Rise

by VR_Trakowski

Summary

If the choice is fly or fall, you spread your wings.

Notes

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Okay, so I wasn't expecting the muse to fall in love with another fandom, and certainly not this hard. But she did, and so I've spent the last two weeks writing almost at NaNo speed. Which isn't to say it's not fun, just kind of hard on the sleep schedule.

This story begins right after the refinery collapse, before the end of the film. Cincoflex is my never-failing mainstay and beta, and I'm especially grateful for her patience this round since this isn't a fandom she really shares. She also made the gorgeous banner!

Production notes on some chapters can be found on my LiveJournal.
Chapter 1

She was exhausted.

Jupiter ached all over after the last week, or however long it had been--she wasn’t even sure, what with all the unconsciousness and the space portals and who knew what else. She’d nearly had her arms pulled from their sockets and her hair from its roots; she’d fallen further than she could run, on more than one occasion; she’d been slapped, beaten, and half-strangled. And she was desperately worried about her--whatever the hell Caine even was, who’d had most of the same happen to him before someone tried to chew his arm off, and he’d been almost explosively decompressed. Twice.

But she had to admit, the view was great.

Space spread out in front of her like--well, like space, and it would probably give her vertigo except for Earth front and center, all white and blue and green and beautiful. The planet (her planet, really??) actually glowed, which was not something that showed up in all those NASA photos.

“Jupiter, how lovely.” The sweet voice made her want to snarl a little, but Jupiter kept a firm hold on her temper, which was Russian, no matter what weird little guys with white hair said. “You’ve had quite the time.”

Jupiter turned. The view on the inside was ornately impressive too; Kalique had agreed to meet with her, but on her own ship, with the air of someone to whom “no” was a word for other people. And Jupiter was too tired, and too worried, to argue about it.

Besides, Kalique’s ship was overshadowed--no mean trick--by an even larger Aegis battleship. It seemed the Aegis was more than a little pissed about the Abrasax family trying to kill off its Recurrence, and had determined that there would be no more mistakes. There were Aegis officers posted in the big room, too, standing by the walls with impassive faces (snouts, some of them--that was going to take some getting used to), but Kalique ignored them as if they were part of the furniture.

Maybe they were, to her.

Jupiter managed a polite smile. “Thanks for agreeing to meet me.”

“But where’s that handsome Splice of yours?” Kalique said, still with the little smile that seemed to be her default expression.

“He has, um, other duties.” Which was what Stinger had coached her to say. Jupiter certainly wasn’t going to admit “in sickbay, under loud protest.”

“What a pity.” Another gesture, and an owlish man--obviously a Splice--and two of those uncanny-valley android-women came in the door. The women held trays; the owl-man merely bowed with a
murmur of “Your Majesty,” and stationed himself near the head of Kalique’s couch.

“Something to drink?” Jupiter’s hostess continued, as a tray was presented to each of them. Kalique took the single glass from her own and raised it in a delicate toast; her eyes were actually twinkling, and Jupiter was torn between annoyance at the condescension and a sneaking admiration at the chutzpah. “I assure you, it’s not poisoned.”

*You don’t have to actually drink it,* Jupiter reminded herself, and took the glass with a stiff nod, equally divided between the android-lady and Kalique herself. The two servitors slipped out of the room without a word, and as the doors parted for them, another person stepped inside, and Jupiter let out a covert breath of relief. Captain Tsing, sharp in what Jupiter guessed was dress uniform, came to stand opposite the owl-man and bowed her head to each woman in turn. “Your Majesty; Lady Kalique.”

Kalique’s smile deepened. “You have a gift for winning champions, that’s clear, my dear. A convicted Splice, a disgraced Legionnaire, the Aegis--I hardly dare guess who’s next.”

Jupiter glanced at the Captain, whose expression was as politely blank as the owl-man’s, and decided not to touch that. It wasn’t what she was here for, anyway. She took another breath, and wished that Caine was there. “Kalique, I--why the hell is everyone calling me a queen? Shouldn’t you have inherited that?”

Wait-- That wasn’t what she’d meant to say, and she felt her face heating, but Kalique didn’t seem insulted (though who could tell with these people?). She merely cocked her head. “It’s a complicated legal designation, really. Mother was head of House Abrasax, the last of her generation. We, her heirs--” Her free hand circled vaguely. “--take lesser titles until only one of us remains. Or unless Mother is...reborn.” Her gesture widened to include Jupiter.

Jupiter pinched her eyes shut briefly, and told her looming headache that she just didn’t have time for it right now. “Okay. I see.” *I think.* “Do you mind?”

Kalique laughed her bright little chuckle, and Jupiter wondered idly if she was capable of frowning. *Maybe she orders people’s heads removed with the same smile.* “Oh, no. I wasn’t expecting to inherit that title for several millennia yet. Besides...things have changed lately.”

“Um, yeah.” Jupiter felt an abrupt chill. “I’m...sorry about your brother.”

The smile finally vanished. Kalique held out her glass, and the owl-man was there to take it from her. “Why? Did you kill him?”

Kalique laughed her bright little chuckle, and Jupiter wondered idly if she was capable of frowning. *Maybe she orders people’s heads removed with the same smile.* “Oh, no. I wasn’t expecting to inherit that title for several millennia yet. Besides...things have changed lately.”

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*Fire and noise beyond belief and acrid gas and a madman screaming at her feet--* “Um. No, actually.”

Kalique shrugged delicately. “What a pity,” she said again. Jupiter blinked, and Kalique met her eyes. “I loved my brother, Jupiter, but he was as dangerous as a feral Splice. And quite insane.”

“And with him gone,” Jupiter said with sudden insight, “you and Titus gain control of his--stuff.”

Kalique leaned back a little, chuckling once more. “You learn quickly! Yes, Balem had no heirs; he expected to live forever, you know. But count yourself among that number; his estate will pass to *all* the closest relatives.” Her smile was conspiratorial. “And if Titus is convicted--well. Forfeiture of assets is often a penalty for erring Entitled.”
And I thought my family was screwed up. “So it all goes back to the state?”

It was Kalique’s turn to look puzzled, though Jupiter suspected it was an act. “The...state? Oh. Oh, no, my dear. His assets would be divided amongst his nearest relations, which are again...you and I.” She stroked her complicated necklace absently. “I really should thank you. Within a few days you’ve completely upset our dynasty, and mostly in my favor.”

“Yeah, well, they shouldn’t have messed with me.” The words were mostly bravado, but she had to start somewhere. “That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about.” Jupiter glanced over at Captain Tsing, who was listening with calm attention; her glance back was reassuring.

“Oh? How intriguing.” Kalique sat up a little, and Jupiter thought that maybe she really was interested.

“I’m gonna assume that bureaucracy is pretty much the same everywhere,” Jupiter began carefully, repressing a shudder at the memory of Orus’ endless maze of frustration. The only thing missing was the smell of stale coffee. “Which means that settling all these estates is going to take time.”

“Yes, indeed.” Kalique shook her head. “Why, Titus himself won’t come to trial for months. But when one lives as long as we do...” Her gesture seemed to brush off such small considerations as “months”.

Jupiter bit her tongue on what she thought of all that. She was here for diplomacy, not puking on Kalique’s delicate little shoes in revulsion. “Yeah. Here’s the thing. It’s going to take me months to get a handle on all this.” Months, years, whatever. “And I need to go home for a while. See my family. You know.”

“Oh, certainly.” Kalique tapped her bracelet absently, and the door swished open for a servitor with another glass. “Do go on.”

Jupiter chose her words as carefully as she could, feeling hopelessly outmatched against this ancient...relation? Who watched her with such cool, amused curiosity. “I’ll be honest with you.” Mostly. “I don’t really trust any of you, but you’re the only Abrasax who hasn’t tried to kill me.”

So far, anyway.

“And you wish to form an alliance?” Kalique actually sat up, taking the glass without even looking. “Jupiter, we’re family. Abrasax scions may feud with one another, but we stand together against all others.”

“So I can trust you to, um, guard my interests for a little while?”

Kalique’s smile got wider. “Well. For a consideration, perhaps.” At Jupiter’s look of alarm, she chuckled again. “Monetary only, my dear. Or perhaps a small favor in the future.”

Jupiter still wasn’t sure about that, but it wasn’t like she had a lot of options just at the moment. Kalique swung her feet gracefully to the floor and took another swallow; Jupiter tried not to clutch her own glass too tightly. The drink smelled like apricots, mostly, and there was no way in hell she was going to taste it.

“Jupiter.” Kalique’s expression turned grave. “I feel I should be honest with you as well. You are--
how old are you?"

“Uh, twenty-two,” Jupiter managed, startled.

“Twenty-two? I don’t even remember much before my five-hundreds,” Kalique mused; Jupiter felt a chill move up her spine.

What would it be like to live so long that parts of your life started to disappear? How could it even be worth it?

“Well. You’re young, you’ve just inherited more power and wealth than your imagination can conceive. You’ve cut a swath through your enemies, leaving them defeated or dead in your wake. You have beauty, determination, and a certain crude charm. And Recurrences are very rare. Entitled society will be positively riveted.” She smiled again, wide and amused. “Of course I’ll help you.”

Jupiter blinked again, trying not to be annoyed at the crude part. “I, uh--you will?”

“Oh, yes.” Kalique laughed out loud. “Darling girl, I can’t wait to watch the fun!”

Somehow, Jupiter didn’t think that was a compliment.

Kalique rose. “I’ll leave you in Mr. Malidictes’ capable hands, then.” Jupiter pushed to her feet as Kalique came over; she half-expected one of those stupid air-kisses that Katharine’s friends used, but Kalique only reached out to touch a strand of Jupiter’s hair.

“So young,” she said wonderingly. “So very young and innocent.” Her eyes crinkled. “Oh, this will be fun.”

And with that she wafted out, trailing skirts and a languid wave in Jupiter’s direction. Malidictes bowed to her retreating back, but Captain Tsing merely shifted her gaze directly to Jupiter. “How are you holding up, your Majesty?” she murmured.

Jupiter opened her mouth, then hesitated. If I tell the truth, I’m going to start bawling. “I can do this all day,” she lied instead.

Tsing was almost as good at subtle expressions as Caine; the lift of her brow combined amusement and sympathy quite well. “Shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“Your Majesty.” Malidictes bowed to Jupiter in turn. “My lady anticipated your request and had me bring a tally of your holdings. Shall we begin?”

Jupiter thought about standing through it, decided her knees were going to walk out without her if she did, and sat--a little abruptly to judge by the flicker of surprise on the majordomo’s face. But he covered it smoothly, and simply stood by her side, passing her sheave after sheave of information regarding bank accounts, starships, employees, factories, stocks, holdings, and real estate--including enough planets to populate a season of Star Trek, Jupiter thought. The array would have been dizzying if she’d been fed up and slept in; as it was, it quickly blurred into a stream of weird names and meaningless facts.

But however it had landed in Jupiter’s lap, it was hers, for better or for worse. At the back of it all was the thought of all those other worlds, with populations ripening towards their peak; much as she
wanted to dump the whole mess and go home (except for Caine, her mind whispered), she couldn’t turn her back on them.

*It’s not just Earth. It was never just Earth, not really.*

When Malidictes finally finished, he fell silent, waiting attentively for her word. Jupiter rubbed her forehead—the headache had gone from theoretical to thumping—and struggled to keep it simple.

“I want a holding pattern,” she decreed at last. “Pay everyone like usual; everything can just keep going as it is, maintenance and supply and all that. For now.” Malidictes nodded. “But no Harvests.”

The majordomo didn’t exactly frown, his face wasn’t built for it, but he radiated disapproval. “Your Majesty?”

She gave him a steely look. “I don’t care when they’re coming up. No Harvests—“ She swallowed bile. “—until I give the okay.”

“Yes, your Majesty.” He cocked his head, a very birdlike move, and glanced at Jupiter’s sloppy pile of sheaves. “I don’t believe there are any scheduled this decade, but I will make certain that your orders are followed most precisely.”

“You do that.” She swallowed again, wishing suddenly for plain water but not wanting to ask for it, not here on this ship that seemed so alien even though her species had designed it. "Oh--about the money--"

"My apologies, your Majesty, I should have begun with that." Malidictes produced one last sheave. "If you will seal this, we will begin procedures to set up accounts for you on Earth. You can order refinements as you require them."

"Great." Jupiter squinted at it, realized that she really had no idea what it said, and couldn’t muster the energy to care. *If they want to steal stuff, there’re easier ways.* She pressed her wrist to the corresponding mark, some part of her still slightly enchanted by the whole painless-tattoo-as-e-sig thing, and the sheave chimed complacently. "How long will it take?"

"Approximately thirty of Earth's minutes," Malidictes said with equal complacence. "Everything should be in readiness by the time you touch down."

Jupiter blinked. *So what happened to that endless bureaucracy?*

The majordomo seemed to guess her thought as he took the sheave back. "We are very efficient when dealing with primitive systems, your Majesty," he said, with apparently no fear that she might be insulted.

She was too tired to take offense anyway. "Right," Jupiter sighed, and pushed to her feet. Before she could bend to gather the sheaves, one of the Aegis was there to do it for her, stacking them neatly and carrying them away.

She ought to thank Malidictes, Jupiter thought, but she just didn’t have the energy. Fortunately he didn’t seem to expect it, merely waiting politely until Captain Tsing spoke up.

“That will be all, I think,” she said. “We’ll escort her Majesty home, and you can wait for further
instructions.”

“Of course,” the majordomo said, and turned to lead them out. He murmured quiet compliments the entire way, and Jupiter nodded absently, so exhausted she could barely walk a straight line. The Aegis troops followed in a sort of honor guard, with Captain Tsing pacing Jupiter, and she tried to keep her head up and look royal—whatever the hell that looked like, anyway. *Almost done...*

“Your Majesty.” Captain Tsing put a hand under her elbow as Malidictes bowed and one of the Aegis opened the airlock. “Allow me.”

“Sure,” Jupiter muttered, and let herself be guided over the threshold and into the Aegis cruiser.

As soon as the airlock shut, Tsing raised her voice. “The Queen is secure! Decouple and let’s go.” She supported Jupiter towards the nearest seat as the cruiser hummed to life. “Are you all right?”

Jupiter didn’t get a chance to reply; a blur of movement resolved into Caine, looming over her anxiously. He was clean of blood and in fresh clothes, but he looked almost as strung out as she felt. *“Jupiter.”*

"Uhh,” she said, and kind of fell over into him.

She barely noticed Captain Tsing withdrawing towards the bridge. Jupiter tried to put her arms around Caine, but before she could stop him he had swept her up in a carry that was by now wonderfully familiar.

“Your shoulder--“ she protested, but he made one of those low growly sounds.

“It’s fine. Healed.” He moved swiftly down the corridor, and Jupiter decided not to argue. Besides, he felt *really* damn good.

She was only just awake enough to sense being laid down on something soft. When the gentle hands withdrew, she mumbled protest, but they returned to pull a blanket up over her.

She was asleep before the edges were tucked in.

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He watched her sleep.

It was hardly the first time. Twelve hours he’d stayed by her, back on her Earth, waiting for her system to recover from all the shocks she’d received so far. He’d smelled the havoc the artificial hormones were playing with her endocrine system, the sour tang of residual panic, the dry ache of near-suffocation, but as the hours had crept past they had smoothed out from faint to honest sleep. It was always different, going from the trace of a genetic pattern to the full and complex scent of a living being, but there was something different about this one. Her smell seemed to lock into his nerves, bit by bit, *matching* somehow in a process he couldn’t explain.

Now he guarded not a simple, unknown tercie quarry, but an acknowledged Recurrence and a Queen. An Entitled, who was as far above him as the stars themselves, and whose future could be a near-eternity of pleasure and power, if she so chose.

A woman who’d challenged him, trusted him, and kissed his brains nearly to mush; who had clung
to him when he’d tried to lay her down in the bunk, too exhausted to open her eyes but still wanting him close.

The contradiction was dizzying. All good sense told him to back away as quickly as possible; to an Entitled, a Splice was basically nothing more than an intelligent animal. Jupiter didn’t realize now what an aberration their connection was—and when she did—

But he couldn’t make himself let go of her hand.
Chapter 2

It was sunset, and from the way the house was lit up, Jupiter knew that the entire family was home. She'd kind of expected that, she'd been gone long enough that everyone would be worried about her, but it would make for a whole lot of drama.

At this point, I don't really care.

She glanced over at Captain Tsing. With her uniform tunic missing, the captain's outfit was close enough to Earth business attire to pass, and she'd done something - Jupiter had missed exactly what - that made her facial implants disappear, or at least seem to. Two other Aegis officers in similar mufti were already taking up stations along the front walk.

"Are you ready for this?" Jupiter asked as they climbed the steps. "It's gonna be noisy."

Captain Tsing smiled a little. "In my experience, your Majesty, many sins can be forgiven by the fact of coming home alive."

"It's not my sins I'm worried about," Jupiter muttered, and unlocked the door. She could hear the raised voices already.

Everyone was gathered around the dining-room table, some of them on their feet and most of them shouting. In the three seconds it took them to notice her, Jupiter made out several different arguments concerning her disappearance, the "gas leak" that had made them all lose consciousness the day before (and bless the Aegis for coming up with that explanation), whether the house was safe to stay in, and whether they'd been rescued by angels or if that was purely Lyudmila's imagination.

Home. She felt the smile spreading and didn't try to keep it back.

Then Nino saw her at the door, and the shouting really began.

Captain Tsing had courage under fire; she didn't retreat as the family descended on them. Aleksa reached them first, and Jupiter's throat swelled as she returned her mother's hard embrace. "My baby, my baby, where have you been?" Aleksa exclaimed, and Jupiter didn't even try to answer; she just hung on tight, the memory of hovering knives and needles still too close and fresh.

Everyone was talking at once, crowding around them, babbling in joy and outrage, and Vassily was trying to shout them all down without success. Jupiter glanced back at Captain Tsing and saw her straighten her shoulders, and then a sharp whistle cut through the noise.
Silence fell, heads swiveled. Captain Tsing nodded formally. "Good evening, everyone."

Vassily bulled to the front. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Tsing gave him a formal nod. "My name is Captain Diomika Tsing. I'm here to escort Miss Jones back to her home."

Jupiter turned in the circle of her mother's arms, swiping quickly at her face. "Cousin, she's with the police." Which was...true, for a certain expanded definition of police.

This produced another explosion of shouting. Captain Tsing rode it out, then continued. "Miss Jones witnessed a shooting and we had to take her into protective custody. Unfortunately we were unable to allow her to contact you until the situation was under control."

Which was also true. More or less.

Jupiter was snatched from Aleksa's arms by Nino, who was muttering about curses. Vassily calmed a little. "She's not under arrest?"

"No sir. She never was," Captain Tsing said patiently. Jupiter had coached her ahead of time, and she was a good actor. "The situation has been resolved. Miss Jones may need to testify at some point in the future, but that hasn't been determined."

Which it wouldn't, of course, but - "Please don't press her about her experience," Tsing added firmly. "She's been requested not to speak of it."

Like that'll last. But it would give her an excuse.

It took a lot more talk, many more hugs, and some suspicion, but eventually things settled down. Captain Tsing was showered with thanks and hustled out, and Jupiter was put promptly to bed with tea. It took almost an hour before various family members stopped tiptoeing down the stairs to make sure she was all right.

It felt like a dream down there in the dark, and Jupiter curled under her comforter, alternately covering and revealing the sigil on her wrist. With it hidden, she could almost believe in that story, that the wild terror and frustration and confusion and moments of brilliant joy had all been a dream.

When it shone softly in her pocket of darkness, she seemed to see a thousand tiny planets orbiting outside those rings of light, little sparks of life that she had to protect. She still heard Titus' smooth voice and Balem's scream of rage.

And she felt Caine's arms around her, his grip on her wrist (not letting her go, never letting her fall), the last kiss - hard and a little desperate - before parting.

"Jupiter?"

She hastily pulled down her sleeve and flipped back the comforter's edge. "Mama."

Her mother, rangy and tough and alive. Jupiter bit back a surge of tears as Aleksa sat down on the edge of the bed and smoothed back her daughter's hair. "Are you all right, my baby?" she asked quietly.

Slowly, Jupiter shook her head, and her mother gathered her into her lap while she cried, rocking her and singing soft old lullabies.
She stayed in bed for a day - there was a certain novelty in being waited on hand and foot by family - but by midmorning on the second day she was climbing the stairs to make her own tea and try not to trip over Vladie's Roomba.

It was nice to have time to herself to surf the Internet, paint her toenails, read - all the things that usually fell by the wayside - and while Jupiter knew she would soon have to bully her way back to work, she was willing to take the breather for a little while. The cramped space, the little rituals and spats and caresses - they were all newly significant. None of her family remembered what had happened, but Jupiter woke every night from dreams where she just couldn't get through that fucking light-up floor, and Dragon-guy fed her family to Balem's refinery one by one by one...

Lost sleep or not, by the end of the week she was ready to climb the walls. Not having Skyjacker boots to do it with, she settled for telling her guardians she was going for a walk. It worked, she judged, mostly because her guardians were Vladie and their grandmother - everyone else was out.

Chicago was itself - noisy, somewhat grimy, and wonderfully undamaged by space guns, explosions, flying lobster ships, or anything else that wasn't strictly Earth in origin. It did feel a little odd to be wandering around it by herself, but Jupiter figured it was not so much disorientation from her adventures as the fact that she usually spent all day cleaning houses. Being out in the open air, with nothing to do...now that was weird.

She visited her favorite bakery - raisin vatrushkas for the win - and sat on a park bench to eat, finding herself staring idly at the small bit of the Sears Tower she could see from her vantage point.

And remembering.

Not the falling and the firefight and all the stuff-that-came-next; those she tucked carefully away to look at later, when she felt a little less bruised and shaky. Instead she revisited waking up in a dusty, unfinished room, dry-mouthed and blurry, and seeing across the room only a hulking figure, unknown and dangerous.

He probably knew the second I opened my eyes. Jupiter felt a smile curl the corner of her mouth. Her memory of the clinic attack was fragmented, flashes of terror and distress, and she remembered Caine's voice there more than his face; but waking with her clothes on and a gun within reach -

He'd been kind. She hadn't really realized it at the time. So sue me, I was in shock.

But before he knew she was the heir to a galactic title and an unbelievable fortune, before she was anything but...but cattle - he'd left the gun near her head and told her how to take off the safety. He'd injected her with a translator implant, albeit while she was still out. He'd been patient with her semi-panic, her smart mouth; he'd made sure she wouldn't wake half-naked and vulnerable. He'd explained things.

Up is hard. Down is easy.

The laugh that bubbled out of her was more than half tears, and Jupiter smothered the sob in her palm before wiping fiercely at her eyes.

"Get a grip, your Majesty," she muttered.

She didn't know where he was.

They hadn't really had time to talk. First he was in sickbay, then she was passed out, and when they woke her the ship was already docked with a Legion transport and Caine and Stinger had to report for reinstatement. There was only time to claim one more kiss and peel her hands from his shoulders,
and to run away before she broke and asked him to give it all up and stay with her.

*Because let's face it. This...thing...it's all so fast, and insane, and even if he does keep rescuing me he's got a whole life to get back to out there. He's getting his wings back, and his commission. He'll have Stinger too. And I bet there's no way this Legion is going to let a tracking-genius Skyjacker off to come sit around on a "tercie" planet.*

She shoved away the memory of his stricken eyes as she'd left him. If she went back out there, up and out of the fragile shell of Earth - and someday she'd have to - she might even see him one day.

She tried to picture it, a squad of winged soldiers all tall and fierce, but their faces wouldn't come clear and they were all too far away.

It was tough to cry in public. Jupiter kept it as quiet as she could, hoping that no one stopped to ask what was wrong, because it would be deeply embarrassing to explain that she was missing the half-wolf space soldier who'd saved her from dying and kissed her like she was his key to heaven. But no one came near, and she blew her nose with a napkin from the bakery and wondered bleakly what to do next.

Caine and Stinger were gone, and Jupiter had no idea how to find Kiza. She had a little device - complicated enough to make her wonder what Apple could do with galactic tech - that could contact the Aegis cruiser in orbit overhead, but she knew if she contacted them they'd just be all "What can we do for you, your Majesty" and she didn't know. She had no one to help her, and no idea where to begin. And for the first time in her life, she had a secret she couldn't share with family.

*A whole world full of people, and I'm totally alone.*

The sun was edging down the sky before she found the energy to move. Jupiter reached for the bakery bag, and -

*What the hell?*

There was a box next to her on the bench. It was pretty big, about the size of a carry-on bag, and it definitely hadn't been there when she sat down. And her bench sat against the park wall and some bushes; there was no way someone could have come up behind and dropped it off.

*What. The. Hell.*

Jupiter squinted at it. It looked perfectly ordinary, cardboard and squarish, with the corners folded under rather than taped, and if it had some kind of secret materialization circuit it didn't show on the outside. But as she leaned forward to look at the other side, she spotted a symbol etched into the paper, as if someone really anal had punched it in with a sewing needle.

It was a copy of the sigil on her wrist.

*Crap. I bet it was those Keeper things. Jupiter's stomach lurched, and she couldn't help a nervous sweep of her arm through the air in front of her, in case one of the creepy little aliens was still around. But she hit nothing, and there didn't seem to be any odd gaps in her memory of the day. Maybe they're just that sneaky.*

Gingerly, Jupiter unfolded the top, wondering why Keepers were leaving her boxes. Was it another baffling piece of equipment? One of those ridiculous dresses? Balem's head in a bag?

It was a pair of boots.
Jupiter stared at them, astonished. They weren't just any boots; they were Skyjacker boots, she could see the control wristband poking out of the top of the left one, and judging from the tiny scratches here and there on both, they were used.

*They're Caine's.* She knew it; who else would send her something like this?

She choked a little, and smiled, eyes stinging. Of course he didn't need them any more; he was getting his wings back.

Jupiter wondered suddenly exactly what a Skyjacker looked like with wings. Angelic? Or more like a bird or a bat or those dragon-people? It seemed like for Splices, anything went…

She lifted out the right one. It was lighter than it looked, and as she turned it over to look at the sole, something fell into her lap.

Blinking, Jupiter set down the boot and fished up the object. It turned out to be the smallest sheave she'd seen yet, about the size of her palm, and it took a little squeezing to get the button to work. Fortunately the translator was set on English and she didn't have to struggle with the scroll; the tiny script hung in a net of light above the sheave's surface, almost illegible until she figured out how to enlarge it.

*Caine said you should have these,* it read. *I'd practice if I were you!*

The sigil that signed it wasn't something she'd seen before - it was much blockier than her own, for instance - but part of it was familiar; she'd seen it on the side of Stinger's neck.

Jupiter said something very rude in Russian, hugged the boot, and started to laugh.

"How's she doing?" The commlink was an excellent one, with no static, but Stinger expected no less from Legion equipment.

Captain Tsing's face was as grave as usual; the lift of her brow bespoke some concern. "Integrating back into her old life."

"But?" Stinger knew that hesitation.

"She seems...despondent." Tsing grimaced a little, cheek implant flashing back a gleam of light.

Stinger shrugged, belying his own concern. "It's a lot to assimilate. She probably just needs time."

"Yes, but how long?" Tsing's mouth tightened. "Whether she wants to acknowledge them or not, she has duties. The longer she waits, the more difficult things will be."

"I know." Stinger heaved a sigh. "Look, it's only been a week. When the Legion guard arrives she'll need an introduction, and that may stir her up."

"True. We'll continue the monitoring, though with the Z-class in orbit at least there'll be no outside attempts on her life."

"Better not," Stinger growled, incensed at the idea. Funny how the little thing had gotten under his skin; he'd never expected to actually like a royal. *Perhaps it's because she's not a snot like the rest of 'em.*
Tsing nodded. "How's your daughter?" she asked, softer.

Stinger ducked his head in shame, mixed with incredible relief. "She's well." He couldn't stop the smile. "She's well."

Tsing's return smile was reluctant, but there. "He was right, you know," she said enigmatically, and signed off.

Stinger sighed again, and - for the hundredth time - pulled out the medical sheave to reread the report.

She's well.

He hated this part. It didn't matter how sympathetic the medics were, it was still deeply unnerving to give up control and consciousness to people and machines he couldn't see and didn't trust.

But Caine was a Legionnaire again, and he didn't have a choice.

"Roll over, please, Mr. Wise." The medical android touched his bare shoulder with one artificial finger. Caine obeyed, rotating on the narrow pallet until his spine was uppermost. The scars on his back itched and ached with the memory of pain. "Yes, that's good."

There were footsteps all around him, and acrid medical scents that made him want to sneeze. The pallet was fitted with a chin rest so his head wouldn't dangle, but it didn't fit his jaw and poked uncomfortably.

"Please relax," the android said calmly. "The scan will only take a moment."

Hums, murmurs, the whine of machinery probably only audible to him. He felt goosebumps prickle up all along his skin; the room was chilly. Easy, he told himself. This is the first step to returning.

Back to the Skyjackers and his wings, back to a measure of respect, back to that sunny little planet.

Back to its Queen.

"We're ready for the anesthesia," someone said, and a hand brought the inhaler mask to his nose. He wanted to snarl and shove it away, but instead he pressed his face into it and breathed deeply.

The gas chilled his throat and made his tongue go numb. He closed his eyes and remembered rising up through the transport beam with Jupiter in his arms, her nervous laugh and her scent compelling him to turn his head and just breathe her in...breathe and breathe...

In his dream, they kept rising forever.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

As always, Cincoflex is my mainstay.

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Jupiter opened her eyes and stared straight up at the basement's unfinished ceiling. "Dumbass," she said out loud, and sat up. "Bees. Bees."

She bounded out of bed and went straight to her computer. The lethargy of the past week was gone, replaced by an unfamiliar sense of purpose. Bees! If you want to find a bee, look for honey!

That made no sense, but Jupiter was too hyped to care. Does Stinger have a Website? It didn't seem likely, but maybe Kiza had put one together for him.

Nope, no Website. But two local co-ops listed Apini Hives as a supplier, and there was also a mention for swarm removal services. Jupiter punched the address into her phone and barely remembered to get dressed before running upstairs shouting for Vladie.

"He's not here," Grandmother called from the kitchen, speaking Russian since Vassily was out. "How are you today, my dear?"

Jupiter detoured long enough to kiss the old woman's cheek and get her own pinched in return. "I'm going out for a bit," she said cheerfully. "If Vladie complains tell him I'm shopping for eggs."

The cackle followed her up the stairs as she went to dig out the keys to Vladie's moldy old pickup. He owes me.

She cleared the trash off the passenger seat to make room for the box of boots, put on her seatbelt, and set her phone's GPS for Apini Hives.

It was a beautiful day, not too hot, which was good since Vladie's truck didn't have working AC. Jupiter cranked down the window and cranked up the tunes, and before noon she was humming down a die-straight road lined with rustling green forests of corn, practically vibrating with energy. It was as if the gift of the boots had shaken something loose in her, pulled all her cloudy thoughts into focus, and she was going to take advantage while she could.

The turnoff to Stinger's place had a rusty "No Trespassing" sign out front, but she didn't slow down.
But doubt leached in when she reached the end of the long driveway. Someone had replaced the front door and made other repairs, but the house still looked half-derelict and there was no one in sight.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she's gone. Maybe -

A lone bee drifted in through the open window and circled her head, humming curiously. As if called, a thin cloud of them materialized outside, hovering, and Jupiter got out hastily lest they get stuck inside the cab. Vladie hated bugs.

The cloud descended as soon as Jupiter closed the truck's door, swirling around her - still a little nerve-wracking, but she held out both hands and remembered how they'd attacked a bounty hunter to protect her. "Did I ever say thank you?" she murmured to them.

"Your Majesty!"

Jupiter jerked around. Kiza stood on the porch, one of those bright guns that Caine favored dangling from her hand, and Jupiter gave her a huge grin. "Hi! I'm sorry for just dropping in like -"

Kiza tossed the gun aside and ran down the steps to drop in front of Jupiter, on her knees with her head bent. "Your Majesty - I don't know how to thank you -"

The sight made Jupiter's stomach twist, and not in a good way. "What? Kiza, don't. Please, don't."

She got down on one knee herself, reaching out to grab Kiza's shoulders and then snatching her hands back as the girl cringed. "I'm sorry - I just..."

Kiza raised her head, and the tears in her eyes made Jupiter feel worse. "Your Majesty," the girl whispered, and Jupiter flung her hands wide.

"Stop calling me that!"

Her shout seemed to shut down sound for a second, and then the bees were chorusing around them. They seemed confused, and Jupiter let out a long breath. "Hey, hey! It's okay." She waved at them. "Stand down, guys. Uh, girls." She didn't know if they would attack Kiza and she certainly didn't want to find out.

The bees hesitated, then dispersed, most of them flying away but a few remaining to buzz in slow loops overhead. Jupiter decided that was the best she was going to get, and reached out for Kiza again, carefully. "What's going on?"

Kiza lifted her head slowly, her face more puzzled than upset now. "I don't understand," she said. "You're a Queen. Even the bees know it. Why are you denying it?"

Her accent was thicker than usual, and Jupiter had to listen carefully to make out all the words. Suddenly tired, she sat down in the dust of the yard with an undignified thump. "I'm not denying it. I'm just..." She struggled for the right words. "Kiza, I know we don't know each other. But your dad helped save my life, and you're Caine's friend. Do you think - maybe we could just be friends? Or...or friendly-ish?"

It surprised her, how much she wanted it. Someone with no agenda, someone who knew what was going on.
Someone who would stay.

She rubbed her face with her hands, trying to hide the sudden sting of her eyes, but a hesitant touch on her foot made her drop the barrier. "And last week you were just ordinary," Kiza said, sounding less awestruck.

"Yes." Jupiter grabbed Kiza's hand. "Yeah! Боже мои, why are you the only one who gets it?"

Kiza smiled, half shy, half wry. "I...I'd like to be friends, your - um." Her face pinkened. "J-jupiter?"

"Say that again," Jupiter sighed happily.

They ended up indoors with ice water and a big bowl of corn chips, sprawled on a battered couch with Kiza lazily allowing several bees to journey up and down her arm. Her color was much better than the last time Jupiter had seen her, and she'd gained a little weight.

"We really do owe you," Kiza said, shaking the bees gently loose and reaching for another chip. "Legally you could have had Dad executed on the spot."

Jupiter shuddered. "Look, he helped me out when we first ended up here and then he helped save my life. And Caine's. Twice. So I think the record's more than even."

"The middle of nowhere?" It was pretty, sure, but Jupiter thought she herself would get bored quickly.

"Yeah. It's out of the way. Y'see, there's lots of people choose to live on tercie worlds, though they have to keep an ear to the comm to know when a Harvest is coming."

Jupiter tightened against the surge of disgust at such callous attitudes. "So they can leave ahead of it. Makes sense, I guess."

Kiza looked over at her and sat up a little. "I'm not saying Earth's not very nice," she said hastily. "Your Majesty."

"Oh, stop that." Jupiter threw a chip at Kiza's head. The other girl's look of astonishment melted into a chuckle, and she threw one back, prompting a short chip-fight that left them both somewhat crumby.

Kiza cast herself back down on the couch with a sigh. "He did it for me, you know."

Jupiter, brushing corn fragments off her shirt, gave her a cockeyed look. "Who did what?"

"You...don't know?" Kiza frowned.

"Obviously." Jupiter flicked a last chip Kiza's way.

Kiza sighed again. "I was sick...we didn't have the money for the recode."

Jupiter felt ice crinkling up her spine, and kept her tone carefully level. "Recode?"
Kiza nodded, rubbing absently at her breastbone as if at the memory of pain. "If you're sick, a recode can clear out the infection. But it's very expensive."

No.

"Crap! I left something in the truck. 'Scuse me a sec." Jupiter levered to her feet and trotted out of the house, ignoring the surprised "Your-Jupiter?" that faded behind her. Fortunately, the truck had its driver's side towards the house, so she could pry open the passenger door and bend over the boot box to hide her face.

Recode. Recoding. They gave her that stuff. And she doesn't even see how wrong it is.

Jupiter took a deep breath, then another. How the hell do they do that, live with humans - Earth people - whatever - how do they do that and then just go off and - and -

The edge of the seat was pressing into her abdomen, and Jupiter shifted a little, bracing her feet in the dirt and trying, trying to think, to master her revulsion. It took a few moments.

She was sick. Maybe dying. You might make the same choice if it were you. Or Mama. Or Moltka...

Except, she kind of already had.

She closed her eyes.

Stacks of glowing vials everywhere, filled with death. A woman stepping renewed from a pool of luminous fluid.

Caine's torn skin healing before her eyes...

Okay. Think about this logically. This is their culture. She opened her eyes and stared blankly at the steering wheel. Stinger, Kiza, probably Caine too, they're all conditioned to see it as a miracle.

If she went back in there and told Kiza what she really thought of it all, she'd lose this brand new friendship. There's not a damn thing you can do about it now - whoever died to make that stuff is beyond anybody's help. And Kiza's better now. Healthy.

She curled her hands into the dusty upholstery. At least it wasn't just another baby bath for a rich bitch.

But the thought was hollow. Was it really any less...less evil if the end result was good?

No.

The horror was hardening, shrinking down into something denser inside her. Jupiter didn't know what it was, but it felt like it was there to stay.

But it left calm behind. Okay. I can accept this. I can do this. Not my culture, not my choice, not my decision, and not anything I can do about it right now.

She took one more breath, blew it out, and made herself remember her mother's arms around her in the night. Then she picked up the box, bumped the door shut with her hip, and headed back inside. "Hey, Kiza...do you know where I can download a manual for these things?"

Jupiter had to go home before Kiza had finished running her through the basics of the nifty holographic controls, but Kiza promised to come pick her up on the weekend so Jupiter could take
her first practice flight in the privacy of the Apini yard. "That is, if the truck will run," she said ruefully as they were saying goodbye.

Jupiter winced a little at the sight of it. It would have given Vladie's a run for its money in the "shabby" department even before suffering from the recent firefight. Apparently Keepers didn't fix things for people who already knew about them.

Or maybe Stinger just likes it that way. What the hell do I know how a guy with insect genes and a fetish for indoor beekeeping feels about anything?

It still seemed unfair, but - Hey. Wait a minute.

"I might be able to do something about that," Jupiter said, and grinned. "Hey, Kiza, are you a hot rod kind of girl?"

That Saturday, Jupiter's neighborhood was treated to the sight of a very sleek, very new, very red convertible pulling up to the curb outside her house. The blonde behind the wheel wore oversized sunglasses and a pretty blouse, and Jupiter practically had to shove her cousins back inside as she left - Vladie wanted the girl, and Zeno wanted the car.

"До свидания! 'Bye now," she caroled, and pulled the door firmly shut before running down to the car, the bag holding her new boots bouncing on her shoulder.

Kiza was laughing. Jupiter dumped her bag in the back and swung over the low door to land in the passenger seat, waving vigorously at the males plastered to the house's window. "Drive on," she pronounced in her best royal tones, and Kiza slammed the car into gear and pulled out with verve. Jupiter scrambled for her seatbelt.

"Congratulations," she said with mock solemnity. "You will now be a topic of dinner conversation for at least a week."

