No Fear of Heights
by russomaha

Summary

This is an age-old story, a story of love found, lost and then found again, grown. A story with wolf splices, mermen, flesh-implanted weapons and resorts the size of whole planets.

or:
“Why haven’t we been doing this all along?”
“Your Majesty had ethical qualms. Had I known what it would take to help you overcome them, I would have dropped my pants so much sooner.”

An AU multi-chapter set in Jupiter Ascending ‘verse, with dashing Finnick Odair borrowed from The Hunger Games, along with some elements of his background story, as well as the gritty realistic atmosphere and dystopian vibes.
JA fans will be able to understand the story completely without any prior knowledge of THG. Just keep in mind that Finnick is a charismatic flirt with a heart of gold.
I did my best to adapt it for THG fans, too. Finn deserves more fics dedicated to him, as he deserves not to die in them.
Splices are something akin to Avoxes in this ‘verse.
Happy ending is guaranteed.
Even Sean Bean Stinger Apini does not die in this story. What a tragic waste of a perfectly good trope.

Notes

WARNING: This story is my challenge to myself; it’s not going to be my usual harmless fluff and humour, although it will contain them. I won’t hold back, won’t cut any corners, writing everything I’ve always wanted to write. My mind is an odd place, so this story will be weird, all right? There will be seashells, skin orgasms, figs, wood-chopping, occasional idiosyncratic erotica, sharp-toothed smiles and mentally unsound lycants. And people who are in no way perfect: they’re neither heroes nor bad guys, simply human.
Oh, and there’ll be fish, too.
If you are here just for Caine and can’t be bothered to read through a lotta letters, go straight to chapter 13, his storyline emerges to the forefront of the narrative from that point forth. For the list of possible triggers see the post scriptum notes. Since most of them are spoilers, I don’t recommend reading them. There’s nothing overly graphic in this thing. Except for the descriptions of feet and Balem Abrasax, those are outrageously explicit.
Assassination Attempt

Chapter Summary

Queen sometimes wondered what the next assassination attempt would look like, but never in her most terrifying nightmares she expected it to come from within her Private Security, the highly esteemed and utterly reliable inner circle of her Royal Guard. The realization comes as much a shock as the attack itself.

Chapter Notes

I needed to thrust Caine into Jupiter’s life somehow. This is my thrust of choice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today’s negotiations turned out to be particularly trying.

The ordeal is over now, but Queen is wound-up, annoyed and exhausted. The only thing that makes it better is the gentle, warm, reassuring pressure she feels on the small of her back. Her Royal Consort, who accompanies her to all of her meetings, is well aware of the state she’s in – he knows her in-and-out by now, both figuratively and literally – so he has been keeping a supporting, pacifying hand on her waist ever since the doors of the conference hall closed behind them.

Now that they have reached the safety of the alcazar – her alcazar, to be correct, but really, theirs – he refuses to wait any longer to try and get her mind off things. She feels his hand creep up her back, tracing the outline of her spine, as he ducks his head to run his nose along the shell of her ear – how does he even manage this while they are walking? She envies that inhuman coordination of his. She must admit, that cool tip of his nose burrowing itself into her ear is distracting…

Apparently, the most effective way to get her mind off things is to drive it straight into the gutter.

She doesn’t stop his amorous overtures, as she normally would – there are still guards around them, for gods’ sake, escorting them to their private quarters – when he insinuates his face behind her ear, shamelessly nuzzling into her hair, his hot breath fanning over her sensitive skin, leaving delectable shivers in its wake. He then leans in to nibble at her nape while his hands dexterously work on undoing the her intricate coiffure – a masterpiece Royal Hairdresser spent over an hour working her magic on, much to the queen’s dismay – easing some tresses out, bringing a much needed relief to her tired scalp, carelessly throwing bejewelled pins on the marble floor.

As the queen feels the consort’s hand hover just above the dress fastening on her back, she tenses infinitesimally, preparing herself to stop him. She doesn’t really mind his making his sensual advances outside the privacy of their quarters – not when she’s high-strung and edgy, at the risk of snapping, not when she needs this – but she draws a line at being disrobed in public. Evidently, the consort senses her reluctance, as his hand proceeds to ghost over her nape, radiating exquisite warmth that seeps into her skin, grazing lightly the fine hairs there, ticklish and teasing.
As his fingers keep ravishing her neck, his mouth comes to murmur tempting, obscene promises in that irresistible voice of his – delicious, devious, divine – designed for sensuous seduction, for luring and mesmerizing the unsuspecting prey, the sound in itself being an ensnaring caress and a caressing snare. It trickles past her ears like most voluptuous music, the impudent flirtation in its tone tagging at some animalistic strings hidden within the primal depths of her very being. The queen feels his moist breath wash over her temple, her cheek, the heated skin of her neck, wet with his kisses, sending delightful flutters along her tingling nerves.

And yet she can’t get herself to relax.

The stiffness in her posture, the tension in her muscles linger, so his hand grows more insistent, more compelling, snaking up her nape, delving to scrape gently at her scalp, shooting a heated wave of delectable prickles up to the crown of her head. She feels his nimble fingers gently gather a handful of her hair – and pull. She gasps at the surprisingly acute, almost painful sensation, dropping her head backwards, baring her throat as he immediately dives to graze it with his teeth. They are much sharper than one would expect from a man who looks so humanlike. Those pointed tips are nipping hard enough to hurt, to leave marks of that fascinating hue – her favourite one, one of plums, and figs, and the grape-blood of tzars – on her milky-white skin.

As pain blends with pleasure, both sensations bleeding into each other, copulating into one exhilarating thrill, a jolt of something akin to electricity rushes down her spine, the muscles in her back lock as a burst of warmth blooms inside her core, flooding her chest, sprawling outwards into her limbs, the tension finally draining from her body, being replaced with something more urgent and primal.

He hums in triumph, sensing his victory, content with the result, and she can feel his hum tremble deep within her liquid bones. She smiles at his basking in his achievement, delighted with her choice in partner. She wouldn’t hold his self-indulgent male vanity, his obvious, blatant narcissism against him. He is invariably good at this.

Providing stress relief is Royal Consort’s job description, after all.

Leaving the entourage of guards outside, the two of them enter a long empty hallway, secluded for security purposes, leading to royal private quarters, tightly entwined and panting.

There’s a new guard standing outside the inner door, whose face Queen doesn’t recognize. She has never seen that one before. And she knows all members of her Private Security personally, after all, her very life depends on them. She knows their faces, their names, habitually greets and thanks them, occasionally smiles at them – there is a reason why all of them are single straight men, her warm smiles and general vulnerability tapping into their protective instincts that come unrivalled by any kind of conscious set of mind – making sure they know she appreciates them. It boosts the guards’ loyalty and devotion and helps the queen trust them in return.

Her gaze skims over the new recruit’s pointed ears and uncommonly massive frame as she vaguely recalls the conversation she had with Head of her Royal Guard, months ago. There was this one lycantant that had served under Stinger Apini’s command in the past. Evidently, Commander had been so impressed with him that he insisted Queen should commission his former subordinate – and, apparently, a personal friend – for her Private Security. When it came to keeping her alive – and preferably intact – Queen trusted Stinger implicitly, so she gave him carte blanche on that.

At this very moment, though, all she wants is to disappear behind that door and forget herself with her consort. But she’s a ruling monarch and that means responsibility, above all things. The least she can do for this man who’s prepared to risk his life for her is to acknowledge his existence. She puts her social smile on and tilts her head up to look at his face.
“Hello. You must be the guy that Stinger – Commander Apini – recommended so highly.”

“Officer Wise, at Your Majesty’s service,” he responds, not quite meeting her gaze, back ramrod straight, head bowed in deference.

“Welcome to my Private Guard, Officer Wise,” she nods, running her eyes over him, committing this new addition to her security detail to her memory. She feels Finnick kiss the back of her neck impatiently – one of the most effective tricks in his arsenal that rarely fails to distract her – tugging on her waist, urging her inside. He likes being possessive in public, he’s the only one who can play possessive with Queen. He knows how much she enjoys it, but right now, she feels a stab of annoyance at his insistence – she’s trying to work here.

“Goodnight, Officer,” she manages before Finnick all but drags her into the room, looking at her with that predatory, wicked smile of his. His smile is all angles: sculpted cheekbones peaking in a pointed chin, thin lips, curving into a carnivorous grin, revealing sharp, not-quite-human teeth. She sees the hunger in that smile and shivers in appreciation, the mirror yearning rising within her in response. After years together, he still has this effect on her.

As the door closes behind them, he grabs at her neckline, bunching the delicate fabric in his fist, and slams her into the nearest wall. His palm then splays across her décolletage – his long, beautifully slender fingers spread akin to the arms of an exotic starfish – and inches up towards her neck. It is a slow, viscous, excruciatingly drawn-out progress, the sweetest torture of anticipation. Her breathing has grown erratic, strained by the time his hand comes to engulf her throat – and squeeze. The pressure intensifies, until her pulse is beating frantically against his hand, her veins desperately trying to push back. She feels her eyes roll back in her head, her vision dimming, her whole existence imploding into this single dazzling moment, the universe falling silently away along with all her fears and worries.

She knows how much her consort revels in having this overwhelming control over Queen – all-powerful within the realms of her kingdom – just as much as the woman in her relishes his physical supremacy over her fragile body. He lowers his face to kiss her, and she gives up breathing altogether, cathartic oblivion blanking her mind.

With Finnick, breathtaking takes on a whole new meaning.

He then comes to kneel in front of her, letting go of her throat – leaving a dull ache behind – but tugging on her dress instead, insistent and commanding, urging her down with him. He’s the only being in the universe who gets to see Queen on her knees at his slightest request. She obliges without hesitation, relieved at the opportunity to finally – finally – relinquish the power to someone else. She knows she won’t have to make any more decisions tonight and for that, she’s grateful.

Hastily relieving her of the last remaining pins – her hair is a tangled mess by now – he goes to put a hand against her chest and pushes sharply, throwing her on the carpeted floor – which is so thickly covered for a reason. She smiles as she topples, bracing instinctively to break her fall. Her hand catches on one of the discarded pins, the point piercing her skin. She hisses with sensation, but she’s still smiling, pain is fine when Finn is looking at her like that, if anything, it’s like a spice to a delicious main course –

The door explodes. The next thing she registers is Finnick’s body landing in the opposite side of the room, his head hitting the floor with a sickening thud. There’s a black-clad figure crouched above him, snarling – snarling?! – and squashing his throat. The queen barely recognizes the reverential guard she’s seen by the door just a few minutes earlier in this ferocious animal.

Queen sometimes wondered what the next assassination attempt would look like – because there is
No way this is an abduction, the attacker can’t possibly extract her from her private quarters, the best-secured area of the alcazar – but never in her most terrifying nightmares she expected it to come from within her Private Security, the highly esteemed and utterly reliable inner circle of her Royal Guard, from a man personally recommended by Stinger. The realization comes as much a shock as the attack itself.

Of course, in order to get to Queen the assassin has first to go through Finnick, her very last line of defense. Those who think that Royal Consort’s only purpose is just look dashing and sex the monarch up couldn’t be more wrong. Being that close to the Queen’s body without actually guarding it is an impossibility. Finnick Odair the most efficient of her private bodyguards, with quicker reflexes and better reaction time than any human. As well as several lifetimes of training behind him, along with a few successfully prevented abduction and assassination attempts.

Before she knows it, the queen sits up and shoots her arm forward, aiming at the assailant, twisting her hand down with as much force as she can master, almost breaking her wrist in the process, activating an emergency weapon imbedded in between the two bones of her forearm. Searing pain tears through her skin and she sees a pink gaping hole of torn flesh where the right shoulder of the attacker has been just a split second ago – the severed limb hitting the floor with a heavy dull thud – blood first seeping then outright gushing into the wound as Queen watches, as though mesmerized by the morbid spectacle –

Critical emergency implants are a common thing among the Entitled, intended to be used only in life-or-death situations. They include RegeneX capsules – for the severe injuries to help you last until the medical assistance arrives, – or those with poison – for the occasions when death becomes a better option than survival. There’s also a wide range of weaponry, hidden in the flesh, to give you one last-ditch attempt at self-defense.

Queen forces her gaze away from the wound she’s just inflicted and finds herself staring down the barrel of the gun that the assassin – still kneeling over Finnick’s body – is holding in his one remaining hand. He’s turned quicker than her human eyes can register – how can he even move after a hit like that?! Fuck, she should have aimed better – she was going for the head, a sure mortality, but she missed, she missed – she should have trained to shoot the implant, as Stinger insisted, pain be damned. She had just one shot and she blew it.

She’s waiting to die, silently urging the attacker to just get done with it already, as she feels an unnatural calm settle over her. At least she won’t live to bury Finn.

She sees the assailant look at her, a stunned expression on his face – and then, in the blink of an eye, he shifts to face her, sagging back on his knees and dropping his head to his chest, like a collapsing marionette that’s had its strings cut. His mangled right side is a maroon mess by now. He proceeds to carefully put the gun on the floor and push it towards her.

Dazed with adrenaline and shock, she extends her uninjured arm to snatch the gun, forcing her muscles to move through the rigor of astonishment, and raises it to aim – at point-blank range, with the weapon she’s actually trained to use, there’s no way she’ll miss the second time, even with her nondominant hand – when she hears the assailant speak.

“Is Your Majesty hurt?” she hears his strained, husky voice, not quite believing her ears.

She reads a genuine concern in his tone. Concern for her.

What the –

Then the room is flooded with very armed, very agitated men whose faces, to her relief, she does
recognize. She hears the question repeated all around her and manages to squeeze, “Finn. Save Finn. I’m all right.”

Then she recalls the husky, concerned voice and adds, nodding at the assailant, who’s being dragged outside, half-dead and dripping crimson, “Fix him. I’ll deal with him later.”

Chapter End Notes

All of you JA fans who hate me right now, please, have patience. This is a slow build. Like, a really sloooow build, but there will be a lot of time and affection devoted to Caine in later chapters. Next chapter is Stinger with a bit of Kiza, and the one after that is all Caine.

The quote ‘of plums, and figs, and the grape-blood of tzars/emperors’ is not mine.

If you ever decide to try breathplay, please, keep in mind that it can be more dangerous by impeding the blood flow to your brain rather than cutting off your breath. And that shit can get serious very quickly. Do educate yourself before putting your health at risk.

LIST OF POSSIBLE TRIGGERS: Non-graphic violence, non-graphic mutilation, mentions of torture, some serious mind-fuckery, slavery (well, splicery or avoxery, whichever term you prefer, but really, slavery), racism/speciesism/discrimination in general, mentions of rape/non-con, mentions of murder/genocide, implied underage sex, canon-compliant incestuous themes, sexual harassment, adultery, depression, suicide themes, mentions of castration and eunuchs, self-harm elements.
Someone to Watch Over Me

Chapter Summary

Meet Stinger, who doesn’t die in this chapter, but comes very close to it.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is Stinger with a bit of Kiza, the next one is all Caine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Finnick lives.

Unless death is instantaneous, there’s not much RegeneX can’t restore.

Queen has no qualms using it to save the man who helped to raise her and has been making her happy ever since.

RegeneX treatment is universally reserved for those of the Entitled who can afford it. At Queen Jupiter Seraphi-Nova’s court, its use is even more strictly limited, due not so much to the exorbitant price of the Juice as to the gruesome nature of its production. Unfortunately, no other substance that’s been discovered so far can equal its rejuvenating and regenerative qualities. Although all the court medics - including Royal Physician - are strongly encouraged to use RegeneX only when every other option has been exhausted, as the last-resort cure that can literally work miracles.

Royal Consort’s broken bones, fractured skull, and crushed windpipe have been healed within the first few hours of treatment. Brain damage, however, is something even RegeneX takes time with. Finnick is still unconscious.

The medics have patched up Jupiter’s mangled wrist long ago, after having recharged the weapon imbedded in her flesh. Ever since then Royal Physician has been trying to convince her to get some sleep. She hasn’t slept for over twenty-four hours, but she can’t even think of going off to bed. Not when Finnick might wake up at any moment. Not when –

Not when he might not.

Not when she has this excruciating premonition that she might lose him forever. She’s staying by his side, afraid to leave even for a minute, desperately trying to stare, pray, will him into consciousness.

It’s not like Queen needed this reality check. Despite the fact that the ruling regime of Abrasax Empire is called an absolute monarchy, she knows her power is far from absolute; it spreads only as far as people are willing to submit to it - or to be bullied into submission. Nevertheless, the queen is used to all her orders being obeyed, her tiniest whims fulfilled, those around her tripping over themselves to foresee her every possible wish and meet it too, before she’s even had a chance to think of it herself.
It is empowering.

It is addictive.

Fate doesn’t work that way, however. Life doesn’t work that way. It doesn’t care about a person’s will, even if that person is the ruling monarch of multiple planets.

The sad truth is, the universe isn’t either benevolent or cruel. It’s devastating to realize just how infinitely indifferent it is. Queen can send millions of people to their death just by sanctioning one Harvest, yet she can’t bring one single man back – the one who at this eviscerating moment means more to her than all of those faceless, nameless throngs. She feels control being ripped out of her fingers and it hurts more than a burning blast ripping through her skin, even with the memory from the last night still fresh in her mind.

Her loved one’s healing is beyond her power.

Beyond anyone’s power.

A ruthless, roaring helplessness is clawing at her insides; her absolute inability to change anything is crippling.

Somewhere around midday she’s startled out of her agony by an urgent call from Kiza, Stinger Apini’s daughter and Jupiter’s best friend since the childhood they shared together. She is one of the very limited number of people that are granted direct access to Queen’s communication implant. Kiza’s voice sounds hoarse and panicked.

“Jupiter, what’s going on? They’ve arrested Dad. They won’t let me see you!”

“Finn’s got hurt,” Jupiter barely forces the reply out; saying it aloud somehow hurts more than the silent knowledge.

“Finn?! How? Is he all right now?”

“Unconscious.”

“What – even with RegeneX?!”

“Severe brain damage.”

“Fuck.”

Fuck doesn’t begin to cover it. The medics have assured her that eventually his cerebral physiology will be completely restored. The major cause for Jupiter’s concern is not the brain itself, but its contents, which might be lost forever. Finnick’s skills, his life experiences, his memories, and emotional attachments… Everything that constitutes his personality, that makes him her Finn, might be gone for good.

He might wake up a different person.

He might not remember her.

He might not love her anymore.

Jupiter feels short of breath, all of a sudden, the thought suffocating her.

“Jupiter?” she hears Kiza’s worried voice. “Are you still there? How are you?”
“Alive.”

There’s a pregnant pause. When she hears Kiza speak again, her friend’s tone is more controlled and quiet.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“There’s been – an unexpected attack. One of my guards tried to kill Finn,” Jupiter’s voice breaks at that. “Almost managed it, too.”

“One of your guards?” Kiza sounds incredulous. “That’s – impossible!”

“I was there, Kiza. I saw it happen.”

“Have you been hurt, too?”

“No, I... I don’t understand what happened, really, but he didn’t hurt me.”

Not physically, at least. She still cannot believe what actually occurred, let alone make head or tail of it. Was the assassin really there to kill her consort? If so, why didn’t he? He had a gun and plenty of time to use it. No amount of RegeneX would have been able to bring Finn back if the assailant had discharged the gun into his brain. The Juice can extend your life almost forever, but it can’t resurrect the dead.

Why would anyone, though, go to such lengths to assassinate Finnick if the attacker could just as easily have gotten to Queen herself? She knows enough people who would prefer her dead. Was she the real target? Then why is she still alive? Did the assailant have a change of heart at the very last moment?

Queen doesn’t believe in sudden bouts of conscience in murderers.

“But why is Dad under arrest?!” comes another anxious question from Kiza.

“Stinger was the one who brought the attacker into my guard. It’s a standard procedure; they just have to run some checks on him.”

Commander Apini has been suspended from his duties as Head of the Royal Guard and is currently being detained on suspicion of conspiracy and treason, while the Internal Security Service investigates his contacts and interactions, trying to discern a possible motive and person or organization that might have ordered the hit. After all, Apini was the one who commissioned Officer Wise to join Her Majesty’s Private Security. One who stationed the lycantant at the secluded post by the inner door to her private quarters. One who gave him the opportunity.

If Jupiter didn’t know Stinger better, his involvement would be evident to her.

But she does know him. He has been around ever since she can remember. ‘Uncle Stinger’ Jupiter used to call him back when she was a kid and she and Kiza played together. She remembers him swirling her around in his arms, a child-shaped bundle of pealing laughter. Remembers him teaching her how to ride a bicycle. Once she was about to catch a nasty fall onto a cobbled slope when her pedaled stallion had suddenly decided to act up, and Stinger cushioned her fall with his own body. Not that it was much softer than the cobblestone, but her thirteen-year-old self fully appreciated the badassery of the move. Besides, his protective stunt took the fright out of the equation, and pain is so much easier to bear without fear thrown in.

Jupiter has never had a reason to question Stinger’s loyalty before. And now –
She can’t help feeling sharp stabs of resentment towards her trusted friend. It’s been his doing that Finn is now the way he is, his mistake.

The question is whether there was an intent behind it, or not.

If the Internal Security investigators prove that his error was indeed intentional, Queen will have to sign Uncle Stinger’s death warrant.

Kiza will never forgive Jupiter for her father’s death.

With Finnick rendered amnesiac, Queen in one fell swoop will lose the whole tightly-knit unit she considers her real family.

That, actually, might be the intent behind the attack. If the worst happens, she will be devastated, and emotionally destabilized people are much more susceptible to external influence and manipulation. Who would want to influence and manipulate the ruling monarch, you ask? It’s easier to say who wouldn’t.

“You don’t believe Dad had anything to do with it, do you?” Kiza’s distressed voice whispers into Jupiter’s ear.

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous. Don’t worry, Kiza,” she tells her friend and severs the connection.

The queen doesn’t really believe that the man she trusts the most after her consort, the man who had been like a second father to her while she was growing up would plot an attempt on her – or Finnick’s – life.

Besides, he had plenty of opportunities to kill either of both of them before and didn’t take them.

Has something changed?

Even if Stinger didn’t have anything to do with the attack, it will be blamed on him. His miscalculation with the lycantant guard is glaringly obvious, and there are enough people at her court who would pounce at his mistake and use it to get him out of their way. His influence on Queen is widely known and just as widely envied. Royal Spymaster has been coveting Commander Apini’s position as Queen’s left hand – the consort being her right – for years now. Some courtiers might as well kill to get Stinger’s power for themselves.

Actually, that’s another probable explanation of what happened last night.

Against her own instinct to stay by Finnick’s side, as well as the caution of the investigating officer, Jupiter decides to talk to Stinger so she could protect him from any believable – however false – accusations that might arise. That, and to assure herself that her life-long friend did not, in fact, attempt to murder her.

When she goes to see him, she finds Stinger absolutely enraged.

“What the hell got into Caine to do that?!” he growls, pacing around a spacious detention cell. It’s far from being an austere oubliette – no one would dare to give Commander Apini anything but a luxurious accommodation, adequate to his high status. Even while being under official arrest, he is the third most powerful person at court, after Royal Consort and Queen herself – “After everything I had done for him, after I had pulled him out of that hellhole!”

“According to the report of the investigating officer, the assailant offers no explanation for his actions. In fact, he doesn’t say anything at all. He’s repeatedly asked to see you, though, – which, to
be honest, doesn’t help much to clear you of suspicion,” Jupiter grumbles.

“Look, I’m really at a loss what could have made Caine attack Odair. I didn’t get a chance to talk to him: by the time I got there he was unconscious. And then they arrested me and shoved me here.” – He gestures angrily at his opulent solitary confinement. – “I’m not allowed to communicate with Wise, which I understand and even more, approve of. You should isolate the evidently guilty party from their probable accomplices, so they don’t get a chance to adjust their stories and mess with the investigation.”

“Don’t make it sound like you suspect yourself.”

“Well, if I didn’t know better, I would.” He gives her a wry smile that looks much more like a distorted grimace. “How’s Finn?”

“Stable, but comatose. He doesn’t need to be kept in suspended animation anymore, so I had him moved to our rooms.”

“Does it mean that the medical personnel have access to your quarters at the moment?” Stinger’s tone is dry, collected, professional now.

“Only Royal Physician. Relax, I’m not that naïve. You’ve taught me well.”

“How can I relax? It could have been an attempt to take me out for a while in order to weaken your defense. Although why anyone would do that without jumping at the opportunity to get to you, escapes me. A possible kidnapping planned?.. Be extra cautious, Jupiter, while I can’t protect you,” his gruff voice grows gentle at that.

“Hey, the rest of the guys are still there, aren’t they? And I have cancelled all meetings and visits while Finnick’s – indisposed. I’m pretty sure I’m safe within my alcazar. At least let me delude myself into thinking I am, all right?”

Stinger nods absently, deep in thought. “Would you talk to Caine, Jupiter? I really want to know what the fuck happened there.”

“You’re not alone in that, trust me. Though I don’t think I’m ready to face the man who nearly ended Finn. Without, you know, ending him.”

“They aren’t torturing him, are they?”

The queen can’t help but wince at the question. Death can be merciful, if it’s quick and painless and takes its victim unawares, yet everything in Jupiter revolts against intentional infliction of suffering on any living beings. Therefore torture is officially prohibited on the territory of her kingdom. However, when it comes to the capital crimes endangering the Crown, all limitations are off. Queen doesn’t condone it, per se, but she is forced to admit that drastic times call for drastic measures.

“No. I explicitly ordered to fix him. I don’t think they will try anything along the venue of causing him more damage. Not until I’m done with him, at least.”

“Well, not every torture leaves visible marks. And there are places where you won’t check,” Stinger remarks.

Now that’s a low blow. He knows how visualizing others’ pain hurts her, he knows. What the fuck is he trying to achieve here?

“Thanks, you have reinforced my faith in humanity so much right now,” she grits out.
“Even if they don’t resort to torture, they’re pumping Caine with psychoactive drugs as we speak, to wrench the truth out of him as quickly and efficiently as possible,” Stinger remarks. “Since most of the truth serums were developed for humans, they’ll just be upping the dosage until it destroys his brain.”

“What, am I supposed to feel sorry for him, now?!” Jupiter snaps, feeling the involuntary compassion swell within her and trying desperately to suppress it. “I’m too busy feeling sorry for Finn, so stop pushing my buttons, would you? You know how crucial it is to find out who sent the assassin and for what purpose. Besides, if that interrogation tactic will help to clean your name sooner rather than later, I’m all up for it!”

“Are you?”

She just huffs and shoots Stinger a death glare.

“Look, no matter what he’s done, he used to be my friend. I owe the guy my life twice over.” He’s not Head of the Royal Guard talking to Queen anymore, no, he’s Uncle Stinger talking to Jupiter – ‘Hey, kiddo, can you do something for me? Don’t go riding your bike on the asphalt, you might skin your knees pretty badly. Why don’t you go over to that lawn over there, nice, grassy and soft?’ – “Just yesterday, I would have trusted him with it again. Hell, I trusted him with yours! For all the good it did,” Stinger grumbles under his breath, wincing, then presses on, “Caine’s nothing if not loyal. At least he used to be. Please, talk to him. For me.”

“Do you think he would tell me anything?” Jupiter inquires, sighing in defeat. “So far he’s been pretty keen on keeping his mouth shut.”

“I’m sure he’ll give you answers if he can. If he knows what happened himself. If that fails, arrange for me to try.”

The queen raises an eyebrow at him, “What, and let you two conspire against me even further?”

At that, Stinger throws his head back and laughs – a dry, heartfelt, sarcastic, barking laugh. The laugh she remembers from when she was a child.

She feels intense relief flooding her. It’s nice to know Stinger is still loyal to his Queen.

Or at least to believe he is.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: As usual, my apologies for any glaring errors in my English. I don't have time to proofread this eleventy times, as I do with my short stories.
Meet Caine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If the investigating officer was opposed to Queen’s seeing Stinger, he barely manages to hide his indignation under a thin veil of civility when she tells him she intends to interrogate the assailant. Jupiter understands where he’s coming from: she’s an outrageous amateur meddling in his business, the business he’s an expert at.

Well, he’ll have to suck it up. She’s Queen, so she ignores his protests.

His warnings, however, she does not ignore. Instead of having the arrestee brought to her, she sees him in the specially equipped interrogation room where he can be connected to a range of lie detectors and properly secured, so he wouldn’t try anything.

Jupiter doesn’t think he would, but better be safe than – well, dead.

When they enter, Officer Wise stands straighter, bowing his head sharply in a deferential greeting, abiding to the court etiquette. The little mundane gesture takes the queen by surprise – she doesn’t know what she actually expected, but it certainly wasn’t his sticking to the royal protocol at a time and place like these, – but she automatically nods in response.

“Officer Wise.”

“Your Majesty.”

The lycantant looks vastly different from how she remembers seeing him last. There are no traces left of either the gruesome half-dead corpse or feral beast she witnessed last night. In fact, he looks startlingly human. She can’t help but scan his frame for any signs of torture – fuck you, Stinger! – satisfied to not be noticing any. His face is pale and haggard, his right side is neatly bandaged, the only remaining arm is fixed behind his back. The angle looks beyond uncomfortable into outright painful.

Good.

Bet Finn ain’t comfy in his coma either.

The assailant’s expression is completely devoid of any sign of emotion, a dispassionate mask that somehow comes off not vacant but controlled. His whole demeanour is so composed it almost seems serene. He doesn’t raise his eyes to meet hers, keeping them firmly fixed somewhere in the vicinity of her feet.

“Officer Wise, will you answer my questions?” Jupiter came here without any real hope for answers, but after his obeisant greeting she thinks she might actually get a response. Yet she’s surprised to hear one nonetheless.
“I will, Your Majesty. Although I am not allowed to share the information with anyone else,” he replies, without lifting his head to look at either the investigating officer or two her ever-present bodyguards.

“Not allowed by whom, exactly?”

“Commander Apini made it very clear that I must not divulge the matters that take place at the royal private quarters to anyone except himself or Your Majesty only. So far he hasn’t been to interrogate me.”

Huh, so Stinger did try to protect her privacy for once. Unusual and unexpected, yet still nice of him.

“Leave us,” she commands, waving the three men off. She’s pretty sure she can hear the investigating officer grinding his teeth.

Under normal circumstances, she would be more considerate about her employee’s feelings, but today the circumstances are anything but ordinary. Finn might come to at any moment and she doesn’t have time for pleasantries; she wants to be done with this as quickly as possible and go back to her vigil by his side.

“Your Majesty, the splice might be dangerous,” one of the guards warns her.

She shoots him a “You don’t say?” look; she saw the splice in action. Her wrist, though fully healed, still throbs with phantom pain where the blast ripped through it.

“He’s fully immobilized. Besides, he’s already had a chance to kill me and didn’t. Go.”

When they are finally alone, she asks the question that has been relentlessly haunting her mind.

“Why did you attack my consort, Officer?” she inquires softly, her voice tired and fraught with grief.

“I had the reasons to believe you were in danger, Your Majesty,” comes a calm, quiet, matter-of-fact response.

He’s lying, surely. Yet the low, steady hum of the lie detectors he’s been hooked up to does not falter. Either he’s extremely good at telling lies, or –

– he indeed believes what he is saying.

The queen does not dismiss the arrestee’s words straight away. She’s been conditioned to believe her guards for far too long, it’s like a Pavlovian response to her: the Royal Guard – protection – safety – trust. Was he really trying to protect her? From whom? From Finn?! Why on earth –

She wasn’t really in danger, was she? He must be mistaken, surely. It was his first shift at such an important post, he must have been wound-up, on edge–

She once again assesses his composed demeanor. Whether he intentionally tried to kill Finnick or made a fatal mistake, the fact remains that Royal Consort has suffered severe bodily harm by his hand and that is punishable by death, regardless of the intent. The legislation is extremely strict and ruthless on that point, – Jupiter can’t have people attacking her Finn left and right. This splice is facing a sure execution, and he knows it, ought to know it since he’s been through the training for her Private Security. Studying his face now, the queen can’t believe this man is capable of being on edge about anything, let alone his first significant assignment.

“What reasons?”
“For one, when I first met Your Majesty, I noticed that Royal Consort had injured you. No one is allowed to inflict bodily harm on an Entitled, let alone a royal,” his voice is steady, yet there’s fierce conviction in it.

“Bodily harm?” she repeats, perplexed at what he could have possibly perceived as that.

“You had fresh haematomas on your neck with the scent of Royal Consort’s saliva on them,” he’s relating the facts with clinical precision and impartiality. “They smell of him still.”

Jupiter instinctively raises a hand to her throat to feel the purple marks Finn’s teeth left there. They might as well be the last memento of her Finn, the old Finn, who remembered and knew and loved her. For a moment, she’s blinded with overwhelming rage – she wants nothing more than just see this monster die. And he will die, soon enough. Once she’s found out what the fuck happened that night at her quarters.

“You didn’t attack him then,” she notes.

“Your Majesty didn’t show any signs of displeasure at first. When you deigned to address me, though, Royal Consort’s conduct towards Your Majesty turned into a blatant display of insubordination, bordering on aggression –”

Well, Finnick’s out-of-the-ordinary impatience and erotic assertiveness could have been interpreted like that, she supposes.

“– You got upset with him.”

Now, there’s an important bit of information. She remembers being briefly irritated with Finn before they left the hall, but she also recalls her deliberate poker face at that very moment. Queen mastered keeping up an inscrutable countenance long ago. Concealing your emotions is a skill of utmost necessity in politics. If this man saw through her pretense that easily, so might the others. That’s unacceptable for a royal. What gave her away?

“How did you know I was upset?”

“For a minute or two, I could distinguish resentment in your scent.”

“Lycantants can’t smell resentment,” she objects. Queen has some basic knowledge of each mass-produced species of splices, and she’s pretty sure that sniffing out emotions is not on the list of qualities the wolf splices are bred for. They are a race of soldiers, valued for their fighting skills, endurance, one-track-minded determination and loyalty. She vaguely recalls reading an article on some special genetic mechanism ensuring that last – and most valued – trait. Loyalty is in lycantants’ genes, quite literally.

“Not resentment as such, no. We don’t have any extrasensory emotional perception, but every lycantant can smell intense bodily responses like fear, aggression, distress or sexual excitement from a few paces away. And my sense of smell is better than most of my species have, so I can distinguish the nuanced combinations of those basic reactions, from a significantly longer distance.”

Jupiter’s mind gets stuck on “sexual excitement”. There was a lot of excitement going on in that hall. In front of the door. Behind the door. She can’t help but feel – violated.

It’s a widely-known fact that security is the antithesis of privacy. Queen has an on-going disagreement with Commander Apini on that matter. Head of the Royal Guard has been doing his best to protect her in every way possible, to cover any conceivable loopholes for a potential attack, while Jupiter has been desperately trying to ward off his incessant offensive on her personal space.
Seems like Stinger isn’t above robbing her of the last shreds of her privacy unawares, having smuggled this into her Private Security. Then again, she shouldn’t have been that trusting, she should have done more research on lycantant abilities in general and Officer Wise’s “talents” in particular before agreeing to Stinger’s cunning addition to her security detail.

“I am sorry, Your Majesty, I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought you knew.”

This time, his voice is coloured with an actual emotion. That’s new. Don’t you dare to pity your Queen, motherfucker. She doesn’t say anything out loud, just shoots him a glare of barely contained fury.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, his apology a barely-audible whisper.

“Obviously, my consort’s behaviour in the hall wasn’t enough to trigger you, otherwise you would have attacked him right then and there,” she deduces, raising an eyebrow at him. Not that he would see it, since he’s still staring resolutely at the floor.

“When you entered your quarters, I heard the sound of a struggle.”

The hum of the detectors is still even and unwavering; apparently he is convinced he’s telling her the truth. There was no struggle in the room, though. Unless he interpreted Finnick’s shoving her against the wall as such. Which was probably exactly what he did. The royal protocol does not usually include the ruling monarch’s being slammed into hard surfaces.

“Go on.”

“Royal Consort proceeded to impede your breathing. I was afraid he might strangle you, but there was no scent of fear on your part, nor true aggression on his. So I was waiting out, counting the seconds; had the oxygen deprivation outlasted a full minute, I would have intervened. But then I heard you breathe again and decided the intervention was unnecessary.”

His tone is once again even and unemotional, he doesn’t attempt to justify his actions, to argue his point, just stating the facts. The way he holds himself is respectful, but there’s no hint of subservience the queen has grown so used to, to call for her benevolence. He doesn’t show fear, which, considering the situation he is in, would be a normal emotion to experience; he doesn’t try to appeal to her sympathy, the quiet dignity in him thwarting any pity.

He’s not trying to manipulate her.

It’s a refreshing feeling.

“Let me get this straight. Not only you heard what you assumed to be a struggle, but also my breathing? Clearly enough to know it was mine and count the seconds? Through the closed door?”

So far she has believed her private quarters to be the stronghold of her personal life, where no one could see, hear or – oh, gods – smell her actions. That’s one of the reasons she prefers to commission pure humans for her Private Security. That way, she doesn’t have to deal with any unpleasant revelations concerning the enhanced senses some splice species have. At least with humans, she knows where she stands.

“The door is not soundproof, at least not to a lycantant’s ear; we have an exceptionally keen hearing. And Your Majesty was just on the other side,” he admits uneasily, as if confessing to a crime. Which, come to think of it, he is. Any sort of visual spying or eavesdropping on Queen in her private quarters is forbidden. She probably needs to add olfactory surveillance to that list from now on, too.
“After forty-eight seconds had passed, your breathing resumed and I concluded that my alarm had been indeed unfounded. A few moments later, though, there was a sound of your body hitting the floor. Then I heard you crying out in pain. And when I smelled your blood –” his voice breaks off at that, and she sees him swallow – a strained, painful movement that appears so foreign to his impenetrable demeanour, “– and I just – acted. There was no thinking involved from then on.”

The prick of the pin seemed so inconsequential to Jupiter, she wouldn’t recall it if he hasn’t reminded her of it.

“Why did you think the blood was mine? For all you knew, it could have been Finnick’s.”

“They used the scent of your blood while I was training for Your Majesty’s Private Security Service, pairing it with acute pain stimuli to elicit a reflexive surge of aggression and suppress the self-preservation instinct.”

It takes her a moment to make sense of the scientific terminology – probably because her mind actively refuses to grasp the meaning behind it. Unfortunately, it has no choice but to do so.

“They tortured you at the smell of my blood?” she rephrases slowly, words coming painfully to her. “And Stinger allowed that?!”

As Queen, Jupiter can understand the implement of torture in the investigation process – drastic crimes, drastic measures – but only when all other ways of gaining crucial information have been exhausted. But using it in training for the elite division of her guard –

Didn’t Stinger say this man was his friend? To whom he owed his life?!

The more one learns about the world, the more one grows to resent it.

“I was told it’s a standard training procedure for lycantants. St- Commander Apini wouldn’t have sanctioned it if it hadn’t been essential for Your Majesty’s safety.”

He sounds so sure and so accepting of the whole thing that she feels a sudden urge to hit something. Hard. Digging the heel of her hand into her forehead instead, she desperately tries to gather her thoughts. She never knew something that inhumane was practiced in her own alcazar. By Stinger. Gods.

“It wasn’t that bad,” she hears the arrestee – Officer Wise – saying. “Pain and pleasure stimuli are a considerable part of the traditional reward-punishment system universally applied to lycantant training. We’re used to it.” His voice once again sounds comforting.

Humane this universe is not. Jupiter’s known that for a while now, yet every time she encounters another cruel atrocity it feels like a punch in the gut, she can’t help it. She’s trying to develop a thicker skin, to cope, otherwise she will go insane, she simply won’t survive. You can’t change the universe in a fleeting instant of a lifetime, the queen reminds herself. She will try, though, however many lifetimes it takes. She lets out a sigh of frustration, surrendering to the comfort he’s offering this time – there’s no one else here to console her.

“So, you’re basically telling me,” she starts, forcing her scattering thoughts into order, “that the fact that my consort is currently in coma is the result of Commander Apini’s errant training program?”

“No, he has nothing to do with it,” the arrestee protests – hotly, vehemently – wrenching against his restraints and for one terrifying moment she thinks he might actually break free, “Commander Apini cannot be held responsible my mistake.” For the first time since she entered the room, he tilts his head to meet her eyes full-on. His words are urgent, inciting. “He should not be punished for the
fault that is mine and mine alone."

It’s the most emotion she’s seen of him so far – there’s the loyalty Stinger was talking about. At least this man is devoted to *him*. Despite – whatever. Isn’t that kind of unwavering allegiance supposed to lie with *her*? With her being Queen and all? The skewed fidelity of his protectiveness paired with a humiliating spike of fear – *he probably can sense it, too* – instantly riles her up.

“Are you telling me what I should and shouldn’t do, Officer?” her tone is frigid at the brittle film of ice that forms on water right after the first frosts strike, and just as cutting.

“No, Your Majesty, of course not,” he mutters, dropping his head again, his huge body sagging back into the restraints, and she tries to be not too obvious in her relief.

“Stinger was the one who recommended you. Who *insisted* on commissioning you. This whole mess happened because of him.”

She doesn’t know why she bothers to argue with this person, who is – *nothing* anymore, a dead man talking. Maybe she just wants him to convince her of Commander Apini’s innocence so that she could stop hating Stinger for his mistake.

Maybe she just wants to stop hating *herself* for having allowed it to happen in the first place. She was the one who gave Stinger carte blanche on the commission, after all.

“Your Majesty, it happened because I misinterpreted the whole situation. Commander Apini’s decisions had been dictated by his concern for your safety. He thought I would be useful in that regard. It’s not his fault that I failed.” Then, quieter, “Please, do not sanction his execution.”

“Aren’t you worried what will happen to you?”

“I know what will happen to me.” There is no bitterness or desperation in his voice, only placid resignation – he’s not pleading for mercy, just stating the obvious. “I deserve it. And Stinger doesn’t.”

The confident finality of those words evokes a grudging respect in her. At death’s door, he doesn’t bother to try and protect himself, yet stubbornly stands up for his friend.

There’s something to be said about the lycantant’s loyalty, however misplaced it might seem.

“No one’s going to execute Stinger,” she huffs. “The old bastard will probably outlive both of us, Officer.”

Well, he will certainly outlive one of them. There’s nothing more for Queen to learn here, not really. She should just let the official investigation run its course, let them charge Officer Wise with voluntary manslaughter of Royal Consort – it doesn’t really count as *an attempt* if it takes RegeneX to bring the victim back, not that the sentence would be any different, anyway, – then sign his execution warrant and be done with it. That would be the legitimate course of action.

Would it be justice, though? She recalls the ruthless predator crouching over Finnick’s limp unconscious body, the searing pain in her wrist and the terrifying black chasm of the gun pointed at her face – and feels the urge to go and leave him to his fate.

But then she remembers the reasons why he acted the way he did, his immediate surrender – without a moment’s hesitation, without a second thought – and a concerned “Are you all right, Your Majesty?” –
– right after she had shot his shoulder off.

While he was doing his job.

The job she – well, Stinger, but really, Queen – had commissioned him to do.

She sighs and mumbles, “I can’t do this right now.” She needs Finnick to make full recovery first; she’s feeling way too vengeful for justice at the moment. As she exits the interrogation room, though, she addresses the investigating officer, “Get him back to the medics. Let them restore his arm. I validate the minimal RegeneX use.”

She can’t believe she’s saying this. But… He was trying to save her, the idiot.

Then she mutters under her breath, knowing the lycantant will hear her anyway, even from this distance, “You’re lucky Finn’s survived.”

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Later that day she orders to install an airtight soundproof door to her private quarters.

“And make sure the walls are fully audio-insulated, too. Get a lycantant splice to check that.”

Chapter End Notes

Dear (however improbable) reader! If you’ve managed to struggle through the the story to get this far, you're my hero))
Chapter Summary

_These next two chapters are Jupiter’s backstory with occasional Stinger and Kiza. Also it’s a much needed exposition dump - and even more essential quality time with Finnick for any THG fans who might happen to read this thing._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

RegeneX can rejuvenate a body for an unlimited number of times, over and over and over again.

The brain, however, can only take so much.

At some point of the passing millennia it loses its ability to form new long-term memories.

The capacity to access the memories that have already been formed is next to go.

It’s a process so gradual it is almost imperceptible, drawn-out over multiple lifetimes; but bit by indiscernible bit the mind starts to slip into dementia. That is why the most ancient Entitled in the universe, those who are dozens of millennia old, are not quite right in the head, invariably so. The longer they live, the more their brain degenerates, until one day it just shuts down completely.

That is how the Entitled die.

Given, of course, that they haven’t been offed much sooner by their plentiful enemies, – formidable, cunning and ruthless, – or their own heirs that have become too impatient. Imagine waiting for your inheritance for literal centuries… Anyone’s hands would grow itchy.

The only way to escape the final descent into madness and eventual death is to undergo what is known as the recurrence process, when the body is treated with RegeneX to such an extreme degree that it’s reduced to a zygote, the initial building block of an organism, the single cell that holds within the full DNA information necessary for its genesis. The human that the zygote eventually develops into will be an absolute physical clone of the original. In fact, he or she will be _the original themself_, reborn and fully renovated.

The crucial difference, however, is that the recurrence process completely erases any information that the brain used to contain in the prior life. Therefore the memories, the feelings and emotions, the very personality of the recurring Entitled are lost for good.

So, even though the body goes on, _the person inhabiting it dies just the same._

Therefore no one is eager to recur, postponing it as much as possible.

Quite often, until it’s too late.

Besides the inevitable loss of your whole self, there is another risk to the recurrence procedure.

Once you have been reduced to a single cell – and later, through the artificial gestation period and
infant years into reaching adulthood – you are utterly vulnerable and absolutely incapable of defending yourself. Killing a child is so much easier than killing an overly cautious adult that has centuries-worth of experience of shirking danger. Thus finding a caretaker who would be powerful enough to protect you and loyal enough not to take advantage of your utter helplessness while you grow up is as crucial as it is unlikely in the world where trust is a foreign notion.

That is why successful recurrences are extremely few and far between.

Jupiter doesn’t remember her youngest years much.

She vaguely recalls the sun shining bright enough to pierce through the curtains at her nursery, – bright enough to pierce her with happiness every morning she wakes up to the patchy shadow pattern of trees growing outside, the smell of salt and algae in the air, the never-ceasing splashing of sea waves that’s gotten so ingrained in her subconscious she barely notices it at all.

Her whole childhood is sunlight, brightness, beauty and joy.

Her Dad is almost always there, greeting her with a warm hug when Jupiter wakes up and announces loud enough to be heard across the house: “Daddy, I’m awake,” impatient to start another day.

She knows that every new morning is a promise of new adventures and fun. Dad may take her for a long walk along the beach, teach her to catch shrimp with a T-shirt or show her how to get pearls out of seashells – you can eat the squishy things inside, too; she doesn’t like them very much, they remind her of snot, to be honest, but Dad loves them, so Jupiter pretends to like them, too.

Most of all, though, she loves when Dad takes her fishing. They don’t even have to sail to another island, or go some other distant location, mysterious and enthralling; they might just as well sit on the wooden planks of a low pier in front of their house, swinging their feet in the water and chatting – or even not saying anything at all. Wherever their fishing trips take place, it means that they are together, for a few hours at least, just Dad and Jupiter, with no one to distract him from her.

People tend to distract Dad from her way too much for her liking.

When Dad’s not there to greet her in the morning, Uncle Stinger engulfs her in a strong embrace, and she is giggling and squirming as his stubble tickles her temple and cheek. Uncle Stinger is awesome and badass. He doesn’t care that she’s a kid, he teaches her to shoot. He says one’s never too young to learn to aim properly. Shooting hurts her arms a lot, but she loves it, because she loves Uncle Stinger.

Knifes with him are fun, too.

There’s also Kiza, a girl her age, Uncle Stinger’s daughter. She and Jupiter are best friends forever, naturally. They ride bikes together, or play together on the beach, where they pick pretty seashells scattered across the sand just to boast afterwards whose collection is better. They climb trees in the garden surrounding the house, pretending to be fairy wood nymphs, competing who will get the sweetest fruit or the brightest flowers. Save the bragging rights, it doesn’t really matter who wins since they share their loot equally among themselves anyway.

There is a huge shady fig tree at the very heart of the garden, Jupiter’s favourite, one that bears the sweetest fruit she’s ever tasted – the figs are plump, suede to the touch, with deliciously purple skin and carmine insides. The tree itself is magnificent, too: its numerous silver trunks flare out into a
voluminous pandal of intricately carved leaves with bright veins. If Jupiter indeed were a dryad, as she likes to pretend so often, that is the tree she would want to inhabit.

In the evening, when glaring daylight has dimmed to dusk, the girls have bonfires, roasting clams over the twinkling embers, or watch movies, huddled on the bed together, or tell each other scary stories, – and Kiza is unfairly better at it than Jupiter will ever be.

Once, after Kiza has told her a spine-chilling tale of the insidious Black Hands, Jupiter is terrified to enter a dark room for a fortnight. She doesn’t complain to anyone, though, she would never tattle on her best friend. When Kiza learns how badly she’s managed to scare Jupiter, she just laughs at her gullibility – “I can’t believe you bought that!” - and offers to keep her company at night so that she wouldn’t be afraid of monsters that don’t exist.

During the day, however, they love pretending that monsters do exist. Together, they go on quests that involve evil giants, whale-like creatures capable of carrying cities on their backs and swallowing ships whole, ferocious werewolves, undead skeletons riding carnivorous horses, treasure-greedy dragons – and princesses in need of rescue. Each of them wants to be the knight in shining armour, and never the princess, so they take turns to make it fair and square.

They never play with dolls, because it’s just plain boring.

During one of their more distant outings – in reality, it was a scientific expedition of pioneering new lands full of yet undiscovered bounties, like even prettier sea shells or sand-burying lizards or purple crabs or funny hopping jerboas – they stumble across a small grotto among the rocks lining the sea edge. The cave is not at all dark and scary: the sunshine streams through the opening in the wall illuminating the smooth walls and soft white sand covering the floor. The cave becomes their treasure vault, their pirate ship, their castle, their secret hidout.

Their lair.

One evening, when Jupiter is six, she notices a strange creature in her garden, – she’s seen a lot of unusual beings before, but all of them have been a lot more human-like. This bizarre thing chirrups and twitters instead of talking, and its limbs seem long and spindly and way too thin. It looks emaciated, and naked to boot. When it notices the girl looking at it, it tries to scurry away, quickly becoming transparent, as if disappearing into thin air.

It can become invisible.

How cool is that?!

“Wait, wait!” Jupiter calls out, starting after the unexpected visitor.

The creature stops, tilting its head to a side in a bird-like fashion and staring at her with huge, dark, curious eyes.

“Are you hungry?” The girl holds out her had, offering one of the figs she’s been eating. “Take it, it’s tasty!”

She’s happy when the creature cautiously grabs the treat with its unnaturally long fingers.

“They grow in my garden, on that big tree out there, look.” Jupiter points towards her favourite fig
tree, then stuffs her hand down her neckline, scooping out another fruit, – the only reasonable use for
clothes she’s found so far is making a tucked-in shirt into a huge improvised pocket for carrying
around fruit, shells and sometimes even frogs. You never know when a frog can come in handy,
okay? “You can take as much fruit as you like, so you won’t be hungry. Do you need some clothes,
too? I can get you some. I think Dad won’t mind.”

At that, the creature trills and it sounds a lot like a peal of human giggles. It shakes its head and
approaches the girl, the first fig has been already eaten. It takes the second offering and nuzzles into
her extended palm.

“Oh, can I pet you?”

There is another chirp and the creature nudges her palm with its forehead.

That’s how Jupiter befriends Head Keeper of Havet, the small unseeded planet she will consider
home for the rest of her almost endless life.

She names him Siskin.

When Jupiter is twelve, she grows adventurous – that is, much more so than before. She takes long
solitary walks along the shore and inland, discovering hidden coves with turquoise water and groves
of ancient sycamores with mother-of-pearl trunks and huge velutinous leaves. She enjoys showing
her finds to Kiza later, just as much as she takes pleasure in discovering their splendour on her own.

She doesn’t have as much time to explore as she used to, sadly. Now she has to study a lot, though
why a twelve-year-old would need, say, a course in Interplanetary Macroeconomics, beats her. But
Dad looks pleased when tutors praise her, so she tries her best.

Besides, it’s kind of interesting, however useless.

Still, exploring new territories is so much more exciting.

There’s this island not that far from the beach in front of their house. It just sits there, close yet
unreachable, tempting her. Sure, Dad sailed with her to the island, along with many others, multiple
times, but being taken somewhere for a picnic and uncovering the island’s secrets all on her own are
two different things.

Somehow being unsupervised makes the world so much more intriguing.

The problem is, Dad has explicitly forbidden her to sail any of their boats on her own, even though
she’s perfectly capable of doing that, thank you very much. And Uncle Stinger has just started
training her to use grav boots, so she doesn’t feel all that confident while flying them.

So Jupiter decides to swim.

She’s been swimming all her life, you know, being in the water feels safe and natural to her.

She realizes she’s overestimated her swimming skills when she’s too far from either shore. The water
here is colder, the waves are higher and there is a strong current dragging her into the open sea.
Realizing she won’t make it to the island, she turns back and tries at least to get close enough to the
beach to call for help.

Her limbs are cold, her muscles are groaning with strain. The tug of the current is relentless. Tired of
fighting it, she flips onto her back, since it’s much easier to stay afloat this way. The problem is, with an absolutely clear blue sky above her, Jupiter doesn’t see where she is heading now.

The water splashes over her face, she has to synchronize her breathing with the wave pattern so she wouldn’t accidentally inhale the liquid, because if she starts choking out here, it’s game over. The waves are incessant, however, they keep coming and coming, splashing and splashing, and there’s already not enough air in her lungs, her chest has started burning. She desperately tries to relax, to give herself a break, just floating and breathing, but it’s impossible to force your body into inaction once it’s realized the end is lurking near. She feels her breathing grow increasingly spastic, panic locking her muscles and numbing her mind.

She’s going to drown.

Dad will be so upset.

Then her fear-muddled brain registers some foreign splashes nearby, not just the sound of waves, but something or someone swimming. She’s too afraid of inhaling water to turn her head to look, but – A warm hand comes from behind, cupping the back of her neck to support her head above the water.

“I’ve got you, kiddo.”

She fights her instincts, attempting not to clutch at her rescuer, she does – Dad warned her to never cling to someone who comes to rescue in the water, it might effectively kill them both – but panic does not think and she gropes blindly behind her to grab at his arms with vice-like grip, her freezing, numb fingers digging deep into hot, sleek skin.

“Easy there, not gonna leave you here. Just breathe and try to let go of me.”

Gradually, Jupiter manages to beat the panic into the deeper recesses of her consciousness, focusing on inhaling and exhaling and unlocking her stiff limbs and fingers in the process.

“Ready to go back? Don’t try to swim, I can swim well enough for both of us. Just relax and breathe, okay?”

She nods minutely, unable to find her voice.

And just like that, she is being towed to safety.

Strong hands haul her onto the sun-heated boards of the pierce, and for a few moments she just lies there, breathing, feeling the warmth seep into her back.

“Hey, kiddo, you’re okay?”

She’s still dazed and gasping for air, but she already has the presence of mind to nod and wheeze, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Sorry I didn’t realize what’s going on sooner. You did damn well to keep yourself afloat.”

At that, she sits up, bracing herself on wobbly elbows, and looks at her savior for the first time.

The man is leaning on the low edge of the pierce, his forearms braced against the planks, with the rest of him still submerged in the water. His skin is golden, and his eyes are as iridescent green as brightly lit seawater, with crow’s feet radiating from their corners. Those – paired with the deep
laugh lines on his cheeks – tell her that he’s used to smiling often.

His current expression, however, is concerned and stern.

Uh-oh, he looks like Uncle Stinger or Dad when they are about to give her a serious talking-to. Oh, gods, wait till this gets to Dad. She’ll get a scolding of her life! She’ll be grounded for – forever. She will never be allowed to swim alone ever again.

“Please, don’t tell my Dad!” she rattles off before she has time to catch herself.

The man closes the mouth already opened for a reprimand and considers her for a moment.

“So, you do realize you did a wrong thing, swimming out there all by yourself?” His voice isn’t as stern as she expected.

She nods.

“Sorry I grabbed at you, back there. You could have drowned, too.”

He snorts at that.

“Can’t drown me, kiddo, not if you tried. Not even ten of you.”

She thinks he’s boasting, but she’s too polite to call him on that. Besides, he has just saved her life.

He looks thoughtful for a minute.

“Tell you what,” he says, a slow smile spreading across his face, and mischief in his voice makes her feel like he’s about to divulge a secret to his partner-in-crime, – no other adult has ever addressed her this way, – “I won’t rat on you, because it’s not a nice thing to do. But next time you decide to go for a lengthy swim, you’ll take me with you.”

She feels herself nodding to agree to his deal before he has finished laying it out.

“How do I do that, though? I don’t know where you live.”

“Just come here onto this pier and call for Finnick. I will hear you.”

That doesn’t faze her: she’s used to Siskin appearing wherever and whenever she calls out for him.

“Who are you? Are you a keeper? You don’t look like one. I’ve never seen you here before.”

At that, he beams, and his whole face transforms, radiating brilliance and joy. She thinks he’s pretty, pretty like bright tropical flowers that bloom in her garden or large colourful shells one cannot find on the beach but has to dive deep to obtain. She’s happy to see another thing of outstanding beauty around her. Not that he is a thing, which makes her even happier, somehow.

“I’ve just told you, I’m Finnick.” Duh, he doesn’t say, but she can see it plastered across his face.

She smiles in return.

“I’m Jupiter. Nice to meet you,” – because, occasionally, she actually remembers how to act like a polite girl.

“Same here,” he replies flippantly, starting to push himself off the pier.
“Wait,” she rushes, “would you like to come over?”

Because it is a polite thing to offer. Because she doesn’t want him to go just yet. Because she’s used to having her friends over – Uncle Stinger and Kiza live with her and Dad all the time, and there are always other nice people around – and she hopes that Finnick will be her friend now, too.

“Nah, I’d rather stay in the water,” he shakes his head, yet draws himself back towards the pier. “Thanks for the invitation, anyway.”

She frowns, worried. “You can’t stay there for long. You’ll get too cold and drown.” Just like I nearly did, she doesn’t add.

“Told you, I can’t drown.”

That puzzles her: her sounds so sure.

“Like – at all?”

“At all,” he nods.

She just stares until Finnick snorts at her flabbergasted expression.

“I live in the water. I can breathe down there.”

Well, the ability to breathe underwater is not a novelty. She knows her biology, thank you very much. There are a lot of creatures that can do that, however, they tend to have shells and fins and tentacles and they don’t look like Finnick, not one bit.

Neither they can breathe air.

“Then how come you can breathe outside?”

“Because I can,” he’s beaming again, “all of my kind can.”

“So, you’re, like, a mermaid?” – Oh, this is epic!!! He doesn’t look much like a “maid”, though. – “Er, a merman? Can you sing? You know, the mermaids sing in the fairy tales, to lure people in the water and eat them. You don’t eat people, do you? Wait, do you have a fishtail?! Can I see it?!!”

He throws his head back – revealing thin slanting apertures along his throat – and guffaws at the barrage of questions.

“I’m not a merman,” he shakes his head, still grinning, – his teeth look much sharper than human ones, – “I’m a siren. And yes, I can sing. I’m very good at that, in fact.” – Oh, now he’s certainly boasting, but she lets it go, because – a freaking siren, man! – “Although I don’t eat people. Usually.” – His smirk is so big she wonders how he can speak around it. – “No, I don’t have a fishtail.” – At her crestfallen expression he adds, “My legs end up in fins, though. And you can see them next time we’ll go swimming together.”

He’s baiting her. Oh, he’s so on.

“See you tomorrow, then,” she challenges.

He just chortles and backflips into the sea, for a split second flashing reddish fins – real fins, right there, holy shit! – and disappearing within its depths.

There’s no way she won’t be seeing him tomorrow.
She needs to take a closer look.

Chapter End Notes

So, Finnick is a siren. And I am shameless.

When I think of Finnick in this chapter, I picture the sculpture “Najad på delfin” by brilliant Swedish sculptor Carl Milles. Check out his works, they are inspired and inspiring!

Also, kids, remember stranger danger. Not every smiling guy is a friendly Finnick. Especially when you are twelve.
No Fear of the Deep Blue Sea: Part Two

Chapter Summary

This chapter is strictly Jupiter and Finnick, sorry, Caine lovers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Jupiter soon finds out, having Finnick to accompany her during her jaunts of discovery is even better than exploring on her own: the siren cannot walk on land so she doesn’t have to have a companion all the time like she does when Kiza tags along.

Having Kiza around is still great, just – not all the time, anymore.

Jupiter steamrolls Uncle Stinger into giving her a crash course in operating grav boots. “I need to have mastered them, like, yesterday!” He chuckles at her eagerness, but isn’t really surprised – those boots are something else! She suspects that he not so secretly enjoys flying them as much as she does. After two weeks of intensive practice – and a few close-case-but-not-actual falls – she wrenches a permission to use them by herself out of her teacher, solemnly swearing to fly them on her own strictly above the sea, not too far away from the surface so that she wouldn’t splat herself to death if she falls.

After her drowning scare, she’s not going to take another gamble with her life.

Besides, she plans on staying as close to the water level as possible, since Finnick will be travelling down there. She doesn’t want to be away from him, because when he’s swimming, it’s a fascinating spectacle to behold: it’s an effortless, sinuous movement, just as fluid as the liquid streaming around it. It reminds her of dolphins and their easy grace as they slide through the waves, at one with their element.

In the sea, Finnick is at home.

There is no question whether he will be able to help her out if she ends up in the water again, no matter how far away from the shore. It feels so nice to know that someone will have her back if something happens and she falls – if she fails again.

To not be afraid of the deep anymore.

This new way of travel opens new horizons for her exploration craze: all the islands – with all the scenic views that she has not seen yet, all the intriguing living creatures she hasn’t discovered, and all the flowers she hasn’t smelled – that used to lie beyond her grasp, taunting her, are now within easy reach, ripe to be conquered.

Whenever Jupiter has a day off from her studies, she hastily gobbles up her breakfast then sprints onto the pier, her grav boots in hand, to plop ungracefully onto the edge and call out Finnick’s name. As she does so, she dips her feet down and splashes around for good measure to make herself heard underwater, too. There is usually a couple of minutes wait – she’s nearly bouncing with excitement, a huge grin on her face – and then he emerges, nipping playfully at her toes.
The first time he did that she nearly tumbled off the pier, letting out a thoroughly undignified shriek and scrambling to her feet.

The siren laughed his ass off at her reaction.

*Rude.*

Feeling miffed and vengeful, she launched an offensive, plunging her foot back in the water to send a quick succession of splashes into his face in retaliation. Some droplets managed to get into his airways and make him choke and cough and wheeze.

Having avenged herself, Jupiter fist-pumped in triumph: *she shoots, she scores!*

Guess Uncle Stinger’s aiming exercises hadn’t been so pointless after all.

“I guess I deserved that,” Finnick chuckled. “Sorry if I scared you. I can’t believe you actually thought that I’d bite your toes off.” His teasing felt way too smug for her liking. “I told you I did not eat people,” he smirked, waggling his eyebrows at her embarrassed frown.

“You said *usually.*”

“All right, I draw a line at eating little girls. There are wolves for that, you know. Big, bad wolves,” his grin was so huge she wondered how his face wasn’t splitting in two.

“Wait, are there wolves around here somewhere?” Jupiter never thought there were, but then again, she had never thought there were sirens on Havet, either.

“No, they aren’t any wolves here, don’t worry, at least not of the furry kind.” His expression suddenly turned serious, his voice intense, – Jupiter didn’t like the unexpected shift in his demeanour, she much preferred her Finnick smiling, – “But there are wolves out there who look like you and me, ready to prey on you if you let them. And someday you’re going to encounter them. You shouldn’t trust strangers, Jupiter, shouldn’t believe everything people say to you this easily.”

“That means I shouldn’t believe what you are saying, either,” she countered, unsettled by his abrupt mood switch.

He snorted at her retort, and just like that he was back to his usual self, impish and playful.

“Well, you didn’t believe me when I told you I didn’t eat people.”

Jupiter groaned at that. “You’re never gonna let me live that down, are you?”

“Nope,” he smirked, obnoxious as can be, “neverrr!”

Jupiter hasn’t believed in magic since she was seven years old and her pet hermit crab died because she had forgotten to change the water in its tank in time. She just can’t bring herself to have faith in the existence of some all-powerful force that is meant to be able to fix anything after she witnessed something that could not possibly be fixed.

She likes pretending that magic exists, though, especially when she’s with Kiza and they play their fairy-tale games.

The day Jupiter learns that magic does exist is the day when she hears Finnick sing for the first time.
When the siren’s mouth opens to let a song out, the world around Jupiter dissipates, all sights and sounds falling away into the abyss of oblivion, unable to compete for her attention with the blinding, overwhelming beauty born of his vocal cords. She feels his voice physically wash over her in waves, swirling around her whole body, electrifying her skin, making it tingle with goose bumps, tiny hairs standing on end, leaving tremulous frissons of euphoria in its wake, caressing the very essence of her being from within.

If ecstasy were a sound, it would be Finnick’s voice.

One evening, when she and Kiza are listening to him sing, Jupiter’s gaze focuses on the entranced, open-mouthed expression of undiluted awe on her best friend’s face and she feels a sudden stab of – something, she doesn’t know what it is yet – in her chest as she realizes that she would give anything to be here alone with Finnick, to be the only one listening to his enthralling voice, to watch his mouth move around the sounds of a song, to see the corners of his lips curl into a complacent half-smile whenever he spies the breathless appreciation on her face.

For the first time in her life Jupiter does not want to share something – someone – with Kiza.

When Jupiter is fifteen, she realizes she’s ready to fall in love.

There is no question who she is going to fall in love with.

There are plenty of guys around her – she’s aware of that, she’s fifteen! She’s pretty sure teenage hormonal rush comes with a psychic ability to sense a dick on anything that looks remotely anthropomorphic.

There have always been a lot of men in their household, who have been mysteriously popping up wherever she goes. It doesn’t feel like creepy stalking, though, she knows that they are harmless, if a tad importunate. Dad has always been cordial to them, nodding in greeting and addressing them by their first names – Björn, Ruslan, Steve. When Jupiter was younger she considered them her extended family, something like second uncles umpteen times removed. Now that she is older, she realizes that they aren’t her actual kin, more like her father’s employees, but she’s grown so used to their presence she doesn’t question it.

They always smile at her – have always smiled at her – but nowadays their smiles sometimes feel just a bit too personal, a tad too inviting. Or maybe it’s her hormonal self reading into things too deeply, which is probably the case. Still, it feels so nice to be smiled at by all those older, friendly, handsome men.

So, there are plenty of guys around her, smiling guys –

– but then Finn beams at her with his sharp-angled, full-blown grin – and his cheeks dimple – and there’s just Finnick.

When Jupiter tells Dad, – because of course she does, she’s not used to keeping secrets from him and she’s afraid she might burst otherwise, – a peculiar, wistful expression flashes across his face and for a moment she’s afraid she’s made a mistake by sharing – but he just smiles and tells her, “You’ll be safe with him”.

And she is.

When she kisses Finnick for the first time – because for all he flirts, he doesn’t do more than look and smile – he even stopped nipping at her toes at some point, which was a tragedy of epic proportions
yet she didn’t dare to ask why – the world actually halts. She thought it was just a figure of speech before, but she now knows how it feels.

When she finally manages to bully him into actually making actual love to her actual body, – and it takes her a loooong time, too long for her liking, but she’s nothing if not persistent –

Aren’t guys supposed to be into that? Especially older ones? Did books and movies lie to her? Those other girls had it so easy! It’s so unfair! Eventually, she got so tired of waiting for Finnick to just steal her virtue already she had to take the matter into her own hands. It was like fighting an uphill battle, she’s sure he got some kind of kick out of tantalizing her, the ass.

– it isn’t as earth-shattering as she expected. Because, well… She is self-conscious, okay? She’s all gangly limbs and awkwardness and jutting hipbones and he –

That’s what gods look like. That’s what gods should look like.

What gods should feel like, too.

Jupiter hastily celebrates her twentieth birthday with her family, impatient for the party to end, so she could meet up with Finnick and celebrate it properly.

He doesn’t fail to demonstrate what proper celebration is about. Apparently, a cake and candles and wrapped-up presents have nothing to do with it.

Nothing whatsoever.

Afterwards they sit on the rocks by the sea edge; she is cradling his legs in her lap, enjoying the evening breeze in the dimming light, absently stroking his sleek, slightly clammy scales.

“Does this mean so much to you?” he suddenly questions, his voice weirdly tense.

“This what?” she asks eloquently, perplexed by what he might be referring to.

“This,” he emphasizes as a wide fin slaps her across the chest to illustrate.

“Oh, you mean your legs? They’re amazing,” she replies with a dreamy smile – because they are, every part of Finnick is, – running her hand along the fascinating fan-like structure, ruddy translucent film webbing across thin supple rays of bone.

“Wouldn’t you rather I had proper legs?”

“Your legs are proper,” Jupiter retorts, indignant. “You live in water; they are an incredibly fitting adaptation to your environment.”

“Don’t you want me to be able to follow you onto land?” he persists.

For a few moments, she’s so emotional she can’t breathe. They’ve never discussed this before, – really discussed it, beyond fish and mermaid jokes – the topic obviously being a sore issue for both of them. If she’s honest, she’s been dreaming about it for a long while, but what’s the use of tantalizing herself with the fantasy when she knows it will never come true? So she’s never spoken about it with Finnick, hoping to spare him any unnecessary frustration and hurt.

“It can never happen, Finn,” she replies, despondent, hoping he will drop the subject.
“What if it could happen?”

“How?”

“Never mind that now,” he brushes her question aside, strangely determined and agitated, “if it could, would you want me there, with you, all the time? Or do you prefer just coming to see me for a few hours a day?”

“How can you even ask that?!” she snaps at him, her bewilderment and hurt morphing into anger.

“Tell me. I need you to tell me you want me to have human legs,” he presses on.

“I. Want. You. To have. Human. Legs,” she enunciates, emphasizing every word. “Happy now?”

“I want that in writing.”

“Look, this joke has gone too far.” Jupiter’s blissful mood is fully ruined now. “It wasn’t funny to start with.”

“Please, Jupiter, just do it. For me.” He sounds eerily intense and she doesn’t begin to understand why, but she’s not going to refuse Finnick anything, even if it is some stupid prank he’s playing.

“Tomorrow, okay?”

He nods, visibly satisfied, and then just sits silently for a while, staring into the dying sunset.

“I might disappear for a while,” he tells her at last. “Will you wait for me?”

She has so many questions, but all she comes up with is: “No, I will ditch your fishy ass and go live in sin with Kiza!”

“Ooh, can I join you when I come back?”

“Wait, are you really serious about leaving? About the legs?!”

“Uh-huh.”

“But how?!” she repeats, incredulous.

“If I told you that I would have to swim to the centre of the ocean to find an evil witch living in its deepest crevice and plead with her to trade my voice for the legs, would you believe me?”

“No.”

“Then don’t ask. Just wait for me.”

“But you won’t lose your voice, will you?”

“Trust you to take that out of the conversation,” he chuckles.

“How long it will take?” she whispers, dread settling in premonition of the impending separation.

“I have no idea.”

“I will. I’ll wait for you.” It isn’t really a choice.

“Hey,” he nudges her in an attempt to alleviate the mood, “you have my blessing if you wish to live
in sin with Kiza while I’m gone. I won’t mind. As long as you take pictures to show me later.”

“You, fishy ass! Kiza is my best friend. You don’t live in sin with your best friends. You marry them.”

His laughter is cut off when she grabs his head and kisses him with all the hope and desperation he’s just instilled in her.

As it turns out, Jupiter absolutely sucks at waiting. She finds she’s physically incapable of it. The uncertainty drives her insane, the lack of news – any communication from Finnick – is pure torture. At first, she’s counting the days of his absence, but days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months, and still there’s nothing.

She settles into a new routine: she aces at her studies, reads greedily, pesters Uncle Stinger into training her more and spends a lot of time with Kiza. She does not explore anymore – without Finnick, the world has lost its colours.

Jupiter didn’t realize what a huge part of her life he had become.

When Kiza tells her that she’s been played, shit happens, there’s plenty of fish in the sea, Jupiter just steadily ignores her friend’s attempts to kick her out on a date. Guys don’t exist for her, not while she still believes that Finnick left her for a reason.

It’s the longest half a year of her life.

When Finnick finally reappears, it’s nothing like she imagined. She expected him maybe knock on the front door, or show up at the terrace, or come up to her on the beach.

Instead, she goes fishing one day, as she often does. It gives her a perfect opportunity to simply sit there on the edge of the pier, dangling her feet in the water, uncaring about scaring off any potential catch, stare at the sinker in a hypnotized fashion and brood in peace. She’s so immersed into her melancholy that she fails to notice anything around her until a sharp pricking sensation hits the sensitive underside of her toes. She yaps and jerks her foot up, flailing and dropping her fishing rod into the sea.

“What? You’re not glad to see me?” Finnick’s obnoxious smirk hasn’t changed one bit since she saw him last, yet his face looks drawn and even more angular than usual.

“You, son of a fish!..” she starts, then processes what she’s seeing. He’s still in the water, and that means – “You didn’t get them?”

“Jump in and check for yourself!” Oh, how she missed this outrageous eyebrow waggling of his.

She jumps. And checks. Repeatedly.

It takes multiple manual examinations to convince her of the fact that Finnick now indeed has legs he can walk with.

“Why are you still in the water, then?”

“Hey, hold your horses, lady. I still have to practice using them. Or would you rather I stayed away
for a few more months?”

“Sure I would,” she replies, deadpan, “I’ve been pretty comfy here with Kiza.”

“Now that I’ve returned, can I join?”

She slaps his chest, just because.

“Just watch, then?”

“Pervert,” she breathes her happiness into his mouth.

They start off easily, in the shallows where water reaches up to Finnick’s chest and therefore takes the majority of his weight off his feet. The lower the water level, the more difficult it is for him to walk. Jupiter supports him the best she can, urging him to use her as a crutch. Finnick is not happy with her having to prop him up, with his slow progress, with the constant ache of adjusting sinews and muscles pushed beyond their limit.

Jupiter does not mind that she ends up massaging his legs every evening.

Does not mind at all.

Finnick’s new legs are a work of art. Absolutely straight – no hint of a curved bone-structure anywhere – beautifully-shaped like ones of a woman, with elegant slender ankles flaring into delectable fish-shaped calves and then tapering again into finely sculpted knees – flesh enveloping the bony knee cap in a blatant, obscene fashion like a perfectly-fitted dress hugs a curvaceous feminine figure. The prominent malleoli – ankle bones – are just cherries on top of the overall perfection.

And don’t get her started on his feet. Jupiter can write an ode – probably more than one – to his long, fragile-looking toes with well-pronounced joints, the skin just above them, softer and tenderer than anywhere else, spread over the radiating bones and standing out tendons, with turquoise veins interwoven within. She wants to trace those blue lines with her tongue, to kiss and nuzzle that delectably delicate skin, to suck and nibble on the heel cords, to nip at each one of his toes.

She’s developed a new obsession, she thinks.

“You look like you want to gobble up my little toes,” Finnick comments with a grin.

“No, I want the two of them to dump your fishy ass and elope with me. We will form the most unusual ménage à trois in the history of mankind and live happily ever after. Who are my good little toes? Who are? Yes, you are,” she coos, tickling Finnick’s soles, enjoying the way his feet twitch and curl at her touch.

“That’s disturbing. And you’re calling me a pervert!” he laughs at her, mocking, then adds softly, “I was afraid you had a thing for fins. As it turns out, you’re just really into lower appendages, aren’t you?”

“Yep,” Jupiter admits freely. “All three of them,” she smirks. “When they’re attached to you.”

Eventually – it takes them months – they make it onto dry land, Finnick learning to walk longer and longer distances every day.
The moment when he catches up to her sprinting away from him along the beach, pounces and tackles her – giggling hysterically – onto the sand is so far the happiest moment of Jupiter’s life.

Chapter End Notes

*When I think of Finnick’s singing, I think Freddie Mercury. Nature is yet to come up with a sexier voice. The song that inspired the fragment in this particular chapter is his “Exercises in Free Love”.

The sensations Jupiter experiences while listening to Finnick’s song are called a skin orgasm. Real thing.*
No Fear of the Deep Blue Sea: Part Three

Chapter Summary

Jupiter finally learns the truth. And the truth ain’t pretty, as it often is.

Chapter Notes

The good news is, this chapter ends the flash-back arc and brings us back to the present day, so the next one is all about Caine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Jupiter turns twenty one, her Dad suddenly addresses her “Your Majesty” and her world collapses around her.

She learns that she is not Jupiter, and he is not her Dad at all.

Her name is Seraphi, and the man she called Dad all her life – all this life of hers – is Seraphi’s spouse, who promised his wife to give her a much needed rebirth – and a childhood of her dreams. He took twenty years off his very busy royal schedule to make good on his word, in hopes that one day she might do the same for him in return.

“Seraphi told me she wanted a childhood worth dying for, and I tried my best,” he tells her. “I wanted her fresh start on life to be a happy one. She used to say that ignorance is one bliss a royal can’t afford, so I protected your innocence for as long as I could. It would be dangerous to keep you in the dark any further.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter squeezes through her throat, closed up with shock and emotion, “you have succeeded. When the time comes,” her voice falters, she can’t bear thinking of her father dying, “you can count on me.” And she means it. This man has gifted her with so many carefree years of joy, she will be happy to return his bestowal. “What’s going to happen now?”

“Now you live your new life. Try to use it wisely,” he smiles at her reassuringly, but she doesn’t feel reassured at all. “And I need to return to my own realm. We both have a lot of catching up to do.”

They part ways as parents and children ought to, in a bittersweet comfort of knowing they still have each other, however far apart their lives might take them.

Jupiter learns a lot of things afterwards.

She learns that Uncle Stinger is in reality Head of Seraphi’s Royal Guard, there to protect her younger self, and not her uncle at all.
At least Kiza is indeed his daughter and still Jupiter’s friend. Even though Stinger had been allowed to have her just so the recurred Queen would have a safe, trustworthy playmate, Kiza apparently didn’t know about the queenly stuff either and befriended Jupiter just because they were the same age and living under the same roof, not out of some sick and twisted obligation. That’s a relief. Just like Jupiter, Kiza did not have a mother; she was a test-tube splice-baby genomengineered with her father’s chromosomes through the introduction of the necessary changes to his karyotype to get a female offspring.

It doesn’t make her any less a unique and awesome person.

And then –

Jupiter learns that her Finnick is in fact Officer Odair, Brigadier of the Royal Guard’s Marine Squad, one of the best-skilled underwater bodyguards Seraphi’s Private Security Service had to offer, a few lifetimes her senior, commissioned to keep her safe – and happy – at all times.

Which he did. (And the discovery hurts so fucking much –)

Which he does, because –

“Jupiter, come on, do you really believe your Daddy slash hubby dearest would actually assign me to sex up his darling departed wife and now living daughter?! You’re lucky I still have the bits to sex you up with!”

– and she lets it go.

She also learns that Finnick underwent a drastic surgical modification just so he could be around her. Twice.

Officer Odair was subjected to the initial transformation along with the other members of the Marine Squad, since all of them belonged to the siren species. Their original appearance had been something straight out of the uncanny valley, so their faces and upper bodies were altered to fit a human child’s vision – Jupiter’s vision – of what a friendly person should look like, so that they would not terrify the young queen, if she ever happened to see them up close.

The second round of modification was intended personally for Finnick, after Jupiter expressed her wish – in writing – for him to be able to follow her onto land. This time his lower body was resculpted so he could actually walk.

The second part of the surgical alteration was not performed as painlessly as the previous one, – quite the contrary, in fact, since Most August Husband-Father was furious with the guard taking liberties with his Wife- Daughter. It was probably the most benevolent application of torture for the victim’s benefit in the history of the universe.

Jupiter is indeed lucky that Finnick still has the bits to sex her up with.

She’s devastated at learning what he had to suffer through, but – “Hey, I look dashing, don’t I?” – and there’s that smile again.

So, she’s devastated, yet grateful to Most August Husband-Father for executing her inadvertent order without actually executing Finnick.
That is far from being the last of Jupiter’s painful discoveries.

She learns of RegeneX raw material and method of production. The genocide of planetary proportions – slaughtering so many people, however quickly and painlessly – horrifies her to no end.

Yet she can’t bring herself to outright reject the serum that keeps Dad, Stinger – and her Finn – young.

That keeps them alive.

Jupiter learns that splices she’s been brought up to treat as people – for gods’ sake, Stinger and Kiza are splices, too, yet they are family to her – are considered something akin to slaves in the rest of the universe. They are mass-produced, sold and bought. The conditions of their servitude are defined by whomever owns their contracts, with the splices themselves having no valid opportunity to change their circumstance. They have no legal rights of their own, often deprived even of bodily integrity, the most inherent of human – any sentient being’s – rights.

Jupiter’s does a little personal research on the pleasure splice industry – beyond the much abridged information that was initially provided for her. Apparently, some splices do not survive their masters’ “affection”.

The details leave her dry-heaving.

And that’s just the tip of the tremendous iceberg of problems that constitutes her vast multiplanetary kingdom now.

She has the Augean stables to clean.

She doesn’t feel like Heracles, at all.

Shit.

Jupiter rolls up her sleeves and dives straight into work with all the rashness and enthusiasm of a young soul.

That’s when the assassination attempts begin.

People do not appreciate when someone threatens the sources of their wealth.

It makes the survival of that someone – complicated.

On one particular occasion when Jupiter goes diving with Finnick on some or other resort planet, she spots an exotic, flamboyant shell, which is just sitting there on the white sandy seafloor. She is already reaching for it, overjoyed with her lucky find, when Finnick grabs her hand to stop her.

As it turns out, the shell has been stuffed with an exceptionally nasty explosive.

Later Finnick explains to her that this particular species of mollusks inhabits much deeper parts of the ocean and cannot be found in such shallow waters. Thank gods for his extensive knowledge of marine life, or she might have been dead by now.

They both might have.

His timely intervention earns him the most honourable state award, the Order of Highest Royal Gratitude, while Jupiter earns experience. Never again she enters a body of water anywhere but on her home planet, Havet, which is the single most highly secured place of her kingdom.
A few close calls later, Jupiter finally realizes that the universe cannot be changed in an instant. One human lifetime is but a speck on the time scale the royal Entitled operate on, so her short human life just won’t be enough. It is not easy to come to terms with the realization that she will have to use the life stolen from many others to prolong her own, in order to complete her quest in saving trillions of future lives – she will find a substitute for RegeneX, eventually, she will. She can’t let herself believe otherwise.

She learns to wait out and not rush headlong into things, to seek allies and build a support network, to negotiate and compromise, to think laterally.

She learns to choose her battles wisely.

She learns.

When Jupiter meets Seraphi’s three children – all of whom are older than her – it’s weird. (But not nearly as weird as being told that the man she knew all her life as Dad is, in fact, her husband, even if the marriage is just a statement of his on-going political alliance with the House of Abrasax.)

Her eldest son and heir apparent, Balem, looks at Jupiter as if he wants to murder her. As if he wants to worship her. As if he wants to murder her while worshipping her, like some savage tribes do to their perceived gods.

When she watches him, though, she knows exactly why Seraphi loved Balem as much as she is rumoured to have done. From the aesthetic point of view, he embodies everything Jupiter admires – tall frame, taut and sharp like a naked blade of a sword, long fragile limbs, huge ancient eyes that seem so foreign on a teenager-like body, with insanity burning somewhere within their depths, crow’s feet adorning their corners – how did he even get crow’s feet, he never smiles – never smiles with that opulent mouth of his – oh, that mouth… It’s so lush it’s obscene. Everything about Balem is obscene.

The raw awe she feels in his presence terrifies her.

She glances at Finnick and finds a lot of similarities between the two. At least, appearance-wise: tall, elongated slim-boned structure, more sinew than muscle, same face type, nearly identical copper-hued hair…

Not much semblance in character, thank gods.

They’re both attention-seeking divas, though.

Jupiter declines Balem’s invitation to dinner. She doesn’t like the murderous glares her casts Finnick’s way.

Seraphi’s younger son is shamelessly flirting with her, all suave manners and salacious smiles. But it’s another trait she recognizes from Finnick and it helps her to deal with Titus.

By the time they part, Titus is thoroughly enchanted with both Jupiter and her companion, inviting them to visit his Pleasure Gardens as often as the fancy takes them. With his standing offer to join them, if they so desire.

They do visit often – those Pleasure Gardens are a miracle of cosmic proportions, – although don’t take Titus up on his offer.
The two of them are enough.

Kalique, Seraphi’s only daughter, seems much trickier than the boys. There’s a hidden danger behind her smile, so Jupiter keeps Finnick as close to herself as possible, just in case Kalique decides to assassinate mommy dearest. Or, you know, steal Finnick for herself.

On the other hand, Kalique is the only one of Seraphi’s children who doesn’t address Jupiter “Mother”, which the recurred queen appreciates greatly.

Their is the relationship of heartfelt frenimosity.

Seraphi’s children, though, stay more acquaintances than real kin, and with Most August Husband-Father keeping his distance, just as he promised his late wife, Jupiter’s family has shrunk to her old childhood friends.

Queen realizes, however, that with her pursuing a precarious policy of challenging two of the most high-profit economic venues – RegeneX production and splice trade – she can’t grow too fond of too many people. Anyone who is too close to her is a probable abduction target and blackmail material. Or worse yet – a walking bulls-eye for a potential assassination.

And Commander Apini has his hands full as it is.

But she’s content with having just Stinger and his daughter as her intimate friends, and Finnick as her –

– her everything.

Upon her ascension, Queen is overwhelmed with the sheer number of people she has to deal with now. Quite frankly, it’s unnerving and a bit disheartening. She also has to cope with the acute scrutiny of the media and excessive public attention.

To put it plainly, it sucks.

Finnick, on the other hand, outright enjoys all the interest and limelight he is getting. As it turns out, he is amazingly good with people, gifted with brilliant communication skills and an uncanny talent to flirt any man or woman, splice or alien into submission.

“Why do you think there are so many legends about sirens luring unsuspecting sailors to their deaths?” he quirks an eyebrow at Jupiter, his smile all teeth. “We are irresistible. It’s in our blood.”

“Then why did you and your squad buddies need to be so drastically transformed, if you had been so appealing to begin with?”

“Charisma is not about good looks, dearie. And you don’t actually imply that we should have unleashed our seductive prowess onto a child, do you?! I had enough trouble keeping you at bay when your hormones kicked in as it was.”

“Oh, shut up. You totally defiled me,” Jupiter shoots back, mock-indignant.

“All right, let’s call your jumping my bones an outstanding feat of my beguiling witchery. I am a gentleman enough to take the credit for the lady’s achievement,” he winks at her, all smile and devastating charm.
Queen takes advantage of Finnick’s personal strengths and makes him her public face. As a ruling monarch, she has to uphold a regal and dignified persona, to keep her distance from her subjects to inspire reverence and awe; so the siren does all the dirty work for his queen: delivers speeches, cuts the ribbons, poses for the journalists and even occasionally lets random teenagers – after they have been thoroughly scanned by his bodyguards – take selfies with him. He makes a perfect poster figure: charming, relatable and approachable.

The public laps that shit up.

To boost his public image further, Queen entrusts Finnick with overseeing royal charities and patronages.

“Just keep in mind, Finn, that Seraphi’s fortune was made in RegeneX; it’s monetized death. Don’t make me kill people to save some other people.”

“I’ll do my best to hold back my hero complex in public if you let me wear spandex tights and a cape while at the private quarters.”

“You would wear tights?!” That gets her thinking. “What about stockings?” she inquires, all calculating and businesslike. “You legs will be absolutely stunning in them,” her serious tone is marred by a distinctive note of dreamy.

“I can do stockings,” Finnick puts his confident negotiation face on. “If you fetch me my slippers with your teeth,” he stipulates in a no-nonsense manner.

He does drive a hard bargain.

“You are one sick fuck,” she observes conversationally. “You don't even own slippers. You never wear them.”

It’s true: at their private quarters, Finnick always walks barefoot; he knows how much Jupiter enjoys seeing him like that. He knows all her weaknesses by now and does not hesitate to take full advantage of that knowledge.

“I will get a pair specifically for the occasion,” he replies easily, sending one his sharpest smiles her way before dropping it as if at a wave of a magic wand, collected and serious again. “So, will you do it or not?”

Slippers with her teeth? She will look downright ridiculous like that. Then again, Finn probably thinks he will look ridiculous wearing stockings (she’s sure he’s physically incapable of looking anything but glorious). Hmm, stockings. Fuck it, she can do ridiculous for that.

“Deal,” she holds out her hand to shake his firmly. “Can I persuade you to wear heels with those?”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” he looks contemplative, yet his lips are twitching with a smirk trying to break free. “Can you?”

As she finds out, she can.

However, he makes her work for it.

Soon it becomes apparent that channeling Finnick’s energy into charity is one of the best decisions Queen’s ever made. He has a knack for saving people, finding inventive ways to raise money rather
than tapping royal coffins, ever her hero.

After all, that’s the reason she fell in love with him in the first place.

“Jupiter, I could do more fundraising if you just let me sing. I can do chamber concerts for the Entitled audiences, if you don’t want me to perform for ordinary folks.”

“No,” she replies firmly.

“Jupiter, be reasonable. Those people love showing off how generous they are, I just need to get them in the mood to do so.”

“I won’t have you sing for anyone but me,” she feels like stopping there, but makes herself to add, “Except for the family and friends. Your voice belongs to me, and me alone.”

He huffs, but doesn’t push it.

Finnick indeed tries his damnedest at his charity work. Unfortunately for Jupiter, that means that he is often absent, working on something or other that he feels needs his attention at the moment. The Queen part of her resents this situation to no end, but the Jupiter part grudgingly acknowledges that when you love someone, you have to let them live a life of their own, doing something they enjoy.

He’s always there when she really needs him, she gives him that.

Finnick takes genuine pleasure in helping those in need – as long as he gets the laurels of public appreciation in return, basking in all the attention his efforts are gaining. He is in no way selfless, ever a narcissistic sonofafish, yet Jupiter is delighted to learn just how kind her man truly is.

Not all the public attention is favourable, though.

Each time Jupiter encounters derogatory terms like “gigolo” (Seriously?! The guy is working his ass off! She barely sees him as it is!), “concubinus” (At least, that’s eloquent and more or less correct.), “pleasure splice” (He’s not a splice, you morons!) or “glorified whore” (Fuck you!!!) thrown Finnick’s way, it feels like a physical blow to her gut.

So she does the only thing she can do in the situation: even though Jupiter never felt the need to institutionalize their relationship, she officially makes Officer Odair her Royal Consort, which is the highest formal status she can give him. She knows it doesn’t really make him her equal – one cannot be made an Entitled, let alone a royal, you have to be born into nobility – but it is as close as it gets. It is a statement – as public as they come – of Queen’s devotion and respect. The event is widely broadcast in the most romantic light possible to make the general public coo and aww at the proceedings.

Not everyone perceives it the intended way, however, with public opinion it’s never everyone.

Some say young Queen is thinking with her cunt instead of her brain.

Whatever.

(So what if she does, sometimes? Fuck off, she’s young.)

Some say Queen is coercing the man dependent on her into being her plaything.

That hurts like hell.
Especially since Jupiter has that very fear deeply rooted in her subconscious ever since she learnt about their true identities and respective social standing.

“You can’t live your life trying to please everyone, Jupiter. It will make you a very unhappy person. Just do what feels right to you, and fuck them all,” Finnick argues, upset about her visceral reaction to the allegations. “Not literally, though,” he adds, smirking, “I’d rather stay unique in that respect. And I deserve to stay unique, don’t I?”

“It’s not my fucking you that makes you unique, Finn. You just are,” she states with sombre conviction and his responsive laughter is satisfied and smug.

Jupiter is well aware that however high-rank, Royal Consort’s position – always seen as an addition to Queen – is still emasculating. Finnick is used to leadership: he has at least a lifetime of commanding his squad behind him, – and now he has to follow her requests and orders all the time. At least in public, he does.

So Jupiter does her best to compensate for that behind the closed doors – because even though she quickly ditched her efforts to make everybody happy, with Finnick it will forever be her life-long quest – allowing him to have control over her body, slipping deeper and deeper into a submissive role while they are tête-à-tête. She lets him tell her what to do, manhandle her, press her face down into every appropriate surface – and a few inappropriate, as well: that tree bark was fucking scratchy, all right? – permits him to fold and claim and take, to bite and hurt and bruise, to squeeze her throat possessively when either of them is coming, deciding when she gets to breathe and when she doesn’t.

Hey, no one’s said she does not enjoy it.

They both are compensating, after all.

They don’t need gags – she’s silent whenever he tells her to – or blindfolds – she squeezes her eyes shut when he requires – or safewords – she can say “stop” if she needs to. Either of them can.

They do use binds, however, because those are pure fun.

He doesn’t get to control her orgasms, though. One time he attempted to, her “Enough of that!” was sufficiently terse for him to never try again. Jupiter is willing to meet her man half-way whenever he decides to push at her boundaries, but not to a degree of doing something that she is actively averse to.

All her orgasms belong to him, regardless.

She belongs to him.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t trust Jupiter here, blindfolds are pretty handy.

If you doubt that a guy in stockings and high heels (and pink earrings to boot) can be an epitome of manly manliness, just watch I Want to Break Free video by Queen. You’ll never doubt that again. Everrr.

When I think of Jupiter’s Dad, I think Colin Firth from A Single Man with all the context
it entails. He won’t be an active character in this story, but the movie is still worth checking out. It is a cinematic masterpiece.

Next chapter: Stinger talks Caine to Jupiter and we learn just how unique Officer Wise truly is.
Queen cancels everything that is cancellable in her schedule and works at her private quarters, where still unconscious Finnick has been moved to along with all the necessary life-support equipment. Royal Physician visits every hour or so to check on the patient; except for her and a night-time nurse, no one else is granted admittance to the otherwise highly restricted area of the alcazar.

Jupiter didn’t sleep the night of the attack, high on adrenaline and too busy with the aftermath of the incident.

Neither she did the night after that, her bed feeling too large, too cold and devastatingly empty without Finn there.

As the third night draws upon, at the tenacious insistence of her physician, the queen lets her doctor knock her out with a strong soporific.

Jupiter’s days aren’t any better than her nights. Physically Finnick has fully recovered, but his brain’s still working to heal itself. She looks at his pale face, his features even sharper than usual, and feels herself growing more and more desperate.

She doesn’t let herself look too often.

When Finnick finally wakes up, his first words are “Jupiter, you look like shit,” and she’s so light-headed with relief she’s afraid she might faint.

“What’s happened back there?” – A feeble wave of a hand, signifying “Later.” She’s still beyond words. – “Has he hurt you?” – A shake of the head. – “So, since you’re here – although I must say, I prefer my women more vocal – and I’m here, I assume everything’s turned out to be okay?”

He remembers. Her Finn is back.

She nods, still mute with overwhelming happiness.
“So, when do we get to have awesome post-near-death-experience sex?” he enthuses.

Yeah, that’s her Finnick all right.

Meanwhile the Internal Security Service has finished the investigation of Commander Apini. Queen let the procedure run its course – she needs Stinger’s reputation to be squeaky clean. In some respect, he’s Cesar’s wife of hers. The queen tried to stay as impartial and uninvolved in the matter as she could, however not without dropping a hint that any unnecessary digging under Commander Apini would be frowned upon. After that, the case was wrapped up pretty quickly and Stinger has been fully reinstated in his former position.

Soon after that, however, Queen is visited by Royal Spymaster, who somehow found out about the incident despite its being kept in utmost secrecy. Of course he would. Of course. He is uncannily good at his profession and finds knowing everything about everyone not only useful, but enjoyable. As it turns out, he has been investigating Officer Wise on his own initiative and has some intriguing information to share.

Right after he leaves, Queen calls Head of the Royal Guard on the carpet.

“Royal Spymaster and I had a very interesting conversation, Stinger,” the queen starts, her heart sinking as he tilts his head to avoid looking her in the face, clearly uncomfortable with the impending conversation.

“Jupiter –”

“Would you care to explain to me why you commissioned the splice that had been sentenced to life imprisonment at the Deadlands for attacking an Entitled to my Private Security?”

That sounds eerily like sabotage.

Stinger’s eyes snap up to meet hers, his face oddly relieved. When he speaks, his voice is firm and unwavering. “Because I thought you needed a bodyguard capable of killing a royal,” he tells her, adding uneasily, “after that incident with Balem.”

Jupiter flinches, recalling that one time when Seraphi’s eldest son got way too eager for his mommy. Queen raises a skeptical eyebrow at Commander. “My guards are quite capable at doing that, you know.”

“They did jack shit against Balem’s sargons,” he growls.

“Because I ordered them not to.”

“Because you knew the humans wouldn’t match up to the reptiloids and merely die in vain.”

They never talk about what it took the queen to get out of there alive, with all her men intact.

Then again, Jupiter is pretty sure that she discovered a way to manipulate Balem into doing whatever she asks of him, now. Having one of the most ancient, cunning, influential royals with hundreds of lifetimes of experience and innumerable connections, as well as one of the most formidable armies in the universe behind him on her side might yet prove to be very useful.

If she doesn’t like the price of his compliance, well –
A queen’s gotta do what a queen’s gotta do.

Commander Apini took the incident with Balem hard. It probably was a more devastating blow to Stinger’s dignity than to Jupiter’s sanity. He went from professionally protective into psychotically paranoid after that.

“I didn’t want to give Balem another chance. He might get used to it.”

“So, you’re saying that one single lycantant is capable of changing that?” she scoffs.

“He might, if he’s like Caine – if he is Caine. He could have stopped Balem that day. For good.”

No one could have stopped Balem that day. His security was fucking impenetrable. Any aggression on her guards’ part would have just complicated the situation even further, enraging the already raving lunatic.

Then again, Stinger’s been living much longer than Jupiter – if not Seraphi – and definitely has more experience in the matter. There is a chance he might be right, however unbelievable the possibility seems to the queen.

“I have no issues with my guards. They’re doing their job just fine.”

“They are only human, your majesty. A lycantant is superior to a human in almost every respect: reaction time, agility, strength and, above all, enhanced senses.” Stinger’s voice is careful. Being a splice himself, he does not want to be suspected of discriminating against his Queen’s species, especially since splices are universally considered the inferior race. It says a lot about their relationship of mutual friendship and trust that he is even voicing mutinous thoughts of splices’ superiority to her. “Besides, Caine is exceptionally good at on-the-spot strategizing. There were a few times when he came up with better tactics than I did.”

That gets Queen’s attention. Apini is one cunning bastard, as brilliant as they come. She’s relieved to have him on her side.

Most of the times.

“He’s reported to be a defective clone, the runt of the litter, so to say. Doesn’t it mean that the other clones made with this particular geneprint matrix are supposed to be better?”

“They are,” he harrumphs, “if you value outward appearance and breed standard compliance above everything else.”

“What, exactly, are his defects?”

“Well, Caine is shorter and smaller than any regular lycantant.” – Jupiter has trouble wrapping her head around that being considered shorter and smaller. – “Half-albino to boot. All those traits do not conform to the breed standard for his species. Besides, they are externally observable and therefore considered major faults,” Stinger’s voice is terse and oozing sarcasm. “What is more, his sense of smell is heightened to an unparalleled degree. It’s not a defect, per se, but it’s an abnormality, and any abnormality in the genomengineering industry is regarded as a flaw. That’s why the Legion bought him dirt cheap – Caine had been considered a faulty product and sold at a discount,” Stinger grimaces at that. He clearly does not like calling his friend ‘a product’, but in the dry, callous economic language splices are goods, and together with humans, they are nothing but resources. “Caine’s most useful deviation – most valuable for your Private Security – is his personality.”

“If he has one, I certainly haven’t noticed it.” Jupiter knows she’s being needlessly abrasive, yet
she’s angry that Stinger, the man she trusted so completely, let her down like that and Finn got hurt.

She knows she is lying, though, - even when she lies to others, she endeavours to be honest with herself: self-delusion is a very dangerous habit, addictive and blindfolding, a weakness that a royal can’t afford. Jupiter has noticed the assailant’s – Officer Wise’s, she corrects herself – absolute lack of fear in the face of danger, his utter self-control in any circumstances, except for those threatening his friend, his immediate and unquestioning submission to her will and that fierce protectiveness, escalated to the degree of idiocy, which resulted in the whole ordeal.

“I didn’t mean Caine’s character, Jupiter,” Stinger huffs, “I meant his individual instincts. Splices are genetically designed to never show any aggression towards the Entitled, just like humans have the inborn instinct to show mercy to – hell, outright dote on – any mammal offspring, let alone their own kids. The idea of hurting an Entitled simply goes against our nature. I had to go through special training to block that instinct to become your guard, but even I would struggle with the idea of attacking someone of your class. And any normal splice hurting a royal would feel like you would, wringing the neck of a helpless fluffy kitten.”

Jupiter can’t help but flinch at the visual.

“My point exactly,” Stinger nods, watching her carefully. “And Caine proved to be defective that way. He will easily off a royal for you.”

“Unless he offs me first,” she retorts.

“He wouldn’t,” Stinger asserts firmly. “Even more so after you saved him from being executed for his mistake. Trust me, Jupiter, I know how it feels to be indebted to someone with your life.” Stinger looks away for a moment, his voice faltering with emotion, “Loyalty doesn’t begin to cover it.”

As if she does not know how it feels. She owes her life to him, to Finnick, to so many others that ceaselessly work to keep her safe. That is why during that incident with Balem she did her best to protect her guards. Stinger yelled his head off at her afterwards, because she wasn’t supposed to do that. She knew she wasn’t, but logic and loyalty are two vastly different things.

“Trust me, Jupiter,” Stinger proceeds, “Caine will be a valuable asset to your Private Security in more ways than one.”

“Wait, do you expect me to keep him in the Private Security after what happened?!’” she asks, incredulous. “Stinger, he ripped an Entitled’s throat open! With his teeth. He’s nearly killed my consort, for gods’ sake! I don’t want that beast anywhere near Finnick!”

“Caine is not an animal, Your Majesty,” Stinger counters quietly.

Oh, that reminds her –

“Then why the fuck did you condition him like a fucking Pavlov’s dog?!” she inquires with a cold fury boiling inside her, the same fury she felt when she was interrogating the lycantant, the sheer anger at Stinger’s abuse of his power over his fucking friend while intentionally keeping her, his Queen, in the dark about his training methods. ‘Why did you drill him – with torture, I might add – to berserk out at the smell of my blood? What the fuck were you thinking?!’

“Lycantants are inherently blood-thirsty, Jupiter. And I mean it literally.” Stinger’s tone has immediately turned defensive to the point of exasperation, probably because he is feeling guilty. Good to know that deep down Commander Apini still has some semblance of humanity left. “They yearn for the smell of blood; it triggers an endorphin rush in their brain, giving them a euphoric
high.” Stinger gestures emphatically, angrily. “Their kind was specifically genomgineered that way. That’s why they are mostly used in the military and almost never as private guards. The first thing when training for a bodyguard is to instill the aversion to the master’s blood, channeling the instinctual craving into a surge of outward aggression.”

“What if I cut my finger?” – Jupiter inquires. Thank gods, the monthly bleeding problem that used to be the bane of feminine existence in the past was effectively solved with hormonal implants centuries ago. Jupiter won’t have to endure menstruation unless she decides to have children. She remembers Balem and shudders at the idea. – “What if I scrape my knee?”

“It will not happen while Caine’s around, Jupiter. He will be there to prevent any possible damage,” Stinger replies firmly as the exasperation in his voice morphs into chagrin. “I would have never done that to Caine, had it not been a necessity.”

“Necessity my ass,” she hisses, still incensed, “the result clearly shows just how necessary that was.”

“Yes, it was my mistake and I’m prepared to take full responsibility for it. The conditioning technique didn’t work on Caine the way it does on other lycantants. Probably due to his general deviation from the norm and much keener sense of smell. The truth is, no one knows what exactly fucked up the results.” Stinger’s face clearly shows his confusion. “Still, I should have foreseen the possibility of it happening,” he huffs in frustration. “Besides, I sent Caine in underinformed. I should have been less discreet about your relationship with your consort while giving the final instructions to the guard. I should have warned him, specifically, that Odair was allowed to show aggression towards the queen for – er, recreational purposes.” Stinger’s blush would be adorable if Jupiter wasn’t so embarrassed.

“There really is no privacy in my life,” she groans.

“That was my attempt to protect your privacy, Your Majesty. It turned out to be a crucial mistake that nearly cost Odair his life and consequently emotionally incapacitated you. An unforgivable mistake for Head of the Royal Guard to make. I’ll be submitting my resignation after I’ve found a satisfactory replacement for my position.”

“As if,” Jupiter scoffs, “you won’t get away that easily.”

Now that Finnick has recovered, she’s feeling more benevolent about the incident. Besides, she needs Stinger. He’s the only one she really trusts – besides Finn and Kiza – despite his unfortunate tendency to conceal information from her, like he did with Caine’s background and training methods. He thinks he shelters her from unnecessary stress.

He’s probably right in doing that, too.

“The whole thing has been the most misfortunate coincidence,” Jupiter proceeds. “You sparing my privacy – for once in your life – ” she snorts sarcastically, “ – Finn’s being uncharacteristically inappropriate – even for him – in public, and that damn pin on top of it all…” she trails off, wincing at the memory of that night. “Shit happens,” she concludes. “Keep doing your job, Commander. But learn from your mistakes,” the queen adds forcefully.

“No sparing your privacy anymore,” Stinger swears mock-solemnly, making her laugh. “What about Caine, Your Majesty? Will you allow him back to your guard?”

“No, Stinger, that is out of the question.”
Next chapter has even more Caine and Stinger in it.
Chapter Summary

Where Stinger is a stubborn bastard, Caine aces at stoicism and Finnick is being a force to be reckoned with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jupiter’s noes do not work on Stinger – which makes him equally infuriating and endearing to her. Once he gets an idea into his head, he tenaciously pursues it into fruition. Queen can tell him no once, twice, but it just means she will have to listen to his reasoning over and over again until she either snaps at him in earnest or lets herself yield to his persuasion.

Stinger is one stubborn bastard.

The stubborn bastard who’s now determined to get Officer Caine Wise back into Queen’s Private Security, apparently.

Jupiter realizes that he’s up to no good as soon as Commander Apini demands a private audience with her and the consort.

Stinger’s requests for private audiences never forebode well. They usually mean that the queen is about to either A) be lectured on the error of her ways security-wise (“Why won’t you let me install cameras in your private quarters? It’s dangerous, Jupiter. At least let me position a couple of my men in the inner antechamber.”) Or “You should cut down on your public appearances. I can’t ensure your safety out in the open like that. There are just too many variables no one can possibly foresee.” Or “How could you sneak away with Kiza to Earth with just six guards between the two of you?! Anything could have happened!”) or B) be bulldozed into doing something she resents.

The worst thing about this is that Stinger’s suggestions and talking-tos usually have a point.

For example, the queen knows that she has to employ some security measures at her private quarters beyond the Chamber Presence, the ubiquitous artificial intellect of her alcazar, ever vigilant, ever scanning. The Chamber Presence – Slott for short – orchestrates the functioning of the huge royal palace complex, simultaneously controlling the proceedings in every room and the actions of each member of the staff, providing the security feed for Commander Apini’s men whenever necessary. The only rooms where its incessant vigil is limited are those inhabited by Queen.

Stinger hates his abridged security omnipresence.

With passion.

And yet, Jupiter needs her privacy. She can’t escape to Havet every time she wants to be left alone: the instant transportation process requires the same amount of energy as heating a medium megalopolis through a winter. And energy is money. If Queen is wealthy, it does not mean that she doesn’t have more important things to spend the money on – like funding the scientific research for
possible RegeneX substitutes – or that she shouldn’t economize, otherwise one day – many, many lifetimes from now, but still – she won’t be wealthy anymore.

Or worse yet, she will have to harvest one of her planets for RegeneX production.

Jupiter misses her home planet, though, misses Siskin. His cheerful trill is the first thing that greets her every time she arrives, followed by an whole-hearted hug as his invisible – from all the joy and excitement – body slams into hers, gradually revealing itself to the world as he octopuses the living daylights out of her.

She will visit Havet soon, Jupiter promises herself, but right now she has to endure another irritating meeting with Head of the Royal Guard.

“Officer Caine Wise has fully recovered from his injury and is ready to be reassigned to the Private Security.” Stinger starts without preamble. As Jupiter opens her mouth to object, he presses on, “He’s undergone a new training program to correct the malfunctioning previous conditioning.” As Jupiter scrunches up her nose in distaste, he clarifies, “No pain stimulation has been involved this time.”

“So what, he doesn’t feel like killing everyone in sight at the scent of my blood anymore? Great. A perfect qualification for a bodyguard, right there. I wonder, why don’t I immediately feel the need to never part with the guy?” she quips sarcastically.

