin will stay young and fresh. His organs won't deteriorate. This is a far, far better situation than with your mother."

I looked over to see the green liquid in the distiller turning into steam, which travelled through the glass tube and into Jugs' case. The air within grew hazy and thick, partially obscuring him from view. Moisture dotted the inside of it and settled over his skin like dew.

I took a deep, shaky breath, choosing to trust Lilimar. I had to. I had nothing else.

Taking a step closer to her, I opened my dry lips and croaked, "Please."

Sinking to my knees, I clutched her hand, pressing my forehead to the back of it. It was something the Moric should never, ever do—the lowliest form of supplication. "Please don't let him be taken from me. Please."

"I will do everything I can, Moric," she said thickly, squeezing my shaking fingers.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

One month.

It felt like decades. Centuries. I hardly moved from my seat beside Jugs' glass case, leaving only to use the waterchamber and sleep for a few restless hours in the bed in the corner of the room.

Lilimar brought me food and water that I could barely bring myself to consume. Seis stood guard by the door, often remaining silent, sometimes trying to speak to me even though I never answered. Lyri visited often, sometimes with Gryf, sometimes alone, trying to get me to wash or sleep in my own bed. Trying to get me to go for walks or join him for dinner or do *anything* but keep my vigil beside Jugs' resting place. I refused.

At first, I'd been convinced that the steam pumping into his case wouldn't be enough to keep him alive. That I would see his skin start turning grey and lifeless, his body withering to nothing. But somehow, it did. He truly looked like he was in nothing more than a deep sleep, calm and peaceful and so beautiful my chest felt split open.

When Seis left for the night and the hyll fell silent, I would speak to him. I didn't know if he could hear me, wherever his mind was, but I wanted him to know he wasn't alone. Was he aware? Was he scared? Was he trapped inside his own mind, terrified and unable to express it? The thought threatened to destroy me completely. So I spoke to him. I told him lies. That Lilimar nearly had a cure. That he would be back with me soon.

I told him truths too. That I missed him so much I felt empty, carved out, a hollow shell with nothing left inside. That I would give anything just to touch him, to feel his warm skin against my fingertips, to hear his voice, to breathe him in and bury myself in his arms and never let go.

I talked about everything we would do when he woke up, even though I didn't believe it would happen. I told him we would explore the city—and further, if he wanted to. My whole fiefdom. The entire world. I told him about all the food I wanted him to try, about the gardens and the plants I wanted to show him, about all the places in the hyll I wanted him to see.

After a month of doing nothing but that, Lyri arrived one morning and refused to leave, even when I ignored his pleas for me to do *anything* else.

"Lor, this has gone on long enough."

I said nothing, not even lifting my head. I couldn't tear my eyes from the painfully slow movements of Jugs' chest, petrified that the moment I did, it would stop moving completely.

"Lor, you cannot just sit here forever." Lyri's voice took on a desperate note.

"Why not?" My own voice was lifeless.

"You have a fiefdom to run," he said through clenched teeth. "You have promises to keep. You have people who miss you. *I* miss you," he choked out. "I miss you, Lor. Please. Just please step away for a few hours at least. Jugs will still be here when you come back this evening."

"No," I rasped. "I can't."

I heard Lyri exhale sharply, then felt his hand wrap around my upper arm and tug me out of my chair. "Yes, you can, and you have to. You're the Moric, Lor. Your fiefdom has been without a council for over a *month*. The rest of the world hasn't stopped. The people here need you. You have responsibilities."

"I'll abdicate," I mumbled, still staring down at Jugs. "You can be Moric. You'll be better at it than me."

"No, Lor." Lyri tugged me away from the glass case, and even though I didn't want to step away

from it, my body was too drained and lifeless to resist him. “You’re my brother, and I would do anything for you, but neither of us would benefit if I just took all your problems from you. You need to *deal* with this.”

He turned me to face him, hands settling on my shoulders, eyes imploring. “You had plans. You wanted to make a difference. You still can. Jugs would want you to. He wouldn’t want you to waste away like this.”

I flinched, looking away. “Don’t.”

“Jugs was proud of you.” His voice was harder, firmer. “He told me. He was so proud of you, and he asked me to make sure you didn’t stop trying after he was—g-gone.”

“Don’t,” I croaked again, shuddering with grief as my chin wobbled.

“I’m sorry,” Lyri said gently, squeezing my shoulders. “I know it hurts, but he’s still here. There’s still hope. And in the meantime, you *have* to do your job. You have to actually *live*, Lor.”

I reached up and clutched his sleeve, shaking my head as a tear rolled down my cheek. “I don’t think I can.”

“Yes you can. You’re stronger than you think you are.” He turned and led me to the door, where Seis was watching in silence, his eyes solemn. “You need to bathe and eat a proper meal, and then we will start work. There is a lot to do.”

I peered back desperately at Jugs, but he was barely visible from this distance thanks to the steam filling his glass case. “I don’t want to leave him—”

“He is safe. He will still be here later. Lilimar will watch over him,” Lyri said as we entered Lilimar’s main chamber. She looked up from her workbench, books and toxic plant specimens in glass containers strewn over its surface. Her face was drawn with exhaustion, eyes deeply shadowed, but she gave us a small smile and a nod.

“The steam is working, Lor,” she told me, voice scratchy. “He is stable. He’s fine.”

She came in often to check on him and replace the huge vat of green liquid over the fire, keeping up a constant supply of the steam that poured into Jugs’ case.

“Come and get me,” I told her hoarsely, allowing Lyri to lead me toward the door as Seis followed. “If anything changes at all, come and find me immediately.”

“Of course, Moric.”

I didn’t even have the energy to correct her. I walked like I was in a trance as Lyri led me through the hyll to my quarters and into my waterchamber. I shuddered at the sight of my bed as we passed it, but I could see the sheets had been changed. Through the archway into the dressing room, Jugs’ suitcase was tucked neatly against a wall.

Lyri ran me a bath, then told me he would wait outside and left the room. I washed mechanically, my skin feeling rough and dry from lack of care, my hair lank and oily until I scrubbed it so hard my scalp stung.

After climbing out of the bath, I stared at myself in the mirror as I dried off. My face was a blank mask. More lifeless than Jugs’, who looked as though he was simply in a deep, peaceful sleep.

My gaze trailed over his golden hoop winking in my ear, then up to the ridiculous Moric beads braided into my hair. My hand tightened around the drying cloth. I hated them. They symbolised everything that had been taken from me. My life. My freedom. My mother. Jugs.

Dropping the cloth, I pulled open a drawer with trembling hands. Locating a sharp pair of shears meant for only trimming the ends of my long hair, I looked back at myself in the mirror and let out a deep breath. Then I raised the shears to the side of my head and stared as they hovered over the beaded braid in front of my ear. My hand trembled. I remembered the beads gleaming in Mama’s hair.

I remembered her telling me before how beautiful I would look with them in mine, how she wished she would be able to see it.

I couldn't do it. Instead, my hand shifted, and I watched vacantly as I cut off a fat hunk of hair just behind the braid.

Once I started, I couldn't stop. I hacked at the sides of my head, and I didn't stop until the sides of my scalp had nothing but ugly, uneven tufts of grey hair, the rest still long and trailing down my back. Dropping the shears onto the counter, I located a sharp shaving blade and carefully scraped it behind my ears until all the hair was gone.

Trembling all over, I finally stopped and stared at myself in the mirror. The braids were all still there, piled up on the top of my head in their intricate style with the two still hanging in front of my ears. But the sides of my head were now bare. It reminded me of Jugs' hair, with his wild mane and short sides.

It made me feel closer to him.

I didn't take any off the back, keeping it a long mane of hair across the middle of my head that trailed down my spine. A bit like the bareghs' manes too. If Raynir had seen this, he might have expired with outrage.

My jaw clenched, eyes flashing with the first hint of emotion—pure, all-encompassing rage. I *wanted* him to see me. I wanted him to see that he couldn't control me anymore. I wanted him to know that he was powerless, that all his plans had finally been foiled, even if it was too late to truly matter.

I rubbed the loose strands off my shoulders and chest with the cloth, then swept up the long hunks of hair all over the floor in silence. Lyri had left some clothes for me, and as I redressed, a new fire burned in me.

If I let myself stagnate, it would have all been for nothing. The council had poisoned Mama to keep this fiefdom under their control. They had poisoned Jugs for the same thing. If I did nothing, nothing would change in Thinir. I would still be the weak, useless Moric they had tried so hard to keep me.

Lyri turned when I opened the door, giving me a small smile until it dropped from his face, replaced by utter shock. I said nothing, walking past him and into my dressing room to get a jacket. As I shrugged it on over my tunic, he came in and cleared his throat.

"It looks nice," he said quietly. "It looks like Jugs' hair."

I gave a short nod, fiddling with my jacket cuffs for something to do. Lyri gently took my arm and led me out of the bedchambers, across the hall to the dining room. Seis followed us in but said nothing.

"Seis, please join us," Lyri said, nodding at the third seat with a bowl in front of it.

"Thank you," he said quietly, sitting down as Lyri directed me to my seat before retreating to his own opposite.

"Hungry?" he asked lightly.

"No."

"Just try eating a little." He nodded at the big bowl of ude in front of me. "I asked cook to make it. Please. Just a little. For me."

Exhaling quietly, I picked up my spoon and dragged it through the thick sludge. Steam wafted from it, a blend of the ude's bland scent and that of the stewed wanuk meat hitting my nose. Neither Lyri nor Seis moved, both watching carefully as I ate a mouthful in silence.

They only picked up their own spoons once I'd eaten a few more. None of us spoke while we ate, and when Seis poured me a cup of molt tea, I gave him a nod of thanks and sipped it.

The hollow cavern of my stomach felt a little better as I scraped the bowl clean. Neither Lyri nor Seis commented on the fact that I'd managed to eat all of it. Seis just poured me more tea as they ate their own meals in silence.

"Right," Lyri said cheerfully after several minutes, pushing his bowl away. "Now that the basics are taken care of, how about we tackle one other thing today? And then something else tomorrow?"

I sighed. "Alright."

"The most important thing to do is form a new council. We can't go much longer without one. Queries from citizens are piling up, decisions are outstanding. Everyone in the city knows that your former council are sitting in gaol cells. We need to form a new one quickly so the hyll doesn't appear weak."

I don't care about the hyll appearing weak, I wanted to say, but then I pictured Raynir's smug, wizened face again. The fire in my belly returned, burning hotter now that I felt marginally more alive.

Sitting up, I nodded and gulped more tea. "Alright."

"You already had some ideas, didn't you, Lor?" Seis said with a kind smile, before standing up to retrieve something from the sideboard. There were no carafes of water waiting there this morning, I noticed vacantly.

He sat back down and slid my ledger toward me—the one with all my notes and plans to improve conditions for the salyik population. There were other notes in there, ones that had felt impossible to even attempt to tackle at the time—an idea to widen the council, to bring in other members who represented more than just the vint population in Thinir.

"Did you? That's good." Lyri smiled at me, then nodded at the ledger. "Let's hear them, old sport."

Exhaling, I opened the ledger to the right page. My voice was still wooden when I spoke, even though it was slowly beginning to sink in that I *could* actually achieve what I wanted to now. There was no Raynir or council of angry old vints controlling my actions. Controlling *my* fiefdom.

"I had an idea to appoint new councillors who represented each of the populations in Thinir," I said quietly. "It has always just been vints on the council, which isn't fair. Vints aren't the only ones who live here."

Lyri nodded, sipping his tea. "Yes, quite right. Our needs aren't the same as some of the other citizens here. They all deserve a seat at the table."

I licked my lips, feeling a bit more confident with Lyri's support. "After meeting Talimuth, I wondered if they might want to become a councillor for the salyik."

"I think that would be a fine choice, Lor," Seis said. "They were chosen as the representative for their people already, which means the salyik trust them to act in their best interests. And their understanding and discretion over what happened here when they came for their meeting... They seem very trustworthy. Only their progenitor knows about Jugs and the poisoning, and that is because Talimor has been helping Lilimar."

"Alright, so we approach Talimuth." Lyri nodded. "Do you have any other ideas for new councillors, Lor?"

"I think you and Iorn should both have seats at the table," I said quietly, my voice still hoarse but gaining strength. "And Seis, to represent the baregh population."

He gave me a tiny smile. "I'd be honoured."

"And the port master," I continued, "who knows Thinir's sea imports and exports better than anyone else."

Lyri nodded. "Excellent idea."

“Some representatives for the different businesses in the city,” I added, more emboldened now. “Someone who understands the tourism trade and all our innes. Others who have expertise in running the theatres, taverns, food and clothing shops. That way we hear from them directly—they can tell us what those businesses need to thrive.”

Lyri grinned at me and my chest went tight when I saw the pride in his eyes. “Perfect.”

“I’m afraid I don’t personally know anyone suited to represent the usho population in Thinir...” I admitted, but Lyri shook his head.

“Don’t worry about that. Gryf and I can come up with some ideas. Usho run many of the businesses in the city, so they will be properly represented at the table anyway. But I can think of a few enterprising young usho who would do well at acting in the best interests of their people.”

“Alright.” I fiddled with the corner of the page, hesitantly eyeing Lyri and Seis. “So you... you think those are good ideas?”

“They are excellent ideas, Lor,” Lyri declared. “This is exactly what this city needs to wash away the stain of Raynir and the last council. A fresh start. A council where *everyone* is represented. A forum for all voices to be heard.”

“But what if...” I flushed. “What if they don’t want to join? What if they aren’t interested?”

“They will be,” Seis said. “But if any of them aren’t, we will find others.”

“Would you like Gryf and me to go into town and approach them all with the offer?” Lyri asked, draining the last of his tea.

I stared down at my ledger. Part of me wanted to say yes, so I could retreat back to Jugs’ bedside. But... this felt like something I should do myself. This felt significant.

And if Jugs was here, I knew he would say how proud he was of me if I did it myself.

“We will go.” I sat up straighter and carefully closed my ledger. “The four of us.”

Seis gave me a tiny grin, but said, “It’ll be more than four, Lor. You’ll need a proper retinue of guards if you are to go into town yourself.”

I managed to give him a tiny smile back. “Alright, Seis.”

He pushed back his seat and rose to his full, towering height. “I will go and fetch Gryf and several other guards.”

“Cheers, old sport.” Lyri leaned forward eagerly as Seis left the room. “We should go for a drink as well. Or visit the docks just for a walk. See if Haknir’s got any fried posk for us.”

I tried to smile, but a throb of grief made my shoulders sag again. It was one thing to force myself to do my duties, but it was another to act like everything was fine. To attempt to *enjoy* myself.

But Lyri’s expression was filled with such fragile hope that I couldn’t bring myself to say no. He had told me that he missed me. Our bond was so close that sometimes, over the years, it had seemed like we could even feel each other’s emotions. We always knew instinctively when the other was upset or something was wrong.

I remembered Jugs’ words, some of the last he said to me, about what I would still have once he was gone. My brother. Seis and Gryf and Lilimar. He had tried so hard to take away my guilt, even as his body had been failing him. And he had asked me to put that drinking vessel on the shelf and talk to it like it was him—tell him what I had achieved each day.

Well, I still could. I could tell *him*, not an empty drinking vessel in his place. I wanted him to be proud of me, if he could still hear me. I wanted to tell him that I *was* doing good things, that I hadn’t let Raynir and the old council win.

And if he ever did wake up, I wanted him to wake up in a world that was better. Kinder than the one that had treated him so cruelly, with empowered old crones snatching his young life away and

thinking of him as nothing but a problem to be dealt with.

I stood up, clutching my ledger, and nodded at Lyri. The fiery urge—one I hadn't felt for years, since I was a boy, before the beads had been wound into my hair—flared hot in my belly.

I was going to make Jugs proud of me, even if he wasn't here to see it.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

We visited the salyik district first, the promise I had made to Talimuth over a month ago, to speak with them again about their people's wellbeing, reverberating in my skull.

The salyik population lived in the lowest part of the city, closest to the port, where everything was loud and busy and overcrowded, the air tinged with the sharp, salty smells of fresh catches from the sea and the cloying haze of the herb that most dock workers smoked in pipes and rolled leaves.

I was jumpy and incredibly nervous. The walk through the entire city had been nerve-wracking, even though those we passed merely dipped into deep bows at the sight of me before whispering among themselves as they watched our procession. Lyri walked by my side, Seis and Gryf just behind and six more guards fanned out around us, watching keenly.

But at the same time, the ache in my chest had eased, just a little. The day was beautiful, the sky an unbroken pale pink, the air balmy and warm. I passed bakeries and apothecaries I had only vague memories of visiting as a boy, and all the other places I had never been—the smaller theatres that housed the bawdy shows, taverns with patrons already sitting outside. Tiny little buildings crammed one on top of the other in the staggered streets, eating establishments with pretty metal chairs and tables arranged on the narrow pavements out front.

Homes stretched up above the businesses on street level, all packed close together, lines of washed clothes drying on ropes strung between opposite windows. Usho and vints peered out of their upper windows to watch me go past, some holding squalling babies and bouncing them excitedly on their hips, others narrowing their eyes as they puffed on pipes and muttered about the gaudy display of wealth.

I had always loved Thinir, and I had always been grateful to live here, in this quiet but prosperous corner of the world. But I had never truly considered all the *other* people living here. My subjects. The people who were directly affected by the decisions I allowed the council to make.

And none more so than the salyik, whose district was a marked difference to the rest of the city. The houses grew smaller and shabbier the closer we got to the heart of it. There was still washing strung up from windows, but the clothes and sheets looked older, some so patched up I couldn't tell what the original pattern had even been.

The air grew heavier and more sombre. The salyik were a tall and willowy people, but they ducked their heads and hunched over when they saw me, averting their eyes. Many fled into their homes and shops when they saw us approaching, and all quiet conversations ceased as we passed.

The stone streets here were cracked and littered with weeds. Many of the buildings had huge cracks down them, some so wide I could see the fabric that had been pinned up inside in an attempt to keep out the chill. Windows were splintered but immaculately clean. Pots of plants and flowers lined the fronts of run-down old houses, little splashes of colourful cheer amidst all the poverty and terrible conditions.

The salyik themselves, too, were all dressed in clean, well-kept clothes—even the robes that had been patched up or looked too small for the tall frames they covered. An amalgamation of unpleasant smells made the air too warm and humid, coming from the nearby docks and the open grates that led to the sewage system under the city. But other scents came from the shop fronts we passed, smoky incense and floral herbs burning in thick bundles to try and disguise the more unsavoury ones.

Every single shop was tiny—too tiny for all the wares crammed in. The walkways were narrow and the wooden shelves sagged under the weight of the goods. The tiny market stalls in the district

square were half falling down, held together by haphazard nails and bits of wood, making the items they displayed far less appealing.

Not that they had any customers other than their own neighbours. No other Thinir citizens came here, and the salyik hadn't been allowed to rent shop or market space in the main part of the city. Sometimes they hovered by the city gates and around the edges of the market, trying to sell things to tourists, but they had always been escorted away by the city guards on the orders of the council.

I clenched my jaw in anger, then forced myself to relax it so I could smile at those we passed. None of them smiled back, some of them looking wary, others downright terrified by my presence here. Like they all thought I was here to do something awful—make their lives even worse.

Seis led us to Talimuth's address, and my heart sank when I saw the cracked front of the tiny house and heard a cacophony of voices through the open windows. How many people lived here? The house was tall and very narrow, nestled between a run-down apothecary and a dirty alleyway filled with rotting old crates that stank of the sea.

I remembered Talimuth sitting in my gaudy dining room, so poised and quietly refined, their white hair neatly pinned back and their robes spotless. Spoiled, privileged brat that I was, I would have never pictured this as the home they returned to after our awful meeting that day.

As the guards took up spots around us and went still, Seis knocked on the wonky door before stepping back so that I was in front. A few moments later, a tall salyik answered the door. Their eyes flared for a split second at the sight of me, but other than that they showed no emotion as they dipped into a slight bow.

"Moric." Their purple eyes slid over to Lyri. "Verin."

I cleared my throat and tried to keep the nerves out of my voice. "Good morning. Apologies for disturbing you, but I was hoping that Talimuth would do me the honour of speaking with me."

They watched me in silence, head cocking slightly at the word "honour". Then they pursed their narrow lips before nodding once. "Would you like to come in?"

"Thank you." I inclined my head and stepped forward, Lyri following behind. "Is it alright if my brother joins me?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid there isn't much room."

"That's fine," I said quickly. "The others will wait outside."

"Moric—" Seis began uneasily, but I turned and cut him off with a quick smile.

"If you'll wait here please, Seis."

He pursed his lips but gave a nod, exchanging a look with Gryf as they settled on either side of the door.

Lyri and I followed the salyik inside in silence. The air in here was warm and slightly musty from too many bodies packed close together. The front door led to a narrow corridor with a staircase directly in front and one door to the right, which the salyik led us through.

I could already see that there were only two rooms on this floor. We were in what appeared to be the main room of the house, with a fire and eating area to one side, a big table crammed into another corner. But there were beds in here as well—no, not beds. Thin sleeping mats on the floor, some rolled up and tucked neatly away, others being used by salyik who sat talking quietly, but fell silent when they saw us.

Through a doorless archway was the second room, and I could see a cupboard overflowing with bottles and jars, another hearth, and the very edge of a proper bed with a wooden frame.

The salyik who'd shown us in cleared their throat. "I'll fetch Talimuth."

They vanished up the stairs. Lyri and I stood in silence, the weight of the other salyiks' eyes on my

face. They didn't say a word, ducking their heads as if they wanted to be invisible.

Eventually, Lyri cleared his throat and spoke. "Apologies for invading your home." He chuckled, then hesitantly added, "Are you... Talimuth's family?"

None of them answered, two of them exchanging a wary look. I heard Lyri exhale quietly a second before calm, steady footsteps sounded on the staircase. A moment later, Talimuth appeared.

"Moric." They nodded at me, then Lyri. "Verin."

I smiled at them. "Good morning, Talimuth. I... I apologise for the delay in coming to speak with you—"

"No matter." Their voice and face were both as emotionless as ever. "I understand things have been... difficult."

Pain stabbed through my chest at the reminder, but I kept the small smile plastered on my face. "Yes. Well, I'm here today with a... proposal, of sorts. Is there... is there somewhere that perhaps we can talk?"

I flushed with embarrassment as I asked, my ears twitching. I doubted there was a single room in this house without at least one or two salyik occupying it.

Talimuth paused, their eyes sliding over to the three salyik sitting on their bedrolls. Without a word, they all got up and left in silence, one of them going upstairs and the two others leaving through the front door.

"I'm sorry," I said, flustered. "I didn't mean to make them leave—"

"It's fine, Moric." Talimuth glided to the pocked dining table and pulled out a chair. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, no, thank you." I sat and clasped my hands together on my lap as Lyri settled into the seat beside me. Once Talimuth was sitting down opposite, their spine straight and posture poised, I licked my lips nervously. "Talimuth, you have probably heard about the... events that transpired a month ago."

They nodded once. "You mean your entire council getting locked up in gaol."

"Yes," I said tightly. "That. It came to light that they—Councillor Raynir, in particular—were behind the poisoned water you detected in my dining room."

They gave another nod, showing no reaction to my words. "Intended for your... Jugs."

"Yes," I croaked, and felt Lyri briefly squeeze my elbow. "I want to thank you for all your help in... in finding out what was being done to him. And your progenitor's help with Lilimar."

After a moment of silence, they asked, "May I ask what happened to Jugs?"

The pain made it hard to breathe. It rendered me silent and made my shoulders hunch forward in a fruitless attempt to alleviate the ache in my chest.

Lyri answered instead. "The remedy your progenitor showed Lilimar is keeping him alive while she continues searching for a cure."

"That's something, at least," Talimuth said flatly, but their voice softened the tiniest amount when they added, "I'm sorry we couldn't help more."

"No." I shook my head, sitting up straight again. "You have done more than enough. He would have been... I would have lost him completely without your help."

"Like we lost our mother," Lyri added through gritted teeth.

Talimuth's eyes flared. "The same was done to her? That is what took the last Moric?"

"Yes." Lyri's fist clenched and unclenched on the table, slowly. "Raynir again."

Before the grief could swamp me, I cleared my throat and said, "That is what we are here to discuss with you, Talimuth. As you know, my former council are now all sitting in gaol, which means

it is time to form a new one. And I very much hope that you will take a seat at that table.”

I could tell that I’d shocked them, even though they barely reacted. But their lips parted a fraction, and they went completely still in their seat. “Join... the council?”

“Join a *new* council. One that truly represents all of Thinir’s citizens, including our salyik population.” I gave them a nervous smile. “Your people chose you to represent them before, for our meeting. I’m hoping that means you are open to taking a more permanent role as one of my councillors.”

They said nothing for a very long time, gazing at me in silence, their eyes unwavering. I fought the urge to fidget anxiously, to fiddle with the braids in my hair. The sides of my head felt strangely light and cool. I’d forgotten for a while that I’d sheared the hair there clean off.

“Yes,” Talimuth said eventually, their voice quiet. “I will. Thank you, Moric.”

For the first time in longer than I could remember, my mouth stretched into a proper smile. I inclined my head. “Thank *you*, Talimuth.”

Lyri followed as I stood from my seat. Talimuth stumbled slightly over their robes as they rose quickly as well, looking dazed as though they were still processing.

“I’d like to invite you to join me for lunch in a few days, along with the rest of my new councillors.” Assuming any of the others said yes. “I think it would be nice for us all to share a meal together, to symbolise this new start for Thinir. We can discuss how we move forward as a council then.”

“Y-yes, alright.” They blinked, then blinked again. “I... I will wait to receive the invitation.”

“Until then...” I turned, and Lyri handed me my ledger. I held it out to Talimuth. “These are the proposals I had hoped to discuss with you at our previous meeting. The changes for the salyik population. If you’d like to read them over and perhaps consult others on what would work best, I’d be most grateful.”

“Yes,” they repeated faintly, taking the ledger. “I will.”

“Thank you. Now, we will leave you to your day.” I tried not to glance around the cramped, cluttered room as Lyri and I made our way to the door. “Thank you for allowing us into your home, Talimuth.”

“Yes.” They followed us into the tiny hallway, and I spotted a cluster of salyik peering over the railing at the top of the stairs. “We will speak soon, Moric.”

“Lor,” I corrected, giving them a tiny smile as Lyri opened the door. “I look forward to sharing a meal with you, Talimuth.”

Seis looked tense as we stepped outside, his eyes sweeping down my frame while Gryf’s did the same to Lyri.

“Oh, don’t give me that look, Gryf.” Lyri slapped him on the arm. “Worrywart.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not like it’s my job to keep you safe or anything.”

“We’re perfectly safe,” Lyri said cheerfully, then turned to face me. “Now, where to next, Moric?”

“To see the port master, I think.” I gave him a tiny smile, feeling more optimistic now that Talimuth had agreed to join the council.

“Jolly good.” Lyri patted my arm before we started walking. The guards slunk around us in silence, still watching everyone keenly.

As we approached the district square again, the din of voices from those gathered grew louder. But then I realised I could hear one voice far more distinctly over the others. It wasn’t impassioned, but it was louder, and constant.

“Hear that?” Lyri muttered, jerking his chin ahead of us just as the square came into view down a

narrow alleyway. “The preacher.”

A flurry of nerves tightened my chest. I had forgotten about the salyik preacher.

We remained silent as we entered the district square, and my gaze immediately shifted to the tall, pink-scaled salyik standing on an upturned crate in the centre. They wore long, flowing robes like many others of their kind, and their white hair was pulled back in delicate braids.

“Our numbers are great,” they were calling, their voice loud but devoid of any emotion. “And our blood already nourishes this land. It is ours. We are the rightful owners of Thinir, of this fiefdom. We should be the ones in power.”

Unease made my gut cramp. The preacher hadn’t noticed us yet, their back to us, but other salyik in the square had. Their eyes darted to us, filled with mild terror, no doubt wondering what the Moric would do after hearing these things.

“For too long we have lived in squalor, trodden into the dirt under the mighty weight of the corrupt hyll,” they continued. “It is our time to sit up in that gaudy tower, to look down upon the rest and know that the salyik are the true harbingers of Thinir’s strength.”

Lyri snorted quietly beside me, crossing his arms. “I think they mean that *they* wish to be sitting up in the hyll. They clearly fancy themselves some kind of ruler.”

I licked my dry lips. “You don’t... you don’t think they are saying this in the hopes of bettering the salyiks’ lives?”

“No,” Lyri said bluntly. “I think they’re saying it because of their own thirst for power. Gryf and I have listened to them before. They never speak of improving things for the salyik as a whole. They speak of gaining a following to seat *them* on the throne.”

“What... what should I do?” I whispered, my chest clenching with weak fear when the preacher turned and finally saw us, falling silent.

Our eyes met. Theirs were a pale pinkish-grey, and though their face was as blank and mask-like as Talimuth’s—as all salyik—something made me want to draw back and look away.

Talimuth kept their emotions hidden, but their face was still kind. Non-threatening. This salyik’s face was... wrong. The blankness looked more like a true void of emotion, of compassion, of *anything*. Their eyes were almost dead.

Something about them was terrifying.

“Chin up,” Lyri whispered. “Show them nothing.”

I swallowed, but forced myself to raise my chin and hold their gaze. They looked utterly unfazed that I had witnessed them attempting to stir up a revolution, to unseat me from my throne. Technically, I could have them arrested for treason, but I didn’t think that would be a good idea. I worried that doing so would make them a martyr, which might encourage other salyik to follow their cause.

As we started walking again, another salyik approached the preacher and tugged them forcefully down from the upturned crate. The square had fallen silent, and all the other salyik still looked terrified. But then I noticed some staring hard at the preacher, lips thinned and eyes grim with determination.

Perhaps Lyri had been right before. Perhaps they would handle the preacher themselves.

“I don’t think they’ll be preaching here for much longer,” Lyri muttered as we left the salyik district, echoing my thoughts. “Now that they all know the Moric has witnessed it for himself...”

“What will they do to them?” I asked hoarsely, smoothing down my tunic and trying to appear composed as we left the salyik district behind.

“Probably shun them,” he said. “Kick them out of the district.”

Shamefully, the possibility of that made me feel relieved. I was trying—trying to do better, to be a

true Moric—but I had absolutely no idea how to handle the preacher, and if the salyik dealt with the problem themselves, that was one less issue for me.

But if they didn't, we would have to do something. What if they started to listen? What if they really did start a revolution and storm the hyll? What would happen to Lyri and I? To Seis and Gryf and Lilimar and everyone who worked in the hyll?

Mabs, what would happen to *Jugs*? If we were ousted from the hyll, I wouldn't be able to take him with me—how could I move that enormous glass case, and the distiller keeping him alive, and how would Lilimar continue making the remedy that stopped him from dying?

As we made our way to the port, I grew even more determined to do the work I had been so hopeful about before Jugs got ill. I had to make it work, if for no other reason than to keep Jugs safe.

I wouldn't fail him again.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

One year and three months.

The stabbing pains of grief had softened slightly, like the edges of the invisible blade being plunged into my chest over and over again had become dulled.

But they were still there. Always there. And they grew sharper once more every time I visited Jugs, like the knife was twisting, making the wound a little bigger, a little deeper.

He looked exactly the same. Pink-cheeked and soft-lipped and smooth-skinned. The sheet over him hid the terrible rash that I knew still covered his chest and back. If I was having a good day, I could almost convince myself that he was merely sleeping peacefully, and that soon he would awake and look at me with his crystal eyes and smile and laugh and tell me that he loved me again.

I didn't have many good days, but I had some. My new council was working flawlessly, and we were finally starting to see some of the changes I had made for the salyik population. It was a slow process, bogged down by legislature to unpick and longstanding prejudices to fight back against. Some of the other new councillors had been wary of Talimuth at first, but all that did was make me turn to Talimuth more. To show the others that they were an equal member at the table, that their opinions and views were just as important.

Gradually, the mistrust faded. The councillors all grew friendly with each other—and with me. It helped enormously having Lyri at the table, because he was good at keeping the mood light, but equally as good at tamping down any rising dissent with the firm, intimidating voice he used on his soldiers.