"Just what I've always dreamed of," Kiza replied drolly. "And thank you, your Majesty."

This time the title was half respect, half tease, and Jupiter just shot her a reproachful look before putting on her own sunglasses. "Hey, all that space-wealth, I ought to be able to get my friends some wheels. Especially when it's kind of my fault they don't have any."

She had been half-afraid that Kiza might refuse the gift, but whether it was a cultural thing or just good sense, she'd been delighted. It had been simpler than expected; calling the Aegis cruiser, explaining her - not problem, it seemed, queens didn't have problems - her desire to Captain Tsing, and one warp-speed e-mailish thing to Malidictes later, Officer Percadium was visiting a high-end dealership with a cashier's check. Jupiter wondered idly if he'd worn a disguise, and if not, what the salesperson had thought of his facial implants.

Just that he's a rich Goth, probably.

"Three of them brought it by," Kiza was telling her. "I think they're getting a little bored up there."

Jupiter had to stop and consider that one. A convertible full of three more-or-less alien soldiers driving down an Illinois country highway...

"That sounds like either a horror flick or a really dumb buddy comedy," she said at last, and Kiza laughed again.
As Jupiter was starting to expect, the bees came out to greet her when she arrived. Kiza walked through them as if they weren't there, but Jupiter supposed that by now she was pretty immune.

"Do you know when your dad's getting back?" she asked as she pulled the boots on carefully. The insides molded themselves easily to her feet, despite the fact that hers were so much smaller than Caine's - much like her borrowed Aegis boots had. Every time she'd put those on she'd considered just how big a mint someone could make on Earth with that piece of technology.

"As soon as he can," Kiza said, straddling a chair backwards to watch. "He'll want to show off his wings."

"Mm." Jupiter bit her tongue on asking about Caine, and flexed her toes experimentally. Never in her life would she confess to having rolled over in the night to shove one hand down to the boots' very bottoms, in hopes of some kind of message from their former owner.

Hell, they didn't even smell like him.

Flight practice was slow at first. It was more like ice skating than anything else Jupiter could think of, and she could feel where she'd be sore in the morning from her overbalancing and rebounding. But Kiza shouted encouragement from the ground, and gradually Jupiter learned how to smooth out her steps and learn to trust in a force she could barely see and couldn't begin to understand.

The nice thing about the boots' tutor mode was that it had built-in safeties - she couldn't fall, even if she ended up dangling upside down ten feet above the driveway. Kiza had to get a ladder to help her upright again, and Jupiter could hear her muffled snickering before she'd climbed the first rung.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh," Jupiter said after she'd been righted, scraping her wild hair back into its ponytail. "It's your turn next."

Kiza sobered at once. "Oh, no, your Maj- - Jupiter. Please, no. I don't like heights." She backed away a little, and Jupiter frowned.

"Hey, no problem, relax. I just thought you might want to play too."

Kiza shook her head vigorously, then dragged the ladder away.

Jupiter went back to her practice, thinking hard. Deference was one thing, but Kiza had acted as if Jupiter could somehow make her try the boots. As if a direct order would compel her.

_The more I think about that, the freakier it gets._

They spent the evening with pizza, brownies, and Kiza's stash of old B-grade horror flicks, laughing and talking, and it finally dawned on Jupiter that Kiza was probably pretty lonely. _Huh. At least I've got more cousins than I know what to do with. She just has her dad, and he's not even here._ And she got the feeling that Kiza didn't have much of a social life either.

_I guess it would be hard_, she thought later, when she was tucked into the cluttered space that served as a guest room for the Apini house. _Being friends with someone when you know that they could suddenly be turned into youth serum, and not even being allowed to warn them._

The thought was less sour than Jupiter expected, but it still gave her a weird mix of sadness and anger. _This whole situation is fucked up beyond belief._

That night, she didn't dream of her family; instead, Balem tried to make her admit, over and over again, that some lives mattered more than others, and she couldn't escape him...
Kiza, much to Jupiter's relief, was not a morning person. They both slept in, and then sat around blearily nursing coffee until Kiza was awake enough to make waffles - Jupiter admitted that she wasn't allowed near a waffle iron after the Great Smoke of 2009, whose explanation was embarrassing but at least had the virtue of making Kiza laugh so hard that she dropped the mixing bowl.

And waffles with honey were excellent.

They'd just finished the dishes when Kiza's cellphone rang, and she trotted out to the living room to retrieve it. When she came back, she was frowning.

"What's up?" Jupiter hung up the dishcloth to dry and stretched her back - sore, as predicted.

"Someone needs a swarm removed," Kiza said, mouth pinching thoughtfully. "Dad's not here, but I can do it. If...if you don't mind."

Jupiter blinked at her. "Why would I mind?"

"It'll take several hours. I might not be back until, like, sunset." Kiza gestured with the phone. "If you'd rather, I can take you home first, but we didn't finish Squirm last night..."

"Hey, if you don't mind me hanging around here without you, it's all good. Or do you need help?" Jupiter had no idea what was involved in such things, but after the last couple of weeks moving a bunch of honeybees sounded simple by comparison.

Kiza shook her head hastily. "Thanks, but no. I don't think anyone would understand them escorting you."

Jupiter winced. "Ooh. This is true. Well, I'm sure I can keep busy until you get back."

She did help Kiza load the truck, which coughed and rattled but consented to start, and waved as Kiza disappeared in a cloud of dust. "Hope it keeps working," she muttered, waving the haze (and a few bees) away.

The house seemed big and empty and a little creepy with Kiza gone. Jupiter didn't want to poke around too much, it seemed like a violation of privacy, but even with the constant drone of the interior hives the place started to get on her nerves. It felt like alien assassins might be lurking in any shadowy corner, ready to burst out and -

Jupiter threw up her hands and went outside, trying not to slam the door behind her. "At least you can get some practice in," she told herself, and pulled on the Skyjacker boots.

Fortunately for her concentration, her bee escort always left her as soon as she turned the boots on. Jupiter started out slow and low, skating through the air as she warmed up stiff muscles, but pretty soon she was as high as the house's roof, and daring to move at a pace that would have been a jog on the ground. She widened her circles, feeling the breeze that rustled the corn tug at her shirt, and had to grin.

_Maybe it's time to level up._

She put on some speed, daring swoops and leans and wondering just how Caine had achieved his running-sideways trick; the boots held her up, but they didn't negate gravity entirely. _Centripetal force, maybe. Or is it centrifugal? I can never remember -_
That was the moment when Jupiter realized that she'd leaned over too far, and she started to tumble.

She couldn't stop a small shriek. The boots wouldn't let her drop, but the side of the derelict barn was coming up really fast.

Crap, this is gonna -

She jerked to a stop a foot from the barn, held in place by a tight grip around her calf. Blinking, Jupiter managed to twist her shoulders around enough to peer up at whatever had caught her.

The wide shape against the sky was bobbing slightly, thanks to the beat of the huge wings spreading out behind, and was wearing that slight, shy, amused smile. "Her Majesty may wish to work on her port-side backstep reflexes," Caine said.

The next few moments were totally undignified, and Jupiter didn't care at all. In fact, she was pretty sure she'd yelped like a stepped-on cat and started squirming, but Caine interpreted that correctly and just sort of tossed her upright somehow, snatching her out of her flip like an ice dancer or an acrobat. She barely managed to flick off her boots' power before plastering herself against him, burying her face against his shoulder in a hug that was just this side of frantic, and it would have been completely embarrassing if he hadn't been holding her just as tightly, head bent over hers and breath ruffling her hair and collar.

In fact, she had to shove his head up when she lifted her own, and the hesitation in his face when she met his gaze made her heart twist. Jupiter cupped his jaw in one hand and leaned up to kiss him, hard.

That seemed to solve the problem, if the enthusiasm of his response was anything to go by. She felt his fingers tangling in her wind-blown hair, his thumb stroking the nape of her neck, and she just sort of melted against him, not caring that she was messy and sweaty. He was warm and solid and real, velvety skin and crisp hair and just the slightest sting from his teeth.

When they had to breathe, Jupiter hugged him again, feeling her throat swell. "Oh man, I thought I was never going to see you again!"

Caine's grin vanished into puzzlement. "Why?"

She blinked, taken aback by his simple question. "Well - you had a life to get back to. I mean, obviously." She gestured at his still-beating wings.

Caine raised both brows, then tightened his hold on her waist and brought them both down to the ground, landing lightly and setting her on her feet as carefully as if she were made of glass. "We did. Captain Tsing, as your interim Chief of Security, requested Stinger's squadron be the one assigned as your honor guard."

"Oh." Jupiter grimaced, utterly exasperated. If I'd known that - "Why didn't she say so?"

"She may have assumed you already knew."

With an effort, Jupiter set aside the anger at the thought. What was standing in front of her was more important anyway, and she had to rein in the urge to just drag him off somewhere and kiss him for hours.

Caine hadn't let her go; now he simply stood looking down at her with an expression intense with pleasure and something else Jupiter couldn't name. His hands were warm on her waist, and his wings were folding inward, disappearing behind his back.
"Hey, hold on a sec," Jupiter said, standing on tiptoe and trying to peer over his shoulder. "Can I see?"

The twitch of his lips hovered between bashfulness and pride. "As your Majesty wishes."

Jupiter held in the quiver that his words gave her. Caine let her go and stepped back, folding his arms and turning around to face the other way.

They were dark brown and amber, rising from the spots where she'd seen circular scars on his back - a much smaller surface area than it seemed like they'd require, but Jupiter remembered Stinger saying they were cybernetic or something; obviously it worked somehow. They were tucked up against his spine, but as she watched Caine extended them slowly, and they unfolded on and on - long and silver-capped and gorgeous.

Without her permission her hand rose to touch, and she snatched it back just in time. But Caine glanced back over his shoulder. "Go ahead," he said.

The long main feathers were stiff and sleek, not as soft as Jupiter expected, but still light and vibrant under her cautious fingertip. They seemed almost to pulse, row on row of pattern shifting slightly like a heartbeat or a breath. Impulse rose; Jupiter gave in, and stood on tiptoe again to rub her cheek against the shorter, covering scapular feathers.

They clouded softly against her face, ruffling slightly and exhaling a wild scent of powdery, metallic spice, underlain with Caine's own leather-musk scent. It was slightly intoxicating, and she almost didn't hear the sudden suck of Caine's breath; but the way both wings shivered up to almost veil her in feathers was unmissable.

She resisted the urge to lean further and just snuggle, and straightened with a sigh. "Caine, I...I don't know what to say. They're amazing." She ran a delicate hand along the top of one, fascinated as it quivered slightly. "Did...did it hurt?"

His head, still turned to watch her out of one eye, shook slightly. "Not this time."

That brought up a whole host of questions, some of which implied very unpleasant answers, but Jupiter let them all go for now. Instead, she ducked underneath the left one, coming up in front of him and sliding appreciative hands back up his vest towards his shoulders. "So...you can carry an extra person?"

Caine's soft little smile widened. He scooped her up as smoothly as the first time, crouched, and leapt.

And they soared.

Jupiter lay in bed that night, buried beneath the covers despite the clammy summer warmth of the basement, and stared thoughtfully at the glimmer of her tattoo. Her entire outlook had been flipped end-for-end that day, it seemed, as quickly as Caine had brought her upright in the air and as stunningly.

It wasn't just the hour they'd spent aloft, though Jupiter dwelt a long while on the memory; it was coming down to meet Stinger in his own yard - snapping his own magnificent wings open and closed and dropping again to one knee to thank her for his pardon, much as that made her want to run away.

It was the sheave Stinger gave her, listing the names of the Legion honor guard that would be
landing within the week. It was the weight of expectation in his eyes and stance; the way the bees soared out to meet her.

It was Caine's arms holding her tight and safe, dream made reality.

All that she'd pushed away was undeniably present. Everyone kept saying that she could choose what to do about it all, but -

*But they're all hoping so hard that I'll take this on that they might as well be holding signs,* she thought, and then muffled a laugh in her pillow at the image of Stinger waving a *Jupiter for Queen* banner. Even Kiza seemed to just expect that Jupiter would be eager to step into the role of Entitled.

*Too bad you have to be one to be the other.*

She could refuse it. She knew that. Deny the pressure, turn her back on it all, let Kalique manage everything for the next sixty or seventy years, and pretend it all hadn't happened. Admit that she couldn't do it. Caine would stay, she was pretty sure, if she had the guts to ask him - if he could leave the Legion again. But what would happen to Stinger then? And Kiza?

She sighed, and ran her thumb over the tattoo, which had no effect on it. *You've already chosen, haven't you?*

It wasn't something she wanted, not really. But it looked like becoming that queen was the only way to protect not only the planets she was told she owned, but the people she cared about. Including this odd little three-member family that wouldn't admit it was one.

*Well then.* She sighed again, not *entirely* reluctant. *You wished for your life to change...and wow, has it ever.*

*Better get started.*
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Sorry about the delayed update. Sheesh, this chapter just wouldn't end.

Couldn't do it without Cincoflex!

Production notes on some chapters can be found on my LiveJournal.

Is there a POC fan who'd be willing to beta a little of this for me? I'd like to introduce a Black OC and I'd really appreciate a cross-check on my privileges...

The car was coming.

Caine circled high above the road, high enough that the little open vehicle looked like a toy, but even at this height he could scent his Queen, her genes singing to him across the distance. He wanted to stoop on the car as if it were a target, just to shorten the time before he could be close to her again, but Kiza would yell at him if he did.

So he paced it above, letting his new wings play with the air currents, and felt his heart trip when Jupiter at last looked up and waved.

He flew lower, closer, watching her. She looked well; her hair was pulled back in its usual tail, ruffled by the wind of their travel, and she was wearing Earth garments, snug trousers and a loose top.

She was almost there, and he did a barrel roll just from sheer anticipation.

As the car turned onto the driveway, Caine dropped out of the air, aiming for the patch of weedy ground that served Stinger as a front yard, and landed in a puff of dust at the same instant that Kiza braked to a stop.

Her Majesty laughed, releasing her seatbelt with a snap. "Nice!" she called, and scrambled out before he could get close enough to open the little door for her.

But it didn't matter, because she ran right into him, bouncing up on her toes to land a kiss on his mouth, a burst of sweetness. Caine caught her close and returned it, a little more slowly. His Queen hummed, hands stroking his shoulders, and he wanted to wrap his wings tight until she was surrounded by feathers, safe and -

"No PDAs," Kiza said, passing by with several bags of sharp-smelling food. "Come on, guys, I'm starving."

Jupiter pulled back a fraction, chuckling. Caine frowned. "She should be more respectful."

His Queen took one hand from his shoulder to lay a finger on his lips. "Don't you dare. She's fine the way she is." She grinned and kissed his chin quickly. "Aren't you hungry?"

Caine wished she'd do it again. "Yes."
"Then come on." She slipped from his arms, but then took his hand and tugged him up the steps and into Stinger's house.

It had been...unreal, to find her there just a few days ago, more vivid than his memory could hold; dancing clumsily in air, all determination and a strength that left him breathless. Seeing her face light at the sight of him had stunned him despite the memory of her kisses; holding her had made the strange new ache in his chest disappear.

They'd seen each other since, of course, but at the end of every meeting he'd had to return to the farm and leave the Aegis crew to handle her security, and it had felt wrong despite Stinger pointing out that technically, Caine was still on sick leave.

He'd tried appealing directly to her Majesty, but she'd muttered something about ohshah and told him to relax, and anyway, when would he sleep if he spent all night on the roof?

Telling her that he could go days without sleep if necessary had had no effect at all.

But now she was there, safe and real, and would stay all day and come back the next. The squadron was due to make orbit shortly, which would bring its own problems, but it would also put Caine back on proper guard duty. Being without an assignment left him at a strange uncomfortable loss, not knowing what to do with himself. Kiza had lent him some of the Earth books she'd collected, and there was always sparring practice with Stinger, but time had still gone far too slowly.

Now, he feared, it would go too fast.

The battered table in Stinger's house was just big enough for the four of them, if wings were kept folded. Stinger himself sauntered in from the back, wiping his hands on a rag and reeking of honey; Caine knew he was doing something with his beehives in anticipation of changes coming.

"Hey, Stinger!" Jupiter kissed him on the cheek, which made him turn a dull red. "Thanks for letting me come back this weekend."

Stinger cleared his throat, and Caine smirked at his embarrassment. "My house is yours, Majesty."

"Yeah, well, it's still nice of you. I hope you're hungry, we bought out half the restaurant."

"Legionnaires are always hungry." Kiza grinned. "Chopsticks or a fork, your Majesty?"

Jupiter started unloading cartons from one of the bags. "I can do chopsticks."

In the end, they all used the sticks that came with the meal; they were no odder than other utensils Caine had used in the past. The food, however, was a new experience, distracting him even from the presence of his Queen by his side and the occasional pressure of her knee against his. The flavors were good, certainly - a change from the bland Legion rations that had made up most of the meals of his adult life - but after a while they were interfering with his sense of smell, and it made him a little nervous.

"So how was your week?" Jupiter asked Kiza. "It dawned on me that I don't really know what you do, besides collecting swarms once in a while."

Kiza speared a piece of vegetable with one of her sticks. "Mostly I deal with the honey," she said comfortably. "I was taking a few courses at the local college last semester, but Dad thinks studying Japanese culture is a waste of time." She poked her father with one elbow.

Stinger huffed. "I didn't say that."
"Yeah, you just think I should be watching off-planet stuff. Seriously, the 'verse's animation industry is **stagnant,**" she said to Jupiter. "I keep thinking how cool it would be if we could export some of the classic anime."

"You can't?" Jupiter asked, and they were off on a discussion Caine couldn't follow. Stinger rolled his eyes tolerantly and kept eating; Caine sorted through a carton of noodles, trying to avoid the crunchy bursts of spice Jupiter called **ginger,** and felt his spine relax. Here in this room were all the people who mattered to him, and they were all safe and at peace.

It was as close to perfection as he could hope to get, and so far from his recent past that he still had trouble believing it was real.

It was a good thing there was a lot of food; Splice metabolisms ran high, and while they could go a long time on short rations, their bodies were set up to take advantage of abundance when offered. Caine and Stinger were still picking through the remains when Jupiter pushed back her chair, sighed, and spoke. "So you all think I should really do this Entitled thing, huh?"

There was a little silence, and then Stinger sighed in turn. "It's not a matter of **doing,** your Majesty. It's what you **are.**"

She cocked a brow at him. "But I could say no. Leave it all with Kalique and stay - here. For the rest of my life."

Stinger looked as if he'd bitten into something sour. "...Yes."

"That wouldn't solve the problem," Caine pointed out. Her Majesty had already made up her mind; she'd admitted as much the evening before, after one of her wild flights through the Chicago sky. But he could see why she might want to test the assertion. "Earth would only be safe for your lifetime."

Kiza propped her elbows on the table and her chin on one hand, watching. Jupiter rubbed her eyes. "I don't suppose I could set up some kind of foundation," she muttered, then snickered. "Too bad 'Save the Earth' is taken. All right then. Let's do this."

Stinger relaxed, exhaling a relieved breath; Kiza grinned. "It won't be all bad," she said. "You'll see when you get there."

"I'll take your word for it," Jupiter said wryly. "To be honest, though, I don't even know where to **start.**"

"If I may suggest it, your Majesty, one of the first things to do should be to inform Lady Kalique," Stinger said slowly. "Her advice could be helpful."

"Yeah, if I can **trust** it." Jupiter bit her lip.

"She hasn't done anything overt against you," Caine admitted. He didn't like Kalique any more than he did any other Entitled, but as far as he could tell she had done exactly what she said she had.

Whether she actually had his Queen's best interests at heart...that was something else altogether.

"All right," Jupiter said again. "Let's see what she has in mind. The last time I talked to her she sounded like she wanted to do some kind of debutante thing." She made a face.

"Debutante thing?" Stinger asked, and Kiza laughed.

"Introduce her to society, that sort of thing. Really, Dad, you need to watch more television."
"I'd rather eat dirt," Stinger muttered, which only made both women laugh.

"I'll clean up," Jupiter said, rising, and shot a stern glare at the Apinis when their mouths opened in protest. "I don't cook, which means I get the dishes."

"It's not appropriate," Stinger began, but Jupiter shook her head.

"I get that, but this isn't space, it's your house. Just let me be an ordinary guest, okay?" She switched from glare to appeal. "Just for now."

"Give it up, Stinger," Caine said, reaching over to pluck an empty carton from his commander's hand. "Either she's a guest and she's allowed, or she's an Entitled and you can't argue with her."

Kiza burst out laughing. Stinger sputtered, buzzing a little, and gave up. "Fine thing when a man gets thrown out of his own kitchen," he grumbled without heat.

"You hate dishes," Kiza reminded him, and stood to pull him from his chair. "Dish soap is under the sink, your Majesty."

"Nice one," Jupiter said approvingly as Kiza dragged her father out. "So how was your week? I've seen you three times and you hardly said a word about what you were doing." She wrinkled her nose at him and started stacking plates. "Don't think I didn't notice."

It hadn't occurred to Caine that she would be interested, and the knowledge that she was added another layer of unreality. No one, no one had ever cared so much, not even Stinger. "Just off-time. Syncing my wings, studying, practice." He collected all the empty cartons. "Kiza helps me - we don't have sparring pistols so she got these weapons called paintball guns."

Jupiter choked. "Paintball? Seriously?"

Caine deposited the cartons in the trash can. "Kiza's a first-class sharpshooter; Stinger taught her." And he was glad to know that she hadn't let her skill lapse in five years of obscurity on a tertiary planet.

Jupiter cocked her head at the angle that meant she was thinking hard, then shook it and put the plates in the sink. "Check your assumptions at the door," she muttered, but she looked pleased. "Then I just have one question."

Caine straightened. "Anything, your Majesty."

Her smile spread. "Next time, can I watch?"

"Your Majesty doesn't require permission." But the idea warmed him. Being able to show her his skill and training, without the danger - he liked it.

"Yeah, but it's polite to ask." Jupiter turned on the water, humming.

Caine was just stuffing the last of the leftovers into the refrigerator when Kiza came back in holding a small box. "Caine, I just remembered, this is yours," she said, handing it to him as he straightened. "It's stuff Dad hung onto for you."

"Stuff?" He took the box, staring down at it in puzzlement.

"I dunno - guess you'll have to open it." Kiza patted his arm, then went to take the dishtowel from Jupiter and hang it up. "Come on, your Majesty, I'll show you how to use the comm so you can get
in touch with Lady Kalique."

His first impulse was to follow, but instead Caine sat down at the now-empty table, pulling the lid off the battered plasboard container.

It was just a handful of little things - pretty pebbles he'd picked up on one world or another, the two medals he'd been awarded years back, his double-pipe, a sheave of holos. The latter was out of charge, he found when he tried to thumb it on, but if he remembered correctly it was mostly sunsets and aerial views.

Personal effects, things he'd given up as lost after the court-martial.

Caine looked up as Stinger came in, heading for the sink with a glass in his hand. "Bloody spicy food," the older man grumbled. "What's wrong with just bread and fruit, eh?"

Since Stinger had eaten most of three cartons of lunch, Caine ignored this. "Stinger."

"Mm?" Stinger held the glass under the spigot and turned the tap.

"If you were so mad at me, why did you keep all this?"

Stinger glanced back over his shoulder, then shut off the water and came over to the table. "Kept wha- - oh." His face reddened again. "Would you believe me if I told you it was Kiza done it?"

Caine regarded his commander, the old warmth unspooling behind his breastbone. "No."

"Aye, well." Stinger took a long drink. "I don't know exactly - never expected to see you get out of the Deadlands, for one." He regarded the box for a moment. "It just seemed like - you'd lost a lot even before then. Seemed a shame to let it all get thrown away."

Caine fingered one of the pebbles, a rough chunk of translucent rose. "Thank you."

When he looked up, Stinger was even redder, his brand standing out against his neck. "Tell anyone, and they'll not find the body," he said, smirking.

"Kiza did it," Caine agreed, letting his own smile loose. He picked up the double-pipe and blew out the dust, and Stinger snorted and left him to it.

He was running through scales when Jupiter came back in. She stopped and just stared at him, and he raised his brows and finished with an arpeggio before taking the instrument from his mouth. "Am I flat, your Majesty?"

She blinked twice, and he could see her pass on some bad joke. "No, it sounds fine to me - I just didn't know you played music."

"Legionnaires are encouraged to pick up a hobby. Something portable." Her Majesty was eyeing the double-pipe curiously, and he held it out to her.

She took it carefully, dropping into another chair, and looked it over. "Yeah? What does Stinger do?" She arranged her fingers on the stops. It looked more natural in her smaller hands - his were large enough that they almost covered the two barrels.

"Carves luckstones. I don't know if he does it any more, but before, just about everybody in the squadron had one of his." Caine pulled the box closer and rummaged through the pebbles until he found the little hexagon of cloudrock Stinger had given him years ago. No bigger than the tip of his
thumb, it had the sigil of their old unit carved in relief on one side, and on the other a profile of the pack predator spliced into his genes.

He rubbed it between thumb and forefinger; the glassy smoothness was an old familiarity. Its gifting had been the sign that he was really part of the squadron; it had been the first time since he'd been culled that he'd felt - not at home, exactly - but welcome.

It was strange, to remember that now; he'd kept it back for so long.

"May I see?" Jupiter asked.

Caine put it on the table and pushed it forward with one finger. She set the double-pipe aside and pinched up the little rock, rubbing her thumb over both faces in almost the same gesture he'd used, and then peering closely at it. Caine expected her to ask what the sigil meant, but she didn't, just passing it back in the same fashion. "He's got talent."

Caine scooped it up and dropped it back in the box. Jupiter smiled and held out the double-pipe. "Play something?"

He shook his head as he took it back. "I'm out of practice."

Her Majesty shrugged concedingly. "What kind of music do - Um. Crap." Her smile widened, rueful. "I'm not sure that question will translate. I don't think there's such a thing as space country and western."

He had to laugh a little. "Yeah, doesn't work, does it." He looked in the box one more time, just to make sure. "I had a music sheave too, but it's gone. It would have been out of charge anyway."

Probably one of his squadmates had taken it, and he couldn't grudge the theft, because he'd been as good as dead and why let it go to waste?

"Oh! Well, we can fix that." Jupiter bounced upright, face lighting. "Kiza! You have iTunes, right?"

Kiza's voice came back from the living room. "Duh."

Jupiter stood up, grabbing Caine's hand and pulling him up with her. "Great! You, my friend, are about to be introduced to the wide, wide world of Earth music."

The next two hours were filled with Earth's infonet, something called YouTube, and a fairly entertaining selection of music. Eventually Caine took over the primitive headset Kiza used on her machine (it made his ears ache, but the sound quality was good) and started calling things up at random, while Kiza and her Majesty argued the merits of various players and whether overnight delivery was better than going to the actual store.

And all the while, the thought ran through his head again and again. This is real. I'm really here, it's not a dream or a mirage.

It's real…

Jupiter wasn't quite sure what to expect when Stinger and Caine went out for sparring practice, but sitting on the porch steps with Kiza to watch, she had to admit it was impressive. In so many ways.

She'd seen them fight each other before, of course, and for real - kind of - but that had been hardly more than a spat. And Stinger's bees had distracted her pretty quickly anyway.
This time they were much more methodical about it, and a whole lot faster. And noisier, keeping up a near-constant stream of insults and trash talk as they threw punches and kicks, closed to grapple, and broke away again. Stinger wasn't so surprising, but Jupiter reflected that she hadn't heard Caine say so much at one time before.

It was fascinating. And very entertaining, on more than one level, though Jupiter kept that firmly behind her lips. Kiza sprawled next to her and shouted taunts on occasion, or explained some move to Jupiter, when she could be heard above the grunts and thuds.

Male mating ritual. Well, Jupiter could see how it could be foreplay, at least, which was another thought she didn't speak aloud, even though it set off an interesting quiver in her belly.

But beneath it all was the growing awareness that both men were also performing, and for an audience of her. Not just the usual male display in front of a female, either; it was more than that, more important.

They want to show me how good they are, because I am their Queen.

The thought settled a weight across her shoulders. For the first time, the role felt real. She wasn't just responsible for an oblivious Earth, or a bunch of still-theoretical worlds; these lives were truly in her hands, present and almost tangible.

Because of what she was, but also because they chose to be.

Some small part of her, the part that still hated cleaning other people's bathrooms, wanted to throw up its hands and say Fuck that. But the rest of her welcomed the new weight, bearing up under its pressure.

I already chose. This is just the next step.

It felt good.

And then Caine had Stinger pinned and griping, and Jupiter laughed and applauded, and watched Caine turn pink with pleasure. It was true she had no idea what to do next, but hell, she'd already winged it through Entitlement, kidnappings, dinner and a wedding, and fights with homicidal relations. It seemed to be working.

When practice was over, Stinger dodged inside; "My house, shower's mine first," trailed back. Kiza snorted and disappeared around the side of the barn; Caine, still breathing heavily, just shook his head and let his wings extend for a few lazy flaps.

Jupiter waved away the dust they raised and strolled over. "That was seriously impressive," she told him.

He went pink again, which was an adorable look. "Really?"

The question was almost inaudible, and Jupiter nudged his shoulder with hers. "Hell yes. I just wish I'd had a video camera."

Caine seemed to take that last about as seriously as she meant it, though his eyes were wide and delighted. "Your Majesty is too gracious."

My majesty is kinda turned on, actually. But this wasn't the time or place for that discussion. Jupiter settled for a kiss, putting her hands on his waist for a change and loving the way he leaned into her.
"I'm not clean," he murmured after a while, stroking a strand of her hair off her cheek.

"Don't care," Jupiter returned, and pressed closer. He smelled like warm leather, which she'd figured out was mostly his clothing (even though it wasn't leather), and musk, with a strange almost-herbal tang beneath. The sweat on his skin just made it more intense, and Jupiter took the opportunity to press her face into the hollow of his throat and breathe in.

Caine made a startled sound, his hands closing on her shoulders, but he didn't pull away. Jupiter laid a kiss on the still-hot skin beneath her lips, then tilted her head back to look up.

Caine's eyes were closed, his brow furrowed as if something were hurting him, and Jupiter touched his cheek. "Are you okay?"

He blinked his eyes open. "...Yes." His wings curved slowly forward until they stood in a circle of feathers.

Jupiter turned a little, reaching out to brush her fingers along the top of one. Caine shifted her gently so that her back was to his chest, and brought his wings in closer, wrapping his arms around her as well. It felt wonderful, and Jupiter sighed happily, snuggling back against him.

"What did Lady Kalique say?" Caine asked just over her head.

"Hm? Oh, I didn't speak to her, just to her steward-guy. Mr. Malidictes." Jupiter closed her hands over Caine's. "She's going to meet me when I, um, get up there."

But before she could really relax, a window slammed open somewhere and Stinger shouted something about the shower. Caine growled, more vibration than sound, and his wings withdrew as he released Jupiter.

"To be continued," she muttered. He snorted, and followed her inside.

Sunday was quieter. Stinger disappeared after breakfast, saying he had something he had to do. Caine started working on some complicated piece of equipment; he called it a *shield projector*, which was apparently entirely different from the device he wore on his arm, but since it involved both holograms and enough gears to rev a steampunk addict Jupiter didn't even bother asking. Space tech was *weird*.

They were out in the yard, stripping corn for dinner, when Jupiter finally screwed up the courage to ask Kiza. It felt a bit high school, but she had to get data from somewhere.

"You've known Caine for a while, haven't you?"

"So?" Kiza echoed, then had mercy on her. "He's a lonely soul. Dad told you that lycantants come in packs, right?"

Kiza looked up, grinning a little. "Oh aye. Dad used to bring him by every so often, felt sorry for him I think."

"So..." Jupiter trailed off, not sure how to ask. *What's he really like? What does he eat, what makes him laugh, what happened to him after the - the attack?*

"So?" Kiza echoed, then had mercy on her. "He's a lonely soul. Dad told you that lycantants come in packs, right?"

Jupiter nodded, and Kiza set aside her clean ear and reached for another. "He's not really possible, Caine isn't, but try to tell *him* that. He'll work his tail off just to prove he can do it, but nobody really had a good word for him besides Dad. Too small, too odd."
It hurt Jupiter's brain to think of Caine as *small*, but it was obvious that he had a ferocious inferiority complex going. Not at all helped, she thought viciously, by a society that treated him like a disposable - but he seemed to be an outcast even beyond that.

Except for these two, and now Jupiter...

"I told him he should have applied for transfer out of Dad's squadron, rather than come back here," Kiza went on soberly, and Jupiter blinked in shock.

"Why?"

Kiza bent over the ear whose silk she was peeling away, strand by strand. "Because..." She looked up, and her expression was almost frightened. "Majesty, can I be honest?"

Jupiter squeezed the ear she was holding, feeling the husk rough against her palm. "Only if you call me Jupiter."

Kiza dropped her gaze again. "He's practically bonded to you. But when you see what it's really like, being an Entitled...being pushed back, well, it'll...hurt him."

Jupiter pinched her eyes shut for a moment. The smell of the corn was strong in her nose, a fresh earthy scent that was just that, Earthy. It made it harder to think about what she'd seen out there, the strange twisted fantasy of living forever.

"I know I haven't seen much of it," she began carefully. "But what I did see, I didn't much like. And I hope I'm not the kind of person who would *do* that to someone."

Kiza lifted one shoulder in a shrug, small and defensive. "I'm just...afraid for him, your - Jupiter."

Part of Jupiter wanted to reach over and shake Kiza into seeing her as *herself* again, not the alien they expected her to become. The other part, the cool, analytical voice that was showing up more and more often, overrode it. *She doesn't really know you*, it said. *And Caine's her friend; she loves him. Of course she's afraid.*

"I hear you," she said finally, and Kiza nodded, and they finished the corn in something like peace.

"Mister, Miss, Sa," Jupiter muttered to herself, and worked a dock root out of the ground. *Mister for guys, Miss for girls and it has nothing to do with whether they're married or not, and Sa for neuter people. Pretty straightforward.*

Weeding Stinger's garden was actually a good way to work off nervous energy and go over some of the huge number of things she was trying to memorize. Kiza had shown her what was a weed and what wasn't, mostly, and then gone off on an errand, and Jupiter knew Caine was around, because every so often she'd look up to see him passing through, either on watch or to watch her.

She didn't mind. It felt oddly good to be protected, and while normally it would make her nervous to have someone staring at her, this was Caine - it already felt strange when he wasn't around.

*Oh, you are so fucked,* she told herself. *Completely gone on a winged wolf-guy from another planet. What do you even know about him, really? Like, what planet?*

And yet...it didn't matter. She hadn't thought it possible, this connection - *attraction* was *far* too weak a word - with anyone. On some level, she'd believed her mother's words about
love.

_Gotta admit, this does kind of sound like a fairy tale. Complete with evil villains._ But knowing that this man was willing to not only kill for her but _die_ for her...it should have made her feel uncomfortable, panicky even. Instead, it was like when he said her title -

"Your Majesty?"

Jupiter started and looked up. Caine was standing next to her, and as she squinted he shifted to block the sun from her eyes. "Hey, what's up?" She wondered if she was blushing.

"Stinger just called in. The squadron made orbit last night, and they're coming in." He held out a hand to pull her to her feet.

"Yeah?" Jupiter let him help her up, then wiped her forehead on her arm, feeling grimy. "I should probably go clean up then."

Caine looked up at the sky, and just shook his head. His wings were unfurling, but instead of extending all the way out he arranged them so that they rose behind his head, a sort of mantle, and widened his stance.

And they came.

One by one, falling out of the sky like - gods, Jupiter thought in stunned irreverence. Each one dropping precisely to land on one knee, head bent, wings held at the same angle as Caine's; surrounding her in a circle that pulsed like a heartbeat, one more soldier each second in a maneuver of breathtaking precision. Ten of them, and Stinger last, leading them in a shout that seemed to shake the air.

She had no _words._

Then they were rising in unison, wings snapping back, and Stinger stepped forward, face suffused with restrained pride. "Your Majesty, the Legion Skyjacker squadron _Stormbreaker_ is pleased to present itself for your inspection."

She was spending an awful lot of time these days feeling small, grubby, and unprepared. Jupiter made a mental note to talk to Caine about _timing_, swallowed hard, and looked...up.

They were _all_ taller than her, Stinger's size or bigger, men and women and at least one she couldn't actually tell - faces varying wildly, but all bearing the same beautiful brown-and-silver wings that Caine and Stinger shared. It was good to have Caine's strength at her back, because this was brute power multiplied, but as she looked at their impassive, parade-rest faces, she could see hints of the same awe that had been in Stinger's face, that first bee-filled day.

_Oh boy._

Jupiter took a deep breath, tried to channel someone innately gracious (all she could think of was Madeleine Albright, for some reason), and nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Apini," she managed, and the calmness of her own voice surprised her. "I'm very pleased to accept them."

And as Stinger beamed and started to introduce them, she had to smother a totally inappropriate giggle. _I think we're going to need more corn..._
Chapter 5

The view of Chicago from midair over the water, Jupiter decided, was almost as good as the one from the top of the Sears Tower. It was interesting to see how quickly the city shrank as they got further from the shore, and in the sunset light the buildings glowed, looking for a little while like a different, more magical place.

Being that far out over the water made Caine nervous, however, though it manifested mostly in scowls and flying so close that Jupiter was afraid she'd smack into him. The winds were rougher out there, but she could deal.

"What's your problem?" she finally asked, as they made their way back to shore. She had to shout a little to be heard over the wind.

"I don't like deep water." Caine jerked his chin at the waves below them.

"Oh. Well, you can swim, right?"

He shook his head. "I sink."

"I guess that makes sense, all that muscle and low body fat," Jupiter agreed, and coasted down to the beach, aiming for a spot past the waterline, and only stumbled a little on landing. Caine came in gracefully, wings curving to drop him to the shore, and Jupiter admitted silently to a bit of envy. "But that doesn't mean you can't learn how. Like, what if you had to fight on a boat or something?"

"I have." Caine shook out his wings and folded them up. "We wore shields. At full power they could keep us dry for eighteen hours."

"Right." Jupiter smoothed back strands of hair blown loose by the wind. "And what would have happened when the power went out?"

He gave her a duh look. "We would have drowned."

She had to laugh. "That's no good. I'll teach you." At his horrified expression, she rolled her eyes. "Not here. Later. Somewhere warmer."

Before he could respond to that, Jupiter felt her phone vibrate, and pulled it out of her pocket. The text notice on the screen read Your Majesty, may I have a moment of your time?

The originating address was hash - space tech interacted only halfway with Earth's systems - but the phrasing told Jupiter that it had to be from Captain Tsing. "Huh." She turned the phone so Caine could see it. "I wonder what that's about."

He lifted a hand to the implant behind his ear. "Do you want me to ask?"
"Sure." Jupiter put the phone back and watched as Caine held a one-sided conversation with nothing. The idea of having a cellphone - at least the phone part - embedded in her skull was an interesting idea, but Jupiter was still a little creeped out by it.

"She'd like to see you in person," Caine said finally. "They can enter atmosphere right now, if you'll permit."