“I assure you, Jupiter, we have fixed the blood glitch. The medics managed to completely block the burst of aggression at the scent.”

“Stinger, I can’t have a bodyguard I am afraid of,” Jupiter reasons. “Besides, having him around will emotionally traumatize Finnick.”

“As for traumatizing Odair, why don’t we ask him?” Stinger deflects, eyeing the consort questioningly.

So that’s why Stinger wanted Finnick here.

“As if Finn will ever admit to being scared of anyone!” Jupiter retorts.

“Why, I freely admit that I am plenty scared of you!” Finnick grins at her cheekily. “You traumatize me every day, Jupiter. Especially when you glare at me like that.”

Traitor.

“So, you are telling me that being around a guy that all but killed you won’t bother you? At all?” Jupiter has hard time believing that.

“Maybe it will,” Finnick concedes, his expression turning serious, “maybe it won’t. Let’s try and see, shall we?” – Jupiter can’t believe what she’s hearing. – “If he is as good as Stinger says he is, he might be worth having around. As much as I hate to back the old badger up on anything,” he meets his former superior’s death stare with a beatific smile, “it might make you safer. And that means I’m all up for it,” he tells her, his voice soft and earnest.

Jupiter has never been able to resist that particular tone of his: she can feel herself starting to cave in already. But no, that lycantant will be a regular reminder of the scarring experience she’s just lived through. It’s time to wrap up this conversation, otherwise those two will either steamroll her into reassigning him, or it will end up in a conflict, with her feeling angry and guilty, Stinger exasperated and Finnick pouting at her for the next few days.
Jupiter hates conflicts within her family: she has so few people she truly cares about.

“Look, Stinger, no matter how useful your man might be, the whole blood-thirst thing makes my skin crawl. Whether he goes berserk with it or gets high on it, that’s creepy either way. And I have more than enough of creepy in my life. I have Balem for a son.”

“I assure you, Jupiter, the blood won’t be a problem.”

“Oh, it won’t, will it? Fine. Let us call a wager, then,” she challenges Stinger.

Both Jupiter and Stinger are avid gamblers. They used to have epic card battles back when she was a kid, betting ‘chicken gods’ – small pebbles with holes in them – or beautiful seashells or other worthless yet precious items. Their games often ended in emotional shouting matches as they heatedly accused each other of cheating and not playing fair. A little rough-cut wooden wolf Jupiter won from Uncle Stinger still adorns her royal space clipper as a talisman for good luck and safe sailing.

However, Queen never participates in any gambling and betting practices other Entitled engage in, never bets real money or anything of material value. She knows all too well how easy it is to lose herself in the game, to give in into the deceptive thrill of the gambling spirit. Keeping in mind how Seraphi got her fortune, she refuses to waste away human lives.

This, however, is a different matter, since there is no money involved. If Jupiter wins, it will get Stinger off her back immediately – he does play fair, no matter what her younger self might have insinuated. If she loses, the only thing she’s risking is feeling uncomfortable around one of her guards for a few weeks, then she’ll come up with some excuse or other to send him away. Still, the wager is too important to decide upon with a flip of a coin or a card game, so Jupiter comes up with another solution.

“Finn, please, move away into the farthest corner,” she demands, taking a pin out of her up-do as her consort complies, stepping back as far as the room would allow.

Two of her hairpins have very sharp points so that they could be used as miniature miséricordes. They are long enough to pierce through an eye and reach the brain, which is one of the quickest and most efficient ways to kill someone. Not that the queen puts much faith in the weapons, but Commander Apini personally trained her to use them when she was a child – back then Jupiter thought it was another awesome badass game Uncle Stinger had come up with. And, well... you never know what might come in handy one day.

She offers the pin to Stinger.

“Call your man in. He must not know it’s a test; that would be cheating on your part,” Jupiter emphasizes, giving Stinger a hard look. “Then use this to draw my blood. If Officer Wise does not move, does not show any reaction whatsoever, you win, and he can rejoin my security detail. If he does react... Well, I won’t be wasting any RegeneX on either of you, that’s for sure. And he can make himself useful at some distant military outpost. Very distant.”

Stinger gives her a challenging look of his own as he takes the pin, then demands Officer Wise’s attendance through his i-comm.

Implanted communication devices are commonly used at court, in secret services and the military, yet prohibited among the general public for state security reasons, since the interactions cannot be intercepted or traced. Besides, the exorbitant price of the implantation surgery involving highly delicate structures of the inner ear makes it inaccessible for anyone but the Entitled, anyway.
A few pregnant minutes later, Officer Wise enters the room, gives a short bow to Queen and another to Royal Consort - Jupiter immediately tenses at having him in the same room as Finnick; that is exactly why she does not want him around, – then turns to look at Commander Apini expectantly.

Without preamble, Stinger barks, “Attention!”

Officer Wise’s position does not change much, yet the transformation of his demeanour is unmistakable: with a click of the heels his whole body stiffens, somehow managing to stand even taller and straighter, arms glued to his sides, head held erect, face impassive, eyes fixed on some invisible point in front of them. It seems like even his breathing has shallowed to minimize the motion, his posture thrumming with tension.

It is as if they have just witnessed him being turned to stone.

Watching the lycantant, Jupiter realizes with chagrin that she is as good as have lost the wager already. Well, too late to bail out now.

The queen holds out her hand to Singer, palm up. He glances at her to confirm that she hasn’t changed her mind and points the pin at the fleshy curve beneath her thumb.

If Jupiter flinched or blinked, she would miss it – a flicker of motion, the pointed blade piercing flesh – the flesh that is not her own.

She hasn’t even registered the lycantant move and cover her palm with his own hand. A split second later, it is over, his hand has already been removed, a foreign warmth still ghosting over her skin, while she is left staring dumbly at her unhurt and unbloodied palm, trying not to retch at the visual still imprinted on her brain, – she’s perfectly good with needles being stuck in her, but somehow seeing it being done to someone else triggers her gagging reflex.

Officer Wise is back to being a stock-still statue at the very same spot he was standing on a few moments ago.

This faster-than-you-blink shit is getting seriously unnerving.

“The fuck,” Stinger curses, and Stinger never curses around Jupiter, it’s a habit he still has from back when she was a kid. “Caine, you had an order!.. And – ” for a while, he seems to be lost for words, though in reality he’s probably stringing elaborate profanities in his mind, “– what did I tell you about touching a royal?! Queen was not in any real danger! You dumb, thickheaded cub…”

For Commander Apini to be talking to any of his men this way – when there are witnesses around, let alone in the presence of Queen and Royal Consort – is unthinkable. He must have had a lot riding on the outcome of the audience to lose his temper like that. Stinger’s tone is utterly exasperated, yet there’s an unmistakable tint of genuine affection in it. If he and Jupiter were alone in the room, she’d bet there would be a lot of picturesque – albeit censored – expletives involved. Probably a bit of manly and mature facepalming, too.

Jupiter knew Stinger cared about this man – cared enough to have pulled out all the stops to get him out of the Deadlands, the penal colony of no return, and into a position at the most elite and privileged division of the armed forces in the kingdom, nearly having butchered his own career – his own life – in the process. However, to actually hear that gruff tenderness saturating his voice – directed at someone other than his worshipped daughter Kiza or herself – is startling.

Anyway, the queen has won the wager, that’s all that matters.
Her eyes drift down, away from Stinger’s angry face as he continues raging on. Randomly, she spots a tiny red speck of blood suddenly appear on the floor by the lycantant’s foot.

The triumphant cheer dies on her tongue.

“I cannot allow Her Majesty to get hurt,” she hears Officer Wise reply to his Commander as Stinger pauses in his rant to take a much-needed breath. Jupiter gaze jerks up to see him giving Apini an unwavering you-of-all-people-should-know-better-but-subordination-wouldn’t-let-me-say-it-out-loud look, his demeanour confident and calm. Apparently, he has his own opinion on the matter.

Stubborn sod.

He and Stinger might be worth each other.

Jupiter hears a sudden guffaw from behind her. Finnick, still chuckling, approaches the group with a slow clap and a satisfied smirk, looking obscenely pleased, like a leopard seal that’s just eaten an exceptionally fat penguin.

“Nice reflexes there, man,” he nods approvingly to the lycantant, reaching out to grab Jupiter’s still tingling hand, entwining his fingers with hers. “Even better protective instincts,” he compliments, raking his eyes up and down the splice’s frame in an evaluating fashion. “Quick lateral thinking,” Finnick sounds genuinely impressed. “Although I would have looved seeing Commander get socked by one of his own men,” Finnick proceeds with a smirk.

Finnick is usually much less generous with praise towards those of male persuasion: he himself should be the pinnacle of masculine perfection in any given company.

Actually, it seems like her consort is flirting.

Well, even if he does, Jupiter doesn’t pay much mind to it.

The thing is, flirting is Finnick’s way of being. Mostly, he does it just for the hell of it. He doesn’t differentiate between men and women, doesn’t discriminate, flirting effortlessly – and shamelessly – with either sex. His flirting is almost invariably effective, he’s professional at it. It’s a part of his job as Royal Consort to charm the brains off the people Queen needs to be enthralled into malleability. It’s a useful tool – no, weapon – in her arsenal of means to influence people. Jupiter is relatively new to the politics, hopelessly inexperienced, so she would use anything at her disposal that helps her pull her opponents’ – and allies’ – strings.

“You know, things would go much smoother if you let me fuck some of them,” her consort told her once.

“You’re kidding, right?” she gaped at him.

“No, not really.”

“That would be prostitution.” She was too shocked to come up with a more elaborate response.

“I won’t be doing it for money,” he rolled his eyes at her. “It’s for a good cause.”

“Still prostitution.”

Finnick went silent for a long moment, then murmured quietly, “You do understand that what I’m doing is not that different?”
Jupiter’s first instinct was to object vehemently, to deny the horrible accusation of whoring out the man she loved, but she caught herself and took some time to think about it. At any social – political, really, always political – gatherings they attended, he worked hard: he smiled and broke the ice and paid attention only to come up later with highly personalized compliments for the people Queen was interested in. Above all, he listened – looking fully engrossed in the conversation, nodding and humming at the right places, providing insightful commentaries yet careful to never appear smarter than his interlocutors, seemingly enraptured by their company and wits (or erudition, or shitty jokes, or good looks, or ‘sparkling’ personality – or whatever it was the person talking to him wanted to be admired for). Finnick rarely liked the people he had to seduce into compliance, yet during each interaction, he gave his all to win favour for his Queen.

“I know,” she ended up saying. There was no point in lying to herself, or Finn. “But it’s as far as I’m willing to share.”

“Ah-huh! I knew it! I knew it didn’t have anything to do with ethics. You just want to hog me all for yourself!” he exclaimed triumphantly, nudging her side in a conspiratorial manner. “Then again, there are not many forbidden fruit for those people,” he added, thoughtful. “I am a novelty that way. Maybe my unavailability makes me more alluring and my seductive powers” – there was his signature exaggerated eyebrow waggle – “more effective.”

“I’m sorry you have to do this.” What else could she say? ‘You may stop, if you don’t want to do it’? It wasn’t a choice she could afford to offer. In fact, neither of them had much choice in the matter, at least, not for a few more lifetimes, until Queen had finally built up a sufficient network of connections and felt sure of her allies.

One couldn’t possibly change the universe single-handedly.

“Oh, shut up,” Finnick waved Jupiter’s apology off. “I’m definitely not the victim here. That’s what I was born to do: lure in poor unsuspecting people and eat them up alive,” he shot her his widest, predatory grin, showing off all his sharp teeth.

It looked scary.

So, Queen does not mind her consort’s flirting. It’s good practice.

The lycantant that seems to be the focus of Finnick’s attention at the moment, however, does mind to be practiced on, if his rigid posture and tight eyes are anything to go by. He probably believes that Finnick means it, too. Well, if Commander Apini did not inform his man properly about Royal Consort’s habits, it’s not Queen’s job to enlighten him.

Meanwhile Finnick proceeds with his accolade. “Hey, Jupiter, it would be such a waste to send away a guy who can make our old badger splutter,” he tells her, beaming, his eyes never leaving the splice’s form.

“I thought it was your major function at court, Odair,” Stinger grouses.

There is not much love lost between those two. Apini still can’t get over the atrocious breach of subordination committed by his former subordinate years ago, when the siren dared to befriend the young queen. It took Jupiter a few years – and one ascension – to finally convince Stinger to stop calling Finnick ‘that sneaky prick’. Since then Apini seemingly has come to terms with Finnick’s place in Jupiter’s life, even though his resentment towards the consort’s influence over the monarch – and his former ‘niece’ – still shows. Frequently.

A few new spots have joined the first one on the floor. Stinger must have cut through a larger artery;
a hand is interwoven with a particularly rich vascular network.

“Oh, come on, you two! Yes, Wise has broken your order, Stinger. It only shows that he’s got half a brain of his own, unlike most of your guys who wouldn’t dare to breathe unless you tell them to. In an emergency situation, the ability to make your own decisions is more important than mindless obedience. You might not be there to issue orders. Queen might be incapacitated to command,” Finnick’s tirade breaks off at that, as he swallows thickly. So far, that has not happened once, yet the possibility is daunting. “All he did was protect Jupiter from unnecessary pain. Or did you really want to hurt her?”

Stinger glares, refusing to dignify Finnick’s insinuation with a verbal response.

The drops on the floor have merged into a tiny puddle. Jupiter can see lycantant’s knuckles streaked with red.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” she hisses, tearing her hand out of Finnick’s comforting grasp, hitching her dress skirt up to reach the clean petticoat underneath that hasn’t been in contact with the floor. She rips a strip off the hem and shoves it at Officer Wise. “Here,” she tells him, irritated. “Stop that bleeding already.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” comes a stunned answer, as he hesitantly accepts the unorthodox bandage and wraps it around his palm.

Beside her, Finnick snorts obnoxiously. “Way to be dramatic, Jupiter.”

“Well, excuse me if I don’t happen to have any sterile gaze on me,” she snarks in return.

“Aren’t you ladies supposed to be carrying around fancy scented handkerchiefs to bestow a favour on your knight in shining armour?” Finnick inquires, ironic and amused. He’s clearly enjoying the situation, taking full advantage of the fact that it’s just four of them in the room, and Officer Wise has proven that he can keep Queen’s private matters private.

Well, two can play this game.

“Shut up, Odair, or I’ll stuff the rest of my petticoat in that big mouth of yours.”

“Ooh, gags! That’s more like it! I bet there will be enough left to bind me, too!”

Stinger groans loudly, long-sufferingly. “Could you two please settle your kinks in private? I don’t need to be hearing this. It’s scarring my soul.”

“You don’t have one to scar,” Finnick fends off easily.

“Can we please get back to the matter at hand?” Apini suggests in a clipped tone. “We have been discussing Wise’s reassignment.”

“From where I’m standing, you have lost the wager,” Jupiter points out blandly, unsure if she won it fair and square.

If it’s a good or a bad thing, either.

Finnick’s next words render her speechless.

“I want to keep him,” he announces firmly.

A long silence follows.
“Finally, it seems to dawn on Finnick that his claim could use some explanation.

“Aww, dearie, you’ve seen that he is harmless. He’s a big fluffy teddy bear at heart, I just know it.”

Jupiter glances at the ‘teddy bear’ in question; there’s nothing teddy-bearish in sight. In fact, his carefully blank face seems positively murderous underneath the stoic mask of calm. Finnick really shouldn’t be provoking him like that, yet the queen is no longer worried about the lycantant’s losing it as she did at the beginning of the audience, not after what she’s witnessed.

“Besides, he’s not hard on the eyes. No, I take that back. He’s positively an objet de vertu,” Finnick enthuses, obviously expecting her to share his sentiment, as if the lycantant’s beauty was blatantly self-evident. “I must admit, he meets my aesthetic requirements, exceeds them, even.”

Jupiter can’t help but examine the officer more closely, perplexed by her consort’s exaltation. As she does so, she notices the lycantant’s complexion – which was unnaturally pale to begin with (“half-albino”, she recalls Stinger’s words) – go literally ashen with – humiliation?.. rage?.. fear?.. – even though his expression remains impassive.

An objet de vertu? What a strange choice of words on Finnick’s part; he’s usually much more considerate than that. Being what they are, splices are traditionally subjected to objectification, dehumanized by their masters and the society at large. Hell, Jupiter wouldn’t like to be called that either, and she is not a splice. No wonder Officer Wise does not look happy at the compliment that’s more insult than anything else. There’s something to be said about his composure, she notes with burgeoning respect.

The queen proceeds with her visual examination, much more meticulous than a once-over he got the first time she met him and much less prejudiced than her scrutiny during the interrogation. He certainly looks decent enough: a towering, broad-shouldered frame, bulky and overly-muscled, one that screams masculinity and strength at a volume that makes her virtual ears pop. Seriously, how is all that supposed to be shorter and smaller than average for his kind? She should take a look at a classic lycantant specimen, just out of curiosity. (Personally, Jupiter prefers Finnick’s lean, wiry physique with its nimble, light-footed grace; then again, to be fair, Jupiter prefers Finnick’s everything.) In addition to his impressive stature, Officer Wise has a nice symmetrical face with well-proportioned features. It could use bigger eyes, though. And more expression.

Like, all of it.

His face does not look all that intelligent, to be honest. Then again, appearances are deceptive; if Stinger says the man is smart, then he must be. There are no fools on Stinger’s team.

Generally, splicers intentionally design their ‘products’ so that they would be less astute than human beings. Splices already tend to have some or other physical advantages on pure Homo Sapiens, it is unwise to give them the intellectual one as well. All-round superiority might rush to the heads of the race that is supposed to be kept inferior; things might get complicated. Genuinely clever splices are usually custom-made according to the particular requirements of a client – that’s how Stinger’s daughter was designed – or are just production glitches, like Officer Wise, if Apini is to be believed.

“Can we keep him? I want to keep him,” Finnick babbles with all the enthusiasm of a five-year-old that he is at heart. “And I should have anything I want, because I’m me. Clearly,” he graces Jupiter with a smug, wicked, happy grin and her heart melts into a warm puddle of delighted goo somewhere at the bottom of her stomach. “Oh, it will be entertaining,” he goes on excitedly, wagging his eyebrows at her.

She can’t help but snort at that. Does Finn really want this man around that much? For what? To
feast his eyes upon? Or to hone his beguiling skills on a resistant subject? Well, if he does, he can have him. Right now, she would give anything to her consort – anything she has to give – just for the overwhelming merit of being alive.

“Fine. **Stinger** can keep Officer Wise in the Royal Guard, *not* the Private Security.”

Commander Apini, who’s kept deadly silent through the entire exchange, acknowledges her decision with a grunt.

“Oh, come on,” Finnick whines, refusing to compromise, “what’s the fun in that? We won’t be seeing him around much. And I want to be seeing – *all that*,” he gestures grandly at the hulking figure – silent, pallid and stone-still.

Well, more like *petrified*.

Jupiter watches as bright patches of crimson bloom on the pale cheekbones of the guard. He looks like he’s stopped breathing altogether.

Maybe this whole performance is just Finn’s inventive way of taking vengeance on his attacker. The asymmetric retaliation as it’s called in politics. Well, after what was inflicted on him, Finnick is entitled to have some fun at his assailant’s expense.

“Have it your way. Private Security it is. But if you get mauled *again*, I swear, I will resurrect you just to murder you with my own hands,” Jupiter huffs. “And then replace you with Chris.” She picks the guard’s name completely at random. She can’t remember much of him, except that he has ginger hair and is much smilier and chattier than the others.

“Oh, *that* is your idea of a substitute for me?!” Finnick exclaims in mock-indignation. “Your taste in men is so much worse than mine!” he declares, motioning his head towards Officer Wise to illustrate.

By this point, Jupiter just wants this audience to fucking end already. She nods good-bye in the general direction of Stinger and his man and tugs at her consort’s hand to drag him away, as he shoots a parting wink at the lycantant-shaped pillar of salt.

As two of them exit the room, Finnick’s smile is brilliant and vicious.

She does not ask.

**Chapter End Notes**

*The Russian military command “Смирно!” that literally means “Freeze, don’t move!” would have worked so much better than “Attention!” here, but since I’m writing this thing in English, certain sacrifices have to be made.*

*I couldn’t have Stinger using dog commands like “Stay” on one of his men. I know they are popular in this fandom, but that’s just unnecessary humiliating.*

*The chapter title is from the namesake song by Queen and David Bowie. Sometimes I think I’m writing this thing just to be able to type down the name of my favourite band as many times as possible)*
Next: Caine and Finnick and some befuddled Queen.
The next time Queen sees Officer Wise in the secluded hallway preceding her private quarters she gets an eerie sense of déjà-vu.

Finnick is walking behind her, and as they approach the hulking figure by the door she feels herself tense up more and more with every step that brings her consort closer to the guard. After their recent interaction, Jupiter does not feel outright distressed at the idea of those two being in one room together anymore. She is no longer convinced that this will end badly, with the splice snapping into his aggression – well, defense – mode again, but the concern is still there. Her protective instincts buzz with the anticipation of a possible attack, no matter how many times her brain tells them it is not forthcoming.

Psychological trauma does that to a person, you know.

She has to ensure Finnick’s safety, any way she can, to give the guard an additional reason to be extra careful around her consort, besides his own survival. Recalling their interaction during the interrogation and the splice’s startling serenity in the face of the impending execution, she finds his self-preservation instincts an insufficient incentive.

The thing about motivation, it is never excessive.

This man seems to not fear anything – perhaps, with the exception of being subjected to her consort’s overtures, surprisingly enough – so it’s useless to try and threaten him personally. In fact, it’s not just useless, it’s counterproductive: if he is here to protect the queen, he will be more inclined to do so if he likes her, not hates her guts. So, no threats.

Guilt-tripping it is, then.

Guilt-tripping is one of the most powerful tools of manipulation. However, as any potent agent, it should be administered in minimal – homeopathic – doses. If one pushes too far, too hard, it can evoke an intense defensive response, leading to the reaction opposite to the one intended. Queen is intimately acquainted with this particular strategy, since it is her consort’ psychological weapon of choice whenever his usual “I want this, give it to me right now” tactics fails to make her do his bidding.

So what if Jupiter knows that he’s manipulating her? It does not make it any easier to resist his emotional blackmail when she is this emotional about him. So she capitulates.

Every. Freaking. Time.

It’s easy to manipulate a person once you know where their true allegiance lies. Being the object of Jupiter’s – and being obnoxiously aware of it – Finnick is able to convince her to do pretty much everything he asks of her. And as Queen discovered during the interrogation, Officer Wise’s loyalty is firmly placed with Stinger, so she will have to aim for that particular Achilles heel of his.

“Go on, Finn, I need to talk to Officer Wise for a minute,” she tells her consort as they arrive at the door.

To her surprise, Finnick stalls, evidently hesitant to leave.
“What, you made me keep Officer in the Private Security and now you’re afraid to leave me alone with him?” she lifts an incredulous eyebrow at him.

“I’m not afraid to leave you with him, I’m afraid to leave him with you. Keep your hands to yourself, dearie,” he teases with a smirk and saunters into the antechamber, pointedly leaving the door slightly ajar behind him.

Hmm, interesting. Is he just taunting her as he so often does or is he really worried to leave her here, masking his concern with mock suspicion?

Focus, Jupiter.

At the last moment, she recalls that it’s a lycantant she’ll be talking to. She already knows he can hear her breathing – probably her heartbeat, too – and detect the faintest changes in her scent.

_He would know if she tells any lies._

Well, she can work with that. She’s a royal, she’s skilled at the art of deceit by now. The first rule of making a lie convincing is to stick to the truth as much as possible, preferably avoid any fabrication at all, just edit and rearrange the fragments of reality for your specific purposes.

As for emotions, well… She has plenty of anxiety to go about; there is no need to reveal the real reason for it.

“Officer Wise, good evening.”

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” he responds quietly, repeating the deferential sharp bow he greeted her and Finnick with, ducking his head a little lower this time, eyes firmly trained on the floor.

So, here goes the truth.

“Officer Wise, I must admit, I’m worried about your presence in my guard.”

The colour drains from his face just like it did when the lycantant found himself the focus of Royal Consort’s flirtatious attention. Hmm, Finn was right, he is not hard on the eyes, but the deathly pallor is not a flattering hue on him.

“Your Majesty?..”

“Has Commander Apini told you that he submitted his resignation after your attack on Royal Consort? He was prepared to answer for your actions.”

Not that the old badger was – or will be – in any real danger, not while Jupiter is in charge and trusts him. However, his friend here does not need to know that. With a momentary recollection of that memorable night Queen lets the panic that’s been lurking at the edge of her subconscious ever since the incident flood her system, saturating her blood with adrenaline and fear. No one can tell just by her scent _who_, exactly, she fears for, but it will make her concern smell genuine nonetheless.

The lycantant glances up sharply, for a beat meeting her gaze before looking down again. Good, she’s got his attention – enough for this minuscule breach of the court protocol.

“No, Your Majesty, he hasn’t. Commander Apini does not share his decisions with me.”

Trust Stinger to stick to subordination even when he clearly cares about the person. That man is a rock. If this is his interpretation of friendship, Jupiter would really hate to be considered his foe.
“He said he owed you his life.”

“He did not owe me anything,” comes a firm, resolute reply. “Whatever I might have done for him in the past, I did not do it to indebted him to me.”

Probably that’s exactly the reason why Stinger was so hell-bent on dragging this guy under his command again. Loyalty out of personal devotion is much more reliable than those of duty, fear or gain. The last one is no loyalty at all. If someone ought to be paid to ensure their trustworthiness, they’re not at all trustworthy: there is no guarantee that they won’t sell you out to a higher bidder.

“Your Majesty? May I be allowed to ask a question?”

That’s forward and unexpected, but she finds herself nodding.

“Has Commander Apini’s resignation been approved?” the guard asks with a distinctive breathless tremor in his voice.

Worried. He is so worried for Stinger he’s waiting for her answer with bated breath.

Perhaps as worried as she is for Finnick.

At this realization, she feels a sharp stab of envy: Queen wants this kind of fierce dedication to be hers.

To be where it belongs.

“No, I have rejected it.” That might buy her some extra loyalty, too, so why not answer truthfully? “However, the incident was damaging to Commander’s reputation. If he had not been my personal friend,” – yes, clump yourself up with Stinger, there you go, – “he would have been dishonorably discharged for his mistake in choosing you for my guard. Probably even legally prosecuted.” Truth, nothing but the truth. “The thing is, I care about Commander Apini.” Jupiter makes her voice sound softer, more emotional now. It’s easy to achieve: she does care about Stinger, she cares a lot. “I do not want to see him suffer on your account any further.” She knows he shares the sentiment. “Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, of course.” – She’s satisfied to see him gulp: an obvious sign of nervousness. – “I will not let Your Majesty or my Commander down again.”

Good boy. She has him exactly where she wants him.

“Good night, Officer. I’m glad we had this talk.”

Unfortunately, Finnick does not follow his own advice concerning Officer Wise.

Does not keep his hands to himself, that is.

Oh, he behaves well enough in public. Around other people – guards, courtiers or servants – all Finnick does is watch. Mostly. His gaze follows the lycantant with the focused determination of a predator on the prowl, ready to pounce on its prey. His leer lingers, making it difficult for the guard to ignore it.

Making sure the splice feels that nagging, prickling sensation that alerts a person that they are being stared at.
Making sure he is aware.

The guard’s reaction is very subtle, so Queen does not pay much mind to it at first. Her mind just registers on a barely conscious level that he does not react to Finnick like most people do. When he notices her consort contemplating him, he stiffens, face going even blanker than usual, lips pursing in a tight thin line. Finnick evidently finds such a response enjoyable, a small, secretive smile playing on his lips, like he’s just won a victory of some sort and looking forward to further conquests.

Whenever the chance presents itself – without the matter being overly obvious – Finnick moves to stand a bit closer to the guard than generally acceptable, intruding into his personal space, sometimes accidentally brushing up against him. However, Jupiter has a sneaking suspicion that all those ‘accidents’ are meticulously staged.

On the occasions when the consort makes a physical contact, his hand touching Wise’s shoulder or his arm, there is an aborted flinch, the splice freezes in place as if to stop himself from recoiling: that might be construed an impolite response to the outwardly amicable gesture.

Or maybe the wolf part of him recognizes the siren for the predator he is and Wise refuses to act like prey.

As much as she loves Finnick, Jupiter understands where the lycaentant is coming from. Being the subject of an Entitled’s explicit interest never bodes well for a splice. It is intimidating enough when someone has the unlimited power to do with you as they please – whatever they please. When that someone is so obviously obsessed with you and might or might not have unsavoury intentions, it must be terrifying.

Royal Consort may not be a nobility by birth, but the power he wields surpasses that of most Entitled; it can be curtailed only the limits enforced by Queen. And when it comes to Finn, Jupiter is loath to enforce anything, let alone limits.

Getting progressively aware of the atmosphere of unease between those two as she observes Finnick stalk Wise, for the first time since she laid eyes on the lycaentant Jupiter feels a twinge of something akin to sympathy towards him.

It’s not that Finnick does not pay attention to other dwellers of the alcazar – being Finnick, of course he does. However, their reaction is usually vastly different, since most of them know him – for a while now – for the easy-going, friendly, fun siren being he is. Typically, people smile, laugh and sometimes even flirt back. Chris, for one, gives as good as he gets whenever there is no one else around to rat him out to Stinger, who would inevitably rip him a new one for insubordination otherwise. The redhead guard can get as mouthy and handsy as Finn himself. Jupiter just shakes her head at their shenanigans and asks if she can watch their intercourse go any further. “Naughty, naughty!” Finn chastises her then with the air of mock-indignation, pointedly leading the queen away from any potential competitors for her attention.

(Sometimes Jupiter gets an unpleasant feeling that Finnick does not really trust her to stay away from other guys. She never doubts him, though.)

That is what Finnick’s flirting usually is: a charming, lighthearted way to ease the tension, to brighten up the routine of their days, to cheer up himself and those around him. As a rule, if his flirtation is not received well, Finnick backs off and does not pester. Officer Wise, however, seems to find himself an unfortunate exception to that rule. Far from withdrawing, Finnick persists and pushes onward. It seems like a blatant self-assertion, an obvious display of power and dominance –

A dick-measuring contest.
Except the guard has never volunteered to enter it and by the look of him, would gladly jump off that train, given a chance. He does not show any opposition or defiance, let alone antagonism. No matter what Finnick does, Officer Wise stays motionless and silent. He does not voice any objection to the consort’s imposing himself on him, does not attempt to step away whenever Odair invades his personal space or touches him. Wise follows the court etiquette rules to a tee, greeting – a reserved yet not brusque “High Consort” accompanied with a deferential bow – and responding in a dutiful manner on any occasion he is being addressed.

All the while looking as if he’d rather be elsewhere – anywhere but near Finnick.

Queen witnesses their pregnant interactions, growing increasingly ill at ease. She does not need to be a lycantant to sense the sheer discomfort coming off the guard in stifling waves. For all she expected to feel tense around the new guard, she would never have thought it would be Finnick who’d make her feel this way.

“What’s with all the ogling?” she asks her consort one night.

“What ogling, dearie?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Finn. What’s with your stalking the newbie?”

“I like watching Officer Wise. He’s a looker, so I look.”

“Objectification is not a nice thing to do,” she remarks in a neutral tone.

“Says the girl who objectifies me like there’s no tomorrow,” he smirks, pointedly pressing his bare foot down on hers.

Well, she can’t argue with that. One downward glance and she does not feel like looking up anymore, let alone lecturing him on ethical issues.

“My point exactly,” he drawls, his voice molasses.

Finnick fights dirty.

Things get increasingly worse when there are just three of them in the room. Which happens frustratingly often because Commander Apini – for reasons known only to him – keeps posting Officer Wise in the secluded hallway leading to the royal private quarters with irritating regularity.

Without witnesses around, Finnick does not confine himself to eye contact and “accidental” touches. He goes full-on tactile.

Again, it’s nothing scandalous: a slap on the arm, a pat on the back, a squeeze on the shoulder. On the surface, all of those can be interpreted as friendly, harmless, innocent gestures. However, Jupiter knows Finnick all too well for that: this is neither innocent nor harmless. There’s too much dogged deliberation in Odair’s actions, in the way they make the lycantant freeze and blanch and bate his breath, his eyes going shut off and distant while the consort obviously relishes Wise’s discomfort, his well-hidden yet still noticeable distress.

There is nothing innocuous about that, it is a purposeful intimidation tactics.

Which, come to think of it, is the definition of terror.
Little by little, Jupiter starts to resent the time when she and Finnick withdraw to their rooms after dinner. It used to be her favourite time of the day and now it gets cringeworthy awkward on regular basis. She dreads the nights when she sees the lone massive figure standing at the inner door. In morbid fascination she watches Finnick’s mouth spread into a delighted grin, as his pace quickens with the fervor of the hunt.

Without hesitation, Finnick slinks up to Wise, stopping only a palm length away – so close that they are sharing the same breathing air – apparently feeling at home in the splice’s personal space – denying him the right to have one. The lycantant goes very still, visibly steeling himself for what is to come; Queen can’t help but fear that it’s the calm before the storm. As Odair’s hand snakes up the uniformed chest, he leans in – so close his nose almost grazes the guard’s jawline – and, dropping his voice into a lower pitch, drawls “Good night, Caine” into the guard’s throat, the breathy sound of Wise’s personal name implying intimacy that is not there. The lycantant shuts his eyes and visibly struggles to not shrink back in distaste, face tilting away almost imperceptibly, jaws tightly clenched, as the muscles of his neck strain to hold his head in place.

One split-second snap of those jaws, and Finnick might be dead.

Jupiter realizes with a start that she’s gritting her teeth, too. Finnick draws back, letting his hand fall away; there is a sharp intake of breath – she isn’t even sure whether the sigh of relief has come from the splice, or from her.

The queen is getting weary of this whole situation. One can cut the tension between those two with a knife; it’s starting to get on her nerves. She would so much rather not be here to witness this. Then again, she’d rather be here, because deep down – so deep she is afraid to admit it even to herself – she isn’t sure how far her consort would go if not for her presence. So far, he hasn’t been known to abuse his power or anyone beneath him, but this… This is abuse.

Why the fuck is he so hell-bent on playing with fire?

Once Jupiter and Finnick are alone, she finally lets her irritation spill.

“Odair, what the hell are you doing, taunting Wise like that? If he snaps and bites your hand off, I will not let the medics grow it back for a month, so you would learn to be more careful in the future.”

“If he snaps, you’ll have every reason to send him away, dearie,” he replies cheerfully, carefree as can be. “That’s what you want, don’t you? You never wished him here in the first place.”

However, the queen is no longer sure whether she will send Officer Wise away or not, even if he snaps. She can’t help but admire the guy’s continuous resistance to Finnick’s incessant provocation.

Worried and annoyed with Finn’s childish, unnecessary risky poke-the-bear routine, Queen feels the urge to stop her consort once and for all, to put an end to this twisted power game of his, whatever sick satisfaction he’s getting out of it.

But what if he’s not just stroking his ego? (Gods know, Jupiter does enough of that to have the freaking thing purr.) What if it’s Finnick’s coping mechanism, his way of making himself feel safer around the man that hurt him?

She recalls the horrifying bone fractures that she saw on the MRI scans at the medical wing of her alcazar, remembers all those days that Finnick spent in coma, pale and lifeless, and resolutely decides to not intervene in the matter.
Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is from the namesake song by Queen.

A special thank you to TheLadyRo for her emotional – very emotional – feedback and loving on Caine and hating on Finnick with a passion in this chapter. Girl, you rock!
It’s late, time to go to sleep, really, but Jupiter’s still reading in bed. She is no novice to late nights: there’s always too many things to do and too few hours in her day to do it. Queen’s job is never done.

Finnick is lounging opposite to her, – all slender limbs, tanned skin and lean muscles, – back propped against the cushioned footboard, engrossed in a sheath of his own. The neckline of his shirt is stretched askew, revealing part of his shoulder and a clavicle. He is providing a lovely vista for her even when he’s not trying to. It’s an inborn talent, Jupiter suspects. There is a platter full of figs by his side and from time to time his fine-boned hand blindly reaches for the fruit, eyes never leaving the screen.

Apparently, all food tastes better if it’s being consumed in bed.

The queen is trying to comprehend a patent on the application of the extract from the velvet antlers of several species of deer for treating extensive burns. It’s not a light reading by any means, but she understands enough to collect that the extract is not as effective as RegeneX – nothing ever is, damn it – but it does produce a similar effect, albeit much slower.

Her sheath pings with the notification of a message from Commander Apini. Since it’s not a direct call on her i-comm, it’s not a life-or-death emergency, and Jupiter feels tempted to just ignore it until tomorrow. However, her sense of responsibility wins and she clicks the message only to frown immediately.

Ugh.

Not again.

“Why so morose, sourqueen?” Finnick’s foot taps on her thigh. “Do share, let’s be morose together!”

“Stinger demands another private audience tomorrow.”

“What does the old badger want now?”

“No idea.”

She’s so not allowing cameras into her bathroom.

“Can I tag along?”

“Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Since when you’re this invested in what Apini has to say?”

“Hey, I’m a part of your security, too.”

“Why don’t you talk to him without me, then? You could give me a summary afterwards. A very
short one. Like, one word. Here’s a prompt: it starts with F.”

“It’s you he wants. Who’s Queen here? Not me, no, thank you. So man up and do the queening.”

“You’re supposed to be my deputy, Finn,” she whines. “Why can’t you take dealing with Stinger and his security issues upon yourself?”

“Because I have my own duties to deal with. Besides, I’m not touching Stinger and his issues with a barge pole,” he smirks.

Ass.

“You could appoint someone specifically for that purpose,” Finnick suggests helpfully. “Listen to the grouch rant and tell him to fuck off afterwards. You know, Kiza would be perfect for the job.”

“As if. I’ve already asked her to mediate my interactions with her father. Offered her a hefty pay for that, too. She said that no money could make her deal with her dear Dad any more than she already had to,” Jupiter replies with chagrin. “And I don’t think anyone else is capable of handling Stinger and his steamrolling ways.”

“He’s only that pushy because you allow him to push,” Finnick remarks.

As if she didn’t know that already! Jupiter huffs in resentment and returns to the patent, trying to figure out if it is worth acquisitioning and introducing to healthcare system. She needs to consult some experts tomorrow. There are no full substitutes found for RegeneX yet, but every partial surrogate that might cut a sliver – however tiny – away from the huge pie of RegeneX market is a step towards its eventual replacement.

A purple fruit, landing smack on her chest, startles Jupiter out of her thoughts.

She shoots Finnick an unimpressed look, grumbling, “Finn, can’t you see I’m working?” The fig looks appetizing, though, so she bites into it: she’s always loved the fruit.

“I’m bored. The speech I’m supposed to memorize by tomorrow is mind-numbing,” he moans, tossing his sheath aside, making a long-suffering pout at her. Even Finnick’s pout is something to behold.

“So clearly, annoying me is the only possible route of entertainment left for poor you,” she snipes.

“It’s a solution,” he nods thoughtfully, taking one of her feet into his lap and squeezing each of her toes in turn, then digging his thumbs under the ball and running them down to her heel. Jupiter melts into her pillows. “Then again, I can think of a better one,” he adds as his own bare foot insinuates itself between her legs, pressing down exactly where it would be most distracting. Her crotch instantly heats up – and not just with the warmth radiating off Finnick’s sole, either.

“Finn, I need all my blood up here,” Jupiter taps a finger to her temple.

“Would you prefer an intellectual intercourse, then? I can do that, too. We could discuss the euphemisms of Orousean courtly poetry or the subtle eroticism of Orchidaceae flower structures,” he muses, his fingers working their magic into the spot just above her toes. Jupiter didn’t know how tired and neglected it felt before Finnick’s hands have made it better.

So, so much better.

“Finn, don’t get me wrong, those are obviously fascinating topics, but I have to make an important
decision here. And you’re just trying to derail my mind into the gutter, again,’’ the queen rebukes. “Besides, orchids are anything but subtle. I mean, they’re named after a testicle, for gods’ sake. And have you seen Paphiopedilum hookerae? It looks like a clitoris and a scrotum, smashed together. That’s just obscene.”

Finnick snorts at that. “Just admit you have hots for plants, you dirty perv.”

“I have my fetishes,” Jupiter concedes with all the deadpan dignity she can master, pursing her lips together to suppress a huge grim threatening to break upon her face.

“Hey, why don’t you come here and practice some of them on me?” he invites with a grin.

“Finn, I…” She does not really want to have sex right now, but then again, neither does she want to say no to him.

They are long past the stage when lovers are convinced they should have sex only when both of them crave it. Real life makes adjustments to that idealistic notion quickly enough. He’s rock-hard and overly enthusiastic every morning, while she’s sleepy and grumpy and all too busy checking for any emergencies that might have occurred overnight. She grows interested by the afternoon, when his morning eagerness is gone – as, more often than not, he himself is too, off to do something or other. And by nighttime she’s so utterly exhausted that she has to make a considerable effort to master more than a lukewarm welcome to his advances.

Yet they’ve learnt to compromise and meet each other halfway, using their opportunities to the full whenever they come up. If one is asking, as a rule, the other does not refuse.

There is another cause for her current reluctance, although, besides being weary and busy.

Each time Finnick initiates sex – she never does lately – Jupiter gets a haunting flashback of what happened on that fateful night in the antechamber of their private quarters. She’s already had the room refurbished into unrecognizability, detesting the reminder of the attack. Unfortunately, she cannot erase her own recollections – well, she can, but that would involve losing all the memories her brain has formed ever since, and Queen cannot afford that.

Therefore the traumatic event stays vividly imprinted on her mind, slowly but surely impairing her libido. After the incident she’s been irrationally afraid to touch Finnick, as if it would break the illusion and she would wake up to discover his dead and broken body splayed on the floor. Wake up to her worst nightmare.

“Hey, whatever it is you’re thinking now, don’t.” Finnick’s firm voice – paired up with an insistent squeeze on her foot – brings Jupiter back to reality. “I’m here. I’m alive.” – Oh, he knows all too well what’s going on in her head, sometimes even better than she does herself. It comes with age and experience, she thinks. – “But, having been through a close encounter with death, I’m more than ever into celebrating life. Don’t you think I am entitled to lots and lots of mind-blowing sex? C’mon, you’ve been treating me like a piece of priceless china,” he complains, “I would much rather be treated like a piece of meat. So. Put. Out. Already,” he enunciates, punctuating each words with a gentle tug on her little toe.

Jupiter grabs a pillow and flings at him; it hits his head with a satisfying whump. There is a loud, pained groan as Finnick’s body slides down, slumping on the mattress. Before she knows it, she’s kneeling by his side, in a full panic mode, cupping his face with her hands. What the hell was she thinking?! He’s suffered a severe head injury not that long ago!
He’s laughing, though, the bastard, and she feels an immeasurable relief, her body sagging into the aftermath of the shock. His hand shoots up to grab her for a kiss.

“You’re an idiot,” she snarls into his mouth, dizzy with assuagement and anger, as she straddles his midsection, fully intent to smother him with the same pillow she hit him with.

“It’s when you call me an idiot I know you really love me,” he emphasizes his quip with a sharp buck of his hips so that her butt hops into the air a little. She shrieks at the surprise of it. When she lands back, her anger’s gone and she is giggling.

“Finn, how old are you?” she inquires, making herself more comfortable on his increasingly interested groin.

“Hmm, I don’t know – five?”

“I’m pretty sure five-year-olds can’t do this,” she grinds down on his full-blown enthusiasm to illustrate.

“Oh, really? Maybe they can do this?” Finnick remains completely relaxed and immobile below her while his dick moves all on its own to tap her counterparts from underneath like a separate living being. It never ceases to amaze – and arouse – her how he can do it without contracting one single muscle in his body. Not any one she can feel, at least.

“Hey, quit exploiting my weaknesses, or I will exploit yours,” she threatens, vengefully rolling herself along his length.

He retaliates with another hip jolt, more energetic one, that sends her hopping – and laughing – even higher this time –

– and landing heavier, the momentum pressing her down on his erection with delectable, persuasive force.

Her laughter cuts off as her hands fist into his shirt and – oh, okay, the enthusiasm is completely mutual by now.

His grin is unbearably smug and full of triumph.

A few hops later –

“It’s time you took this off,” Finnick suggests, tugging on her nightgown, “to give me a pretty view.” His voice sounds casual and collected, yet his fingers dig painfully – deliciously – into her thighs, giving away the fact that he’s not as unaffected as he’s pretending to be.

“Later. Now shut up and keep going, bronco,” she pants, too invested to bother to strip.

He snorts loudly, obnoxiously, shaking his head and neighs, making her giggle again.

The ass.

He knows that giggling is kind of counteractive to coming, he knows!..

In the end, however, coming wins.

Her last coherent thought is: “Thank gods it’s Chris outside tonight and not that lycanta– unngh.”
The next day, Finnick tags along to Queen’s meeting with Commander Apini, just like he intended to do.

And why is Officer Wise here, too? Jupiter has a bad premonition about this.

Has the guard finally complained to Apini about Finnick’s bullying? Commander demands unquestioning obedience to his authority from his men, but when it comes to their safety and comfort outside their duty he gets as protective as a mother bear. Gods, this is about to turn nasty.

“I want to talk to you about Officer Wise, Your Majesty,” Stinger starts.

She kind of figured. Yep, nasty it will be.

She steels herself and nods, urging him to go on. The sooner they get this over with, the better.

“It’s counterproductive to use someone of Caine’s qualifications to stand sentinel at doors,” as always, Stinger dives straight in without preamble. – One of the things she loves about him is that he never beats about the bush, never wastes Queen’s precious time, as so many others tend to. – “It’s like hammering in nails with a microscope.”

Huh, this is an unexpected topic. Jupiter can’t help but feel relieved.

“I think you should allow him on your escort team, Your Majesty,” Apini proceeds.

Oops, relaxed too soon.

The escort team accompanies Queen whenever she leaves the safety of her alcazar. Along with a medic specializing in first aid and toxicology – a monarch never knows when someone might attempt to poison them – and a highly skilled psychiatrist that makes sure that no means of neuro-linguistic programming or hypnosis are used to influence the sovereign, the team includes the most efficient, most trustworthy, most everything of her guards. Those are Queen’s actual bodyguards, who stay in close vicinity of her person at all times when she is outside.

Of course, that’s just the tip of the iceberg of Queen’s security detail, but those people are the best of the best. Getting a chance to be considered a candidate for the escort team by Commander Apini takes many years of impeccable service.

Or, evidently, being a mutant lycantant and his personal friend.

Queen is no way above favouritism herself, but Commander Apini has never condoned the practice. When it comes to Wise, however, he seems as biased as they get.

“Do you think Officer Wise is qualified for that?” the queen asks, eyeing the silent guard who seems not only mute but also deaf to their conversation if his expression is anything to go by. Jupiter feels a bit awkward to be talking at him.

She understands now why he’s here, why this whole audience was arranged over a matter that could be easily settled with a call to her i-comm or even a message to her sheath: “May I get Wise into your retinue?” “No.” That would have been short and simple. This, however, is meant to be complicated. Stinger’s ensured that it will be most difficult for her to dismiss his initiative: if Queen does so, she will have to reject Officer Wise to his face.

That manipulative old bastard!..

“He probably needs a little more time to gain the experience and reputation that a position of that
much responsibility requires,” Jupiter proceeds in a neutral tone, trying to sound impartial and inoffensive. What her politely worded objection is really saying is: “Are you kidding?! The guy hasn’t served a whole year yet, and started off his career with almost killing Royal Consort!”

“I have to disagree,” Stinger deflects firmly. “As Head of Your Majesty’s Royal Guard I guarantee that Officer Wise will live up to the requirements of the escort team.”

So, he’s putting his own good name and authority on the line to seek advantage for his friend. Again. Obviously, Stinger is resolved to make this conversation as hard on Jupiter as possible.

“Don’t you think Wise’s integration into the team might be – problematic?” she hedges.

Those guards are the best of the Private Security, which in itself is the cream of the Royal Guard; they are the elite of the elite, and they know it. They won’t take kindly to their Commander’s sudden protégé no matter how well qualified he is, especially with his track record of attacking an Entitled, being sent to the Deadlands for his crime, then, upon his new commission, promptly proceeding onto mauling Royal Consort. Gods, it’s crazy that Stinger keeps him in her guard at all!

And the integration is important. The key to the escort team’s successful functioning is its cohesion: it is a finely-tuned and well-oiled mechanism, each part of which performs its own role in perfect synergy with others. Introducing a foreign element to it might cause discord akin to the effect of throwing a wrench into the works.

And that might cost the queen her life.

“It will be problematic, yes,” Stinger admits grudgingly. However biased he might be about Officer Wise, Commander is not stupid. “However, I believe, the advantages will outweigh the possible – grinding of the gears, so to speak.”

So, Apini has no qualms of throwing his friend to the wolves. If Queen accepts Wise’s candidature, he’s in for a long and very lonely service.

That’s one weird friendship, right there.

Then again, it doesn’t look like the lycantant is integrating well in the Private Security, either. His attack on Finnick – who is well-liked by most of the guards – along with his chumming up with Commander do not do him any favours in that regard. Even Chris, who is friendly to everyone, always chatty and smiling, seems more reserved and formal around Officer Wise: he’s probably afraid that Wise will snitch him out to Stinger and there will be hell to pay for his breach of discipline.

“Jupiter,” the consort’s voice draws the queen out of her contemplation, “I don’t think it will do any harm. With Officer Wise’s special talents he will be useful out there. His ability to sniff out aggression before anyone has shown any visible signs of it or to detect the lies your interlocutors may be – and will be – telling,” he says in a sincere, earnest tone as he approaches the guard. “Besides,” Finnick grins, back to his – default – playful mode, “that means I will be seeing him around more. We’ll have to interact more closely now,” he drawls, slapping the lycantant’s nape in a sign of approval and the guard jumps a little, before he manages to catch himself.

If taken at face value, Finnick’s slap is a perfectly normal, friendly, bro gesture.

Except Royal Consort and Officer Wise are not – and never will be – bros.

Finnick beams innocently – too innocently – as his hand lingers on the other man’s neck, the thumb running over the corner of his jaw and caressing the earlobe. Then he slides his palm down – in a
slow, deliberate, *leisurely* manner – along the guard’s chest. By the time Finnick drops his hand to his side, the lycantant’s face has gone blotchy with stress, jaw muscles twitching, his whole demeanor screaming with tension.

Jupiter can barely hold back her wince, a feeling – all too well-known by now – of utter awkwardness itching under her skin. The whole interaction makes her squirm in her own skin, fighting an urge to leave the room. What the hell is Finnick doing, screwing her over with that highly *untoward* – on more levels than one – display in front of Stinger, no less? She averts her eyes from the embarrassing spectacle only to meet Apini’s furious glare. He locks his eyes with hers, as if to ask, “Are you allowing this⁈”

She gives him a tiny shrug of her shoulders.

That earns her *Uncle Stinger’s* disapproving pursed lips, which are so much worse than any of Commander Apini’s glowers, on any day. The thin line of his mouth tells her – while staying completely unmoving, – “Jupiter, I am disappointed with you. I’ve raised you better than that.”

Quite frankly, at the moment she’s disappointed with herself, too.

Jupiter feels suddenly grateful to Officer Wise for his being here. She has a distinctive feeling that if it wasn’t for his constraining presence, she would have to answer a lot of uncomfortable questions from his Commander right now. With cowardly relief she shoves the lackluster prospect to later – preferably never, if she’s lucky, - and hastily agrees to Apini’s proposition just for the chance to escape the room and drag her consort away from the guard.

Jupiter is not lucky.

Being the tenacious beast he is, Commander Apini wouldn’t leave the matter be. Of course he wouldn’t. *Of course.* As soon as Stinger manages to get the queen alone, he’s does not hesitate to unleash his righteous indignation on her.

“What the hell Odair is playing at?” he barks at her. “He’s always been handsy, but what I witnessed earlier was definitely bad touch territory. Since when he’s allowed to grope your guards?”

Oh, so Wise didn’t previously complain about the situation to Apini, neither as a subordinate to his commander nor as a friend to a friend, otherwise Stinger would know the answer already. What kind of friendship it is, anyway, when people don’t share crucial information about their lives with each other? What do they do when they get together, if not talk?

*Men.*

“Finn’s just being friendly,” Jupiter demurs, knowing perfectly well that Stinger is right and Finnick is wrong, yet feeling the paradoxical need to defend her consort all the more for it.

“I thought we had an anti-sexual harassment policy at court,” he grinds out.

“We do,” she affirms calmly. “I understand your concern for your subordinate, Stinger, but have you actually seen anything *sexual* back there?”

“Sexual or not, it was definitely harassment. Why do you let Odair accost Wise like that?”

“I do not *let* Finnick accost anyone.” – A blatant lie. – “Personally, I haven’t witnessed anything that would concern me enough to actually *forbid* him to approach Wise.”
“You’re not going to address the matter, are you?” Apini inquires, giving her a hard look. It’s not really a question; he knows the answer already.

She holds his glare, unwavering.

“Jupiter, you are usually the first to protect splices from any form of abuse. Why are you so determined to turn a blind eye in this case?” The accusation in his voice is unbearable.

“I don’t give a shit whether he’s a splice, an alien or a human!” she finally explodes. “He nearly killed Finn! So yes, I will turn a blind eye as long as it makes Finnick happy.”

“So what, you just gave Caine to Odair in recompense? To do whatever he wants with?”

Well, when put like that, it does sound wrong. Sordid. She feels a sudden urge to justify herself, to explain her inaction in the matter.

“Come on, Stinger, it’s Finn we’re talking about. He can be an exceptional ass sometimes, but he wouldn’t do any actual harm. He will probably just annoy the crap out of Wise for a while, then lose interest and move onto another, more willing target to try and seduce silly – you know Finnick,” Jupiter reasons.

“Yes, I know Finnick,” Apini grinds out, “probably better than you know him, or at least longer. People often do not conform to our expectations of them, even the people we think we know.”

“I almost lost him, Stinger,” Jupiter pleads. “Do you have any idea how terrifying that was? He nearly died, for gods’ sake; let him have some fun.”

“Fun?” Stinger’s so outraged Jupiter can’t help but reel back. “You call the public humiliation of someone who’s willing to protect you with his life ‘fun’?!!”

His blatant challenge spurs something dark and ancient come to life inside her, like a formidable primeval monster hiding at the back of a cave, unseen in the darkness, lurking yet not charging – until some stupid primitive man in a fur loincloth dares to poke at it with his toothpick of a spear.

“You want to talk about the splice’s rights? Let’s do that, shall we?” Queen offers icily; it’s not really an offer but an order. “Any and all rights can exist only while paired up with liability. What about Wise’s liability, huh? He was liable to die for the crimes he had committed, twice over,” she hisses, seething, and this time it’s Stinger’s turn to recoil. “Would you rather I had left him to his rightful punishment? Or maybe you’d prefer me to have been merciful and send him in exile? Don’t you dare to make this about the rights of splices in general. It’s only fair that Wise lost all his rights the moment I abused my power to lift the criminal liability off him, because you begged me to.”

Stinger immediately changes his tactics.

“Jupiter, please, Caine is my friend,” he implores, the obvious distress in his voice tugging painfully at the queen’s heartstrings. “I can’t just stand by and do nothing when I see him being treated like that. It’s not like I have any power to keep Odair at bay.”

The queen draws a long breath, trying to calm herself. She wouldn’t think twice to grant Stinger’s appeal if his interests were in conflict with someone – anyone – else’s but her consort’s. If pressed to choose whose side she’s on – like Stinger’s forcing her to do at the moment – she’ll always side with Finnick.

It’s not really a choice.
Yet she can relate to Stinger’s vehemently defending someone he cares about.

She’s doing exactly the same, after all.

“You can give your friend less shifts,” she suggests. “Post him away from our private quarters, someplace where he won’t catch Finnick’s eye. Or transfer him from the Private Security altogether.”

“I brought him here to keep you safe, not to hide him away from your boy toy,” Stinger grits out.

That man never knows when to stop.

“That’s enough,” Queen cuts him off, instantly incensed again. “Commander Apini, you will not insult my consort in my own alcazar. Or anywhere else, for that matter. If you want to protect your man, take action at your own end.”

“I want to protect Caine, but I want to protect you more,” Apini’s voice is earnest and tired.

“I’m sorry, Stinger,” she shakes her head, suddenly feeling as drained as he sounds. “I’m not going to intervene.”

Queen sticks to her decision.

However, she keeps a closer eye on her consort, since –

– Finnick is hers, and therefore her responsibility.

Whenever Odair gets too carried away with his newly found entertainment, Jupiter carefully distracts him or steers him away from Officer Wise while actively pretending to be oblivious to the situation.

See no evil, hear no evil, and all that.

Their nightly withdrawal to the private quarters is the worst. Why Wise is even still here? The queen agreed to his transfer to the escort team, what the hell is he doing standing guard? What is Apini thinking posting him at the worst spot possible?!

Jupiter can’t really cling to Finnick every time they walk through that hallway: it would be way too obvious an attempt to control her consort, and he does not appreciate the feeling of being controlled. It would be humiliating – for both of them – to let it show that she does not fully trust him.

Besides, she does.

Except around Wise.

So she just – sort of tentatively hovers.

On most nights she succeeds in doing the damage control.

Until one evening, already through the doorway, she glances back to see what’s holding Finn.

Up until this point, all Finnick’s gestures towards Officer Wise could be interpreted – misinterpreted – as amicable, non-sexual ones. If she squinted. Or better yet, looked away.

A hand sliding down the ass is fucking impossible to misinterpret.
Whatever Finnick might have done in the past, he never stooped to blatant molestation.

This is a disgrace.

There is no mistaking it for a friendly display, especially when she glances up to the lycantant’s face, blank as ever, yet pale as alabaster. For a beat, he meets her gaze, before looking away just as quickly. She’s pretty sure she reads fury in those eyes. His whole frame is bar taut, hands balled up into fists, yet firmly pressed to his sides. He’s clearly resolved not to respond to Royal Consort in any manner that might be construed as offensive, not even to protect himself.

It’s his restraint what breaks her own.

“Get off him,” she’s snarling at Finnick before she knows what she’s doing.

“I was hoping for something more along the lines of ‘Get him off’,” he smirks, yet steps away.

Why is he doing this? Why is he goading her – around a witness, no less? She absolutely hates doing this to Finn, especially in public.

“Consort Odair,” she starts in her official, cold, commanding voice, watching the playful grin slip from his face, “you will not approach Officer Wise in either verbal or physical fashion except for the occasion of imminent danger. From this moment onwards all your interactions will be dictated by and strictly limited to the court protocol. Slott,” she addresses the Chamber Presence, the artificial intellect of her alcazar, ubiquitous and all-seeing.

“Your Majesty?” Slott responds immediately.

“If you register any interaction between High Consort and Officer Wise that might constitute sexual harassment, immediately report personally to me.” Because she knows Finnick, knows he might feel tempted to disobey when she’s not looking.

It’s not like she would actually punish him for his disobedience, so better be safe than sorry.

“It will be done, Your Majesty,” Slott confirms.

“Now, Consort Odair, please, leave us.” Jupiter won’t make Finnick apologize; she’ll save him this indignity, at least.

Besides, Queen’s apology is worth much more than one of Royal Consort.

Finnick nods with an unfathomable expression – at least he does not look upset, there will be hell to pay for this as it is: a male ego is such a fragile thing, it bruises as easily as an overripe peach – and murmuring, “Your Majesty, Officer Wise,” pivots on his heel and disappears into the antechamber of their private quarters.

The queen turns to the guard, her throat burning with indignation and shame.

“Officer Wise, please, accept my sincere apologies for my consort’s inappropriate behaviour. I will make sure it will not happen again.”

“Your Majesty,” he exhalles almost inaudibly and the relief in his voice feels like he has not been breathing at all up to this point, expression of sheer gratitude on his face.

If anything, it makes her feel even worse. She hates herself for letting it go this far, for not having intervened earlier. He shouldn’t be fucking grateful for a chance to not be sexually assaulted in her
“Took you long enough,” Finnick grumbles as soon as the soundproof door seals itself behind Jupiter.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I thought I would have to fellate the guy before you’d step in,” Finnick smirks.

What.

“What. Wait, you wanted to be stopped?!”

“See, Jupiter, I’d much prefer being irresistible, which usually implies that people don’t resist me,” he emphasizes with a huff. “Do you think it was much fun to hit on someone who is so obviously revolted with me? Which, quite frankly, I can’t understand. I mean, it’s me, for gods’ sake! He must be outrageously straight and a dick about it, too.”

“Naturally, that’s the only possible explanation,” she snipes sarcastically. “Besides, it’s not him who’s been a dick. Seriously, Odair, why would you create a situation so humiliating for everyone involved, if you haven’t even been getting anything out of it?”

“Oh, I’ve gotten what I wanted out of it all right.” The smug look on his face tells her that he is indeed satisfied with the outcome of his actions. “You really still don’t get what I was doing, do you?”

“Well, would you care to elaborate, since I’m evidently too dense?”

“You didn’t trust Wise to control himself around me after the incident.” Finnick’s tone is solemn now, all hints of playfulness are gone. “Do you now?”

“After the stunt you’ve just pulled and he hasn’t bitten your head off? Hell, yes.” – The memory of the white-knuckled fists is still too vivid in her mind’s eye. – “It’s you I don’t trust around him anymore.”

“You doubted his loyalty,” Finnick proceeds, refusing to acknowledge her jab.

“He’s loyal to Stinger, I do not doubt that.”

“No, but you didn’t believe in his fealty to you, personally. Do you still think that he won’t be faithful to Queen, even without Stinger ordering him to?”

She recalls the overwhelming gratitude in the lycantant’s eyes – the gratitude he should not be feeling – and shakes her head.

“Well, then you have your answer why I did what I did,” Finnick states. “You should trust those who are there to protect you, Jupiter, not just pretend to be doing so. Trust cannot be faked. A moment of hesitation when he tells you to duck or get down in the midst of an attack might cost you your life.” – She can’t help but agree with him on that one. – "Besides,” he proceeds, “you were too edgy around him.”

“I was edgy because you made me edgy. And you kept making me edgy.”
“It had started before that. Remember that little chat you had with him on his first day here? His second first day?”

“That night, you didn’t close the door properly... You were eavesdropping!”

“Of course I was,” he admits, unapologetic. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have known just how worried and stressed you were. You tend to keep your troubles to yourself, which complicates my fixing them a lot,” Finnick observes with mild reproach. “It is my job to prevent you from stressing out, so I did what I had to do to resolve the situation.”

“By making me stress out even more,” she accuses.

“Jupiter, judging by Stinger’s determination and your reluctance to tell him to fuck off from time to time, Wise is here to stay. And that means decades, if he is lucky to survive that long. Imagine years of feeling apprehensive around someone that has to be this close to you. I know you, it would have driven you insane.” There’s sympathy and truth in Finnick’s words. “The process of rebuilding trust once it’s been broken right from the start – like between you two – takes an extremely long time. So I’ve schemed a little and compressed it for you. What’s more, I’ve ensured Wise’s allegiance personally to you, just like you wanted. Believe me, a rescue from being violated by a guy whom you detest but can’t say no to is pretty loyalty-inspiring.”

With numb dread, Jupiter realizes that Finnick sounds like he knows what he’s talking about. These days it’s easy to forget that he wasn’t always on the top of the social hierarchy. There was a long, long time when he had to unconditionally follow orders and regulations, submitting to subordination and those above him, just like Officer Wise does now. And, well… with all sirens being inherently attractive, the unsavoury scenario seems dauntingly probable.

She just desperately hopes that the guy Finnick couldn’t say no to wasn’t her.

Come to think of it, he did put up a lot of resistance to her hormonal younger self.

She thought he was just being a tease.

Maybe he wasn’t.

No, he must have known that she wouldn’t have insisted if she had realized she wasn’t wanted.

Then again, letting a royal know that they’re not wanted might cost a person their life. Or, at the very least, their whole career.

With effort, Jupiter sweeps the horrifying thought away. Finnick would have told her.

He would have.

Her consort rarely talks about his past, obviously preferring to live in the moment, while Jupiter – with all her curiosity and possessiveness – has so, so many questions about it. However, it’s not the time to voice her questions now. Maybe not ever. Those who want to leave their past in the past should be allowed to do so. Finnick’s life before they met belongs to him alone; she is not entitled to it.

“Finnick, I honestly don’t know what to think of your scam,” she tells him helplessly, slightly dazed with the sudden explanation to what seemed to be a straightforward conflict situation.

“Oh, come on. From now on, you trust Wise and he trusts you; it’s a double win,” Finnick proceeds. “So stop being such a sourqueen already.”
“Well, I guess I owe you a thank you…” she trails off, unsure.

“Willing to accept gratitude in kisses and blow jobs,” Finnick beams a beatific smile at her.
“Preferably the latter.”

She blows a raspberry at him and his demands. Jupiter may be appeased about his motivation and achieved results, but his methods still leave a lot to be desired.

“Finn, did you really have to be such an ass about it?” she grouses.

“That was the idea! I had to be a villain enough for you to seem a hero in comparison.” – She winces at his wording, she does not feel a hero in this situation, a vindictive enabler is the definition that comes to her mind instead. – “It’s my job to show you off in the best possible light. And if I sometimes did enjoy making the guy squirm, well…” Finnick’s eyes turn hard and unforgiving. “He had nearly killed me, had made me feel insufficient and useless at your protection. I do not appreciate being insufficient.”

“Petty revenge does not become you,” Jupiter mutters.

Doesn’t become either of us.

“Heh, as if I need anything to assist me in being the pinnacle of awesome.”

“You could have told me about your plan,” she complains. Then she wouldn’t be feeling such a fool right now.

“It wouldn’t have worked if I had. Back there,” he tilts his head at the direction they’ve just come from, “you were genuinely scandalized. Pretending doesn’t really work with lycantants, as you must know by now.”

“So how did you manage to pull it off, if you weren’t really interested in him that way? I’m pretty sure a splice like that would have smelled the lack of your, you know, interest.”

“Who said I wasn’t interested? The key to credible pretending is to be genuine about it. The guy’s a stud muffin and a good egg, what’s there not to like?”

“I thought you just said that you didn’t like him. Now you’re saying you do like him. Those are kind of contradictory statements.”

“I did not like what he had done to me, which no one would have in my place. It does not mean I don’t like what he is. That initial fuck-up aside, I think Stinger did a good job in bringing Wise into your guard.”

“Finnick,” she groans, “you and your surprises! What am I going to do with you?”

“Love me. Then admire me. Then love me some more. And did I mention blow jobs?”

“Seriously, though, don’t do it again. If this gets out, it’ll screw up with my efforts to protect splices from abuse. If I don’t practice what I preach, who would want to listen to my advocacy?”

“It won’t get out, I’ve been careful enough not to do anything inappropriate with witnesses around. And Caine has proven he’s good at keeping Queen’s secrets.”

“You owe him an apology, I think.”

“Hey, I can’t break my character this quickly. I will apologize. Eventually.”
“And by eventually you mean never.”

“Oh, you know me so well!”

Chapter End Notes

The ‘hop the bronco’ game is a joy: whether you come from it or just have a giggling fit, it’s pleasant either way. However, it’s very hard on the guy’s back, so the girl should use her thigh muscles to buffer the drops the best she can. Yes, it takes some fun out of the experience, but it prevents you from causing a long-term spine damage. A chiropractor’s bills are opposite to romantic. Please, take care of your partner’s health.

The chapter title is from the namesake single by Freddie Mercury.

The idea of ‘being morose together’ is stolen borrowed from Wolf in the House by JoeLawson, a great fic from Teen Wolf fandom. The term ‘sourqueen’ has been derived from the ‘sourwolf’ endearment from the same fandom. Derek is almost as good as Caine at being a tragic lone wolf)
Queen’s job is not what it’s made out to be.

It’s not about smiling and waving while looking pretty, or prancing at balls, or wearing fancy dresses and sparkling jewels.

At first, Jupiter’s PR team attempted to bully the young queen into doing more public appearances – the waving and smiling stuff. However, pretty soon she realized the futility of her efforts – since in reality the public has absolutely no say in who rules the kingdom; neither people care who their leader is as long as the said leader keeps the economy stable and let them live their lives in prosperity and peace. After that particular epiphany, Jupiter happily threw Finnick under the bus: he’d do much better at upholding Queen’s positive public image than she herself ever could. With her consort obligingly doing the charming-of-the-people bullshit, – even enjoying himself in the process, – Jupiter could devote most of her attention to keeping her kingdom functioning properly.

The frolicking at balls part isn’t that alluring, either. The balls and assemblies are political events where Queen has to deal with a lot of unpleasant people and masterfully evade dealing with many more unpleasant people. The glorified vanity fairs are in fact dick-measuring contests of literally cosmic proportions: venom and Machiavellian scheming camouflaged in dazzling glamorous wrapping. Honestly, Jupiter would gladly avoid them if she could.

Unfortunately, she can’t.

The new recurrence needs to rediscover the numerous connections Seraphi used to have and determine which of them need to be reestablished and which severed for good. The task is as dangerous as navigating a minefield, and about just as fun.

Now, onto the dazzling glamorous wrappings: fancy dresses and jewelry.

Queen’s clothes are simple and minimalistic, their cut is classic to the core: it’s only fashionable that becomes outdated. And she needs to stay timeless, considering how long she’s going to reign.

Jupiter can’t get frisky with the colour palette either: in public, she always wears the colours of the House of Abrasax; she is never allowed to forget that she is a walking, talking symbol.

As for jewelry, well…

When someone is poor, one simply can’t afford to wear jewels.

When someone is wealthy and influential, one has to wear them to show off their status to other sharks they deal with.

When someone is as powerful as Queen Jupiter Seraphi-Nova of the House of Abrasax, one can afford not to wear them: all those who matter are well-aware of the queen’s wealth, power and social standing anyway. And Jupiter is grateful for the opportunity, because royal jewelry is freaking heavy, all right? The gemstones should look impressive, and impressive-sized gems weigh like the freaking stones they are, not to mention the metal setting. Neither gold nor platinum, neither iridium nor rhodium are exactly light metals.
The only piece of jewelry Jupiter absolutely must wear is the Abrasax Smaller Crown – the bigger, ceremonial one, weighs like half a full-grown cat and twice a health hazard if put on someone’s head. The Smaller Crown is a modest diadem, an airy filigree of platinum and diamonds with twenty-five dangling pearls. Jupiter likes the idea that at least part of her crown was made by living beings: the gentle flesh – mantle, how very appropriately regal – of mollusks had been covering stray grains of sand with endless layers of mother-of-pearl for many, many years, creating unique and priceless iridescent drops.

Tears of the sea.

Not just the sea, though.

There are so many very real tears in the foundation of the Abrasax Empire.

All the symbolic weight aside, the Smaller Crown is light, as far as crowns go, but even that puts a considerable strain on the queen’s neck and can cause severe headaches if worn for a long period of time.

Within her alcazar Jupiter only puts it on to receive visitors and for important ceremonial proceedings. Although whenever she has to leave her palatial complex, the crown goes with her. While the glowing sigil on Jupiter’s wrist is the legal symbol of her royal power, one that serves as the signature and signet rolled into one, the crown is visible regalia of her august status, like a neon sign on top of her head saying, “Here comes a queen,” warning everyone around her to abide to the royal protocol.

Jupiter admits that carrying the thing on her head is necessary, but it doesn’t help the headaches.

So yeah, the jewels are more of a nuisance than anything else.

The deromanticized reality is that Queen’s job is not about glitter or glamour, it’s all about making tough decisions and taking responsibility for them. Jupiter tries hard not to think that the choices she makes influence lives of billions of people.

No pressure, no pressure at all.

Usually the process looks something like this –

Be handed a sheath to sign by one of her ministers or another.

Try to understand whether it is worth signing or not.

Consult an expert in the field. Be provided with some advice.

Consult another expert who hates the first one’s guts. Be provided with the opposite advice.

Feel utterly underqualified for the task of decision making on such a grand scale.

Bang your head on the nearest flat surface.

Curse Seraphi for fucking up the millennia of her experience and knowledge.

Realize that Seraphi wouldn’t have done it if she had had any other choice. No one willingly chooses to die, especially not the Entitled.

Take a few calming breaths.
Do some independent research.

Try to come up with a compromise solution just to get over and be done with the fucking problem already.

Gods, how Jupiter wishes she wasn’t such a control freak. She lets her ministers deal with the lesser issues on their own, of course, otherwise she would have drowned in all the information, but there are always matters that seem important enough for Queen to get involved personally. Jupiter knows that she needs to do more delegating: she’s always swamped with reports and projects awaiting for her verdict, and so, so tired of working all waking hours – as well as some of those she should be spending sleeping. Her problem with delegating more is that she has no idea whom can truly trust. Everyone around her has their own agenda.

_Everyone._

Well, maybe except for her family. Finnick, Kiza and Stinger are the only three people in the universe Queen has implicit confidence in; they are the last bastion of Jupiter’s sanity.

She loves them all the more for that and lets them make their own decisions.

Sometimes, she even lets them make decisions _for her._

Speaking of the decisions made for her –

Occasionally, they work out better than her own.

For instance, Stinger’s lycantant protégé proves to be _indispensable_ at the royal escort team.

There are no irreplaceable personnel at court, except maybe for Royal Consort and Head of the Royal Guard himself, but some people fit at their position as if they were made for it, their individual talents and capabilities turning out to be exactly what the job requires.

Then again, that’s the whole reason why splices are being produced. (Well, that and cheap forced labour.)

However, Queen would never have thought she would be using a straightforward military splice not so much as a guard, but as a walking lie detector. Following Finnick’s advice, Jupiter starts to exploit the lycantant’s ability to sense lies to its maximum. Since Queen can’t hook everyone she speaks with to lie-detecting machinery – _unfortunately_! – having a remote one comes in handy. Every time someone tries to feed a load of bullshit to Queen, she hears a low hum on her i-comm, quiet enough to be inaudible to anyone else in the room, and can tailor her response accordingly.

Officer Wise has the valuable advantage of looking nothing more but a primitive fighting machine – well, a highly advanced machine for the primitive purpose of fighting – so the idea of his being anything else but that does not enter anyone’s mind; more often than not Queen’s interlocutors do not even notice a mere _splice_, let alone pay him any attention. Therefore they don’t grow suspicious of his presence and don’t get their guard up.

Queen always knew that people lied to her, but she had no idea just _how freaking often_ that happened.

The discovery is a little sickening.

And not a little disheartening.
Soon Jupiter starts keeping Wise at hand in her own alcazar, too, because her own courtiers are not any less prone to deceit than the representatives of other Royal Houses.

Before long, Queen is exploiting the hell out of Officer Wise’s specific talent.

On one occasion, when Jupiter sees a lycantant in the entourage of Crown Prince of the House of Siath, she smiles knowingly to herself, scrutinizing the splice with detached curiosity. So that’s how a typical individual of the species looks like! In the process of scrutinization her curiosity is getting less and less detached. The specimen is taller and leaner than Officer Wise, has darker hair, darker skin, darker eyes – damn, brown eyes have always been her weakness!.. He looks intimidating. And intimidatingly beautiful.

Best-looking piece of lie-detecting equipment she’s ever seen.

Queen swallows the non-existent drool – her throat suddenly feels dried-up – and beams at the prince, nodding her head in a heartfelt greeting.

With both parties equally equipped, there will be no vulgar lies at these negotiations. Just a lot of sophisticated truth-warping.

Oh, this will be fun!

The challenge keeps her smiling all the way through the meeting. To confuse the opponent, she casts glances at the stellar sight behind the prince’s back at random intervals throughout their conversation. Those brown eyes, no doubt, make her heart rate spike regardless of whatever she’s saying at the moment. She’s aware what equipment calibration is, and does not mind throwing a proverbial wrench into the highly-tuned works that are the splice’s analyzation system of body responses, making sure the non-Wise lycantant leaves more leeway for observational error while processing her reaction than he should.

She also inserts a few tiny, meaningless lies here and there, lies that do not serve her purpose in any way, other than confusing the splice by possibly being something that’s untrue.

She’s pretty sure the Siath’s lycantant does not alert the prince of her lies once.

When halfway through their conversation she hears Wise’s quiet hum, she raises a questioning eyebrow at the prince only to get an apologetic smirk in response, as if saying, “Well, it was worth a try.” It makes her preen inwardly, feeling like she’s won some kind of a dick-measuring contest: ‘my lie detector on two legs is better than your lie detector on two legs.’ Even if the other one looks better, her own ‘device’ has higher sensitivity or analyzing capacity, or both, and therefore is more efficient. It’s all that matters.

In the end, Queen is completely satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations. The House of Siath and the House of Abrasax’s representatives part on friendly terms, – well, as friendly as any terms can be in politics.

On the way back the queen is in high spirits; Jupiter’s hand is itching to clap her lycantant’s shoulder to show her appreciation. Recalling his interactions with Finnick, however, she withholds from making any physical contact. No need to stress the guy out with her attention, too, no matter how innocent it might be. Instead she says – loud enough for those around them to hear; hopefully, it would help to boost the newbie’s prestige amongst the escort team, – “Good job, Officer Wise. I’m...
very pleased with your input today.”

“At your service, Your Majesty,” he responds in full accordance with the royal protocol, bowing his head – or maybe ducking in self-consciousness – but there’s a definite tinge of delighted surprise in his voice.

She beams at him.

Stinger’s favouritism is paying off. Not that she will be admitting to the old badger that his choice might not be such a disaster after all – unless she’s really hard-pressed. Confessing that someone made a good decision while you were actively resisting it – especially to that someone’s face – is so not fun.

“I let you out of my sight for a day only to find out that you ogled a lycantant on the enemy’s side. Don’t you have your own to ogle?” Finnick teases upon her return.

“First off, you could have come with me instead of going about your business. Actually, I’d have strongly preferred that,” Jupiter grumbles resentfully. “Second off, how do you even know that?! You were not there!”

“I have my sources,” he smirks, putting on a mysterious face.

Nothing in Jupiter’s alcazar stays a secret from Finnick for long, if he puts his mind to it. He has neither problems with, nor qualms about charming – or blackmailing – the information he wants out of the alcazar personnel and other inhabitants, from maids to ministers. Seems like he has an informant in her escort team, too.

Where is privacy when she needs it?!

“Speaking of ogling your own lycantants,” Jupiter starts in a clipped tone, “Just earlier, I saw you contemplating Wise’s ass. Again. What the hell, Odair?!” – The best defense is a good offense, after all. – “You promised to stop harassing the guy!”

“Sorry, sorry, I swear I’m not doing it on purpose!” To his credit, Finnick does look contrite. “I just can’t help it sometimes. He’s – kind of hard not to look at.”

“Wow, you really are taken with him, aren’t you? I knew you didn’t mind guys, but I had no idea you were this much into them.”

Now Jupiter just feels confused. So far she’s been convinced that females are Finnick’s sex of preference. For all his flirting – both in the line of duty as Royal Consort and for purely recreational purposes – in all their time together Finn has never acknowledged this openly having a genuine interest in a man. Nor has he ever indicated that he finds her lacking certain body parts.

Then again, maybe his partiality for anal and blow jobs should have been a tip-off.

Nah, if it was an indication of anything, it was an evidence of Finnick’s being a guy.

“Remember all those legends about sirens luring sailors to their death?” Odair smirks.

“Uh-huh,” she hums, unsure what he is driving at.

“Well, in the olden days, all sailors were men. Having a woman on board a ship was actually
perceived as bad luck. Which it probably was, at least for the poor girl, considering how blue-balled all those men must have been.”

Jupiter frowns, “Shall I be worried about you and Wise?”

“I promised I would stay away from him and I will. Can’t have him thinking Queen’s orders can be disobeyed, can we?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Why would you be worried, then?” For once, she’s managed to perplex Finn.

“You know, jealousy and stuff,” she supplies airily.

“You should never do jealousy, Jupiter,” her consort replies, serious to the point of gravity all of the sudden. “It is a vicious parasite that disintegrates you from within, contaminating your whole life in the process. Jealousy is pointless when you don’t have a reason for it, and even more pointless when you do. Why hurt yourself further once you’re already hurt?”

“Somehow your tirade does not make me feel relieved,” Jupiter grouses. “I wonder why.”

“I like Wise, I admit it freely. That’s why I’m doing my best to stay away from him, for all of our sakes. Not sure what to do about the scent, though.”

“Ugh, the poor guy. Even when you don’t do anything, he feels harassed because you smell horny around him. I accept one single splice into my Guard and so many problems follow. Had I known what it would entail, I would have told Stinger to shove it in the first place.”

“Ooh, I’d love to see the old man’s face if you ever told him that in those exact words! However, in Wise’s case, he was right. Wise is useful,” Finnick points out. “You feel more relaxed, more confident when he’s around.”

“True, but I also feel much more worried about flatulence-inducing foods and I love me some kidney beans!”

Finnick guffaws. “You don’t seem to worry about that when it’s me who suffers the consequences!”

“You’re a different matter, we live together. You don’t seem too self-conscious when I catch you peeing into the washbasin, either. And you have a urinal for that!”

“Hey, that way I can relieve myself while brushing my teeth! I’m saving precious time! Your consort is being more efficient and you give him grief for that, how is that fair?” Finnick protests.

“That’s not what I was going to give you grief for this time, quit sidetracking me! We were discussing your lusting after the guy I had specifically forbidden you to lust after. Finnick, sexual harassment should not be tolerated,” she states forcefully. “So stop oozing indecent pheromones around the lycantant with that super nose of his!”

“It’s not like I can control my scent!”

“Gods, Odair, you’re a grown-ass man. Deal with your horniness and fuck off from the guy, once and for all, you freaking creep!”

“Would you care to help me deal with my horniness?” Finnick waggles his eyebrows, his hand sneaking up to undo the fastening of her dress, insinuating inside and splaying itself between her
shoulder blades.

“Ugh, Finn, you’re such a burden to bear,” Jupiter grumbles, a delicious shiver at the contact assuaging her anger. “Never thought Queen’s duties would include protecting my subjects from accostment with my own body. Come on, let’s see what can be done about that horniness of yours.”

She might as well take full advantage of her consort’s crush.

“Do you imagine him when you’re with me?”

For a moment, a guilty expression fleets across Finnick’s face. “I don’t really have the brain capacity to imagine things while having sex. Too busy feeling. Although sometimes I might get, um, inspired prior.”

He sounds so reluctant in his confession that she can’t help but snort. “It’s fine, you know, as long as I get to enjoy the process. Your mind is yours, I can’t control it. Nor do I want to. Besides, maybe imagining you two together will get me inspired, too,” she smirks.

“That’s – that’s good,” Finnick starts uncertainly, as if having some inner struggle with himself. “If you start reeking of arousal around him, the guy might get too distracted. You do not want your guards distracted at their job, do you?”

“So, you are allowed to have hots for Wise and I am not?” she laughs. “That’s discrimination, right there!”

“Your mind is yours, I can’t control it,” he repeats her words right back at her. “Although, I must admit, I sometimes want to,” he divulges with a bashful smile. “It is all right by me if you let your imagination boost your libido. In fact, I am all up for that, sometimes literally,” he shoots her a mercurial smirk before proceeding in a careful, thoughtful tone, “Just, keep in mind that the guy has some mighty nose on him, and recently he has been traumatized in that respect. What is a joke for Queen, might be perceived as a genuine threat by a splice. Or a demand to comply with your desires.”

“Says the guy who harassed Wise for months.”

“Look, I… I am not proud of my methods, but they work,” Finnick counters, pauses, then adds softly, “Although there is really nothing fun in hurting those who cannot protect themselves from you. Especially not in the most personal, most private way. Never forget that.”

“If you’re implying that I somehow might become a rapist somewhere down the road, Odair, do think again,” she tells him, unamused.

“Just be aware of your power, always. It’s easy to get used to everyone’s immediate compliance, to grow self-indulgent and tyrannic. If I – or Stinger, or Kiza – don’t keep reminding you of the dangers power holds, no one else will.”

“All right, all right, knock it off with the sermon,” she huffs, throwing her hands up. “Your Wise is safe with me, oh Great Protector of the Downtrodden!”

“Shut up, oh Mighty Leader. Now, you’ve mentioned something about imagining me with him. Does it mean I might interest you in watching some gay porn?”

“Finnick, really? You’ve just lectured me on the dire perils of my imagination.”
“That’s not at all what I have said! Imagination entails no perils whatsoever; our actions, however, do. Feel free to imagine me with anyone you like. I will look fabulous while being paired up with Stinger,” he supplies, grinning evilly.

“Finnick, yuck!” she swats at him, giggling with surprise and mild disgust.

“Besides, I want to see you squirm while watching awkward porn.”

“I’m Queen, I can afford my porn to not be awkward.”

“Now, where’s the fun in that?!”

Queen Jupiter Seraphi-Nova and her entourage are the first royal delegation to arrive at the festivities organized by the House of Urio to celebrate the birth of the heir apparent.

As they are led away from their clipper and into the sprawling bowels of the Urio’s main alcazar, the escort team automatically arranges itself into the standard formation around the queen. Suddenly Officer Wise, who is walking a few steps ahead of her, halts in his tracks and visibly tenses, smelling the air. An instant later he’s already activated his grav boots and is flying back to their clipper, taking the startled queen along with him.

Two of her human guards do not respond as quickly and die under the debris of the explosion.

Whether their normal, un-enhanced reaction failed them, or they had momentary doubts, reluctant to follow the newcomer’s lead, it does not matter now – the people are dead.

On the way back to her alcazar, Jupiter locks herself up in her rooms and weeps quietly for Björn and Steve. She remembers them being around ever since she was a girl. The thought of never seeing them again makes her insides ache; she knows this kind of pain will never be undone.

No one gets back from the dead.

When they arrive, Finnick is already waiting at the landing pad, his lips pale and eyes tight. He yanks Jupiter into a bone-crushing hug; that’s when her crying starts in earnest. Having someone die because of you is a horrendous feeling.

When her sobs turn into full-blown hysterics, choking her on every desperate, erratic inhale, Finnick carefully wraps his hand around her throat, squeezing it. It’s neither threat nor foreplay, it’s a gesture of reassurance: ‘You can give up the control of the situation to me, I will help you to get through this’.

Her breathing instantly becomes slower and shallower, her body reflexively controlling the amount of oxygen infiltrating the lungs. Her brain purges itself of everything – including the shock and the grief – but the immediate task of inhaling and exhaling. Eventually her breathing evens out, bringing with it a temporary relief of calm.

The grief is still there, but the panic isn’t. Queen can be functional once again.

Royal Consort keeps his hand on the small of her back all the while she addresses the nation, showing her people that their Sovereign is alive and well, downplaying the incident as much as possible, a serene mask of majestic dignity on her face, her blood a thick cocktail of stress-suppressing drugs.
After that’s been dealt with, Finnick takes her to Havet, the royal stronghold of Jupiter’s kingdom.

When she ascended to Seraphi’s throne, Jupiter turned the planet she grew up on into her own personal sanctuary. Upon learning the things that had been kept from her during her childhood and adolescent years, Jupiter had a strong feeling Queen would need a place to escape to from time to time, taking refuge from the harsh realities of the ruthless world she now lived in.

Havet’s exosphere is under impenetrable surveillance by the military, the Royal Guard patrolling the stratosphere, double-checking on them. The planet itself has no human life, inhabited only by throngs of keepers – an alien race from the Diorite System genetically repurposed into servants and guards rolled into one – that control all the dry land and sirens who make sure the seas and oceans are safe. No one can infiltrate Havet, and the only instant transportation Gate to the planet’s surface is situated at the heart of Queen’s private quarters in her alcazar.

Her childhood home is the only place in the whole universe where Jupiter feels truly safe.

Once there, Finnick does not try to distract her with sex: they both know it wouldn’t work. Instead, he lets her sit on the beach in silence and stare at the ocean for as long as she feels compelled to, holding her close.

“They died, Finnick. They died.”

“You could have died, too,” he tells her, his fingers digging reflexively into her belly. His hand is shaking. “I could have lost you. When Stinger told me...” His breath catches and for a moment he seems lost for words. He shakes his head, fighting it off. “Thank fuck Apini dragged that lycantant into your Guard! Why are you being so stubborn, refusing to allow splices into your escort team?” He sounds angry and exasperated. “They’d be much more efficient at protecting you. Admit it, they are better than humans.”

“I’m not saying they aren’t.” she responds, tired: she had this conversation with Stinger many times before. “But I am Queen, Finnick. People follow me, they mimic me. What I do, or say, or wear, or who I surround myself with, becomes a fashion. I do not want slavery to be fucking fashionable.”

“If it hadn’t been for Wise, you would have died,” he points out grimly. “Humans are just not enough!”

“Yes, I had commissioned those humans and they were not enough. It’s my fault they are dead. I killed them, Finnick.”

“Oh, no, don’t you dare! You didn’t put that bomb out there. You just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shit happens. It’s just one of the risks of your job, but it’s not – your – fault.”

It still feels like it is.

When Jupiter is too exhausted to hold herself upright, Finnick guides her back to the house and lies down on their bed, bringing her with him. He flings his arm to the side, inviting her to rest her head on his shoulder, his steady heartbeat better consolation than any words. He lets her curl to his side, tucking her numb face into his warm skin. As talkative as Finnick usually is, he does not speak.

He simply lets her be.

He does not let her be alone.

His hand comes to stroke her arm – slowly, soothingly, a measured rhythm that her distressed mind
eventually follows into oblivion.

As it turns out, the assassination attempt was not even aimed specifically at Queen Jupiter Seraphi-
Nova, or the House of Abrasax at large; it was just a random antiroyalists’ attack. The bomb had
been set to kill the first delegation that went past it, no matter who they were. Those who had
organized the bombing did not care if they killed Jupiter or any other royal as long as it killed
someone of the blue blood.

They did not care how many others the explosion would take along with the intended victim.

Completely random, innocent others, just there in the line of duty.

Collateral damage.

For Jupiter, they were people. The men that were around her whole life, keeping her safe even when
she had been unaware what they were doing. Taking care of her. She grew emotionally attached to
them; she shouldn’t have, but she did.

It feels like she lost family members.

She has to keep her mourning secret, though: Queen cannot let the public know how much her two
lost guards meant to her – it would just endanger those who are left more than they already are. Her
enemies mustn’t be allowed to find out that they can actually wound her though her guards. A
member of the Royal Guard, especially while off duty, is much easier target to eliminate than Queen
herself.

On top of that, she must conceal that the antiroyalist attack has been successful, for it has instilled
fear in Queen. If you fear the terrorists, the terrorists win. That is the whole point of terror.

So she mans up and does not cut down on her public appearances, visits or audiences. She accepts
the House of Urio’s profuse apologies for failing to provide the suitable security for their guests with
good grace, gritting her teeth and thinking ‘Careless fools!’ Such a thing couldn’t have happened in
her own alcazar, not while paranoid Stinger is in charge.

Commander Apini offers to replace the lost bodyguards with lycantant splices. Queen thinks on it,
examines how she feels about Officer Wise and discovers that her mind actively rebels against seeing
him die, too. She does realize, though, that she needs someone more efficient for her security than
humans. In the end, she decides on sargons, who are just as quick as lycantants, but more durable
and have less acute sense of smell.

She hopes the reptiloids will be alien enough for her not to grow attached to them.

Easier to lose.

Jupiter might put her fearless face on in public, yet she wakes up at nights with a startled gasp from
the stifling feeling of someone sinister chasing at her heels, with no escape in sight. She wakes up,
and still there’s no escape. Finnick stirs, sensing her being wide awake by his side, mutters sleepily a
senseless and comforting ‘It’s okay, it’s gonna be okay’, and spoons her with his warm and relaxed
body. She wills herself to thaw into it and fall sleep again.

When panic overwhelms Queen outside the sanctuary of her private quarters, where there’s no
leeway for losing her composure, she casts a pleading glance at her consort and he takes her hand, surreptitiously squeezing her fingers with enough force to hurt, the slight physical pain relieving the emotional – much greater one – within, fear ebbing away as her body reflexively relaxes.

Without her having to ask, he starts sticking around much more, neglecting his own duties in order to just be there for her. Jupiter hates feeling weak and needy, but what she hates more is the crippling guilt mixed with fear and grief that overwhelm her at most unfortunate moments, making her breath catch and her voice falter. *Making her vulnerable.* So her fingers extend as if on their own volition seeking the comfort of Finnick’s strong hand.

He makes sure it is there to hold.

In most kingdoms, orders and medals are a cheap way for a government to say thank you to their heroes without actually loosening the purse strings of the state; they are just pretty baubles to be worn self-consciously on special occasions and gather dust somewhere in a closet for the rest of time. Sure, the state awards have a great deal of honour attached to them, but what does that achieve besides stroking the recipient’s ego? The ego-stroking can get you far, but one can’t pay the medical bills with honour, esteem won’t settle your mortgage, appreciation and respect won’t pay your rent or feed your family.

Queen Jupiter would rather her kingdom’s heroes were well-fed, that’s why all the Crown’s awards have certain amounts of money attached to them – the higher the award, the heftier the payment.

The Order of Highest Royal Gratitude, however, is a different matter entirely. If you’re awarded with it, it means that you have done something so significant for The Crown that your deed – like saving the Sovereign’s life, for example – is considered priceless and the Crown is willing to grant you something priceless in return. It can get you something otherwise unobtainable: a transplantation of a vital organ – or a restoration of your own – without any lists or risky waiting, an admittance for your children to the best universities there are, a pardon for a crime, even an additional lifetime through RegeneX rejuvenation procedure.

For a splice, it can mean a complete surgical modification to make them look like a pure human and a consequent life of one – life free of servitude, free of rightlessness, free of discrimination.

“Officer Wise, is there anything the Crown can do for you to reward you for saving Queen’s life?” Jupiter asks at the Investiture ceremony, following the standard protocol for the event.

*Ask for a way out, while you still can. Sooner or later this job will get you killed, too.*

Officer Wise looks completely composed, not at all overwhelmed by the immensity of the proceedings. It’s his chance to transform his whole life, a chance very few humans – let alone splices – ever get. Jupiter knows for sure that many of those present at the ceremony are choking on envy right now: the royal court draws in men of ambition, people who know exactly what they want from life and from their careers. Yet the guard doesn’t look pleased or proud, or even content, as Queen witnessed others look in his place. If anything, he seems a little lost, as if he does not understand why he’s here, being proclaimed a hero just for doing his job.

It’s the best sort of people that get perplexed when their actions are being rewarded.

That only makes Queen want to do something for him even more.

*Ask for a way out of this. Let me give you a happier life.*
“Thank you for the honour, Your Majesty, but at the moment I have everything I could wish for.” His voice is a bit hoarse with uneasiness, yet his tone is firm and decided.

Damn it. You’ve saved my life, you idiot, why won’t you let me save yours?!

It’s not uncommon, however, for the recipient to postpone the act of accolade for the time when they truly need it. It’s way too rare an opportunity to be treated lightly.

“The Promise of Royal Gratitude will stand for as long as I rule or as long as you live, whichever ends first. You can request it to be redeemed at any moment, unless your immediate duty dictates otherwise.”

**Hope you’ll get smart sooner than you get dead.**

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

As much as Jupiter resents Wise’s choice, as Queen she is relieved that he has chosen to stay. She feels safer with him around.

She finds herself having to stop herself from asking Stinger to give the lycantant a few extra shifts. The guy works hard enough as it is.

Then again –

When Stinger offers, she does not decline.

(Finnick cashed in his own Promise of Royal Gratitude he’d gotten for saving Jupiter’s life in the last-ditch attempt to get her to try anal – yep, that’s Finnick for you – after she had been adamantly refusing him for years.

The queen knew *for certain* that this particular favour wasn’t on the list of possible acts of accolade, yet she agreed because she was impressed by the surreal silliness of the request. To give up something that can change your life for *that*?! She just had to experience it to find out *why*.

Jupiter had always been a curious girl.

In the end, the experience turned out to be indeed life-changing, although more for her than for Finnick himself. Never in her life was Jupiter happier about her consort’s steamrolling ways. Why the hell had she resisted for so long? They could have been doing it so much sooner!)

**Chapter End Notes**

*If by any chance someone is interested to see what Jupiter’s Smaller Crown looks like, google Russian Beauty Diadem by Viktor Nikolayev. I had a chance to see the thing with my own eyes, and I must say, out of all the treasures of Russia’s Diamond Fund it*
left the most lingering impression.

Here’s the link, but I’m not sure if it will work: http://www.gokhran.ru/en/diamond-fund/experimental-lab/portfolio/russkaya-krasavitsa/index.phtml

A completely random enraged shout-out: They banned YouTube in our country, can you believe it?!! First it was Tumblr, now YouTube… WTF, people?!! If AO3 is next, I don’t know what I’ll do… If you’re not getting any updates in the future, please, know that it’s not my fault.
When Head Spymaster demands an urgent private audience with Queen, she knows something is very, very wrong.

Last time he did that Jupiter had to turn one of her ladies-in-waiting into RejeneX juice for espionage.

The girl was one of those Queen actually talked to, too.

He steals into the room – ever an ominous harbinger, pale like a ghost, his black robes a stark contrast against his deathly pallor – and bows deeply.

“Greetings, Your Majesty,” his voice comes out like a hiss. He has grey hair, long, thick and lush despite his age; his face is etched with deep lines that were put there not so much by the years lived but by all the scheming and plotting he’s done over them. His watery-gray eyes, rimmed in red, slither along Jupiter’s frame, making her skin crawl.

Whenever their paths cross, Queen has Spymaster Wormtongue’s undivided attention fixed on her with some kind of uncanny fascination, which sets her fight or flight response on edge. Finding herself the focus of Spymaster’s gaze feels like she’s a rabbit being mesmerized by a snake. Their interactions always leave her unsettled and somehow sullied; that is why she strongly prefers meeting him in the company of Royal Consort: with him around, Head Spymaster creeps her out a bit less.

Unfortunately, Finnick is away for a few days, representing Queen at some charity event or other – or did he mention an intergalactic health care conference? – honestly, by this point, she has lost track of his innumerable official engagements. Gods, how she wants him to stick around a bit more!

Neediness, however, is not a good trait in a person. So she mans up to the fact that Finnick will not return until tomorrow morning and postponing an urgent audience when it’s Head Spymaster who requests it might be very unsafe. Who knows what’s lurking out there, threatening the Crown’s interests this time? Jupiter has to face Wormtongue alone.

She’s pretty sure that’s exactly the way he planned their meeting.

However, the queen demanded that Commander Apini put Officer Wise in today’s bodyguard escort. The door to the Green Drawing Room, where all her top secret audiences are held, is not lycantant-proof, so he will hear if she speaks loud enough. It’s not like she’s afraid of Head Spymaster, just – to be on the safe side.

Wormtongue does his job – excels at it, really: he’s brilliant at what he does, ever-vigilant, ever-cunning – not for the money his high position provides. His austere lifestyle is well-known at court and often ridiculed – in secret, of course, no one wants to make an enemy as formidable as Head Spymaster. The man apparently does not care for earthly possessions or even comfort. It is power that makes Wormtongue tick. Queen prefers to think that is the only reason why he highly values her personal appreciation and praise. Eerily so: a few kind words, a more-than-lukewarm smile, a slightly deeper nod, a brush of her hand on his shoulder are enough of a reward for him.

His non-monetized loyalty makes him a very valuable asset.
It also might make him very dangerous, if treated wrongly.

“I am aggrieved to inform Your Majesty that I received some news that Queen might find distressing,” he bows deeply with the expression of an utter concern on his face, his sibilant voice shockingly sympathetic. It makes her tense up reflexively.

“Well?” The queen steels herself for whatever is coming next, her expression carefully blank.

“I am afraid Royal Consort Odair has committed treason.”

A laugh bursts out of her, startled and fleeting like a panicked game bird, spooked out of the undergrowth by beaters, taking a desperate break for the sky only to be shot down a moment later.

Jupiter thought she was prepared to hear anything, but that… That doesn’t make any sense.

“Is this a joke?”

“No, Your Majesty, it is not. Unfortunately, I am very serious.”

Of course he is. She doesn’t believe Wormtongue has a smidgeon of humour within him.

She doesn’t believe Wormtongue, full stop.

Head Spymaster is envious of Finnick – so many people are – because the consort has power over Queen, manipulating her actions and prompting her decisions. And Jupiter is fine with it, because she knows Finn, knows he is intelligent and provident and decent. Wholesome. None of his advice so far has been anything but sagacious, none of his initiatives anything but useful.

So she is fine with it – and many people aren’t. The power Finnick wields is based less on his position – Royal Consort’s post does not imply that much authority – and more on Queen’s willingness to support all his proposals and validate all his decisions, no questions asked, and this is not the first attempt to undermine her trust in him.

Jupiter stiffens, looking directly into the delator’s colourless eyes, and grits out with as much ice as she can master, “I will be very disappointed if you are making an accusation like that without irrefutable evidence, Spymaster.”

“Consort Odair has been leaving the alcazar in secret to meet with a lady that is not Your Majesty. The nature of their relationship does not leave any room for doubt. Odair has broken the oath of loyalty to Your Majesty that he sworn when he accepted the position of Royal Consort. According to the law, that constitutes treason.” His voice sounds matter-of-fact, but there’s a hint of some emotion she can’t decipher. “I have the agents’ reports and holographic footage to confirm their affair. If Your Majesty would allow?..”

All Jupiter can do is nod mutely.

Oh, the holo evidence has been filmed and edited masterfully. It’s inescapable and devastating. She takes one glance at Finnick beaming at the woman – his other woman – with his warm, genuine, heartfelt smile – and she’s convinced. The way he looks at that girl… Jupiter knows that look. It is the way she looks at Finnick. This is not just a random affair, not a simple bit on the side, this is –

This must be how a frozen fish feels like when it’s being gutted.

She stares at the projection on the wall, shocked into unblinkingness, taking in the way Finnick breathes the girl’s name – Annie – and how her face lights up in response. The girl is young, oh
gods, so young, and Jupiter recalls how she and Finnick met, when they met, and maybe her being older doesn’t do it for him anymore –

She can do young, she can –

Fuck, no. She is not taking RegeneX age-reversal procedure until she’s fully exhausted her body’s limit for this lifetime. A fucked-up kink of the unfaithful motherfucker is so not worth the innumerable lives – however nameless – that it takes to fill a single rejuvenation bath.

Besides, it’s not a simple matter of age. Things like that are never this straightforward.

“Your Majesty, I am deeply saddened to be the bearer of such unpleasant tidings.” Wormtongue has the gall to sound commiserating.

Jupiter ‘s mind recoils from both his sympathy and his news, desperate to escape this new and horrible reality, pretend to have never learnt the exposé. But she’s not your ordinary wife who has an option to simply ignore her husband’s infidelity for a while to give herself some time to come to her senses and gather her wits a little… She’s Queen and she has to deal with it.

Right. Now.

She expects to feel furious at Finnick, jealous, hurt, expects to feel something –

But there’s nothing but emptiness in her chest, a terrifying hollow gaping like an open wound that is so recent it hasn’t started bleeding yet. She knows that the pain will hit soon enough, devastating and ruthless, incapacitating her, so she must act quickly, while she still can.

She squeezes her eyes shut and waves to Slott to stop the holo, the images she’s just seen still vividly imprinted on her brain.

“How long has it been going on?” she forces through her clenched-up throat.

“According to my sources, more than a year, closer to two years, Your Majesty.”

Two years.

Two.

Years.

She fails to wrap her head around that.

Later. She will process it later.

Why does she unexpectedly feel dizzy? Where did this sudden urge to retch come from?

It shows on her face, apparently, as she hears Spymaster make some kind of soothing noise and offer quietly, ingratiatingly, “Your Majesty, I can take care of this. Queen does not have to bother herself.”

That has the effect of a cold shower on her, instantly sobering her up. Oh, she knows exactly how Wormtongue will take care of this: he’s frightfully efficient in the matters of this kind. She will never see Finnick again.

Then again, it might be a relief –

The person she held dearest has been deceiving her for years.
What else might he have been lying about?

She cannot trust him.

Is he even safe?

– but she’s not ready. Not yet.

She resolutely shakes her head at Wormtongue.

“If Your Majesty allows her humble servant to give Queen some advice…” he prompts.

“I’m listening.”

“It might be dangerous to keep Consort Odair around. One who is capable of backstabbing the people who trust him metaphorically, is capable of backstabbing them literally as well, if appropriately motivated.”

“Once a traitor, always a traitor,” she mutters, not sure if she means Finnick or Wormtongue.

“Exactly, Your Majesty.”

This time, she distinguishes the well-disguised emotion in Spymaster’s voice: it’s triumph.

At that very moment, Queen clearly sees today’s audience with him for what it really is: an all-in, a gamble of a lifetime. It’s not about concern for Sovereign’s safety or the Crown’s best interests; it is about clearing the path.

Let’s face it, Royal Consort is – or at least, has been – the most influential person in the kingdom, with Queen listening to his advice and more often than not yielding to his insistence. If Odair does not get involved in politics much, it’s not because he can’t, but because he can’t be bothered.

Head Spymaster, in his insatiable thirst for power, yearns to be the major éminence grise; in order to achieve that he needs to get rid of Finnick first. There might be also another, more personal motive involved, but the mere thought of it makes Jupiter nauseated.

In his opening move Wormtongue knocks the props out from under Sovereign, leaving the queen bereft of the very keystone of her emotional support system, and then he will proceed to shove his metaphorical shoulder at her first to cry on and later lean onto.

Well, fuck that.

The question is, what is Wormtongue’s back-up plan? People like Head Spymaster never gamble without a plan B. What will he do if Queen does not react as planned, what if she stubbornly decides to keep her consort close? Then Wormtongue will have to get some kind of leverage on him – to tie Finnick’s hands if Royal Consort decides to retaliate against Spymaster for snitching on him, if nothing else – and with Odair’s dirty secret already revealed that only leaves one option.

The girl herself.

If Wormtongue get his hands on Finnick’s Annie – with the way she’s just seen Odair worship that name with his lips – he will have complete control over the man who has so far been able to manipulate Queen into almost anything.

Thus, he’ll have control over Queen herself.
She cannot risk that.

Besides, she could use some leverage while dealing with Finnick herself.

\textit{Once a traitor, always a traitor.}

She files that thought for later, too.

At the moment, it’s time for action. Queen must act in complete secrecy: she shouldn’t forget it’s Royal Spymaster she’s playing against. She does not delude herself into thinking that she would stand a chance if this were a pure battle of wits. In that respect, Wormtongue with his lifetimes of spying and scheming could run circles around her. The only things she has going for her is his natural hope that his gamble will pay off and his inexplicable fixation on her. Playing a dumb damsel in distress is her best chance.

Jupiter can’t be too dumb, though, and simply order Wormtongue to get the girl for her: the hostage will inevitably get ‘lost’ on the way to alcazar. There will be profuse apologies afterwards for the ‘mishap’, of course, the convoy might even lose their positions, but the end result will stand: the girl will be in Spymaster’s clutches.

The queen can’t act through her usual channels, either. If the situation were any different, she would normally contact Stinger and demand that the girl be delivered to her. And that is exactly what Wormtongue will be expecting her to do; he will be monitoring her actions closely and Jupiter has no idea where he has his spies. If she attempts to involve Apini, Spymaster might immediately find out and react accordingly. She knows he already has his agents on the location: someone must have been taking the footage she’s been shown. If he detects any suspicious activity, he might intercept the girl before Apini’s men get there.

Queen really could use some kind of envoy for special missions like this. She probably has one – at least one – but Jupiter has never had to kidnap anyone before, so she has no idea who that is.

Although she knows someone who fits the bill but to perfection.

She even has her knight already in place on the chessboard.

For the time being, she has to keep Wormtongue distracted while believing his gambit’s working.

\textit{Let the game begin.}

First, she needs to make sure the girl is still intact.

“I hope your men have been discreet. I do not wish my consort to suspect anything sooner than it suits me.”

“Your Majesty does not need to worry. Consort Odair has no idea he has been under my surveillance.”

“Good. For a short while, I’d like it to stay that way. I need some time to think.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“You have my gratitude, Spymaster. You have delivered information of crucial importance,” she bows her head to him a little, nearly choking on her praise – the words taste like bitter bile. “Although, I must admit, I am not sure how to go about it. You understand, I’m shocked.”
At that, Wormtongue puts his condolent face back on and hums in consolation. Who knows, maybe he even feels genuine compassion for the queen. Jupiter’s going to work with that. She does not even have to play up her distress: she’s devastated and it shows.

“Please, give me a few minutes to recollect myself, Gríma.” She uses his first name to address Head Spymaster for the first time ever, and he looks so stunned that her heart would go out to him, if he hasn’t just destroyed it. Gods, he really may have a personal reason for doing this. No fool like an old fool, especially when it comes to younger ladies.

“By all means, Your Majesty. I am despondent to have unsettled you like that.” Judging by the look of him, he actually might be.

“Then I’ll be joining you in the Cedar Grove, where you could give me further details on the matter.”

“Fresh air might help, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, hopefully it will clear my head. Before I make up my mind, I’d like to hear your thoughts on the situation.”

To influence the sovereign’s decision is the bait she knows Gríma will inevitably take. A private walk in the gardens with Queen is just another possible lure. Anything that works.

He turns and slinks away, a dark and ugly shadow, forever cursed to be the herald of ill-tidings, a walking omen of misfortune, so full of hopes that she is going to dash like he’s just dashed her happiness.