Iorn, the baregh general who worked closely with Lyri, was stoic and didn't speak much, but listened intently to everything that was said in the council chamber. Seis was a calm, authoritative voice that spoke up in defence of the hyll as well as the baregh population. The port master, an old vint called Ciffir, was a boisterous and rough-around-the-edges sort, who didn't mince his words and said "fuck" even more than Lyri. But I liked him—he was honest and enthusiastic, and very hardworking.

We also had Kimil, a vint who owned one of the largest theatres in the city; Ganigor, an usho who ran several innes; and Polgog, another usho who owned a large tavern—one that Lyri frequented—but was also there to represent the usho people as a whole. I wanted to appoint a second salyik councillor at some point, but for now, Talimuth was doing splendidly. At first, they had been wary and hesitant to speak up in meetings—to actually tell us about the issues the salyik faced, and how their district's conditions could be improved. But eventually, they had grown more confident and even begun disagreeing with other councillors on some things, though they always remained unfailingly polite.

Lyri's shrewd assessment of how the salyik people would handle the preacher had been correct. A few weeks after we witnessed them in the district square, the guards posted at the city gate reported to Lyri that the preacher—Malomar in'ya Konikt—had left the city with nothing more than a heavy bag of fabrics and clothes.

Lyri had had them followed for months. They wandered away from Thinir and further south in the fiefdom, stopping for a while in an ancient stone cottage that sat alone, a day's walk from the Zoli Basin. Then they continued west before descending into the Barren Valley, a cavernous crack in the flat lands. It wasn't actually barren—plenty of plant life grew there—but most creatures and all people avoided it because of the old telyth who had lived there for eons, his nest buried deep in the

rock.

They hadn't been seen since, and they never attempted to return, so gradually, they were pushed from our minds. We had other things to think about, and I was grateful that my days were kept busy. My new councillors didn't spend hours—whole meetings—focusing on the minutiae of ceremonial events or the correct way for the guards to greet visitors to the hyll. They focused on the important things—how to better handle the shipments arriving in the port to make procedures swifter. Incentives to bring more tourism to the city and therefore boost trade in our innes, taverns and theatres. Funds to repair damaged buildings, especially those in the salyik district, and renovate abandoned, dilapidated shops to bring new trade.

Once, Councillor Kimil had suggested destroying the poison plant garden outside my hyll, because it required many gardeners to oversee it, thanks to the plants' varying needs due to the different climates in which they originated, making it an expensive endeavour for the hyll. I had flat-out said no, giving no explanation. When she had questioned the need for such a gaudy display of wealth, I had snapped at her, much to my later mortification. Lyri and Seis had quietly backed me up, with Lyri saying that the discussion was not on the table. She hadn't asked since.

Only a select few people knew about Jugs. It was safer that way. Talimuth, obviously, and their progenitor, who often visited Lilimar to help in her research for a cure. Iorn knew of his existence but nothing else, because he had played a part in interrogating the former council alongside Lyri, but I trusted him. Seis and Gryf knew, of course, but other than that, Jugs was still a secret to the rest of Thinir. The rest of the entire world.

However, everyone knew that I had *someone*. Because a year after Jugs had gone into his deep sleep, I asked Lilimar to pierce my lip. To show the world that there was one person—a single person out there—who was mine, who I would never speak ill of, who would be the only one to ever feel the touch of my mouth.

I had asked the jeweller to make me a ring with a tiny blue jewel in it, the exact colour of Jugs' eyes. I had picked it myself. I often spun it when deep in thought, pressing that tiny gem to my lower lip or against the inside of my mouth, remembering the feel of Jugs' warm mouth against mine.

I had continued to keep my hair in the style I'd hacked it into. It made me feel closer to him when I looked in the mirror. It was something we shared that no one else did, which was perhaps silly or frivolous—it was only hair—but it helped with the pain.

Ciffir, the port master, had jovially asked me who I'd taken as a consort when I'd arrived for our meeting after piercing my lip. Talimuth had gone very still, saying nothing. They had visited Lilimar's chambers with their progenitor a few times, and I had let them into the Moric's resting chamber to see Jugs. I could still remember the sadness faintly dimming their eyes, the tight press of their lips as they gazed down at his sleeping form in the misty glass case.

I had given Ciffir a tight smile that day and said it wasn't something I wished to share. He'd simply laughed and teasingly said he'd get it out of me after a few drinks.

That was something else that was new—and rather unsettling. I actually... *liked* my new councillors. I liked having dinners with them after a long day of meetings, when we would discuss anything but work, though I usually left it to Lyri to be the life and soul of the evening while I smiled politely and spoke when directly addressed.

They almost felt like... friends. Something I hadn't had, other than Lyri and Seis and perhaps Gryf, since I was a child. But as we all sat together in the formal dining room, sharing food and wine, it just made me miss Jugs even more. He would have enjoyed it. He would have laughed at Ciffir's jokes. He would have liked Kimil's brash, overbearing nature—similar to Lyri's. He would have sat and

talked and joked with Seis and Lyri and Iorn, and politely conversed with the reserved Talimuth. He should have been there with us, as my consort. My partner. The other half of me.

But he wasn't. And I didn't know if he ever would be.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Five years.

“It was the Valor of the Morics today,” I whispered to my sleeping Jugs, once the hyll had gone still and silent after nightfall. “Do you remember our night after that? When you were waiting for me in my room?”

My fingertip to the glass, I traced over his features. His pink lips and sweet ears and noble nose. The sweep of his eyelashes over his pink cheeks. The glass case was even hazier today, Lilimar having placed a fresh vat of the green liquid over the fire, its steam settling over Jugs’ skin like morning mist.

“You liked my outfit very much.” A ghost of a smile played at the corners of my mouth, not really there. I didn’t smile much anymore. “I have worn that same outfit for the last five years. There’s no need for me to have a new one every year, is there? And anyway, it... it reminds me of you.”

In the silence that followed, I imagined what he might have said back if he’d been awake. It was getting harder and harder to remember his voice, which made agony cramp up my insides. Sometimes I listened to the tapes on the cassette player just to hear his language, to try and imagine him saying the dull words.

I no longer slept in here. The more time that had passed, the more horrifying I had found it to sleep in a room with him when it felt like he wasn’t really there with me—just his body, still and lifeless and trapped behind glass. But I still visited every morning, before doing anything else, and came every night to sit by his side for hours, until exhaustion made me finally retreat to my cold, lonely chambers.

I still spoke to him, telling him everything that the new council was achieving, the changes we were making in Thinir. I told him about Lyri and Gryf going back through the void a few times, just to explore. The last time, a human in the forest had shot at them with a strange small canon in his hands, spraying hard metal balls over the trees they had ducked behind as he shouted in terror. They hadn’t gone back since.

That guestroom door was still firmly locked, the void humming quietly behind it, now unused and serving no purpose. No other humans had ever come through it. Lyri said the settlement nearby—the camp—was empty every single time they went through, so perhaps the children had never returned.

Jugs’ suitcase still sat in my dressing room, tucked in the corner. I had taken out one of his short shirts and slept with it every night, clinging to it like I was a child desperate for comfort. I hated sleeping alone in my bed, but I hated sleeping in that room with Jugs’ lifeless body even more.

The more time that passed, the less convinced I grew that Lilimar would ever find a cure. And I wondered what I would do. How long I would wait. How long I would cling to that last scrap of weak hope, to the painful belief that one day, Jugs would wake up, and he would be well, and we could spend our lives together.

How long could I stay like this—a husk, just waiting, not truly living? How long could I stand to only half feel, like my emotions were being smothered by thick, heavy blankets? I didn’t let myself feel happiness. I didn’t let myself feel pride or contentment or satisfaction over the work I was doing. I didn’t think I was even capable of it anymore. Some mornings I could barely bring myself to get out of bed. My face felt stiff from the blank mask it was permanently arranged into.

I was the Moric, truly now for the first time, doing right by the people in my fiefdom and slowly chipping away at the inequality that had been rife under the former council’s rule.

But it had cost me everything else.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Eight years.

I had one of my worst days.

I refused to leave Jugs' side. I told Seis to cancel my council meeting with just minutes to spare. I cried, and cried, telling Jugs how much I missed him, begging him to give me any sign that he could hear me—anything. A flicker of his eyes under his closed lids. A twitch of his fingers under the sheets.

He remained as still as ever.

I screamed at Lilimar when she came into the room, asking why and how she hadn't found a cure yet. It had been *eight years*. Eight years of feeling like half a person, of going through the motions, barely able to feel anything at all some days. Most days.

Eight years of slowly forgetting the exact sound of Jugs' voice, his laugh, the feel of his skin, the press of him inside me.

It terrified me, like he was dying even though he was right there. I demanded she open the case so I could just touch him—just run my fingertips through his hair and over his cheek, just to remind me. She refused, saying it wasn't worth the risk. So I screamed at her again, calling her incompetent, saying she was going to let Jugs die just like she'd let my mother die. The words were abhorrent, vile, poisonous, but I couldn't stop them once they started pouring out.

I shouted at Lyri when he rushed into the room to calm me down, ripping my arm from his grip and telling him to leave me the fuck alone. I screamed at Seis to do something useful for once and go and get Talimor so they could help Lilimar actually *achieve* something. Then I screamed at Talimor and Talimuth when they arrived, asking how they couldn't have a cure for something they knew, they recognised, so easily.

I couldn't stop. A distant part of me was horrified by my actions, my words, wondering if Jugs could hear all of this from his deep sleep, wondering what he would think of me. But I couldn't stop. I hadn't let myself feel anything for eight years, not truly, and for some reason, that day broke me. It wasn't even a particularly significant day. It was just the day that broke me.

Eventually, when my throat was sore and voice hoarse, I collapsed back into my seat and sobbed hysterically at Jugs' bedside. No one spoke, but I could feel their eyes on me, the room tense and silent except for my pitiful cries.

I couldn't truly grieve, because he wasn't dead. But I couldn't let myself hope, because there was still no cure. I was stuck. Waiting. Waiting.

Waiting for the day Lilimar told me she had done everything she could, that there truly was no cure. And then what? We would stop filling Jugs' case with the steam that kept him alive, and I would have to watch him slowly die in the same way my mother had.

Some deep, hopeless part of me knew that day would come, and the more time that passed with nothing, the closer it got. Lilimar would give up eventually. Soon. She'd run out of ideas, her research would give no answers, there would be no more plants left to experiment with.

All that we were doing was delaying the inevitable.

Lyri had to help me to the bed when I started shaking, weak and exhausted, my tears finally drying up. I was empty. He sat beside me on the edge of the bed as I curled up into a ball and stared at nothing. Lilimar, Talimor and Talimuth left the room without a word, and Seis stayed silent at his loyal post by the door.

Before passing out, I whispered an apology to Lyri and Seis, but my voice was dull and wooden. I wasn't going to let myself feel like that again.

I wasn't going to let myself feel anything.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Ten years.

I sat in the council meeting, half listening to Lyri and Kimil chuckling over something, and Talimuth interjecting with a dry comment.

Ten years.

What had his skin tasted like? I could still remember his scent—I had eaten more lokl in the last ten years than the previous forty of my life. But it wasn't quite right—it was warm and soft like his scent, but still missing something. Something that had been uniquely him.

Were his eyes really as blue as the jewel in my lip, or had I misremembered? I still had dreams of him smiling and laughing and gazing down at me in the bed, but the colour of his eyes in those dreams was wrong now, I was sure of it. It wasn't bright enough.

Ten years.

I couldn't remember what it felt like to laugh. I remembered laughing with him, nervously at first, when I had still been shy and unsure during our meetings in the guestroom. Then with my whole belly, harder than I had ever laughed before, as we curled up in bed together and talked for hours.

I could feel my chest rising and falling with my breaths as I sat in the council chamber, but other than that, it was like I didn't really exist.

Someone said something—Iorn, I thought, his voice deep and rumbling. Lyri answered, chuckling as he reached forward to grab his cup of water.

I stared at the table, barely moving except for my breaths. Inhale, exhale. Some days, it was all I felt capable of doing.

Even when the door to the chamber burst open suddenly, I did nothing but slowly lift my head to gaze through dead eyes at the vint soldier standing there, panting hard like he had run the entire way from the bottom of the city.

"M-Moric," he gasped, doubling over to catch his breath as Lyri and Iorn jerked up from the table. "S-something is—Th-there is something—"

"Catch your breath, sport." Lyri clapped him on the back, then gripped his shoulder to straighten him up. "Nanimir, isn't it?"

The soldier nodded, letting out a long, slow exhale to try and calm his heart rate. He wiped his sweaty forehead, then turned to me with a bow.

"Something has appeared in the Barren Valley, Moric. We were doing our patrols and saw creatures flooding in that direction, so we followed them."

"What has appeared?" Lyri asked sharply when I said nothing.

"Some—" Nanimir shook his head, eyes wide and dazed and bloodshot. "A huge... black thing in the air, Verin. And—and the creatures are... They're vanishing through it."

That finally made me sit up and take notice. My wide eyes met Lyri's grim gaze as he looked over at me. Seis went stiff in his seat, and from his post by the door, Gryf darted his gaze between all three of us.

"What does it look like?" Lyri asked, voice hard. "Tell me exactly what it looks like."

Nanimir shook his head again, like he still couldn't believe it. "Like a huge... rip in the air. Like the sky has been torn open. The edges of it spark like embers, and the... the sound that comes from it is like... like the echo of the Mabs."

Another void. It was another void.

“Who and what is going through it? Lyri asked, gripping Nanimir’s shoulder to keep him upright. He looked exhausted, like he had run all the way here from the valley itself.

“All kinds. Myrms, behamots, bahyks, borolesh, kolebs. Some wanuk and copicens.”

All wild animals, mostly harmless if left alone, and some isolated species. The kolebs lived in tunnels underground and avoided contact with others. But...

“Behamots?” I said slowly. “But they inhabit the coast far south of the valley. It is several weeks’ walk from there.”

“We don’t know how long it’s been there. It took us a week to get back here and that was riding our morke at breakneck speeds,” Nanimir said, but then he swallowed, his gaze growing fearful. “But it isn’t just... There are others going through. Forileuns. Typilds. Mortiks. Kariks. And... and the rycke.” He whispered the word. “The rycke was there. Watching.”

Iorn shot up from his seat as Lyri went stiff. “The rycke is in the fiefdom?”

“Yes.”

A shiver ran down my spine. The rycke was an awful legend, a terrible nightmare from a forgotten age. And the other creatures Nanimir named, some of them were almost as bad. Horrific things that lurked in dark corners of the world, hunting their prey, stalking lost travellers, terrorising small settlements and villages.

And they were all going through the void.

To Jugs’ world.

“But... you said they’re all vanishing? As they go into it?” Ciffir asked, sounding baffled. “Vanishing to *where*?”

“Maybe they are simply dying,” Kimil offered, sounding uncertain for once. “Most of those creatures aren’t particularly smart. They act on instinct. Perhaps instinct is telling them to run into it, and it is... simply killing them.”

No. It wasn’t. I knew it wasn’t. Seis and Gryf and Lyri knew it wasn’t.

They were flooding Jugs’ world. Some of the most awful creatures to exist were pouring through that void and into Jugs’ world. Where five *billion* humans lived.

I couldn’t decide which was more frightening—terrible creatures from here streaming into that world, or an army of humans pouring into this one. Would the humans come through themselves? If the void was as big as Nanimir said, surely they would. Surely they would come through. Surely they would try to defend themselves.

And then what?

I stood up abruptly, and all the other councillors rose. But I stared only at Lyri, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing as he stared back. What was happening to the void in the guestroom?

“Councillors, I—I believe we must end our meeting for the day,” I managed to say, still staring at my brother. “Iorn and the Verin must discuss this immediately. For the safety of Thinir.”

“Of course.” Ciffir nodded, giving Iorn a grim smile. “Don’t envy you, friend.”

“I don’t understand,” Ganigor said as the others started filing out of the room, Talimuth giving me a slight bow with a thoughtful look in their eyes. “If they’re all vanishing, isn’t that a good thing? If the rycke goes into it and vanishes, that means the rycke is gone forever.”

Once they had left, the five of us stood in silence for a moment, before Lyri sighed and turned to Iorn. “Have a few things to tell you, old friend.”

Iorn knew about Jugs, but all he knew was that Jugs was a being from somewhere far, far away from here. Not another world. He didn’t know about the void. He didn’t know any of it.

“Alright,” he said calmly, then showed no reaction as Lyri explained everything to him. Finding the speck over ten years ago. Its gradual growth over the months that followed. Then Jugs tumbling through it from another world.

When Lyri finished speaking, Iorn exhaled a slow breath and scrubbed a hand over his tusked mouth. “Alright,” he repeated. “So the void grew. Does that mean this new one in the valley has been growing too? Perhaps it appeared at the same time.”

“Perhaps,” Lyri said doubtfully, then cast me a grim look. “The salyik preacher went into that valley and never came back out.”

“But why has it suddenly grown enormous?” Gryf asked with a frown. “What’s causing them to grow? Or even appear?”

“It’s like... the space between the worlds is disintegrating,” I said vacantly, staring at the table before lifting my head to eye Lyri again. “When did you last go to the guestroom?”

Lyri grimaced. “Not for several months.”

Seis headed for the door without saying a word. The rest of us followed, Iorn bringing up the rear with a wary frown.

“If those creatures can get into that world through the other void, they could potentially get back through this one,” Seis muttered to me as we walked toward the guest quarters. “The hyll could be overrun with beasts.”

I shuddered, imagining kariks and forileuns and swarms of eerie little typilds teeming through the hyll’s corridors. The rycke’s true form squeezing through the void to tear everyone to shreds. It would be a bloodbath. Chaos.

Was that what was happening in Jugs’ world right now?

When Seis unlocked the guestroom door and cracked it open to peer in, I saw his shoulders slump with relief. Opening the door wider, he allowed us all to see the void, exactly as it had always been.

“So this one is... more stable?” Lyri asked uncertainly. “It hasn’t grown.”

Iorn was staring at it in shock, mouth opening and closing wordlessly. “It... There is truly... another world through there?”

“Yes,” I croaked. “One that is now being flooded with terrible beasts.” Turning to Seis, I gazed up at him fearfully. “Humans are vulnerable. Their skin is soft, their teeth are blunt. They have no claws or tails or... Seis, they will be *slaughtered*.”

His mouth set into a grim line, and he exchanged a look with Iorn. “Moric, there isn’t really... We could try to hold them back from the void in the valley, but... it sounds like many have gone through already. They are already there.”

“What must be happening over there?” I turned back to the void. “What—what will the humans do?”

“If they’re smart, they’ll fight,” Lyri said grimly. “If they can. Some of those creatures... I don’t hold out much hope.”

“Don’t say that,” I croaked. Jugs’ world. His *world*. His people. Were they all to be slaughtered? If Jugs ever did wake up, would he even be able to go back?

“What’s going to happen?” I whispered, wrapping my arms around my middle. In an instant, I felt like a boy again. Like an untrained Moric, fresh on the throne, turning to Raynir to handle everything because I felt woefully inadequate.

But Raynir still sat in the city gaol, rotting for his crimes. He was no help here, not that I ever wanted his guidance again.

Lyri, who knew everything, who was always calm and confident and assured in the face of any

kind of danger, quietly said, “I don’t know.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

In the weeks that followed, we received missives from Morics across the world, detailing the voids that had appeared in their own fiefdoms. Some smaller than the one in the valley, some close to shorelines, some stretching so high into the air that winged beasts flew through them without even realising.

Lyri sent soldiers to patrol the land around the valley. The old telyth who lived there was nowhere to be seen, and eventually the flood of creatures crossing through the void slowed to a trickle.

Especially when some started coming back with grievous injuries.

Myrms limped through, coated in blood, before collapsing to the ground and being dragged away by predators. Kariks reappeared, screeching in agony and fury with smoking holes littering their shiny-wet bodies and several tentacles ripped clean off. Packs of kolebs carried their dead back, chittering frantically to each other.

The humans were fighting back. Somehow. I remembered the strange small canon Lyri had told me about—the one that a human had used to try and hurt him and Gryf when they went through the guestroom void many years ago. Were they using those? Or did they have greater weapons, ones strong enough to fight the likes of cagins and forileuns and mortiks? The rycke?

Many creatures never came back, according to reports from the soldiers, and any that did returned severely injured or close to death. Lyri wanted to go through the big void himself, to see what was happening, but I flat-out refused. Instead, he went through the guestroom void with Gryf, Iorn and several soldiers to try and see what was happening in Jugs' world. The first time they went, just a day or so after we received news of the void in the valley, he said nothing was different.

A week later, he said they walked even further, out of the forest and toward a wide road that was smooth and grey. He said there were many, many humans sitting in strange metal boxes on the road, and they all started screaming when they saw Lyri and the others, loud horn noises coming from the boxes, which started jerking forward but had nowhere to go.

When he told me, I realised what he was describing. Jugs had told me about *cars*, saying humans used them to get from one place to another. And all these humans appeared to be trying to leave. To flee.

Where were they all going? If Jugs ever woke up, would he return to his home to find it empty, deserted, everyone else gone?

Word spread through the city, the fiefdom—the whole world—about the voids. Some people travelled out to the valley to see it for themselves. Some even went through, despite the soldiers' warnings that it was dangerous. Few returned, but those who did spoke of blue skies and strange creatures dressed in green and brown who shot at them with unknown weapons, blasting limbs to nothing, riddling their bodies with holes.

Many died not long after returning, but a few survived, and their stories spawned wild theories and fearful rumours. The place through the void started being called *otherworld*, just as we had named it all those years ago, and whispers flew that the strange creatures were going to invade, were going to destroy our way of life.

But they never did. Not a single human stepped through the void—either void. Lyri and the others went back through the one in the guestroom, leaving for even longer each time, and said they came across a large village—or very small city—that had been completely deserted.

All the humans were gone.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

“Something is happening, Jugs,” I whispered to his sleeping form. “In your world.”

The void in the valley continued to unsettle me, made me retreat to Lilimar’s chambers to be with him even more than usual. I swept my hand over the glass, fingertips curling and pressing in as if they thought they might be able to touch him. It had been so long since I’d touched him.

“Our void is safe,” I told him. “But the new one... So many creatures went through it into your world. Will the humans be prepared to deal with them? There are so many of you, I’m sure they... they’ll rally their defences, won’t they? They’ll be alright.”

Silence. I sighed, dropping my hand and fisting it on my thigh as I stared at his sleeping face.

“Maybe if more civilised people from here go through, they will bring back some of your brightly coloured foods,” I said with a wobbly smile. “Maybe we can find peace between the two worlds. And then... and then when you wake up, you won’t have to be a secret.”

Letting out a shuddering breath, I pressed my hand back to the glass. “I want to show you everything here,” I whispered. “I want you to see the difference I am making in the city. I want you to be proud of me, Jugs.”

More silence. Always just silence. The vat of green liquid bubbled softly, its steam snaking through the glass pipe into Jugs’ case, giving me only brief glimpses of his beautiful face through the haze.

“Moric.”

Turning, I saw Talimuth standing in the doorway, their arms tucked into their sleeves. I nodded at them once. “Talimuth.”

“I came with my progenitor to help Lilimar’s efforts.” They took a single step into the room, emotionless eyes fixing on Jugs’ case. Then, voice quiet, they said, “He is from there, isn’t he? The other place. The one creatures are travelling through in the valley.”

I didn’t see much point in hiding the truth from them. And of everyone, Talimuth was one of those I trusted the most. I nodded again, staring down at Jugs.

After a pause, they stepped closer until they were beside me, both of us gazing down into the case.

“I’m not sure how much you know about our history, but the shunning of the salyik people began when an old chieftain mated with an unknown creature.”

I nodded. I had read a great deal on salyik history since that embarrassing council meeting years ago when Raynir treated me like a child for being ignorant about the fiefdom’s past.

“We have only old, crude drawings from that time,” Talimuth continued flatly. “But they looked a bit like him. Like Jugs.”

“They were human?” I knew I should have been more shocked by this news. But I didn’t feel much anymore.

“Impossible to say now, but perhaps. They were strange enough for the rest of the world to turn their backs on us.”

A weak stab of fear tightened my gut. If Jugs ever did get better and wake up, what would happen if the rest of the world discovered him? Would I be ousted from the hyll? Would the vint people be shunned?

As if they knew what crossed my mind, Talimuth said, “But that was a very long time ago. The world, for the most part, has become more accepting. More tolerant.”

“Except toward you,” I said woodenly, then felt my ears twitch as I realised how callous the

words were.

“Yes,” Talimuth said. “But you are changing that. It’s slow, but it is happening, Moric.”

“Lor.”

“Lor,” they corrected after a pause. “I can see how little you feel anymore. I can see in your eyes how empty you are. But you are still trying. And you are succeeding. We thank you for it.”

“It’s not me. It’s the council. You’re the one making the changes, Talimuth.”

“It’s all of us,” they said. “Don’t discredit your own contributions, Lor.”

I stayed silent, shamefully not having the energy to care much about any of it. The work of the council. The void in the valley. Anyone else. Talimuth was right. I was empty inside.

After a minute, they spoke again. “My progenitor has been doing their own research. We have a small library in our district, and there are many, many old books and accounts from the salyik when we lived elsewhere in this land. Including the Crepis Flats.”

I finally turned to look at them. They gazed back, face as mask-like as ever, but I had spent so much time with Talimuth now that I could see the minute changes in their expression that betrayed what they were feeling. And right now, there was something like wary determination tightening the skin around their eyes.

“I was reading with them the other day, and came across a short account of a salyik child accidentally ingesting saffin.”

I flinched, looking away. “How terrible.”

“Yes.” Talimuth paused. “But it mentioned something. The child’s progenitors and a group of others went deep underground to find a fungus that grew in the cave systems beneath the Flats. I’m not sure why or how they knew about it, but they believed it would cure the child of the saffin poisoning.”

My heart stopped dead in my chest. I turned back to stare at Talimuth. Scarcely able to breathe, I whispered, “Did it?”

Talimuth’s lips thinned. “No. But it stopped the poison’s effects from worsening. The child had to consume the fungus for the rest of their life, but it kept them alive. In pain, still with the symptoms, but alive.”

My breath began leaving me in shallow spurts, pulse thumping in my throat. “So it... Jugs could wake up? Live?”

“Live in pain,” Talimuth said, their voice the faintest bit grim. “With the poison still ravaging his body. And... not necessarily, Lor. I’m sorry. The account said they retrieved the fungus just a handful of days after the child consumed the saffin. Early on. Not weeks later, and I know your Jugs was being poisoned for many weeks.”

Pain made me flinch and look away. “So it wouldn’t work for him.”

“It might,” they said solemnly. “At the very least, it could be something for Lilimar to work from. However, the place where they found the fungus, under the Crepis Flats... Those cave systems are where the eyriads were banished to.”

I shuddered. The terrible, warmongering eyriads. I had never seen one in the flesh, just old drawings from the great battles when they had been spreading across the lands like a plague, killing and conquering.

“It was one of the reasons why my people had to leave the Crepis Flats,” Talimuth said. “The risk was too great. Which, I imagine, meant they were no longer able to retrieve the fungus they needed to keep that salyik alive.”

My eyes shot to them. “It was around the same time?”

Talimuth nodded. “The account is short, but a later entry notes that their supply of the fungus ran

dry after they were forced to leave the Flats. The child was much older then—had, in some ways, lived a very full life—but it was still cut shorter than it should have been.”

I shuddered. The list of slights—no, not slights, nothing short of atrocities—against the salyik by the rest of the world grew longer and longer every time I learned something new. I hadn’t realised the battles against the eyriads had affected them so directly. Displacing them from their homes, taking them away from the lands and flora and fauna they knew so well and utilised so efficiently. No one had cared. They had just been another casualty of war, but not in the sense of a brutal but quick death in battle. More like an open wound that continued to fester, untreated eons after it had been inflicted.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

“I don’t say any of this to cause you guilt, Lor.” Talimuth shifted, arms still tucked into their sleeves across their middle. “If there is a way for us to retrieve a supply of this fungus, then it may help in finding a cure for Jugs.”

“But how are we supposed to retrieve it if it is in the caves occupied by the eyriads?” I chewed my lip, fingers tugging at Jugs’ golden hoop in my ear. “And how do we even know what it looks like or where it grows?”

“The account contains illustrations of the fungus and details on where it grows in the caves.” Talimuth hesitated. “But as to your other question, I wonder if the Verin and baregh general might be better placed to answer.”

My heart began to pound, hard and fast. Was this the answer? Was Jugs finally going to get better and wake up?

“They are in a meeting about the void.” I stared at Talimuth, not letting myself feel any hope. Not yet. “Do you have the account with you?”

“I copied it out for Lilimar, as she wouldn’t understand the language. And I copied the drawings.” They nodded at the door leading to the next chamber. “She has them now.”

“Will you come with me to speak to Lyri, Talimuth?” I asked, stepping closer.

They inclined their head. “Of course, Lor.”

After a final look at Jugs, we left the room, retrieved the translated account and illustrations from Lilimar, and headed for the war strategy chamber with Seis, where Lyri and Iorn had spent much of their time after finding out about the void in the valley weeks ago.

When we entered, they both looked tense as they spoke in low voices, heads bent over a vast map of the world that stretched out across the table.

Lyri looked up, eyes dropping from my face to the sheets of parchment clutched in my hands. “Alright?”

I licked my lips, feeling a little nervous as my gaze darted down to the map. I could see many pins stuck into it, denoting the locations of all the voids spread out across the lands.

“I’m—I know you’re preoccupied, but…” I glanced at the silent Talimuth. “We have a new possibility for a cure for Jugs.”

Lyri’s lips thinned as he gazed at me, face still drawn and tense. I could see him warring with himself over whether to ask me if it could wait. We had found out about the huge void in the valley just weeks ago, and guilt flashed through me as I wondered if I was being selfish. Lyri had bigger things to worry about, but to me, nothing was more important than Jugs.

In the end, he exhaled, straightening up and scrubbing a hand over his mouth. “Alright. I could use a break from discussing potential warfare against an unknown enemy anyway. Let’s sit.”

Seis, Talimuth and I sat in silence, and once Iorn and Lyri had settled into their chairs with quiet sighs, I let Talimuth quickly explain everything they had told me.

Lyri frowned, leaning forward to inch the parchment closer to him so he could have a look. “So this fungus could potentially hold the properties needed for a cure, but it grows where the eyriads live.”

“Yes,” I said nervously, fidgeting with my jacket cuffs under the table. “How... how possible is it to retrieve it?”

“If any of us descend into those caves, we won’t come back out,” Iorn said grimly. “There is a reason the eyriads laid waste to these lands, and others. They’re near unstoppable, and their lust for battle has no doubt been growing for eons with no outlet.”

“What if no one had to go down?” Talimuth asked. “What if we made a deal with them?”

Lyri snorted. “The only deal they’d be willing to make is for their freedom.”

“Which is not an option,” Iorn added.

“There must be something else they want,” I blurted desperately.

“Even if there is, it would mean trusting them to follow through,” Lyri said with a frown. “We would have to open the entrance to the caves, lower a ladder for one of them to come up and exchange the fungus for whatever they want. It’s extremely risky.”

The remaining eyriads had been banished to the caves under the Crepis Flats when they lost their final battle against the isdernucs. The sole entrance to the caves was located high, high above their heads with no way for them to climb up and escape. The only way in and out was by lowering a rope ladder. It was how they’d been contained for so long.

“What about—What if we lower a basket instead? Ask them to put the fungus in it?” I asked.

Lyri gave me a blank look. “Why would they be willing to help us for nothing in return?”

“They might not be so bad.” My ears twitched when Seis, Lyri and Iorn gave me incredulous looks. “They might be reasonable.”

“They’re warmongers,” Iorn said flatly. “Strategists. Sly and cunning. They *are* that bad, Moric.”

My mouth trembled as I stared down at the drawing of the fungus. It showed a cluster of long, thin fungi, almost like a dead creature’s fingers breaking through the ground in desperation. It felt too fitting. It had been *ten years* of nothing—no cure, not even a hint of one. It felt like Jugs’ final hope.

I pursed my lips shut to stop myself from begging, from being even more selfish. It was a huge risk, opening the entrance to the caves, negotiating with an ancient warmongering people who had been banished underground for a reason.