"Okay, why not." I wonder what's going on.

It took barely five minutes for the transport beam to appear, shining serenely down on the shore though the cruiser above stayed cloaked. Jupiter stepped into it and felt the now-familiar quiver as gravity stopped working for her and the ground seemed to fall away beneath her feet.

Caine chose to use his wings instead, springing into the air and making lazy circles around her as she rose, and Jupiter had to smile every time he went past. Caine was mostly looking outward, on guard even now, but she saw his lips twitch more than once.

She considered making faces at him, just to make him break down and laugh, but he swooped up and out of sight, and then she was rising the last few yards into the cruiser.

Captain Tsing was waiting for her near the beam hatch; so was Caine, who took her hand to help her out of the beam, courtly-style since she didn't actually need it, but since it meant touching him she wasn't going to argue at all. Behind Tsing was most of the bridge crew - which was really most of the crew, period, it wasn't a big ship, at least compared to the others Jupiter had seen so far (and wasn't that enough to make her head hurt).

Captain Tsing bowed her head, smiling. "Your Majesty, welcome aboard," she said.

Jupiter grinned at her. "Thanks. What's up?"

"I apologize for not coming to you, but as you requested, we didn't want to disturb your family," the Captain began. Jupiter waved this off.

"Sure, no problem. Is something the matter?"

Captain Tsing shook her head, clasping her hands behind her back. "No, your Majesty. But with the arrival of your honor guard, this cruiser is due to be reassigned."

"Ohhh." Jupiter blinked. "Of course," she said blankly, feeling something not unlike panic knotting in her stomach. Of course they have to go, they're cops, they've got work to get back to!

But she knew so little about this new universe, there were so few people she could trust - "I wish you could stay," she blurted.

Captain Tsing's face brightened a trifle, and the crew, standing at more-or-less attention behind her, shifted hopefully. "I wish we could too, your Majesty."

She knew the feeling of missing a cue, it happened a lot these days. Jupiter cocked her head, trying to figure it out.

Caine, lips pursed in that tiny smile, leaned down to speak quietly. "I think they're hoping you'll buy out their contracts, your Majesty."

Jupiter blinked again. "I can do that?"
Captain Tsing straightened a trifle. "Any Aegis employee who has worked the value of their contract may be purchased away by an interested party. Subject, of course, to the usual will-to-work regulations and so forth."

That sounded borderline unethical to Jupiter, but she wasn't going to argue, not if it meant keeping people she knew around. "Sure! I mean, yes, absolutely."

The bridge crew actually started cheering, and it made her grin. "Not that I know anything about - I don't even know how much you guys get paid."

"Standard contracts will be fine, your Majesty," Captain Tsing said firmly, though her own smile was wide. "We can negotiate with Mr. Malidictes, unless you have appointed a new head of finance."

Jupiter made a mental note to find a head of finance as soon as possible. "That's great! Um, does the ship come along with you?"

"That's a separate negotiation," Officer Percadium said, stepping up beside the Captain with an even wider grin. "If you like, your Majesty, I can handle that for you. We're all fond of the old girl, we'd hate to leave her."

"Please," Jupiter said with fervor. The manifests Malidictes had read off to her had any number of starships listed, but they were all out there somewhere, and besides she had no idea what they looked like or what they were capable of doing. She glanced up at Caine, who took her plea for help as his own cue.

"You can coordinate with Commander Apini, Captain," he said with a touch of deference. "I'm sure he'll be pleased to have his security force increased."

"I look forward to working with him on a closer basis," Captain Tsing said, satisfied.

When Jupiter stepped back into the transport beam, waving back at the snappy salutes made in her direction, she had to laugh, if only to herself. Every time I turn around, this whole thing gets bigger.

But it was laugh or run screaming, and she didn't want to fall out of the beam...

Two windfalls came to the Bolotnikov household that summer, and Vassily dated from them for years. First, a British solicitor turned up on their very doorstep with a small bequest for the child of the long-deceased Maximilian Jones, an inheritance from a distant relation who had passed away.

Second, their own Jupiter, that same child, landed a job that required no papers and promised a salary far beyond what she could hope to bring in cleaning houses. A wealthy young woman - reclusive and sickly - had heard of Jupiter through her friend Katharine, and hired her to serve as a personal assistant and something of a caretaker. It would, of course, mean that she would have to leave the family home - she would require an apartment much closer to her employer's - but despite her mother's reservations it would also mean more space in the basement.

And Jupiter, in the true spirit of family, poured most of the bequest into the family coffers, and promised a share of her wages as well.

Whatever reservations Vassily might have had were swept away by that prospect.

"I know you don't like it, Aleksa," he said as they discussed it, just the three of them in the living room, "but children grow up. And here in America, we speak English, and our children move out
when they grow up, instead of staying home with the family where they belong."

Aleksa snorted. Jupiter laughed, and hugged him; he squeezed her back, glad in his heart that she really was growing up. It would be better, of course, if she found some nice young man - Russian if possible - and married him and started having fat babies his sisters could play with, but Jupiter was smart, and sometimes it was better to just let them go.

Perhaps she'd find that nice boy somewhere out there among the wealthy; now, wouldn't that be luck?

"Mama?" Jupiter looked pleadingly at Aleksa. "May I have your blessing?"

Aleksa heaved a long sigh. "It's not right for you to live alone," she grumbled, but pulled her daughter into her embrace.

"Don't worry, мамочка," she said, laughing. "I'll still come home for supper sometimes."

Vassily sat back, content.

There really wasn't a whole lot one could do with a telescope in an urban area - too much light pollution - but a few things were visible. Jupiter spent a while gazing at the planet she'd been named for, contrasting the tiny bright image with the terrifying reality.

It was weird. She'd daydreamed for a long time about a telescope like the one her father had owned, one that would bring the stars he loved closer. But now that she'd actually been out among them, the view from the roof seemed fake, almost; it left out so much.

But it did make her feel closer to her father. Maximilian would have been fascinated, she thought; horrified by a lot of it, but delighted at the chance to see beyond what one simple instrument could show him.

When she was small, Jupiter had made up conversations with her father, going to and from school or lying in bed at night. He had always been kind and understanding and on her side, no matter what her mother or Nino or Vassily might say; but it had been years since she'd let the fantasies fade away, folded up her image of him and tucked it behind the frame on her mother's dresser.

_Daddy._ She closed her eyes, one finger stroking the cold metal of the telescope's stand. _What would you want me to do?_

It was silly, there was no way to know for sure. But the imaginary father of her childhood smiled at her, gentle and loving. _What needs to be done, my -_

"Jupiter?"

Her eyes popped open, and she looked up to see her mother ducking carefully onto the roof. "Hi Mama."

Aleksa came over to where Jupiter sat, hands held slightly out for balance even though the edge was several feet away. "Nice night," she said, grudgingly, and Jupiter smiled and patted the roof next to her.

Aleksa sat gingerly, and for a little while they just kept the silence, hearing the occasional hum or rattle of an engine passing by. Finally Aleksa spoke.
"This job. It's not really for a rich girl."

Slowly, Jupiter shook her head. She should be panicking, she supposed, but calm seemed to cradle her, up here in the night above the streetlights.

Aleksa sighed. "I knew that. But it's not bad, is it?"

Jupiter shook her head again. "It's not bad, Mama. But it's big, bigger than you can imagine, and I don't know how to explain."

Aleksa's voice was calm as well. "I won't ask. You're a woman now, it's your business no matter what Vassily says. But you know if you're in trouble, the family is always here to help."

Jupiter's eyes stung, and she sniffled once before putting an arm around her mother and leaning in. Aleksa returned the embrace, pressing a kiss to the crown of Jupiter's head.

"Nino always said you were destined for something great," she said after a while.

Jupiter laughed a little, then sobered. "Mama, have you ever wanted to teach again?"

She felt the ripple run through Aleksa, though what it meant she couldn't tell. "What, after all these years? They don't give tenure to illegals." The comment was a dry joke.

"What if you weren't?"

Aleksa went very still. Jupiter pulled in a breath and continued. "With the right lawyers, you could get papers. Maybe papers for everybody."

"Can't afford that." Aleksa's voice was dismissive, but the tremor came again.

"I might be able to make it work, Mama." She wasn't about to unleash a space-lawyer - or worse, Advocate Bob - on the INS. But money could hire lawyers here on Earth, the best lawyers.

Aleksa's voice went distant, as if coming through layers of time. "I didn't regret not staying home, you know. Russia was familiar, but dead end without Max. America, land of opportunity, eh?" She chuckled, and Jupiter tightened her arm, smiling wryly.

"You do what you must," Aleksa said then, her voice firm. "Yes, legal would be good. But you take care of your big thing, don't worry about little things."

"Yes, Mama." Jupiter hugged her again, privately resolving to see about the matter before she left Earth.

Just in case.

And they sat together, watching the night spin away.

The actual location of the building didn't matter much to him; Caine had access to better security devices than any on Earth, and he planned to be nearby most of the time anyway. But he checked line of sight to and from the windows anyway, and explored the roof access and staircase before he approved it.

His Queen circled the small apartment, eyes narrowed thoughtfully, as he stood by the door. It was hardly more than what she called an "efficiency", but the building was newer and the empty space was clean. Though Jupiter had run a judging finger along the woodwork and muttered something
"Not bad," she said at last, and Kiza, who was sitting on the one kitchen counter and swinging her legs, grinned.

"I could find you something bigger," she began, but Jupiter shook her head.

"It's going to be tough enough to convince my family about this job. Anything fancier and even Vladie would smell that rat." She smiled a little uncertainly and tilted her head. "Are you sure this is okay with you?"

Kiza shrugged. "Like you said, I probably won't have to do it unless it's an emergency. And you bought me that wardrobe, how can I argue?" Her grin went cheeky.

Stinger had grumbled about Kiza being tapped to play Jupiter's fictional employer if necessary, but Caine thought he was overreacting. Kiza was smart and willing and could, Jupiter said, look the part; and if her Majesty wanted it so, then it was up to them to provide it as best they could.

"Fair enough. And next door's empty too, right?" At Kiza's nod, Jupiter went over to the living room wall and rapped lightly on it. "Good. I'll put in applications."

Kiza nodded again, and slid down from the counter. "Then I'd better head back, it's going to be dark soon and you know how Dad gets."

"Parents, yeah," Jupiter agreed, and they smirked at each other in an understanding opaque to Caine.

It didn't bother him. He'd never had a family, as such, though the Legionnaires had come close for a while; he'd done squadrons, and solo, and now he was the chief bodyguard and...something...to one rebellious, incredulous, tercie-born Entitled.

He'd never been happier.

Kiza took her leave, and Jupiter looked around the apartment once more, testing the stove burners and opening the fridge to sniff suspiciously. "It's really not a lot of space. Are you sure this will be okay?"

Her concern baffled him. "Your Majesty?"

She waved vaguely at the apartment. "This. I'm not even sure you can spread your wings all the way in here. Is it big enough?"

Caine cocked his head, then shrugged off his jacket. His wings unfurled slowly, and he stretched them as far as they could go. They cleared the walls, barely. "It's fine."

Jupiter sighed, and he closed them with a snap. "You think I'll feel cramped in here?"

"Yes." His Queen threw up her hands. "I don't know what you're used to, but -"

He gave her a patient look. "Majesty, I used to share a bunkroom half this size with seven Skyjackers, and all of us had wings."

That made her laugh a little, and he forbore to mention the bare rock he'd slept on in the Deadlands. Things like that always upset her, and it wasn't important anyway. This spot was clean, dry, and as safe as he could make it: luxury.

"Well, at least we can double the space." Jupiter fished the iriser from the bag she carried and set it
against the wall, and within seconds it had opened a passage to the next apartment, a mirror of the one they stood in. "Vassily knows a wholesaler furniture dealer; bet we can get some decent furniture in here with no trouble."

"As your Majesty pleases," Caine murmured, ducking through ahead of her. The iriser was a short-term solution, but there were other things that could be used; and as Jupiter had already noted, she wasn't planning to spend much time there at all.

The second apartment was just as clean and empty. Jupiter performed the same checks she had in the first one; as she closed the refrigerator, Caine cleared his throat. "Has Stinger spoken to you about the squad leaves yet?"

Jupiter looked puzzled. "Leaves? Oh, leaves, right, not tree parts." She waved a hand, grinning. "No. You guys get the weekend off?"

"Not exactly." He tapped his upper arm. "Since you've officially accepted the Stormbreakers as your honor guard, we need to update our insignia."

Her brows went up. "Is that what that's for? Cool!" She stared at his arm as if she could read the pattern through his sleeve. "So, wait, you can change it?"

"The process is pretty simple, but we have to visit a Legion post. Stinger said I should go first, as senior."

"Oh." Jupiter sobered. "Will you have to be gone long?"

The question made a warmth start up in the pit of his stomach. "Just a couple of days. Stinger will assign one of the others to close-guard you in the meantime."

"Oh-kay." Jupiter bit her lip. "I mean, not to knock them, they all seem pretty nice, but I don't really know them."

"You will," Caine said. "Rush Orig is senior after me, but if you'd prefer Stinger could choose one of the females. Probably Forthwith Antinari."

"She's one of the twins, right?" At his nod, Jupiter brightened. "I'll get 'em straight eventually. Okay, but you hurry back, all right?"

"Of course, your Majesty." Caine didn't bother to hide his smile as he went to examine the blinds.

They seemed to work in a truly illogical fashion, and he gave up poking at them when he heard Jupiter sigh. "What is it?"

"I don't know." She tugged at her tail of hair, then pulled off its elastic band to reset it. "I guess I'm just a little freaked at the idea of actually moving out."

Caine came over to take the band from her, smoothing her hair carefully back from her face. She sighed again, this time happily, and leaned into his hands; he bent his head over her crown to pull her scent deep into his lungs, and took his time refastening the tail. "Many things have changed for you recently."

"Mmm. Some of them are good." She turned as soon as he was finished, sliding her arms up around his neck and tugging his head down for a kiss. "Some are very good."

It was such a strange bliss to stand with his Queen in his arms like this, to kiss her without stint or
reservation and feel those kisses returned, to soak himself in her scent and taste and know how pleased she was. He had never expected something so rich and wonderful to happen to him.

Stinger had been right; he'd been hunting for this all his life. He'd just never truly believed he would find it. He would have been content to guard her, just that, if she had asked no more of him.

But she did ask.

Nowhere else could he have found this. No one else ever looked at him the way she did, moving right past all the things that made him unfit in others' eyes as if they didn't exist. He did want to bite her, in the very best way; he wanted to bare his own throat to her and let her do as she willed -

He was about to lift her off her feet for a better angle when her phone shrilled. Jupiter winced and broke their kiss. "Crap, I need to get that, sorry."

She stepped away to answer it. Caine went to investigate the small bedroom and play with the sliding door of the closet, mouth still tingling with the taste of her. Her Majesty moving into this space would suit him, at least; it would be much easier to guard her if he could be close by. Her family's home was difficult to secure, all the more so if any watchers had to stay out of sight.

And despite her reservations, there was plenty of space for several of her honor guard. Nor would they complain; access to the kitchen alone would be worth the minor crowding.

Caine made a mental note to obtain groceries.

*Lots of groceries.*

A year was pretty much a year all over the known universe. It was one of those things everyone knew, and Stinger hadn't consciously thought about it for years until he'd had to explain it to Jupiter. Planets might vary in the time they took to complete an orbit, but as far as humanity was concerned, a year was one Orus-orbit. Which happened to be roughly the same as Earth's, but that was merely coincidence.

She'd taken in that explanation with little more than a "Hmph" and gone on, leaving Stinger to reflect that a year, hell, a *month* before...Earth's *or* Orus'...he never could have imagined what he had now.

His commission, his wings. His friend. His daughter, well and whole.

And his Queen.

She really did grow on a man. Plucky, determined, and down-to-her-Earth, she was about as far from an Entitled as one could get. She was also naive, impulsive, and occasionally distressingly stubborn, but she was young, it was to be expected.

And all Stinger's gene-engraved habits of deference and obedience kept running into her blunt refusal to simply accept them. She'd have to eventually, he figured; but in the meantime it was going to be a wild ride.

He sat on his front porch and waited for the Queen and her chief bodyguard to get back from morning flight practice. Somehow his isolated home had become the informal base for - well, it wasn't a *court*, exactly. But whatever was forming around her.

Stinger found he didn't mind. Being made Jupiter's Chief of Security as soon as he showed his face was not entirely unexpected; who else did the poor kid *know*, after all? It was easy to assign most of
his squadron to atmospheric patrol and the rest to ground perimeter, with a few detached to keep an eye on Jupiter's family.

The memory of her cheerfully shaking hands with each squad member was something he treasured. Never had he seen so many tough, experienced soldiers taken aback at once.

But one squadron of honor guard and a personal bodyguard wasn't anywhere near enough, even with the addition of the former Aegis crew. Even if Kalique was telling the truth about protecting Jupiter's interests, and Stinger trusted Entitled about as far as he could throw a warship with his bare hands, his Queen was going to need help. Much more help than one runt lycantant and an old soldier could give her.

Laughter rang down from the sky, and two figures dropped into the yard, one wearing glowing boots and the other beating a fine spread of wings. Jupiter managed to skim up the steps with reasonable smoothness, though her stop was still too abrupt for grace; Caine merely angled up a little and landed neatly on the porch rail, which fortunately had been rebuilt well enough to withstand his weight. He perched there, wings slightly out for balance, and nodded to Stinger.

Jupiter, still laughing, bent over to catch her breath and deactivate the boots. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask," she said, straightening flushed and windblown. "If all you Skyjackers have wings, why do you have the boots too?"

Caine answered that one. "Not all missions are in environments where wings can be used. Some require pressure suits."

"Not to mention getting one shot off you is a black-hole bitch," Stinger added dryly.

"Ouch." The Queen flapped one hand in vague apology and sat on the seat opposite Stinger, reaching for the pitcher of iced herb tea. "Refill?"

Stinger hesitated before holding out his glass. He couldn't help it; the idea that an Entitled would serve anybody, let alone a Splice, was so absurd that he had to consciously think himself into motion. But she didn't seem to notice, merely topping off his glass before pouring two more and handing one to Caine.

She sipped, sighed, and smiled; Stinger felt a small surge of ridiculous pride. The blend, and the honey that sweetened it, were his own, and Jupiter had quickly claimed an addiction to it. Caine guzzled it by the gallon, but somehow that wasn't nearly as complimentary.

"So where were we?" Jupiter asked, as a veil of bees drifted in to hover over her head. "I don't care if I own an entire garment industry, Stinger, I'm not gonna bring them all down here to dress me every day."

Stinger refrained from rolling his eyes and instead took a swallow himself. "Let's agree to set aside protocol and personal attendants for now, your Majesty. But you still have an urgent need for staff."

Jupiter grimaced. At that moment Kiza swung the screen door open to stick her head out. "Lunch'll be ready in about half an hour. Majesty, can I borrow Caine?" Her grin was cheeky, but there was no good taking her to task; the Queen was grinning back.

"Only if he wants to." Jupiter cocked a brow at Caine, whose attempt at deadpan failed when the corner of his mouth twitched up. His gaze slid to Stinger's, though, who gave him the tiniest of nods in return - taking over watch.
The lycantant dropped easily down from his perch and followed Kiza inside, only a faint grumble about KP duty again echoing back. Jupiter snickered and poured herself more tea.

"I saw that," she noted, raising the glass at Stinger, who gave her an innocent look back. "Staff?"

"Some say the first talent of rule is delegation," Stinger said. "I'm just a soldier, your Majesty. You need assistants, and you need advisors. Unless you want to rely on Lady Kalique for all your information."

Jupiter wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, good point. And I think I need a head of finance too."

"Exactly. And when you leave here, you'll require ship crews, service staff - some are still in place, tending the late Queen's properties, but they won't be enough."

Her Majesty looked as if she was getting another headache. "Let's start with the basics. I have security, what else do I need immediately?"

"Someone to handle day-to-day operations - several someones, I should think." As her Security chief, Stinger had been given access to the Queen's personnel rolls, but while he didn't know all the positions listed, most of them seemed to be related to the private side of Entitled life, not the business side - at least on the level that would be expected to interact directly with her Majesty. It made sense; experienced talent would have been moved to another branch of the family after Seraphi's death, or hired away. "You probably won't need a majordomo until you leave Earth, but a personal secretary or two wouldn't come amiss."

"Mm." She chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip, staring out at the cornfield but clearly not seeing it.

Stinger let her think.

"What I want," she said slowly, "is to understand this weird-ass economy you all live by, that's based on melting people down for parts."

Stinger hid a flinch. He'd figured this would happen; this sort of culture clash was common among tercies, if he recalled his Legion protocol briefings correctly. "That's as may be, your Majesty, but I wouldn't phrase it like that. Not where people can hear you."

Her gaze flicked to him, and the hint of chill in it made him bow his head; but at the same time, he felt a tiny stir behind his breastbone.

Maybe she's got the metal for this after all.

"So noted," Jupiter said after a moment, and when he looked up again the commanding air was gone, replaced by uncertainty. "It's just - "

Stinger raised his brows, inviting her to continue.

"I don't know if I can trust anybody from - out there," and she gestured upward, a few bees accenting the wave. The pang of guilt wasn't quite as sharp as it might have been, but he still felt his face flushing, and Jupiter winced. Reaching forward, she tapped his wrist lightly. "It's great to have you three, and the squad - hell, I'd be dead without you, several times over - but like you said, I need specialists, and I think I need someone who doesn't already have an agenda."

Stinger sighed, the guilt mixing with a shy pleasure at her approbation, but he set them both aside. "I'm not sure that's possible, Majesty. Anyone you can hire will be...part of the culture."

Jupiter drank from her glass. "Then...I'll have to look closer to home."
Stinger frowned. "A tercie won't understand," he began, but she cut him off.

"I'm a tercie, and I understand. At least a little," she added ruefully. "Look, we can present it as a hypothesis first, something made up. See what they say. If it doesn't fly -" She shrugged. "There's always that memory-blanking trick." Though her lips tightened at the mention of it.

Aha. "You've already got someone in mind, haven't you?"

She smiled a little. "Maybe."

Uh-oh. Well, you knew getting back into the Legion meant the end of peace and quiet. "Yes, your Majesty," he said, and was rewarded with a grin.

He'd been sick of peace anyway.

As Caine had told his Queen, having his insignia updated was simple; he merely had to report to the nearest Legion post with a copy of his assignment orders, and within a couple of hours he bore not only the Stormbreaker sigil but a simplified version of Jupiter's as well. He was proud to bear her name and title, proper acknowledgment of his service to her and her connection to him.

He could have caught the next transport back to Earth's sector and called for pickup from the former Aegis crew, but he'd asked Stinger for an extra day of leave. There was something he had to do.

Orus was as much a nightmare as ever; the mere smell of the dusty corridors made him itch, and brought back memories of following Jupiter through its endless labyrinth and watching her be taken further from him at each stop. But the fresh tingle in his arm was as good a counterweight to that as the wings on his back, and Caine kept his head up and his pace brisk. He had as much right to be there as anyone, now.

He had to sign in at the prison complex, but no one questioned his destination, and it wasn't hard to find the level he wanted.

Entitleds had more than tiny bare rooms, of course. Titus' prison was a bower of luxury, full of silks and plants and dainties and even some artwork. But none of that mattered to Caine; the only thing that did was the barrier that kept Titus from leaving.

He was standing there at parade rest for almost two minutes before Titus, sprawled on a divan, noticed him. It took the Abrasax scion another two to actually look up, of course, but the power play was worthless. Caine merely waited, silent.

Finally Titus lifted his eyes, gave an exaggerated double-take, and tossed aside his sheave, leaning back as if at ease. "Ah, Mr. Wise. Come to gloat?"

His careless air was almost genuine, but Caine could smell him through the forcewall - smoldering anger, humiliation, and a tinge of desperation. It pleased him.

"That's not the term I'd use," Caine told him, not moving. Though...it was pretty close.

Titus regarded him a moment, pressing a finger to his lips. "Then why are you here?" he asked casually. There was an upsurge of hope, that perhaps this scorned gamepiece could somehow be made use of -

"So you can see me," Caine said easily.
Titus actually blinked. "That I can," he said, cocking his head to one side. "Is there a reason behind this vision?"

Caine ignored the mockery, and slowly extended his wings, raising them up over his head in as much of a display as the corridor would admit. Titus' expression didn't change, but Caine could see his jaw tightening. "I'm here to tell you that if you ever even think about threatening Queen Jupiter again, you won't live to finish the thought."

The rage-scent spiked, and Titus laughed scornfully. "She sent a feral Splice to threaten me? She - "

"It's not a threat," Caine overrode him, and watched Titus' lips part in astonishment at the interruption. "It's what will happen. And her Majesty didn't send me; I came on my own."

"You're lying," Titus said flatly.

Caine shrugged, wings rustling. "Maybe I am," he said casually. "Didn't you tell me that lies give life meaning?"

He smiled, letting his teeth show. "It can be your reason to get up in the morning."

The over-pretty mouth twisted in fury, and Titus seized the nearest object - an empty glass - and hurled it at the forcewall. "Get out! Get out of my sight, you misbegotten mistake!"

The glass bounced off the forcewall and shattered on the ground. Caine watched the pieces spray, lifting one brow, then cocked his head at Titus, who was turning purple.

Finally he turned to go, and drew his wings in enough to clear the corridor wall as he stepped out of sight. He'd done what he'd came for, and while he was both pleased and satisfied...he still wanted a shower.

And to get back to his Queen.
Her Majesty was on a tear.

It was the first time Stinger had seen her really lose her temper, and his inbred deference was urging him to go find someplace else to be just at the moment, but he ignored it. For one thing, any moment now she would -

"Did you know about this?" Jupiter whirled on him, one hand still gripping the sheave that had set her off. Stinger held back a shrug.

"It's standard procedure for farmed worlds, Your Majesty," he said carefully. "A globally secure population tends to stabilize growth at a level too low for profitable Harvesting."

"So you people send down agents to make things worse?" She smacked the sheave against her other palm, ignoring its pained beep. "Stir things up, keep people fighting each other and having bad ideas and I don't know what the fuck else? Like a Harvest isn't bad enough!"

Stinger did not point out that he had nothing to do with it; it wouldn't help. "That's economics, Your Majesty," he said, as diplomatically as possible.

Jupiter growled under her breath. "Get them here," she said abruptly.


"Get them here. I want to see them. In person."

Well, if anyone had the right, but - "Ah. Your Majesty, I'm not sure here is the best place."

She looked around at his home, distracted enough to frown. "If you don't want them here, I guess - "

He dared to interrupt. "That's not it. You really, uh, need someplace more...impressive."

"Oh." Jupiter frowned, her temper dying back, but the set of her mouth told him that she was still furious. And determined. "You have a point. The apartment's the only other option, really."

"You have a third," Stinger reminded her. "The Aegis ship."

Her smile was equal parts approval and anger. "Good idea. I'll call Captain Tsing."

Stinger cleared his throat. "If you'll permit, Your Majesty, I'll set it up. You'll need to, ah, present a more royal appearance."

Jupiter glanced down at her faded shirt and thigh-length pants, and snorted. "Very tactful, Stinger. Okay, I'll find something else to wear. What kind of timeframe are we looking at?"
He was already heading for the comm. "About half an hour." A royal command superseded time zones, after all. And he'd need at least four of the Stormbreakers; the former Aegis were good, but nothing beat size and wings for looking impressive.

He heard Jupiter yelp, and then she was gone, feet pounding up the stairs, and he let himself smile. *Entitled she may be, but she's still - her.*

And wasn't that a blessing, somehow?

Within the promised half-hour the Queen was settling gingerly into a cushioned chair someone had dragged hastily out of Captain Tsing's quarters. She'd changed into her Aegis outfit, which looked formal enough if not very Entitled, and pulled her hair back in that severe tail; in Stinger's opinion, she'd do quite well.

The ship's officers' mess wasn't a large room, but it was the best option, and had ordinary chairs enough for the personnel Jupiter was summoning. Stinger positioned Rush and Absaba behind her - the combination of their height and faces would make a good impression - and let Tsing place a few of her people around the room. Technically the agents on Earth were her Majesty's employees, but there was a reason Entitled kept squads of guards on hand, and it wasn't for the honor of it. Stormbreakers Honch and Glasta could handle escort; Honch was large, and Glasta was pointy, and together they would be enough to make most potential assassins reconsider.

"How many are coming?" he asked Captain Tsing in a low voice as Officer Percadium swung a last chair into place at the table.

"Five. We couldn't raise the sixth; I sent Chatterjee down to check, but I suspect that he dissolved his network and left when the planet changed hands." Her sniff expressed disdain for someone running out on their assigned duties, and Stinger had to grin a little.

"Probably figured better scarper than face the unknown. Well, her Majesty's about to spin their worlds the other way."

Tsing's brow creased in worry. "She does understand they were only doing their jobs, yes?"

"Aye, but whether they'll keep them is another thing." Stinger kept a small doubt to himself. Jupiter was smart enough to understand the difference, but she was still upset - and Entitled weren't known for sweet reason. He spared a moment to wish Caine was back from his leave - the boy did have a steadying effect on her - but if wishes were feathers we'd all be flying. "How many are on board?"

"We're about to pick up the last one." Tsing cocked her head, listening to her implant, then murmured a reply. "Will you give the Queen a heads-up? He's up and we can bring them in on her word."

"Got it." Stinger threaded his way past the table and the extra personnel to halt by Jupiter's chair. She was chewing nervously on her lip, but her eyes were still bright with anger. "Ready when you are, your Majesty."

"Right. Do I look okay? I can't believe I just asked that." Jupiter tugged on her tail of hair.

Stinger kept his mouth straight. "You're fine, your Majesty."

"I can hear you laughing. Okay, send them in." Her twitch of a smile disappeared and she straightened in the chair, crossing one leg over the other and resting her hands on the chair's arms. It worked; suddenly she had an air of stern dignity that hadn't been there a moment before.
Not bad, Stinger thought, and nodded to Percadium by the door. The ex-Aegis opened it with a flourish, and five people filed in, trying not to look alarmed and failing badly.

They were all pure human, since they worked on Earth, and the two women and three men were all wearing what Stinger had learned was business attire for the nation Jupiter lived in - trousers for the men and slim skirts for the women, and light jackets all around. They stopped at the far end of the table to bow to their Queen, and Stinger could see their pulses running fast even from his place at her side.

Jupiter let them stew for about five seconds, then spoke briskly. "Sit down."

They sorted themselves into chairs. Stinger kept a sharp eye on them as they did, and knew that everyone else in the room was doing the same; they had all been scanned on arrival for weapons, but a good assassin wouldn't need one.

The one who'd come in first, a heavyset male past youth, folded his hands on the table and cleared his throat. "Your Majesty," he began.

Jupiter raised one finger. "No. You're here to listen."

That left him with his mouth hanging open, but he had the sense to close it instead of continuing, and Stinger gave him full marks for wit at least. Jupiter looked them all over thoroughly, taking her time, until they began to shift in their seats.

"As of right now," she said at last, "you're all fired."

That made them sit up even straighter, and the first man flushed with indignation, but before he could muster a response the Queen continued.

"Whatever you're doing right now, shut it down. I have no interest in promoting chaos on Earth at this time."

"But your Majesty," the man protested. "Without our efforts this planet - "

Jupiter frowned, and he cut himself off with a gulp. "As I was saying," she went on, her tone chilly, "I'm really more interested in the opposite, at least for now. You people are obviously experts. I'm willing to offer you the opportunity to switch tactics - on a provisional basis."

The five exchanged glances. They had good game faces, Stinger acknowledged, but he - and probably every other Splice in the room - could tell that they were astonished by the Queen's decision.

Once again, the heavyset male was the first to react. Drawing himself up with great dignity, he bowed stiffly. "Your Majesty," he said, biting off the words, "with your permission I will withdraw."

Jupiter nodded. The man turned and marched towards the door; two of Tsing's people fell in behind him, and when the door swung open Stinger could see Honch looming outside, ready to escort him back to the transport beam and wherever he'd come from.

Slowly, two of the others and then a third rose and bowed as well. Jupiter said nothing as they turned to go; their exits took half the personnel in the room with them, leaving it much less crowded.

The last was one of the women, not much taller than the Queen, who looked as if she'd come from the nation known as India, though Stinger doubted she was from Earth at all. She regarded Jupiter with interest. "Your Majesty," she said at last, "I've often wondered how our techniques could be
applied to the other side of the balance."

Jupiter smiled. "That's exactly what I want to hear," she said. "Tell me more."

Stinger held back his smile.

_She'll do._

It took Jupiter a little while to notice the way the Skyjackers behaved around Caine. The former Aegis were fine, they all seemed to consider him a hero - which obviously embarrassed him - but they were a looser bunch to begin with. The Stormbreakers deferred to Caine without question in matters of her security, acting at his direction if Stinger wasn't there, but they didn't talk to him otherwise. And occasionally she caught a glimpse of one deliberately avoiding him - not quite a snub, but close.

The fact that Caine seemed to _expect_ it made her heart hurt.

Jupiter knew it was no good asking him - he'd either evade the question or give her some bullshit about deserving it. And asking Stinger would make it sound like she was complaining, which she wasn't.

She just wanted to understand.

So when Caine was offplanet getting his tattoo altered, Jupiter lay in wait in her apartment's living room, watching through the passthrough until Forthwith Antinari settled in the opposite room to work on some small piece of machinery. The Skyjacker was one of the more alien-looking of the Stormbreakers; there were Earth women her size, but her skin was a striking pattern of blue and gold, and she had no hair at all. Jupiter didn't know if she was naturally or just shaved her head every day; her twin brother had the same skin pattern in red and gold, but wore a long ponytail. Jupiter suspected the coloring was engineered, but hadn't yet figured out how to _ask._

When Forthwith saw Jupiter stepping through the passthrough, she rose hastily to her feet, wings snapping into position. "Your Majesty!"

Jupiter waved at her. "Hey, relax. No, sit down, it's okay." She pointed to the chair Forthwith had been sitting on, and dropped to the thin carpet herself. "What are you working on?"

Forth was one of the less uptight Skyjackers; she only dithered a moment before deciding that if the Queen wanted to sit on the floor it wasn't her place to object. "Um, just a minor repair, your Majesty." She sat, slowly, as if someone was going to spring out of nowhere and yell at her for it. "The projection unit needs tuning."

Jupiter didn't ask for an explanation; she figured she wouldn't understand it anyway. Instead she grinned. "You're an engineer?"

Her smile seemed to relax Forth a little. "Not as such, Majesty, no, but we can all turn our hands to things like this." The Skyjacker was still holding the boxlike device, and she spun it a little, looking down at it. Jupiter took a moment to admire the grace of Forth's movements; somehow the Stormbreakers managed to make size look like the only way to go. "The tech's pretty simple."

"If you say so," Jupiter drolly, and a flicker of a smile touched Forth's lips. Jupiter leaned back on her hands, crossing her ankles. "There are days when you all make me feel like a geezer"
confronted with the Internet."

That made about as much sense to Forth, Jupiter guessed, as "projection unit needs tuning" had to her, but the Skyjacker nodded. "It must be a very...big change, your Majesty."

Jupiter knew by now that it was no good trying to get any of them to stop using the title, so she let it slide; Stinger's little lectures on expected behavior were annoying, but he did occasionally have a point. "You have no idea. Or maybe you do - what kind of planet did you come from?"

Forth shook her head immediately, reaching for the tool she'd set down when Jupiter had come in. "I don't have a home planet, your Majesty. I was bred on Finder Seven, it's a station in the Javna system." She started tinkering with the box. "My Splicer owns most of one of the sections. We did have training sessions on planets, though."

"Yeah?" Jupiter asked encouragingly, and Forth grimaced down at the projector, her wings shivering slightly.

"I like space better. Though Earth is quite pleasant," she added quickly, and Jupiter had to suppress a snort - she sounded like Kiza.

"No worries. Though maybe I should take your whole crew on a trip to the Grand Canyon, just for the flight opportunities." Not that she'd ever been there herself.

"As your Majesty pleases," Forth said politely. Jupiter managed not to roll her eyes.

Before she could pursue her original goal, the beep of the door unlocking interrupted, and Jupiter glanced over to see Laur coming in. It didn't surprise her; the twins were never apart for long unless on separate assignments. He bowed smoothly to Jupiter as he entered, and she wiggled her fingers at him in acknowledgment, but his gaze was on his sister. Forth didn't look up from her work, but one of her wings stretched out to him, and he stepped into its curl.

Jupiter wondered abruptly how they'd interacted before they'd become Skyjackers. The wings were integrated so well that all the squad looked as if they'd been born with them.

She opened her mouth to ask her original question, but it suddenly seemed a lot harder with the both of them there. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask, what do you guys think of Stinger?" she asked instead.

That made them both look up, startled. "He's...an excellent commander," Laur said cautiously. His voice was so close to his twin's that sometimes it was hard to tell which one was speaking.

"Sure, I knew that," Jupiter said amiably. "I mean, you guys didn't know him before he got assigned to lead your unit, did you? Was it weird to suddenly have him in charge?"

The two didn't exactly exchange glances, but the effect was the same. Forthwith's reply was more relaxed. "It's unusual, to change commands so abruptly, but it's not unheard of, and honor guard is almost always a promotion. And Commander Apini's got a good rep."

Laur snorted. "Good? The man's practically a legend. Highest kill count in his sector, excellent pilot, and he's known for his loyalty to his unit. Nice to see exile didn't spoil him."

"Yeah, and didn't Honch work with him way back when? Before Bellicosa. I can't remember the squadron name, though." Forth wiggled the tool she was holding. "You could ask them, I suppose."

Them wasn't the precise term for a neuter person, Jupiter knew, but that was how her translator
implant handled it in English. Honch was a very large individual best described as hulking, and Jupiter didn't think she'd heard them say more than five words yet. "Yeah, that'll work well," she said wryly.

Laur looked taken aback to hear her joking, but Forth chuckled. "Every squadron needs a strong silent type."

Since she'd seen Honch lift up the back end of Kiza's convertible when it got stuck in a pothole, Jupiter couldn't argue with the descriptor. But before she could think of another angle for her question, the door in her apartment beeped, and the sound had her shoving hastily to her feet. Only one person would be coming in that way without knocking first.

"'Scuse me, see you later," she said hastily, and half-ran back through the passthrough. Caine was just closing the door behind himself, and when he turned and saw her coming his face lit. Jupiter felt her breath catch in her throat at the sight.

She didn't slow down; his arms reached for her, but his wings got there first, all but scooping her closer, and Jupiter kind of ruined the kiss because she was smiling too widely. Judging from the way Caine gathered her up, he wasn't bothered.

"Missed you," Jupiter said after a second, proper kiss. "I thought you were only going to be gone two days!"

"I had something I had to do." Caine was smiling too, the small shy look that always melted her heart. "I wasn't sure I was going to make it back in time for your appointment."

Jupiter glanced over her shoulder at the wall clock. "You came in just under the wire, Stinger's due to pick us up in about fifteen minutes." She ran a hand up his bicep, careful to avoid the outside. "Hey, can I see?"