She has no qualms about it.

Once Wormtongue’s gone, the queen lifts her hand up, letting the cameras scan the royal sigil on her wrist, and snaps her fingers, cutting off any and all security feeds. Then she addresses the Chamber Presence, “Slott, the highest privacy setting should be activated wherever I go.”

“It will be done, Your Majesty.”

This way, no one will know what she is up to, not even Head Spymaster. Besides, it doesn’t look at all suspicious that the distraught queen does not want anyone to see her tears.

Now, however, is not the moment.

Later. There will be time for tears later.

She heads for the private quarters, her usual escort of guards trailing behind her.

“Officer Wise, follow me,” she tells the guard when they reach the door to the antechamber.

She’s made sure Wormtongue keeps his guard down for the time being; now it’s time to make her second move in the game: Wise will retrieve the girl for her.

To her own surprise, Jupiter realizes that she is curious to see that Annie in person. She wants to know what it is about her that makes her better.

Makes her loved, while Jupiter…

As it turns out, isn’t.

Hurts.
Later. She will break down later.

It hasn’t escaped her notice that Gríma never revealed the girl’s location. Unwilling to make him suspicious, she didn’t ask about it. If anyone can find the target quickly and efficiently, it’s the lycantant with an abnormal sense of smell who was trained as a tracker for the Legion. All of her bets are on him now.

The next part is going to be humiliating.

Unfortunately, it is also unavoidable.

“There’s this woman my consort has been seeing,” the queen starts without preamble.

For a split second a concerned expression flickers on the guard’s face, quickly morphing into an impenetrable mask of neutrality. She feels grateful for Wise’s usual impassive demeanour, it’s so much better than Wormtongue’s – probably fake – pity. She can’t take pity right now, the genuineness of it notwithstanding.

“Can you pick her scent off his belongings? Maybe clothes? No, not clothes, those have already been washed. Shoes?..”

“The scent is already familiar to me, Your Majesty,” comes an immediate reply.

“You knew?!” she exhales, incredulous.

“Such scents are impossible to conceal,” he responds matter-of-factly.

If Wise knows, then –

“Does Stinger know?” He must, too.

That gives Wise pause. “I had to mention it in my report,” he admits reluctantly, clearly worried that he might get his Commander in trouble.

So, Stinger knows. He probably had known even before Wise reported it to him.

This is even more humiliating than she thought. How many people knew while she was unaware? That really shouldn’t surprise her, come to think of it. Two years. Nothing Queen-related stays secret from Commander Apini for that long.

So, Stinger knew and –

– he didn’t tell her.

Can she even trust him? Who can she trust?!

Later. She’ll deal with it later.

Right now she needs to hurry up with stipulating her quest.

“Do you think you can you locate the girl? She must reside in the close vicinity of the alcazar.”

It’s not like Finnick can afford a long commute. Not frequently, at least.

“Yes. There’s a smell of the river in the scent. There are not that many residential properties on the bank, especially not with a garden.”
There’s a garden?

It must be some top-notch villa to have a garden in the area of the city where land is so expensive one should be able to snort the dirt like a drug.

Then again, the girl is Royal Consort’s mistress. She shouldn’t come cheap.

Jupiter wonders just how much, exactly, he has been spending –

Later. She’ll count her losses later.

It’s not like any financial expenses could compare with the damage that cannot be evaluated in any units with numbers attached to them.

“There are numerous flower scents,” Wise dutifully answers her question. “At least one of them is really uncommon. Even Your Majesty’s gardens do not have flowers that smell like that, so they must be something exotic. Easy to recognize.”

The estate that surrounds the alcazar is more of a botanical garden than a park. Queen is a collector of sorts: she likes all things green and leafy, finding joy in the infinite variety of flora. Wise is right: if a flower cannot be found in the royal gardens, it must be a true rarity.

Seems like the girl has something else that Jupiter hasn’t.

Just like Finnick’s heart.

For a moment, she feels a sharp stab of envy, but tramps down viciously on it, distracting herself with another surprising revelation.

“You’ve been smelling flowers in my gardens?!”

“As a member of Your Majesty’s Guard I am allowed to be there,” the lycantant replies, alarmed.

“That’s not what I… Never mind. Easy to recognize, you say?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I want you to find her,” the queen starts, then pauses. She feels her throat working, trying to articulate her next command.

“Shall I – dispose of her, Your Majesty?” Wise asks softly, carefully. She knows what he’s doing: he’s meeting her halfway, trying to spare her the strain of forcing the words out.

The temptation to say ‘yes’ is overwhelming.

She knows that if she as much as nods, the girl – the girl who’s making her feel like this – like this unbearable this – will be dead by the end of the day. Sooner, probably, knowing how efficient Wise can be. He will obey Queen blindly, confident that he’s acting in the best interests of the Crown.

Doing the right thing.

What is the right thing to do, though? It’s up to Queen to make sure that whatever he’ll do next, it will be the right thing.

Or at least, not an obviously wrong one.
She wants to be worthy of being obeyed.

And really, it might not have been the girl’s fault that she caught Finnick’s eye. It probably was him who initiated the relationship. And she fell for his charm like so many others do – like Jupiter had done – or she might have only played along, intimidated by Royal Consort’s power.

Or maybe she’s just a simple-minded fool to disregard Queen’s wrath.

Either way, she doesn’t deserve death.

Regardless of Jupiter’s feelings on the matter.

“No. Bring her to my private quarters, unharmed, as quickly as you can. Do not inform your Commander of your whereabouts or report your actions to anyone but me. Until the girl’s secure, it’s crucial your mission should stay as covert as possible. Do you understand?”

Wise nods.

“There’s an emergency evacuation Gate in my rooms that will instantly transport you to a safe house on the outskirts of the city. You’ll find a clipper and a standard Guard arsenal there. Use anything you think you might need.”

“Do you think I will be met with armed resistance, Your Majesty?”

“If I know Finnick,” – just an hour ago Jupiter was sure she knew her consort, now he’s a stranger she does not know what to think about, tries not to think about, – “he wouldn’t leave someone precious to him unprotected. Although the girl’s security isn’t the only cause for concern. There will be Wormtongue’s people there, keeping watch. Probably Apini’s, too,” she adds as an afterthought. Since Stinger is aware of the situation, he must be making sure no one gets their hands on such stellar blackmail material. “They might attempt to stop you, but that I can help you with. Come here. Undo your collar.” As he does what he’s been told she assesses the lycantant’s height. “Could you lean down a little?” she asks him, raising her hand.

His face is a curious mix of perplexity and caution, yet he complies without question.

Queen presses her wrist to the side of the guard’s neck, activating the duplicating mode of her royal sigil.

“Don’t move. This might prickle a little.”

Her wrist tingles as the sigil leaves its exact imprint on the lower section of his neck, where it can be easily concealed if he buttons up his collar, but can be revealed just as easily for anyone to see.

“This is the Doublet Sigil, it invests you with the power of Viceroy. It means that unless you are in the same room with me, you have Sovereign’s power. Your actions are Sovereign’s actions, your orders are Sovereign’s orders. In fact, in the eyes of the law, you are Sovereign. We are one and the same.”

She takes her wrist away, Wise straightens up and steps back, a mirror image of the sigil glowing on his skin.

“Make sure the surveillance sees this. If they’re smart, they won’t try to stop you. If they’re smarter, they’ll help.” Queen really hopes they are no stubborn fools in her secret services that would follow their commanders’ orders and not those of Queen’s direct envoy. “If someone hurts you while you’re wearing this, they won’t be answering for attacking a mere splice, they will suffer the consequences
of attacking Queen.” She sighs. “I’m afraid it won’t be enough to stop whomever Finnick left to
guard the girl, but at least it might give them pause. Hired muscle are rarely suicidal. And if you get
killed or injured, I’ll have them hunted down and annihilated.”

After all, Gríma’s men excel at that.

Wise gulps and nods. “I understand, Your Majesty.”

“Go now.”

He turns to leave.

“Wise?”

He pivots on his heel. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Please, do not die. If there’s more resistance than you can handle, retreat. I don’t want her badly
enough to lose you over it.”

For a moment, he looks startled, then drops his gaze, nods sharply, not asking any questions, and
steps into the Gate.

Sometimes being in the position not to explain herself to anyone is an immeasurable relief.

Especially when she can’t explain something even to herself.

She rubs her eyes until they tear up, looking bloodshot and swollen before rejoining Head Spymaster
in the garden. Let Gríma think she has been crying. It’s time for her third move in the game: she
needs to keep Wormtongue distracted for as long as she can, buying time for Wise’s search. And
Queen can be distracting, if she wants to. And she does want to – in order to get the girl, first and
foremost, but as she’s realized all of the sudden, she wants Wise to return safe and sound just as
badly, without Spymaster’s men killing him on their commander’s orders and blaming his death on
Finnick’s goons. She won’t allow Gríma a chance to give that order.

It’s an extremely long and thorough walk.

“What the hell do you want with that girl?” she hears Apini’s urgent voice on her i-comm just when
her legs are about to fall off. So, Wise must have secured the girl. It’s getting dark, yet Wormtongue
is still dutifully keeping her company, divulging his insights on the foreign policy. Some of them are
surprisingly astute. The guy is as sharp as a razor blade, she gives him that.

She wraps up the conversation, unhurried – there’s no need to give him any reason to get his guard
up, not until the girl is safely hidden in her private quarters, where no one has a chance to get to her –
thен reconnects with Apini.

“Stinger! Just the man I need. The Green Drawing Room. Now.”

“Jupiter…”

“Now, Commander Apini.”

So, Wise reported his actions to his Commander. Or Apini’s team that had Finnick’s girl under
surveillance did. Well, it does not matter now. Not much, at least.
“Would you care to explain, Commander, how my consort was able to get away from his security detail for long enough to have an actual affair? For two years straight?” she inquires as soon as agitated Stinger emerges on the doorstep.

“He wasn’t. It’s impossible.” His words are laconic and dry. “He tried at first, but then a safer arrangement was achieved. A more discreet one, too.”

A long silence follows. So, Stinger has been intentionally covering up for Finnick?

One single deceit is more than enough, but double is –

Who are these people that she thought she knew?

“I’ll have Gríma’s head for hurting you like this,” Stinger growls.

“Oh Finnick’s?” she wonders numbly.

“Will it make you happy if I had Finnick’s?”

“I don’t think anything can make me happy at this point. And Gríma’s just being loyal. More loyal than you, I might add.”

“He is being a callous, selfish bastard, who stooped to hurting you for a chance to kick Odair out of his way to try and get the position of Queen’s right hand for himself.”

“You won’t touch Gríma. In fact, you will make sure nothing bad will happen to him, because if it does, you’ll be the one to pay for it. I need at least one person at my court who would tell me the truth. Evidently, I cannot hope for that much from either you or Finnick.”

“I do not know what that ambitious scumbag made you believe, but it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“Adultery and possible treason are not as bad as they sound?” Jupiter seethes incredulously. “Being unable to trust the person I used to trust the most is not ‘as bad’? If Finnick lied in this, he can be lying in anything!” She hates that her voice breaks, her self-control cracking. “Stinger, how could you keep something like that from me?”

“Then you would have felt like this so much sooner,” he tells her gruffly. “You were so happy, so – infatuated.” His voice grows gentler. “I didn’t have the heart to destroy that.”

She has no words.

But she is Queen, so she has no choice but to find them.

“You are a disappointment. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve been deceiving me as much as Finnick has. You lied to me, if only by omission, you still lied,” her voice is ringing higher and slightly hysterical, so she breaks off and takes a few calming breaths. This isn’t the time to lose her composure.

Later. She’ll let herself unravel later.

“As a sovereign, I am supposed to make responsible, considered decisions. In order to do that, I need to be well-informed. It’s people like you that make me venture into it blind. I absolutely hate when they do that to me. When you do that to me. The bitter truth is better than a sugar-coated illusion. Because in the end of the day, it is I who will be picking up the pieces when the mirage crumbles around me.”
“Jupiter, I had two awful choices to pick from: to tell you that the man you loved was unfaithful to you and ruin your happiness or to keep you ignorant and happy. I chose what I considered the lesser evil.”

She shakes her head in exasperation. There’s no convincing Stinger that he was wrong when he is certain of his rightness.

“I want your full report on any of Finnick’s secret activities, including but not limited to his affair. The sooner, the better.”

There is no need to tell him that similar reports will be submitted by both Wormtongue and Head of the Internal Security. She’ll triple-check Royal Consort’s actions and double-check Commander Apini’s cover-up of it. The idea that Queen might have traitors this close to her is terrifying.

“It will be done, Your Majesty.”

“If Odair’s deceit goes beyond personal matters into the affairs of state, and you have been covering up for him in that respect, too, then I suggest you take Kiza and flee. After your fuck-up with Wise I protected you, because I was sure you’d made a genuine mistake. This time you were fully aware of what you’d been doing, so I won’t protect you anymore,” she states angrily. Then takes in Stinger’s stricken face and adds, much softer, “But I will make sure you won’t get caught.”

She’ll save herself the torture of seeing Uncle Stinger die.

He stands up straighter, taller.

“As far as I know, Odair has not committed anything more grievous than a trivial infidelity.” – Trivial. Something minor, of little importance. Guess compared to the political matters, it is. But within the scope of one human life it makes Jupiter feel like her whole world has been shattered. – “If I had believed for a moment that his actions could endanger Queen,” Stinger continues, “I would have informed you immediately. Even if you don’t trust a thing I’m saying right now, believe this: I’ve always done everything I could to keep you safe, Jupiter. However, if Queen thinks that my actions require a punishment, I will not be a coward to flee from it.”

Fuck you, Stinger. You and your stupid perception of morals.

She takes in a lungful of air to tell him in no uncertain terms what she thinks of his code of honour, when Slott announces, “Your Majesty, Officer Wise is here.”

The breath whooshes out of her. “Let him in.”


And proceeds on saying exactly nothing else.

Jupiter looks at him expectantly, while he keeps silent. Then it dawns on her: she told him the mission was secret and Commander Apini is in the room. So it wasn’t Wise who reported the abduction to him.

Good.

Nice to know there’s loyalty left in some people.

“You may speak, Wise,” she assures him.
“The girl is delivered. Shall I bring her in?”

“No!” Stinger roars. “Do not come near that girl, Jupiter!” There’s panic in his tone now. “Promise me you won’t approach her until we’ve checked her properly. It’s dangerous to bring anything – or anyone – straight to Queen’s rooms. Wise, what the hell were you thinking?!”

“He was acting on my direct orders,” Queen tells him distractedly, noticing that the guard’s uniform is damaged and blood-soaked in places. “Wise? What is that?”

“There was some resistance, just like Your Majesty predicted. I was lucky Commander Apini’s men,” he nods to Stinger’s direction, “provided fire cover.”

“Of course they provided fire cover. Jupiter, you don’t grant a Viceroy status to someone without informing me! How am I supposed to keep them safe, if you make it a secret?!”

“Stinger, take the girl to the back rooms and run whatever checks you need on her. Keep her alive and leave us.” She waves Stinger off, turning back to Wise. “And you are not at the medical wing – why?”

“Your Majesty said it was urgent.”

“I thought I told you... Never mind. To the medics, right now. Tell them I want you patched up yesterday. You won’t need my validation for RegeneX use with that,” she gestures at the Doublet Sigil.

He nods in acknowledgement.

“And Caine? Thank you for the job well done.”

He seems to be frozen in place.

“What are you waiting for? Go get yourself fixed!”

A gulp, a nod and a few quick steps later the queen is left alone to wonder why the hell she feels more relieved about her envoy’s being safe than about the girl he retrieved.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is already a mess, so I figured, why don’t I throw in a LOTR character just for the hell of it? This chapter is a declaration of my undying love for brilliant Brad Dourif as Gríma Wormtongue in Two Towers.

And I made a golden (half-albino, right?) retriever out of Caine.

I have no shame.

The chapter title is inspired by a lyric from The Story of the Impossible song by Peter von Poehl.
“Hi, Jupiter! Gods, fame is tiring. Shaking those people off has been a challenge,” Finnick complains as he enters the room the queen is waiting for him in. He gives her a tiny exhausted smile that looks so familiar, so genuine it makes Jupiter’s insides ache. She does not know what she expected, but normality wasn’t it, not when her world feels like it’s been turned upside down. She immediately gets up from where she’s sitting and turns to face her consort fully.

It takes a moment for Finnick to notice Officer Wise, standing silently behind the queen, as inconspicuous as ever. Odair stops dead in his tracks, surprise written all over his face.

“What’s Wise doing here?”

Jupiter would so much rather talk to Finnick tête-à-tête: no one likes airing their dirty laundry in public. However, since Odair is compromised, Queen can’t afford that luxury anymore. It’s been years since her consort was a part of her security detail, but once a guard, always a guard. She knows better than to confront the efficient killing machine with the accusation that means a death sentence for him – and his loved one.

Still, she attempts to keep it as private as she possibly can. Since Wise is already aware of the situation and in himself is worth at least two human guards, it’s only logical to have him here as a… peacekeeper. His presence alone should prevent Finnick from any violent outbursts.

“Has Stinger finally steamrolled you into letting his guys into your rooms?” – That ‘your’ is jarring: they live here together. At least, they used to. – “Not that I mind your choice,” Finnick beams a wide, welcoming grin at the lycantant, starting towards Jupiter once again.

“Stay where you are, High Consort,” Queen commands.

“Jupiter, what’s going on?” Finnick’s face falls as he stills, his expression growing worried.

“Head Spymaster paid me a visit this morning.”

“You shouldn’t meet with that creep while I’m away. What did he say to make you look like someone’s died?”

“He accused you of treason.”

Finnick’s expression does not change, not a single muscle in his face moves; yet Jupiter can sense Wise tensing up beside her. Apparently, Odair’s stolidity is nothing more but a supreme pretense.

How can you be so self-possessed? Is duplicity so deeply incorporated into your character that maintaining a false front comes naturally?
'Don’t make any rash decisions,’ her mind chants.

The rest of her just wants to tear Odair apart.

While Jupiter was waiting for Finnick to return, she was terrified she might break down and burst into tears when she finally faced him: to show any more vulnerability to him than she already had done would be degrading. Yet there’s nothing but cold fury in her veins now, and fury does not cry.

Jupiter swipes her dry, tearless eyes over her consort. For an instant, her vision shifts, and suddenly Finnick’s handsome features look ugly to her eyes. For the first time in her life, she fails to see his appeal. She squeezes her eyes shut, trying to shake the delusion – disillusion? – off. When she reopens them, Odair looks beautiful once again.

Except he feels like Balem now: repelling in his beauty.

*How could I be so blind?*

*Later.*

“Gríma has always had a vivid imagination,” Finnick speaks up smoothly. “It’s not the first time he’s tried to poison your mind against me. What did he come up with now?” he inquires in a light, nonchalant, breezy manner.

*How can you lie to me this easily?*

This is torture. She cannot bear dragging the conversation out.

“Finnick, Annie’s here,” she says.

His whole careless demeanour changes in an instant.

“What have you done to her?” There is no sign of his composure now, his voice distressed and raw. It takes him a visible effort to stay in place.

“She is alive and well, but under supervision.”

Apini still hasn’t let Jupiter near Annie, telling the queen that the security is not yet done with the new arrival. Jupiter has no idea what danger the girl can possibly pose to her – she looked a wisp of a thing – but when Head of the Royal Guard is *that* concerned, Queen listens.

“You mean you locked her up? Please, not again, it will destroy her!” Finnick protests, looking *wrecked*. His panic wrecks Jupiter in turn. “You can’t do that to her, you can’t!..”

“Can’t I?” Queen challenges, incensed. “*Who’s going to stop me, Finnick?*”

Wise is stepping in front of her, activating his shield before she’s had a chance to realize how rigid the consort’s posture has suddenly become. Finnick makes an involuntary step towards her – the guard is reaching for his weapon –

This might be over before it’s begun.

“Do not provoke Officer Wise, Odair,” Queen interferes coldly. “Once you are dead, Annie’s life will be of no value to me.”

Finnick freezes.
His reaction tells her more about what the girl means to him than any holos could. A short-lived satisfaction – Annie will make a useful hostage; Queen hasn’t risked Wise’s life in vain – is almost immediately overswept by a sudden wave of pain: seeing the records was bad enough, but witnessing her Finnick care this much about someone who isn’t her is eviscerating.

‘Don’t make any rash decisions’ her brain repeats to her on a loop.

Jupiter swallows thickly and squints at her consort through the shield. It is transparent enough, but she does not recognize the stranger she is looking at. Who is this man? What is he doing in my life? And yet she wants to reach out and move the shield away, so she could see him better: it feels surreal and wrong to have a barrier between herself and Finnick, of all people. Although she realizes that the feeling of wrongness has nothing to do with the protective energy field shimmering in front of her.

Besides, if the lycantant has deemed necessary to put it there, it is. Finnick may have no weapons on him, but he does have emergency implants – just like the queen herself. He might have no intention to attack her – it won’t do him any good if he does, but under the influence of extreme emotional disturbance people tend to act irrationally. So many foolish things are done in the heat of passion! She really does not want to chance being shot, so she stays securely behind the shield.

“Is Annie all right?” Finnick demands, frantic.

Her consort’s unconcern about his own fate should be endearing, really: Finnick Odair – always a savior, always a hero. But she is done with being endeared by Finnick.

“At the moment, she is in suspended animation,” Jupiter responds reluctantly. “She does not feel or apperceive anything. I assure you that out of the three of us she is the most comfortable one.”

“What are you going to do with her?”

“I do not know yet,” Jupiter answers honestly.

‘Don’t make any rash decisions’ seems to be her mantra for tonight.

“None of it has ever been her fault,” Finnick pledges solemnly.

“From where I’m standing, it takes two to tango. She must have known who she was dealing with and who you belonged to: there’s not a single person in the kingdom who’s unaware what Royal Consort looks like,” the queen counters. “Or are you telling me each time you two had sex you coerced or raped her?” – Finnick flinches. – “Because if that’s the case, making my decision will be fucking easy.”

“I would never hurt Annie.”

Jupiter grits her teeth. “Apparently, you’re fine with hurting me.”

“That’s not… I never meant to hurt you,” he shakes his head. “I just couldn’t… I was afraid that this would happen. Don’t you understand?” he shrugs – a tiny, helpless gesture. “I’d never want to hurt you. I love you.”

Now that’s a low blow.

Jupiter winces, but a tiny traitorous voice inside her sings in relief, ‘Please, convince me that it’s still true, please, do, please, love me, I won’t believe my own eyes –’

Queen holds up a halting hand. “Enough. I don’t want you to lie to me any more than you already
have.”

No more illusions.

One backstab is enough.

Hurts.

Later.

“From this moment onwards, you are considered a threat to the Crown,” Queen announces. “You are not allowed to leave your suite in the private quarters. The guards have orders to execute you on the spot if you attempt to do so. Slott will not listen to your commands anymore. Your access to its security settings has been revoked.” – She’s wearing her detached, official demeanour as armour that’s more effective than Wise’s shield at her protection at the moment. – “All your communication devices have been disabled. Your actions will be thoroughly investigated by the Internal Security. If no illicit activities other than fornication are found, we will speak again.”

“Are we really doing this?” Finnick inquires, incredulous. “Do you realize what consequences your actions might have?”

“Don’t you dare to speak to me about the consequences of my actions,” she snarls, for an instant losing the iron grip on her composure, her fingers involuntarily curling into fists, nails digging into her palms. “Have you stopped once to ponder those of yours?!”

How could you?..

Later.

“Involving the Internal Security seems a bit excessive, don’t you think? It’s not like I’m a danger to you, despite whatever your trigger-happy guard might think,” Odair implores, glancing at Officer Wise, whose stance is still tense and apprehensive.

Of course, Finnick wouldn’t want to involve the Internal Security. It deals with all the violations at court and within the secret services in a strict and ruthless manner; Jupiter is a woman stupidly in love with Finnick, she can be bargained with.

He doesn’t know it yet, but there will be no bargaining after this.

It’s not like Jupiter is looking forward to divulging the situation to yet another secret service. She’d rather as few people knew about it as possible: it’s one thing to endure an infidelity on your own and quite another to have your disgrace made – well, not public, thank gods, but known. However, Queen has to find out whether her consort is indeed a threat. She cannot trust Apini on that – he was the one to arrange for the cover-up, for gods’ sake, – neither can she trust Wormtongue – he is way too eager to shipwreck Odair. So she has to involve a neutral party.

As if any party at court can be neutral.

At least, when she has three independent reports to compare, she’ll stand a chance of figuring out the truth.

If Finnick is not a danger, as he claims, then she shall see what to do about him, and if he is –

The Crown could always use more RegeneX.
“I used to think I knew what you were capable of, Odair. You proved me wrong.” He doesn’t
deserve an explanation, but she will give him one nonetheless. “I could have never predicted your
fucking someone else behind my back. And in my book, anyone unpredictable this close to me
means danger. You know – better than anyone – how high-risk my everyday life is.”

Finnick gulps and looks away, eyes distant. “You know they will find whatever you want them to
find.”

“I want to know the truth.”

Why wasn’t I enough?

Later.

“Truth is subjective.”

“I will attempt to be objective when I have sufficiently cooled down,” she promises, because it is
Queen’s duty to be fair to all her subjects and Finnick, fortunately for him, is one of them.

“I need to see Annie,” her consort ventures, obviously sensing a crack in the defensive wall of her
anger. “You must let me see her.”

“Please, tell Queen more what she must and mustn’t do,” Jupiter encourages acrimoniously.

He shakes his head, muttering something under his breath.

“What was that?” she demands.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.”

“I couldn’t believe what you had been doing to me either.”

Finnick nods dejectedly, then visibly rallies. He raises his eyes – eyes the colour of sun-pierced sea
waves, eyes she thought she would never be able to get enough of – and speaks up again, plain and
earnest. “I have many enemies at court, including the Internal Security. I know I am not guilty of
anything but loving Annie, but they might convince you otherwise,” he states, his voice unwavering
and firm. “However, no matter what they will tell you, Annie is as far removed from any political
games as a person can possibly be.” – This is Finnick at his best: interceding on the behalf of an
innocent in the face of a possible death. Queen cannot help but feel a little awed. – “Please, don’t
take this out on her.”

Is Annie the only one you are concerned about at a moment like this?

What about me? I’m hurting, too.

Later.

Jupiter can’t find it in her to respond.

“As for me, I may not come out of this alive,” Finnick proceeds. “Jupiter, you know what love feels
like. Will you deny me what might be the last chance to see the person I love?”

One of Finnick’s undeniable strengths is being able to appeal to the best in people, – that’s why he’s
been working miracles at his charity work. No matter how much Jupiter wants to refuse, to hurt him
in retaliation – as much as he is hurting her – she does know what love feels like –
It feels like a freefall into darkness.

– she looks up at the tortured expression on the face she used to love so much – the momentum of a feeling of that magnitude cannot be quenched in such a short time – and responds, “Officer Wise will escort you.”

They part in silence.

After Finnick and Wise leave, Queen is once again left in solitude, only this time there is a feeling of finality to it. She has done everything that needed to be immediately done, and finally – finally! – there are no witnesses around her. The highest privacy setting is still enabled. No one will bother her, no one will be able to see or hear, no one will judge.

It’s later now.

For a moment she just stands there, breathing deeply, erratically, trying to comprehend that at long last she is completely on her own, that she can let herself –

All those laters come flooding her brain all at once: the rush of questions and thoughts that were swirling though her head earlier and were shoved aside only to come back with vengeance is roaring in her ears like a waterfall. The pressure builds and builds – it feels like her skull is cracking and her ribcage is caving in. The initial stupefaction of shock recedes, giving way to pain.

How could he?..  

Once a traitor, always a traitor.

Who can I trust in this life, if not the man I love?

...loved.

How could I love someone who didn’t love me back?

How come I didn’t notice?

How could I be that blind for two whole years?

Two years.

Gods.

For all that time, so many people knew while I was none the wiser.

Oh shit, this could have gone public! All of them could know!..

Uncle Stinger knew and didn’t bother to tell me. I trusted him as much as I trusted Finnick.

Will I ever be able to trust anyone at all?

How could I be stupid enough to trust them in the first place? Everyone lies to me. Everyone.

I though Finn wouldn’t do that.

I thought he loved me.
Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And, finally –

Why, why wasn’t I enough?

Dismay, anger, disbelief, resentment, shame, desiderium… The supersaturated solution of emotions precipitates: all the thoughts condense, crystallizing into one wordless feeling of betrayal. The idea is simple and straightforward, like a steel blade stabbing through her flesh.

It hurts. Her whole being hurts so much it’s unbearable.

She screams.

The wail is guttural and primal, it is born somewhere in her stomach – the most vulnerable part of the body, unprotected by neither bone nor muscle. It is a sound animals make when they know they are about to die, mere moments before the agony descends, a vocal manifestation of sheer despair. The screech lasts for as long as she has any air left, leaving her lungs burning after it runs its course.

She draws in a frantic breath and it pushes its way out of her in another scream –

– again –

– and again –

– and again.

There is no crying, though. Jupiter yearns to cry: tears are the human body’s way to bring relief to the psyche, but her eyes are dry. One cannot really cry when there are no tears, can one? Apparently, relief is not in store for her.

All she can do is scream.

Her mind has been replaced with thick and toxic fog, clogging up her eyes and ears – everything that is capable of sensory perception, of registering something that’s not anguish. She has no idea how much time has passed – it might be minutes, it might be hours. Time is irrelevant: she is beyond the hope that the pain might abate with its passage. Nothing exists outside of this endless current moment of blistering agony.

She screams –

– her body’s trying to alleviate the torture in any way it can –

– and screams –

– her mind’s a whirlwind of excruciating nothingness –

– and screams.

Until she can’t anymore.

Her vocal cords have been abused so much that they are incapable of producing sound any longer. Her throat is raw and swollen.

Later, she won’t remember much of what she did that night. She will remember pain, and daze, and screaming. But mostly pain.
When soundlessness descends, her eyes are still dry.

Eventually Jupiter finds herself in the transporting chamber where the Gate to Havet is situated. It seems that independently of her mind her brain commanded the body to seek a safe shelter where it could lick its wounds. And Havet is the safest place she knows – her sanctuary, her true home.

For the first time since her ascension, Que–Jupiter is not going to do what she must be doing. She is not going to stay and keep dealing with her royal duties. Those will include the damage control of Finnick’s brainless indiscretion, and she just can’t –

She can’t.

With the escape from the reality this close, she’s about to flee to her home planet leaving the burden of unresolved problems behind for others to handle. Or not to handle. There might be lots of blunders. So many things – bad things – might happen if the sovereign goes AWOL all of the sudden. But she really can’t find it in her to feel concern about the outcome of her actions anymore.

For the first time since her ascension, Jupiter does not care.

Her mind floats through a thick haze of anguish, her thinking inhibited, her senses dulled. When she enters the transportation chamber, it takes her some time to realize that she is not alone in the room. With some delay, her eyes focus on the obstacle in her way to the Gate. At a snail’s pace, her brain processes what she’s seeing: a looming wall of muscle, a diffident-looking wall of muscle, yes, but a wall all the same, unmoving and solid. Finally, the realization crawls to the forefront of her mind: she’s looking at Officer Wise.

All Gates in her quarters are small and narrow, built to transport one person at a time, for security purposes. (Sure, Jupiter and Finnick – or Kiza – have used the Havet Gate together, but it’s a tight fit.) The minimal size of the Gates makes it impossible for a large military squad to follow or to smuggle a bulky piece of weaponry or machinery through if Queen ever has to use it to flee from her attackers. Makes it easier to defend the Gates: one single guard can block the entrance.

The thing is, the guards are meant to block it behind Queen, not in front of her.

What the hell is Wise doing in her private quarters? Usually an unauthorized intrusion into the holy of holies of her alcazar would come as a shock, but now she’s only mildly surprised.

It seems like she is beyond being shocked any longer.

How did Wise even get here? Due to the strictest security regulations only four people – three now, she corrects herself – have access to the Gate chamber: Queen herself and those she considers her family – Stinger and his daughter Kiza; Finnick’s access has been revoked along with every other privilege of Royal Consort. How the hell –

Oh, right, the Doublet Sigil. She should have revoked it, too.

Not that it really matters at the moment. The only thing that matters is that Wise is obstructing her way to the escape.

She looks up at him questioningly, unwilling to talk.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you go alone, Your Majesty.”
“You can’t let me?” she rasps, her throat sore and her vocal cords dead.

“That’s not – that’s not what I meant to say, Your Majesty, I’m sorry. Please, accept my apologies.”

He looks cowed for a moment, then soldiers on, “It might be dangerous for you to be on your own when you are like this: there is too much distress in your scent. You don’t smell like yourself. I have to go with you to make sure you are safe.”

She can’t deal with this shit right now.

“Move,” she croaks, gesturing vaguely at him to step aside.

And Wise –
– does not.

Instead –

He drops where he stands, drops to his knees without hesitation or preamble – and she winces, because that must hurt, it must hurt a lot with his height and weight – and the queen is left blinking at him in disbelief.

He has disobeyed a direct royal order.

And here she thought she was beyond being shocked.

In Jupiter’s experience, no one has ever done that. She can’t even recall what kind of punishment it entails, but it must be severe enough for no one to try. It probably involves replenishing the Crown’s RegeneX supply.

Then it dawns on her.

He has moved.

Without actually letting her through.

The queen stares, silent.

The guard lifts his head and stares back, unblinking. “I cannot leave you alone in a state that might lead to your life’s being endangered. It is my duty to keep you safe. Please, let me do my job.”

This is the third time he dared to fully meet her eyes, the first one being back in the interrogation room when he argued for Stinger’s life, and the second – just this morning but seemingly ages ago – in the similar transportation chamber where she ordered him to stay alive. Funny, how she even remembers that.

Obeying while disobeying is not an easy stunt to pull: Wise has executed the word of her command in direct contradiction to her will. She feels momentarily tempted to break his subtle defiance, to order him out of her way in a no-nonsense fashion, wording her command the way that will leave him no other option but to allow her to pass.

There is no insolence in his posture, though, no challenge in his gaze, just expectation, patient and hopeful, that she will make the right decision. She briefly wonders how someone this huge can pull off looking so innocuous and meek. Must be a gift. There’s so much earnestness in his demeanour, and something else, something strained and intense and elusive –

And then she gets it:
– It *pains* him to have evaded her intended order.

At that very moment she realizes that in this standoff Wise has the upper hand - because he explicitly *trusts* his Queen not to abuse her power.

And she is powerless against that.

“Fine,” she huffs. “Get rid of all your non-implanted weapons, otherwise the security scanner won’t let you through.” Oh gods, he’s making her talk. It hurts like hell.

He complies silently and she’s amazed to see just many of them he’s had on his person.

“Am I allowed to keep my shield?”

She shrugs. “Try passing.”

The scanner flashes red.

“Leave it, then.”

When the lycantant repeats his attempt, the flash goes off again.

“Do you have anything else on you?”

“Nothing I can think of, Your Majesty.”

“Any food?”

He shoots her a startled look, but does not ask.

“No, Your Majesty.”

She sighs. She’s not in the mood for solving riddles.

“If I may be allowed to venture a guess, Your Majesty, I think the scanner identifies *me* as a weapon.”

“Makes sense,” she mutters, looking the military splice up and down, then steps aside. “Get your neck to the control console here, let it scan your sigil. After I ratify your application with my own, it’ll let you through.”

He steps into the Gate the same moment she does – no sooner, no later: he’s probably afraid she might make a break for it and does not want to risk that. The hulking lycantant is severely crowding Jupiter’s personal space; the similar problem with Kiza is solved by simple hugging. With Finnick, it never existed in the first place. When Jupiter shoots the guard an annoyed glare, his answering expression is so painfully awkward that she lets it go without a comment.

His relieved exhale momentarily creates a wider gap between them.

“May I tell Commander Apini that I will be your liaison on Havet?” he asks her hesitantly.

She nods mutely. It’s not like she’s in a condition to communicate with anyone right now, Stinger least of all.
For the first time in Jupiter’s life her arrival on Havet is not a cheerful occasion. It used to be the safest, most carefree and joyful place in the universe for her.

It’s just a foxhole, now.

Jupiter’s home planet is the only place where the queen could find the luxury of solitude. Back in her alcazar – let alone anywhere else – she’s always surrounded with people: her guards and secretaries, advisors and ministers, assistants and servants. Even in her own quarters she’s rarely alone, since she shares them with Finnick. Sure, the private quarters are a sprawling labyrinth of rooms – there’s even a small courtyard garden she uses as her private study. Naturally, they include a separate suite for Royal Consort, but it was never used.

Until Queen had to put him into solitary confinement there.

Gods, Finnick, what have you done?

Jupiter’s thoughts are interrupted with a happy chirrup as Siskin appears out of nowhere to greet her, as usual, not bothering to make himself visible. She half-heartedly returns his enthusiastic embrace of welcome, quietly asking Head Keeper to leave her be during this stay.

Then she turns to Wise, resentful of his presence. The guard in his black uniform looks jarringly out of place in the serenity of her childhood home. Regardless of his intentions, he robbed her of the solitude she sought in order to mourn her loss in peace and save the last shreds of her dignity, not that there was much of it left to start with after Finnick’s two-year travesty.

They say that misery loves company.

Grief, on the contrary, just wants to be left the fuck alone.

She frowns at Wise, trying to decide what should be done about him. He’s back to not meeting her eyes.

“I won’t order you to stay away.” Since she already allowed the guy to follow her here so he could do his job, it’s only logical to let him stick around. Regardless of what he might have been thinking when he squeezed himself into the Gate with her, Jupiter does not go back on her decisions. So she opts for the second best. “But keep as far from me as your senses would allow,” she commands. “Do your best to stay out of my sight.”

He nods sharply once, never looking up.

Having dealt with that, Jupiter gets out of the house as soon as possible: too many ghosts are haunting it now, too many happy memories that are forever poisoned by the falsity of them. She promptly forgets about her silent escort: years of exhausting overexposure to mandatory socializing made her good at tuning people out.

Her legs, apparently choosing a destination by themselves, carry her to the grotto she and Kiza found back when they were kids. The two of them used to be so happy here. Come to think of it, it is one single place that is not contaminated by Finnick’s presence: she’s never brought him here since it was Jupiter and Kiza’s – only Jupiter and Kiza’s – secret base.

She lies down onto the warm white sand and just – is.

There are no thoughts in her head anymore, all sounds seem muffled and distant, her eyes are looking nowhere. She doesn’t feel time drift by; she’s silently watching the patch of sunlight streaming though the opening crawl along the walls of the cave, blindingly white at first, and later
amber yellow, then tinting orange, and, finally, pink. When the day fades into pearlescent twilight, she hears the shingle rustle outside the grotto.

“Your Majesty, it’s getting colder,” comes a tentative voice. “You should head back to the house.”

“Leave me alone.”

There is a pause, then –

“The sand is cooling very fast, Your Majesty. You shouldn’t be lying on it any longer.”

“Fuck off, Caine,” she snaps, curling in on herself, turning her back to the entrance of the cave, where the guard is. Where the world is.

She does not want to deal with either.

The lycantant, mercifully, says nothing more.

Her mind is drifting in a limbo that is neither consciousness, nor the absence of it. The hurt that had her screaming in agony has dulled into numbness the way topical anesthetics make the pain go away leaving a part of your body feeling uncomfortably strange and foreign, like it does not belong to you anymore.

*Her whole mind feels like it doesn’t belong to her anymore.*

She stares at the wall until there’s not enough light to discern the crack her eyes landed upon when she rolled over.

She doesn’t remember falling asleep.

Her awakening, however, is vivid and memorable in its unpleasantness. She wakes up in a complete darkness to violent shudders wracking her whole body. Her back and buttocks are surprisingly warm, tucked against some delightful source of heat, – she instinctively tries to burrow deeper into it, – her front is covered with something like a blanket, but her legs and feet are freezing off. The night air is chilly and the sand beneath her turned positively glacial, leeching the heat out of her already hypothermic body that just wouldn’t stop shaking. She grits her teeth, trying to make them stop clattering.

“May I take you back to the house now, Your Majesty?” comes the familiar voice, startlingly close.

Suddenly the nature of the mysterious warmth behind her back becomes very clear.

“Y-yes,” she manages to grit out, almost biting off her tongue in the process.

In mere minutes, she is tightly wrapped in the improvised blanket – which turns out to be Caine’s uniform jacket – scooped up, rushed through the night air – the wind resistance making her shudders intensify almost to a degree of convulsions – and shoved under a heavenly hot, nearly scolding shower, clothes and all.

It takes a much longer time for the shivers to recede, her muscles unlocking and melting into the euphoriant heat.

As she leaves the bathroom, tightly wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe, she sees Caine hover just outside the door.

“Take a hot shower. You must be freezing, too,” she drops in passing as she shuffles to Kiza’s
bedroom – no way she’s sleeping in her and Finnick’s bed tonight.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is inspired by The Story of the Impossible by Peter van Poehl.
As soon as her eyes open to see the next morning, Jupiter escapes the house again.

What used to be her cherished childhood home is now a set of lonely rooms full of inadvertent mementoes of the era that is dead and gone: the dining room that was not used for the intended purpose since her Dad and his entourage had left, – yet the massive dinner table came in handy once or twice when the cool polished wood felt like a nice contrast to the heated, slightly dampened sheets, – the open terrace where the two of them used to lounge in the quiet hours when lilac watercolour evening slowly evolved into black velvet night, the parlour with the grand piano Finnick used to sing at, his nimble fingers flitting over the ivory of the keys with elegance and ease of ballet dancers… She shies away from even thinking in the direction of the master bedroom.

She cannot stay inside these walls, the walls that used to witness her happiness…

Her innocence…

Her ignorance.

She cannot bear to be reminded of none of those, so she flees.

This time, however, Jupiter has enough presence of mind to take a backpack with some drinking water and her sleeping bag in it.

She woke up already tired this morning, so she does not feel like doing anything but making her way back to the cave. She drags a beached driftwood log into the shade – it takes surprisingly more effort than it should – and sags heavily on it, leaning onto the cool stone wall of the entrance as she stares into the endless blue where the water becomes indiscernible from the sky. The cerulean height is empty: not a cloud or a seagull in sight; her mind is equally blank.

She does not miss having thoughts.

When evening descends, she unrolls her sleeping bag and settles for the night. She listens to the hum of crickets and the whispering rustle of the wind in the long salt-hardy grass that stubbornly resists the never-ending onslaught of the storms, all of that underlain by the calming susurrus of the sea waves lapping at the shingle beach. She envisions how tiny sparks of light – luminescent unicellular algae – flash in the darkness of the water as it splashes upon the shore. Out of the opening in the cave wall she can see a patch of the sky, dotted with so many stars it takes her breath away. One cannot see this many stars from her alcazar’s windows: the light pollution of the large palace complex and the capital city surrounding it blinds their inhabitants to the magnificence of the night skies.

She cannot bear the thought of going back.
On the morning on her third day on Havet Jupiter feels too fatigued to leave the cave. Her body presents very convincing arguments against her ever moving again: her head is swimming, her mind’s in a daze, her limbs feel like they’ve been pumped with lead. However, she has finished her water last night, so she will at least have to drag herself to the nearest stream. The sea holds an immense amount of water, yet one cannot drink from it without being violently sick afterwards; that’s the only complaint Jupiter has ever had about her beloved element.

She untangles her recalcitrant extremities out of the sleeping bag, trying to rein in the fine tremor in her muscles, and forces herself to get up. She drags herself to where she left her backpack last night only to discover that –

Her water bottles are full.

There are more of them, too.

She told Siskin to leave her alone and keepers always – always – follow their superiors’ orders: that is why they are so widely relied on by royalty everywhere. That’s the way they were genomgineered: disobedience simply does not compute in their brains, their inherent need to abide by the hierarchy amplified by the biologically enforced connection to the bearers of royal genes. In other words, Siskin is designed to adore and obey her the way little children instinctively love their parents and follow their lead.

Keepers’ unfailing loyalty – along with their ability to erase memory in humans and human-based splices, the talent that can be extremely dangerous in the wrong hands – are the reasons why the royals won’t let anyone else get their hands on the alien race: exploiting the creatures themselves, they do not allow any lower-rank Entitled to enslave them. That’s where splices come in.

Speaking of splices… Those bottles most certainly did not magically refill themselves. That means Caine must have checked up on her while she was asleep: he examined her water supply and, having found it lacking, replenished it.

That’s really creepy.

But nice, too.

Seeing that she does not need to haul her fatigued body out of the cave – the nearest fresh water spring is not that far away, but she is drained – Jupiter feels sheer relief wash over her, making her muscles even weaker than they were before. As much as she resents Caine for insinuating his attendance on her, she has to admit: the guy does make himself useful. So she decides to consider his care more nice than creepy.

“Thank you, Caine,” she says out loud, knowing that he must be within hearing distance – the lycantant hearing distance, that is. Being a human, she does not stand a chance to catch the answering ‘At Your Majesty’s service’, but she knows it’s being muttered out there somewhere.

Then again, for all she knows it could be ‘Fuck you, bitch! Just get your shit together so I could go home already.’

The thought does not bother her as it normally would.

Nothing bothers her anymore these days.
The blood-red sun is sinking into the nest of purple clouds on the horizon. Jupiter watches the sunset sitting on the driftwood she dragged yesterday to the mouth of the cave. She’s glad she did it: today she probably wouldn’t have enough strength to do so.

Her mind is lost somewhere far away: behind the sun, farther than the horizon.

There is a rustle of shingle approaching her perch. She does not turn her head to look.

“Your Majesty, you should eat something,” a soft voice draws her out of her reverie – her solitary confinement, more like, – “It’s been nearly four days since you had any food.”

Her last meal was the breakfast she had before the fateful audience with Head Spymaster, but she hasn’t thought about eating anything ever since. She does not want to think of it now, either.

“I’m not hungry,” she mutters, wishing Caine would just leave her be.

“You are hungry, Your Majesty, you simply do not feel it,” his voice is calm and patient. “Please, let me get you something.”

“I don’t want any food.”

“Your brain will suffer from the lack of nutrients; it’s suffering already. I cannot watch you starve yourself.”

“Then don’t watch,” she snaps at him. Three days of complete silence healed her throat so she actually can snap now. “Feel free to leave at any moment. In fact, I’d prefer it if you did.”

If people are careful, they lose their positions after Queen speaks to them in that particular tone. Lives, if they’re not.

Silence. – Smart guy, he knows what’s good for him. – Then, stubbornly, “Let me make you a nutritional injection, if you don’t want to eat.” This time, there’s a note of desperation in his voice.

She finally turns to look at him. He already has an injector ready, because of course he has. Sometimes keepers’ obligate obedience is much better than splices’ relative freedom to act at will. The very thing that Queen usually advocates until she is blue in the face angers her to no end right now. She considers the lycantant for a long moment, ready to command him to get the fuck off Havet, ready to order the keepers to drag him away, if need be –

He squats down beside her, holding her gaze. “Please.”

The position and the tone remind her of something, something she tried very hard to forget –

“Is Your Majesty hurt?” she recalls the same husky, concerned voice asking her on the night when she nearly killed its owner.

– and she extends her arm, expectant.

“I will take some time, I’m afraid,” he mutters apologetically, sitting down on the log beside her. “The solution needs to be released gradually into your bloodstream.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

She feels his fingers take the offered limb, warm and sure and careful.

For the following hour they sit next to each other, with him holding the injector to the vein on her
forearm, cradled in his lap, and her staring at the sea with unseeing eyes.

“Shall I take you home, Your Majesty?” he asks afterwards.

“I have no home anymore.”

The house that she called her home now feels but a hollow husk of what it used to be, a dusty mausoleum of her idealism and effervescence. Instead of helping her to find her center, her balance, it only upsets her further; instead of giving her strength, it keeps her trapped in the past, leeching the last traces of energy that are left in her body. It keeps reminding her about how happy she used to be, how glorious her visits here were, how full of life she once felt. All of that is gone now. The loss is throbbing in her solar plexus as it is, she does not want reminders.

“Beds are more comfortable to sleep on than the ground,” Caine observes in a neutral tone. “I could take a bed out and put it somewhere in the garden. You will not have to come inside.”

He does not cajole, he states, so she does not feel an immediate urge to reject his offer.

Actually, when she thinks about it, it’s not such a bad idea. The garden has always been her favourite place on the whole planet. In the whole universe. Admittedly, the memories would still haunt her there, but no more than they would haunt her anywhere else. She won’t have to worry about getting water to drink anymore. Having lavatory facilities at hand won’t hurt either.

She looks at Caine as if she’s seeing him for the first time. It’s utterly surreal when a virtual stranger understands you more – or at least, sooner – than you understand yourself.

“Let’s go.” When he makes a move to pick her up, she stops him. “I’ll walk.”

By the time they approach the house, it is night: she tried to stride faster, but got winded almost immediately. It’s a good thing that one can walk along the beach even when it’s dark: the water edge serves as a guiding line and the cool breeze is invigorating after the daunting heat of the day. Caine does not attempt to help her except having wordlessly but firmly plucked the backpack out of her hands back at the grotto. She didn’t try to fight him on that, understanding that lugging her own exhausted self for such a distance would be challenging enough.

As Jupiter observes Caine carry – neither drag nor haul, carry – a bed frame of one of the smaller beds from the guest rooms to set it under a huge sycamore tree in the garden, she feels a vague stirring of interest. A box-spring is next; Jupiter’s gaze grows pensive and calculating. By the time Caine appears with a mattress, her idea is fully formed.

“So you can carry beds, huh? Give me a hand with something.”

Watching her and Finnick’s bed go up in flames on the beach in front of the house, her fingers clutching spastically a bottle of lighter fluid, Jupiter feels something thaw a tiny bit in her chest. She would have enjoyed taking an axe to the misfortunate piece of furniture, if she wasn’t this fatigued by her four-day fast. As it is, she has to content herself with witnessing the fire lapping at the expensive wood with its ravenous bright tongues, blue and orange, sparks swirling over the mattress as it collapses in a cloud of foul stench – natural wood smoke always smells much nicer than that of anything man-made. As the flames climb higher than she is tall, blazing into the black void of the night sky, Jupiter stares at them as if mesmerized, feeling her mind go blank with primal fascination and awe.

Caine attempts to crowd her away from the fire, but she’ll have none of it. She wants to experience the fiery obliteration to its fullest, standing so close the heat is almost scorching, feeding the demon of
destruction that resides in every one of us when we are hurting or agrief. Maybe after it devours its burnt offering it will stop clawing at her insides so much, hollowing her out from within.

She does not leave the bonfire until there are only glowing embers left.

She falls asleep satisfied.

Jupiter wakes up to a plump purple fig sitting on the pillow next to hers. Obviously, it couldn’t have fallen off the sycamore tree her bed is situated under. Figs don’t fly, either.

She’s half eaten the treat before she knows what she’s doing.

“Whose idea was this,” she holds up the fig stalk when she sees Caine getting up from a hammock tied between two mulberries, “yours or Siskin’s?”

“Siskin?..” he questions, confused.

“Head Keeper here.”

“Well, it was a collective effort, Your Majesty. I asked him to show me your favourite fruit and he did. He even helped me to choose the ripest one.”

“How did you get him to cooperate? He’s usually doesn’t show himself to strangers.”

The lycantant silently gestures at the sigil still glowing on his neck.

“Thank you, Caine,” Jupiter tells the guard; there is more than the fig she is thanking him for. “And thank you, Siskin!” she calls out a bit louder.

There’s a delighted chirrup in the nearby tree, then an apricot floats down into her hand. She accepts it with a grateful nod.

“Wait, what did you eat for the past few days?” she addresses the lycantant.

“Nothing, Your Majesty.”

“Nothing?!” Sure, there is no food in the house, but the garden is bursting with all sorts of edible things. “You can’t eat fruit?” She studies the hulking frame that screams ‘Protein!’ at her. Hardly a vegetarian there, true, but lycantants are omnivores, they ought to be able to assimilate plant food – she remembers as much from her home schooling biology course.

“I cannot eat fruit from Your Majesty’s private garden without Your Majesty’s verbal permission. I’m not supposed to take something that is yours. That would be theft.”

She goggles at him.

You freaking idiot.

The idiot who’s technically right. It is easy to forget sometimes how many strictest laws, rules and regulations are there to protect Queen’s person and her property. They are introduced and enforced for a good reason, yet sometimes –

People take them straight into absurd territory.
“You thought I would begrudge you a few fruit?!” She rubs her forehead, trying to reign in her anger: Caine does not deserve it; his only fault is being too honest. “Caine, you are my employee and therefore my responsibility. That means you should be well fed and generally kept in good health. Why would you starve yourself when you saw I was in no condition to do anything about it?”

“You are my responsibility, too, Your Majesty.” He utters nothing else, but ‘Why would you starve yourself when you knew I was in no position to do anything about it?’ is hanging heavy in the air between them.

She does feel guilty at that – not about her self-imposed fasting: she didn’t eat because she couldn’t – but for inadvertently making Caine starve while she was lost in her grief. Now that she’s looking at him – really looking at him – she sees the obvious signs of fatigue: the cheekbones stand out sharper on his face, his eyes look bleary and bloodshot, the skin – where it hasn’t been burnt by the sun into an angry inflamed erubescence – has an unhealthy grayish hue to it like the liquid revealed underneath the thick layer of cream when you skim settled raw milk. An uneasy premonition stirs in her chest.

“Caine, when did you sleep last?”

“Four nights ago, Your Majesty.”

Shit, this is even worse.

It’s like walking up to her aquarium one morning only to discover that her pet hermit crab was dead – its tiny body out of the shell that used to invariably protect its fragile spiral hind half in life – because Jupiter had been too distracted to change the water in time. Back then it was a tragedy that made her seven-year-old self sob for days.

She later realized that her father intentionally hadn’t installed an automatic filtration and aeration system in the tank so the future Queen would learn to take proper care of those in her control. Unfortunately, it had only made Jupiter quit on the notion of pets altogether: she didn’t want to risk killing yet another beloved creature.

And now she is failing once again to take proper care of the living being she’s supposed to keep provided for as an employer, an owner and the sovereign.

Well, fuck.

“Here,” she shoves the apricot she’s holding into the guard’s hand. “Siskin will get us some more. Let me get my grav boots and then we’ll fix ourselves a more substantial breakfast,” she says hastily, already on her way to the house.

When she dashes back out again, Caine is still holding the fruit she gave him, staring at it like he’s afraid that if he bites into it, the thing might actually bite back.

“It’s not poisonous,” she assures, coming to hover beside him and he jumps a little. “If I wanted to get rid of you that badly, I would find an easier way. But you don’t have to eat it, if you don’t like apricots.” – The fruit is ingested so fast she barely has time to panic that in his haste Caine might choke on the stone. (He doesn’t.) The guy must be really hungry. – “Come on, I’ll show the most easily accessible source of protein on the island,” she beckons him to follow, already heading towards the sea. “Finnick calls it –” Jupiter feels a sharp stab of pain at the name that springs so naturally on her tongue, but she just holds her breath for a moment and soldiers on, “– our secret stash of fast food. While we are getting there, pray tell me, why didn’t you ask for the permission to eat, if you abide by the rules that much?”
“I didn’t want to bother Your Majesty at a time like this,” he mumbles so quietly that she can barely hear him against the rush of air in her ears.

“You should have just eaten. Here on Havet, you can eat anything you consider edible,” she clarifies to avoid any further misunderstandings. “And why didn’t you sleep?”

“I had no one to stand in for me. I’m not supposed to leave Your Majesty unattended when you are – compromised.”

She shakes her head, frustrated. With him or with herself, she does not know. Both, probably. “First, we’ll get some food into you, then you’ll pick yourself a bedroom to sleep, long enough to compensate for a four-night deprivation.”

“I mustn’t leave you alone, Your Majesty,” he mutters stubbornly.

“Because you will be so much help to me when you collapse from exhaustion!” she scoffs.

“Lycantants can go without food or sleep longer than humans without it affecting their efficiency.”

“I can see that. No human would be this functional after a hundred hours of being awake. Look, let’s eat first and argue later, all right?”

“I wasn’t arguing with Your Majesty.”

“And you’re clearly not doing it right now,” she retorts. “Oh, here we are.”

They land on the bank of a tiny cove outlined with low rounded rocks. Jupiter takes off her boots – they don’t take well to being fully submerged – and wades into the natural pool, the shallow water only reaching the top of her thighs. The stone walls of the cove are overgrown with scallops packed together so densely one can’t see any rock between them. Jupiter bends towards them, then sharply straightens, slapping her hips frantically, feeling her pockets.

“O, shit, I forgot a knife,” she curses feelingly. “Do you happen to have one, by any chance?”

Caine digs into his own pocket and hands her a jackknife, which is obviously an army issued weapon and not one of the knives she uses here. Jupiter accepts it, staring at the blade – a fuller and all – in dumbfounded bafflement.

“You managed to smuggle a weapon to Havet?” she breathes finally. The rules expressly prohibit bringing any kind of arms to the planet and the Havet transportation chamber has the strictest security system imaginable, how did he even –

Oh.

Maybe the scanner didn’t read Caine as a weapon, after all.

She raises her stricken eyes at him. “You told me you wouldn’t eat fruit from my garden because of fucking rules, yet you chose the break the most important one of them all?!”

“I swear, Your Majesty, that was not intentional,” the guard shakes his head vehemently, backing slowly away from her, a scared expression on his face.

“Back in the transportation chamber I told you to get rid of all your weapons, it’s not like you could forget.”

“I had a lot of them; I could,” Caine offers hopefully. He doesn’t say he did, though. “And the most
important rule of Havet is not to harm your person in any way, Your Majesty.”

Now, that’s a distraction if she ever heard one. A suspicion sneaks into her head. Jupiter narrows her eyes at the lycantant, trying to formulate her question in the way that wouldn’t scar either of their sensibilities.

“Caine, do I want to know where, exactly, the knife was hidden on your person?” she inquires slowly.

For a moment, his fearful expression turns downright terrified.

“No, Your Majesty, you don’t.”

Bingo.

So, he didn’t want to leave her unattended in the chamber even for a minute, afraid that she might bail on him and transport on her own, blocking the Gate behind her to prevent anyone from following, yet he tried to keep at least some of his dignity intact.

That, she can relate to.

“You could have simply told me to turn away.”

“I could have?” he questions, perplexed, as if the idea that he could tell Queen to do anything does not process in his brain.

“Yes, you could. This,” she holds up the knife, “is a serious violation of Havet’s security regime,” she reproaches half-heartedly. “I can’t have people sneaking weaponry here, Caine, no exceptions. You understand better than I do how dangerous that might be, so don’t take it personally. I do realize that someone like you wouldn’t need any implement to kill me if they get this close, but it’s still a useful interdiction.”

“I understand, Your Majesty. I’m sorry.” Caine’s face hardens. “And no one will get to you within killing distance, either with or without a weapon,” he promises solemnly.

“One day someone will.” She’s made her peace with that: she’s too good at making enemies to live as long as the Entitled usually do. Besides, there is Balem. She has no way of knowing when his patience will run too thin: he’s the embodiment of unpredictable. With an heir like that Jupiter does not need enemies to do her in. Sometimes Jupiter wonders why she’s still alive. She resolutely shakes her thoughts off. “Now, we’re not here to discuss morbid matters, we have a breakfast to forage for.”

She puts the contraband weapon to work, wedging the knife in between a scallop and the rock to cut down thin, but extremely hardy fibers fastening one to another, twisting the mollusk – very similar to a bread plate in both shape and size – to detach it more easily.

“Here we are. Now, this is kind of tricky,” she comments as she holds her take in one hand and uses the other to insert the tip of the blade into the hinge of the shell and twist. The two valves – otherwise nearly impossible to force apart – open with only a slight effort.

“Please, Your Majesty, let me –”

She shoos the guard’s hands away. “I’d skewered my palm a few times before I mastered this.” – Caine makes a concerned meep at hearing that. – “Don’t want it happen to you, too.”

She slips the blade inside the now open shell and separates the soft mollusk body from the valves,
then proceeds to pull off the unappetizing innards off the delicious adductor muscle – a juicy, tender meat roughly half the size of her fist – and gives the latter a quick rinse in the sea water. With a victorious cheer, she holds out her loot to the lycantant on the open palm, “Here, eat.”

He eyes it for a moment, then bends down and carefully plucks the scallop from her hand.

With his mouth.

What the –

A laugh trills out of nowhere behind Caine’s shoulder.

“Um, Caine, you know you can use your hands, right?” she asks the guard, flabbergasted. “Siskin, show the man how it’s done.”

Once the next bit is cleaned, it is picked from Jupiter’s hand, dangled in the air in front of Caine’s face for a few moments in teasing fashion before disappearing in three well-measured bites.

“That was rude, Siskin,” she berates. “And you could have the decency to actually show yourself while demonstrating.”

A twitter that follows sounds a lot like a raspberry. Keepers do obey her unconditionally, but no one said they can’t have fun while doing it.

“So much respect,” she mutters.

“I can always eat him,” Caine offers helpfully.

The twitter turns into an indignant squawk, then an overripe apricot – seemingly materializing out of thin air – lands on Caine’s face in a squishy orange splat. The lycantant just shrugs his shoulders and eats the juicy pulp.

“That was a joke, Siskin,” Jupiter says forcefully, giving the guard a withering glare. “When I said you could eat anything on this planet, Caine, I didn’t mean keepers. Or myself,” she tacks on upon a momentary consideration, because who knows, maybe humans are considered a food source by lycantants. “So, no eating queens or Siskin, not even for an inappropriate application of food. And stop licking your fingers, it’s unhygienic. Go and wash your hands and face,” she instructs, gesturing at the sea.

The guard obediently dunks his head into an upcoming wave and thrashes it around, then emerges and shakes it even more vigorously, sending water flying everywhere.

Jupiter scrunches up her nose as few stray droplets splatter on her face. Lycantants are weird creatures, if Caine is anything to go by. Then again, she shouldn’t apply her very human perception of what is normal to other living beings.

“That works, too,” she remarks as she finishes cleaning yet another scallop, offering it to Caine once again.

At least he doesn’t question her cooking methods as he swallows the raw mollusk in one gulp.

“Try chewing the next one, maybe?”

“Sorry, Your Majesty, just – hungry.”

“Yeah, about that. Save the fruit, this is the easiest way you can feed yourself here. If you’re not into
a vegetarian diet, you can go fishing as well. I’ll show you the equipment once we get back to the
house,” she informs him as she holds out the next piece of scallop meat for him.

Caine hesitates. “You should eat, too, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not really hungry.” – He frowns. – “Don’t fret, I will eat once I’ve made sure both you and
Siskin are stuffed to the brim. These scallops aren’t going anywhere.”

Siskin currs gently into her ear as he steals the tidbit she’s holding for himself, devouring it with a
satisfied chirp.

“Then again, maybe they are,” she smirks.

“I think that was ‘Snooze and lose!’ in keeper speak,” Caine comments and she looks up sharply at
him in surprise: the guy has a sense of humour? “If I may ask, Your Majesty, why is there no
provision here? I’m sure regular deliveries can be arranged.”

“Caine, I could arrange for a whole tribe of chefs to camp out in the wilderness here, not mere
provision supply. The lack of any processed food is very intentional. I like to experience hunger
while I visit here.”

“It’s just – it’s not the nicest feeling, especially when…” Caine trails off, grimacing.

“I should have told you that you were allowed to provide for yourself when we arrived here. I’m not
in the habit of starving others – or myself. This time was – unforeseen.” Not that she was in any
shape to care about anyone at the time, herself included, yet she still owes him an apology. “I’m
sorry that you’ve suffered on my account. That was very thoughtless of me.”

He starts at her apology as if he doesn’t know what to do with such a disconcerting and possibly
dangerous thing. “No, Your Majesty, that wasn’t what I meant,” he assures her hotly, then pauses,
contemplating something. Finally, he seems to make up his mind. “Back at the Deadlands we were
supposed to fend for ourselves. It wasn’t – an easy living. I do not see why you would
inconvenience yourself on purpose, Your Majesty.”

”Caine, I come to Havet to take my mind off things. It’s hard to be concerned about the Intragalactic
RegeneX Index or a protracted suspension of diplomatic relations with the House of Khoni when
you have to first forage for the ingredients and then cook yourself a meal or else you will go to bed
without supper. When you are really hungry, it is impossible to think of anything else.”

“Yeah, I know.” The lycantant’s eyes are distant; he obviously isn’t seeing her anymore. She hopes
he will never have to starve again, at least, not while she is in charge of him.

“It’s probably difficult to understand after what you’ve been through, but hunger can be very useful
for someone who’s never wanted for anything in her life, like me. Hunger helps to keep things in
perspective. It reminds you about what truly matters in life and what is just – chaff. It teaches you to
value simple, yet most important things, things that are essential for your survival.”

Caine’s gaze focuses on her again. “Like food?”

“Like food,” she nods and sticks another scallop in his hand. “Like warmth and sleep and health.
Like family and loyalty,” her voice falters, but she perseveres, “Like the sea.” She glances out onto
the waves in appreciation and gratitude. She loves the sea so much she can’t imagine her life without
it. “The sea both gives you sustenance – in more ways than one – and makes you hungry all the
time.”
“So, I am not allowed to procure food for Your Majesty while we are here, am I?”

“Well, I certainly appreciated the treat earlier this morning,” she admits. “You are allowed to get food for me as long as I am allowed to get it for you.”

“That cannot be right. I should be the one to –”

“Caine,” she says forcefully, overriding him, “if you want to remain here, please, stop rubbing my nose in my queenly status or the situation back home. I come here to forget things, this time more so than ever before,” she winces, shifting her eyes away.

There’s an insistent chitter next to her, reminding her of her feeding duty, so she holds out the scallop she’s been absent-mindedly working on. The invisible hand picks it up and she feels a gentle nudge from behind, as Siskin rubs his head on her back in gratitude.

“Siskin here is a sucker for physical affection,” she remarks fondly. “In case of an emergency, you can always bribe him with a back scratch and he will bring you something to eat. You will, buddy, won’t you?”

There is a confirming chirp.

Caine will definitely not go hungry anymore.

She starts eating herself.

“Now go and apologize to your body for a hundred hours of sleep-deprivation abuse.”

“Your Majesty, I cannot leave you unattended,” he repeats in that patient if long-suffering manner adults talk to their kids.

She sighs. Sometimes men can be unreasonably stubborn.

Like, always.

“Caine, you can barely stand.” After their impromptu breakfast, the lycantant’s eyes began closing by themselves: the guy is sleeping on his feet.

“I am standing,” he points out mulishly.

“Yes, barely. So just go lie down already, you can proceed arguing with me with more positional stability lest you collapse where you stand.”

“I don’t know why you think I’m arguing with you, Your Majesty. I would never argue with Your Majesty, that’s strictly forbidden,” he tells her earnestly, yet doesn’t make a move to leave.

“Gods, this is ridiculous. What do you think might actually happen to me in the most heavily secured place of my kingdom in the few hours when you are asleep?”

“I need to stay awake to make sure nothing does.”

“You are quickly becoming the most paranoid idiot I know. And I know your Commander.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Your Majesty,” Caine sounds genuinely flattered.
“Grr,” she growls in frustration and the lycantant suddenly freezes, his face going weirdly slack, his eyes unfocused. She blinks at him in confusion, witnessing his ears turn red—well, redder, they were red enough to begin with from all the sun they’ve been exposed to for the last few days. Before she has a chance to ask what’s wrong with him, Caine shakes himself out of his stupor.

“I assure you, Your Majesty, I am still capable of carrying out my duties.”

“Like hell you are!”

“Your Majesty, let me contact Commander Apini and request another guard to be sent in if you are dissatisfied with my service.”

“That’s out of the question,” she cuts off. Back at the alcazar, Caine caught her in a moment of weakness; no way in hell she’s letting anyone else onto Havet—she does not need any more witnesses to her mourning, Caine in himself is one too many. “And if I was dissatisfied with your service, trust me, you would already be off this planet.”

“Your Majesty—”

“I’m done with this. Come on.” She marches into the house, picks a random guest room, throws the door open and gestures at the bed, “Get in.”

“Your Majesty—”

“I said get in.”

He shuffles into the room and sits on the bed, his whole frame thrumming with reluctance.

“Lie down.”

“Your—”

“Lie. Down.”

He obeys with a rebellious air of a teenager who’s being put to bed too early on a Friday night—‘You, evil parents, can get me to go to bed, but you can’t get me to sleep!’—not bothering to take off his boots, probably keeping them on for any emergency that might arise.

Well, you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.

Besides, as infuriating as Caine is, the queen doesn’t want to abuse him. This whole argument—even if he vehemently denies it is an argument—started because she didn’t want him to hurt himself by being awake any longer. Yes, she can order him to take a nap in no uncertain terms, and he will probably obey, but there is a vast difference between commanding someone to do something necessary and violating their will to the degree that they might lose faith in both your leadership and their own compliance.

She resolutely strides up to the bed with the very unhappy lycantant on it.

“Scoot.”

“Your Majesty?”

“I’ll sit with you and read something. Siskin, get me my sheath, please.” She picks one of the pillows and sets it against the footboard. “Siskin’s folk will raise the alarm should anything happen, and I promise I won’t leave while you’re asleep. But since you obviously don’t trust your Queen’s word,”
she shoots Caine a scathing glare and he winces, “this is a fail-safe.” She presses her hand into the springy mattress and shakes it up a bit. “If I try to sneak away,” – another pointed look, – “you will feel the bed shift and wake up.”

“I might not,” he mumbles, yet settles into the pillows, finally relaxing and turning onto his side to make himself more comfortable.

Seriously, men.

“Here,” she pushes her bare foot towards him, – she’s taken her boots off before getting them on the bed cover unlike a certain someone. “You can keep your hand on my leg to make sure I’m still here and living.”

He eyes her for a while in what appears to be an even mix of bewilderment and suspicion, then tentatively wraps his arm around her calf and ankle, hugging her extremity to his chest with a relieved sigh like it’s his favourite teddy bear he’d been sleeping with for his whole childhood.

“Sleep tight, Caine,” she tells him and despite her annoyance there is a tinge of reluctant fondness in her voice.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he replies, his voice already fading as he himself fades into the realm where nothing but oblivion exists – he’s obviously way too tired to dream.

Once Caine is out, her grief is in.

With vengeance.

She cannot actually read, not really. All she can see is a white background with some incomprehensible black symbols on it, clumped up in clusters; her mind fails to concentrate enough to discern any meaning behind those signs. She ends up watching some silly physical comedy holos, the sound fed directly to her i-comm so she wouldn’t wake up the sleeping guard.

Eventually she slides forward, shifting her fallen-asleep leg into a more agreeable position – Caine clings onto it, but fortunately, does not wake up – and leans her head back onto her pillow, drowsing off herself.

Chapter End Notes

*Botanically speaking, the fig is a much more likely candidate for being the biblical forbidden fruit than the apple. If you wish, you can see the deeper symbolism in the scene that takes place under the sycamore tree. If not, then it’s just an exchange of treats.*

*The scallops described here are a real species, *Patinopecten yessoensis*, although I made a travesty of their biology. They do not attach themselves to rocks; they don’t inhabit warm tropical waters but cold northern oceans; they cannot be found in the shallows. They are delicious, though, both cooked and raw.*

*Siskin’s name translates into Russian as Чижик. They are wonderful, charming birds.*

*Havet translates from Swedish as ‘the sea’. The name for Jupiter’s home planet is*
inspired by the fairy tale *Pappan och havet* (Moominpappa and the Sea) by incredible Tove Jansson. The cave described here as Jupiter’s sanctuary is borrowed from yet another tale by the same author, *Kometen kommer* (The Comet Is Coming). If you ever get to reading Tove Jansson’s fairy tales (which are not only for kids, since they can be understood on multiple levels), you’ll give yourself a gift that will last you a lifetime.
A storm rolls in just as the sun dips its plump blushing bottom into the horizon. The wind picks up, swelling the tattered sales of the cloud ships that appear seemingly out of nowhere, their leaden hulls stowed to the brim with rain; the evening light dims into gloomy dusk in mere minutes as the gray armada quickly overtakes the whole sky. The pleasantly soothing hum of the waves turns onto incessant menacing roar, chorused by the whooshing hiss of the gale and the hoof-like pounding of the myriad of raindrops, loud as a stampeding herd of kulans.

Jupiter is sitting cross-legged on the bed – it has been hastily evacuated from the garden onto the open terrace just when the first fat drops of moisture spotted the ground, – watching blindingly bright lightning strobe and zigzag across the sky, illuminating the rough sea, – angrily attacking the pallid beach with long sinister-looking swells crowned with white crests, – and the rain-drenched trees around the house. The wind mercilessly tosses and thrashes their branches around; their leaves are limp and laden with water, glistening in the flashes of unnaturally white light.

Thunderstorms are glorious.

When thunder booms, it reverberates through her whole body, throbbing in her bones. No wonder the ancients perceived storms as manifestation of the wrath of gods. Short stretches of darkness and quiet in between the bolts feel pregnant and tense, only the harbingers of the next upcoming onslaught of light and sound. Jupiter huddles deeper into the blanket wrapped around her shoulders, almost vibrating with anticipation.

She always feels keenly alive during thunderstorms: it is as if celestial electricity galvanizes her brain, making her just a touch insane, but in a good way. Her whole body – that was numb and unfeeling just a short while ago – buzzes with excitement not unlike sexual arousal: there is a touch of adrenaline rush there, prompted by the immensity of the chaos surrounding her, a bit of breathless awe at the transcendental spectacle her eyes are witnessing, and a whole lot of aesthetic and sensuous gratification.

The only thing that mars her tête-à-tête with the storm is Caine.

The guard, who’s usually so good at being invisible and unobtrusive, hovers. As the night progresses, he is drawing closer and closer to her. Every time a lightning flashes, her peripheral vision registers that he’s gotten an imperceptible increment nearer. There is no danger out there, yet he’s behaving like there is.

It is unnerving.

When Jupiter finally loses her patience and turns to snap at the lycantant, there’s another flash of lightning, and Caine is standing close enough for her to notice him wince at the sight, white as a sheet, awash in the eldritch light of the tremendous electricity raging in the skies above. Next instant the luminance is gone but her eyes discern the black silhouette flinch back a little at the following blast of thunder, ducking his head minutely in an involuntary evasive reflex. And then it hits her –

*Caine is afraid.*

He is afraid of the storm – like many people and even more animals instinctually are – and yet he
stays here with her, refusing to take shelter in the safety of the house, even knowing that there is no real danger – at least not one he could protect her from.

Suddenly, she does not feel like snapping.

“You have a fear of thunderstorms?” she asks the space in front of her, not looking his way anymore. She knows how important it is to have at least some semblance of privacy when you’re feeling vulnerable.

“It’s not a fear, it’s a phobia.” That sounds suspiciously like grumbling.

He even forgets to tack on the obligatory ‘Your Majesty’ at the end, which is saying a lot.

“Hey, you don’t have to convince me you are fearless, I am well aware of that by this point.” It’s probably not the best time to remind him of their interaction in the interrogation room that convinced her of that, once and for all. The person who could be that calm in the face of his impending execution is not a coward, even if they, say, shriek at the sight of a millipede or faint at the touch of a doctor’s needle. “Why does lightning bother you?”

“Lightning is unpredictable. It’s a danger you can’t smell, can’t track, can’t fight. It can hit you at any moment and you cannot defend yourself against it.”

“There are a lot of unpredictable and stealthy dangers out there, Caine. Did you know that cancer cells appear in our body on regular basis? It’s only our immune system that detects and destroys them before they have a chance to develop into something sinister. Even today’s medicine can’t cure all forms and stages of cancer. And don’t get me started on demyelinating deceases!”

Her RegeneX-related research has left Jupiter with a lot of knowledge she wishes she could unlearn.

Caine shoots her a sidelong glance. “You sure know how to calm a guy, Your Majesty.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. What I meant to convey was that out of all the things to be afraid of, thunderstorms are the most harmless.”

“Not so much when you are out there in the open with no shelter, soaked to the bone and very much a current-carrying conductor, Your Majesty.”

“You are no longer in the Deadlands, Caine.” – Then again, he’ll probably be stuck in there forever, no matter where he is. – “We’re under the roof of a house equipped with a highly effective lightning protection system, on the terrace made of wood, one of the best electric insulators out there. We’re safe, Caine,” she reasons, knowing her logical arguments are futile: his fear is not about not being safe, it is about not feeling safe, like all irrational fears are. She wishes she could help him with that, but that is not a simple task.

“The terrace is wet and the air is very humid. They’re both conductive, Your Majesty. You’ll be safer indoors.”

She really does not want to go inside, but she takes in how strained Caine’s voice sounds, how rigid his posture is and casts a longing good-bye glance at the magnificent display above.

“I guess you’re right. Discretion is the better part of valour. Let’s turn in for the night.”

He follows her into the house as she leads him to the master bedroom. Without the bed the room looks eerily empty and orphaned.
Or maybe it’s without Finnick.

Jupiter shakes the thought off and soldiers on. “This room has the best light and sound insulation in the house.”

The queen is very keen on keeping her intimate life private, especially when she has guests staying with her. She’s never been quiet, and a mere idea of Kiza or Stinger overhearing something was such a turn-off that having her bedroom completely soundproofed was the first thing she did when the house was being renovated after her Dad’s departure.

Head of the Royal Guard was extremely unhappy about it, but his attempts to tell her how risky the modernization was fell on deaf ears (“Jupiter, your idea of privacy is ridiculously unsafe! What if the guy hurts you?” – “Who, Finnick?!”” – “It might not always be Finnick.” – “Singer, honestly, you’re such a killjoy! But I won’t let you ruin my sex life.” – “Girl, I don’t want to know your sex life exists.” – “And that is exactly why I am soundproofing my bedroom!”)

However, Stinger managed to convince her against insulating the whole house (“Jupiter, other people should be able to hear if you call for help, for gods’ sake!” – “Fine! Listen to Kiza’s sex life, if you wish, you pest, and ponder on your paranoia!” – “Kiza’s boyfriends are not allowed onto Havet.” – “Stinger, how could you live to be your age and still believe that one needs another person to have a sex life?” – A pause. A long, tense, pregnant pause of horrified realization. – “I really think you should soundproof my daughter’s bedroom instead of yours, Your Majesty. Consider this an official request.” – “Nope, not a chance. After all, it’s ridiculously unsafe!”

Jupiter flips a switch on the wall above the place where her bed used to stand – there is no Chamber Presence in this house, the things are kept as simple and manual as possible – and rolling shutters slide down behind the outside glass wall.

“They are meant to block out the blazing sun, but are effective against lightning, too,” she explains to Caine. “Thunderstorms are fairly frequent here and they’re not easy to sleep through. Go get yourself a bed and try to doze off.”

She turns to leave.

“If I stay in a soundproof room, I will not be able to hear if something happens to Your Majesty.”

“Are we back on this again? Caine, as you can clearly see, I have survived your taking a nap earlier.”

“That was the risk I shouldn’t have taken, Your Majesty.”

Stubborn ass.

“So what, I am supposed to camp out here with you?!”

“No, Your Majesty, of course not.” The guard seems appalled at her conjecture. “I am supposed to stay in a room – a non-soundproof one – adjoining the one you will be sleeping in.”

“Will you be sleeping, too?”

“It does not matter, Your Majesty,” he assures her just as he winces at yet another boom of thunder – with the door open, it still can be heard inside, albeit dimly. This room is indeed the best place for someone who does not like storms, yet Caine looks extremely reluctant to stay in it.

_Do you really worry about some vague and probably non-existent threat or are you just afraid to_
stay in the mute darkness alone?

The decision comes as quickly as the understanding that she will regret it.

“Get two beds, Caine. Or just two mattresses. I’ll get the bedding.”

Jupiter returns with an overflowing armful of blankets and pillows – the ones she used before perished in the bonfire along with her former bed – to find that Caine brought a bed for her and a mattress for himself. Apparently hierarchy ought to be observed even when it comes to sleeping arrangements. Gods.

“Here,” she hands him half of her haul with a little more force than necessary. The prospect of staying the night in this room does not appeal to her in the slightest, but if she bails, she’s pretty certain the obstinate idiot won’t sleep a wink.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he blinks at her, as if failing to comprehend what she expects him to do with the heap of sheets and blankets he’s now holding. “Shall I?..” he gestures at her bed.

“Caine,” she snaps, “I know these past few days may have made you think that Queen needs constant bottom wiping, but I assure you, most of the time I’m pretty capable of taking care of myself. I come to Havet with that express purpose, so would you please back off?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, Your Majesty,” he assures her, dropping the bedding onto his mattress to hold up his hands in a surrender gesture, and her annoyance deflates like a popped puffball mushroom.

“Just go to sleep, Caine.”

The moment she turns off the lights, the room is plunged into absolute darkness. No matter how intently Jupiter peers into it, she can’t see a thing. She’d bet that even Caine’s superior eyes can’t discern anything around him: for night vision to work, it needs at least some residual light. Unless he has thermal vision. Does he have thermal vision? Is it polite to ask?

Gods, what drivel she is thinking about!

However, when Jupiter tries to think about something other than possible peculiarities of lycantant biology, her own brain betrays her. In the sensory deprivation of the invisible and silent room – especially since it’s this room, – having nothing but its own contents to process, it begins to recollect…

Reminisce…

And emote.

No, no, no, she’s just managed to numb herself into apathy, she does not need her fucking emotions back!

Caine’s mattress creaks softly: the lycantant is probably settling into a more comfortable position. The unnatural quiet enhances the sounds within the room. It never used to bother Jupiter before.

The blank nothingness – as tenebrous as the shade of a raven’s plumage and just as macabre – starts filling in with the images her eyes used to witness in the past, her memory unhelpfully supplying the hollow echoes of the events that once constituted her life: Finnick’s smile, her own laughter, his throat moving as it formed the sounds of a song, the wave of awe that filled her at the sound, the way he squeezed her fingers whenever she was nervous, her instant relaxation at his touch, the ease with
which he could make her forget even the shittiest of days before going to sleep…


Jupiter’s memories gather around her in the darkness, crowding her space, like grieving relatives around a coffin. It’s raining and all the umbrellas at this funeral are black.

There’s muffled stirring coming from Caine’s corner and whispering of sheets.

Jupiter is not even fully aware what her ghosts are burying today. What is her mind trying to exhume from her subconscious only to ensepulchre it even deeper, hiding it under layers upon layers of avoidance and escapism? What has she lost that was so precious that she feels the deprivation this deeply? What is she this terrified of never having again? What is the common denominator to all the images her brain is throwing at her? Is it love? Beauty? Happiness? Joy? She does not see, does not understand. She wants to take a look into that casket.

Caine rolls over with an unhappy huff.

The coffin drops and the bereaved scatter.

This is ridiculous.

“I thought you were supposed to fall asleep,” Jupiter grits out. “You’re so on edge, your nerves are catching.”

Admittedly, if she wants the guy to calm down enough to drift off, snapping at him is not the best of tactics. So bite her. It’s late, she’s tired and miserable, and she does not want to be here, facing both her deceased dreams – and fears, very much alive and kicking.

Mostly in the gut.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I’m trying. It’s just – I can still hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“The thunder.”

“Really? Huh. I guess I’ve been swindled. If the contractor that soundproofed this room is still in business and alive, I’ll have to rectify both of those oversights.”

As she says those words, she realizes that they aren’t said in jest: she fully means them. If the builder responsible for the faulty sound insulation was here right now, she would order his execution without batting an eye, without taking time to think – no one should be allowed to fool the queen without severe repercussions.

What is it with her? She’s been spectacularly short-tempered lately.

“No human would be able to detect the sound, Your Majesty,” Caine counters in his habitual nonantagonistic manner. “It is appropriately muffled.”

How does he manage to be so inoffensive while arguing with her? She’s vexed by how non-irritating he is being.

“And what if I had not humans but lycantants staying in the house with me? I mean, I kind of already do, but what if I had things I didn’t want them to hear?”
As far as she is concerned, certain lycantants are walking privacy violations, both due to their heightened senses and their infuriating fidelity to duty.

Which is all the more maddening because of how disarming the latter quality is: she can’t even get properly angry at them for that, damn it.

“I do not think any sound a human can produce can be on par with the acoustic impact of thunder,” Caine comments. “And you can always send those lycantants away whenever you wish.”

“That has been working so well with you, hasn’t it?” she retorts sarcastically.

“These are extenuating circumstances, Your Majesty,” Caine mumbles, seemingly aggrieved.

Once again, Jupiter’s irritation collapses, punctured by a sudden stab of pity. She does not envy the guy, with him being awkwardly stuck here with her and her grief. Speaking of which –

“Caine, why were you in the transportation chamber that night?”

“You smelled all wrong, Your Majesty, not – healthy. After I escor… er, did what you had told me to,” – Jupiter silently appreciates his tact in not mentioning Finnick’s name as well as the latter’s ardent desire to see his beloved. Fuck. She’s so not thinking about that right now! – “I reported my concerns to Commander Apini. I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I had to.” – See? Walking privacy violations.– “Only Commander and myself had clearance to access your private quarters and do something about the situation.”

“So Stinger threw you under the bus,” Jupiter surmises. The cunning bastard, he knew it would be too risky to show his own face in Queen’s vicinity after what he had done. Useless, too: she would have had no qualms about kicking him right out again.

“Uh, no, actually, he dismissed me for the night. He said that you should be left alone to calm down on your own.”

As she should have been. Stinger does know her, after all.

“You disobeyed Apini?!” That is impressive. Jupiter does not know why she is so surprised, though: she saw Caine disobey Commander once, when the guard had been ordered into inaction, yet failed to comply and put his hand between her own and the blade.

Come to think of it, that was quite a similar situation, actually.

She wonders what Caine considers to be the blade in this case.

“Technically, I didn’t,” the guard replies. “It wasn’t an order. No one but you could order me, Your Majesty, not until you remove the Sigil.”

“So you committed breaking and entering all on your own.”

“There was no breaking, Your Majesty: the security system let me in after it had scanned the Sigil. Although I do admit to entering your quarters without permission, and I am sorry about that.”

“You’re really not,” she groused.

“I am, Your Majesty. It wasn’t nice that I had to impose on your privacy in order to protect you.”

“Protect me from what, Caine?” she asks, exasperated.
“Anything can happen.” His answer is as vague as it is firm, brooking no doubt or argument whatsoever.

Confident.

From what Jupiter has observed, the only moments when Caine seems to be perfectly self-assured and disregarding any danger to himself are those when he is protecting someone – either Stinger, as she witnessed at the interrogation room, or her. She knows by her own experience how fears and insecurity recede when you have to protect someone: Queen has a lot of people to keep safe herself.

That gives her an idea.

“Since you are here to defend me from gods know what, let me inform you that there’s a scary-ass electric storm out there.”

That gives Caine pause.

“I am aware of that, Your Majesty,” he replies eventually, confusion clear in his voice.

“Well, why aren’t you protecting me from it?” She consciously keeps a note of whiny petulance out of her voice: no need to overdo this.

“Am I supposed to?” He sounds lost.

“You said yourself it was unsafe. And scary.”

“But we’re indoors, it cannot harm you here. And you are not afraid; there is no trace of fear in your scent,” the guard counters tentatively.

That nose cannot be fooled; then again, she has no intention of actually deceiving Caine. You can win a game even if the other player is seeing your hand – if you have stronger cards.

And yes, sometimes being seen as vulnerable and fragile means having stronger cards.

“Caine,” she questions seriously, “are you denying me every woman’s inherent right to pretend that I am terrified of something to be protected by a very manly man?” – It’s just a tiny, harmless manipulation the female kind have been using since the dawn of times to make their male counterparts feel a bit better about themselves. – “Do you expect me to jump on tables from silly things like mice or spiders? Because that would be very misogynistic of you.”

There is another pause. She almost can hear the gears turning in his head.

“So, you want me to protect you from the storm?” Caine clarifies, something evidently not quite computing in his brain, yet she hears him stand up. “But I’ve already gotten you away from the terrace, what else can I possibly do?” To her satisfaction it seems to be a genuine question and not an objection.

“You can make physical contact, and breathe evenly, and be warm. What else is there to do?” – All the things she intends on doing herself. The only truly effective way to soothe someone’s fear is not using words to reason with them, but speak the body language, appealing to the visceral responses rather than the intellect. – “Come on,” she pats the bed beside her, moving to the side to give him room, “let us be spooked together, it’ll be more fun that way.”

“I’m not allowed to be on the same bed as Your Majesty. That would be lèse-majesté.” Despite Caine’s cautious words, his voice now sounds much closer.
She rolls her eyes at him, even though he – probably – can’t see her. “That didn’t stop you earlier.”

Lycantant logic is a bizarre and convoluted thing.

“Your Majesty insisted.”

“Shall I insist now, too?” She’s careful with her intonation, making her words seem not an offhand retort, but what they truly are – an offer to absolve her subordinate of the responsibility of making the decision.

“You shall, Your Majesty.”

Is it just her imagination or does that sound less like a mere acquiescence and more like an encouragement?

“Then I insist.”

There is some shuffling, then she feels the mattress dip under a considerable weight as Caine arranges himself along her side, not touching any part of her. Seems like the guy has thermal vision after all, otherwise how would he be able to manage such precision? She draws her arm aside in invitation and pats her shoulder with the fingertips, before dropping her hand onto the bed. Caine hesitates – what she’s suggesting is probably another despicable case of lèse-majesté – but finally he places his head on her shoulder. She moves her arm to wrap it around his back –

– and yanks it away as if scalded.

“Um, Caine? Why are you naked?”

Jupiter would be lying if she said she is not waiting for the answer with bated breath.

“You said I had to be warm, Your Majesty. The Guard uniform is very well insulated to prevent us from giving off a detectable heat signature. I wouldn’t feel warm to you wearing it, so I took it off,” Caine answers matter-of-factly, all efficiency and pragmatism.

Two words: lycantant logic.

“You are a weird creature,” she exhales feelingly, finally voicing the thought that has been repeatedly entering her mind during these last few days. At the moment, she’s too astonished for tact.

“Yes, Your Majesty, I’m well aware of that.” There is a distinctive note of bitterness in his voice.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she tells him as her awkwardly hovering forearm finally comes to hug his back, failing to encompass its ridiculous expanse. Her fingers register how tense his muscles are.

“ Weird is not synonymous to bad, Caine.”

“Both in the splicing industry and the Legion it is,” he remarks. He sounds tired.

“This isn’t your splicer’s facility, nor is it the Legion. Both you and your weirdness are appreciated here,” she assures him and is herself surprised at the heartfelt sincerity in her words. If she can hear that, he most certainly can, too. “Although I must admit, taking off your clothes because you thought you would be tepid to the touch is something else.”

“I still have my pants on,” he informs her chest, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his tone.

She snorts a laugh at that, she cannot help it. “Nice to know. Beside the point, but nice to know. Let me guess: it would be lèse-majesté if you took them off, right?”
“Yes, Your Majesty, it would,” Caine confirms solemnly, his back tightening up further under her palm, as if his body instinctively prepares to take a hit.

“Of course it would,” she drawls melancholically, her mirth fading as quickly as it appeared.

“I could put my clothes back on, if this displeases you.”

“Frankly, I don’t care much either way; you just surprised me, that’s all. May as well stay as you are.” Jupiter has always been an adherent of the minimal fuss attitude; besides, there is no need to make the situation any more awkward than it already is, so she’ll just have to take it in stride. “Here, have some of my blanket, I don’t want you to freeze, even partially.”

“Lycantants have a wider range of temperature tolerance than humans, Your Majesty,” Caine informs, yet he accepts the corner of her covers as she drapes them over his side, once again being reminded of how rigid his body is.

“Buddy, you’re as taut as a tightrope,” she comments. “You’ll never be able to fall asleep while you’re this tense. You said yourself, there’s nothing to fear here. Or do you have a phobia of queens, too?”

Caine freezes under her hand, his muscles stiffening to the degree when she can sense tremors running through them.

Holy shit.

That was supposed to be a joke.

Her calming strategy really isn’t working. Trying to sooth the guy’s fear by bringing him literally in touch with the source of his other fear… Great, Jupiter, just – great.

No time to kick herself over it, though, she’ll have to work with what she has.

Her hand presses firmer onto the lycantant’s back as she centers herself, trying to find that inner certainty, that strength which allows her to lead and make people want to follow. She’ll deal with this. She always deals with things. That’s what she does.

“It’s not a phobia, Your Majesty,” Caine answers finally. “It’s common sense.”

“Are we really that intimidating?” the queen asks softly. If he’s talking to her, he has less time to be afraid. Our fears grow when they are mute.

“All the Entitled are unpredictable, Your Majesty, and royals most of all. You never see them coming. You can’t fight back.”

That is a bold thing to say. Treasonous, even, if it was coming from anyone who hasn’t proven their fealty to the Crown. Why is he divulging this to her, to an Entitled, to the monarch? How can he trust and distrust the same person simultaneously? What’s going on in that bizarrely wired head of his?

“Why when it comes to interacting with royals your first idea is of fighting back?”

The possibility that she might have an anti-royalist in the very heart of the Private Security is mind-boggling. The idea that all members of the Royal Guard should be avid supporters of the monarchy is axiomatic.

Then again, if the guy did mean her any harm, he had plenty opportunities to inflict it. Yet he did the
exact opposite. As far as Jupiter is concerned, it’s not beliefs that matter, actions do.

“The royals do not notice you unless you have displeased them. And if you did displease them, you
don’t stand a single chance of defending yourself. You’re utterly and absolutely helpless.”

What are they talking about here – the Deadlands or the interrogation room? Both? Something else
she has no idea about?

“Caine, I realize that your experiences may have taught you differently,” she starts patiently, “but
royal power is not about tyrannizing, it is about taking care of the people whose lives we are
entrusted with. Those who have never been in this position cannot imagine the extent of the
responsibility we shoulder. And that responsibility involves maintaining order, which in turn implies
that we have to mete out justice. In other words, we ought to punish those who are a threat to our
subjects.”

“So much power concentrated in one single point is never a good thing,” Caine responds. “If
someone finds himself at the receiving end of its manifestation, he gets destroyed. It’s like being hit
by lightning.”

Holy hell, does the guy even realize what he is saying?! ‘So much power concentrated in one single
point is never a good thing’ is probably the idea that was running through the minds of those who
chopped the heads of their monarchs on the guillotine in the distant past or planted the bomb that
took the lives of two of her guards not so long ago.

And it is coming from her trusted bodyguard.

What the actual fuck?!

Should she be afraid? She does not feel afraid. Caine was the one who saved her from that
explosion, after all. However, his words make her feel deeply hurt and pissed. It’s not the first time
she’s heard the accusations of hogging too much power and sure as hell it will not be the last. Yet
she’s been diligently trying to use that power wisely, giving all her time, all her effort, her whole life
to better those of her people and the depth of their ingratitude is getting to her.

“So you think that royals are nothing but a volatile and destructive force of nature, blind and
inhuman?” she inquires tersely, her own body tensing up against Caine’s warmth.

“No, Your Majesty, I think they are indeed human. Having to handle so much responsibility would
wear any human down. They cannot stop, they cannot take a break, toughening up in order to
endure the pressure, until they harden to a point where they’re not really human anymore.” These is
an understanding in Caine’s words she didn’t expect from an underdog like him.

“It’s not like royals get to choose their fate, Caine,” Jupiter reflects, her indignation morphing into
sadness.

She was so much happier when she didn’t know she was a queen. If she had had a choice, she
would have left things the way they were when she was a kid: life was so much simpler back then.
It’s not like she wanted power, her power was forced upon her and somewhere deep down she keeps
resenting it.

“I understand that, Your Majesty,” Caine acknowledges with a heavy sigh. “Splices cannot choose
their fate either, just like royals. It’s not my fault I was born a splice, and it’s not your fault you were
born a queen.”

Has she just gotten an absolution?
For being a queen?!

From a splice?!!

By gods, the guy has some guts on him. From what she’s seen so far Caine is an outlandish tangle of fears – which seem ridiculous to Jupiter; seriously, who is afraid of thunderstorms and her?! – and somewhat foolish yet breathtaking courage.

Or he is just keenly intuitive about where, when and to whom he can vouchsafe his thoughts.

Either way, a warning will not go amiss.

“Caine, you should be very careful with that kind of discourse. Some of your ideas can be considered, let’s say, inappropriate for the royal court. You may be accused of sabotage of morale and Stinger will have to use his authority to protect you from being investigated by the Internal Security.” Because if they investigate Caine, they will find him guilty, considering what she has heard tonight. “That will make Apini vulnerable in turn. Then I will have to get personally involved in order to protect Stinger. And Queen should stay above petty intrigues.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I shouldn’t have opined on things that are not my business, or have compared myself to you; we are incomparable, I realize that. I will not do it again.”

“Caine, this is not about what you think, this is about what you say. As long as I’m satisfied with your service, your ideas do not concern me – your mind is yours, you’re free to think whatever you please. But voicing your thoughts can get you in trouble if you share them with a wrong person.”

“You are the first person I’ve shared them with. I usually don’t talk to people – I don’t have many people to talk to. You asked me a question and I’m supposed to answer truthfully to Your Majesty,” Caine is quiet for a while, then, tentatively, “Am I in trouble?”

“So, now you think I am the wrong person?”

“I do not think you are. I know you wouldn’t hurt someone unfairly, Your Majesty,” he states. He sounds very sure.

Considering their prior conversation, Jupiter didn’t expect to hear that much conviction in his words – the words that strike a chord with some of her darkest, deepest fears. She envies his certainty.

“Who can say what is fair and what is unfair, Caine? When a random guard had nearly killed my consort, I had no doubt that executing the culprit would be a perfectly just course of action. Although I think when you were about to be put to death by the very Queen you tried to save, you hardly found it fair.”

“I made a dire mistake. Punishing me for it would have been fair,” Caine mutters grimly.

“Well, then I’m glad your concept of fair disaccorded with mine on that particular occasion, otherwise you would be dead.”

“Why did you let me live?” The question is murmured so quietly she barely catches it. “You were so upset with what I had done, so angry… So sad.”

Yeah, like Queen could afford let her emotions govern her decision-making.

“For the same reason I let you follow me here: for better or worse, you were doing your job.” – You were being loyal. Even if Caine does not support monarchy in general, he definitely supports her.
She’s seen him do it. She’s *seeing* him *doing* it. – “No one should be punished for sticking to their duty. Besides, I think it’s better to regret being too merciful than being too hasty with punishment, especially the capital one.”

“So you believe that mercy triumphs over judgment?”

“In your case, it did. Although my reasoning is that it gives me better chances of rectifying my mistake, if I come to regret showing mercy on one occasion or another.”

“I’m not used to being shown mercy, Your Majesty.”

*I’ve gathered that much.*

“I’m not used to showing it too often. Queen can’t afford to have an all-forgiving attitude: impunity sets a very bad example. You may have more than atoned for your mistake in my eyes, but there are people out there who remember that you attacked Royal Consort and *got away with it.* In certain circumstances that knowledge might turn into temptation. What cost me nothing back then one day might cost me dearly.”

“Thank you for making an exception for me then, Your Majesty.”

“I was afraid,” Jupiter confesses. There is something surreal to the absolute quiet and darkness that surround them when the storm is raging outside. It’s surprisingly easy to open up in the dark, talking about things she usually doesn’t talk about. Her eyes cannot discern any shapes or shades in the pitch blackness; if not for Caine’s warm weight on her shoulder, she would think she was talking to herself. Even as it is, it feels that way.

“What could you possibly be afraid of in that situation, Your Majesty?” Caine sounds baffled and – is that *protectiveness* she hears?!

“Caine, do you think it’s easy to decide what is wrong and what is right? There’s no one who could pat Queen on the back and reassure me, “Jupiter, you’re doing the right thing!” – That used to be what Finnick did for her, sometimes. Now with him out, there’s definitely no one left. – “Yet there are tons of detractors out there – who do not have a sniff of experience with power – who take immense pleasure in pointing out my mistakes.” – Besides, there is her conscience, which is even worse than the horde of critics. Its judgment is ruthless and inescapable: there’s nowhere she can hide from her own mind. – “I’m constantly afraid of doing a wrong thing, to abuse my power. And to grow resentful at people’s unappreciation, short-sightedness and – sometimes – sheer stupidity or downright cruelty along the way. I’m afraid all of that will eventually make me unnecessary callous. That I will come to enjoy others’ pain, the pain they seem to enjoy causing me – and each other.”

Caine is silent for a long moment, as if he is expecting Jupiter to add something. She doesn’t feel like adding anything: she’s had all of that brewing inside her for so long she knows that it can’t be helped with *words.*

“I think,” he finally speaks up, “that your having all those fears is as good guarantee as any that what you fear will not happen any time soon, Your Majesty. At least, it will not happen frequently.”

She snorts sullenly, “Not much of a consolation there, Caine.”

It’s a surreal conversation they are having, one that would never happen in different circumstances. As a rule that brooks no exceptions Jupiter is much more careful about what she divulges to other people. Cradling a stranger’s head on her shoulder is not an activity in which she routinely indulges, either. And to top it all off, no splice would normally dare to ask Queen personal questions, let alone...
volunteer his own opinion on the matter.

However, there is no Queen and no splice any longer here tonight, no two opposing ends of the social spectrum: they are just two voices in the dark, two sources of heat, two heartbeats, invisible in the lightlessness, oddly equal. Her bare hand on his naked shoulder – that at some point of their conversation has finally relaxed and sagged against her forearm – creates an illusion of closeness, of intimacy, of trust. Well, maybe the latter is not exactly an illusion.

At least, not anymore.

“I wish, Your Majesty, I could protect you better. This doesn’t seem enough,” Caine confesses with a frustrated, helpless huff.

“You are already doing more than anyone else would.” If Jupiter is honest, she’s been expecting to see the moment when Caine’s sense of duty would finally clash with his self preservation instincts and he would back off and let her brood in peace. He hasn’t. Huh.

“If you could tell me what else you are afraid of… Maybe that would help?..”

“Caine, you can’t protect me from everything I fear. No one can.”

“I realize that, Your Majesty. However, being more thoroughly informed cannot hurt.”

Caine’s down-to-earth pragmatism appeals to Jupiter. Besides, she hates being kept in the dark herself, so she attempts to give a full and honest answer.

“Betrayal.” She does not need to think on that one. “Humiliation. Rape. Torture. Any kind of intense physical pain, really.”

“You shouldn’t be afraid of those things. You shouldn’t be thinking of those things, not being who you are, Your Majesty.” Caine’s words are so heated it makes her want to smile.

He’s so naïve.

“Caine, both you and the whole Guard are there just so I wouldn’t get kidnapped again or worse. I have a capsule of deadly neurotoxin implanted in my mouth specifically for the occasion of torture. There have been multiple attempts to explode, shoot or poison me. I’ve had the skin on my arms and legs replaced where it was poisoned by the sheets imbued with venom which nearly stopped my heart.” – She was lucky she wasn’t sleeping alone that night, lucky Finnick reacted as quickly as he did, despite experiencing the effects of poisoning himself. – “Queen’s life is not as enchanted as people tend to think.”

“Suffering is not all bad,” Caine’s voice loses its conviction, yet he attempts to sound reassuring. – Coming from someone else, it would be patronizing. However, she’s willing to accept the reassurance from the person who knows what he’s talking about, who’s had firsthand experience with pain. – “Those who have been through suffering are less likely to inflict it on others.”

“Or they might become embittered and start doling out suffering themselves,” she counters. “Isn’t that exactly what you were talking about earlier? I am at risk of ceasing to be human.”

“You’re stronger than that, Your Majesty.”

“Am I? Doesn’t feel like it.”

“You have to be. You have no other choice: you can do too much damage otherwise.”
“I guess so,” she concedes.

That’s her life in a nutshell: *she has no other choice.*

“You didn’t mention death,” Caine speaks up after a stretch of silence.

“Pardon?”

“Among your fears, Your Majesty, you didn’t mention death. Or was it self-evident? Everyone fears death.”

“Do you?”

“No, not really.” – She feels him attempting to shake his head against her shoulder – an unconscious, automatic gesture. – “Not anymore.”

“I think we don’t have anything to fear about death itself. Death is nothing to us: when we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not.”

“You don’t believe in afterlife, Your Majesty?”

“I don’t have to believe in it: I *live* the afterlife, Caine, Seraphi’s afterlife. Beyond recurrence, I don’t believe in any other kind. Death is the end of everything, it’s just a stop. There’s nothing terrible about that; sometimes it can be a relief, a mercy. It’s what precedes death is scary: dread, weakness, illness, madness.”

“My fear of electric storms must seem ridiculous to you. It looks so silly compared to such profound matters,” Caine admits glumly.

“I thought you said it was *a phobia,*” she teases. “And my most *profound* fear is one of mole crickets.”

“What?!”

“Oh, don’t pretend you didn’t hear me the first time, Wise, not with that super hearing of yours!” Jupiter grouches.

“But mole crickets are harmless!”

“As are thunderstorms!” she retorts. “Have you seen all those spikes?!” Her shoulders jerk in an involuntary shudder. “They can *fly,* too!”

“Are there any on Havet?” Caine inquires in an invested, businesslike manner, practical as ever.

“No, of course not. This planet was seeded very thoughtfully. No scary insects here, thank you very much. No biting or blood-sucking creatures, or poisonous ones, or dangerous in any way. But the mere fact that those monsters exist somewhere out there, ugh!..”

“I promise I won’t let a single mole cricket approach you,” he swears solemnly.

“Thank you, Caine,” she says, ridiculously relieved all of the sudden. “I wish I could promise you the same about thunderstorms. Or queens.”

“I must admit, Your Majesty is not that intimidating up close,” he vouchsafes into her bosom.

“Shut up, I’m scary.”
“If you say so, Your Majesty.”

Next morning – Is it morning? The room is still completely dark and silent, so she can’t really tell, – Jupiter wakes up to a heavy weight in her lap, pressing mercilessly onto her full bladder. What in the hell is that? Groggy and a bit disoriented from lingering sleep she blindly gropes the wall and flips the switch. The shutters start their slow journey upwards; the early amber light gradually filters into the room to reveal a snugly curled-up Caine, his arm slung across her thighs, his face tucked into her groin.

His face…

…into her groin.

She manfully suppresses the urge to flail and kick the guy in the head, but it’s an effort. It’s never a good idea to jostle a sleeping soldier who’s been in action – or a military splice who’s been to the Deadlands: they might break your neck before they realize what they are doing. Mortal danger ingrains the body with reflexes that are not easily erased. (When Jupiter was a kid, she once jumped onto sleeping Uncle Stinger – only to be violently thrown into a wall. She got concussion and vertebral bone bruise. Her Dad was not amused. Poor Stinger was beside himself; after the incident his bedroom door was always locked at night and she learnt to never jump on adults if they didn’t see her coming – which, quite frankly, was probably a good thing.)

But hey, what can she say, she is not used to waking up to random dudes’ mugs buried into her most private nooks and crannies. Now that’s a depiction of lèse-majesté, if she ever saw one.

Although Caine isn’t doing anything particularly illicit down there, only sleeping. He can’t be held responsible for his actions when he’s asleep, can he?

Still, this is bizarre. Maybe for lycantants it’s normal? Maybe that’s how they sleep all the time? Maybe sleeping with their head on someone’s shoulder is as unorthodox for them as this position is for her? Hell if she knows.

When she attempts to carefully squirm from under Caine’s dead weight – once the initial shock has subsided, her bladder starts insistently reminding her about its contents – the arm on her hips tightens as the lycantant settles more comfortably onto her lower half. By gods, the guy is heavy. And strong, even in his sleep. Trying to eel her way out of his grip is pretty much useless.

Oh, well.

She tried to let sleeping lycantants lie, but she needs to use the bathroom, now.

“Caine, let me go,” she commands in an even voice, unmoving.

He startles awake, blinks up at her face, squinting from the morning sun, then glances down at where his head has been just moments ago –

– and scrambles back so fast he tumbles off the bed with a resounding thud.

“Are you all right?” she asks, leaning forward to see if he indeed is.

“Are you?” he croaks, voice thick from sleep – and probably shock. Well, now they’re even, then.

“I’m not the one who fell.”
“No, I mean…” he vaguely gestures at her abdomen, flushes crimson and resolutely clamps his mouth shut.

Wise move.

Jupiter considers him for a moment, briefly wonders how the vessels in his ears can possibly hold the amount of blood necessary to achieve that particular hue of vermilion, takes in the overall expression of stupefied mortification and comes to a decision.


“Yes, Your Majesty,” he exhales, finding his tongue again. If immense relief was a sound, it would be Caine’s voice right now.

Jupiter gets up to find out that one of her legs – the one Caine used as a hug pillow – has fallen asleep so deeply it's nearing coma. The sharp pins-and-needles sensation is unbearable, but her dignity has suffered enough for one morning, she will not let herself groan out loud, she will not.

Jupiter grits her teeth and clutches at the wall to keep herself upright. Having made sure that she’s not about to fall on her ass, she starts limping to the adjoining bathroom with all the majestic grace her viciously tingling leg allows. If Queen says majestic, it’s majestic, shut up.

“Your Majesty, shall I help you to?..”

“No, thank you,” she cuts him off, dismissive. “No one will be carrying me to do my potty business until my next recurrence when I’m a toddler again. You go dunk your rear in the sea – the water is usually cold in the morning – otherwise it might bruise.”