I was willing to do it. I was willing to risk *everything* for Jugs. But I was the Moric—I couldn’t be selfish. I couldn’t put my needs above everyone else’s. I couldn’t put my brother at risk, sending him out there to negotiate with the eyriads. It wasn’t fair.

Lyri sighed, and he reached over the table to grip my arm. “Give us some time to think it over, to come up with a plan. And to continue monitoring the valley. Iorn and I can’t really leave Thinir right now.” He scrubbed a hand over his face, suddenly looking tired. “We’ll think of something, Lor. Jugs is stable still, isn’t he? So... are you willing to give us time to think about this? We can’t rush into anything.”

The thought of waiting even a day made my stomach cramp up. But I forced myself to nod, and even managed to lift my head to give Lyri a tiny, grateful smile. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

The Crepis Flats were an eerie part of my fiefdom, one I had never visited before. There had been no need—they were empty, and the knowledge that the eyriads lurked deep beneath our feet made the whole place feel like a burial ground.

Close to a stretch of stormy coast, the Flats spanned as far as the eye could see—empty, desolate, dry ground littered with fissures that emitted strange sounds. Almost like dread-churning music—low and hollow at the same time.

I shivered, pulling my cape closer around myself. The strong winds that came off the sea and swept undisturbed across the flat plains made the air cold, blowing my hair into tangles. Talimuth walked in silence beside me, their white hair tightly pulled back into a braid. In front, Lyri and Iorn led the fifty-strong retinue of soldiers—a mix of vints and baregh—that accompanied us, all armed to the teeth in preparation for our meeting with the lone eyriad who had agreed to help us.

Lyri and Iorn had travelled here already to heave back the great stone blocking the only entrance to the caves below, calling down to the eyriads that they would like to speak to a leader. The eyriads organised themselves into hordes, each led by a warlord. It had been Marikhai, leader of the Strife Horde, who answered their call.

Lyri said he had agreed readily, saying he knew of the fungus and that it grew in abundance in the caves, which gave me hope that they truly weren't as bad as the legends made them out to be, and also made me feel terribly guilty that they were still banished underground.

But I could only deal with so much at a time. Yes, the void in the valley had grown quiet, not many creatures from this world going through anymore, and no humans appearing from the other side. But it was still an issue that wasn't going away, and I knew Lyri was still concerned about it. It had taken many weeks for him to finally agree to us coming out here to try and obtain the fungus from the caves. I'd tried to be patient, tried not to hound him too much, but with every day that passed, I had grown terrified that somehow knowing about this potential cure would tempt fate or the Mabs to take Jugs from me as punishment for our inaction in procuring it.

But nothing had changed. Jugs remained in his deep sleep, kept alive by the steam that filled his glass case. Lilimar had been studying the translated account of the fungus that had kept a salyik child alive so long ago, and she was eager to receive it and start work.

Dark stones littered the flat ground in clusters, and I could see plants sprouting up between them. When I saw a clump that looked like yavra, I shuddered and looked away quickly. I knew what that was. I pictured Raynir out here in this desolate place, hunched over and carefully picking the deadly saffin to take back to Thinir. To kill my mother. To kill Jugs.

"How do you think Raynir knew about the saffin?" I asked Talimuth quietly as we walked, my voice almost lost over the howling winds.

They cocked their head, eyes vacant as they gazed around at the Flats. "It is not necessarily a secret. Just a little-known plant because of the fact that it only grows here. If Raynir was looking for an inconspicuous way to get rid of your mother, he probably did a lot of research. Saffin is unique in that it doesn't act the same as other poisons in the blood. It is much slower acting, much more subtle at first. In an adult, a few doses wouldn't be enough to kill them. Prolonged exposure, however..."

I nodded, tucking my chin down as my hair blew around my face. Wanting to change the subject, I said, "Thank you for accompanying us here, Talimuth. Is it... strange for you? To be here?"

"No, not really," they replied. "I never lived here, obviously. Neither did my progenitor. It has

been many, many centuries since the salyik left this place. Honestly, I wouldn't want to live here. It is very bleak."

I silently agreed. The sky was bright and pale, but the sea to our right, beyond the cliffs, was tumultuous. We had left our morkes on the edge of the Flats, the ground too littered with fissures to safely ride them all the way to the cave entrance. Ten more soldiers had stayed behind to guard them, and when I glanced back, they were nothing but tiny specks in the far distance.

"Look." Talimuth's flat voice made me face forward again. They were pointing at something far ahead of us, past Lyri and Iorn and all the soldiers trudging in front. "There are the remains of the old salyik settlement."

Far in the distance, I could see crumbling ruins made of the same dark stone that littered the ground around us. They looked as though they had been squat buildings, though perhaps the strong winds had eroded any upper floors that had previously existed. The settlement was large, spread out across a patch of ground between the cliffs and the big, imposing mound of boulders we were heading toward—the ones littered with spikes I could see from here, all pointing downward at a narrow valley between the stones.

Far beyond the old salyik settlement, past the edge of the Crepis Flats, there were more buildings packed closer together, taller and less eroded. It looked almost like a small city nestled by the coast, quaint and archaic, but even from this distance, it felt... empty.

"What's that?" I asked Talimuth, pointing, but it was Seis who answered, walking just behind us.

"The old city of Honra. It straddles the edge of your fiefdom, but it's technically part of Moric Oril's fiefdom of Ayivis. It was abandoned when the eyriads were driven into the caves. Too close for comfort."

"I see," I said quietly, ears twitching as I glanced at Talimuth, whose face was blank as they gazed ahead. I couldn't tell if they were looking at the salyik ruins or Honra.

My attention shifted as our party got closer to the mound of spiked rocks. In the centre, I could see an enormous flat boulder, like a disc, covered in faint markings.

"The spikes," I asked, belly clenching with foreboding. "Are they—"

"They were put there after the eyriads were driven underground," Seis said. "To warn others who travelled through here, and as a deterrent in case the eyriads did ever manage to escape."

They were even eerier than the Crepis Flats themselves. They looked unnatural in this flat landscape—huge, jutting spikes that gleamed in the sun, like a deadly forest of enormous thorns.

Lyri glanced back to find me as we got closer, his eyes grim, but he gave me a small smile that soothed some of the guilt and worry in my stomach. He had been tense over the last few weeks, constantly in meetings with Iorn as they made plans to shore up the fiefdom's defences if an army of humans did ever appear through the void—through either void. I knew he was growing increasingly concerned about the glaring vulnerability in our own hyll. If the humans knew that these voids existed, that this world existed, they might start looking for others. They might find Jugs' void. Even though the large village nearby was deserted, there were obviously some humans still out there attacking and injuring the creatures that had travelled through.

And now Lyri was out here—for me, for Jugs—to potentially unleash another terrible enemy on us. I said a quick prayer to the Mabs that this Marikhai was as amenable as he had appeared to be—that he wouldn't betray us.

The soldiers all fell silent as we reached the large cluster of boulders topped with deadly spikes. From a pack, one of them pulled out a tight roll of rope and wordlessly handed it to Iorn, while eight others carefully stepped between the spikes and positioned themselves around the enormous flat

boulder on the ground.

After glancing at Iorn and Lyri for the nod of approval, they began to heave. Everyone else remained silent, all the soldiers positioning themselves on the rocks and the ground around the cave entrance, their spears and maces and axes and swords gripped tightly in their hands.

Two more baregh soldiers were driving thick metal spikes into the hard ground, grunting as they swung heavy mallets down. A gust of warm air blew my hair back as the cave entrance was uncovered, nothing more than a wide, round hole between the rocks. The eight soldiers straightened carefully, avoiding the spikes, and gripped their weapons as Lyri stepped forward and knelt at the edge of the hole.

“Eyriad,” he called down. His voice seemed to echo endlessly, and I wondered what he was seeing—what it looked like down there. Did they have any light sources? Some forms of subterranean plant life gave off their own light, but I knew nothing about these caves, and I was too tense to ask Talimuth beside me.

There was silence for a few minutes. None of us spoke, all the soldiers tense and ready. Waiting. Then, from far, far below, a deep and rumbling voice called up. “Vint. Good to see you again.”

Lyri glanced over at Iorn, before cupping his hands around his mouth to call down. “Have you decided on what you want in exchange for helping us?”

I was vibrating with tension, convinced the eyriad would say that he’d changed his mind, that he wouldn’t give us the fungus. But a moment later, I heard a deep chuckle.

“Yes. Simply a chance to breathe fresh air, to see the sky and the sea, is enough reward.”

I saw Lyri frown hard. “Bollocks,” he called down. “What do you really want?”

Another chuckle. The voice was so deep and smoky, I struggled to picture the creature it came from. “I speak the truth. A chance to plant my feet on the surface of the world for a few minutes is all I ask.”

Lyri didn’t speak for a while. I could see his mind churning, figuring out what to do—whether to believe him. He glanced back at me as I fidgeted anxiously, then exhaled as resolve settled over his features.

Turning back to the hole, he called, “Do you have the fungus? Show me.” After a few moments, he nodded and called, “No weapons. And no one is to follow you. If a single eyriad steps foot on the ladder behind you, I cut it down and you plummet.”

“No one will follow me, vint,” the voice called up airily. “We are all in agreement.”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Lyri stood and nodded at Iorn, who stepped forward with the bundle of rope ladder. It was a very thick roll, giving me a hint of just how far beneath the ground the eyriads were. Together, Lyri and Iorn hooked the loops around the metal spikes driven into the ground, gave each other a final grim look, then let it unfurl into the hole.

“No weapons, eyriad,” Lyri called, gripping one of his swords as he peered down into the hole. Then he snorted, muttering, “Not that he has anywhere to hide them.”

I glanced at him in alarm. Was the eyriad... *nude*?

After a few seconds, I saw the top of the rope ladder pull taut against the metal spikes in the ground. Lyri remained on his haunches, sword poised over the rope, ready to slice through it if any other eyriad started climbing. But he didn’t move, and several tense minutes later I saw a huge, dark hand reach up from the hole and grip the top of the ladder.

Every single soldier pointed their weapons at the emerging figure. I was frozen in place, staring at the enormous creature that pulled himself up from the hole. I had seen drawings of the eyriads—and the poor costumes at the Valor of the Morics—but they were nothing compared to an eyriad in the

flesh.

Lyri and Iorn were quickly pulling the rope ladder up so no others could follow from the caves below, but I couldn't tear my gaze from the creature in front of us. He was enormous, towering over the baregh, his shoulders wide and body thick and heavy with muscle. His skin was blacker than any vint's, with glowing red fissures that reminded me of the land we stood in. Horns exactly like the ones mounted to the plaque in my chamber curled back from his broad forehead, five red rings piercing each one. Gleaming red cuffs accentuated bulging biceps, and more piercings in the same mysterious red metal adorned various parts of his body—his nipples, his septum, his navel, which also had a thin chain trailing from it and vanishing underneath the waistband of a miniscule skirt that barely covered the tops of his huge thighs. A long, sinuous tail curled in the air behind him, moving lazily and almost threatening to flutter up that tiny skirt.

My ears twitched with embarrassment, and I tried to look away, but I simply couldn't. He was a *beast*. Long black hair shot through with rough braids fanned out over his broad shoulders, and when I finally returned my gaze to his face, I went hot all over when I saw him smirking at me.

Then he tilted his head back, seemingly unbothered by the countless weapons and spikes pointed at him from inches away, and inhaled deeply.

"Fresh air," he rumbled, fangs gleaming in his mouth when it stretched into a wide grin. "And a cool breeze. How long it's been since I felt either."

"Yes, they're both very nice," Lyri said impatiently, gripping both his swords as he eyed the eyriad—Marikhai, leader of the Strife Horde—with wariness. "You have them?"

Moving slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, the eyriad tugged a sack off his shoulder and handed it to Iorn. My gaze locked on that bag and refused to budge, even when I saw the eyriad look around casually in my periphery, still ignoring the deadly weapons inches from his face.

"It looks much the same." He snorted. "Except for these delightful spikes."

"One wrong move and you won't have to worry about the spikes," Iorn growled, his big body stiff with tension as he passed the sack to Talimuth, who peered inside. "A lone eyriad is no match for fifty of our best soldiers."

Marikhai chuckled as I looked over Talimuth's shoulder into the bag, staring at the clumps of long thin fungi, their colour sickly pale from a lack of sunlight. But the eyriad had stayed true to his word—there were dozens of clusters in the bag, and they looked fresh.

"Such a young Moric."

I jumped when Marikhai spoke again, darting my gaze over to see him grinning at me—a wide, toothy, very unsettling grin.

"It's an honour to meet you, Moric," he drawled, trailing solid black eyes—much like a vint's—down my frame in a way that made me want to squirm. His irises were nothing more than thin rings of glowing red.

"I—" Glancing at my brother for courage, I swallowed and tried to stand straight. "And you, Marikhai. Thank you for your help. It means much."

"Mmm." He smirked, looking over our small party, quirking a brow at Seis hovering by my side and gripping his axe in both hands. "I am somewhat intrigued as to why you need this specific fungus. From these specific caves."

"Does it matter?" Lyri asked bluntly.

"I suppose not." But Marikhai was watching me with shrewd, calculating eyes, even as he crossed his huge arms over his equally large chest in a casual pose.

Ears twitching with nerves, I cleared my throat and said, "Are you sure there is nothing else we

can give you for your cooperation, Marikhai?"

This felt too easy. Unless the eyriad truly weren't as bad as the legends made them out to be? Salyik had always been treated unfairly too. Maybe they weren't really as bloodthirsty and power-hungry as—

"Your fiefdom, perhaps?" he asked demurely with a sly smile.

Iorn growled as Lyri snorted. "Back in your hole you go, eyriad."

"Ah, just a minute more? Please?" Marikhai shot my brother an innocent, fanged smile. "The air feels so good on my skin. In my lungs. And we *did* gather plenty of the fungus for you."

Iorn shot Talimuth a quick look. "They are the correct ones?"

"They are." Talimuth peered in the bag again, then went still. "But there is—there is something else in here."

"What?" Lyri stiffened, eyes darting between Talimuth and Marikhai. The latter merely raised a brow, side-eyeing the soldiers still pointing their weapons directly at him.

"I can't—" Talimuth reached in, then made a soft sound and dropped the bag. "It's a baby skilos."

"*What?*" Iorn roared, eyes darting around as Lyri gritted his teeth, his ears twitching for the tell-tale rumble of the baby's parent under our feet.

Skilos were huge burrowing creatures that burst out of the ground and swallowed their prey whole. And the eyriads had put a *baby* in the bag, no doubt to draw its parent up to the surface and kill us all.

Lyri snarled. "Eyriad, you fucking—"

"Purely an accident," Marikhai said lightly, side-eyeing the soldiers again as their concentration split, some of them glancing around at the ground warily. "It must have snuck into the bag."

I squeaked and jumped back as the baby skilos wriggled out of the sack, its countless tiny legs skittering onto the dry ground and its big, filmy eyes peering up at us as it let out tiny hissing sounds. Its body gleamed a toxic orange in the bright daylight.

Then a soldier shouted, lowering his weapon to point at something beyond the mass of boulders. My ears twitched as the ground rumbled under our feet.

"Get the eyriad back in the hole," Iorn shouted. "Lower the ladder. Eyriad, you move an inch and —"

"I'm merely standing here," Marikhai said innocently.

Talimuth snatched up the bag and stepped away from the baby skilos as the rumbling grew louder. Seis began pulling me back as Lyri shouted for half the soldiers to follow him, then vaulted onto the rocks and took off over the other side. Gryf cursed and ran after him. Iorn was shouting at two soldiers who fumbled with the ladder, sweating as the rumbling grew louder and louder until a shower of dry ground burst into the air beyond the boulders, a monstrously huge shape looming up behind it.

And in the middle of it all Marikhai stood, calm and smug, arms still folded over his enormous chest. The soldiers still surrounding him grew distracted, glancing back repeatedly at the battle now being waged on the other side of the rocks.

"General, they're—"

"Watch the fucking eyriad," Iorn shouted, then cursed and leapt onto the boulders. "Hag's balls," he gritted out, then glanced back at Marikhai. "Now, eyriad. Back down."

Marikhai raised his huge hands placatingly. "Alright, I'm going."

His eyes shifted slyly as he turned and ambled over to the cave entrance, crouching to grip the top of the rope ladder. His head cocked as he went very still. Just as Iorn began to shout at him again, his

tail whipped out, curled around the leg of the nearest soldier—a vint—and flung him toward the hole.

The others shouted and scrambled to grab him as the soldier managed to cling onto one side of the ladder, his eyes wide with terror. Iorn leapt for Marikhai, but the eyriad was already darting under the spikes with shocking agility and sprinting away. Raucous cheers and laughter rang up from the caves far below, several other eyriads calling up in their language, no doubt cheering Marikhai on.

“*Fuck*,” Iorn snarled, taking off after him.

I did nothing but stare, mouth agape, Seis’ fingers twitching on my arm. Heart pounding, I gasped, “Seis, you must—”

“I can’t leave you, Moric,” he gritted out, tugging me away. “Both of you, we have to go.”

“But Lyri—”

“Lyri is *fine*, Lor.”

Half of the remaining soldiers had taken off after Iorn and the eyriad. Several were hurriedly pulling the poor soldier out of the hole, having already sliced through the rope ladder so that no more eyriads could climb their way up. Six huge baregh strained as they heaved the huge boulder back over the entrance to the caves while the rest disappeared over the rocks to join the fight against the skilos. It was chaos, and in the middle of it all I stood, utterly useless and frozen in place.

“Lor,” Seis shouted, making me jump violently. “We must go.”

Darting a terrified glance over at Talimuth, who was clutching the bag of fungi tight, I finally nodded and stepped back. I didn’t want to leave my brother, but Seis was right. This would have all been for nothing if we died in the belly of a skilos, and then Jugs would be—He would—

“*Now*, Moric.” Seis yanked me away with force, and I tripped over my own feet as I finally started running.

The baby skilos still skittered over the ground, hissing and crawling closer to the rocks. I could hear its parent screeching in fury and pain on the other side, soldiers grunting and shouting as they fought it. In the far distance, Iorn led a small contingent of soldiers that raced behind an imposing black figure, who was sprinting across the land and vaulting over rocks and fissures without breaking his stride, keeping well ahead of the baregh and vints. My gut clenched with terror. The eyriad was going to escape. What would he do? Could he move that boulder on his own and unleash the rest of his horde?

I didn’t have time to worry about it, because in front of us I heard more rumbling coming from deep below. My ears were better than Seis’ or Talimuth’s, so I jerked to a stop before they did.

“No,” I shouted, frantically shaking my head and pointing ahead of us. “There is another. Another is coming.”

Seis cursed, backtracking and grabbing my arm to pull me in the other direction. Talimuth followed us just as the land exploded at our backs, the terrible screech of a second skilos filling the air. Dust and dry earth rained down on us, pummelling our heads and backs.

The sounds from beyond the rocks had gone quiet, but I heard Lyri’s familiar shout before footsteps pounded in our direction. My heart stuttered. My brother was going to have to fight *another* of those things. Had any soldiers died against the other one? How many were left?

I couldn’t look back as we ran, now going in the wrong direction. Seis had been leading us back toward the soldiers waiting with the morkes in the far distance, but now we were heading further north, toward the old salyik settlement. My breaths heaved out of me, lungs aching. I hadn’t run like this since I was a youth. I spent my days lounging around the hyll, and my body was soft and weak.

But Seis wasn’t letting me fall behind. He practically dragged me with him, his heavy boots pounding over the dry earth, Talimuth panting lightly beside me as they clutched the bag of fungi.

Behind us, another battle raged on. Behind us, a warmongering relic from an age filled with death and blood and chaos escaped, to no doubt unleash the same all over again.

And it was all my fault. A weak sob escaped me as I ran. If Lyri died fighting a skilos, I would never forgive myself. If Marikhai unleashed the rest of the eyriad and conquered my fiefdom, cutting down everyone in their path, I would never forgive myself.

But if Talimuth didn't make it back to Thinir safely with those fungi, I would never forgive myself either.

So I ran. I ran even as my lungs burned and sweat dripped from me beneath my clothes. I ran until the sounds of battle faded behind us, and only the eerie whistling music of the Crepis Flats reverberated in my head.

When we eventually stopped, Seis wasn't even out of breath, but Talimuth seemed to be in only a little better shape than me. We both gasped for breath, doubling over to alleviate the ache in our lungs, as Seis peered back with a hard frown.

Then his shoulders sagged. "They did it."

Straightening up, I spun to peer into the distance, my heart thumping. "Lyri?"

"He's fine, Lor."

I sagged in relief, trembling hands wiping the fine dust from the ground off my face. Talimuth let out a low, shaky exhale, still clutching the bag tightly.

"Will any more come?" I asked fearfully, even though my ears could pick up no more sounds from below us.

"I don't know," Seis said in a low voice.

"Skilos never lived in this area before," Talimuth panted, slowly catching their breath. "The land is too hard. They prefer softer soil to burrow through. I wonder if a pair were drawn to the area by the reverberations caused by the eyriads."

"Fucking eyriads," Seis growled, then raised his hand to shield his eyes as a piercing whistle reached us over the winds. "Lyri is calling us back. Let's go. The less time we spend here, the better."

My legs trembled wildly as we started making our way back across the Flats. I could see the group of soldiers, led by Lyri, heading toward us, and when we reached them I was relieved to see my brother unharmed, just breathless and windswept.

"Alright?" He checked me over quickly, sheathing his swords on his back.

I nodded, trying not to burst into tears at the sight of several soldiers bleeding from various wounds, one panting weakly on the ground as others supported him. At least Gryf was fine, standing beside Lyri with no obvious injuries. Behind them, the long, fat body of the dead skilos snaked over the ground, gooey orange blood soaking into the dry earth around it.

I felt awful. "Is—Did anyone—"

"No deaths." Lyri exhaled and shoved his hair back. "No life-threatening injuries."

"The eyriad got away," Seis told him quietly. "Iorn went after him."

Lyri's mouth twisted. He glanced back over his shoulder, but Iorn and the eyriad were no longer in sight. "Well, shit."

"I'm sorry," I blurted, trying not to blubber like a baby in front of all the soldiers.

Lyri frowned, stepping forward to pat my cheek. "It's not your fault. We should have known it wouldn't be that easy. The eyriads are sneaky bastards."

"What will he do?" I whispered fearfully. "If Iorn doesn't catch him, will he... Can he come back here and unleash the rest of them?"

"He can't move that boulder on his own. It took eight baregh to shift it. Eyriads are strong, but not

that strong. And they work in hordes. As units. A lone eyriad isn't much use to anyone."

"But he still might... hurt people."

Lyri shrugged. "He might. We'll keep looking for him. We'll find him. But anyway, you still have the fungi?"

"Yes," Talimuth said quietly, shifting the bag over their shoulder.

Lyri grinned at me. "Then this was a success, I'd say."

"A *success*?" I gawped at him. "We—The eyriad escaped! We all almost got eaten by a skilos!"

"Almost, but didn't." Lyri slapped me on the back. "Therefore, a success."

CHAPTER SIXTY

The fungus didn't work on its own.

I should have known it wouldn't. Talimuth had told me it wasn't a cure. They'd said all it did was halt the poison's effects, stop them from worsening, but it didn't remove them. It hadn't flushed the poison from that poor salyik child's system.

And Jugs' symptoms had already progressed to the point of rendering him unconscious, even before Lilimar placed him in his glass case and sent him into a deep sleep. She told me gently that the fungus alone wouldn't do any more than the steam was already doing. It wouldn't make him wake up.

But she was optimistic, saying this unique fungus obviously held properties that counteracted the effects of the poison. With further research, she was confident she could figure out a cure.

But a month passed with nothing. Then six months. Then a year.

Lyri and Iorn kept searching for the eyriad, Marikhai, who had escaped from the caves. Iorn had chased him all the way across the Crepis Flats and further south—terrifyingly close to Thinir—before the eyriad doubled back and crossed the border into the neighbouring fiefdom of Ayivis, vanishing in the ancient Amaranthine Forest.

There had been no news of him since. With the salyik people's permission, Lyri had sent a small regiment of soldiers to settle in the old salyik settlement in the Crepis Flats, so they could keep watch over the cave entrance in case Marikhai ever returned to try and unleash the rest of his horde. He never did.

The void in the guestroom remained dormant, nothing ever coming through it. I almost forgot about it some days. The bigger void in the valley had gone quiet as well, a few creatures braving the journey to the unknown other side. Some came back through, but they were usually terribly injured, already near death.

All around me, life returned to normal. People stopped speaking so frequently about the otherworld—the void was far enough from Thinir that they no longer cared about it, because it hadn't affected them. No humans ever came through, and for most, their way of life remained unchanged, undisrupted. Faith in the power of the Mabs renewed, the temple in their name overflowing every week as people praised their might and strength for keeping us safe, for keeping our lives free of deadly otherworlders.

But they weren't all deadly, and one still lay in his deep, peaceful sleep in my hyll. Never waking. Never looking at me with his crystal blue eyes, never smiling at me, never lifting his hand for a high-five.

Lyri and Iorn remained concerned about the voids, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Whatever was happening in the otherworld, it wasn't something we could control. The only human I cared about was in this world with me, and I doubted I would ever get to speak to him or touch him or feel him against me again.

I didn't care about any other humans.

Lyri did, though. He and Iorn spent long meetings pondering their fate, wondering about the state of their world. They went through the guestroom void often to scout, but never stayed for too long. I suspected Lyri was too scared to leave me for any amount of time. He hovered over me constantly, trying to get me to eat, forcing me to my chambers when I refused to leave Jugs' side at night. He sat with me for hours, even though I rarely spoke. He tried to get me to go into town with him and the guards, but I never did.

Perhaps I should have moved on by now. My time with Jugs had been intense, but brief in the grand scheme of things. But I couldn't. I tried sometimes—I would stop outside Lilimar's chambers, staring at the door and telling myself to try not going in. Telling myself that he would still be there if I didn't visit for a day, or a week, or a month. But I could never bring myself to do it. I had to see him. I had to see that he was still there, still alive in his own way, even if I didn't believe that we would ever have anything more than this again.

I was stuck. Still waiting. Still unable to grieve and still unable to feel any hope.

I had no hope left.

I had nothing left at all. I was a shell. Hollow and empty. A body that moved, a mouth that spoke, but nothing else.

Lyri came to me one night and cried—actually cried, a sight I hadn't seen since we were young—begging me to stop torturing myself. Begging me to let myself live and feel, at least a little. But when he told me that this wasn't what Jugs would have wanted, I shut down completely. I stopped looking at him, stopped responding, even though the sight of my fierce brother's tears almost made me feel *something* for the first time in years.

But it wasn't enough. Nothing was ever enough.

The more time that passed, the less alive I felt.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Fifteen years.

Fifteen years, and Jugs looked exactly as he had the day he fell asleep and never woke back up.

Fifteen years, and Lilimar was still working tirelessly to find a cure. The cave fungus that we had risked so much to procure just became another useless specimen alongside the overflowing poison garden, which was unfathomably large now. An extravagant collection of plants from all over the world, all deadly, all with their own known cures. All useless.

So much had changed since I lost Jugs. I had a new council, and Thinir was becoming a better place for all its citizens. The salyik were slowly integrating themselves into main society. It was taking a while for others to accept them—their market stalls always received less business, their shops didn't have many customers—but it was happening. Slowly. It was better than nothing.

The entire world had learned of the existence of Jugs' world—a whole other place, filled with strange creatures—and now vast voids littered the lands. Our little one in the guestroom was miniscule in comparison to some of them.

There was a lone eyriad loose in the world for the first time in eons. There had been no sightings of him since he vanished into the Amaranthine Forest. Soldiers remained posted in the Crepis Flats, but the Strife Horde leader had never returned or attempted to free the rest of his kind.

I was finally a true Moric. Making changes that affected my subjects and my fiefdom for the better. Bringing equality to the people under my rule. Doing things I should have been *proud* of, but I still felt nothing.

I did my duty. I concentrated in council meetings. I spoke when addressed. I ate and slept and bathed. But I didn't feel like a person anymore. I simply existed.

Fifteen years since I had lost Jugs. Almost a third of my life spent in this in-between place where I couldn't feel and I couldn't move on and I couldn't truly grieve.

It was a part of me now—the pain. The emptiness. The guilt. I had told Jugs that I wouldn't survive it, not as I was, and I had been right. I was different.

I wasn't cruel or rude or neglectful of myself or others. I was just... nothing.

When Gryf found me one morning and told me that Lyri wanted to speak with me in the war strategy chamber, I stood up without a word and followed him, Seis at my back. I gave my brother and Iorn a brief nod when we stepped into the room, my mouth unable to smile properly anymore. Lyri eyed me with concern, but he had long ago learned that there was little point trying to talk to me about it.

"Alright?" he said with forced cheer, nodding at an empty seat. "We didn't interrupt anything important, did we?"

"No." I sat and smoothed down my tunic, then rested my hands on the armrests and waited in silence.

Lyri and Seis exchanged a look as my guard took his place by the door, next to Gryf. Iorn was frowning down at the huge map on the table, studded with pins to mark the voids that littered the world.

"Well," Lyri began slowly, sinking back into his seat. "As you're well aware, we have had many discussions about the voids."

"Yes." I couldn't muster even a hint of interest. I didn't care about the voids anymore.

"We are..." He glanced at Iorn. "We are still concerned about what the humans might do."

My shoulders jerked up in a stiff shrug. “Why assume they will do anything?” I asked flatly. “They haven’t for five years. Well, fifteen if you count Jugs’ void.”

“That doesn’t mean they won’t,” Iorn interjected, voice and face grim. “Perhaps they have been planning. Shoring up their defences. Crafting more weapons.”

I shrugged again. “Perhaps. I suppose we might find out one day.”

“Look, Lor, here are the facts.” I went quiet at the stern tone in Lyri’s voice. “From our trips through the guestroom void, we can confidently say that the humans have had to abandon their homes. But there are still some out there, and they’re organised enough to defend the void in the valley on their side. Everything that comes back through is grievously injured.”

“Which means they have good weapons,” Iorn added. “Their numbers must be strong to take on some of the beasts that have flooded their world.”

I pursed my lips. “Alright, so they are able to defend themselves. Surely that means we shouldn’t get involved—”

“Lor, you remember what Jugs told us.” Lyri’s eyes were grim. “There are five *billion* otherworlders through there. If they ever do decide to invade, we’re fucked. That’s it.”

I flinched. “Jugs said humans weren’t interested in invading. He said—”

“That was when no one else knew about us. When only he travelled back and forth through the small void in the guestroom. Now there are *dozens*, Lor, all across the world. Dozens of weak spots that the humans know about. Dozens of places they can pour through. If they are organised enough, they could destroy half the world in months. Maybe even *weeks*.”

Shuddering with horror, I wrapped my arms around my stomach. “How do we stop them?”

“We wouldn’t be able to. There simply aren’t enough of us, even if the Morics joined forces again.” Lyri exhaled and exchanged a look with Iorn. “We have been discussing... alternatives to war.”

“What alternatives are there?” I asked bleakly.

“Diplomacy. A truce. A peace treaty between the worlds.”

“Why would they ever agree to that?” I croaked. “The creatures that went into their world...”

“It would appear that many humans—if not all—have been displaced by the creatures travelling through the void,” Iorn said. “Towns and settlements and cities deserted. If we offer them protection and refuge, perhaps that will be enough to ward off any invasion they might be planning.”

“Refuge?” I echoed warily. Iorn and Lyri exchanged another look.

“On the northernmost border of the fiefdom, past the Crepis Flats, there is an abandoned city. Honra,” Lyri began.

I nodded slowly, remembering seeing it and what Seis had told me when we went to procure the cave fungus five years ago. “Yes, I know of it.”

“Moric Oril isn’t interested in it,” Lyri continued. “It’s been empty for eons. It could work as a refuge for some humans, if the Moric is willing to give the land to us.”

“A... refuge for humans?” I stared at him. “Bring humans here to *live*?”

“Why not?” Lyri shrugged. “Some beings from our world are living in theirs now, which they are clearly unhappy about, judging by the state of the creatures who make it back through the void. This could... soften the blow. Open up communications. Allow us to potentially co-exist in peace.”