One brow rose, and Caine shrugged out of his jacket, revealing the shimmery lines of his tattoo. Jupiter couldn't read it - yet - but the wheel at the top now held a simpler version of the sigil on her wrist. The bracket below was altered as well, presumably naming him one of the Stormbreakers, and Jupiter cocked her head for a better look. "Amazing," she muttered, remembering the etching of the stardust symbol into her arm - it had tickled and fizzed, but not hurt. "Somebody ought to open a parlor with this tech. They'd make a fortune."

"If royalty begins to pall, perhaps your Majesty can switch careers," Caine murmured, eyes crinkling as Jupiter snickered. On impulse she pressed her lips to the altered image, and heard him suck in a breath.

"I'll keep it in mind. You still need to change before we go, though."

Caine nodded, and his wings folded back behind him. Jupiter stepped away to let him bend for his bag, and watched him duck through the passthrough. And wondered if the twins were still in the living room, and whether they'd ignore him again.

Then she looked at the clock again, and swore. I have to change too.
But the boy did take his duties seriously, which Stinger was glad to see - it looked like pairbonding after all this time hadn't loosened his wits any. He handed Jupiter into the car and climbed into the back, despite the tight fit.

The Queen took the front passenger seat and kept shooting uneasy looks at the seat behind Stinger, the one that looked empty but that Caine kept out of. She had what she referred to as a *squick* regarding Keepers.

"Tell me more about this economist, your Majesty," Stinger said, sniffing the air coming in the open window. He didn't like air conditioning. "She teaches high school, you said? That doesn't sound, ah, complex enough."

Jupiter faced forward and smirked a little. "She used to teach at the graduate level," she explained. "And she wrote *Essentials of Economic Theory As Applied to Modern Problems of Industry and Public Policy*. And a whole bunch of textbooks."

And three editions of *Economics for the Inept*, Caine had reported to Stinger the night before; information searches might not involve scent, but unleashing a tracker of Caine's calibre on even this world's primitive infonet had turned up what there was to be had. Most of it was journal publications, but there had been a couple of images - a pure human about thirty years' her Majesty's elder, with her arms around a couple of students or posed in a head-and-shoulders shot with a polite smile. Energetic-looking, but nothing that especially stood out.

"Why her, though?" he pressed. "What makes you think she may be able to cope with the truth?"

Jupiter folded her arms, looking a bit frustrated. "She used to watch *Star Trek*? I don't know. It's just a feeling, I guess."

Stinger nodded and concentrated on driving. Her Majesty's free and easy manner tended to bring out the tendency to challenge her, but then his genes would remind him that he was supposed to *defer*, not argue. It could get confusing, on occasion.

They didn't have too far to go; Dr. Thompson's neighborhood was much like Stinger's own, endless fields of corn and soybeans under the summer sun. Her house was at the end of a long gravel road that cut between fields - clearly the remnant of some farm property, as there was a ramshackle barn nearby, though the small house made smaller by a giant oak was much newer. As Stinger parked, the door opened and a woman stepped out onto the stoop.

He felt a small pulse of surprise. The dynamic woman of the pictures, crowned with beaded braids, looked older and quieter now, her hair a fluff of greying black. She wore a tank top and a long skirt, and her face was drawn in lines of patience, but when the Queen climbed out it lit with pleasure. "Jupiter Jones!" she said, holding out her arms. "It's good to see you again."

Her Majesty returned the hug warmly as Caine and Stinger unfolded themselves from the car. "Hi, Doctor Thompson. Thanks for agreeing to meet with us."

"Honey, call me Aggie. I'm not your teacher any longer." She looked beyond Jupiter, smiling. "Who are your friends?"

Jupiter waved at them in turn. "Mr. Apini and Caine Wise. This is Doctor Agnes Thompson."

Stinger nodded formally, allowing none of his doubts to show. Caine kept his usual impassive expression; his more lupine traits were camouflaged by what her Majesty had taken to calling a "likealizer" - because, she claimed, "tertiary-world personal-skinfield anonymizing transmitter" was
way too much of a mouthful. As long as it was powered, he looked Earth-ordinary.

Dr. Thompson took them all in with an assessing look, then leaned back to pull open the screen door. "For something this serious, whatever it is, you'd better come inside."

Her house was cool and dim, made up of soft fabrics and muted colors. She waved them all to seats and made the ritual offer of something to drink; Jupiter accepted, Caine demurred, and Stinger took the glass of lemonade but didn't taste the contents.

"So what's this all about?" Dr. Thompson said, seating herself across from Jupiter in an armchair. "You're not in trouble, are you?" The glance she shot Stinger and Caine was sharp.

Jupiter shook her head. "No, no. It's just...we've got this project going on, and I'm hoping you can help me."

"It's summer, I'm at loose ends," Dr. Thompson replied easily. "Let's hear it."

To Stinger's mind, the scenario her Majesty laid out didn't sound particularly believable. She was claiming to be working for an author composing a sweeping saga - "Think Wheel of Time," Jupiter explained, whatever that was - and who wanted expert advice on how to move his protagonists through the intricate society and economy he'd already created.

"The first book's been sold," Jupiter added ruefully as she finished a rough outline of the galactic economy. "He can't change the setup now."

Dr. Thompson, leaning her elbow on the arm of her chair, pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Too bad, because that's a hell of a mess he's got there. And more than a little sick, if you don't mind my saying so." She glanced Stinger's way, and he kept his face as neutral as possible. Caine, hulking on the couch next to her Majesty, just looked dour.

"Mow," somebody said loudly, and Caine started; Stinger felt himself twitch. But the Queen's face lit. "Oh, dust!"

What? That made no sense to Caine either, judging from his frown, but Dr. Thompson shook her head.

"No, Dust passed away a couple of years ago." She leaned out of her chair to peer back towards the kitchen. "Edsel, come out here and say hello properly!"

Another mow heralded the appearance of a strange-looking little animal; it took Stinger a minute to recognize it as the species Earthlings called "cats", since it was very different from the barn variety that was all he usually saw. It looked exaggerated - overly long, overly thin, with huge ears and a narrow pointed face. Its coloring looked like someone had started to paint it brown and run out of paint halfway through, but its eyes were a brilliant blue.

It stalked past Dr. Thompson, who watched it with a smile, and went to sniff delicately at the hand Jupiter extended. Stinger could hear the faintest rumble of a growl coming from Caine, but her Majesty reached back to put her other hand on his knee, and it faded.

The little animal looked up at Caine, and Stinger could see the lift of its lip; its tail lashed. Caine growled again, louder this time.

The overlarge ears went back, and then the animal turned its back on Caine and paraded - there was no other word for it - over to Stinger. He looked down at it dubiously.
"Are you allergic?" Dr. Thompson said, eyes crinkling with amusement.

Stinger honestly didn't know what to do when the cat sprang up to his knee. It wasn't showing an aggressive posture, merely a curious one, and her Majesty laughed. "Hold out your hand," she said.

Gingerly, Stinger complied. Edsel repeated the sniff routine, then licked its nose, blinked, and collapsed into a loose circle in his lap and started vibrating.

Dr. Thompson chuckled. "Edsel is an impeccable judge of character," she said. "You appear to have passed, Mr. Apini."

"Right," Stinger sighed. "Where were we, y-ah, Miss Jones?"

Dr. Thompson asked a number of questions and even started taking notes. Jupiter couldn't always supply the answers, but Stinger was ready to step in if necessary - when he knew the answer, which he didn't always. Jupiter begged a sheet of paper and started taking her own notes on what to "ask the author".

The whole thing was as flimsy as a paper house, Stinger thought, but as her Majesty had pointed out earlier, Dr. Thompson might not believe them but she was hardly going to guess the truth on her own. And as long as she was willing to help...

Eventually the economist seemed to have learned all she wanted, and she and Jupiter chatted for a little while about memories of school and other students. Stinger was not so much bored as disconnected; at some point, he realized, he'd started stroking Edsel, whose vibrations had intensified at the touch. The fur was surprisingly pleasant to feel; soothing.

"We won't keep you any longer," the Queen said at last. "Thanks for helping me out, Aggie."

Stinger noted with some amusement that she and Caine were actually holding hands. He caught the lycantant's eye. "Better go out and see about things," he said, knowing that Caine would take his meaning and dismiss the Keeper.

Caine nodded, rose, ducked his head to Dr. Thompson, and thumped out. Dr. Thompson watched him go with an amused twist to her lips. "Your taste has improved," she said dryly.

Jupiter blushed, and Stinger had to smother a chuckle. "If we have more questions I'll get him to put you on retainer," Jupiter said quickly.

"Oh, that's not necessary, honey," Dr. Thompson protested, but Jupiter shook her head.

"Value for services rendered - I remember that much, at least!" She rose, and Stinger shoved gently at Edsel. The cat uncoiled and bounced away, looking indignant, and Stinger stood as well.

Dr. Thompson walked them to her front door, chatting lightly. "What do you do when you're not escorting young ladies around the countryside?" she asked Stinger as he passed her.

"I keep bees," he said, because he still did, and it was still a satisfying job.

Her brows went up, and she nodded approvingly, a motion cut short as Edsel leapt up to her shoulder. "Nong," the cat commented, sounding anything but approving.

Her Majesty laughed again. "Bye, Edsel! Talk to you soon, Aggie." Caine was already starting the car, and Stinger nodded farewell as Jupiter turned away.
Dr. Thompson's gaze caught his, and he realized that they really hadn't fooled her at all; but for whatever reason, she wasn't going to make an issue of it. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Apini," was all she said, holding the door for them, and Stinger gave her another nod and followed his Queen out into the sun.

"That went pretty well," she said hopefully as Caine turned onto the main road.

Stinger grunted. "She wasn't buying it, your Majesty."

He was quiet on the drive back, sitting alone in the rear seat since the Keeper had departed on its own. The depth of Dr. Thompson's knowledge and insight had taken him aback. *Face it, you're used to thinking of tercies as simple.*

Well, most of them were, he argued to himself. Primitive people on primitive worlds, most of them never getting beyond their own atmospheres; one didn't get involved with them, for obvious reasons.

Grumbling to himself, Stinger set the whole mess aside. He had bigger worries.
The next morning it was Rush who brought the word, soft in Stinger's head through his comm implant. "Commander, there's a vehicle coming this way, looks like it's heading for your turnoff."

Stinger pushed away from the two-way unit on his table, envisioning Rush far overhead on skywatch. "Make sure you're out of sight, her Majesty doesn't like blanking if it can be avoided. Just the one?"

"Just one," Rush confirmed. "But I don't have eyes on the Queen or Caine."

Stinger thought fast. "They were headed south when they took off. Raise him on the comm while I deal with this. It may just be a customer." He didn't encourage visitors, but as her Majesty had proven Apini Hives wasn't impossible to find.

He put the rest of the Stormbreakers on alert as he headed for the door; this was most likely absolutely nothing, but he hadn't made commander by taking that kind of chance. He snagged the nearest jacket to cover his wings and reached the porch just as the silver sedan jolted into view.

It was hard to see the driver through the accompanying cloud of dust, but when the car stopped and the haze settled Stinger's stomach gave an odd lurch at the sight of Dr. Thompson climbing out of the vehicle.

An obviously upset Dr. Thompson, at that. Stinger sighed, and signaled Rush.

"It's her Majesty's economist. Ask the Queen if she'll come back, discreetly, and see Dr. Thompson." It wasn't that he didn't trust Jupiter's judgment; it was her finesse that worried him. Braking still escaped her on occasion.

The economist slammed the car door and stomped towards him, and Stinger could see how she'd made a success at teaching adolescents. She was no Entitled, but part of him still wanted to give way.

"Doctor - " he began as she neared, but she cut him off.

"What the hell are you playing at, Mr. Apini? Where's Jupiter?"

"She'll be along shortly," he replied mildly, giving up on the lie.

"She'd better be." Dr. Thompson glared at him.
He folded his arms and cooled his tone. "What's this all about? I might remind you this is private property, Doctor."

She wasn't noticeably cowed. Holding up the tablet she'd brought with her, she turned it on, tapped it, and lifted it so he could see. "You tell me."

It was a security video, the kind without sound. The view was Dr. Thompson's yard, though from far enough to the side that Stinger realized the camera must have been installed on the barn. As he watched, Stinger saw Caine emerge from the little house and walk over to the car, open the back door, and stand staring in for a few seconds; the picture wasn't good enough to see if he was speaking.

Then a small, brownish creature climbed out of the vehicle, its limbs bending in ways no Earth creature's did, and after staring back up at Caine for a moment it scuttled off down the drive and out of sight. Stinger suppressed a groan. What was the damn thing thinking?

"Well?" Dr. Thompson snapped. "Is this some sort of practical joke, because if it is - "

"Dr. Thompson? Aggie, sorry." Much to Stinger's relief, Jupiter jogged out from behind the house. She was windblown and still wearing her Skyjacker boots, and frowned when she sensed the tension. "What's the matter?"

"She saw the Keeper yesterday." Stinger grimaced.

"The what?" Dr. Thompson asked. She was still holding out the tablet, and with a glance for permission Jupiter restarted the video. Her lips parted in dismay as she watched.

"Are they allowed to do that?" she asked when it finished. "Never mind. Aggie, you'd better come inside."

Stinger sat on his objection. This was, after all, what her Majesty had been aiming at; it had just happened faster than planned.

As they followed Jupiter up the stairs, Dr. Thompson squinted at the Queen's usual escort of bees. "You really are an apiculturist, then."

Stinger shrugged, and held the door for them both.

The dining room was empty, but Stinger could hear Caine lurking in the kitchen. "Game's up," he called. "Might as well come out."

The query of "Your Majesty?" came back, and Jupiter sighed.

"If the demo doesn't make her call the psych ward. Yeah, okay."

Caine's wings were folded and not immediately visible, but his ears and brand were fairly obvious. Dr. Thompson's eyes narrowed at the sight of him before she turned to Jupiter. "'Your majesty?' she inquired.

Jupiter blew out a breath and gestured the economist to a chair. "You know that long story I told you yesterday? That's not even half of it."

Dr. Thompson sat slowly. "Go on."

Stinger took his own chair, reversing it to straddle it; as Jupiter talked, he pulled off his jacket. It was,
he knew, pure perversity on his part, wanting to startle the tercie, but she'd have to know sooner or later and it might as well be in here instead of one of the Stormbreakers dropping on her head.

Dr. Thompson, listening closely, did a beautiful double-take as Stinger slowly extended his own wings. Her mouth opened, closed, opened...and then with a visible effort she returned her attention to Jupiter. Stinger had to grin a little.

When her Majesty ran down, Dr. Thompson pushed slowly to her feet and walked over to the window. Caine was leaning against the sideboard, his wings mantled, but she gave him barely a glance, instead staring out into the sunshine for a long time, one hand pressed to her mouth. Jupiter fidgeted anxiously, but said nothing, and they waited.

"It's like The Saliva Tree with a side helping of State of Decay," Dr. Thompson muttered at last, then turned around. "So what are you going to do about it, Miss Jones?"

Her Majesty grinned. "I was hoping you'd ask," she said, and Stinger mentally upped the personnel rolls by one.

The weeks piled up. Jupiter spent most of her days at Stinger's farm, either learning to fly or sprawled on the couch studying up on the culture of the universe she was going to have to enter. And there was tons of it. History, technology, culture, legal stuff - the Entitled protocols alone gave her a two-day headache.

Dr. Thompson studied right along with her, spreading her work over the dining room table - though she concentrated on the economics of the system, making copious notes and occasionally ranting under her breath about the people who'd set it up. She usually brought Edsel with her; he would hang out on a windowsill, wisely ignoring the bees, until Stinger sat down somewhere, and then would go and imitate a loaf on the Splice's lap.

Stinger, also wisely, didn't protest the loafing.

Jupiter also worked on getting an idea of what she had actually inherited. It was hard to visualize, especially when she didn't even know what some of the stuff was; but she still went over the lists and inventories, trying to take it all in, because sooner or later she would have to deal with it. The sheave of spaceships alone made her boggle, in part because they were so hard to tell apart.

She scrolled through the list, her mind tripping over the strings of letters and numbers. "Don't any of these things have names?"

Caine, who had been doing some reading of his own, came over to peer over her shoulder. "They all do - that's the second column."

Jupiter huffed. "No, like - titles. Enterprise, Bismarck, Santa Maria, that kind of thing."

When she tilted her head up, he looked distinctly baffled. "No."

It always felt a little like stepping on a stair that wasn't there, tripping over some little cultural difference. "You guys don't name your ships - huh."

"Earth people do?" Caine cocked his head.

"It's bad luck not to." Jupiter grinned and swiped a finger along the list to make it blur past. "Well, I'm not going to sit here and dream up titles for every one of these right now, but we're gonna start with the new one." Not that she actually believed in luck, at least that way, but the notion fit. If we're
It took a bit more explaining, but in the end the Abrasax Cruiser 12-Delta-5 was rechristened. In name if not in fact - breaking a bottle of champagne on the prow was difficult in vacuum, and Jupiter didn't want to make that much of a production of it anyway - but one of the crew did actually suit up to paint it on the hull. The Neva took its place among Jupiter's fleet, and its crew - bemused but pleased - began identifying themselves with that name.

Just when Jupiter thought things were calming down (and she really had to stop thinking that) the mavericks started showing up. At least that's what Stinger called them.

A few were legitimate - assigned, like he had been, to Earth for one reason or another - but most were there unofficially; galactic citizens who, for whatever reason, preferred a tertiary world as a dwelling place, and were willing to hide their natures to stay there.

Jupiter wasn't even sure why they came. "It's not like I'd know if they were here or not," she complained to Caine. "Most of them are already under the radar."

Caine, watching with wary humor as a tall, gaunt human dressed like a Goth trucker mounted the porch steps, just shrugged. "They want to see you, your Majesty. Earth is yours; they want to acknowledge it."

That still didn't make sense to her, but she rolled with it. The legit ones all wanted to swear fealty, or at least renew their contracts, depending; the others mostly just wanted to stare, as Caine said. It made Jupiter uncomfortable, but they didn't stay long.

There was one who came in and tried to spit at her instead of bowing, but Caine swooped down and crumpled him up like a piece of scrap paper, ejecting him out the door before Jupiter had time to do more than blink. Judging by the cursing, a few other Stormbreakers made sure he got off the property; Jupiter hoped dryly that he wasn't too damaged in the process.

She was getting to know them better, at least some of them. Rush was third-in-command and had blue-black hair against blue-white skin, and could have passed on Earth if not for the wings; Glasta had been Spliced with something that had a lot of very sharp claws and teeth, and reveled in his appearance. Absaba had white-blond hair and the austere, gorgeous features of an angel, while Soren was exactly Stinger's height and had skin that matched her wings. It was easier to tell them apart by physical features at the moment, but other traits were starting to stick in her mind too - like, Soren swore using words Jupiter's translator refused to deal with, and Absaba was so awed by Jupiter's title that he could barely speak to her.

It was easy to see that they were a unit, too, except for Caine. They bunked together in Stinger's ramshackle barn, now somewhat repaired; they ate together when they were off shift, filling up his kitchen with strange cooking smells, ribbing, and the occasional stretch of wing. Jupiter sometimes wished she could join them, but merely appearing in the kitchen for a drink of water made them all get quiet and "Can we help you, your Majesty," and she didn't have the energy to try to break them of it. Stinger wouldn't approve anyway.

She did have to make another call to Kalique, or Malidictes as proxy, to request another favor. Jupiter thrashed it out with Stinger and Caine and Aggie ahead of time, because she knew Kalique would call in the debt eventually, but Aggie held firm. "I need the perspective," she said. "And you need someone taking over that task. It may give Lady Kalique another hold on you, but having her handle your affairs is a larger one."
So Jupiter gave in, and the request went through. And the next week, a small ship settled down on the edge of the cornfield in Stinger's backyard.

The woman who stepped off what Stinger called a skimmer looked Vietnamese to Jupiter, except for the turtle's beak she bore and the spots and streaks on her skin. "Your Majesty," she said, bowing deeply and looking not at all fazed by the shabby living room or Caine looming formally nearby. "My name is Virtu, and I am pleased to serve you."

Jupiter was getting a little more used to the term of address, though she still didn't really want to hear it from anyone but Caine. "Yeah, hi. So did Kalique pick you out herself?"

Virtu held out a sheave, which Caine leaned over to take before Jupiter could move; he flipped it over, glanced at both sides, and then handed it to Jupiter with deference. She played along for the moment, though this much ceremony seemed more than a bit silly for someone seated on a beat-up couch in a house half held up by honeycomb.

Virtu clasped her hands together at her waist. "No, your Majesty. I was selected and briefed by Mr. Malidictes. My record - " She nodded at the sheave.

Jupiter thumbed it on, glanced at the index, and shut it off again. "It's gonna take me half an hour to work through that. She wasn't going to make Virtu stand there while she did it.

"You're by Chordan Du, aren't you?" Stinger said, not moving from where he leaned in the doorway. "That's good work, your Majesty. Du always codes for brains."

Jupiter resisted a brief urge to throw the sheave out the window and yell at them all about slavery - Caine's gaze flicked to her and then away again - and instead regarded Virtu, who nodded once to Stinger.

"All right. I've just got one question for you." Jupiter leaned forward and looked directly into Virtu's eyes. "Who are you really working for?"

The woman didn't blink. "You, your Majesty. If you permit."

She heard Caine pull in a breath, and looked his way. It felt very weird to use him like this, but he'd been so pleased when Stinger suggested it -

He nodded too, face solemn but not concerned. "She's telling the truth."

Jupiter sat back, feeling a pulse of relief; she really wanted someone to handle this for her. "Okay then. You're hired, Miss Virtu. You'll be working with my economic advisor, Doctor Thompson; she'll be here tomorrow."

The turtle beak seemed incapable of either a smile or a frown, but Virtu's eyes crinkled and she bowed again. "Of course, your Majesty. In the meantime, would you like to take a closer look at your current holdings? I have the files in my luggage."

More homework. Jupiter suppressed a sigh, and got on with it.

"Mama." Jupiter returned her mother's warm hug, suddenly grateful for the familiar arms around her now that she was about to leave them so far behind. "It's good to see you."

"You're looking well," Aleksa told her brusquely. "This new job, it suits you."
Jupiter shrugged a little, not quite sure what to make of that. "Let's get some coffee and sit before all the tables are taken."

The little bakery was more carry-out than eat-in, but there were a few spaces for seats, and its clientele and food were mostly Russian. It was a good place to meet; visiting the Bolotnikov household always meant a stay of several hours drinking tea and listening to gossip and family stories. Not that Jupiter minded, but she just didn't have the time today.

"I will get the table. You fetch coffee," Aleksa commanded, and Jupiter obeyed happily, waiting in the fast-moving line to order pastries as well. Outside Soren was idling by the window, playing with the smartphone Stinger had obtained as a prop for these undercover missions; Caine was, Jupiter knew, on the roof of the building, just in case.

She'd offered to buy them coffee, but they weren't allowed to snack on duty, apparently, which Jupiter thought was kind of unfair.

"So how is everybody?" she asked as she sat down, sliding a cup towards her mother and setting the bakery bag in the middle of the table.

"Very well, very well, Moltka got an A on his book report," Aleksa said, and for the next little while Jupiter heard about Lyudmila's arthritis, Zeno's truck, and Vladie's latest girl. It was familiar and comforting, and Jupiter stored up each word, because as nosy and exasperating and overbearing as her family could be, they were Earth to her - absolute normalcy, a symbol of what she had to protect. Even if she'd been willing to sacrifice them all to do it.

"How is new job?" Aleksa asked at last, eyes sharp. "Still can't talk about it?"

Jupiter shook her head and reached for another pastry. "It's about to get pretty busy, though."

Aleksa's hand trapped hers briefly against the bag. "You'll stay in touch." It was half assumption, half order, and Jupiter appreciated the nuance.

"I will. You know I have Skype set up on my computer; we can use that. Moltka can show you how." Captain Tsing had promised her that the top-level comm tech available to Entitled would mesh better with Earth systems than the standard Aegis issue.

Aleksa nodded, picking up her cup again. "Vassily's so full of himself about the money you're sending that I'm about to kick his задницу."

Jupiter laughed out loud, watching her mother's evil grin. "Just make sure he spends enough on you!" She made a mental note to start sending Aleksa a check too. Vassily was a good manager, but his sense of priorities could sometimes get a little skewed.

They talked for a while longer, even after the sweets were gone, but eventually Jupiter's phone alarm beeped. She swiped it off, but before she could apologize Aleksa nodded.

"Time for you to go, I know. What do I tell the others?"

Jupiter bit her lip. She didn't like the lying, but she didn't see much choice. "Miss Apini wants to visit an Italian spa, a really remote one. We might be there for months."

Aleksa's mouth tightened at her last word, but she didn't argue. "Call home," she commanded instead.
"I will, мамочка." They rose, and Jupiter hugged her mother again, tight and tight. "As often as I can."

"Jupiter?"

Jupiter looked up from the sheave about spaceships - it seemed to be written for eight-year-olds, which was good, because that was all her brain was capable of absorbing at the moment - to see Aggie in the doorway. "Hey, what's up?"

The economist glanced at Caine, who was sitting across the room cleaning a weapon. "Could I speak to you alone?"

Jupiter cocked a brow at Caine, but he shook his head; he wouldn't go farther than just outside the door, and she knew he could hear from there. She thought a moment. "Why don't we go for a walk?"

They ended up strolling down Stinger's rutted driveway towards the road, with Caine and Honch in the air overhead - too far up to hear them, Jupiter hoped, but satisfied with keeping her in sight. "Okay, is something wrong?"

"No, no." Aggie put her hands in her sweater pockets. "I've finished my analysis, that's all. Well, as much as I can from here."

"Oh - oh." Jupiter blew out a breath. "Yeah?"

Aggie nodded, looking tired. "Yeah. And let me say again, this is a very twisted society."

"No kidding." Jupiter huffed. "And I thought Earth was bad."

"Earth still is bad," Aggie said sharply, stopping to look at her. "Don't close your eyes to its flaws even if they're small in comparison."

Jupiter winced. "I know. I know. I wish I could do more about it, but owning the Earth isn't..."

"It's not the same thing as ruling it, yes, I understand." Aggie sighed. "And I will admit that you have other concerns at the moment."

"Yeah." Jupiter started walking again, sniffing the cooling air. "More than I can keep track of sometimes." She kicked at a pebble. "So - what should I do?"

"That depends on your goals," Aggie said slowly. "If you just want to assimilate into this society, nothing. You're well-placed to take advantage of it for as long as you like."

"Oh please." Jupiter shot her a disbelieving look. "I admit the whole money thing is kind of cool, at least until I remember where it came from, but if you think I'm going to go along with all this bullshit - "

Aggie chuckled. "I didn't think you would, honey. But I have to lay out all the options."

"You can skip forgetting about it, because I'm not going to do that either," Jupiter said, still a bit indignant. "All that would do is postpone those Harvets for another five or six decades."

"Yes." Aggie nodded. "So the third option is - change."

The word seemed to hang in the dusty air for a moment before a bee cruised through and broke it.
"Yeah." Jupiter laughed softly. "It sounds really stupid, how can one person change things and all that, except from what everybody keeps telling me I really do have that much power."

"If you choose to use it," Aggie agreed. "And there's danger in that."

"Yeah," Jupiter said again. It scared her, that thought; look what it had done to the Abrasaxes, after all. Even Kalique was...not right. "That's why I need all of you guys, you know, to keep me straight."

It was so true; she'd never have the guts to take any of this on if it weren't for Caine, and Stinger, and all the rest of them standing behind her, even if they didn't have the same goals she did.

Aggie smiled. "You'll have plenty of them, I think." She cocked her head. "So the problem is two-fold, at least at the gross level. The manufacture and use of Regenex in nearly all parts of society and technology, and the oppressive social strata."

"I'm not sure which one makes me want to puke more," Jupiter muttered, glancing up to make sure their two guardians were still out of earshot.

"Right there with you," Aggie replied dryly. "Well, as far as I can tell, you can't remove the purpose of Regenex. The lure of immortality - not to mention its use as medicine - is just too strong and too interwoven into the society. So, you'll have to replace it."

Jupiter gaped at her. "With what?"

Aggie laughed. "I have no idea. But think about it, honey. This business has been going on for millennia. I'm willing to bet that someone out there has found an alternative - maybe lots of someones."

"Oh." Jupiter wondered idly if the driver had seen the Skyjackers. Probably thought they were turkey vultures. The thought of how that would annoy them tickled her.

"And the other half?" Jupiter asked at last.

Aggie shook her head. "That one...I don't have an answer for you there."

Jupiter bit her lip, aware of the differences between them. Aggie glanced over at her. "Lead by example, honey. That's a start, anyway. And always be aware of it."

They walked on for a while, eventually turning around to go back; Jupiter waved at her guards overhead, but neither accepted the offer to come down and join them.
"I'm going to have to go soon," Jupiter said finally. Part of her was looking forward to exploring, but the other part dreaded stepping into whatever limelight Kalique had in mind. "If I'm going to make this work..."

"I don't envy you the task, Jupiter." Aggie pushed a stray curl out of her eyes.

"Want to come along?" Jupiter said jokingly, trying to lighten things again. "I could put you on permanent retainer."

She expected Aggie to laugh, but instead the economist looked thoughtful. "It would be quite the adventure," she said, almost to herself.

Jupiter felt a surge of hope. "Seriously? You'd think about coming with? I could really use the help."

Aggie pursed her lips, her expression almost wistful. "As it happens, I was planning on taking a leave of absence this semester. But it wouldn't be permanent, Jupiter, I could only come for a little while."

"I don't care," Jupiter said fervently. "Just come along, please, don't leave me alone with all these weird people from outer space!"

As she'd hoped, that made Aggie laugh. "I think there's at least one you wouldn't mind being alone with," she teased, and Jupiter blushed again. "Yeah, but there's never any opportunity.

"Don't get me started," she grumbled. "Hey, will you bring Edsel?"

"I'll have to," Aggie said. "He won't be pleased."

"Doesn't surprise me," Jupiter replied, wondering how the cat would react to another world. Sheesh, how will I react? "I'd like you to meet Kalique, though. See what you think of her."

"Yes, that should be interesting," Aggie murmured. They came abreast of the driveway and started down it, their escort descending for a landing, and Jupiter held her peace.

I won't be alone, she told herself. I can do this.

Really I can...

But when Aggie went back inside, Jupiter hesitated, then circled the house, knowing Caine would come up to walk with her. She reached out for his hand as soon as he was beside her; the wrap of his long fingers around hers was reassuring, as was the curl of his wing around her back until the tip brushed her far shoulder.

"What troubles your Majesty?" he asked after a bit, when they'd almost reached the edge of the far cornfield.

Jupiter slowed to a stop and considered her list of problems - the short list, anyway. I'm overwhelmed by how much I have to learn, I'm scared spitless of going up into space and trying to fake my way into Entitlement, I've got more stuff than I can keep track of and whole planets of innocent people depending on me to keep them from being turned into youth juice, and right now the thing I want most is to drag you off into a dark corner and find out if you're as incredible in bed as I think you are.

Odds were that he knew them all already, even the last one, but the trouble with that was there was no privacy to be had - protocol dictated that the Queen have at least two guards within eye- or
earshot at all times, and even the double apartment wasn't private enough. And while Jupiter thought she might be able to order the second guard away for a while if she forced the issue, it would upset Caine, which was no way to begin a seduction.

And it's probably going to have to be one. He was so deferential that Jupiter knew she was going to have to make the first move - probably a lot of them, in sequence. It didn't bother her, it was actually kind of nice not to have a guy pushing all the time, but again - that sort of thing really needed space and time that they didn't have right now.

Jupiter sighed, and settled for the truth, but only part of it. "Aggie said some things that are going to make stuff harder when I get up there." She leaned her head against Caine's shoulder, and his wing curled closer.

"And they will already be difficult," he agreed, his voice almost more vibration than sound.

"Yeah." Jupiter felt like asking him to wrap her up entirely in feathers for, oh, the next ten years or so, but that wouldn't make any of the problems go away. She shifted until her forehead was pressing into his bicep, a little surprised at how depressed she was getting. "Sorry. I guess I'm just tired."

"You have every right to be." His free hand slid up the back of her neck and buried itself in her hair, gently massaging her scalp, and Jupiter moaned a little at how good it felt. "But we are all here to help."

"And don't think I don't appreciate it." She burrowed closer, letting him go so she could wrap her arms around him. "Do I pay you guys enough? I'm gonna get Virtu to double your salaries."

Caine laughed softly. "You'd have to renegotiate our contracts with the Legion. More trouble than it's worth." Jupiter made a discontented noise, and he stroked her hair. "But bonuses paid directly are always welcome."

"Oh good." She said it against his skin. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Your Majesty." His voice was tender. "You really need to eat."

He was right. She'd missed lunch, driving back from seeing her mother and full of latte and vatrushkas, and as if in agreement her stomach grumbled. "Probably."

Caine bent and scooped her up, but he didn't bother lifting off, just carrying her easily towards the house. Jupiter grinned. "You're going to make them think something's wrong."

"If something were wrong I'd be running," he replied. "You do realize there are Entitled who never walk anywhere at all?"

Jupiter snorted. "You're not making this royalty thing sound any better, you know."

His only reply was an amused sound. Jupiter let her head rest against his chest and watched the light fading from the sky, until he carried her inside.

Kiza was at the kitchen table when they entered, chatting with Absaba; the latter immediately evaporated out towards the living room as soon as Jupiter appeared. Jupiter rolled her eyes. "Sorry about that," she said as Caine set her carefully on her feet.

Kiza laughed. "It's okay. I keep telling him you only eat babies, but he won't believe me." She cocked her head. "Are you all right?"
"She needs to eat," Caine said, eyes crinkling. "Babies aren't ideal, though."

Jupiter snickered, and walked over to the fridge to peer inside, trying to locate something she recognized. She'd set up a fund for domestic expenses as soon as she'd started spending so much time at the house, and it was another example of cultural differences that neither Stinger nor Kiza had tried to refuse; they'd simply accepted it with the pleasure that comes with a gift one wasn't really expecting. Kiza often cooked for Jupiter and anyone else who was around, but she claimed to enjoy it. And since Jupiter could barely boil water, she didn't try to argue.

"Don't even start," Kiza said, rising to shut the fridge door firmly. "I'll make you an omelette."

"All right," Jupiter said meekly, and sat down at the table. Caine nodded in satisfaction, then touched the comm implant on his neck.

"Excuse me, your Majesty," he said, and when she nodded slipped out of the room. Jupiter could hear him thumping up the stairs; for a stealthy hunter he could make a lot of noise at times.

She watched Kiza moving around the kitchen, her bright hair bound up in a bandanna and her bare feet tapping on the uneven linoleum, and steeled herself to ask. "Are you going to come along, when this circus takes off?"

Kiza glanced back, a little surprised. "Of course I am, I can't leave Dad. Unless, if you order me not to," she began, looking alarmed.

Jupiter sputtered. "Kiza - you don't work for me, I can't order you to do anything!"

"You're an Entitled, and you rule Earth," Kiza countered, eyes wide. "I'm one of your subjects."

"You're not a citizen of Earth, are you?" Jupiter frowned, suddenly unsure. "Or are you? I don't know what the rules are." Better move that one to the top of the study list.

Kiza shrugged. "Gyre citizens who choose to live on tertiary worlds are usually considered to be subjects of whoever rules the planet."

"Anyway, I own the place, I don't rule it," Jupiter said firmly. "And I can't order you to do anything, Kiza. You're my friend, not my employee or my subject."

"Is that a decree, your Majesty?" Kiza asked, but she was smiling, and Jupiter made a face at her and reached idly for the fork sitting on the table.

"I just wasn't sure if you can leave the hives and all that." And whether Stinger would allow his daughter to follow along into what could be a dangerous situation, but Jupiter had no idea what the age of majority was in space society either.

"He doesn't really want to, but Judy from Blossomfield Bees will come in to look after them for us. Dad figures that you'll be back for visits sometimes, and he can drop back in."

"Makes sense, yeah." Jupiter sniffed at the luscious scent of browning butter and fiddled with the fork. "I'm glad you're coming with. Because I'm going to need every friend I can get out there."

Kiza grinned. "It's going to be an adventure, your Majesty. I wouldn't miss it for the world. Even this one." She flipped the omelette neatly onto a plate and slid it in front of Jupiter. "Besides, someone has to look after Dad. Caine will be busy looking after you."

"'Zat a comment on my self-care abilities?" Jupiter asked wryly, slicing into the hot egg.
"Oh, aye." Kiza's grin widened, and she sat back down opposite Jupiter to watch her eat, sipping at a glass of tea.

"Well, it's going to be soon," Jupiter admitted after she swallowed her bite. "If I wait too much longer I'll wimp out."

Kiza simply nodded. Jupiter ate another few bites, wondering absurdly whether something as homey as an egg was available out in space, but all that did was lead to visions of *Pigs in Space* and that end was madness, so she wrenched her thoughts back on track.

She couldn't figure out how to say *I'm sorry for putting your dad's life in danger*, because that was what it was, even if nobody was coming out and saying it. Jupiter had read enough, now, to know that the "honor" part of honor guard was only half the story. *These guys are prepared to die for me if they have to*. And unlike Caine's devotion, it definitely gave her the weirds.

But she knew Stinger wouldn't have it any other way. *I just hope I don't have to look Kiza in the eye and really apologize, someday.*

"How soon?" Kiza asked after a minute. "Because if we're going, there's a couple of DVDs I'd like to get to take along. Not to mention a few other things you can only get here."

"At least a few days, Stinger says I should call in one or two ships. The *Neva* isn't really big enough for everybody at once." Which made no sense to Jupiter since as far as she could tell the whole trip to Seraphi's business world would take about forty-five minutes, but she was prepared to roll with it. "But you'd better go for expedited shipping."

Kiza snickered. "I'll pick up the rest of the *ElfQuest* comics then. Caine loves those."

"Huh." Jupiter grinned back. "We'll have to look into that anime exporting idea some time too. What else is there here that they don't have out there?" She forked up another bite.

"Toblerone," Kiza said, rising to pour herself more tea. "And salt and vinegar potato chips, but Dad's the only one I know who'll eat them."

Jupiter had to laugh. "So noted."

He was off-duty, so Caine decided to practice a little. He flew up to the roof of Stinger's house and perched on a flat spot, enjoying the light of Earth's tiny moon - surprisingly bright for so little reflective surface.

The double-pipe warmed quickly in his hands as he ran through scales. It felt good to play it again. He'd missed the instrument in the Deadlands - not that he'd have used it there, the noise would have attracted attention - and he hadn't had much chance to play since it had been returned to him.

So he worked his way through some old favorite melodies, Legion drinking songs and tunes that had been popular years ago, just whatever came to mind. It was soothing. Sometimes he harmonized with the instrument, humming deep in his throat to add a third thread of sound, enjoying the challenge of staying in key.

Of course he was aware of Jupiter the moment she stepped outside; even if he hadn't heard the door open and close, her scent would have risen to him like a beacon. It seemed to seek him out, and he pulled it in, some small tension relaxing at the knowledge that she was close by.