“I’ve had worse injuries, Your Majesty.”

“Regardless, go make yourself scarce and let us both regain our dignity in solitude. Besides, I don’t want your freaky heightened senses anywhere near my person while I’m doing my morning ablutions. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Now shoo.”

“May I check the bathroom first, Your Majesty?”

“Go ahead,” she waves her hand permissively, “I’m sure my lavatory is wrought with peril!”

“You never know,” he replies, utterly deadpan.

She cracks up, almost losing her balance.

Whether intentionally or not, Caine is fun.

Huh.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter is a bit of a surprise for me. Caine demanded I should include it, even if it ruined the meticulously planned architecture of the story on the whole, refusing to act out the plot until I did so. He is one willful character.

Either that, or I’m developing schizophrenia.

Words ‘Mercy triumphs over judgment’ are neither Caine’s, nor mine.

The quote ‘Death is nothing to us. When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not’ belongs to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. Smart guy, he was.

The idea that being spooked by a thunderstorm together can be fun comes from the charming animation Woof the Kitten that can be watched with English subtitles here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4Y1d4a4r-Q

PS Since apparently there is at least one person out there who actually waits for my updates – which, quite frankly, blows my mind – I’m leaving this prognosis of my progress. Please, don’t expect the next chapter sooner than three weeks from now. I have another short story in work and eight stitched-up holes in my body that do exactly nothing for my inspiration or typing abilities. Although I foresee an operating table starring in one of the later chapters. Ooh, maybe I’m clairvoyant in addition to schizophrenic))
Nudity has never bothered Jupiter.

For some people – herself included – nakedness is not necessarily sexual. Painters and sculptors have been portraying nude figures since the very concept of art first appeared in order to demonstrate the inherent beauty of the human body and pornography was invented only as a byproduct of that. People go to museums to look at classic statues for aesthetic visual pleasure and not to leer at the marble girls’ boobs and guys’ junks. Parents proudly demonstrate pictures of their naked babies to family and friends in order to show how cute their kids once were with no intention of encouraging pedophilia. There is nothing sexual about nudity unless it is eroticized by the audience observing it.

Come on, who would consider a flaccid dick arousing? An erect one is useful, at least, and pleasant to look at in profile, but a peacefully hanging one, disinterested and inoffensive? An asparagus shoot is more erotic. Arousing, really? Some people have issues.

Boobs, she could understand. Boobs are aesthetic. And feel very nice to the touch, but she digresses.

Yet those few misfortunate body parts are completely outlawed in polite society. Although the queen could apprehend why uncovering certain fragments of a body can be considered sexy – she really liked feet, after all – but why it should be considered indecent and therefore forbidden is beyond her. After all, walking barefoot is perfectly normal in many places – like a park or a beach, for example, or, oh, everywhere in the countryside. If seeing lower extremities on blatant display arouses her, does that mean she should issue a royal edict obligating everyone wear shoes? Then what to do about the fact that some types of foot garments make feet look even sexier? Flip-flops, for example, are to footwear what a thong is to lingerie: they not so much conceal as highlight. Does that mean she should prohibit wearing them, too? Make everyone wear boots, even in tropical climates? That’s just absurd!

And why would she complain, anyway? Jupiter has so much fun when she and Kiza manage to slip away to some terrse planet – Earth, for example – to find themselves at some small seaside town in summer. There are so many bare feet to go around! It feels so nice to let herself indulge in objectification from time to time!

Unfortunately, very few of those feet are beautiful enough not to be an offense to her aesthetic sensibilities, and even if they are, there is no guarantee that the person attached to them won’t be a scarecrow, sadly.

The concept of indecent exposure varies from culture to culture: in some countries a woman’s uncovered face is considered an insult to propriety, while other nations pay no heed whatsoever to naked female breasts. There is even a tribe where you can stroll around buck-naked, yet uncovering the top of your head is considered obscenely lewd. The problems start when someone’s personal perception of what is decent and what is not clashes with the one of the society they live in.

Jupiter, personally, has never seen an issue in the absence of clothing. When you grow up in a hot climate with the sea literally at hand – or rather at foot – you tend not to attach much importance to garments. For a long while, her younger self couldn’t grasp why the heck you had to wear dresses when running around naked was so much easier. If you got hot – which in Havet’s weather happened all the time – you just went and dunked yourself in the water, not needing to bother with
the tedious task of changing into a bathing suit and then changing back again into dry clothes afterwards; you just swiped a towel over yourself and you were good to go!

Finally, one day, her Dad sat her down and explained that when it came to being undressed, one had to think about more people than just oneself. There were lots of men in their household who could be embarrassed by her display of nudity, Dad told her. She was confused about why would they even care – *she* wouldn’t have cared if they were strolling around without a stitch on – but apparently, they did. Dad was very vague about the reasons of such a puzzling reaction, so she decided to ask Uncle Stinger.

At her perfectly innocent question – “Do you care if I’m naked, Uncle Stinger?” – he froze and went silent for a while. Her child self – and children are very intuitive when it comes to that sort of matters – could acutely sense his unease. Eventually, he answered – Uncle Stinger always answered all of her questions, even the most stupid and embarrassing ones, which was one of the reasons why Jupiter held him in highest regard. (The other reasons were his mastery with knives – he could knock down a high hanging apple by cutting the twig holding it with one precise throw – and his unbelievable luck while fishing. She suspected he was cheating, somehow, although failed to see how that could be achieved. Did he lure fish by magic?)

“I don’t care, honey,” he told her finally, “but other guys might. I think it’s about time you started paying attention to whether you’re dressed or not when there are other people around you. Especially men.”

After that, Jupiter came to the conclusion that men were not fun.

However, she obediently complied with Dad and Uncle Stinger’s appeal. Well, mostly. Whenever there was no one around – except for Kiza, because Kiza didn’t understand the sudden inexplicable necessity to wear clothes, either – Jupiter wrenched off the annoying fabric to enjoy the brush of warm, gentle wind on her body, the cool splatter of rain or the flowing embrace of water. Besides, if she fell on the ground or spilled something onto herself when she was naked, she just went and washed herself in the nearest source of water – and voila! She had nothing to betray her negligence or clumsiness! It was an all-around win.

When Jupiter got to know Finnick well enough, she found out he was perfectly unperturbed by his nudity: in the siren culture, no one wore clothes; cloth garments simply made no sense for the people that lived mostly underwater. She was overjoyed that she had finally met a kindred spirit. By that time she knew what propriety was and couldn’t think less of the concept. It was nice to have someone who shared her beliefs. Although she did understand what a girl’s getting undressed in front of a guy meant in the human society and that made her too uncomfortable to voice those beliefs to the siren. Fortunately, Finnick didn’t bat an eye when she had finally dared to self-consciously ask if she could go skinny dipping with him – *because clothes, ugh!* – and replied she could do whatever she wanted, that he didn’t view children as sex objects. She splashed his grinning mug for the insult – *A child, really?! She was thirteen, for gods’ sake!* – but felt an immense relief that she could be herself around someone else besides Kiza.

Guess some men were fun, after all.

Eventually, she started noticing Finnick’s body in more respects than a simple ‘Wow, he looks so cool in the water!’ manner. Her self-consciousness reemerged again, because there was no way she could compare to *that*. Who *would* compare supreme inherent grace, ideal proportions and flawless toffee-coloured skin to flailing teenage clumsiness, too-long limbs with excessively prominent joints and tons of freaking freckles with – let’s be honest here – an occasional pimple? Yet she swallowed her awkwardness, putting a considerable effort into not making her insecurities show; she refused to
yield to a sudden urge to cover herself in Finnick’s presence, giving him the same courtesy he had given her once: letting him be comfortable and natural around her.

After they eventually had sex, she finally realized one simple truth: she might look imperfect, but who the hell cared?! Her body was awesome if it could bring her that much enjoyment! It made the last remnants of her self-consciousness vanish along with her final issues with nudity.

When her Dad left, taking the rest of supposedly easily embarrassed inhabitants with him, Havet was turned into a private royal resort and Jupiter was free to not wear clothes again anywhere she went. The newly-ascended queen, Finnick and Kiza felt perfectly comfortable being naked around each other.

Unfortunately, there was still a matter of Kiza’s dad. Once grown up, Jupiter tried to communicate the delights of nudity to Stinger on an adult level.

Let’s just say she didn’t succeed.

“Please, Jupiter, do me a favour and keep yourself dressed while I’m around,” he told her adamantly.

“Are you telling me that a scenario in this universe exists where you would regard me as an object of sexual desire?” she huffs, exasperated.

“No, such scenario does not exist. And I would rather it remained that way, so keep your naked ass to yourself. Preferably Finnick’s one, too.”

“Maybe I wanted to ogle your naked ass,” she sassed back just to be obnoxious, – because taunting the father figure is the most mature thing an adult person can do, obviously.

“That can be arranged,” Stinger threatened.

“Ugh, you can’t use your nudity as a weapon of psychological intimidation.” As far as she was concerned, aggressive exhibitionism was no better than self-righteous prudishness.

“I can use anything as a weapon.”

Knowing Stinger, he could. So whenever Apini visited Havet both Jupiter and Kiza wore at least some item of clothing, while Finnick gleefully paraded around buck-ass naked – he didn’t give two shits about old badger’s opinion and wasn’t afraid to demonstrate it. As much as she disapproved of using nudity to show off and challenge others, Jupiter would be lying if she said she didn’t appreciate the sour look that crossed Stinger’s face every time Finnick’s more private parts were on unobstructed display. Guess Head of her Royal Guard wasn’t the only one who could use his state of undress as a weapon.

And now, Jupiter once again finds herself on her beloved ocean planet, where the weather is hot and the allure of the sea is impossible to resist. Its cool depths promise to alleviate the oppressing swelter, to wash away the clammy sheen of sweat that makes her dress cling to her skin whenever she leaves the air-conditioned sanctuary of the house, – the house she still tries to evade at every opportunity, – to soothe her very being with their calming rhythmic sway. She wants nothing more but to ditch her clothes to go for a long, languid swim and then never put them back on – at least, not until the sunset brings the relief of a refreshing night breeze.

Besides, doing something she enjoys so much would be a welcome distraction from the deep, destructive sorrow that seems to permeate every cell of her being.
Unfortunately, she has the predicament of Caine on her hands.

That means she cannot simply saunter around in a state of nature out of respect for his sensibilities *(ugh, men)*, but she at least should attempt to get rid of his vigilance for long enough to have a nice bathing session unimpeded by clothing – she owes that much to herself.

She strides up to the guard, who is quite effectively making himself an inconspicuous part of the landscape sitting in the shade of a large group of silver-berry trees.

“Your Majesty?” he gives her a questioning look, making to stand up, but she gestures him back down. He’d better be sitting for this.

“Is there any chance you could give me some privacy while I take a swim?” she ventures.

“I wish you didn’t consider my presence an infringement of your privacy, Your Majesty,” Caine sighs. “It’s not supposed to be, you know. You should be comfortable enough to go on with your life as you normally would on your own, while I keep you safe *around* your routine.”

So she should. However, Jupiter hasn’t reached that level of zen yet when one can be utterly unconcerned by the presence of bodyguards; she knows she shouldn’t, but she still considers them an audience – and probably will for a couple more lifetimes. And wherever there is an audience, she has to keep her social status in mind: Queen *mustn’t* disrobe in public.

“Can’t you – I don’t know – look somewhere else for a while? There is a splendid landscape back there, see?”

“Water is dangerous, Your Majesty,” he replies, looking increasingly ill at ease.

“Caine, I grew up here; I probably swim better than you do. There are no sharks, stingrays or other dangerous creatures here. I’m not unwell or inebriated. And I’ll call for help if anything happens.”

“You never know what might happen, Your Majesty. You may not have a chance to utter anything.”

She eyes him with growing resentment. Maybe she *should* disregard his presence and go swimming au naturel – exactly the way she likes it. After all, why does she have to conform to proprieties in the sanctuary of her own home? Besides, it’s not like Caine is that stellar at upholding societal norms himself! It’s never a good idea for a guy to spring his nudity on an unsuspecting girl in the dark. He’s lucky she didn’t interpret that as an attempted sexual assault – that would have been the first idea to enter many people’s heads, had they been in her place. What’s more, under no circumstances a guard is allowed to tuck his nose into the sovereign’s crotch. Hell, *no one* is permitted to do that; the privilege is reserved for Royal Consort alone. If the queen has to take Caine’s quirks in stride, he sure as fuck can adjust to hers.

Then again, the poor guy was traumatized enough by Finnick’s inappropriate attention in the past and the guilt for not stopping her consort in time still lingers at the back of her mind. Jupiter has no intention of stressing Caine out in that respect any further. Getting undressed in front of a member of the opposite gender is considered to be a sexual advance in the majority of human cultures, so it probably applies to the lycantant tradition as well.

Keeping that in mind, Jupiter comes up with the most obvious – and most embarrassing – solution: to ask the lycantant directly.

“Caine, do you think you can handle my swimming sans bathing suit, or will it scar your psyche?”

For a long while he stares at her as though she has spoken a foreign tongue. Watching his ears
gradually gain the colour of ripe summer raspberries, Jupiter immediately regrets being that straightforward. His flustered reaction suggests that she may have been unintentionally cruel: after all, some people are excruciatingly hypersensitive when it comes to matters relating to nudity and sex. She should have just gone with the suit and be done with it.

“Your Majesty does not have to consult with me on her wardrobe,” Caine finally responds.

“I know that; what I’m asking is whether or not you’ll be awkward around me like you are right now for a long while afterwards? Because as much as I love skinny dipping, I hate awkwardness more.”

“I can’t guarantee not being awkward, Your Majesty,” he stammers, “I’m sorry.”

“Ugh, you’re as straight-laced as your Commander.” Defeated, she plops herself down onto the sand beside the guard.

“Of all the epithets out there, I would never apply ‘straight-laced’ to Commander Apini,” Caine remarks.

“Come on! I know you’re old buddies and all, but you have to admit that Stinger is a puritan of daunting proportions!”

The lycantant looks at her strangely. “He raised you, Your Majesty, of course he would hold himself very… err, reserved around you.”

“You mean he behaves differently around you?” she inquires shrewdly, interest piqued.

“Sometimes.”

“Really?! Nice to know the old badger occasionally lets himself loose; he always seems so morally upstanding, it’s depressing!” she laments, then nudges Caine’s side with her shoulder, “Come on, give me some dirt on Stinger to help me knock him off his high horse once in a while!”

“I cannot do that, Your Majesty,” the guard responds evenly, “unless it’s a matter of the Crown’s security. Is it a matter of the Crown’s security?”

“Nah, it’s only a matter of my personal entertainment,” she admits reluctantly.

“I can assure you that even when Commander Apini lets himself loose, as you have deigned to put it, he doesn’t do anything tarnishing the honour, dignity or reputation of Head of the Royal Guard.”

“I thought you were supposed to answer my questions truthfully, Caine,” she pressures, disgruntled at his evasion.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, but I want to live.”

“The blackmail material is that good, huh?”

“My lips are sealed.”

She smiles. For once, she’s not jealous of Caine’s loyalty to Stinger, she’s proud of it.

As Jupiter makes her way home after a long refreshing swim (with her bathing suit on), her stomach starts insistently reminding its owner that some voids must be kept filled. Preferably, with high-quality protein. Tasty high-quality protein. She glances up at the sun, high above her head and hot as
“Caine, I’m going fish hunting. Care to join?” she asks the guard as they reach the house.

“Hunting?”

The transformation he undergoes at that one single word is remarkable. The drooping eyes shoot open, the expression of lazy indifference – which everyone wears in sweltering heat – morphs into one of absolute awareness and keen interest. The lycantant’s posture, so lax and leisurely mere moments ago, now zings with eager tension. All that is lacking is a short tail to be held straight out from the body at the smell of prey.

“There is a shallow brackish lagoon not far from here; it’s called a liman,” she explains. “In the afternoon, the sun heats the water through, right down to the bottom. Near the beach it gets as hot as soup: some of the smallest fry get literally cooked alive and float belly up. The heat affects bigger fish, too. They grow disoriented and sluggish. We’ll simply fly along the shoreline and when we see a big enough fish, we’ll just use these.” She rummages through the fishing equipment closet and takes out a couple of scoop nets with long handles.

“When you said ‘hunting’, I thought we’d use some kind of weapon.” Caine tries to hide his disappointment – not very successfully, as it is clear as day to Jupiter – as he critically surveys the nets.

“Men and their love for pointy toys,” she grumbles, diving back into the closet. For a moment she considers Finnick’s trident – it will triple the chances of getting a catch – but no, just – no. Too memorable, too soon. She emerges with a simple harpoon. “Here, you can try your hand in spear fishing, if you prefer.”

“That’s more like it,” the lycantant hums approvingly, taking the harpoon out of her hand for closer inspection.

“I must warn you, though: one needs an exceptional reaction time and eye-hand coordination for this. I have been trying to master this technique all my life and never hit a thing. Near missed maiming my foot once or twice, though.”

“It’s surprising St… Commander Apini let you near such a dangerous implement, Your Majesty,” the guard frowns. “It can be deadly.”

“Oh, Stinger and I loved to play with deadly things. He wasn’t such a paranoid bore back then,” Jupiter sighs. Everything used to be so much better when she was a kid. Like Uncle Stinger didn’t keep her in the dark for years about matters of crucial importance. Oh, wait, he did. Why does she keep him as the head of her security again? Because she trusts everyone else even less. “Anyway, be careful with your feet around the harpoon. And maybe you should change into something lighter?.. And cottoner. You’ll get a heat stroke in that black pseudo-leather of yours. Although I’m not sure if I have anything in your size here…” She starts racking her brain urgently recalling the clothes she keeps here. There’s no way Stinger or Finnick’s shirts will fit the lycantant, not mentioning Kiza’s or her own –

“Do not concern yourself, Your Majesty. The Guard uniform’s insulation system works both ways: it’s just as good at keeping me cooled when necessary as it is at warming me up.”

“Hmm, I thought it keeps you warm and conceals your body heat by simply trapping it inside.”

“I would have boiled alive as soon as we arrived here, Your Majesty, if that was the case,” Caine
counters softly. “The uniform either stores the heat it’s exposed to during the day in order to warm the body at nighttime, or transforms it into electricity to recharge the grav boots. They require a lot of energy if I use them often.”

“That’s some clever fabric,” Jupiter comments with an impressed whistle. Personally, she prefers natural textiles like cotton, silk or cashmere, but military uniforms have much higher requirements than girly dresses, even if the latter are intended for a queen: a sovereign is not supposed to be exposed to any extreme, life-threatening conditions. “It seems like I take good care of my soldiers, even if I’m not aware of it myself.” The thought is a pleasing one.

“You do, Your Majesty,” Caine nods. “Although this kind of state-of-the-art uniform is reserved for your Guard only, I believe. In the Legion we used to have much simpler regimentals. This one is too expensive to provide for every private out there.” There is subdued pride in his voice with just a hint of smugness.

Huh. Someone here apparently enjoys being dressed nicely – or, rather, being dressed better than his peers.

Sometimes loyalty is bought with such simple things!

“I’m glad you like it. And, what’s more important, that it keeps you comfortable. Now, put this on, and we’ll be set to go,” she tells him, diving into the fishing equipment closet once again to procure two boonie hats, one of which she offers to Caine.

“Why do you have the army issue hats in your possession, Your Majesty?” the lycantant sounds deeply mystified.

“You’re not the only one who appreciates the advantages of military uniform. Boonie hats are the best when it comes to protecting your head from the sun. And they have the additional advantage of looking exceptionally funny on every person who wears them.” Well, not on every person. Girls rock boonie hats while guys look downright hilarious in them, but Jupiter mercifully omits that sexist piece of information. Besides, it’s only her personal opinion, anyway.

“Uh, can I have a cap or something? Something other than this. Please?” Caine fumbles the brim in his hands, contemplating the headwear with ill-concealed antipathy.

“Caine, your ears are badly sunburnt, and the skin on your poor neck – wait, let me take a look – yep, it’s already peeling. With your fair skin, that’s practically asking for melanoma! A cap won’t protect those areas. So quit fondling the hat, you’ll make the poor thing blush, put it on and let’s go.”

She decisively takes the offensive garment out of his hands, stands on her tiptoes to put it on the guard herself. To her satisfaction, he doesn’t try to lean away from her outstretched arms, actually bending a little to help her yank it onto his head.

“It looks ridiculous,” Caine complains sulkily from under the drooping brim, sneaking a peek in the nearest mirror.

“Buddy, you’ve been through worse trials than having to wear a funny-looking hat. Man up and bear the deplorable lack of high fashion on your head. It’s not like there are tons of people here to see you like this, anyway.”

This time the guard does not protest, but his answering sigh is so long-suffering and tragic that her heart goes out to him.

“If it’s any consolation, I think you look nice,” she offers, trying to comfort him.
Caine does look nice: the comic headwear softens his usual stoic appearance, too strict and unapproachable, underlined by the all-black close-fitting uniform. Who came up with the design for that thing, anyway? It looks like something straight out of a BDSM catalogue rather than a practical working outfit. Don’t those skintight pants – ahem – inconvenience guys in certain places? You know, causing jamming or chafing? She learnt from experience what too tight pants could do to a girl – every woman knows that beauty demands sacrifice, but that was just going too far – and men are even more sensitive when it comes to trouser disagreement. (Come to think of it, men are more fragile creatures all around: not only they are less resistant to feminine nudity and tight pants than females, they can’t pull off a boonie hat, too! Poor things.)

Whoever came up with the concept for the Royal Guard uniform, the finish result must have been approved by Seraphi – the queen had to see that every day, so they ought to have made sure she didn’t dislike the visual. Over and above that, the outfit had probably been designed with the sovereign’s preferences in mind. Her predecessor must have been one kinky queen.

Well, either that, or Commander Apini has a troubling fascination with black leather. Seriously, why would anyone –

“I look like a wilted toadstool.”

Caine’s comment startles Jupiter out of her musings – it’s a good thing, too: she’s sure she was paying way too much attention to his lap area than socially acceptable; even though she’s been contemplating the cut of his pants rather than what’s underneath them, he doesn’t know that. She raises her eyes to see him scrunching up his nose at his reflection in the mirror.

“Toadstools don’t have such thick stems,” she demurs automatically realizing a bit too late that her words can be taken as a double entendre. “I mean, you look edible.” Way to go, Jupiter, dig yourself deeper, why don’t you? She lets herself relax for one measly moment and her brain immediately starts spewing nonsense that can be interpreted as innuendoes! “I mean, the part of you that is below the hat,” – she gestures at Caine’s entirety to illustrate, so there won’t be any way to misinterpret her words, – “should look much, much thinner for you to resemble a toadstool. You’re too thickset for that. It’s edible mushrooms that usually have such broad stripes. I’d say you look more like a young Boletus edulis when they sprout in spruce forests in late summer, stretching through the thick carpet of fallen needles.” The shape of the mushrooms also has a lot of phallic imagery to it, but Jupiter wisely keeps that little bit of information to herself.

“Shall I take that as a compliment?” Caine’s voice sounds doubtful.

“Oh, by all means, do, they are the very best mushrooms out there. At least, the most aromatic ones, after the black truffle.”

“They smell nice, you say?” Caine inquires with a surprisingly keen interest. “Maybe you could…” he breaks off as if suddenly coming to his senses and realizing who he is talking to. “Never mind, Your Majesty.”

“Maybe I could what?” she prompts.

“It’s just… It would be nice to know how they smell like. Although I’m sure Your Majesty has better things to do than show them to me.”

“They don’t grow here, Caine. The local climate is too hot for the boletus mushrooms. We’d have to travel to one of the polar islands to find them. But back at the alcazar, there is a section of the Royal Gardens where they are cultivated. I could show you after we get back.”
At the thought of getting back her mood immediately sours.

Jupiter understands that she couldn’t have stayed at her alcazar and carried on with her life as if nothing had happened; it was physically impossible to keep fulfilling her duties in the state she found herself in. With every passing day here, in the peace and quiet of Havet, away of the turbulence she left behind, she hurts less and less. The possible return of the anguish she experienced after the initial shock had worn off horrifies her. She doesn’t want to rock that boat, so she’s been steadily ignoring all the messages, the attempts to contact her and, above all, the thoughts of coming back.

However, with every passing day her conscience is nagging her more and more: she has responsibilities, she has people who depend on her, all of which she is currently ditching to wallow in her grief. She shouldn’t be this selfish, she shouldn’t be this fucking weak –

“Come on,” Caine says firmly, probably sensing her mood change, “we were going fishing. Let’s go fishing.” He holds out a scoop net to her. “Lead the way, Your Majesty.”

When they get to the liman, it’s barely past midday and the white unforgiving sun is blazing dangerously hot. The water surface is serene, barely rippled by any waves at all. The water is so clear you can easily see the mesmerizing pattern of undulating wavelets on the sandy floor, high-contrasted by the blinding sunlight, sporadic tussocks of sea grass, brown and leathery, swaying around in a lazy fashion, and, most importantly, any fish. The first thing you notice, though, isn’t the fish themselves; it’s their dark shadows sliding across the light background of the sand. The backs of the fish – the parts that a predator sees from the above – have silvery camouflage colouring that stays remarkably inconspicuous in the water, hiding them in plain view.

It’s not too long, though, until Caine notices two sizable fish that apparently have lost their sense of direction and dumbly nose the sand close to the water edge as though trying to nuzzle their way onto the beach. He stoops closer, making sure his shadow stays well behind the fish.

At the lycantant’s first attempt to scoop out a fish with his net – the action is so quick it is a blur – the misfortunate implement snaps in two, the hoop breaking away from the handle. The broken hoop opens and the net slips off together with the fish trapped inside.

Both Jupiter and Caine watch the disaster unravel as though mesmerized. Caine is the first to shake off the stupor and attempt to catch the escaping trophy, but it’s too late: it has already disappeared into the lagoon. He swears under his breath and tosses the now useless net handle away.

This is the most emotion Jupiter has seen of him since they arrived on the planet.

“Caine, you shouldn’t have scooped so fast. At that speed water probably has the resistance of tar! You’re trying to catch a fish, not to break the sound barrier!”

“It would’ve gotten away otherwise!”

“Not if you had set the net behind it – slowly and carefully – leaving it no way to go but the beach. As enviable as your speed is, haste quite often makes waste. Now, pick up the pieces of the net – we have no one to clean after us in this place but ourselves, – and let’s go look for another possible catch.”

Caine signs, pulls out the misfortunate net out of the water – it hangs limply like a drooping banner of defeat it is – and picks up the broken handle from the sand. As they continue their way along the water edge, the lycantant keeps glaring at the lagoon as though it has personally offended him.

“Cheer up, buddy. Fishing is a gamble. Sometimes you get a fish, sometimes – a netful of sea grass,
sometimes – a lost hook or a broken net. That’s half the fun!”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I’ve never had to fish with a hand net before. I didn’t expect it to be this complicated. I just don’t want to fail at providing a satisfactory catch for you.”

“Caine, I don’t think you understand why I have invited you to go fishing with me. I don’t need you to provide anything for me, I can catch enough fish for both of us. I just thought this would entertain you a little. You must be bored out of your mind, having nothing to do but keep an eye on me all day.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m bored, Your Majesty. Today has certainly been entertaining,” he remarks, giving her an unreadable look. “And this is fun; however inconvenient, it’s still a lot of fun.”

“Inconvenient?”

“You can’t pick up smells through water?”

“I can, to an extent, but in water scents spread much slower than they do through the air, so I can’t really track a fast moving object like a fish quickly enough to hunt it down. Besides, I cannot hear it down there, either. I have only my eyes to rely upon and that’s simply not enough,” he grimaces in dismay.

“Way to make a human feel inferior!” Jupiter retorts.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I didn’t mean to offend you or your species. I only meant that being unable to make a full use of my senses doesn’t feel right,” the lycantant offers with an apologetic shrug. “Imagine how you would feel if you had to do this blindfolded.”

“I’m sure that even at the current disadvantage you’ll do better than any human would. Try your luck at spear fishing next; it’s a technique where your speed and strength are sure to work in your favour.”

Her words turn out to be prophetic.

Caine masters spear fishing without any trial-and-error routine. His first attempt is a success and they have a dinner now.

She laughs, astonished, and can’t help feeling a bit envious about those inhuman reflexes of his.

All right, a lot envious.

She doesn’t show it, though. Seeing how efficient he is at this, Jupiter realizes that she’ll be of much more use if she takes upon herself the task of cleaning the catch. So she takes the pike-perch Caine has caught, finds herself a place in the shade and sets to work.

Two more pike-perch and one smaller rudd later, the master fisherman himself joins her in the shade of the tamarisk bush. He squats down as far from her as the patch of shade would allow – and it doesn’t allow much – attempting to give her the deferential distance determined by the royal protocol. She looks up from trying to carefully remove the intestines without puncturing the gall bladder, otherwise the fish meat will turn bitter and inedible, to make sure Caine’s out of the sun – a heatstroke is no joke and no etiquette rules are worth getting it – to find him staring raptly at her hands, unblinking.

Sure, her hands look pretty disgusting, covered in fish blood and gunk, but that hardly warrants such
fascination.

“Caine, you’re giving off a really creepy vibe here. Do you like watching living things being gutted?”

Caine startles out of his trance with a twitch.

“It’s the smell. It’s… alluring. Exciting.”

“Please, don’t tell me that fish entrails arouse you. There are things I shouldn’t know about my employees.”

“No, it’s… It’s not that. I meant the excitement of the hunt, the greed that comes with it: the smell makes me want to go and get more fish, as many as I possibly can, never mind that we have enough already.”

“I know that you mean about hunting enthusiasm. It’s so difficult to snap out of it! You did well to have stopped yourself in time. No need to kill more living creatures than we need feed ourselves.” She returns to the task at hand. “So, you find the smell of raw fish alluring? That’s – a bit unorthodox.”

“It may be for humans, but lycantants perceive scents differently. Many things that smell unpleasant to you seem nice to us.”

“Scents… They are very important to you, aren’t they?”

“They are. Olfaction is to us what vision is to humans, I guess. Most lycantants can’t see colours, so they see the world coloured in scents instead.”

“Wait, you are colour-blind?!”

“If I was, I wouldn’t be in your Guard, Your Majesty; the Private Security has much higher requirements than the Legion. I see bright colours, but I can’t distinguish some of more toned-down hues. However, I’m an anomaly. The majority of my species see life in monochrome.”

“But colour blindness cannot be comfortable to live with. As far as I know, it’s a genetic flaw. Why didn’t the designers that genomengineered you fix it?!”

“Our creators had to sacrifice something in order to leave a bigger portion of our brain to the processing of odours. They chose colour vision, since it takes up a considerable part of human brain.”

“Um, I meant to ask, but it seemed inappropriate at the time… Well, since we’re talking about this anyway… Do you have some kind of thermal vision?”

“I’m afraid I don’t, Your Majesty,” Caine responds with apparent confusion. “There are plenty of gadgets to compensate for that, though. Or I can have a neural implant engraved in order to see the infrared part of the spectrum. Is there a need for that?” he inquires with obvious apprehension in his voice, as if worried that having super smell and hearing isn’t enough: ’No thermal vision?! Bam, you’re out of the Guard!’

“No need, don’t worry, you’re functional enough as you are,” she waves his concerns off, then uses the conveniently raised forearm to wipe her brow: cleaning fish in scorching heat is not an easy job. “I just don’t understand how you manage to orient yourself in the dark so perfectly, if that’s the case.”
“Like I said, I see the world in scents. Sight is not the dominant sense for lycantants like it is for humans, so when it’s dark, we don’t feel blinded. For us, every object – especially a living one – is characterized not only by its size and shape but first and foremost by its smell. When I cannot see things, I still can smell them and estimate the distance to them accurately enough.”

“It’s really fascinating – how differently you perceive the world!” She’s finished scaling the fish and really needs to wash both her hands and her produce, but the conversation has her fixed firmly in place. “I wonder how Havet looks to you. I mean, scent-wise.”

“It smells very nice here, much better than back at the alcazar. There are a lot of new smells, and those that are familiar are intensified by heat… Grapes so full of sugar they begin fermenting on the wine. Ripening melons. Seaweed drying on the beach. Remnants of mollusks rotting inside the shells. Warm rocks as sea water splashes over them. Overheated sand scorched by the sun. But mostly it’s this amazing smell of a huge body of water, the humidity and salt in the wind.”

“That sounds so nice… It’s a pity I will never be able to experience it. I will never see the islands through a seagull’s eyes. I will never hear the night through a bat’s ears. I will never feel the miracle of the sea through a dolphin’s skin… Being human feels so – so limiting.”

“I guess every species has its own limitations. You enjoy the full palette of colours, I enjoy scents no human could ever sense. For you, this place is a never-ending parade of beautiful sights; for me, it’s a combination of equally beautiful smells – salt water, sweat, earth, greenery… They seem both new and familiar at the same time. It’s like coming back home after having been away for a very long time.”

“That is exactly how it feels to me, too,” she nods in amazement: it’s been a while since she felt this much at the same wavelength with someone else. It’s a delightful feeling. It doesn’t last long, though, as she is hit with a sudden realization, – “Wait, did you just tell me I stink?!?”

“I said no such thing, Your Majesty,” Caine frowns.

“What about something-something-sweat and scents being intensified by heat? Oh my gods, I totally stink.” Now that she’s thinking about it, she can feel the perspiration trickling down her spine. This is embarrassing.

“If it makes you feel better, I can smell the sweat on you all the time, not only here,” Caine supplies hesitantly.

“No, no, that definitely doesn’t make me feel better. At all. What about being told that I stink all the time can possibly make me feel better?!?”

“It’s a human tradition to suppress body odour at all costs, but to a lycantant, it’s so weird that you disguise your natural scent with the chemicals that smell much fouler. Sweat usually has a very faint, nice smell, unless there’s something wrong with the person: they’re too overheated, sick or have unhealthy habits. It holds so much information about people, yet they do all they can to extinguish it with the overwhelming stench of shampoos, deodorants and perfumes. ”

“Is that your subtle way to tell me I should stop using perfumed cosmetics because their smell clogs up your delicate nose?”

“I would never dare to tell you what to do, Your Majesty! I just don’t understand why you do it. You smell much better without any artificial stuff camouflaging our natural scent.”

“Next thing you’ll be telling me you like the smell of dirty socks,” she scoffs.
“No, that’s too potent for me,” Caine replies in all seriousness, with the air of a gourmet talking about a particularly pungent Roquefort cheese. “Although there are much worse odours out there. Still, every smell is interesting to get acquainted with, even if only once.”

“Is that why you’ve been smelling flowers in the gardens around my alcazar? You actually enjoy smelling things, different things, no matter if they smell pleasant or not?”

“It’s nice to connect the scents around me to their sources, to associate them with the visuals. Do you mind my doing that, Your Majesty? I mean, my smelling your flowers. I didn’t pluck or damage them.” The anxious undertone in Caine’s voice is back.

“No, you’re welcome to them, any time you like. It just seems like a bizarre hobby for a man, that’s all.”

“I’m not exactly a man, am I? I have more in common with a dog than I have with you, Your Majesty.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she agrees uncertainly. She has no idea what percentage of human DNA compared to non-human one was used to construct the lycantant species. Maybe Caine is right, maybe he does have more in common with a dog than he has with her. His statement doesn’t feel right, though, but anthropomorphism – the attribution of human traits to non-human entities – has always been an instinctual tendency of human beings. More often than not a misleading one, too. “You look like a man, though, so I keep forgetting you that you’re not human. And keep applying my stereotypes and prejudices to you as if you were. Sorry about that.”

“No apologies necessary. It’s not a bad thing for a splice to be treated as a human.” The lycantant’s words are mostly a factual statement, but there’s a faint hint of bitterness to them.

“Being human is not as great as it must seem to a splice, Caine,” Jupiter sighs. “While you are deprived of many choices in life, having to actually make those choices and live through their consequences with no one else to blame for them but ourselves is not a walk in the park either. Especially when you have to make life-changing decisions not only for yourself, but for others, too. And take shit for that from all those who are dissatisfied with the results, and those are always plenty.”

“Still, it’s nice when you can make a choice.”

“Caine, remember when you got the Royal Gratitude award? You were given a chance to make a life-changing choice – you could have a life of a human, you could have all freedom and all choices you could wish for and yet what did you do? You didn’t change anything, just stayed as you were, because that was easier, wasn’t it?”

“It was easier, Your Majesty,” the guard admits. “But I wanted to stay, too. That was my choice.”

“Why would you want to stay? It’s a dangerous job you’re doing. One that is almost sure to get you killed at some point or another.”

Caine’s answer is much simpler – and much more complex – than she expected.

“My best friend is here. His family is here. They need taking care of.”

“Oh, don’t tell that to Kiza! She is quite an independent young woman who can take care of herself. And she makes sure everyone knows that. Repeatedly.” Annoyingly so.

“I wasn’t talking about Kiza.”
Jupiter fails to find a response to that for a long time. Finally she comes up with –

“Stinger is a lucky guy to have you.”

“He is not the only one who has me, Your Majesty.”

O –kay, the conversation has just gotten acutely uncomfortable – for the reasons Jupiter doesn’t care to identify. She hastily gathers the fish and gestures to Caine, “Come on, let me wash these and let’s head home. The dinner won’t cook itself.”

“Sure, Your Majesty.” The lycantant picks himself up from the sand, dusting off his pants. “Lead the way.”

After the initial shuffling with their sleeping arrangements, Jupiter and Caine came up with a compromise: she lets him sleep in the same room with her under the strictest condition that he actually sleeps and does not attempt to keep his vigil through the night. She remembers the negotiations clearly, for more reasons than one.

“Caine, you don’t look that well. You’re not sleeping again, are you?” she observed one morning.

“I’m sleeping enough to stay alert, Your Majesty.”

“Ugh, you’re a walking picture of mistreatment, a pang of conscience on two legs. And I have enough on my conscience to have you on top of it all. Seriously, do I have to order you into bed again?”

“Please, don’t do that, Your Majesty.”

“What else can I do? You wouldn’t sleep otherwise and that is weighing down on my sense of responsibility.”

“Your Majesty, I’m a grown man, who is capable of taking care of himself. You shouldn’t feel responsible for me.”

“I can give you the exact same argument right back, except with the change of the gender.”

“It is my duty to take care of you, Your Majesty.”

“The same. Right back. At you.”

“Why do you care so much?” Caine exclaimed in exasperation, then immediately backpedalled, “I’m sorry, Your Majesty, it’s not my place to question your motives.”

“You’re one of my subjects.” – The subjects she was currently abhorrently neglecting, hiding on the godforsaken planet from her personal problems. Yeah, she definitely had too much on her conscience. – “It is my duty as your Queen to have the good of my subjects at heart, so quit resisting already! Everyone thinks they know better and there’re so freaking many of you! How am I supposed to keep things going if everybody does whatever the hell they please? Seriously, ruling you people is like trying to make newly-hatched ducklings perform the perfectly synchronized routine of artistic swimming! No, not even ducklings, water fleas! Imagine how organized those are!..” She cut off to regain her breath – the rant had gotten her slightly winded.

“Are you telling me I’m preventing you from carrying out your royal duty, Your Majesty?” Caine
clarified, looking vaguely horrified.

“Exactly.” At that point, she wasn’t above intimidation.

“Would you stay in the same… Err, I mean, would you keep close again?” The hope in his voice was faint, but it was there.

“Caine, this is blackmail. You’re blackmailing Queen with your self-imposed martyrdom. Well, not completely self-imposed, but still highly unnecessary,” she protested, although without much heat: she felt a bit guilty for ranting at him – he, of all people, didn’t lack discipline or organization, even though his stubbornness got to her at times.

“I would never do such a thing, Your Majesty.” The vague horror turned into plain horror.

She squinted at Caine in suspicious contemplation. Did he really not understand what he was doing to her? Or he did, but didn’t care? Or, even worse, intentionally manipulated her for reasons of his own? But what did he stand to gain by doing that? Who was she seeing in front of her? A Machiavellian master manipulator with outstanding acting abilities or a straightforward soldier whose creators had overdone it a bit when they had spliced protectiveness into his DNA?

Which, she had to admit, was probably the definitive quality of any lycantant.

Ugh, Finnick’s example made her see cunning manipulative bastards everywhere. She would never be able to trust someone as fully as she had trusted him.

At that instant, it finally dawned on her what she’d been mourning so bitterly all this time.

She would never be able to trust anyone again.

She’d lost her ability to trust people.

She’d lost her faith.

All fight went out of her at that realization.

“All right,” she sighed, forcing out a breath that seemed to have been stuck in her lungs. “I’ll keep you company if it will ease your mind. But get yourself a proper bed, you’re not sleeping on the floor again!”

Since she was uncomfortable staying in her own bedroom, they moved into Kiza’s. Two king-sized beds, pushed together, take up a considerable portion of the room, but it’s not like Jupiter intends to dance around. The unspoken agreement is that the queen and the guard would sleep head to toe, since that position seems to be the least intrusive one, – and it also allows Caine to snake a sneaky hand onto her foot at night, making sure she is alive and kicking (which she invariably is, sometimes literally: her feet are ticklish, so he’s brought it upon himself).

They never speak about the latter happening, though.

The arrangement lets Jupiter sleep easy, knowing that Caine isn’t running himself ragged with sleep deprivation, while he keeps a close eye (well, sometimes a hand, but shhh!) on her at all times. Sure, it violates her privacy to the degree that she would have never allowed back at the alcazar; however, Caine’s persistent – albeit at times annoying – concern mellows her towards the encroachment on her personal space.

In return, Caine takes his being sent into exile each time she needs to visit the bathroom with
admirable fortitude, complaining only every second time, no more.

“Your Majesty, sending me away is unwise!”

“What, do you expect an alligator to pop out of the toilet and bite my butt off or something? Seriously, I’m not in danger every single second you take your eyes off me!”

“No, but you might be! I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Sometimes I suspect you get a kick out of stalking me!”

“I don’t, Your Majesty. Well, maybe a little. You smell nice, so it feels nice to be around you.”

Really? You tell that to the queen’s face?!

Sometimes she has no idea what to do with his honesty.

“Ugh, go away now, and take that super nose with you. As far as that tall poplar over there, I’ll be watching!”

A sigh. “All right, if you’re absolutely sure it’s necessary…”

All in all, they try to keep their irritating each other to the minimum and actually get along pretty well.

The combination of the sun and the sea makes a person dog-tired by the end of the day. Caine is out like a candle – or, rather, like a man whose conscience is clear and whose duty has been completely fulfilled.

Jupiter, on the other hand, feels like she’s failing on both accounts. Her conscience is uneasy; her head is buzzing with questions she has no answers for. How long can she allow herself to stay here? How are the things back at the alcazar? She knows anything drastic hasn’t happened, otherwise Apini wouldn’t hesitate to descend upon her like the wrath of gods and drag her back. Still, she winces at the thought how many lesser fuck-ups are taking place while she’s away. Her kingdom is like a horse carriage: the moment to let go of the reins, it’s anyone’s guess where the brainless animals will take it. She has to come back. Should she? Is she ready to return to controlling her kingdom? Will she be able to regain control of her own life? It makes no sense to go back if she’s just going to break down again. Then again, how long can she hide from reality? Escape might be a temporary answer, but it’s never the final one. She’s not supposed to be this weak. How much of a fucking coward is she?!

The night is quiet: there’s only the distant whisper of the sea and the incessant stridulation of the crickets in the garden, both sounds are so familiar and ever-present they fade into the background, only underlining the silence. The lights in the room are out – if Jupiter’s awake, it doesn’t mean Caine should be inconvenienced into wakefulness, too. Unfortunately, the dark and quiet – which usually help people fall asleep – only enhance the onslaught of her brain onto itself.

Finally, Jupiter gives up on her attempts to sleep and gets her sheath from the nightstand. Taking a deep breath, she dusts it off. She can’t solve everything while she is here, but she can start by reading her messages and maybe dealing with one or two minor problems.

The long list of missed calls and unread messages is in itself intimidating. Okay, okay, no need to panic. Let’s read something that may be easy to –
She immediately singles out Wormtongue’s report on Anna Cresta. That must the full name of Finnick’s Annie. Something she never in a million years cared to know.

Jupiter knows she shouldn’t open the report, she shouldn’t, she is not ready.

Morbid curiosity gets the better of her.

When she reads the words ‘a sex worker’ she sees red.

He’s traded her for a whore.

Before she registers what she’s doing, she’s flinging the sheath and watching it hit the wall with a sharp crack.

The next thing she knows she’s being yanked down by her leg – her breath being shocked out of her – and there’s a fully alert lycantant on top of her, quivering with tension and adrenaline. Caine looks around wildly in search of danger. How could he have moved this fast? How did he even get into this position? A moment ago his head was resting peacefully on the pillow next to the footboard of her bed, now her nose is tucked into his neck. How on earth did he pull that off?

What’s more important – why?!

Is there a danger out there she can’t sense?

Belatedly, she realizes that the dying crash of her sheath must have resembled the sound of a shot.

She is an imbecile.

An imbecile of epic proportions.

“We’re safe, Caine,” she exhales as soon as she manages to find her breath again. “There is no danger, Caine, I swear, no danger at all.” Her hand comes up to stroke his shaking side. “You’re safe, Caine; I’m safe, too. No one’s trying to attack us. No need to save me from anything.”

Except for, probably, her own idiocy.

“What was that noise?” Caine asks, still keeping his position above her.

“That was me being a thoughtless dick to sleeping people, nothing more. I’ve tossed my sheath against the wall.”

She feels his ribcage expand and contract under her fingers as he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. If she was in his place, she’d probably want to kill her brainless self right now.

“I take it, it was no hairy spider on the wallpaper?” he asks instead.

“No.”

“Bad news?”

“You can say that.”

The tremors under her hand subside, yet his side remains stone-hard with tension, although it’s no longer from the anticipation of an attack, but rather from muscle exertion: he holds his whole body in the air, keeping his weight completely off her, supporting himself only on his elbows and toes. It’s a good thing, too: considering how much a guy his size must weigh, she would be squashed by now.
otherwise.

“You are upset.”

“Believe me, Caine, I don’t need you to tell me that,” she spits bitterly.

The pain she first felt that horrid night after she had allowed the news to finally hit her – the pain that has somewhat faded into the background during her stay here – is back full force. Her world is once again compressed into a ball of blazing agony behind her sternum. Everything else has disappeared – all the distractions, all the comforts, all the things that used to make sense in her life – and she is left with the emotion that is much more than she can cope with.

She wants the pain to stop.

She wants it to stop at any cost.

There is only one thing she knows that could maybe – hopefully – be intense enough to overpower this excruciating sensation for a while.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Oh, he shouldn’t have asked that question.

Nor should she answer it.

She needs the pain to stop, and needs must.

Nothing else matters.

“Caine –”

No, don’t you dare…

“– If I –”

...To ask someone…

“– Asked, –”

...Who can’t say ‘no’.

“– Would –”

Harassment…

“– You –”

Coercion…

“– Have –”

Rape.

“– Sex with me?”

He tilts his face closer to her – and for one petrifying moment she’s afraid might actually kiss her – to sniff carefully somewhere next to the side of her head.
“You smell of anger –”

A puff of air stirs thin hairs on her temple.

“– And hurt –”

Another warm exhale washes over her cheekbone, wafting down her ear and neck.

“– And grief.”

He smells nice. How can a man smell nice if he hasn’t changed his clothes for over a week?

“There is no trace of arousal in your scent. Please, don’t do this to yourself.”

She scoffs with her whole body. There’s nothing she can do to herself that would make her feel worse than she is feeling now.

Caine interprets her response as though she has spoken.

“Don’t do this to me. Please, don’t make me force myself on you.”

A sharp laugh startles out of her. Who’s forcing whom here? Neither? Both? The absurdity of the situation is ridiculous. Once started, she can’t stop laughing. Her mind is blank, her instinctual reactions are taking over. The hiccupping, hysterical laughter eventually devolves into scratchy, tearless sobs, until they in turn degenerate into dry heaves, as if her body tries to rid itself of what is hurting it inside the only way it knows how. She has to put all her effort into holding her breath in order to prevent her lurching stomach from spilling its contents.

And still, there are no tears.

When this is blown over, she’ll be able to say that she hasn’t shed one single tear for the man who has betrayed her.

Even now she knows it will be a hollow satisfaction.

Finally, her retching subsides and the awareness of the immediate situation settles in. What the hell is she supposed to do about Caine, still frozen above her?

She should be saying something, preferably that she didn’t mean it, that he can go now. She can’t get herself to utter anything.

He should be moving away at any moment…

Aaany moment now…

Any moment?..

He doesn’t.

It should feel claustrophobic to be wedged between the mattress and this looming body, foreign and huge, but she fails to find any discomfort in her. Quite the opposite, in fact, it feels weirdly comforting.

Caine is probably waiting for her to make some kind of decision. She ought to be making a decision in this situation. It’s up to her. She’s the queen here.
Fuck that.

She lets her body go limp and simply revel in the warmth it’s surrounded with, in the feeling of being shielded from the world. There is no real solace to be found in the nightmare that Finnick has forced upon her, but there might be some temporary relief. She allows herself to take what she’s being given.

Just for a few seconds longer.

Maybe minutes.

Minutes pass.

Caine still hasn’t moved. Hasn’t said anything, either.

There is no corporeal, palpable danger here. But there is dander still. Probably Caine senses it, too. For once, she is grateful that someone can understand her without words, can see – well, smell – through her and discern the things that hide inside.

However, performing a plank on a soft mattress is much more strenuous than it appears – she knows that from experience (don’t ask; let’s just say guys get a lot less credit for having sex in the missionary position than they deserve).

“How long can you do this for?” she asks.

“I… I don’t know, exactly. Until the morning, maybe?”

Oof. She didn’t expect that long.

“Just give me a couple more minutes, okay?”

“I’m sure my stamina is better than that,” Caine responds, his tone coming off slightly affronted. She snorts – because there must be a double entendre hidden in there somewhere, there must. Or maybe she’s just too corrupted by Finnick’s way of thinking.

Anyway, that means no decision making in the nearest future.

Good.

She knows that the time for decisions will inevitably come, that she will eventually have to get a grip – both on herself and the situation.

Yet at the moment, Caine’s silent presence manages to ward off the pain, somehow, and she lets herself accept this anesthetic comfort, however short-lived it might be.

Chapter End Notes

For any Annie’s fans out there: I am not anti-Annie either in this fic, or in general. She is one of the nicest and most relatable characters in The Hunger Games series. Keep in
I do not think that horses – or any other animals for that matter – are brainless. Living things are much smarter than people usually give them credit for, even though their intelligence is different from ours.

For more phallic imagery in mushrooms, check out young Leccinum aurantiacum (подосиновики). They are like dicks sticking out of the forest floor, sometimes covered by leaves (which, as far as classic art is concerned, are what dicks should be covered with).

There’s even a whole genus of fungi called Phallus, with the crowning achievement of nature’s lewdness, Phallus impudicus, which roughly translates as ‘a shameless dick’. Sometimes a fully grown penis-shaped mushroom grows with younger representatives of the same species at its base, which have a shape of balls.

Yes, really.

Biology is one sexy science.

(And yes, I see male genitalia in shrooms. What can I say? I have issues.)

PS This chapter has been brought to you by Victoria, who delivered a timely nudge in the right direction. Thanks for that, by the way. (Вика, if that was you, I am impressed with your English!)

PPS As I have recently discovered, the idea of the colour deficiency of the lycantant vision was prompted by now we’re gonna be face to face by bemusedlybespectacled (ardentintoxication). She is an amazing author; if you haven’t read her stories yet, you should give them a try.
Grief is born instantaneously – the moment you receive the news – yet it takes a long time to subside: months, years… A lifetime, sometimes.

Grief intoxicates your soul the way poison intoxicates your body and similarly, your system tries to purge itself of it in any way it can: sometimes you vomit, sometimes you lose consciousness, most times you cry. However, the worst case is when your body does nothing at all, simply absorbing all the venom, letting it permeate your blood, poisoning you whole. Then, if the system doesn’t fail from the initial toxic shock, it starts to excrete the toxin bit by bit; it’s a long, excruciating process. Some types of grief – those that cut the deepest, like the loss of someone whom you deeply loved – do not leave you for the rest of your life. They fade with time, get easier to bear, but never go away without a trace.

Jupiter has lost someone she loved, despite the fact that Finnick’s still alive. Her Finnick – the image of him that she knew and treasured – is gone forever; leaving a stranger she doesn’t know – and doesn’t wish to know – in his stead. The loss she’s grieving is not the loss of the actual Finnick – who needs a cheating dick for a life partner? – but her romantic, idealized, delusional perception of him. She’ll never be able to trust anyone so infinitely, to love anyone with her whole being, to view anyone as perfection – perfection that does not exist, yet she managed to see it in Finn for such a long, long time.

A poet once said that loving someone is seeing them the way gods intended them to be, but their parents have failed to incarnate. Not loving someone is seeing them the way their parents have incarnated them. Falling out of love with someone is seeing the desk, the chair instead of them.

Will she see furniture instead of Finnick now?

She has already been through a disillusionment of similar proportions: the day she turned twenty-one and was told that all her life up to that point had been a lie. That day she lost her Dad, she lost her home, she lost the world as she knew it.

However, that time Finn was there to help her cope with the news. As a result, she got through it almost unscathed – through sheer youth and being in love to the degree of obsession.

By gods, how stupid she was back then!

Her stupidity was her salvation.

When Jupiter was informed that she was a queen, she felt an exuberant surge of energy: there were
so many things she could do! She had a chance to do so much good, to right the wrongs, to change her people’s lives for better!

Stupid and naïve.

Slowly, the realization dawned just how little she could actually do: the inertia of her massive kingdom, let alone the Abrasax empire in its staggering entirety – besides Jupiter’s own realm, it included the colonies under the autonomous rule of Seraphi’s three heirs – was just that: massive. The system proved to be almost immovable. Her ideas were met with resistance on every level imaginable: governmental, bureaucratic, those of the elite and of the everyman, not to mention were frowned upon by Heads of other Royal Houses. The general opinion was, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,’ – no one likes when somebody starts rocking the boat they feel comfortable and settled in.

The problem was how stable both the economy and the society were – and still are – time-tested and gray with the passage of ages.

Why put an end to splicing industry if it is booming and brings prosperity to so many people? Never mind that means production and forced labour of sentient beings – beings not that different from humans. After all, at the dawn of the humanity people exploited horses to plough fields and then used them for food when they couldn’t work any longer. Horses were quite intelligent beasts, too, yet no one had moral qualms about breeding and exploiting them.

Not to mention how smart pigs and cows can be, yet sausages are delicious.

Why stop RegeneX production when it can heal almost any ailment and can make you live so much longer? Again, it’s extremely profitable: people would pay just about anything for a chance not to die in their due time. But profits are the privilege of royals, for no one else can produce the Juice: neither has the resources, nor is allowed by law. Your normal, ordinary people could never afford a full rejuvenation bath, but they can use RegeneX-containing medicines. Imagine this: you, your mother or your kid is dying; you know the cure exists but it’s no longer available because your Queen refuses to produce it for her own moral reasons – the reasons you, terminally ill, or you, devastated with grief, can’t possibly relate to. What is more fair – to let your own people die in order to protect those who have no idea you exist or that the end is coming, or to take those unsuspecting lives to give health and longevity to your own nation?

Would you kill another’s child to keep your own alive?

If you have firmly answered no, then you probably have never been confronted with that choice.

Jupiter doesn’t know the answer. That’s why the queen is so obsessed with the search for RegeneX substitutes while Seraphi’s stores haven’t dried up yet. She is certain that one day the alternative will be found – the humanity can achieve anything if it tries hard enough – but when that day will come? Tomorrow? Or a thousand years from now?

Jupiter doesn’t know the answer to that, either. She knows, however, that if she gives up on searching, that day might never come.

By gods, she’s so tired of waiting – waiting and stretching out those last RegeneX stores, so tired of the uncertainty, never knowing when… Never knowing if…

So, so tired.

Similar to the attempts to carefully wrap up both splice and RegeneX production, most of her initiatives feel like trying to run through a bog: the more she moves, the tighter it’s holding her back.
How soon walking through a swamp would exhaust you into immobility?

So fucking tired.

However, she hasn’t given up and has kept on struggling: sometimes she’s won, most times she’s lost. Sometimes, she might get incredibly lucky, like on that one occasion when the leader of the Splicers’ Guild, known for his rampant conservatism and unwillingness to compromise, died of liver failure right before the Guild’s negotiations with Queen (‘Probably killed by his own bile, in the archaic meaning of the word,’ Finnick joked unkindly), and his replacement turned out to be a much more reasonable person.

That time, she saw the incident as a kismet and it served as an inspiration through many a future failure. Funny how the optimistic enthusiasm of youthful naïveté, along with the exhilarating first love form an impenetrable suit of armour, protecting you from all the negative happenings in life.

This time, she has neither.

She feels – well, not old, – but not young enough anymore. When her body is rejuvenated this time, she will get to keep her memories. She will remember all the wrong decisions she has – and will have – made – hell, she’ll have history textbooks to remind her of them! She’ll get to keep all the guilt for the things that have and will have gone wrong. All the knowledge of how despicable and ugly the universe really is, – the knowledge she’s never volunteered to have in the first place. All the pain of being repeatedly deceived, including the betrayal by the person she trusted most. Her mind will stay old, growing more and more ancient with each lifetime lived. She will stay old, because what is she if not her mind? There is no such thing as rejuvenation of a soul, is there?

And as for love, well…

Is that even a thing? What if it doesn’t exist? Jupiter knows she felt it, as she knows Finnick didn’t. Which is – understandable: all people are unique and, being different, all feel a bit differently. Towards different people. Can a love of two be even called ‘love’, if it’s – an asymmetry? If it’s not equal? What are the chances that out of billions and billions of souls, the one she loves would have the exact same feeling – not any other emotion: similar, but not the same – towards her, not someone else?

Non-existent.

Gods, she is so tired.

This is probably how anyone would feel at the funeral of their idealism, deceased due to the terminal loss of innocence. Her faith in the good in people – the faith every human being is born with – has taken the final, fatal blow; she almost can see the last straw slipping down her broken back.

There is no magic cure for grief and loss, no pill can mitigate this form of ailment. Time heals all sorrows, they say. Those mysterious they – who have a saying for any occasion and are supposed to know the answer to everything – never tell you how much time it will take for your pain to ease, or how excruciating the process will be, or that the anguish will recede only to let emptiness and despair settle in its wake.

Deep down, Jupiter is surprised that something as trivial as an infidelity has hit her this hard. It seems almost insulting, how hypersensitive she’s turned out to be to such a little, insignificant thing. She’s been in a few dangerous situations, barely escaping with her life, she’s seen people die, die for her, for fuck’s sake!! And this is what has finally broken her down?!
Yet the moment she was confronted with the ugly reality of betrayal, it felt like her all her skin had been ripped off her psyche, robbing it of its natural protective barrier, leaving it bleeding and utterly vulnerable to any further abuse. That’s why she instinctively sought solitude and refuge somewhere safe.

That’s why the second blow came as devastating as it was and she reacted to it as badly as she did.

Caine has never mentioned what happened between them that night, like Jupiter has never spoken of the awkward morning she woke up to his face in her lap or stolen checking-if-she’s-there touches; they guard each other’s secrets in silent unison.

She quickly fell asleep, exhausted by her emotional outburst, still covered by his warm and shielding presence. The next morning she woke up rather late to a smell of fried fish, wafting from the kitchen. She automatically thanked Caine for making breakfast – and got a nod and a hushed ‘Your Majesty’ in response: neither of them acknowledged the fact that she was thanking him for more than the fish he’d fried – all the while resenting him for the exact same thing: what if it would have helped?

She didn’t feel the breakfast’s taste.

Where do you go, once you’ve hit rock bottom and there’s no other way but up?

Nowhere.

You drift in the demersal waters disintegrating from within, like the decaying corpses of dead organisms sinking to the seafloor. The utter hopelessness is gnawing at you at the thought that this is your life now, that there is no respite in sight.

She wanders along the trails no one has set a foot on for years – they’re overgrown into the complete disappearance, only visible to her mind’s eye, – trying to reconnect with the place that used to give her strength in the past, used to replenish her energy stores whenever those diminished. She retraces her younger self’s footsteps: she remembers how she went exploring the island she lived on, curious and eager, and how much joy she found along the way.

It feels like there’s no either curiosity or eagerness left in her now, nothing of the lively, enthusiastic child she once was.

The jaunts that used to be exhilarating now seem tedious and boring: the wondrous flowers that bloom all around her have lost their novelty, – despite their petals still being soft like the lips of lovers and their fragrance still as sweet, – the soothing sounds of nature – the splashing of waves, the whisper of leaves, the vivacious singing of birds or the incessant gentle susurrus of grasshoppers – do not delight her ear anymore, the vistas that she remembers to be magnificent no longer hold their former splendour, even the tiny jerboas with their long tails scattering from under her feet in kangaroo-like hops are not funny anymore.

Nothing’s funny to her now; it seems that on top of everything else, she’s lost her sense of humour.

Instead, she notices how stones are inconvenient to walk on, wobbling and threatening a sprain, how her feet drown in the sand with every step she takes, how grass pricks and cuts her ankles, how daunting is the heat, how uncomfortably her clothes stick to her sweaty back, – and, above all, how utterly senseless her journeys are.
It is like looking in a mirror and in lieu of endless perfectly shaped legs, a well defined waist and long elegant neck (or, as an option: a goddess-like bosom, amazing posture and fantastic hair) seeing a protruding belly, too-wide hips and fucking cellulite (it’s always there if you look closely enough; if the bastard’s hiding, you can always squeeze your thigh to force it to show itself).

Only rather than viewing her body in a negative light – Jupiter can’t be bothered to even glance in a mirror nowadays – she’s started viewing everything in a negative light. Her ability to regard the world in its entirety taking in both the good and the bad of it has seemingly vanished; she’s left only capable of perceiving its flaws.

The weirdest thing is that she realizes perfectly well that the reality hasn’t changed, it’s her perception of it that’s been altered. Instead of seeing things for what they are, she sees the worst in them, the uglier side that can be found in everyone and everything. She was deprived of her rose-tinted glasses long ago, now it’s like black-coloured ones have been forced upon her instead.

She isn’t even angry at the situation, only resignedly resentful – of herself, mostly – and vastly apathetic. The vicious loop of ‘How could he?.. How could I?’ has finally gone quiet in her head.

She cannot find it in her to fight the numbness that overtakes her soul the way hemlock poison overtakes a body: slowly, gradually, it creeps from the legs upward in deadly paralyzing progression; when it reaches the heart, your life is over.

This poison started with her heart.

How does one live without a heart?

Is that even a life?

If it is, it’s doesn’t have the component of living in it, bare survival only.

Despite her walks not having the desired effect, she persists in continuing them: being cooped up in the house with Caine feels much too stifling.

He follows her everywhere, a silent looming shadow, doing his best to give her space, to be as unobtrusive as possible. She knows he is out there, though; his company does nothing but remind her of how alone she really is here.

How alone she will be everywhere, now.

Her lonesomeness runs deeper than a woman’s feeling of abandonment by a man she loved, it is the definitive knowledge that she – by the nature of her lineage – neither has nor will ever have another equal, – at least, within the limits of her kingdom: there can be only one sovereign.

Royalty is a curse that was inflicted on her at birth and there’s no magic fairy to save her from the repercussions.

With Finn, they’d met before she learnt the truth, and by the time of the big reveal their relationship had been already formed: they had been just two ordinary people who had loved each other so they stayed just that – with no titles, no deference, no hierarchic distance between them. Jupiter doesn’t fool herself: the social crevasse between Queen and the rest of humanity is not easy to bridge. Maybe even impossible.
They say it gets lonely at the top.

They have no idea.

*She* had no idea, before, thanks to Finnick, despite the fact that her tiny family has been falling apart ever since she learnt that she was a queen – since her blood curse has come into action.

Her Dad left first, and even though he and Jupiter keep in touch, their relationship hasn’t been the same: it is too weird to know that she is married to someone she came to think of and love as a parent. The warmth is still there, but the distance between them has been progressively growing: there’s no hope of restoring the close-knit love they shared back when she was a child.

With Uncle Stinger Jupiter has been going through a difficult and sometimes painful role reversal: now *she* has to be the authority figure instead of him, and it’s been hard on both of them. He often feels compelled to direct her actions and it frustrates him that he no longer can. Jupiter admits that Stinger is older and wiser and that quite often he *is* right, so she has problems with resisting his assertiveness. As a result, Queen has had to distance herself from Head of the Royal Guard in order to be able to command him.

Kiza took the news about her friend’s queenhood with all the enthusiasm of a twenty-one-year-old girl. She eagerly explored the royal wardrobe and treasury, but the novelty soon wore off. Besides, ever since her ascension Jupiter was hopelessly busy. Instead of exotic vacations and picturesque balls that Kiza was envisioning in her fantasies, the new queen buried herself in work and studies necessary for the said work. Kiza wanted to go and explore the universe, magnificent and alluring in its infinity, and Jupiter barely had a day off once a month: she simply couldn’t afford such luxury.

So the girls parted ways while Jupiter was discovering her kingdom and Kiza was discovering herself. Eventually, Kiza came to the conclusion that she wanted to be a tech wizard and continuously insisted on not having a position at court. Her independence both added to and took away from their friendship. The two have maintained their relative equality, which was a plus. Their communication, however, has dwindled to a visit once every few weeks and an occasional string of drunk late-night i-comm conversations when Kiza parted with yet another boy- or girlfriend.

Yet Finnick made sure that Jupiter never felt lonely.

As she’s discovering now, loneliness *sucks*.

The paradox is, she’s never resented being alone! If anything, it’s been a welcome reprieve from the constant discomfort of being watched – if not by servants then by guards, if not by courtiers then by the public, – from incessant necessity to control the way she looks, the words she speaks, her every gesture and every action. Not having any watchful eyes on her has been a rarity, a delightful luxury – one of those unapparent luxuries that can be understood only by those who have everything *but* what they want in life. Solitude used to be – no, *is* – one of her favourite things in life, on par with the sea, music and all things alive.

Despite the same objective nature of these phenomena – being alone – there is an ocean of difference between solitude and loneliness. Solitude is something that you choose, something that you seek and yearn for; it brings you peace and comfort, recuperating the soul the way sleep recuperates the body. Loneliness, however, is something that is imposed on you, and like anything that is forced on you against your will, it evokes protest, resentment and rejection.

In other words, what used to bring her joy now hollows her life out even further.

Yes, there is Caine, but he is here to keep an eye on her, not to keep her company – he is *around* her,
not with her. Besides, even if he was, strangers are not exactly a company, are they? Despite whatever familial feelings Caine has towards Stinger (friendly? filial? brotherly? romantic? all of the above?), despite the fact that he regards her as the extension of the Apinis’ family and in a way has apparently ‘adopted’ her, keeping her under his protective wing with much more diligence than his guard duty would require, – to her Caine holds no familiarity. At least, not enough to be considered a companion.

Despite that, weirdly, she doesn’t mind his ‘adoption’ of her: far from being patronizing, it’s almost reverent. His protective hovering over her reminds Jupiter of her own protective hovering over Kiza – and, seems like ages ago, Finnick: the misplaced hovering of motherhood (both hate her doing it with a passion, probably exactly like any children would do).

*Is this how having a mother would feel like?*

Jupiter would never know.

If anyone else tried to insinuate themself this close to her, she’d be suspecting some nefarious hidden agenda: what the hell do they want with Queen? Caine, however, doesn’t seem to give two shits about Queen – ‘*So much power concentrated in one single point is never a good thing*’; an anti-royalist on Her Majesty’s service, what a joke! – but he obviously cares about Jupiter.

Usually, it’s vice versa: everybody cares for Queen, yet no one cares for the person behind the title. No one cares what she is, what she wants –

She’ll never be allowed to have what she really wants; she was deprived of her right to choose her life the day she was born – the curse! She doesn’t like the hectic, fast-paced life she’s been thrust into, preferring the much slower tempo of living she used to have back on Havet, one that allowed her to enjoy every moment, to savour every day. Each day she lives as a queen, she feels like she’s wasting a better, happier life that she could be living instead.

– Oh, the courtiers try to cater to Her Majesty’s slightest whim, but only to ingratiate themselves with Queen in order to pester her later asking for favours in hopes to fulfill whatever empty ambitions they have.

She thought Finnick cared, but, apparently, it was just more of the same ingratiable bullshit.

It’s nice to feel cared for, to have someone watch over her day and night not because they have to, but because they simply worry about her – even if Caine’s concern about her is only the echo of his true concern about his… whatever, let’s quote the man himself and say *best friend* Stinger.

Does she envy their friendship? Not really. Envy is similar to jealousy: it’s wanting to have something someone already has, while wanting them not to have it any longer. Jupiter would never want to deprive Stinger of his friend, even though she wouldn’t mind having a Caine of her own.

Someone loyal.

Someone honest.

Someone decent.

Wholesome, even.

How many people out of her immediate circle can she whole-heartedly apply such an epithet to?

*No one* – herself included.
Kiza, as much as Jupiter loves her, has her weaknesses – which Jupiter loves, too, even if she does not approve of them. (Love doesn’t judge.)

Apini lies. (A disappointment, yes, but again, no judging – still too much love involved: whenever it comes to Stinger, Jupiter is a kid again, with a kid’s blind love and ready forgiveness.)

Finnick manipulates and lies. (His judgment day is drawing near, for she will render to the man according to his deeds – there’s not enough love left in her to protect him any longer.)

The rest manipulate and lie even more – at least, attempt to. (No love there, only judgment; they play that dangerous game at their own risk and peril.)

With a Caine, she wouldn’t have to judge: there would be nothing to judge for.

By gods, Apini is one lucky bastard.

She’s been trying to be like that: honest, decent, wholesome – after all, Queen is supposed to be an ideal worth admiring, an example worth following.

Why trying to be perfect feels this shitty? Why failing at it hurts this much?

Why is she such a bitter disappointment to herself?

Jupiter goes through the motions – tired, always tired – mindlessly weeding and watering the garden, doing the laundry, fishing and cooking her catch, making sure Caine eats and sleeps enough, – but she is absent from her actions. Her body is sleepwalking while her mind is imprisoned in a dark and cold oubliette of disillusionment and utter senselessness to everything she does. She would scream at the lack of meaning in her life – if she wasn’t this apathetic.

Yet sometimes Caine manages to jolt her out of her daze – whether intentionally or not, she has no idea.

“Caine, would you like to try the single most delicious thing on Havet?” she asks one morning. If he’s stuck in the company of a dead-eyed, mostly silent zombie, he at least deserves to have some nice food in him.

“I thought you said you were inedible, Your Majesty,” he remarks seriously, shocking her into speechlessness, then adds upon some consideration, “Besides, I would have to kill you for that. It’s kind of – counterproductive, don’t you think?”

“Was that – a joke?” she looks at his unsmiling face and wonders if it’s her sense of humour is failing her – which is probably the case – or it’s one of Caine’s weirder moments.

“No.”

Weirder moments it is, then.

Frankly, she has no idea how to respond to that. She’s grown accustomed to casual lies she’s fed on everyday basis: people are always trying to shield either themselves or her with their half-truths, part-truths, untruths – however, their intentions, whether good or bad, do not change the end result: she is being lied to so often she feels lost when confronted with the real, full-bloodied truth. Caine’s
honesty should come with a pharmaceutical warning, ‘Toxic in high concentrations! Must be administered in homeopathic doses: five drops per dose, no more, otherwise may cause a side effect of utter stupefaction. Avoid driving, using machines, or doing anything else that could be dangerous if you are not alert.’

“Why are you so surprised?” Caine asks after the silence stretches too long. “I’ve told you that you smell nice.”

“Not as in food!”

“You don’t think food smells nice?”

“Yes. No. That’s not… Argh, stop confusing me! Food’s smell makes you hungry, it makes you salivate. Other nice smells are just – enjoyable. They don’t cause salivary discharge.”

“Your scent doesn’t make me salivate, but only because I was conditioned not to. Salivate in your presence, I mean. That would be inconvenient and distractive,” he informs her matter-of-factly. Considers her mute form and adds, “I’m sorry if that shocks you, Your Majesty. I didn’t exactly choose my own reflexes.”

She knows he didn’t, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s plain creepy.

“Caine, have you ever – eaten anyone?” she asks in morbid curiosity.

“Do you really want to know the answer to that question, Your Majesty?” he inquires slowly, deliberately.

“I guess not.” – Come on, Jupiter, stop pussing out! Look the truth in the eyes for once! The reality doesn’t change simply because you’re unaware of it. – “Yes, actually, I do.”

“When I attacked the senator… I bit into his throat. I do not think I spat out the mouthful I’d gotten before they managed to drag me off.”

“You do not think?..”

“I don’t remember. When I’m like that – acting purely on instinct – I’m not… I’m incapable of higher brain functions: controlling what I do, committing my actions to my memory… I just – act.”

“Are all lycantants like that?”

“If they were, our production would have stopped ages ago. Splicers would’ve come up with something less – volatile.”

“Did that senator – smell nice, too?”

“I didn’t try to kill him for the pleasure of eating him,” Caine spits, indignant. “I may be closer to a carnivore than you are, Your Majesty, but I still consider eating humans – or splices – cannibalism. I wouldn’t resort to it unless I absolutely have to.”

“Have you ever – had to?”

“Back at the Deadlands… Things were tough. Sometimes, it was literally kill and eat, or be killed and eaten. Some chose to keep their humanity until the very end. Chose to die. I – I couldn’t. It’s not in my nature to give up. I had to survive at any cost. To die there – like a dog – without something – or someone – to die for, without a purpose?..” Caine is growing agitated, and she places a hand on
his arm to calm him down. “Survival at any cost... That’s why I think I’m closer to an animal than to a human,” he concludes – quietly, but resolutely.

She’s shocked – although she’s shocked not by what he did, but that he’s told her.

She is so used to lies – or omissive silence. Being told the truth doesn’t feel better, but it is.

“Caine, I’m a hundred percent human, and only gods know what I would do in a situation like that. Every living being – unless it’s a plant or a fungus – has to kill others in order to survive. Even herbivores kill – they kill plants, but that doesn’t make that any less of a killing. Survival is every living being’s inherent right. And cannibalism is much more common in nature than people usually think. Sometimes mothers eat their own offspring to keep their strength up, so there could be other generations to come.”

“So, you are not – disgusted?” Caine asks cautiously.

“Oh, I am. Not with your – survival tactics, though. I’m utterly disgusted with the fact that places in this universe exist where people have to resort to those tactics. You wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t been forcibly put in those conditions, would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Why were you sent there in the first place? I mean, why did you try to kill the senator, if not?..”

“Some humans treat splices like they’re things, – worse than things: things break if they are abused while we can heal, to a degree. Worse than they would treat animals, - animals do not understand threats: you hurt them – they bite back. We, on the other hand, can be intimidated into letting people do atrocious things to us. But, if pushed too hard, some of us still can lash out and fight back – those who are strong or dangerous, like my kind. However, not all of us are strong or dangerous, Your Majesty. Sometimes those who are strong have to lash out for those who are not – because the latter can’t.”

“But there are – committees for humane treatment of splices; couldn’t they – or you on their behalf – have complained?”

“Committees controlled by other senators?..”

She has nothing to say to that. She is aware of the situation – the corruption that is rotting the national administration from within, the nepotism and cronyism, the mutual cover-ups – but there’s not much she can do, save decimating half the Entitled in her kingdom, both guilty and innocent. She probably should include herself on the execution list, too – after all, she’s widely known for her favouritism.

“I’m sorry.” She is.

By gods, she is. Funny how people who commit atrocities rarely feel shame, but those who have no hand in those misdeeds experience the disgrace the former should be bearing. She has to suffer through the shame for every crime and violation in her kingdom. Most time people blame ‘the system’, it’s her face they see in their minds.

It is exhausting.

“Do not apologize for something that’s not your fault, Your Majesty. If you take upon yourself more than you can bear, it will break you.”

“How is that not my fault? It’s going on under my rule, on my territory!”
“You can’t control every single person in your kingdom, Your Majesty. It’s physically impossible. We are like water fleas, remember? Therefore – it’s not your fault.”

“Standing by and letting atrocities be committed is a crime in itself! But there’s not much I can do without implementing drastic measures, in other words, resorting to atrocities myself, like introducing the death penalty for corrupt practices and having mass purges among the state officials. Nothing else would be – understood by those people. Considering the resources and connections those people have, any fine would be like a sniff for them, and imprisonment will turn into a stay at a luxurious hotel –”

After a few loud public scandals when a son or a daughter of some high-ranking ‘civil servant’ was detained for a series of repeated petty crimes, only to leak the holos of their lavish ‘cells’ into the Space – how dumb should one be to do that?! – Queen had to intervene personally, having the youngsters incarcerated in the dungeons of her alcazar just to make sure – only this time together with their influential parents. (That was the first time Jupiter even learnt that her alcazar had dungeons.) The younger generation was released after serving their due time, while their daddies and mommies have stayed imprisoned for corruption – and will be for a long while.

For compromising the state authorities in general, as well as her personal trouble – having the scum under her own roof – the queen made sure that their ‘stay’ with her would be the most uncomfortable one.

The media christened those arrests and the following incarcerations ‘Her Majesty’s hospitality’.

Since then, ‘Her Majesty’s hospitality’ has become a much more threatening term than ‘imprisonment’ itself.

“– Death, as barbaric as it is, is understood by everyone,” Jupiter finishes her thought.

“You’ll never have to take lives with your own hands, Your Majesty, there are those who’ll purge for you.”

“That’s what makes it so tempting – and so horrendous! Those are lives, Caine! Living people! In the end of the day, I’ll be the one taking those lives. Me, Caine, not the executors!”

“Lives that poison many more lives around them, humiliating, stealing, raping. Are those lives really worth keeping around?” Caine counters.

“Who am I to judge?”

“Queen, Your Majesty. If not you, then who?”

She has nothing to object to that. ‘If not you, then who?’ is the question of her life.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, it’s not my business to discuss politics with Queen,” Caine offers an apology that sounds equally awkward and insincere – he catches himself like that sometimes, as though coming to his senses and realizing all of the sudden who he’s talking to. Then, much more genuinely, he adds, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I really think it’s not your fault.” – At least one of them does. – “You were saying something about the second most delicious thing on Havet?..”

She blurs before she manages to stop herself – hasn’t she had enough truth for the day? – “Do I really smell, er, nicer than everything else here to you?”

“Well, I haven’t smelled everything here yet…”
“That’s – comforting,” she comments sarcastically.

“I swear, Your Majesty, I won’t attempt to eat you.”

“If you do, please, have the decency to wring my neck first,” she tells him: promises are promises, but being practical can’t hurt. “That way, it’ll be quick and much less painful.”

“I would never hurt you.”

Finnick’s vehement ‘I would never hurt Annie’ springs to her mind, reverberating with a sharp stab of pain in her heart.

‘You’re already hurting me, Caine, if inadvertently,’ she tells him silently – he doesn’t deserve to hear that.

“I believe you,” she tells him out loud. “Come on, let’s go get some crabs.”

They take a boat and sail a considerable distance away from the shore, to the bright red buoy that marks the crab cage. One of the duties of Siskin’s team – along with taking care of the house and the grounds – is resetting the crab cage every week. The cage is more of a net than a cage, really, since it’s not made of metal but of a very sturdy rope; still, it keeps its shape, so they call it a cage. The trap is shaped like a low bottle with a widely flaring bottom and a rather narrow neck: once crabs get in – lured by the irresistible smell of rotting fish – they can’t get out.

The contraption is held with a string that slowly disintegrates in water. If the trap gets lost, all the crabs inside will be free within a week. Such a short imprisonment does not hurt the captives and they get off unscathed. However, if the poor crustaceans are unlucky enough to find themselves caught whenever Jupiter’s visiting, they are sure to end in a pot: she always has a taste for crabs.

Jupiter has to use a winch to get the cage up to the surface: it’s way too heavy to pull out manually. Once the trap is out, the next job is to carefully relocate the beautiful monsters into an overside transportation net: crabs should be kept in water until they are processed – boiled and either eaten or frozen – otherwise they die and spoil very quickly. And no one wants to know what a spoiled crab smells like!

The crabs are huge and slow-moving – unlike their smaller brethren, which are quick and nimble. Their glossy carapace reaches the size of a dinner plate and their legs can grow as long as Jupiter’s arm. The crustaceans, encased in a thick hard shell with spikes all over it, with ominously looking pincers, are reminiscent of some grotesque otherworldly war machines – beautiful monsters indeed.

Watching Jupiter tackle them, Caine grows nervous, attempting to help but only getting in the way.

“Your Majesty…” comes a plaintive plea as she jerks her hand from a particularly bellicose crustacean.

“Caine, sit back and stop rocking the boat, I have enough – oh, look what you’ve done!” Chagrined, she looks at the crab that took advantage of her distraction and managed to sneak away. Her gaze follows the escapee as it slowly descends into the depths, moving its long limbs in a triumphant farewell.

“Shall I get it back out?” Caine rushes to the board with Jupiter and the cage, and the boat takes a dangerous list.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty.”

“Never mind, Caine, the guy deserves to survive for being this sprightly.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t. Despite their threatening appearance, these creatures are harmless, unless your finger gets in a pincer. Even though it won’t get broken, you’ll get a nasty bruise.”

“How do you know that, if the crabs are as harmless as you say they are?”

“I did it once. Stuck it in on purpose. You know, for science.”

“And after that you tell me I am weird?!”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t,” she rebuffs, convincing – with certain difficulty – yet another crab into the transportation net.

“Do we really need this many, Your Majesty? They seem very large,” Caine comments carefully holding another one of the potential escapees by the tips of its legs in his outstretched hand. Considering Caine is standing – again, ugh! he seems to forget himself whenever it comes to any kind of hunting – and the crab’s other legs nearly reach the bottom of the boat, that’s one impressive crustacean.

And that’s not even the biggest one.

The one that got away was bigger.

Why those that get away are always bigger?!

“Do you think we will eat them whole?”

“Um, yes? Well, without the shell.”

“No, Caine, it’s only the legs that are edible!”

“But the body looks so much meatier!”

“Only looks. It’s filled with gills and other unappetizing innards, which we will give back to the sea. Fish will be happy.”

“Still, we’ve caught too many,” Caine persists. “One crab per person seems enough.”

“Once boiled, they freeze really well. It’ll be nice to have some extra for future use. I can’t concern myself with feeding you every waking moment, you know.”

She has moping to do.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I should…”

“No, you shouldn’t. Now shut up and help me to get this thing out, you’re the strong one here. Wait, I need to step back to the other board first.”

After Caine hauls the transportation net with a dozen crabs overboard, Jupiter resets the trap, lowers
it into the water, and they head home.

Straight upon arrival, Jupiter starts a huge pot of water — tall and narrow, like a milk can — in the summer kitchen out in the garden: there’s no way to cook the crabs indoors, it’ll be such a mess! Caine brings the net with their writhing, twisting, crawling catch and dumps it on the floor beside the butcher block.

Once the water boils, Jupiter grabs a crab by three legs on one side and flips it over onto the block, proceeding to hack the legs off in one swift blow of a heavy cleaver.

“They taste so delicious that on their home planet they have been overfished into extinction,” she comments grimly. “They are too good for their own good.” Another side, another hack. “They are like splices that way.”

“Does it mean you want to devour me, Your Majesty?”

“Was that a joke?” The cleaver pauses in the air. After ‘you smell so nice I want to eat you’ conversation she thinks she might be asking Caine that often.

“Only a question.”

“No need to take my words so literally, Caine,” she tells him, chopping off the legs of the next crab and chucking them into the boiling water, watching the greenish-gray colour instantly turn into a wonderful vibrant coral hue. “Feeding on a species is only the most basic manner of consumption, but far from being the only one. Look at the pleasure splice industry: what we don’t eat, we fuck, satisfying another of the most primal, most animalistic urges. It’s just a tiny step above eating,” she remarks bitterly.

“I didn’t think you, uh, employed pleasure splices at the alcazar.”

“When I say ‘we’, Caine, I mean ‘we, humans’. As much as I detest the whole phenomenon of pleasure splices, I can’t separate myself from the consumption process,” she admits, guilty and upset with her own inability to change the situation — at least, to change it quickly. “Various splice industries produce splices so humans could exploit them — for whatever purpose necessary. I exploit splices, too: you are here, after all.”

“I don’t feel particularly exploited, Your Majesty. Especially here. Especially when we’re about to have dinner.”

“Was that a joke?”

“No, it was a statement of the facts.”

“If there’s an attack, what would you do, Caine?” she inquires, fishing the first portion of crab legs out of the pot for him.

“Try to protect you, of course,” he replies, accepting the offering.

“With your life, if necessary?”

“You will be safer while I’m alive, but if necessary, yes.”

“See, these crabs have died so we could feed on them and live. If there is an attack, you are prepared to die so I could live. There is no difference.”
Her mind shrinks on itself at the thought how many people died already so Seraphi could live for as long as she did and be ‘reborn’ in Jupiter’s form. RegeneX isn’t made of rainbows and unicorn poop, it’s made of billions of lives cut short, lives not lived. How many has she already taken? How many more she’ll have to take? Her heart spasms painfully at the mere idea.

Caine looks at her and deliberately sets his plate aside. He rises from the table, comes over and puts his forearm on the butcher block.

“Here,” he tells her. “Chop it off.”

“What?!”

“Cut my arm off. Or give me the cleaver, I’ll do it for you.”

“What are you?.. No!” Seeing Caine reaching for the cleaver, she drops the crab she’s holding to free her hands – to do what? To try and snatch the cleaver before he does? It’s no use: Caine’s much quicker. To wrench it out of his hands? Also no use: he’s much stronger. So she does the only thing she can do, grasping at the place where the supposed cut might take place with both her hands. Whatever’s gotten into him, he won’t slice through her limbs, too.

Caine doesn’t try to shake her hands off.

“See?” he responds instead. “That’s the difference.”

“You, my friend, are one crazy person,” she exhales, still holding onto his arm.

She’s not exactly sure what he was trying to demonstrate here, but she feels lighter, somehow.

“I think the crab you dropped is heading for the sea,” Caine comments calmly.

“Oh, shit!” She lets go of his arm and rushes after the meal that’s making a run for it.

When Jupiter comes back with the fugitive, Caine is already sitting back at the table as if nothing out of ordinary has happened, studying his plate with a puzzled expression.

“Um, Your Majesty? How are you supposed to eat these? I mean, I can just crack the shell with my teeth, no problem, but that won’t look exactly, er, cultured enough for Your Majesty’s company.”

“You just cut the tips off – there isn’t much meat in those – then you chop the segments close to the joints. As a result, you get these tubes of hard shell filled with meat. Now, if you tap the end of it against your plate hard enough, the meat comes out… I said comes out, damn it… Aha! See? Or you can just suck it out, but, considering the shape, size, and colour of the segments, demonstrating that won’t look cultured enough for your company, Caine.”

“If you say so, Your Majesty. May I use my imagination?”

She glances up at him. Is he joking? Is her sense of humour failing her again?

Caine looks impenetrable, as always.

“If you must.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, and don’t try to swallow the meat whole, there are these thin translucent bones – they’re not exactly bones, but let’s call them that for simplicity’s sake – that need to be removed.”
“Got it,” Caine confirms diligently. “Suck, do not swallow.”

She contemplates him in silent stupefaction – not for the first time these last few days.

“All right, was that a joke?” she asks.

“Might’ve been,” he admits, completely deadpan.

A burst of relief – “Finally!”

Crab meat is fragrant and delectable, as always, yet to Jupiter this favourite delicacy of hers tastes like soggy papier-mâché mush, flavourless and bland.

Everything tastes to her like that these days.

Everything feels to her like that these days.

If you run from something, how long do you run for? How far do you go?

Do you ever stop?

And if you cannot stop, how does your escape end?

One day Jupiter visits so-called Contemplation Cliff. That’s how she and Kiza named a tall cliff overlooking the sea, one of the highest points on the island that offers a panorama of a vast bay and two extending capes, curling inwards, as though holding the cove in their arms, embracing it. Jupiter remembers the view to be astounding, breathtaking, overwhelming… Now it looks – large. That’s it, just large.

Somewhere along the way, she’s lost her sense of wonder.

The main selling point of the place, however, is that the cliff overhangs the sea underneath, so you can sit on the very edge of it in the shadow of an old contorted pine tree and dangle your feet in the air – so high up that if you try to look down the waves look tiny from this height – more like toy waves, than the real deal, splashing around toy rocks. That’s the reason why the two girls loved to come here so much. You should be careful while looking down, though: vertigo might hit you at any moment, making you lose balance – and the way down is a very long one.

It’s a very nice place to simply sit and think – or sit and not think.

That’s what Jupiter’s come here for today: not thinking.

That’s the only delight she has left in her life by now.

Unfortunately, her mind rarely complies with her wishes.

It keeps insistently reminding her that at some point – some point soon – she will have to go back, she will have to face the reality, she will be expected to function as if nothing has happened. But her whole world is in ruins – again – and this time she is too fucking tired to pick up the pieces.

What’s the purpose of it, anyway? What’s the point in picking up her struggle with deceit, disloyalty, cruelty, injustice, discrimination and greed of the outer world when she knows the crusade will never
All those things have existed since the dawn of the humanity – since before primeval hominids evolved into first humans – and they will exist after the humanity evolves into the next species.

The ‘I versus others’ or ‘we against them’ opposition – and avarice, territoriality and aggression that stem from it – are just the other side to our need to survive, a part of our self-preservation instinct.

Every living creature needs certain resources to sustain itself and that means that it takes them away from others, since all the resources are limited. If a wolf eats a rabbit, it deprives all other wolves in the vicinity of a chance to catch and munch on the same misfortunate rodent. If the wolf population is scarce and rabbits are plentiful, there will be next to no tension between neighboring packs. However, if there are more predators than the territory can sustain and they often go hungry, their aggression increases and they start to turn on each other.

The same is true for humans. *Homo homini lupus est.*

There is no way to put an end to that vicious cycle, to stop humans from being competitive and aggressive, from discriminating each other and dehumanizing those they consider different: those of other gender, sexual orientation, religion, nation, race or species – in reality, it doesn’t matter what to discriminate for. Queen’s whole life is fighting windmills, an extremely arduous endeavor – and, in the end of the day, completely useless.

Her existence is an ouroboros of effort and disappointment.

And the circle – just like any circle – has no way out.

The churning water below seems to grow increasingly louder with every passing minute. It sings to her in a siren voice – in Finnick’s voice – mesmerizing her, drawing her in.

Suddenly, the way out appears very clear.

What holds her here, anyway? What does she have to look forward to? More deceit, more disappointment, more shame? It’s so tempting to simply skip all that and get straight to the final destination.

Like, right now.

All around Jupiter seagulls puncture the air with their sharp cries, a mouse is rustling in the grass somewhere nearby, a little green spider is making its way up her arm… All of them are tiny particles of an immeasurably larger picture of life. Who will miss the mouse if it gets caught by a fox? Who will notice the absence of the minuscule spider if Jupiter chooses to squash it? Life will go on without them just as smoothly – just like it will without her. No single human has any impact on the universe at large, not even a space queen. It will be as if she has never existed.

And she should have never existed in the first place, without the miracle of the liquid death. Jupiter was brought to life by the will of the dead woman, who relievably escaped into non-existence, tricking her recurrence into shouldering her burdens – while she should have just let Jupiter not be.

The death itself does not scare her. Some religions threaten their disciples with eternal torment if they choose to end their life by their own volition. But there is nothing there, on the other side: neither fiery pits, nor lush fields and loved ones.

*There is no other side.*

Jupiter knows, since she has already been there. She is supposed to be Seraphi that retrograded to the
brink of non-existence and returned back to life. No matter how frequently her own face looks at her from Seraphi’s portraits and sacred statues, no matter how many times Seraphi’s own children recognize her, no matter how often Balem calls her ‘Mother’ in that tragic, longing voice of his – Jupiter knows she is not Seraphi.

She’s never felt guiltier for being the living proof that Seraphi’s dead, permanently and irreversibly, than with Balem. While the late queen’s other children – Kalique and Titus – only play at missing their parent, Balem… Balem suffers. There’s so much yearning, so much expectation, so much demand in every ‘Mother’ of his that one day Jupiter broke down and screeched ‘I’m not your Mother!’ in his face. Not one of her proudest moments. Especially considering the fallout that followed.

There’s nothing of Seraphi in Jupiter: the former queen is said to be a very strong woman, cunning and ruthless, one that embraced her power instead of cowering from it. Jupiter feels neither strong nor cunning, let alone ruthless. Power has never been a gift to her, it’s been a burden, a cross she has to bear for the rest of her eternity. She does not want this existence, not really, this larger-than-life responsibility and never-ending duties, the ceaseless exercise in self-control and – what feels like – pure masochism. What’s the point in devoting your life to taking care of others – to keeping them happy – when she can’t be happy herself?

She hasn’t been happy since the day she turned twenty-one.

Finnick, to his credit, managed to make her at least content – what they call ‘happy enough’.

Her predecessor probably thought that she was granting Jupiter a favour when she was giving her life. Life can be both a gift and a burden, a blessing and a curse, but when it turns to only a curse?.. It’s the first lifetime of this recurrence of Jupiter’s, and already it feels fucking endless. This is not the life Jupiter wants to have. What’s the point in living if you have to suffer through your life?

This time, no one will resurrect her, no one will make this choice for her.

She won’t let them.

There are so many rocks down there that, if she’s lucky, she’ll be unconscious when she drowns.

“Please, don’t try that,” Caine’s quiet voice jars her out of her trance coming from her left, startlingly close.

She looks up sharply to discover him sitting right next to her. She hasn’t detected him getting there. Who would’ve suspected such stealth in that bulky body of his?

“I’ll have to catch you if you jump, and you’ll be angry with me again,” he sighs. He doesn’t look at her, squinting at the restless sea. “I don’t want you to be angry with me.” The last part comes out barely audible.

It takes her a few seconds to process his statement.

“You’d keep me alive against my will? By force?!”

For a long moment, Caine looks pained. Then his face settles into a hard mask of determination and he nods.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” he offers. “I cannot let you die.”

His ‘It’s not in my nature to give up’ – both guilty and resolute – echoes in her mind.
For a few heartbeats, she can’t see anything but blinding white fury. He doesn’t know what her being angry means yet. This is her life and she should be the one to decide whether she would live or die – she herself, and no one else. She is entitled to choose her own fate: life is a right, not an obligation.

“Who the fuck do you think you are to play god with me?!” she hisses.

Isn’t that supposed to be her job?

“Nobody, Your Majesty, I’m nobody. But who would I be, if I let another living being die for no apparent reason when I have a chance to prevent it from happening?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” she cuts off. “This is my choice to make and you stay the fuck away.”

“It is your choice to make, Your Majesty, and if you make it when you are not distressed, then so be it. But while I know that you’re not quite yourself to make that choice, I can’t just stand by and do nothing. I’m sorry,” he repeats and his apology does sound sincere.

She can see his point, but he obviously doesn’t see hers: she cannot take it anymore. She’s done.

Her tongue absently comes to circle the molar that has a tiny capsule of a highly efficient neurotoxin embedded in it: a few quick seconds and it’ll be over. A royal ought to have an option to find their escape in death when faced with unbearable torture or indefinite imprisonment. It’s their responsibility not to abuse that option in any other situation, though.

Fuck responsibility.

What was the combination of the teeth she has to touch with the tip of her tongue to trigger the needle that would pierce the capsule flooding her mouth with venom?

“Please, don’t try that either.” Caine’s frame tangibly tenses up beside her. “If you resort to the emergency poison, I will have to do my best to extract the toxin from your mouth, while injecting you with the antidote I have on me at all times.”

A startled laugh bubbles out of her – like a pocket of gas out of a swamp, a product of decaying life – foul and empty.

“Stinger’s got his shit covered, hasn’t he?” she muses.

Of course Head of the Royal Guard would have foreseen every possibility, the paranoid motherfucker, – that’s what the queen usually values him for. His providence saved Jupiter’s life on multiple occasions; now his precautiousness has turned against her.

What a fucking poetic irony!

Then a thought occurs to her –

“How, exactly, are you supposed to extract the poison from my mouth?” she asks, turning to look at Caine.

The guard resolutely keeps his eyes on the horizon. “The way you’re advised not to get the venom out of a snake bite.”

“Seriously?! You’re supposed to suck it out? A fucking kiss of life?! That is a sure poisoning for you!” she exclaims, incredulous. “Do you even have a dose of the antidote for yourself?”
“No. The moment I activate the injector, though, a SOS signal will be sent to the Guard. They will be here in minutes to make sure you’ll live.”

“In minutes? Do you have any idea how potent the toxin is?” She feels herself growing more and more agitated, coming out of the stupor she’s been sucked into. “You’ll be well dead by then!”

“I know.”

She’s overcome with stifling outrage – and breathless awe. “Your Commander is one cunning bastard! How could he have instructed you to die in vain? I can’t believe he’d do that to you! Can’t believe he’d do that to me, either.”

Stinger’s calculation is actually a very smart one.

Apini is perfectly aware that Queen has some kind of personal connection with every member of her Private Security. It’s not that she communicates with them that often – Jupiter has probably talked more to Caine these few past weeks than she has spoken with the rest of her security team put together in a year. Their relationship stays purely professional, but near constant physical proximity creates a bond on a more basic, subliminal level: her body recognizes them as those who are always close and tricks the mind into accepting that feeling of closeness on an emotional plane, too.

In other words, she cares about her guards.

If she attempts to kill herself in the easiest and quickest way possible, one of them might die saving her. In Caine’s case, with no other guards around to help him, he will die for certain. And he doesn’t have any choice in the matter. She may want to end her own life, but she wouldn’t take him along with her in a try to achieve that.

A try that would most probably fail, anyway.

Way to manipulate her out of any reckless suicide attempts and into living!

She’s steaming silently, because Stinger isn’t here – wait till she gets her hands on him, – her fingers pulling at the grass leaves around her in aimless agitation.

Suddenly, she feels Caine’s fingers creep tentatively over her palm, grounding her. His hand is rough, and very warm.

“It will get better with time,” she hears him murmur.

She listens into the nothingness that now constantly resides inside her, eroding – no, carving her out from within.

“It will never get better,” she rebuffs with the vehemence of despair.

“You can’t know that,” he says forcefully, passionately, visibly losing his ever-present imperturbation. “I was sentenced to die in the Deadlands, Your Majesty. Yet I did my best to survive. And life back there can be worse than a quick death, at times.” Caine can’t contain the shudder. Coming from this stoic man, it tells her more than any words would. “There was no hope that my situation would ever get better, no hope at all.” He turns to look at her, not only making full eye contact but urging her – commanding her – to hold his gaze. “Then, one day, your Royal Guard’s clipper showed up. I’d never expected Commander Ap… Stinger come to my rescue,” he sounds incredulous, still. “The ship delivered me to your alcazar. And here I am.”

At that, he smiles.
With a start, Jupiter realizes she’s never seen Caine smile before; hell, she didn’t know he could smile – he’s always been so reserved and serious. His smile is just a tentative curl to the corners of his mouth, yet it transforms his whole face, lighting up his eyes, brightening his whole demeanour. Despite the crow’s feet that gather at the corners of his eyes he actually looks much younger, much more innocent.

Like everything bad that happened to him – didn’t. Like there was neither violence nor killings, neither arrests nor Deadlands in his life.

He looks – happy.

She likes this look on him. She wants to see it more often.

“The thing is, you don’t know what your future holds. You never know,” he emphasizes with dead set conviction.

His certitude is so infectious that she feels a faint hope stir inside her.

“Don’t tell me babysitting a sourqueen is that much better than surviving the Deadlands,” she retorts.

Caine pretends to consider it for a moment, then offers, “Just a touch. At least I have a company that doesn’t want to off me.” He wrinkles up his nose, but the smile is still there.

“Who says I don’t?” she nudges his ankle with her foot. “You can be infuriating.”

“That I can be,” he agrees easily, nodding his head in an abashed manner.

They’re silent for a while.

What is there to say, really?

“Is this why you didn’t let me out of your sight all this time? You were afraid I might?..” she trails off.

“It’s not the only reason, but mostly, yes. I’d met people who’d smelled like you did the night you left your alcazar – before. They hadn’t lived long. Despair and survival don’t usually go well together.”

“Why didn’t you say something? You could have – I don’t know – warned me?”

“And put that idea into your head, possibly prompting your suicide? Besides, I hoped it wouldn’t come to this.”

“You hoped I would be stronger.” She hoped she would be stronger.

“I hoped you would hurt less. Pain takes on many forms; it’s only natural trying to get rid of it. But this is not a circumstance that calls for such a drastic measure. It hurts now, but it will pass. Eventually.”

Of that, she’s not so sure. She doesn’t voice her doubts, though. If someone is prepared to put their own life on the line to save another’s, they deserve to not be easily dismissed. She can hold on for a little longer – if anything, to keep Caine alive. Or not to leave him with the guilt of failing at his duty – he doesn’t deserve that, either: he’s doing all he can.

Maybe a while later, she will feel better – enough to want to keep herself alive, too.
Oh, and for the record – just in case I do something stupid, although I don’t think I would, not now – you are allowed to use the antidote. But don’t you dare to play Snow White with me, Wise, no matter what Apini’s instructions are. That is an order.”

“Way to ruin my fun, Your Majesty.”

“Gods, you’re such a suicidal freak,” she sniffs, making a mental note to implant him with his own capsule of the antidote when they get back to the alcazar.

“Takes one to know one,” he parries, immediately getting comically wide-eyed and panicked at the insolence of his own remark.

She feels a smile tug up her lips against her own volition.

“Jupiter. While we are here, I’m Jupiter to you,” she tells him firmly.

“Nice to meet you, Jupiter.”

“Likewise, Caine. Likewise.”

Turning to look away out onto the sea, she leans into his side, a solid wall of muscle, alive and warm and there. She contemplates the expanse of the disquiet waves, a kaleidoscope of turquoise, emerald and alexandrite hues, a tiny seagull soaring up high above her head in the larimar vastness of the sky between the mother-of-pearl clouds – the ever-changing precious mosaic of life.

While such beauty is out there, this world might be worth hanging around, if only to witness it herself in all its glory.

She closes her eyes and relaxes into the warmth against her shoulder.

The water doesn’t sing to her anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll be honest: I’ll be surprised if this story has any readers left after this chapter. I promise, though, that it’s the lowest point of the entire thing, the next chapter will be more light-hearted.

Another confession: at the end of this chapter, I shamelessly go all New Moon on you. ‘His hand was rough and very warm’ is a direct pick-up from the book. Actually, that is my favourite line in the whole saga that took such an aggrieving turn soon after that quote had taken place.

The chapter has been inspired by one and only Jacob Black and the brilliant film Single Man. ‘You never know’ philosophy was borrowed from the movie, straight from the mouth of irresistible Nicolas Hoult.

On a more serious note, please, keep in mind that Jupiter’s behaviour here is not supposed to be an example worth following in any way. I’m not depicting a healthy coping process, but portraying the route of going under. If you ever find yourself feeling
like Jupiter does in this chapter, please, seek medical help!!! I can’t emphasize that enough. The most perilous catch of a suicidal depression is that more often than not you don’t realize the danger you are in; and even if you do, you can’t be bothered to care. In either case, you are unable to help yourself all on your own.

Grief happens, people react to it badly. Sometimes it is impossible to cope with single-handedly; if you turn to others for assistance, it doesn’t mean you’re being weak, it means you’re being smart.

Don’t try suicide – nobody’s worth it!

The crabs described here are the red king crab, *Paralithodes camtschaticus*. Like the scallops mentioned earlier, they don’t inhabit warm seas, but very cold northern oceans. However, the fact that they are extremely delicious is absolutely true.

The quote ‘Loving someone is seeing them the way God intended them to be...’ is taken from the diaries of Marina Tsvetaeva, my favourite poet.
As promised, this chapter is much lighter and safe to read even for depressed people.

“You should keep chickens here, Your... Jupiter.”

Her name still sounds slightly awkward when coming out of Caine’s mouth, but she can tell he’s trying. They’re sitting next to each other on a warm flat rocky outcrop, surrounded on three sides by the sea, rods in hands – not so much fishing as killing time.

After their face-off on the cliff, Caine’s demeanour has perceptibly lost its tension – the tension Jupiter hadn’t realized had been there until it drained out of the guard – like a tightly wound spring returns to its normal state of rest after it’s been released. He’s started actually smiling, sometimes even daring to go as far as to joke.

It is a nice change.

They have become – well, not exactly friends, the social abyss between them is way too wide for that, but there’s certain camaraderie to their intercourse that wasn’t there before. After weeks of living parallel to each other, they’ve taken to doing things together. It’s happened almost seamlessly, like when two people walking side by side at the same pace fall into step. If earlier their paths truly intersected only at meals and bedtime, now they interact all day only to fall asleep alongside one another in two pushed-together beds: Caine’s still obsessed with not letting her out of his sight, even at night.

Frankly, she’s not as opposed to the idea as she was before.

Their is an easy, natural neighbourship, a synergy that is supposed to come after years of mutual accommodation, yet here it is, after only few short weeks of cohabitation. Jupiter suspects, however, that it comes not without effort on Caine’s part as he adjusts not only to her routine but to her lifestyle on the whole.

The smoothness of their rapport probably has also a lot to do with her uncharacteristic indifference and detachment from happenings in her life that come with persistent sadness.

Guess sometimes bad things can lead to something good.

It doesn’t change the fact that they suck, though.

“Chickens?” Jupiter asks, shaking off the absent-minded stupor that fishing usually puts a person into.

“Uh-huh.”

“Tired of fish? Miss eggs?”
“A bit.”

“As a kid, I was traumatized by a cock,” she divulges.

“I really hope you mean a rooster,” the lycantant responds with a hint of alarm in his voice.

“Yes, Caine, the only pecker that assualted me was of the original, avian kind. There was this aggressive stag that used to attack both me and Kiza when we sneeked into the chicken coop to steal some eggs. I went in first, so usually I suffered the most.”

“Why did you have to steal your own eggs?!”

“To make an unсанctioned egg flip, of course.”

“Unsanctioned? Who would refuse a drink to a queen?”

“I wasn’t a queen back then,” she sighs nostalgically, longing for the good old days of unawareness and no responsibility. “I was a normal, ordinary kid – just like Kiza. Our dads didn’t like it when we got too high on sugar and turned into hyperactive howler monkeys, as kids are prone to do. So we had to fend for ourselves and to be surreptitious about it, too. Anyway, that rooster was a big, strong brute that considered itself an alpha male – well, I guess it was one… It was extremely protective of its flock and territorial like you wouldn’t believe. The damned pest would peck at my knees any chance it got, sometimes until they bled. Once it tried to take a shot at my eyes, and I broke a finger fighting it off. Since then I don’t like chickens. So I don’t keep them here.”

“I can’t believe Stinger would allow anyone – let alone a bird – to bully you,” the guard sounds scandalized.

“Once Stinger got a whiff of that – after the finger incident I couldn’t keep our plundering raids on the coop a secret any longer – the rooster was no more. I’ve never eaten chicken soup with as much satisfaction as I did that day. I’d had to suffer through quite a fustigation, though. ‘Bla-bla-bla-animals-can-be-dangerous-bla-bla-bla-what-were-you-thinking-Jupiter?!’ As if I hadn’t known it already! It’s my finger that had been broken! But you know how Stinger gets when he’s upset. That was an ass-whooping to remember.”

“He didn’t… lay a hand on you, did he?”

She nearly drops the rod she’s holding.

“Wow, Caine. Wow. Your mind goes really dark places really fast! Come on, Stinger?.. He only deals verbal blows, but boy, those hurt.”

“Not only verbal blows,” the lycantant mutters.

“What?!” She needs to get a tighter grip on the damned rod, it’s been two close calls already. “You mean he hits you? But that’s…. That’s abuse! It’s unacceptable for the Royal Guard! Or any service, really.”

“That has nothing to do with my service in the Guard, Jupiter, calm down,” Caine soothes, looking pointedly at her whitened knuckles. At least this time ‘Jupiter’ doesn’t sound forced. “He does it strictly on a personal basis, an old friend giving a piece of mind to an old friend, you know? It’s just the way he expresses his, uh, affection when he’s stressed. Like when…” he cuts off abruptly.

“Like when?..” she prompts.
“Never mind that, Jupiter.”

“Like when?..” she insists, suspicious of the lycantant’s sudden evasive secrecy. “Give me an example that would justify such an extreme display of affection.”

“Like when they released me after my attack on Consort Odair,” Caine continues in a subdued voice, shooting a concerned glance her way. “Stinger greeted me with a sound uppercut and called me names I wouldn’t repeat in your company. I hadn’t known he knew that many! Judging by his Profanese, he was relieved out of his mind that I’d lived to see him again.”

“Well, I can’t say that wasn’t justified.” Jupiter has to admit – albeit reluctantly – that Stinger’s reaction there was understandable. “Still, men are weird.”

“We are,” Caine agrees easily. “Though women aren’t that better.” – She hides a tiny smile at the fact that he finally feels comfortable enough to openly counter her arguments with his own. – “They’re very hard to comprehend sometimes.”