“I don’t—I—” I scrubbed a hand over my face. “How would we even *begin* to carry out such a monumental task? And there are five *billion* humans, Lyri. They can’t all live in one city.”

“No, but several thousand could. And it would be a start. Jugs said those five billion are across the entire world, and there are dozens of voids in this one, spread far apart. Perhaps they all lead to

different places over there. We could set an example—pave the way for other Morics to do the same.”

I blinked at my brother, who was usually keener to use his fists or swords than to negotiate for a peaceful outcome. “Why... why do you care so much? About what is happening over there?”

Perhaps the question sounded callous. Perhaps it came from my own inability to feel much anymore. And there *was* one human I cared about. Only one. But Lyri didn’t share those all-encompassing feelings toward Jugs, so I... I didn’t understand.

Lyri’s face softened. He reached out and clasped my arm. “If—*When* Jugs gets better, do you want to tell him that his world has been destroyed by beasts from this one? Or do you want to show him that you did everything you could to help his people? He is human, Lor. And right now, *we* are the invading world. No other humans have come here. We are the ones who have to make it right.”

“But how would we... You said all the humans are gone. Whenever you have gone through the guestroom void, you don’t see any. How would we even... find them?”

“They are still organised enough to defend the void, so they must have a ruler of some kind, mustn’t they?” Iorn asked with a frown. “Someone we can approach with the offer.”

A memory pinged, making me sit up straighter. “When Jugs found out I was Moric, he called me something—king. I think it means the same thing in their world. A leader or a ruler.”

“Alright, that’s something.” Lyri nodded. “We find their... *king*, and explain our offer. Reach out peacefully.”

“Did Jugs mention who their king is?” Iorn asked me.

My brows furrowed as I tried to think back—to years ago, when Jugs had still been with me, warm and happy and full of life.

Ignoring the pain that stabbed at my chest, I licked my lips and said, “I think... I think he said they were called Ronod Rayan. I remember thinking how strange the name was.” I shook my head. “But he also... he also said they would be changing soon.”

“Changing?” Lyri’s brow furrowed. “You mean the next in line was on the cusp of taking the throne? Was he old? About to die?”

“No, he said their kings are elected.”

Iorn and Lyri stared at me.

“Elected?” Lyri squinted, glancing at Iorn. “What, they just have an endless supply of royal families to choose between to rule?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged helplessly.

“Well, even if it is someone else now, surely they would live in the same place. A hyll of some kind.” Iorn looked at me. “Did Jugs say where their king resided?”

“He—” I froze, then jumped up out of my seat. “He brought me a map once of where he lived. He showed me where the void was and several other things. I think he pointed out where their king lives.”

“Do you still have the map?” Lyri asked quickly.

“Yes, it’s in my room.” I turned for the door, but Seis stepped forward.

“I’ll retrieve it for you, Lor.”

I fished my key out of my pocket and handed it to him, telling him where to find the map—stored with all the other precious items Jugs had brought me—in the sideboard in my room. After Seis had left, I turned back to Lyri and Iorn.

“Lyri, do you really think this could work?” I fiddled with my jacket cuffs. “It could be very dangerous.”

“It could, but so is sitting around waiting for the humans to potentially invade and start a war with us.” Lyri shrugged. “At least this way, we have some control. The voids aren’t going away. We know they won’t.”

“And you really... want humans to live with us? Alongside us?”

Lyri frowned at me. “Do you have something against humans? The only one we have met is the one still in this hyll, and he wa—is a wonderful person.”

My ears twitched with embarrassment. “No, no, of course I don’t have anything against humans. But... would they want to live *here*?”

Lyri shrugged. “If they don’t, at least we tried. At least we extended a peace offering. That’s all we can do.”

I fidgeted. “What if Moric Oril won’t give us Honra? Where would we put them?”

“They will,” Iorn said bluntly. “They’re not interested in that city. And we have good relations with them already. I’m sure something can easily be agreed.”

“What... what would we offer in return?”

“We could just pay for the land.” Lyri paused. “Or we offer to pay higher rates for our imports from their fiefdom. There are plenty of things we can do, Lor. That’s the easy part.”

I exhaled, wiping my face and sinking back into my chair. He was right. Somehow, in this scenario, renegotiating fiefdom borders that had been in place for millennia *would* be the easy part.

It was everything else that would follow that already felt impossible.

Dread churning in my belly, I looked up at my brother and said, “And I suppose... I suppose you will be the one to lead a diplomatic convoy to the otherworld?”

“Yes. Sending a royal as an emissary—it would show respect and convey just how serious we are about this.” Lyri gestured at Iorn. “Iorn would stay here as Thinir’s general, of course. And I wouldn’t take many soldiers with me—that would send the wrong message. It won’t stretch our resources.”

My mouth trembled. “But... you’d be *gone*.”

Lyri’s face softened. “Hopefully not for long, Lor. And if this works—if we can come to an agreement with their king, we could stop having to worry about potential war. We would stop seeing creatures limping back through that void in the valley, wounded beyond saving and giving us just a hint of what the humans are capable of.”

Iorn grunted. “I fear they would be a formidable enemy. There have been no reports of the rycke returning from the otherworld, which potentially means they have weapons capable of destroying such a horrific monster. If they chose to invade, we would be powerless.”

I chewed my lip anxiously, trying to tamp down the worry squeezing my insides. Perhaps the humans weren’t as vulnerable and weak as we had assumed. Perhaps they were... even more dangerous than some of the terrible creatures that had crossed over into their world.

But Jugs was so gentle. And kind. And accepting. Surely the majority of humans were more like him? Surely they would want peace, not war, just as much as we did?

And Lyri was right. When—if—Jugs woke up, I wanted to show him that I had done everything I could to help his people in this strange new time when our worlds were linked. When they were intertwining, just as Jugs and I had done so long ago.

“Yes,” I heard myself rasp, lifting my head to look at Lyri and Iorn. “Let’s do it. Let’s offer the humans refuge. We will set an example for the rest of the world.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

It took four years for negotiations with Moric Oril over our fiefdom borders and the ownership of Honra to complete.

In the end, we agreed on paying a large sum for the land as well as increasing the rates on the goods we imported from their fiefdom.

Once the abandoned city of Honra officially became a part of my fiefdom, Lyri organised a contingent of soldiers to accompany a large group of tradesfolk who would go and begin preparing the city to make it liveable again. No one knew that the plan was to offer it as a refuge for humans. We would tackle that if their king agreed.

Then, for the first time in years, I felt true fear as my brother began preparing himself for the journey. He had listened to all my cassette tapes to give himself as much knowledge as possible about the human world. He had my map, and I worried every single day that I had pointed to the wrong place on it for the location of their king.

But at least I had been able to help him somewhat. I had forced myself through the pain of reliving all my conversations with Jugs so many years ago, writing down any details that might help Lyri while he was over there. The fact that the sun set and rose in the same directions as it did here. The fact that there was only one moon, so visibility would be poorer at night. The fact that their days and nights were roughly the same length as ours, and that the temperature tended to drop when it was dark.

When the day finally came for him to leave, he looked calm and confident, which helped to lessen some of the dread tightening my chest, even as he stood in front of me armed to the teeth with a small army of ten soldiers behind him—and Gryf. Of course Gryf would be going with him.

The void in the guestroom hummed quietly as we said our goodbyes. I clung to my twin so tightly that I struggled to breathe, his various sword and dagger hilts poking at me as I held on for too long.

“I’ll be fine, Lor,” he whispered, squeezing me back. “We can handle it. And if the human king says no, at least we tried. Jugs will be proud of you.”

“I’m not the one doing anything,” I choked out. “You are the one at risk.”

Lyri snorted, gently peeling me off him to grasp my shoulders. “We’ll be fine. The humans may appear to have good weapons, but I doubt any of them are as big as baregh or as quick as vints. There is a reason they all fled from their homes when the void appeared in the valley.”

Letting out a shuddering breath, I clung to his cloak sleeve and forced myself to nod. “Just be careful. Please.”

“I always am.”

I couldn’t even bring myself to glare at him. My face remained frozen into its mask, but Lyri must have seen something in my eyes, because he patted my cheek gently.

“I’ll be home soon, Lor.”

Swallowing, I lifted my chin. “See that you are.”

He chuckled, and as he turned to say goodbye to Seis, I did the same with Gryf, who assured me he would protect Lyri with his life. I believed him.

I found myself inching closer to Seis as the first of the soldiers vanished through the void. Gryf gave us a tusked smile and a small nod before he followed. Lyri shot us a final grin, his eyes filled with a blend of determination and excitement, and then stepped out of sight into the otherworld.

I took a stilted step closer to the void the moment he was gone. A thin fissure appeared in the unfeeling shell that encased me, making my breath hitch.

“He will be fine, Lor,” Seis rumbled out from behind me. “Lyri is one of the most capable people I have ever met. And he is determined. He’ll be back before you know it.”

My chin wobbled, but I gave a clipped nod. “Yes. You’re right.”

Turning to Seis, I tried to give him a tiny smile, but my face felt as though it would crack if I did. So instead, I gestured at the door. “Shall we?”

As we left the guestroom, I turned and stared at the void one final time. Already, it felt... wrong. Like Lyri was too far away.

But he would be back soon. I knew he would. The Mabs had already taken so much from us both, they wouldn’t take us from each other. They just wouldn’t.

Life wasn’t that cruel. Even after all these years, after everything, I had to believe it. Because if I didn’t, I would shatter.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Lyri never came back.

A year passed. It felt like too long, but not outside the realms of possibility. They had to travel to the human king's hyll on foot, try and speak with him, perhaps negotiate terms, then travel back. A year was reasonable.

Then a second year passed.

Nothing ever came through the guestroom void. Not a single soldier. At my order, Iorn sent through ten more soldiers to try and find them.

They never came back either.

I ordered more to go. Three years passed, then four. I sent more and more soldiers to try and find my brother, and none of them ever returned. None of them.

Eventually, Iorn told me we couldn't send any more.

If I'd thought I understood what it felt like to be half dead before, it was nothing compared to this. My twin, the other half of me, was gone. Jugs was still a lifeless body in the hyll—a gruesome living statue to commemorate everything I had lost.

I didn't understand how the Mabs could be so cruel. I didn't understand what Lyri and I had done to deserve all of this suffering. Losing our father at such a young age. Losing our mother. Losing Jugs. And now losing each other.

I couldn't bring myself to consider what had happened to him. I knew from painful experience that it was healthier to assume he was dead, that he wasn't coming back, so that I could grieve. But just like with Jugs, I couldn't. Sometimes, I swore I could still *feel* him. Those twinges in my brain that weren't mine—some strange, innate instinct that told me Lyri was upset or distressed or furious. That he was still out there somewhere.

But he hadn't ever come back.

I haunted the hyll like a spectre. Staff avoided me. Guards averted their eyes as they bowed when I approached. I barely spoke in council meetings, and all the councillors knew why, the empty seat at the table like a gaping wound. I turned down invitations from other Morics for visits. I cancelled the Valor of the Morics every year—I couldn't bring myself to stand in front of the city in my gaudy outfit and address them all when I felt dead inside.

Every night, I sat beside Jugs' glass case in silence. I couldn't even bring myself to speak to him anymore, to hope that he could hear me, wherever his mind was. I only had terrible things to say. I had nothing good to tell him. Our plan to offer refuge to the humans had failed. My brother was gone. Gryf was gone. Lilimar seemed no closer to finding a cure than she had been over twenty damned years ago.

It was one stormy morning, as I sat beside Jugs in silence, that I finally rose from my seat when I heard her in the next chamber, getting ready to start another long, pointless day of testing and research. My limbs ached, stiff from sitting still for so long. Outside, the sea frothed angrily and the sky was a dark pinkish-grey, rain hammering at the windows.

Just as I was pressing my fingers to the glass in goodbye, I heard raised voices in the next room. The door burst open, Seis filling the doorway, his whole body tense.

"Lor, something has happened to the void."

My heart stopped. I stepped away from the glass case. "Which one?"

"The one in the guestroom." Seis' lips thinned. "The staff heard a loud noise coming from there."

Very loud.”

“Lyri?” I choked, rushing for the door.

“No, not—It didn’t sound like people.” Seis followed me as I ran through Lilimar’s chamber and burst into the hall. “Lor, it’s not Lyri—”

“Did you go and look?”

“No, I came straight to find you, but Lor—”

“It could be Lyri. He could be back.” I didn’t stop running, ignoring staff who stared and guards who called after Seis, asking what was happening.

I burst into the guest quarters and ran down the corridor, Seis right behind me. But when I turned the corner and guestroom door came into view, I stopped dead so suddenly that he almost slammed into my back.

“What... what is that?” I whispered, horrified.

The guestroom door had been ripped from its hinges and was now half buried in a river of slow-moving grey sludge. I could see it pouring through the void, filling the bedroom and spilling out into the hall. The stuff streaming through the void flowed quicker, but it seemed to slow the further it got and was coming to a stop in thick grey puddles halfway down the corridor.

“What is it?” I repeated, stepping closer without thinking. Seis’ strong grip locked me in place.

“It looks... almost like the molten rock that flows from some mountains,” he said, voice low and wary. “Like liquid stone.”

“But it is... it is hardening.” I pointed at the end of the stream. More of the grey sludge was still pumping through the void, but it was layering over itself rather than flowing like water.

Wood creaked under the weight of it. Seis and I stood in silence, watching as the sludge slowed and hardened until no more could pour through. The void was completely buried now, just the very top of its sparking edge still visible under the mountain of grey that filled the guestroom and made a gentle slope halfway down the corridor.

“Why would they do that?” I turned to Seis, hands clenching into fists. “Why would they do that? Why would they block off the void?”

“I don’t know, Lor.” Seis’ tusks peeked up as his mouth thinned into a grim line. “But it doesn’t... Lyri and Gryf will still be able to get back. There are other voids.”

I choked on a breath. “Anything that comes back through the valley is already close to death! They can’t—they can’t try and come back that way. They can’t—”

“Lor.” Seis gripped my shoulders. “Lyri and Gryf will find their way back. They will.”

“Then why haven’t they?” I croaked.

“I don’t know,” Seis said hoarsely. “I’m sorry.”

I stared up at his kind, familiar face, then turned back to the river of grey stone that had encased the void. It felt like an insidious message from the Mabs—or perhaps whatever gods ruled over the humans.

This is your punishment. For taking a human from the otherworld for yourself. For letting your brother go through there. For everything.

My mind threatened to fracture. It was too much. At least with the void still intact, a weak tendrill of hope had remained that Lyri and Gryf would return. But this felt... final. This felt like an ending.

So much had changed since the void had first appeared, all those years ago. And now it was gone.

In silence, I turned and walked away. Seis followed, saying nothing as I made my way to my quarters and stepped into my bedchamber. I didn’t even know what I was doing. If I allowed myself to feel anything, to think at all, I would crack.

“Lor.”

I flinched at the sound of Seis’ hesitant voice behind me as I stared out of the window at the city below. At all the lives continuing as normal, filled with happiness and family and lovers and purpose.

Was this my punishment? For being born into such privilege, for being so weak for the first twenty years of my rule? Was this pain and loss just a part of this life? My mother had experienced it too—losing our father so young, having her own life ripped away from her. Maybe this was the payment the Mabs demanded for living in such luxury. For never experiencing the day-to-day hardship that others did.

Or maybe it was just me. Maybe I had angered them in some way, and I was cursed, and everyone around me—everyone I cared for—was doomed to suffer for my mistakes and sins.

“Lor, please.” Seis’ voice was hoarse, vulnerable in a way I hadn’t heard before. “It’s me. Of anyone still here, it is me you can talk to.”

Of anyone still here. Because everyone else was gone. Jugs. Lyri. Gryf. My mother.

My chin wobbled. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” he croaked.

“Because it feels like I will die if I let myself feel anything.” I let out a slow, shuddering breath and smoothed back my hair with a trembling hand, trying to stand up straighter. “So I can’t.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

Thirty years.

It didn't seem possible.

I couldn't even fathom how different everything had been thirty years ago. How happy I had been, snatching my secret moments with Jugs at night. Learning to defend myself against the old council, slowly growing to hope that I could make a difference as Moric. Laughing and joking with Lyri, listening to his wild stories, sharing meals with him. Having quiet conversations with Seis as we carried out our duties for the day.

"Moric."

I barely heard the frantic voice calling my name as I gazed at the sea sparkling in the distance. The sounds of the docks drifted up from below, the bolska blooms above my head rustling as I sat alone in the shade in my private garden.

The city—life—continued on as normal beneath the hyll, while I sat here slowly dying.

"Lor."

The shout finally made my head lift, hollow terror thudding through me when I saw Lilimar out of breath at the door, Seis just behind her. My chair tipped back as I shot up, part of me wanting to cover my ears and run. I didn't want to hear her tell me Jugs was truly gone. I wasn't ready to hear it. I would never be ready.

But then she smiled at me—a huge, breathless grin. "I did it."

My knees almost gave out. I gripped the edge of the table for support, the sound of crashing waves thundering in my ears. "Wh-what?"

My voice was faint, barely audible, but Lilimar nodded. "I have the cure. It works."

I staggered toward her, feeling as though I might vomit everywhere. "I—I—Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." She gripped my hand when I reached her. "It is ready for Jugs."

I tried to take a step forward and stumbled. Seis darted around Lilimar to gently grip my shoulders, directing me inside. I wasn't aware of anything as we walked quickly through the hyll to Lilimar's chambers. My blood was pumping hard in my ears, blocking out all sounds, my legs moving by rote as Seis directed me through the corridors.

When I blinked, I was standing beside Jugs' case. I stared down at his beautiful face in a daze as Lilimar bustled around the room and Seis unlatched the top of the glass case. It opened with a hiss, steam billowing into the air.

My hands shot up to grip the edge of it. It had been so long since I had touched him—so, so long—and he was right there, looking just as he had before I had lost him to this endless sleep.

Lilimar appeared on the other side of the case, setting a tiny glass vial filled with yellowish-green liquid beside Jugs. She gently moved his arm, laying it flat along his side with his palm facing up.

"It must be administered into the blood," she said, brows drawn with concentration as she squeezed Jugs' elbow tight.

The veins in his pale inner forearm grew more pronounced, popping out of the skin as his circulation was cut off. Over the thickest one, Lilimar poised a thin, hollow needle that widened into a funnel at one end. I flinched when she swiftly plunged it in almost flat against his arm, and I saw the vein shift under his skin.

"Seis," she said, voice tight as she held the needle in place.

He calmly picked up the vial and opened it, then poured the thin liquid into the funnel. After a few

long seconds, Lilimar released Jugs' elbow and slowly slid the needle free. A drop of deep burgundy blood welled before she pressed a thick pad of gauze to it.

Then she lifted her head to smile at me as I stood there trembling, clutching the edge of the case. "It's done. Now we just wait for the effects of the steam to wear off so he will wake up."

I couldn't bring myself to believe it—not until I saw it for myself. Not until Jugs woke and I looked into his crystal blue eyes for the first time in thirty years.

"What is it?" I whispered. "What did you use for it?"

"An extremely complicated mix of many things, including the cave fungus from the Crepis Flats, as well as many of the ingredients that make up the cures for the toxic plants in the garden." Lilimar shook her head, wiping her lined forehead. She had aged rapidly over the last thirty years. "For years, I have been trying different combinations. Some did nothing. Some lessened the poison's effects but didn't get rid of it completely. Saffin is completely unique—it doesn't act like any other known poison. It's slower and affects the blood in a unique way."

Looking exhausted, like she hadn't slept for the entire thirty years, she shrugged. "At least now we have cures for almost every known poison plant in the world. And we know what saffin poisoning looks like, acts like, and how to stop it. We can make sure that this never happens again."

Swallowing thickly, I croaked, "H-how do you know it will work?"

Lilimar cleared her throat awkwardly. "Seis made me poison him several weeks ago. So that we could be sure."

My head snapped up, gaze shooting to Seis, who gave me a tiny smile. I thought I would pass out as a maelstrom of emotions threatened to drown me. Shock. Disbelief. Fury.

"How dare you, Seis?" My voice wobbled. "What if it hadn't worked? What if you had *died*?"

"We had to be sure, Moric," he said quietly. "I wanted to do it for you both."

"You could have *died*," I shouted, hot tears spilling over as the guilt threatened to choke me. I couldn't believe he had done that for me—for Jugs.

"But I didn't," he said steadily, then shot me a wide smile. "And it means we know the cure works. Lilimar tested my blood just before we came to get you. All traces of the poison are gone."

"I would never have allowed you to do that," I snapped tearfully, feeling lightheaded over everything that had happened in such a short amount of time. "I can't believe you—you—"

"I knew you would say no, which is why we didn't tell you." He shrugged.

"I didn't want to do it," Lilimar said as she lifted the gauze from Jugs' arm and stepped away to place it and the needle in the water basin. "I was ready to poison myself, but Seis pointed out that if the cure *didn't* work, there would be no one here to keep working on it."

My chin trembled as I reluctantly stepped away from the case to approach Seis. "I am furious with you, Seis," I said shakily.

He chuckled. "That's fine, Moric."

"Lor," I corrected automatically. Then I choked on a sob and flung myself against his chest. "Thank you. I... I can never repay you for this. Either of you."

"You don't need to." He gave me a gentle hug, rubbing my back and patiently waiting as I cried into his vest.

I managed to compose myself just enough to pull back, sniffing and self-consciously wiping my cheeks. "I'm sorry for shouting."

He chuckled again. "No need to apologise. And it's... it's nice to actually see you feeling something. Even if it is fury toward me."

"I'm not really furious at you," I mumbled. "You are my friend, Seis. If I lost you as well..."

His face softened. Gently, he pulled me back into another hug. I shuddered as my cheek pressed to his warm chest. I had barely touched another person in so long. I hadn't let myself, especially after my final goodbye with my brother.

“You haven't lost me,” Seis rumbled, pulling back to smile at me. “And you haven't lost Jugs. The cure works, Lor. He's going to wake up.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

I didn't sleep.

After Seis carefully lifted Jugs out of the case and laid him on the bed, he and Lilimar left the room. She returned that evening to light the fire and bring me some food and molt tea. I couldn't touch the food, but sipped the tea to keep myself awake as I sat beside the bed.

The next morning, she came back to check on Jugs, giving me a satisfied smile after listening to his heart. While she was in there, I briefly left the room to use the waterchamber, and when I returned, she told me the steam's effects would likely wear off at some point during the day.

I only managed a brief nod, refusing to let myself feel anything over her words. If he didn't wake up, I knew I would crumble entirely. Turn to nothing.

The day passed agonisingly slowly. My gut felt hollow and empty, but I couldn't bring myself to eat. My legs and back were stiff and sore from sitting still for so long, but I refused to stand up from my vigil beside the bed.

The fire burned out and Lilimar returned as the sun was setting to clean the hearth and lay a new one. Jugs hadn't moved at all on the bed, but I realised that his chest was rising faster now—not the terrifyingly slow movements that I had grown so used to seeing.

My eyes kept drooping closed as the sky got dark through the window, but I stayed stiff and upright in my chair, fingers clenching the armrests. I felt as though I was made from glass, and if I moved even an inch, I would shatter into a million pieces.

Eventually, all noises from the other room stopped when Lilimar went to bed. The hyll was silent, the only sound the crackle of the fire and Jugs' slow, steady breaths.

Until they changed.

I shot out of the chair when I heard him inhale sharply. His arm shifted off his stomach as I knelt beside him on the bed, my legs trembling. When his eyelids fluttered open, I thought I was going to pass out, white spots dancing in my vision.

"J-J-Jugs," I whispered, too terrified to touch him.

He blinked rapidly, throat clicking as he swallowed. His blue eyes looked dark in the low light, and when they turned to me, I let out a pained sob.

"Jugs," I choked out again, my hand shaking wildly as I placed it on his chest.

"Hi." His voice was rough and hoarse, but his pink mouth curved up into a tiny smile as he raised a trembling hand. "High-five."

An ugly sound ripped from my throat before I began to weep. Instead of high-fiving him, I clasped his hand and brought it to my lips, kissing his palm over and over. "Jugs. Jugs."

"Please don't cry," he croaked, weak fingers curling to brush my cheek. "I'm okay, Lor. I feel okay."

I was crying too hard to answer him, throat aching and snot dripping from my nose. I cried so hard I thought I was going to be sick, clinging to his hand and burying my trembling mouth against his palm.

"Lor, please don't cry," he repeated, chin wobbling at the sight of my desperate tears.

"I'm s-s-sorry." Thirty years' worth of emotion was pouring out of me, and I couldn't find the strength to stop it. "I just—I c-can't—"

"No, don't be sorry." He glanced around the room, brows furrowing. "Where are we? Did Lilimar find a cure then? I feel great. Well, kinda weak and like I might ralph, but... better than I have in weeks."

I took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm myself down enough to answer him. Finally lowering his hand from my mouth, I clasped it gently between both of mine. Fresh tears dripped down my cheeks from the feel of his warm skin, the sight of his pale hand entwined with mine after so long. So, so long.

“Sh-she found a cure,” I whispered. “But it took a long time. You have been... a-asleep for a long time.”

“Asleep?” he echoed uneasily.

I exhaled slowly again, preparing myself to tell him. “When the sickness got worse and you—you w-wouldn’t wake up, Lilimar put you into a deep sleep that... slowed your body down. It kept you alive while she looked for a cure.”

“Oh.” His throat bobbed with a nervous swallow. “L-like a *koh-muh*? How... how long?”

I pursed my trembling lips and forced myself to look him in the eyes. “Thirty years.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

It took a long time for Lor's words to register. Maybe even a few solid minutes. I felt hella spacy, my body weak but restless at the same time, like I was coming out of a hard sleep that left me groggy but wired.

I remembered crying to him the night before—finally letting myself talk about what was happening. Finally letting myself acknowledge that I was going to die. I'd been able to feel it coming—the end. I'd been able to tell that I didn't have long left.

Neither of us spoke as I stared at him, wanting to sit up but knowing I would definitely puke all over him if I did. The room we were in was unfamiliar—smaller than Lor's bedroom, but warm and cosy thanks to the fire burning cheerfully near the bed. A clinical but vegetal smell filled the air alongside the smoke from the fire, and behind Lor I could see a weird glass case on a stone pedestal, its walls dripping with condensation.

I had to have misheard him, right? I was a little out of it, so maybe I... Maybe he'd said *thirty days*. That was still pretty trippy to think about, but being in a coma for a month wasn't *too* bad.

Or maybe he'd said thirty months. Two and a half years—that was kinda terrifying to think about, but still not too bad.

But thirty *years*? Nah. No way. People didn't survive comas for that long, did they?

And that would mean I was... in my *fifties*.

"Huh?" I croaked at Lor, long minutes later.

He swallowed, ears twitching madly as he clutched my hand with trembling fingers. His voice was ragged when he said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry it took so long. Lilimar worked tirelessly and we tried—we tried to—"

"Did you... did you *actually* say thirty years?" I licked my lips. I felt thirsty, but not horribly dehydrated, and there was a strange earthy taste coating the back of my tongue. "Because I remember falling asleep last night. We talked and—and I got a little upset, but—"

"It wasn't last night, Jugs." Lor's face crumpled. He looked like he was barely holding himself together. His breath shuddered out of him as he clutched my hand tighter, bringing it back to his lips and holding it there as his eyes slid shut, tears dripping from them. "I have missed you so much."

As I stared at him, I realised he *did* look different. Not that much older, somehow, but... his face was a little thinner, a little sharper. Drawn and exhausted. And his hair was... he'd cut it into a kind of punkish mullet, the beads and braids still there, but the sides shaved bare.

I could feel a hard, thin ring piercing his lower lip, pressing into the back of my hand. He hadn't had that before.

My gaze shifted to my own hand before trailing down my arm. If it had really been *thirty freaking years*, shouldn't my skin look older? And shouldn't my muscles be atrophied? Shouldn't my voice be deeper, rougher?

"H-how..." I lifted my other hand to my face. My arm trembled wildly, weak from lack of use, but I could still feel the strength there. My bicep bulged with muscle, and my chest still looked wide under the thin sheet covering it.

My face didn't feel wrinkled or thin. My hair wasn't a long, stringy mess as if it had been growing for thirty years. I didn't have a beard or even stubble.

Tugging down the sheet, I lifted my heavy head and stared down at my body. It looked the same as always. Strong. Fit. Young.

“How,” I repeated, voice shaking. Tremors began to wrack me, my throat bobbing convulsively, filling me with a stab of terror that the poison still coursed through my system. That it was still going to kill me. “It can’t have been—I still look the same. It c-can’t have been that long. How?”

If it had really been thirty years, did that mean my parents were dead? They would be old by now. And all my friends—April, Anton, everyone—had they all forgotten about me? Were they still living in Linden Falls, occasionally remembering the guy who’d vanished one day thirty years ago, maybe telling their kids about that weird night I’d gone missing from Camp Wynsome and returned wearing a silky black robe with no explanation?

“Whatever Lilimar used to keep you alive, it... it kept you like this,” Lor whispered, finally lowering my hand but still clutching it tight. Painfully tight. “As if you were just in a deep sleep. But it... it has been that long, Jugs. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t understand,” I croaked, eyes filling with hot tears that spilled out and dripped down my temples.

Lor let out a low sob, lowering his head to press my knuckles to his forehead. “I’m sorry.”

His distress helped to clear some of the shock fogging my already hazy brain. Blinking hard, I tried to sit up but couldn’t. Giving his hand a weak squeeze, I whispered, “Why are you sorry?”

“Because it’s my fault.” His voice broke. “It’s my fault. I should have known what Raynir was doing. I should have tried harder. I sh-should—I should have never been so selfish, begging you to come here, trying to make you stay with me. I f-feel like a monster who has snatched away your life.”

He shook his head, sobbing again. “I’m sorry, I’m making this about me. It is not about me. It is... Jugs, I...” His mouth trembled wildly. He looked a split second from shattering. “I have felt dead without you, and now I cannot stop... I’m sorry.”

But he was wrong. It was about him too. If I’d really been in this weird, youth-preserving coma for thirty years... then that meant Lor had been without me for that long. Awake and aware.

Fresh tears dripped from the corners of my eyes, for a different reason this time. Not fear or panic or confused, overwhelming shock.

“You’ve w-waited for me this whole time?” I whispered. I could see the grief, the misery—the *loneliness*—still tightening his features, making him look brittle and even more fragile than normal. His long, elegant fingers were thinner and bonier than before. Even his hair looked flatter and messier, like he’d stopped bothering with it.

Like he’d stopped bothering with much of anything.

“I would wait my whole life for you,” he said quietly, trying to steady his voice even as tears continued to stream freely down his cheeks. He pressed his lips to my hand again. “I would wait forever for you, Jugs.”

My chin wobbled. I wanted to sit up, to pull him into my arms, but my head swam when I lifted it and my body felt too heavy to move. Sniffing wetly, I drew his hand closer. “W-will you come here?”

I managed to shift over, groaning with the effort, so he could slip into the unfamiliar bed with me. His whole body was trembling, and when he curled up against my side with his face buried in my neck, he started crying again. Huge, choking sobs that sounded painful, like they were ripping apart his throat. I found the strength to wrap my arm around his shoulders, and it rested there heavily as my fingers sifted through his hair.

Some part of me had accepted what he’d told me—that it had been thirty fucking years. He had no reason to lie to me about it. But I was in too much shock to fully process what that actually meant. The implications. How much had the world changed? Were my parents still alive? What would happen if I reappeared in Linden Falls looking exactly the same as I had thirty years ago?

I gulped in breaths, trying to stay calm as I pressed my nose and mouth to Lor's temple. My heart was hammering hard in my chest, making me feel a little lightheaded. Closing my eyes, I inhaled his scent greedily, something deep inside telling me that I hadn't had this—him—for a very long time. I could remember falling asleep beside him and it felt like the night before. But my body knew instinctively that it hadn't been mere hours ago. My arm held him closer, my legs shifted to tangle with his, my insides ached with want.

I'd been asleep, unconscious, unaware of anything, but some part of me had still *missed* him.

"Lor," I croaked, squeezing him tighter, feeling some of the strength returning in my desperation to keep him as close as possible.

I couldn't believe how long they'd kept me alive to try and save me. Were humans ever kept in comas for that long? I didn't think so. I didn't think they'd survive it. I didn't think doctors or families would cling on for that long, would hope that something could be done.