He stopped playing as she looked up his way, pushing her hair from her eyes in the habitual,
unconscious way she had when she was too tired to remember to refasten the tail.

She waved. "Do you mind company?" she asked softly, knowing he could hear.

"No," he replied, pitching it just loud enough to carry, and started to spread his wings; but she made a "wait" motion and switched on her boots just long enough to climb to his perch.

Caine slid to one side and held out an arm, and she settled next to him with a weary sigh. He draped one wing around her, and she caught the tip to stroke it briefly before snuggling into his side.

"You can't sleep?" he asked quietly.

Her Majesty sighed. "I'm nervous about tomorrow."

He could understand that. Tomorrow would be her first major step into the world of Entitled - journeying to Gabal, the business world of Queen Seraphi, and officially taking possession of it. And while Caine was certain she would manage magnificently, it was no surprise that she didn't feel certain about it.

"You'll be fine," was all he said. Jupiter snorted, and leaned closer, arms folded loosely across her chest.

He simply sat, and savored it. Others were watching tonight; he could afford to relax a little, to just enjoy the fact that his Queen came to him when she was tired and stressed, that she drew comfort from his presence.

After a while he began to play again, the soft lullaby one of the crèche attendants used to sing late at night, and her breathing slowed and her scent grew less metallic as her stress ebbed. He wound the tune around itself, varying it on each pass, until she was sound asleep with her head in his lap.

Caine let the music die away, and watched the moon track across the sky, content.
Chapter 8

Her Majesty was yawning.

Caine wasn't surprised. While he'd have been quite content to stay on Stinger's roof all night with her head pillowed in his lap, she'd woken after little more than an hour and insisted on going back inside, and while he'd gone to bed himself her light had stayed on. If she had managed to sleep, it hadn't been for long.

Sleepy or not, however, she did look quite regal. The dress she wore was from Earth, but it looked close enough to Entitled fashion; it was silvery, and floated in layers, and that was about all the detail he could describe, aside from the fact that it suited her very well.

She held the skirts up above the dust as they walked towards the skimmer. Early morning light gilded what was left of the corn - it had been harvested two days prior, and left Stinger's place feeling exposed - and there was a distinct chill in the air. This hemisphere of the planet was tilting towards winter.

Caine fell in behind her, watching as Stinger and the rest of the Stormbreakers waited next to the slightly bigger ship that would take them to Gabal. Tsing's crew was already on board the Neva, waiting in orbit; the skimmer and the mistico had been brought from Gabal to provide more room. The staff on Seraphi's business planet were apparently quite eager to serve her Recurrence - the ships had arrived mere hours after the request.

Kiza and Dr. Thompson would be following in a few days' time; the economist had some affairs to finish before leaving, and Kiza had volunteered to wait to go with her.

Jupiter slowed as they neared the skimmer's open boarding ramp. "Are you sure this thing is big enough?" she asked Caine. "It doesn't look like it can fly, let alone do interstellar travel."

"The ship that took you from here to Cerise was smaller," Caine told her, though it pained him to revisit the memory. If he'd just been a little bit faster -

As if she sensed his discomfort, Jupiter gave him a tired smile. "Right, space tech. I'll get used to it." She waved to the Stormbreakers and headed up the ramp, and Caine followed.

It seemed a bit excessive to him to be taking three ships, particularly the skimmer, but Captain Tsing and Stinger had agreed that bringing the skimmer directly into the landing bay on Gabal would be both more secure and more impressive than using a transport beam or a shuttle, particularly if the mistico full of Stormbreakers landed first. Caine approved of the security, at least.
The little ship was luxurious to the point of absurdity, with a plush seating area in front of the flight console and a huge viewing window; behind the flight deck were living quarters equivalent to the apartment Jupiter had rented in Chicago, but much more richly furnished. Caine, inspecting it on arrival, had noted with relief that it was all clean, with fresh linens and even a few pieces of clothing in the narrow closet.

He didn't know why Queen Seraphi might have wanted a ship with no space for her attendants, but it didn't matter. *Maybe she just wanted some time alone.*

It was distinctly odd to think of an Entitled being so...ordinary, but being near Jupiter kept adjusting his worldview.

Her Majesty walked around the flight deck, peering at the controls with interest as Caine brought them on line. "That is so cool," she murmured.

He grinned a little. "Would your Majesty like to close the hatch?"

He took her hand and guided it into the holofield, showing her where to pinch her fingers and turn, and felt a pulse of pleasure at her delight when the ramp retracted smoothly and the hatch irised shut.

"Remember when you had to open the door for me on the *Neva*?" Jupiter asked, smiling up at him. "At least I can do that much for myself now."

"There are Entitled who never open doors for themselves either," Caine pointed out, amused, and she rolled her eyes.

"They'll get stuck in their own bathrooms someday. I'll leave the driving to you for now though."

Caine nodded. He approved of her endless curiosity concerning the technology around her; it was always safer to know how to do things even if one never expected to need to. "Excuse me, your Majesty, I need to do a communications check."

Jupiter nodded and wandered back towards the observation window, standing to watch out of it as Caine checked in with the *Neva* up in orbit and the (yet-unnamed) mistico parked in the corn stubble. He could see the latter through the window as it sealed and shielded, vanishing in a shimmer of distortion; he did the same with the skimmer. No passers-by would be reporting UFOs today.

Her Majesty was silent as he lifted the skimmer out of atmosphere and around the planet's curve. They were meeting the *Neva* on the far side of the planet, since portaling in view of the occupied space station was considered bad form, but it didn't take long to enter orbit next to the cruiser's bulk. The Stormbreakers' ship came in right behind.

Jupiter was still staring out the window at her Earth as if it were looking back at her.

*Maybe it is.*

Caine ran through the pre-portal routines at speed, but with care; he hadn't piloted one of these models before, though the controls were standard. Everything was in order; he finished the second comms check and went over to where her Majesty was standing, sliding his arms around her waist and rejoicing silently in his privilege to do so. She sighed happily and leaned back against him.

"We're ready to go," he said after a moment. "The escort waits on your word."

Jupiter sighed again, not as happily. "I suppose we can't keep them waiting."
He puffed a breath of laughter. "They will wait on your Majesty's pleasure all day, if you wish it so."

"Yeah, but that's just obnoxious." She folded her hands over his and squeezed, then let go, yawning.
"Go ahead, Captain, let's get out of here. Second star to the right and straight on till morning."

Caine snorted at the title and released her, heading back to the control console to relay her order. Their little convoy began to move, with the Neva taking point to form the portal.

But before the bigger ship even began, the controls under Caine's hands flashed red and the skimmer veered off-course. He swore in surprise, then dismay as the console refused to answer to any of his gestures.

"What's the matter?" Jupiter braced a hand against the bulkhead.

"I don't know." He thumped the console with one fist, to no effect. "I'm locked out - Majesty, strap in, I don't - "

The comm was a babble of alarm, but he had no time for it. Caine dropped to one knee and levered off the console's casing, groping for the cutoff and hoping desperately that if the mistico was in their path, it would get out of the way in time.

"Caine?" Jupiter's voice was sharp in alarm, and she hadn't moved.

And then he heard the distinctive rising hum of the portal generator and lunged at her, wondering wildly if they had time to get to the lifepod, but before he was halfway there the skimmer lurched hard and he went tumbling.

Light vanished, and reality wavered as they passed through the portal. He heard Jupiter gag and felt his own gut twitch queasily, but then they were through and things were solid again.

Alarms sang clashing notes; there was only a little light, most of it coming in from the big window. Caine got his limbs beneath him and staggered up, searching desperately for his Queen. There, there she was, in a heap next to the bulkhead, and he fell down beside her and gathered her up. "Jupiter?"

"M okay, I'm okay, are you okay?" Her voice was wavery but her hands reached out for him, patting frantically. "Caine?"

"Not hurt," he bit out, then, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." She braced herself against him, sitting up. "Just knocked off my feet. Caine, is the ship okay?"

He didn't want to leave her, but she had the right of it. He levered himself to his feet again and returned to the console; its lights were burning in the darkness, most of them the angry red of error.

"The hull and life systems are intact," he reported after a quick examination. "I'm not sure about the guidance system or communications."

"Yeah, no kidding." Her Majesty was standing now, still leaning against the bulkhead and peering vaguely in his direction; she wouldn't be able to see anywhere near as well he could, not in so little light. "What happened?"

He growled a little. "Sabotage." It was the only answer; ships did not portal at random. The knowledge was a sick knot inside him. Someone had sabotaged the ship, and he hadn't noticed; someone had tried to hurt his Queen.
The knot was rapidly becoming rage.

"Well, hell." She sounded more annoyed than upset. "So why are we still alive?"

"Good question." Caine regarded the console sourly, then bent to reach into the still-open casing and feel around. The cutoff resisted his push, as it was built to do, then snapped into place.

The console went dead. Caine took in a slow breath, released it, and flipped the switch back.

The lights came back on. Jupiter blinked at him across the little space, face creased with dismay and anger. "You know, I'm getting pretty tired of people trying to kill me."

Caine grimaced and straightened. "I'm not sure your death was intended."

"Yeah? What the fuck was that then?" She stalked closer, and he had to remind himself that her anger wasn't directed at him.

Caine poked at the controls. They had folded down on the reset, and now came back up, though many were still glaring red. "Someone got into the programming to set up an unauthorized portal. If they could get that far without being detected, they could easily have damaged life support, or set up an engine overload. Someone wants you... out of the way." And all the reasons he could think of for that were very, very bad ones.

"Mm." Her Majesty frowned more deeply. "Do we even know where we are?"

"Not yet." He brought up the comm panel, which was silent. "But I think we're alone. For the moment."

"And if I want more answers I should shut up and let you work, huh?" The humor was strained but there, and he couldn't help softening at her wry smile. "Okay. But one thing first."

"Your Majesty?" And it still startled him when she embraced him, hugging hard, though he didn't hesitate to return it.

"I'm glad you're okay," she said to his collarbone, and he folded her closer, pressing his cheek to her hair, grateful beyond words that she too was unhurt.

Then she laid a quick kiss in the hollow of his throat and let go. "I'll stay out of the way."

Caine was no engineer, but the Legion expected its soldiers not only to handle a wide range of craft, but to be able to perform basic repairs when necessary. It didn't take him long to confirm his initial suspicion - only the programming had been tampered with, not the hardware. And while that was reassuring on one level, it also presented its own set of difficulties.

As he worked, he sifted the scents of the cabin as best he could. Aside from himself and Jupiter, they were mostly stale, and all foreign; he didn't know any of the people who had last been in the skimmer.

But he set their traces in his memory nonetheless. If - when - they got out of this, he would personally chase them all down, and find out who had dared to threaten his Queen.

Jupiter had settled herself on the viewing couch in front of the window, apparently watching the stars, though she was chewing on her lip the way she did when deep in thought. And though the window had no reflection, she knew without turning when he was finished. "What's the word?"
Caine let out a long breath and came to where she was sitting. He tried to stand at parade rest, but she pointed at the other end of the couch, and he perforce sat.

"Your Majesty," he began, "I apolo - " And got no further as her hand landed firmly on his mouth.

"Was this something you should have seen?" his Queen asked sternly.

Compelled, he could only shake his head. She nodded, once, and let him go. "Then it's somebody else's fault. Not yours."

He had to take another breath before he could go on. "I, uh. The programming was sabotaged, set to portal this ship on its own, probably the moment we left orbit."

"To somewhere specific?" She gestured at the starfield outside the window.

"I don't think so." Caine looked out, but there was nothing to see besides those distant suns. "If it were, someone would have found us by now."

"Unless they missed the bus," Jupiter muttered, but didn't argue. "So can you fix it? Or do we call for a tow?"

"That's where it gets complicated, your Majesty." Caine swiped a hand through his hair nervously. "The ship doesn't need fixing, exactly; the main computer system needs to run a system cleanse and reboot. But that will take hours."

Jupiter glanced around apprehensively. "Would we have enough oxygen?"

He hastened to reassure her. "Yes - life support would still be running. But in the meantime everyone in the fleet will be..."

"Panicking," she supplied grimly. "Yeah. Well, can we call them, let them know we're okay? Maybe have them send a pickup?"

"We could," he said, and she raised her brows.

"But?"

He kept his voice level. "Transmitting our position - if we can figure it out - and status would be on the same level as a distress beacon. It could mean that whoever sabotaged the ship could find us first."

"But they sent us somewhere at random," Jupiter pointed out. "They don't seem to want us."

"But others might." Caine chose his words carefully. "Your Majesty, the laws concerning rescue and salvage are - harsh. You could be forced to give your rescuer concessions you might not otherwise consider." He hesitated as she bit her lip again. It might be the best thing all the same, to get her to safety as soon as possible, but - "They might even be able to claim ownership of me, depending."

Her eyes flashed with that sudden fury that was like a lightning strike in clouds. "Oh, hell no. Cross that one right off the list." Her grip on his hand was tight. "We are not getting separated."

He had to swallow before he could continue. "Then...then the only choice is to run the cleanse."

Jupiter nodded. "So how long will the reboot take?"

Caine squeezed her fingers and let go. "The reboot, not long. The cleanse...about twelve hours."
Her jaw dropped. "Twelve hours? And I thought Microsoft was bad."

He shrugged. "We can cut that time a little if we reduce life support to minimum. But it will be dark and cold in here."

She waved that aside. "There's blankets in the little bedroom back there. We can snuggle to keep warm." Her smile was teasing, but quickly gone. "Go ahead, start the reset. I'll find those blankets."

Shutting down the ship felt eerie, as if it were never going to come back to life again, but Caine ignored the feeling and made sure the cleanse was underway before going back to the small room.

Only the emergency guide lights were on, and there was already a chill in the air, but her Majesty had piled all the linens on the wide bed. She'd even found the emergency kit and cracked a cold-light; its amber glow looked almost like fire, but steadier. Her elaborate gown lay draped over the headboard, and the closet was open and clearly rummaged through for whatever she'd changed into.

And she was mostly buried under a quilt, eyes closed; clearly her lack of sleep had caught up with her.

Caine slid the door shut behind himself and wondered if he should sit against it, at least until the room was colder, but a drowsy voice came from the heap of bedding. "Get in here, Wise. No noble freezing to death allowed."

"As your Majesty pleases," he replied, unable to suppress the smile, and sat on the edge of the bed to take off his boots.

It felt dreamlike, almost, to lie down next to her and take the blanket shoved in his direction. She was hardly visible, but he could feel her warmth against his skin nonetheless, and as soon as he was settled she startled him by sliding over until her quilt-bundled form was pressed against him.

Very tentatively, he laid one arm over her, and was rewarded with a contented mumble. Shortly her breathing slowed into true sleep.

He just lay still, staring at the far wall in the faint light, and wondered at how his barren life had bloomed.

She slept for almost four hours. The ship got colder, enough to make the blankets welcome but not quite so cold that their breath was frosting. Caine got up once to check the progress of the cleanse, glaring in frustration at the console. Putting life-support on minimum had shaved about two hours off the estimated repair time, but there was nothing more he could do to speed things up.

He was drowsing himself, on his side with Jupiter snuggled against his lower spine, when she woke. Her groan brought him back to consciousness instantly, but as he rolled over she was staggering out of the bed towards the tiny refresher unit, quilt dragging behind her. Caine watched her disappear, finding himself grinning, and took the opportunity to stretch and check the cleanse again before returning to the nest of covers.

She came back smelling of fresh water and drowsiness, and he silently held up the blanket's edge for her to dive under. "Thanks," she mumbled, and rubbed her eyes, visibly waking up. "How're we doing?"

"The cleanse is on schedule. You can go back to sleep," he offered; she still looked tired.

"Mmm." She muffled a yawn, blinking. "Maybe in a bit."
Caine dared to gently push her hair from her eyes. "There's nothing else to do."

She curled a smile at him and propped her head on her hand, elbow denting a pillow. "Have you ever been in a situation like this before?"

"In bed with an Entitled?" he asked, deadpan, and Jupiter snickered and poked him.

"Stuck in a broken spaceship. Waiting for rescue, or whatever."

"A couple of times." Not a very pleasant memory, an overcrowded troop transport full of nervy Legionnaires, some of them wounded - that one had been a retreat. "Not this comfortable."

"Yeah, this thing is ridiculous." She laid a hand on his chest, a light touch. "Tell me what it was like, being a soldier."

To his surprise, he did. Not the ugliness of it, the blood and screaming and death, though from the way her eyes darkened he knew she could hear it all the same. But there were funny moments too, stories of training mishaps, as well as beautiful worlds and endless vistas, and the glorious times when they would all fall out of the sky and descend on their targets like the wrath of the heavens.

"Do you miss it?" she asked when he ran down.

He had to think about that. "Yes...no. Not exactly." When she cocked her head, he struggled to find the right words. "It's what I was trained for, what I was bred for. It's what I am, or...or was." He drew in a breath. "But I don't want to go back."

Her lips parted, but before she could speak he reached out, touching her cheek with the tip of one finger. "I don't want to leave you."

"You won't have to." It was a promise, a firm one. "I'll buy out your Legion contract myself if they ever try to take you away. And then I'll give it to you."

Delight went to bafflement in one second. "I...you can't do that."

She frowned. "What, I thought the Legion worked the same way as the Aegis. Stinger said - "

"No, it's - Splices can't own their own contracts."

She squinted the way she did when some part of her new universe didn't make sense to her. "Seriously?"

At his nod, she cursed. "That...that is totally fucked up. Every time I think I understand this setup, it turns out to be worse than I thought."

"It wouldn't make sense if we could," he explained, or tried to. "A Splice is property - first of the Splicer who breeds them, then of whoever purchases their contract. Splices not under contract would dilute the value of their genomic line."

His words didn't soothe her; she clenched both fists, staring at him in what seemed to be disbelief, and he wanted to apologize even though he'd only spoken the truth.

Then the anger seemed to drain out of her, and her eyes squeezed shut for a moment. "You know," she said distantly, "the worst part of this is that none of you seem to see just how sick this all is."

"It's...how it is." He'd never heard anyone protest it before. "I understand that you think it's wrong, but..."
"Your whole life." Her voice thickened. "You've spent your whole life being exploited. It's so not fair." A tear slid from her eye, and he wanted to lick it away. "Nobody ever let you have a choice."

He settled for blotting the moisture from her skin; the salt scent stung his throat, and some part of him marveled that anyone, that she, would weep for him. "That's not true. I had a choice, once."

"Yeah?" She blinked another tear free. "What did you choose?"

He followed its path as it rolled down her cheek. "To fly through a hurricane to find my Queen."

He watched the droplet fall past her chin towards the sheet below, and held out a finger to catch it. Then her hand was tilting up his own chin, and her lips were on his, a guerdon so sweet it overwhelmed the salt and sorrow.

It was a hot, slow bliss, to kiss her as much as he wished to, and feel her smile against his mouth. Caine pulled away long enough to chase the moisture from her skin, absorbing the flavor with absolute concentration, because it was Jupiter and therefore essential. And then she was tugging him back to meet her kiss, purring a little as their lips met again.

She smelled so good, grief and anger fading into pleasure and arousal, and he couldn't resist kissing his way to her ear and drawing in the warm scent of her from the delicate skin just below. Jupiter giggled, hands curving around the back of his neck. "Tickles," she whispered, and when he would have pulled away guiltily she held on. "I don't mind."

Something in him loosened at her smile, and Caine thought dazedly that he could just lie there forever and let her be his oxygen, but she was reaching for the fasteners on his shirt, flipping open the latches and peeling back the collar. "If you get to smell me, I get to smell you," his Queen said, eyes crinkling, and then she was pressing her nose to the hollow of his throat and inhaling.

His eyes dropped shut and the sound he made was somewhere between a whine and a groan. She giggled again and kissed him there, and he remembered wanting to present his throat to her. "You smell good," she commented.

"Your Majesty," he managed, though it came out sounding strangled, and he could feel her shiver at the words. And he had to kiss her again. She liked his scent. How was that even possible?

One of those small strong hands was still playing with his collar; the other stroked his cheek and curved around to his ear, and Caine shuddered, skin prickling delightfully. And then she was pulling away just far enough to whisper in that same ear. "What do you want?"

The question didn't make sense to him. Caine blinked at her, confused, and Jupiter met his eyes, smiling. "What?" he said after a moment.

She cupped his face in both hands and kissed his nose. "What do you want? And don't tell me it's up to me, Caine. This is a mutual enterprise."

It was hard to think in the close-wrapped dimness, with her scent filling his nose and her taste filling his mouth; all his instincts told him to follow where she led, and rejoice in her delight. And while it was true that there were plenty of things he'd imagined doing with her, they were all strictly in the realm of fantasy. Entitled didn't associate with Splices; the fact that Jupiter touched him and kissed him on a regular basis was so outside what Caine knew to be true that he set it aside as a separate, almost mystical thing.

But his Queen was asking - asking - and so he searched for a path for his words.
"I want to...to breathe you." It was her turn to blink in confusion, and he returned her touch, tracing the line of her jaw with one reverent finger (so soft, she was always so soft). "Your skin, I want to just...breathe. Taste." Steep himself until he could sense nothing else.

Surprise melted into a smile, pleased and intrigued. "Okay, sounds like fun." Jupiter reached for the hem of her top, but Caine startled himself by laying a hand on hers.

"May I, your Majesty?"

Her smile widened and her hands fell away. "Knock yourself out."

He'd learned to cope with the idiom. Caine leaned in to brush his mouth over her cheek, her ear, her neck, filling his lungs with her essence. She shivered hard, and her scent deepened with arousal, winding tendrils into his brain and making the rest of the universe vanish.

He tugged down the edge of her top to expose her clavicle, velvet over the delicate knobs of bone, the tiny hairs there rising as his breath passed over them. So rich it was dizzying, and so warm in his mouth; as if every molecule of air was conspiring to intoxicate him.

The join of her neck and shoulder, the firm roundness of her bicep; when her top would go no lower Caine switched to the cooler skin of Jupiter's wrist and forearm, daring to taste her pulse. Her chuckle ended in a gasp, and the sound gave him a surge of pleasure he scarcely recognized. Her other hand stroked the back of his neck, thumb brushing tentatively over his brand, and he huffed against the tender cove of her elbow, almost thrown off track by the tingling sensation.

Rational thought was thinning out. Caine let her arm go and pushed her top carefully up, exposing the curve of her belly, and closed his eyes as a fresh wave of her scent rose up. He sank into it, rubbing his face against the softness, trying to transfer her smell to his own skin so that he might never lose it.

Jupiter gasped again, her stomach tensing and her hand closing in his hair, but not to pull him away; her other hand was tugging her top up further. He took breath after breath, saturating his lungs with her, feeling as if it would mark him as hers even more than her seal on his arm. He wanted to draw the blanket back over them both, just stay there always, head pillowed on her abdomen and her heartbeat in his ears, but that heartbeat was picking up speed as he nosed up her torso and -

"Caine." Her scent was sweeter here, between her breasts, and she wriggled slightly, but only to pull off her top entirely. He had to taste, he had to; his own pulse was beating like a drum and he could hardly think at all. So soft, so soft under his lips, his tongue; he couldn't get enough.

"All right - my turn." Determined hands tugged his head up, and he blinked and focused on his Queen's flushed face.

"What?" he said, or started to, but she was busy unfastening the rest of his shirt and pushing it off his shoulders. The chilly air had no chance to affect him; her mouth was on his skin in turn, her fingers tracking over his freckles, and Caine's head dropped back in stunned pleasure. It took all his concentration to put his wings into standby mode, before they spread out and destroyed the nest of blankets.

His hands flexed slowly in the sheets; Jupiter was seeking out his scars, kissing each one gently as if to ease the old pain, and Caine locked his throat on a whimper. When she lifted her head she was smiling, eyes sparkling in the low light. "You are so beautiful," she said softly, and words deserted him entirely, but it didn't matter because her lips were on his again, her hands stroking his shoulders, his arms, his chest in patterns that made him shake.
He let his fingers skate up her spine; she purred into his mouth, but her skin was cooler than he liked, so he dragged the nearest blanket up to cover her. His Queen lifted her head and laughed, and slid closer still, leg slipping between his; Caine would have been ashamed at his own arousal, but the way she hummed and kissed him shorted that emotion out. He could only fill his palms with her shoulders, her hair, the nape of her neck - only taste, and feel.

Then she straddled him, and the pressure made Caine gasp, hands dropping to grab her hips. Before he could apologize or even let go, Jupiter was grinning. "It's probably illegal, but I read your medical file," she murmured against his jawline. "So I know you're clean. And I'm clean, if you'll take my word for it. Plus I'm on this primitive tercie thing called the patch."

She looked Caine in the eye, brows rising, cheeks still flushed, and if he hadn't already been wordless the question there would have struck him dumb. He knew he was gaping, knew he needed to answer, but he couldn't even move.

Is this even real?

His Queen bit her lip, still smiling, then dipped her head to whisper in his ear. "Yes or no, Wise. Give me a sign."

Somehow he managed to jerk his chin downward.

She laughed again, then took his hands in hers and slid them under the waistband of her loose trousers, so that he was touching bare skin instead of cloth. And his brain seemed to white out with pleasure and wonder, letting instinct take over.

Caine pushed the trousers down, then all but whimpered when Jupiter wriggled against him to rid herself of them; she busied herself with the catches of his own pants, but in the meantime his greedy hands were taking in all they could, from fragile shoulderblades to supple spine to the firm muscle below. Then she was urging him out of the rest of his clothing; he kicked the pants away in a daze.

Instinct said touch, so he did, eyes and nose and ears all assessing what pleased his Queen the most as she trembled and sighed in his grasp. Instinct urged taste, so Caine sought out her most fragrant, delicious spots, thrilled when she moaned and her own hands faltered.

But instinct fell silent when Jupiter shoved him gently against the headboard and knelt astride him, heedless of the chill. He had no coding for someone who kissed him as she took him into herself, who stroked his astonished face and said "I've wanted to do this since the first time you smiled at me."

Then she pulled back her hair, tilted her head - eyes bright, breathing fast, and oh her scent, her scent - and whispered "Go ahead."

Oh.

Slowly, reverently, he opened his mouth against the tender skin of her throat, set his teeth, bit down. Gentle and perfect.

Her soft cry of pleasure squeezed Caine's eyes shut and set his heart to pounding. It wasn't instinct that moved them together, slow and deliberate in the dimness; it was something they shared, passed from mouth to mouth, lingering in the slide of fingers, rising with the hot tide of rapture in his blood. It was the light in her eyes as he kissed her, the tickle of her hair, the fiery pleasure of every movement, until Jupiter shuddered and cried out again. All the glory he ever wanted was there in his arms, gasping his name, and it was one syllable too much; he was lost in the firestorm, and there was
nothing but ecstasy and his Queen.

He was lost, lost, lost, and utterly found.

He was hers.

She'd never seen him sleep.

Jupiter lay still and watched, knowing that the smile on her face was distinctly sappy and not caring in the least. Caine lay on his side, lashes motionless on his cheeks and face smooth with relaxation, looking...innocent, she decided finally. Like he must have been, once, before his Splicer began to mold him for a soldier.

One hand was beneath his head and the other lay limp between them, but his legs were tangled with hers as if even unconscious he couldn't bear to be parted from her.

_I was right. You are incredible._ Not the way she'd imagined, exactly, but his stunned _reverence _had been an amazing turn-on. Jupiter was quite willing to keep practicing until they got to _eager and confident_.

The past hour did require some consideration, though, and she pulled her thoughts into order even though what she really wanted to do was drift on the lingering high. _It's like...like he never expected this to happen._

It was true that they hadn't really discussed their relationship, but Jupiter had assumed that they were both moving in the same direction, and from what little she'd seen - and read - she didn't think the galactic population at large behaved that much differently when it came to pairing off. And with Caine's enhanced sense of smell, he couldn't possibly have missed what he did to her just by saying your Majesty.

_But I swear he thought he was dreaming this whole time._

Part of her wanted to be mad at him for still thinking so little of himself, or maybe it was still that whole Splice-Entitled thing. _But you didn't talk about it either_, Jupiter reminded herself. _You'd found the perfect guy, and things were going so well..._

She'd let it go. The thought brought a small surge of shame. Her relationship with Caine was one thing she'd thought she didn't have to worry about, and in the process she’d - well, she didn't think she'd actually _hurt_ him.

_But I'm gonna have to be careful._ Jupiter held back the desire to brush a finger over his lips; it would wake him. _Because whatever's going on in that gorgeous head is not what I thought it was._

Caine’s slow breathing deepened. As his lashes quivered, Jupiter put that line of thinking away for later and leaned in to kiss him, matching skin to skin under the blankets and not caring at all that they were both a little messy from earlier.

His mouth was slow and sleepy at first, then moved on hers with the familiar warm gentleness that was so alluring. She felt his lips curve, which made her smile too, and the kiss was ruined as Jupiter giggled. Caine's rare deep chuckle just made her grin the wider, and she felt his hands sliding carefully down her bare sides and around her waist.

She hummed happily and reached up to hold him still for a better kiss, only backing away enough to form words. "Up for round two?"
His body certainly was, Jupiter noted with something distinctly like glee. Caine's arched brow meant "pun noted and ignored", and he kissed her again, lingering until she was ready to whimper herself. "As your Majesty wishes," he replied.

"I'm going to buy you a wand with a star on top," Jupiter told him, then moved her hands lower before he could ask. His gasp was very gratifying.

Wish granted.

They had a snack later, though with the power down the galley was unusable; Caine found some emergency rations in a cabinet, and they were edible if uninspired. And soporific; Jupiter was yawning again as soon as they finished, and barely felt Caine tucking the blankets back over her.

The lights coming back to full woke her later, and she rolled over to see Caine disappearing into the flight deck. When he came back, he wore a satisfied look.

"The cleanse is finished, your Majesty," he reported. "All systems are back up and we can leave whenever you're ready."

"Terrific." Jupiter stretched, still swaddled in blankets, though she could feel warm air coming out of the vents. "I want a quick shower first though."

It wasn't a shower, exactly; it was something that used sound waves, or at least that was how Captain Tsing had explained it to her back when the whole thing was just getting started. Jupiter couldn't actually hear it doing anything, and it just didn't feel as cleansing as water, but she had to admit it worked; when she stepped back out of the cubicle, her skin and hair were clean and fresh.

She wrapped up in a blanket long enough to stick her head through to the flight deck. "Do you want a turn?"

Caine glanced up from the controls. "I already had one."

Huh, must have been more asleep than I thought.

It didn't take her long to get back into the gown she'd bought for the trip, or to settle the sparkling headband - almost a tiara - that set off the outfit. I hope they're not too freaked out by us being missing, she thought, though she was pretty sure it was a vain hope.

As she walked back into the flight deck, Caine glanced back again. "We're ready to portal, your Majesty."

Jupiter picked up speed to go sit on the lounge in front of the window; the transition still turned her stomach. "Okay, go ahead."

The portal bloomed in front of them in amber light; a few seconds later, they were elsewhere. And the view took Jupiter's breath away.

Gabal was blue and white, much like Earth, but it had no green at all - it seemed to be entirely ocean, at least on the side that was facing them. There were ships arcing out to meet them, and Jupiter heard Caine acknowledging them tersely, but she couldn't take her eyes from Gabal. It felt like seeing Orus for the first time, excitement underlain with anxiety. It's yours, she told herself silently, but that felt no more real than it did when she looked at Earth and said the same thing.

Two of the ships followed them down into the atmosphere. The water stretched from horizon to
horizon, but as they descended Jupiter saw an island of some kind come into view. It was quite large, but there was still no green or anything that looked like vegetation; as they got closer, it revealed itself to be entirely manufactured, at least on top. Buildings, streets, pavements - a city, dominated by a spire much taller than anything else. *Is the whole thing artificial?*

Caine guided the skimmer towards what looked to be a circle of concrete or something similar, but as they neared it irised open; they kept going down, revealing a landing bay, well-lit and occupied with what looked to be about fifty people, all facing the landing pad and waiting. The sight made Jupiter swallow nervously.

"You'll be fine, your Majesty," Caine said softly behind her, and she had to smile.

"Remind me not to try to keep secrets from you. Do I look okay?"

Caine shut down the controls, his gaze flicking up from her toes to her face, and the light in his eyes gleamed out at her for an instant before he shut it away. "Very royal."

Jupiter snorted at him and smoothed her hands over her hips just to make sure the fabric was hanging properly. The dress was simple compared to the elaborate thing Kalique had dressed her in, but it still felt not-her. "Okay then, let's go."

As the skimmer's ramp opened, Caine took up position behind her and just to her left. Jupiter reached back to squeeze his hand quickly, and the wrap of his fingers around hers made her feel just that much more confident.

Then she let him go, raised her chin, and started down the ramp.

At least half the crowd were those gun-robots, she saw, drawn up in two ranks in precise order and flanked by Stormbreakers with their wings mantled. Most of the rest were people she didn't know but who probably worked for her, a wildly mixed group of faces and shapes. *Where's Stinger? I don't see anyone from the Neva either -*

As they stepped off the ramp, Jupiter heard a soughing noise, a collective intake of breath from the watching crowd. And with an explosion of noise and blurring movement, she and Caine were suddenly surrounded by Skyjackers.

All of whom were pointing weapons at Caine.

"On your knees!"
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Deepest apologies for the delay in posting; this chapter simply wouldn't stop mutating. As it happens, I think I'm going to have to do something I haven't done in maybe a decade, and start posting without a firm update schedule. When did 3500 words go from a chapter to a scene? *bafflement*

As always, Cincoflex cheers me on and tells me when I'm screwing up!

Production notes on some chapters can be found on my LiveJournal.

- What?

Stunned, Jupiter gaped at them for exactly one second. Then strong arms grabbed her up, pulling her backward and off her feet and away. Someone moved to fill the space she'd vacated, but she could still see a glimpse of Caine slowly raising his hands, sinking down one knee at a time - "Hey!" Jupiter kicked out, trying to get loose, but the arms didn't relax.

"It's all right, your Majesty, you're safe, we've got you," Rush's voice said in her ear, and he swung her around so he was between her and the Skyjackers and set her on her feet. "Everything's under control."

People were hurrying up to her. "Get her out of here," Rush snapped, and someone took her arm, trying to hustle her away. There was a babble of frightened voices, and Jupiter twisted around, trying to look back. What the hell is going on -

She couldn't see, there were too many people in the way. She tried to yank her arm free, but the person holding it - someone with a lot of quills instead of hair - had too good a grip. They were forcing her further and further away from him, what was going on, Caine -

Something in her broke loose, something strong and frightening. Jupiter planted her feet, took a deep breath, and used it.

"Stop."

The word cut through the noise like a bell. The babble fell silent, and the yank on her arm ceased. She glared at the quilly person, who immediately snatched their hand away and bowed.

Jupiter spun on her heel and strode back towards the tense knot of Skyjackers. The crowd melted out of her way. Rush tried to step in her path, his angel's face grim, but she met his eyes and didn't bother to slow down.

He fell back as if she were three times her size.

The closer she got, the angrier Jupiter felt. Between the tall bodies she could see Caine kneeling, his head shoved all the way to the ground and his hands bound behind him in some kind of handcuff-plate.
She stepped up behind Laur and Honch, put one hand on each massive bicep, and pushed. Somewhat to her surprise, they gave way.

Forthwith had her boot planted between Caine's shoulderblades, toe pressing into one wing and the other caught under her heel. He was unprotesting, face flushed and teeth showing but not fighting the restraints, and Jupiter's stomach twisted as his eyes met hers, because there was no appeal in them.

Just resignation.

She hadn't thought it possible to get more angry, but that sight did it. "Let him go."

Forthwith jumped and stepped back; the others shifted uncomfortably. Rush stepped into her view. "Your Majesty, it's not safe. He diverted you to - "

Jupiter raised her gaze to his, and he faltered. The fury was an icy tide inside her, so different from her usual quick hot rage.

"Let...him...go," she repeated, not raising her voice.

Rush closed his eyes, then gestured. Forthwith sprang forward to undo the cuff-plate.

Caine pushed slowly to his feet. He was disheveled and still flushed, but as far as Jupiter could tell, unharmed. He fixed his gaze on the distance, raised his chin, and settled into the parade rest she'd seen whenever he thought he'd done something wrong.

She wanted to grab him and make sure he really was okay, but now was clearly not the time. Instead she turned to Rush, and kept her tone very, very cool. "Mr. Orig. Who ordered this?"

Rush swallowed, then went into the same parade rest. "I did, your Majesty."

Jupiter frowned. "Where is Mr. Apini?"

"Out looking for you, your Majesty. He took the rest of the squadron, and Captain Tsing has her crew. We didn't know where - "

Jupiter raised a hand, and he fell silent. "We'll discuss this elsewhere," she said tightly; the crowd was still there, watching breathlessly, and she absolutely did not want to have this out in public.

She did want to scream at them all that they were wrong and make them fucking apologize to Caine, but the cool whisper at the back of her brain told her it would be a bad idea just at the moment. Instead she took another breath and turned to face the crowd.

"I'm sorry our meeting was interrupted," she said, pitching her voice to carry, and they shifted and sighed, many bowing. "Please...go back to whatever you were doing. I'll try to see you all later."

This was not the speech they were expecting, judging from the blinks and murmurs, but no one argued.

Nor did they move. Crap. I guess I have to go first.

"Mr. Orig, find me someplace where we can continue our discussion. Mr. Wise..." Jupiter extended one hand, palm down. After the slightest hesitation, he paced forward and held out his arm, perfectly correct, for her to rest her hand upon. Rush, face impassive, stepped in front; the rest of the Skyjackers followed unbidden.

Rush led them past the skimmer to the back of the bay, and into a corridor that looked more like a
hall in an expensive hotel than anything else - plushly carpeted and containing the occasional small
table with something decorative on top. Doors lined it at intervals; Rush stopped at one, and it slid
open to reveal a perfectly ordinary conference room, with a long table and a few chairs all floating on
the blue hoverbeams.

Jupiter went immediately to the head of the table and seated herself in the chair there, sitting straight
and curling her hands over the armrests. Caine took up his parade rest on the side of the room, close
to her but not hovering. The Skyjackers clumped at the other end of the room, leaving their leader in
front.

Rush - dithered, Jupiter noted, though only for a second or two before assuming the same stance and
the same thousand-yard stare as Caine. Jupiter thought briefly about ordering them all to sit down,
and then discarded it. The walk had given her a little time to think, but she was still furious.

"Explain, Mr. Orig," she said coldly.

He flinched, and she heard his wings rustle though they didn't extend. His gaze flicked to Caine, and
away. "Your Majesty, are you sure you want him here for this?"

Jupiter looked over at Caine. "Do you want to leave, Mr. Wise?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes, but he licked his lips, then shook his head. His expression was still
wooden, without hope or expectation, and it almost scared her.

"I think he has the right to face his accuser," Jupiter said, turning back to Rush, who looked as if he
were going to be ill. "Go on."

Rush hesitated, then widened his stance and took a deep breath. "You are aware of Mr. Wise's
history, your Majesty." At her nod, he continued. "From our point of view, your ship suddenly went
off course and then portaled away. The only conclusion we could draw was that Mr. Wise had -
"

"Snapped?" Jupiter suggested dryly.

Rush gulped. "Or betrayed you. Taken you hostage for purposes of his own."