“I take umbrage with that!” Jupiter protests enthusiastically, mock-offended for her sex, – it’s a wonder she is able to work up this much enthusiasm, being as apathetic as she’s used to being by now. “Women are very rational and level-headed beings. Yes, we get overly emotional sometimes – which seems bizarre to men – but we compose ourselves much quicker than those pants-wearing testosterone bombshells: if they let loose, it’s ‘everyone, take cover’! And we don’t sock our friends in the jaw when we feel happy for them.”

“I don’t mean just… the latest developments.”

She frowns in confusion. “But he didn’t hurt me beyond that.”

“Indeed you don’t. But sometimes you treat people paradoxically, too.”

“No, Your Majesty, I’m not,” Caine shakes his head, slipping back into the honorific, visibly taken aback by her assumption. “I simply don’t understand how one can love a person who hurts them. It defies any reason.”

“Finn doesn’t hurt me,” she denies automatically, then pauses and rephrases, “He didn’t hurt me back when I loved him. Or rather I loved him while I didn’t know he was hurting me.”

“I don’t mean just… the latest developments.”

He’s right, though, calling it abuse: infidelity is not a proper way to treat one’s partner.

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“I don’t mean just… the latest developments.”

“Think we should drop this,” Caine suggests in a careful, almost gentle tone. “If that’s what you really think, it will be better for you if you keep that persuasion.”

“Oh, no! Now you’ve got me intrigued. Please, do elaborate. Finish what you’ve started.”
“I don’t want to stir up any painful memories,” he tries.

“All my memories are painful at the moment,” she cuts off, demanding peremptorily, “Explain yourself.”

“The night when you first spoke to me…”

“The night when you attacked him?..”

Caine winces. “Yes.” Glances at her apologetically, questioningly.

“Go on.”

“He’d touched your neck. Bitten at it.”

“Yes, I remember you mentioned that at the interrogation. It hadn’t been – hurting, exactly. I’m sure Stinger has since explained.”

She’s so not looking forward to spelling out the intimate peculiarities of her relationship with Finnick to the person she’s known for –

For a quite while, actually.

Huh.

“Commander Apini has explained,” Caine confirms, his voice coming off slightly stifled. She glances at the lycantant: his face is quickly gaining colour, the blood-filled skin standing out against his blond, almost white hair like lingonberry against reindeer lichen. It’s funny, really, how this hulking guy who doesn’t seem to be ruffled by anything (except for queens and lightning; maybe only lightning, now) and sometimes blurts most awkward truths that render her speechless is easily embarrassed by a mere mention of something as trivial as a sexual relationship of a dominant-and-submissive nature. “It doesn’t mean that Royal Consort should have done it,” he says firmly.

She goggles at him.

Is Caine one of those dicks – regardless of their gender – who are convinced that only certain things are allowed between partners and anything beyond straightforward dick-into-vagina sex is forbidden, ‘sinful’ because ‘it’s not the way gods intended it’ or ‘you eat bread with that mouth’? She tries not to jump to conclusions and let her hackles up, but it’s an effort.

“He shouldn’t have touched your neck,” Caine enunciates, side-eyeing the object in question.

“Especially with his teeth. Especially in public.”

Why is he so preoccupied with her neck? What does that particular part of her body have to do with anything? She likes it when Finnick touches it, with teeth or otherwise.

At least, she used to.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

Caine turns to fully face her, scowling. “No one is supposed to bite at your neck,” he states adamantly.

Jupiter blinks at him, surprised at the metal in his tone. Coming from the usually reserved and docile guard, this appears to be more than personal disapproval of her tastes in intimate matters. She senses some bizarre cultural differences coming up.
Does lycantant religion prohibit neck biting?
Do lycantants even have a religion?
“Finnick’s my consort, he was allowed,” she points out, intent on getting to the bottom of this.
“But you’re Queen. He is below you.”
“I’m sorry, still not following,” she shakes her head, utterly perplexed.
Caine tries again, “What if I bit at Commander Apini’s neck in public?”
She’s momentarily dazed by the mental image, but quickly shakes it off in disgust.
Because – Uncle Stinger.
“Yuck, Caine!”
“See what I mean?”
‘… If I bit at Commander Apini’s neck in public…’ Does that mean Caine does it in private?
Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask!..
“Caine, where did that analogy come from?”
Damn it!
Jupiter winces mentally, clutching her rod tighter as she steadies herself for an honest answer. She so doesn’t want to know what Uncle Stinger gets up to in his private life.
It is enough that he knows what she gets up to in hers.
It’s in his line of duty, but still.
Ugh, being a queen…
“Commander Apini is my superior,” Caine elaborates with a perplexed undertone in his voice, sounding like he’s explaining something that ought to be self-evident. “You don’t touch your superior’s neck, it’s just not done! Stinger can touch mine, you can touch both of ours, but I can’t touch either of yours! That would be a despicable breach of subordination that warrants a punishment of a severest kind.”
Jupiter blinks at the lycantant, breathing a discreet sigh of relief. This is about social hierarchy, nothing else.
Thank fuck.
“Considering the lengths Stinger is willing to go to in order to protect you, you’d probably get off with a light tap on your nose,” she grumbles jokingly but quickly sobered up. “Caine, I don’t think it means to humans what it does to your kind. To a human, your biting at Stinger’s neck would imply that you two are in a sexual relationship. Revealing that would be damaging to Apini’s reputation because he is your Commander, hence you might have been coerced into it, and that’s immoral.”
“Stinger would never coerce me into anything!” Caine protests indignantly. “He may not be straight-laced, as you once put it, but he doesn’t do immoral.”
Well, in Jupiter’s opinion, Apini has a dubious grip on morality, to say the least, considering he’d been covering up for her consort’s infidelity for two fucking years. However, he wouldn’t have abused his power to his own advantage, even if he did it to hers – the way he saw it.

Nevertheless, she cannot disagree with the first part of Caine’s statement.

“I know that Apini wouldn’t do that, because I know Stinger and, after all this time, I might say I know you, a little. But most people don’t, and when people don’t know something, they tend to assume the worst.”

“Are you saying my association with Commander might damage his reputation?”

“To a degree, yes. But I know for certain that he would trade his reputation, his career, his very life for his friendship with you.”

“I’d do the same for him.”

That’s why Jupiter doubts that it’s exactly friendship, but she keeps her doubts to herself. Then again, the ties that bind people together aren’t necessarily reinforced with sex. Friendship does exist, as does platonic love; she knows this because she’s felt both. Either way, as long as Caine doesn’t suffer from his superior’s actions, their relationship is no business of Queen’s, therefore Jupiter doesn’t pry.

Instead, she asks what’s got her interest piqued, – as she has recently found out, life without curiosity is incredibly dull, so she welcomes every one of its now rare, sporadic manifestations with open arms.

“Caine, what is it about the neck? Why are you not supposed to touch that particular body part in public?”

“It’s your most vulnerable spot, along with the stomach. The brain is protected by the skull, the heart and lungs – by the ribcage, but one injury to the neck might kill you. The same can be said about stomach, but death from abdominal wounds takes much longer, so there are more chances for the injured to be saved.”

Personally, Jupiter thinks of a different part of hers as the most vulnerable one, but she can see the lycantant’s logic.

Being a guy, he doesn’t have that part, after all.

“A loose hold on the neck with jaws is a common threat among animals, used to subdue those that challenge you,” Caine continues. “Humans do the same, only with their hands instead of jaws. If the threat goes unheeded, violence ensues. That’s why a mere idea that one of your subordinates was hurting your throat, both challenging your supremacy and threatening your well-being, is absolutely unacceptable,” he concludes.

“Caine, once again, Odair wasn’t hurting me,” she repeats patiently. “Even if he touched my neck, even if he caused me pain, he didn’t hurt me. There’s a difference. And it wasn’t a public display of dominance like the one you’ve described, since it took place the privacy of my own alcazar with only few bodyguards to witness it.”

The stubborn expression on Caine’s face tells her he is not convinced.

“Humans have different behavioral norms, I realize that, so maybe my example wasn’t the best one,” he admits. “But he hurt you afterwards, too. I know what I heard. He nearly strangled you!”
Jupiter feels an urge to squirm, growing increasingly ill at ease with the guard’s warped perception of her harmless activities. “Again, that wasn’t hurting, that was – recreation.”

“A man should never hurt a woman, especially for recreation,” Caine spits the last word out, getting alarmingly agitated. Grimaces, shakes his head. “No, that didn’t sound right. A strong one should never hurt the weak, regardless of their gender. We are supposed to protect them,” he states with grim conviction. “What monster does a person have to be to inflict pain on someone who is physically frailer and can’t retaliate in kind?”

Once again, Caine managed to render Jupiter mute: she feels momentarily lost in the face of such impassioned, vehement certitude.

Besides, it’s not like she disagrees with what he’s saying.

It’s just that they are talking about two vastly different things. However, for Caine, they seem to be one and the same. What had made him think of what Finnick did as violence? That those actions were meant to damage, not to boost? That pain could never be enjoyed? What ghosts he’s seeing when he’s staring into the distance with those blank, vacant eyes?

What exactly had the senator he attacked been doing to his splices to provoke Caine’s murderous outburst?

… Just like Finnick provoked another one?

Ghosts of one’s past often interfere with a person’s present.

Logical reasoning is useless when you deal with ghosts.

She places her hand on the lycantant’s upper arm – a gesture somewhat familiar by now. “Caine, he wasn’t hurting me,” she says with the serene composure of sincerity. “You know I’m telling you the truth, with you being my favourite lie detector on two legs. Finn may be many things, but he’s not cruel.”

She may hate Odair right now, but fair’s fair.

Caine’s taut posture relaxes somewhat under her palm. “I know that you believe what you are saying,” he sighs. “That is your truth. Let me keep mine to myself.”

His obstinacy makes her worried.

“Did he do anything to you?”

Caine lifts an eyebrow in a silent ‘Really?!’

“I mean besides… harassment.” It takes a considerable effort to squeeze the word out. But she’d been ignoring the unacceptable for so long, she must at least have the courage to suffer through the discomfort of calling it what it was.

“No. He did nothing beyond what you saw. In fact, he never paid me much attention when you were not around.” He glances at her uncertainly, pursing his lips, as if unsure if he should proceed with the next bit. Finally, he seems to make up his mind. “I don’t think he was doing it to me, I think he was doing it to you.”

Knowing what she knows – the purpose behind Finnick’s stalking – Caine’s conclusion doesn’t surprise her one bit. What does surprise her, however, is how astute his conjecture is. How intelligent
must he be to have deduced it without knowing Finnick’s real motivation, on the basis of his observations alone?

Certainly more intelligent than she was, because she had to have Finnick spell it out for her.

“High Consort was intentionally causing you distress, time after time after time,” the guard goes on. “I wished I could do something about that, but both Your Majesty and Commander Apini had warned me not to. Why did you let him treat you like that?”

“The question is, why did I let him treat you like that? I’m sorry, Caine.”

“You have nothing to feel sorry for. You weren’t the one who was doing it.”

“I was the one who looked the other way.”

“No, you didn’t. You got upset each time he as much as glanced in my direction. I didn’t know what to do with myself, where to disappear so you wouldn’t get upset again.”

She squints at Caine in contemplation. Although already pardoned, but with his future suspended in the air, harassed and humiliated, he still thought he was the protector out of the two of them. What would it take for him to seek protection himself?

“I thought you would hate me again,” he proceeds, “that you would be… Well, not jealous – no Entitled would ever be jealous of a splice – but… insulted?.. Affronted that your consort was paying attention to someone else in your presence.”

“Caine, if something of mine strayed to you – without any provocation on your part – why would I hate you? I’d discipline what’s mine,” she tells him absently, deep in thought.

“But you didn’t, did you?”

There is no judgment, no reproach in his question, only a sort of resigned curiosity – the curiosity that knows the answer already and simply seeks to confirm its knowledge. It makes Jupiter focus, makes her want him to understand.

“Sometimes,” she starts slowly, with emphatic deliberation, “the most potent manifestation of power is not discipline or punishment, sometimes it’s letting it slide.”

He turns to her, his face intent. “Like when you pardoned me?”

“Like when I pardoned you.”

The intense way Caine’s looking at her is getting uncomfortable, so she breaks the silence that stretches just a bit too long.

“Besides, Odair tends to stray quite often – although never before he went quite as far as with Annie – and usually his actions serve a purpose.”

Finnick’s tactics of foisted bonding worked out even better than he had intended: not only it made Jupiter trust Caine that much sooner, but also triggered the lycantant’s protective instincts more efficiently than the manipulator himself could have predicted.

When all was said and done, the end justified the means.

Did it, though?
“What purpose could that possibly have served, except for angering you?” Caine puzzles.

“He did it in order to force me to trust you. To quicken the process up.”

“To force you – to trust me? To force you?.. He shouldn’t have been forcing anything on you. No one should be forcing anything on you!”

“You’ve forced me to live.”

She knows this is a low blow, but she’s still a bit bitter about him blackmailing the decision out of her with his own life. Caine meant well – always means well – but her life feels so empty and difficult to endure, she isn’t happy about keeping it.

The lycantant is silent for a long while. “Does it mean I’m like him?” he finally inquires, subdued.

“No, it doesn’t. It just means that before judging others we should take a good look at ourselves.”

“Do you resent me – for what I’ve done?”

“A little,” she admits. “But I’m sure I will be grateful to you for it later. Very grateful. Much later.”

“I wish the ‘later’ would come sooner. Not for you to be grateful, but for you to be all right.”

“One day, I might be.”

He looks down at her hand that she’s long since dropped from his shoulder, then up at her face, then down again, and finally proceeds to carefully wrap his fingers over hers, squeezing them slightly.

“One day, you will be.”

She absently runs a thumb ever his knuckles, wordlessly accepting his reassurance, and his grip tightens.

She believes him.

She believes him quite a lot these days.

Once Jupiter realized that she was prepared to fucking die just to avoid going back to the Augean stables she had left behind, she’s stopped pushing herself towards resuming her duties. Forcing yourself to do anything when everything in you protests against doing it is nothing but rape committed against your own self.

After all, if her kingdom waited for its Queen’s return for twenty-one years, it could wait for a few weeks more. Sure, it’s not wise to leave it so soon after her ascension – not even one full lifetime passed since then – but it’s probably better than leaving it without the monarch altogether.

Definitely better than leaving it to be inherited by Balem.

She has no intention of handing her throne to him on a silver platter.

She’ll stay alive if only out of spite.

Her earlier comparison of her kingdom to a horse-pulled carriage was a wrong one: the inertia of such a huge formation is way too great for it to be derailed in a blink of an eye. The same thing that
drives the queen up the wall whenever she tries to introduce reforms is working to her advantage now. Her realm is more like an orchard that is left to grow wild: without a gardener’s watchful eye and timely intervention, it gets overgrown with weeds, but it’s a slow, gradual process. The first week you won’t even notice it, except for the fact that the usually cut grass now reaches your ankles. A week later it will reach your knees and weeds start sprouting on the untended mulch rings and the paths that no one walks on anymore. It’ll take a month for the grass to reach your waist, completely engulfing any unpaved surfaces. And years will pass before changes start affecting the fruit trees, and even then, un-pruned and overridden with pests and diseases, the trees will still grow, bloom and bear fruit.

She’ll deal with the weeds and pests when she comes back.

She will come back when she is ready.

“Can I help you with anything, Jupiter?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been staring at me for the last five minutes with an intimidatingly calculating expression. So, what can I do for you?”

“I haven’t been staring, I’ve been sagaciously incubating an idea,” she explains defensively. “And now it’s fully hatched. That super sniffer of yours and I are going for a trip to a lake nearby.”

“May I join you, too?”

“Well, I thought it would be just us two, you know, to keep it nice and private, but if you insist on being the third wheel, I guess you can tag along as well.”

“If I’m allowed to ask, what are you and my nose going to do there?”

“I’m going to exploit the hell out of it, and it’s going to like it.”

“Crikey,” the lycantant quirks an eyebrow at her. “Something tells me I’ll have to be present for that, so you two wouldn’t get too carried away,” the nose owner declares, fishing out his still much-hated boonie hat and decisively putting it on.

“A girl can’t seclude herself with a guy’s pecker without immediately getting a chaperone!” Jupiter grumbles in mock indignation as she disappears into the closet to get a large basket and two trowels.

“Now I want to join you two even more!” Caine exclaims, sounding intrigued. “So, what are we doing?”

“I’m taking you for a hunt. The silent hunt.”

“A hunt?!”

There’s that rapt, bordering on manic fervour again: stance wire-taut, eyes transfixed, voice low and breathy. Caine reacts to a prospect of hunting like other guys react to an upcoming orgasm. Poor thing, she should let him catch a couple of hares for dinner.

On the other hand – no, she shouldn’t, she’ll have to skin the poor bastards; it’s enough that she has to gut fish and chop crabs.
“We’re going to hunt down mushrooms,” she elaborates, handing the eager lycantant a trowel.

Caine’s exhilarated expression instantaneously morphs into a confused one as he considers the garden tool in his hands, then quickly turns into a worried scowl. “Wild mushrooms can be extremely poisonous,” he points out, his voice cautious and subdued; pauses, pursing his lips, grips the trowel tighter. “Some of them are plain lethal,” he adds meaningfully.

Is that –

No, that can’t be!

– Is that suspicion she hears?

Jupiter’s surprised to find out just how much Caine’s distrust hurts.

“Caine, if I was still keen on killing myself, I would choose some other way to go than death by mushroom poisoning,” she snaps frostily. “It’s a very long, excruciatingly torturous process I would never wish on anyone, let alone myself.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I didn’t mean to imply…”

“You did. Either you doubted my common sense or my knowledge; both of those cases were insulting.”

The lycantant heaves a huge sigh. “I’m sorry. The thing is, even back at the Deadlands I never touched wild mushrooms, no matter how hungry I was. One wrong one – and you might die an agonizing death.”

Well, that kind of concern is understandable.

“Caine, there are no poisonous mushrooms here,” she explains in a much softer tone. “There are some inedible toadstools,” – a quick glance at his hat goes a long way in improving her dampened mood – “but they’re inedible only because they taste bitter. Remember where we are – nothing deadly grows on Havet, unless it’s been intentionally planted by yours truly; the keepers make sure of that. And if you don’t trust my expertise, you can simply not eat the mushrooms that we’ll pick.”

“Can you really picture me not eating something that’s remotely edible? Me?!” Caine gasps in pretend umbrage.

She has to smile at his emoting – a few days ago she was convinced he was incapable of it. “Good for you! I like guys who aren’t picky eaters. And those who can eat a horse.”

The pointy ears pinken slightly. “This is the first time I’ve been praised for that. Stinger usually complains that I eat him out of house and home whenever I drop by.”

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“Don’t mind the old badger. I’d bet he secretly enjoys feeding you,” she remarks, gesturing with her head at Caine to follow her. “He used to lament that I was skin and bone – his words, not mine – and sneak me sweets back when I was a kid.”

“Honey-based?”

“You bet!”

Caine smiles fondly. “He hides it well, but Commander Apini secretly is one big softie,” he vouchsafes, then shoots Jupiter a worried sidelong glance, following up with, “Don’t tell him I said
that, though, or he’ll skin me alive.”

“That’s one real softie,” she snorts.

They set out at a slow speed, so that wind wouldn’t hinder their conversation while flying. It’s probably the most beautiful thing about Havet – you never need to hurry: wherever you are at any given moment in time, you enjoy being there. That is the magic of a place you love.

“No, he is,” Caine insists, face luminous with the glow only deep, genuine affection can spark up. “He’s the best. They don’t make ’em like that anymore.”

Normally, Jupiter would share the sentiment, but as much as she loves Uncle Stinger, Commander Apini currently is not one of her favourite people. No need to upset Caine with her resentment, though: the lycantant looks so happy that she contemplates him not without selfish longing, wishing she could soak up the joy radiating off him to restore her own dried-up reserves.

“I’m sure other guys in the Guard aren’t much worse,” she replies reticently.

In an instant, Caine’s smile gets snuffed out like a candle.

Jupiter immediately misses its warmth. What is it she’s said?..

“The folk ’round here aren’t exactly friend material,” the guard shrugs noncommittally.

“Why not?” she frowns. “Don’t you like the guys you’re serving with?”

Jupiter’s known most of them her whole life and they all seem nice enough, – with ever-smiling Chris being an outright sweetheart. It takes a considerable effort to keep a social distance from him that is appropriate for the sovereign – she would’ve loved to have him as her personal friend.

However, from the very beginning Apini has been insisting that Queen shouldn’t chum up with the guards: they are expendable material. The truth behind his reasoning was emphasized by the two recent deaths and the way the tragedy affected her. In fact, as the latest events attest, Queen shouldn’t get attached to anyone: the more you care, the more the world finds ways to hurt you for it.

“It’s not that I don’t like them,” Caine responds. “It’s just… When you’re the only splice in an all-human squad, well…”

“Oh, come on! My guards aren’t chauvinistic dicks!” The queen cannot not stand up for her men. “Odar’s a siren, and they like him just fine.”

“I’m not saying they’re chauvinistic di… people,” Caine disclaims. “They aren’t hostile or anything; outwardly they’re friendly and cooperative, but I know when people get tense or cautious around me – any lycantant can sense that. For reasons of their own they prefer to keep their distance, and that’s all right,” he shrugs nonchalantly, but there’s a certain strain behind the apparent unconcern of his.

One doesn’t have to be a lycantant to sense the tension in the person they’re talking with.

Whatever makes Caine’s demeanour that stilted, it needs to be fixed.

The quicker, the better.

“What about Chris? He’s friends with everyone,” Jupiter offers the most obvious solution.

“That would make me one exception, then.”
If even Chris hasn’t befriended Caine in all the time the latter’s been in the Internal Security, it means there’s something truly wrong with the situation.

“There are sargons on the team, too,” she points out gently.

“They mostly keep to themselves. They differ from humans even more than splices do; some lines simply cannot be erased.”

Personally, Jupiter thinks that the team’s ostracism of Caine – which may not be necessarily intentional or even conscious: those are pretty decent guys – has more to do with Stinger’s blatant favouritism towards him than with interspecies differences. People who feel discriminated would inevitably harbour at least some resentment towards the person they think they’re being discriminated in favour of, and Caine, being what he is, is much more sensitive to things like that than any human would be. Pointing that out, however, would make no practical sense; it might only damage the only friendship the lycantant has.

How must it feel to have no one in this world except for one single friend?

Lonely.

Come to think of it, maybe the intensity of that friendship shouldn’t be a surprise at all.

Jupiter contemplates the guard in silent empathy. She can relate to that dejected feeling of being forever segregated from people around her more than he would ever know. Queen has so few true equals and none of them live in her kingdom: each has a kingdom of their own. That’s probably the reason why royals are always civil to each other, even genuinely cordial at times. Even when they go at each other’s throats, they do so in a dignified and respectful manner, never burning the bridges behind them, never cutting off the way to a possible reconciliation in future: they live too long for life-long grudges.

Of course, there are always the likes of Balem, unbalanced and mercurial, but there’s a black sheep in every flock.

“At least you have Stinger,” she offers as a consolation.

“Yes,” Caine breaks into a surprisingly bright smile: it’s so incandescent it warms something deep inside Jupiter’s chest. “Like good old times.”

“Do you miss the good old times?” – Does everyone miss their past like she misses hers? – “Miss being in action? This job must seem pretty boring in comparison.”

“I like this kind of boring,” the guard states resolutely. “I don’t think anyone who has been in action – really been in action – ever misses that. I don’t mind putting my life in danger when duty demands it, but I don’t enjoy it. Only those who don’t have enough real risk in their lives can be adrenaline junkies. It’s in human nature – in everyone’s nature – to long for a peaceful, secure life. That’s why the military are out there: to insulate civilians from the atrocities of violence whenever those might occur, so that ordinary people would be mostly ignorant of them.”

Caine goes silent for a while; Jupiter does not feel like breaking the lull in the conversation – there’s nothing she can say to that. She is one of the civilians whom people like Caine shield from the dehumanizing realities of violence, and those sheltered would never truly understand those who have experienced them firsthand.

“I miss the guys, though,” Caine sighs, eventually resuming the conversation. “The guys I used to serve with.”
“Have you lost touch with them? I mean, except for Stinger.”

“It’s hard not to when you get sent to the Deadlands. No outward communication there.”

“Were they all lycantants?”

“No, we were a motley crew.” Another fond smile. “Mostly splices and few humans who didn’t mind serving under a splice commander. Then Stinger had to go and save His Majesty’s – Your Majesty’s Most August Husband-Father’s – life and we didn’t see him since. Things weren’t the same after he’d left.”

Jupiter heard the stories about Uncle Stinger’s heroics from Dad many times, but he never divulged much about that particular incident, one that propelled a simple officer from the Legion to the position of Head of the Royal Guard – an elevation of unheard-of proportions. Now she understands why: she hates recollecting assassination attempts on herself: it’s the natural human urge to shy away from one’s own mortality.

Or maybe Dad was sheltering her from the harsher realities of life like he did throughout her childhood.

Like Stinger endeavours to do till this day.

By keeping secrets from her.

She both loves and hates the old bastard for this.

As soon as they reach the lake that is supposed to be their destination, she announces, “We’re here, Caine,” and lands onto the sandy shore. The lake is vast: from where they’re standing, they can barely discern the opposite bank through the air quivering with heat and water vapours. It has a perfectly round shape that appears unnatural, yet the man had no hand in the creation of this body of water, which makes it all the more beautiful.

The lake is surrounded by a wide strip of beach that is mostly bare sand with sparse sporadic tufts of grass to liven it up. However, for two weeks every spring myriads of tiny white colchicums emerge from under the ground, covering the shore with a thick blooming carpet. But the two weeks go by and the flowers disappear without a trace to lie dormant inside their bulbs until the next spring.

The flower bulbs are not the only treasure hidden within the lakeshore depths. If you look closely, you’ll notice that the otherwise smooth surface of the beach is here and there studded with small bumps that are so low they’re barely visible. If the sand on the top of a bump is cracked, it’s a dead giveaway that you’ll find inside what you are looking for.

Jupiter kneels by one of the protrusions – Caine immediately squats down, too – to dig the sand away, working with her bare hands: she’s too eager to bother with a trowel. When she is done, the hidden treasure is revealed: a large milky-white meadow mushroom. She carefully screws it out of the ground, trying to not let sand get in between the gills on the underside of the cap – it will be hell to wash it out if it does. The gills have an amazing ash-pink colour that signifies that the mushroom is young enough to eat. The older the mushroom gets, the darker the gills grow, until they turn completely black. At that stage, it’s better not to harvest it, but break into pieces and throw them around, helping the fungus to seed the larger area with its spores that cover the surface of the gills.

She brings her loot up to her nose and takes a long, delighted sniff. The aroma of a wild meadow mushroom is rich and flavoursome – all those cultivated champignons are nothing like their wild counterparts in either smell or taste, they are like pieces of styrofoam in comparison. The fragrance
makes Jupiter’s mouth water; however, it is delicious in itself – inhaling it feels like having an
olfactory orgasm.

“Okay, I’m getting envious here,” Caine comments from behind her shoulder and she starts a little –
for a moment, she’s completely forgotten she’s not alone, too engrossed in the pleasure of her find.

“Don’t tell me you can’t smell it from where you are,” she grumbles, yet turns to him and stretches
her arm out, offering the mushroom to the lycantant so he could enjoy it, too.

“Sure I can, but it smells much better close up,” he comments, cupping the delicacy in both hands to
sniff at it.

“See? I told you your nose would enjoy it.”

“I get the enjoyment part, but where’s the exploitation? I’ve been promised exploitation. Give me
some exploitation!”

“I guess you’ve figured by now that I’m going to use you as a truffle hog. No offense.”

“None taken. It’s nice to use my nose for something other than tracking people in order to do most
unpleasant things to them.”

“Be my guest!” Jupiter spreads her arm out in a flowery inviting gesture.

“Shall I just point them out for you to pick, or?..”

“Caine, picking the mushrooms that you find is half the pleasure; I won’t rob you of it. You have
your own trowel, don’t you?”

His answering smile is so infectious it makes her lips pull up in response.

“Thank you, Jupiter.”

“Have fun, buddy.”

For the first couple of dozen mushrooms silence reigns unbroken: they’re both too busy with their
digging.

Eventually, Jupiter finds a huge mushroom that still looks perfect on the outside, yet its flesh yields a
bit too much under her fingers. She breaks the cap away from the stripe to find out it’s infested with
tiny worm-like larvae.

Huh, that’s weird. The meadow mushrooms that grow at this particular spot are almost never grubby.

“Caine, would you mind coming here, please?”

“Jupiter?”

“Sorry for interrupting your hunt. Just wanted to warn you that you might find this unappetizing
stuffing in your shrooms,” she shows the insect-eaten cap to the lycantant. “You’d better take a look
inside to see if it’s infested or not. No need to carry the extra load back home, if I’m going to throw
the maggoty ones away anyway.”

“Oh, it’s all right, I can smell if they’re infested or not. I pick up only clean ones.”

“You what?!”
“I pick up only clean ones?..”
“No, before that.”
“I can smell if the mushrooms are infested or not?..”
“Is your sense of smell that good?!?”

He gives a tiny shrug, his ears tingling pink again. “Apparently. It’s not that hard to pick the maggots’ scent. I mean, they are right there, inside the mushroom. Picking scents through water is much more complicated.”

She contemplates the mushroom that looked so perfect yet turned out worm-filled in disgust. An obvious analogy springs to her mind. She hates to be a party pooper, but she has to ask.

“Caine, with that super nose of yours, you knew immediately about Annie, didn’t you? You must have smelled another woman on Odair long before I learnt about her existence.”

The lycantant considers her cautiously before nodding. “Once High Consort came close enough to me that night, I knew. There could be no mistake about the scent: it was multi-layered and intimate enough to mean only one thing.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I know you couldn’t tell me on the spot without reporting to Apini first – subordination and all that shit, – but later, at the interrogation… It was an emergency. You were facing a certain execution and you didn’t tell me! There’s a vast distinction between a guard who tries to murder Royal Consort for no apparent reason and one who attacks a man who has committed treason, even if only a formal one. It could have meant a difference between life and death for you!”

Caine finds his trowel absolutely riveting all of the sudden, as he seems to be unable to look away from the thing.

“I didn’t want to hurt you any more than I already had.” His voice is quiet and solemn. “You were in grief. I couldn’t… I just couldn’t.”

Great, more protective concealment bullshit! Caine has officially joined the club.

Whip out your streamers and confetti.

Jupiter opens her mouth to vent her annoyance, but promptly shuts it with an audible click of her teeth.

The guy refused to grasp at his last chance to save himself so she wouldn’t get hurt any further – not physically, either, merely emotionally.

She realizes with a start that back in the interrogation room, having been mutilated, bound and doomed to die, when he was nothing but a talking corpse to her, he still felt the urge to protect her.

She doesn’t know how to feel about that.

‘A strong one should never hurt the weak, regardless of their gender. We are supposed to protect them.’

Is she really that weak?

She never thought herself to be too fragile, but ‘recent developments’, as Caine has tactfully put it,
revealed to her a new side of her own nature, the side she hadn’t known existed. Seems like she is as weak as he perceives her.

She hates the thought.

“When I finally got a chance to talk to Commander, I reported it to him,” the lycantant goes on. “I had to describe every little detail concerning the incident,” he explains, apologetic. “And that was it.”

“I know it was Stinger’s shot to call, and boy, did he call it!” she laments bitterly.

“I’m sure he meant well, you shouldn’t blame him for…”

“Don’t try to justify your Commander’s deceit,” she interrupts firmly, fixing Caine with a glare. “In my opinion, it was no less treasonous than Odair’s actions. More so, maybe.”

“Commander Apini would never commit treason!” the lycantant retorts heatedly, leaning into her personal space enough to make her recoil in surprise at his sudden movement. There’s that vehemence again – bordering on fanaticism – the one that she once witnessed in the interrogation room; this time, though, it’s not intimidating, it’s painful to watch.

Noticing her flinch, Caine instantly draws back and mutters an apology.

She waves it off, looking at his bowed head in a mixture of pity and horrified realization.

When Head of the Royal Guard conceals vital information from Sovereign, it is treason. Caine’s adamant refusal to see Apini’s transgression for what it was is a disconcerting example of how blind faith can be. And how utterly ridiculous her own must have looked from the outside.

However, she can’t find it herself to break the lycantant’s belief in his only friend.

“It was a breach of trust,” she comments drily, softening the wording as much as she can without actually lying. – A heartbreaking breach of trust. – “And I don’t take to such things lightly.”

As much as she loves Stinger, this is something she’ll have a hard time forgiving him for.

“He only wanted to protect you!”

“Caine, drop it,” she commands curtly and the guard subsides with an unhappy sigh.

The silence stretches between them, tense and uneasy with guilt, – the guilt that is probably mutual, albeit of different timeline: hers is recent – for subduing him that rudely, – while his goes back to the night they first met, when he, just like his Commander, aimed to protect her and only managed to make things worse.

The tension bothers Jupiter, so she breaks it first – with the question that is likely to bring on even more unease.

“Why did you attack Odair, in truth? Did you really think he was about to kill me?”

For a beat, Caine hesitates before answering, glancing at her in what appears to be indecision. Then he visibly rallies, and responds somberly, “High Consort was disloyal. He was being insolent and antagonizing towards you.” The frown on the lycantant’s face grows deeper. “He’d been hurting you unbeknown to you, then he was hurting you in front of my very eyes. At least, that’s what I thought he was doing back then.” – Judging by Caine’s tone, that’s what he still keeps thinking now, despite all her efforts earlier to convince him otherwise. – “And later… He kept hurting you where I could
hear it, but couldn’t actually see what’s happening, which was the worst. When you stopped breathing for a while, and there was this awful sound of you trying to swallow against the chokehold… And then a smell of blood…” Caine pauses, gulps, and finally finishes off with a tiny shrug, “I didn’t do it on purpose, I just… lost it.”

Jupiter considers the lycantant for a while.

The worst thing is, she sees herself reacting the same way in a similar situation, if she witnessed, say, Kiza getting hurt.

Sometimes empathy is your greatest enemy.

“I really hope it was a temporary obfuscation of consciousness like you say it was,” she remarks darkly, “that you didn’t decide to take justice into your own hands, like you had done with the senator.”

“Lycantants weren’t created for justice, we were created for defense,” Caine points out forcefully. “High Consort was disloyal,” he repeats his words from earlier, as if unable to believe them. “Royal Consort’s life in itself is a reward. Disloyalty shouldn’t be rewarded. It is unfair. But even though those thoughts were running through my head that night, it wasn’t what triggered me, like it would trigger justice system splices. I reacted to his hurting you, and nothing else.”

Jupiter sighs.

It’s not that Finnick can’t be loyal, but it ought to be his choice, he shouldn’t feel pressured into it. He’s not a person to appreciate a cage, however gilded it might be – it’s one of the things she loved him for in the first place. She never should have cemented their relationship by giving Odair the Consort status – the moment she did that, he heard the key tuning in the door of his prison cell, locking him in. She had never wanted to officially tie him to herself in the first place, she’d only wished to protect him from the public scorn, and in the end, it achieved nothing.

In fact, it might have been what eventually broke them apart.

“Royal Consort’s life is far from being a reward,” the queen smiles melancholically at the naïve outlook that Caine – as well as many others – have on Odair’s position. “It’s not as sweet and easy as it appears to a beholder. The generally believed misconception that ‘you fuck Queen and get whatever the fuck you want for that’ – I heard those exact words on the Space one night, and there were tons of even more deluded opinions where that one came from – is not the reality of it. In its essence, it’s a lifelong slavery, when your life, your heart, your body, your days, your nights, your every hour – even your death – belongs to Sovereign. A lifetime of belonging is not for everyone.”

Listening to her, Caine gets a strange expression on his face – a little slack and glassy-eyed. She would interpret that as yearning, if that explanation was making any sense. It must be aversion. It should be aversion.

Lycantants are weird.

Caine blinks and frowns in concentration. “But that can be said about any splice in your possession.”

“You get days off. Vacations. Save the current situation, which is a force majeure circumstance, I don’t require your attendance beyond working hours. Or lay claim to your body.”

There’s that delightful hue of lingonberry again. If he keeps flushing like that at a slightest provocation, she might take to embarrassing him on purpose, just to see the blush bloom on his skin. It’s fun to look at.
“My body still belongs to you.”

Jupiter’s momentarily stunned. The air she’s inhaled seems to be unable to find a way out, stuck in her lungs. She feels a hot wave rising up her neck and cheeks – now Caine’s blush has a company and a rival – as she frantically tries to come up with an appropriate reaction. How do you react to that?! What did he even mean by it? From a legal standpoint, it’s merely a factual statement. From a personal perspective, however –

And then she notices the corners of his mouth twitching.

“You!” she exhales in accusation — and utter awe — as she hurls the mushroom she’s still holding at him. Serves him right that there are maggots there. “You give as good as you get, don’t you?”

Caine’s face breaks into a full-blown grin. It is as blinding as it’s impish.

A twitch of an eyebrow. “I try my best.”

Laughter erupts out of her lungs like champagne spurts out of the bottle once the cork has been popped. It gushes out freely, joyful and effervescent. This is the first time she’s laughed – really laughed, with real mirth and real good humour – since Gríma’s audience with her.

“Whenever I start thinking I know what to expect from you, you find a way to surprise me,” she says when she can speak again.

“Is that bad?” Caine asks, crumbling her maggoty missile – he caught the mushroom with a frustrating ease, the bastard; didn’t even have the decency to let it hit him – between his fingers to toss the pieces around, then slips the one he brought with him – a good one – into the basket.

“No, that’s – interesting,” Jupiter comments, glancing at their take. The basket is almost full; guess it’s enough for today. “But you’re a menace!” she accuses, plopping herself down next to their haul, feeling completely drained all of the sudden.

“No,” her companion gasps in feigned horror, lowering himself onto the ground by the opposite side of the basket with much more grace than she did. “I can’t possibly steal that title from Kiza.”

“Yeah, you’re right. If anyone’s a menace ‘round here, it’s Kiza. Wait, you know Kiza well enough to know that?!”

“Anyone who knows of Kiza, knows her well enough to know that. Besides, her dad won’t stop complaining.”

“Does he talk your ear off about her escapades, too?” Jupiter wonders.

“I thought it’s only my ears that suffered,” Caine remarks, voice filled with deep compassion.

“Hah! At least he doesn’t try to bully you into influencing her.” The older Apini is under the misapprehension that since Jupiter is Queen, her opinion weighs with the younger Apini. As if!

“He does worse things to me, Jupiter,” Caine divulges with a mock-aggrieved grimace, shaking his head. “Much, much worse.”

She lifts an intrigued eyebrow at him.

“When Stinger is, um, inebriated, – only when he’s not on duty and to a reasonable degree, of course…” Caine elaborates, glancing cautiously at Jupiter. She rolls her eyes at him and mouths, ‘Of
course!’ He bites back a smile and continues, ‘…He starts talking about how Kiza is a very nice girl, and how she keeps meeting ass… Err, I mean, disagreeable people, and how she deserves someone better…” Caine trails off, the horror from the conversation echoing in his voice.

Jupiter snorts, ‘He plays matchmaker?’

Well, that casts a new light on the relationship Stinger might have with Caine. A guy won’t try to marry off his boyfriend to his daughter. Then again, if Stinger thinks it will make Kiza happy…

Stinger will sacrifice anything for Kiza.

‘He tries to.’ The sour expression on Caine’s face when he nods makes her want to laugh at him and give him a consoling pat on the back at the same time. ‘Not that I’m against Kiza! She is a nice girl, from what I’ve seen of her. When we meet at her old man’s place, we get along pretty well, but…” he trails off.

“At least he tries to get you together with someone, not to break you apart with an already existing partner! I’m surprised he isn’t telling you what a nice girl I am! Ever since I met Finnick, he’s been trying to drive a wedge between us!” she starts complaining indignantly, abruptly claming her mouth shut.

Stinger has been trying to break up her relationship with Finnick. She used to think he was doing it out of prejudice against sirens in general – with them being born man-eaters, both figuratively and literally – and sheer obstinacy, but now…

As it’s turned out, for the last two years Stinger knew something Jupiter didn’t. She recalls their argument after Odair harassed Caine in full view of the latter’s Commander. ‘I know Finnick probably better than you know him, or at least longer,’ Apini told her. ‘People often do not conform to our expectations of them, even the people we think we know.’

Maybe Stinger knew something she didn’t all along – something she’s still unaware of?

“No matter how shit… intoxicated he is, Stinger would never dare to hint at a match with Your Majesty,” Caine protests, defending his friend – as always, no surprises there.

“If he ever does, you have my permission to punch him square in the face for lèse-majesté. That way, he at least won’t pester you with two brides at once,” she responds distractedly, wondering what else, if anything, Stinger might be hiding.

She’s startled out of her rumination when Caine leans over the basket separating them and – slowly, deliberately – rubs his forehead over her shoulder. It looks exactly like he’s wiping his brow on her shirt, except there’s no sweat on his skin.

That, and no one would ever dare to pull such a stunt on Queen.

By now she would be used to being surprised speechless by Caine, if one could possibly become accustomed to being surprised.

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That, and no one would ever dare to pull such a stunt on Queen.
“For offering protection from Commander. Although his matchmaking is not that bad.”

Was that what she was doing, when she gave Caine permission to sock Apini?

Huh.

“Am I supposed to rub myself all over you to say you’re welcome?” she inquires, her tone thick with sarcasm.

Caine chuckles, shaking his head. “That would be most unorthodox, Your Majesty. But then again, you’re Queen, you can establish your own customs.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “I try that shit in public and we’ll have at least two corpses on our hands: of your Commander and of my Mistress of Ceremonies. Both will drop dead out of sheer shock.”

“Is there such a thing as establishing a new custom discreetly? A mass manslaughter should be avoided at all costs, especially if it involves Commander,” the lycantant comments teasingly.

“Careful, Caine! I might think you are encouraging me to touch you!” she chaffs back.

“No, Your Majesty, of course not,” the guard replies immediately, suddenly all wooden again, and Jupiter is left with the unsettling feeling that she’s just missed something important.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Queen is obtuse when it comes to certain matters; she’s not a fan fic writer who sees blooming romances left and right. Don’t tell me that the droid girl from Kalique’s retinue and rosy-cheeked advocate Bob aren’t into each other. Never mind that they never share any screen time together, they’re totally in love!

Caine’s ‘crikey’ is a tribute to Steve Irvin, a great animal lover, a great human being.

And now that Caine mentioned them, I can’t stop wondering what the hell justice system splices are. I mean, who is spliced with whom for the purpose of providing justice?

Don’t try eating wild mushrooms unless you know what you’re doing – Caine’s right, they can be lethal. On top of that, the deadliest ones can be easily mistaken for common meadow mushrooms even by experienced gatherers.

The names of this arc of six chapters, as well as the three chapters devoted to Jupiter’s childhood and the story in general were inspired by No Fear of Heights song by Katie Melua.
No Fear of Heights: Part Six

Chapter Notes

The soundtrack for the first half of this chapter - again, it's inessential but it would help to get the mood better - is Whatever It Takes by Imagine Dragons.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It happens when Jupiter and Caine set out for another of their foraging-turned-hunting trips – their intended goal is whelks this time, but the mollusks are saved from decimation by an unexpected twist of fate – fortunately for them and unfortunately for Jupiter.

While Jupiter flies her anti-grav boots just above the ground, everything is fine. But once they encounter a patch of overgrown vegetation that is so spiky and tangled it’s impenetrable and she tries going above the treetops, her vision swims, her head starts spinning and her knees wobble; she almost impales herself on the thorns of the nearest honey locust tree as she loses control over her boots. At the last moment, she manages to catch herself, closely escaping a nosedive into the thicket of branches bristling with menacing-looking thorns, as long as a hand and branched into multiple needle-sharp points.

Hello, acrophobia.

Instantly, Caine is there to steady her, but with a shake of her head she waives his hovering hands off, landing heavily on the ground.

“What’s happened?” the guard inquires, his face etched with worry.

“Vertigo.”

It’s been a while since the last time Jupiter experienced the fear of heights.

As a kid, she didn’t even realize one could actually be afraid of looking down from high up. On the contrary, she thought it was extremely fun: the little people on the ground looked so cute – like lilliputs straight out of a fairytale, her home resembled the dollhouse she had in her playroom, the trees, too, seemed like something out of a toy store – or maybe a bonsai garden. She nearly drove poor Uncle Stinger insane when he first started teaching her to fly the anti-grav boots. She tried to go higher and higher, above the clouds, where the strong winds were blowing and the air was perceptibly cooler than on the ground level. However, Uncle Stinger allowed that only when he was there to watch over her: no amount of persuading was able to sway him, and doing something under adult supervision is not half as fun.

The only thing that saved Stinger from being overly pressured by the young queen was her meeting with Finnick and their consequent journeys: with the siren anchoring her to the sea, Jupiter didn’t strive that hard to soar high, happy to keep him company just above the water surface.

And then Finnick left. Jupiter was free to fly as high as she pleased again, except flying ceased to delight her. While she was suspended in uncertainty about the siren’s return – although hoping, always hoping – she first learnt what vertigo was. Jupiter was lucky she was flying over the sea when it happened, as she crashed into water and not into land, otherwise there would have been
many a broken bone involved.

Saving her from what could have been an injurious or even a deadly collision was yet another one of the priceless gifts from her favourite element that Jupiter received in the course of her life, along with swimming and diving, sailing and fishing, storms and sunsets, driftwood and amber, seashells and pearls, and, the most precious of them all – Finnick.

Having experienced the terrifying sensation of losing control of her own body that resulted in her fall, Jupiter was reluctant to return to the air, too afraid her next crash might end much, much worse. Eventually Kiza, who got tired of her friend being bound to the ground, came up with a competition of sorts: over the sea, the two girls flew as high as either of them dared and then plummeted down, stopping themselves right before ploughing into the waves. It reminded Jupiter of how Kiza’s dad had taught her to practice bike-riding on a lawn, where grass would have cushioned her possible tumbles. That had made her less afraid to topple off the bike, therefore she hadn’t panicked and, consequently, hadn’t fallen at all, managing to master it straight away.

Jupiter started out her reconquest of heights slowly, letting herself get used to the freefall sensation and the dynamics of it. The first time she rose higher than she was tall, she nearly threw up from sheer fear and not a second later she plunged into the sea. Now, it turned into a matter of principle: Jupiter hated to be afraid of something when there was no real reason to be afraid of it. It took quite a few clumsy landings – or, rather, dives, but as she grew accustomed to taking tumbles, vertigo hit her less and less often. By the time she got to the altitudes that posed a real danger – falling from such a distance would have meant that you’d gain such velocity that it wouldn’t matter if you hit water or stone: the impact will turn you into a puddle anyway – her acrophobia hadn’t been manifesting itself for a while.

Finally, the day came when she realized she once again had no problems whatsoever flying as high as she wanted to. Even though Jupiter never truly got into the excitement of skydiving as much as Kiza did, getting her freedom of movement back was totally worth the staggering amount of the boots she’d ruined in the process.

Recalling how Stinger reacted to her and Kiza’s experimental treatment (with a heart attack and yelling their heads off; the only thing that constrained him a bit was the fact that it had been his own daughter who’d come up with the idea), Jupiter has a bad premonition about Caine’s response to what she’s about to do.

She leads the guard onto a cliff – not the Contemplation Cliff, too many bad associations there – and sits him down for a pep talk.

“Now, Caine, I have to do something that may seem extreme to you, but I promise, I’m not trying to kill myself.”

The guard visibly tenses up at such an ominous beginning, looking at her with a wordless question in his eyes.

“I’m going skydiving,” she elaborates. “And you are staying here.”

“How is that not trying to kill yourself?” he scowls. “After what’s happened this morning, there is no guarantee you won’t lose control again.”

*Thanks for the vote of confidence, buddy.*

“I’ve done it many times before, and there’s never been an accident.” Just a lot of plain diving as the result of panic attacks; she never got seriously injured, though: just a few sprains and a lot of ingested...
sea water. However, Jupiter doesn’t expect it to happen again: she’s more experienced now, more in control of herself. So she is completely sincere when she assures the lycantant, “I’m good at it. It’s safe.”

“You still will be risking your life.”

“It’s not about risking life, Caine, it’s about fighting fear.”

“While risking your life in the process,” he insists.

“Caine, usually I’m all for playing it safe. But sometimes you have to leave your comfort zone. In order to win something, one has to enter a gamble: nothing ventured, nothing gained. My ability to fly is at stake here, and I want to win it back.”

“I know what thinking you’ll never fly again feels like,” Caine remarks gravely, his face tight and eyes sombre, “and the lengths one would go to just to get back into the air. But is it worth betting your life on?”

“Is that why you never take your boots off, even when you go to bed?” – When Jupiter first noticed that bizarre habit of his, she was too absorbed in her inner turmoil to comment on it. Later she’s wondered about it, but hasn’t said anything: no point in reprimanding him for something so small and inconsequential. So far Caine has always slept on top of the bedcover; it’s not that hard to throw it in the wash once a week. Besides, the lycantant is not uncultured: if he is doing something that goes against the rules of polite behaviour, he must have a good reason for doing so. – “Or is it just to keep your maneuverability while on duty? I mean, you can’t be wearing them all the time, can you?”

“When they sent me to the Deadlands, they took away my boots. I mean, it’s a standard procedure, they gave me normal ones instead, but… For a long while, it felt like they’d cut my legs off. So yeah, I’m a bit overly attached to my boots, now that I’ve got them back,” he smiles self-deprecatingly.

“Besides, I would be not much use as your bodyguard if I’m not there in time when you need help. The boots make sure I will.”

“Caine, I’m equally afraid to never fly again. You have to understand that.”

“I do. Trust me, I do. It’s just… Aren’t there safer ways to achieve the same result?”

“Probably there are,” she concedes. “But this is the one I know and I don’t have time to come up with other options. The quicker I’ll start counteracting my fear, the less time it will have to root itself in my head. So I’m going to use the trusted method that worked for me in the past.”

“At least let me fly alongside with you, just as a backup.”

“I’m more likely to crash if I know I have a backup.” – As if Jupiter didn’t try it both with Kiza and with Uncle Stinger! – “I’ll be distracted by the other person and tempted to take more risks. It’s like minesweeping: knowing that you don’t have a second chance makes you extremely cautious.”

“So you will be extremely cautious?”

“I will,” she swears solemnly. “Trust me, I do not want to end my life in a splatter of shattered bones and ruptured intestines.”

He winces at the mental image she’s painted and she pats his arm in comfort, “I’ll be back soon.”

With a small good-bye wave, she soars upwards, leaving Caine on the ground.
'Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down,' she mentally chants to herself, as she shoots upwards, not letting her fear change her mind. While she sees nothing but the open sky above her, everything is fine. Unfortunately, in order to assess her altitude, she needs to look down. She stops, still looking up, does her best to stabilize herself in the air, which isn’t that easy considering the wind, and glances down –

A nauseating rush of dizziness sweeps through her head, heart starts palpitating like crazy, tripping over itself in a frenzied attempt to pump the blood quicker, prompted by the excessive burst of adrenaline, her muscles clench and her legs tremble.

She wrenches her eyes back up again, forcing a few deliberate breaths through her petrified lungs in an attempt to beat the panic down. It doesn’t help: the longer she stays up here, hovering in place, the more and more terrifying the idea of going down gets. She can, of course, admit her defeat and contact Caine through her i-comm, asking him to take her down. He will help her without as much as an ‘I told you so!’ glance, and will never mention her humiliating surrender again.

Somehow, the thought that she actually has that option, makes her panic recede a little – enough for Jupiter to center herself – and turn off her boots.

As she plummets down through the air that rips apart around her with a whooshing sound towards the sea that grows closer way too quickly, for a few moments nothing exists but overwhelming terror. But then her head clears: the brain realizes that it won’t survive unless it stops playing tricks on the body’s reflexes – and suddenly, time slows down.

The first time that happened when Jupiter was seven or eight years old. The adults didn’t trust her with the anti-grav boots yet, so if she wanted to get a particularly tempting fruit, she had to climb a tree. Sure, she could simply ask Siskin for help – he was always around and had the awesome ability to climb even tallest trees with enviable ease – but there was something thrilling about overcoming the obstacle of her insufficient height and getting the fruit she wanted by herself.

So once she was high up in an apricot tree, reaching out for one of the few remaining white apricots – the best variety out there, velvutinous and honey-sweet – and her foot slipped. As she was falling, she saw the ground zooming towards as if in slow motion, time stretching inexplicably – mind-bogglingly! – as she watched the gradual advance of the grass, mesmerized by its pattern, unable to look away. Up till this day that image is vividly imprinted on her brain.

Once she actually hit the ground, she didn’t even feel the pain at first, too thrilled by the amazing phenomenon she’d just observed. Time might slow down for black holes, but it doesn’t stretch for little girls falling out of trees! The astounding discovery was so worth an injured wrist and a concussion.

And now Jupiter gets to experience it again, exhilarated to witness something she’s almost discarded as an impossibility, an imaginative trick of her childhood memory. All right, no time to admire the slow-motion effect in her head: this fall will kill her if she doesn’t shift her focus from the slowly approaching sea to what’s necessary for her survival. All her world narrows down to maintaining the correct position and calculating the right moment to re-activate her boots. She is oblivious to everything that’s going on around her…

…Until a slam to the side knocks the breath out of her.

“What the fuck, Caine?!” she barks out once they’ve slowed down some and she’s regained her ability to breathe. Because of course he would catch her mid-air. Of fucking course. Impatient ass! “You’ve scared the living shit out of me!” She clutches at her jumping heart with one hand and uses the other to smack him upside the head – being carried bridal-style doesn’t allow her much freedom
of movement, otherwise there might’ve been more violence involved.

“I’m sorry, Jupiter, I couldn’t stand by and watch you do something this dangerous.”

“Everything was fine until you intervened! I told you I wasn’t doing it to kill myself; I was a moment away from starting to slow down when you caught me. Which was both terrifying and painful!”

“I’m very sorry about that, it’s really hard to catch someone gently at such a speed. But you might not have slowed yourself in time.”

She takes a lungful of air, fully intending to rip into him in earnest, but he interrupts the furious tirade that’s about to burst out.

“I don’t doubt your skill,” he placates hastily, “but your self-preservation instinct is currently inhibited and your reflexes are not at their sharpest at the moment. I’m not saying you would have done it on purpose, but you might have realized your miscalculation an instant too late and…”

She huffs, crossing her arms on her chest. She’s angry, yes, but at the same time overwhelmed with relief. As her brain keeps pumping out endorphins and dopamine at the realization that it’s survived a life-threatening situation, making her blood fizz with elation against all odds, she starts seeing humour in the situation.

“And who is ruining whose fun now?” she inquires, alluding to their face-off atop the Contemplation Cliff, when she stopped him from doing something stupid right after he’d stopped her from doing something stupid – an anti-idiocy exchange, if you will. “Are you the only one who’s allowed to show off their awesome?”

“You think I’m awesome?” Caine blurts.

“Not right now, no,” she says, pointedly wriggling in his arms. “Fun-ruiner.”

“Now, that’s harsh,” he chastises gently, botching the effect with an impending smile.

“Harsh is what you’re doing to my buzz, you big fat mother hen.”

“Crikey,” he responds, breaking into a wide grin that shows all the teeth – so unlike his first experimental smiles, tight-lipped and elusive. “I did not think I was fat.”

“Wow, someone’s vain. Vain, big, athletic mother hen.”

“Somehow I’ve got a vague apprehension that I’m supposed to be offended by that,” Caine comments, smirking.

“Yes, you are,” she grumbles, fighting a smile herself. “And have the decency to stop grinning like an idiot when I’m insulting you.”

That makes Caine’s smirk sprawl even wider: he looks revoltingly pleased. “You’re insulting me? Naah, you’re praising me.”

“You’re impossible,” she sniffs. “And we’re supposed to have landed already. What’s taking you so long?”

“Arguing with you.”

“Ugh. Put me down so I could at least stamp my foot at you.”
“Here you go. Please, try not to hurt your foot while stamping.”

Jupiter gapes at him. “Just for that, I’ll make Mother Hen your official nickname.”

“If Kiza is a menace and I’m a mother hen, what does that make Stinger? The bully rooster?”

“Why does Stinger have to be a cross between you and Kiza?” she wonders. “You two can’t be his parents even if you tried. Besides, there can be only one alpha male in the coop, so if anyone’s the bully rooster here, that’s me.”

“Alpha male? But you’re a female…” the lycantant frowns in confusion, taking a subtle sniff – that is, he apparently thinks he’s being subtle – as if to ascertain that his nose hasn’t been lying to him all this time, and glances at her uncertainly, “Aren’t you?”

“Caine, most of the time I’m neither. I am Sovereign, the embodiment of power, and power has no gender. I am a symbol, an abstract. My femininity is strictly limited to my private life, which I don’t even have at the moment. So I’m okay with being the alpha rooster. It is the role I was born – and resurrected – into.”

“Would you break fingers of the intruders who’d try to rob your coop, too?”

“No,” the queen tells him somberly, thinking of her unruly, chaotic chicken coop of a kingdom – the one she loves nonetheless, simply on the grounds that it’s hers, “I’d break their necks. Although hopefully, my guard dogs are efficient and intimidating enough to prevent the intrusion from happening in the first place.”

A slow smile spreads over the guard’s face. “Your guard dogs?”

“Uh-huh. And since we’re talking about our roles here, Stinger can be the guard dog.”

“Stinger can be the guard dog,” Caine slowly repeats after her, enunciating every word. “Stinger.”

“Yes. Why, do you have a problem with that?”

Barely containing a smirk, eyes dancing with mirth, Caine contemplates her in silent amusement.

“What?!”

“Nothing,” he shrugs. “I just thought that’s supposed to be my job. Considering I’m, oh, you know, the only lycantant here.”

“Oh, don’t be such a speciesist!” Jupiter retorts.

Caine doubles up, wheezing with laughter, arms wrapped around his midsection; eyes squeezed shut, lips stretched so tight over his teeth they’re nearly white, he gives himself to the guffaws with effervescent abandon, holding nothing back. His sudden, hearty, unselfconscious laughter feels like the explosion of light that blinds you when you drive out of the dense shade of a forest into an open field on a bright summer day, the sun piercing your squinting eyelids with heat and happiness.

She wants to close her eyes and roll around in his laughter.

She wants to bottle it up and save for later.

She wants it to never end.
After her initial attempt at skydiving failed due to Caine’s uncalled-for intervention, Jupiter had to get home, hovering as low as possible and leaning onto the guard’s hand to keep her balance, like a person who’s trying roller skating for the very first time.

It wasn’t a nice experience.

There is no question if she will repeat her attempt the next day.

Of course she will.

Not because she’s that brave – she is a coward, really: she is afraid of so many things, now even more than ever – but because she has no other choice. Or, rather, no better option: the prospect of being forever enslaved by the fear is not alluring in the least. And having no better option does wonders to a person’s courage.

She takes the lycantant to the same cliff they visited the day before. Today her acrophobia has gotten so bad she’s had to walk all the way up, adamantly refusing Caine’s offer to simply carry her there. Winded after a rather strenuous climb, Jupiter plops herself on a flat rock that’s large enough to seat both of them, and pats the space beside her, “Come sit with me.”

Caine perches next to her.

“Jupiter?” His voice is strained: he’s obviously figured what she is up to, but she has to give it to him: the guard hasn’t questioned her actions up until now.

There are times to be Jupiter and there are times to be Queen.

“Caine,” she starts in a calm, neutral, confident voice, “as a rule, a guard – any guard – has to follow their immediate superior’s orders, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the lycantant responds, obviously surprised with this line of conversation.

“And if their superior is absent or compromised, he has to follow the lead of their superior’s superior, and so on, according to the order of precedence – up to Head of the Royal Guard.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And when none of the high-ranking officers are available, it’s Sovereign’s duty to assume command.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the guard confirms somberly. He already knows where she’s leading with this.

“However, Sovereign is not a part of professional military personnel; for that reason, she is allowed to use non-regulatory wording for her commands. Hence all Sovereign’s requests must be transcribed as orders and executed accordingly, correct?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Caine’s expression has darkened into grimness. The loss of levity and good humour between them tugs at Jupiter’s heart, but she has to disregard their emotions for this. In such a situation, emotions are bad advisors – for either of them.

“In an amendment to that,” the queen proceeds, “there are two instances when the monarch is considered unfit to command and her orders can be disobeyed: when she is intoxicated with an agent that affects her mental capabilities or when her consciousness is clouded due to cerebral trauma and similar occurrences. Or, the way you put it, when she is not herself. That was the clause you used when you intervened to prevent my suicide.”
“Your Majesty…” Caine starts protesting, but she puts a hand on his thigh, pressing down slightly – a wordless ‘I’m not finished.’ No one is allowed to talk when Sovereign is speaking. His muscles stiffen under her palm, but she just keeps it there and silently waits until they start relaxing as Caine gets a hold of himself. It happens quicker than she expected: either he’s better at self-control than she thought, or physical cues work more effectively on him than verbal ones. That is a theory worth testing.

“Did I still smell like I was not myself yesterday?” she inquires placidly, still keeping a hand on him, although no longer applying any pressure.

“You… You still smelled sad.”

“Yes, but did you smell insanity on me?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“So you acted in direct contradiction to my request solely on the grounds of your concern for my well-being.”

“Your Majesty…”

“Caine.” Her voice is emotionless, but her hand pushes down in a subtle warning.

“I did. I’m sorry.”

“Show me how sorry you are by not disobeying me again,” she demands, patting his leg comfortably to take the edge off her words as she stands up.

The moment her hand is off him, he explodes, “You’re putting yourself in mortal danger for no reason!”

She turns back sharply. The irritation she’s done a good job suppressing up until now flares up, licking her brain with scorching tongues of fury. She opens her mouth to snap back, but instead lets out a long breath to help herself calm down. Caine has always been patient with her, she owes him patience back.

However, there’s tolerance, and there’s being a pushover.

“Caine, I’m done with trying to persuade you,” she starts firmly; her voice has steel, but no ice in it. “You keep your opinion all you want, but you don’t get to act on it this time. If you don’t see the necessity for my actions, it doesn’t mean they’re senseless. And I don’t have to explain myself: Queen is not accountable to anyone.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, of course,” Caine backs down, his expression utterly miserable.

This is not the victory she wants. She’s chosen the long, roundabout way of convincing and explaining – where a curt ‘Know your place!’ would suffice – in order to spare his pride and his feelings; she’s not going to ruin it now.

“However,” she takes a step towards the guard, still sitting where she’s left him: despite objecting verbally, he hasn’t stood up – hasn’t disobeyed her request by action; it’s a weird feeling having to look down at him for once, though even like this, with him sitting and her standing, their eyes are nearly at the same level, – “as an act of benevolence towards you personally and in respect to your fidelity to duty, I’m going to justify my motives so you could understand them. Caine, being a guard, you should realize this: all entertainment aside, in the course of my life I may have no other option
but to use anti-grav boots – they are a part of the emergency evacuation procedure, after all. And with my life, one has to be prepared to all sorts of emergencies. Don’t you agree?”

“No one can disagree with that, Your Majesty,” he admits reluctantly.

“Therefore I can’t afford to be afraid of flying. The fear of heights is simply off the table for me. And, as excellent a guard as you are, you cannot catch me every time. No matter how hard you try, you can’t. It doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in you or your capabilities; you simply won’t be around every time I might need to get up in the air.”

Caine is still frowning, but the misery is gone. “If you’d allow…”

“It doesn’t matter if I’d allow you to follow me around or not. You only can help me as long as you’re alive, but with your job, there are no guarantees.” She knows she’s being harsh, but the truth is the truth. “Actually, the scenario is possible when none of my escort team will be left alive.” The fact that she closely escaped that situation a few years ago when she’d made a mistake of trusting Balem more than she should have, charges her voice with unwavering confidence.

Caine gulps, whispering, “I understand, Your Majesty.”

“Sometimes a person has to take a freefall on their own – and catch themselves. I need to know that I can survive all on my own. I must nip my phobia in the bud before it gains momentum, because otherwise the fear will grow until it consumes me whole, and I will never know the joy of flying again.”

He looks at her, clearly torn, but finally no longer objecting.

She puts her hand on his shoulder. “Stay here and do not intervene. I’d tell you to turn away, but that would be worse, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess.” His stiff shoulders give a short, jerky shrug. He’s not going to make this easy for her.

“There is no need to torture yourself over this decision – I’ve made it for you. It wasn’t yours to make in the first place.” She gives his shoulder a reassuring squeeze; at first, it feels like squeezing stone, but she does not relent. “I’m going to go and fly, and you’re going to stay here and watch. And nothing bad is going to happen.” As she speaks, still keeping a firm hold on him, she witnesses the struggle leave his expression; the muscles under her grip soften, the tension draining from his frame. So, lycantants do respond much better to body language. The burst of satisfaction at the hypothesis confirmed makes her add, “I’ll come back to you soon enough and let you mother-hen the living daylights out of me.”

“Well, if you promise,” he smiles feebly.

“I promise,” she smiles back, finally releasing him as she steps off the cliff and into the sky.

This time, she catches herself all on her own.

Once, twice, three times.

She stops only when her leg muscles start shaking with exhaustion, making it unsafe to continue.

She promised to be extremely cautious, after all.
When Jupiter returns, Caine’s still sitting on the rock where she left him.

“May I get up now?” he inquires in a strained voice as soon as she lands.

“Sure,” she replies, mildly surprised by the intensity in his voice.

In few long strides he approaches, bends down and envelopes her in a bone-crushing hug, lifting her a little so that only her tiptoes touch the ground.

“You’re safe,” he breathes into her hair.

“Caine,” she choke out, instinctively struggling against the compressive hold that squeezes the air out of her lungs, “what are you?..”

“You promised you’d let me mother-hen the living daylights out of you.”

“I didn’t know this much squashing will be involved, but yeah, I promised,” she pants, short of breath, purposefully going limp in his hands.

There are times to govern and there are times to yield. She’s made him do her bidding, now it’s time to reward him for his patience. Although, quite frankly, she didn’t expect this much emotion out of Caine – any emotion at all, to be honest: the lycantant is usually as imperturbable as they get. But, after all, he let her have her emotional moments, so she won’t begrudge him his, no matter how surprised she is by it. It’s only fair.

“I was worried,” he apologized bashfully, eventually letting her go. Jupiter sways a little as her whole weight is shifted back to her feet – his reaction has really shaken her, or maybe her body is simply short on oxygen – and promptly sags onto the nearest boulder.

“I know. My ribs now know, too,” she grouches sardonically, but her smile takes the sting out of the sarcasm. “Thank you,” she adds much more gently.

“What for?”

“For your protectiveness. For your worry. But most of all – for having faith in me.”

“I always have faith in you, even when you yourself don’t. It doesn’t make watching you do something dangerous any easier, though.”

“You sound eerily like Stinger when he goes on one of his parenting trips,” she observes.

“Parenting trips?”

“It’s like a power trip, only much, much worse. Well, at least you won’t try to lecture me on the perils of smoking, or safe sex.”

“Safe sex? That’s having sex while at least four bodyguards stand watch in each corner of the room,” Caine rattles off, as if he’s memorized the definition by heart. “Everyone knows that!”

She looks up sharply, startled, only to witness the most deadpan expression to ever deadpan in the history of deadpanning. Oh, mister Wise-Ass, just you wait…

“Are you volunteering your services?” she inquires in her suavest, most honeyed voice.
Caine turns **exceedingly** red so quickly that she turns **exceedingly** smug. “There is no way to answer that question without coming off either as a voyeur, or a slacker,” he admits. “The point goes to you,” he bows his head slightly, acknowledging his defeat with majestic dignity.

Jupiter wishes more men were capable of losing that graciously.

“Anyway, Stinger’s idea of safe sex is a bedroom with at least *a dozen* bodyguards where no sex is actually taking place,” she smirks.

“Sounds reasonable,” Caine approves with a straight face.

“Ugh. Go grow yourself a Kiza to pester.”

“Why bother, when I have you ready-made?” he ripostes.

She eyes the cheeky sod for a beat, but eventually concedes, “Touché! Although I feel tempted to smack you for the audacity of calling me ‘ready-made’; I am customized and exclusive, thank you very much,” she declares, gesturing at her body grandly.

Caine, lips quivering with a barely contained smile, squats down in front of her. “Here. Try not to hurt your hand.”

“Um, what?”

“Smack me.”

She goggles at him. “I was kidding!”

“And I’m not. The best way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Go ahead.”

She throws her hands up – half-exasperation, half-surrender. “I can’t do it! You win this one! Oh, lose that smirk, you ass!”

Caine’s smile does not recede. Instead, Jupiter watches in amazement as he leans forward and head-butts her lightly on the shoulder – more of a nudge than a push – much like he did when they were picking mushrooms on the lakeside. “I was wrong; you are exclusive.”

“So, does that mean we both lose?” she wonders with certain disappointment, although why she would be disappointed on his account, she has no idea.

“You know, Jupiter, I think we both win.”

Jupiter’s return to her duties occurs without any fanfare. One day she gets bored with weeding and fishing, so she finds a spare sheath, unlocks it with the sigil on her wrist and starts reading through her messages and mail that’s been snowballing ever since she left, avoiding anything Odair-related like a plague. And just like that, she’s lost to the world.

She comes to a couple of hours later when a hand holding a plump purple fig pops up in her field of vision. She looks up and accepts the fruit with a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Caine.”

“I’ve made lunch,” he informs her. “You should eat something.”
Without letting go of her sheath, Jupiter follows him into the kitchen – who needs a dining room, when there’s only two of them in the house? – where she absently gulps down a few hash browns, still engrossed in her work, thanks Caine again and withdraws to her study. She settles cross-legged on a spacious couch – unless she has to, she never uses chairs – poring over the sheath.

Next time, Jupiter is distracted by a glass of watermelon juice, topped with pink froth – which means it’s fresh off the juicer – and heavenly fragrant.

A long delighted sniff. A glance up. “Caine?”

“It’s been three hours since you had lunch. Drink.”

She obediently drinks. It’s her favourite anyway, so why not?

The third time, the pop-up distraction is a rose.

Jupiter has to blink a few times as she focuses on the latest offering to make sure she’s seeing what she’s seeing. Yes, it is indeed a flower. Now, that is odd. What’s she supposed to do with it?

Her gaze slowly traces the arm holding the rose towards the face of the giver, smiling down at her.

“What’s this?” Jupiter asks as she carefully accepts the purple – so deep it’s bordering on black – velvet-petalled flower with densely prickled stem – millennia of selection and the best roses still have thorns! – and automatically dips her nose into its center to inhale the heavy, heady scent, closing her eyes in pleasure. The action makes her realize just how tired her eyes are, and she squeezes them forcefully, blinking a few times to help them relax.

“You’ve been peering at the screen for seven hours straight; please, give your eyes some rest. Look at something different. I’ve noticed you like to look at these the most,” Caine nods at the rose.

“Wow, who would’ve thought you’d use your observation skills against me!”

“Obviously,” Caine responds, arching an ironic eyebrow. “That was my cunning plan all along: to trick you into letting your guard down, then lure you away with nice-smelling objects.”

“Into your evil lair of hash browns?”

“More like out of your evil lair of sheaths. You should take a breather; there are more roses where this came from,” he entices, dropping his voice into a tempting cadence.

That is, it would be tempting – if the seductive tone wasn’t so blatantly put on. Jupiter can’t help but notice that Caine has a nice voice. Some voices are grating, some just fade into the background so that a listener hears words but never focuses on the voice itself, and some are a true pleasure to listen to: they are like the sounds of nature – the rustling of the leaves, or splashing waves, or bird singing – you can listen to them forever and never get enough. Caine’s voice has a lot of potential and he can modulate it well, it probably can sound irresistible. Huh. How come she didn’t realize that before?

Jupiter scrunches up her nose at the lycantant, reluctant to take a break. As appealing as his suggestion – and his voice – is, there’s a shitload of things she should be doing instead of resting.

“There will be food later!” Caine sing-songs, continuing to cajole her.

“You promise?” Now that she’s thinking about it, she’s feeling kind of peckish.

“I promise. I’m thinking some crab legs?.. The freezer’s packed with them.”
“All right, colour me seduced,” she concedes with a sigh, putting her sheath aside.

“A flower and a promise of defrozen food?” Caine snorts. “That’s quite a grand seduction.”

“What can I say? I’m easy.” She stretches with gusto, her stiff back muscles moaning gratefully in response. As for her legs, they’re so asleep she is afraid to wake them, delaying the moment when she actually has to stand up – it won’t be a dignified performance. “Now that I’m all yours, what are you going to do with me?”

“I’m going to give some rest to your brain and some much-needed work to your muscles. And your spine, too – I’ve heard it popping just now. You definitely should take a walk, or go for a swim, or better yet – do both.”

“Caine,” she groans to the ceiling, dropping her head back, “I’m way too tired for that.”

“You’ve been sitting all day. Your body needs a work-out.”

Jupiter realizes that he’s right: she sorely needs to stretch her legs – as well as the rest of her – but she still whines, “You’re a tyrant.”

“No, Your Majesty, that would be you.”

In any other context, from any other lips, it would have been an affront, but being said with such a sunny smile and so much fondness saturating his voice it feels like a compliment.

“Not all of us are built for around-the-clock physical exertion!” she protests, eyeing his hulking figure critically. “I’m more of a brain-over-brawn person.”

“Someone’s grouchy this evening.”

“I’m always grouchy when I’m tired, and you’re cruelly trying to get me to exert myself when you should be babying me!” she complains, falling back to sprawl starfish-like on the couch.

“Are you sure I should be babying you?” The question is asked in a startlingly serious tone.

“Yes, absolutely.” What, does he expect her to back out of her bout of indolent self-pity or something?

“Babying you?”

“That’s what I said.”

“As in: you want me to do it?”

“Yes.” Now that his cautious insistence has gotten her intrigued, she does want to see where he’ll take this.

“You’re sure?”

“Oh, gods, quit stalling! Are you going to do something or not? I’m on the edge of my seat here!”

With a long-suffering air, Caine perches next to Jupiter, leans over to carefully pick her up and proceeds to sit her onto his lap. She is far from being a tiny specimen of womanhood – Queen cuts an imposing figure if she wants to – yet this close to him she feels like a dainty bijou engulfed by a cozy écrin – or a child sitting on a parent’s lap. Once again she is overwhelmed with the realization of her own fragility – yet this kind of frailty is not synonymous to weakness, on the contrary, it feels
empowering and freeing.

To say that she’s surprised by Caine’s forwardness would be an understatement – even ‘astonished’ doesn’t begin to cover it – but at least now she understands the reasons behind his insistent questioning: if not for her express consent – and even some impatient prodding – as well as the general attitude of good-natured mockery to it, the action might be construed as a dire insult. It’s not something either of them would dare to engage in if anyone was there witness it or around surveillance cameras: there’s something inherently risqué – and something inherently intimate – about such an interaction between two grown-up people. The queen in her has half a mind to put a stop to it, but Jupiter’s curiosity outweighs proprieties, so she plays along, too interested to know what Caine will do next.

Caine doesn’t disappoint. Gathering her in his arms, he starts stroking her hair, crooning gently, “My poor, poor Jupiter, I know you’re tired. But you won’t weasel out of a stroll or a swim. Otherwise, your big bad guard will have to carry you outdoors damsel-in-distress style and dump your little lazy Majesty into the sea.”

She is crying with laughter before she’s fully done being shocked, convulsing with guffaws so hard she nearly falls off his knees – the disaster is thwarted only by Caine’s firm hold on her.

“You are such a troll!” she squeezes between the bouts of giggles. “I can’t believe you’ve just done that,” she exhales incredulously, wiping her teared up eyes with the back of her wrist. “And what’s with all the attempts to carry me around? I get it: you’re mighty strong; you can relax already!”

“So, what will it be: will you walk on your own two legs or will I get to show off my mighty strength?”

“Fine, you win! I’m going, going.” Jupiter makes to stand, and his arms instantly release her. “And where is my rose? Don’t tell me you squashed it with that big fat butt of yours!.. Oh, come here, you poor darling, I’ll put you in water.”

In the doorway, she turns back and glares the lycantant – who looks extremely entertained – up and down, proceeding to announce with grand aplomb, “You might have won the battle, but the war with my sloth will never cease!” She thrusts the flower upwards and waving it above her head in a triumphant manner swans out of the room, followed by a chuckle and a quiet ‘We’ll see about that.’

The guy just doesn’t give up, does he?

After a walk, – she’s even managed to give a quick weeding to her rose bed, – a swim and a dinner Jupiter bullies Caine into bed – it may or may not be a payback for earlier.

(It totally is.)

“You should sleep too, Your Majesty!”

“I’m Queen, I don’t have an obligatory bedtime!”

“Neither do I, you know,” the lycantant counters mildly.

“Maybe not when you’re under Stinger, but while you’re under me, you do.”

A fond, gentle “Tyrant!”
“You know, you should try harder to contain that grin before playing ‘the downtrodden’ card, then I might actually believe you.”

The grin grows wider. “I feel so underyoked!”

Jupiter rolls her eyes at him, settling under the blanket herself. “Good night, Caine.” She turns away to grab the sheath off her nightstand and flicks off the lights, proceeding to immerse herself in work. The quiet darkness of the bedroom, lit only by the glow of the sheath, actually helps her concentrate and think more efficiently: by the end of the day her brain is too tired for tuning out distractions.

Some time later – she doesn’t register time passing when she’s working – there is a rustle of sheets behind her as Caine shifts. What she does register, though, is a sudden insistent flow of hot moist air that hits the cold skin on the underside of her foot, paired with a lightest brush of the nose – a ghost of a nuzzle.

She freezes.

Has he –

Has he just –

Has he just molested her foot?!

First thought: thank gods she’s straight out of the shower.

Second thought: what the fuck is going on here?! Sure, foot-nuzzling is harmless as far as fetishes go, but still, a sexual assault?..

Coming from Caine?!!

An instant later her years of professionally practiced cultural tolerance kick in. She is a queen, after all, she’s had to deal with all sorts of people – and not just humans, too, but splices, droids, and aliens as well. Her mind starts reasoning with itself before she makes any conscious effort to do so.

If she has some peculiar preferences in sex, it doesn’t mean everyone around her does, too. It’s not Caine’s fault that to her feet are as sexual body parts as breasts, buttocks or genitals. What’s more, he’s a lycantant. Who knows what areas and gestures they consider sexual? Take that misunderstanding about neck biting: what she would construe as an unambiguously erotic manifestation, he mistook for a clear sign of aggression and look what it led to. Surely, she must be misinterpreting his actions.

“Caine?”

“It’s late, Jupiter. You’ve been up since dawn. Maybe it’s time to go to sleep?”

He speaks at a normal volume, his tone perfectly humdrum and steady – not the voice one would use to seduce a woman. His efforts to lure her out for a walk in the garden earlier sounded more suggestive than this.

Phew.

That means the foot – blowing? nuzzling? – was also no bad touch territory.

Thank gods.

Still, it’s worth clarifying.
“Err… What was that you just did there, Caine?” Jupiter inquires as her body gradually unclenches, recovering from the shock.

“I, uh, I’m not allowed to speak when you’re performing your royal duties, unless you address me first or there’s an emergency.” His words are coming off a bit more nervous now; the lycantant’s apparently starting to sense her inner turmoil.

“Is that why you stuck all those things under my nose earlier today instead of just saying something?” she wonders.

“Yes.”

“And now you decided to give me a foot rub? Hate to break it to you, but that’s not how it’s done. Usually, people use their hands.”

Or dicks.

But that’s an entirely different kind of foot rubbing.

Although an equally effective way of relaxation.

“Um, I’m not allowed to touch you except for the situations when your well-being is threatened or you give a clear indication that it’s what I’m supposed to do. I tried to attract your attention without violating either of the rules.”

“So you decided to blow on my foot.”

“I guess it was a bad idea?”

“Well, you definitely got my attention. And demonstrated your outstanding ability to think laterally,” Jupiter admits. “Although I’m not sure I’ll be able to fall asleep easily after a goodnight like that.”

“Have I given offense?” he asks cautiously.

“No, but you’ve certainly given surprise.”

“I’m sorry. I really tried not to touch you.”

Should she say it or should she not?

“I clearly remember you touching me on several occasions that had nothing to do with my well-being.” The lap sitting earlier today aside – that could be interpreted as her own request, if you squint: she told him he should be babying her, after all, even though she was joking – there had been times when he had held her hand or had brushed her legs at night, making sure she was still there. It’s the first time she’s acknowledged that happening. It feels wrong, somehow, to mention it out loud, after he’s given her the courtesy of never bringing up any of her, er, more questionable conduct. Yet this new development has finally pushed Jupiter to breaking their unspoken agreement and voicing her awareness of his actions.

“I, uh, wasn’t supposed to do that,” he admits haltingly, a guilty undertone to his voice. “I apologize, Your Majesty.”

She did things to him she wasn’t supposed to, too. And, quite frankly, her behaviour on certain occasions was much more objectionable.

Like asking for sex to distract herself from emotional pain.
Gods, that will haunt her for ages.

Maybe literally.

She rubs her forehead with the heel of her hand, noticing for the first time how sore and dry her eyes are. “It’s all right, Caine. I don’t mind. I wasn’t reprimanding you for what you’d done before, I was merely wondering why you simply didn’t do the same thing again. But you’re right, I’d better call it a day.”

“It’s all right? You don’t mind?” he ascertains.

“Not really,” she tells him, yawning and turning off the sheath. She fluffs up her pillow and sinks into it with a blissful sigh, turning away from Caine’s side of the beds and closing her weary eyes to relax into the anticipation of sleep.

In the dark, Caine shifts again and she can feel the warm fingers carefully wrap around her toes as he gives her foot a full-blown nuzzle.

Her eyes fly wide open as her lungs halt mid-exhale.

_Okay, Jupiter, breathe._

Maybe that’s simply a goodnight in Lycantant.

“Uh… Have I told you you’re an odd creature?” she asks with a breathy chuckle, rolling onto her back again.

“Yes, Your Majesty, you have,” Caine confirms dutifully.

“Why did you do that? This time?”

“Because it felt nice. And you said you didn’t mind.”

Because it felt nice.

_Because it felt nice._

Gods, a certain someone’s honesty should be censored.

“So, you like rubbing your face against random people’s feet?” Jupiter wonders aloud against her better judgment.

Was her initial association correct and is it some kind of lycantant fetish? However, in the context, his action doesn’t feel sexual, even though at first glance it appears to be that way.


“Okay, you’ve got my interest,” she announces turning to face him – not that she can see make out much of him with the lights off. “Is that some kind of lycantant body language?”

“Yes.” He sounds extremely reluctant to elaborate.

Which only piques her curiosity further.

“Caine, if you insist on rubbing yourself against me, I’m afraid you’ll have to explain.”
“It’ll sound bad, to a human,” he hedges, hurrying to assure, “But to a lycantant, there’s nothing sordid to it, I swear.”

“I believe you.” She does. “Now the explanation, please.”

She hears him take a long fortifying breath followed by –

“I was marking you as mine.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

She didn’t know what she expected, but it certainly wasn’t that.

At all.

“It’s not what you think,” he’s quick to elaborate. “It’s not… proprietorial. Or, uh, sexual.” Despite the darkness, she can hear the blush in his voice. “Lycantants – humans too, actually – have a lot of scent-producing glands around lips and eyes. Anywhere any hair grows, really. So when I rub my face on you, I’m leaving my scent on your skin. It doesn’t mean… To another lycantant, it will signal something like, ‘I care enough about this person to protect them if they’re threatened; so if you have bad intentions, move along.’”

“There’s no one here but us, Caine,” she points out.

“I know it’s irrational and useless, since there are no other lycantants here to read the scent mark. It’s… It’s more like a protective spell or a good-luck charm, really. Like an iron nail that people used to hammer into the lintel of their front door to ward off evil spirits, to prevent them from entering the house. It did nothing to the non-existing ghouls, of course, but it made the inhabitants of the house feel safer.”

“I have a good-luck charm of my own, you know. It sits on the dashboard of my clipper,” she responds, thinking back on a little carved wooden wolf she won as a child from Uncle Stinger. “I know it’s only superstition, but I never travel without it.”

“My instincts urge me to keep you safe,” Caine says, “and it feels nice to act out on them, even if there’s nothing to keep you safe from.”

“Does it work only with lycantants?”

“Only species with acute olfaction can detect the smell,” Caine answers, clearly puzzled.

“No, I mean, can humans leave their scent marks, too?”

“Sure. Not only humans – any human-based splice species, any mammals, really. Not droids, though: to leave an individual scent mark, one has to have an individual scent and droids smell more or less the same.”

Jupiter sits up resolutely and holds her palm out. “Give me your hand.”

Queen doesn’t need scent-marking to know that Caine is hers – in the lycantant sense of the word – has been hers for quite a while now. Her first and foremost duty towards her subjects is protection; she wants the guard to know that his protectiveness is not one-sided, that it’s a mutual arrangement: she will defend him, too, if need be. It’s a relief to finally get a chance to convey it to him in his own language.
Against the lighter backdrop of the window wall she can see Caine’s black silhouette slowly sit up, shift forward and place his invisible hand in hers, palm up.

Is it just her imagination, or is his hand trembling?

Hers is firm.

“‘I care enough about this person to protect them if they’re threatened; so if you have bad intentions, move along’, right?”

“Right,” he murmurs.

Jupiter leans down and rubs her face over the rough surface of Caine’s palm, making sure her lips and eyelashes touch the calloused skin.

Caine’s right: it does feel nice.

“Will this work?” she asks once she’s finished.

“Yes,” – it’s more of an exhale than a word. Caine coughs softly, clearing his throat. “Yes, it will,” he repeats, firmer this time. He leans forward and after a beat of hesitation, bows down and, like that time when they went to the lake or the day she reconquered heights, rubs his forehead against her now naked shoulder. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

He reminds her of a calf: large, massive-boned, simultaneously naïve and inherently wise, – as wise as any animal is with its behavioral patterns honed by millions of years of evolution, – and endearingly awkward. Although Caine’s awkwardness is never physical – in that respect he is as graceful as they come – but social: in non-routine situations that aren’t regulated by any rules he sometimes loses his otherwise firm footing and doesn’t know what to do with himself, getting both overly cheeky and overly meek – just like any young bovine would be, and similarly intent on butting things with his head… This time, though, the gesture doesn’t startle her one bit. Reaching up, she fondly musses the hair on the back of the lycantant’s head.

“Good night, buddy.”

“Good night, Your Majesty.”

It doesn’t matter that her scent will be washed off Caine’s hand come morning: it’s the gesture that counts. Before he might’ve been aware that she – as his superior and legal owner – should provide a safe environment for him; now he knows he can count on her help if he needs it.

She falls asleep with the vague yet highly satisfying feeling of duty well done.

Chapter End Notes

*What Caine did with his Jupiter-scented hand is anyone’s guess, although I have my suspicions. Now you have them, too. You’re welcome!*

*My greatest beef with the original movie is that the Wachowskis had two good comedic actors for their leads – both Kunis and Tatum shine best in comedies – and the directors*
didn’t give them anything funny to say or do. That lone ‘I love dogs’ line was downright cringe-worthy! And neither Jupiter nor Caine ever smile or laugh. No wonder the actors look like they’re suffering through their roles most of the time!

Then again, the Wachowskis gave us this fantastic universe, so who am I to bitch about their creative choices? I’m writing fan fiction on their work, for fuck’s sake!

Skydiving is used strictly as a metaphor here and in no way is supposed to encourage anyone to follow Jupiter’s example. If you suffer from acrophobia, messing with heights can be extremely dangerous, even lethal.

‘The best way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it’ is one of my favourite quotes by Oscar Wilde.

It’s now obvious to me that this story will be a bit longer than the initially promised thirty chapters. Thirty-three, maybe? Before Caine started acting out, the ‘No Fear of Heights’ arc was supposed to be only three chapters long. Three!!! Now it will be seven. Ugh.
Chapter Notes

_I haven’t been silent this long for naught: this is the longest chapter yet. Probably one of the best, too, but I’ll let you be the judges of that. Enjoy!_

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning Jupiter wakes up to find Caine still peacefully asleep in the bed next to hers. It comes as a surprise: usually by the time she grudgingly cracks her eyes open, he’s up and already quietly pottering about in the kitchen. As far as morning people go, the lycantant is pretty tolerable: he doesn’t exhaust her with his untimely exuberance or annoy the crap out of her with chattering, placing a cup of coffee in front of the half-conscious queen with a hushed greeting, quickly followed by a breakfast. She’s all up for him channeling his morning energy into cooking. Guess today it’s her turn to make breakfast.

Oh, well.

Jupiter slips out of the bed, as stealthy as a kitten stalking its mother’s jumping tail – that is, the stealth is wholeheartedly attempted, but not exactly there; quite frankly, she’s surprised that the lycantant with all his keen senses hasn’t somersaulted out of his slumber at her first stirring – and tiptoes out of the room. Seems like yesterday was harder on him than usual for some reason. She worked all day, so he had to cook all their meals. Was cooking that exhausting for him? He didn’t appear to be particularly overworked last night. Whatever the reason, if Caine wants to sleep in, she’ll do her best not to wake him.

After visiting the bathroom (for once, unchecked for alligators) and washing her face in cold water in a futile attempt to kick-start her brain into coherent thinking, Jupiter zombie-walks into the kitchen to the holy fountain of brain-invigorating elixir: the coffee-maker. Coffee beans are delivered on Havet along with the basic groceries that can’t be grown in a garden or foraged, yet are impossible to cook without: oil, certain spices, flour and yeast. Unlike the latter essential foodstuffs, coffee is not a necessity by any means, but Jupiter cannot imagine living a single day without it; it’s one gastronomic luxury of civilization she allows herself to enjoy on her home planet.

Actually, Havet’s climate allows growing coffee locally, but the harvesting and processing of the beans are so complicated that it’s impossible to fit into Jupiter’s short visits here. She tried to get local keepers involved in doing it, but they developed such a hopeless addiction to the final product that it damaged their health. Apparently, coffee affects a keeper’s system a bit like cocaine influences one of a human. Therefore all coffee trees had to be destroyed and now only Siskin is trusted with the queen’s personal reserve of the beans.

Come to think of it, the contents of the can are dwindling suspiciously quickly. She should have a word with Head Keeper about that.

After Jupiter’s glorious revival to the world of functional humanity through a cup of the bitter dark roast, she makes a quick sponge starter for bread dough and pops it into a lukewarm oven to ferment
and rise. Making bread from scratch is beyond Caine’s culinary capabilities, even though over the last few weeks Jupiter’s learned that he is a decent cook. He sticks to simple, easy to make recipes, but he makes them well – which is more than she expected out of a guard: all the members of the Private Security are provided with both room and board, and she seriously doubts that any one of them ever held a spatula in their hand.

However, one doesn’t survive the Deadlands without learning to feed himself.

As Jupiter starts kneading the dough, she feels a twinge of annoyance at having to do this routine, boring work when she has a heap of real work waiting for her – even though equally tedious, but much more necessary. The queen is hit with the realization that she misses the bread that is delivered to her table ready-made, one that hasn’t been baked by her own hands, misses not having to waste her precious time on baking, foraging and cooking.

Jupiter has already given up on gardening: it takes up too much time. Weeding, watering, deadheading flowers and picking fruit are all time-consuming processes she simply can’t fit into her day anymore. One morning, observing wilted tomato plants with guilty chagrin, she summoned Siskin and asked him to take over the garden again. She got a cheerful chirrup in response and a handful of early blackberries she didn’t know she had.

She still does random jobs around the garden, but mostly to get a break from endless reading and writing; she can’t help thinking that her actual job would be much easier to handle from her alcazar, with all her secretaries, assistants, advisors, counsellors and consultants at hand.

It dawns on her that she might soon be ready to leave Havet.

Although there is one final task she ought to deal with first, and that is to read all the reports on her consort’s activities and decide what must be done about him.

She’s not quite sure she is prepared to do that yet.

Caine stumbles into the kitchen when the bread is getting golden in the oven and Jupiter is frying pancakes. To be honest, she wouldn’t bother for herself alone: her appetite is still gallivanting somewhere most of the time, and in those rare moments when it makes an appearance she doesn’t care much what she eats. Caine doesn’t seem to care about his diet either: the huge lycantant eats like a horse, inhaling anything she puts in front of him – it takes a lot of nutrients and calories to upkeep a body that size. Still, whenever he commands the kitchen, he tries to make something that she’d enjoy and she endeavours to return the favour.

Frustratingly, the pancakes she’s making aren’t as tasty as they could be, since the batter contains no eggs (she really should take Caine’s advice and get some laying hens; after all, no nasty roosters are necessary for egg production) and for the absence of cows plain milk is substituted with some homemade almond milk – Jupiter has a few almonds trees growing in her garden. By gods, she misses a good old omelette with a side of crispy bacon, as well as real cream in her coffee!

Maybe she should get a cow here, too.

A miniature one; what would she do with two buckets of milk a day?

Huh. Do keepers like milk? They can’t get high on it, can they?

“Good morning,” the lycantant mumbles, not quite fully awake yet, blinking his bleary eyes. “I’m sorry I’ve overslept.” The apology is accompanied by a rather groggy head-butt to Jupiter’s shoulder. Since the queen didn’t react negatively the first few times he did that, he’s evidently decided that he’s
allowed to do it thenceforth.

And he’s not wrong in his assumption.

Jupiter’s come to learn that a lycantant head-butt can be a hello, a good-morning, a good-night, a thank-you or an ‘I’m sorry’. When Caine nudges her with his forehead or temple, she translates it as a general acknowledgment of her existence and a display of benignity towards her, something in the lines of ‘Still like you’ or ‘Still glad that you’re here’.

Usually, the queen is so tired of any and all manifestations of attention – the guards’ sharp nods, the courtiers’ deep bows, the crowd’s loud cheers – that they make her want to crawl away and hide. But here, on Havet, Jupiter’s had some rest from people and the overwhelming amount of communication she normally has to perform, and she is back to being grateful that someone is kind enough to notice her being there. Besides, she doesn’t think Caine communicates his goodwill to the Crown, he rather demonstrates his amiability personally to her, Jupiter, and that is always nice.

She smiles at Caine, endeared by the sight of the pillow-faced, sleep-rumpled lycantant. A couple of cowlicks add a masterful final touch to the truly formidable image of the guard. “So you have, sleepyhead, and yet I’m still alive. Shocking, isn’t it?”

“It is,” he grins, then clamps a hand over his mouth to cover a yawn.

“No assassins in the cupboards. No piranhas in the toilet bowl, either. My butt is still intact.”

For a moment, Caine’s eyes drop down to check, but he immediately catches himself. “I never said there would be piranhas,” he protests. “I suspected sharks. Imagine how cool it would be if you could go fishing in your own bathroom!”

“Is the whole sea of fish not enough for you?” Jupiter wonders.

“Nope.”

“You are a maniac.”

“I am, and you love me all the more for it.”

Jupiter’s brows fly up at the presumption; dead silence ensues. She watches the realization of what Caine’s just unthinkingly blurted dawn on his face as his eyes grow wider and wider. Observing his reaction is a lot of fun, but she keeps in mind that well-caffeinated people shouldn’t laugh at those who haven’t had their fix yet and therefore are still brain-dead – that would be just unkind – and does her best to contain a smirk.

It’s a heroic effort.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I meant… I didn’t mean that you actually… well, you know…”

“Oh, shush! Go wash your face before you dig yourself any deeper. Then have some coffee and breakfast, and only after that you’ll be considered a mentally adequate person. Then you’ll be held responsible for what you’ll say or do.”

“Can’t I have breakfast now? That smells delicious,” Caine takes a peek at the stove over Jupiter’s shoulder. Well, over her head, really.

“No one eats my food before I’m done cooking it, and I’m obviously not done;” she mutters distractedly, spreading the batter over the skillet bottom. “Now shoo.”
Caine goes silent, but she does not hear him leave. Then, suddenly –

“Did you mean what you said earlier? That I’m currently not considered mentally adequate and therefore not accountable for my actions?”

Jupiter frowns, puzzled by the unexpected turn of the conversation. “Yes, I did. Why, should you be?” she returns the question, focusing her attention on the pancake that’s attempting to burn itself to death. The auto-da-fé is prevented by a quick flip of a spatula.

“No, I shouldn’t,” he states cheerfully. “That means I can do this.”

Before Jupiter has time to turn back to see what criminal deed Caine has in mind – his words did sound ominous – a strong arm hugs her from behind. The motion is so quick and unexpected it momentarily stuns her. While the cook is being effectively distracted and immobilized with her elbows pinned to her sides, Caine’s other arm sneaks around her to steal the pancake right out of the sizzling skillet.

An instant later the restraint around Jupiter’s torso is gone and the pancake thief is making a sharp exit.

“Oh, you!” Jupiter whirls around and lunges after Caine, managing to slap his retreating butt with the spatula despite his attempt to evade her weapon at the last moment by arching forward. For a human, to hit a lycantant who’s trying to escape them is quite an achievement. She must admit, she’s mighty proud of herself.

Caine jumps sideways, laughing so hard with his mouth full that she’s afraid he might choke on the stolen goodies.

“Cheekiness is the second happiness,” Jupiter grumbles.

Swallowing his ill-gotten gain with visible difficulty (serves him right!), Caine declares, “He who doesn’t risk, doesn’t get to drink the celebratory champagne! Or eat pancakes straight out of the pan. Which is the only reasonable way to eat pancakes!”

“I’m seriously considering leaving you hungry this morning,” she threatens.

“No, you’re not!” – Damn those lie-detecting abilities! – “You’d never leave me hungry; you’re too much of a softie for that,” Caine demurs, creeping closer to the stack of pancakes with all the deadly grace of an apex predator.

“There’s nothing wrong with my being a softie! I’m not supposed to be hard,” she parries, annoyed, hiding the future breakfast in the cabinet behind her legs from any further theft attempts. “That’s a job for you guys.”

Caine freezes at the double entendre. The colour he’s turning reminds Jupiter that she wanted to find some strawberry jam to serve with the pancakes – made with honey instead of sugar, of course: there’s no sugar on Havet, sadly. She misses sugar.

“Are you – are you assigning me with it, Your Majesty?!”

Now it’s her turn to freeze. She nearly drops the skillet, too. “What?! No!”

“What a disappointment!” Caine sighs dramatically in mock-dejection.

With that parting shot he disappears into the safety of the bathroom before Jupiter, numb with shock,
gets any chance to retaliate.

Coward.

Oh, she will get her own back!

When Caine returns, Jupiter wordlessly puts a scorchingly hot skillet on the table in front of him, sliding two-thirds of the pancake stack into it.

He says he likes it better that way.

Ass.

She then proceeds to take her seat, puts some jam on her pancakes (she misses butter!) and gets two sheaths out on the table – her own (who ever eats without reading?!?) and a spare one, handing the latter to Caine.

He takes the offering, but eyes it in puzzlement. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Whatever you’d like: surf the Space, shoot monsters, watch porn, read philosophical essays on the meaning of life… Just keep yourself entertained while I’m working. I don’t want you to die of boredom.”

She observes – not without certain vindictive satisfaction – as another of Caine’s treacherous blushes overtakes his skin.

Bingo.

*An eye for an eye, buddy, an embarrassment for an embarrassment.*

Although his reaction is not quite as jaw-dropping as she hoped – not quite as jaw-dropping as the one *she* had just minutes earlier.

“You wouldn’t mind me watching porn around you?” Caine questions, looking like he might have forgotten about his ravenous appetite.

Out of all the options she’s listed, the only one he’s heard is *porn*.

Typical.

“Why would I care what you watch? Just feed the audio to your i-comm so that the sound does not distract me.”

“But it’s *porn*!”

“So?”

“It’s only enjoyable while it’s secret and forbidden! What fun is it to watch with your explicit permission?”

Not quite the response she expected. So far, Caine is winning their… *game*?

Are they *playing*?

*Since when did she start paying it enough mind to keep score*?!
“Don’t tell me I’ve just ruined your personal life!” Jupiter retorts.

Caine huffs. “You haven’t. Human pornography, as curious as it is, doesn’t work on lycantants. Images and sounds aren’t enough, we need, err, something more specific.”

“Really?! Then how do you?.. Wait, don’t tell me. That’s an intrusive personal question, you don’t have to answer it.” Besides, if he answers it, she’s pretty sure he’ll win one more point because the information most likely will be mortifying.

“I could enlighten you,” he offers generously with a shit-eating grin, despite being red as a freshly-boiled crab. It looks like he enjoys embarrassing her no less than she enjoys making him blush.

“I’d rather you didn’t. I don’t want to picture panty-sniffing lycantants while I’m trying to work. Oh, shit. Now I’ll picture them anyway!”

Damn. She’s stepped into this one, hasn’t she?

Caine guffaws at her with shameless abandon. “Point to me!”

“The lengths some people would go to in order to score,” Jupiter grouches, mock-annoyed, and Caine’s laughter chokes off with a gurgle. “The point is mine!” she sing-songs, breaking into an obnoxious smirk.

“Let’s call it even?”

“Sounds fair.”

Cain digs into his breakfast with the gusto that warms Jupiter’s heart. There is no better compliment to a cook than a hearty appetite and Caine is extremely generous with his munching, slurping praise. He lavishly lathers the pancakes with the jam, rolls them up into fat tubes and swallows each one in a couple of gargantuan bites, sloppily squeezing the filling out of the farther end in the process. When it drips onto his hands or the skillet, he doesn’t hesitate to lick it up.

Jupiter winces, watching as he cleans a particularly bad drip off his sleeve with his tongue – how long is that thing?! A tongue is not supposed to be that long!

“Can you touch the tip of your nose with your tongue?” she blurts in spite of herself.

“Uh-huh,” Caine nods without pausing his champing.

“And your chin?”

“Sure.” He puts away the half-eaten pancake. “Why, do you have any particular use for my tongue in mind, Your Majesty?”

“Nope. It’s just abstractly awesome. Like a giraffe’s.”

“A giraffe’s?”

“Have you seen a giraffe’s tongue? It’s long as a snake and black! So cute!” she enthuses.

“Does my tongue lose cuteness points for not being black?” Caine asks worriedly.

“You’re not a giraffe, so no, it doesn’t.”

He grins, “Thanks.”
“But you really should stop licking your clothes. It’s awfully unhygienic!”

“Lycantants have a very strong immune system, Your Majesty,” Caine assures her, resuming his relations with the unfinished pancake. “Don’t worry about me getting sick on you.”

“Speaking of hygiene,” she starts, trying to formulate the issue that’s been bothering her for some time in the most tactful way possible, “don’t you think your uniform could use a wash? I mean, if it can be washed in water.”

The lycantant swallows yet another pancake whole, – how does he even manage that? She can’t get the thing into her mouth unless she cuts it into quarters! – and answers, “It can be washed, and it does get washed regularly.”

“How?! I’ve never once seen you take it off. It’s like your second skin! I sometimes think it grows on you.” There goes her tactfulness.

“Jupiter, I don’t need as much sleep as you do,” Caine tells her seriously. “I told you that before, but you didn’t believe me. I have plenty of time at night to do whatever needs to be done, like washing my clothes, or myself.”

She stares silently at him for a few seconds. “You mean you walk around the house naked while I sleep? Since you don’t have any other clothes to change into?”

He nods absently, eyeing the pancakes that are left on her plate. “Are you going to finish those?” She wordlessly pushes the plate towards him, trying to process the latest piece of news.

“Thanks.” Caine quickly rolls one up, then glances up at her, “Jupiter? Why do you smell funny? Is something wrong?”

“It’s just…” she flounders for an answer. Failing to find a polite one, she goes with the truth, “I’m sorry, but there’s something creepy about what you’ve just told me.”

Honestly, Jupiter is surprised at her own reaction. She’s fine with nudity as long as it’s out in the open; she wouldn’t bat an eye if Caine strolled around without a stitch on in daylight, plain and honest, but something about him doing it at night, in secret, while she’s asleep just doesn’t sit well with her.

“Would you rather I walked around the house naked while you’re awake?” Caine asks, his eyes crinkling with mild amusement.

“Says the guy who wouldn’t even let me disrobe to take a skinny dip!”

“What do you mean, I wouldn’t let you? I haven’t said a word against it!”

“The tint of your ears was objection enough.”

Caine’s face turns solemn. “Your Majesty, I don’t have any problems with my own nudity, it’s only yours I have issues with.”

“Now, that’s just unfair! You saunter about in the state of nature to your heart’s content; I try to take off my swimsuit for five minutes and you nearly get a stroke!”

“I don’t think I was at any risk of having a stroke,” he tells her, his cheeks pinking into a lovely watermelon hue. Despite that, his lips are quivering with a barely contained smile. “My concern was
of the opposite nature.”

“What do you mean, ‘of the opposite nature’? The opposite of a stroke is a hypotensive crisis; how my undressing would result in your low blood pressure?”

“A stroke happens when all blood rushes up into the head. I was worried that the blood might drain down from it,” he explains, his voice slightly choked. “I’m not allowed to have an erection in your presence.”

She openly gapes at him, “There is a rule about that?!!”

“In the Private Security, there is a rule about everything,” Caine assures her firmly. “Since it’s Queen we’re dealing with.”

“Why, and there’s no clause about foot blowing?” Jupiter humphs ironically, referring to their scent-marking exchange. “Such an oversight on your Commander’s part! I’m disappointed in him. Gods, ‘foot blowing’ sounds so filthy when I say it out loud! Like something straight out of some hardcore fetish porn.” She grows quiet, trying to figure out how that process could be carried out in practice. It’s an interesting theoretic puzzle.

Caine’s flush turns from watermelon to cranberry. He even halts his chewing for a moment. “I hope you don’t consider what I did filthy.”

“In truth, I don’t consider anything sex-related filthy,” Jupiter replies sincerely. “Neither do I consider what you did sex-related. You may pale down now.”

“I wish I could,” he mutters, then offers earnestly, “If my walking around naked while you’re asleep bothers you, I’ll stop.”

It does bother Jupiter at some subconscious level to a disturbing degree, but if she’s honest, her being skeeved out is probably rooted in her fear of a sexual assault, and Caine is the last person she expects it from.

Don’t let your fears grow by indulging them.

“Caine,” she tells him firmly, “as long as you get enough sleep, your nighttime activities do not concern me. You are cooped up with me around the clock here; it’s nice that you’ve found some time for yourself. Feel free to do whatever you like.”

“Thank you,” he responds, but doesn’t’ return to eating, apparently thinking something over. “You know,” he starts hesitantly, “you should feel free to do whatever you like, too. If you don’t like swimming in a suit, you can take it off. I’ll do my best not to react to it. After all, that’s what I’ve been supposed to do all along.”

“You know what puzzles me,” she says musingly, stealing back a piece of pancakes off his ‘plate’ and dunking it in jam, “you said that images didn’t work on lycantants. How come you’re worried about, you know, breaking the rules, simply by watching me undress?”

“I said that images didn’t work by themselves, that we needed something more specific. And you are not a hologram, you smell.”

“I beg your pardon?!” Jupiter knows she must stink to the lycantant, but he is not supposed to just go out and say it! Besides, didn’t he tell her earlier that she smelled nice in a gastronomic kind of way? If Caine’s concerned about getting an erection… Does that mean lycantants like to fuck their food?!!
She regrets starting this conversation in the first place. There are some things she’s better off not knowing.

“I didn’t mean it as an offense, Jupiter,” Caine responds softly. “The fact is that you are a living being, and every living being emits a certain odour.”

“But how can it be both comestible and erotic?”

The lycantant is silent for a while, frowning in thought. Then he comes up with –

“You like the sea, right?”

“I love the sea,” she replies passionately, unsure what it has to do with anything.

“You like looking at it, you like swimming in it, you like fishing in it… Do you like how it smells?”

“Of course I do!”

“So whenever you sense that scent, you are reminded of all those different things you like doing with it.”

“I see where you are going with this. But food and sex are two things that differ so vastly that one cannot be associated with the other!” Jupiter tries her best not to sound like a judgmental asshole, knows she’s probably coming off as one anyway, yet persists, genuinely attempting to understand.

“Can’t they? Don’t humans use spice or fruit smells to scent their skin, which they generally do to make themselves more sexually appealing? Some people get aroused by feeding their partners, others get off by being hand-fed. There are certain sexual practices that involve foodstuffs. Or, on the contrary, eating something that’s not exactly food.”

She recalls how many times she had to swallow ‘something that’s not exactly food’, and nods. Good thing she’s finished that stolen piece of pancake: her appetite is gone again and it would be bad manners to offer it back.

Caine wordlessly pours another cup of coffee and pushes it at her. (She hopes the bitter liquid will wash away the bitter taste in her mouth.)

Sometimes the lycantant’s mood sensitivity is a blessing.

No matter what changes Jupiter makes to her daily routine after returning – if remotely – to her duties, two things stay invariable. Every evening, when the sea is at its gentlest, she goes for a long swim – while Caine scrutinizes the waves for many dangers they ought to hold from the beach, – and watches the sunset afterwards. For her, it’s a chance to be all alone for a while – the guard never joins her in the sea, probably for security reasons, and she never invites him to – and to be at one with nature. Both are essential to help her keep the emotional stability she’s with great difficulty managed to regain. It cannot be called happiness or even contentment by any means, but at least that acute, gut-wrenching, stabbing misery is gone.