But Lor had. Lor hadn't given up, and he had spent the last thirty years just waiting, hoping I would wake up.

No one had ever cared about me that much.

"I love you," I sobbed, managing to heave my body to the side so I could bury myself against him. "Thank you. Thank you for waiting for me."

He lifted his head, nose almost bumping mine. And my mind knew that I hadn't seen those silver and black eyes for so long, that I hadn't been this close to him in years. They still streamed with tears, sparkling in the firelight, but they were so beautiful and so familiar and filled with so much love and sorrow that my body felt like it was expanding from the force of the emotion overwhelming me.

He'd waited for me all this time.

In that moment, nothing else mattered.

"I love you," I whispered again. It almost scared me how much I loved him, and I had never, ever seen anyone look at me the way he was looking at me right then—like he couldn't believe I was really here, awake. Like he was terrified that if he moved, I'd disappear.

Like he didn't care that he had waited so long, that he would have waited even longer—forever—because it had all been worth it in the end.

"I love you," he whispered back, raising a trembling hand between us to press his fingertips against my bare chest. "I have been so empty without you, Jugs. But you kept my heart safe in here."

God, he made me want to blubber like a baby when he said romantic stuff like that. I was *already* blubbering like a baby, sobs hitching my throat, my mouth trembling as I shifted closer, our noses nudging, until I could press my lips to his.

The new piercing was firm and warm, and I shuddered when Lor cupped my cheek, sweetly kissing my upper lip with so much tenderness that my chest ached.

"This doesn't feel real," he whispered when we eventually parted.

My mouth quirked. I remembered saying that the first time I went back to see him—to see if he had been real, to make sure I hadn't imagined him. It felt like only months ago to me, but it had been years. Decades.

The panic threatened to bubble back up and overwhelm me. I had been asleep for *decades*. I forced it back down and kissed him again. Lor was here. He was here. He hadn't left me. He hadn't given up on me.

Everything else could wait. He'd waited long enough.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

When our tears dried up, we stayed curled around each other on the bed for a long time, not saying anything. My body wanted to move, but my limbs and my head felt too heavy. And besides, there was nowhere else I wanted to be. No one else I wanted to be with.

Lor cradled my head against his chest, sifting his long fingers through my hair, the touch so soothing that I almost fell asleep—despite sleeping the last thirty years away.

I focused on his heartbeat against my forehead. Solid, calmer now, steady but quicker than a human's—it had always been quicker than mine. He was still wearing all his clothes—even his boots and jacket—and I knew he had to be hot under the sheets with the warmth of the fire heating the bed, but he didn't move away for even a second.

I burrowed my fingers under his tunic to feel his skin. Warm and smooth and so familiar. I tried to press myself as close to him as possible, and he let me, tangling our legs together, cupping the back of my head and pressing his lips into my hair.

I felt like a child needing comfort, but it was helping. It was keeping the panic at bay. I was still unsettled, my body still trembled lightly, but this was enough for now. He was enough.

The only sound for what felt like hours was the quiet crackling of the fire. But then he spoke, his voice a low, hoarse murmur. "It feels like I am dreaming."

Panic gripped me, made me clutch him tighter. What if this *was* a dream? What if I was still asleep?

"You're not," I said quickly, for both our benefits. "We're both awake."

He shifted, moving down so our faces were level. His fingers tangled through mine, pressed against his chest. "Did you dream?" he asked me quietly.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

His eyes lowered, focusing on our linked hands. "Did you hear me?"

I tried to think—tried to force my brain to stretch my sleep to the length it had been and not just the few hours it had felt like. I remembered Lor's voice, but I didn't know if I was thinking of memories from before.

"I don't know," I whispered eventually, dipping my head to kiss his pierced knuckles. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry." He gazed at me, eyes still so big and solemn, but less pained now. Like he was slowly growing used to me being awake.

"You spoke to me?"

He nodded. "Every day."

My gaze shifted over his shoulder to the unsettling glass case in the middle of the room. Like some kind of... voyeuristic coffin. "Was I... in there?"

"Yes." Lor kissed my hand. "I couldn't touch you. I didn't know if you could hear me. But it..." He shuddered out a breath. "It kept you safe. It kept you alive."

My heart gave a mighty thud. Unable to tear my eyes from the glass coffin, I licked my lips and croaked, "Has it really been thirty years?"

"Yes." My gaze snapped back to Lor, his eyes full of sorrow again. "I'm sorry, Jugs."

"It's not your fault." I cupped his face. "And what you said earlier... You're not a monster. You didn't snatch my life away. I kept coming back because I wanted to, Lor. Because I want to be with you. Because I love you. Neither of us could have known this would happen."

"I should have known," he said, voice hoarse. "I should have paid more attention. I should have

been better.”

“No.” I shifted closer, resting my forehead against his. “None of this is your fault. You did everything you could. L-look at the”—I swallowed hard—“Look at the lengths you’ve gone to keep me alive. No one’s ever cared about me as much as you do.”

Lor’s breath hitched. “You mean more to me than anything else. I would do anything for you, Jugs.” Lifting our joined hands, he pressed my fingertips to his mouth—to the ring piercing his lower lip. “This means that I will never want anyone else. My mouth will never touch another. I will never speak ill of you. Your name is the first thing I want to pass my lips every morning and the last thing I say every night.”

I swallowed thickly, gently touching the tiny blue gem on the ring. “You... you got this done even though you didn’t know if I would ever get better?”

“If you’d never gotten better, I would still have spent the rest of my life by your side.” He kissed my fingertips. “There is no one else for me, Jugs.”

“R-really?” My voice was small. No one had ever wanted me that much. Not even my own parents. “Even... even after all this time?”

“I would have waited forever,” he told me.

My eyes filled with tears again. I didn’t voice it, but... I struggled to understand why. Why he loved me so much. Why he had waited so long for me. I wasn’t anyone special. I was just the idiot who’d fallen through that void and into his palace. I wasn’t very smart, and I didn’t think I was very handsome.

But... Lor did. Lor told me I was smart. And he said I was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. He treated every moment with me like it was precious.

Tucking my face into his neck, I mumbled, “I don’t want to go back. I want to stay here with you. Is that... is that possible? Can we be together here?”

I felt him stiffen against me, and terror at the thought of his rejection made me want to draw back. Before I could, he spoke, his voice low and wary. “There are things I need to tell you, Jugs.”

I sucked in a breath, slowly lifting my head. His eyes were bleak again. Worried.

“What... what do you need to tell me?”

He pursed his lips, making the tiny blue gem wink in the firelight. “Many things. But first we... You should try and drink some water.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “Is it safe?”

“Yes,” he said calmly, stroking my cheek. “It is from Lilimar’s chamber, just like the water you drank before—after we found out about the poison. It’s safe. I promise.”

“Okay,” I said in a small voice, trusting him.

He didn’t move, gazing at me with big mournful eyes. “I don’t want to stop touching you for even a second,” he whispered, sliding his fingers into my hair. “It’s been so long.”

“Then don’t.” I closed my eyes, trying to burrow even closer to him. “I don’t need water. I’m okay.”

I wasn’t quite sure *how* I didn’t need water after thirty freaking years, but I was telling the truth. I didn’t feel dehydrated. The longer I was awake, the better I felt. The grogginess was melting away, the strength was returning to my limbs. But I still just wanted to lie here with Lor.

He loosed an unsteady exhale, then started talking. “About ten years after you went into your deep sleep, another void appeared. Many, in fact. All over the world.”

My head jerked up. “What?”

“Some of them are... very large. And many, many creatures from this world went through them.

Into yours.”

I gawped at him, my mouth opening and closing wordlessly. There were... creatures from this world in the *human* world? Lots of them?

“So they... they all know about this world?” I tensed. “Did they invade? Attack?”

That was what humans generally did. Start wars.

“No. No humans have come through.”

My brow wrinkled. “So they... Do they not know about them then? Are they hidden like ours?”

“No, they do know about them.” Lor hesitated. “Any creatures that make it back here are... severely injured. We think the humans are defending themselves. Defending the voids on their side.”

That sounded about right.

“What...” I licked my lips. “What kind of creatures went through?”

Lor gazed at me solemnly. “Bad ones, Jugs.”

My breath caught. “Like... like *really* bad ones? Not ones like you or Seis?”

“Some like us,” he said slowly. “But many others. Wild ones. Dangerous ones. They... Lyri went through our void several times to see what was happening.”

“What’s happening over there?” I asked quickly. “What did everyone do?”

“They—” Lor shifted uncomfortably, averting his eyes. “They left.”

I stared at him. “Left?”

“All the humans are gone.”

My face blanched. “Gone... You mean dead? They were killed?”

“No, we—We don’t know. And there are obviously still some, defending the void. But... when Lyri went to your village, where you lived, it was empty.”

Holy... holy shit. The whole town had been deserted?

“Where did they all go?” I croaked.

What if they *were* all dead? What if everyone on earth was dead?

What if I was the last human?

“What did Lyri see?” I asked hoarsely. “Can I speak to him? Can he tell me what’s happening over there?”

Lor flinched, his brows drawing in pain. “Lyri... Lyri went through the void over ten years ago and never came back.”

I froze, only my eyes moving as they darted over Lor’s face. He looked agonised, like it hurt him to even say the words.

“Oh Lor, I’m so sorry,” I croaked.

His twin. His only family in the world. And if Lyri had been gone for ten years...

I wasn’t generally a pessimist, but I also wasn’t deluded. Humans feared the unknown, and they destroyed what they didn’t understand.

And humans had guns. Grenades. Bombs. Jesus, *nukes*. If voids started appearing and terrifying unknown creatures poured through them into the world, I wouldn’t put it past at least a couple of countries to just nuke the problem away.

“He might still come back,” Lor said woodenly, but I could hear that he didn’t really believe it.

“He will,” I insisted, leaning in to kiss his cheek, his nose, his browbone. “Lyri’s a fighter. And he’d do anything to get back to you.”

Lor’s smile was small and devoid of any hope. He exhaled a sharp breath and burrowed closer, nuzzling his nose against my cheek, drawing comfort.

“Gryf went with him,” he said quietly. “But Seis is still here with us. Seis is part of the reason you

are better. With Lilimar, of course.”

“He is?”

“He got Lilimar to poison him so they would know the cure worked.”

“Jesus Christ.” I blinked in shock, then pulled back to look at Lor. “He needs a raise.”

His mouth finally curled at one corner into a true, if miniscule, smile. “A what?”

“More money. He needs to be paid more. Or a promotion.”

Lor snuffled out a tiny laugh, and it was the best sound I’d ever heard. “He already has the best position here, as my personal guard.”

I grinned, glad that the sorrow was leaving his silver eyes. “Arrogant much?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that.” His cheeks darkened with a blush, and I couldn’t help but stroke my thumb over one to feel the warmth. “Just that he... But yes. I will pay him whatever he wants. I will give him whatever he wants. I am forever in his debt, and Lilimar’s. I’ll carve up my fiefdom for them if they desire to be Morics themselves.”

“What about me?” I was still grinning as I nudged his cheek with my nose. “What if we make a new fiefdom for me? Jugslandia?”

He laughed, the sound still a little fragile. “You can have my whole fiefdom for yourself. Or we rename it. Jugslandia. And Thinir can be...”

“The City of Jugs.”

His true laugh burst out of him then, snorting and a little hissy. The most perfect sound in the world. “We name everything Jugs? And you called *me* arrogant?”

Of course I didn’t really want his fiefdom or to have anything named after me. I just wanted to see him smile and laugh. Even before I’d gone into my deep sleep, I hadn’t seen him do either of those things for so long.

“Okay, how about naming the fiefdom after Lilimar and the city after Seis? They both deserve it.” I sobered, swallowing thickly. “I can’t believe they... I can’t believe Lilimar spent all this time trying to help me.”

“She never gave up,” Lor said quietly. “She has worked so very hard. I owe her everything.”

“I need to thank her.” I smiled at him. “She was so kind to me before... When I was sick. She helped me feel less scared.”

He glanced over at the window, where I could see the sky turning a coppery pink as dawn approached. “She will be here soon to check on you.”

When he turned back to me, his mouth was curving up into a smile—a hopeful one, almost excited, like the start of a new day made it truly sink in that I was awake, that after that asshole council’s attempts to tear us apart, we were together again and had our whole lives ahead of us.

“And then we will get you up and bathed.” He raked his fingers gently through the hair flopping over my forehead, pushing it back. “Cook will make you whatever you want to eat. We’ll go and sit outside to get some fresh air, and...” He grinned, eyes sparkling. “I will finally get to show you Thinir.”

I chuckled nervously, eyes darting to the window. “Is that... safe? What if someone spots me?”

“The whole world knows about the otherworld now. And I am not hiding you away forever.” His brows drew together with determination. “You are not spending your life locked up in this hyll. I want to show you everything.”

Excitement fizzed in my gut. I’d spent so much time in this world, and all I’d ever seen of it was the guest quarters, Lor’s chambers and a few glimpses of Thinir at night when I peeked out the window while I was in his room. I had no idea what this world actually *looked* like. Did other

creatures live in the city besides vints and baregh?

“Okay.” I grinned at him. “That sounds rad. I want to see all of it.”

“And you will.” He kissed me soundly, then pulled back. “I can hear Lilimar getting up. Would you like me to help you sit up?”

“Um, okay. Thanks.”

After getting out of bed, he propped several pillows against the headboard, then gently helped me sit up with a surprising amount of strength in his delicate body. My head swam for a few moments. I’d been horizontal for a *long* freaking time. But when he handed me a glass of water—clear and free of any herbs—sipping it helped.

A minute or so later, there was a soft knock at the door. “Lor?”

“Come in, Lilimar.” Lor fidgeted beside the bed, but his sharp teeth flashed in a huge smile that spread over his face when the door opened and the kind healer vint stepped into the room.

She looked tired, but her eyes widened when she saw me awake and sitting up. “By the Mabs.”

I gave her a grin and a little wave. “Hi, Lilimar.”

She looked as though she might collapse with relief, but she only managed to take a few steps into the room before Lor was launching himself at her.

“Thank you.” I could see how hard he was squeezing her, clutching her slender form to him.

“Thank you, Lilimar. Thank you.”

Over his shoulder, her tired face softened into a smile. She hugged him back tightly, smoothing down his mussed hair in an almost motherly gesture. “You don’t need to thank me, Lor.”

“Yes I do.” He finally released her, ears twitching with embarrassment as his voice grew thick and he fiddled with his cuffs. “I can never repay you. But I will try to. Anything you want—anything at all—it is yours.”

“Seeing Jugs awake, and seeing some life back in you—those are both enough.”

“Nah.” They both turned to look at me as I grinned. “You gotta ask for something better than that, Lilimar. He’s a big, powerful Moric. He can give you anything you want.”

She laughed, patting Lor’s cheek as his ears twitched, before walking over to the bed with her medical satchel. “It is wonderful to see you awake, Jugs.”

“Yeah, it feels pretty good to be awake.” I smiled at her as she perched on the edge of the bed and opened her satchel. “Thank you so much, Lilimar. For everything.”

Her eyes creased into a smile as she reached over and grasped my arm with long, spindly fingers. “Well thanks to you, Jugs, I think I might be an expert on every kind of poison in this entire world.”

“You should write a book,” I said as she carefully tugged down the sheet to expose more of my chest.

Her head cocked. “Yes, perhaps I will.”

I followed her gaze down to my chest, sucking in a sharp breath when I realised the horrible white rash was completely gone. I heard Lor let out a shaky, relieved breath as he settled into the chair beside the bed, immediately reaching out to clasp my hand. I squeezed it back, grinning at him. It was finally starting to feel real—that the poison was gone. That I wasn’t going to die.

“No throat spasms or trembling in the hands?” Lilimar asked, face tight with concentration once again as she grabbed her cone thing that she’d always used to listen to my heart.

“Nope, none at all.” I couldn’t stop grinning, and neither could Lor, but we both waited patiently while she carried out her checks, listening to my heartbeat, helping me sit up to check my back, feeling around my neck and stomach with careful hands.

It felt a little weird to be naked in front of her—geez, had I been in that glass box thing *naked* for

thirty years? Had Seis seen my junk?—but her hands and gaze were brisk, gentle but impersonal.

After taking a small sample of my blood for a final check, she closed up her satchel and smiled at me. “Your muscles are healthy, but it’s going to feel strange and unnatural to walk at first. And your belly is about to tell you that it is very, very hungry, but you shouldn’t eat too much to begin with. Some broth and bread first, I think, before we move you on to something more substantial.”

“Okay.” As if her words had triggered it, my stomach squeezed and let out an enormous growl. I chuckled, pressing my hand to it. “Oh geez.”

Lilimar stood up from the bed. “I’ll prepare you something. And try and find you some clothes that fit.”

“Oh, yeah, that’d be rad.” I chuckled awkwardly, resisting the urge to cup my hands over my junk, which was embarrassingly prominent under the thin sheet.

“Your suitcase is still in my chamber.” Lor grinned at me, scrambling back onto the bed now that Lilimar had vacated the space. “All your wonderful shorts and shorn off shirts.”

“Awesome.” I leaned over to kiss his cheek, then rested my head on his shoulder with a sigh. I could feel my body waking up, becoming lighter, my limbs and belly tingling a little with the urge to *move*. But I stayed where I was, tucked against Lor’s side.

At the door, Lilimar paused and smiled at someone in the other room, then looked back at us. “Seis is here.”

I resisted the urge to cup my junk again. Okay, I *had to* ask Lor at some point if the big baregh had seen my cock and balls. My bare *ass*. Oh man, that would be so freaking embarrassing.

He filled the doorway a second later, tusks jutting up as a huge grin spread across his beastly but handsome face. “Look who finally decided to wake up.”

I laughed, shifting upright a little more as he ambled across the room and reached down to grip my shoulder. “Nice to see you again, Seis.”

“And you, Jugs.” He squeezed my shoulder, eyes roaming over my bare arms and chest. “Still in fighting condition.” He grinned at me. “Still almost as big as me.”

I snorted, because that was bullshit. I was bigger than Lor, but I was nowhere *near* as big as a baregh. Still, his words made me flush with pleasure.

“We’ll get you out there training with the guards soon.” He gestured at the window. “Get your strength back up.”

“Okay.” I chuckled, then sobered as I glanced at Lor. “Seis, Lor told me what you... Thank you so much.”

“Bah.” He waved a hand, settling into the chair Lor had vacated, the wood creaking under his weight. “It was nothing.”

“It was *not* nothing, Seis,” Lor said curtly.

The big baregh flushed, his cheeks turning ruddy. “Yes, well, it’s done now. And it all worked out.”

“Yeah, it did.” I grinned at Lor, who grinned right back, his sharp teeth gleaming white and his silver irises flashing in the morning sun.

He looked so happy—so relieved—that I leaned in to kiss him, uncaring of our audience. But I kept it brief, because I didn’t want to make Seis uncomfortable. Plus, I probably *really* needed to brush my teeth. And shower. I didn’t stink of body odour, but there was a strange, musty, vegetal scent clinging to my skin.

Not that Lor seemed to care. He lunged closer to kiss me again, smiling against my mouth and gripping my hand so tight, like he didn’t ever want to let go.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

Nothing could ever feel better than this.

The pink glow of morning streamed through the thin curtains in my bedchamber, sending shards of colour across the floor from the beads draped over them. In the city beyond, my ears picked up only the faintest sounds. Flying creatures cawing as they swooped down to catch their prey in the calm sea. The first distant shouts of dock workers and sea-hunting folk starting their day far below.

Beside me, Jugs' gentle, steady breaths tickled my neck. The warmth of his big body pressed into my side—skin smooth and bare against mine, a heavy arm slung over my belly and his golden hair brushing my cheek.

My eyes were drooping with exhaustion, but I hadn't let myself sleep. I hadn't wanted to miss a single moment of my first night with Jugs back by my side, in my bed, where he belonged. My fingers played gently with the hair that fell over his nape. My heart thumped steadily, calmly, as if it was trying to match the pace of Jugs' against the side of my chest. My entire body felt warm and content in a way I couldn't remember. Alive for the first time in so, so long.

I never wanted it to end. I wanted to lie here with him, like this, forever. Just the two of us, hidden away, finally together after everything.

The day before had been overwhelming, but it had ended exactly as it should have—as I had been waiting for for thirty years—with Jugs and me slipping into our bed, our skin bare so we could be as close as possible, to curl around each other and enjoy the quiet bliss of just being together. He had fallen asleep quickly, exhausted after everything, and I'd pushed back the terrifying thought that he wouldn't wake up again. I had forced myself to stay calm and relaxed, to hold him close to me, letting his steady breaths soothe the worries away.

He's fine. He's cured. He's healthy.

And he was. I could feel it. His heart was strong and steady, his breathing that familiar rasp from the back of his throat that I had spent so many nights listening to before he went into his long, deep sleep. When he had started snoring in the night, I'd had to clap a hand over my mouth to push back the tearful laugh that threatened to burst from me. I'd missed that sound so much.

After he had finished his meal the day before, Lilimar and Seis had carried the glass case out of the room before Seis heaved its stone pedestal away. Then they had replaced it with a big bathtub, and I had helped Jugs wash the residue of the green liquid's steam from his skin. His knees had buckled during the walk from the bed to the bathtub, legs trembling wildly, but I had kept him propped up and helped him into the tub.

My eyes had prickled with tears when the steam from the hot water pinkened his cheeks, making him look just as he always had before he got sick. I had cleansed his body and scrubbed his hair reverently, stealing kisses whenever I could from whatever part of him I could reach.

Once he was wrapped up in a thick cloth to stay warm and get dry, Seis had returned carrying a neat pile of clothing, teasingly telling Jugs that he had taken it from one of the smallest baregh guards in the hyll. The loose shirt and trousers still swamped him, but he had grinned up at Seis and punched him lightly on the shoulder, the fine tremor in his muscles finally gone after the warmth of the bath.

Our walk through the hyll to my quarters had been... strange. Jugs had paced the room at first, growing steadier on his feet until he could walk without my assistance. Then he'd shoved back his wet hair, making it spike up wildly over his forehead, and given me a wary but determined nod.

Iorn and several soldiers had met us at the door to Lilimar's chambers to accompany us. I didn't

think any of the hyll staff would attempt to hurt Jugs, but I wasn't taking any risks, and I knew they would be utterly shocked by the sight of him. Everyone knew about the otherworld, but none of them had ever seen any of the creatures who lived there. None of them had ever seen a human before.

The soldiers all stared openly at Jugs when he stepped out into the hallway, but Iorn managed to mask the worst of his shock. He knew more about the otherworlders than the rest of them, but he had still never seen Jugs for himself.

He had greeted Jugs politely, but seemed keen to get us safely into my quarters. Staff and guards froze and stared as we walked through the hyll, Jugs' hand gripped tightly in mine and Seis staying close on his other side. There had been frantic hushed whispers, and I knew it was only a matter of time before word spread through the entire city. But I wasn't going to let anything bad happen to Jugs. I wasn't going to let the rest of the world shun us like they had with the salyik.

For the first time in my life, I actually felt strong.

The rest of the day had passed quickly, and for most of it, I couldn't keep still, my whole body feeling like it would burst with utter happiness. Jugs had been tired after the walk through the hyll, so I'd settled him in our bed and fussed over him, reverently brushing his hair that had been tangled after his bath, fetching his sweat shirt and some shorts from his suitcase so he could change into his own clothes. I'd laid and lit the fire to keep him warm. Lilimar brought us more food in the afternoon, and I ate twice as much as Jugs, feeling truly hungry for the first time in years.

I told him about all the positive changes that had happened in Thinir—my new council, Talimuth and our friendship, how much better things had become for the salyik people—and when he grinned at me and told me how proud he was of me, I finally *felt* it.

I didn't talk about Lyri, or what had happened in Jugs' world, or that a lone eyriad was loose. I didn't focus on the bad things, because I didn't want to ruin this blissful time now that he was back. I knew we would have to talk about it all eventually, but not now.

By the time night fell, Jugs had been yawning widely, his eyelids drooping. As we got undressed for bed, he'd sleepily asked me if I would "turn on" the pink crystals in the canopy. Smiling, I stood on the mattress and swept my hand over the shower of dawn-shard crystals, my touch making them all flicker to life in a soft haze as they tinkled together. He'd laughed in delight, just like he always used to when he asked me to do this.

Before he had fallen asleep, he had mumbled that he loved me as he curled up into my side. Chest hitching beneath his warm cheek, I had whispered that I loved him too.

I liked that human expression for the way I felt about him—how simply it summed up the overwhelming flood of emotions that teemed in my chest. How it said everything in so few words.

We hadn't moved since, and before he woke, I allowed my mind to wander to the thoughts I hadn't let sour our time together the day before. I wondered how Lyri would have reacted to Jugs waking up. How quickly he would have tried to press a drink into his hands to celebrate. How hard he would have hugged me, whispering how happy he was for me.

Was he alright? He had to be. I couldn't let myself believe anything else. Now that I had Jugs back, my heart felt whole again, but there was still a chasm inside me—a deep, painful ache that never went away, like a part of me was still missing.

Would the humans have hurt him? Did they have creatures in their world that were as terrible as the rycke? Surely Jugs would have mentioned it if they did.

What had happened to my brother? To Gryf? To all the soldiers who had gone through to look for them?

Would we ever find out?

When Jugs stirred against my side, I pushed back all the worries. Shifting carefully so I was facing him, I watched breathlessly as his eyelids flickered, before his beautiful crystal blue eyes opened sleepily.

“High-five,” I said, grinning so wide my cheeks hurt as I lifted my hand into the scant space between us. “Hi.”

Jugs snorted and smacked my palm with his before rubbing his eyes. “Hi.”

“How do you feel?”

“Better.” He grinned at me drowsily. “Like I needed to sleep, which seems kinda silly.”

“No.” I kissed his knuckles again and again, clutching his hand. “Your mind is finally awake and working hard. That is exhausting.”

He chuckled. “Don’t think my mind’s ever worked all that hard.”

“Yes it has,” I said sharply, feeling defensive over his own inability to see how smart he was.

“And your body is waking up and moving after a very long time. You’re going to be tired.”

“Mm.” Jugs shifted, then made a face. “Speaking of my body waking up, I *really* need to pee.”

“Do you need help getting to the waterchamber?” I sat up and helped him upright, but Jugs shook his head at me with a smile.

“I’ll be okay. Be right back.”

I watched anxiously as he slipped out of bed, swaying a little before his steps grew steadier as he went into the waterchamber. My ears twitched as I listened intently, making sure he didn’t fall over or hurt himself. A second later, I heard the sound of a stream hitting water followed by a euphoric groan.

Biting my lip to suppress a chuckle, I waited impatiently in the bed until he reappeared, scrubbing a hand over his wild mane with a contented sigh.

“I didn’t know peeing could feel that good.”

I didn’t answer, my chest aching as I stared at him. Splashes of colour danced over his pale skin from the window, his body still so big and strong and perfect. When he slipped back into bed with me, I tackled him down and began kissing every inch of his beautiful face.

Jugs laughed, sliding his arms around my back as I peppered kisses over his ears, his cheeks, his browbone and down his nose. When I reached his mouth I slowed down, lingering there for a long time, my eyes sliding shut in bliss as I clutched his face.

I didn’t want to smother him—alright, I *did* want to smother him—so I pulled back and smiled down at him, stroking my thumb over the corner of his mouth. “What would you like to do today?”

“Don’t you have important Moric duties?” he asked with a little grin, keeping me pressed to his front.

“Fuck my duties,” I declared, which made him blink at me.

“Oh wow, geez, okay.” He chuckled, lifting his head to kiss my cheek. “I kinda just want to hang out with you today. Is that okay?”

“That is more than okay,” I murmured, dipping down to kiss him again. Then I grinned again, laying my cheek on his chest. “I have missed your odd little expressions for things. *Hang out.*”

He chuckled, squeezing me tighter. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes.” I closed my eyes and nestled my cheek closer. “I would be happy to stay here just like this all day.”

I felt his fingers thread through my hair, thumb brushing the shaved side and making me shiver. “Me too,” he croaked, but then his belly rumbled so hard beneath me I felt it through my own gut.

Laughing, I slid down to press my ear to his stomach. “It’s telling me what it wants.”

“Oh yeah?” Chuckling, he feathered his fingers over the pointed tip of my ear. “I bet you can hear

everything going on in there.”

I could. I could hear the steady thump of his heart, the constant gurgling of his stomach, the whoosh of his blood thrumming through his veins. His warm thighs bracketed my sides, and his relaxed cock pressed against my collarbone. Turning my head, I kissed his navel, breathing in his scent, then rested my chin on his belly to grin up at him.

“It wants lokl. And tea.” I paused. “And cookies.”

“Doesn’t sound like I’ll be able to go and get us cookies anymore,” he said grimly, brows pinching, so I quickly started pressing kisses all over his stomach, not wanting to let him think of any of the bad things that had happened.

He squirmed, laughter bursting out of him. “Ticklish.”

“Just checking that everything is in working order.” I kissed my way up to his chest, then across his shoulder and over his neck, nibbling there gently until he burst out laughing and writhed beneath me.

“Everything’s in working order, I promise,” he gasped between laughs. Then he groaned, wriggling a hand between us to press it to his stomach. “Ow, laughing feels like I’m doing sit-ups.”

“*Doing sit-ups*,” I echoed with a snort, finally lifting myself off him. “You only need to sit up once, Jugs. And I will help you.”

“No, I meant—Never mind.” He sat up unaided, leaning back on his arms. “Can we get some breakfast? I’m, like, *super* hungry now.”

“Yes, of course.” I scrambled out of bed and reached for my robe. “I imagine Lilimar might bring you something—”

As if summoned, there was a knock at the door through the antechamber. Jugs started slipping out of bed as I belted my robe and padded across the room. In the past, I would have been frightfully embarrassed about speaking to anyone other than Jugs in *just* my robe, but nothing could pierce the bubble of happiness that surrounded me. I crossed the antechamber and unlocked the door, grinning at Lilimar standing there.

She grinned back. “Judging by your face, I assume Jugs is still doing well?”

“Perfectly.” Bouncing on my toes, I couldn’t resist reaching out and squeezing her hand. “He slept well, and now he is awake. He ate most of what you brought him yesterday, and he is very hungry again.”

“Well, that’s good.” She gestured at the dining room door behind her. “I’ve brought your breakfast. But I think soon he can start having whatever he wants. Just a few more days of light meals until we are sure his body is functioning properly.”

“He—” I almost told her that Jugs had urinated this morning, but that seemed a bit personal. She would probably ask him anyway. “Yes, that sounds wise.”

We would have to wait for our lokl, but that didn’t matter. My grin widened when I saw Seis ambling down the corridor toward us, already smiling.

“Good morning, Seis.”

“Good morning, Lor.” He glanced at the door behind me. “How is Jugs?”

“Very well, he—” I stopped and turned when I heard him padding across the antechamber behind me, my chest constricting at the mere sight of him. He had dressed in his shorts and sweat shirt from last night, looking just like he always had. My Jugs.

“Morning.” He grinned at Seis and Lilimar. The latter rushed forward and cupped his face, squashing his cheeks a little, like Mama always used to do to Lyri and me.

“Look at you.” Lilimar’s eyes glistened. “I had worried you would be bedridden for weeks, but

here you are. Humans are strong, yes?”

Jugs chuckled, his voice a little muffled thanks to her hands on his cheeks when he said, “I guess so.”

“I’d like to check you over after you’ve eaten,” she said, finally releasing him and stepping back. “But we can do it here. No need to go back to my chambers.”

I glanced at Seis, a tiny stab of anxiety making me chew my lip. “What are the hyll staff saying?”

He shrugged easily. “That there is an otherworlder in the hyll. But they seem more intrigued than scared. Don’t worry, Lor. The guards will keep everyone calm. You just enjoy your time with Jugs.”

“I should probably tell the council,” I mused, a hand lifting to fiddle with my braids. “Seis, will you send a message to Talimuth? I’d like them to know that Jugs is well.”

“I can tell them,” Lilimar said, ushering Jugs toward the dining room. “I’m going to visit them and Talimor after breakfast. I’ve been thinking about what you said, Jugs,” she added as we all made our way into the dining room. “I think I’m going to write a book, but I’d like to do it with Talimor.”