A low rumbling sound reached her ears; Caine was growling.

Rush didn't stop; his words tumbled out faster. "Stinger said it couldn't be true, but we couldn't find
you. They've been out searching ever since, but portals are almost impossible to trace, and then you
came back, and - "

"And if you'd thought it through, Mr. Orig, wouldn't you have realized that if Mr. Wise had betrayed
me, there would be no point in bringing me back unharmed?" She couldn't believe how stupid this
was.

Rush closed his eyes. "We didn't know - you're so, um, fond of him, he might have -"

Oh, so now I'm the besotted female too dumb to see Caine's the bad guy. "I think you'd better stop
there, Mr. Orig."

Rush snapped his mouth shut; his face was almost green. Caine's growl faded. The rest of the
Skyjackers were all looking at the floor.

"As it happened, the ship was sabotaged," Jupiter said. "Without Mr. Wise's expertise, I'd still be
stuck out there, or worse." Rush blinked.

She leaned forward and fixed Rush with the hardest glare she owned. "I trust Mr. Wise," she said, wishing she could growl. "He's saved my life a dozen times. I don't know what bug you've got up your butt about him, but you had better straighten out your attitude before I get really pissed off."

"Your Majesty," Rush muttered, almost inaudible.

"That goes for the rest of you too," Jupiter added, switching her glare to the Skyjackers lurking at the back of the room.

They cringed.

She wanted to punish them, make them see how they were wrong, but Jupiter didn't have the least idea how.

So take Stinger's advice.

She sat back. "Now. Has anyone called up Commander Apini or Captain Tsing and let them know I'm safe?"

She half-expected the answer to be no, but Rush nodded. Jupiter exhaled. "Then tell Mr. Apini I want to see him as soon as he gets back." She pushed to her feet. "Mr. Wise?"

He didn't hesitate this time, but she knew the moment he stepped up beside her that he was still locked down tight. She put her hand on his arm again and strode out the door.

Behind her, Rush said something in a low voice, and Honch and Laur followed them out, the latter hastening ahead and bowing a little to show her which way to go. I guess I'm supposed to have the escort.

She wanted to send them all away, but as they left the building and stepped outside into a damp wind, Jupiter could see people on the sidewalks and vehicles on the street. It was a very weird feeling to know that she might not be safe without the soldiers behind her.

The tall tower that dominated the city was their destination, according to the briefing Stinger had given her the day before, but while she could see it looming overhead, Jupiter couldn't tell how far away it was. But a large vehicle, looking like nothing so much as a black jellybean with a windshield, was parked at the curb, hovering a foot or so above the pavement. It didn't have a door as such - just an opening, and Laur hurried forward to look inside, then nodded back at her. "It's safe, your Majesty."

Caine handed her into the vehicle and stepped in as soon as she was seated in the single seat facing forward; the front panel in the compartment was translucent, and Jupiter could see Laur sliding in next to the driver and Honch next to Laur. Caine sat opposite her, and the opening shrank and disappeared. Then the front panel went opaque as well, though there was a window on the side furthest from the door-spot.

The vehicle lifted smoothly into the air. Jupiter immediately leaned forward to touch Caine's knee. "Are you okay?"

He didn't physically flinch, but she could sense his withdrawal all the same. "I'm not hurt, your Majesty."

Jupiter bit her lip; the roil of anger, frustration, and worry in her belly was making it hard to stay calm. "I don't know what their problem is, but I will make fucking sure that - "
"Your Majesty." Caine was looking past her again. "It doesn't matter."

Her jaw dropped. "What? Of course it matters!"

He shook his head, and she wanted to grab him and make him meet her eyes. But the vehicle was changing course, and she glanced out the window to see them banking towards the huge tower. 
_Crap. No time._

And then straightened. _Waitaminute, who's running this circus anyway?_

Leaning forward, she knocked on the panel behind Caine's head. He started, then hastily tapped a control on his armrest; the panel went transparent again.

Laur turned in his seat. "Your Majesty?"

"Stop this thing," Jupiter said crisply. "Right now."

The driver, who was thin and had black-and-yellow stripes in their hair, glanced back, and the vehicle came to a halt, hovering in mid-air.

"Do you want to descend, Majesty?" Laur asked uncertainly. "We're already overdue at the Tower."

"Yeah, they can wait." It was rude, Jupiter knew, but Caine was more important. "Can you just hold here?"

Laur exchanged a glance with the driver. "It's not advisable, your Majesty," the Skyjacker said carefully. "A stationary vehicle is an easy target."

Part of her wondered again just how much danger they were in, on what should be her own planet, but she saved the question for later. "Then take us on a tour. City, ocean, I don't care. Keep moving until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, your Majesty," the driver said in a thin, reedy voice, and they began to move again, arcing out around the Tower and over the city below. Jupiter sat back.

"Can you - " She pointed, and Caine made the panel go opaque once more. "Thanks. Can they hear us?"

He shook his head again. She blew out a breath. "Okay then. Now what the hell do you mean by it doesn't matter?"

Caine's hands closed slowly into fists where they rested on his thighs. "Your Majesty, I...I...you don't know yet. You haven't seen what it's like, the difference between Entitled and Splices."

"And I already told you, I don't fucking care." The anger that was rising inside her was her usual hot Bolotnikov temper, and that was reassuring, because the cold fury of before was not anything she ever wanted to feel about Caine.

He still wasn't looking at her. "But it will matter. And I'm not just a Splice, I'm defective. Dangerous. They - " He jerked his head at the panel, but Jupiter knew he was talking about more than the Skyjackers. "- will always distrust me because of it."

"That's their loss." Jupiter leaned forward again to slide her palms beneath his tight-clenched hands. His jaw flexed, but he didn't pull away, and she wrapped her fingers as far around his fists as they could reach. "Now tell me what's really going on with you."
He was silent a long moment, and Jupiter didn't push. Finally Caine closed his eyes.

"What happened on your Earth...I've never felt like that before," he said, so softly that she almost couldn't hear him. "Never had anything like that...like you. Never thought it was possible."

Jupiter set her teeth against a threatening sting of tears. *This is about him*, she reminded herself grimly. *Don't distract him.*

"I couldn't...you kissed me and I couldn't help it, couldn't stop it any more." His eyes opened, wide and pleading. "You wanted me, you wanted *me*, and you kept me with you and...and made a place for me. I never had a place before, not really. Not - not *with* someone."

Want. *It's want.* Jupiter held the words back, because she knew he wasn't done, but her grip tightened and she could feel his hands trembling, just the slightest bit.

"I let myself forget. I thought maybe it would be possible, that things could be different, Stinger said..." He swallowed. "But they're not, and I see now what will happen."

She didn't let go, *couldn't* let go. "Caine. Do you really think I would stop - " *Loving you* almost tumbled out of her mouth, and she snatched it back, because it was too much for right now, and where the hell had it *come from* anyway - "stop caring about you because some tight-assed snobs didn't like it?"

He stared at her helplessly. "I...I...don't know."

A knot of pain pulsed under her breastbone. *Quit it,* she told it silently. *What kind of faith has he got to go on, anyway? He just told you he's had nothing his whole life.*

His hands were shaking harder. "What *do* you think will happen?" she asked gently.

He closed his eyes again. "They will scorn you. Mock you. Treat you as *less.*" It was just a hoarse whisper. "Jupiter, I know what you and Doctor Thompson intend to do. And it will be a thousand times harder if you have me by your side."

Clearly she and Aggie hadn't gotten far enough away from Caine's ears, but it didn't matter now. Jupiter had to swallow hard herself, and force her next words out past her tightening throat, because nowhere in there had he mentioned what they would do to *him*. "Do you *want* to leave me?"

"No." His fingers uncurled at last, turning to grasp hers tightly, as if she were about to be pulled away. "But I could guard you, nothing more, just that and - "

"No." The same word; the same denial. "Caine, *no.* Listen to me." She squeezed his hands until he opened his eyes. "You are the best part of this whole insane thing - hell, you're the best thing that's happened to me, *ever.* I am *not* giving you up, I don't care how hard it gets or what people say - "

His breathing was rough, the faintest high-pitched sound coming out of his throat, and she kept going, unable to stop. "As long as you're with me I can do this. Fuck 'em all if they don't like it - as long as *you* want to stay - "

The sound sharpened, and Caine abruptly slid to his knees in front of her, bending his head and lifting their joined hands so he could press his face against them. His lips moved against her skin, and she knew somehow what he was saying.

*Your Majesty.*
The tears returned, burning hot, and she bent her head over his, burying her face in the soft furry hair that smelled so good. His shoulders were quivering, wings trembling against his back, and Jupiter realized with another jolt of pain that his stuttering whine was—was crying, that her hands were dry because he couldn’t weep like a human.

The small cruelty was too much. She pressed her lips to his temple, his ear, the brand on his neck. "Believe me," she ordered, speaking the words into the roughened skin as if they could take away all the pain of it. "I will not let you go."

His fingers tightened, and he nodded, beard tickling her skin. Jupiter tugged one hand free, but only so she could wrap her arm around his shoulders and just hold on, hold on.

He felt...strange.

Jupiter's hand was moving slowly through Caine's hair, a soothing stroke, and he didn't want to move his head from where it rested on her knees. He was drained, as after a difficult test or one of Stinger's life-or-death practices, but at the same time there was a lightness in the middle of his chest, a new sensation that he finally recognized as the absence of pain. The ache he'd carried all his life was gone.

I am not alone.

The last few months had been like a dream, one that had broken the second they'd stepped off the skimmer's ramp, but instead of waking to desolation he'd been—defended. Trusted. Protected.

On the surface it made no sense; he was the protector, by breeding, training, and choice. But deeper, it was perfection—it was Jupiter. It was her nature, as much as guarding her was his.

Her Majesty had chosen him, over and over again. Kiza had been wrong.

His Queen would not betray him.

It was a new strength within him. Caine had already laid his heart at her feet; now he knew that she had accepted it. And with that knowledge he felt as though he could take on the universe, if doing so would keep her safe. It wouldn't matter, what others thought of him, he'd learned long ago not to care; what mattered was what she thought.

Her other hand was still wrapped around his, thumb rubbing gently over the back of his hand. Caine watched the movement, wondering a little at the strength in Jupiter's grip...in her spirit.

He'd been defended before, accepted before; Stinger had taken him in, as much as he could, and saved Caine's life with his own sacrifice.

But liking and obligation and even honor didn't blaze as bright as Jupiter's unhesitating fearlessness, her utter confidence in him.

I will follow her anywhere.

Her Majesty sighed, sounding reluctant. "I guess we'd better get this show back on the road."

He didn't want to move either, but Caine nodded once, drawing in a long breath before straightening slowly. Jupiter's gaze searched his face, a little anxious, but whatever she saw seemed to reassure
her, and she bent forward.

Caine reached up to touch her chin with his free hand, a silent request to still her so he could sip the last of her tears from her skin. So strange, and so sweet beneath the salt; evidence of her caring. It was a taste he wanted to remember forever.

And it was his privilege to finish at her lips with a proper kiss.

She pulled away reluctantly, sitting back as Caine returned to his seat, and poked gingerly at her armrest until she brought up the intercom control. "All right," she said to the air. "Take us to the tower."

A snappy "Yes, your Majesty," came back, and the transport banked. Jupiter stabbed the button again, mouth twisting wryly. "Why the hell don't these things have bench seats?"

That startled Caine into a laugh. "If your Majesty will permit?" he asked, and at her nod leaned forward to call up the proper controls on her armrest.

She squeaked as her seat expanded, the armrests drawing apart, and he turned another laugh into a cough, though her mock-glare told him she'd noticed. "Okay, space tech is weird," she said, and patted the new space. "Get over here, Wise."

He obeyed his Queen at once, and spent the rest of the flight with Jupiter leaning against him and his arms around her waist, tasting her scent as her stress ebbed and she relaxed.

When the vehicle settled onto a small landing pad near the top of the tower, there was another host of people waiting, though smaller than the crowd outside the skimmer. Jupiter stood and smoothed her gown and hair, biting her lip nervously; Caine took his proper spot by the exit. "You'll be fine, your Majesty," he repeated.

She shot him a tense smile, and then the vehicle irised open.

Caine helped her out, making a quick scan of the assembly, but he couldn't detect any danger. A tall android woman, her artificial skin done in a pattern of painted roses, stepped forward. "Your Majesty, welcome. I am Sevet, your Head of House here on Gabal. We are most pleased to welcome you back to your Tower."

"Yeah, about that." Jupiter held up a finger. "I am not Seraphi."

Androids didn't blink, but Sevet's head rocked back a fraction. "...Yes, your Majesty."

"Good. Nice to meet you." Jupiter gave her a smile, and Sevet seemed to recover her aplomb. She started to introduce the various people waiting, and Caine took stock as each one came forward, ignoring the occasional uncertain or apprehensive glance. Laur and Honch were not far behind him, and he knew he could depend on their skills as well, but he was leaving nothing to chance.

Jupiter smiled, repeating names and nodding as her new entourage bowed, one at a time. Caine knew she was tired, but she would have to meet these people eventually, and better sooner than later.

When Sevet ran out of people, she folded her hands at her waist. "We are all at your disposal, your Majesty."

"Great. You can - "

"Your Majesty!" Stinger pushed through the crowd, his face lit, and a wave of relief rushed through
Caine at the sight of him. "You're all right!"

Jupiter returned his hug fervently. "Thanks to Caine, I am, but - "

"I heard," Stinger said, smile vanishing. "Majesty, I need to take Mr. Wise's report."

"Yes, of course." She glanced back and up at Caine, brow creasing in concern.

He dipped his head in acknowledgment and moved past her to Stinger, and Honch and Laur moved up to take Caine's place behind Jupiter as smoothly as if they'd done it a hundred times. Caine didn't like leaving her, particularly in this new place, but he didn't doubt the Skyjackers' loyalty to her, and logic pointed out that he himself couldn't guard her constantly.

Jupiter laid a hand on Stinger's arm. "None of it was Caine's fault," she said quietly, and Caine had to swallow hard at her words.

Stinger nodded. "I understand, your Majesty," he said, and gave her his own short bow before striding away.

Caine fell in to follow, and wished protocol let him look back.

Jupiter watched Caine and Stinger disappear into the building, Caine's shoulders stiff and his wings furled tightly, and had to wrench her attention back to the group surrounding her.

"Which would you like to see first, your Majesty, your personal quarters or the offices?" Sevet asked.

Jupiter squared her shoulders. "Let's start with the personal quarters." That can't take too long, can it?

Unfortunately, it could. Three floors of the tower's upper spire were given over to Seraphi's private rooms. Most of the mob peeled off early on, but there were still five or six people following along as Sevet led her through suite after suite of bedrooms, lounges, bathing rooms, dining areas, and places that had no obvious function to Jupiter's eyes. One area with about the square footage of the Bolotnikov house was clothing storage; after one boggled glance Jupiter declined the opportunity to go through it. Part of her yearned to explore, but - I'm too tired and too wired. Clothes can wait.

Most of the spaces were large but uncluttered, open and airy; the colors were mainly dark and almost masculine, quite a contrast to the overdone spaces on Cerise and Titus' clipper. Everything was exquisitely clean; but then, Jupiter thought, they'd had time to freshen the place up.

The tour wound up at the largest suite, which took up all of the third floor. It boasted an outer ring of force-shielded balconies, a bathing room twice the size of the others Jupiter had seen so far, another tub room with the same sort of equipment used when Kalique had had her Regenex treatment, and a number of sitting rooms, dressing rooms, and closets.

It also had a bedroom with an actual bed instead of one of those unnerving beam setups. The bed was as wide as a luxury car and had draperies to match its covers, and Jupiter immediately wanted to crawl into it and pull the sheets over her head.

"This was the one Seraphi used, right?" she asked Sevet when they had returned to the central sitting room.

"It was, your Majesty." Sevet had about half the emotional expression of Lieutenant Chatterjee, and
the rose-patterns made her face harder to read, but she still managed to exude hopefulness.

Jupiter thought about moving to a different suite just on principle, but all the others used the hoverbeams for beds and she just wasn't into that right now. "Okay. It looks good."

Almost before the words were out of her mouth people were bringing in her luggage and starting to unpack it. "Let's leave the rest of the tour for later. I need to, um, freshen up."

"What else do you require, your Majesty? We are here to serve," Sevet said, looking pleased.

Jupiter opened her mouth to say "nothing", and then changed her mind. "I'd like a meal - something that can sit, sandwiches or something. Make that three - I'm sure Mr. Apini will be by soon and Mr. Wise hasn't had lunch either." No wonder I feel so funky. Aside from the snack on board the skimmer, she hadn't eaten since breakfast, and she wasn't even sure how long ago that had been.

"At once, your Majesty." Sevet bowed, her headpieces spinning and sparkling.

"In the meantime...I'll be in there." Jupiter pointed to the bedroom. "Let me know when Mr. Apini or Mr. Wise shows up."

Fortunately, Sevet took the hint and didn't follow her. Jupiter glanced back as she entered the bedroom, and saw Laur and Honch taking up guard position along the wall. She paused to catch their eyes. "You can sit if you want to."

Laur blinked, and Honch kept their usual impassive expression. Jupiter didn't wait to see if either chose to sit; after a moment of fumbling, she managed to get the door to slide shut, and the relief was so great she almost sat down on the carpet right there.

She felt like she had whiplash.

What the hell was all that?

The fury that had seized her had seemed to loose some other personality, someone who knew how to be in charge, and it was enough to make her shiver.

"You're not Seraphi," Jupiter muttered. It had always been a creepy little notion in the back of her brain - what if she really was a reincarnation? Not just DNA, but soul?

Well, if I am, clearly I should be pissed at myself for forgetting. That was absurd enough to make her snort, and Jupiter sighed and went to collapse onto one of the suite's couches. It looked sort of like the armless things Kalique favored, with one end curved up for sitting against, and it was quite comfortable even if it was floating in midair.

Jupiter closed her eyes and tried to relax. The anger was only the half of it; the other was Caine's instant assumption that everything they had together - including the hours on the skimmer - should be discarded because of this society's bigotry.

Jupiter pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and tried to consider it dispassionately. He's got a point. I don't know what it will be like.

But she couldn't imagine discarding him, not for any reason - any more than she could imagine denying her own Russian heritage, or thinking that harvesting people for Regenex was a great idea. Some things just aren't right. No matter what anyone says.

I suppose I could do this without him. If I had to.
Jupiter dropped her hands and stared at the ceiling, feeling the same strength welling up that had got her through her first actions as Earth's Queen. But I'm not going to. And if anyone argues, I'll find an oubliette just to stuff 'em in.

That made her snicker, and she heaved a breath and turned her head to survey the room. It was quite big enough, larger than the entire Bolotnikov basement, but it was done in dark materials that made it look like an apartment out of one of those architectural magazines - clean and almost empty, but expensive. The oddest thing was the lack of windows; the suite lay in the heart of the tower, protected and shielded.

*Just what do I need to be shielded from?* The thought didn't make her feel any safer.

Sighing, Jupiter laid her head back on the lounge and tried to remember the keywords Sevet had listed. "Screen?" she said tentatively.

The wall across from her, which seemed to be some kind of abstract mural, abruptly went blank and lit up with a cool white glow. Jupiter thought for a moment. "Um, exterior view."

Without fuss, the screen produced an image of the city-island, spread out as from a height. Beyond it was the dark blue ocean, looking very cold and not terribly soothing. Jupiter could just see flecks of white appearing and disappearing on its surface. "Huh. I wonder what happens when there's a storm?"

"Gabal is not known for high-intensity storms, your Majesty." The bodiless voice made Jupiter jump. "But the city is equipped with a force dome for emergencies, and there are safe-vaults in the bedrock."

It was entirely gender-neutral, and unlike the chamber presence at Kalique's place it didn't give a name. "Would your Majesty like to examine the plans?"

"No, thanks," Jupiter said, then paused. *Are you supposed to thank one of these things? I have noooo idea.* "Um, how much attention are you paying?"

"This facility does not record without specific instruction," the voice replied. "Lifesign and safety monitoring overrides require alpha-level release codes. All else is available upon request."

"Okay, good. That sounds good," Jupiter said, trying not to babble out of the sheer *weirdness* of it all. "You just...keep doing what you're doing."

"Yes, your Majesty," the voice said.

"Oh, and if I want a question answered I'll ask for it. I am *way* too tired to try to break any habits right now." Talking to herself being at the top of the list at the moment - well, the voice or whatever it was would just have to deal.

"Yes, your Majesty." It was exactly the same intonation. Jupiter made a face, and watched the water for a minute, comparing it to the view from the Sears Tower back home. There were similarities, but Gabal's view was definitely more forbidding. *And anyway this tower looks more like the Space Needle.* At least in shape; it was much taller, and solid.

"Screen off," she said at last, and the wall went back to being a mural, a somewhat claustrophobic transition. Jupiter thought about getting up and looking around some more, but she just couldn't find the energy...

She was almost asleep when the genderless voice spoke. "Your Majesty, Commander Apini requests
Jupiter sat up fast enough to make her head swim thickly. "Come in?" she said uncertainly.

The door slid aside to reveal Stinger, and bless him, he was holding a large tray of food. "Your Majesty," he said with a tired grin.

"Oh, I'm glad to see you," Jupiter said fervently. "Pull up a chair. Or something."

Stinger obeyed, setting the tray down in the air next to her; it promptly generated its own blue hoverbeam and stayed there. Stinger towed over a legless chair done in something leather-like and sat in it, and Jupiter managed to move the tray in between them. "You didn't have lunch either, did you?"

Stinger shook his head, and didn't hesitate when she pointed, picking up something that looked mostly like a wrap and sitting back with a grunt. Jupiter helped herself to a flatter sandwich and took a huge bite, too hungry to be wary; fortunately, the filling tasted a lot like chopped ham, and she felt better almost immediately.

They ate in silence for a bit. Stinger made a decent inroad on his side, but there was a *lot* of it; Jupiter noted that Sevet seemed to understand combat-Splice appetites. Stinger really did look tired, and Jupiter thought guiltily that the last day or so had to have been pretty rough on him. *But honestly, I don't know what else we could have done.*

After his third sandwich Stinger sighed and slumped a little in the chair. "Before I report, your Majesty, can you tell me what happened, from your point of view?"

*Hah. I bet Caine was being terse.* "I'm not sure what happened, exactly. But the ship went off course all of a sudden, and then did the, the portal thing. Caine was trying to stop it but - " Jupiter shrugged.

Stinger nodded, clearly aligning accounts in his head. "What happened then?"

*Um.* Jupiter bit the inside of her cheek against the sudden rise of her pulse. "Caine said it was sabotaged, and that we could call for help, but it would be dangerous because we didn't know who'd find us first," she said, which *was* what happened.

Partly.

Stinger nodded again, and she went on. "He ran a, what did he call it, a system cleanse on the computer, which took forever, and then we came here."

She could see Stinger's shoulders relax. "Good. Good lad, he called it right. There's plenty of scavengers out there would be happy to take advantage of a lost ship, and not all of them are low-end scum, either."

"That's pretty much what he said." Jupiter picked up a piece of fruit, something spherical and light blue; she had no idea what it was, but it smelled good.

"Aye. Well, to say watching you disappear upset us would be understating the case." Stinger's mouth twisted wryly. "Captain Tsing and I both tried to follow, but it's almost impossible to trace a portal unless you're scanning it when it happens, and we didn't have time."

He shifted uncomfortably, and Jupiter finally placed his expression as guilt. "Of course not," she said, a little surprised. "Whoever sabotaged the skimmer didn't want us followed."
"...Then what did they want?"

Before she could pursue the thought Stinger went on. "Yes, well. The Neva and my ship both started looking in whatever likely places we could think of for you - we didn't know what shape you might be in."

"Makes sense," Jupiter agreed. The fruit tasted something like a grape, though the texture was more pearlike; weird, but good. "I don't think Caine knew where we ended up either."

"Uncharted," Stinger shrugged. "Between systems. There's a hell of a lot of void out there."

"Where did you look?" Jupiter asked, curious, and he grimaced.

"Cerise, for one, and some of Lady Kalique's other holdings." He was looking guilty again. "She took you once, and..."

Jupiter snorted. "That'd be the first place I looked too," she pointed out.

He nodded, conceding. "I know Diomika also went to Lord Titus' primary world - just because he's in custody doesn't mean he's cut off from his people." He picked up a long slice of something that looked like a perfectly ordinary carrot. "And she checked Orus too, said she knew somebody in Arrivals who could tell her if a skimmer had come in."

He sighed, and snapped the vegetable in two. "The real question, your Majesty, is who sabotaged you."

"Yeah." Jupiter snagged a napkin from the tray; her grape-pear was juicy. "Are there space-CSIs?" At Stinger's squint she waved the fruit. "People who investigate crimes based on evidence."

"The Aegis," Stinger said, a little doubtfully. "But I'd prefer to handle it in-house, your Majesty. Caine can track whoever was last in the skimmer."

Oh. "Well, sure, if you think that's better," Jupiter said. "You're the expert." She hesitated. "You'll send someone with him, won't you?"

Stinger smiled, dryly fierce. "The Neva crew's already volunteered. I might send another Stormbreaker along, though, just for backup."

"Yeah, that's another thing." Jupiter sat straighter, incensed all over again. "Stinger, what the hell was that when we got here?I mean, I knew the squad didn't like Caine, but - "

Stinger winced. "My apologies, your Majesty. Believe me, Mr. Oreg and I are going to have a long talk about that." He rubbed his chin. "I'm not saying his suspicions weren't valid at first, but when you turned up safe he should have known better."

"Valid?" Jupiter glared at him. "How could they be valid, you know Caine better than I do!"

Stinger frowned. "Yes, and we both know he's - not capable of that. But Rush doesn't know him that well, and as senior on the ground he had to take the possibility into account. I don't like that, but it's true."

Jupiter could see that, which just made her feel sulky. "He still needs his attitude adjusted."

Stinger chuckled, startling her. "Majesty, I think you've already done that. If he slinks any lower he'll be on all fours."
That made a smirk tug at her lips, but it also brought a faint chill at the memory of wielding that...power. It was one thing to know that people would obey you because of your genes, crazy as that was; it was another to suddenly have so much force at your fingertips.

*Yeah. I definitely need them all to keep me on track.*

"However, I'll see to it personally that he doesn't repeat the error," Stinger added, expression going grim. "The situation's a bit complicated, but - "

The neutral voice interrupted him. "Your Majesty, Mr. Wise is at the door."


"The chamber presence can handle it, Majesty."

"Yeah, but that takes too long," Jupiter sat up a little as Caine came in; he had a duffel-type bag slung over one shoulder, riding outward so as not to foul his wing, and he promptly dumped it in the nearest corner, giving his commander a slightly defiant look.

"You're learning," Stinger said cheerfully.

Jupiter grinned at Caine. "Are you hungry? 'Cause there's lots left."

"I ate, your Majesty," he said, but she shoved the tray in his direction, which moved it about an inch.

"Let me guess. Three of those gross powerbars in two minutes, right?" Jupiter's private theory about why Legionnaires were so obsessed with food was because standard-issue rations took bland to a whole new level - and the pocketable nutrition bars they all carried around were worse. "At least have some dessert."

Caine's lips twitched, but he acceded, choosing a bite-sized pastry from the tray. Stinger stood, turning to Jupiter. "Well, your Majesty, if you don't need anything more just now I'll go see about that last little matter. We'll be keeping a closer watch while you're here, with a double guard besides your usual escort." He jerked a thumb in Caine's direction.

"Okay, but why?" Jupiter frowned. "If this was Seraphi's planet, what's so dangerous about it?"

Stinger blinked. "Nobody told you? Gabal is where Seraphi was murdered."

Startled, Jupiter stared at him. Stinger cocked his head. "They found her body at the base of the Tower - she'd been, ah, beaten and strangled before she was thrown off. They never found out who killed her."

"Balem," Jupiter heard herself say. "It was Balem. He...told me." The thought was distant, somehow, maybe because the memory still made her feel strange. Her side twinged, even though the bruises were long gone.

Stinger went very still, and Jupiter heard Caine's wings ruffle. "Oh," Stinger said at last. "Well. I'll...revisit that protocol, your Majesty, though maybe we'd best discuss it tomorrow."

Jupiter nodded, muffling a sudden yawn.

Stinger smiled dryly. "Get some rest. Lady Kalique will be here in twenty hours, and you'll need all your wits." He took one last sandwich, beating Caine's reach for it, and went out chuckling. Caine lifted a lip at Stinger's departing back and took a cluster of berries instead.
Their settled shorthand of a tease was so _comfortable_. "You have no idea how glad I am that you guys are here," Jupiter said, stretching.

Caine shot her a slightly disbelieving look around his mouthful, but she could see the tips of his ears reddening.

She yawned, and made herself get up before she fell asleep where she sat. "I need to go find my toothbrush. Hey, chamber presence?"

"Your Majesty?" the flat voice said.

"Can you set me an alarm for eight hours from now?"

"Yes, your Majesty," it replied. "What is your preference in waking sounds?"

Jupiter blinked. "Um, beeping, I guess." _Note to self: review alarm sound files._

_Later._

Her toiletries were spread out across an acre of counter in the enormous bathing room where someone had unpacked them, looking very lost. There had been something more space-y aboard the _Neva_ back when she'd first ridden in it, like a cross between a toothbrush and a sonic screwdriver, but she'd barely figured out how to use it, and if this bathroom had something high-tech for the same purpose it wasn't immediately apparent. _Just as well. I'm too tired right now, I'd probably end up with it stuck up my nose or something._

When she came back out Caine was handing the tray to someone at the door. Jupiter sighed as it slid shut. "Do you think anybody out there remembers where they put my clothes?"

"Of course," Caine said, raising a brow. "But your Majesty really should get some sleep first."

Jupiter snorted at him. "Duh. I just want my sleep shirt, that's all, but I'm kind of afraid it's vanished into that black hole Seraphi called a closet."

"Oh." He hesitated, then cleared his throat. "I, ah, can offer your Majesty a substitute. If she likes."

His ears were red again, Jupiter noticed, and that combined with the extra formality was just _adorable_. "Sure, okay."

Caine crouched to open his duffel, pulling out something long and black and shaking it out before handing it to Jupiter. She held it up; it was thin and almost silk-like in texture, a long-sleeved shirt with those mysterious invisible fasteners that so much galactic clothing used.

"It's worn under armor," Caine explained. "It's designed to be comfortable."

"I'll bet." Jupiter resisted the urge to rub it against her cheek. "It's perfect, Caine, thank you."

His smile was equal parts pride and shyness. Jupiter went up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek. "I'm going to change."

He nodded, and cleared his throat again. "I need to speak to Laur. I'll be right back."

Jupiter watched him go, then changed into the long shirt, though she couldn't get all the fasteners to work. It felt amazing against her skin and fell nearly to her knees, and she sat down on the edge of the bed to roll up the sleeves so they didn't dangle past her fingertips.
Caine came back in just as she got the second one to stay. His smile returned, small and sweet, and he came over to fasten the shirt properly, hands gentle as he pulled the edges together.

Jupiter smothered another yawn. "Thanks."

He nodded. "There's no guard antechamber here. Do you want me in here, or out in the next room?"

That baffled her, and Jupiter tilted her head back to frown up at him. "You need to sleep too, you know."

Caine nodded patiently. "I can take the couch, it's big enough."

Exasperated, Jupiter squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "I thought we had this discussion. What's wrong with the bed?"

Caine cocked his head. "It's your bed," he said, sounding a little surprised. "It's not for me to decide."

"The hell it's not." Jupiter reached up, and he surprised her by dropping to one knee to put their eyes on a level. She put one hand on his shoulder and cupped his cheek with the other, looking into calm eyes that still didn't see what she was saying.

So use his language.

She leaned forward to kiss him briefly, then pulled back just enough to speak. "Listen to me, Mr. Wise. This is as royal a decree as I'm going to get with you."

He licked his lips. "Your Majesty?"

Jupiter smiled. "I want you here. Not outside, not on a couch, not on the damned floor. I want you in the bed, with me. On one condition."

His brows went up inquiringly, and she held his gaze. "And that's, as long as you want to be there."

His lips moved in a silent oh.

"Our time in the skimmer...that wasn't a one-off, Caine. I meant what I said about a relationship. If you want to be with me, then I want you there all the way." She swallowed. "If you think that's too much, or you don't want to, that's okay too - "

He shook his head, exhaling on a long note, then touched her cheek as lightly as if it were still bruised from Balem's blow. "Your Majesty," he said again, this time hardly more than a whisper.

And then he rose again, reaching past her to pull back the covers on the bed. Jupiter found herself lifted smoothly and settled on the sheet, pillows at her back, and Caine drew the covers up to her waist. "Lights on dim," he ordered, and the light level dropped obediently.

She watched dreamily as he moved quietly around the room, stripping down to his underwear without the least trace of self-consciousness and then vanishing into the bathing room. She was barely aware when he returned, but the shift of the bed when he joined her woke her a little.

"'M always falling asleep on you," Jupiter mumbled, trying to open her eyes.

Caine laughed softly and gathered her close. "Yes," he said, and the word was full of satisfaction.

His chest was warm and firm against her cheek, and Jupiter managed to put one arm over his waist, fingers burrowing beneath his wing.
Her last awareness was his hand settling on her hip and the contented sigh that ruffled her hair.
Chapter 10

Jupiter woke slowly to silence and low light, and just lay still for a while, appreciating the perfect firmness of the mattress and the coziness of the light blanket, and the warm security of the arm banded around her waist. It wasn't until she pried her eyes open that she realized the blanket was actually a brown-and-amber wing, a spread of feathers draped over her from shoulder to toes. It made her smile, half in pleasure and half in wonder at how much had happened the day before. Well, it got us here...that's a definite plus.

Jupiter didn't think she'd moved, but a soft "Good afternoon, your Majesty," was murmured against the back of her neck, and her smile widened. How'd he know?

She stroked the wing-edge nearest her face, watching with fascination as the feathers rippled in reaction. "Hey there."

Caine's body was solid behind her, a heat source to be envied; his normal temperature was a few degrees above Jupiter's, and she couldn't help thinking how nice he'd be to have around during a Chicago winter. Part of her wanted to just pull his arm closer and go back to sleep, but she'd woken up too far - and anyway, there were probably a million things she had to do before Kalique arrived. So Jupiter rolled over slowly, trying not to ruffle the feathers. For an instant she felt - shy, almost; her hair was a mess, and she knew she had morning breath.

But her self-consciousness vanished at the look on Caine's face. It was the same expression as he'd worn the day before, the silent, joyous wonder of a man who has woken to find his impossible dream is true.

Very carefully, as if giving her time to back away, he tilted his head and kissed her. Slow, and sweet, and wonderfully tender, and for a long moment Jupiter couldn't even think, only kiss him back and revel in the fact that Caine was there, at last.

It made her feel - powerful, somehow, and as if all she wanted to do with that power was heap happiness on him until his hands could hold no more.

His fingers were tracing her spine, and Jupiter laid a hand on his chest, but the feel of fabric distracted her a little. Still, it took her a moment to summon the words when Caine was so close, mouth moving from her lips to her cheek as if he wanted to taste her skin all over again. "You're dressed," she managed finally, and felt his smile against her temple.

"I don't need as much sleep," he said, and Jupiter finally connected the dots - he'd gotten up for his clothes and then come back to bed to be with her.
Really should have done this weeks ago, she thought, ignoring the fact that there hadn't been that much privacy, and slid her hand up to rest her thumb in the hollow of his throat. "Did I miss the alarm?"

Caine eased back enough to look at her. "No; it's only been about six hours."

"Mmm." Jupiter stretched her legs out. "I suppose I have to get up and go out there to be royal now."

Caine smiled again. "If your Majesty says so."

That made her snicker, and Jupiter leaned forward to plant a kiss next to her thumb; for some reason that particular spot felt like hers. "You hungry? Scratch that, stupid question." Kiza had been right about Legionnaires.

She moved to sit up, and Caine retracted his wing; the cooler air didn't quite make her shiver. "Sevet will have a meal for you as soon as you're ready," he said easily. "I should report in with Stinger."

Jupiter watched as he rose, his wings - the other had been spread out behind him - folding up neatly along his spine. "Only if you promise me you'll have real food for - what is it, lunch?"

"Yes, your Majesty," he said obediently, still smiling, and she grinned back and stretched all over before sliding off the bed. Caine's shirt really was comfortable; even the sleeves had stayed neatly rolled up, and Jupiter wished she could just steal it.

"Lights?" she said, a bit tentative, and the room got brighter. "Hey, what's the weather like out there?"

Like the sitting room, the bedroom had one wall that was mostly mural, and it too faded to white before showing an image of the city from above - no, a live image, Jupiter realized when she saw vehicles moving. It looked much the same as it had earlier, sunny but chilly, and she decided it had to be mid- or late afternoon by now. Gabal's day was about twenty-eight Earth hours, which meant that Kalique would probably be arriving before dawn, but - I guess when you go from planet to planet day and night are less important. The idea felt weird, but Jupiter gave it a mental shrug; there were other things to worry about.

Something huge and winged flashed past in the image, directly in front of the camera, and Jupiter jumped. "What was that? I thought this place didn't have birds!"

"Back," Caine said crisply, and the picture reversed its flow, though not its speed. He looked sharply at the screen, then shook his head and relaxed. "It's Glasta. He's probably on patrol out there."

"Oh." Jupiter blew out a breath as the image started going forward again. "Well, now I feel stupid."

"Why?" Caine asked, looking genuinely curious, and Jupiter blinked.

...Good question. "Never mind." She waved her hands as if to clear the air. "I'm going to go clean up, and see if I can find some clothes."

Caine nodded and bent to retrieve his heavy boots, sitting on the low lounge to pull them on. Jupiter knew she should get moving, but she couldn't help dawdling a bit, just to watch him.

Once he walked out the door, she knew, things would start, and this little bubble of peace would break. It had to happen, but it still felt a little unnerving.

Caine stood, snuggling his control wristband into place, and Jupiter sighed before coming over to put
her hands on his shoulders and kiss him. The way he cupped her face, fingers brushing her pulse, nearly had her dragging him back to the bed right then, but she restrained herself. "See you soon."

Caine's smile still held that edge of wonder, and he stepped back as if it were an effort to do so; and then he was gone, striding out at a fast pace. Jupiter sighed again, stripped off his shirt, and went to investigate the bathing room in more depth.

*Depth* was the word; it had a tub that was more like a pool - almost big enough, Jupiter thought with amusement, to teach Caine to swim in. It was already full, and the water eddied gently, looking very inviting. But she knew if she got in there, she wouldn't want to get out.

Fortunately, there were also two separate showers, one of the waterless type like the ones she'd seen on spaceships, and one that was almost like something from Earth. She chose the latter, which was big enough to share with a couple of friends and resembled an architectural magazine more than a common facility, and Jupiter spent a luxurious time in it, figuring out how to adjust the water and sniffing at the various soaps and shampoos available. At least, that was what she thought they were. *Anything's possible, I suppose.*

Her stomach was complaining by the time she got out. There were no towels; instead the shower itself dried her off with warm air, and Jupiter immediately started wondering if it was possible to install something like it in the family house in Chicago. *Imagine what it'd be like in January…*

But with the lack of towels came the lack of anything to wrap around herself. There was nothing resembling any kind of clothing in the bathing room or the main room, and even Caine's shirt - which she'd left on the bed - was gone. Puzzled and a little annoyed, Jupiter managed to pull the sheet from the mattress and turned it into a rather oversized toga before it dawned on her that she could just ask. "Hey. Chamber presence?"