That’s one boat she doesn’t want to rock by any means.

Even though Caine keeps his distance while she swims – with her tacit approval – Jupiter let him know early on that it’s not necessary when she surveys a sunset simply by patting the space next to her. He joined her then, and he’s been joining her ever since.
There are few spectacles more soul-settling than the sun slowly descending into a huge body of water. The unshakable regularity with which it goes down at the end of each day – all the while never repeating the same display twice – and the imperceptible graduality of the process – you know the changes are there, but can’t really register them without looking away for a while – fill your heart with the serenity only nature can give. While it can be perfect time for reflection, for Jupiter it’s a rare opportunity to clear her head of any thoughts and descent into absent-minded stupor, when the brain relinquishes its higher functions and fully gives itself to the sensory perception, the physical exhaustion after a long swimming session helping it on its way.

It is like sex, but for the mind.

Some people call it meditation.

This evening Jupiter habitually enjoys her nightly show, sitting cross-legged on the end of the wooden pier in front of the house. The sun that is still bright, but no longer dazzling is half-drowning in rose-tinted gouache mist stretching along the horizon. It casts a vibrant raspberry glow onto the dimming sky – not unlike the hue of Caine’s blushes – and an equally colourful sun-glade across the water, giving the dark sea a bordeaux sheen, making it look like delicious red wine. The water is rather choppy tonight and the breeze is fresher than usual, chilling Jupiter through her wet bathing suit and the towel.

“It’s getting colder. We may have to leave soon,” she remarks, regretful, not looking away from the sky, rubbing the small of her back with her hands to warm it up.

For the last couple of days her back has been aching for no apparent reason – might she have overdone it with overzealous weeding, taking out her frustrations on the poor plants that happened to be unwanted in her garden? Or maybe she’s been spending too much time hunched over her sheath? Whatever the cause of the discomfort, exposing any aching part of one’s anatomy to a cool night breeze for a prolonged period of time is never a good idea.

She hears Caine sigh and shift. As she turns to glance at him, she sees him lower himself on the pier planks behind her and curl his body around her backside, putting his head onto his folded arm next to her hip.

She observes his ministrations in mute astonishment, raising an eyebrow at him when their eyes meet. The question ‘What in the ‘verse are you doing?!’ remains unsaid.

And, since she actually has not voiced it, Caine chooses not to answer it, closing his eyes against her inquiring gaze.

At first she flounders, at a loss how to react. This closeness is… not exactly uncalled-for, but – unexpected. Too abrupt. It is the first time Caine has initiated such an extensive physical contact – it’s not intimate, exactly, but intimate enough. For a beat, she considers moving away, but that would make things awkward and she detests awkwardness.

What’s more, she’d hate the unease she initially had with Caine to make a return appearance.

Jupiter contemplates the lycantant for a moment. Surely, his forwardness deserves a reproach of some kind. Then again, the sunset is glorious and she’s warmer now, so she can enjoy it longer. What’s to complain about?

Instead, she notices the awkward angle Caine’s head is at and automatically pats her thigh. The invitation doesn’t need to be repeated: one quick shift, and his head is already there, his eyes still tightly closed. The moment his temple makes contact with her skin, she can feel the tension leave his
body in one long, relieved exhale.

Absently, she moves to pet his hair, catching herself only when her palm is close enough to feel the warmth radiating off his skin. Her hand halts mid-air.

Without opening his eyes, he briefly presses his head firmer into her leg – a bit like a cat would head-butt its master’s hand in a silent demand – cats never ask, it’s not in their nature, all they ever do is demand – for caress.

Before she’s had a chance to reconsider, Jupiter gives in to his wordless request – just like she would do to a cat’s – her hand coming down to lightly scratch at his scalp, threading fingers through his close-cropped hair. The texture feels odd: it differs greatly from Kiza’s heavy tresses that streak between Jupiter’s fingers like ripened grain or Finnick’s locks that slip through her grasp with weightless ease of a silk scarf. Instead of a sliding sensation, there’s a prickling one: short and rough, Caine’s hair feels more like bristle, tickling pleasantly at the skin of her palm.

Another ghost of a nuzzle on her thigh feels like an acknowledgment and a gratitude.

Caine’s eyes remain firmly shut.

She looks away and into the sunset, while her hand keeps petting his head.

This action isn’t prompted by her sense of duty, by the responsibility of the superior, like when she was deliberately calming him down during the thunderstorm. It has no purpose, no intent behind it. The contact should seem weird, should seem foreign, the reasonable, logical part of her brain is telling her: they’re nowhere near as close as their interaction would suggest.

Her instincts, however, are quiet – like they usually are when she is doing the right thing.

After all, petting strays seems like a natural thing to do.

They’re merely providing one another with what the other needs: he’s shielding her aching back from the cold wind, and she’s giving him the touch he’s asked for. It’s a simple enough exchange. So she stops overanalyzing it and lets her doubts dissolve into the beauty her eyes are witnessing and the enjoyable tickling brush of his hair against her fingers.

Actually, it is surprising how much warmer Jupiter feels now with Caine wrapped around her. Logically, considering the insulating qualities of the guard’s uniform, she should be feeling colder right now.

She gives the leather-like fabric an experimental touch.

Yep, cold.

That means that the sudden warmth she’s feeling is produced by her own body.

It’s born inside of her.

Weird.

At that moment Caine gives another deep sigh of contentment, distracting her from that line of thought. A low, steady rumble starts at the point where his throat is pressed against her leg, and soon it is vibrating through her whole self. The short textbook entry on lycantants Jupiter read as a teenager didn’t prepare her for this: it never said that the splice species could purr. Then again, why the quality that lacks any practical use would be described in the textbook?
No matter how useless, the purring of a being that size feels fantastic.

Jupiter is tempted to move her hand just a little bit and press it over the lycantant’s throat, just to feel this mesmerizing sound reverberate through her palm. But she recalls Caine’s peculiar attitude to neck-touching and his heated ‘Stinger can touch my neck, you can touch both of ours, but I can’t touch either of yours!’ She doesn’t want to do something simply because she’s entitled to it, so she sticks to running her fingers through his hair and concentrating on the hypnotic tremors seeping into her thigh.

If this is how Caine’s enjoyment feels, she wants him to be happy forever.

Some deep, instinctual part of her suspects that the chilly night breeze might have been merely a pretext, that she might have been subtly, surreptitiously fooled into providing something she initially wasn’t quite prepared to give: with a few simple, wordless movements Caine might have tricked himself a petting session out of Queen.

Then again, it’s the first time Caine has ever asked anything of her – asked for himself, not in an attempt to keep either his best friend or his queen safe – and it’s something as simple as a tactile contact. He obviously enjoys it, if his current thrumming delight is anything to go by. Come to think of it, the lycantant has never missed a chance to touch her or be touched by her.

 Was the quick hug this morning a distraction for the pancake stealing, or was the pancake stealing a decoy for the hug?

Weren’t Caine’s tactile advances invariably innocent, the tendency would be worrying and she would put an immediate stop to them, but as it is…

She lets it slide.

Eventually, Jupiter gets herself to read Wormtongue’s report on Odair – while meticulously cross-referencing it with similar reports from Stinger and the Internal Security.

This time, her reaction isn’t despair or devastation, oh no – it’s very healthy anger. By the time she’s done studying all the available information, she’s so livid that if Finnick was there, she would strangle him with her own bare hands.

And not for the infidelity, either.

In fact, his cheating on her seems like a minor issue in comparison to what she’s just learned.

Her own certainty – ‘Finn might be many things, but he’s not cruel’ – comes to taunt her from the past.

Oh, Odair is cruel. Whether by intention or by mere thoughtlessness, but the motherfucker is cruel all right.

Cradling her head in her shaking hands – fury tends to electrify the body with an excessive amount of adrenaline, spurring it into taking some drastic action, which isn’t always the best thing to do under the influence of any strong emotion – Jupiter keeps chanting inwardly, ‘Don’t make any rash decisions, don’t make any rash decisions…’ She needs to calm the fuck down, before she goes back and starts killing fools.

Once the tremor in her hands subsides, she marches out of her study and straight onto the pier in
front of the house, perching on its very edge. Not a minute later she hears the boards creak under heavy footsteps, and Caine sits down an arm’s length away from her. He was tactful enough to make himself scarce while she was going through the stressful texts, but apparently, her being this close to water – which he still considers a danger – has been enough to draw him out of hiding.

“I couldn’t drown myself here if I tried,” she snaps at him, irritated by his overprotectiveness – or maybe because she just really wants to snap at someone and there’s no one else in the vicinity.

“I know,” he replies mildly, “that’s not why I’m here.”

She purses her lips, holding back a retort. She’d rather be left alone right now, but if he wants to be there for her, he is entitled. After all he has done for her here on Havet, together with everything he did earlier, it’s the least of the things he is entitled to.

The lycantant doesn’t ask any questions, doesn’t pry, wordlessly sensing Jupiter’s stressed-out mood; he just sits there, silently sharing her distress with her, managing to alleviate her burden by shouldering a part of it, without actually knowing what it is.

Sometimes sitting close and being quiet together is all you can do for a person.

Eventually, Jupiter speaks up. “I’m so tired of this shit,” she vents bitterly, peering at the sea, addressing no one in particular.

Fortunately, Cane is smart enough to realize it’s not his company she’s referring to. “What kind of shi… stuff, exactly?” he ventures.

“Royal shit. Never being able to trust anyone, never knowing what to expect from people, never anticipating where the next blow will come from…”

“Has something happened back at the alcazar?” Caine’s voice sounds deeply concerned now.

“Something has. Or, rather, something did. I’ve simply just found out the true extent of it.”

“Are you going back?”

She shakes her head. “If I go back right now, there will be casualties. Very intentional casualties.”

“Don’t see a problem,” he shrugs.

“And if one of them is your beloved Commander?”

“Now I see the problem. Can I do anything to help?”

“Sure. Bite Stinger’s head off, would you?”

“Unless it’s an order,” Caine responds carefully, “I’d rather not. It’s not an order, is it?”

She sighs. “No, it’s not. Although at the moment I really wish I could smother Stinger, then revive him just so I could smother that secretive motherfucker again!”

“I meant – can I do anything for you, now?”

Jupiter recalls the guard asking the similar question under the similar circumstances. That time, she decided for him what he could do for her and nothing good came of it. Maybe this time she should let Caine decide what he can or cannot do to help?
Is this how trust begins?


Except there is nothing ‘just’ about it, in either sense of the word.

Caine slightly leans his torso backward, dropping his hands to either side of his lap in a clear invitation. “May I hold you again?”

She scoffs, “How will that make anything better?”

“It won’t.” – his answer is immediate and honest. “But it may make you feel a bit better. And that would be a start.”

She eyes him dubiously. Sure, whenever shit happened in the past, Finnick’s arms brought some relief, but that was Finnick, and now he is… unavailable.

As well as the root of the problem. Just to think how much she trusted him!..

Nope, not going there. Life is dismal enough in itself to additionally complicate it with angst.

“You think it will make me feel better?” she asks.

Caine shrugs. “It might. If not, what do you stand to lose?”

Indeed, what? Her dignity? Considering what she went through with Caine there to witness it, that ship sailed long ago.

“Might as well give it a try,” she concedes.

He helps her as she crawls sideways onto his lap, circling his hands loosely around her frame, not attempting to draw her any closer. There’s nothing of a joke about it this time, unlike the first time he did this: no playfulness, no mirth, no provocation. However, there is care – one that doesn’t need big words or grand gestures, it’s so pervasive it saturates the very air between them. It’s a silent, sombre exchange: he offers her comfort when she needs it, and she accepts it, giving him the satisfaction of knowing that he’s being kind, being useful, being appreciated.

Of mattering.

When she’s sitting like this, their eyes are nearly on the same level, but Caine deliberately avoids making eye contact, because it would be too intrusive, refusing to make her feel any more vulnerable than she already does. Grateful for his tact – or his instincts; it doesn’t matter whether he’s doing it consciously or not, it’s helping either way – Jupiter leans her head into the crook of his neck. As his heartbeat pushes steadily against her forehead, she feels her anger gradually subside, soothed by its calming rhythm, leaving only melancholy in its wake.

“Things are gonna be okay, you know,” Caine murmurs eventually.

“No they won’t.”

“Well, they’re gonna get better than they are now. You’re gonna make them better.”

“Easy for you to say!” she scoffs, although without any malice. “You won’t be the one to do the work!”
“I’ll gladly do any work you’ll allocate to me.”

“Oh, that’s easy. You’re great at what you do, so simply keep doing it. I, on the contrary, suck at my job. I’m so tired of floundering like a blind kitten thrust into water, so fucking tired of not knowing the shit that’s going on under my very nose. And then, when I learn about it, it’s so atrocious I wish I didn’t know about it, because now I’m supposed to deal with it and I have no idea how!” she throws her hand up – the other being jammed in between her side and Caine’s chest – then drops it listlessly in helpless frustration. “I wish queening came with a manual for dummies.”

She knows she shouldn’t be saying any of that out loud with an audience around: Queen always ought to know what she is doing, ought to be certain about her decisions and actions and never show any signs of doubt or regret.

Oh, fuck it. Here on Havet Jupiter has the luxury of not being Queen for once.

And Caine is good at keeping the Crown’s secrets.

“You know, Jupiter,” – Caine’s been alternating between calling her ‘Your Majesty’ and ‘Jupiter’ seemingly at random, but in this case his use of her first name appears to be very deliberate, – “I think everybody wishes their life came with a manual for dummies. Anyone would avoid their mistakes if they could.”

“I’ve made so many mistakes, you have no idea!”

Finnick is just another entry added to the already long list of her numerous errors, so why does it hurt so much?

“The more mistakes we make and, more importantly, admit to, the less self-righteous we become,” Caine reasons. “When a person feels self-righteous, people around them usually suffer. Especially when the said person is a leader.”

“I am so tired, Caine, so tired of trying, trying again, trying some more, almost getting there – and failing.”

“Only those who do nothing never fail.”

“Yeah, but it seems like all I ever do is fail.”

“I know it means little, but I’ll tell you this. If someone has to rule my life, I want it to be you,” he replies calmly.

Jupiter pulls away slightly to glare at Caine in annoyance. Why do people like him keep believing in her? They are the major reason why she can’t simply give up – the prospect that seems so tempting lately.

“Sure, welcome my parasitizing you, why don’t you?” she grouches, sarcastic – she can’t help but feel a bit resentful. If it weren’t for splices – as well as those poor unsuspecting terrsies that are intended for RegeneX feedstock – she could just hand the reigns over to the Crown Prince; Balem seems so much better at leadership! At the very least, he doesn’t suffer from having to haul his part of the Abrasax Empire and seems to have much more order within his realm. He probably would make a strong, efficient regent. Let’s be honest: she is a young, inexperienced, weak leader. If Jupiter thought that Balem would be better at being the head of their House – and in many aspects, he would be – she would give up her throne without hesitation: she’s never had the greed for power all royals are supposed to have. Balem’s methods, however…
“Maybe it’s not parasitism but symbiosis?” Caine counters, jarring her out of her uneasy thoughts. “I’m doing my part of the job and you are doing yours.”

“For that to be symbiosis, it should be *mutually* beneficial; I ought to be contributing something positive, making a difference… But all I ever do is run around in circles, not letting things get worse but failing to improve them, either. I am a useless ruler!” she protests. “I’m not cut out for this!”

“I *am* cut out for the lot I’ve been given. All splices are genetically tailored specifically for their future occupation. Would you like to be a splice instead?”

Not having a choice of occupation by birth is bad enough, but not having that choice *on a genetic level?!* No, thank you.

Then again, maybe being well adjusted to the fate she cannot change either way would be better? Hell if she knows. She’s not a splice, and that’s that.

Jupiter shrugs, making an effort to be tactful – and truthful at the same time. “From what I’ve seen of you, your kind are quick, resilient and strong. The qualities anyone could use more of, regardless of what they do for a living. Hell, I would give a lot to have your reaction time!” she exclaims, recalling the lycantant’s spear-fishing.

“All military splices are also aggressive and extremely territorial,” Caine starts in a quiet, serious voice. “We’re made to defend what we consider our own. And when push comes to shove we resort to violence really quickly. You had the misfortune to witness it yourself, Your Majesty,” the guard reminds her, alluding to the attack that cast a macabre shadow on their first meeting. – As if she could forget! – “We have partially suppressed self-preservation instincts and are prone to take more risks. No guts, no glory, you know?” He smirks, but his smirk is more akin to a sardonic grimace. “Those qualities are detrimental in normal, civil life. Such people are usually called ‘daredevils’, ‘hotheads’, but mostly…”

“Idiots,” Jupiter mutters, suddenly recalling how many times she’s been tempted to call Caine out on his foolery.

“Yes, that,” the lycantant confirms with satisfaction, his bitter smile bizarrely morphing into a wide happy grin. It is as dazzling as it is unexpected. All Caine’s smiles still take Jupiter by surprise, but this one more than most.

“Why are you smiling?”

He shakes his head, “No reason.”

“But you are grinning like…”

“An idiot?” he prompts, beaming even wider. “Maybe I *am* one.”

“Ri-ight,” she drawls, her voice dripping with irony. “An idiot who knows words like ‘symbiosis’. A total moron, sure.”

Caine snorts a laugh. “Maybe that was just a one-off.”

“It wasn’t. No unintelligent person would use words like ‘stimuli’ or ‘haematomas’ while on the brink of death,” she states, recalling their interaction when she was interrogating him. “When people are distressed, they tend to use the words that come naturally to them. Most would use shorter, simpler ones, or just expletives or obscenities. You were speaking like you always speak;” – with
surprise, Jupiter realizes that she’s spent enough time with Caine to learn how he normally speaks in everyday life, – “which demonstrated outstanding self-control, as well as above average intelligence and erudition.”

“You still remember what I said at the interrogation?” Caine exhales in obvious astonishment.

“It was a…” – traumatic – “…memorable experience. You weren’t at all what I’d expected. The way you carried yourself…” she frowns, recollecting. “It made me doubt myself, doubt everything I’d thought about you, including my determination to see you executed. My doubt saved your life,” the queen tells him somberly. “And now I know your deepest, darkest secret,” Jupiter tacks on lightly.

“And what is that?” Caine inquires with a smile, but there’s a surprising amount of anxiety behind it.

“You are a closet nerd!”

For a beat, he stares at her in mute surprise, then bursts out laughing, burying his face into her shoulder, tickling her skin with his breath, his guffaws quaking them both.

She glows at his laughter.

“By the way, how do you know words like that?” Jupiter asks after his mirth subsides. “Your vocabulary goes far beyond the one that military splices usually have.”

The lycantant’s face sobered up. “I am literate, Your Majesty,” he replies quietly, with a hint of offense in his voice. “I know not every splice can read, but I can. I wouldn’t be in your Guard if I couldn’t.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she waves off his perceived affront. “Your being a splice does not in any way imply your illiteracy. It’s just not every literate person knows words like that. My question was: why would you read the texts that contain such words? You are a soldier. You’ll always be a soldier. Don’t you think that with the predetermined career of yours, getting knowledge that’s irrelevant to the said career is kind of – useless?”

Everything seems useless to her lately, the absence of meaning making her future appear nothing but an endless hollow, draining all her life energy like vacuum empties anything it comes in contact with.

“You know,” Caine starts in a careful voice, “in the olden days, army officers used to be one of the most highly educated strata of society. One cannot be dim if one has to lead other people, to be responsible for them. At least, one shouldn’t. Sorry, I guess I don’t have to tell you that,” he shoots the queen an abashed smile. “As for usefulness, well… All knowledge is useless, unless it’s necessary for our immediate survival,” the lycantant admits, adding, “That doesn’t mean it’s not interesting.” He hesitates for a beat, then asks cautiously, “Do you – do you disapprove of my interest, Your Majesty?”

Jupiter blinks at him, startled by his question. Is that how her question came across – like she was reprimanding him? Indeed, sometimes what you say and what people actually hear are two vastly different things. She energetically shakes her head.

“No, I was simply curious, that’s all.”

The weirdest thing, she was curious – like, genuinely interested in what he had to say. There’s something about Caine that whets her curiosity, even when she can’t scrape up any for anything else.

Huh.
“See?” he grins. “Interesting.”

“Oh, shut up,” she grumbles. “No need to sound so conceited.”

“No need,” he agrees, positively beaming now, “but it is such a pleasure. Not every day you win an argument with Queen.”

The sod.

“I knew there’s insolence buried deep underneath all that outward deference of yours,” Jupiter remarks.

That wipes that cheeky grin off his face at once – the effect that doesn’t bring her any satisfaction. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” he hastily backpedals.

“No, it’s nice to know you have a backbone,” she smirks. “After all, lycantants are vertebrates. And I don’t like doormats.”

“Does that mean you like me?”

She drops her smile and scowls, “Don’t push it, Wise.”

“Do you mind if I pull instead?” he asks playfully, glaringly unintimidated, tugging at her lightly – it’s more of a hint than a real attempt to draw her closer.

After some inner struggle – one that takes an embarrassingly short amount of time – she closes her eyes and lets her head fall onto his neck again.

“Apparently, I don’t.”

She stays like that for a while, the only sounds interrupting their silence are the splashing of the sea, Caine’s quiet heartbeat – or maybe it is her own? – and sporadic distant cries of seagulls. It gives her the sense of marrow-deep tranquility she hasn’t felt for a long, long time.

Her soul is at rest.

The setting sun has painted the sky a juicy shade of peach, saturating everything beneath it with warm, golden glow. The clouds are silhouetted against the apricot backdrop with dazzlingly bright lining, downy and ephemeral. The intense fruity hues are bleeding into the sea, diluting in the water, mixing with turquoise blues and silvery grays.

Eventually, Jupiter crawls off Caine’s lap – she’s lighter than him, yes, but far from being a feather; his legs must have fallen asleep by now, not that he would ever complain: men can be so silly in such matters – but doesn’t go far, ensconcing herself a mere arm length away. Why would she want to leave? She likes this place, likes being here, in the company of someone like Caine – quiet, unobtrusive and understanding, – likes watching the sun set; despite all the shit that she’s been through and all the shit that’s still awaiting for her back at the alcazar, she is enjoying the moment she is in.

She’s doing nothing. She thinks of nothing. She wants nothing, except for this moment to stretch on into eternity.

Although maybe the knowledge that it’s so short-lived and fleeting is what makes it so enjoyable in the first place?
She doesn’t know. She doesn’t care.
She is at peace.

First thing the next morning Jupiter tucks her sheath under her arm and sets out into the garden. There’s so much work to do the queen doesn’t want to lose any time on breakfast, she’ll forage something on her way. Passing a gazebo buried under a rampant grapevine she absently plucks a cluster of tiny, obsidian black grapes – seedless and honey-sweet – and a large leaf to use as a plate. She settles under a sycamore on the circular bench surrounding its huge silvery trunk. When it comes to providing shade, there are few trees that are as good at it as sycamores with their large, thick star-shaped leaves with velvety undersides.

A sycamore is also commonly known under the vernacular of ‘a hussy’ because the outer grey layer of old bark peels off the tree in large patches, revealing the new, fresh one, in its colour and texture reminiscent of the smooth tanned skin of a woman.

Jupiter can’t help but feel an inner kinship with the tree that seems to be unwilling to keep its clothes on.

Caine joins her a minute later, dropping a boonie on her head with a sigh. Wordless, but very reproachful.

She shoots him an annoyed look. “I didn’t need that.”

“You should keep your head covered while outside,” he reminds her, sitting down with his own sheath.

“Caine, I was out in the sun for the whole of two minutes. And now I’m in a dense shadow. No risk of getting sunstroke here.”

“Better to be safe than sorry.”

“You’re fussing too much,” she grumbles, not bothering to remove the hat, reluctant to dismiss Caine’s caring gesture, even though his care feels excessive.

“Nope. I’m taking my revenge,” he grins, pointing up at his own boonie – the one that she all but forced on him a few days into their stay on Havet.

Her lips pull up at his teasing tone. “I knew this was a vendetta, you cunning, vengeful beast,” she comments.

Caine’s smile falters as he winces, – shit, that was a bad choice of words.

Acting on an instinctive impulse, Jupiter leans over to nudge his shoulder with her head. “Sorry. Didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know. It’s just… When it comes to lycantants, people mean it like that too often.”

“I’m not ‘people’, I’m me,” she points out drily.

“Yeah,” he draws out in a pensive voice. “It wouldn’t surprise me if…” he cuts off suddenly.

“If?..” she prompts, realizing that Caine’s not going to finish his thought. Glancing at him, she witnesses in bewilderment as his cheeks fill with the ruddy hue of a robin’s throat. Why is he
blushing now?! Neither of them has said or done anything remotely blush-worthy!

“If it was another of your peculiar terms of endearment,” he finishes quietly, his answer leaving her more mystified than she was before.

“My peculiar terms of endearment?...” Does she have any terms of endearment, let alone peculiar ones? She’s never paid any attention to that particular matter.

“You called me a moron,” Caine reminds her, “and straight after that proceeded to tell me why you thought I was smart.”

“And?..”

“When you called me fat, did you think I was obese?”

“Ever heard of irony? It’s painfully obvious that you’re anything but overweight. And I don’t condone body shaming, so I don’t engage in it.”

“You would have never called me a beast if you still thought I was,” Caine concludes with an elated air of ecstatic epiphany.

Jupiter frowns at him. She recalls thinking that Caine was a monster once, but it seems so long ago – as though a whole lifetime has passed – when she last felt intimidated by the lycantant. Now it feels like the phrase ‘a gentle giant’ was invented specifically for a creature like him. That much strength and lethality enveloped in utter placidity and composure appears to be paradoxical, but that’s probably what the creators of lycantants were going for: if such deadly beings were aggressive in everyday life, there would be no reining them in, and controllability is the first and foremost requirement on any and all splice species.

“And that realization has made you blush?”

“It’s nice... It’s a pleasure to know that you really don’t think that anymore,” he admits, his flush deepening into a darker shade of a bullfinch’s breast.

So Caine blushes not only when he’s embarrassed, when he’s pleased, too?

Huh.

Good to know.

She has no idea why it’s good to know – it seems to be a rather useless piece of knowledge – but nevertheless, she suspects she won’t be forgetting it anytime soon.

“If calling you names makes you blush that prettily, I can think up a few more,” Jupiter offers teasingly. “I’m generous like that. The monarch should be magnanimous to instill love in the hearts of her subjects.”

Caine shakes his head, chuckling. “Thank you, Your Majesty, but I think I’m good for the time being. Besides, ‘prettily’? I blush very handsomely, thank you very much,” he sasses back.

Hmm, that sounds like a challenge.

Oh, buddy, I’ll blush you into submission, just you wait.

Time to change her tactics.
“I agree. You do blush very handsomely,” she confirms in all sincerity, eyeing him with earnest deliberation.

Caine, who’s already taken a breath for what probably would be a witty riposte, chokes on air. His flush is so cardinal now it’s reaching the vibrant hue of a woodpecker’s crest. She takes pity on him and turns away to peer at her sheath to save the guy any further embarrassment.

“This round is mine,” she murmurs quietly.

He snorts in response, but doesn’t say anything, admitting his defeat.

That gives Jupiter about an hour to work in peace.

But in her life, peace never lasts for long.

She’s trying to disentangle the legal lingo of the new legislative proposal that puts senior citizens at a great disadvantage but considerably benefits the Crown’s coffers, when out of the corner of her eye she notices a hand creeping slowly towards her improvised ‘plate’ to snatch some grapes. There is definite deliberation behind the exaggerated crawling movements of the fingers. This isn’t mere taking, this is stealing – as theatrical as it gets.

Apparently, someone’s come up with a new plan for his teasing game – the one that neither of them has announced outright, neither knows the rules to and whose existence both, if asked, would disavow. Jupiter realizes, of course, that in any other circumstances, with any other participants, it would be called flirting, but not with them – the mere idea is preposterous. They’re just being silly. Spontaneous. Childish. Obnoxious, at times. At times highly inappropriate, both of them. Immature. Ingenuous.

They’re just being themselves.

There are so few people in the universe Jupiter can be herself with: Kiza and…

And no one else, now. Just Kiza.

Although, at this moment, there is also Caine.

The hand keeps inching towards Jupiter’s grapes. As soon as she turns her head to glance at the ‘stealthy’ hand, it retreats slowly enough for her to notice. Knowing how quick the lycantant can be, he could have drawn it back without her eyes registering it, yet this movement is clearly meant to be observed.

Shrugging internally, Jupiter resumes her reading.

The hand starts sneaking to the leaf with the grapes again.

Another direct glance – another hasty retreat.

This time she has to purse her lips to contain a smile.

At the third attempt at the fruit thievery she looks up at Caine to witness the most innocent expression she’s ever seen on a person: ‘No, it’s not me who’s just done that. What hand? Oh, this hand? No, it’s not mine either. Never mind that it’s attached to me. I tell you, it’s not mine’.

Without a word, Jupiter pushes the leaf with the grapes towards the lycantant and proceeds with her work.
“You’re no fun,” he sighs.

She side-eyes him. “What was I supposed to do, yell at you for pilfering my food, thus violating the pecking order? You’re welcome to the grapes. Do help yourself, have as much as you like,” she coaxes, tacking on tauntingly, “Otherwise I won’t be able to call you my big fat mother hen.”

“I thought we’d agreed that I was athletic,” Caine corrects her, mock-affronted, as he pops a grape into his mouth with an overly smug smirk.

He’s clearly baiting her.

All right, she’ll bite.

“Fat.”

“Athletic. You said it yourself, and Queen’s word is law.”

“It is, and now I’m saying ‘fat’. Look at yourself! You must weigh as three of me.”

“It’s only two of you. Well, maybe two and a half. And it’s all lean muscle! See?” He pulls one of his jacket sleeves up and sticks his forearm out for her inspection.

She pokes her finger at the pale skin of the proffered limb. “It’s so not all lean muscle! I definitely feel some bone underneath.”

“But no fat!”

“No fat. But who gets chubbed up in their forearms? It’s other places that usually suffer.”

Caine gives her an amused look, crow’s feet gathering around his deviously sparkling eyes. “I didn’t think you’d like to poke at the other places, but if you wish, I could demonstrate them, too,” he eggs her on with delighted enthusiasm, raising his hands to undo his jacket.

This time the queen reacts quicker than Jupiter does. Apparently, she already has some things ingrained in her at the reflex level.

“No, thank you,” she halts the guard’s initiative, hastily covering his hands with her palm. “I’ll take your word for it.”

The answering grin is shamelessly victorious.

Conceited smirking ass. Threatening a nudist with nudity… She recognizes Stinger’s school!

“Buddy, when it comes to nudity, you have no chance of out-daring me,” she assures him. “Because for me, it simply does not matter. I have no problems with poking at any given part of your body, let alone seeing it. But as you admitted yourself, to you, nudity matters. So I’m backing down just so things wouldn’t escalate into dubious territory.” At the end of the day, theirs is a working relationship, and for all their verbal fencing it would be very wrong to take it as far as undressing on a dare, let alone allowing physical contact while doing it. “Out of the two of us, someone has to be responsible. And since I’m the boss, it ought to be me.”

“But still you’ve chickened out, so I win,” Caine brags, quirking a challenging eyebrow at her, daring her to disagree.

“You win,” she admits grudgingly. “I hereby acknowledge that you consist of an intimidating amount of top-grade lean beef and are ready to be shipped to a meat-processing plant.”
He pouts at her, “You are a sore loser.”

Jupiter shakes her head at his antics, biting back a smile as she returns to her reading. “And you’re still a big fat mother hen,” she mutters under her breath.

His responsive snicker is music to her ears.

The evening today is particularly pleasant. The air is thick and moist, there’s not a breath of wind in the balmy twilight. All colours are softened, all contrasts are blurred, the hues interbleeding into each other; all sounds are muted, distant, ethereal. The sea lazily undulates – you cannot even call that waves – the water rolling with the ponderosity of mercury, glistening with an oleous sheen in the slanting rays of the setting sun, slowly expanding onto the beach to just as languidly retreat back into itself. It looks as though the sea is breathing.

It wouldn’t surprise Jupiter if it was.

There is this weird sensation like time has stopped, as though eternity itself has descended onto Havet, enveloping the sea, the beach and everything in it into a protective cloak of changelessness, encapsulating the contents in the glass ball of pinnaculous serenity. This must be what forever feels like.

Tonight Jupiter acutely enjoys her traditional bathing session. She learnt some utterly unpleasant things lately, had to make a few utterly unpleasant decisions compromising with her own conscience – she’s always compromising with her conscience in her line of work, it’s one of the most exhausting things about it – so it feels orgasmic to submerge herself into the water and let its gentle flow wash away the filthy residue of negativity that seems to be clinging to her skin. The pain in her back has finally subsided, so nothing mars her easy gliding through the soothing cool folds of the sea.

When Jupiter’s wading out of the sea, reluctant to leave but too tired to continue swimming, she gets this strange sensation of something slipping out of her, the liquid shockingly warm compared to the much cooler sea water. She bends down to take a look and sees a trickle of red sliding down her thigh.

Oh, shit.

So that’s why her back’s been aching lately.

And then there is a loud splash. She lifts her head, but before her brain manages to process what her eyes are seeing, her visual perception is overpowered by the tactile one: a cool wave splashes at her legs and then they’re tightly gripped by two warm hands right below her buttocks. And is that…

Is that a tongue against her inner thigh?..

The touch feels scorching on her wet, wind-chilled skin.

She gasps loudly, startled.

Distracted by her gasp, the lycantant looks up. Their eyes meet. His pupils are huge, there’s something wild, chillingly savage in his gaze. His eyes aren’t human: there is no Caine behind them.

Ohshitohshitohshitohshit!..

They stare at each other for an eternity – which probably is only a couple of seconds in real time –
seemingly frozen in the paralysis of shock.

She sways once, as though drunk. His fingers dig deeper into her flesh – deep enough to hurt, deep enough to bruise. If it hasn’t been for his hands, firmly holding her legs in place, she would have already sunk back into the water.

This is surreal.

And then her gaze focuses on his blood-smothered mouth. She watches, mesmerized, as a sheen of crimson sprawls over his wet pink lips. His eyes never look away from hers as his tongue absently slips out to capture the last remaining traces of her blood off of and into his mouth.

She feels a sudden impulse to touch it – with her fingers, or better yet, with her own lips. The impulse comes out of nowhere – like a silent lightning strike during a dry storm, like a knife to your ribs in a dark back alley. For a few heartbeats, all she knows and feels is that overpowering, overwhelming urge. Her mind is blank: there are no thoughts, no logic, there’s only sheer want, burning through her lower brain – and her lower body, igniting the instincts that have been there longer than the humanity itself has existed.

And then reality comes flooding her echoingly empty head, swirling around the hot bonfire of arousal in an icy wave, crushing and drowning it in utter horror at her own reaction.

*What the actual fuck is going on?*

*What’s wrong with Caine?!*

*What’s wrong with her?!*

Well, at least her response has been more dignified than peeing herself with fright.

Thank gods for small mercies.

Caine’s eyes grow impossibly wider. His expression shifts and she sees the horror she is feeling mirrored on his face. He blinks once, twice – and springs a few paces away from her, ploughing through the water as though it offers no resistance, but then sinking heavily into the sea as if his legs no longer hold him. The wave caused by his sharp recoil pushes her gently and it’s enough for her to lose her already precarious balance and sag heavily into the sea herself.

‘It’s for the better,’ she thinks numbly, ‘the smell of blood won’t be so potent, diluted in water.’ The spray of cool splatters that she’s gotten into her face seems to have cleared her head a little.

Judging by the terrified expression on the lycantant’s face, she’s not about to be eaten.

At least there’s that.

Caine takes a sharp inhale, jarring Jupiter out of her trance. He silently extends his hand towards her, palm out, in a gesture that’s meant to be either placating or pleading, she isn’t sure which – maybe it’s both – but drops it helplessly with a quiet splash.

For an endless moment, they just keep staring at each other dumbly, absolutely horrified – though probably – *probably* – for entirely different reasons.

It’s the look of dread on Caine’s face that breaks Jupiter’s paralysis.

It feels wrong, *too* wrong.
Out of all the things out there to be afraid of, he shouldn’t be afraid of *her*.

The thought makes her remember who’s the queen here and at least attempt to regain control of both herself and the situation. She draws a long startled breath – until her lungs are about to explode with all the excess air, and exhales slowly, trying to expel her shock.

“I can’t believe you’ve just done that,” she says just to say something, to make sure she can speak again. Her voice sounds distant, foreign to her own ears.

Caine opens his mouth, trying to respond, but nothing comes out.

Frankly, she knows how it feels.

“Well, at least you didn’t maim anyone this time,” she offers as a comfort.

His face goes through a quick succession of expressions – each next is more emotional than the previous one. The mute pantomime startles a sharp wild laugh out of her.

“I thought we’d been through this: no eating queens is allowed.”

Her adopting a humorous – albeit a bit hysterical – tone seems to help Caine come to his senses.

“I…” he gulps with visible effort, then clears his throat, “I wasn’t eating.”

“Sorry, dude, but you kind of were,” she tells him, gesturing at his mouth. “Blood consumption counts as eating.”

“That wasn’t a feeding imperative,” he rasps, still looking petrified.

“What was it then? Wait, don’t tell me,” she flashes her palm at him, shaking her head emphatically. “I do not want to know.”

“I won’t say anything that you don’t want to hear, Your Majesty,” he assures her. “But I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I’m sorry I scared you.”

Her horror had nothing to do with being scared, but now’s not the time to get into the details.

“At least now I know they didn’t use torture while retraining you,” she remarks.

“They didn’t.”

“Good to know. Although I thought you were still supposed to hate the smell of my blood?..”

“After… After what had happened that night at your private quarters, they did their best to reverse it.”

“Looks like they’ve overdone it a little,” Jupiter observes sardonically. “Again.”

“You are… You shouldn’t be bleeding, Your Majesty,” the lycantant tells her, his voice still trembling, but quickly getting steadier: he’s evidently switched into his duty mode, and it shows. “Something’s wrong.”

This is not a conversation she wants to have with Caine. Or any other male, *ever*. However, it would be unkind to leave the guard without an explanation; the queen should put a stop to his panic. Jupiter sighs. *The things she has to do sometimes!..*
“Look, shit like this may happen when a woman is under severe stress: the body’s reaction to physical or emotional strain wreaks havoc on our hormones, it may even overpower the hormone-regulating implant. The past couple of months haven’t been exactly easy on me. But don’t worry, it’s all par the course; I’m not going to bleed out on you any time soon.”

At least she hopes she isn’t, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Please, let me get you to Royal Physician.”

“You, Caine, won’t be getting me anywhere. Not after this,” she cuts off, emphatically gesturing at her lower half, now safely hidden in the water, and he flinches.

“You still should see a doctor,” the guard insists quietly.

“I should, and I will,” she replies steadily. “But you won’t be anywhere near me when I do that.”

“I know I won’t be; I’m aware of the consequences of an assault on Sovereign,” Caine states grimly. “At least let me make sure you’re all right first.”

Jupiter frowns at him. An assault on Sovereign? She hasn’t thought about it like that, but now that she does, she supposes that’s an accurate legal description of what has just transpired between them. Any act that goes against the physical inviolability of Sovereign means death to the culprit – no clauses, no amendments, no mitigating circumstances: it’s way too dangerous a crime to allow any leeway. Caine’s actions have certainly violated – something, at the very least Jupiter’s lawful right to not be licked at places she doesn’t want to be licked at by people she doesn’t want to be licked by.

As well as her inherent entitlement not to know certain mortifying things about herself.

But executing Caine for what he’s done?...

Sometimes a choice is so obvious it’s hardly a choice at all.

“An assault on Sovereign?” the queen repeats the guard’s wording in a purposefully incredulous tone. When it comes to law, wording is everything. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. You just tripped and fell,” she tells him meaningfully. “Obviously.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you did, completely unintentionally, of course, and landed head-first in the most unfortunate place imaginable while accidentally having your mouth widely open. Happens to the best of us.”

“It does?”

“It does,” she confirms, inquiring pointedly, “Do you think you can withhold from tripping and falling again in the nearest future?”

The lycantant gives a jerky nod, swallowing thickly. “That was… sudden. The smell took me unawares. I’m really sorry, Your Majesty.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry, Caine,” she tells him somberly, “I want you to be more careful. More self-controlled, for both of our sakes.”

“What’s going to happen now?” he asks in an unsteady voice, apparently still badly shaken.

Buddy, first you shock me stupid, then you expect me to make decisions for both of us?!
Quite frankly, she thinks she has more right to be shaken right now, but when her subjects panic, Queen has no other options but to stay calm.

It is a curse of any leader.

“Now I’m going to the house and you’re going to stay here,” she tells Caine firmly. “Give me fifteen minutes to make myself presentable. I’ll call you when I’m ready. Then we’re going to return to the alcazar. Upon our arrival, you will proceed straight to your quarters. If Apini demands a report – which he will – redirect him to me. Tell your Commander that I’ve personally granted you a furlough for all the overtime work you’ve put in during these past weeks. Then go someplace nice where you won’t have to babysit queens.”

“Are you – are you sending me away, Your Majesty?” the guard asks feebly. She wouldn’t think it possible, but his expression looks even more horror-struck than it did a few minutes ago.

Jupiter knows the heartbreak she’s seeing on his face, she recognizes it. It is the terror of losing something you hold very dear. If the queen sends Caine away for good, it doesn’t mean that he will lose his livelihood – as long as he belongs to the Crown, the Crown will take care of him – but he will lose both Stinger and Kiza, the people he considers his only family. He’ll still be able to see them, of course – twice a month at best, once a year at worst, depending on where he will serve. But it’ll be mere visits, short and fleeting, contrary to living a few minutes away, practically next door to each other.

However, there is a very good reason why sending him away is exactly what Queen should do.

“Caine, do you realize that if there were any other guards around, you would be dead by now, before I had a chance to cry ‘Halt’? You guys are trained to shoot at any sudden movement in my vicinity.”

He gives a jerky nod, dutiful as ever.

“It’s dangerous for you to stay around me if you’re unable to control yourself,” she continues. “Neither of us can risk a repeat performance of your, uh, instinctual behaviour in public. If anything like this occurs again in the full view of witnesses that I won’t be able to blank… Even if the guards don’t get you first, there will be an execution. You might have gotten away with attacking Royal Consort, but letting a physical assault on myself go unpunished is one precedent I’m not prepared to set. If I’m willing to spare you on this particular occasion, it doesn’t mean I’m willing to risk other people being tempted to follow your example.”

Caine nods mutely, and something fades away from his gaze.

It’s as if he himself is fading away in front of her very eyes.

Witnessing it physically hurts her.

Yes, to send Caine away would be the most reasonable thing to do, because the guy is evidently not quite right in the head, and in the Private Security his unpredictable behaviour might translate into numerous deaths, starting with his own. But –

She would miss him.

She would miss his smiles that had to be hard-earned and his vivacious laughter, his awkward honesty and erratic, jaw-dropping quirks, his steady demeanour that usually exudes calm and peace, only to instantaneously break into unapologetic, giddy eagerness at a slightest chance to chase and hunt something down, his annoying and nurturing care, his –
With a start, she realizes that she’d miss Caine’s *everything*.

This is a ridiculous motivation to possibly risk his life and her potential humiliation, if something like this ever happens in public. But –

She would miss him.

When back in her alcazar, alone and hollowed-out, she will be swamped with duties, surrounded by the artifice and soullessness of her mundane routine, with so few people to put a smile on her face: Kiza, a couple of wittier lords- and ladies-in-waiting, maybe that redhead guard Chris – and, surprisingly, Titus. Seraphi’s youngest son may be the sleaziest being in existence, but he never fails to make Jupiter laugh, even though she hates herself for doing it.

Besides, it’s not like Caine has done something truly wrong. Well, *he has*, but not before having done tons of *right*. And –

*She would miss him.*

There are so few people in the whole vast universe she’d genuinely miss.

Oh, fuck it.

She’ll let him make the choice himself.

“You realize all the additional risks of your continued service in the Internal Security and still want to stay?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, I do.” His face lights up with hope.

“Then I won’t have you transferred, but I have to fix the… bleeding problem first before you may return to your duties.”

“I understand, Your Majesty. Will I be re-conditioned again?”

“Do you think you need it?” Jupiter isn’t sure it will help: they conditioned him twice already and, judging by the results, fucked up on both occasions.

He shakes his head. “I don’t think so.”

“In that case, you won’t be. There’s enough damage done to your natural reactions. But it’s your choice to make and your risk to take. If your self-control slips again, you’ll be the one to suffer the consequences.”

“Once we come back, will you blank me?”

Tonight Caine seems hell-bent on asking her all the tricky questions she doesn’t want to answer.

‘Leave no undesirable witnesses’ is a major rule by which all royals – hell, all the Entitled – operate. Only monarchs don’t have to resort to killing; they have keepers with their unique ability to erase memories at their disposal. One short command to Siskin – and Caine will forget everything that’s happened here on Havet.

If Jupiter blanks him, no one but her will remember this latest mortifying incident… Or that inglorious occasion when she all but begged him for sex… There’ll be no witness to her weakness, her despair and humiliation. Caine will forget that his Queen was so feeble-spirited that she was reduced to a suicidal zombie by something as inconsequential as infidelity…
He will forget his triumphant spear fishing…

The lightning storm, the mushroom hunt, the scent-marking, the stolen pancakes…

He will forget how much he laughs these days…

_He’ll be afraid of her again._

And this time, for a good reason.

“No, Caine, I will not blank you,” she tells him firmly. “Just remember that everything that happens on Havet, stays on Havet. You cannot speak about what went on here to anyone, including your Commander. I might have a private word with him later, but you keep your mouth shut. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

As Jupiter is leaving the sea, careful to keep her lower half submerged till the very last moment, she passes Caine, and tries to master an assuring smile. She raises her hand and he looks like he’s trying not to flinch away from it. She pauses, her smile turning sad, but deliberately proceeds to give him a passing pat, gently brushing his temple with her fingertips.

“They’ve really fucked up your brain in that training, haven’t they?”

He wordlessly leans into her touch and something aches in her chest at the knowledge that this chapter of her life is over.

It’s time to go home.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Yes, I’ve actually made a plot point out of uterine bleeding. I think I have every right to do that after the Wachowskis made one out of a maxi pad and I had to sit through it with the two guys I had dragged to the cinema, promising, ‘Oh, it’s a space adventure, with shooting and lasers and stuff, it’ll be fun, you’ll see!’ They indeed saw. That was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, and that’s saying something.

Those of you who have read my _Shell-shocked_ would recognize the premise. I’m not plagiarizing myself – or maybe I am? The thing is, this is the original version, never mind it’s been posted almost a year later. I never dreamt back then that I would endeavour to write the whole thing, so I simply fluffed-up and published a short fragment of it.

“…Eat pancakes straight out of the pan. Which is the only reasonable way to eat pancakes!” is a quote from ‘Kometen kommer’ by Tove Jansson.

The phrase ‘instinctual behaviour’ is a tribute to the story _Instinctual Behavior_ by _Clockwork_. It is my most favourite interaction of Caine and Stinger ever. The story has been such an inspiration to me that it may be well considered a part of NFoH universe.
The mention of vendetta is yet another tribute, this time to the Wachowskis themselves and arguably the best film of theirs, ‘V for Vendetta’.

If you’ve managed to catch a subtle allusion to ‘The Master and Margarita’ by Bulgakov, know this: I love you!

And yes, lycantants purr. I know they’re canines and not felines, but it’s my fic, so if I want my lycantants purring, they’ll purr, damn it.

Jupiter calls Caine ‘a sod’ a few times in this story. I heard it used as a very light insult, more of a joke than a real derogative, something a school teacher would use. But then I looked into the etymology of the word… Apparently, it’s the abbreviation of ‘a sodomite’. Holy hell! I don’t like that connotation for numerous reasons, I don’t like it at all. The problem is, I don’t have any alternatives to substitute it with - I don’t know English well enough. If any of you have any suggestions, please, let me know. They will be very welcome.

This chapter is delivered to you by Patagon and Julia, whose comments kicked my imagination into a higher gear. The spatula spanking scene was born out of the elation brought on by your enthusiasm. Thank you for your help.

PS Where are you, Ro? I miss you.
When Jupiter and Caine use the instant transportation Gate this time, the tiny inner chamber feels oddly more spacious than when they crammed themselves into it to transport to Havet. Back then the queen was acutely annoyed at the guard’s inadvertent intrusion into her personal space (in addition to the intentional one when he’d broken into her private quarters – never mind that Slott had let him in). Now Jupiter’s only worried that their proximity might trigger Caine’s bizarre reflexes once again. The guard, however, appears to be in full control of himself, even if he looks a little pale and his breath comes more shallow than usual.

She charitably pretends not to notice.

When they arrive to the alcazar, it’s the dead of night. The day length on Havet is very similar to the one they have here – Seraphi evidently thought of every comfort while choosing a planet for her private resort. Apparently the late queen didn’t like feeling jet-lagged while travelling to and from it. Still, the duration of the day-and-night cycles is not exactly the same and the few-minute discrepancy has accumulated over the two months they’ve spent on Havet.

The royal quarters are dark, quiet and echoingly empty – no one inhabits Jupiter’s chambers anymore but herself. She walks Caine to the outer door of the antechamber – it feels appropriate somehow, as if he were her guest. The door divides her personal rooms from the rest of her palace, which is, by definition, a semi-public place.

Behind that door lies the long guarded corridor where she and Caine first met.

Behind that door, her privacy ends.

She actively resents having to open it.

Caine pauses at the door, seemingly as reluctant to open it as Jupiter is. He turns to face the queen.

“Your Majesty, there is no need for the Doublet Sigil any longer,” he reminds her softly.

Oh, right. It’s sort of slipped her mind.

How could she forget giving the power equal to her own to someone else? It’s not something Queen has any right to overlook! She never forgot to remove the Sigil from Finnick’s cheek before, whenever she sent him off to legally represent her.

She raises her hand, “Let me remove it, please.”

Caine bares his neck and closes his eyes. A quick press of her wrist to the mirrored image of her own Sigil, a light prickling sensation, and all the signs of the glowing emblem are gone. She automatically runs her thumb over the patch on his neck where it used to be, smoothing out the skin.

Caine’s breath catches.

Jupiter instantly drops her hand and steps away, feeling abruptly awkward all of the sudden.
Shit, lycantants are weird about neck touching, how could she forget?

She seems to forget about many things tonight.

Her hand balls up into a nervous fist, trying to get rid of the sensation of Caine’s skin tingling in the tips of her fingers. She silently expects him to leave.

He shifts from one foot to another and lingers. “Guess I won’t be able to call you Jupiter anymore?”

Suddenly, it feels like a loss.

“Not unless we’re at my private quarters, alone,” she answers dully.

“Do you mind if I use my last chance, then?”

She silently shakes her head.

“Goodbye, Jupiter.” He leans down and rests his forehead against her shoulder.

If she tilts her head to the side just a bit, she’ll be able to touch his hair with her cheek. She is stunned by how strongly she’s tempted to do that: to show affection in return for affection. The force of the urge is unbelievable – it’s the force of an instinct, and, like the force of any instinct, it’s nearly impossible to resist.

Once Caine steps out the door, they’ll be back to their traditional roles, back to being Queen and a guard. She will never get a chance to do this again.

She yields to the temptation, leaning into the touch with her entire self.

They stay like that for a long unbroken moment, connected on some deep, instinctual, animalistic level – simply two living beings seeping fondness into each other – nothing more, nothing less. The awkwardness she felt just moments before has dissipated without a trace. She feels comfortable, safe, at home somehow.

Then, as though in a meticulously choreographed ballet, she lifts her head upright and he withdraws his as they simultaneously take a step away from each other, slipping back into their fate-assigned roles. The guards gazes down on her from his full height while Queen looks down at him from her elevated social position.

The moment of equality is gone.

“I bid you a good night, Your Majesty,” Caine utters with a courteous bow.

“Have a good vacation, Officer Wise. You’d better be well-rested when you come back; I have plans for you.”

Something melts in Caine’s solemn face as his eyes light up – apparently, despite her promise earlier, he has been worried the queen might change her mind and get rid of him – as he bows again and disappears behind the door.

Without him, Jupiter’s rooms seem acutely hollow all of the sudden, even the air – as usual, conditioned to the perfect temperature – appears to get colder. She ups the heat a couple degrees and busies herself with a flurry of activity.

First off, she pops a sleeping pill under her tongue – she didn’t have trouble sleeping on Havet, but something tells her it’ll be a different story tonight. She has about fifteen minutes to make
arrangements for tomorrow before the sleep hormone kicks in.

“Slott,” she addresses the artificial intelligence of her alcazar.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty.”

“Do not inform the court that Queen is back. I need a couple of days to get back into the swing of things.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Were there any emergencies while I was away?”

“Commander Apini announced an emergency regime in certain parts of the alcazar, including a few rooms at your private quarters. He used his access to my system to prevent me from informing you. Quote,” the voice changes and she can hear Stinger say gruffly, “No need to bother Jupiter with this bullshit, she has enough on her mind as it is.” The voice changes again as Slott proceeds, “None of the other authorized officials has declared an emergency, otherwise I would have contacted you.”

“Stinger didn’t install any cameras in here in my absence, did he?” Jupiters asks cautiously; in her life, caution pays.

“No, Your Majesty, he didn’t. He felt tempted, though. I threatened to squeal on him if he tried.”

Jupiter’s lips pull up. “Thanks, Slott. Tell me, do I have anything super important on my schedule today?”

“Your secretary has cleared your schedule as we were unaware when you would return. Although he asked to remind you as soon as Your Majesty came back that your scheduled visit to Her Majesty Kalique is drawing near. He didn’t want to send an apology letter declining the invitation if there was a slightest chance you’d return in time.”

Smart guy. Well, not exactly a guy. Her secretary is an android: no living being is capable to endure the stresses of the job for long and Queen can’t afford to change her secretary every few months. Still, Bob chose to go by ‘he’ – as well as by ‘Bob’ – so he is a smart guy.

“I haven’t missed any appointments with any other royals, have I?” Jupiters ascertains, wincing inwardly. If she has, there will be a shitload of diplomatic complications.

“No, Your Majesty, you haven’t. However, during your absence, your secretary has marked one hundred and fourteen entries on your calendar as well as thirty-eight names on the list of the people who petitioned for a private audience with Your Majesty as ‘of paramount importance’.”

Welcome to purgatory.

“I’ll deal with that later. Alert the kitchens I’ll have my usual post-Havet breakfast in the morning.” – Oh, crispy bacon, eggs fried in butter and coffee with real cream! – “Actually, tell my chef to make two. The second should be delivered to Officer Wise’s quarters. Discreetly; don’t make a fuss of it.”

Caine missed eggs as much as she did, if not more, she remembers, but having a royal breakfast delivered to his doorstep at the Guard quarters with all the pomp and circumstance that usually accompany royal meals won’t do him any favours with the teammates who are already shunning him for some unclear reason. Queen should be very careful with her favours: sometimes they can do more harm than good, and she doesn’t wish to add to Caine’s problems.
“Alert Commander Apini that I will see him after breakfast in the Green Drawing Room,” Jupiter keeps listing off, trying to remember all the tasks she should start out with. “Tell Royal Physician to visit me an hour after that. Inform Bob that I will need him today. Is Kiza in the alcazar?”

“No, Your Majesty. Although she asked me to let her know when you come back. Shall I do that, Your Majesty?”

“Sure. Tell her I’ll be free this evening, if she wishes to drop by.”

Jupiter used to try her best to clear her evenings – at least, some of them – to be alone with Finnick. With Odair under arrest, there will be not much for her to do tonight – and the nights to come – but work.

Not an alluring prospect.

Fortunately, she doesn’t have time to ponder on it, as the pill-induced drowsiness is starting to take over. She slips into her too-large bed and closes her eyes as Slott dims the lights.

“Wake me up six hours from now.”

“It will be done, Your Majesty,” Slott murmurs softly.

Jupiter doesn’t hear her: she’s already asleep.

The conversation with Stinger does not start well.

Things get heated very quickly. There is a lot of yelling, a lot of explicit language (mostly on Jupiter’s part, but Apini lets a couple of curses slip as well), and a lot of emotions that neither party enjoys.

“How could you do that to me? How could you?!” Jupiter bellows, and she’s not going to apologize for raising her voice at her elder, because the said elder is an imbecile and he doesn’t see it. “What if it’d gotten public, what if someone had found out?!”

“No one did,” Stinger growls. “I made sure no one did!”

“That abomination should have been put an end to immediately!”

“I had no authority to stop it on my own, so that meant telling you, hurting you.”

“What if that had been Kiza? Would you have kept it hushed up, too?”

“But it wasn’t,” Apini counters firmly. “And what would you have done, if Kiza had been in your place and you had been in mine?”

Jupiter chokes on her anger.

Pauses.

Thinks.

“I would have killed Odair, had he done to Kiza what he did to me,” she states quietly, resolutely.

She loves Kiza like a sister she never had. More, maybe.
“Are you telling me that is what I should have done? That was the easiest decision out there! It was much harder not to kill him!” Stinger throws his hands up, exasperated. “But I had to think about you, first and foremost. How would you have felt, if you’d lost him back then?”

Jupiter grits her teeth. “Then I’d have wiped Odair’s memory back the moment prior to the affair. Would’ve made sure he forgot about anyone but Kiza.”

“I don’t have the authority to blank Royal Consort,” Stinger reminds her tersely.

“You didn’t have the authority to hide his wrongdoings from me, either, yet you did!”

“My men listen to me, keepers don’t. They obey only royalty.”

“Like keepers are the only way to cause amnesia!” the queen huffs.

“No, it’s not. But all other ways are extremely traumatic. I couldn’t take such a risk, that would’ve meant hurting you too, had something gone wrong.”

Jupiter has no response to that and it only infuriates her further.

“The only thing I could have done,” Apini continues, “was to arrange an accident for the girl, to eliminate her out of the equation. No girl, no problem. But I don’t think you would’ve approved.”

“No,” Jupiter admits, defeated, “I definitely wouldn’t have.”

When the initial outburst is over, Apini’s pale, his lips are pressed into a thin white line, and Jupiter’s face is blotchy and her voice is hoarse from all the shouting.

Her eyes are dry.

She still hasn’t shed a single tear on Finnick’s account.

Finally, both Jupiter and Stinger calm down enough to turn into Queen and Head of the Royal Guard once again.

“Now, onto the matters that I left out of my report,” Commander Apini announces, back to his composed and business-like demeanour.

“Left out? Why would you leave anything out?”

“There is always a chance that someone else’s eyes might see what’s written, Jupiter. Like this,” Apini gestures between them, “no one will hear what’s meant for your ears alone.”

“I’m listening.”

“You know we gave the… new arrival a complete security check. By the way, you should never smuggle anything from the outside straight into your quarters like that ever again, do you hear me?”

“Come on, the girl was tiny and weaponless, what could she have done to me?”

“Jupiter,” Apini starts in a heavy, sombre voice, “that girl could have been an efficient assassin, disguised as a village idiot. A person can be subliminally programmed to attack a target reacting to a certain trigger, the skills and the program itself securely buried under an alternate personality – several alternate personalities, sometimes.”

Jupiter’s mind gets stuck on the weird sobriquet: Stinger’s usually not one for name-calling.
“A village idiot?”

“The girl is… a bit on a simple side. She was like a terrified child when we’d woken her. All she did was cower, cry and ask for ‘Finnie’. Our psychiatrists confirmed that she wasn’t acting. That girl indeed has a few screws loose in her head.”

An abrupt surge of acid burns along Jupiter’s throat.

*Gods. This is getting better and better.*

She takes a few deep breaths and gets a hold of herself. It’s surprisingly easy: her reaction isn’t nearly as emotional as she would’ve thought. Each time she gets bashed over the head with a new piece of shitty news the blow gets duller and duller. Maybe one day, it’ll stop affecting her at all: she’ll have built up an emotional immunity to shit.

She wishes the day would come soon.

“You didn’t… traumatize her much?” Jupiter asks hesitantly. She doesn’t really want to hear the answer.

“I’ve erased all the memories of the proceedings after we were done,” Stinger neatly sidesteps her question.

*Poor girl.*

“And you thought that a frail mentally deficient creature was a danger enough to require an emergency regime in my quarters?” the queen inquires coldly, recalling Slott’s report last night.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about,” Stinger starts, his features morphing into a mask of eerie calm.

“I don’t like that expression on your face. It never bodes well.”

“Jupiter… *Your Majesty,*” Apini corrects himself and the queen tenses up, preparing for another blow. “Not only we examined the girl psychiatrically, we fully scanned her body as well. There was a bomb implanted in her abdominal cavity. A bomb set to detonate in the close vicinity of the Royal Sigil. This is now the investigation of an attempted regicide.”

Jupiter gulps through her suddenly dried-up throat.

“That means the girl was planted,” she rasps.

“She was.”

“Was she aware?”

“No. She doesn’t have the mental capability to pretend well enough to have been hiding something like that from Odair. I doubt she’s able to pretend at all.”

“But what a ridiculously complicated plan!.. They needed Finnick to fall for the girl and have an affair with her first. Even so, what were those chances that she would ever meet me, let alone be close enough for the bomb to kill me on the spot?”

“Maybe they thought Finnick would bring her here to meet you himself,” Stinger counters. “After all, you let him have all he wanted, why not a mistress?”
That gives Jupiter a pause. Maybe she would have let him, if he hadn’t chosen to betray her instead. Had Finnick been more honest, she might have been long dead by now.

What a joke.

“Besides,” Apini proceeds, “even with Odair’s secrecy and the subsequent two-year delay, the plan almost worked. What would you have done, had I not intervened that day? Tell me you didn’t feel tempted to see the girl your consort had fallen for with your own eyes, like any woman would have done in your place.”

“I did feel tempted,” Jupiter bites out, feeling a sudden urge to hide. She cannot bear the sympathy in Stinger’s gaze.

“The girl’s a timid, child-like, helpless thing. On top of that, she was scared senseless. Chances were, you would have sent all the guards away to stay one on one with her, both to protect your privacy and not to terrify her further. You would have stepped closer, maybe even tilted her chin up to see her face better – she is shorter than you and has a habit of keeping her eyes downcast... In that position, the Sigil on your wrist would have detonated the bomb and the focused blast would have gone straight under your sternum and into your heart. Even immediate RegeneX treatment wouldn’t have saved you.”

Jupiter absently lifts her hand to rub at her midsection. The picture Stinger’s painted seems uncannily plausible.

“How did they make Finnick notice her? How did they make him notice her enough to make his mistress? How did they know?!”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that,” Stinger shrugs. “Odair keeps saying that he just saw her and knew he couldn’t leave without her. But that Cresta girl might not have been the only call bird, there might have been dozens of others before her, she was only the first that worked. Why she clicked while the others hadn’t, I have no idea. We know precious little about Anna, there are no records on her anywhere. We know when and where Odair met her, but other than that – nothing.”

“Does Finnick know about… the stuffing?!”

“He acts like he doesn’t. And I don’t have the habit of sharing information with suspects.”

“Finnick? A suspect?!” the queen scoffs. “He had much easier ways to get to me!”

“Everyone who had been in contact with that girl before she was delivered here – and therefore had an opportunity to plant that bomb – must be considered a suspect and investigated accordingly. Everyone. Even Wise.”

“Caine,” Jupiter gasps, clamping a hand over her mouth only to listlessly drop it to her chest. “I could have killed Caine when I gave him the Doublet Sigil and sent him to retrieve the girl!”

Stinger shoots her a weirdly intense, unfathomable look. “No, the replica wouldn’t have triggered the bomb, only the original itself. Whomever planned this, they knew that Finnick wore the Doublet Sigil often enough, and didn’t want their efforts to get wasted on him.”

“Great, your secrecy kept Finnick next to a fucking ticking bomb for two fucking years!” Jupiter explodes. “Really wise move for the head of my security!”

“He should have been executed anyway,” Apini snarls back, losing his self-restraint again. “Odair’s
the only one I couldn’t protect you from. *Because you wouldn’t let me!*

*Thanks, Stinger, rub it in, why don’t you?*

“The only scenario in which my consort is allowed to die,” the queen cuts off icily, “and that is *by my decision*. Any other situation would be nothing but a dire failure on your part!”

“He is alive. *You* are alive,” Stinger growls. “I’ve done my job. So what are you accusing me of?”

Jupiter rubs her temples. Startles – her fingers feel like ice.

Deflates.

“This is… a bit too much. Too soon. I haven’t recovered yet from…” Nope, no wallowing in self-pity. The more you do it, the more it sucks you in. The queen stands up straighter, squaring her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Stinger, you *have* done your job. I guess I’m just… shell-shocked. If it hadn’t been for you, I probably wouldn’t have been alive to snap at you right now.” She swallows. “Thank you for saving my life. *Again.*”


“You don’t really believe that Finnick was involved, do you? I can tell you right now Caine had nothing to do with it.”

Stinger gives her another peculiar look. “I think neither had Odair. He nearly shot me when I as much as mentioned Cresta’s name. He wouldn’t have done that to his Annie.”

Jupiter’s jaw clenches. “No, I suppose he wouldn’t have.”

“He wouldn’t have done it to you, either,” Stinger adds reluctantly, as though the words are being pulled out of his mouth with dental forceps. “He’s been asking about you every time I’ve been to see him. He is… worried about you.”

“Bet he’s worried about *her* more.”

“Yes, but… You’ve incarcerated both him and that girl of his. He has a good chance to die by your ruling. And still he’s worried about you.”

“It’s his own hide he’s worried about,” Jupiter objects tiredly. “Or, more likely, that of his precious Annie, considering what a fucking hero he is.”

Maybe she’s being bitter and cynical, but at least she sees the situation for what it is now.

When did her relationship with Finnick go to shit? Before Annie? After?

She’d bet it’s before.

“I don’t think it’s just that,” Stinger replies. “But – find out for yourself. Talk to him.”

“I will. When I’m ready.” *And when my lie detector is back from his compulsory vacation.* “Any versions as for who might have planted Annie?”

“If the several-year delay had been foreseen, it must have been an Entitled. Only they can afford to wait years – or even decades – to take out their enemies. And the girl’s memory was erased. It couldn’t have been done with hypnosis: our specialists would’ve broken a hypnotic memory block, if there had been one. So, it must have been achieved with either psychotropic drugs, which would
explain the girl’s mental disorder, or...”

“Keepers,” Jupiter murmurs. “Which would mean there’s a royal behind it.”

“And you have three power-greedy children, Your Majesty.”

“Neither Kalique nor Titus have a compelling incentive to kill me. They would have to get through Balem to ascend to my throne. Besides, once he gets my crown, there is no guarantee he’ll let them keep theirs.”

Long before her recurrence, Her Majesty Queen Seraphi divided her empire in two, keeping only the half of it under her full control and splitting the other half among her three children. The primary heir, her firstborn Balem got the better portion of it, and the rest was shared between the secondary and tertiary heirs, Kalique and Titus. Seraphi still kept the official title of Head of the House of Abrasax, and the formal, albeit very limited control over Abrasax Empire on the whole – like the power to declare war and annex or relinquish territories – but otherwise her children enjoyed complete autonomy.

With that single stone, Seraphi managed to kill two birds at once. She downsized the territory of her immediate domain, – everyone knows that the smaller a kingdom is, the easier it is to control. She also gave her heirs each their own province to rule – an opportunity to gain the experience they would need if they take over as Head of their House one day – and an outlet for their hunger for power, thus toning down their eagerness to see mommy dearest dead.

After Jupiter’s death the control over Abrasax Empire in its entirety will be assumed by the primary heir, Crown Prince Balem Abrasax. Whether he will choose to leave his siblings their domains or not is anyone’s guess. And by the time of his own death he may have heirs of his own and redistribute the territories between them. Therefore both Kalique and Titus have a good reason to wish Jupiter a long and stable reign.

So that leaves Balem as the main suspect.

Along with plenty of other royals and Entitled who may wish the current Queen taken out for political or economic reasons.

Welcome to hell.

“It’s too early to say anything definitive, Your Majesty,” Commander Apini admits uneasily. “Investigating something that happened two years ago is extremely difficult. The girl herself, our major witness, is disturbed and unstable, she’s not much help to the investigation. Another potentially crucial witness, the owner of the brothel the girl came from, was killed as soon as Anna Cresta was taken out of it by your consort. My best hope is Odair. So far, he hasn’t been particularly cooperative. He’s hiding something, but I’m pretty sure it’s not connected to the bomb.”

“No shit. He could’ve ended me with poison, quickly and quietly, at any time,” Jupiter sasses, irritated by her own vulnerability; although her annoyance is probably camouflaging much deeper terror. “He could’ve put in my food, my night cream – hell, even on his freaking dick! – and it would’ve worked without a hitch.”

“Talk to him,” Apini urges once again. “Maybe he’ll tell you more than he’s told me. With you away, I couldn’t make him talk. Only Queen can validate an enhanced interrogation of Royal Consort. Now that you’re back, my hands won’t be tied anymore.”

“Let’s try the peaceful option first before we resort to torture, shall we?” the queen scrunches up her
nose. She’s never approved of the enhanced interrogation techniques, unless there was no chance to get the crucial information some other way.

“Odair simply may not know anything useful. Jupiter, you should realize that we might never learn the truth.”

“I understand that. But it would be helpful to know whom to expect a back stab from, Stinger.”

“Be careful around Balem.”

“Like I’m not already careful around Balem, for fuck’s sake!” Jupiter retorts.

“Then be even more careful. When he realizes his plan has failed – providing, of course, it was his plan – he may try again.”

“Right. Well, you focus on the investigation, Stinger, and I’ll concentrate on the secrecy. I can’t afford a word about what happened to get out. I want everyone who had anything to do with this case blanked. Finnick’s team, the surveillance, the investigators, everyone.”

“All my men know how to keep their mouths shut,” Stinger grits our. “No need to take away two years of their lives simply because they witnessed Odair’s fling!”

“I wasn’t asking, Commander. It was an order,” Queen informs him coldly.

“If I blank everyone involved, then who is going to investigate the latest assassination attempt?!” Apini seethes. “Or is that less important than your dirty little secret?”

“It’s not my dirty little secret!” Jupiter yells, incensed all over again. No one can get to her quite like Stinger can. “It’s Finnick’s dirty secret! The only reason I didn’t put an end to it is because you didn’t tell me shit! I haven’t done anything to be ashamed of!” – Well, actually, she has, comes a sobering thought. But that’s between her and Caine. Although a spike of shame helps her regain her composure once again. – “Leave the absolute minimum staff to work on the investigation,” she continues much more calmly. “Make sure they are the most trustworthy of your people, but other than that – no witnesses. Odair’s escort team must be not only blanked, but also dismissed.”

“His team is second best after yours!” Apini protests. – Apini always protests; it’s equally infuriating and exhausting. – “You want me to get rid of my best people?!”

“Your best people who conspired with you against me,” the queen bites out sternly. “Who helped to cover up treason, thus committing treason themselves. Be grateful I’m keeping them alive.”

“Can I at least transfer them somewhere?” Stinger pleads. “Discharging them will be a terrible waste!”

“Fine. But the blanking order still stands. And I don’t want to see them around. The less reminders, the better.”

“Will be done, Your Majesty,” Apini grunts.

“Be careful not to blank Officer Wise, though.”

Here’s that intense look again.

“Your Majesty?”

“I’ll need someone to monitor all my interactions with Odair. Just in case.”
“And you want it to be Wise?” Apini asks with an odd inflection.

*Why wouldn’t she?*

“He’s already aware of the context. He’s worth at least two of three human guards. Capable to detect lies, which is always handy. And *I know* that he can keep quiet.”

“That, he can,” Stinger agrees as the muscles in his jaw start working in a very disgruntled manner. “He refused to report on the time he spent with you on Havet. Said he was to protect your privacy, under your orders. And that you personally granted him a furlough. What did he do to deserve such an honour?”

“Never mind what he did, the point is, he deserved it,” Jupiter hedges, feeling uneasy under Stinger’s penetrating gaze.

“You know, Wise looked like he was about to crawl out of his skin when I was asking him the questions I was supposed to ask as his superior. *Extremely* uncomfortable. What are you two being so enigmatic about?”

Caine is indeed good at keeping her secrets, even from his best buddy – *boyfriend*? – Stinger.

Huh.

Good. There’s no way she’s going to tell Apini about her near-attempt at suicide or Caine’s violation of Queen’s bodily integrity. If she does, she will never hear the end of it and Wise will be kicked out of the Guard by his boss in the blink of an eye, his personal relationship with the said boss notwithstanding.

“I think we’re done here, Commander.”

Apini looks like he wants to ask more questions; nevertheless he bows, mutters, “Your Majesty,” and turns to leave.

“Oh, and Stinger? Please find the guys from Caine’s former unit in the Legion. If you consider them acceptable, get them into my Guard. Actually, even if you don’t consider them acceptable, find them some jobs around the alcazar.”

One good turn deserves another, after all.

“I take it, Caine served you *very well* to earn such generosity,” Stinger comments with a bizarrely waspish undertone in his voice.

“He did,” Jupiter responds, a little surprised by Apini’s inexplicably aggressive attitude. Isn’t he happy the queen is taking care of his protégé? “He had to spend two whole months with me, day and night. It was… pretty intense at times,” she confesses, thinking back on the first few days of their stay on Havet, when Caine neither ate nor slept. “But he never complained. That guy is a real trooper.”

Stinger raises an eyebrow at her. “I hope you’re doing this as a reward and not as a… *restitution*?”

Jupiter frowns in puzzlement at the constipated expression he’s wearing.

Then understanding dawns and her face morphs into an icy mask of fury.

“What exactly are you implying, Commander?” she challenges, her question filled with so much acid
she is surprised it doesn’t burn her mouth through.

“I just want to make sure you treated Caine right.”

“I don’t think that after your own treasonous conduct you get to lecture Queen on morality, Commander Apini,” she cuts off frostily, satisfied to see Stinger wince.

She is tempted to leave it at that – would serve Apini right – but recalls that those two might be involved. Will Stinger hold it against Caine if he thinks that the guy served her? If he had been coerced into serving her – since he obviously wasn’t willing, as his boyfriend should well know? Would it ruin their friendship?

No matter how put out Jupiter is with Stinger at the moment, she has no intention of complicating Caine’s life.

“As for Officer Wise,” the queen proceeds with an affronted air she even doesn’t have to fake – there were certain moments between her and Wise she isn’t proud of, but the only person who has the right to judge her for them is Caine himself, and he didn’t, – “he has proved to be a brilliant guard. He’s even more paranoid than you are; I guess that counts as an indicator of highest professionalism with you guys. Wouldn’t let me out of his sight for one single moment, checked my bathroom for sharks every time I went in...” She shakes her head at the memory of their lavatory-related quarrels, then fixes Apini with a glare. “And I treated him accordingly, as I treat the very best of my employees. There’s nothing to restitute him for: Caine didn’t do anything he hadn’t volunteered to do. Well, except for wearing a boonie hat. I forced that on him.”

“A boonie hat?” Stinger asks, looking utterly perplexed.

“A boonie hat. You should brief your men on the dangers of ultraviolet. As for the rest, it’s my private life, and you are not entitled to it. Have a good day, Commander Apini,” the queen gives Stinger a short nod in a clear dismissal.

So their conversation doesn’t start well and it ends not much better, either.

The consultation with Royal Physician goes a long way in calming Jupiter’s nerves – because bleeding when you shouldn’t be bleeding is kind of unnerving.

Her body will be helped through the unplanned menstruation with hormonal injections, and in a week’s time the implant will take over again with an adjusted dosage of the hormones that have been released into her system for years now.

It’s good news: it means that Officer Wise’s vacation won’t be as long as the queen feared. Jupiter wants to talk to Finnick as soon as possible – to be over and done with the whole fucking situation – but she cannot afford to be so incautious as to do that one-on-one. And she really doesn’t want to get any other guards involved in her personal mess.

Besides, she’s looking forward to seeing Caine again.

The briefing with her secretary conclusively convinces the queen that her kingdom is not falling apart.

Guess she isn’t as important as she thought.
It’s a relief.

As the day goes on, the queen manages to tick off a few names off the audience list.

Initially, she intended to have a meeting with Head Spymaster in the evening, but decided against it. Royal Consort’s fate is still suspended in air, Apini’s fall from grace that Wormtongue had all reasons to hope for hasn’t happened, so Gríma doesn’t know what to expect of Queen.

Good.

Let him steam in uncertainty for a bit longer.

She summons Minister of Economic Affairs instead. It always pays to pay attention to economy.

In the evening – more like night, really – Jupiter returns to her private quarters to find Kiza sprawled on her favourite divan with a glass of wine in her hand.

“Spill!” the girl orders without any preamble with an air of someone agog for a juicy bit of gossip.

“About… Finnick?” Jupiter frowns, not a little confused by her friend’s cheerful enthusiasm, as she takes her shoes off and feelingly hurls them into the farthest corner of the room. It hasn’t been a full day yet and she’s already missing Havet’s freedom to walk around barefoot.

“Pfft, who cares about Finnick!” Kiza scoffs, gesturing with her glass in a dismissive manner. “He’s an okay guy on the whole, but weak when it comes to his dick. They all are. End of story. Now, details! What was it like?”

Jupiter feels a sudden need for a drink, too. She takes the glass out of her friend’s hand and downs it.

“Being cheated on? Sorry to disappoint, but it didn’t feel much different from my normal life, only with a bit less Finnick in it. No, actually, with a lot less Finnick in it.”

“No, you dummy, I mean Caine!”

Caine? Why would Kiza want to talk about Caine, of all people? What does he have to do with anything?

The queen plops onto the couch beside her oddly excited guest, twisting one arm behind her back to undo the fastening of her dress. “Err, Kiza, I think you know Caine better than I do.”

Considering he’s probably sleeping with your father.

Maybe as we speak.

After all, the two of them haven’t seen each other for two months; it would be the most logical thing to do to celebrate the reunion.

She really should stop thinking about Officer Wise’s private life; it’s none of her business.

Seriously.

She yanks the clasp in futile irritation, but it doesn’t budge.
“Oh, come on, don’t you play coy with me!” Kiza huffs, slapping Jupiter’s hand away and undoing the dress. “You owe me. Dad wanted to hound you down on Havet, but I convinced him that you wouldn’t wish to be disturbed: you must have taken that stud with you for a reason.”

“What stud?” Jupiter blurs dumbly, too busy getting out of the tangled heap of fabric – it’s not easy to take off a long flowing dress if you’re sitting on a good half of it – realizing a moment too late that Kiza meant Caine. The idea that she would take him with her to entertain herself is so ridiculous it’s failed to compute at first.

So that’s why Stinger was so on edge about Caine today. Apini was convinced the queen had been fucking his boyfriend for two months. Thank you, Kiza.

Then again, if it hadn’t been for Kiza’s intervention, her father probably wouldn’t have let Jupiter to come to her senses in peace.

Thank you, Kiza.

Kiza glares. “Since when do you have secrets from me? If you don’t want to share, that’s fine, but quit pretending you don’t understand what I’m talking about!” the girl pouts. “By the way, I want a bra like that, too!” she pokes at Jupiter’s breast. “Only purple.”

“Slott, you’ve heard Kiza?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You’ll have your bra by tomorrow evening; my tailor already has your measurements. He’ll make you choose from a bazillion shades of purple first, though. Personally, I think you’ll look better in chartreuse-green or dove-gray, honey,” the queen comments, contemplating her friend’s cleavage appreciatively, her gaze lingering on the smooth, soft skin in an admiring, good-hearted envy. Honey and milk, Kiza’s complexion is, so unlike her own freaking freckles. “Shower?” Jupiter offers.

“Already been, but I’ll sit with you.”

The queen has so little time to herself that whenever Kiza visits, they use every minute to chat. Having a spacious shower comes in handy on more than one occasion. Actually washing herself and having sex aside, Jupiter every so often uses it for reading. Or eating. Or hosting guests – it’s always the guest, though: namely, Kiza.

“So, we were talking studs,” the girl reminds Jupiter, following her into the bathroom, sagaciously taking her glass and the bottle with her. “And you were being deviously secretive.”

“Please, don’t call Officer Wise that,” Jupiter winces as she sheds her underwear and turns on the water, checking for the temperature. “He was there in his official capacity, nothing more.”

“Either you’re lying, trying to protect his reputation, – which you’re exactly the kind of fool to do…” Kiza trails off meaningfully, and the queen can feel her friend’s suspicious glare through the transparent energy screen she had to enable to contain the spray to keep her company dry.

“Now, why would I do that? To fuck the queen is an honour,” Jupiter grits out sardonically, squeezing a bit of shampoo onto her palm.

“Yeah, only the queen herself doesn’t feel that way.”

“I think that to fuck Jupiter is an honour. It’s not my fault that the rest of the world doesn’t see me behind the queen.”
“Didn’t Caine?”

“He did, actually,” Jupiter’s hands pause in her sudsy hair at the memory of the mushroom picking scene as the corners of her mouth pull up. “He’s… He’s a decent guy, really.”

“Then you’re dumber than I thought.”

Jupiter’s smile slips off. “Kiza, I couldn’t tell my man was cheating on me for two years. Clearly, I’m an outstanding imbecile,” she points out bitterly. “Are you intending to share?” she asks, gesturing at the bottle under the girl’s seat.

“Sure.” Kiza pours her glass full and sticks it through the screen.

Jupiter hastily gulps it down, trying to save the wine from the shower and shampoo. The red tangy liquid tastes faintly of soap nonetheless.

“Thanks,” she holds the glass out.

Kiza accepts it and puts her hand on Jupiter’s bare shoulder, holding her gaze. “Sweetheart, guys are sneaky,” she says forcefully, squeezing the shoulder in emphasis. “I didn’t know mine was a two-timer either until I started having problems with my lady parts, remember? That asshole! Couldn’t even be bothered to use protection!”

Oh, Jupiter remembers. Vividly. Remembers driving through the gloomy darkness, lit only by the headlights, white line markings standing out in stark contrast against black asphalt, remembers the truck filled with bitter cigarette smoke and – most of all – remembers Kiza crying silently in the passenger’s seat.

The two of them sneaked out to the Apini’s estate on Earth using one of the emergency transportation Gates in the private quarters, taking no guards, no escort whatsoever with them. It was a spectacularly stupid, risky move on the queen’s part, of course, but the farm was where Kiza wanted to be, and she wanted to be there alone. In the years that had passed since they had left Havet, Kiza had grown attached to this place almost as much as Jupiter was attached to their childhood home on the sea planet.

So the queen brought her friend to the Apinis’ house and wordlessly put her on the passenger seat of the ancient truck, – nothing more but a prop to keep up the rustic farm pretense. By some miracle it roared to life without any protest, and Jupiter started driving around, wherever the road took them. Kiza was smoking one cigarette after another, peering into the darkness with unseeing eyes as black woods and rustling cornfields swept by, filling the car with the ashy haze of burning tobacco.

Jupiter kept driving aimlessly through dark and empty roads, round and round and round, inhaling the acrid smoke, sharing the night, the grief and the poison with her best friend.

When the sky started getting lighter on the horizon, Kiza announced resolutely, “I’m done with men.”

“Who needs dicks?” Jupiter agreed. “Girls are hotter. We’ve got boobs.”

“Yeah, and straight legs.”

“And no beards.”

“And awesome hair.”
“And we’re not covered in fur.”

Kiza snorted. Her tears subsided. “Can I hide at your place for a while? I don’t want Dad to see me like this.”

“Sure, honey, stay as long as you like. You can camp out with us, if you want company, or take Finn’s suite, if you want to be alone.”

Kiza sniffled, “Finnick won’t mind?”

“You know that Finn likes having you around.”

“Do you think I could keep this from Dad? He’ll freak out.”

“He’s already aware, hon. Your Dad is always aware of what’s going on in your life. You know how paranoid he is. And I think he’s already freaking out, considering we ran off without any guards. When we come back, he’s going to eviscerate me.”

“He won’t, he’s your security.”

“Well, maybe he’ll spare me, but I wouldn’t give a squished bug for the life of your ex. I bet Stinger’s aiming a gun at his balls as we speak.”

“No, Dad’s too right for that. Although I’d love to see the fucker suffer.”

“There was this way to punish the enemies of the state in the ancient times,” Jupiter started, “it’s called impalement. A sharp pole was shoved up one’s ass along the spine without piercing the heart of lungs. If the executed was lucky, his death lasted hours, if not, days. Want me to revive it?”

“How come my ex is the enemy of the state?”

“He’s hurt you. That makes him my enemy, honey. And Queen is the state. So, shall we return to our historic roots? Just say a word.”

“Nah, no need to overdo it,” Kiza smiled wetly for the first time since she’d had her heart broken.

“Ready to go back?”

“Yeah, let’s go. After all, I need to find myself a lady friend. ASAP.”

“That’s my girl,” Jupiter cheered, steering the truck around.

Predictably, the older Apini freaked out, both about their escape – and his daughter’s bad break-up.

And when Head of the Royal Guard freaked out, things happened.

A quick injection of a certain toxin into a certain nerve made sure that Kiza’s ex would never be able to have sex again – not with his dick, at least – spreading disease and misery around him. The guy didn’t remember what had been done to him: Commander Apini was one of the three people – along with Queen herself and Royal Consort – who had the authority to use keepers’ memory-erasing abilities on anyone of a lower rank than himself.

Jupiter congratulated Apini on his inventiveness. When it came to Kiza’s well-being, both Queen and Commander agreed that there were no measures too extreme. Although personally, Jupiter thought Stinger had been too mild in his retaliation: she would’ve preferred to see the motherfucker who’d made her beloved friend take up smoking dead.
Kiza’s voice draws the queen out of her distressing recollections.

“Seriously, I can’t believe you spent two months alone with Caine Hot Ass Wise and didn’t tap that!”

“Why, does his ass come with your personal stamp of approval?” Jupiter asks, grasping at the chance to lighten up the mood.

“Do you need my personal recommendation to fuck the guy? Because I could give him a test drive, if you want,” Kiza offers generously.

‘Don’t you mind sharing him with your dad?’ Jupiter nearly blurts but this time manages to bite her tongue at the last moment.

“Wanna be Her Majesty’s personal man taster?” she jokes instead. “I already have official food tasters in my security staff; I could institute the position of Royal Concubine Praegustator.” The queen is only half-kidding: she would absolutely do it if only Kiza agreed to have a position at court. The only problem would be getting concubines, but Jupiter will cross that bridge when she comes to it, if she comes to it. She’s sure she’ll think of something.

“Sampling guys to provide you with a detailed review later, breaking down their performance? That would be such a back-breaking job!” Kiza snickers. “Officer Caine Wise. Form: five stars; execution: five stars; technique: four stars; artistry: two stars; kink: zero.”

‘Kink: zero’? Boy, you’d be surprised,” Jupiter chuckles, recalling the hot tongue on her chilled bloodied skin.

“I thought you said you hadn’t slept with him,” Kiza perks up.

“Oh, I slept with him all right, as in ‘sleeping in the same room.’”

“Aha!”

“No aha, Kiza, no aha. The guy is simply as paranoid as your dad when it comes to my safety, and just as pushy, even though he is more subtle about it. My point is, Caine is odd even in everyday interactions. I’m sure he’s bound to have some sex-related peculiarities as well. Oh, what the hell am I talking about? He’s my employee, this is inappropriate,” she grumbles, getting out of the shower and grabbing a towel.

“Oh, get that stick out of your ass and be a normal human being for once! Speaking of asses. At least admit the guy has a nice rump.”

“I honestly didn’t notice,” Jupiter shrugs, blotting her hair with the towel. Out of all the things she did notice about Caine Wise, his rump wasn’t one of them.

“You… You didn’t notice?!” Kiza gasps. “What were you doing out there for all that time?!”

“Coping. And Wise was there to make sure I wouldn’t off myself. That’s all there was to it.”

“Don’t tell me you were that upset about Finnick. He’s not worth it.”

“No, he’s not. My faith in him, however, was.”

“Oh, sweetheart!” Kiza strides over to envelop Jupiter in a tight hug. “Men are all bastards, save my Dad. A girl should never trust them, only use them for their dicks.”
“I wish dicks were detachable from the bigger dicks who wear them,” Jupiter mutters feelingly, gently disentangling herself out of Kiza’s embrace and slipping into a fluffy bathrobe.

Kiza giggles, “Remind me to introduce you to my extensive collection of those. They have all the advantages and none of the downsides of real guys.”

“Oh, I’m sure the tour will be most enlightening.”

“Although guys aren’t that bad if you consider them nothing more but driving devices that propel a penis into motion,” Kiza concedes in a musing fashion. “I mean, if the evolution came up with them, they have to be good for something, right?”

Jupiter snorts a laugh at her friend’s commendable practicality. They enter the bedroom to discover that two trays with the supper and tea have been already brought in and placed on the nightstands. Kiza comes up to the bed and collapses backwards, prostrating herself across the mattress, while Jupiter reclines onto the pillows and digs into the hash browns with smoked salmon and sour cream-and-garlic sauce. Mmm, she missed sour cream… Although Caine’s hash browns were crispier. How is it possible that a random guard’s hash browns were better than those made by Royal Chef?

Maybe she should transfer Wise to the kitchens.

Nah, she shouldn’t – she wouldn’t get to see him at all then.

Still, those hash browns were fucking awesome. Maybe she’ll find a pretext to ask him to cook them again?

Kiza sniffs the air. “How can you eat that foul-smelling stuff?!” she inquires haughtily, pulling Jupiter’s big toe.

“Shut up, I love garlic. And all those who don’t are simply culinary perverts!” Jupiter pulls her toe out of Kiza’s grasp and uses it to poke at the girl’s ribs. Kiza squeals, flails and subsides in a heap of slender limbs and giggles.

“No one would want to kiss you!” she squeezes through her laughter.

“Like I would want some garlic-hater to kiss me!” Jupiter retorts. “In fact, I don’t want anyone to kiss me. I’m done with kissing. It’s overrated, anyway.”

“Oh, you’re done, are you?” Kiza arches a challenging eyebrow at her friend, then quickly wiggles her way up, aligning herself with Jupiter, and smacks an obnoxiously loud kiss on the queen’s chewing mouth – only to immediately recoil with a grimace, “Eww, that stench!”

“That’s your divine punishment for non-consensually kissing your emotionally destabilized friend,” Jupiter cackles evilly. “I said I didn’t want anyone to kiss me! I’m not in that place right now,” she adds, her laughter dying as quickly as it came.

“Cut out that mopey bullshit!” Kiza orders categorically. “Drag yourself out that hole you’ve gotten yourself into and live a little!”

“I gladly would, if I could!” the queen protests. “It’s not a masochist, you know.”

“You totally are.”

“Well, yeah, but only in the bedroom. Life is no place for masochism. Trust me, I want to stop
feeling as shitty as I do now, but I have no idea how.”

“Just fuck it out of your system!”

That’s Kiza’s answer to most of life’s problems.

Only a couple of months ago, it was Jupiter’s, too.

It used to be the most efficient way to forget about all her troubles, if temporarily. It worked every time.

Finnick made it work.

And now –

Jupiter feels nauseous just thinking about touching someone in a sexually intimate way, about the ultimate vulnerability of being that close with someone. Her mind recoils at the mere idea of letting herself be that exposed and defenseless with anyone whom she trusts less than she used to trust Finnick. And she trusted him more than she ever trusted any other person. After a betrayal like that – coming from him – she’ll never be that gullible again, never allow anyone to hurt her that badly. It’s simply a self-preservation instinct.

“I don’t feel like having a tryst, Kiza,” Jupiter says tiredly. “I’m spent.”

“It doesn’t have to be with feelings,” the girl rolls her eyes. “Good-ol’ hook-up will do. It’ll help you come to your senses sooner. Seriously, you should have just asked Caine to help you out, since he was already there. He’s not that bad-looking and he is a helpful guy. I’m sure he would’ve obliged.”

“Not a chance,” Jupiter bites out, cringing at the memory.

“Why? Is that because he’s a splice? Wolf ears don’t do it for you?”

“His ears have nothing to do with it. They’re nice.”

“So why not?”

Jupiter feels tempted to deflect the question with some lighthearted remark like ‘I’m actually more of a cat person’, but decides to go with the truth. If she can’t be honest with her best friend, who can she be honest with?

“I asked,” she confesses quietly.

“You what?!”

“You’ve heard me.”

“I didn’t know you had it in you!”

Jupiter didn’t know either. If she could help it, she’d rather never have it in her ever again, never feel driven out of her mind with hurt, desperate enough to coerce someone into helping her out with sex.

“Good for you!” Kiza cheers, demanding, “Details!”

“It wasn’t good for neither of us. It was highly inappropriate on my part, downright creepy. And there’re no details. He let me down easily.”
“Wha– He refused you?! Refused the queen?!” Kiza lets out an impressed whistle. “I mean, what a dick! But I must say, the guy’s got balls!” She seems obviously torn between indignation on account of her rejected friend and awe at the sheer audacity.

“Please, stop describing Caine through genitalia metaphors!” Jupiter winces. “He really is a decent guy. He did the only right thing there was, Kiza.”

She might have resented Caine at the time for his refusal, but how would she look him in the face now, had he agreed? There would have been no other choice but to blank him and send him away – to get rid of both the witness and the embarrassing reminder of her sordid mistake.

And, as Jupiter recently realized, she doesn’t want to do either. She likes having him around.

“Yeah, that sounds like Caine. Always does the right thing. I have no complaints about his looks, but why are the guys who always do the right thing so ungodly boring?” Kiza laments.

Jupiter frowns, puzzled. “You think he’s boring?”

“No. I think he’s fun. Like, really fun.”

“Fun? The guy communicates in grunts and pink ears. How can that be really fun?”

“Shut up, pink ears are fun! As for grunts… How much do you two talk, exactly?”

“Like I’ve just said, Caine doesn’t talk! He listens, nods and makes appropriate noises at appropriate moments, but that’s all.”

“That’s odd,” Jupiter puzzles. “Sure, Caine is quiet, but he talks. And he’s more eloquent than most guys of his position. Has a great sense of humour, too.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Kiza’s eyes sparkle with curiosity; she’s definitely intrigued. “First you say that he’s a decent guy, which is a ringing endorsement coming from you, now you’re saying he’s really fun… You like his ears and furry isn’t your thing… And you asked him to do you!…”

“Could we please not dwell on that one?” Jupiter groans, burying her face in the pillow in mortification.

Why, oh why didn’t she keep her trap shut?!

“Do you… do you really like him or something?” Kiza’s voice sounds tentative all of the sudden.

“I…” Jupiter blinks…

‘Does that mean you like me?’

‘Don’t push it, Wise.’

‘Do you mind if I pull instead?’

…And beams widely, “Yes, I like him. I like him very much.”

“So go for it!” Kiza enthuses.

“Didn’t you hear me when I told you the guy had said ‘no’?”
“We both know that a guy’s ‘no’ translates as ‘I wanna shove my dick down your throat but I don’t want complications’. No offense, sweetheart, but you come with a shitload of those.”

“Well, be that as it may, but Caine’s ‘no’ was more in the lines of ‘I’ll take the complications, but may I not shove my anything into your anything, please?’”

“Huh. Maybe he simply didn’t want to take advantage? With you being all down in the dumps. What if you’d come to your senses afterwards and decided you hadn’t wanted it in the first place?”

“I didn’t want it in the first place. I still don’t want it. I do like Caine, but it’s… It’s not like that. You know, when he’s around, I feel warmer… right here,” Jupiter turns to Kiza to splay her hand over the girl’s midsection, right below the breasts. “Not down there,” she moves her hand lower, patting Kiza’s lower abdomen. “It’s nothing like I’ve ever felt before. I simply enjoy the fact that he exists out there somewhere.”

Kiza takes Jupiter’s hand and interlaces their fingers. “Don’t you want him to exist, well, closer? Like here, in your bed.”

“Why would I want him here? A pretty large Apini is already occupying a good half of it.” Grinning, Jupiter squeezes Kiza’s hand. “And Caine takes up a lot of space.”

“Heh, this bed’s a stadium. It can well take five people, let alone the two of us and a lycantant.”

“Have you seen Caine? That guy is humongous up close!”

“He is,” Kiza agrees. “I sometimes think I should fuck him just to see if he’s humongous everywhere.”

Jupiter feels a twinge of worry. Sure, she remembers Caine saying he wasn’t interested in Kiza that way, but Kiza can get him interested in no time, if she puts her mind to it; Jupiter has no doubts about that – because she’s Kiza. The girl can seduce a saint. The lonely lycantant will be a piece of cake – isolation makes a person extremely vulnerable to that sort of thing.

Unless he’s banging Kiza’s father.

But maybe even then.

“If you hurt Caine,” Jupiter announces earnestly, “I’ll have to kick your ass.”

“If I hurt him?!” Kiza gapes. “If I – hurt him?!! This is the first time you’re protecting someone from me, not vice versa!”

“Honey, it goes without saying that I’ll kick his ass if he hurts you, though I don’t think he will. Caine is… considerate. He’s kind. At least, he has been to me. Annoying like you wouldn’t believe, but kind. And not because I was the queen, but simply as a human – well, a lycantant – to a human.”

Kiza sighs. “You’re just too used to people trying to take advantage of you all the time. Don’t overvalue normal human decency.”

“That’s the thing, Kiza: human decency is not normal,” Jupiter objects. “The higher you ascend in the world, the less of it you see around you. And on top, where everyone seeks to take advantage of you, it’s almost non-existent. It’s an extraordinary thing that shouldn’t be taken for granted or underappreciated. Caine has it while most people don’t.”

“Brr, that’s one of the reasons I don’t hang around the court much,” Kiza visibly shudders. “I’d hate
to see the world the way you’ve come to see it. To me, most people are decent enough, and Caine’s just one of them.”

Jupiter knows why most people that currently surround Kiza are decent. Both Queen and Commander had a hand in that. One STD disaster was enough.

Queen cannot afford to live the illusion herself, but as long as she can give an enchanted life to her best friend, she’ll do it.

“Honey, if you decide to fuck him, keep him,” Jupiter urges the girl solemnly. “I know you don’t like guys much, but Caine is special. He is worth keeping.”

If her best friend finally settles down, the queen would much rather Kiza did it with Caine. He will be the first person out of a plethora of Kiza’s romantic interests the queen feels she would welcome into her family without any internal struggle.

“Now you just sound like my Dad!” Kiza scoffs.

“So, you’re already aware that your dad sees you two together?”

“As if it’s possible not to!” the younger Apini lets out a sarcastic snort. “You know Dad, he doesn’t do subtle. He fires all guns right in your face: if he wants you to get together with someone, he shoves the guy at you every chance he gets, if he’s proud of you – he slaps your back so hard it’ll bruise, if he’s unhappy with you – he rips you a new one, regardless of witnesses. One time when he was laying into me, Caine actually had to clamp a hand over Dad’s mouth and carry him out of the room before an irreparable rift could be created between the two halves of the Apini clan. I felt bad for the poor guy, listening to Dad yell at him in his room afterwards.”

“So, Caine bravely plays peacekeeper amongst the warring Apinis?”

“More like a cross between a buffer and a bumper. He lets Dad vent to him what an unruly daughter I am over a bottle of vodka and lets me vent what an infuriating dad I have over a beer. And then the three of us have tea together. And pies. Caine likes pies. The guy has some mighty sweet tooth on him.”

So, Wise is a good listener and he uses his talent to his advantage, getting two friendships and tea with pies out of the deal.

Smart rascal.

“I didn’t know you baked,” Jupiter remarks. Out of all the things she expected out of Kiza, baking was the last of them.

“As if!” Kiza scoffs. “Dad bribes the cooks to have something to lure Caine with. Works every time. The moment a pie is delivered, Caine materializes on our doorstep as though by magic. I wonder if he can smell it all the way from his apartment.”

“Knowing Caine, he might,” Jupiter smiles. “From what you’re telling me, he makes quite a useful addition to your household. Maybe you should just accept him as a part of it.” She is surprised how much she wants the Apinis to do just that. Then she’ll be able to drop by – discreetly, of course – once in a while and ask Caine for more hash browns.

It’s not like she could ask him for more smiles.

Although she might get them as a seasoning.
“From where I’m standing, he’s already a constant in our lives,” Kiza grumbles. “I mean, he’s always there.”

“You don’t sound too happy about it.”

“No, it’s okay. I’d like him better, though, if Dad wasn’t pushing him at me so hard. I don’t think Caine likes the situation, either, but he never argues with Dad. I mean, the guy can calm my father down and shut him up, but arguing? Never. Caine simply smiles that disarming smile of his and looks at Dad like he’s hung the moon, and Dad eventually subsides, venerated into submission.”

Jupiter knows the feeling.

“Yes, Caine is good at pulling shit like that,” she nods, smiling at the memory.

Kiza pokes at her cheek, “Are you sure you don’t want to bag the guy who puts a smile like this on your face?”

“I don’t think either of us wants to bag the other, Kiza. That’s the beauty of it.”

During their stay on Havet, not once did she get any vibes of possible attraction from Caine. Sure, their banter was at times suggestive and certain things he did could have been interpreted as sexual advances, but only on the surface. Being inside those situations, she could sense that the chemistry, the tension that wordlessly communicates someone’s erotic interest was missing. There were no glances to her lips or any other of her prominent assets, no lingering touches – hell, almost no touches at all save those ‘let’s make sure Her Majesty’s still breathing’; it was as though she was an animated furniture item. Even when Caine confessed he was worried about having an erection in her presence, it was neither a compliment nor a come-on: he was simply voicing his concern about the possible violation of the rules.

Their whole cohabitation might not have been perfectly professional – both pancake stealing and spatula spanking were hardly royal protocol behaviours – but it was perfectly asexual.

That’s why their last interaction on Havet came as such a shell shock, completely out of the blue.

That’s why even then the queen – half-subliminally, half-consciously – chose not to interpret Caine’s actions as a sexual assault, otherwise she would have been much stricter when she was determining his fate.

“Still, we need to get you laid, as soon as possible!” Kiza insists.

Sometimes, looking at Kiza’s soft, luminous femininity – all subtle curves, sylphlike limbs and a shimmering smile – it’s easy to forget she’s related to Commander Apini, one of the hard-assiest of all the hard-asses in Jupiter’s kingdom. Other times, however, the queen is reminded that her best friend is literally the female version of her father. Similar to Stinger, if Kiza gets an idea into her head, she’s like a dog with the bone: she would keep pushing her point with the force and determination of a terraforming bulldozer.

“Sweetheart, sex will help you stop being so hung-up on Finnick,” the girl keeps arguing for her solution.

“I’m not hung-up on Finnick!” Jupiter protests.

“Don’t you hate him with a passion right now?”

“Naturally, I do.” For more reasons than one.
“Then you *are* hung-up on him, you still *care*. It’s only when you grow immune to Finnick and stop giving two shits about what he’s done or is doing, you’ll be free. And sex will speed the process up,” Kiza reasons.

As much as Jupiter doesn’t want to have sex, the sensible part of her agrees with Kiza, telling her that taking physical pleasure in someone else but Finnick might be the first step towards severing the emotional connection that turned from a blessing into a curse. Jupiter wants it *gone*. She’s had her freak out, now it’s time to pull herself together and return to normality, and finding a new bed partner might catalyze her recovery.

Easier said than done.

The queen often gets compliments about how divine, how irresistible, how unique she is. However, all those praises have nothing to do with her personality or her looks – and *everything* with her being Queen.

Her queenhood aside, she is perfectly ordinary.

True, Jupiter looks flawless whenever she makes her appearance at court or public ceremonies and Entitled gatherings – and outright *divine* on official portraits and sacred statues. But most of it is the result of the hard work of royal stylists and make-up artists, her personal couturiers and tailors, cameramen and lighting technicians, court painters and sculptors. *They* make her beautiful, *they* make her shine when she needs to make an impression.

But take off the fancy clothes, wash away the thick cover of make-up, undo the intricate coiffure – and you’ll be left with the girl no one would notice if they passed her on a street or in a grocery store (or at least they wouldn’t if Queen’s face wasn’t so well-known).

There’s nothing outstanding about Jupiter’s character, either. She’s smarter than average, but her inexperience and gullibility more than make up for that. She can be dishonest and manipulative, but only when the situation demands it – and unfortunately, when you’re Queen, it happens quite often; she enjoys being earnest much more, though. She is as compassionate as your next person – although with her profession Jupiter could really use less empathy – but her temper shows when she’s irritated. When her patience runs thin, she can lash out in rage, but quickly forces herself to calm down and deal with the consequences of the conflict, whether apologizing to the other party if they’re innocent or punishing them if they’re faulty, trying to be fair either way. She is both impulsive and self-possessed, conservative and adaptable, reasonably selfish but caring and generous towards the people she loves.

Once again, Jupiter is perfectly *ordinary*.

And her being ordinary means that she has just as many chances at being liked – or loved – by others as anyone else. She refuses to believe herself unlovable just because one asshole couldn’t love her as he should have.

The problem is, Jupiter may be ordinary, but *Queen* isn’t. And everyone around her is so dazzled by the brilliance of the title that they are blind to Jupiter behind it. What’s the point of having a *personal* life with someone who doesn’t see a *person* in you?

However, Kiza obviously wants *to talk boys*, just like they used to do when they were teenagers. Ever since then, they only had Kiza’s flames to discuss, since Jupiter was firmly fixed with Finnick. No wonder the girl is so eager to finally gossip about Jupiter’s potential booty calls – or, as they’re tactfully called where royals are concerned, *favourites*. 
After the news Commander Apini has dumped on her today, Jupiter could use some light, senseless boy talk.

“Maybe you’re right that sex might help me to move on,” she concedes. “I kinda lack in the partner department, don’t I?”

Kiza props herself up on one elbow and contemplates her friend for a while, considering and calculating. Usually that look doesn’t bode well for Jupiter. “Guess getting an Entitled squeeze is out of the question? They will be falling over themselves to replace Finnick in your bed.”

“Only to manipulate me better,” the queen scoffs. “No way in hell I’m letting someone else weasel their way to power through my bed. No sleeping with the enemy, thank you very much.”

Not that she considers all the Entitled her enemies. Some of them are useful allies, some could be a nice company, few chosen ones are genuinely fun. But none of them can be trusted.

Queen would know. She is one herself.

“Not getting back to Father-Husband, either?”

“Kiza! He’s Dad to me! Phew, gods, gross.”

Besides, Jupiter strongly suspects that her Most August Husband-Father isn’t interested in those of female persuasion in the slightest.

“Get yourself a pleasure splice, then, and be done with it.”

Queen physically flinches. “Let’s not go there, Kiza,” she mumbles dully.

Her friend shoots her a questioning look but doesn’t ask, respecting the request.

“An android?” comes another option.

“Yuck. I’d rather stick to vibrators.”

“Now you’re just being picky!”

“I don’t like fucking machines. Both the fucking machines and fucking the machines.”

“So, you want someone who is actually a living being, not an Entitled, not a pleasure splice… Anything else?”

“I want someone who’s not interested in my power. Who sees me as a human, not as Queen.”

“Now, tone down your expectations, woman! Let us be realistic here!”


Even if her partner will be no more than a simple booty call, she must at least trust him not to backstab her – both metaphorically and literally – while they’re alone together. If she can’t let her defenses down during sex, then what’s the fun in that? The whole ordeal of getting intimate with someone seems extremely daunting at the moment. Why bother going through it for something as simple as sexual satisfaction if she has be on full alert all of the time? It’ll ruin the sex for her, anyway.

Call it a trust kink, if you will.
“Well, you have a whole entourage of studs you call Private Security, hand-picked by my father,” Kiza waggles her eyebrows at Jupiter. “They’re very safe.”

“Honey, they are my employees. I can’t do them. That’s just wrong; what kind of example would I be setting?”

“Oh, come on! What did I say about that stick and your ass? People already think they’re your harem, anyway,” the girl tacks on airily.

“What?!”

“You didn’t know?”

“No, I didn’t! That’s… That’s an abominable assumption!” Jupiter sputters. “I mean, they are supposed to appear an eye candy, but not vagina lollipops!”

“You know what they say about assumptions and asses,” Kiza shrugs. “Quit freaking out, some of the guys are actually flattered by those insinuations. They would never spread such rumours themselves, but no one would believe them no matter how convincingly they deny the innuendos.”

“Shit, and now that I went away with Caine for two months… How many people do you think would assume what you assumed, Kiza?”

“Only half the court. You know how quickly gossip sprawls around here.”

“Fuck,” the queen curses feelingly.

“Relax, very few people are aware what happened between you and Finnick, Dad took care of that. I only know because Dad knew you wouldn’t hide it from me. The rest are convinced that Queen took an impromptu vacation with her consort. And maybe invited one of the guards for a threesome, but that’s just hearsay,” Kiza winks at her.

Jupiter groans, slinging an arm across her eyes in despair.

“So, since it’s a well-known fact that your guards are serving you,” Kiza chuckles, “maybe you should actually pick a good-looking chap and let him fuck you into oblivion? Hey, remember the first escort team Dad assembled for you, back when he still believed he could shift your attention from Odair to someone else? All of them were drool-worthy, not a rotten apple in the bunch. I used to hang around just to ogle!”

“Ugh, don’t remind me! They were so distracting I had to have them transferred someplace where I wouldn’t see them often. Poor bastards, suffered for nothing but their own beauty.”