“Talimor is, um... Talimuth’s parent, right?” Jugs looked at me. “They helped you?”

“Yes. We couldn’t have done it without them.”

“I’d like to meet them,” Jugs told me with a smile. “Thank them.”

“Yes, I want you to meet Talimuth,” I said eagerly, directing Jugs into the seat to the right of mine. “Seis, Lilimar, will you join us for breakfast?”

“I’ll join you for a *snack*,” Seis chuckled as he pulled out a chair. “But I’ll have to go and cajole cook into making me something else after.”

Baregh *did* have hearty appetites, and Lilimar had delivered us a light breakfast of broth, bread rolls and a big, steaming bowl of ude.

“Is that... *oht-mil*?” Jugs asked, leaning forward to peer at it.

“It’s a dish made from a grain that is cooked for a long time and spiced with whatever you want.” I grinned at him, dishing him up a small bowl. “Lilimar’s version is very nice.”

Lilimar chuckled, pouring everyone a cup of molt tea. “Your mother liked my take on ude as well.”

As we all started eating, I reached across and tangled my fingers with Jugs’, unwilling to stop touching him for even a few minutes. When he eventually squeezed my hand and let go to tear his bread in half, I shifted my hand under the table to palm his knee instead, fingers sifting through the light hair trailing up his thigh.

I glanced at him every few seconds while we ate, belly warming with relief at the sight of him eating more than the day before. He liked the molt tea, saying it reminded him of something called *kahfee* with hot *syn-uh-muhn*. I could tell he didn’t really like the ude, but he dutifully ate what was in front of him and told Lilimar it was delicious, which made her ears twitch with pleasure.

After our meal, Lilimar and Jugs went into the sitting room so Lilimar could check him over. Seis and I stayed in the dining room, finishing our tea and making plans to reschedule the council meetings due to take place this week. I wanted to enjoy my time with Jugs first. And I could finally admit to myself that I *had* worked hard over the last thirty years. I had done so with none of the passion or pride I should have felt, but I’d still done it. I could take a week or so to myself while Jugs acclimated to this new time. This new world.

When Lilimar and Jugs reappeared, she declared that Jugs was in perfect health, his body waking up just as it should. Despite our audience, I couldn’t stop myself from flinging my arms around his neck and tugging him down for a deep kiss, grinning so wide when we parted that I didn’t think I’d ever be able to stop.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

“Holy *crap*.”

I scrambled up onto my knees on the small window seat in Lor’s room, pressing my hands to the glass as I stared down at the ornate, manicured gardens that sprawled out around the front of the palace—hyll.

Lor had told me they were public gardens, the citizens of Thinir free to wander them and enjoy the plant life that was so rare in the rest of the city. I’d never had a good look at them before, seeing as I’d always been here when it was dark.

I’d been staring in fascination at all the strange, brightly coloured plants, and the creatures wandering between them. Vints like Lor, but none with the same deep blue skin tone as him and Lyri. A few baregh guards posted at intervals, keeping an eye on everyone. Some squat creatures with bulbous eyes and tendril-like hair.

Then movement at the edge of what Lor had told me was the poison plant garden had drawn my gaze, and I stared in utter shock when I saw a freaking *human* walking next to a tall, scary-looking dude in a hood with curling black horns.

“What’s wrong?” Lor rushed over as I pressed my nose to the glass, watching as the pair made their way to the thick stone railing that edged the steep side of the mountain.

“There’s a human.” I pointed frantically, my fingertip thudding against the glass. “Look, it’s another *human*.”

They were peering over the railing before the guy turned to grin up at his spooky companion. We were too high up for me to make out details, but he had dark hair and pale skin. He was tall and lean, dressed all in black, and he looked completely at ease.

“What?” Lor spluttered, peering out beside me, his ear brushing my hair. “Hag’s balls.”

I snorted a laugh at the weird expression, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the human guy. So the humans weren’t all dead then? They were okay? This guy looked fit and healthy. And *happy*. He was grinning up at the hooded creature, whose black-fingered hand rested against his nape in an intimate touch.

“What in Ara’s name is a human doing here?” Lor croaked. “And with the *telyth*?”

“What’s a telyth?” I asked absently, watching as the pair turned to face each other. The guy’s expression sobered as he said something, and then the... *telyth* cupped his face in his hands. Okay, they were definitely a couple.

My belly warmed with a weird swell of... companionship or something. Just seeing him here—especially with a non-human like me—lessened some of the dread that had churned since Lor had told me about all the voids opening.

Maybe... maybe it wasn’t too bad in the human world, despite all the terrible creatures going there. Maybe everyone was okay. Maybe Lyri would come back.

“A very old creature,” Lor answered me, still staring at the pair as the telyth slipped a ring off his finger and slid it onto the human’s. Geez, it almost looked like... they were getting *married* or something.

“What the heck are they doing here?” I asked. “There aren’t other humans here, right?”

“No, there aren’t any. I have no idea.” Lor’s sharp teeth worried his lower lip, jostling the piercing there. “Are they... together?”

We watched as the telyth dipped his hood closer to the human’s face for what was clearly a kiss.

“I’m gonna say yes?” I pursed my lips and side-eyed Lor, whose dainty nose was practically pressed to the glass. “So... maybe all your citizens won’t find me so weird? None of them seem to really be reacting to that guy.”

Lor’s mouth twisted. “Well, he’s with a telyth. No one would dare insult a telyth’s companion. They can be... quite vicious.”

“Okay, but still, they’ve all seen a human now, right? So that’s something.”

The telyth and human guy began walking through the gardens hand in hand, heading back down into the city. Once they were out of sight, I shifted on the window seat to face Lor and took his hand.

“If a human made it here, that means it can’t be too bad over there, right?” I nodded out the window, even though we couldn’t see them anymore. “That guy didn’t look that much older than me—than, um, how old I look, I guess?” Fuck, I forgot I was in my fifties for a second. “And you said the big voids opened twenty years ago, right? So he... he obviously survived whatever happened as a kid.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Lor murmured, sitting down on the seat beside me.

I looked down to watch my fingers playing with Lor’s knuckle piercings. I wanted to ask him if I could go through our void to see what was happening over there. Just... to see. But I didn’t think he’d react well to that—Lyri had gone through and never come back. I didn’t want to freak Lor out when he was clearly so overjoyed to have me back.

He said he’d felt dead for the last thirty years without me. What if I went through and couldn’t get back for some reason, like Lyri? I couldn’t do that to him. He’d already lost so much.

Deciding to bring it up another time, I instead said, “Maybe we could go find that guy and ask him what happened in the human world?”

Lor looked doubtful. “We could try. Telyths aren’t... very sociable. Honestly, I’m very surprised to see him here. But I could... I could ask Seis to try and find them in the city. Invite them here.”

I nodded quickly, because I was kind of desperate to find out what had happened in my world. My... old world. I’d told Lor I wanted to stay here with him, and I did. I didn’t want to keep going back and forth, and it might not... even be possible anymore.

But even if it was, I didn’t want to live half a life with Lor. I wanted to *be* with him, properly, sharing everything. Sleeping beside him every night. Waking up next to him every morning. Eating our meals together, hanging out with Seis and Lilimar.

Even if the other voids hadn’t opened, what was really waiting for me back in my world? Parents who didn’t really care about me. Friends I hadn’t hung out with much, because I’d wanted to spend every free moment I had with Lor. A job that was just a job.

And realistically, how could I even go back looking the same as I had thirty years ago? Everyone would freak out. I’d probably be carted off and experimented on, kept under observation.

But if we found that guy, at least I could find out what happened. At least I’d know. At least it might tell us how likely it was that Lyri would ever come back.

“Alright.” Lor cupped my face, leaning in to kiss me sweetly. “I will find Seis and send him out into Thinir. I must admit, I am... interested to meet another human.”

I grinned, nudging his cheek with my nose. “What if you like him better than me? He looked real handsome from up here.”

“Impossible,” Lor told me solemnly, still clasping my face between his hands. “No one is more beautiful than you.”

I blushed, reaching up to tug on my earlobe. “Thanks.”

When he said it, I actually believed it. I knew I wasn’t ugly—Greg had obviously liked the look of

me, and I'd always got attention from girls, which had just scared me more than anything. But I was pretty sure that had been more to do with my height and body than my face. Wasn't like Greg had had to look at my face in that dark supply closet.

"You'll be alright here while I go and find Seis?" Lor asked me. "I won't be long. And I will tell him not to mention you to the telyth, just in case. I'll just say that we are inviting them to the hyll. They will no doubt think it's simply because I'm interested in the otherworlder."

I nodded. "Okay. And yeah, I'll be fine."

He seemed reluctant to leave me for even a few minutes, still clasping my face as he gazed at me. Then he leaned in and kissed me again, lingering for a long time before standing up and smoothing down his tunic.

"Do you need anything before I go?" he asked anxiously. "Are you hungry? Do you want more tea?"

"No, I'm fine." I chuckled, then shifted uncomfortably on the window seat because my body decided in that moment that it had another, very pressing urge. One I hadn't felt since I'd woken up for the first time in thirty years.

"Alright," Lor said softly, still gazing at me with yearning as he backed away, before sighing and turning for the door.

The moment he was gone, I stood up and hurried to the bathroom—or waterchamber, as Lor called it. A grin was spreading over my face, which was probably a weird reaction to have—I'd never been excited to take a shit before. But it felt like my body was finally waking up fully, operating as it should. It made me feel *normal*, when everything else was most definitely *not* normal.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, I felt floaty and at peace with the whole world. Lor was coming back into the room, so I told him that I'd just had the best poop of my life, which made him laugh.

"I just saw Lilimar," he said, tugging off his boots to crawl onto the bed. "She was coming back from visiting Talimor, and she walked past the telyth and human."

"No way." I clambered onto the bed with him. "Did she speak to them?"

"No, she said they"—his ears twitched, and he lowered his voice—"she said they were talking about *fucking*."

I burst out laughing. "Well, they looked pretty loved up when we saw them."

"She said she heard the telyth call the human Danny."

"Oh, okay." I smiled at him. It was kinda weird to hear such a normal name among all the unusual ones here.

"Seis is out there looking for them," Lor told me as he tugged me down and curled up against my side. "We will see if they accept our invitation."

"What are telyths like?" I asked, threading my fingers through his soft hair as he rested his cheek on my chest.

He shrugged. "Just... very old."

I snorted. "Is that it?"

"Well, I suppose... They are almost extinct. Remnants from a past age. They keep to themselves mostly, hiding in their nests away from civilisation. The one we saw, he has lived in the Barren Valley in my fiefdom for... eons."

"So how did he end up with a human, um, boyfriend?"

"Well, the void appeared in the Barren Valley. Perhaps he got curious and went through it."

"And picked up a hot human boyfriend while he was there."

Lor lifted his head to give me an impish grin. “Is that really so different from what *you* did, Jugs?”

I laughed, fiddling with the braid dangling in front of his ear. “I guess not. And *my* boyfriend is way hotter. The hottest.”

Lor’s ears twitched as he shot me a shy smile. “But you said that human was handsome.”

“Objectively, sure.” I grinned at him and slid my hands down his lean back to squeeze his ass. “But you’re perfect. And you’re mine. I could never want anyone else.”

Lor’s silver eyes flared with heat as he licked his lips, but he seemed a little hesitant when he leaned up to kiss me. When I kissed him back, parting my lips to glide my tongue against his, he let out a tiny sound of pleasure and shifted on top of me until he straddled my waist.

I clutched his ass, heat squirming through my belly, but my cock didn’t even stir. Which, yeah, okay, worried me a little. I had the most beautiful creature in existence on top of me, his tongue in my mouth, and not even a twitch. But I tried not to think about it too much. My body was still waking up, getting back to normal. Maybe it’d just take a little more time, even though I’d always had a hair-trigger with Lor.

That wasn’t to say I wasn’t enjoying this make-out sesh immensely, because I was. Lor thrust his tongue greedily into my mouth, and when he rocked his hips, I could feel his prick starting to harden against my belly. I moaned, hands sliding around to fumble with the tiny buttons on his pants. Even if I couldn’t get hard yet, I could still do something for *him*. He’d gone thirty years without sex—I mean, so had I, but I’d been asleep for it. I wanted to make him feel good. I wanted to feel his cock sliding over my tongue, hear the desperate cries that he always tried to muffle with his palm. I wanted to—

A knock at the door made us both freeze. Lor lifted his mouth from mine, breathing hard, when we heard Seis’ muffled voice call his name through the door.

Lor let out a deep breath, dipping his head to give me one more brief kiss before climbing off the bed. I quickly scrambled up as he tugged on the hem of his tunic and disappeared into the antechamber to answer the door.

“I found the telyth,” I heard Seis say as they made their way back into the bedroom. “The human wasn’t with him. I don’t think he’s too keen to have him wandering the city much.”

“Where are they staying?” Lor asked, coming to slip his arm around my waist.

“An inne near the entrance to the city.” Seis snorted, shooting me a wry smile. “Wasn’t all that hard to find them. Apparently he threatened the entire inne last night for looking at his human funny.”

Lor sighed as my brows lifted. “Threatened?” I asked apprehensively.

“I told you telyths aren’t particularly sociable,” Lor said, which made me side-eye him. “What did he say to my invitation?” he asked Seis.

The baregh huffed and pulled a tiny notebook out of his vest pocket. “He made me write it down. He said...” Seis flipped open the notebook and squinted at it. “He said, ‘No, I’m not fucking interested in meeting the Moric. If I see him or any of his guards anywhere near Danny, I’ll rip their spines out. You think I give a shit about that vint just because his skin is blue?’”

Seis paused and glanced up at us. “At that point I told him I would simply pass on the message that he had declined, but he kept going.” He cleared his throat. ““The only reason we are here is because Danny wanted to see a city. Don’t try and talk to him, don’t go anywhere near him. Now fuck off, baregh, so I can get back to my human, and tell your fucking Moric to stay the fuck away from him.””

There was silence after Seis finished speaking, tucking his notebook away with a carefully blank expression, until Lor cleared his throat. “Well. Alright then.”

“He seems... passionate,” I said cautiously.

Seis chuckled, looking entirely unbothered. “Telyths are cantankerous old fuckers.”

“Well, I mean, the guy with him seemed... pretty cheerful?” I glanced at Lor, who didn’t look surprised either. “So he must have some, um, nice qualities.”

“Mm.” Lor sounded doubtful. He turned to face me with a sad smile. “I’m sorry you won’t get to speak to the human, Jugs.”

“It’s okay.” I smiled back, pushing away the sinking disappointment that I wouldn’t get to meet the only other human here. “At least seeing him means we know there are, um, some humans who are okay, right? That’s good.”

Chewing on my lip, I glanced nervously between the two of them. “Um... has no one else ever come through our void then? The one in the guestroom? No other humans ever discovered it?”

Lor and Seis exchanged a wary look.

“Something... happened to our void a few years ago,” Lor began slowly. “The... the humans blocked it off.”

“Blocked... blocked it off?” I stared at him.

He nodded, looking at Seis again before pulling me toward the dressing room. “We’ll show you.”

Seis followed as we made our way through the secret tunnel and into the guestroom it led to. Lor’s shoulders had hunched up the closer we got, but he stayed silent as he pulled open the door and ushered me into the hallway.

I froze at the sight in front of me. A mountain of concrete filled half the corridor, the guestroom door ripped off its hinges and swallowed by it. Only a tiny hint of the void was still visible, its edge sparking against the solid lump that had completely encased it.

“They... they poured concrete over it?” I asked in disbelief. “Does that mean they found out about it? Or... did they just raze the forest and cover it without realising?”

“We don’t know,” Lor croaked, arms wrapped around his middle as he eyed the slope of hardened concrete spilling into the hall.

I didn’t know what to think as I stared at it. So even if I wanted to go back, I couldn’t go this way. And Lor had said humans seemed to be defending the big void in the valley on their side. It had to be the military or something, and I was pretty sure their policy when it came to creatures appearing through the void would be “shoot on sight”. I doubted I’d make it even a few steps if I tried to go back that way.

Fixing a wobbly smile on my face, I turned to Lor. “Well, at least that means nothing can come through it.”

But then I winced, glancing back at it. It also meant *Lyri* couldn’t get back through it, if he was still alive. As I stared at Lor’s miserable face, I knew that was exactly what he was thinking, and I wanted to get him away from here—I wanted us *both* to get away from here. I didn’t want to think about... what this meant. For either of us.

“Come on.” I tugged on his hand and tangled our fingers together. “Let’s go back to your room. I’m, um, I’m kind of thirsty.”

I wasn’t, but I knew it would make Lor jump into action. He did, nodding quickly and hustling me back through the guestroom. Seis gave my shoulder a comforting squeeze as we walked through the tunnel in silence, and I lifted my free hand to briefly grasp his fingers, taking a quiet breath.

I had a family here now. Lor and Seis and Lilimar, and Lyri and Gryf if they ever returned. Maybe in some ways, my mind *did* remember being asleep for thirty years, because I almost felt... distant from it all. So much time had passed. My parents would be old, if they weren’t already dead, and they hadn’t... they hadn’t ever cared about me that much anyway. Not in the way parents should.

As I stared at the back of Lor’s head, at his big, sweet ears and long grey hair, his narrow

shoulders and beautiful skin, a sense of peace washed over me. Seis gave my shoulder another squeeze before letting go, and I clutched Lor's hand tighter as he led us back to his bedroom.

My life was here now. With him.

I didn't need anything else.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

I couldn't work out what had woken me up at first as I blinked open one eye, my cheek squashed against the pillow. Lor had left a few of the glowing pink crystals in the canopy lit, because he knew they soothed me, and the weak light was enough for me to see the outlines of furniture in the otherwise dark room.

We'd gone to bed early after Lor admitted that he hadn't slept for the last couple of nights. He'd looked exhausted, so after a bath I'd climbed under the covers naked while Lor pulled on some of his fancy pyjamas, which I could feel sliding over my skin as he slept soundly beside me, one leg cocked over the backs of my thighs and his warm hand on my back.

I was on my belly, and when I shifted a little, my eyes popped open wide as I realised what had woken me up. My cock was *painfully* hard, throbbing against the mattress, damp heat already seeping into the bottom sheet. Biting my lip to suppress a groan, I couldn't stop myself from rocking my hips and shuddering hard as my cock dragged over the mattress.

They rocked again. Sweat bloomed on my hairline as I bit back a whimper, not wanting to wake Lor up. He'd been so tired. But oh my god, I'd never been this hard in my life. It was almost *agony*. My nuts were tingling, drawn up tight like I was already on the brink of coming. My nipples were stabbing into the mattress, and the drag of them from my quickening breaths sent sparks of pleasure down through my belly and into my junk.

Shit, even the slide of my stomach and legs against the sheets felt amazing. My whole body was trembling with sensitivity, and when Lor shifted against me, his hand slipping lower down my back in sleep, I squeezed my eyes shut to try and ignore the feel of his skin against mine.

Maybe I'd be able to slip out of bed without waking him to go and jerk off furiously in the bathroom. Oh my god, I needed to jerk off so bad. I needed to come. I needed to come more than anything else in that moment, my mind fixating on it with scary intensity.

I was pretty sure that if I just rocked my hips a few more times, I'd come all over the bed. That felt a little weird to do when Lor was sleeping peacefully beside me, but the moment I slid my thigh out to begin slipping out of bed, I heard him suck in a breath as his body stirred.

"Jugs?" His voice was croaky from sleep, but he shifted closer to kiss my shoulder blade. I shuddered from the touch. "Are you alright?"

"Um..." My voice shook, but now that he was awake, I was pinned in place. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted Lor's hands and mouth and body all over me.

"What's wrong?" he breathed, sounding alert and fully awake now. His hand slid down my spine, making me shudder again, before he reached for my shoulder to gently roll me onto my back.

My cock bucked hungrily in the air, drawing his gaze immediately. He went still, fingers twitching on my chest.

"Oh... oh my."

"S-sorry," I gritted out, already panting as I stared down at my engorged cock. Jesus, it looked *huge*. And obscene. Flushed and leaking on my belly. "I c-can—I'll go to the bathroom and—"

"No," Lor barked, already sliding down my body. I whimpered, shaking hands reaching for his head, and opened my mouth to tell him that he didn't have to do anything, but before I could say a single word he had swooped down and enveloped the head of my cock with hot suction and a desperate moan.

I cried out at the shock of agonising pleasure, thighs snapping up to trap his lithe body between

them. He pulled back with another moan to lick down one side of my cock and back up the other, already breathing hard as his long fingers fumbled to cup my balls, rolling them in a way that made my hips strain up.

His tongue was *everywhere*, moving too feverishly for me to keep up as I panted in desperation, shaking hard and trying not to come straight away. My body knew I hadn't felt this in a *long* time, and I wanted to make it last, even though that would be impossible.

"You're leaking so much." Lor's whisper was intimate in the quiet room, his voice low and throaty and filled with desperate arousal. He lapped at my cockhead with a soft moan, tongue twirling, those slight ridges making me shudder.

I wasn't surprised I was leaking a lot. I was seconds away from blowing for the first time in *thirty years*.

"I have missed this so much," he continued between savouring licks. "Your taste. The feel of you on my tongue. Having you here with me."

"Lor," I croaked, my whole body trembling as I lifted my head to gaze down at him. The hazy pink light only offered me hints of what he was doing. The gleam of his piercings, the pale slick of his tongue as it wound around my cockhead. His heavy-lidded silver eyes that flicked up to meet mine as he rubbed my tip against his pierced lower lip.

My breaths were heaving out of me, loud and rough. My toes flexed, limbs shaking as my cock jumped against his tongue. My nuts ached, feeling ridiculously full and heavy.

"Lor," I panted again, then cried out when he ran his lips down one side of my shaft, tongue gliding. My hips snapped up uncontrollably to shuttle my cock against them, and my neck arched, tipping my head back against the pillows. I couldn't stop, thrusting wildly against his mouth, feeling his fingers squeeze my sac before one drifted down to stroke my taint. When it brushed against my asshole, an embarrassing sound ripped from my throat as my entire body strained up.

"*Fuck*," I cried out as cum started shooting out of my cock, impossibly hard and fast, lashing my throat and chest. My vision greyed out, white noise filling my ears.

Lor moaned and sucked my head into his mouth, rhythmically squeezing my nuts and making me shudder even harder. It didn't stop, even as a weak ache stabbed at my insides. Lor let out a muffled sound of surprise at how much cum was filling his mouth, but I could feel his throat bobbing as he swallowed, soft fingers curling around my shaft and squeezing like he wanted to milk every drop from me.

As I panted weakly, ass sinking back onto the mattress, he lapped at my belly and up to my chest, legs scrambling to straddle me. With shaking hands, I reached under his loose, silky pyjama shirt to palm his sides, sliding them up until my thumbs brushed over his pierced nipples.

Lor moaned, crushing his mouth to mine, tongue thrusting feverishly as I toyed with his nipples. Without breaking the kiss, he began fumbling with the buttons on his shirt, so I slid my hands free to help him pull it off. Our tongues thrust together messily, neither of us willing or able to stop, thirty years of pent-up longing and lust and missing each other making us mindless to anything else.

Somehow we managed to get his pants off without breaking apart, and then I was sliding my hands over his thighs, his ass, between his legs to stroke his tight sac and fist his cock. Lor gasped into my mouth, hips jerking forward into the touch. I realised my own dick was still rock hard when my knuckles brushed over the shaft, so I pinned our lengths together with a moan and rocked my hips.

But that wasn't enough for Lor. He tugged my hand free and shifted higher, still kissing me desperately, his trembling fingers curling around my dick and aiming it up. I had enough sense left to rip my mouth free, breathing hard.

“No, wait.” My voice was gravelly. “It’ll hurt you. I need to stretch you first.”

Lor groaned in impatience, but let go and scrambled around to straddle my midsection, facing the end of the bed. I watched in stunned, aroused shock as he leaned forward on his forearms between my legs and spread his thighs wide.

“Hurry,” he panted as I stared at his ass, completely exposed to me. My cock jerked, lifting off my belly and smacking back down. “Jugs, *hurry*.”

Holy crap. Trembling with lust, I sucked two fingers in my mouth and reached out to stroke his hole. It twitched as he moaned, sinking his upper body deeper into the mattress. His warm stomach pressed against my straining dick, making my hips jerk.

His body sucked me in when I sank one finger inside, and Lor let out a guttural, relieved groan. He was already slick inside, and the sounds his body made as I thrust my finger in and out slowly made me grit my teeth, hips starting to rock.

One finger became two, my other hand splayed over his ass, gripping it tight and spreading him wide so I could watch. The moment I slipped in a third and spread them gently to get him ready, Lor hissed and bucked his hips.

“Are you okay?” I croaked immediately, stilling my fingers.

He moaned, ass clenching around the intrusion, before shifting forward to dislodge them and scrambling around to face me. His eyes were wild in the low pink light, silver irises gleaming and lips trembling as he breathed hard.

My hands fell to his hips as he shifted, and before I even realised what was happening, he was sinking down onto my cock with a long, trembling moan, head tipping back and hands on my shoulders, pinning me down. My dick twitched inside him, brain almost short-circuiting from the intense, tight pressure.

“F-fuck,” I panted, gazing blearily down as his ass met my thighs and his hole clenched around me.

Lor gave himself only a few seconds to adjust before he was rising up to slam back down. I cried out, fingers digging into his soft hips, but I could only stare in total awe as Lor began riding my cock like some wild, untamed creature. His hands kept my shoulders pinned to the mattress, and his frantically moving hips made the enormous bed creak and shift.

“Oh my god,” I croaked, wanting to stroke his cock but absolutely not wanting to mess up his stride. His stride was *awesome*.

Besides, I didn’t think he needed it. His dick looked painfully hard, barely moving despite his manic pace, and was dripping pre-cum onto my belly. He was whining with every gasping breath, fingers digging hard into my shoulders, the wet sound of us fucking, coupled with the smack of his ass onto my thighs, obscene in the best way.

When he leaned down to attack my mouth, thrusting his tongue inside with a grunt, I couldn’t stop my hips from snapping up as I locked my arms around his slender waist. I planted my heels into the mattress for leverage, knees falling open wide. My hips smacked against his ass hard with every frantic thrust, jolting his whole body.

We were fucking too hard and fast to kiss anymore, and Lor was panting against my mouth as he slammed his hips down just as forcefully as I was fucking up into him. For a split second, I wondered how this wasn’t hurting him. He looked so delicate—fine-boned and elegant and soft—but I knew for a fact just how strong he was.

And how much he loved getting fucked hard.

When he fisted the pillow either side of my head and rose up to push back harder onto my cock, I lunged up to latch on to a nipple, tonguing the tiny peak and its warm metal ring. Lor cried out, a hand

fumbling to fist my hair tight, keeping my head in place at first, then directing it over to his other nipple. I sucked with a moan, fingers splaying over his ass and urging him to keep moving against me.

When his cries grew higher and louder, I knew he was close to coming. Releasing his nipple, I lifted my head to capture his mouth, both of us breathing too hard and fast to kiss properly. It was more like panting against each other's lips, tongues dancing feverishly together, until Lor stiffened up and began to shake on top of me.

"Jugs," he breathed, his hair falling around us like a curtain, trapping the heat and causing moisture to dot our overheated skin.

Honestly, my stomach and thigh muscles were beginning to scream in protest from being used so vigorously after so long with absolutely no use whatsoever, but I refused to stop. I literally *couldn't* stop. My body didn't give a shit about the pain, it was solely focused on making Lor come and then having a spectacular orgasm itself.

I fumbled between us for his cock, groaning at how impossibly hard it was. The moment I began to stroke, my fist flying over his length, Lor practically wailed as his back arched and his extrusion shot out, twining around my fingers like it wanted to be within my grasp.

But before I could unpeel my hand to grab it, Lor was coming. Strained, choked cries fell from his lips as his hips jerked hard again and again, his cock and extrusion streaming cum all over my hand and stomach. It shot out of his cock in rapid spurts, whereas the milky fluid from his extrusion released in a single long stream as the appendage quivered. It was so inhuman, unlike anything else, but I loved it. I loved him—everything about him. He was my person. The one I was always meant to be with, even though we were from different worlds. Even though we'd been torn apart for so long.

He'd waited for me.

My strained shout almost became a sob when I started to come, holding my cock as deep inside him as possible and shaking violently as I clasped him to me tight. Burying my face in his sweaty shoulder, I let out hoarse grunts with every flex of my cock, feeling him still clenching around me. The light from the pink crystals above him in the canopy swam, winking in and out before I squeezed my eyes shut and jerked my hips one final time as the draining orgasm finally ended.

We were both breathing hard when the fuzzy ringing in my ears finally stopped. Lor was trembling on top of me, damp cheek pressed to mine, but I heard a quiet moan leave him when his hips moved, rocking back onto my sensitive dick. I hissed, shuddering from overstimulation, which made him hurriedly lift up so I could slip free.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, lifting his head to give me a hazy smile. "I just missed you so much."

I swallowed, my throat dry, and smoothed his sweat-damp hair back from his face. "I missed you too."

"You were asleep," he said wryly, but I could see the yearning in his eyes. The need for confirmation that I felt as strongly about him as he felt about me. Maybe that sounded arrogant—for me to assume how he felt about me—but I didn't think so. He'd been unfailingly clear in his devotion. He'd waited for me for thirty fucking years. He hadn't given up.

"I still missed you," I croaked, gently fingering the pointed tip of his huge ear. "I love you."

Lor's smile was soft and utterly content. His eyes slid shut as he pressed his lips to my cheek and whispered, "I love you too, Jugs."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

For the second time that morning, I stumbled into the bathroom to wash. The first time I had tried at dawn, my legs weak and trembling and barely able to hold me up, Jugs had stalked in behind me and spun me around to crush his mouth to mine. Then he had dropped to his knees and sucked my cock into his mouth for what felt like the hundredth time that night, sucking feverishly as his fingers slid back to tunnel inside me.

He had been insatiable, and so had I. But now he was passed out in bed, completely exhausted. I was too, coated in sweat and fluids, but I badly needed to wash before going back to sleep. My body still humming with satiation, I ran a bath and cleaned myself languidly, my eyelids heavy and limbs weak. But I was utterly content.

I smiled at the sound of Jugs snoring in the next room. Even when he'd complained, with a chuckle, that his muscles were very sore, he hadn't been willing to stop. Each time we'd been waiting for our cocks to get hard yet again, he would plaster me to his front and kiss me long and deep. He would kiss and lick every inch of me, making his way down my front from my neck to my toes, before rolling me over and doing the same to my back. He pushed his tongue inside me before gently sinking his teeth into my backside, then making his way up my spine with seeking kisses until I was shuddering and writhing against the mattress.

Our bodies had been starved, and we hadn't been able to stop—not until Jugs went limp beneath me after the last time and mumbled that he was falling asleep. I'd laughed, giving him one last kiss, but his lips were slack against mine before it even ended.

After I finished washing, I pulled on clean nightclothes and slipped back into bed with him. Curling myself around his back, I fell asleep almost instantly, and when I woke, I could immediately tell it was late morning. The sun shone brightly through the curtains, too high to send splashes of colour across the floorboards from the beads. The city sounded lively beneath the hyll, the sea splashing against the rocks of Thinir, gentle waves breaking in the distance.

My body was utterly drained, but when Jugs groaned, my prick reacted to the sound instantly, twitching in my silky trousers. But then he groaned again, hoarse and pained, and fear cut through the pleasant haze and made me sit up.

“Jugs?”

He rolled onto his back with another moan, and his voice was croaky with sleep when he mumbled, “My whole body hurts.”

“What?” I scrambled onto my knees and fluttered my hands uselessly over his chest, not wanting to touch him in case something was wrong and it hurt him worse. “I’ll get Lilimar—”

“No, no.” He chuckled, rubbing his eyes before letting his arm flop back onto the mattress. “It’s just *dohmz*. But, like, super intense.”

“It’s... what?” I drew back, baffled.

“DOMS. Delayed onset muscle soreness.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “You usually get it after working out, but um... I guess last night I used muscles I haven’t used in a long time. All of them, basically.”

When he chuckled, the panic eased. “It’s just normal soreness?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yeah.” Jugs grinned at me sleepily, making my heart clench, and reached up to stroke my cheek. “I’ll be all good. Just gotta get used to using my body again.”