"Your Majesty?"

"Send somebody in here with a robe or something? A bathrobe," she added hastily, before she ended up with something *formal*. "Dressing gown. You know."

"Yes, your Majesty."

Less than two minutes later, which Jupiter couldn't put a face to it. "Sure, let them in."

The outer door slid open to reveal someone short and round and feathery - clearly a Splice - who was carrying a pile of soft cloth; Jupiter kind of remembered them from the mob the day before. "Your Majesty," they said in a piping voice. "You requested a robe?"

"Yes, thanks." Jupiter tossed her hairbrush onto the bed and went to take the robe, only to stop short as the Splice held it out and open - obviously waiting for her to drop her sheet and step into it.

"No. I don't care what Entitled usually do, I am *not* getting naked in front of somebody I've just met."

Jupiter reached out and plucked the robe firmly from the Splice's hands. "Thank you," she said, and watched them blink. "I'll meet you outside in a second."

Brem hesitated a moment, then bowed. "Yes, your Majesty."

Jupiter watched them leave, then sighed and stripped off the sheet. *I wonder if I can get them to call...*
The robe felt like silk several layers deep, and fit perfectly, though it was a shade of green Jupiter had never considered wearing. She managed to get all the fasteners done herself, this time, and stepped out into the sitting room with her chin up, trying to feel in charge of the situation.

This time Absaba was standing on guard, and Sevet was waiting near a table set with food and what Jupiter took to be a place setting. Brem and a half-dozen other people were scattered around the room, and Jupiter recognized a couple of them from the day before.

"Your Majesty," Sevet said, bowing. "Your meal is ready, and your schedule awaits your pleasure."

Jupiter gave the room in general a polite smile and walked over to the table, trying not to feel underdressed. "Thanks." She sat down at the only chair and surveyed the meal, which did smell good. "So what's the schedule look like?"

The food was, again, tasty, though there was a lot more than Jupiter could eat; she suspected it was more to give her a choice than because Seraphi had been a big eater. She kind of wanted to ask Sevet to find a chair and sit down, because it was a little unnerving to have her looming next to the table, but Jupiter had the feeling it would just make the android woman uncomfortable.

"Your main event today is Lady Kalique's arrival," Sevet was saying as Jupiter nibbled on a pastry. "Quarters for her and her court are in readiness, though she may elect to return to her ship to rest; she has done so in the past."

Jupiter nodded, wondering if that was considered rude, or just practical in a society where your family members regularly tried to kill you. "Okay. What t - how long before she gets here?" Because her iPhone probably hadn't synced up with Gabal's local time.

Sevet's polite expression didn't change. "Approximately sixteen hours, your Majesty. She may be late."

"Fashionably, I bet," Jupiter muttered, and took a cautious sip of the liquid steaming gently in a delicate cup. It tasted mostly like strawberries, and she had a sudden, intense desire for coffee.

"Indeed." Sevet's tone offered no opinion. "You will need to dress two hours prior, and Mr. Apini has requested an interview before Lady Kalique touches down, concerning security changes. Aside from that, you have not completed your tour of the Tower." She folded her hands at her waist, and Jupiter bit her tongue on asking why she would need two hours to get ready for a visitor, and took a closer look at her new Head of House.

In her limited experience, androids were really hard to read and moved stiffly to begin with, but there was just something about the set of Sevet's torso that seemed off to Jupiter. "This isn't really your job, is it?"

"But it's not in your job description."

Sevet shook her head slowly. "I am a domestic management model, your Majesty. My programming is flexible but if you wish me to become your secretary I will require new software."
"What, I can just reprogram you?" Jupiter gaped at her, horrified when Sevet nodded. "Oh hell no. Look, I'm going to get a secretary as soon as I can, things have just been pretty busy lately. Just...I don't know, wing it for a bit, okay?"

Sevet's right headpiece popped out a half-inch, then went back in, but she seemed to relax slightly. "As you desire, your Majesty."

"Great." Jupiter stuck a fork into something that looked promisingly savory. "Let's finish the tour as soon as I get dressed, and then go from there."

Much as Jupiter was interested in the vast closet-slash-dressing room she'd seen earlier, she opted for something out of her own luggage for the rest of the tour, in the interests of saving time, and at her direct request Brem produced the clothes that had been put away before her nap. Sevet looked very slightly pained when Jupiter emerged from the bedroom wearing a pair of boot-cut jeans and her Aegis vest, but she didn't say anything, and Jupiter pretended not to notice.

The rest of the tour took two and a half hours; Jupiter timed it. It seemed that most of the Tower was offices related to Seraphi's business - only the top part was living quarters - and Seraphi had had a lot of business. Given how long it took, Jupiter was grateful that the rest of the entourage had stayed behind; apparently they were all on the private side of the staff.

"How much of this is still going?" Jupiter asked at about the ninety-minute mark. Many of the offices had people in them - who all sprang to their feet and bowed when Jupiter, Absaba, and Sevet passed through - but some were dark and empty. "I mean, Seraphi's been - gone - almost a hundred and fifty years, right? Can all of these interests run on their own that long?"

Sevet gave the impression of shrugging without actually doing so. "That is a question for your business managers, your Majesty."

Jupiter had the sudden impression that she was back on Orus. "Right," she sighed, and kept going.

Caine showed up about when Stinger was expecting him - just in time for a meal. The boy had always had an extra sense when it came to food, and since Stinger had already made up to the Tower's provisions officer - his first move at any new billet - there was plenty to share.

"Help yourself," he said around a mouthful, waving Caine to a seat across his desk. "How's her Majesty?"

"Feeling better," Caine said, and though he kept his face straight Stinger could see the contentment behind the professional expression. He reached for a sandwich. "Nice office, Stinger."

Stinger looked around with a smirk. "Yeah, it is, isn't it? The arsenal's impressive. The late Queen took her security seriously." He sobered a bit. "For all the good it did."

He knew Seraphi's death probably wasn't the fault of her guards; given that her murder had gone unsolved, she'd most likely sent them out for some privacy. Though he would love to know how Lord Balem had gotten to her without anyone seeing him, and it wasn't just academic interest.

The Head of Security's office was large, and nicely appointed; it served as a communications hub, with plenty of comms available, and any number of security feeds. Stinger didn't know how long they'd be on Gabal, but while they were he would easily be able to stay on top of things.

He took another look at Caine. "You doing all right?"
The boy ducked his head, but the contentment was still there. "Yeah. I think so."

Stinger nodded back. "Aye, big changes. But I told you she'd make it work. Once that one decides something, the rest of the universe had better get out of the way."

Caine looked as though he wanted to argue the point, but he just took another sandwich instead. Stinger felt for him; Jupiter had turned his life upside down and shaken out the dust, and the lycantant was still struggling to cope, especially after the last day or so. Having your dream come true isn't all meat and malt.

But her Majesty would do right by him, that much was clear as day, and since Caine was as good for her as she was for him, Stinger felt it was really his duty to keep them together where he could.

"I'll be discussing security with her Majesty later," Stinger went on. "Normally I'd put you in for close-guard automatically, but we need to run that saboteur down and you've the best nose for it."

Caine lifted a lip just enough to show his canines, a familiar promise to his quarry, and their eyes met in perfect understanding. "Yes, sir."

Stinger gave him another nod, approving. "Captain Tsing's putting the Neva at your disposal, but I want to send a Stormbreaker with you too."

Caine frowned at that, an unhappy look, but Stinger continued. "Urdur or Soren, your choice, but I want a Skyjacker watching your back." Both of the two had been out with him when Jupiter and Caine had arrived and hadn't been involved in that debacle.

Caine didn't look any happier, but he didn't argue. "Urdur. Her Majesty prefers females for close-guarding if it's not me; Soren can fill in."

"Makes sense given where she's coming from," Stinger agreed. "Urdur won't give you any trouble. They may not have been there for her Majesty's tongue-lashing, but believe you me, all of them heard about it."

Caine grimaced, and Stinger sat forward. "Don't think I didn't see what was going on with them all, but I was hoping they'd get their heads out their backsides." He recognized the small unhappy shrug, the one that said Caine deserved what he got, and he couldn't fault the boy for it - but things were different now, and the sooner they got rank sorted out, the better. "Didn't happen, so I had a little talk with them myself. I can't say Rush loves you any better than he did, but he'll be more polite about it."

Caine's snort was eloquent. Stinger knew that half of Rush's problem wasn't the contempt most of the Skyjackers felt for a Splice who'd lost control, but jealousy of Jupiter's preference for Caine; but he'd keep it under control now, or Stinger would know the reason why.

"When do you want me to go?" Caine asked, flexing his wings a little. "Before or after Lady Kalique arrives?"

"As soon as you're ready," Stinger replied. "The armory's stocked if you want something, and I'll give Urdur their orders and Diomika a ping. She said she'd need about an hour."

Caine nodded. "I need to go over the skimmer again first." He rose. "With your permission, Commander?"

"Go on with you," Stinger said, and Caine gave him another sharp smile and left.

Stinger swallowed a last bite of fruit, and went to call Urdur.
The skimmer was still in the landing bay. Caine didn't call up the lights when he boarded it, letting the emergency guide-lights provide illumination, and closed his eyes to them as well to sift the scents left behind.

The strongest were his own and Jupiter's, and he blessed the quick wits of whoever - probably Stinger - had ordered that the skimmer not be touched until Caine could get back to it. He pushed past them, though, opening his mouth a little to catch the fainter odors on his tongue as well.

As before, he didn't recognize them. Two people, one of them with the muskier undertones of a Splice, though not a cross he was familiar with. Caine had tracked any number of people in his career, sometimes specifically as a kill mission, but each person had a unique scent.

Under those were the slightest hints of others, but they were old enough that he didn't bother with them. The skimmer had probably sat unused for years if not decades; whoever had sabotaged it had to have come in later, since Jupiter hadn't been there to threaten until recently.

The damage had most likely been done right there in the control room, since it involved the software rather than the hardware, but Caine checked the rest of the little ship as well, just to be sure. The lifepod was still sealed, untouched; he tapped the door control for the living quarters and stepped inside.

And stopped, breathing deep, as the scents swept over him. It smelled like them, like her, like sleep and sex and being shown, most emphatically, that he was the one his Queen wanted.

If he could have bottled the air to keep, Caine would have. Instead he forced his senses past that bliss to whatever might be older, and found nothing. Nor was there any real trace in the 'fresher or the tiny space that passed for an engine room.

All right. He returned to the control room and made doubly sure he had the older scents memorized. His reputation for being able to track genes across actual star systems was slightly exaggerated, but even so this was a tougher task; he had no genetic material to start from, just the fading wisps of passage.

But he'd succeeded with less. I will find you, whoever you are.

You tried to hurt my Queen. You will answer to me.

When Caine returned to the Tower to take his leave of her Majesty, he heard laughter coming out of the dressing area of her suite. The door was open partway, and someone was protesting. "Your Majesty -"

"No, no," Jupiter said, still laughing. "It's okay! Really. I'm not mad!"

Leaning in through the door, Caine was bemused to see Jupiter sitting on a high stool in the middle of the room, the blush-pink gown she was wearing mostly hidden in a cascade of her own dark hair. It tumbled from her crown to the floor and far past her feet, making her look small and a little lost, except for the amusement on her face.

"Caine! Check this out. Apparently the magic hair loop is a little on the fritz." She waved at him, and he came in, carefully skirting both the astonishing cloak of hair and the attendants twittering fretfully at its edges. There were three, one feathery Splice and two androids - one male, one female. Caine recognized them all from Stinger's security brief; they were wardrobe and cosmetic servants. "I had no idea those things could do something like this."
Caine considered the cascade. "It looks very dramatic, your Majesty," he said, trying to suppress a smile. "But perhaps a little, ah, restrictive."

Jupiter scrunched up her nose at him, still chuckling. "I've always been more of a Cinderella than a Rapunzel," she said. "But apparently the 'less' setting doesn't work any more. Too old, I guess - it was Seraphi's, after all."

The servants were still fussing - the Splice was ruffled and both androids' headpieces were spinning fast - but clearly none of them knew how to cope with the situation. Caine wanted to roll his eyes, but instead he pulled his combat knife from its sheath on his thigh and held it up. "With your permission?"

"Your Majesty!" the male android blurted in dismay, but Jupiter waved it down with true royal unconcern.

"Please," she said. "Kalique's going to be landing soon and apparently I'm nowhere near done here."

She reached up and started gathering the mass together at the nape of her neck. Caine waited for the ends to drag closer to the stool, then stepped around it to stand behind her. He clamped the knife blade between his teeth and used both hands to help Jupiter twist her hair into a rope as far down as her buttocks.

"About there," she said, leveling one hand at her waist. "I think there's a pair of scissors in my stuff if we can't find anything else, so you don't have to be too precise."

Caine nodded, even though she couldn't see him, and looped the rope in his fist so he could cut it without yanking. His knife was always sharp; he dropped it into his free hand and sliced through the fine strands with one quick movement.

The mass of it fell around his boots, and he let the rope go and sheathed his knife, watching with some fascination as her hair sprang back a little to cover her spine like a cape. Jupiter shook her head, making it ripple back and forth, then grinned at him over her shoulder. "Great, thank you."

He really wanted to bury his face in the stuff, and perhaps it showed a little, because she bit her lip before glancing around at the servants. "Can you guys leave us alone for a bit? Just wait out there, thanks." She pointed at the door, and they all dipped bows and left, though not without a backward glance from the female android.

When the door slid shut behind them Jupiter reached up and back, and Caine bent down into her grasp, rubbing his cheek against the crown of her head and breathing in the warmth of her scent, tinged with ozone from the malfunctioning groomer tool. Jupiter purred, leaning back against him, and for a moment he just held her close.

But they were both on schedules. When he released her, Jupiter spun around on the stool, hooking her fingers into his belt and looking up at him. "Stinger said you were going out to look for whoever sabotaged the ship," she said, smile fading. "You'll be careful, right?"

Caine covered her hands with his, thumbs stroking the soft skin of her wrists to memorize it, and reveled in the caution. "As your Majesty commands."

She raised a brow, half humorous. "Consider it commanded, then. When do you have to leave?"

"Captain Tsing's prepping the Neva right now. Within the hour."

Jupiter nodded. "I wish you didn't have to go," she said quietly. "I know that's not what I should say,
but it's true."

It was astonishing, how easily she could rob him of words. Hearing her say she would miss him was like a prize given all unexpected, for something he didn't even know he'd done, and Caine held onto it to remember later. Then he bent, combining obeisance and desire in one movement as she rose to meet him.

"I'll come back as soon as I can," he mumbled eventually against her mouth, and felt Jupiter's smile tremble.

"You better," she said sternly. "Soren snores."

He choked on a laugh, and Jupiter pushed back, mouth still curved. "Go on. I have to get ready for the fashion-off with Kalique."

Caine nodded, then took her hand and bent again to press his lips to her fingers. "Your Majesty," he said, and strode out. He still had to collect his gear before reporting to the Neva.

Captain Tsing was waiting when he boarded the cruiser, hands folded behind her back. She, like the rest of the crew, was wearing civilian clothes, since Jupiter hadn't had time to choose a livery for them, but she still managed to make the soft shirt look like a uniform. Caine dipped his head a fraction; he liked Tsing. "Captain."

She gave him a nod back, calm approval. "Mr. Wise. Where are we headed?"

"One of Queen Seraphi's storage and repair stations over in the Local Arm." Caine held up the data wafer he'd put the location on, and when Lieutenant Chatterjee extended a hand he spun it through the air to her. "The skimmer and the mistico were brought over by transport tug when Gabal's people started hoping her Majesty might visit."

Tsing nodded; she knew as well as he did that tugs could move small fleets without having to power up a single ship. "So the sabotage happened at the station."

Caine tilted his head a fraction. "There's a small chance that the tug was intercepted along the way, but whoever did that would have to fix its logs. Easier to do it on-site. The data regarding the ships was open-access; tracking it had taken him mere seconds. He hoped that the station's records would be equally transparent.

"Very good. We'll be departing in about ten minutes. Mr. Wise, as you know, there's not a lot of space on board so I'm afraid you'll be sharing a cabin with Sa Urdur." Her smile was small. "You'll have to take turns stretching your wings."

Caine gave her a Legionnaire's shrug, the gesture that said such things were beneath a soldier's notice; she nodded back, and he went to put away his gear. Guess now I find out if Stinger's right.

The felid Splice was in the cabin when Caine opened the hatch, just coming out of the tiny 'fresher unit. They nodded warily at Caine, one ear flicking a little, but they smelled more uneasy than hostile, which was heartening. Caine raised his brows. "Which bunk do you want?"

Urdur blinked large eyes, then relaxed a bit, wings rising just slightly behind their back and then dropping out of sight. "Top's fine."

Caine tossed his bag onto the bottom bunk. Urdur blinked again. "How soon before we portal?"

"The Captain said ten."
"Thanks." The Splice slipped out the door. Caine wondered briefly if they were one of the kind of people who enjoyed watching portals, or if they just had a last message to send before leaving, but either way the interaction had gone better than he'd expected.

He'd just finished putting his gear away in one of the two small clothespresses when someone knocked on the hatch. "Delivery!"

When Caine opened it, whoever had knocked was gone, but a small package sat on the deck just outside. It smelled faintly of her Majesty, as if she'd handled it recently.

Caine sat on his bunk to open the box, finding a velvety sheet of Entitled stationary bearing Jupiter's somewhat hasty writing.

*Caine - in Earth's past ladies would give their knights a token to wear when the knights went off to battle. You don't have to wear this but I thought you might like it. - Jupiter*

Next to her name she'd drawn a tiny shape he didn't recognize, two symmetrical curves. Beneath the note was a dark circle of braided hair, glossy and smooth, and Caine ran a reverent finger over it before scooping it out and lifting it to his nose. Her scent lingered in the coil, a perfume all her own, and he closed his eyes for a long moment to savor it.

The circlet fit perfectly around his bicep. Caine flexed his arm against its soft grip and shook his head in wonder, then smiled at the memory of what he'd left behind when he'd picked up his gear.

The *Neva* hummed as the portal generator cycled up, and Caine braced himself for the transition.

And made a mental note to look up the definition of knight.

"How do I look? I'm serious this time." Jupiter twitched the skirt of the gown the wardrobe android - Norwen Cal - had chosen for her, and raised her brows at Stinger.

"Entitled," he assured her, and fingered his collar. It was the first time she'd seen him in the Skyjacker dress uniform, which included the sleeveless vest that Caine favored; it suited Stinger just as much, and Jupiter could see her sigil in Stinger's own tattoo as well.

Soren and a very stiff Rush were similarly garbed and standing behind her in proper guard position as the transport carrying them arced away from the Tower. The big landing pad on the edge of the city, much larger than the one the skimmer had come to, would accommodate both Kalique's shuttle and the guards needed to honor her, Jupiter had been told.

She touched an uneasy hand to the elaborate construction of her lengthened hair; it wasn't as ridiculous as the things Titus' servants had done to her head, but she hadn't had time to get used to it. The gown was less revealing than the one Kalique had given her when they first met, but it was similar enough that Norwen assured her it would be a "delicate compliment" - his words - to Jupiter's guest. Jupiter was willing to roll with that for the moment.

She let her hand drop a little to her own collar, slipping a finger under it and smiling to herself. The lingering tender spot from Caine's bite wasn't really visible on her skin, which was probably a good thing given how many people were dressing her and making her up these days, but she didn't even have to touch it to remember the look in his eyes when she'd offered him her throat. Or the soft sound he'd made when his teeth had closed so carefully -

*Stop that.* Jupiter dropped her hand and forced her mind back to business. *Now is not the time.*
But she really wished they'd had a little more time before he'd had to leave.

Jupiter stepped up to the window to look out as the landing pad came into view. It was already populated with the near-ubiquitous gun-bots and the rest of the Skyjackers, much as the underground bay had been when she arrived; there was also a small wedge of various servitors that Sevet had arranged to be at Kalique's disposal, though she would also have a host of her own with her. And I thought I couldn't pack light.

She bit her lip. It was easy to look on Kalique's Entitled habits as baffling or even silly, but it was also a buffer against Jupiter's increasing nervousness. Kalique seemed friendly, and as far as Jupiter knew the woman hadn't done anything to harm her, but she was also fourteen thousand years old and saw her own mother every time she looked at Jupiter, and Jupiter just didn't know how to cope with all of it.

I don't even know if I can trust her. But there was only one way to find out.

The transport settled into place, and Stinger touched his comm implant and glanced over at her. "The shuttle's about to hit atmosphere, Majesty."

Jupiter nodded and took a deep breath. "Let's go."

The transport's back end opened, extending a ramp, and Jupiter just managed to not look back and make sure Soren and Rush were following. Stinger walked ahead of her, the shotgun-like weapon he preferred carried at a parade angle, and Jupiter could feel the gazes of the waiting people fastening on her.

There was a small shelter set up at the edge of the landing pad; Jupiter thought it looked like a cross between a large gazebo and an old-fashioned lawn swing, though it was half-smothered in gauzy fabrics and the couch within was doing the floaty thing. She followed Stinger to it and settled gingerly on the couch as Rush and Soren took up positions next to either end, and watched as the transport folded up its ramp and lifted silently away.

She wished Sevet had come along; the android had arranged the whole setup, apparently knowing exactly what protocol to use, but it seemed that protocol didn't include the Head of House joining in the parade.

At least the weather's nice. Gabal's sun didn't seem to have quite the intensity of Earth's, because at home on Earth a day so clear would have had Jupiter squinting, but she didn't feel cold even in the gown and the breeze that fluttered the shelter's draperies was just refreshing instead of chilling. Jupiter could just see a glimpse of the ocean surrounding the island past various distant buildings, and wondered abruptly if anyone went sailing on it.

Stinger nodded in response to something only he could hear, and looked up and out of the shelter. A dark dot appeared in the sky almost directly overhead; as Jupiter watched, it grew larger, and a low throbbing hum began to vibrate the air.

For an instant, it felt like any alien invasion movie Jupiter had ever seen - the impossibly huge craft swelling as it descended, locking attention, carrying something powerful and potentially terrible on board - and she suddenly felt alone, so very far from home and surrounded by people she didn't know or understand. The weight of their expectations, especially Kalique's, threatened to squash her as flat as she would be if that ship landed on her.

She took a long breath, fighting panic. Crap, how do I do this? She thinks I'm her mother, for pity's sake -
- And that made her think of Aleksa, who would no doubt have something deeply sarcastic to say about the whole situation, and just like that her anxiety collapsed. Jupiter swallowed a slightly hysterical giggle, wishing that Aleksa could have come along somehow, and tried to relax.

The shuttle slowed to a stop about two stories above the landing pad, and after a moment a space opened in its underside and a transport beam appeared. It was wider than all the others Jupiter had seen so far, and as she watched people began descending in it in pairs - first in dark and relatively simple outfits similar to the Skyjacker's, and then in the much more elaborate getups that Jupiter had seen on Kalique's people on Cerise. Duh, she probably has her own honor guard from the Legion.

Both sets arranged themselves in a semi-circular pattern around the beam's end-point, and then there was a brief pause before a single figure appeared in the beam. Jupiter had to give Kalique points for perfect timing - and for somehow managing to keep a skirt that long under control when she was floating down through the air.

"That's your cue, your Majesty," Stinger murmured, and Jupiter stood to walk to the front of the shelter. Her people had better timing than Titus's; they snapped to attention the instant Kalique's feet touched the ground, not two seconds before, and Jupiter could see her smiling.

Of course she's smiling.

Then it was time to pace forward and greet her visitor. Kalique reached out to touch Jupiter's hand in the same gesture they'd exchanged the first time, and Jupiter found herself smiling back without effort. It was genuinely good to see someone she already knew, even if the acquaintance was slight. "Thank you for coming."

Kalique was gorgeous in a gown the color of Gabal's huge ocean, with a sparkling pattern laid over it; her hair was dressed high, and she was wearing as much jewelry as she had been the first time Jupiter had seen her. "My dear, of course! You look so well - Entitlement suits you."

Jupiter wasn't at all sure about that, but she let it pass. "So do you," she replied honestly. "Come on in out of the breeze."

She led Kalique - and the two servitors and three guards who followed - back to the gazebo, which had quietly manifested a second couch while Jupiter's back was turned. Kalique settled comfortably on one while her people disposed themselves behind her, and Jupiter took the other one. "Did you have a good trip?"

It seemed like a stupid question when traveling meant walking onto a ship, waiting half an hour, and getting off again, but Jupiter had to start somewhere.

"Oh yes, quite nice," Kalique said. "This voyage is the maiden run for my new clipper - you'll have to come try its paces with me."

"Sounds like fun," Jupiter said, wondering if Kalique's ship had enormous statues too. One of her people, a pure human whose name she couldn't quite remember, paced forward holding a small tray with glasses and a two small platefuls of confectionary. He extended it first to Jupiter, who took a glass, and then to Kalique; it seemed rude to Jupiter, but Sevet had explained that it was a courtesy ritual to demonstrate that the host was not afraid to eat from the same plate offered to a guest - a ceremonial guarantee against poisoning.

That made little sense to her, since it would be easy to poison one set of anything ahead of time if you knew you were going to pick first, but she knew better than to argue. Kalique herself accepted both a glass and one of the dainties, and the man took himself over to the side of the gazebo to wait.
As he did so, the whole contraption rose smoothly about five feet off the ground and began gliding away from the pad and towards the broad street leading to the Tower. Stinger had warned her this would happen, so Jupiter didn't jump; Kalique didn't even seem to notice - or more likely, expected it.

"I have no end of plans for you," Kalique said, sipping delicately as the gazebo swung onto the street and the guards surrounded it; it wasn't going fast enough for them to break out of a walk. "Fortunately the season is just beginning, and we can plan your debut without haste."

"Season?" Jupiter asked, half her attention taken up by the people lining the streets to watch the procession pass. *When did this turn into the Thanksgiving parade?*

"Yes, it lasts about three years," Kalique said. "It's the best opportunity for mingling, for introducing you to the First Estate. No end of parties, gatherings, and the like." She gestured with her glass, beaming. "Don't worry, my dear, you'll take them all by storm."

Jupiter didn't think that was a pun on her guards. "I like parties," she said cautiously. As much as the next girl, she supposed, but she didn't think Entitled gatherings featured beer, loud music, and gossiping friends. *Or maybe they do, what the hell do I know?*

Kalique nodded. "You'll be expected to host eventually, of course, as the House of Abrasax's First Primary, but of course everyone will understand that you'll need time to work up to it. Allowances are made for new Recurrences, particularly those from tertiary worlds."

"Good to know." Jupiter tried to imagine putting on a party for Entitled, then decided that some things were just outside the scope of her imagination.

Kalique held out her glass, and the servant stepped forward to refill it. Jupiter looked out at the people they were passing, and spotted a little girl in the crowd, standing close to her parent. The kid was, Jupiter realized, the first child she'd seen outside of Earth, and on impulse she wiggled her fingers in a wave, smiling.

The kid's eyes widened, and after a second she waved back shyly, before being eclipsed by the edge of the gazebo.

Jupiter turned back to Kalique. "I'd really like to know more about Seraphi's business interests," she said, taking a swallow of her own drink, which was more of that strawberry stuff. "Since I'm here, and all."

Kalique made a moue. "At our level, business and pleasure are often the same thing," she said. "I wasn't current on most of Mother's projects, but I may be able to give you some pointers. How is Malidictes' choice working out for you, by the way?"

"Virtu? She's great." Jupiter twitched her skirt over her ankle. "She's very good at explaining things." And had gravely referred to her Majesty as a *very quick study*, which had made Jupiter feel a little less overwhelmed by all the data coming her way.

"Malidictes has a gift for choosing personnel." Kalique looked pleased. "If you need any assistance, please feel free to make use of him. He knows all the best splicing facilities."

Jupiter went cold. *There is no fucking way I'm going to go buy people. For anything.*

But she couldn't say that to Kalique, at least not yet, so she tightened her jaw and tried to keep her expression neutral. "I'm still trying to figure out who I've got already. But thank you."
If Kalique noticed Jupiter's shift in mood, she gave no sign of it. "Your formal entree into society will take planning, as I said, but I'll host a few casual gatherings first, so you can get a feel for things. There's so many people to introduce you to, you know."

She was still smiling, slightly flushed, and something clicked in Jupiter's head. She's excited about all this. She really is.

...I must be the most interesting thing to happen in the last thousand years.

The concept was too bizarre even to laugh at, which was just as well. Jupiter listened as Kalique went on about couture and etiquette and power brokering, trying to take it all in, but on one level she was wondering how much of Kalique's enthusiasm was for her mother's memory, and how much was delight over a new toy.

Well, this toy has a mind of her own. She thought of Earth, so fragile and bright, and as before seemed to see behind it the ghosts of the other planets she owned. And beyond them, yet more worlds, equally vulnerable. And I don't intend to play by the rules.

But first she had to know what the rules were. So Jupiter listened, and memorized, and wished she could take notes.

Like, note: hire secretary to take notes for me.

And, as she finished her strawberry drink, she thought of one more.

Send someone back to Earth. For coffee.
The wardrobe suite was...impressive. Jupiter walked slowly towards the dais in the center, gazing at the various holograms placed around the big, low-ceilinged room; they were all of different outfits, ranging from simple to mind-bogglingly complex, floating in midair as if worn by something invisible.

"So all these clothes are in storage here?" she asked, stopping to look at one image that looked made of water instead of cloth. She lifted a hand even though she knew the gown was intangible, and at the motion the hologram rotated slowly, the pictured fabric rippling realistically. Jupiter twitched in surprise.

"Oh yes." Kalique strolled past several dresses, and paused in front of one. "Mother wore this one at Dannae Ba Korbash's century-party, I remember." Her smile was soft.

Jupiter walked over for a closer look. It was a simple white sheath decorated with green vines and small pink buds; she thought it was a pattern at first, but when Jupiter looked closer she realized that the greenery was on the surface of the gown, not part of the weave.

As she watched, one of the buds unfolded slowly into a familiar blossom. "Roses," Jupiter said, more to herself than to Kalique. "They weren't real, were they?" Who knows what's possible with this tech?

Kalique pursed her lips. "I'm not sure; they may have been hybrids." She flicked a finger at the hologram, and the dais was suddenly occupied.

"Whoa." Jupiter knew she was gaping, but she couldn't help it. It was her, wearing the rose dress - or rather, it was Seraphi.

Fascinated, Jupiter stepped closer. For a moment she wasn't sure if it was a recording or another hologram, but the figure spun majestically, then dipped, bent, straightened, and walked in place without changing expression, and she decided it was the latter.

The roses on the dress were cycling through bud and bloom and bud again, but Jupiter was more interested in Seraphi's face. She still remembered the statue in Kalique's shrine and its remote expression - she didn't think she'd ever looked like that in her life - but this was different. The hologram looked - cold. Stern.

The expression didn't change at all as the hologram repeated its movements, and Jupiter wondered how it had been made. Had someone recorded Seraphi somehow? Or was it a generic model that had been customized? The surge of curiosity was unexpected, but it was the first glimpse of the actual woman Jupiter had gotten since that last exchange with Balem, and she wanted to know more.

"The hairpieces can be changed out if you prefer," Kalique said, drifting over and apparently
unaware of the focus of Jupiter's concentration. "But in this case it would be a pity; the harmony with the gown is so charming."

Jupiter tore her gaze from the holo-Seraphi's face to focus on its hair instead, and saw that the dress's high collar supported a rose-vine that wound into the coiffure, with more blossoms opening and closing in the high-piled hair. Kalique was right; it was charming.

"Wouldn't it be out of date, though?" Jupiter asked doubtfully. Or is a century and a half long enough to count as vintage out here?

Kalique paused, then gave her one of those gently superior smiles, which kind of put Jupiter's teeth on edge. "Oh, no. Clothing is far too ephemeral to fall victim to trends. Jewelry, on occasion..." She reached up to twist one of the long chains she was wearing around her neck. "When a new designer comes on the market, perhaps, or when a new metal or gem is discovered. But fashion is usually reserved for longer-lasting things. Art, ships, planets, and the like."

"Oh-kay." Jupiter squinted a little. "So if I show up at a party wearing this outfit - " She gestured at the rose-dress. "Nobody will think I'm just into thrift?"

Kalique cocked her head, looking slightly baffled. "It would demonstrate continuity, actually; I wouldn't be the only one to remember Mother in that dress. She always dominated, you know." She turned back to the image, expression going dreamy. "Always the mistress of the situation."

Jupiter wasn't into psych, but Kalique's words gave her a sudden insight into Balem. Well, that would explain a lot.

But it was going to be quite a while before Jupiter was going to achieve that level. If I even want to. She tried to shake off the thought, returning to the impulse that had made her ask Kalique to join her. "So...where do I even start?"

Kalique's gaze sharpened again, and her smile widened. "Hmm...let me see."

The next few hours were actually fun, if deeply weird in some respects. Jupiter's on-site dressers, Sa Brem and Mr. Cal, conferred with the three women Kalique had brought along, but it was Kalique who made most of the decisions as they moved slowly through the room, selecting outfits to try.

It was like shopping with half the aggravation taken away, Jupiter thought as she tried to glide in a very narrow skirt. Everything fit exactly, and it was all in colors that suited her skin tones. Not all of it suited her taste, but that was part of the fun too, and Jupiter was a little sorry that Kalique was built differently and couldn't try stuff on herself.

Kalique didn't seem to mind, however. She reminisced about various pieces and gave absent orders to the attendants, pausing on occasion to nibble on something from the tray of snacks Sevet had ordered be on hand. Jupiter tried on elaborate gowns and simple ones, trousers and tops, shoes ranging from sandals to boots to pumps actually made out of glass, which made her snicker - fortunately they were unbreakable. There were more gloves, scarves, and belts than she could possibly keep track of, and she counted herself lucky that Seraphi had apparently not been into hats, because the only one Jupiter wore when it wasn't freezing was an old Bulls cap, and she didn't think that would fly at an Entitled cocktail party.

It was interesting, though, that there was nothing like the weird black gown Titus had had for her when she'd been brought to his ship. Jupiter couldn't deny that it had been a killer look, but it had made her extremely uncomfortable, and she wondered what Titus' motivation had been in choosing that outfit in particular. Because there is absolutely no way he picked that at random.
But it was a question for when she saw him again, which Jupiter suspected she would have to do at some point, and she didn't want to talk about either Titus or Balem just at the moment, not when things were going so...lightly.

And then they moved on to the jewelry, and Jupiter lost her train of thought entirely in sheer dazzlement.

Abrasax Fleet Substation 6-A was huge, as befitted an installation built to repair starships, but a lot of it was dark and closed when the Neva came in on approach. Caine, watching it swell on the viewscreen, wasn't surprised. While it was true that the station and probably any ships docked there had come to Balem as part of Seraphi's trust on her death, he had had his own fleet and facilities; it probably hadn't gotten much use since.

To Caine's way of thinking, that was an advantage. The fewer people and ships that had been through since Jupiter's discovery, the easier his task would be. He lifted a lip briefly at Balem's memory, and went to arm himself as the Neva came in through the grav-hull to dock.

Captain Tsing led the way onto the station through the hatch, with Caine and Urdur behind her and Chatterjee and Nesh behind them. It was a delicate arrangement, Caine had to acknowledge; technically it was his mission, but it was Tsing's ship, and outside of her Majesty's direct personal security they were roughly equal in rank.

He didn't personally care. Caine knew Tsing's aims were the same as his own, and in any case she wasn't the sort of commander to abuse power. But presentation was important when entering potentially hostile territory, and a pure human commanding a ship would make a better impression than a Splice, even a Skyjacker.

The station manager was waiting for them in the docking bay, she and her coterie of subordinates dwarfed by the huge space and the view of the stars beyond the grav-hull, as well as by the Neva itself. Caine was not surprised to see that she was a Splice; she bore a strong resemblance to Balem's refinery manager, though her hair and skin were dark brown instead of nearly colorless. Caine reflected idly that Balem might have purchased an entire litter to run various facilities for him. Such things were common, and rat-Splices made excellent managers, being both loyal and detail-oriented.

The crew behind her was a mixed lot of pure humans, Splices, and a couple of androids, all looking stiff and slightly alarmed, but the manager's face was calm as she stepped forward. "Welcome to Substation 6-A," she said to Tsing, her gaze flicking over each visitor. "I am Manager Traduce. I and my crew are at her Majesty's disposal."

And hoping that disposal wasn't literal, Caine imagined, though he kept his face impassive. He was sifting the air for traces of either of his suspects, but mostly what he smelled was the dry air of the dock, the metal of the cruiser, and nervousness. None of the people before him were familiar in any way.

"Thank you, Miss Traduce," Tsing said smoothly. "I'm glad to hear it. We've come on a sensitive errand for her Majesty Queen Jupiter; is there a place where we can discuss it in private?"

Traduce nodded, and Caine caught a whiff of curiosity from her, but no alarm - which suggested that the news of the sabotage hadn't made it that far.

"Thank you, Miss Traduce," Tsing said smoothly. "I'm glad to hear it. We've come on a sensitive errand for her Majesty Queen Jupiter; is there a place where we can discuss it in private?"

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The manager led them to a small office not far from their chosen landing bay. It was cluttered with various items, mostly machine parts of one kind or another, and the desk looked battered with use. Tsing gestured her people to stay outside, but Caine and Urdur went in with her, and Traduce
slipped behind the desk, waving at the chairs in front of it and then pointing the door closed. "Please, sit, and tell me what we can do for you."

Tsing did. By the time she finished explaining, Traduce was almost more grey than brown, and was wringing her hands, nose twitching with distress. "Horrible," she said, her voice wavering. "Horrible! And that one of my people...I had no idea...how could they…"

Tsing cut off the babble. "Miss Traduce, her Majesty is not Lord Balem or Queen Seraphi. She's not interested in punishing the entire station for crimes committed by one or two. But we do need to find the saboteur."

"Of...of course." Traduce blinked rapidly, and seemed to calm a little, though Caine could tell she was still terrified. "Let me…"

She rummaged in one of her desk drawers for a moment, coming out with a handful of keypass clips. "How many do you want?" she asked, voice steadier.

"Three," Caine said, and Traduce started slightly at the sound of his voice, but she dropped three clips on the desk and put the rest away. Pressing her thumb to each clip in turn, she coded them with a few taps and then reached over to hand them to Caine.

"They'll open any door in the station except Controlled Materials and the grav-hull gates," she said. "If you need access to those I will be happy to assist you, but safety regulations dictate - "

Caine nodded. *Makes sense. Nobody wants the Queen's reps wading into etching acid, or accidentally evacuating the repair docks into space.* "I'll need to see your logs, beginning with the date the skimmer left the station," he said.