Nowadays her escort team consists mostly of blond men with milky-white skin and pale eyes. Not only they don’t distract Jupiter from her duties, but serve the additional purpose of tricking the people she deals with into thinking that ‘tall, fair and bland’ is Queen’s preferred type in men.

Officer Wise, with his towering stature and colourless melanin-deficient appearance, fitted right in.

“Dad would be head over heels if you let one – or better yet, a bunch – of his guys keep an eye on you in here,” Kiza continues, gesturing around the room. “He often complains what a thorn in his ass your privacy regulations are. Ever since we left Havet, infiltrating your private quarters has been a dream of his. If he needs to infiltrate your bed for that, then so be it. Just drop a hint that you need someone safe, and he’ll provide them for you. Hell, I’m sure he’d do you himself, just to be on the safe side. He’s responsible like that.”
“Hey! Are you telling me my dad isn’t sexy? He is the male version of me. I’m insulted on both of our accounts.”

“Honey, you are sexy. And your dad is s…” Jupiter chokes on the word ‘sexy’ while applied to Uncle Stinger, “superb, too. He is an awesome guy, I love him dearly, just let’s never speak about him in that context again. Everrr.”

Kiza, the menace, is chortling evilly at her mortification. “Is it because he looks older? That could be easily…”

“Kiza! I’m sure your Dad will still be hot when he looks eighty, just please, shut up already!”

“Oh, I’m so telling him you think he’s hot! He won’t be able to look you in the eye for months!”

Jupiter flicks a grape at the devious insinuator. “Stop pimping your father out! No, scratch that. Pimp your dad out as much as you want, he could use more love in his life – maybe it’ll make him less grumpy, and gods know, we all could use that! – but stop pimping Uncle Stinger to me! Besides, I’m pretty sure our dads were together while we grew up, and that’s a mood-ruiner, right there.”

“What?!” Kiza gasps. “No! Why would you think that they were?.. Dad was just the head of the security back on Havet.”

“Well, he’s the head of my security, too, but do you see us living in adjacent rooms with a door between them?”

Kiza stares. “Oh gods, you’ve just ruined my childhood!” Now it’s her turn to groan and burrow her head under a pillow. “What kind of monster are you? You’ll have to wipe the memory of this conversation from my brain, ASAP.”

“Payback is a bitch, honey,” Jupiter informs her lovingly.

This time, it’s the queen who gets a grape in the face. After the sneaky vengeful shot, Kiza dives under the pillow again, letting out a loud despondent wail.

Jupiter strokes her friend’s side, apologetic. “Don’t take my words to heart, hon. It might have been just a security requirement for all I know.”

“You think?” Kiza mumbles, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“Yeah. After all, our house back there wasn’t anything like the fortress I have here. The head of the security might have needed to be by the sovereign’s side at all times. And not for sexual purposes.”

“Still, you are evil,” Kiza grumbles, peeking out with one eye from under the pillow. “Just for that, I’ll tell Dad that you requested the company of one of his men for a night, each night a new guy.”

Jupiter picks the pillow off her friend’s face and whacks her with it, hissing, “Don’t you dare!”

Kiza dissolves into delighted giggles, obviously pleased with the effect she’s had. “Oh, he wouldn’t believe me anyway,” she admits, batting weakly at Jupiter’s downy weapon, poised for another strike. “Fine, that leaves us with only one option. I’ll have to fuck you myself,” she declares resolutely.
“Kiza, you won’t be my rebound guy,” Jupiter drops the pillow on the bed and flops back on top of it. “I won’t do it to my best friend. Who’s a girl.”

“You have a problem with that?”

The question gives Jupiter a pause. “Are you – are you serious?” she asks, incredulous.

“Sure. So, is my being a girl a problem for you? Because if not, my offer stands.”

Out of all Kiza’s suggestions it is the only one Jupiter truly considers.

She’s never given much thought to her sexuality: she met Finnick before it was an issue and when she fell for him the rest of the living beings that she could have considered sexually simply ceased to exist in her mind.

The fact that Finnick was a male was nothing but a happenchance.

Just like humans, sirens have male and female individuals, although some other alien species have more than two sexes, not to mention that even if their sex distinction is binary, it’s not necessarily male and female. Sexual reproduction is simply an integration of two parts of different genomes to make up a new one, vastly different from both parental organisms. It doesn’t necessarily imply that one organism – which is considered male – must fertilize the other, female. They can exchange their genetic material on absolutely equal basis, or change their biology from a donor to an acceptor or vise versa multiple times during their lifespan.

Jupiter strongly suspects that had Finnick been a girl when they first met, she would have fallen for him anyway. Sure, she loved Finn’s penis for the sensations it brought her, but she didn’t love Finn for it. If you fall in love with genitalia, don’t be surprised if one day you find a total dick or an utter cunt by your side.

While Jupiter and Finnick were together, the thought of willingly having sex with someone else didn’t occur to her. Oh, sure, she looked – hell, downright ogled every now and again: a lot of other people gave her inspiration and ideas. She loved dark, almond-shaped eyes, surrounded by black and fluffy lashes, loved raven black hair, loved full, sensuous lips – all of which Finnick lacked. His eyes were light green, his golden eyelashes barely noticeable against his toffee skin, his hair was bronze and his lips were not that succulent. In fact, he didn’t fit Jupiter’s type at all. However, all those ideas and inspiration she got while ogling the ‘tall, dark and handsome’ (gods, she’s so cliché!) were only to be enthusiastically realized with Finnick, and Finnick alone.

Thus for the entirety of her sex life, Jupiter was strictly Finnick-sexual, and now…

Now it feels like she is no one-sexual.

It’s not that she has a problem with Kiza’s being a girl. Quite frankly, Jupiter’s always thought that girls on the whole are much more beautiful than guys. Almost every girl is at least cute, while a man is considered handsome if he’s one step above a wild baboon.

Who in their right mind would deny that boobs and no stubble are a gift to humanity? Seriously, who can resist a good pair of boobs? Certainly not Jupiter. She still marvels at the fact that two of them grow on her; it’s a source of her continuous delight. That’s why she doesn’t hold the objectification of female bosom by men against them – not when she objectifies the hell out of herself.

She’s never understood the necessity to have an express preference for the opposite sex. Admittedly, the mutual attraction of the sexes is strongly enforced by human genes because throughout the history of evolution it was the only way of procreation. However, since the ancient times people
tended to have sex more for the purposes of pleasure than for producing offspring and having the
former not followed by the latter was one of the humanity’s most long-standing dreams.

No wonder that the invention of contraception was one of the most significant milestones in history.

Finding a way for women to procreate without involving any males at all was also a consequential
event. Now, two women could have a child together and it would be their child, of both of them.

Or even one woman, if she really wanted to and was able to afford the genomgeneering procedure
financially – which not many were – could have a child completely of her own.

Seraphi’s children never had a father.

It’s one of the best-kept secrets of the House of Abrasax, but the three heirs barely had any mother in
them, either, having their genomes designed and assembled to the late queen’s specifications, who
evidently didn’t think too highly of her own genes.

So the biological imperative to copulate with dick-wielding individuals of the human species no
longer stands. Save for the obsolete genetic memory, there is no real reason why Jupiter has to have
an express preference for males simply on the grounds that she was born a female.

Besides, what do men have going for them that women don’t? Sure, masculine and feminine faces
differ, but necks are the same, arms are the same, legs are the same (although women’s definitely
better), butts are the same, torsos are more or less the same (again, women definitely have an
advantage here, see boobs), and feet look equally lovely on both sexes. And all that excessive hair
growth men sport on their faces – or sometimes all over, ugh – is not particularly pretty.

Neither are their dicks or balls, come to think of it.

Then again, they do not have to be. It’s not like one can see them while they’re at work. They should
just feel good, that is all.

Which they undoubtedly do.

All in all, it’s a tie: Jupiter honestly can’t say she has a clear preference for guys compared to girls, or
vice versa.

And out of all the girls Jupiter’s seen, the younger Apini is definitely the most attractive. Kiza’s eyes
aren’t dark, but they don’t have to be: they have this luminous gray hue the clouds turn right after a
sudden summer rain has stopped and the bright sunrays start peeking through. She’s also a proud
owner of a long, straight nose with the most endearing rounded bulb at the end – probably the most
charming of Kiza’s features – and the most kissable lips Jupiter’s ever seen on a person. And don’t
get her started on Kiza’s dainty narrow feet with gloriously long toes!..

Their friendship has always been tactile. The two of them have been walking around holding hands
for as long as Jupiter can remember. But the simple handhold – cupping one had in another – has
never been good enough – close enough – for Kiza: she always laces her fingers with Jupiter’s,
interlocking them together, and it feels right. They hug and kiss almost every time they meet and
part. Back when they were younger, they used to braid each other’s hair. It’s hard to believe looking
at Kiza’s short haircut that just a few years ago, she used to have thick luscious hair, long enough to
sit on. Jupiter loved running her fingers though it, loved plaitting it into a braid as thick as her
forearm, only to urge her friend to shake it loose once she finished so she could play with it again.

The day Kiza cut off her hair was a tragedy in Jupiter’s life. She knows she has no right to, but she
still resents her friend for that a little.
The two girls frequently shared a bed, both as kids and teenagers, until Finnick supplanted Kiza’s sporadic company at night with the continuous presence of his own. However, Jupiter made sure that Kiza knew that whenever she was going through some troubles in her life, she was welcome to come and camp out in Jupiter and Finnick’s bed without ever being considered a third wheel.

Kiza exercised the invitation a few times, and Finnick never complained, taking it as an opportunity to show off in front of two girls instead of one. He sang and played for them, the double increase of the audience never failing to bring him into high spirits. The only drawback was his loud demands for pillow fights and strip poker. Which was amusing, considering he saw both girls without any clothes on many times when the three of them visited Havet.

However, no matter how intimate Jupiter and Kiza’s friendship’s been, their interactions have never ventured into erotic territory.

It’ll be so easy to cross that line.

But getting together and possibly breaking up is not the game Jupiter wants to play with her best friend, risking ruining a lifetime of effortless sisterhood in the process.

“I have no problems with your being a girl, Kiza,” Jupiter assures her friend earnestly, “but I have already lost Finn. I won’t lose you, too. I can’t lose you, honey, I love you too much for that.”

“Come here, you.” Kiza’s hug is fierce enough to make Jupiter’s ribs creak in protest. And that’s exactly what she needs right now.

“I think…” Jupiter takes a deep breath, “I think I’ll lay off sex for now.”

Kiza makes a disgruntled sound.

“No, wait, listen,” Jupiter persists. “When you have sex, your body produces the hormone – oxytocin – that makes you like the person you’re fucking, regardless of what your mind actually thinks about them. Considering the latest developments, I’m starting to rethink my whole relationship with Finnick. Was my love for him indeed love or just a hormone-induced haze? We met when I was a teenager, and teenagers are notorious for thinking with their… uh, hormones.”

“You loved him,” Kiza cuts off ruthlessly.

“Yeah, well, okay, I did,” Jupiter admits. “Still, I’d rather abstain from having sex with anyone and stay unbiased for a while.”

“One cannot live without sex!”

“I’ve been doing it for the past two months. Still alive, as you see.”

“Barely, by the look of you,” Kiza gives her a vicious eye-roll. “Obviously, I’m not talking about survival, I’m talking about joie de vivre! You look like you wouldn’t know what it is if it hit you in the face.”

“Kiza, if I don’t want to have sex, what joy could it possibly bring me? But, if I find myself interested in it again, I’d rather have it with myself. Maybe it will help me love myself a little more. I could use some self-love: I’m not my favourite person in the world right now,” Jupiter scrunches up her nose, grimacing.

“Fine, it’s your body, so it’s up to you to decide what to do with it,” Kiza throws her hands up in an exasperated surrender. “Really, though, you should drop by and check out my extensive collection of
sex toys. I’ll give you pointers, free of charge,” she winks.

“Thanks. I’ll do that. Hey, wanna be Royal Sex Toy Tester? I hear the pay is good!”

That earns Jupiter a smack upside the head.

“Contact me when you want a real sex toy tested for you,” Kiza grumbles. “Like Caine, for example.”

*I’m pretty sure your dad’s already on it.*

*Although he’s definitely not doing it for me.*

“Leave Caine alone,” Jupiter grits out, “I take an issue with you calling him a sex toy.”

“Huh,” Kiza gives her a long, contemplative look, but doesn’t argue. “I’m staying,” she announces decisively after a long pause, switching topics. “No way I’m leaving you to sleep alone tonight.”

“Right, because it won’t be at all awkward after you’ve propositioned me.”

“It won’t be awkward unless you make it awkward.”

“Thank you, Kiza.”

“I could camp out here with you for a while, if you don’t want to be alone,” the girl offers.

“I don’t want to be alone, but I’d rather be on my own nonetheless. I won’t be a happy camper, honey. I’ll be too mopey and grumpy to be around. It took all Caine’s silent stoicism to tolerate that, and trust me, you’re anything but stoic. You’ll grow fed up with it in no time and I’d much prefer not having you sick and tired of me.”

“Well, I can’t get sick and tired of you in the course of one single night. Even you aren’t that tedious.”

Jupiter laughs, tightening her arms around Kiza. “Only you can be supportive and insulting at the same time!”

“That’s what friends are for!”

Chapter End Notes

*The chapter title is from the namesake song by Queen.*

*Could please anyone tell me if the word ‘chit’ can be used as a joking insult in regard to a man? Because to me, Caine feels like a chit, especially considering the word used to mean ‘a kitten’ or ‘a cub’.*

*From now on, I’ll be juggling several storylines. It’s really difficult since I can’t see the text from the reader’s perspective. If you notice any discrepancies or feel that some*
reasoning or motivations are unclear, please, let me know. I’ll greatly appreciate it and do my best to fix it.

Dear (one of) Kiza’s prototype(s), please, don’t freak out. I’m well aware that you are straight as an arrow, and love you just the way you are. Stay fabulous!

Apologies to anyone who’s been waiting for the update. Sorry it’s taken me so long to finish this. I always knew what I wanted to say in this chapter, but couldn’t find the words. Now I have.

In the process of finding them, I wrote a little redux (spin-off? remix?) called The Tale of Prince Finnick and the Half-Albino Wolf. Check it out, if you want. It’s your chance to get a happy ending sooner)))

Congratulations to everyone with the upcoming New Year! This world can be a cold, dark, and disappointing place to live in, but three things never fail to make it better – love, laughter, and imagination. So I wish all of them to you, and more. Whoever you are, wherever you are, be happy!
The next day Jupiter decides to man up and meet with Wormtongue. The longer she postpones the audience, the more daunting it becomes.

Besides, it might be dangerous to neglect Head Spymaster for too long.

While she was on Havet, the queen contemplated getting rid of him, because she couldn’t stand the guy – now that his tidings broke her heart, even more than she had done before.

She could send him off to retirement with all possible honours – after all, he is old, well past his prime. However, the information Head Spymaster possesses is way too dangerous to be left in his head. There is no telling whom he might take it to. Of course, before letting Wormtongue go, Queen would erase the memories of his service the best she can, but keepers’ skills don’t work that great with long-term memories, particularly those that are older than ten years. That’s one of the reasons why top-post courtiers are allowed to spend their entire lives at court – at least, they are if they do their job well.

And Gríma excels at what he does.

He has been a staple at court since Seraphi’s time. Seraphi was the one who promoted him to the post he’s occupying now. And no matter what Jupiter thinks about her predecessor’s trapping her recurrence into this existence, she realizes that late Queen was no fool – she wouldn’t have ruled for as long as she did if she had been. When it comes to choosing people for key positions, Jupiter trusts Seraphi’s choice.

Since Head Spymaster has been around for a long while, he has extensive experience in his field of work, but what’s even more important, the necessary connections. What cannot be done through official channels, can almost always be achieved through interpersonal favours. If she replaces him, a significant portion of that network will be lost.

Besides, the guy is smart.

It doesn’t seem that Gríma’s age has affected his intellect in the slightest. His gambit against both Odair and Apini was thoroughly thought through, waited out with reptilian patience and delivered in the most effective manner at the most appropriate moment. It may not have worked out quite as well as Wormtongue was probably hoping, but it was definitely an impressive blitz.

That man knows how to play games. It makes him both dangerous and valuable. The queen should learn from him, not give him the boot. Why lose such a brilliant player when she can have him playing on her side and let her whole kingdom benefit from it? Jupiter’s realm has one of the most efficient – and most feared – intelligent services in the galaxy. She cannot let her personal feelings interfere with the security of her nation.

Having carefully weighed the pros and cons of Wormtongue’s dismissal, the queen decided he would stay.

When she arrives at the Cedar Grove, the lone black-clad figure is already waiting for her.
She vaguely registers that Gríma doesn’t creep her out quite as much as he did before.

“Your Majesty.”

His salutatory bow is graceful, but a tad bit stiff. Head Spymaster’s face, as usual, is perfectly inscrutable, but she can feel his tension: the situation with Royal Consort is still unresolved, Commander Apini was neither tried for conspiracy nor even lost his post, so Wormtongue doesn’t know what to expect of Queen.

That gives her all the advantage she needs.

Mutual apprehension is a good place to start Queen’s new relationship with her Spymaster. She’s had enough of being the only one uneasy during their interactions, which are about to get a lot more frequent.

Queen has plans for Wormtongue.

Apini’s conviction that he’s allowed to do whatever the hell he pleases is starting to annoy her. With the cover-up of her consort’s infidelity, Commander went a step too far. He’s overstepped his limits so he shall be reminded of his boundaries.

Therefore Queen needs someone to challenge Apini’s dominance at court. So far he has been the third most powerful person in the kingdom. Head of the Royal Guard is far from being a prominent figure, few people outside the alcazar have ever heard his name, but those within the walls of the royal palace are well aware with whom true authority lies.

Any royal court is a hodgepodge of different cliques, vying for power, and those who want to stay in Queen’s good graces know very well that they have to support Apini, or at least never oppose him. Otherwise one word from Commander – and you could not only be out of court, but out of life. Due to his influence on Jupiter Stinger has had no equals to challenge him on his decisions – some of which were, let’s say, highly objectionable, if the story with Odair is anything to go by.

He has no equal still.

Well, Queen will create one to balance the things out.

Wormtongue is just the man for the job – he as well as volunteered with that exposé of his. Why pull your chestnuts out of the fire yourself when you can make someone else do the hard work for you? It’ll be a relief to have someone – other than herself – to call Apini out on his shit.

“Head Spymaster,” the queen nods almost imperceptibly, returning his greeting but only barely, letting the silence linger and the man steam in the uncertainty. She turns and starts walking down the path, leaving him no other choice but to follow, daring Wormtongue to speak and question the purpose of his summon.

However, he impeccably adheres to the royal protocol: when Queen summons someone, she should be the one to breach the subject – no one gets to question Her Majesty – so he wordlessly trails half a step behind her.

Jupiter hates when people do that, it prevents her from seeing their faces, but it’s a display of deference she can’t be too dismissive of. Such visual demonstrations of respect and submission are ancient, but far from obsolete. Like most time-tested traditions, they serve a purpose. Firstly, they show anyone who might be watching that Queen is revered, and therefore the onlookers ought to do it, too. And secondly, when a person displays submissive behaviour, he or she instinctively – at least, to a certain degree – feels submissive.
The queen highly doubts that Head Spymaster feels genuinely obsequious when it comes to the relatively young and inexperienced monarch, but he will.

*In time*, he will.

And she has time. That’s one thing Queen with her innumerable future lifetimes has in abundance. The endless life that stretches in front of her seems daunting and downright terrifying sometimes, but it’ll give her plenty of opportunities to gain experience, toughen up and grow as a ruler.

Jupiter’s gaze glides over the tall cedar trees, which are already old. They are slow-growing, long-living conifers: some of them can last for over a thousand years. If someone doesn’t succeed in assassinating her first, she might live to see them grow ancient and die – and be supplanted with new, young cedar saplings.

They stride onward, the gravel crunching under their feet, followed by the queen's standard bodyguard escort. They all are to be blanked after this conversation.

A bird bursts out of the hedge, startling Jupiter. Her footsteps falter briefly.

A random Havet recollection emerges. *’I promise I won't let a single mole cricket approach you.’*

She'd feel much safer if she had Caine behind her back right now.

*When will this fucking bleeding fucking stop already?!!*

She wants her guard back.

Eventually, the queen breaks the silence. “Do you recall our previous walk here, Spymaster?”

“Every audience with Queen is unforgettable, Your Majesty,” Wormtongue responds courteously.

“Oh, flattery won’t get you anywhere.

“Our last meeting was uniquely memorable, though,” she remarks in a neutral, slightly bored tone.

“Unfortunately, I cannot say my recollections of it are particularly pleasurable.”

“I’m most aggrieved to hear that, Your Majesty.”

The only reason Jupiter hears a slightest waver of fear in Spymaster’s voice is that she’s listening for it.

“Your report related to the topic of our previous conversation had too many details and too little substance to it,” the queen remarks. Going through it on Havet was a pain, and not only for the contents, describing Odair’s infidelity in excruciating detail.

“I do apologize, Your Majesty. I will endeavour to be more laconic in the future.”

He does his best to sound firm, but she can tell he’s not sure if he *has* the future he’s speaking of.

“Nevertheless, I was impressed with the immense amount of work you and your men had done in order to deliver the information to me,” Queen commends. “I wonder, though, why did you wait *for months* before informing me?” she questions with the air of distant curiosity, turning her head to peer into Gríma’s face.

There is no pause of hesitation, no flicker in Wormtongue’s expression – it’s obviously the question he expected. “As Your Majesty said, such accusations must not be unsubstantiated. It took some time
to gather evidence.”

Yes, and to make sure the blow would be most devastating, impossible to recover from. You dick.

Then again, there’s nothing but the truth in Gríma’s words: baseless allegations are unacceptable in the matters of treason.

Or in the matters of Jupiter’s heart.

“You brought me much grief,” the queen reflects, letting some of her true emotions seep into her voice, tainting it with bitterness and sorrow. “I won’t pretend to harbour overly warm feelings towards you after what happened, Wormtongue,” she admits.

Sometimes – albeit very rarely – honesty is the best policy. If the queen intends to take Gríma in her favour as a counterweight to Apini, she’s in it for a long haul. She doesn’t want to strain herself with lies or pretend any more than absolutely necessary – both are extremely tiresome. The queen has too much tiresome in her life. There is no need to add yet another exhausting duty to the already long list.

Spymaster’s pasty skin pales even further, he purses his lips but gives a polite bow in the acknowledgment of what’s been said, “Your Majesty, I am disconsolate to have caused Queen suffering. Although I can suggest an effective cure for that, if I may.”

That’s – unexpected.

“Hmm?” she hums in interest.

“The royals of the old used to execute to the messengers who bore bad tidings. There was a wide range of options: beheading, hanging, quartering… All of them were highly therapeutic for the sovereign, I am certain. Although I would be grateful if Queen does not put me on the rack. I am afraid, Your Majesty, my old bones cannot take it,” Wormtongue remarks with a sudden dry, sarcastic laugh.

She starts a little at the sound of his creaky, surprisingly high-pitched laughter – more like giggles, really – or maybe at the fact that Head Spymaster has laughed at all. She thought he was physically incapable of having a sense of humour, even a gallows one.

“Aren’t you afraid I might actually take your advice, Spymaster?”

“Queen taking my advice will make it into pleasure.”

She smiles at his boldness, “You are a brave man, Gríma. And an honest one, too.”

All jokes aside, Wormtongue is brave. Outing her consort was an extremely dangerous gamble: in one fell swoop, Head Spymaster made the two most influential figures at court – High Consort himself and Head of the Royal Guard – his enemies while also risking alienating Queen. The guy’s got balls.

“I am an old man, Your Majesty. My life has been already lived, I do not have that much to fear,” he responds demurely, but his pallid cheeks pinken slightly at the compliment – or maybe at the casual manner in which Queen has addressed him by his given name.

“I hope you still have enough life in you to be still useful to the Crown. Queen needs brave and honest men. I have too few honest people around me.”

“Until I am dead, I am at your service, Your Majesty,”
“Good. Let’s get to the matters at hand, shall we? I need every single one of your agents to forget everything connected to this case. Apini will assist with keepers. You get to retain your memory, of course, but you are the only one I trust with the knowledge.”

“It will be done, Your Majesty,” comes an immediate reply.

Gods, it’s such a relief to talk to Wormtongue after Apini. No questions, no protests, no arguing… Everything is as it should be between Queen and her subjects.

“I am yet to decide what should be done about Odair,” she proceeds, “but I already know that some of his functions will be delegated to your men. No one is irreplaceable, not even my consort. Please, remind me, do you have any modified sirens under your command?”

“Oh, you have no idea! – “Considering her close relationship with High Consort, she may be a spy, and that’s my jurisdiction. However, Commander Apini denied my experts access to her,” he complains.

She hopes the warning will prevent Spymaster’s potential attempts to replace Odair, planting some other smooth operator – or, as it’s called in politics, an agent of influence – in her bed.

“I will make sure no one distracts Your Majesty,” Wormtongue promises. By this point all tension has left his posture, a barely-there smile snaking along his lips. “What should be done about the girl, Your Majesty?”

Neither of them mentions Annie Cresta’s sudden disappearance from her place of residence and her mysterious reappearance at the royal private quarters.

“Nice try, darling, very convincing. Sure, I’m dumb enough, but do you really think I am that dumb?

Good, if you do.

“She’s not an issue,” the queen waves off airily. “That girl can hurt no one now. She’ll be kept isolated until I find her a better use. You know how much I hate wasting my resources.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I was only trying to ensure Your Majesty’s safety and relieve Queen of the unnecessary concern. What I meant to say is that Queen can count on me to alleviate Her Majesty’s pressures. Some people tend to become rather… burdensome. Sending them away on a vacation does not always work.”

The word vacation turns Jupiter’s insides to ice. The only person she’s sent away is Caine.
Someone has come prepared.

*That motherfucker.*

The question is, is that an obliging offer to rid her of her supposed indiscretion or a veiled threat? Probably both, depending on how Queen will take it.

*How dares he threaten Queen?!!*

She halts her stride and stares Wormtongue down. “The people who become *burdensome* to Queen get *obliterated,*” she enunciates, her voice hard, “not sent on a vacation. I should think you are wise enough to remember that, Spymaster. Or shall I refresh your memory?”

Her threat isn’t veiled at all. The message ‘Back off from Wise, or else…’ is crystal clear. If Wormtongue dares to touch Caine, no amount of usefulness will save Spymaster from Queen’s wrath.

Gríma bows his head in apology, “Forgive me, Your Majesty. My memory fails me sometimes. Must be my old age.”

It’s the third time in the course of a relatively short conversation he has mentioned his age. Along with ‘*Queen taking my advice will make it into pleasure*’ Wormtongue’s hints aren’t that subtle.

Gríma is old, approaching the end of his current lifetime. Whether he gets another one or not depends on Queen.

*Let’s see if you are worth it, shall we?*

“You’ve dedicated all your life to the security of the Crown. Queen owes you a reward for your continued faithful service. What would you like it to be, Spymaster?”

Gríma’s eyes light up with hope. A blink – and the expression is gone.

“I did not do anything that was not required by my duty to my Sovereign, Your Majesty. Besides, Queen is already rewarding me by keeping me alive after the devastating news I brought her, for which I am most grateful,” Wormtongue responds, refusing to take the bait.

“Your modesty is commendable, Gríma,” the queen compliments, her mouth curling upwards in a sardonic smile. “You’re not the greedy bastard I thought you were.”

Wormtongue shoots her a startled look, but then his eyes sparkle and bloodless lips quiver with a suppressed smirk. “Thank you, Your Majesty. I think myself to be the most ascetic bastard out there.” His voice is just as thick with sarcasm as hers was.

*So you indeed have a sense of humour. Huh.*

Jupiter hates it when people take themselves too seriously. Her interactions with Spymaster might yet turn out not quite as painful as she thought.

“I find our conversations most… *enlightening,*” the queen vouchsafes. “We should talk more. Let’s say, half an hour every week in my gardens. Longer, if you have something to say that may be of particular interest to me.”

A weekly tête-à-tête audience with Queen, in her private gardens, is something most courtiers can only dream of. Being singled out like that will stroke Gríma’s ego as well as give an immediate boost
to his influence at court, if he chooses to share the news of his new-found privilege.

Somehow she thinks he will.

He gives her a deep obeisant bow. “I’m most honoured, Your Majesty.”

Outwardly, he looks unmoved, but she recognizes the undertone of triumph in his voice.

Let him think he’s won while Queen is the real winner here.

On her way to her private quarters, Jupiter absentmindedly nods good night to the guard at the door to the antechamber. A flash of ginger catches her attention and she pauses mid-step. She turns to the guard.

“Actually, Chris, I’d like to have a word with you. Please, follow me.”

The guard’s eyes widen, he swallows, nods and trails behind the queen as she leads him into her chambers. She won’t have to worry about any cameras or overhearers there.

As soon as they arrive at one of the rooms she uses for personal conversations, Jupiter gracefully lowers herself into one of the armchairs, keeping her back ramrod straight – her legs are screaming, but she can’t fully relax just yet, she’s not quite done being Queen for the day – and motions at another, “Please, do sit down, Chris.”

The guard shoots her a spooked glance and stiffly perches on the very edge of the chair she gestured at, trying to take up as little space as possible.

Now that she’s truly looking at him, she’s recalling their first meeting in fine-grain detail.

Commander Apini has always introduced every new member of the Internal Security personally to Queen. The tradition is not just a way to let the newbies feel the honour – and the responsibility – of their elevated status, but also a very practical security consideration: the queen should memorize the faces of her closest guards, so if she sees someone she doesn’t recognize, she’ll know something’s wrong.

Oddly, Caine was the only one Stinger didn’t introduce to her in person. The only reason it didn’t set off any alarm bells in her head is that Commander had talked her ear off about the new lycantant guard. Then again, it might have been why the queen so readily mistook Wise for an assassin that night.

Out of all the introduction Stinger has done, though, Chris’ was the most memorable one.

There was something about the guard’s outlandish, piercingly blue eyes that made the queen break the protocol that day and ask, “Are you a natural human, Officer?”

“No, Your Majesty, I am a lemur splice,” he answered in a quiet, pleasant voice with a smile that outshined his head of ginger hair, bright as the sun.

All splices have peculiar, eye-catching features usually located on their face or head – the places where the distinguishing signs could be easily observed by onlookers – to let the humans know that they are not dealing with their own kind. The practice is much more humane than branding that was used for slaves in ancient times, but its nature is nonetheless the same: marking the rightless. The higher status the splices are going to have, the less conspicuous marks are given to them.
Lycantants, for example, have large pointy ears covered in short velutinous fur. The large auricles improve the splices’ hearing, collecting and amplifying sound better than those of a human, but they are also almost impossible to hide, because the splices are meant to be mostly privates, rarely rising to an officer’s rank. Kiza, on the other hand, who was genomengineered specifically to be a personal friend to Queen, is almost indistinguishable from a human girl, although even she has the distinction of hexagonal pupils.

Chris’ inordinately large, flax-flower eyes didn’t look fully human, either, hence the queen’s tactless, but necessary question.

“Any enhanced abilities?” she continued her interview.

“Amplified hearing and olfaction, improved coordination and reaction time, augmented agility and stamina.”

Jupiter shot an unhappy glower at Stinger. He knew how reluctant she was to let anyone with inhumanly keen senses anywhere near her private quarters.

“How good are your hearing and sense of smell, exactly?” she inquired suspiciously.

The guard’s smile faltered. “Not that much better than those of a human,” he admitted apologetically, apparently misinterpreting the queen’s disgruntled frown. A momentary pause followed. “But I have a tail,” he added in a hopeful voice.

The queen’s brows flew up. “Does it boost your abilities somehow?”

“Well, it helps my balance a bit… and it’s fun.” There was that winning grin again.

Stinger made a stifled grunt of disapproval. The guard’s face morphed into a spooked expression, but Jupiter ignored Apini’s stuffy attitude. It was impossible not to warm up to the spice’s ingenuous demeanour. The queen had way too much artifice in her life.

“And where is that tail of yours, Officer?” she asked, a very un-protocol smile creeping onto her face.

“Oh, I’m not allowed to wear it out around here. I’m supposed to look human. Queen doesn’t like promoting splice employment.” The guard’s face fell. “Oh, Your Majesty, I’m sorry. I guess you already knew that.”

It took everything Jupiter had not to burst out laughing. When meeting Queen, people were quite often nervous and occasionally spouted drivel, but this took the cake. She chose not to comment on the newbie’s faux pas.

“Tell me, Officer, is your tail fluffy?” she asked instead, barely able to articulate through her grin.

The splice perked up again. “It is. And it has red and white rings,” he informed her proudly.

She turned to Stinger, whose face had reached a vibrant hue of puce at the appalling informality of the conversation.

“Commander Alpini, Officer henceforth has my personal permission to wear his tail out around the alcazar. Apparently, it’s fun.” She turned back to the newbie. “Welcome to my Private Security, Chris. I’m looking forward to seeing your fluffy tail.”

Chris blinked and beamed. “Thank you, Your Majesty. You can pet it, too, if you want.”
Stinger growled.

The guard flushed the brilliant shade of crimson that only redheads were capable of. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. I didn’t mean it that way.”

Commander gave up on the formal protocol, emitted a loud, drawn-out groan and buried his face in his hands.

She did pet the tail. Eventually, when there was no one around but Finnick to witness it. It was too fluffy to resist.

“Relax, Chris,” the queen addresses her guest, “I’m honestly not going to bite you.”

Her words have the desired effect as some of the awkwardness leaves the guard’s rigid posture.

He flashes her a quick apologetic smile, “Sorry, Your Majesty.”

“Chris, over the years you’ve given me the impression of an honest, genuine person. That’s why I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

He swallows, looking like he wants to undo his collar. “Of course, Your Majesty. What would you like to know?”

“I am a bit concerned about the atmosphere in my Private Security. You see, I’ve always considered solidarity the strongest point of my guard. Any discord within the structure that’s crucial for my safety is unacceptable. Don’t you agree?”

Chris nods repeatedly, his vibrantly red head bobbing up and down. “I do, Your Majesty. I haven’t been conflicting with anyone, I swear.”

“Oh, no, this isn’t about you, Chris, at least, not personally. I should have made it clear right from the start, I’m sorry.”

The guard finally relaxes, glancing at her with curiosity instead of apprehension.

“You see,” she proceeds, answering his unasked question, “I’ve sensed some tension in regard to Officer Wise. So I thought I’d ask you about the nature of it.”

Chris stiffens up again. “Your Majesty, I don’t want to cause any problems to anyone,” he pleads.

“I promise, whatever you will tell me won’t cause anyone any problems,” she assures him. “I’m seeking to resolve them, not vice versa.”

Chris looks doubtful. “Your Majesty, I don’t want to get Wise in trouble. He seems like a nice guy. And he takes his duty very seriously.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that,” she smiles at Chris’ attempt to defend his comrade – the comrade he’s not even friends with. “Our conversation will not have negative consequences for Officer Wise. Or you, or anyone else involved. I give you my word.”

“Queen’s word? Really?!”

“Well, since it’s Queen who’s giving it to you, you can be assured of the word’s authenticity.”

Queen’s word is unbreakable. At least, that’s what the majority of people have been led to believe and Jupiter does all she can to uphold the myth.
“Well, I can’t speak for the other guys,” the guard starts hesitantly, “but I can tell you why I stay away from Wise.”

“Why?”

“It’s just… Caine is… um, excessively friendly.”

“What do you mean, ‘excessively friendly’?”

“He is… handsy. Well, not exactly handsy, but… He tends to touch people.”

“You mean… sexually?” she asks, utterly bewildered. That doesn’t sound like Caine at all! Then again, what does she really know about the guy? It’s not like they’ve been bosom buddies for years. They spent two months living under the same roof, that’s all.

“Yes. No. I don’t know, actually. All I know is that he rubbed himself against me once.” Chris flushes red, hastily adding, “Not like that! Not… down there.”

Now that sounds familiar!

“And what did you do?”

“I didn’t know what to do. I mean, he wasn’t aggressive, or even pushy, really. It simply came out of nowhere – took me completely aback! – so I just… I backed away. And tried to steer clear of him since.”

It’s lucky Caine took his advances to someone as lenient as Chris; some other guy might’ve socked him in the jaw for what he thought to be sexual harassment. On the other hand, the lycantant is larger and stronger than any human; the trained guards would be reasonable enough not to pick fights with him – again, resulting in avoidance.

“Did you complain to your superior?” If Chris had done, it would’ve reached Stinger in no time and he would’ve done something about the misunderstanding.

Right?

“Oh, I didn’t want Commander to find out. Everyone knows Wise is Apini’s squee…” Chris cuts himself off, shoots the queen an apprehensive glance and corrects himself, “Uh, sorry, I mean, he and Commander are… well, involved. And I didn’t want any problems, either for myself or Caine. The weird touchy-feely thing aside, he really is a good guy.”

Jupiter frowns, “You say everyone knows Wise is Apini’s lover. Has anyone actually seen them in an… unequivocal situation?”

“No, of course not. Commander Apini is too professional for that. But there have been… well, certain public displays of affection.”

“Could you please elaborate?”

“Well, I’ve seen Wise do the same thing he tried with me when he leant down and sort of… well, nuzzled into Commander’s shoulder. And Commander once clamped his hand on the back of Wise’s neck. As I said, it’s nothing compromising, just… intimate. So everyone knows they’re together,” he concludes.

Jupiter looks away, gnawing on the inside of her cheek in thought. The fact that Chris – along with
all other guards, apparently – assumed the very thing she assumed about Caine and Stinger makes her angry, both at them and at herself. By gods, that ‘everyone knows’ bullshit is the curse of any tightly-knit, somewhat isolated community, including the royal court! Caine has to suffer through what is basically a boycott because of the simple miscomprehension that turned into a detrimental prejudice against him.

 Fuck that shit.

“Everyone knows I spent two months on a romantic getaway, don’t they?” the queen starts.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Chris confirms, looking noticeably relieved at the change of the topic.

“Well, contrary to everyone’s belief, I didn’t.”

“You didn’t?”

“Chris, do you really think your Queen is irresponsible enough to leave her kingdom unattended for two months to frolic on a beach somewhere?”

“No, Your Majesty, of course not,” the guard disavows automatically and she sees the realization dawn on him. “It’s just… that’s what we were told,” he adds apologetically, clearly repentant to have thought so poorly of his sovereign.

“The information released to the public doesn’t serve the purpose of keeping people informed but rather keeping them calm and content, maintaining social stability. In this case, the official version was quite contrary to what had actually occurred,” the queen vouchsafes. “And in a way, Officer Wise had to save me again. Like he had already done in the past.”

Chris’ eyes grow wide. “Were you abducted?!” the guard exhales in horror. “Was there a secret rescue operation? That’s why Commander was so on edge, wasn’t it? And why Consort Odair was absent, too?!?” – Actually, that could be a very helpful rumour. – “I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Chris apologizes, getting a hold of himself. “Are you all right?” he asks with genuine concern in his voice.

She hasn’t been mistaken: the guy is kind.

If this works, he’ll make a nice friend for Caine.

“As all right as I can be, under the circumstances,” she tells the guard gravely. “But that information should be handled delicately, you understand. People mustn’t know that Queen can be abducted; the mere possibility must be kept from entering their minds.”

“Of course, Your Majesty, I understand.”

Quite intentionally, Queen doesn’t order to keep the information secret, which means the entire Private Security will be apprised of it within two days. Any and all members of the Royal Guard’s inner core are strictly forbidden to share any information with outsiders. Any violation of secrecy constitutes treason since it might endanger the sovereign, so Queen’s private bodyguards know how – and with whom – to keep their mouths shut. However, judging by the rumours Kiza regularly brings her, they gossip like old fishwives amongst themselves.

“My point is,” the queen continues, “quite often what everyone knows cannot be further from the truth.”

“So…” Chris puzzles. “Are you saying that Commander and Wise are not together?”
Honestly, Jupiter still is none the wiser, nor she wants to be.

“What I’m saying is that their public displays of affection, as you have put it, do not mean what you think they mean,” she carefully sidesteps the question, countering it with her own, “What do you know about lycantants, Chris?”

“Not much. They have this super sense of smell – even better than our kind – and that they are one of the most efficient breeds of soldiers.”

She scrunches up her nose at the word *breed*.

Technically, different types of splices are neither breeds nor species. A breed is a distinctive group within one species, unified by the same appearance and other characteristics, while a species is a much larger homogenous group set apart from others by the fact that the individuals within it can produce fertile offspring with each other. When two species are interbred – or genetically spliced – you get *hybrids*. The majority of naturally occurring hybrids are incapable of procreation, it’s their most notable distinction from the representatives of a species.

The genome engineers who design splice matrices enforce the sterility of their creations.

If the animal genes artificially introduced into splices’ genome leak into the human gene pool, unpredictable genetic variations – possibly pernicious – will occur. Humanity fought long and hard to rid itself of its own genetic burden to introduce such an egregious risk factor. Therefore all splicers are universally obligated by law to make their splices incapable of producing offspring with humans.

The splicing industry took it one step further and made all splices completely sterile. Why give your goods the ability to multiply on their own? It will reduce the profits.

Sometimes only male or female individuals of a particular variety of splices are produced – depending on the prevalent demand. Military splices like lycantants are almost invariably all-male, while gestational carriers are, predictably, all-female. All in all, humans treat splices much like they’ve treated animals throughout their history, exploiting and altering them according to their masters’ needs.

So while Jupiter understands why the word *breed* is applied to splices, she never uses it herself: it reminds her too much of livestock.

Then again, it’s not the word she should be spurning.

The queen forces herself to focus on the conversation at hand.

“You’re right, Chris, lycantants are very efficient soldiers. However, along with the qualities that make them such, like short reaction time or great endurance, they also have some odd behavioral patterns from the species they were spliced with – odd, of course, only from a non-lycantant perspective, like yours or mine. For lycantants themselves, they seem perfectly natural. You may have some of those, too – things that your lemur genes urge you to do that might appear weird to onlookers.”

The splice’s face lights up with understanding. “Well, I sometimes really like rubbing my wrists along my tail or my… Uh, never mind,” he blushes again, abruptly steering away from the topic, as if having just realized that it’s too personal to divulge it to *Queen*. “It’s just scent-marking stuff. Sorry, Your Majesty, I talk too much,” he mumbles, grimacing.

“Don’t apologize; it’s nice to know that you understand what I’m talking about,” she gives him an amiable smile. “Similar to you, Caine sometimes really likes bunting his head against other people,
the people he feels a connection to. In lycantants, the nonverbal communication – mostly olfactory and tactile – dominates over the verbal one when they socialize amongst themselves. Or with those they perceive as their kind.”

She did some quick research after the mind-boggling discovery that Caine was capable of purring. That was a nice surprise that got her interested in their abilities and behaviour. The information on lycantants wasn’t hard to find, it was much harder to sift through all the preconceived bullshit about their savagery, promiscuity and other nonsense like that to get to the sparse snippets of factual knowledge.

She can say that now she knows and understands much more about Caine than she did before. What she doesn’t understand is why she is the one who has to do this. Why the hell Apini didn’t explain anything to his subordinates about the then new member of the team?!

Men.

“You mean lycantants prefer scent and touch to words?” Chris rephrases, brows drawn together in concentration.

“Exactly. Speech is a secondary means of communication for them.”

“So, when Wise and Commander touch each other they merely demonstrate that they are… birds of a feather, so to say?”

“Yes. Although I don’t think they actually demonstrate anything; they just acknowledge their camaraderie. My guess is Apini, being the good Commander he is, is trying to compensate for the lack of interaction with the rest of the team.”

“And when Wise tried to touch me, it was his attempt to buddy up with me? And I just… Shit,” Chris’ face falls in evident regret. He’s quick to snap back to the discourse. “Uh, forgive me, Your Majesty, I shouldn’t have cursed around you.”

“You shouldn’t have, but you’re forgiven,” she nods graciously. “Thank you for the enlightening conversation.”

As the guard backs out of the room, her thoughts return to Stinger and his apparent misstep in managing his men.

Undoubtedly, everyone makes mistakes. Was it indeed a mistake, though?

Maybe it wasn’t. At the time, Stinger had just reunited with the old friend – or the lover – he had greatly missed. Maybe he wasn’t prepared to share him with the others, preferring to hog all of Caine’s time, attention and affection. Maybe it was his intentional tactic to keep his buddy to himself.

Maybe Apini’s just a jealous bastard.

If so, instead of helping Commander out, she’s just thrown a considerable wrench into his game.

Oh, well.

She regrets nothing.

Time passes. It’s both a head-spinning whirl – when it comes to private audiences, formal meetings,
dealing with correspondence, reports and other documents – and a teeth-gritting crawl – when it comes to enduring all that.

Upon her return, the queen’s temper has been shorter than usual. She gives her Privy Council quite a shock when she yells the head off Chancellor of Treasury. All members are then blanked and the discussion recommences in a more reserved manner.

The queen ruthlessly weeds through the list of the people who tried to contact her while she was on Havet. She meets with everyone who had a good reason to be contacting her. However, she ruthlessly dismisses those who dared to bother her with minor issues, easily manageable without her intervention – much like she would thin out young radish shoots that have sprouted too densely, weeding out all weak and damaged ones.

If a person is incapable of making their own decisions, they don’t deserve the position of power they were put in. Jupiter’s never suffered fools gladly, but now she seems to have no patience for them at all.

In fact, people in general have started to annoy her.

A couple of days after her arrival, she starts loathing the entire court.

By midweek she hates her whole nation.

As the weekend rolls in, she thoroughly abhors herself.

A week goes by and she’s still bleeding. Royal Physician assures her it’s all par for the course.

How could women put up with this bullshit every month? It must have ruined the best years of their lives!

Finally, the bleeding stops. She gives it one more day – just to be sure – before she summons Caine.

Normally, if Queen needs to contact a particular guard, she does so through Commander Apini – subordination and all that. This time, though, Jupiter sends a short message directly to Caine’s i-comm.

‘Sorry to cut your vacation short. Please, come back. The Crown needs you.’

The moment she sees him, her heart makes a wild leap of joy. It takes all of her self-control to hold the expression of polite neutrality – there are people around them – and merely nod, acknowledging his return.

“Officer Wise.”

“Your Majesty.”

Life suddenly feels a lot brighter.

Now that Wise is here, the queen can finally confront her consort without either unduly endangering herself or involving any unwanted witnesses. The conversation they’re about to have is going to be very personal and there is only so much humiliation Jupiter can take.
“Finally, you have deigned to see me! I was getting tired of Her Majesty’s hospitality.”

Odair purposefully strides into the room, heading towards the queen. Jupiter is sitting at her desk, preferring to have a massive piece of furniture in between herself and her consort – as well as the massive lycantant standing behind her right shoulder.

So maybe the impending conversation daunts her.

She has to soldier on through it regardless.

As Finnick is approaching, Wise clears his throat and Odair catches himself, stopping a safe distance away from the queen. Not that any distance within the room is really safe when all the participants have weapons.

She should’ve had Odair’s implants removed.

Well, hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Finnick glares at Jupiter, “Are we continuing with this charade? Would you quit pretending that I’m some kind of danger to you? It’s ludicrous!”

She doesn’t acknowledge her consort’s barb, doesn’t even lift her head to look at him, ignoring his angry tirade. He always does this: whenever he feels guilty, he grows irascible, snapping at her – it’s like he doesn’t realize that in doing so he only antagonizes her more.

Or maybe he doesn’t care. It’s not like he is used to being cut down to size. The queen has spoiled him with her love, now she has to deal with the passive-aggressive brat he has become.

She waits him out, seething.

When Odair is done venting his frustrations, she finally looks up at him, feeling her own rage boil inside, rising like white-hot lava, erupting in a low, malicious hiss –

“A sex slave, Finnick? Really?!”

There’s so much condensed hatred in the question that Odair takes an involuntary step back, momentarily thrown off.

“It’s not like that. Annie isn’t… Don’t call her that.”

“I have here,” the queen picks a sheath from the desk and stands up, holding it out for her consort to see, “the certificate of ownership that unequivocally states that I am now the legal owner of the pleasure splice named Anna Cresta.” She slams the sheath down with a bang. “Not only you acquired a sex slave, Finnick, you bought her in my name!”

“It’s not like I could buy her in mine!” he retorts. “You were the one who prohibited selling pleasure splices to private buyers! As your consort, I didn’t want to go against the law or involve third parties in a documented deal like this. Legally, I could only acquire her as a representative of the Crown.”

“So you admit that you intentionally went against my will and took advantage of my title?” the queen fixes Odair with an accusatory glare. “You know how strongly I feel about that disgusting branch of splicing industry. I did everything I could to bring it down. But apparently, the banned domestic production, the sky-high import duties and the prohibition of private party sales are not enough. Because of sick fucks like you, who are prepared to pay exorbitant amounts of money to have a rightless being to fuck!”
“Stop,” Finnick puts his hands in front of him like a barrier from her onslaught. – Apparently, the truth hurts. – “Just stop. It’s not like that and it never has been!”

She shakes her head, “I should have gone with a total prohibition. You were the one who stopped me. Now I know why.”

“Oh, for gods sake! I talked you out of it only to prevent creating a black market. I didn’t even know about Annie back then!” Finnick argues heatedly, throwing his hands up in the air. His sharp gesture warrants a warning growl from the guard. The consort glances at Wise scornfully but refrains from further sudden movements. “Jupiter, if you prohibit sex splices, it doesn’t mean that people will stop using them.”

“Obviously,” the queen intones scathingly, motioning at him with her open palm.

“Jupiter, be reasonable,” Odair appeals in a quieter, much more controlled voice. “I was trying to do the very same thing you strived to achieve – protect the vulnerable. I thought the living conditions in official establishments would be much better than in shady bootleg brothels. Apparently, I was wrong,” Finnick visibly deflates, admitting his mistake.

It comes as a mild shock to Jupiter. The Finnick she knows never admits his mistakes. Then again, this isn’t the Finnick she knows.

The Finnick she knows doesn’t exist.

“Is that how you go about ‘protecting the vulnerable’?” She can barely breathe through her revulsion. Her loathing had plenty of time to grow and ripen and now she’s choking on it. “By buying one of those vulnerable for your undivided personal pleasure?!”

“I told you, it wasn’t about ‘personal pleasure’!” Finnick spits the words out like she’s just insulted him.

“Oh, really?” Jupiter leans forward, narrowing her eyes. “Tell that to the holos of you two fucking!”

“They showed you?” He has the gall to look appalled.

She looks at him – looking at her with indignation and pity – and asks herself why she has forced herself to go through this ultimate humiliation. Somehow, she felt obligated to confront her consort face to face, to give him one final chance to justify himself. But does she really owe him anything after what he did?

Unfortunately, she does.

Odair has saved her life three times. That should count for something.

Jupiter squeezes her eyes tightly shut and takes a deep breath. One, two, three, four, pause. One, two, three, four, exhale. When her eyes open, she’s back to Queen again.

“I refused to believe in your betrayal,” she responds with the serenity she doesn’t feel. “So I demanded evidence. They presented the evidence.”

Stop pitying me. I do not need your pity.

I do not need anything from you, anymore.

Finnick’s eyes turn sad. “Look, I swear it didn’t start that way. It was a rescue operation that went…"
complicated.”

“A rescue operation, huh? Did you courageously save your dick from underfucking?”

“Would you please tone down your sarcasm?” Finnick implores somberly. “This is no laughing
matter.”

“And here I thought it was,” she deadpans.

“Jupiter, this is… painful.” – It is, Finn, it is. – “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Well, you have a choice. Either you talk about it to me by your own free will and volition, or I give
Apini the permission to use enhanced interrogation techniques on you. Take your pick.”

Finnick stares at the queen as though he’s seeing her for the first time.

“You are not kidding, are you?”

He glances above her shoulder – at Wise, presumably – and his expression shifts, like he’s just gotten
an answer to his question.

The queen raises an eyebrow, demonstrating her impatience.

“All splices are designed to fit their intended roles in life,” Odair starts, apparently having made the
right decision. “Like this one here,” he nods at the lycantant, “is made for shooting and not thinking
overly much. Can’t have them soldiers being too smart.”

“Get to the point, Odair,” Jupiter interrupts brusquely. She will not have her consort disparage Caine.

“Likewise, pleasure splices are made to want and enjoy all kinds of sex.”

Is he really going there? Is he going to explain in what ways fucking Annie was better than fucking
her? Around a third party?!

Jupiter feels slightly queasy.

“Spare me the details of your illicit sex life,” she orders curtly.

Finnick glowers and perseveres. “The problem is, sometimes glitches happen. Something in the
genetic programming goes wrong resulting in a faulty product. Again, see the example in front of
you. Well, behind you,” he motions in the lycantant’s direction. “That guy thinks. And occasionally
mauls a random Entitled. Both are considered unrectifiable defects in military splices. He never
should have gotten in the Legion, let alone the Guard. But here he is. And that’s exactly how you
like him.”

“Your point, Odair?” Jupiter snaps, losing her patience. She knows how she likes her Caines without
Finnick mansplaining it to her, thank you very much.

“My point is, some pleasure splices don’t like having sex. And still get sold to brothels. Because
that’s how certain clients like it.”

Jupiter stares at him, horrified. “That is illegal!”

“Not every business owner can resist money being thrown at them.”

Unable to stay in place any longer, Jupiter walks around the desk, drumming her fingers on the top.
“Your Annie was in a licensed, reputable establishment that never had any problems with the law.”

She did her homework: she studied the reports. She has them fucking memorized by now.

“Not having problems with the law can be achieved either by law abidance or by bribing the officials commissioned to enforce it,” Finnick counters. “And if you cater to their specific tastes, you don’t even need money for your bribes.”

Well, that certainly clarifies some things.

For the first time since Finnick entered the room, Jupiter regards him with something akin to respect.

“The murder of the brothel owner… It was your doing, wasn’t it?”

“It was. I didn’t do it personally, of course: couldn’t risk it being traced back to me. But neither could I let the fucker put Purveyor to the Royal Court in his advertisement. The deal was meant to be secret, but how long would he be able to restrain himself? I had to act quickly. I had some retired friends, back from the service. They’re all dead now.” Finnick glances at Caine again; there are sorrow and resignation in his eyes Jupiter’s never seen before.

She wondered how Caine with all his enhanced abilities and back-up from Apini’s men had managed to get wounded that day.

Now she gets it.

Even retired, royal guards are a force to be reckoned with.

“How did you learn about Annie’s situation in the first place?” the queen inquires.

She knows the girl was a decoy duck. Now she knows why someone as smart as Finnick fell for the deception: it wasn’t deception at all. Whoever had planned the attempted regicide, had known Finnick’s most vulnerable points – they’d aimed at his savior tendencies and had triggered his powerful protective instincts. No real hero can resist a good damsel in distress, and since the hero was shrewd, the distress had to be genuine.

The question is, how did they manage to stick the lure under Finnick’s nose without him realizing that he was being baited?

“I was inspecting leisure establishments with the commission from Sex Without Violence,” Odair explains. “Remember them? You gave a gala to support their goal last year.”

“I did? I guess I must have, if it was you who organized it.” Queen patronages so many charity events she cannot possibly keep track of them. That’s always been Finnick’s job.

Finnick nods. “Well, while we were there, one of the workers managed to tip me off. Apparently, she was a fan.”

Stinger would love to get his hands onto that ‘fan’ of Finnick’s. Although two years later it’s doubtful they’ll ever find her, if she’s even alive. In such matters, middlemen are usually bumped off.

“Why didn’t you tell any of that to Apini?”

“Because it’s none of his fucking business!” Odair snaps. “Annie has little dignity left as it is. Not that it bothers her, with the way her mind is. But it sure as fuck bothers me! Her past is past, she should be allowed to have no one know about it.”
“I see you feel very protective about her.” The queen’s lips twist. She shouldn’t be envious – her relationship with Finnick is past now, too – but she is. How stupid is it to envy the abused, half-mad girl? “Instead of getting personally involved, though, you should have informed the proper authorities and instigated an official investigation,” she chastises.

“Yeah? By the time the investigators arrived, all evidence – including Annie – would have been cleaned up. I might’ve had her death on my hands!” Odair responds, agitated. “I couldn’t raise a fuss about it!”

“So you talked to the owner, flashed your title and bought her – in my name – to get her away from there as quickly as possible, and then cleaned up the mess behind you,” Jupiter makes a sweeping motion with her hand. “Fine. I can understand that. I’m not exactly happy about it, but I can understand it. What I don’t understand is if it wasn’t an affair thing in the beginning, just a rescue thing, why didn’t you bring the girl to me and say, ‘Jupiter, this is Annie. I saved her from a life of continuous rape and want to make absolutely sure that nothing like that will ever happen to her again. Can she stay in the alcazar where I could personally keep an eye on her?’”

“You would’ve never agreed to that!” Odair retorts.

Jupiter sighs, rubbing her forehead. She’s getting a headache. “That’s where you’re wrong. I would have, because I trusted you. Completely. All I wanted was to see you happy, even if that required fostering stray… girls.” Annie doesn’t deserve to be called a prostitute.

Finnick looks down and asks quietly, “Can’t we go with that plan now?”

Jupiter shakes her head, “I guess you know yourself that it’s too late for that.” Too late not to lie. Too late not to hurt. Too late not to hate. All the too lates fill her with overflowing sadness – as well as futile anger at Finnick for making it too late. “You chose to save the girl, good for you. But the moment you chose to keep her a secret from me, you lost all chances of my support.”

“I couldn’t tell you!”

“Why?! Why couldn’t you just tell me? To spare me the betrayal? The disgrace? Hadn’t I done enough for you to earn some respect, at least? It was so easy, just seven fucking words – ‘Jupiter, I do not love you anymore’!” She hears her voice breaking, hating herself for the weakness. “Why didn’t you trust me enough to tell me the truth?”

“Don’t you understand? I was afraid this would happen!” Finnick shouts, gesturing between them. “And I still love you. That’s never changed,” he adds quietly.

She flicks her hand, waving off his obvious lie, but it all comes bubbling up, all the painful, ugly, unbearable emotions she’s been trying so hard to suppress emerge to the surface, bursting like an abscess, leaking the pus of her stale grief. She clamps one hand over her mouth and digs the fingers of the other into the desktop, the dull pain from the pressure helping her to ground herself.

She will not cry.

She. Will. Not.

Inhale. One, two, three, four. Pause. One, two, three, four. Exhale. One, two, three, four.

Repeat.

“I knew that if I told you the truth, someone would inevitably suffer,” Finnick tells her softly. “If not me or Annie, then you. I couldn’t leave her behind and you were never open to the idea of sharing
me with someone else. I knew you’d be devastated. Is there a way to break a loving heart with grace? To spare it the pain? Because if there is, I couldn’t find it. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

His gentle voice is like a hand that reaches inside her chest and squeezes her heart, milking it for all it’s worth.

Unfortunately for Finnick, there is not much left to milk.

“Oh, don’t you dare to paint your egotism as selfless care about my feelings!” she snarls back. “If you gave two shits about them, you wouldn’t have cheated on me in the first place. And you kept it a secret, like the coward you are, robbing me of a slightest chance to do the damage control! Did you stop to think what it would have done to my reputation had the word gotten out?! The media would’ve annihilated me!” the queen gestures wildly, unable to keep her outrage in. “My own people would’ve despised me! The hypocrite of a queen who wouldn’t let the common folk get their rocks off with pleasure splices allowed the very same thing to her toyboy!”

Odair recoils as though she slapped him, but promptly regains control of himself. “You could’ve said you didn’t know. Which you didn’t.”

“And publicly admitted that Queen had been fooled by none other but Royal Consort? Quite a leader I am, if I can’t control my own man! You know as well as I do that it’s the retinue that makes the king. If my own courtiers— my own consort! – do not respect or obey me, why should others? You are the major influencer in my entourage, your first and foremost job is to prime my audience for me, and yet you willingly risked crashing down my public image!”

“Jupiter, nothing happened,” Odair reminds her calmly, maddeningly reasonable. “I did everything I could to prevent it from getting out. I kept the secret from everyone, not just from you.”

“And what a fine job you did! First with those buddies of yours, then with Stinger, and finally with Wormtongue! And gods know whom else along the way. It wouldn’t have been so terrible if you had chosen anyone else, but no, you had to go for a mentally damaged pleasure splice!”

“Since when you’re suddenly splicist?”

The queen refuses to rise to Finnick’s provocation, which they both know is nonsense, – it’s nothing but an attempt to make her feel guilty and therefore be more lenient to him.

“It’s not me who’s splicist, Finnick, it is you who’s evidently stupid,” she responds coldly. “You mustn’t forget for one moment who you are, High Consort. Why do you think I entrusted you with royal charities and patronages? I’ve made you into a symbol of everything that’s good and wholesome in this world.” She shakes her head at her own foolishness. – Gods, there is no better example of infinite imbecility than a woman in love! – “People look up to you, they aspire to be like you! Your popularity exceeds my own. Had it ever become public knowledge that you were in a romantic relationship with a pleasure splice, it would have been the best promotion sex slavery could ever get. What the hell were you thinking, Finnick?!”

“I wasn’t,” he admits, closing his eyes. His voice is raw. “When I saw her there, huddled in the corner… I couldn’t make myself walk away, couldn’t leave her unprotected for another moment. I had to do something, then and there. Was it so wrong to save the helpless girl?”

And just like that, he’s back to his usual eely, manipulative self. If she chose to ignore his mind tricks for all the years while they were together, it doesn’t mean she doesn’t notice them.

“Quit twisting my words, Finnick,” the queen rebuffs sternly. “I have no problem with you helping
Annie. What I have a problem with is you fucking the helpless girl you saved and jeopardizing both my public image and my humanitarian initiative in the process.”

“Sounds like you’re more concerned with your prestige than my actual infidelity,” Odair remarks.

Is it just her or does he sound offended?

“Naturally. In case you have forgotten, I’m Queen. What I feel about your liaison is my private business, but Queen’s reputation is an affair of state – therefore it matters more. Besides, it’s not just PR fallout that was at stake. As a former guard, you must remember one of the basic rules of the Private Security – no family, no attachments. They make people too vulnerable to manipulation and blackmail. And you, as my consort, would have been so much more dangerous than a random guard.”

“Jupiter, you can’t believe that I would hurt you. I’ll give my life to keep you safe.” Finnick’s words ring with sincerity.

Sincerity and reality are two different things, though.

“Will you give Annie’s?”

Odair is silent for a long time.

Finally, he comes up with, “I wouldn’t trade your life for Annie’s.”

“Oh, no one would’ve asked such a nasty thing of you, Finnick. It would have been something small, something seemingly inconsequential – like to share a piece of information. Just how many state secrets do you know, Finnick? All those I do, and then some?”

“Are you seriously suspecting me of espionage?!”

“What do you think my secret services have been checking you for? The sordid details of your bedroom adventures do not interest me, I assure you.”

“This is absurd! I’d never sell your secrets!”

“I know you wouldn’t sell them. You would trade them. I wonder how much of Annie’s agonized screaming would it take to make you do just that. A minute? Two? What lengths would you go to in order to make it stop?”

Finnick winces. “Jupiter, I repeat, it didn’t happen!”

“No, but it could have happened. It was a possible scenario, because you’d made it possible!”

Odair runs his fingers through his hair. “You’re getting paranoid, just like Stinger.”

“I have good reasons to be paranoid. When I visit my family and get kidnapped by the said family, that’s a good reason to get paranoid. When I reach out for a pretty shell and almost explode, that’s a good reason to get paranoid. When I go to sleep in my own fucking bed and nearly die of heart failure, that’s a good reason to get paranoid. When the person who knows all my secrets, who can influence my every decision, who can convince me to be in a certain place at a certain time without my escort team gets himself a lover he would do anything for, that’s a good fucking reason to get paranoid.”

“Will you listen?! How many times do I have to tell you I wouldn’t betray you for Annie!” Finnick
yells in exasperation.

“You already have,” she murmurs.

“That’s – that’s different. I may have been unfaithful to Jupiter, but I’ve always stayed loyal to Queen.”

“Oh, really? Do you remember the oath you swore when you became my consort?” the queen inquires. “Do you even remember you swore it? ‘I will defend Her Majesty to the utmost of my power against all conspiracies and attempts whatsoever, which shall be made against her person, crown or dignity.’ Dignity shouldn’t be a foreign word to you, Finnick, seeing how desperately you fight to protect Annie’s. What have you done to my dignity?”

Finnick shakes his head, “Jupiter, you’re taking it too hard. Few people know about this, and those who do, will keep quiet. Besides, when a consort’s lover has really damaged the monarch’s prestige? Most people either do not care or assume we both already have them. You have no reason to feel compromised by Annie, she’s never been a threat to you. No matter how much I love her, she cannot sway my fealty to the Crown.”

“Words,” the queen dismisses his pledge. “How much do you think your words are worth now, Finnick? If I learned anything from the story you told me, it’s that you would do whatever it takes to keep your Annie safe. Hell, you would murder just to avenge her abuse. Which would’ve made her perfect leverage if she had fallen into wrong hands.”

“So far the only hands she has fallen into are yours, and it’s you who are using her as leverage. Or are you using her to simply hurt me back? I was the one who hurt you,” he slams his palms into his chest, “take it out on me! What has she ever done to you? Why are you keeping her prisoner?!”

“It’s just self-defense, Finnick.”

“You do not need to defend yourself from me!” he snarls. “Your so-called ‘self-defense’ is nothing but petty revenge!”

“Revenge? Revenge?!”

Jupiter feels something snap inside, her tight self-control slipping away through her shaking fingers as fury rises in its wake. She spent two months struggling with her emotions, trying to cope with the unbearable feeling of betrayal, to suppress her responsive rancour in an attempt to be just to Finnick and his girl. To be fair.

Maybe she shouldn’t be fair.

Maybe she should be herself – the queen who has been wronged.

Her muscles quiver like a tightly taut bow-string after the arrow has been released; she feels too hot and too cold at the same time. She stands up straighter, taller, squaring her shoulders – the way she’s seen Seraphi stand on the alcazar’s murals, the portraits hanging in every public office or statues adorning Seraphinite temples, in all her eternal glory. At that moment, Jupiter realizes just how eternal the great Queen really is. Seraphi’s power is thrumming through her veins, swelling up with Seraphi’s blood, and it’s the first time when it truly hits her: her power is absolute.

She can be anything she wants – do anything she wants.

No one will dare to openly oppose her.
Jupiter’s been waiting for her royal heritage to kick in since she turned twenty-one. Ever since her ascension, she tried to learn as much as she could about Seraphi, struggling to find something—anything—of the formidable late Queen in herself. She knew she wasn’t cutting it as the matriarch of the House of Abrasax: too inexperienced, too weak, too meek, too eager to please too many people. She lacked backbone—and an iron fist. No wonder Balem—or some other heir of hers—has tried to get her out of the way. Weak leaders are meant to be taken down.

Who knew it would take a betrayal and a heartbreak rolled into one for her to find her royal legacy? And to think, all this time the power has been inside her. It couldn’t be anywhere else, really: *it’s in her genes.*

She *is* Seraphi.

Queen smiles.

Finnick’s eyes widen.

Royal Consort has always been very sensitive to Jupiter’s mood changes, careful to never push too far. This time he’s overdone it, and by the look of him, the realization is already dawning.

“Oh, darling, you don’t know about revenge,” Jupiter drawls in a honeyed voice. “RegeneX can make torture last *forever.*”

“You wouldn’t torture me,” Odair states firmly, but there’s a barely noticeable tremble to his words.

“Oh of course I wouldn’t torture you. You are the beloved hero of my nation!” Queen coos gently. “I’d make you watch.”

She barely catches a glimpse of Finnick’s contorted face before her line of vision is suddenly cut off by the black leather uniform.

Once again, the guard has moved to stand protectively between the queen and her consort.

Only this time, there is no shield in sight.

And why is Wise facing *her*?!

“Your Majesty, you need to calm down.”

His demeanour is impassive, but after the two months they spent together she can tell he’s struggling to stay stolid. She has seen him like this enough times to recognize the signs.

Caine is afraid of her.

*As he should be.*

“Are you telling me what to do, Officer Wise?” Queen inquires, her question an equal-measure mixture of politesse and poison.

Caine gulps but perseveres, “Your Majesty, do you want this to come to a physical confrontation? High Consort’s aggression level is reaching the critical point, I don’t know how much further he’ll be able to hold back.”

“That’s Finnick’s problem, not mine. Clearly.”

If Odair attacks her, well… That’ll be one difficult decision off her list.
“If High Consort decides to use his implanted weapons on you, I will be able to thwart the attack, but I can’t guarantee that he will survive my defense. Do you want to risk him dying?”

“Maybe I do,” she smirks.

The guard shakes his head. The motion is a bit too jerky for the inherently graceful lycantant, whose every move is usually smooth and fluent, betraying how tense he really is. “This is not you, Your Majesty.”

For an instant, Queen’s vision flickers and the world in front of her changes colour.

“What asked you, splice?” she snarls, enraged beyond herself.

Caine flinches bodily and staggers back, dropping his gaze and muttering, “No one, Your Majesty, no one. Forgive me, Your Majesty.” He hastily steps away and out of her line of sight but her eyes follow him, unable to look away from the disaster unravelling in front of her.

Jupiter’s anger collapses in on itself, leaving horrified shock in its wake.

“Odair, wait outside,” she commands curtly.

Finnick glances at Caine, then at the queen. Hesitates.

Asks, “What are you going to do to him?”

“Out, now.”

The consort shuffles out of the door that slides shut behind him with an almost inaudible hiss.

Silence reigns.

She rubs her face, hard, probably completely ruining her make-up.

When she eventually looks up, the lycantant is still frozen in place, head bowed, staring at the floor.

The blazing inferno of fury that’s been raging inside her mere moments ago has been completely blown out by a chilly squall of guilt. Caine has nothing to do with the pain she is feeling, he’s just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Taking her anger on him has been… beneath her.

“I’m sorry, Caine.”

He shoots her a quick glance only to immediately drop his gaze again.

No, a simple ‘I’m sorry’ will not cut it. If she wants to be forgiven, wants him to indeed hear and accept her apology, she has to apologize in the language understood by the person she is apologizing to.

And want she does.

Right now, all she wants is Caine to stop looking like a beaten dog.

Driven by intuition and sheer regret, she makes a few quick steps towards the lycantant and takes off her crown, hastily disentangling it from her hair. Turning back, she carelessly tosses it onto the desk where it lands with a loud clank. Then she moves even closer – until her toes are almost touching his, – bows her head and bunts his chest with it, leaving her forehead to rest against the cool leather of his
“I shouldn't have snapped at you the way I did,” she whispers. “I shouldn't have used what you are as an insult. It's a disgrace that the idea even entered my head, let alone spilled out like that. I am sorry. Truly.”

She feels his chest move under her face, his frozen body coming to life. For a second, his hands rise to hover tentatively above her shoulders but fall back down again.

“I understand, Your Majesty. It's all...”

“Don't tell me it's all right,” she protests, stepping back to look up at him. “It's not. It's not.” Too ashamed to maintain the eye contact she turns away and starts pacing across the room in agitation. “I've been trying so hard to make it not be all right for anyone to treat splices with contempt, and here I am, doing it myself!”

“Are you?” There is an odd, unfitting undertone in Caine’s voice.

She whirls around to look at him and is startled to find that he is smiling. “Huh?”

“Are you treating me with contempt? And even if you did, did you really do it because I was a splice?”

“No,” she shakes her head, “definitely not because of that.” It's a relief that she can be completely sincere in her answer.

“I angered you,” Caine points out, “and you snapped back. We – all of us – rarely think about our wording in the heat of the moment. Even if the choice of words was... misfortunate, your reaction was well deserved since I had challenged you – around your consort, no less, the person you were already feeling vulnerable around. It was extremely stupid of me. One of the stupidest things I've ever done, really, and that's saying a lot.” He gives her a small, self-deprecating shrug. “There is a reason why people are warned not to approach predators when those feel threatened. Fools might get mauled.”

She stares at him, wide-eyed. “Have you just compared me to a predator?”

“Would you rather I had compared you to a prey?”

She regards him thoughtfully, catching herself on the realization that there’s much more to Caine than meets the eye. “Still, my reaction was wrong. I'm the queen, I should control my temper better than that.”

Caine smiles down at her, “Your Majesty, please, do not think that I’m belittling your status, but you are a human, first and foremost. And humans are emotional beings. So you lost your temper, but now we're talking, you're apologizing. It wouldn't have been any different if I was a human just like you; no need to overcompensate because I'm not.”

Not for the first time, the queen is floored – and humbled – by the lycantant’s generosity of spirit.

“You do understand, don't you?” she marvels.

His smile turns soft. “I do.”

“Gods, I want to be you when I grow up,” Jupiter blurts out.
The lycantant grins wider, “You’ll have to do a lot of body modifications in order to achieve that. As well as a lot of growing up. You’re tall for a human female, sure, but way too short for a lycantant male.”

“Like I would want your stature, Officer Reach-For-a-Sparrow!” she snorts. “Or your sex, or your ears… Well, maybe ears, they are awesome. My point is, I’m happy with the body I have. It is your heart I truly want!”

“You already have it,” he tells her softly.

The Oath of Allegiance immediately springs to her mind. *I do swear I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Jupiter Seraphi-Nova and her Heirs... Will defend her person, crown and dignity to the utmost of my ability... Will well and truly serve our Sovereign with my mind, my heart and my life...*

“Yeah, I know, every soldier’s heart belongs to Queen,” she waves Caine off, feeling a bit awkward. The queen always feels a little abashed – and a lot moved – when she hears those words, because deep inside Jupiter feels she’s done too little to have deserved such loyalty – it’s like a loan she’s hoping to repay. She comes up to the desk and plops herself onto the corner, feeling very tired all of a sudden. “Unlike my consort, I do remember the text of the Oath – I’m often present when newbies plead themselves to the Crown. It boosts the morale, or so I’m told. You tell me, does it?”

Caine blinks, momentarily frowns, blinks again and sighs. His reaction seems both confused and confusing. Not for the first time, Jupiter gets the impression of being a child regarded by a gentle, but exasperated parent.

She shakes the feeling off, looking at the guard questioningly, waiting for the answer. “So, tell me, does it?”

“Does it what?” he asks, looking somewhat lost.

“Boost the morale.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” Caine answers finally. “You weren’t at my swearing.”

She feels a sudden urge to apologize for not being there when he pledged his fealty to her.

“I can’t be everywhere at once,” she explains. “Queen attends only huge collective events. You were... a speciality act.”

“I always am,” the lycantant sighs, his bewildered smile slipping off. “Never normal.”

“I meant that in the nicest way possible,” Jupiter clarifies. “You’re an exception to many rules. The first lycantant to be Queen’s private bodyguard. The first splice to have been accepted into the royal escort team. The first former convict to have been admitted into the Royal Guard. Stinger pestered me for weeks to sign your pardon. I had to overrule the court-martial verdict made in Titus’ territory. If he ever finds out, he won’t be pleased. I usually stay well out of the heirs’ business.”

“Why did you do it then?”

“I trusted Stinger when he said I wouldn’t regret it.”

Caine’s face turns grim. “And I immediately made you regret it.”

“You did,” she nods. “And then you didn’t. I’m glad I helped Stinger to bring you here. You are a
living proof of how faulty a hasty judgment can be. So thanks for stopping both me and Finnick before we had a chance to do something rash to each other.”

Instead of the protocolary ‘At your service, Your Majesty’ she gets ‘You’re welcome.’

It feels better.

Warmer.

“That said,” the queen proceeds, “don’t you ever dare to speak over me around witnesses again, Officer Wise. Understand this: Queen can’t afford a guard talking back at her in public. Anyone else would be out of the Guard in the blink of an eye for such insubordination, blacklisted for life, if not court-martialed. The only reason that you’ll get to walk away from this without repercussions is that Finnick is too preoccupied with his own problems at the moment to run his mouth. And that I value you too much to let you go.”

Caine shifts from foot to foot, gradually turning pink – whether from her reprimand or compliment, she has no idea. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Hey, Caine?”

“Your Majesty?”

“If you ever feel like renewing the Oath, I’ll make time to listen to you. In person.”

After a moment of hesitation, he slowly comes over and nudges her shoulder with his head. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She nuzzles into whatever part of him is the closest. Her make-up is already ruined anyway.

She’s glad they’re speaking the same language.

Besides, he smells so good. By gods, she missed him.

Caine suddenly stiffens and takes a step back. Jupiter gives him a puzzled look – she thought he liked being scent-marked.

“Your Majesty, you’re not yourself,” he repeats seriously, apparently trying to convey something very important – something she’s evidently not getting. “You didn’t use to smell like this before.”

“Really?” She thinks back for a moment. “You know, I don’t feel like myself lately.”

Ever since she came back she’s been oscillating between seething irritation and sudden bouts of anger. She’s never enjoyed her job, but she didn’t use to hate it quite this much. She blamed it on her return to the stressful environment of the court with the heaps of overdue work and excessive socialization – and, well, Finnick.

“I’m sorry if I’m overstepping again,” Caine starts in a halting voice, visibly shrinking from what he’s about to say, “but maybe you should consult Royal Physician about readjusting your hormone intake?”

“What?!”

Because – what?!

“You don’t smell like your usual, normal self. There’s something wrong with your body’s
chemistry.”

“Why do you think it’s connected to my hormones?”

Caine inhales, opens his mouth to start speaking, gapes for a second and closes it again. Dark pink blotches bloom on his milky skin. He takes another fortifying breath and blurts, cringing, “Yousmelllikeyoureovulating.”

She has not just heard what she has just heard.

Has she?

Judging by the bright cherry hue of the guard’s ears, she has.

First off, Caine can’t be right, it’s way too early. Besides, the implant is already working, fully suppressing ovulation, so it won’t come to it at all.

Second off –

“How can you possibly know that?! It’s not like you sniffed multiple women and then cross-referenced their scents with their hormone tests. Or did you?..”

What the fuck do they do in lycantant training?!

“No, of course I didn’t. It’s just…” Caine’s poor ears look like they’re about to catch fire. “Um, since lycantants are a human-based splice species, we still notice it when a woman is most likely to conceive. Whether we want to or not,” he adds hastily, lifting his palms up in a pacifying gesture. “So yeah, I know the smell. Instinctively. I’m sorry.”

Jupiter buries her burning face into her palms. It feels like Caine’s ears look.

There’s something definitely wrong with her hormones. Whatever the issue is, she shouldn’t smell the way Caine says she does. And female sex hormone imbalance is notorious for causing the symptoms she’s been experiencing throughout the last week: emotional instability, pessimistic perception of life, constant irritation, and wild aggressive outbursts…

…Like the one she’s just had.

“On the scale from one to infinity, how much do I reek?” Jupiter mumbles through her fingers.

Caine hesitates.

She lifts her face. “It’s an infinity plus one, isn’t it? Be honest!”

“Just how honest should I be?” Caine hedges. “Like, plain honest or honest honest?”

“It’s that bad? Be honest honest.”

“You do not reek. But the smell is potent enough to be arousing. Even for me, despite…”

“Young, she groans, not really registering anything after the ‘arousing’ part, “I asked for ‘honest honest’, not for ‘oh my gods, call the keepers, I need my brain bleached right this moment!’ honest!”

On top of all her other problems, her scent triggers an imperative to breed her in the poor lycantants who are misfortunate enough to find themselves in her vicinity.
Royal Physician can wave her position good-bye.  

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. You asked, I answered. I’m sorry I’ve embarrassed you.”

Jupiter sobers up, squashing down her mortification to focus on the more practical matters at hand. “Do I need to send you away again?”

Caine’s face falls. “I’m not an animal, Your Majesty. I can control myself.”

_Not every time, apparently._

She keeps the thought to herself. If he can be generous and forgiving with her, so can she with him.

“It’s not about your ability to control yourself, Caine. It’s about your concentration while working. A guard must keep his focus at all times, so there mustn’t be any… distractions.”

“I’m doing fine,” the lycantant insists. “Please, don’t send me away.”

Puzzled by a note of desperation in his voice – doesn’t everyone want a couple of extra weeks off work? – she assures the guard, “If you’re sure it won’t interfere with your job, you can stay. I don’t want you to regret telling me the truth, no matter how awkward it is. You are a really, really brave guy. Thank you. And thank you for your courage in stepping in between me and Finnick in time. I am genuinely sorry about lashing out on you.”

“I understand, Your Majesty. Hurt breeds hurt. It’s a vicious cycle that’s very hard to break. I just wish you would stop hurting.”

“I wish it too, Caine. So let’s get over and done with this bullshit.” Jupiter grabs the crown and puts it on her head again, jumping off the desk. “Slott! Call Odair in.”

The first thing Finnick does upon reentering the room is shoot a concerned glance at Caine, like he is worried the queen might have done something terrible to the guard in his absence. For that fleeting instant, Jupiter’s in love with him all over again, having been reminded of why she loved him in the first place. The guy has a huge heart, caring about others even when he’s in danger himself.

Too bad that huge heart of his doesn’t seem to give a damn about her.

“It’s not Officer Wise you should be worrying about, Odair,” the queen comments waspishly.

Finnick gives the guard another lingering once-over, then squints at her, his face turning thoughtful and calculating.

She doesn’t like that look at all.

“You lipstick’s smeared,” Finnick remarks, apparently non-sequitur.

She doesn’t turn to glance in the mirror, doesn’t as much as twitch a facial muscle. The years of consciously practicing self-control have paid off.

Fuck Finnick and his insulting assumptions.

“We’re not here to discuss my make-up,” the queen announces icily. “Let’s cut to the chase, Odair. I have here three detailed reports covering your activity for the last two years. All insufficiently substantiated allegations aside, none of them contains anything more incriminating than you ‘secret’ correspondence with Kalique, the one I asked you to engage in. Which – bonus points to Gríma for even discovering it and minus points to you for not making it secret enough.”
“Not like it was supposed to be secret from you,” Odair huffs.

The queen ignores him as she continues, “However, considering your illicit liaison and consequent conspiracy to conceal the crime, two out of the three reports pronounce you ‘insufficiently reliable’.” She lifts her eyes to meet Finnick’s. “Odair, you know what ‘insufficiently reliable’ means when it comes to the sovereign’s consort.”

His face turns grim. “Immediate elimination.”

“Exactly.”

“Who was the one who found me reliable enough? It certainly wasn’t Wormtongue.”

“Apini. ‘Close surveillance and limited clearance are advised.’”

“I didn’t expect that. Thought he’d jump at the chance to finally get rid of me.”

“After the cover-up, I can’t say I trust his recommendation,” the queen responds drily.

“I’m still alive, ain’t I? That means you do not want me dead,” the consort counters with more certainty than she would like.

Jupiter glances down. “I was… too distracted to make the decision.”

“I see you were busy on your vacation,” Finnick drawls, eyeing Caine again.

How the fuck Finnick even knows that she left? He was supposed to be kept in an information vacuum! Then again, her consort has always had way too many friends. She should dismiss everyone he came in contact with during her absence. Every fucking guard.

“I see you’re well informed,” the queen remarks. “Did your informant also tell you about the bomb found inside your lady friend?”

“What?! Found… inside?” Blanching, Finnick leans forward, taking a step in her direction. “Is Annie all right?!”

“Is Annie all right? Is Annie?.. Fuck you, Finnick,” Jupiter spits out. “That bomb was meant for me. Without Stinger’s paranoia, I could be dead by now, but everything that you’re concerned about if Annie is all right.”

With visible effort, Odair gets a hold on himself. “Jupiter, I can see that you’re all right with my own two eyes. Please, tell me how she is. Shit, Apini must have tried interrogating her! Jupiter!..” he makes to approach her.

In a blur, Wise is between them. An instant later, he firmly but very carefully –almost gently – places Finnick on the initial spot the consort was standing in. The lycantant’s hands linger on the Odair’s upper arms as he makes deliberate eye contact with the siren. Jupiter’s not sure what Caine is trying to convey, but apparently, their silent communication is successful: Odair’s posture marginally relaxes and he stays rooted in place as the guard lets go of him and swiftly strides behind the queen again.

Jupiter is almost sure she’s just witnessed a compassionate reassurance.

“I want to be you when I grow up.”

“Your girl is alive and well,” the queen takes a page out of Caine’s book. “The bomb had to be
extracted but there was no lasting damage. As for the interrogation, Apini had no choice in doing what he did. Annie was blanked afterwards and returned into suspended animation. She is not suffering, Finnick.

Unlike the two of us.

“Who did this to her?”

Her again.

Jupiter’s fingers curl. She’s never wanted to strangle someone with her own hands as much as she does Finnick at the moment. It’s like he’s intentionally undoing the precarious balance Caine’s helping her to find.

Apparently, her consort is an imbecile.

She presses her hands against her thighs, forcibly straightening them.

“Probably it was the same person who planted Annie to be picked up by you,” the queen responds. “I have many enemies. And because I have many enemies, security is my first and foremost consideration. It should have been yours, too. Instead, you criminally endangered my reputation and my life.”

“Jupiter, you’re exaggerating!” Odair reasons. “You said yourself, the bomb had been deactivated, the secret is contained. And all those hypothetical threats you mentioned are no longer valid since Annie’s here. You are safe.”

The ease with which her consort disregards the consequences of his actions – both potential and actualized – finally convinces Jupiter that there is no way to salvage the situation. The queen arrives at a decision. She straightens and wipes all emotion off her face.

“Consort Odair,” she addresses Finnick in her official tone. “You violated the Oath of Allegiance to your Queen, thus committing treason. Considering the services you rendered to the Crown in the past, including three successful rescues of Sovereign, I was determined to be merciful. However, this interrogation has convinced me otherwise. You haven’t said once that you repent your disloyalty. In addition to the complete absence of remorse, you’ve demonstrated the lack of responsibility as you’ve persistently refused to acknowledge your mistakes and recognize the jeopardy your actions put Sovereign in.” Jupiter’s voice falters, but she soldiers on. “Loyalty and responsibility are the top requirements for the post of Royal Consort, and both your conduct and your words have shown that you no longer meet them. Therefore you’ll be removed.”

Finnick stares, incredulous. “You mean you’ve kept me alive for two months only to kill me now?!”

Jupiter looks away. “I do not want to kill you, Finnick,” she whispers. “But I am Queen and I must do my duty. I made the mistake of choosing you to be my consort. I was young and stupid and in love, and I let my heart make my decision for me. Now I’m rectifying it,” she adds firmly, her voice hoarse and somber. Getting rid of Finnick is a necessity and a relief, but not a joy.

“There are more humane ways to dispose of me, if that’s what you want,” he argues.

“The only way a Royal Consort can leave his position is having breathed his last. You knew that when you agreed to become mine.”

“Could you forget about your prestige for once? If I was yours, it means no one else can have me, is that it?”
“Finn, you’re smarter than that. If consortship was about prestige for me, I would have never made a mere Brigadier of the Royal Guard my consort in the first place!” she responds. “My only concern is security. You know too much for me to let you go. If you fall into wrong hands, you’d be a well of information that might be perilous for me and, more importantly, my kingdom. And keepers can’t erase your memory that far back with enough accuracy to make sure you don’t remember anything about our years together. Do you think I haven’t considered other options?!”

He presses his lips together, glancing away. “So, you’ve been madly in love with me for all these years you cannot even wipe from my memory, yet the moment I fall in love with another you suddenly do not love me anymore?”

The worst thing is, she does. At least, looking at him now, some deep nostalgic part of her still loves him like nothing’s changed.

Except everything’s changed.

She turns away from him; she doesn’t want him to see her face. She summons all her hurt and all her anger to pull herself through this.

“We won’t talk feelings, Finnick. If I had listened to my feelings, the moment I learned about your infidelity I would have had you skinned alive, watched and enjoyed the show. And you’ve done a great job today to revive those urges. However, acting out on them is beneath me,” the queen states firmly. “Your execution will be quick, dignified and painless. It’ll be announced to the public that you have died a hero, protecting the Crown.”

“Which, in a way, I will,” Odair smiles sadly. “Take care of Annie, will you?”

“Tell me, is she worth dying for?” Jupiter asks in morbid curiosity.

“She is.”

Finnick’s answer is immediate and certain.

At least there is integrity to this romance of his.

“I will take care of her the best way I can,” Jupiter promises sincerely, her throat closing. “Any last words?”

Finnick is silent for a long time. When he speaks up, it’s nothing she’s expected.

“When I die, my voice will die with me.”

Jupiter’s heart gives a violent, excruciating wrench and stills. For a moment, she is afraid that it might stop for good.

She hears Caine take a quick step towards her, no doubt ready to slam the damned organ back into contracting if it fails to restart on its own.

The heart gives another painful spasm and resumes its work – jarring, uneven beats – and the guard halts but doesn’t retreat. The queen doesn’t wave him off, secretly grateful for his steadying presence behind her back.

Because she is about to do one of the most stupid, senseless, irrational things in her entire life.

Her consort is a threat. All threats this close to Queen must be eliminated.
She can’t.

The idea of taking Finnick’s life is horrendous enough, but taking his voice…

She won’t be just depriving herself of the pure essence of beauty, she will be robbing the universe at large – it’ll be like taking a torch to a priceless canvas or a sledgehammer to a marble masterpiece. There are plenty of good voices out there, but once in a while there comes a voice that’s capable of enchanting entire worlds, connecting directly to people’s souls regardless of the language they speak.

Jupiter doesn’t even believe in souls – or any deities, for that matter – but when Finnick sings she feels like she has one – because she’s seeing god.

His voice has always brought the very best in her.

Now that it is about to be snuffed out of existence, she’s realizing how wrong it was of her to keep it to herself. No, as many people as possible should get a chance to hear it, so when it’s gone, they’ll know this once was.

Her eyes meet his.

“Sing.”

“What, right now?”

“No, Finnick.” She’s not sure she can take it right now. Or ever. “You always said you wanted to sing for large audiences, and I didn’t let you. Well, now I’m letting you – no, I’m telling you. Go out and sing. I’ll give you all support you may need: financial back-up, promotion… Anything.”

“Are you – are you serious?” His dull, tired eyes light up.

“Your voice is the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced. I can’t find it in me to destroy it, no matter what my logic tells me. So take full advantage of that. Sing for charity, sing for fame, sing for fun. Sing as much as you can, because you are on borrowed time.”

“What do you mean? I thought you changed your mind about the execution.”

“Finnick, when the word gets out that Queen is no longer infatuated with her consort, those people out there,” she motions at the door, encompassing the entire court in one gesture, “will find a way to do away with you to clear a place by my side, just so they could squeeze their own agent of influence into it. Especially if they believe they will be doing Queen a favour, ridding me of the unwanted lover.”

“We could pretend that nothing’s happened.”

“Clearly, I won’t scorn you in public. But you, of all people, must know what a shitty actress I am.” The queen knows her weaknesses. She might be able to conceal her emotions for a short while, but long-term pretense is not her forte. “We’ll keep this as hushed up as we can. However, you will never formally represent Queen again; all political events will be excluded from your schedule.”

“Jupiter, under the circumstances, do you really think I’ll be reckless enough to compromise you?!”

“You’ve already compromised me once, who says you won’t do it again?” she parries. “Besides, it’ll give you more time to exercise your vocal talent. Make sure I won’t regret giving you this chance.”

“You won’t. I’ll make the Crown proud.”
“We’ll see.” Even if Finnick does make her proud, it’ll hardly cancel out her humiliation. “Your singing mustn’t interfere with your formal duties, though. You will keep doing those – except for the doing me part of your job, obviously. All our contact will be limited to shared official engagements. I do not want to see your face any more than absolutely necessary. As soon as Stinger and Gríma arrange a new joint escort team for you, you will be free to leave your quarters. Until then, your movements stay restricted to your suite.”

“Where is my usual escort team?”

“They have been dismissed.”

“But those were my friends!”

“Exactly. And I need them to be the friends of the Crown. You’ll be kept under around-the-clock surveillance. All your verbal communication and written correspondence will be monitored. Any trips are to be negotiated in advance.”

“So I’ll be a prisoner in my own home?”

“Finnick, I gave you every privilege, every comfort and every luxury a person could possibly have. You chose to abuse your freedom, so now you’ll have none.”

“What about Annie?”

Jupiter takes a sharp inhale at yet another mention of the girl. Apparently, the notion of sore subject is foreign to her consort. She thinks she might start hating the girl against her own will.

“As a mercy to you both, Annie will remain unconscious. She is my guarantee that you’ll behave. You will behave, won’t you, Finnick?”

“I will behave even if you let her go,” he vows solemnly. “Please, let her go.”

Jupiter knows she’s stupid – at least when it comes to Finnick she is – but even her stupidity has limits.

“If I do that, then I’ll have nothing but your self-preservation instinct and your word to ensure that you will stay in line. And you’ve proven that I can’t trust either.”

“Jupiter…”

“That is enough,” she cuts off. “Queen has spoken. Dismissed.”

Finnick looks like he wants to argue, but thinks better of it. He gives her a sharp bow, mutters, “Your Majesty” and exits the room with the discipline she recognizes from the Royal Guard.

Good.

Some discipline will do her consort good.

The moment Finnick’s out of the door, Jupiter’s shoulders sag under the ineliminable burden he’s suddenly become. There is a reason why spouses – as well as other long-term life partners – are sometimes called a ball and chain: her consort is a dead weight that she now has to drag behind herself despite the fact that their relationship is over. It is a stalemate: she cannot get rid of Finnick, but she cannot stand living with him around, either. It is the shittiest thing about real life – there is no
neat closures, no poetic justice, no satisfying retributions, no *deus ex machina*... You’re simply stuck in certain circumstances and more often than not you can’t get out of them.

Like an insect in pine resin.

Jupiter stares into space in front of her with dry, uncrying eyes. What the hell is she supposed to do now? How is she going to cope with being constantly exposed to the very cause of her anguish? Like she needs another stressor! Her queenhood was packed full of stress as it was!

Fuck her fucking job.

Fuck her fucking consort.

*Fuck her fucking life.*

Caine shifts.

“Your Majesty, may I be allowed to say something?”

“Oh, *now* he’s asking,” she mutters, sagging heavily onto the corner of her desk.

The guard waits.

“Go ahead,” the queen motions her hand at him in surrender.

“Maybe you should consider visiting your home planet tonight, Your Majesty?”

Havet? *Again?*

“I don’t have time for that anymore,” she sighs. – *Didn’t have it in the first place.* – “Can’t be running away forever.”

“Not for long, just for an hour or two. It’ll do you good.”

“Do you have any idea how much a single transportation to Havet costs?”

“You can afford it,” Caine states bluntly. “Isn’t your sanity more important right now?”

She shrugs. He’s right.

“Care to join me?”

The guard visibly startles at her question.

*Shit.* Where did that come from? It’s not what she was intending to say at all. She has to back–

“Gladly.”

She glances at the lycantant. He still looks a bit taken aback, but one corner of his mouth has curled up in a tiny lopsided smile.

Huh.

Seems like there is no need to backpedal after all.

She studies the lycantant’s face in search for any signs of reluctance. His verbal answer doesn’t mean much: whenever Queen asks for something, *everyone* responds that they would gladly do it – it
doesn’t mean they will be actually happy doing it. The guard’s shift is supposed to be ending after the audience since it’s already past the time when the queen usually retires to her private quarters; it is his personal time she’s asking for.

Caine briefly meets her eyes – apparently sensing that he’s being stared at – and immediately looks away. His smile, however, doesn’t falter. Honestly, he doesn’t seem that unwilling to spend a few extra hours with her.

Besides, it will be awkward if she backs out now.

She slides off the desk.

“Come on, big guy. Let’s get the hell outta here.”

They arrive in time to catch the last vestiges of the dying sunset. The beach is bathed in the warm slanting rays drowning it in gold and ochre. The air feels like freshly drawn milk against Jupiter’s skin, its touch is lingering and humid. The sea is quiet and serene, barely a splash in the reigning silence.

Caine was right: this is the place to be after the conversation she just had. It’s a much better alternative than her painfully empty chambers right now.

With a relieved sigh, Jupiter plops herself onto the sand completely disregarding her delicate dress – she dressed up finely to face Finnick, encasing herself in the impeccability of her clothes as though in body armour. She folds her legs in front of her, wrestling with the skirt that’s trying to ride up to her waist.

Freaking skirts. They are not made to sit cross-legged.

Without a word, Caine lowers himself into the same position an arm length away, managing it with an appalling ease.

Out of the corner or her eye, she longingly regards the guard’s black-clad lap, envying his wearing pants.

Oh, well.

With a resigned sigh, she shifts her gaze to look straight in front of her.

Just like the nature that surrounds them, they’re quiet for a long while. Jupiter doesn’t feel compelled to fill the silence, comfortable in their mutual muteness. Gradually, her muscles begin to loosen, her posture loses its tension, the stress ebbing away.

That’s the moment her conscience chooses to start nagging at her.

Caine shouldn’t be here.

There’s no necessity for him to be accompanying her. He should be back in the alcazar, in his own apartment – or maybe at Apinis’ place – unwinding after the long day of work just like she’s doing now.

Why the hell has she dragged the poor guy with her?

She has no right to give him extra work – because let’s face it, no matter where they are, while she’s
around, he’d be inevitably guarding her – only because she felt like having his company tonight.

She is a bad employer.

Using her power for her personal gain – isn’t that the very definition of corruption?

She is an awful queen.

As she steams in her self-castigation, her body starts tensing up again, undoing the effect the sea has had on her.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to come here with me,” she eventually admits into the dimming twilight, finally giving a voice to her conscience.

“I’m glad you did,” Caine responds at once. He sounds – stubborn?

She glances at him and sees that he is drawing some kind of pattern in the sand in front of him with a seashell; there is certain unease to his movements. He’s staring at the shell in an intensely focused fashion.

He doesn’t look that glad.

She eyes his restless hands. “Wouldn’t you rather be resting?”

He clenches the shell in his fist and then hurls it in the sea. Her eyes follow its inordinately long flight.

“Your Majesty, if you have changed your mind and do not want me here any longer, you can simply order me to leave,” Caine replies grimly, still not looking at her.

His reaction takes her aback.

“I do want you here.” Maybe she shouldn’t have kept quiet for so long, maybe for Caine the silence has been awkward. On top of everything else, she is a shitty host.

“Then why are you so stressed?” Caine responds. “I don’t want you to feel stressed because of me. Just tell me to go and I will,” he promises solemnly.

“I’m not stressed because of you,” she denies automatically, only to remember who she’s talking to and correct herself, “Well, I am, but not because of you… Ugh. I’m just worried because I’m making you work too much.”

“What?” His gaze snaps up to hers, eyes wide. “Is that what all the tension is about?”

“Well… yeah. Why else would I be tense? Especially with you here?”

Caine’s stony demeanour melts into a warm – if a bit embarrassed – smile. “I thought… It’s nice to know that you’re not afraid to stay alone with me at a secluded place like this.”

“Afraid?” she frowns, thrown. “Why would I?. Wait, should I be afraid?!”

He vehemently shakes his head, “No, no, you shouldn’t. I just thought you might be, after…” Even in the dusk, she can see his ears changing colour. “All right, I’m shutting up now,” he mutters, dropping his gaze.

She has a feeling he’s regretting throwing away the shell to focus on.
“Nothing happened,” she reminds him sternly.

“No, of course not, nothing did,” he hastens to confirm so quickly she’s surprised he hasn’t tripped on the words. His hands start fidgeting again; he carefully avoids her eyes, angling his head slightly aside, clearly wanting – and not daring – to turn away completely.

When a huge lycantant – a conspicuous figure by definition – is visibly trying to hide from the view, it is both comical and disturbing.

“Caine, what is wrong?”

“Nothing,” comes a too-quick, too-loud answer.

“You seem uncharacteristically fidgety tonight,” she points out. “And usually you are tranquility itself. If something’s bothering you, you should tell me.”

“It’s just… I’m nervous, I guess,” he shrugs.

Caine? Nervous? Caine?!

She’s seen the guy keep his composure when she was pointing a gun at him with every intention to shoot. She’s seen him being perfectly serene during the interrogation before his execution. She’s seen him calmly step between Queen and her escape – while the said Queen was out of her mind with hurt and only gods knew at that point what she would do to him for his defiance. Just earlier this evening he’s pulled a similar stunt, fearlessly – well, almost fearlessly – placing himself between her and her consort.

Now he’s nervous?

Why?!

“Why?!” she breaths out her astonishment.

“I mustn’t question Your Majesty’s actions,” the guard starts hesitantly.

“No, you mustn’t. But looks like that’s exactly what you’re about to do. Since I’ve asked for an explanation, go ahead.”

“Your Majesty, why am I here?”

Instantly, Jupiter stiffens. “You may leave at any moment. Without any repercussions, I promise.”

“That’s not…” he shakes his head. “You’ve brought me here, so there must be a reason why you’ve brought me here.”

She blinks at him. “You think when I do something I always have a specific purpose in mind?”

“You’re Queen.”

Why is it if you’re the sovereign people tend to think that you have some hidden agenda behind your every word and every action even when you’re just being spontaneous?!

“You’re sitting there, not saying anything – and growing upset – and I know I’m supposed to be doing something,” Caine continues, sounding disconcertingly upset himself. “I’m probably supposed to know what. But I don’t know. Guess I’m just dumber than you think. If you could just tell me?..”
“You can keep sitting here and watch the sunset with me, – at least, what’s left of it, anyway,” she starts speaking in a low, calm voice without really thinking about her words – only to assuage his inexplicable anxiety. “You can ditch the boots you seem unable to bear parting from and go for a swim. You can wander off and do whatever lycantants do while in the wild. Enjoy this place. That’s what I’ve brought you here for.”

As she is saying those words, she realizes that’s exactly why she’s done it. Somehow, Caine makes her feel like sharing nice things with him. And Havet is the best thing she has.

“What option should I choose?” the guard asks, perking up. “Although I must warn you, the last one is completely moot. Lycantants are never in the wild,” he informs her. “Except for, well… When they get sent to the Deadlands.”

She goggles at him, “Are you telling me this place reminds you of the penal colony?!”

“No, of course not! It’s just… I don’t exactly know what to do with myself when I’m not doing my duty. We are bred and brought up to serve a purpose, obey commands and follow rules. So when I don’t get any orders, I feel… lost,” Caine admits with a tiny self-conscious shrug.

“The last time we were here I didn’t have to give you orders,” Jupiter points out in puzzlement. “The last time we were here I knew exactly what to do. You were in danger; I had to make sure you survived and got to safety.”

She mulls that over for a while. She did survive and got to safety, so to speak, – or at least to the mental territory where she’s no longer a danger to herself. Caine proved to be awfully good at his job, despite the fact he had to act without any prompting, driven only by instinct and intuition.

Yet he needs guidance when it comes to leisure?!

“So you’ve been told all your life what to do with your time by others?” she summarizes.

“Of course. Well, again, save for the Deadlands. Lycantants’ first years are spent in a crèche at the splicing facility; once we reach a teachable age, we join the training centre on the premises. All that time our every action is regulated by the strict routine. When we are…” – bought goes tactfully unsaid, although there is an awkward pause there – “…recruited, we are sent to our duty station and start our service while continuing our training, if that’s required. We’re not supposed to have free time. Ever since Commander transferred me to Your Majesty’s escort team, I have too much of it on my hands. I don’t know about other guards, but I have no idea what to do with myself while I’m off duty!” he complains.

The sight of a complaining Caine makes her blink in wonder.

“Your vacation must have been an interesting experience for you, then,” Jupiter remarks, nonplussed by the guard’s unconventional attitude to having time off. And to think, all this time she’s been convinced she’s overworking him!

“It was torture!” he blurts out, then promptly attempts to fix his faux pas, “I did not mean to sound ungrateful! It was very generous of Your Majesty to grant it to me.”

“I really didn’t mean it as a punishment.”

“I know. And I know you didn’t really have any other choice. It’s just… I was afraid you might forget to recall me from my leave and I’d end up permanently dismissed,” he confesses quietly.
“Why would I do that? I missed you.”

“You – you thought about me while was away?”

“I did.” The incredulity in his tone makes her add, “Repeatedly.”

“You’re telling the truth,” he comments, his voice confused and disbelieving.

“Lay off you lie-detecting skills, would you?” she grouches. “Lying is exhausting. Why would I lie to you when I can tell the truth?”

Caine’s expression shifts: his face is all crow’s feet and an impish smile now. “You are a politician.”

She nods, “Touché. So, since I’m a professional telling-people-how-to-live-their-lives person, you want me to instruct you what to do with your evening?”

“That would be very nice, yes.”

“Fine. Here’s my instruction: do what you want.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“But you must have some expectations of me?” he asks hopefully. “It’ll be easier if you just spelled them out.”

“None whatsoever,” she cuts off heartlessly, although the callosity of her voice is marred by a threatening smirk. “Would people stop expecting the queen to work and govern them after hours?!”

“So I’m allowed to do whatever I choose to?” There is a distinctive note of mischief in Caine’s question, echoing her playful tone.

“Well, I can think of a few exceptions,” she hedges, “but I highly doubt that you’ll manage to strike them. So yeah, go ahead, do what you like. And stop calling me Your Majesty – I’m done queening for the day.”

To Jupiter’s astonishment, Caine shifts on to all fours and very slowly crawls closer, – so she could observe his movements and not be spooked by them, she presumes. Pausing right next to her – by this point, she’s way too intrigued to care about the intrusion into her personal space – he drops onto the sand and curls around her in one swift movement. The next thing he does is try to squeeze his head under her arm to put it onto her leg, but bumps into her breast, jerks back and freezes, cringing and squeezing his eyes shut.

Jupiter is too busy being stunned by his gall – as well as flabbergasted by the unexpected turn of events – to smack him for the accidental feeling up as he is clearly expecting. Chris was right, Caine is handsy – at least he is if that epithet can be applied to the person who’s touching you with everything but their hands. Really, she shouldn’t be this shocked: the lycantant has done this before, only the first time he used a more or less believable pretext of keeping her warm.

“You’re definitely full of surprises,” she comments in wry amusement.

Caine’s eyes open slowly – one after another – but the wincing expression remains. “Is this okay?”

“I wouldn’t say so,” she responds. – His grimace gets even cringier. – “It’s a rather unexpected interpretation of my blanket permission, creeping into the exception territory.”
“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to. I should…” He makes to get up.

“Wait.”

He freezes once again.

“Is this really what you want to be doing? Sitting here with me? Well, more like lying around me?”

“Yes, it’s really what I want to be doing,” he confirms earnestly.

“You had to hang around me all day. Don’t you want to be on your own for a change?”

“Not really. I had more than enough of that last week. And today has been a very stressful day. I’d rather you were not alone.”

“Mother hen,” she teases, touched. Straightening her back, she lifts one arm up in invitation and pats her leg with the other hand. “Come here.”

He cautiously maneuvers his head under her arm – conspicuously careful to avoid any surface projections this time – pillows it on her thigh and immediately slides his eyes shut. The action is followed by a heaving, delighted sigh. A moment later she feels his body go slack around her.

Jupiter surveys the happy grin that hitches up his only visible cheek, a deep laugh line cutting it in two.

“I’m agreeing to this on one condition,” she stipulates.

“Which is?” he asks, unmoving. His whole demeanour exudes consummate satisfaction with his achievement of finally getting his head into her lap and utter unconcern about anything else.

“You will purr.”

Caine cracks one eye open. “Is that an order?”

The question is asked in an uncharacteristically relaxed tone, both languid and teasing. She’s never heard this voice from Caine before.

She smiles, “Only if you want it to be.”

A pause.

Then, hesitantly –

“Well, if you will pet me…”

She bursts out laughing – seriously, the gall of some people! – but slings her arm around Caine’s torso to reach the back of his head. It’s a bit awkward: the guy’s shoulders are way too wide for her position to be entirely comfortable. As she reaches at the base of his skull and starts scratching lightly, Caine nuzzles into her thigh and makes half-mewl, half-sob of blissed-out contentment.

Something inside her melts – washing away her caution, her hesitation, her defenses – and her fingers delve into the lycantant’s hair, nails digging deeper into his scalp.

The delighted purring that starts somewhere deep inside his throat tells her that her new-found vigour is very much appreciated.
“You sure know how to exploit your queens, buddy,” she comments, baffled by how on earth she’s managed to end up giving her guard a petting session – again – when initially she had no intention whatsoever of doing so.

“I thought you said you’re done queening for the day?”

As Caine speaks, the purring doesn’t cease but grows much quieter, giving the lycantant’s voice a breathy, guttural cadence that sends a trickle of delightful tingles down Jupiter’s spine.

“Well, you know how to exploit your Jupiters, then.”

“Opportunities like this do not arise often. So I exploit them whenever I get the chance.” Caine’s face looks completely lax, unguarded. He hasn’t even bothered to open his eyes. “I like being touched. We all do.”

“You mean lycantants?”

“Uh-huh. Though humans like it, too. We’re just more open about it, that’s all. Humans tend to see it as a weakness, touching only those they fully trust. Their family, mostly. And we have none; we can’t afford to be that picky. We take what we can get. One of the reasons I miss my former unit so much is… they understood.”

Once again Jupiter recalls Chris’ complaint about Caine’s being ‘handsy’. The very word he used has strong negative connotations, implying something inappropriate and aggressive. However, there’s nothing forceful about the lycantant’s yearning for touch. It’s a gentle, inviting need that rewards the giver – once they have pushed through the thick thorny hedge of the conventional proprieties – with just as much pleasure as the receiver gets.