“What can I do to help?” I asked anxiously, chewing my lip. I hated the thought of Jugs in pain.

“Nothin’. I’ll be totally fine.” He struggled upright with a wince, groaning as he placed a hand on his tight stomach. “Maybe a warm bath will help.”

“I’ll run it for you,” I said immediately, scrambling off the bed.

After helping him into the bath, I hovered worriedly until Jugs laughed and assured me he was fine. His hair was a wild mess from my hands, but he didn’t wash it, saying it hurt too much to lift his arms over his head.

By the time he got out of the bath, his face was creased in pain and he was complaining of intense cramps in his legs. Even though he insisted that it was normal, I panicked and went to fetch Lilimar after helping him back into bed.

When she arrived, I explained—my ears twitching madly—that Jugs had had a *vigorous* night, and he was complaining of muscle soreness. She shot me a knowing look, but dutifully checked him over and assured me that it was normal and he was completely fine.

Still, I fidgeted anxiously beside him on the bed for hours, helping him sit up to eat and drink, watching when he dozed off and slept peacefully for a while. When he woke back up he said it was a bit better, but I quickly fetched some oil to give him a massage, hoping to ease it for him.

Unfortunately, all that did was make me desperate for him again as I straddled his thick thighs and smoothed my hands up his wide back. I tried to make sure he couldn’t feel my straining cock against him, because he was hurting and it was entirely inappropriate. But I couldn’t help but shuffle back between his legs and reverently smooth my hands over the globes of his backside, staring dazedly as my thumbs swiped up over the bottoms of his cheeks and parted them slightly, offering me a brief glimpse of his dusky hole and the light whorl of golden hair surrounding it.

I dug my teeth into my lower lip, staying silent as my cock began to leak and Jugs groaned in pleasure-pain beneath me. My thumbs swiped again, edging closer, fingers digging briefly into the firm mounds.

Jugs’ breath caught. His cock had been relaxed, pointing down between his spread thighs, but I could see it thickening and lengthening. Tension snapped through his strong back as he shifted, lifting his hips a little.

My breaths were choppy in the quiet room. I realised I had stopped moving, keeping his cheeks spread as I stared down at that tiny hole. When it twitched, I exhaled in a rush.

“Lor,” Jugs croaked, which made me jolt guiltily.

“I’m sorry,” I rasped, releasing my tight grip to smooth my hands up to the small of his back.

“No,” he blurted, shifting again, turning his cheek on the pillow to peer back at me. His face was flushed a sweet pink. “Will you—um... K-keep going,” he whispered.

Swallowing thickly, I let my hands slide back down to spread him wide again. Then I found myself leaning down, my cock straining and leaking in my silky trousers, to press my lips to the inside of one cheek.

Jugs twitched with a gasp, hips pushing up again. I repeated the kiss on the other side, breathing hard, then timidly swiped my tongue over his hole. He choked on a breath, fingers curling into the pillows. Emboldened, I licked again, glancing up to see his eyes shut and lips parted, brows drawn as he panted with pleasure.

I knew how good this felt. Jugs had done it to me many times in the past. His knees slid out, hips tilting up and making him gasp when his cock dragged against the mattress. Eyes slipping shut, I began lapping at his hole, moaning quietly from the feel of him twitching under my tongue. His thighs quaked on either side of me, the muscles of his backside tensing beneath my fingers as I kept him spread wide.

When I circled my tongue before pushing the tip against his hole, he shuddered and let out a guttural groan. Pulling back, I stared in awe as I trailed a fingertip over him until he grunted and pushed back, urging me to slip it inside.

My fingers were still oily from the massage, so I was able to sink the middle one inside with ease. A choked gasp escaped Jugs as his head craned back, but his hips were already writhing, encouraging me to gently thrust my finger in and out.

“F-fuck.” Clutching the pillows, he tilted his head to glance back at me, cheeks pink and lips parted around his hectic breaths. “F-fuck me, Lor.”

My breath caught. Finger stilling, I whispered, “A-are you sure? You were hurting—”

“I’m sure,” he panted, hips moving again. “I’m *super* sure. I want you to fuck me. Please.”

Letting out a shuddery exhale, I licked my lips and nodded, then looked down to carefully slip a second finger inside. Jugs groaned from the increased pressure, but he kept rocking back as he panted, his cock stiff and flushed, still tilted down between his spread thighs.

Once his hole felt more relaxed from my tunnelling fingers, I slid them free and leaned down to lick a wet stripe up the underside of his cock. Jugs jerked with a gasp, then moaned and buried his face in the pillow when I tongued his tight sac before licking back up to his hole.

“Now,” he croaked. “Like this.”

Oh Mabs, I didn’t know how long I was going to last. My hands shook as I ripped off my shirt and tugged down my trousers just enough to expose my cock, which was aching and leaking already. My extrusion stirred under my pubic mound, threatening to uncoil.

I fumbled with the oil, coating myself and going lightheaded from the slick sound of my hand on my cock. Jugs looked back to watch, breathing hard, with his blue eyes so much darker from lust. When he reached back to spread himself for me, I choked on a breath and had to whip my hand away from my cock before I came.

Placing one hand on his wide back, I leaned forward and clutched my cock to line it up with his hole, willing myself not to come. A helpless moan left me when the narrow tip of my cock slipped inside easily. Mabs, it was so *tight*. I could feel Jugs’ body sucking me in, and my cock sank all the way inside in one slow, gradual thrust.

“Oh m-my,” I stammered, breathing hard and holding myself still. Jugs released his backside to fist the pillows again, hips shifting and hole twitching around my length.

“You feel so good,” he mumbled, spreading his thighs wider and tilting his hips up. “Can you fuck me now? Please?”

I choked on a disbelieving laugh and leaned down to kiss between his shoulder blades. “Yes. But I... I don’t know how long I’ll last.”

“That doesn’t matter.” He turned his cheek to smile back at me, and I couldn’t help but lean forward to capture his mouth in a messy, awkward kiss.

As I pulled back, my hips started to rock, slowly and hesitantly at first. I had never done this before, and I didn’t want to risk hurting him. I knew his cock was far larger than mine and I took it with ease, but I *liked* feeling almost impossibly full. I liked the feel of him slamming into me, hard and fast, until I could do nothing but take it.

“T-tell me how you...” I swallowed, panting as I rocked my hips. “Tell me what you want.”

“Faster,” Jugs croaked, his back muscles tightening in a breathtaking display when I increased my speed. He let out a long groan. “Yeah, like that.”

I sank my sharp teeth into my lower lip to try and stave off the unimaginable pleasure coursing through my cock. He was so tight and hot, and the oil made my thrusts smooth, with just the right

amount of friction. A whimper escaped me before I clamped my lips shut, breathing hard through my nose as I started thrusting faster. And harder, unable to stop it.

“Fuck. Yes.” Jugs’ voice was strained, but drenched in pleasure. He hoisted himself up onto his knees and forearms with a groan, before he began pushing back into every thrust.

I gasped from the rush of hot pleasure, sliding my hands down to grip his sides. “Jugs.”

“Keep going.” He folded his forearms over the pillow and rested his forehead on them, upper body sinking into the mattress. “You feel so good, Lor.”

“S-so do you.” My gaze roamed greedily over his broad back and bulging arms. His backside was so... rounded and *firm*, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the rhythmic movement of it every time my hips smacked into him. He was so much bigger than me in every way, and I loved it.

Jugs moaned, sounding drunk with pleasure. “C-can you reach my dick? I don’t wanna move but—fuck, I need to come.”

I rushed to accommodate him, wanting to make this as good for him as possible. Draping myself over his lower back, I reached around and fumbled for his cock. Jugs groaned loudly when I wrapped my fingers around it, hips jerking forward and channel clenching tight around me, making me gasp.

“Fuck, Lor.” His hips moved feverishly, tunnelling his cock through my fist and increasing the depth of my thrusts.

My legs started to tremble wildly, and I gritted my teeth to hold on for a little longer, but I couldn’t bring myself to slow down or soften my thrusts to make it last. My hips were pounding into him now, smacking against him loudly as a slew of animalistic grunts flew from my lips. Mabs, the *sounds* I was making. But Jugs seemed to like them, moaning constantly now as he fucked himself on my cock and grew painfully stiff in my hand.

“Oh my god,” he breathed, his voice muffled by the pillow. “I’m gonna come—I’m gonna come —”

Please, I wanted to beg, because I was barely hanging on. I stroked him faster, my free hand clutching his shoulder to steady myself. I was sweating, trembling all over, my thighs and backside and lower back tightening from the hot rush of pleasure growing stronger and stronger.

When Jugs tightened up around me and cried out, craning his head back with his cock pulsing in my fist, I let out a relieved, desperate moan. His hips jerked with every spurt of his release, his back muscles clenching up and thighs quaking on either side of me.

Once his orgasm ended, I knew he would grow too sensitive if I kept stroking him, so I leaned back and gripped his hips as I pounded into him, chasing my own release. It took only seconds before my extrusion shot out, and I watched in stunned disbelief as it coiled around my length and squirmed inside him. Jugs twitched with a clipped moan, clenching around me again as I began to come, my body going weak all over.

I gasped out a desperate moan, hunching over him as I poured my release into his body. It didn’t stop for long moments, but I collapsed over his back, still twitching as my orgasm finally came to an end and left me utterly drained.

Jugs’ hips slowly sank back onto the mattress, taking me with him. I was draped over his back, gasping into his sweaty shoulder blade, our bodies still joined.

“Geez, that was so good,” he mumbled, a hand awkwardly reaching back to pet my side. “I’ve never done that before.”

My lips tipped up into a drowsy smile, eyes closed so I could bask in this feeling for a little longer. “I know,” I croaked, then kissed his spine. “Neither have I.”

“Did you like it?” he asked. “Sorry, I should’ve asked before if you were interested in... Not

everyone likes topping—”

“I loved it.” I carefully slipped free of his body and shifted higher on his back, knowing he could easily take my full weight, to kiss the corner of his mouth. “I love *you*.”

His lips curved into a shy smile. “I love you too.”

I kissed my way along his cheek to nuzzle his ear, before finally sitting up and shifting off him on legs that trembled. “Are you still hurting from your... *domz*?”

Jugs chuckled, lazily rolling onto his back and shoving a hand through his hair. “Nah, not as bad. The sex helped a lot,” he added with a grin. “And the massage.”

I rolled my eyes, leaning down to kiss him. “The massage got cut very short. I’m sure it didn’t help much at all.”

“Well maybe you’ll just have to give me another one,” he said slyly, tangling his fingers through mine. “And, you know, I wouldn’t be disappointed if the same thing happens again.”

I laughed, warmth filling every inch of me, making me feel like I might burst with happiness.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

About a week and a half after waking up from my coma—I didn't know if that was the correct word for what Lilimar had put me into, but it was what I was using—I had a weird day.

I'd dreamt that I was working at Camp Wynsome, with April and Mike and Mindy and Stan and all the others, but Anton was also there for some reason. It was super sunny, the grass and sky almost violently vibrant, the happy sounds of kids laughing and playing coming from an unknown place. And then my parents showed up, getting out of their car with bright smiles and cheerful waves for me. Which, yeah, had *never* happened in real life.

But before either of them had been able to move closer, noise had sounded from the forest behind me. In the dream, I'd turned and seen a flood of indiscernible shapes streaming from between the trees—black lumps with jutting white teeth and glowing eyes, giant, hairy monsters with claws bigger than a grizzly and gaping, bloody mouths, tiny insect things that swarmed over the ground until they reached April and covered her entire body as she screamed, reaching for me.

In the dream, I'd watched everyone around me get torn apart or eaten or gored by monsters. April, Anton, my parents. I'd heard the shrieks of children from somewhere far away, but when I'd tried to run toward the sounds, I hadn't been able to move. The sky had grown dark, the forest had loomed taller, and monsters bumped into me from every direction but otherwise never laid a hand on me.

Until I was the only person left standing, the entire world going silent.

I'd woken with a thundering heart, drenched in sweat and already crying. Lor had been touching me with gentle but frantic hands, blinking the sleep from his eyes as he asked me what was wrong. I hadn't been able to answer him, covering my face with my hands as I sobbed.

Eventually I calmed down and managed to explain the nightmare, which made Lor's face pinch with guilt and sorrow, but I told him I was fine and rolled onto my side so he could cradle me with his smaller body from behind.

But the tears didn't stop. I lay there in silence, my eyes open and streaming, as Lor made soothing noises and swept his hand up and down my front. Eventually he fell back to sleep, but I didn't. I couldn't stop crying, and intellectually speaking I knew why, I knew what the dream meant, but it still felt strange. Like I wasn't in control. Like I didn't even *need* to cry anymore, but my body wouldn't stop.

I must have drifted off to sleep at some point, and when I woke my eyes were swollen and my throat felt dry and sore. Lor looked incredibly worried, but I couldn't even bring myself to smile at him. I ran myself a bath and started crying again as I sat in the tub with my knees pulled up to my chest. I was still crying when I got out and dressed in clean clothes. I was still crying when I realised I had to leave the bathroom at some point and Lor saw me, rushing closer to fuss over me. I managed to stutter an apology, telling him I was okay, but he pulled me to the bed and cradled my head to his chest for a long time.

And I just kept crying.

Some of it felt like grief. Grief over everything I'd lost—my life, my friends. My parents. They weren't nice, but I'd still loved them. Of course I had. And I thought maybe they'd loved me too in their own way—my dad at least. Maybe. He'd seemed to care sometimes. I didn't think my mom had been capable of loving anyone but herself.

And they were most likely gone. Dead. Maybe they'd been killed by the monsters from this world. Maybe they'd survived that and died from old age. But even if they were still alive, I didn't think I'd

ever get to see them again. I didn't think I could get back to my world, and even if I could, how would I find them? Lor had told me everyone had fled when the big voids opened.

Where had they all gone?

I suspected some of my uncontrollable crying fit was also due to my brain finally processing the shock of what had happened. Of how long I'd been unconscious and unaware of everything around me. Of the fact that thirty years of my life had gone by—not just mine, but Lor's. Everyone's. He didn't look much older, and he was his same sweet, gentle self, but he seemed more self-assured than he had before. Like he refused to deal with anyone's shit anymore. Which was a relief for his sake—I didn't ever want anyone to manipulate him and use him ever again.

It was growing dark by the time my eyes finally stopped leaking. I'd stopped actively crying a while ago, but the tears had continued to stream silently down my cheeks, like something had broken inside me and was struggling to fix itself. Lor was still holding me when I eventually dozed off, and when I woke up the room was dark and cold, and my head was still on Lor's chest. His tunic was damp under my cheek from the onslaught of tears that had soaked into it for hours.

But he hadn't let go of me. He hadn't slipped out of bed once I'd dropped off, even though he had to be hungry and uncomfortable and probably bored. I let out a shuddering breath and gripped him tighter, rubbing my nose in his tunic to breathe in his scent.

"Sorry," I whispered, my voice throaty.

He shifted, threading gentle fingers through my hair. "Don't be sorry."

I licked my dry lips, wondering what he was thinking. What he was assuming. "I'm not sad about being here," I whispered, wanting to reassure him. "I want to be with you more than anything. But... but not knowing what happened... Not knowing if my parents are alive..."

"I understand," Lor whispered, kissing the top of my head. His voice was tinged with grief, and it took me a second to realise why.

He *did* understand. He understood completely. He had no idea what had happened to Lyri and Gryf in the other world—if they were still alive. And if they weren't... we'd probably never find out for certain.

We'd both lost things.

Struggling up, I propped my elbow on the mattress and gave Lor a shaky smile. My eyes were tight and crusty, and I knew my face would be splotchy, my nose bright red, making it look even bigger. But Lor gazed up at me with total adoration, his long-fingered hand cupping my flushed cheek.

"I feel better," I told him, meaning it. "I think I needed that. Like a... cathartic release."

His brows twitched, but he didn't ask me to repeat the unfamiliar word. Instead, he just nodded and smoothed his thumb over the corner of my mouth as he repeated, "I understand."

"I love you," I croaked, wanting him to have no doubt how I felt about him. "I want to be here with you. I want..." Inhaling a shaky breath, I took his hand and tangled our fingers together, resting them on his chest. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Lor's mouth trembled. He shifted to sit up against the headboard and drew our linked hands to his mouth, kissing my knuckles. "I want that too. More than anything. But... but I don't want you to feel like you have to stay here, Jugs. With me. I don't want you to think you have... no other options. If you want to go back to your world, we will find a way. I will—We will smash through whatever the humans blocked the void with. I will order Iorn to send a thousand soldiers to accompany you, to keep you safe—"

"Lor." I shook my head, shifting to sit cross-legged beside him. "I don't want that. I want to stay here with you."

“Are you sure?” he whispered, pressing his lips to my knuckles again and lowering his eyes. “I just want you to be happy, Jugs.”

Part of me almost couldn't believe that he was willing to let me go back—if that was what I wanted—after waiting for me for thirty fucking years. But I knew it was the truth. I knew he'd find a way for me to go back if I told him that I wanted to leave. And it just made me love him even more.

“I'm happy with you,” I mumbled, squeezing his hand tighter. “I've never been happier than when I'm with you, Lor. I want us to be together forever.”

He stared at me, brows pinched with anguish. Then he blurted, “Unite with me.”

I blinked, mouth opening and closing wordlessly before... “Uh.”

It sounded like some... Like he was asking me to go on some epic fantasy quest with him. Unite with him... in battle? In... bed? My dick twitched at that idea, but I was pretty sure that wasn't what he meant.

He scrambled up to kneel opposite me, still clutching my hand. “Unite with me,” he repeated, tone pleading. “Lawfully, with witnesses, so everyone knows that we only want each other. That you are mine and I am yours. So the whole fiefdom knows.”

My stomach flipfopped with a rush of nerves, mouth suddenly as dry as the desert. “Y-you mean like... get married?” I stuttered, not quite able to catch my breath. I wasn't sure if it was terror or pure joy making me fidgety. Maybe both.

“Yes, yes, like that.” Lor nodded frantically and knee-walked closer, kissing the back of my hand again and again. “Like what you told me humans do. It is similar for vints. I want that, Jugs. I want you by my side always.”

“Oh geez.” I swallowed, then let out a bark of nervous, slightly hysterical laughter. Get *married*? But I was only twenty-one—

Oh. Wait. No. No, I wasn't.

The familiar panic that rushed up on me when I thought about how much time had passed reared its head again. It mingled with the utter shock that Lor had just asked me to marry him, and the... the happiness.

Yeah, I was happy. Fuck yes I was happy. I was here by the skin of my teeth as it was, and I'd always been inclined to grab life by the balls and just go with it. I mean, shit, I wouldn't be here right now if I hadn't made the decision to creep back into the forest to make sure that weird portal to another world actually existed.

“Okay,” I said, feeling strangely shy as I smiled at Lor. His breath caught, eyes glimmering in the dark as he gripped my hand tighter.

“Yes?” he whispered fearfully, sounding like he wasn't sure he'd heard me right.

“Yes.” I leaned in to give him a deep kiss. “I wanna marry you. Um, unite with you.”

Lor let out a hoarse sound and flung his arms around my neck, burying his face in my throat. “Jugs.”

I laughed, hugging him back. My eyes prickled, but thankfully no more tears came. Pretty sure my tear ducts had shrivelled up by that point, and if I actually started to cry again only puffs of dust would come out.

“Does this mean I'll get a fancy title like you?” I teased, nuzzling the shell of his ear.

He let out a tearful laugh against my throat, then pulled back to beam at me, sharp white teeth flashing in the dark. “I'll give you any title you want, but officially, yes. You'll be the Meriv.”

“Meriv Jugs.” I cringed, making a face. “Maybe I should go by Michael. It sounds fancier—”

“No,” Lor interrupted stubbornly. “You are Jugs. My Jugs.” Cupping my face, he leaned in to kiss

me, smiling against my mouth. “I cannot wait to tell Seis that you have agreed to unite with me. I thought I was cursed when I was without you. When everything—” He stopped and took a breath. “But how can I be when I get to have you? I am the luckiest creature in this entire world. In both worlds.”

I bit my lip, clutching him tighter. “Lor.”

“I cherish you like nothing else, Jugs. I cherish every moment I have with you. I will do my best to make you happy. I will do *anything* for you.”

He gazed at me, eyes imploring, like he still thought he had to convince me—*me*, a nobody who’d barely graduated high school and had parents who didn’t give a shit about me, while *he* was a big, powerful ruler who was so beautiful and kind and loving and could have anyone he wanted. Literally. I was pretty sure people would fight each other to the death for the chance to marry Lor, and not just because of his title.

“You don’t have to do anything for me,” I mumbled, feeling overwhelmed. “I just want you.”

“You have me,” he breathed, wrapping his arms back around my neck and hugging me tight. I felt his lips move against my skin as he said, “From the moment we met, you have had me.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

Things moved quickly after that, entirely due to my rather impatient orders.

Usually a Moric's union was an enormous affair that involved the whole city—a day that was treated similarly to the Valor of the Morics, with huge crowds forming outside of the Mabs' temple to catch the first glimpse of the newly united couple, followed by a tour through the city and finally an elaborate feast in the hyll with dignitaries and Morics from nearby fiefdoms in attendance.

We didn't want any of that. Our union was to be small and intimate, taking place late at night when the city was at its quietest so that we could get to the temple with minimal disruption. Only a handful of people would be in attendance, and we would share a simple meal after to celebrate mine and Jugs' union.

I couldn't wait. I woke up every morning practically vibrating with excitement, knowing I was one day closer to uniting with Jugs. The only time my elation would fade was when I remembered that Lyri wouldn't be with us to witness it. Then the grief overwhelmed me until I could pull myself together and realise that Lyri wouldn't have wanted me to stop living my life. He had told me as much while he was still here. He had begged me to keep living.

So I did. But, as I had done over the last ten years, since he went through the void and never returned, I sometimes spoke to him in my head. We had never had that kind of connection, but I still tried. I tried to feel him, and sometimes I thought I could—moments of anger or despondence that weren't my emotions.

Never happiness or joy. I never felt those from him.

But those brief flashes of foreign emotion were enough to convince me that he was still alive. He was still out there somewhere, which meant one day he might return. He might. I had to believe it.

While preparations for our union were underway, Jugs began to spend time around the hyll outside of our quarters. He met the council, who were all stunned into shocked silence at the sight of him—except for Talimuth, of course. I couldn't contain my beaming smile as I watched Jugs grin at Talimuth and cheerfully tell them how great it was to meet them. And Talimuth even smiled back—a tiny, barely there smile, just a slight curve of their mouth, but a smile nonetheless.

While I was busy with my duties, Jugs spent time with Lilimar or Seis. Lilimar peppered him with questions about the human world—things she had listened to on the cassette player and wanted to know more about—whereas Seis seemed more interested in roughhousing with him and getting him outside. The baregh guards all *adored* Jugs, laughing uproariously in good-natured humour when he attempted to wield their heavy weapons or tried on their enormous armour. But they also trained him and strengthened his body even more, commenting on his impressive size and stamina, and praising him for his determination to keep up with them despite their much larger size.

They also encouraged him a few times—much to my worry—to get drunk with them, but Seis always kept an eye on how much ale he imbibed, and he'd only delivered a falling-down-drunk Jugs to our quarters once. The other times, my human was only tipsy, which tended to make him very... handsy.

We quickly realised that, through speaking to Seis and Gryf so much before, his brain had fully absorbed the baregh language. He hadn't noticed at first, he told me, until it hit him that he was speaking to the other guards and they could understand him perfectly, despite none of them consuming the nami weed. He was equally fluent in vint language now as well, able to converse with the councillors and hyll staff with ease. It made me want to burst with pride—made me tell him over and

over how clever he was, which always made him blush.

As was to be expected, word of Jugs' presence spread quickly through the entire city. Every morning, the public gardens were teeming with people casually walking among the plants for hours and trying to catch furtive glimpses of the otherworlder living with their Moric in the hyll. We caught wind of whispered rumours that Jugs was an otherworld king of some kind, here to negotiate for peace, which he found hilarious.

I had offered several times to take him down into the city, to show him all of Thinir, but it took him about a month to accept. He'd said he was "hella" nervous, but finally felt ready. So one bright morning, surrounded by thirty soldiers with Iorn leading the way, we left the hyll and made our way down into the city proper.

People stopped and stared in shock. They all knew of Jugs' existence, but they had never seen him before. I thought the telyth's visit with his human had benefited us greatly, softening the blow a little, because most of those we passed whispered frantically to one another but gradually went back to their business. A few very young vints had run up to Jugs and asked him why he was only half-dressed—he was in his shorts and sweat shirt—which made him burst out laughing while his face flamed bright pink. After they'd run off back to their mother, he whispered to me that maybe he needed some clothes like mine so he would fit in better.

I told him that he should dress exactly as he wanted. And after glancing around, I had leaned in and whispered how much I enjoyed gazing at his long legs and bare stomach in his usual clothes, asking if he would wear the pink shorts for me that night. His face had turned pink again, but for an entirely different reason this time, as he bit his lip and grinned at me.

The outing had gone well, and Jugs had seemed enthralled by Thinir, which filled me with pride. We'd wandered through the main market near the entrance to the city, with me politely declining the constant offers of gifts and free goods. I wanted to buy Jugs something, but he kissed my cheek and said he was happy just looking.

We'd visited Talimuth and their progenitor in the salyik district, which was much improved these days, with houses and shops repaired, the streets clean and smooth, the market stalls newly built and sturdy. The atmosphere was considerably different compared to my initial visit to Talimuth all those years ago, and the salyik people—while still reserved and largely emotionless—seemed happier. They were certainly less impoverished, even though the efforts to integrate them into the rest of the city yielded slow results.

When we visited the docks, Jugs stared in awe at the sea and the mountain of Thinir towering over us. I managed to find Haknir, the old vint dockworker who had always been kind to Lyri and me as children, and he gave Jugs some freshly fried posk in a sweet bun before clapping a jovial hand on my shoulder and telling me that it was good to see me after all these years. He hadn't asked about Lyri. Everyone knew that their Verin was gone, though no one knew where. But the lack of his presence was still keenly felt in Thinir.

I began teaching Jugs to read and write the vint language when I had the time, and Lilimar continued his lessons when I was busy. He taught me to read and write his language—English—as well, though it took me a while to be able to copy the squat, rounded letters he showed me, so different to the long and swirling lines that formed written vint.

We spent long, wonderful evenings together in our quarters, often eating alone but sometimes with Lilimar and Seis and Talimuth. I told him about my council meetings, and he began to offer ideas which made me ask him if he would take a seat at the table. He declined with a look of mild horror, saying he was in no way qualified for something like that, but I already planned to ask him again. I

thought Jugs' perspective would be invaluable, especially if Lyri did ever return and had been successful in his mission to offer refuge to humans, to have some of them live in Honra.

Not that that seemed at all likely anymore.

About two months after Jugs agreed to a union, we were united—married, as he called it—at midnight in a quiet, simple ceremony in the temple. The only attendants were Seis, Lilimar, Talimuth and Talimor, as well as the high worshipper of the Mabs' temple who carried out the ceremony.

Jugs had looked so handsome in his deep blue tunic and trousers, made just for him by the royal tailor and fitted perfectly to his big body. I wore my outfit from the Valor of the Morics, my tunic with the delicate chains that attached to my finger piercings. I knew Jugs liked it, but it also held a second purpose—it covered up the constant tinkling sound of all the chains under my clothes. I had elaborately adorned myself for Jugs, and I could tell that he knew what would be waiting for him when he undressed me later that night, judging by the heated looks he kept sending me.

We had decided to mix human and vint customs for our union. We said our vows in the traditional way of my people—our voices low and echoing in the cavernous main room of the temple, with its impossibly high ceiling to pay homage to the Mabs' vast size—and ended the ceremony with a kiss in the way of his. We didn't exchange rings, which Jugs told me was customary—we already had each other's earrings still in our ears.

I blubbered only a little during our vows. My hands were tightly clenched in Jugs', and his gaze didn't leave me for a second, even when he stumbled over his words and flushed pink. I squeezed his fingers with a watery smile to tell him that it didn't matter in the slightest.

By the time the high worshipper ended the ceremony with a customary prayer to the Mabs, to watch over us and keep us happy and prosperous together, I couldn't stop smiling and neither could Jugs. When we turned to face our miniscule audience, grief stabbed through me yet again as my eyes automatically tried to seek out the grinning face of my twin brother. I pushed the pain back, blinking rapidly and hoping that wherever he was, perhaps he could feel my happiness. Perhaps it would give him some comfort, to know that I was truly living again, not just existing in a void of nothingness. Perhaps it would give him renewed strength to find his way back to us from wherever he was, from whatever was keeping him away.

I was shocked to see my big baregh guard a little tearful as he congratulated us, his deep voice gruff with emotion. He laughed when Jugs hugged him tight, slapping him on the back and making my new *husband*—the human word for it that I liked very much—jerk forward with a choked sound.

Lilimar was openly weeping, and she patted both our cheeks in a gesture so much like my mother that my throat closed up. I held her tight for long, long moments, whispering over and over again how grateful I was to her, for everything she had given me. For never giving up on Jugs, even when the hope had begun to fade from me.

Talimuth and their progenitor Talimor were, of course, far more reserved in their reactions, but they both squeezed our hands hard and told us how pleased they were for us. Talimor presented us each with a necklace that held a tiny flat disc of metal stamped with a foreign symbol that they told us symbolised good fortune and a long and happy union.

Over our quiet, intimate dinner, Lilimar offered to pierce Jugs' lower lip as was customary for vints, which made him chuckle sheepishly and admit that he wasn't sure if he wanted any facial piercings. I kissed his cheek and told him he didn't need to, which made him give me a grateful smile.

And after our dinner, we ignored the chuckles and sly comments as we made our exit, my ears twitching madly, and returned to our quarters. It was very late—or early, perhaps, the sky already beginning to lighten—but we didn't sleep. Jugs peeled off my clothes to reveal the chains adorning

my body, and proceeded to kiss every inch of me before we finally came together under the glowing pink crystals in the canopy, with feverish hands and desperate mouths and gasping breaths.

I fell asleep smiling, his name the last thing to pass my lips.

LOR

Countless times over the last thirty years, I had considered going to see Raynir in the city gaol. Not for counsel, or even to ask him why he did what he did. Just to show him that he hadn't won. To tell him that Jugs was still with me, healthy and happy, that we were lawfully united. To tell him that the salyik people, who he had spent so long treading into the dirt and treating as lesser, were finally flourishing and climbing out of poverty.

To tell him that I was strong now, my own person, a true Moric who worked hard to do right by the people under my rule. That I was no longer his puppet, mindlessly agreeing with him, vapid and empty perched in my gilded cage.

But I didn't. I never went to visit him. Despite everything, I *knew* Raynir, and I knew that his total and utter lack of power—of sway—was a punishment all on its own. I wanted him to think that I had forgotten about him completely—cast him from my mind the moment he was out of sight, because I was quite sure that the idea of being nothing, of being powerless and no longer able to influence me or anyone else, was more torturous to him than any revelations I could make about what I had achieved in his absence.

I was also quite sure that despite my best intentions, I simply wouldn't be able to see his terrible, wizened face without breaking my composure and screaming at him for what he had done. Killing our mother, almost killing Jugs, orchestrating the poverty and mistreatment of an entire group of people for his own gain and out of nothing more than plain, evil hatred.

He wasn't worth even the hour it would take me to visit him and return. He wasn't worth anything.

We did receive reports from the guards stationed at the gaol that he had aged considerably in the thirty years he had been locked up. His health was deteriorating, and his mind was starting to crumble. He spent days screaming obscenities until his voice was hoarse. Whispering to the councillors in the other cells, conspiring as if he could do anything at all from his prison, as if he didn't think the guards mere feet away could hear him.

I didn't think of him often anymore. Mainly it was when I gazed at Jugs' beautiful face beside me in bed or across from me at dinner, and a fierce, burning swell of satisfaction would rise in me. Raynir had taken much from me, but he had failed in taking Jugs.

I still smiled every morning I woke up and saw him beside me. I still felt a secret little thrill whenever I watched him move around our quarters with easy familiarity, knowing this was home to him now. I wondered if it was normal for me to feel so smitten as I watched him do silly little things, like yawn and scratch his belly as he got up and walked to the waterchamber, or tug his clothes out of the wardrobe to get dressed for the day, or tap his feet against the side of the window seat as he read a book.

I didn't care if it wasn't normal to be so besotted. I cherished every single moment I had with him, even the moments when we were simply existing within each other's space, not doing anything of note. Perhaps I cherished those moments the most.

He still hadn't agreed to join the council, despite how often I pleaded with him. He would chuckle and give me a firm kiss, telling me I was doing just fine already. But he did join us when we all had dinner together, and just as I had desperately yearned for all those years ago, they all adored him.

Ciffir, the old port master, roared with laughter at Jugs' jokes, slapping him on the back and telling him to come down to the port to meet the other dockworkers. Kimil, the vint theatre proprietor, found him fascinating to talk to, asking him everything about the human world. Polgog, the usho who owned

a large tavern in the city, constantly asked Jugs to join him for drinks and share stories of his life. Iorn enjoyed talking with Jugs, though he often began to steer the conversation toward human wars and weaponry until Seis or I gave him a stern look.

But Jugs was still especially close to Seis, and had grown very close with Talimuth, which made me happy. They often joined us for dinner or walks around the gardens, and when I was busy outside of council meetings, the pair of them sometimes went into the city for Talimuth to show Jugs the shops and buildings and explain the history of Thinir.

Jugs also spent much time with Lilimar, and had confided in me that she felt more like a mother to him than his own mother ever had. I had smiled and kissed him, admitting that she felt a bit like a mother to me too, though she could never replace my own Mama. But her calm, kind presence soothed the jagged edges of the wound in my soul that I knew would never fully heal.

The months since our union had been wonderful. Jugs was healthy and strong, completely recovered from his terrible ordeal, and growing even stronger now that he was spending time with the baregh guards. Most nights, I could barely keep my hands to myself when he pulled off his shirt or tunic to reveal his big, beautiful chest.

He hadn't gotten his lip pierced, but a few months ago he had returned to our quarters with a sheepish grin on his face before pulling up his shorn off shirt to reveal two fresh piercings through his nipples. It had been torturous waiting for them to heal, even with Lilimar's quick-healing salve, and the moment he told me they no longer hurt, I had spent a long, *long* time playing with the little hoops topped with tiny, polished silver stones. He'd shyly told me he'd picked them because they reminded him of my eyes.

We hadn't slept much that night.

If he was going into the city or we were having dinner with the councillors, Jugs tended to wear a tunic and trousers in the vint style, all made personally for him by Fadmira, the royal tailor. But if he was in our quarters or spending the day around the hyll, he always wore his tiny shorts and shorn off shirts, which I appreciated greatly. And he still slept naked—something else I appreciated—but told me that he loved my long, silky nightclothes. He especially loved burying his cold hands under them after getting into bed to make me squeal, before kissing me senseless until I was thoroughly distracted.

It had been almost a year since he had woken up from his deep sleep, and I wasn't sure if he would want to mark the day or ignore it completely. I was growing jittery and anxious as the anniversary approached, wanting to spend every moment with him. One afternoon, as I was sitting in a council meeting, the urge to see him burned hotter and hotter until finally, I stood and called the meeting to an early close before hurrying off to track him down, shooting Seis a mock glare when he followed and teased me about being a lovesick fool.

We found Jugs in the private garden, reading a book with his feet propped up on the opposite chair. His eyes lit up at the sight of me, making my chest ache, and he grinned and set his book down on the table just as I reached him and sank sideways onto his lap.

"Hey." He chuckled and dutifully high-fived me when I lifted my hand. "I thought your meeting was going on for longer."

"I finished it early," I said between kisses to his cheek and ear, ignoring Seis' chuckle as he sank down into a vacant chair. "I wanted to see you."

"Oh." He flushed with pleasure, giving me a firm kiss. "So you have the rest of the day free?"

I nodded, leaning forward to pour Seis a cup of molt tea before stealing Jugs' to sip it. "Yes. We can do whatever you want."

“Rad.” His face lit up. “Can we go to the beach?”

I smiled, nodding again as I passed him his tea. Jugs liked visiting the docks, but he adored going to the stretch of beach just beyond Thinir’s cliffs, which had fine sand and calm waters. He had even dragged us out there during the colder months, when the sky was stormy and the air was biting cold. Only Seis had remained unaffected by the chill, chuckling at the sight of us shivering and bundled up in thick coats as we walked along the shore.

At least today was warm and sunny, and the idea of spending the afternoon walking along the quiet, peaceful coast with Jugs and Seis made me smile. I gave Jugs a final kiss on his cheek and stood, waiting as he and Seis drained their cups before following me up.

“Wanna throw the old seaweed ball around if we find some on the beach?” Jugs asked Seis as we made our way back inside the hyll. My mouth twitched as Seis chuckled.

There was a kind of seaweed that sometimes floated to the surface and puffed up into a ball to keep it buoyant. I had no idea why it did that, though I was sure Lilimar could tell me if I asked. Jugs had come across one that had drifted onto the beach one day, and after asking what it was, he had picked it up and hefted it in his hands, commenting on its decent weight.

Then he and Seis had started tossing it back and forth to one another, gradually getting further and further apart to see how far they could throw it, making me roll my eyes.

They had asked me to join in, and at my first attempt to catch it when Jugs had gently thrown it at me, my ears had twitched madly. I was terrible at it, though gradually getting better, but my throws were always weaker than Seis’ or Jugs’, and half the time I fumbled to catch it, but neither of them cared. It was actually rather fun, despite being such a strange thing to do.

And despite the fact that I always came back to the hyll with the front of my tunic covered in sand from my multiple missed attempts to catch the damned ball.

Jugs threaded his fingers through mine as we made our way to the front hall, any staff and guards we passed bowing and greeting us with smiles. The hyll staff adored Jugs just as much as everyone else did, because he was always so friendly and cheerfully spoke to everyone. Honestly, despite his repeated insistence that he wasn’t qualified to sit on the council, I was quite sure that Jugs could bring peace between the two worlds with his kind, sweet nature alone. He had certainly helped the people here grow less wary of the otherworlders. Thinir’s citizens clamoured to greet him when he went into the city, gushing over him and trying to give him gifts. Many people had—much to my embarrassment—adopted hairstyles similar to ours. It was common for people to look to their Moric for the latest in fashion and style, but I was quite sure that they were all trying to emulate Jugs more than they were me.

Just as we reached the front hall, the great doors burst open. Seis immediately went tense and stepped in front of us, one hand on his axe hilt. I peered around his big body to see a soldier I recognised doubled over and gasping for breath, his hands on his knees. It was Nanimir, the soldier who had delivered the news of the void opening in the Barren Valley all those years ago. It seemed the poor vint was always running until his legs almost gave out.

Panic tightened my chest as I wondered what had happened this time. Perhaps the humans had finally come—perhaps they were here to start a war. My wide eyes darted to Jugs, but he was just watching Nanimir with a mildly concerned expression, while inside I was already frantically trying to figure out how I could best protect him if humans flooded the city and cut us all down.

But then Nanimir choked out a cough, straightening up and going still at the sight of us.

“Moric.” He stumbled forward, still panting heavily, his uniform rumpled. “The—the Verin—”

I stopped breathing. My heart gave a mighty, sickly thump in my chest, then began to race. I

couldn't move, frozen in place, clutching Jugs' hand tightly as I croaked, "What?"

Had one of the soldiers returned with news? Was Lyri—Was he—

"He's—" Nanimir cut himself off with another weak cough, making me want to shake the answer out of him. "He's outside."

"What?" Jugs squawked as I stared at Nanimir blankly, his words taking a long time to register.

"He's what?"

"He's outside, with another otherworlder. He's on his way—"

I tore my hand from Jugs and started running, almost slipping on the smooth floors as I sprinted for the door. I could hear Jugs and Seis racing after me, but then the blood pumping in my ears drowned out everything else.

He's here? But I didn't feel him. Wouldn't I have felt him—

I burst through the doors and squinted as bright sunlight pierced my eyes. But as I blinked rapidly, frantically trying to clear my vision, I could make out two figures heading up the long walkway that bisected the public gardens on either side of the hyll.

A pained sound left me as they came into focus, and I saw my twin brother's teeth gleaming in the sun as he grinned at me and raised a hand in greeting.

"Mabs," I choked as I started running again, stumbling the last few steps and flinging my arms so hard around my brother that he almost toppled over. "Lyri. Lyri."

He squeezed me back, letting out a wobbly chuckle. His voice shook the tiniest amount when he said, "It's good to see you, Lor. I missed you."

I was already sobbing, and when Lyri gently extricated himself from my painfully tight hug and smiled at me, his eyes glistened. No—eye. There was a black patch over one of them, but I was too overwrought to truly take it in.

"Sorry it took so long to get back," he said hoarsely. "I was held up. For a long time."

Trying to compose myself, I nodded quickly and wiped my cheeks, then finally looked over at Gryf standing silently beside him.

Except it wasn't Gryf.

He was another human. His skin and eyes were a deep brown, and the closely shorn hair on his head and thick beard on his face were almost black. He was even taller than Jugs was, towering over Lyri beside him.

My mouth opened and closed in wordless shock—and embarrassment that this stranger was seeing me in such a state. Nervously smoothing back my hair with shaking hands, I tried to pull myself together and give him a smile, but I wasn't sure how welcoming I looked while I was still crying. Still, he smiled back at me kindly, then glanced down at Lyri beside him.

"This is Cat," Lyri told me proudly, taking the human's hand and pressing a smacking kiss to the back of it. "And before you ask, Gryf is fine."

"Oh. Oh." I fussed with my hair again before remembering my manners and holding out my hand for the human greeting Jugs had taught me so long ago. My voice shook wildly as I said, "Hello, Cat. It's wonderful to meet you. I'm—I'm dreadfully sorry for m-my emotional display—"

"Hey, it's no problem." He chuckled, shaking my hand. "I get it. I've heard all about you, Lor. Lyri has—" He glanced down at my brother again, dark eyes softening. "Lyri has missed you a lot."

"And it is entirely thanks to Cat that we are even here." Lyri turned and tugged Cat's chin down to give him a sound kiss. "I've gotten better at the kissing thing," he muttered to me with a sly grin, snickering when I let out a choked gasp.

Cat chuckled, scrubbing a hand over his beard. "Well, not really thanks to me. It was those two

guys who—”

“We’ll tell Lor everything later.” Lyri waved a hand, then went still as his gaze drifted behind me and his mouth spread into a wide, gleaming grin. “Well fuck me. Jugs, you sly bastard, come here.”

I heard Jugs’ familiar laugh as he and Seis jogged over to join us. Lyri immediately pulled Jugs into a hard hug, murmuring something so quietly that even I couldn’t catch it. Then he hugged Seis with a laugh and smacked him hard on the back, reiterating again that Gryf was fine, because he knew Seis would have been worrying.

As he introduced Cat to Jugs and Seis, I stood there in stunned disbelief, staring at my brother. As the shock began to wear off, I realised how different he looked. There was the eyepatch, of course, making me worry fiercely about what had happened to him. He looked older and wearier, like he’d been through things that had taken some of the shine off. And all the piercings were gone from his ears—it looked as though some had been torn directly from his flesh, leaving scars and rivets in his skin.

Terror mingled with the utter relief at seeing him again. I needed him to tell me what he had been through, what had kept him away for so long, but... but not yet. Right now, I just needed to—I needed —

I flung myself back at Lyri with a sob, gripping him tight. “Are you alright?” I wept into his shoulder, unable to let him go.

“I’m fine, Lor.” He squeezed me back. “I promise.”

“I can’t believe you are really here,” I sobbed. “The—the void—”

“Yes, we know the guestroom void has been covered,” he said grimly as I finally pulled back and wiped my face.

“What did they do to it?” Jugs asked quickly. “We saw the concrete...”

“They built over it,” Cat told him. Jugs stared at him.

“So there are—People are still—”

“Plenty of people are still alive.” He gave Jugs a kind smile. “They mostly live along the coastlines now, so the military had to keep expanding city perimeters to fit them all in. They bulldozed the forest and town at some point to build over it.”

“Oh my god,” Jugs said shakily.

“There is a lot to tell you.” Lyri gripped his shoulder and rotated it with a wince, making panic streak through me again. But then he grinned at me as he threaded his fingers through Cat’s. “But first, can we go inside and get a drink? Hag’s balls, I need a drink.”

I heard Jugs snort, and was only vaguely aware of him gently taking my hand and leading me back inside behind Lyri and Cat, Seis just beside us.

“Are you okay?” Jugs whispered, squeezing my fingers.

“I—I don’t know,” I answered vacantly, then blinked hard. “No. I mean, yes. Yes, I am... I am wonderful. I can’t—I can’t believe—”

When I started blubbering again, Jugs pulled me to a stop and cupped my face to give me a deep kiss. As he hugged me tight and pressed my cheek to his big chest, I heard Cat mutter to Lyri up ahead, “Babe, we probably shouldn’t be too long...”

Lyri groaned. “Yes, you’re right. One drink though.”

“Where are you going?” I jerked up, staring at the pair of them fearfully. “Are you leaving again? You can’t—you can’t go back—”

“No, Lor, we’re not going back.” Lyri smiled at me. “We just...”

He glanced at Cat uncertainly, then gave me another smile—this one chasing away some of the fear and replacing it with suspicion. That was the smile he’d always given me, and Mama, when he’d

done something he wasn't sure we'd approve of.

"Lyri?" I croaked, clutching Jugs' hand tight.

He huffed and crossed his arms. "Well, we've brought back some humans. They're setting up camp a short distance from the city. But we should probably get back to take them to Honra."

I blinked. Blinked again.

"You've what?" I asked faintly.

"Well that was the plan, wasn't it?" Lyri threw his arms up. "And it's not even that many! Plus, they're well-protected—half of them have mates from this world, including the fucking rycke—"

I choked on a breath and stumbled back, lifting a hand to my forehead. "*What?*"

"He's alright," Lyri said gruffly. "Quite timid, actually. But anyway, we'll have one drink then go back to take them to Honra—"

"There are *more* humans?" Jugs asked in disbelief. "Here? Right now? Like... really close?"

"Yes." Lyri glanced at me, before giving Jugs a big, wicked grin. "Want to go meet them, old sport?"

I was still reeling, trying to keep up with everything that had just happened, when I heard Jugs laugh and say, "Heck yes I do."

Oh Mabs.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading Lor and Jugs' story! Did I write a book set (at least initially) in the eighties just so I could have an MC with a glorious mullet who wears tiny shorts and crop tops? It is entirely likely.

I have had the idea for Lor and Jugs since writing the novella *Wyn*. I wanted a sleeping beauty himbo. I wanted there to have been a human who came over to the monster world well before it was discovered by the rest of humanity. I wanted to make Wyn look like a complete fool with his misconceptions about Lor, how he runs his fiefdom and why he has that giant poison plant garden. It is *not* just a gaudy display of wealth, Wyn! It is to SAVE JUGS' LIFE.

And, yes, I wanted the eighties aesthetic and vibe. A mulleted himbo who says “rad” a lot and wears tiny clothing that drives Lor wild. The electric pink crystals. The cassette player. The summer camp. The eighties slasher-horror-movie edge. The satanic panic. April and how adorable she is. I hope she did okay when the monsters came.

This was so much fun to write, and I hope you enjoyed it even though it is quite different to the other books in the series—being mainly from Lor's POV, for one, but that was necessary given how much of the story revolved around what was happening to his friends, family and in his fiefdom. Plus the whole Jugs being asleep for thirty years thing.

And you know I had to get a little Wyn-and-Danny cameo in there, with Wyn being a total bastard as per usual. Would've been cool to have Danny and Jugs meet, though. And they will! Just not yet.

I hope you enjoyed seeing more of the monster world, meeting more monsters living their everyday lives (see, Moth, salyik aren't bad! Your progenitor has just always been a total asshole), and seeing what happened over there when all the tears started opening everywhere. What's up with that, huh? Are they still growing? Is the fabric between worlds literally disintegrating?

The full **Monster Index** and **Human Index** are both available to view on my website, lily-mayne.com. I have included just the relevant monsters and humans for this book in the back.

What's next?

As you may have guessed by the ending of Lor, next up in the Monstrous series is Lyri and Cat's story. Lor's hedonistic twin brother who makes a quick journey to the human world to negotiate for peace but then it ends up being... not so quick. He still does what he sets out to do though! In a sense. He is determined, that one.

I will also be releasing *King of Death*, book three in my Folk series, an m/m fae romance trilogy. This will be the conclusion to Ash and Lonan's bittersweet love story. They will obviously get a HEA—of course they will—but I'll be putting them through just a tiny bit more struggle before then.

And in 2023 I will have a book set in a brand new universe coming out! This will be a fluffy, contemporary MF monster romance with a Domme/sub dynamic and is just purely a sweet, cosy romance-driven story with extremely low angst, a very interesting meetcute and a precious, dorky monster MMC who I love so much, he is my baby.

Monster Index

Vint: Humanoid species that is dominant in the monster-world city of Thinir. Dark skin. Big, pointed ears that tend to be pierced and grow with age—their ears can get so large that they flop over. Long fingers, sharp teeth and elfin features. Sharp-tongued and combative. Keen botanists.

Moric Lor is the ruler of a prosperous fiefdom in a corner of the monster world, close to the Caen an Sin, that contains the city of Thinir and the Barren Valley, where Wyn resides and where the main tear to the US is located. Lor lives in a hyll—like a palace—at the top of Thinir and oversees the fiefdom with his council and his twin brother Lyri, who is his general.

He is very young for a Moric, and feels unprepared and unqualified for the role. He is quite anxious and timid, and cares deeply about appearances because he worries about how he is perceived his citizens. Loves his twin brother deeply and cares strongly about being a fair ruler to all in his fiefdom.

Appearance: Beautiful, delicate and elfin features, with very big pointed ears with lots of piercings. Deep blue skin—a characteristic of “royal” vints. Eyes with black sclera and silver irises. Small, sharp features. Long, dark grey hair that has many beads and gems wound through it—these are the Moric’s beads, that are not allowed to be removed until a Moric dies and the beads are passed on to their successor. Slender build.

Verin Lyri is the twin brother of Lor. He is trans. He is the general of Thinir, overseeing the fiefdom’s army alongside the baregh Iorn. Confident, brash and a *little* overbearing, but it comes from a place of love. Very much enjoys and is a resolute supporter of all earthly pleasures—drinking, fucking, gambling, fighting and generally being a bit of a menace. But he does take his job and the safety of his brother and the fiefdom very seriously. Ruthless, but not cruel. Determined.

Appearance: Delicate elfin features. Big pointed ears with many piercings, deep blue skin, eyes with black sclera and silver irises. Long grey hair usually kept in a simple style. Lor and Lyri are almost identical, but Lyri’s features are a little harsher. Toned, wiry build—he has a lot of energy.

Lilimar is the vint healthkeeper of Moric Lor’s hyll. She is very protective of Lor and Lyri, having overseen their birth and tried to save their mother—with whom she was very close—when she grew ill. Deserves to have an entire fiefdom named after her given how freaking hard she works in Book Seven. Jugs regards her as a motherly figure in his life and loves her very much.

Councillor Raynir was head of Moric Lor’s council in Thinir. Sly, conniving, and sat on the council for a very long time. Has a deep, unjustified hatred of salyik and used his position of power to keep them in poverty. Tried very hard to keep Lor under his thumb through manipulation, gaslighting and more insidious methods. Now locked away in the city gaol. Asshole.

Ashara: Specimen 007 at the military’s Nebraska base. Tall, slender humanoid species. Non-gender-specific. Pale grey. Angular yet flat face with alien-like features and big dark eyes.

Observed by Danny in Book One, standing in the centre of their cell, unmoving. Their DNA was used on Seraph.

Moric Oril is the ruler of the Ayivis fiefdom, the neighbouring fiefdom to Moric Lor.

Baregh [barr-egg]: Species that are typically employed as guards in the monster world, due to being

big and hulking. Big and muscular; pale grey skin and a thick, dark mane of hair that extends down the back.

Observed by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella. They guard the city of Thinir, including Moric Lor's hyl and public gardens. Also seen briefly by Hunter in Book Two, at the fighting competition. This one is thickly scarred, chained up, and being forced to fight by another small, wiry species of monster with six arms.

Seis [sayz] is Moric Lor's personal guard. Quiet and serious, but friendly with Lor and very supportive. Adores Jugs.

Gryf [griff] is Verin Lyri's personal guard. Easily influenced by Lyri, which means he's partial to having a drink while they're out in town, but takes his job very seriously. He and Lyri maintain a casual sexual relationship but are not romantically interested in each other—they're very good friends.

Chilt: A shellfish-type creature found in the monster world. Their meat is typically jellied and eaten as a favoured dish of vints, particularly within the port city of Thinir.

Eyriad [err-ee-yad]: An ancient warmongering species that were driven underground many, many centuries ago after laying waste to several fiefdoms, murdering Morics to usurp their thrones. They are driven to conquer and seize power. They are sly, cunning and enjoy strategizing and wargames. Eyriads organise themselves by hordes, each of which is led by a warlord.

The remaining eyriads reside in the cave systems beneath the Crepis Flats in Moric Lor's fiefdom. Well—except for the one who escaped.

Appearance: Very tall and muscular with jet black skin that is covered in glowing red fissures—like cracks with lava beneath their skin. Large black horns that sweep back across their head and are generally pierced with red metal hoops. Long, sinuous tail. Long black hair, roughly braided. Solid black eyes with glowing red rings for irises. They tend to wear very little as a show of their strength and prowess in battle—they see it as a mark of pride that they don't cover their bodies with armour. Generally heavily pierced and adorned with bicep cuffs and other body jewellery.

Marikhai is the leader of the Strife Horde. He negotiates with Lyri and Iorn to exchange the fungi they need from the cave systems for a few minutes of fresh air on the surface of the world. Except not exactly. He is a sneaky little shit. Whereabouts currently unknown.

Folna [fol-nuh]: A canine-esque monster world species that can be kept as pets. Mentioned by Lor in Book Seven.

The Mabs: The Mabs, Ara and Hag, are two ancient (more ancient than Wyn), gigantic beings that live in the Caen an Sin in the monster world and witness the sharing of time between lovers. Their “battles” shake the land. Worshipped as gods by most in the monster world, but not by Wyn.

Ara has pure black skin and either wears a white mask or has a face that looks similar to a stag skull, with enormous antlers. He wears blue-gold bands on his biceps and above his knees, and a short, sleeveless tunic made of white leather.

Hag has anaemic white skin and either wears a pure black mask or has a face that looks similar to a wild boar skull, with huge sharp tusks jutting out to the sides. He wears a short black leather kilt, and has strange markings down his shins and the centre of his chest.

Encountered by Danny and Wyn in the monster world in Wyn's novella.

Morke: A monster world creature that is used for transport—either hitched to carriages or wagons, or ridden directly. Mentioned by Lor in Book Seven.

Pama: Small sea critters that live in rock pools in warmer areas of the monster world. When they mate and retreat into the water to have young, they leave behind a thick milky jelly that is used to make expensive face creams—the kind that Lor likes.

Posk: A monster-world sea creature that is typically fried and eaten. Eaten heavily in the port city of Thinir.

Salyik [*sal-yick*]: Humanoid species that live in the monster-world city of Thinir, but are relegated to the poorer areas close to the city's ports because they are the minority. Treated poorly by other citizens. Quiet and tall.

Observed by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella. Also encountered often in Book Seven.

Moth (full name: Malimoth) is half-human, half-salyik. He is the son of the Herald, a power-hungry salyik who ran a cannibalistic cult in the Wastes. He is a very prickly, closed off and arrogant person due to being alone for basically his entire life—he lived on the streets in one of the cities as a little boy, before making his way out into the Wastes alone when he was twelve. He was then found by one of the Herald's missionaries at the age of thirteen, which is how he discovered the truth about his monster half. He is a nomad who travels the Wastes, sticks close to the Nebraska camp, and has a very remote safehouse. Formerly in love with Ghost—has since realised that it wasn't love, just a desperation to have someone who didn't seem to instantly detest him. He's *actually* in love with Charlie, even though Charlie annoys the crap out of him.

Appearance: Moth has long, silvery-white hair that he tends to wear either in a braid or half-tied back. Dark eyebrows and eyelashes, very pale blue eyes with filmy pupils. Tapered ears with several piercings. Unnaturally beautiful, with a 'vibe' that makes most humans instinctively find him "wrong" or slightly repulsive. Tall and leanly muscled. His torso, neck, hands and arms are covered in black tattoos which are words in the salyik language that basically tell other salyik to not approach him because he's a "half-breed". He also has a line of symbols scarred into his spine, which allowed the Herald to summon him. He has patches of pink, brown and purple scales all over his torso, and his legs are completely covered in scales and are not quite human, with completely inhuman feet with arched heels and three toes with thick, black claws. He also has a very cute tail that tends to betray how he's feeling. And he has a sword. That he stole.

The Herald—Malomar in'ya Konikt—was Moth's progenitor and a power-hungry salyik that travelled through the tear and began amassing a following to create a cannibalistic cult that operates out of a shopping mall to the north west. They were guarded by Gloam's two brothers, Metelimus and Neminos, and enslaved Gloam when he refused to follow them with the brothers' help. They gave Gloam to Mary to act as her protector while she carried out her missionary work with the military. They made their way through to the human world after they were shunned by the rest of the salyik community in Thinir because they were trying to start a revolution and overthrow the current vint monarchy.

Appearance: The Herald had long, white hair half tied back in complicated braids. Androgynous, inhumanly perfect face described by Rig as looking "like no one else alive, and a million other

people all at once—blank enough to be forgettable”. Ghostly pale skin covered in faint pink scales, and intense, pale pinkish-grey eyes. They wore long white robes made of an otherworldly fabric.

Encountered by Rig and Gloam in Book Four when Mary takes them to the cult for Rig to become a coal. Also encountered by Moth and Charlie in Book Five. Destroyed by Moth. Encountered by Lor in Book Seven.

Talimuth [*tal-ih-mooth*] is a salyik who acts as the representative for their people when Lor begins his efforts to improve the lives and wellbeing of the salyik population in Thinir. They later take a seat on the council and become a very close friend of Lor’s. Their progenitor, Talimor, helps in Lilimar’s efforts to save Jugs. They are very quiet and serious, don’t show their emotions often, but care deeply about those they are close to and the wellbeing of their people.

Appearance: Tall and slender with long white hair, and pale purple eyes and scales.

Scurig [*skoor-ig*]: Monster-world critters that have many legs and like to live in dark shadowy corners. Web spinners. Lor hates them.

Skilos [*skee-loss*]: Mammoth worm-slash-millipede creature that burrows underground and bursts out of the ground when it senses vibrations from nearby prey. Waves its body through the air to distract its prey.

Appearance: Described by Rig as being “the length of a stretch limousine, as tall as a horse, and a toxic orange-red colour that screamed danger”. Has hundreds of tiny sharp legs that let it move fast. Big white eyes and a wide, thin mouth that can open extremely wide, with stubby sharp teeth. Has a retractable barb on its tail end. Goopy orange blood.

Encountered by Gloam and Rig in Book Four, when one attacks them as they are travelling across the Wastes to Mary’s place. Destroyed by Gloam. Also encountered by Lor, Lyri and the rest of their group in the Crepis Flats, after the crafty Marikhai sneaks a baby skilos into the bag of mushrooms he has agreed to give them.

Soliri [*soh-leer-ee*]: Rare creatures that only inhabit a small stretch of warm beach on an island far to the north of Lor’s fiefdom. They come on shore to sunbathe and naturally shed their iridescent scales, which are then collected and used to make expensive beauty products due to the belief that their scales have youth-giving properties.

Telyth [*tell-ith*]: One of the old races, known as Soul Eaters. Only seven remaining, including Wyn and Orlith. Humanoid, single-sex species that is born from eggs. Has the ability to dissipate into thick black smoke; can travel great distances this way. This ability is obstructed by behamots, whose rock-like skin sends vibrations that prevent dissipation. A species that does not need to eat, drink or sleep.

Appearance: Tall, rangy muscular build. Pale, greyish white skin. Black, curling horns that have jagged edges. Prominent brow bone and flat, bridgeless nose; sharp cheekbones. Thin, raised ridges across the curves of the forehead and cheekbones. Very sharp teeth.

Wyn is completely covered, head to toe, in scars. He has one pure black eye that can see death, and one that is white with just a tiny pinprick of a pupil. Long black hair. Black-stained fingertips. He typically wears heavy black boots, black pants, a loose black shirt and a long, grey coat with a ragged hem and a hood that conceals his face. Specimen 015 at the military’s Nebraska base.

Orlith has one pure black eye that can see death, and one that is silver. Long white hair. Black markings extending up past his wrists. His horns are smoother than Wyn’s, but have a second jagged

spike. He wears a variety of coats; he likes to steal them from the human world, as well as other human items that he hoards in his nest in the monster world. Met by Wyn and Danny in Wyn's novella. Previously had a casual relationship with Wyn; was hoping Wyn would want to have babies with him. He's jealous of Danny.

Usho [*ooh-show*]: A monster-world species that is described by Wyn as “boring and logic-driven”, which makes them good business owners (no offence to business owners—that's just Wyn's opinion). They tend to reside in cities, and are a dominant species in the city of Thinir in the monster world. Keep to themselves and have no natural predators due to tasting very bad. Somewhat arrogant.

Appearance: Bumpy, grey-green skin. Bulbous eyes. Thick necks and very wide mouths with lots of blunt, crowded teeth.

Encountered by Wyn and Danny in the monster world in Wyn's novella, several times. They are all very rude to Danny, so Wyn gets, ahem, protective. Also encountered often in Book Seven.

The full Monster Index can be found on my website, lily-mayne.com

Human Index

Cat (real name: unknown): Co-leader (but currently MIA) of the Nebraska raider camp. Cat was found alone by Anchor in the Wastes when they were just teenagers, and together they built the raider camp. A calm, protective leader who most of the raiders look up to. Loves to read—his room at the camp is stuffed with books he's scavenged. African American.

Currently Cat is holed up in New York with an “unknown” (not so unknown now) beastie after being held at the fighting prison to the north. He declined the chance to escape the prison with Hunter and Charlie, claiming there was someone there he couldn't leave behind. Something happened at the prison which resulted in it being abandoned.

Appearance: Dark hair, very dark eyes and a beard. Tall and solidly built. A scar on his left temple.

Danny: Wyn's human and former (terrible) soldier. A total sweetheart. Danny joined the military after his mother died, because he had nothing else, but quickly realised he wasn't cut out to be a soldier. Luckily, he met Wyn. Fairly insecure, but easygoing. Somewhat clumsy but would never admit it. Loves to tease Wyn. Loves Wyn full stop. Irish American.

Appearance: Dark hair, bright blue eyes and golden skin. Fairly tall, with a slim but muscular build. His nose is crooked, thanks to being broken by Mallory, and he has a tiny scar on his chin that he got as a kid while being clumsy. He is missing the little toe on his left foot. He is a beautiful little sugar muffin.

Michael “Jugs” Pyne: Sweet, unwitting human who tumbles through a second, unknown tear that forms in a guestroom within Moric Lor's hyll about ten years before the main tear expands. Friendly, adventurous and initially starved of affection thanks to his very distant parents. An affinity for wearing shorts and crop tops. American.

Appearance: A beautiful dark blond mullet and bright blue eyes. A big nose, ears that stick out far and a hoop through his left lobe. Big, strong build. About 6'1.

The full Human Index can be found on my website, lily-mayne.com

Books by Lily Mayne

Monstrous

(MM Monster/Human Dystopian Romance)

Soul Eater (Book One)

Edin (Book Two)

The Rycke (Book Three)

Wyn (Novella)

Gloam (Book Four)

Moth (Book Five)

Seraph (Book Six)

Lor (Book Seven)

Coming in 2023: Lyri (Book Eight)

Folk

(MM Fae Fantasy Romance)

Mortal Skin (Book One)

Forgotten Vows (Book Two)

Coming soon: King of Death (Book Three)

Monsters & Mayhem Collection

(MM Dark Horror Romance)

Death's Bloom

About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

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