She wants to offer.

Nevertheless, she mustn’t forget who she is. There are multiple reasons why Queen must keep her distance from those around her. With Caine, the constraints are even tighter than usual. Their current interaction is an exception, prompted by her state of upset and the fact that she is completely out of the public eye for once. Jupiter cannot offer to do this for him on a regular basis, no matter how much she wants to.

Then again, he hasn’t asked her to.

Or maybe he has, in a way, when he’s curled around her after she told him he was supposed to do whatever he wanted.

Whether he’s asked her or not, she wants to see Caine happy, content with his life. She wants it for all her people. It is her greatest weakness as a ruler – Queen is always in the epicentre of the conflicting interests of numerous competing groups in the society, permanently frustrated that she cannot satisfy everyone, no matter how hard she tries.

But maybe, it is her greatest strength, too.

Her hand absently starts rubbing the soft, velvety edge of the lycantant’s pointy ear. He makes some kind of throaty gurgle and cuddles tighter around her. She leans back onto him, ensconcing herself as though in a comfortable armchair.

“You can easily get this, if you like it so much.” To illustrate, she runs her thumb to and fro over the supple tip. It tickles. “The Psychological Support Centre is there for a reason. People who work there are very nice. As a member of the Private Security, you’re entitled to as many relaxing head-
scratching sessions and ear massages as you want.”

Since Commander Apini peremptorily enforces ‘no family, no outside emotional ties’ rule for all of the Private Security – as well as encourages it for the rest of the Guard, the men who serve at the alcazar and spend almost their entire lives there, can grow isolated and depressed.

Not to mention sexually frustrated.

The Royal Centre of Psychological Support, located on the premises, is intended to resolve – or, at the very least, alleviate – those issues.

Queen needs all the highly trained and heavily armed men who have direct access to her person to be absolutely loyal. And what loyalty can you expect from people if you don’t take care of their most basic needs? The Crown provides all members of the Private Security with free living accommodations, meals and uniform, as well as the very best health care including RegeneX treatment if injured on duty. The healthcare benefits incorporate therapy sessions provided by professionals, including physical contact and on-demand sexual services.

There is no lack of mental health practitioners willing to work at the Centre, despite the severest security restrictions: the wages are high and all Queen’s guards are mostly handsome and invariably fit. Although the queen would bet anything that at least half of those workers are concurrently either Internal Security or Gríma’s agents who keep an eye on the integrity of their clients – just in case.

The Centre caters to all tastes and preferences. The only thing it doesn’t have is pleasure splices. If Jupiter’s guards want to fuck a sex slave, they might as well pay their own money for it in one of the capital’s many brothels. Such behaviour is frowned upon, though, and almost inevitably gets the guy transferred from the Royal Guard altogether. Most guards value their position way too much to challenge Queen’s widely known aversion to the phenomenon of pleasure splices.

Evidently, Royal Consort doesn’t.

Fuck Royal Consort.

Jupiter forces herself to focus on Caine again.

“Those are complete strangers. They wouldn’t even smell familiar,” the lycantant responds to her suggestion with no enthusiasm at all. “I need at least some trust to enjoy someone’s touch.”

To that, Jupiter can relate completely.

“You could ask Stinger,” she comes up with another option. “Since you’re old buddies and all.”

Bearing in mind what Chris said, her advice is most likely useless: Stinger’s probably already doing all he can – whether as a friend or as a lover. But Uncle Stinger isn’t a tactile person: his love is gruff and grudging. One stiff, almost reluctant hug per meeting – and only when they are alone and not talking business, which is almost never – is what she’s come to expect of him these days. Although when she was a kid, his hugs didn’t use to be this minimal and awkward. She misses those happy times. Things were much simpler back then.

“Stinger does it, sometimes. Not nearly as often as I’d like. And I… I can’t really ask for more. He’s my Commander.”

That is one weird-ass relationship, if you ask Jupiter. But no one asks her, so she keeps her opinion to herself.
“Then ask Kiza,” she offers next. “She’s not your superior and she probably won’t mind. Despite all her sarcasm, she is a very kind, warm person.”

“I know she is,” Cine agrees with a small smile. “It’s just… Considering how much her father shoves us together, she might… misunderstand. Think I’m hitting on her. Things will get awkward.”

“You could explain.”

He makes a noncommittal sound.

‘Caine doesn’t talk. The guy communicates in grunts and pink ears.’

“Caine, why do you not talk to Kiza?”

“She is Commander’s daughter and Your Majesty’s personal friend, I can’t just go out and talk to her,” he says like it’s something obvious.

“I’m afraid I’m not following.”

“She is Commander’s daughter and Your Majesty’s personal friend,” he repeats. “She has a much higher status than I do.”

“But…” Jupiter’s official status is incomparably higher than Kiza’s, yet Caine seems comfortable enough to chat with her. She hates to remind him of her royalty right now — but she’s so intrigued by the inconsistency!.. “You talk to me.”

“You ask questions.”

That she does. Too often, too many, a great deal of them inappropriate.

“I’m too curious for my own good,” she acknowledges with a self-deprecating sigh.

“It’s not a bad thing. It means you notice. No one else has paid me enough attention to ask me why I don’t talk to Kiza. Or if I overheat in my uniform.” He shoots her a quick impish side-glance. “Or what I jerk off to.”

“Oh, gods,” she groans, slapping her free hand over her face, “You’re worse than Kiza! And I withdrew that question! I didn’t even finish asking it!”

“May I ask you a question, too?” Caine interrupts her bout of mortification.

“Unless you mean to ask what I jerk off to, go ahead.”

“Why am I here? Really?”

“I’ve just told you: I want you to have fun.”

“I’ve got that, but… What’s in it for you? I mean, you hated it when I first followed you here. You were kind enough to let me stay and do my job, but… You barely tolerated my presence.”

“You grow on people,” Jupiter admits with more sincerity than she means to. “Like moss,” she tacks on grudgingly.

Caine smirks, “Moss doesn’t grow on people.”

“Fine! Fungus, then.”
“Thanks, I’m flattered,” he sasses back. “I endeavour to be the most persistent mildew there is.”

The mere idea that Caine is sassing back makes her smile. Which doesn’t stop her from rolling her eyes at his sarcasm. “What I mean to say is that you annoyed me at first, sure, but for the majority of the time I enjoyed your company. And your hash browns.”

“Is that a hint? Lycantants don’t do well with hints.”

‘Men don’t do well with hints,’ she wants to say but doesn’t. It’s not Caine’s fault he is a guy.

“A gargantuan one,” she replies instead.

“All right, I’ll make hash browns for supper. But you are peeling the potatoes.” As soon as the words are out, Caine’s smile dims and his expression morphs into an uncertain one. “Uh, I didn’t mean to tell you what to do, Your Majesty, I’m sorry.”

“Ugh, quit majesty-ing me,” she grumbles. “I’ll peel the damned potatoes if that gets me your hash browns. Life’s full of sacrifices and hard work,” she concludes, letting out a tragic, deeply put-upon sigh.

In reality, it’s very nice to think that the hardest work she’ll have to do tonight is peeling some potatoes – the process that involves zero decision making. It’s been a bit over a week since her impromptu vacation ended, but she’s already tired of all the queening bullshit. Her tasks and duties never end, no matter how many of them she fulfills, it’s like they multiply by binary fission! The first thing tomorrow morning she’ll have to instruct Stinger on the new security regime for –

Oh, shit.

She’ll have to explain this to Stinger, too. Her hijacking Caine for the evening probably won’t go unnoticed: Apini, the control freak he is, has a very hands-on approach when it comes to the Private Security. Commander will have questions.

Great, another painful conversation.

Caine nuzzles into her leg, attracting her attention. “What’s wrong?”

“Quit sniffing out my emotions,” she reprimands reflexively.

“It’s not like I’m doing it on purpose,” he explains patiently. “Besides, my nose pleads not guilty in this case. You’ve stiffened.”

She absently runs her finger along his nose, amused by the way he is scrunching it up under her fingertip. “Caine, can you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“If your Commander notices your absence tonight and demands an explanation, I want you to report everything that will have happened here to him in excruciating detail. Answer any questions he might ask. Just make sure the surveillance cameras are off and no one else is there to hear your answers.”

Caine’s eyebrows fly up. “I thought everything that happened on Havet stayed on Havet?”

“It usually does, but I think we should make an exception this time.”

“Why?”
“Well…” she draws out, squirming. This is awkward. “You see, the last time we spoke Stinger as well as accused me of taking advantage of you.”

The brows stay up. “Taking advantage of me how?”

_Gods, why are men so dense?_

“Well, he didn’t say it outright; my guess is sexually,” she ventures. “I mean, what else is there?”

Caine unwinds himself into an upright position so fast she loses balance and almost tumbles over, having lost the support of his body that her back was comfortably propped against. His hand shoots out to hold her up.

_{“He what?!!”}_

The low growl in Caine’s voice makes Jupiter’s skin crawl.

Usually the guard is the embodiment of calm. He’s proven time and time again that he’s not angered easily – hell, she’s witnessed it as recently as earlier today, when she insulted him and his first reaction was to apologize to her. Yet once upon a time, she had the misfortune of seeing Caine in a fit of berserk rage.

This comes disturbingly close.

“Easy there,” she warns, “no need to bite anyone’s head off!”

“He shouldn’t have said it,” the lycantant grits out through the clenched teeth. “Old fool never knows when to keep his mouth shut!”

So Caine didn’t know anything about it?

_Do those two ever talk?!_

“It’s your Commander you’re talking about,” she reminds him drily. “And your friend. He feels very protective of you. Besides, he didn’t say it, it was merely implied.” Which probably was worse. _Felt_ worse, anyway – all the more for how close his suspicion fell to the harsh truth: _it had almost happened._

Caine is silent for a long moment. He’s breathing heavily and his posture is unnaturally rigid – a shocking contrast to how relaxed he was a mere minute ago.

“It’s lèse-majesté to insinuate things like that,” he finally responds, his tone hard. “If I heard anyone saying shit… stuff like that around me, they wouldn’t be able to speak again for a long time.”

That’s a surprisingly violent reaction to a simple misunderstanding.

“He wasn’t the first or the only one to make the assumption.” Jupiter wisely doesn’t mention Kiza’s name. “It’s a reasonable conjecture, logic-wise. No one but the two of us knows what really happened the day we left. And I’d rather it stayed that way.”

She’d much prefer people thought that she took the guard with her for… _reasons_, rather than knew that he challenged Queen – and _won._

Caine stubbornly shakes his head. “Suggesting that a human – any human, let alone Your Majesty – might be fu… _involved_ with a splice is a gross insult. It’s even worse coming from another splice. Stinger is one of us, he should know better.”
She gapes at him, lost for words.

Jupiter is of course aware of the conventional attitude towards sexual and romantic relations with splices that prevails in the society – she wouldn’t be much of a queen if she wasn’t. Such affairs are mostly looked down on with scorn, regarded with similar disdain as prostitution.

Prostitution is legal on the entire territory of the Abrasax Empire – prohibiting it achieves nothing but making it a shady business, endangering both the clients and the workers, while huge sums of money escape the Crown’s coffers and flow into wrong hands. The legalization of prostitution allows the state to control the trade, collect the taxes from it and significantly reduce the associated health risks. However, the practice still widely remains a social taboo. It’s not that people do not use the monetized sexual services – they do, the business is booming – they just never admit to it.

Sex with splices suffers the same silent treatment: many do it, few do it openly.

Although a lot of loud-mouthed moralists preach against it.

Guess it’s a cheap way to show how ethically superior the preacher is.

When it comes to royals, the situation is a bit different.

Titus has never deemed necessary to conceal his splice lovers – if anything, he flaunts them, as though reminding everyone around him that quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi – what is permissible to Jupiter is not permissible to a bull. But that’s meant to be a challenge to the society – vaunting the fact that the king can afford to live by his own moral standards, not applicable to mere mortals – and for it to be a challenge the exploited phenomenon should be considered taboo in the first place.

Jupiter saw many splices in Balem’s alcazar, but what he does with them is anyone’s guess. Primary Heir probably considers himself too high and mighty to use them for anything but work. Then again, there is no saying where someone’s sexual preferences might lie.

The less she thinks about Balem’s, the saner she will be.

Kalique has plenty of splices in her entourage, but Secondary Heir wisely keeps all her liaisons under a tight veil of secrecy. In Jupiter’s presence, Seraphi’s only daughter prefers to engage in blatant flirting with Finnick, never paying much attention to anyone else, splice or otherwise.

Despite the fact that the public attitude towards dalliances with splices varies from outraged damnation to indifferent tolerance, to Jupiter it’s never been an issue. She was brought up with one splice for an uncle – a second father, if she’s honest – and another for the best friend, how could she possibly see anything wrong with loving them? The discovery that Caine believes it to be degrading makes her heart ache on some unfathomable level.

“Caine, how can you share such views?!” she exclaims, finally finding her tongue. “You are a splice yourself!”

The lycantant’s lips twist as he looks away. “It doesn’t matter what I think on the issue, it’s about what the majority of people think. And as long as the society at large believes that sex with a splice is demeaning, it is,” he rebuffs with the conviction that deserves a better application.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Jupiter explodes, throwing her hands up in the air. “All this time I’ve been trying to change the way my human subjects feel about splices, but it looks like I should have started with you, you brainwashed idiot!”

Caine stares at her wide-eyed, blinks, squeezes his lips together, makes a choking sound, snorts and
finally bursts out laughing. For the next couple of minutes, he’s a mess of wheezing, gasping, hiccuppings guffaws. By the time he subsides, his eyes are watering.

“You are a really weird royal,” he comments, shaking his head and swiping at the tears with the heel of his hand.

“Well, you are a really weird splice,” she grumbles, still incensed.

“We match,” he grins.

“Are you comparing yourself to Queen? Isn’t that lèse-majesté?” she counters petulantly.

“Only if you’re offended by that. And you are not. Are you?” he ascertains.

“I so am,” she deadpans.

“Come on, stop pouting,” he elbows Jupiter gently to the side, almost tipping her over – guess that goes for ‘gentle’ in Lycantant, – hastily apologizes while straightening her back up. She slaps his hands off, huffing in annoyance. Caine’s face shifts to almost comical horror, he instantly snatches them away and apologizes again.

“Would you stop doing that? You’re giving me a whiplash!” she complains. “One moment you’re blatantly headbutting my boob and think that it’s okay, the next you’re jumping out of your skin after doing something as innocuous as helping me to keep my balance!”

“The – the headbutting was unintentional!” Caine stutters. “I’m sorry! I’m just not used to… err, navigating female terrain. It has more obstacles, you know!” he points out, motioning at her torso, looking deeply betrayed by the fact that female bodies dare to grow breasts.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never snuck your head into a girl’s lap before me, buddy,” Jupiter smirks, not little entertained by his pique at her anatomy. Her boobs are awesome, regardless of what random lycantants think of the matter. “Considering how much you love a good head scratch, there is no way I’ll believe you.”

“I have,” Caine admits. “I had to access it from a different angle, though. And I wasn’t there for a good head scratch.”

“Eww!” She clamps her palms over her ears. “Way too much information, dude! I did not need that visual!”

Snickering, Caine leans over and runs his temple along the arm she’s holding next to her face – an offer of peace. Her hand, as though by its own volition, leaves her ear to scrape at the back of his head as he arches his neck into her touch.

Oh, that reminds her.

“Caine?”

“Hmm?”

“You do realize you can do this only with no witnesses around, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he nods into her shoulder. “I would never touch Queen in public unless Your Majesty is in danger.”

“Well, the same goes for your Commander. No matter what you two are used to doing in private –
that's your business and yours alone,” she adds hastily, intimidated by the prospect of another bout of oversharing, “you should stop touching him around other people. They tend to misinterpret that.”

Caine withdraws to look at her. “It’s not like I’m doing it on purpose. I know we’re no longer in the Legion, but sometimes… I forget. I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I’ll try harder to remember my place.”

Jupiter sighs in frustration. “Caine, I’m not reprimanding you. This is neither a rebuke nor an order, it’s advice. You can take it or disregard it, if you wish,” she explains. “And it’s definitely not about reminding you to know your place. Everyone at court, myself included – hell, myself the most, because I’m Queen and have to set the standard – has to maintain a working relationship with others, or at least the appearance thereof. The way you two interact on duty is up to your Commander, – Queen shouldn’t interfere in such matters. I’m simply warning you that it’s not doing either of you any favours with the rest of the team.”

“But he… He never said I couldn’t.”

“And most likely never will. Maybe he doesn’t even notice it. I take it, it’s natural for both of you, and there is nothing wrong with that. Just maybe… Not around the guys?”


“Now, where are my hash browns? One cannot eat a thank you, buddy.”

They end up staying the night. She has nothing but her empty bed and bitterness to return to; he doesn’t seem eager to go back, either.

Caine loudly laments that he doesn’t get to do any bed carrying and show off his mighty strength. Since the last time they left in a hurry, the queen didn’t give Siskin any instructions and their previous furniture arrangement is still intact.

It’s only the next morning she realizes there was no real reason for Caine to sleep next to her last night: there was no need for his suicide watch anymore. She has no time to reflect on it, though: he shamelessly ropes her into making pancakes for breakfast.

Oh, well. It’s only fair.

Chapter End Notes

You know you’re scraping the bottom of the inspiration barrel when you force yourself to suffer through a kiddie animation just to hear Caine’s voice for an hour and a half and… Smallfoot’s turned out to be AWESOME! I laughed my ass off imagining stoic Caine in the sound booth making all those high-pitched yelps and girlish shrieks. Tatum may not be the best at emoting with his face, but he kicks ass at voice acting! I believe it’s his best role yet. He truly shines in comedy.

And I didn’t know the guy could sing. I’ve got myself a new favourite workout song))

Besides Caine’s voice, the film features a Queen song (always a bonus), a naturalist personality much like Gerald Durrell or Steve Irwin, and raises a profound philosophical question of scientific development versus the risks new knowledge might
entail. It’s like it was tailored specifically for my tastes!

On an entirely different note, if you like the royal court shenanigans I depict here, watch *Favourite* with Emma Stone and Rachel Weisz, if you haven’t yet. It’s… something else.

The chapter title is taken from *Something Just Like This* by The Chainsmokers & Coldplay.

‘It’s the retinue that makes the king’ is a quote attributed to Niccolò Machiavelli.

Fun fact: Human men can sense when a woman is ovulating – not consciously, thank gods, but on a subconscious level. Actually, most of the biology-related stuff I come up with in my stories is well based in reality.

Both my readers and myself owe this chapter to Julia, who delivered a gentle encouragement at a moment of doubt. Thank you, Julia, whoever you are.
A Place to Lose Myself and Not Feel Used

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day Queen summons both Commander Apini and Officer Wise to privately instruct Head of the Royal Guard on Odair’s escort team and the new official duties of his subordinate. Jupiter could have discussed the guard’s extended obligations with Caine himself last night, but when it comes to the lycantant’s service she mustn’t act over Apini’s head – it’ll undermine his authority as Commander.

To say that Stinger isn’t pleased that from now on he’ll have to work in close coordination with the Internal Security and Head Spymaster would be a dire understatement. As usual, he voices his displeasure rather unequivocally.

“Your Majesty, many commanders sink the ship. I cannot guarantee Odair’s safety if my team receives different, possibly conflicting orders from different superiors.”

“Let’s be honest, Apini, you cannot guarantee it either way. Accidents do happen,” the queen responds coldly as she nods at Caine, alluding to the storm that followed his first appearance on her horizon.

Stinger winces. “As Head of your Guard, I must inform you that this decision will significantly weaken High Consort’s security. You should consider revising…”

“Let me decide what I should and shouldn’t do,” she interrupts him, adding quietly but firmly, “This is an instruction, Commander, not a discussion.”

“So you refuse to heed my advice even if it might save Odair’s life?”

Those used to be the magic words that could make the queen agree to any proposition of Stinger’s. It’s weird how little they touch her now. It makes her feel – freer.

Deader inside, but freer.

“May I remind you, Commander, that I’m not obligated to follow your advice just because you deem necessary to bless me with it. As some of your decisions demonstrate, you’re hardly the wisest person in the universe. I may be better off thinking with my own head for a change.”

Apini’s cheeks turn pale. “If I have lost your trust, Your Majesty, please, accept my resignation and fully entrust my successor with commanding High Consort’s escort team as well as your own security,” he appeals darkly.

“No.”

“Why not?!”

Jupiter frowns. Apini’s overstepped the mark: to demand an explanation from Her Majesty like that – particularly with a third party present – is a dire violation of the royal protocol. No one questions Queen.

“Because Queen says so,” she replies curtly.
The thing is, Jupiter doesn’t want to vouchsafe her reasoning. If she’s honest, she is no longer worried quite as much for Finnick’s life as she used to, she’s much more concerned with keeping him in check. However, there are so many people eager to assist Sovereign in solving her problems in hopes to rise to the top that pronouncing her thoughts out loud would be just like signing her consort’s death warrant.

“I do not want Odair to stay without one of your men guarding him for a single minute,” the queen proceeds with giving orders. “For a single second. The same goes for the remaining two-thirds of the collaborative team, which will be there to supervise your work. And when I say ‘guard’, I mean not allow Royal Consort to do anything that might be damaging to my reputation, like run his mouth or stick his dick – or anything else for that matter – into anyone who isn’t Queen. It’s sad that I have to spell it out for you, Commander Apini.”

Head of the Royal Guard glares at her – he obviously doesn’t appreciate to be made look like a fool in front of his subordinate.

*You made a fool of me, Stinger. How does it feel to be in my shoes?*

Poor Caine looks like he wants the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

Neither says a word.

Good.

Apparently, both still remember a thing or two about subordination. Queen can continue her instruction uninterrupted.

“Henceforth Royal Consort is deprived of any privacy. No tête-à-tête audiences, no secret conversations, no unread correspondence. If he compromises me again – or sells me out – you, Apini, will be executed alongside him. I may have given you both a second chance, but I don’t do third chances. If the same mistake is repeated twice, it’s no longer a mistake, it’s a tendency. I won’t tolerate errant fools this close to me.”

Stinger grits his teeth, but keeps his mouth shut. This time, he does not meet her eyes.

Instead, her gaze is caught by Caine who sends her an imploring look. No matter what situation they are in, he’ll always be protecting his Commander.

Jupiter purses her lips and turns away. Nevertheless, as she goes on formulating her directive, she makes an effort to refrain from any further derogatory remarks.

“One more important change to the previously standing orders. If there is an abduction attempt and the guards realize that they cannot possibly prevent my consort from being taken, they are to kill him,” the queen announces with a heavy heart. The order should have been given from the very start, but she loved Finnick way too much to do the reasonable thing. The content of Royal Consort’s head is way too dangerous, Queen cannot risk it getting into the enemy’s hands. It took her the Annie scare to realize it. “I’m giving this command only to your part of the team,” she adds quietly, “because despite everything that transpired, I still trust you the most. I trust your men not to finish Finnick off without a very good reason.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Stinger inclines his head in a clipped bow, his expression not showing any signs of lightening up.

Oh, well. She tried.
“Now, concerning Officer Wise here,” the queen moves onto the next topic. “From now on, I want him by my side at all times when I’m not in my private quarters. Especially if Odair’s around.” She turns to Caine. “You are to never leave the two of us alone. If we enter a room, you follow us. If I command everyone to leave, you stay.”

Caine shoots her a quick glance, immediately dropping his gaze in protocolary deference. He shifts from foot to foot, his shoulders tense. Something is bothering him but unlike Apini he doesn’t dare to voice his concerns.

“What is it, Caine?” she asks.

“May I ask a question, Your Majesty?” the guard ventures.

“I’m listening.”

“What about your interactions with High Consort… in the private quarters? Shall I follow you there?”

“Absolutely. I have just told you, wherever Finnick goes with me, you go, too.”

Apini clears his throat, looking utterly ill at ease. “What Wise is asking, Your Majesty, is if he has to supervise your, uh, bedroom activities with your consort.”

She blinks.

Caine was there when she was talking to Finnick.

Wasn’t he listening?

“I relieved Odair of that particular duty. There’ll be no such activities to supervise.”

“You might change your mind, Your Majesty,” Caine counters. “And order me to leave. What should I do then?”

“I won’t,” she denies automatically.

She won’t. At the moment, Finnick holds no more allure to her than a dead porcupine.

A putrid, decomposing one.

No one currently holds any allure to her. Sex is the last thing on Jupiter’s mind right now.

“Actually, Your Majesty,” Apini intervenes again, “while giving instructions to your guards, you should cover all potential developments. And Wise is right, that is a possibility.”

Pigs would fly sooner.

There is no point in arguing, however. It’s not like she wants to relay her intimate emotions to these two.

The queen fixes Officer Wise with an irritated glower, annoyed to be put through this awkward conversation, especially with Uncle Stinger in the room.

“If somehow, against my better judgment, I find myself in an intimate position with Odair, you have my permission to physically remove Finnick from the situation and not let him near me for a couple of hours,” she raps out sharply. “It should give me enough time to cool down, analyze the situation
and decide what I really want. If, after the two hours have passed, I repeat my order to leave us alone, then you will follow it.”

“I understand, Your Majesty,” Caine nods, swallowing. “Thank you for the clarification.”

By this point, Caine has reached his trademark hue of crimson. Stinger’s face, just minutes ago pallid with anger, has pinkened, too. He looks like he sorely regrets not being as far away from here as possible, preferably in a different galaxy – a neighbouring solar system is definitely not far enough.

Watching the men steam in their embarrassment, Jupiter abruptly lightens up. The discussion is so awkward for each of the three of them, it’s hilarious.

“Breathe, Caine,” she urges, smiling. “Whatever my interactions with High Consort will be, bedroom activities won’t be one of them. But if something comes up, I’ll call for you to make sure the sex is safe,” she smirks. She simply can’t resist the temptation to make his ears a hue redder.

“Wise, wait outside,” Stinger barks tersely.

Jupiter’s smile slips. She’s perfectly aware of what that particular tone of Stinger’s means: a decidedly unpleasant conversation is ahead.

Caine glances at the queen, unsure, and she closes her eyes with an infinitesimal nod, allowing him to leave. She did what she did last night and she’s not going to hide behind the guard’s wide back from his Commander’s wrath.

As soon as the lycantant is out of the door, Stinger takes the bull by the horns.

“Leave the guy alone, Jupiter.”

The curt straightforwardness of the demand startles her. “I beg your pardon?”

“There are plenty of those who seek favour with Queen. Caine doesn’t. Leave him be. He’s not the guy for someone like you.”

Jupiter’s surprised by the effect Apini’s words have on her: a quick, scalding splash of hurt followed by a slower, cooler yet much more powerful rolling wave of anger. Apparently, Apini believes she is less worthy of his friend than Kiza, whom he insistently shoves at the guy, in Caine and Kiza’s own words.

Stinger likes to repeat that Jupiter is like a daughter to him. Like a daughter is not a daughter, is it? She’s not related to him by DNA. Does that make her less adequate, less worthy, less… just less?

She doesn’t ask.

She isn’t sure she’s prepared to know the answer.

“Commander, I don’t remember asking you to determine suitable matches, whether for the officers of my Guard or for me,” she remarks with an air of frigid sangfroid. “I may listen to your advice in regard to my security because I recognize your superiority when it comes to experience and knowledge in the matter. However, do not delude yourself into thinking that you have a say in my personal life.”

“Not everything is about you, Jupiter,” Stinger snaps, surprising her with his brusquerie – bordering on rudeness – once again. “Caine has been through enough. Being Queen’s favourite isn’t easy. Take it from a favourite of Queen’s.”
She studies Apini, contemplating his words. It’s odd of him to similize Wise to himself. Stinger is her family while Caine is…

“Caine is not my favourite.”

She’ll be damned if she knows what Caine actually is to her.

“Isn’t he? He spent months – months! – with you on Havet, the place forbidden to anyone who you don’t consider… your closest people.” Ever since her ascension, Stinger has been very careful to never refer to himself – or Kiza – as her family. It hurts. “Even Kiza isn’t allowed to bring her friends there. Yet last night you took Caine there again. Or are you going to tell me he’d volunteered this time, too?”

“I’m not going to tell you anything. I do not have to explain myself to you.” Honestly, she couldn’t answer his question if she tried. Why did she invite Caine over last night? It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, impulsive and unplanned; she simply didn’t want to part with him, that’s all. “All I will say, there’s nothing untoward between us. Your protectiveness is uncalled for. Caine may not be a favourite of mine, but I mean him no harm.”

“You’ve just demanded he stay by your side at all times. You talk directly to him when I, his Commander, am present,” Stinger huffs. “You even joke with him, and joke inappropriately, mind you! If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck…”

“It may as well be a coot, among other birds,” Jupiter parries calmly. “I talk and joke with other guards, too. Considering Caine’s views on sex with humans, I don’t believe the idea of the dalliance with Queen has ever entered his mind.”

“How do you know his views on sex?”

“We talk. It’s something people do when they’re not fucking,” Jupiter snarls, but quickly regains her composure. Getting emotional won’t help her to get through to him. “Before Kiza brought the latest court tattle to me, I hadn’t even thought my perfectly professional relationship with Wise could be misconstrued as an affair;” she admits, still scandalized by the revelation. “Out of the three of us, Stinger, you are the one who has the mind of a dirty old man.”

“Are you telling me no personal sympathy was involved in your decision to keep him around from dawn till dusk? I know you’re not used to being alone but you could choose a more appropriate candidate to keep you company than Caine,” Apini insists with his patented tactlessness.

“Well, a tactless question deserves a tactless answer.

“Doesn’t it occur to you that if I wanted Caine to be Odair’s substitute I would have demanded his company from dusk till dawn and not vice versa? My schedule is too tight for a fuck – even a quick one – during the day.”

Her blatancy is rewarded by Stinger’s grimace of disgust. Well, what goes around, comes around, Uncle.

“As for personal sympathy… I like Wise,” she admits. “But if that bothers you so much, remind yourself that it’s no one’s fault but yours. It was none other but you, Apini, who snuck the lycantant into my Guard – the splice who can tell if I am ovulating or what I did the last time I visited the bathroom simply by being around. Such intimate details are not something I would gladly vouchsafe to a stranger. Yet you forced us to work in a close-knit tandem when, despite my objections, you crammed him into my escort team. Out of my respect for you, I gave the guy a chance and he proved
that he was worthy of the opportunity I’d given him. It never would’ve worked if Caine was a sad excuse for a human being and I hated him. And now, having done all that, you dare complain that I like him?"

“I’m not complaining that you like him.” Stinger’s unhappy expression does nothing to support his words. “The problem is… the guy is growing attached,” he grits out as though the words hurt him.

*Men and feelings.*

The former like talking about the latter about as much as pulling teeth.

Without anesthesia.

“You taught me yourself, it’s not a bad thing when it comes to guards,” she counters. “There’s no loyalty like personal loyalty.”

“You have all Caine’s loyalty you can possibly have. You can stop trying now.”

The queen raises an eyebrow at his patronizing tone, “Are you telling me what to do again?”

“You don’t want that kind of attachment, trust me.”

“Trust you?” she squints at him. “Can’t say I do.”

Stinger grunts but otherwise disregards her jab. “Lycantants are not humans. What is a passing fancy for you might ruin Wise’s life.”

Fancy? *Fancy?* What’s between her and Caine – whatever the hell it is – is in no way a fancy.

She has a growing suspicion it is not *passing*, either.

“So, lycantants are not humans, huh?” Jupiter responds acidly. “You didn’t emphasize that to my escort team when you were introducing the new member. I wonder why.”

“In the all-human cadre, I didn’t want to attract attention to Caine’s non-humanity. He’s well adapted, it’s not like he needs any special treatment.”

“If he doesn’t need any special treatment, then why are you’re reminding *me* of his species?”

“Because no one of them would do what you are doing. You’re building a connection that is undue. What was he doing with you for the entire night last night?”

“I don’t report to you.”

“You don’t, but Wise has to. And he didn’t.”

“He didn’t? I told him he could. I have nothing to hide.”

This time, at least.

“Well, he did report to me as soon as he returned this morning, but he was as vague as can be. Gave me a shitload of details, but nothing of substance. Apparently, you enjoy meditating on the beach. As though I didn’t know that already! His answers were evasive, his entire report was nothing but a smokescreen. Because you’d made him think that your interests somehow contradicted mine.”

Listening to Apini’s irate rant, Jupiter’s hit with a sudden realization that should have been obvious
yet it’s never occurred to her before.

“Stinger, why does Caine report straight to you and not to his immediate superior?” Her eyes narrow in suspicion. “It violates the chain of command. Wise should report to Head of the escort team, not to Head of the entire Guard.”

Commander’s face shuts off. “I ordered Wise to report directly to me. I thought it would protect your privacy.”

His reaction confirms her initial suspicion. If Commander Apini starts talking about protecting her privacy, it means he has done something very wrong – just like when politicians speak of patriotism it usually means they’ve stolen at least a half of the country’s budget.

“Why did you ask Caine questions about what I was doing on Havet last night? Queen was safe, that’s all that should matter to you. As long as I’ve returned unharmed, you shouldn’t care if I meditated on the beach or fucked Caine’s brains out in the bushes. Why do you care?”

Apini’s jaw clenches. Apparently, he’s not inclined to answer her questions.

Sometimes silence is the answer enough.

“Caine isn’t just my guard, is he?” the queen inquires, surprising herself with her own calm and certainty. “You meant him to spy on me for you, didn’t you? With his enhanced senses he could tell you much more than any other guard could. And with your intimate friendship, he’d tell you anything you wanted to know, my privacy be damned. Is that why you’re so upset that he’s getting personally attached to me? You’ve finally gotten one of your guys into the territory forbidden to your surveillance – and he doesn’t want to spy for you any longer. Because he doesn’t want to betray me – even for you.”

“It’s not spying, it’s protection,” Apini demurs, as self-righteous as only a father figure can be. “I must know what you’re doing at all times to take care of you. To stop you from doing stupid dangerous things.”

“Stupid dangerous things?! I have a right to make my own decisions! I’m not a child anymore! I wish I were, but I’m not and nothing’s going to change that,” she argues bitterly. “I will not try to eat a glass bauble or pet a viper, for fuck’s sake! When would you stop sticking your nose into my private business?”

“When you stop sneaking off to terrsie planets without a proper escort – and dragging my daughter with you, endangering her, too!” Stinger roars, losing all traces of his composure. “When you stop making lovers out of the first smarmy bastard you meet – while I can’t do two shits to protect you even if I see bruises on your wrists in the morning and have to wonder where else he might have left them!”

Jupiter winces, but subdues the impulse to snap back. Stinger was the only person who dared to ask about those bruises.

The marks on her skin were born of passion and pleasure.

Not everyone is that lucky.

A lot of women – some men, too – get caught in abusive relationships they don’t see a way out of. The higher the social standing of the victim, the more they tend to keep the problem secret, trying to save the last remnants of their dignity. As long as the façade is kept up, others do not bother to glance behind it, not really caring about the truth.
Stinger cared about the truth. Still cares about the truth. Cares about her.

His incessant concern is both heartwarming and infuriating. How can she feel so much tenderness and resentment towards the same person at the same time?

“Sometimes you act like you have lost your brain,” Apini expressively slaps his forehead, his voice still raised. “What did you do when you found out about Odair? You dragged his girl – stuffed with explosives like a roasted turkey – right through all lines of your defense and I barely escaped seeing these walls splattered with your guts!” he throws his hands wildly around himself.

How is it possible that they both behave so alike when they are exasperated if they don’t have a strand of DNA in common?

“But then you managed to top even that. You stole away with the military splice with dangerously glitching conditioning and did not send me a single fucking message for two months! Do you have any idea what I went through during those months?!’ her all-but father shouts at her, white with fury. “If it hadn’t been for Caine’s brief reports, I wouldn’t have known if you were dead or alive!”

Torn between anger at Stinger’s overprotective – controlling – tendencies and guilt for her not quite responsible impulsive escapades, Jupiter resists the urge to point out that Stinger himself assured her that Wise was absolutely safe. Instead, she keeps her mouth shut. It’s not the first time they’re having a dispute like this and it won’t be the last. She will not stop doing the things that horrify Stinger – well, maybe except for the smarmy bastards, her romance with Finnick was admittedly stupid – and he won’t stop trying to prevent her from doing them by any means possible, both ethical and unscrupulous.

One means, however, he won’t use any longer.

“Commander Apini, you will never insult Officer Wise again by asking him to spy on me,” Queen orders in the tone that brooks no argument.

“All I want to do is to keep you safe, Jupiter!”

“And all I want to do is to keep my privacy private. Wise understands that, and you don’t.”

Stinger opens his mouth to object but the queen sharply lifts her hand to silence him.

“We won’t return to that shuttlecock of a debate, Stinger, it’s endless and futile. From now on, Officer Wise will report to no one. I’m leaving him the right to give his superiors the information that might endanger my security if left undisclosed. But he will be the one to decide what he should report and what should be kept confidential.”

“Jupiter, you can’t be serious! You can’t leave such decisions to him. They are mine to make.”

“Not anymore,” she cuts off but adds more softly, “When you steamrolled me into accepting Wise in the Guard, you said that you trusted his judgment. So trust his judgment now. He deserves it.”

“Wise doesn’t have the experience and knowledge required to sort out the information,” Apini reasons. “Sometimes a tiny, seemingly inconsequential detail can turn out to be crucial. Caine makes his judgments based on his instincts more than anything else. And sometimes our instincts get better of our logic, Jupiter, and we make mistakes. You’ve learnt it the hard way with Odair. If Caine makes a mistake like that it might cost you your life.”

Somehow this reminder of her mistake with Finnick – more of a slur, really, one of the many Stinger slipped at her during the conversation – is the last drop that makes the cup of Jupiter’s patience run
“Don’t you dare to pester Caine when he endeavours to protect my secrets, Apini,” she hurls. “If you violate my order, I will take him from under your command completely. Have a good day, Commander.”

Apini’s parting nod is abrupt and brusque.

In the evening, Kiza visits Jupiter, announcing a sleepover.

“I tried to be a good daughter and visit Dad first, but he’s too busy raging at poor Caine. Seems like it’s his favourite pastime lately. Apparently, Caine spent a night with you?”

Jupiter winces. “When you put it like that, it sounds dirty. All we did was go to Havet for a night. By the way, do you mind if we take our sleepover there? I miss the sea.”

“Wow, you’re usually so stingy when it comes to visits there. Sure, let’s go.”

As they walk towards the transportation chamber, Jupiter can feel her friend’s inquisitive eyes on her.

“What made you change your miser ways and allow yourself to live a little?” Kiza asks as they both squeeze into the Gate.

“Caine.”

The girl whistles. “I wonder how he achieved that. You’re usually as stubborn as a mule,” she pokes Jupiter in the stomach. “How did he tempt you to have some fun? Did he take that pole out of your ass and switch it with his dick? Be honest, you know I won’t tell Dad.”

Jupiter chokes, “Good gods, Kiza! We did nothing of the kind.” She tries to escape the barrage of questions, fleeing the Gate and embracing happily trilling Siskin. “Hi, honey, I missed you, too.”

Giving Head Keeper a perfunctory hug, the younger Apini continues her interrogation – she’s so much like her dad sometimes!

“What did Caine do to you then to deserve Dad’s wrath? Judging by the decibels, he at the very least deflowered you.”


They settle on the wooden terrace steps in front of the house, warmed by the last rays of the setting sun, with a bowl of blackberries that Siskin has obligingly provided for them.

“Well, maybe not deflowered… Seduced you, then.” Kiza picks the biggest berry and puts it in her mouth with obvious delight. “Or you seduced him. I don’t care who initiated it as long as sex happened.”

“Can you imagine me seducing anyone?” Jupiter snorts, joining in the supper. “Or Caine, for that matter?”

“No, I can’t imagine Caine as a suave seducer. He is too obtuse for that. You are too.”

“Caine isn’t obtuse!”
“I meant blunt, duh. Straightforward. Don’t get your panties in a twist! I like Caine, but the guy has no imagination. If he wanted to fuck you, he’d probably come up to you with all the subtlety of a falling brick and say,” Kiza drops her voice trying to imitate the lycantant’s deeper timbre, “Your Majesty, may I perform a lycantant mating ritual on you?”

“A lycantant mating ritual?” Jupiter giggles, admiring Kiza’s overly serious face that perfectly mimics Caine’s default expression. “What do you mean by that?”

“No idea,” Kiza shrugs, taking another blackberry. “It probably involves bloodied dead animals on your doorstep or something equally disgusting. I’d bet a lot of sniffing and licking under the tail follows, though.”

“Gods, you are so splicist for a splice!” Jupiter declares feelingly, not for the first time astounded by her friend’s casual speciesism.

“I am a splice, I am allowed,” the girl retorts through a mouthful of berries and sticks her purple tongue at Jupiter.

“I do not have a tail,” Jupiter points out unnecessarily. “Guess that makes me inadequate for lycantant sex. Thank gods.”

“So what did you two do instead of doing something productive, like each other?”

“Talked for a bit, had supper, went to sleep.”

“Ugh, you are so boring!”

“Anything that doesn’t involve wild, hot sex on the ceiling is boring to you,” Jupiter scoffs. “I can’t afford to change guys like you do batteries in your vibrators.”

“Hey, I take umbrage with that!” Kiza flicks a blackberry at the offender. “All my vibrators have extremely long-lasting batteries! Speaking of changing guys. I hear Finnick’s starting a new career. Did he get to keep his balls? Or will he be singing castrato?”

“Honey, he had to have been castrated before puberty for it to affect his voice. Besides, Finnick has no problems hitting high notes even with his balls still in place.”

“I do not get you,” the young Apini shakes her head at Jupiter. “‘You cheated on me? You bastard! Here, have fame and fortune and everything that goes with it.’ How’s that fair?”

“It’s not. Life rarely is,” the queen shrugs. “But his voice deserves it. There are bigger things in this world than my personal peeves.”

“Still, I think you’re being too lenient to him.”

“If you’re questioning my decision, offer a better option. A viable one,” Jupiter snaps in irritation. “I wanted to keep his voice alive, therefore I couldn’t execute him. I wanted him to sing for my people, therefore I couldn’t lock him up in an oubliette somewhere. Unless he does something to jeopardize me again, I’ll let him live his life, do what he’s good at and bring his vocal beauty to the world. This world can always use more beauty, there’s too much ugliness in it.”

Her friend gives her a narrow-eyed stare. “You just needed an excuse to keep him alive, admit it.”

Jupiter opens her mouth to argue – and closes it to think for a minute.
“I do not know,” she replies eventually. “Maybe. It didn’t feel like it at the time, though.”

“Do you want him back?”

“Definitely not.” This time, Jupiter doesn’t pause to think.

“It is okay to want him back, you know. When I broke up with my first boyfriend, I wanted him back. He was an asshole, but I still missed him. Guess that’s what first boyfriends do to you.”

Jupiter sighs. “I want Finnick to hurt – like I’ve been hurting ever since… But I don’t feel the urge to punish him. To neutralize the potential harm he might cause? Sure, but not punish.” She starts fiddling with the hem of her skirt, absently staring at her fingers. “More than anything, I want him to regret what he did. But he doesn’t. And no matter what I do to him, he never will. He thinks he saved that girl and… he did. She was in a horrendous situation I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. Finn did the right thing, not having turned his back on her suffering. And… deep inside… I admire him for that.”

“You would.”

“The problem is, he doesn’t distinguish between the rescue and the romance that followed. He seems to see it as a natural progression of the girl’s deliverance, an integral part of it. Maybe it was. Maybe taking her out of the abusive situation wasn’t enough, someone had to help her cope with the aftermath of it.”

“You are an idiot, sweetheart,” Kiza diagnosticates decisively. “Stop trying to justify Odair’s fuck-up. I’m not saying he’s a bad guy, but what he did was bad.”

“For me, it was,” Jupiter looks up at her friend’s compassionate face. “For Annie, it wasn’t.” She stands up, picking up the now empty bowl. “Come on, it’s time to go to bed.”

Kiza gets up silently, probably realizing that continuing the conversation would be nothing but pouring salt in the still fresh wounds, and heads to her bedroom.

A few moments later a whistle reaches Jupiter in the kitchen. She leaves the bowl and goes to see what has impressed her friend so much.

“When you said you and Caine had shared a room at night, I didn’t think you meant ‘shared a bed’,” Kiza comments, observing the construction that still occupies a better part of her bedroom.

“We didn’t. There are two beds,” Jupiter points out, suddenly feeling defensive for no reason.

“Sure there are,” Kiza smirks, throwing herself on the bed that used to be Jupiter’s, claiming it for herself.

Guess the queen is left with the other one. She briefly considers changing the sheets, but Caine slept on top of the covers, so there’s no point.

When she settles under the blanket, though, she realizes that she should have changed the pillowcase at least: she can swear it still smells faintly of Caine. It must be just her imagination playing tricks on her: a lycantant splice could probably sense the remaining traces of Caine’s odour, but a human nose would never discern the day-old scent that was barely detectable to start with.

I miss you.

She is surprised to find how much she wants him to be here, despite Kiza’s soft breathing next to her.
She doesn’t want a company, she wants Caine.

Maybe she could…

No, she shouldn’t bring him here ever again.

There are a lot of reasons why the queen must keep her distance, not the least of them being Caine’s safety.

‘Not everything is about you, Jupiter.’

She shouldn’t further fuel the rumours that started after her two-month disappearance. If the courtiers think Officer Wise might be Queen’s new favourite… If even Stinger – who knows both Jupiter and Caine very closely – was confounded, others will be all the more confused.

‘If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck…’

After Finnick’s fall from grace becomes obvious – which will inevitably happen eventually – there will be a melee for his place. Some court players might see Officer Wise either as a useful pawn or a pesky obstacle in their influence game and Caine might get mauled in the power struggle. Head Spymaster has already shown interest in Wise. Being noticed by Gríma is never a good thing. And Wormtongue is just the one she knows about, there may be many more she’s unaware of – and therefore can’t protect the guard from.

As much as Jupiter enjoys Caine’s company in an unofficial setting, she doesn’t want the lycantant to get involved in the court rat race: with that honest mouth of his, he’s utterly ill-adjusted for navigating the web of intrigues. She reminds herself that they’re not friends – not anything, – that for him she’s just a job. And she should leave him be.

Her fingers curl into the pillow.

She recalls how safe he made her feel while they were here last night – and before.

How easy it was being herself around him.

Sharing her life with him.

She wanted to share more.

She wanted to take him to Havet’s northern islands in the autumn, when the chocolate-hued caps of Boletus mushrooms dot the lichen, the tasty gems of nature sitting on the lining of milky-white velvet, and let him learn their scent he expressed his curiosity about. She wanted to show him the lotus lake, buried under the heaps of round leaves and flowers bigger than both her hands, and try to catch a pike lurking underneath the floral carpet – a majestic spotted fish with s long snout and extraordinarily sharp teeth and way too many bones to pick out. She wanted to teach him to hunt partridges in the winter by burying empty bottles in the snow with a handful of bright red rowan berries on the bottom. She wanted…

It does not matter what she wanted.

It has to stop.

No more reckless gaffes like the one last night.

He kept her safe. One good turn deserves another. She wants him to be safe, too.
Her heart twists inside her chest. How can she miss something she’s never had?

How can she miss it **this** much?

It is ridiculous, they’re no one to each other.

*She* is ridiculous.

*It has to stop.*

She burrows her face into the pillow and falls asleep with Caine’s scent in her lungs.

The next morning when the queen steps out of the antechamber into the long narrow hallway preceding her private quarters, Officer Wise is already waiting for her.

At her emergence both he and Chris, who is apparently doing the graveyard shift today, startle and rear back from each other, snapping to attention. Evidently, the two have been engaged in an engrossing conversation.

“Good morning, Officers,” she greets them, her tone betraying her amusement.

“Good morning, Your Majesty.”

“Shall I leave you two to gossip in peace?”

“Forgive me, it was my fault,” Chris responds guiltily, taking the responsibility for the breach of the protocol, his striped white-and-ginger tail twitching nervously behind him. “But we weren’t gossiping. I was just asking Caine… err, I mean, Officer Wise questions. The questions I wasn’t supposed to ask.” He dares to glance at her – a flash of flax eyes, the blue so deep it’s nearly purple. *Is there such a thing as blue lighting?* “He didn’t say anything to me,” he assures her hastily.

“He never does,” she drawls, sending Chris a wink. The guard’s mouth falls open. Turning to leave, she mutters, “Slackers.”

Two muffled snorts echo her mock rebuke as Caine falls into step behind her.

She smiles.

It is her first and only genuine smile that day.

The queen forces herself to stop smiling at Caine each time she sees him.

Instead, she greets him with a reserved, formal nod just like she greets all other guards.

Maybe her greeting is even more distant when it’s addressed to him.

Eventually, he stops smiling at her, too.

It shouldn’t bother her as much as it does. She’s doing the right thing.

...*It does.*
The following weeks are a strenuous exercise in keeping face. Jupiter knows she’s a bad actress – she’s hopeless at conveying emotions that aren’t there, yet pretty good at concealing those that are. She hides her loneliness and grief behind an impenetrable mask of imperious dignity.

Back when Jupiter was a kid, Uncle Stinger used to train her to control her emotions and their external manifestations. He made it into one of their cool games, like sharpshooting or dodging shots. The goal of the ‘keeping face’ game was to remain as outwardly unaffected as possible while he tried to surprise, spook or disgust her. There are a lot of instinctive responses a person can’t possibly control, but there are plenty of reflexive ones that can be reined in and changed. Apini was teaching her to be the mistress of her reactions and she liked the idea very much – even as a child, Jupiter enjoyed having control.

Maybe there’s more of Seraphi in her than she thought.

She knew Uncle Stinger would never let her come to any real harm, so one day she offered to include pain into their repertoire of triggers. Stinger, who usually welcomed Jupiter’s initiatives, went oddly quiet at what she thought was a brilliant suggestion. He said that her father would never give his permission to it – and even if her Dad agreed, he, Stinger, wouldn’t be able to deliver.

“Sorry, kiddo. You’re like a daughter to me. I can hurt you no more than I can hurt Kiza.”

Jupiter got hurt during their ‘games’ quite often, but she didn’t say anything. The games were fun, they were worth a few bruises and a random sprain.

The most memorable of her trials was when Stinger had a sheep killed and gutted in front of her and she had to fish out a handful of pebbles out of the bowl with its still steaming guts without wincing.

They had mutton for dinner that day, but Jupiter had lost her appetite. (She’d also learnt that you can’t make a mutton stew without killing a sheep. Everything had its cost.)

However, when Uncle Stinger made Jupiter watch as he slit his forearm open with the favourite knife of his, she broke, turning away and squeezing her eyes shut, refusing to play anymore. Without batting an eye, he asked her to help him heal the cut. With shaking hands, she held his wound together, carefully watching what she was doing so as not to dislocate the two sides of the cut as he applied the regenerative spray. When his arm was as good as new, he said she’d won the round.

She didn’t think she had. Helping her loved one heal had never been a challenge in the first place.

Only after her ascension, Jupiter realized why Uncle Stinger had been doing what he had. Commander Apini’s methods might not have been the gentlest but he had attempted to give her an inoculation for what awaited her in her future as Queen. Quite soon into her quendom, Jupiter learnt that meeting life’s challenges unflinching and sorting out her emotions later was one of the most useful skills a royal could possess.

But even if she doesn’t show her emotions, it doesn’t mean she doesn’t feel them.

When she returned from her escape to Havet, she thought the worst after-effects of Finnick’s ‘surprise’ were behind her.

Now she starts suspecting they still lie ahead.

The grief no longer comes in sudden tsunami-like waves that threaten to knock her down and drag her under. Back when it did, she used to get reprieves. Instead, it has transformed into an ever-present icy fog, draining her warmth – her energy – every minute of every day. Most of the time it lurks in the background, almost imperceptible, only to congeal her by its glacial breath when she is
reminded of Odair’s existence.

Jupiter tries to be reminded as seldom as possible.

Finnick’s schedule is changed around hers to minimize the time they see each other. They never leave or return to the private quarters simultaneously so they wouldn’t cross paths in the antechamber. Queen keeps Odair maximally excluded from her official functions: wherever she can appear alone without causing too much echo along the grapevine, she goes without Finnick.

Unfortunately, Royal Consort’s overexposure to the limelight has made it extremely difficult to conceal the recent rift between them. To keep up the pretense of a happy union, they sometimes make public appearances together, but meeting one-on-one is out of the question. Instead of sharing their life like they used to, they live parallel to each other.

There are no more dinners in the Malachite Dining Room in the western wing of the alcazar, its dark green walls awash with the soft amber light of sunset… No more evening walks in the gardens before they go to sleep… No reading in the same bed, exchanging jokes, random comments, and occasional pillow missiles… No impromptu songs at the closest piano available or even with no instrument at all… No sneaking away for a quick fishing trip, no serious conversations or playful sarcastic banter, no smiles, no laughter…

No kisses, no touches, no sex.

Jupiter thought she loved sex the most in their relationship. Yet, paradoxically, she doesn’t miss it at all.

To put it mildly.

The mere idea fills her with revulsion. The nauseating vulnerability aside, sex does ugly things to you: it blinds you, making you think with the body parts not intended for thinking, it turns you into a needy, clingy, pathetic thing, it fills you with possessiveness and greed. With jealousy, which in itself is one of the most malignant human emotions since it makes you doubt your self-worth.

The worst part, though, is how addictive sex is. It is but an unhealthy compulsion, much like alcoholism or narcomania, and the worst thing any addiction does to you is it enslaves you.

Jupiter does not want to feel enslaved.

Mercifully, her body has followed her will by having shrunk her libido to a vanishing point. The longer she goes without sex, the less often her body reminds her sex exists.

It doesn’t bother her in the slightest. If anything, it’s a relief.

However, she misses the little things she didn’t even notice while she had them: Finnick’s warmth under the blanket, the dimples on his cheeks when he smiled, his tired ‘Hi’ when they met at the end of a long day, the quiet sounds of another living being in her now silent rooms…

But most of all she misses touch.

Finnick has always been a very tactile person. She didn’t realize how much touch he was giving her until the sensations stopped.

Having lost the man who provided the majority of physical contact in her life, Jupiter’s left only with the secondary sources. And not that many people are allowed to touch Queen.
Kiza is very generous with her touches – hugs, kisses, hand-holding or simply lying on a bed, limbs entwined – but these days Kiza is rarely around. She’s busy with her life and Jupiter doesn’t expect any more physical displays of affection from her friend than she had been getting before her life fell apart.

Once in a blue moon, Stinger gives Jupiter a hug or an awkward pat on the back – or at least, he used to: their relationship, already complicated since her ascension, has become even more convoluted after the conspiracy. Since the queen learned Commander Apini lied to her they haven’t touched one another – because, as she suspects, both feel more inclination to smack each other rather than show familial affection.

Both Kalique and Titus ceremonially embrace Jupiter whenever they meet, but their touch makes her spine tingle with the premonition of a dagger stabbed between her ribs. Tertiary Heir not once has intimatted that he is open to more than a greeting hug. Jupiter’s still not sure if he fully means it or flirting is just a way Titus shows his hospitality.

As for Balem…

The situation with Balem is complicated. Ever since their disagreement, they never meet in private, but she can’t refuse him the contact while they are in public – he is her Crown Prince and Heir Apparent, after all. The House of Abrasax must stand united in the eyes of potential enemies, and among royals, everyone is a potential enemy. Jupiter’s duty as the Head of the House is to demonstrate the solidarity of her royal family – and she does.

Balem takes full advantage of that. Multiple kisses to her hands – many more than the protocol requires, – a forearm under her elbow, a hand on the small of her back, knuckles brushing over her ribs, a palm between her shoulder blades... Sometimes she wishes she could wrench his arms out of their sockets and shove them up his ass. But she doesn’t shrink from his touch or otherwise show her discomfort, she holds her back straight and her head high – and smiles at him with feigned fondness and sincere condescension.

She takes vengeful satisfaction in the knowledge that her arrogant superiority drives him insane.

That doesn’t stop him from touching her, though.

They are both losers in the game of touch.

Besides her real family and her official one, almost everyone is strictly prohibited from making tactile contact with Queen. Most of the staff in her alcazar are forbidden to even approach Her Majesty, let alone touch her. Sovereign’s agreement to any physical interaction with anyone who is not Royal Consort should be vocally expressed and documented by the Chamber Presence. It helps to avoid any unnecessary executions while keeping Queen’s bodily integrity sacrosanct.

Of course, there are employees who are allowed to touch Jupiter in the course of their professional activities: Royal Physician, Royal Chiropractor, her personal trainer, her dance instructor… Every morning, Jupiter has to put up with her hairdresser and make-up artist touching her, making her presentable enough to face the scrutiny of the court. And her visagiste is a bit too generous with skin contact. Jupiter would get rid of him, but the guy is as gay as they come, so there certainly isn’t any sexual subtext in it. However, he not-so-subtly relishes being able to touch Queen.

The creep.

He makes her look good, however, – indeed, a real artist there, – so she lets him keep his position.
The queen was supposed to have people assist her getting dressed, too, but from the very start, Jupiter adamantly established that if a piece of clothing could not be put on or taken off by herself, she wasn’t wearing it. Besides, Finnick was obliging in dealing with any fastenings on her back – whether she needed his assistance or not.

Finnick…

Fuck.

“Well made, by the look of him,” Kalique nods at someone behind Jupiter’s back.

Queen Jupiter Seraphi-Nova accompanied by Royal Consort and their entourage has arrived to pay a visit – prescheduled almost a year prior, as any meeting between royals – to the alcazar of Her Majesty Kalique, Secondary Heir of the House of Abrasax.

Jupiter’s relationship with Kalique is… complicated. Secondary Heir is the only one of Seraphi’s children with whom the recurred queen has something that can be called – for the lack of a better word – a friendship. Unlike her creepy siblings, Kalique doesn’t persist in addressing Jupiter Mother, nor does she expect her to act maternally towards the daughter Jupiter can’t possibly remember. The two of them treat each other as peers –as equals.

Although Kalique definitely believes that she’s more equal than Jupiter.

Her outward amiability has long since ceased to fool the queen: the only female heir is probably the most dangerous of the three – a deadly sting wrapped in honeyed smiles. Balem is at least open in his hatred and Jupiter can be as blatant in avoiding meeting him, declining all his invitations and never inviting him to visit her. She doesn’t have that luxury when it comes to his younger siblings. Fortunately, Titus values his comfort too much to conflict with Head of the House. Kalique… not so much.

She never does anything openly hostile, only merely irritating. And her favourite way of doing it is flirting with Jupiter’s consort.

As long as Jupiter trusted Finnick, she never got genuinely jealous. Why bother if her man, as she believed, was faithful to her? It doesn’t mean that another woman’s excessive attention towards him wasn’t annoying.

The reason for Kalique’s passive aggression has always remained unclear to Jupiter. Is it her formal supremacy as Head of the House? Or Kalique’s deeply-rooted insecurity? Or past offenses from her millennia-long relationship with her late mother? Jupiter has no idea what skeletons Seraphi had in her closet.

Whatever the reason, Kalique takes obvious pleasure in dominating Jupiter.

When people hear the words dominance and submission they tend to think about oddly clothed folks, whips, and ring gags, while in fact both of those concepts are an integral part of the day-to-day life of every single person.

A child instinctively submits to their parents, following their lead in order to survive while being incapable to do so on their own. Then the puberty hits and the hormonal clock makes the teenager rebel against parental will, urging the youngsters to separate from their original family and form their own in order to prevent inbreeding – while the parents still try to assert their dominance expecting the obedience they’re used to. No wonder it’s the most problematic period in both raising children and
growing up.

In a friendship, one friend often submits to the other, listening to their advice and acting accordingly, and if either of them breaks the dominance pattern, the friendship often breaks apart.

The same goes for romantic relationships and marriages. More often than not, one partner is a leader and the other is a follower. Two leaders together would fight for dominance until they poison each other’s lives – or break apart. Two followers would struggle, too, because neither of them would want to make decisions and take responsibility for them.

In the most successful unions, two people switch dominance – whether from time to time or from activity to activity. Always being the locomotive in a relationship is exhausting, as is constant compliance with the decisions that aren’t yours.

Usually, the power balance between two people is very subtle and imperceptible to others. It also often goes unnoticed because of how used we are to it. We rarely register who is the first to say ‘Hello!’, whose hand is on top during a handshake or who’s the last to avert their eyes – all of those little tells are processed subliminally, but seldom on the conscious level.

The people who take dominance and submission to their bedroom are merely being open with themselves, admitting their tendencies and needs – and satisfying them. BDSM is the pinnacle, the quintessence of interpersonal power play, its most condensed and purest form. Such relationships are not about black leather accessories and scary-looking dungeons. They are about honesty and fearlessness, vulnerability and trust. Sexual submission is allowing yourself to be ultimately vulnerable with someone and trust this someone to give you what you need – even if what you need is pain – and take what they need from you while never – ever – really hurting you.

If someone’s hurting you, causing you misery instead of joy, it’s not BDSM. It is abuse.

Unfortunately, domineering personalities very often exploit the natural tendency of other people to submit – rooted in their genetics, upbringing, inexperience or past traumas – in order to manipulate and abuse them both inside and outside the bedroom.

Kalique is a classic case of an abusive non-sexual dominant (maybe sexual, too, but Jupiter has no inclination whatsoever of finding out).

Naturally, Jupiter anticipated their meeting without excessive enthusiasm.

On top of that, Seraphi’s younger children are used to the fact that their mother’s recurrence visits them in the invariable company her consort. If Jupiter left Finnick home as she wanted, Kalique would immediately know that something isn’t right. Jupiter cannot let her know how vulnerable she is right now.

Don’t show your weakness to vultures, it’ll make them swoop at you.

So she’s had to drag Odair along.

Oh, joy.

However, it’s not Finnick who’s presently had the misfortune to catch Kalique’s attention.

As Jupiter is turning around to see who her hostess is looking at, she already knows. There’s only one person in her entourage who could be well-made. It’s not the weak spot she was expecting to be aimed at – until this moment, she hasn’t known this one existed! – and therefore it was left uncovered.
Fuck.

Her gaze slides over Caine’s pale face, bleached of any expression.

*How does Kalique know about him? What does she know?*

*Does she know about Finnick, too?*

*About Annie?!!*

Swallowing her quickly rising panic, Jupiter schools her expression into polite bemusement and smiles at her hostess, “Kalique, you have seen Officer Wise before.”

“Oh, darling!” Kalique’s laugh is a lilting melody, the musical result of centuries of careful honing. “Like I would pay attention to your guards! This one, however, is definitely worth a closer examination.” Her eyes sparkle as she looks the lycantant up and down – with the thoughtful, appraising air of a horse breeder considering buying a stallion for her pedigree stock.

Is Kalique going to look him in the teeth? Or wherever the hell one is supposed to look at in studs?

The only reason Jupiter notices Caine shrinking from Kalique’s inspection – imperceptibly to any other observer – is that she saw this reaction before. He shrank like that from Finnick – too many times to count. He shrank like that from lightning during that memorable night on Havet when she first punched through the wall of formality between them.

He shrank like that from *her.*

Jupiter grits her teeth and says nothing. It’s an obvious provocation, she mustn’t react to it. If she gives any kind of reaction, *it will have worked.*

“I bet he looks even better without the uniform,” Kalique remarks, obviously pleased with what she sees. “Step forward, splice, I want to get a better look at you.”

Caine –

Caine doesn’t move.

He stays rooted in place, glancing at his queen questioningly.

As Head of the House, Jupiter has no problem to put Secondary Heir in her place. She hates resorting to power posturing around Kalique: if you don’t touch shit, it doesn’t stink that much. Theirs is a tense truce, but a truce nonetheless, and Jupiter values it as such. When you have nothing better, you learn to appreciate small mercies.

Jupiter’s eyes meet Caine’s, blank from... *something.* Something that tugs at her heartstrings. For a millisecond, lightning flashes in front of her memory’s eye. *The thunderstorm, her fingers digging into the warm naked back, the phobia of queens...*

Power posturing it is.

“Kalique, darling, you can’t command my men,” Queen speaks up. “They are, you know, *mine.* Don’t you have enough of your own to order around? If your Guard is lacking, I could send you a couple of regiments.”

The narrow-eyed glare Kalique sends her way – if Jupiter had any decency she would crumble to ash on the spot – is quickly replaced with a delighted smile – both satisfied and predatory.
Jupiter shouldn’t have jumped at Wise’s defense. Her protective instincts got the better of her and now Kalique knows that he matters. She evidently suspected before, but now she knows. Jupiter has revealed that a possible chink in her armour is indeed a chink and handed Kalique another pawn to play her dominating games.

It’s going to be a looong visit.

“I see you’ve trained your man well,” Kalique drawls. “When a stranger beckons, he doesn’t come running to sniff at their hand. Once you have tamed them, lycantants are very obedient, aren’t they?”

Are they? Jupiter has no idea. All members of her Royal Guard follow orders without question, but it sure as fuck is not what Kalique is implying. It’s obvious now what Kalique knows – what Kalique thinks she knows – about Caine’s relationship with her.

The sharp talons going into her flesh are agonizing.

Jupiter’s hands go clammy and cold. She is not ready to have this verbal cross-fire with Caine caught in the middle – he’ll be the one to suffer the most from it! – she feels so utterly unprepared –

“All of Her Majesty’s soldiers are dutiful,” Finnick steps in. “Although Jupiter does not like her men tame. I mean, look at me!” he motions at his glorious body with a flowery gesture of the fine-boned wrist.

Kalique’s eyes snap to him.

Of course she doesn’t like her men tame: you become responsible – forever – for those you have tamed. And she doesn’t need any more responsibility, she’s so fed up with it she can vomit the stuff. That’s why she’s never attempted to tame Finnick.

Maybe she should have.

Meanwhile, Finnick comes up to the guard and casually slings his arm around Wise’s torso as though he has done it a hundred times before.

What the fuck is he doing, drawing attention back to Caine again?!

“I wholeheartedly agree with you, Kalique, Caine deserves to be noticed,” Finnick purrs, briefly glancing at Jupiter. – Her panic halts once she realizes what he’s doing. They’ve played on the same team for so long they’re able to understand each other without words. – “I’m handsome, humorous and hedonistic…”

“And humble,” Jupiter mutters.

She is rewarded with a blinding grin. “That, too,” Finnick nods with feigned seriousness and hugs Wise closer. “And Caine is strong, silent and stoic; we balance each other out perfectly,” the siren praises the lycantant like a newly-minted wife would rhapsodize about her husband; the manner Odair’s regarding the guard can’t be described as anything but possessive worship.

Jupiter half-expects Caine to flinch away, to step out of Finnick’s arm and ruin the entire game. Contrary to all of their previous interactions, however, Wise does not stiffen, he relaxes into her consort’s embrace, letting Odair draw him closer, leaning in with a tiny, shy, awkward – utterly
endearing – smile.

It takes all of Jupiter’s self-control not to drop her jaw.

*He’s playing along.*

And doing it *beautifully* – much better than Jupiter can manage at the moment (then again, maybe the constipated expression she’s sure she’s currently wearing is exactly what she needs right now – at least, she’ll do her damnedest to make it work for her).

“And, as you know, all of my friends are Jupiter’s friends,” Odair continues, eyeing Kalique meaningfully, probably alluding to their ‘secret’ correspondence and mutual *understanding*. “She’s generous like that. Aren’t you, dearie?”

“You’re right on one account: Officer Wise does balance you out well, you mouthy self-indulgent brat,” Jupiter grouses humorously, closing ranks with her consort at Caine’s defense. “Officer knows how to behave, unlike a certain someone.”

“That is because you love spoiling me so much,” Finnick sasses back.

“The weakness I am rapidly regretting.”

“Ooh, someone’s moody!” Finnick shoots her a beatific smile and turns to Kalique. “She’s been pouting ever since I decided to devote myself to music. Jupiter doesn’t seem to understand that every genius needs *inspirations*,” the siren looks at Caine warmly, *dotingly*, gives his shoulder one final squeeze and approaches the queens.

In one neat move, he’s shifted Kalique’s focus from Wise back to himself. A favourite of a favourite is much less worthwhile than a favourite of a queen. There is no telling how the monarch would react to such a person: the sovereign might take them into favour, but she’s more likely to demote them on no other ground but jealousy. The unreliability of their position makes them rather useless chess pieces.

“I see you give your consort more and more toys to play with,” Kalique addresses Jupiter. “Aren’t you afraid he’ll find them too distracting?”

This time, though, the beak slips off the armour.

“I welcome anything that helps Finn’s talent,” Jupiter answers earnestly – her love for Odair may be gone, but her attitude to his singing hasn’t changed. She knows that she sounds like the lovesick woman she used to be, which is exactly what she wants to sound like. Jupiter even manages to cast the siren an adoring look. “Although his new vocation takes up too much of his time,” she complains. “I have to visit you to spend a few uninterrupted hours with my own consort; can you believe it, darling? All Finnick speaks and breathes these days is music!”

“Apparently, not only music,” Kalique shoots another glance at Caine.

“Mostly music,” Finnick states firmly.

“I’ve always believed this mouth can do beautiful things,” their hostess runs her finger along Odair’s indulgently smiling lips. The only way her flirtation could be more flagrant is if she jumped the guy right there.

It’s meant to be a challenge to Jupiter, but she refuses to rise to it, keeping quiet while she rallies her scattered self-possession, grateful to Finnick for giving her a respite with his timely intervention.
Hating him for having caused the problem in the first place.

“Indeed,” Jupiter attests mildly, ignoring the unsubtle second meaning of Kalique’s double entendre, “Finnick’s voice is perfection.”

He beams at her and her heart spasms in pain.

“There is no perfection in this world,” Odair counters with a moue of mock mourning, “but if there were, I would be it. After you, ladies, of course,” he adds with an air of old-fashioned gallantry, holding Kalique’s gaze as he bows down to kiss her fingers. Their hostess’s tense smile is turning genuine again: even the weathered Entitled can’t resist the siren’s formidable charm.

Jupiter takes the lingering kiss as her cue.

“Finnick, dear, you’ll bruise poor Kalique’s hand,” she remarks pointedly with a hint of jealousy that a few months ago could have been genuine.

Revealing false weak spots is equally important to concealing real ones; it’s a useful decoy stratagem.

Kalique smiles a sharp, raptorial smile, this time reminding Jupiter of a cat – the one that spotted a bird with a broken wing. Seraphi’s daughter spends the rest of the evening flirting away with the person she perceives as her mother’s man – and blessedly ignoring Caine.

While carefully looking thunderous, Jupiter heaves a huge internal sigh of relief. Let Kalique play her little dominance games while Jupiter takes a breather, observing from the sidelines. The queen is surprised to find that none of Kalique and Finnick’s blatant flirting that used to be so unnerving touches her anymore. In fact, once it stopped bothering her, it’s turned into a fascinating spectacle. As Jupiter watches Finnick work, she feels some of the former awe seep back into her heart.

When they bid their goodbyes, Kalique couldn’t look any more complacent while Jupiter is tired, but inwardly entertained.

This is the first time Queen parts ways with Secondary Heir a secret victor in their unending stand-off.

Jupiter’s half-asleep in her bed aboard her clipper heading back to the alcazar when her intercom chimes gently. Fuck. She’s almost managed to doze off. She has been having problems falling asleep lately, her usual sleeping pills failing to sedate her. It takes a lot of conscious effort to make her body relax into sleep – and keep the shadows that creep over her in the dark at bay. Now she’ll have to start the drudgery all over again.

She burrows deeper into her blanket without bothering to glance at the screen on her nightstand and check: there’s only one person who would dare to bother her at this hour of the night.

“Go away, Odair.”

“Uh, it’s not… It’s Officer Wise, Your Majesty,” comes the unexpected response. “Have come as summoned.”

His voice sounds so certain that for a moment Jupiter doubts her own memory – did she call for him and forget about it? But no, she remembers very clearly that she did not, in fact, summon Officer Wise. After all the effort she’d put into convincing everyone that he is nothing but another guard to her, she would’ve never asked him to openly come into her rooms.
At night.

The lie is probably for the benefit of the guards standing watch by the door to her suite: only Royal Consort can turn up uninvited on the queen’s doorstep with a surprise visit in the middle of the night.

Apparently, not only Royal Consort.

Ugh.

Right.

After what happened at Kalique’s, she probably owes Caine an explanation. Now, though? He couldn’t wait until the morning?

Until the next year?

“A minute.”

With a groan, she forces her tired body up, reaching for a dressing gown to make herself presentable. As she walks across her suite towards the hall, the Chamber Presence automatically illuminates the rooms along the queen’s progression, turning the lights on the lowest setting – Jupiter’s eyes have already adjusted to the darkness, bright light would hurt them. Wrapping her dressing gown tighter around herself and hastily tying her belt, Jupiter waves at the door and it immediately slides open, closing behind the guard’s back as soon as he steps in.

Caine hesitantly hovers by the entrance, awkwardly shifting from foot to foot like he’s afraid to come further into the room, as though her suite is the lair of a fire-breathing dragon. Considering the effect insomnia has on her, Caine may be not that far from the truth. In the dim light, she cannot see his face, just the dark silhouette outlined against the pale wall.

Even the silhouette looks utterly uncomfortable.

Caine would probably be much less wary of the dragon.

She hugs herself, trying to alleviate her own awkwardness. Since when does she feel uneasy around Caine, of all people?!

Apparently, since Kalique announced their nonexistent affair to all and sundry. Gods, that woman can be such a bitch sometimes. No, she’s a bitch most of the time, but sometimes it hurts.

The visitor just stands there, his silence doing nothing to dissuade the tension in the air.

Oh, right. The queen should initiate the conversation.

“Caine?”

“Thank you for seeing me, Your Majesty,” the guard starts haltingly. “Please, forgive me for the false pretense. And for disturbing you this late.” His voice is low, hushed, but she can discern a tiniest tremble in it.

What came off as confidence through the intercom now sounds more like desperation.

“Never mind that,” she waves off his apology, on high alert now. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Do not worry yourself, Your Majesty.”
“Then why are you here?”

“Well, I…” His shoulders produce a gesture that looks as much a spastic twitch as a shrug. Visibly pulling himself together, he takes an abrupt step towards her and implores, “Please, let me stay.”

“Stay?..” she asks, bewildered, at a loss what he may mean.

*Why in the universe would Caine want to stay the night in her suite?!!*

“Yes. I want to stay with you.”

There’s urgency in his voice that makes her initial astonishment turn into a bad, chilling feeling. She is afraid to ask why he wants to stay here with her badly enough he’s dared to come here uncalled on the off-chance she might let him in. Is he hiding? Was he unsafe outside?

“The couch in my drawing room is quite comfortable,” she offers. “Although it may be a bit too short for you.”

Caine shoots her a startled look, “What?”

“Well, there’s only one bed here and it’s mine,” she says apologetically. “And it’s even shorter.”

Jupiter’s private clipper is much more of a military ship than anything else: it’s small, fast and heavily armed; it was created with security as the first and foremost priority. Therefore it doesn’t offer the luxuries royal travel ships usually have – like an overabundance of spacious rooms. The onboard royal suite is tiny compared to what it should be, which doesn’t bother Jupiter one bit: she’d rather stay alive in a handful of compact rooms than die in an enormous flying palace.

The lycantant shakes his head, “I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I don’t understand. Why are you telling me this?”

“Caine, you’re the one who’s burst in here demanding to stay with me. This isn’t the private quarters in my alcazar where I have enfilades of spare bedrooms. You didn’t expect me to put you in my bed, did you?”

Her sudden nighttime visitor freezes and she can see she’s struck him dumb.

*Why?! He couldn’t really have expected to sleep in her bed, could he?*

“I didn’t mean to stay here,” Caine explains softly and his posture loses most of its rigidity. “I meant in your escort team.”

“But you already are in my escort team.”

“I thought… I thought that after Her Majesty Kalique’s… uh, remarks you wouldn’t want to keep me there.”

She rubs her forehead, unhappy to be reminded of the incident that made her feel so helpless. “Look, Caine, if after Kalique’s derogatory insinuations you wanted to leave the team, I would understand you and accept your transfer, despite the fact that I’d much rather keep you. But I take it you want to stay. So what are we talking about?”

“You’d rather keep me? Even after today?”

“Today was… unpleasant. Kalique can be tactless sometimes. What of it? Shit happens.”
“But you got so upset… Yet you didn’t deny Her Majesty’s speculations?” Caine’s tone makes the phrase into a question.

“Caine, you are one of the Crown’s soldiers and therefore one of Queen’s men. My men. I wasn’t going to publicly disown you just because some b… I mean, some bird-brained person jumped to conclusions.”

Jupiter starts pacing around the room, disgruntled to be rehashing today’s events, the effectively suppressed anger rising in her anew. Fuck, going back to sleep will be torture.

“You see, Caine, the more you deny doing something, the more you convince people that you are actually doing it. That’s why slander is so difficult to fight,” the queen sighs. “People think that there’s no smoke without fire, all that bullshit. Shifting attention is a much better tactic, as Finnick – with your help – demonstrated today. By the way, your acting was brilliant – so subtle, so convincing! I was impressed.”

“I tried my best. You were so distressed – and then High Consort intervened – and you weren’t anymore. I was happy I could help.”

“Why did you play along?” Jupiter voices her then-surprise and now-curiosity. “I mean… It was almost telepathic extent of cooperation.”

“All members of the escort team must unquestioningly follow the lead of Queen and Royal Consort while in public,” Caine recites. “High Consort was definitely leading me. He was projecting… uh, lightness, I guess – it’s hard to put into words, it was just this feeling of ease – so I responded in kind. I wasn’t wrong to follow him, was I? You were so relieved when I did…”

“Was my relief that obvious?” Jupiter asks, concerned.

“No, not to humans. The level of stress in your scent has drastically decreased, though. But I don’t think anyone else in the room could tell. You looked pretty grumpy.”

Despite herself, Jupiter smiles at his wording. Grumpy. By gods, she’s lucky Kalique doesn’t have any lycantants in her entourage! Secondary Heir is way too cautious to keep such dangerous creatures close to her soft and squishy self.

After all, lycantants’ bloodthirst is the universally acknowledged truth.

“Could you… Maybe you would explain to me how what I did helped the situation, Your Majesty?” Caine asks tentatively. “So I would know what’s expected of me.”

Jupiter nods, distracted, and looks around for a place to sit: this is going to be a long conversation. Unfortunately, the hall has none, so she nods in the direction of her drawing room, biding Caine to follow. He moves through dimly lit rooms without a single sound, like a bulky yet light-footed shadow. For a moment, Jupiter considers upping the illumination, but she’s already had difficulty falling asleep tonight and bright light will make the process even more problematic. Obscurity it is.

Having reached their destination, Jupiter lowers herself onto a chaise lounge, motions with her hand at the armchair next to it, inviting her visitor to sit, then drops it listlessly onto the armrest. The cozy surroundings make her feel more comfortable inside – and she could use some inner comfort for what promises to be a highly unpleasant conversation.

“Caine,” she grasps the nettle, “my consort’s indiscretion put me in a vulnerable position. I may be
Queen, but I am not an unemotional machine, unfortunately.”

Caine makes an aborted movement as if he wants to take her hand but thinks better of it. She appreciates the impulse nonetheless.

“Contrary to what public is led to believe, my relationship with Kalique isn’t that great,” the queen continues. “She takes pleasure in pecking at my weak spots. The same goes for the rest of my heirs. Somehow, she found out about… Actually, I do not know what exactly Kalique found out. Probably that recently I spend much less time in Finnick’s company and much more time in yours. I cannot have her digging deeper and unearthing Annie.” Jupiter takes a sharp inhale, fighting off a stab of pain that always accompanies that name.

“Your Majesty, you do not have to explain anything, especially if it upsets you.”

She waves off his concern and soldiers on. They all will be better off if Caine fully understands the situation.

“Annie isn’t just a chink in my armour, she’s a huge gaping hole leading straight to my gut,” Jupiter admits. “If Kalique learns about her, she’ll definitely take advantage of the knowledge, one way or another. At the very least, it’ll give her a weapon to cause me a great deal of emotional anguish. So, to thwart her further interest, Finnick switched the real and therefore dangerous affair of his with a false one, hence protecting all of us – you, me and, by extension, himself.”

“Me? Why would High Consort protect me?”

“Did you enjoy Kalique’s attention today?” she returns.

“No, Your Majesty, I must admit I didn’t.”

“If she thinks that you are Finnick’s replacement, there will be so much more attention coming your way. And not only from Kalique. So, since she obviously hadn’t been there holding a candle for any one out of the three of us, Finnick concocted a new interpretation on the spot, using the information she might’ve had. He’d based it on our pre-existing, widely known and therefore credible behavioral patterns: I used to give him everything he wished for and he is notorious as a chronic flirt. What’s more, none of those characteristics made either of us look good, which made the new version even more plausible. Thus he refocused Kalique on himself, shielding you.”

“I just… I still don’t understand why he would shield me,” Caine wonders in disbelief. “I thought High Consort was doing his duty, protecting your reputation.”

“Wise, I don’t think allowing Odair to have a bit on the side helps my reputation any,” the queen remarks bitterly. “Whether it’s you or Annie.”

“It’s better than the alternative.”

“The alternative?”

“Having Queen’s name connected to a splice.”

“Are we on the splice thing again?” Jupiter groans and rolls her eyes in a very unqueenly manner. “Caine, I told you, I don’t care about that.”

“You got extremely upset when Her Majesty Kalique mentioned me,” Caine insists. “And back when High Consort had implied the same thing, you’d gotten disconcerted, too. And very angry.”
“You caught that, huh?” She must admit Odair’s misinterpretation of her smeared make-up was particularly insulting. To suggest that she was making out with some guy while she was about to send her loved one to his death!..

Her former loved one.

Former, yes.

“You stress response had spiked so abruptly it was hard not to notice it,” Caine replies, sounding genuinely contrite – what for? For sniffing out her emotions? “Although not as much as it did today. I’m sorry I have compromised you.”

Aah, that’s what the contrition is for. She’d rather it was the former reason.

“You haven’t compromised me,” Jupiter huffs, annoyed. “If you want to know how to compromise a queen, you should take a few lessons from Finnick.”

“You were upset,” the lycantant insists stubbornly.

“Of course I was!” she snaps. “Do you think I want to have Kalique turn you into a scratching post for sharpening her claws?!”

“You mean... you got that distressed because you were worried about – me?!”

Well, duh.

Sometimes you’re not the sharpest tool in the box, buddy.

Keeping her uncomplimentary thoughts to herself, she merely nods.

“Why?!”

She isn’t sure if his astonishment is more insulting or sad.

“Loyalty is not a one-way street, Caine. I care about those who care about me. You kept me safe when no one else would. I will pay like for like.”

He makes another move towards her arm lying on the armrest, pauses, glancing at her questioningly, and tentatively takes her hand, cupping it in both of his.

“You owe me nothing, Your Majesty.”

Maybe it’s the low light, or the sleeping pill combined with the late hour that always makes her head feel heavy and a little tipsy, or the husky cadence of Caine’s voice, but the touch feels so electrifyingly intimate she wants to take her hand away.

She doesn’t.

“I’m sorry you got entangled in this,” she briefly squeezes his hand. “I tried to keep you out of it. I failed.”

He doesn’t respond straight away. The silence that stretches between them feels a lot like understanding.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Your Majesty,” he says eventually. “I can take care of myself.”
Why the blatant lie? By this point, she’s studied Caine well enough to recognize a fake front when she sees it. Is his put-on nonchalance supposed to comfort her – or himself? Caine isn’t stupid. He must realize that a splice can never ‘take care of himself’ when it comes to royals. Didn’t he tell her that himself that rainy night when they were sharing fears? If an Entitled really sets their mind to hurting someone like Caine, he won’t be able to do two shits in his defense. Unless an equally powerful figure stands in their way. But –

The male ego is such a fragile thing.

And Caine is, admittedly, a male.

She’ll have to handle this with care. No need to ram through his defenses in her attempt to protect him.

“As fearless as you are, Caine,” she says softly, “you are wise enough to understand that someone of Kalique’s calibre warrants certain caution.”

“I’m not afraid of her.” A pause. “At least, while you are on my side, Your Majesty.”

Her answering smile is bleak.

“As fearless as you are, Caine,” she says softly, “you are wise enough to understand that someone of Kalique’s calibre warrants certain caution.”

“I’m not afraid of her.” A pause. “At least, while you are on my side, Your Majesty.”

Her answering smile is bleak.

“Even I can’t fully protect you from Kalique,” Jupiter confesses with honesty that costs a lot to her. “I’ve slapped her on the wrist today, but I’m not prepared to start an on-going confrontation – for any reason.” She can’t afford to antagonize Secondary Heir. Or any other royal for that matter. Gods, she is so tired of all that allying bullshit, but one man in the field is no warrior, even if the man is a queen. “Kalique is one of the few allies I have so far. Or at least non-enemies. And royals… royals can be petty and vindictive sometimes. We are too used to getting what we want.” And never getting what would make us happy. “It’s easier if she thinks that you are not worth her while.”

“I can’t believe that Her Majesty thought I was worth her while in the first place… that I was your… um, your… that I was yours.”

“I was surprised she thought that, too,” Jupiter admits.

Why did Kalique decide you were important to me? Was she merely underinformed by her spies?

Jupiter glances at her hand in Caine’s, clasped in the dark room.

You can come to Queen’s quarters uninvited – at night – and be let in.

You can ask Queen questions and have them answered.

You can take Queen’s hand without asking first and not be immediately dismissed from the Guard.

Maybe Kalique’s assumption shouldn’t have been that surprising.

In the middle of the night, enveloped in the quiet semi-darkness – and with her hand cocooned in Caine’s warmth – Jupiter is struck with a chilling realization.

Caine is important to her.

More important than just a loyal guard.

So important that it is impossible to hide from anyone who knows what to look for.

More likely than not, today’s incident will not be an isolated one she can forget like a bad dream.
She’s known that this might happen, but to have it happening… The very thing Jupiter intended to protect Wise from is coming to pass and she cannot stop it, unless she casts him out of her life – the sooner, the better. He came here tonight worried that the queen might send him away and he was right to worry about it – he thought well ahead of her, having foreseen the probable consequences of today’s confrontation well before she has done.

*Wow, she’s dumb.*

*And here she thought it was Caine who’s not the sharpest tool.*

Her reasoning may be entirely different from what he believed it to be – Jupiter wants to protect him, not to flick a possible speck off her reputation – but the result will be the same nonetheless.

She should get rid of Caine for his own good.

Jupiter swallows. Her throat is dry.

She’s not prepared to part with him.

She’s just promised she wouldn’t.

She’ll break any promise if it keeps him safe.

What is she supposed to do? Let him stay close to her leaving him exposed to further insults – and gods know what else – or dispatch him against his will – and her own wishes – to some safe environment without intrigues and prejudice?

Shit.

*What is she supposed to do?!*

Caine gives Jupiter’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Your Majesty?..”

She starts, looking at him with wide eyes.

“If I may be allowed to make an observation, Your Majesty, you seem very stressed.” The lycantant sounds absolutely sure of what he’s saying; then again, in the small enough room he must sense her upset with doubtless clarity. “May I attempt to bring you some relief?”

She stares at him, lost for words.

He cannot be implying what she thinks he’s implying.

Firstly, *the audacity,* and secondly –

She asked him when she needed that – when she *misbelieved* she needed that – and he refused.

*Now he’s offering?..*

She slips her hand out of his grasp, sitting up straighter.

“How, exactly, are you going to achieve that, Officer Wise?” the queen inquires slowly, her voice stiff with suspicion.

He reels back and stills in an uncomfortable-looking tautness. She cannot see it in the semidarkness, but she’d bet anything his skin is turning vibrant red right now.
Yep, definitely didn’t imply that.

Gods, Finnick has ruined her for life: she sees innuendo at every turn.

“I didn’t mean, erm, High Consort’s methods,” Caine clarifies stutteringly. “That would be very wrong!”

“Indeed.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” he shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Please, forgive me if I offended you.”

“What were you offering, Caine?” she asks much softer.

“Um, it’s – it’s easier to show than to explain.” He stands up and offers her a hand in invitation. “If I may?..”

She nods and gets up, too, because he’s managed to arouse her curiosity.

Well, at least some part of her is still capable of being aroused.

Slowly circling around, he comes to stand behind her, so close she can feel his uniform brush against her robe with every breath he takes.

“May I have your permission to touch you, Your Majesty?”

“You have been touching me for a while now.”

“I’ll have to touch you more. I’d rather not do it without your explicit consent.”

This is getting more surreal by the minute.

“Be my gue... Wait.” She twists her entire spine to take a look at his face. “I don’t smell like Mother Nature is trying to dupe you into procreation anymore, do I?”

He chokes, then grins – a flash of gleaming white teeth – and shakes his head, “No, you don’t.”

“Good. Be my guest, then.”

Caine places one hand on her forehead, partly shadowing her vision, as the other palm comes to cover her solar plexus – where her stress pulsates like a physical wound – and she tenses as the side of his wrist pushes her breast slightly up.

“I’m sorry, with the height difference... My arms aren’t long enough to reach lower,” he explains haltingly.

“I am not putting on my high heels for your convenience, Officer Reach-For-a-Sparrow. My feet are tired as they are,” she responds. “You should consider growing longer arms.”

The lycantant snorts a laugh. “I’ll get on that, Your Majesty. This would work better if you had fewer layers here,” he adds in a serious tone, briefly pressing his hand onto her midriff. The overlapping front of her dressing gown does feel rather thick down there.

“First you want to touch me more, then you want me to disrobe. Are you sure this isn’t sex?” she grumbles, tugging at the knot of her belt that she tied too tightly in her nervous haste to meet him at the door.
Caine takes his hands away so she could see what she is doing.

“If it were sex, I’d be the one undoing your belt right now,” he replies confidently with a hint of a smile in his voice.

“So, you like to take the lead?” she asks distractedly, fully absorbed in her struggle with the stubborn knot. Sometimes she wishes she wore longer nails.

“No, I just enjoy unwrapping presents. I don’t get many of them, so I never miss the chance.”

“I don’t get to unwrap any of my gifts, despite the fact that Queen gets tons of them,” Jupiter complains. “The security scans, unpacks and analyzes every present for hazardous substances. Most of them I don’t even see, they are immediately sent to charities.”

“You mean, someone’s job is unwrapping presents?!?” the guard asks with outright awe in his voice.

“Don’t get too excited, Wise, I’m not letting you out of my escort team. Shit,” Jupiter mutters breathlessly, her fingers slipping off the sleek fabric. The edge of her nail catches on it and painfully rips off. She hisses as the ache reverberates along her finger. Nail injuries – even the tiniest ones – always hurt disproportionally badly: fingertips contain too many nerve endings for their own good.

A sudden relief comes from where she would’ve never expected.

Warmth, wetness and light, rhythmic pressure soothing the flare of pain…

*How has her finger found itself in Caine’s mouth?!*

The lycantant, crouched in front of her, looks equally shell-shocked – like he has no idea how his mouth has ended up around her finger either.

Instead of freaking out – what she logically ought to be doing in this instance – Jupiter stills in paradoxical serenity, relaxing her hand instead of yielding to the urge to jerk the digit out – those teeth are very sharp and if Caine instinctively clenches his jaws, he’ll bite the phalanx clean off. Compared to that, a torn nail would seem an ecstasy.

“You know, I was about to do just that,” she comments calmly. Her first reflex response was to suck the injured finger into her mouth, too. “Would you be so kind as to remove your face off my finger, please? I slightly mind the mouth not being mine.”

Caine hastily releases the trapped digit and scrambles back.

“Thank you.” She studies the ripped nail. “Was there blood?”

The lycantant gulps with visible effort. Rasps, “Um, no. Not yet, at least.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t know. You got hurt and I…” he trails off with a helpless shrug.

“You just acted. There was no thinking involved,” she finishes for him, recalling his explanation during the interrogation after his attack on Finnick.

He shrugs again, not making a move to stand. “I’m sorry, I…” It’s obvious he’s groping for an appropriate justification for his actions but can’t come up with any.

Jupiter decides to take pity on him – and herself. This night has been bizarre enough without diving
into the lycantant’s psyche.

“We’ll just add this to the list of things that never happened,” the queen announces decisively. “Now, cut the damn thing,” she orders, tugging at the belt.

Caine shifts closer but doesn’t get a knife out. “If I draw a blade this close to you, Your Majesty, the security system will go in the red alert mode and those guys out there will be here in seconds,” he explains, his voice still shaking a little. “Shall I do it regardless?”

She winces at the idea of being seen like this with Caine – particularly after Kalique’s innuendoes – by the entire escort team and the crew, as it would happen in the case of red alert.

“Probably not.”

Too much needless blanking.

“Here, let me…” He carefully takes the belt out of her hands and attempts to pry the tangled ends apart.

Another time, another man – her father? Uncle Stinger? She was smaller then, but so was the man – both a human and a bee splice would look smaller than a lycantant. Just like this, the man was squatting down in front of her, fixing her… dress? Coat? Shoe? She doesn’t remember the details. What she remembers, though, is the feeling of being loved and cared for.

She shakes the feeling off.

Her mind comes up with the weirdest associations sometimes.

Caine curses, fumbling with the belt, immediately apologizes and she smiles.

“You won’t be able to…” Jupiter starts.

Abruptly, he leans down and in one snap of his teeth, the stubborn strap of silk comes apart.

“…Or you can do that,” she finishes sarcastically.

Tilting his head to one side, he lycantant examines the belt, effectively bitten in two, sad torn threads drooping pathetically from the ends. He raises his apologetic eyes at her, “I’m sorry.”

Caine’s definitely more impulsive tonight than usual.

Must be nerves.

“Why? You’re very good at foreplay,” she remarks, attempting to ease the atmosphere. At his startled look, she elaborates, “You said it yourself: if you’re the one undoing my belt, it’s sex.”

The guard’s flabbergasted expression morphs into an impish grin.

“Someone seems determined to see this encounter in an erotic light. Now, I know I’m a tempting specimen, but do get a hold of yourself, Your Majesty,” he mock-scolds with exaggerated primness, batting his eyes at her, and she laughs out loud.

Out of all the facets of Caine’s personality, she loves the playful one the most.

He rises to his feet and comes to stand behind Jupiter once again. Releasing the front of her robe, she lets it fall open, revealing the thin nightgown underneath.
This time when his hand slides over her midsection, she is completely relaxed. Through the thin fabric, she can clearly feel the heat radiating off his skin and does not regret the ruined robe one single bit. The palm pushes slightly, gently urging her to lean back onto him.

She rests her head against his sternum. “What are we supposed to do next?” she mumbles, closing her eyes.

“Nothing. Just relax.”

His hand is so warm against her ribs – not really pressure, merely grounding weight. After few short moments of hesitation, she melts into his warmth. His slow, steady, calming breaths rock her body with every inhale like gentle sea waves. She adjusts her own, sped up ones, to match his calming rhythm. Following her slacking muscles and winding down lungs, her heart slows its beat, too. She feels Caine’s solid presence with more than just her skin. It’s the tactile embodiment of the ‘I have your back’ reassurance.

The feeling that she lost the moment she stopped trusting Finnick.

When her mind goes to her consort, her stomach muscles contract abruptly as though in the anticipation of a gut punch. Her breathing stutters. Her mind jumps from ‘How could he?’ to ‘What the hell am I doing?’ to ‘Why another guy is cleaning up his shit?’ to ‘How could I be so stupid to let Finn do it to me in the first place?’ Although it’s not so painful to think such thoughts with the grounding weight of Caine’s hand on her sternum, but it still hurts.

“Shhh,” Caine soothes, readjusting his palm on her chest. Somehow having it pressing down on her ribcage helps her breathe easier. “Stop thinking,” the lycantant urges in a soft whisper. “Please.”

Well, if Caine is here to clean other people’s shit – including her own – he deserves all the cooperation she can give him.

She ruthlessly stamps down on her memories, trying to clear her mind as much as possible, concentrating on the warm, steady hands on her body, hands that belong to another but nonetheless feel like a part of her. Bit by bit, her brain gives up its frantic attempts to analyze and control the situation – reluctantly so: more than anything, the brain loves controlling its environment – finally coming to terms with the realization that it’s not going to get endangered or hurt any time soon, that processing the past blows in order to prepare to the ones to come is not needed at the moment.

Of course, there are a lot of potentially distressing circumstances and hurtful people out there, but right here, right now her world consists of only two persons, neither of whom means her any harm. Her ruffled, scampering mind slows its pace as all emotions leave her body. Calm washes over her, flowing through her blood vessels, trickling down her spinal cord, percolating her tissues with the unhurried viscosity of honey. Her limbs grow warm and heavy and limp, she feels like she couldn’t move a finger if she tried.

Detachedly, she thinks that it reminds her of subspace, only no one is dominating her.

Her lips smile weakly. Her mind and its bizarre associations!..

This would feel so much better if they were lying down, though. She’s so relaxed her knees are going weak. It’s not likely her guest would volunteer that much, it was a risk enough for Caine to show up here uninvited and offer what he did. Jupiter does not feel like she has a right to ask it of him either. Where is that line between accepting a favour and taking advantage of the person who’s volunteering it?
Reluctantly, she steps away. The moment she moves, Caine’s hands fall away, letting her go without any resistance.

“It works too well,” she admits. “I, um, have a problem standing up?..” Somehow that comes out as a question while she intended it to be a statement.

“Well, a horizontal position is preferable,” he agrees easily.

She glances up at him, unsure.

“You could command it, Your Majesty. It would be lèse-majesté if I offered it,” he remarks quietly.

“You think maybe we could?..”

Caine immediately moves, mercifully not waiting for her to finish her half-baked request, already lying down.

*On the floor.*

“What are you?.. Why not the?..” she gestures down, stunned, then in the direction of her bedroom.

“When I came here, you said you didn’t want me on your bed,” he responds in a careful, guarded tone. “Unless, of course, you’ve changed your mind and now do want me there?”

She gets an odd feeling that she’s being tested somehow.

Is she supposed to insist like she did back on Havet? The floor cannot be comfortable.

For that, she’ll have to actually order Caine not into a bed, but into her bed – and not for his benefit, but her own.

Hell, no, she’s not doing that, no matter how innocent the purpose.

The floor it is, then.

“You make me do the weirdest things,” she grumbles as she lowers herself onto Caine, trying to maintain as much dignity as possible – which is not much – and make herself comfortable without squirming on the guy’s groin. There is no need to make this any more awkward than it already is.

Hmm, it’s strange to look at her room while lying on the floor; to look at it while lying on a lycantant lying on the floor is even stranger.

Ugh, Caine has really uneven terrain.

And where is she supposed to put her hands?

“So, here I am,” she announces as soon as she decides that the position is not going to get any more comfortable. “Are you squashed yet?”

There is a jolt beneath her that feels a lot like a laugh. “Don’t hold your breath.”

She wait for Caine’s hands to return to her midsection and forehead.

They do not come.

“Where are your hands, you slacker?”
“I, uh, I cannot reach your midriff from the side like this – it’s even lower than it was before. I’ll have to… from the up front.” Now his voice is blushing.

“Do what you have to, I don’t care,” she mutters, closing her eyes, impatient to return to the mindless trance. “By the way, add this to the list. This obviously isn’t happening.”

“Of course, Your Majesty, it isn’t,” Caine responds dutifully as his palm slides down the thin cotton along her breastbone and settles over the solar plexus. “I’m not even in this room right now.”

In this position, Caine’s wrist is resting on the inner side of one of her breasts as his thumb skirts the outline of the other. The sensation takes some mental adjustment before she relaxes into him again, and oh yes, this feels much better than standing up. The arrangement would be more comfortable, though, if he didn’t have his armoured uniform on with so many hard things in so many inconvenient places, – what the hell is that shit digging into her butt? – but there’s no way she’s asking him to take it off. This feels way too intimate with both of them fully dressed; if either of them wasn’t, they would be slipping into sheer embarrassment territory, which would render the whole interaction moot. Jupiter’s almost gone back into the blissful state of safe half-consciousness when her mind flashes the memory of Kiza’s lycantant mating ritual. It piques her curiosity – and keeps piquing it until she feels like physically squirming, which isn’t a good idea considering the position she is in. She wants an answer – very much against her better judgment.

“Caine?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m gonna ask a stupid question. Don’t laugh.”

“I’ll do my best not to.”

“This isn’t a lycantant mating ritual by any chance, is it?”

Caine coughs a loud snort and her uneven mattress of lycantant flesh covered in the rather uncomfortable bedding of the Guard uniform starts shaking violently. She could fall off if he wasn’t tightly clutching her to him.

“You promised not to laugh!” she protests perfunctorily, not really hurt by his reaction: it was a ludicrous question. Besides, Caine’s laughter is a beautiful thing, even if he’s laughing at her.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, I… I can’t… can’t stop.” The bedquake continues, accompanied by fitful wheezing. A few choked grunts and convulsive gasps later Caine makes a valiant attempt to answer her query. “I can… I can assure you, though,” he squeezes breathlessly, “that it has nothing to do with lycantant mating rituals. None whatsoever.” And he dissolves into another fit of laughter.

She waits until his mirth subsides before asking the next question.

“What is it, then?”

“It has no name.” He takes a long deep breath and starts speaking in his normal collected, serious manner that sounds jarring after the hysterics he’s just had. “It’s just something that helps you calm down.”

“Where did you learn how to do this?”
"I came up with it on my own, Your Majesty. You see, in the Deadlands, you’re always alone, unless you want someone to slit your throat in your sleep. At times it becomes too much and panic gets the better of you. You feel like you can’t cope, like you don’t stand a single chance of surviving. When such things happen, this helps."

"If you were there alone, who was doing this for you?"

"I did it myself," he answers quietly and the sheer loneliness of that statement is overwhelming. Something contorts in Jupiter’s chest right under Caine’s palm at the thought of having no one – no one at all – to help you in your hour of despair. She has Kiza and Stinger, Royal Physician – the new one – and an army of therapists she could employ. After today’s incident with Kalique, she’s pretty sure that she still even has Finnick, who might have betrayed her yet still remains reliable, no matter how paradoxical that sounds.

"You can do it yourself, too, Your Majesty," Caine continues. "Although you don’t have to. If you wish, you can call for me at any time, and I will help you. You’re always so upset lately. I want to help, but I can’t unless you let me. Please, let me. There’s nothing wrong with asking for help when you really need it."

"How do I know that I really need help, though?" Jupiter asks bitterly – more of a musing than a real question. She should be more self-sufficient, should be able to shoulder her heartbreak on her own. It’s not like she has any real problems: she has a roof over her head, food to eat and clothes to wear, she’s healthy as a horse and everyone she loves are still breathing. A failed romance is nothing earth-shattering, for fuck’s sake!

She shouldn’t be this weak.

She hates herself for being this weak.

Now that Caine has shown her this technique, she ought to be able to do it on her own. It’s not at all complicated: one hand here, another hand there, breathe slowly and clear your mind.

Yet she isn’t sure if the method would work without Caine’s steady heartbeat, without the soft, undulating roll of his belly, without his quiet, placid, husky voice – without the general Caineiety of his.

"You employ a chef to cook food in your alcazar," Caine remarks suddenly, apropos of nothing. "I have an entire battalion of chefs and cooks and kitchen maids," Jupiter replies, confused by the unexpected change of the topic.

"But you are capable of cooking and feeding yourself. I saw you do it on Havet. Is nourishing your body any different from nourishing your mind? Why do you so easily accept help with that and not with this?" he briefly presses her closer against him.

‘Because this makes me feel so vulnerable it’s terrifying,’ she does not say. ‘Because I can’t afford to trust.’

"You don’t really think I’ll slit your throat in your sleep?" Caine asks. Apparently, her trust issues are glaringly obvious. "You know that physically I would never hurt you, don’t you?"

"I do," she replies without a slightest hesitation. After Havet, if she had to pick one person to be responsible for her physical well-being, it would be Caine. From what she’s seen so far, lycantants make outstanding mother hens.
“Then summon me, if you feel upset or stressed again. I’ll do whatever I can to ease you out of it.”

She feels like she should decline the offer, no matter how kind it is.

If she accepts Caine’s help, she’ll be admitting her defeat, showing that his Queen is useless at fighting her own battles.

Besides, Caine already gives her almost every waking hour of his, it would be unpardonably greedy to ask for more. The guy must have a life outside of his service.

Not to mention the rumours that will explode if he starts spending hours in her private chambers. No matter how hard she may try, she won’t be able to keep his regular nighttime visits under wraps. Kalique already took a dig at him and if Jupiter continues like this, there will be plenty more to come.

“You shouldn’t be seen visiting me, Caine. It won’t do you any favours,” Jupiter voices her concerns. “You shouldn’t have come here tonight.”

First thing upon their arrival, she’ll instruct Stinger to blank any witnesses and clean up the security records of Caine’s visit tomorrow. Commander Apini will be overjoyed by tonight’s development.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I thought… I thought I might not get another chance to speak to you after we arrived at the alcazar and… I panicked. I’m sorry,” the lycantant apologizes again.

She’s tired of hearing his apologies.

“Don’t be. Despite the complications, I’m glad you’re here. Your nameless thing is helping.”

“Then let me keep helping you. I want to. Really.”

Jupiter is not too proud to admit she has a problem she’s been failing cope with. Her melancholy, anxiety and insomnia have been getting progressively worse. And now, she has someone who wants to help – and can help, like he’s just demonstrated: it’s been a while since the last time she felt this safe and serene.

Back in the Deadlands, Caine didn’t have such a luxury. He made it work on his own simply because he didn’t have any other choice.

She, however, does.

There is no use to hide from him or pretend to be something she isn’t. What’s the point? He’s seen her at her worst, he already knows how weak she can be.

And she is useless at fighting her own battles – at least, right now she is.

It will be stupid to let her pride and fears overpower her good sense and refuse Caine’s generosity in helping her feel better, even if that means she’ll be admitting to a weakness. Out of all the people she expects to take advantage of her weaknesses – which is all people – he isn’t one of them.

And still…

Gods, why is surrender so fucking hard?!

“Thank you, Caine. I will ask for your help when I need it,” she promises firmly, shutting a decisive lid on her inner struggle.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”
“What are you thanking me for? You’re the one doing something for me.”

“I’m not the only one here doing something for the other, am I? I don’t know what you said to Chris, but it looks like I’ve got myself a fan. He thinks I am some secret hero.”

Uh-oh. Nope, not going there. She doesn’t want his gratitude.

She wants him to be happy.

“You are a hero,” she responds firmly. “Although not so secret. The entire nation had a chance to witness your investiture ceremony. I’m sure you have a lot more fans than one.”

Caine hums, neither dismissing her statement nor agreeing with it. “Stinger said we’d soon be seeing a couple of faces from our common past,” he says instead. “Commander’s sudden nostalgia raises some suspicions. You don’t happen to know why he decided to seek out our old friends, do you?”

“Wise, are you implying I had a hand in that? I assure you, Queen has more important matters to deal with.”

“Not one single lie in that sentence,” he remarks and the smile in his voice is so obvious she sees it behind her closed eyelids.

“I’m learning.” Her lips pull up. “You’ll have to teach me how to lie so that even a lycantant couldn’t crack me.”

“Will be happy to be of assistance. Some other night, perhaps?”

“Some other night. Speaking of Stinger. If tomorrow he asks you what you were doing here tonight – and he will, because I’ll have to ask him to blank everyone who might have seen you visiting me in my quarters at an improper hour – tell him I asked you to come over to instruct you about the incident at Kalique’s. Otherwise he’ll have your, um, head handed to you for turning up here uninvited.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. And now, Jupiter, would you stop worrying about me and relax already? It’s the single purpose of this whole thing.”

“Nah, you just found a pretext to feel me up,” she grumbles without thinking.

An awkward pause – Jupiter begins to tense preparing to hear his embarrassed apologies – again – and start explaining it was just a joke that’s fallen flat –

And then –

“Why, did you expect anything else out of the lycantant mating ritual, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, gods, you are a second Kiza,” she almost sobs in a weird mixture of relief and mortification, slapping his leg with a theatrical groan. “I hate you.”

“Lie.”

Her smile is the last thing she remembers.

Jupiter wakes up in her bed alone, well-rested and content, with the blanket tucked carefully around her, to realize that for the first time in many weeks she fell asleep without having to endure a long
daunting struggle with insomnia.

Thank you, Caine.

She still doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do to keep Caine safe from the court intrigues, but she knows one thing: unless he asks her, she’ll never let him go.

She’ll keep him close.

No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is a lyric from *Something New* by Tanita Tikaram.

“You become responsible – forever – for those you have tamed.” Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

“…Fame and fortune and everything that goes with it” is a line from *We Are the Champions* by Queen

What Caine performs on Jupiter here is a self-help anti-anxiety exercise. It works both with or without a partner.

*If you’re interested in BDSM, please, don’t learn about the practice from Fifty Shades of Grey! Not only that erotic ‘masterpiece’ rips off Twilight and ruins the great character of Jacob Black, it distorts the very foundation such relationships are based on, spreading the idea that it’s okay – and even desirable – to be abused by your domineering male partner among girls and women like a hazardous virus. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying pain and/or submission in your sex life – as long as it’s your conscious decision and you enjoy it. If either process or the end result evokes internal protest or regret, you’re dealing with abuse. Run! Abusers do not change ‘by the power of love’.*

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