Traduce relaxed slightly. "Your clips will give you complete access to station records," she said. "I will give orders for full cooperation from all personnel. In the meantime, Captain, do you desire quarters within the station?"

Tsing pursed her lips. "I think we'd better remain on board the Neva," she replied. "Though you can expect to see some of our crew, ah, stretching their legs."

A hint of a smile touched Traduce's face. "I do understand," she said. "Please, consider yourself at liberty."

She rose to show them out, and Caine fell in behind Tsing, handing one clip each to Urdur and Tsing and fastening the last to his own sleeve.

"Is there anything else I can do to assist your investigation?" Traduce asked as they stepped back into the corridor.

Tsing glanced at Caine, who shook his head. "You've fulfilled our needs for the moment," the captain said with a small smile. "I believe Mr. Wise and Sa Urdur are ready to begin, so we should get out of their way."

Traduce nodded. "Then if you'll excuse me I'll issue those orders and then go see about the leakage on Level 7. If you need to enter Interiors and Upholstery, please pick up protective gear until further notice." She bobbed a half-bow at them all and whisked back into her office.

Tsing waited for the door to close before grinning. "Not bad; I like her style."

Caine shrugged, but he could see what Tsing meant; the Splice obviously cared about her people and
the station, and there was no odor of deception on her. "Perhaps you can bring her to the attention of her Majesty."

"I might, once we get this mess cleared up." She gestured at Chatterjee and Nesh. "Do you want any other backup? Like Manager Traduce, we're at your disposal."

Caine glanced at Urdur, who flicked a neutral ear. "Maybe later," he replied. "I want to scan those records first."

"I saw a general-access terminal back the way we came," Urdur said. "We can start there."

"Good. Let's go." Caine dipped his head to Tsing and led the way at a fast stride. He wanted the saboteur's neck in his hands, and the sooner, the better.

The terminal was tucked into a niche in the corridor wall, and looked well-used; it was older tech, like a lot of the station, but it lit up at once when they stopped in front of it. Caine frowned at the opening holo - it wasn't an interface he was familiar with - and Urdur trilled low in their throat. "Graf OS. I know that one."

Caine stepped back, opening a hand, and Urdur moved in to tap at the control panel with a speed that spoke of confidence. Caine watched over their shoulder as Urdur speed through various records, the tiny red light of restricted-access continually flashing to green as the terminal read Urdur's clip and offered up its data.

Finally the terminal spat out a long sheet of thin plastic printout, the kind common in environments where sheaves could easily be damaged, and Urdur caught it and handed it to Caine. "That's all the personnel who were on-base between the time the skimmer arrived here and the time it left, and their assignments and quarters."

"Nice." Caine bared his teeth in a fierce grin, and was a little surprised when Urdur returned it, showing teeth just as sharp.

"I enjoy a good hunt," they said. "Let's go find this vermin."

It was the first moment of accord Caine had found with any of the other Skyjackers, and it was startlingly good. He grinned wider, and the two of them loped down the corridor towards the first room on their list.

After a late lunch - Jupiter wondered how Kalique could be hungry after snacking all morning - Kalique excused herself for a rest, returning to her ship and issuing a languid invitation for Jupiter to join her for dinner late that evening. Jupiter waved her and her escort off and immediately went to find Virtu.

The turtle-Splice was ensconced in the office Jupiter had ordered be made available to her, and while it was already thick with sheaves, they were all in tidy piles. She rose and bowed as Jupiter came in. "Your Majesty."

Jupiter wiggled her fingers in greeting, then turned to shoo her attendants back out the door. "Thank you, I'm good - Soren, you can stay." It had been a little dismaying to realize that an even half-dozen people would trail her everywhere if she allowed it, but for the moment Jupiter let them since Kalique was there to observe. But Virtu's office had only one chair, and Jupiter wasn't sure she wanted them listening anyway.

Virtu offered her the chair without the least sign of discomfort. Jupiter took it even though it made
her uncomfortable to have Virtu standing, because it would be really awkward to refuse, and she
didn't intend to stay long anyway. Soren took up station by the door with silent ease, and if not for
the wings and her gun might have stepped in from the street of any American city, North or South.

"How may I serve you, your Majesty?" Virtu asked.

Jupiter glanced over Virtu's desk, careful not to touch anything. "I know you're swamped right now,
but I have a problem I'm hoping you can help with."

Virtu clasped her hands at her waist. She was a very quiet person, but tended to wear colors in
combinations that Jupiter could only term eye-searing, and today wore a scarlet tunic and trousers
with copious embroidery in Earth-sky-blue, none of which matched her skin. Jupiter reminded
herself that even with Kalique's tutoring she really had no idea about fashion or beauty standards in
the universe at large, and focused on Virtu's calm face and voice. "Of course, your Majesty," the
woman said. "What is it you need?"

Jupiter chose her words carefully. "The Abrasax heirs pulled the top-level staff from Gabal when
Seraphi died," she said, as if she'd always known the information instead of just learning it in the past
day or two. "I need a new business manager, and probably support staff for her, him, or them. And I
haven't forgotten that my head of finance needs some people to be head of," she added, pointing at
Virtu.

Virtu cocked her head, eyes crinkling in what Jupiter had come to recognize as her version of a
smile. "All very true," she replied. "Are you looking for assistance in personnel selection?"

Jupiter leaned back in the chair. "I am, yes. I know it's not your area of expertise, exactly, but some
of 'em will be working for you. Do you - " She hesitated, still not sure how things worked in this
new environment, but - There has to be some kind of job market out there. Not everybody can afford
to just go buy a servant when they need one. "Do you know anyone good who's looking for a
position?"

Virtu rocked thoughtfully on her feet. "Not personally, no. Am I to understand that your Majesty
does not want to see a Splicer to fill any vacancies?"

"Damn straight," Jupiter said, then winced as Virtu's face went utterly blank. Crap. "I don't mean
that I don't want any Splices! I do, of course I do." She winced again at her own babbling, and Virtu
blinked in confusion.

Jupiter waved both hands, then took a deep breath and ordered her words. "What I mean," she said
carefully, "is that I want to hire people who want to work for me. Not just people whose Splicers
think they'd be good at the job."

Then came the belated realization that she had no idea if anyone had asked Virtu if she wanted her
job, which just made Jupiter feel worse. But Virtu was relaxing, eyes crinking again.

"Naturally, your Majesty would prefer experience at this time," she said, her voice amused.
"Purchasing fresh personnel can wait until you are more established."

"Exactly," Jupiter agreed. She gets it, at least partly. "I need people who know what they're doing.
More people." She waved at Virtu again.

"I will be most pleased to assist. What are your immediate needs?"

Jupiter dug her iPhone out of her pocket and called up the list she'd made. "Let's discuss it."
By the time the conversation was over, Virtu was back in her chair and Jupiter was perched on the
edge of the desk, and the Splice had taken copious notes on a small sheave, scribbling in a shorthand
Jupiter couldn't make out. "Yes," she said at last. "I believe I can find what you need, if your Majesty
will give me leave to go offworld."

"Whatever you need," Jupiter said fervently. "There's a whole bunch of spaceships available, and
you can requisition a pilot and anything else you need. Here, give me a blank one." Virtu handed her
a sheave, and Jupiter wrote a quick set of orders and sealed them with her sigil.

Virtu accepted the sheave back with a satisfied blink. "Very good, your Majesty. This shouldn't take
too long."

Jupiter slipped off the desk. "I hope not. Aggie'll be arriving in a few days - I wish I could send her
with you, but that might be too much for her right off."

Virtu flipped one hand. "I'm not sure about that, but perhaps another time. I assume your Majesty
would prefer to offer the same generous contracts she has extended to her current employees?"

"Yep." Jupiter put her iPhone away. "Oh! That reminds me - Caine said I can give the royal guard
bonuses instead of increasing their salaries?"

Virtu nodded. "That's customary, yes."

Jupiter cocked her head. "Can I do it privately? Like, give one a bonus but the others don't know
about it?"

"Certainly." If Virtu thought this was favoritism towards Caine, she didn't let it show. "The bonus
would be registered with the Legion, so Mr. Apini would be aware of it, but financial awards can be
kept private."

"Good. Okay, I'll get back to you on that." Because while she'd been ready to give them all a prize a
few days ago, Jupiter was still kind of pissed at the Skyjackers who'd tried to arrest Caine, and Rush
in particular. I should probably talk to Stinger first anyway. Though he deserved a fat bonus too…

Sighing a bit, she added it to her mental list, which was getting long enough that she really ought to
make it a physical one. And then there's the whole secretary thing.

Jupiter took her leave of Virtu and headed back out the door with Soren, picking up her retinue as
she hit the hallway. So far the half-dozen attendants were all her employees, though Kalique had
made dire hints about finding some upper-crust nobility to swell their ranks and add prestige -
prestige to whom, that's the question. But these people were general servant-types, plus a couple of
the robot guards that she'd seen with all the Abrasaxes.

At least if I need an errand run, there's someone on tap. Jupiter tried to look at it as a bonus. She'd
asked Stinger about the gun-bots, and he'd shrugged and said they were standard for Entitled, but not
to depend on them too much. Given how Caine had apparently taken a bunch out all by himself on
Cerise, Jupiter took the warning seriously.

Suddenly the corridor seemed too small and stuffy. "I want to go look at the water," Jupiter said to
the group at large. "Like, in person, not out a window. How do I get there?"

It took some doing, but eventually Jupiter was walking down to the end of a broad pier at one edge
of the big island, Soren beside her but the rest of her little crew staying in the jellybean-shuttle that
had brought them all down from the tower. The gun-bots stood guard at the start of the pier, capes
snapping in the wind off the water, and Jupiter dragged in deep breaths of the chilly air and let the
wind destroy the coiffure that her hairdressing android had put it in after the dress-up session.

The water was an even dark blue, almost metallic in color, and smelled more like \textit{water} than an ocean or a lake - no odors of fish or salt or weed, or any organics, really. There was nothing floating on the little whitecaps, and when she peered over the edge - Soren tensed - Jupiter saw no weed or debris, nor anything darting past beneath the surface. \textit{Huh. I wonder how deep it is here.}

It was peaceful, though. Jupiter thought about hanging her feet off the end, then thought about what might be living down there that she couldn't see, and reconsidered. She ended up sitting cross-legged about a half-yard back from the edge, resting her elbows on her knees and trying to relax.

Soren, who was about as close-mouthed as Absaba, took up an easy stance a little way behind her, and Jupiter closed her eyes and turned her face up to the mild sun.

It was the first chance she'd had to experience the actual planet, as it were, and in fact her first chance to experience \textit{any} planet other than Earth. She hadn't had time on Cerise, Orus had been entirely indoors, and Jupiter - well. \textit{Come to think of it, was that Orus, or were we orbiting Orus?} Nobody had made that clear.

But this little part of Gabal was empty if not quiet, and all the noise was from the planet itself. Jupiter had always liked the water; Nino had always claimed it was because Jupiter had been born at sea. Jupiter herself thought it was more because the huge body of water that was Lake Michigan was so utterly different than the city on its shore - beautiful, alien but not hostile, big beyond human control.

She didn't think about how the whole place - both places - now belonged to her. She just sat, feeling the wind scour her skin and tangle her hair, filling her lungs with oxygen. The sun heated her just enough to keep her from shivering, and she could almost pretend that she was back home, sitting on a boulder on the lakeshore, her life no more complicated than keeping Vassily from shrinking her social life with yet another house to clean.

Except...she didn't want to pretend.

\textit{Huh.} Jupiter examined the thought, but it was true. \textit{This whole thing is overwhelming, but...I kinda don't mind.}

\textit{Good to know.}

She smiled a little, and turned her face upwards to the light, and let the wind blow her thoughts away too.

Just for a little while.

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Kalique's new ship was as ornate as her previous one, though instead of rococo walls and bare floors it looked vaguely like something out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, all rich colors and fabrics and patterns everywhere. Jupiter stepped carefully across the thick carpet, uncertain in the thin-heeled shoes Mr. Cal had chosen for her to accompany the gown he'd insisted on. Jupiter had done spikes before, but not while trying to wrangle a meter of trailing skirt. \textit{Okay, now I'm beginning to see the point of those Entitled who don't walk anywhere.}

But she'd made it safely up the transport beam into the shuttle, with two Skyjackers to guard her and the little Splice Sa Brem to carry the box Jupiter had brought along. At least Absaba and Banti didn't seem intimidated by the Entitled atmosphere; Brem was harder to read under the feathers.

Kalique came forward to greet Jupiter as she and her entourage stepped off the shuttle, much as
Jupiter had met her the day before, though this time she just clasped her hands at her waist. Jupiter, having asked the chamber presence for advice, did the same. "I'm glad you could join me," Kalique said, and her smile was warm. "It's not that I don't find Gabal charming, but - "

"Really? 'Cause I don't," Jupiter interrupted, feeling a little mischievous. "It's way too intimidating."

Kalique blinked, obviously taken aback, and then she laughed. "You're wicked, to catch me in a lie already," she said, dimpling. "You're quite right. Mother intended it to be intimidating; she always said it gave her an edge in doing business."

Jupiter grinned back. "That, I can see."

Kalique nodded, and stepped forward to slide her arm familiarly through Jupiter's. "Wait until you see her main alcazar; it's a much better display of her taste. Come, let's eat, and then I will show you my beautiful ship."

Kalique guided Jupiter through the big room, which while nowhere near as large as Titus' landing bay was still a lot of space, and then down a few corridors to a dining area. To Jupiter's relief, the place looked nothing like Titus' intimate dinner for two - it was a sort of conversation-pit setup with a low table in the middle, already crowded with decorations and tableware. Servants stood against the walls at intervals, and some of those gun-robots were there as well, though Jupiter trusted they were mostly ceremonial.

The chamber presence wasn't the only one Jupiter had questioned. As they sat, she gestured at Sa Brem to step forward, mentally blessing Sevet for knowing what to do. "I have a gift for you," she said, and Brem bowed and slid the box into Jupiter's hands. Jupiter leaned over to present it to Kalique, whose face brightened with what seemed to be genuine interest.

It was about the size and shape of an old laptop, and nearly as heavy; it astonished Jupiter on some level that she could just send someone back to Earth not only for coffee but for this, though Sevet had come up with the wooden container. It didn't seem special enough, but between what Kiza had said and Kalique's penchant for snacking, Jupiter was willing to take the bet.

Kalique set the box in her lap and lifted the lid, brows going up at the neat ranks of cardboard within. Jupiter spoke up before Kalique could ask. "It's an Earth delicacy. Not available anywhere else."

"How interesting." Kalique pulled out one of the prism-shaped boxes and looked it over. Jupiter had told Honch to stop by Stinger's farmhouse and talk to Kiza about where to go, and the Skyjacker had done well on their mission; there were four varieties of Toblerone in the container. "It's a sweet?"

"Yep." Jupiter resisted the urge to babble; Sevet had assured her that at this stage the gesture was really more important than the actual gift. "It's - exclusive." Which wasn't exactly true, but it was close enough, and Kalique probably didn't know enough about Earth to know the difference. And it was easier than sending Honch out for Godiva. Or See's.

Kalique replaced the box and closed the container, setting it next to her on the low couch. "I have a gift for you, as well."

As she spoke, one of her android servants came forward and handed Kalique a long glassy wand; Kalique promptly passed it to Jupiter. It felt like glass, heavy and smooth and cool, and it had something glittery embedded in it from the blunt wider end to about two-thirds towards the narrower, more pointed tip. Jupiter turned it slowly, admiring the light flashing back, and then looked at Kalique in inquiry.
Kalique smiled, and twirled one finger, pointing up. Jupiter tilted the wand towards the ceiling, and rotated it cautiously.

Soft chimes sounded, and from the shadows above came a small flock of - something. Jupiter tilted her head back to watch; as they drifted lower, they caught the light and flung it back from dangling prisms, twinkling with rainbows; each was hardly larger than her two fists together, and she finally decided that they resembled jellyfish as much as anything.

"Wow." The wand sagged in her fingers, and the swarm drifted to follow in the direction the tip was pointing. Jupiter grinned, and tilted it back, instantly reminded of Stinger's bees outlining her gestures. "They're gorgeous."

Kalique leaned back, looking satisfied. "I had them designed for you; the technology's not unusual, but the artist is new."

"Cool," Jupiter said, and meant it. She played with the wand for a minute or so; it offered a lot more control than something so simple should, and Jupiter didn't think she'd figured out every motion by the time she handed the wand to Brem. Sevet had coached her on this too; gifts were put away for later, not kept to linger over. Jupiter had no idea why, but it didn't matter at the moment.

Brem, having watched Jupiter, twirled the wand to gather the flock and headed back to the shuttle, trailing the small cloud of chiming - Jupiter had no idea what they were, robots or animals or something she'd never heard of. The box she'd already given Kalique was gone, handed off to another android, and at Kalique's gesture more servants brought in trays and dinner began.

It was a long meal, course after course of dishes almost all completely alien to Jupiter; each one was a tiny portion, so she didn't fill up too quickly, but there were a couple she wasn't sure she could swallow when she tried them. She didn't think Kalique would be too upset if she spat something out, but Alekisa had drilled manners into Jupiter very young, and she'd long ago learned to eat what was put in front of her whether she liked it or not.

But most of the food tasted acceptable and more than a few dishes were delicious, so Jupiter decided it was a reasonable trade-off.

Kalique kept the conversation light, telling tales of various other Entitled, which Jupiter tried to remember; but it was hard to keep all the names straight and she was increasingly tired. Maybe I should have gone for a nap instead of sitting by the water. Fortunately only every third course or so had alcohol to accompany it, and the glasses were small.

By the time they'd finished the last one - and Jupiter was interested to see that in Entitled meals the dessert apparently came in the middle - she was full to the brim and wondering how soon she could make her excuses. But Kalique gathered her skirts and rose. "Let me show you my ship before you go - it's a new model and something you may want to consider for yourself."

Jupiter stood, and found her arm taken again, but she didn't really mind. "I seem to have a whole bunch of spaceships already."

"Oh, yes, but they're all out of date." Kalique started off at a leisurely pace. "And while you may eventually fall heir to some of Balem's fleet or even one of Titus' monstrous creations, you'll need something right off to make a splash."

"Mm," Jupiter said, trying to look agreeable. "About how long is that all going to take, anyway? I'm not greedy," she added hastily. "I'm just trying to, um, plan ahead."
Kalique patted Jupiter's arm with her free hand. "Of course you aren't. Let me see. Titus isn't expected to come to trial until, oh, perhaps next year; the date hasn't been set yet and the silly boy is furious over having to stay confined."

Jupiter blinked. "He can't get out on parole?"

Kalique glanced at her, a slight wrinkle appearing between her brows. "Parole? That word's not translating."

*Huh.* "Never mind," Jupiter said. *Good to know he won't be running around loose.*

Kalique shrugged. "As for Balem's estate, that will probably be handled a little sooner. Normally the lawyers would divide things, but we may be able to keep it in the family and avoid the subsequent wrangling." Her lips curved wryly. "It will certainly be easier this way. Titus has a habit of wandering off when he wants to make a point, it's very tiresome."

Jupiter thought of the way Vladie would invent urgent appointments when he didn't want to do something, and laughed. "I know exactly what you mean."

Kalique's tour of the ship took in as much of its luxuries as its capabilities. Jupiter, veteran of many family conversations about car engines, made obediently enthusiastic comments about the decor, amenities, and speed of Kalique's new toy. It wasn't that different from when Zeno brought home another beater to fix up; there was just a lot more walking involved. Fortunately, the tall shoes were a lot more comfortable than they looked, once she'd learned to balance in them.

_I don't know why I'd want a ship the size of a few football stadiums, unless it's to intimidate someone, but there's something to be said for all the room._ Jupiter thought as they passed through a long hall lined with statuary. It was very different from the somewhat cramped Aegis cruiser, most of whose space was reserved for the single-pilot fighters it carried; Kalique's vessel reminded Jupiter more of a cruise ship than anything else, except intended for a few rather than many.

*One thing's for sure, if I buy one of these things it's going to have a totally different decorating scheme. The Renaissance Faire theme is starting to hurt my eyes.*

"I've been meaning to ask," Kalique said, pausing to stare thoughtfully up at a winged figure with a blank oval where its face should have been. "Do you need any help pursuing the saboteur who sent you off course?"

Her tone was casual, as if such events were commonplace, and Jupiter was starting to think that they might be. "That was fast," Jupiter said dryly. "Or did Commander Apini tell you what he was looking for?"

The look Kalique gave her was indulgent. "My station-keepers reported the incident, of course, though they weren't clear on what had occurred - Mr. Apini was very brief indeed. As for the details, Malidictes had those within an hour of your reappearance."

Jupiter's stomach twisted. "I thought Virtu -"

"Oh no." Kalique played with the dangling pendant of her long necklace. "No, I played fair with that one, my dear. But gossip will flow, even when forbidden. Perhaps _especially_ when forbidden."

*Okay, new list. One: Kalique probably has spies hanging around me already. Two: gotta find out who they are.*

*Three: plant a few of my own?*
That idea was so bizarre that Jupiter immediately filed it under *think about it later*, a list that was getting dismayingly long. "I didn't tell anyone not to gossip," she said, fixing on the minor point to keep her confusion from showing.

"Good," Kalique said, smiling again. "Discreet servants are a far better choice; they are much more judicious in what they pass on."

"Got it," Jupiter said. *Not gonna touch that one right now.* "To answer your question, though, no. Commander Apini has it under control."

Kalique nodded. "Jupiter, I feel I must warn you, given your, ah, recent arrival to Entitlement."

Jupiter felt her eyebrows going up. "Okay?"

Kalique's expression had gone sober again, and all of a sudden her eyes were cold. "When you find this creature, whatever it is, resist any impulse to be merciful."

By the time Jupiter shut her bedroom door on all her attendants - and Soren, who had gravely agreed to guard outside in the main room - she was exhausted all over again. Interacting with Kalique was a strain no matter how friendly the woman was behaving, and it felt strange and a little alarming to have Caine absent. Jupiter kept glancing around for him and not finding him, and it made her feel lonelier in the midst of all the strangers around her. *If he can't be here, I wish Kiza and Aggie were.* But they weren't due to arrive for another day or so.

*Huh. I wonder if Kiza likes the ocean.* And since that reminded her -

"Hey, chamber presence. Does anything live in the ocean out there?"

"There are a few species of bacteria but their density is low."

Jupiter tugged on a lock of her hair, confused. "That's it? Why aren't there - no, wait. Give me a rundown on Gabal's history. The highlights."

She sat down on the hovering couch and undid her shoes as the flat voice recited. "Gabal was seeded with human life by Abrasax Industries approximately 125,000 years ago. 6387 years ago, it was successfully harvested under Queen Seraphi's order."

Jupiter grimaced, swallowing against a small surge of nausea. The chamber presence continued.

"Due to the age of its star, Gabal is not considered an ideal candidate for re-seeding. Queen Seraphi sterilized its biosphere and raised its temperature to melt the planet's ice caps, generating the shallow ocean now in place."

Jupiter stared at the ceiling, caught in a weird disbelieving horror. "So basically, you're telling me she killed the planet and remodeled it, just so she could use it as an office?"

"Correct, your Majesty."

Her temples were throbbing. Jupiter thought about Earth without its humans, all the variety of life that would still be there, from plants to bugs to elephants, and felt sicker. *The more I learn about this woman, the less I want to be anything like her.* "But there is some life, still. Bacteria, you said."

"The bacteria comes from the planet's current inhabitants," the chamber presence corrected. "It is impossible to keep a biosphere sterile without complete isolation."
It was eerie, the idea of an entire world with nothing alive on it besides one island and a few microscopic critters. One that's got oxygen and water and stuff, anyway.

"What's the other side of Gabal look like?" she asked suddenly. "Is that all ocean too?"

The screen-wall lit up with a picture of the planet, which promptly began rotating, clouds swirling lazily above the blue sphere. A red dot appeared in the southern hemisphere, and gradually moved right. "This is your current location," the chamber presence said. A few seconds later it disappeared as the image of Gabal continued to spin, and a gray patch eventually appeared on the left side of the planet, much more northerly. When the patch reached the center of the sphere, it stopped turning.

It was about a third of the size of Australia, Jupiter estimated, though geography had never been her strong point. The image zoomed in, the planet filling the screen, and the gray sharpened and focused until Jupiter could make out a little detail. Wrinkled waves of bare stone stood up from the water like an ancient maze, with a few rounded peaks on the edges like islands, and Jupiter realized that what looked like a low patch of ground was probably the remnants of Gabal's highest mountains.

*How do you sterilize an entire planet?* Jupiter opened her mouth to ask, and then decided that she didn't want to know.

"What did it look like before - before it was harvested?" She almost called the words back, but the display had already changed.

It looked a lot like Earth, but with less water; there were a couple of small seas like the Mediterranean, but no globe-spanning oceans. From Jupiter's orbit-distance viewpoint, it seemed like the vegetation had been more blue-green than bright green, and the ice caps at both poles were huge, extending much further than Jupiter could remember seeing in any image of her home planet.

But it was still similar enough to put a lump in her throat. *Don't ask, don't ask* - "What did they look like? The people who lived here?"

The display changed again, and Jupiter swallowed, because they were - people. Just ordinary people, with two eyes and one nose and five digits on each hand, just people walking down a street or sitting in chairs or talking to one another; holding children, driving vehicles, walking some kind of fuzzy turtle on a leash.

Just people.

The spasm of pain finally penetrated, and she uncurled her fists, barely seeing the dents where her nails had dug into her palms. "Turn it off," Jupiter said, though the last word was more a squeak; but the images vanished.

She rolled over and buried her face in her arms, feeling the smooth velvet of the couch press against her chin and hearing the endless silence of an empty world, and all she could think was *don't let me be her, please don't ever let me be like her, ever ever ever*
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Cincoflex betaed this chapter despite her vacation-thank you, love!

Apologies for the delay on this one. The muse decided to go chase another story for a couple of weeks - seriously, I tried - but I think I've finally got her back on track.

Production notes on some chapters can be found on my LiveJournal.

None of the Neva's cabins were large, and neither was the furniture they contained. Caine's head only just cleared the upper bunk when he sat on the lower, and he had to be careful how he disposed his wings, but it was space enough for him to write up a quick report for Stinger. Granted, it wasn't much more than we got here, and haven't found anything yet, but he knew Stinger would want the update, and the Neva's comms officer would send it along as soon as Caine made the request.

It felt odd, being away from Jupiter. Caine paused for a moment to reach up and touch the band that rode his bicep, as if it were a talisman; he'd been apart from her quite a few times since she'd claimed him, but only once at such distance, and part of him fretted at the separation.

She's fine, he told himself. Stinger and the others will look after her, guard her well; she's safer on Gabal than on her Earth even with Lady Kalique there.

But it still pulled at him, a peculiar nonphysical ache that said no and wrong and alone even though the Neva was full of people. Caine schooled himself to ignore it. The sooner he found the saboteur, the sooner he could get back to his Queen.

The little console built into the opposite wall beeped. Caine nodded at it, and the screen flickered, then produced an image of the comms officer - a young man who wore a voder over his mouth like the Stormbreaker Banti. "Mr. Wise," the voder said, as smoothly as an android. "You have an incoming call from the Queen."

A streak of surprise ran through him, and his heart rose. Caine sat up straight, setting his sheave aside. "I'll take it here."

The officer disappeared, replaced by Jupiter, and Caine instantly wanted to crawl through the image to join her. His lungs expanded reflexively, trying to draw in her scent, but of course all that met them was the dry air of the cabin; still, he couldn't help his smile. "Your Majesty."

She was sitting crosslegged on her - their? - bed, wearing the shirt he'd left for her under a pillow, and Caine was torn between delight that she'd found it and chosen to wear it, and worry, because she looked exhausted despite her own smile. "Hey - I didn't wake you, did I?"

Caine shook his head. "I'm waiting for Urdur to get out of the 'fresher," he said. "Felids always take too long to get clean."

Jupiter chuckled. "How are things going?"

"We've started quartering the station, but there's a lot of it. The manager's been very cooperative,
"Good, they'd better be." Jupiter rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Urdur's treating you okay?"

Caine wished even more that he was there, so he could tuck her into bed again; clearly she needed rest. "They're fine. Really," he added at her skeptical look. "Urdur's got a pretty good nose, actually."

As if summoned by their name, Urdur came out of the 'fresher, vestless and smelling of soap. They took one glance at the screen, bowed to Jupiter, and vanished tactfully out the hatch - thereby going up another notch in Caine's estimation.

Jupiter laughed again. "Fair enough."

"Your Majesty." Caine raised his brows and gentled his voice. "I know it's late there. What's wrong?"

He saw her lip tremble before she bit it, and the ache increased sharply. "Nothing - nothing major, anyway. I just...did something I shouldn't have, and now I'm afraid to go back to sleep."

That wasn't hard to interpret. Caine wanted to scoop her up and just hold her, comfort her, but she was far too far away. "Is Lady Kalique not treating you well?"

"Hm? Oh, no, she's fine. For certain bizarre values of fine, but whatever." Jupiter waved a hand unconcernedly, then let it drop, sobering. "I just asked the chamber presence to show me what Gabal was like before it was Harvested."

Caine had never thought much about Harvesting before he'd met Jupiter; it was no concern of a Splice or a soldier, and questioning the ethics of Entitled was never encouraged. But her utter horror at the idea had pushed him to consider the question; he could see both sides of the issue from where he stood, but his loyalty was to his Queen. "It was...difficult?"

Jupiter swallowed, eyes squeezing shut. "If I ever even start thinking that's a good idea, you have my Entitled-y permission to toss me over the nearest cliff. And no catching me on the way down."

The idea was borderline offensive, but Caine could tell she wasn't truly serious even without smelling her. He pursed his lips. "As your Majesty wishes."

That made her smile again, just a little. "Well. I don't want to keep you up, I just wanted to see you for a minute, y'know? Shake off the nightmares." She muffled a yawn. "I can't keep you guys awake all night."

"Your Majesty may talk as long as she likes. Urdur will sleep in the corridor if you wish it," he said, prompting a snort. Urdur would, too; the Stormbreakers were all devoted to her, particularly the Splices.

She looked at them all and saw people; how could they not love her?

"I don't pay 'em enough for that. Besides, you need your sleep too. The sooner you find the saboteur, the sooner you can come back." Jupiter blinked sleepily. "I miss you."

Caine's throat closed at her words, and he had to work to clear it. Only she could strike him to the heart so easily. "Your Majesty."

It was all he could force out, but she seemed to understand; her lips curled up. "Get some sleep," she
said, and blew him a kiss before vanishing.

Caine just sat for a long few moments, the ache of separation sharper but his heart singing. She had called him for comfort. Not just because she missed him, but because she needed him.

It was like their time in the skimmer - too much, too rich, scarcely to be believed, and yet it had happened. Caine closed his eyes to savor it, then tapped his comm implant reluctantly.

Urdur said nothing when they came back in, merely springing up to the top bunk with liquid ease and settling in with a rattle of feathers. Caine waved off the light and lay back himself, reaching under his own pillow. He'd been halfway out of the Queen's suite when the thought had occurred to him, and he'd ducked back into the bedroom to scoop up the discarded shirt.

Now he pressed it to his face to inhale Jupiter's sleepy scent, a soft drowsiness that sat gently on his tongue. Tucking it between his cheek and the pillow, Caine relaxed in the Neva's close darkness, and slept.

Jupiter woke to the same dimness the bedroom always displayed when she was sleeping. Normally she didn't require a nightlight, though the Bolotnikov basement was never wholly dark except during a power outage; but for the moment being able to see her weird new environment when she opened her eyes was reassuring.

She stretched in the sheets, groaning faintly, and took stock. She still felt kind of bleary, but rested; seeing Caine, even briefly, had had an effect, even if it had made her that much more lonely after disconnecting.

"Outside view, please," she said, and silently the opposite wall turned into a virtual window. Not that there was much to see - evidently she'd woken before dawn. "What time is it?"

"Four twenty-two, your Majesty."

Jupiter scrubbed her face with both hands. "Look, just put up the time on the wall, okay? And leave it there." She focused on the digits that appeared. "A little bigger - okay, that's good."

She slogged into the bathroom and took her time in the shower, trying to wash away the intangible residue of the night before. When she stepped out, freshly dry, the sight of herself in the real-time screen that passed for a mirror made Jupiter pause.

She looked small and pale and unkempt - not at all royal. That's just the outside, though. The second she asked for it, there were three beings ready and eager to do her clothes and hair and makeup, producing an image as powerful as Jupiter wished - or as they envisioned.

Yesterday was a roller coaster. Jupiter stepped closer to the screen, looking into her own eyes. Yeah, I'm more comfortable with this whole Queen thing, but there's some fucking terrifying stuff that goes with it.

She blew out a breath and straightened her shoulders. "It's too late to change your mind," she told the image. "Go big, or...just go big."

For a moment she imagined Caine standing behind her, calm eyes fixed on hers in the image, in his own way immovable. Just having him around was an ego boost, but it was his faith in her that was the true goad, because she desperately didn't want to disappoint him.

And then the Caine in her mind blushed, and Jupiter remembered she was nude, and started to
giggle. "Too bad," she said out loud. "Could have made something of that."

She ran her hands down her torso, sighing, and turned to go out and find her robe, and her attendants, and breakfast. But before leaving, she folded Caine's shirt and laid it carefully in a drawer in the room's little desk. *That should keep anyone from messing with it.*

Then she tightened the robe’s belt and took a breath. "Let’s get this party started," Jupiter muttered, and opened the door.

Kalique sent down a message from her ship saying that she was fatigued and would see Jupiter that afternoon, so Jupiter spent the morning talking to the people who staffed the various business offices in the tower, wishing she hadn't just sent off Virtu. But one of her android attendants, a male done in glossy black all over, was amenable to note-taking, and Jupiter kept him close as she spoke with person after person.

Seraphi’s business interests had been wide-ranging, Jupiter discovered. The offices were really contact points for larger enterprises spread out over several galaxies, ranging from agriculture to import/export and passing through banking, publishing, and pharmaceuticals - Jupiter was a little surprised to learn that Regenex couldn't fix everything.

There were also a few industries that she didn't understand at all, but she listened to those managers too, nodding along and hoping to look things up later. *Like, what the heck is a vitilite provider?*

There were, however, no Splicing facilities listed among the assets, and Jupiter was relieved at their absence.

She'd just finished hearing about a company that mined one of the components used in starship hulls - *if mined* was the term when it usually meant literally breaking up a planetoid and extracting the ore - when her stomach finally got her notice. Jupiter halted in the corridor, which looked a whole lot like the corridor she'd stopped in the day before, and looked at the people following her around.

Today it was Forthwith and Laur, two robot guards, a matched set of Splices delegated by Sevet to attend her, and Jahn, the android.

"Lunchtime," she said. "Let's have a picnic."

The Splices - one of which looked distinctly froggy, while the other's only unhuman attribute was an extra set of thumbs - glanced at each other in confusion. Forthwith's lips twitched; Jahn merely kept his usual polite expression. Jupiter sighed.

"Eating outside. Don't tell me nobody does that out here."

"Oh! Of course, your Majesty," the frog-splice said. "Perhaps on one of the balconies?"

Jupiter shook her head. "I want to eat down by the water. Hey, is that floating pavilion still around? That'd be perfect."

It took a little doing, but eventually Jupiter was settled next to a table within the pavilion from which she'd greeted Kalique, and the pavilion was parked next to the same pier Jupiter had visited the day before. It was another mild day and the food looked enticing, but Jupiter looked around at the seven beings all standing at attention and shook her head.

"Come on, guys. This is ridiculous. You three, you can at least sit down if you want." She pointed at the two attendant Splices and Jahn, knowing that the Skyjackers wouldn't sit and the gun-bots didn't. "And are any of you hungry?"
"We're not allowed to eat on duty, your Majesty," Laur reminded her, shrugging a little. "It's a safety protocol."

The two attendant Splices looked astonished at the question - almost frightened. "We - we're - not hungry, your Majesty," the human-looking one managed. "Though your Majesty is very gracious to offer - "

"Okay, maybe later," Jupiter said hastily; they were clearly uncomfortable at the notion. "Go on, call up some seats. Hey, call Stinger for me while you're at it, okay?"

*Maybe I really should get one of those communication implants. Hard to explain at home, though.*

Within a couple of minutes Stinger dropped down out of the air to land outside the pavilion, clumping in and exchanging nods with the Stormbreakers. "Your Majesty?"

"Pull up another floaty thing and help me eat all this?" Jupiter gave him a beseeching look. "There's enough food here for six people."

Stinger grinned and took the seat that one of the Splices made the pavilion generate. "Sevet doesn't know what you like yet, that's why." He scooped up a cracker and popped it into his mouth. "Tell her and you'll both feel better."

Jupiter glanced over at her attendants, now all seated in a row and looking a little less stuffed than earlier. "Sure. Jahn, add that to the to-do list, would you? Thanks."

Stinger gave her an approving nod. "Getting your chickens in a row, are you? That's good."

Jupiter bit her lip, trying not to laugh, and reached for her fork. "Um. It's ducks."

"What? Oh." Stinger coughed. "Damn tercie languages - sorry, your Majesty - "

"Oh, come off it." Jupiter smirked, and helped herself to what looked like salad before passing him the bowl. "Have you heard from Caine?"

"He sent in a report last night, though they've not much to report as yet." Stinger pulled a small sheave from his uniform pocket and handed it to her. "I'm glad you called me, I was going to request a meeting anyway."

"Yeah, about that, we should be meeting every day anyway, right?" The thought made her head ache a little, that she would have to schedule time to see someone she thought of as a friend, but Jupiter supposed she'd get used to it eventually.

"It'd be a good idea, yes, especially if you're going to make a habit of eating outdoors where anyone can see you." Stinger's half-smile made it a tease, but Jupiter could see his point.

"You think somebody else wants to hurt me?" The salad tasted good, if a bit salty, and Jupiter chewed carefully, trying to wrap her head around the idea of yet more people wishing her dead.

Stinger shrugged. "I served five years in the Noltorian royal guard - there's always someone with a grudge against Entitled."

"Great." Jupiter frowned. "And I haven't even done anything yet."

"Of course you have, your Majesty," Stinger noted mildly. "You dismissed the steering agents for Earth, for starters. People'll take notice."
He served himself a ladleful of tiny spheres that looked like nothing so much as emerald beads. "You upset the market and the Entitled hierarchy just by existing. There will always be some who resent it."

"Gah." Jupiter reached for what proved to be, reassuringly, a bread roll. "Y'know, with all those millennia, you'd think - "

Stinger squinted, not quite a grimace, but Jupiter got the warning, and took a bite of the roll. *Don't talk about how much you hate the current society in public, right. Geeze, this is ridiculous.*

Stinger cleared his throat. "Yes, well. Regarding that security matter we discussed when you arrived, are you ready to make that public?"

Jupiter hesitated. "Let me talk to Kalique about it," she said finally. "I mean, I don't know what the legal system is really like yet, but I suppose it has to come out sooner or later. But I think she has a right to know first."

Stinger bowed his head. "I agree, your Majesty. And she may be able to advise you on the matter."

Jupiter nodded glumly, and glanced at the three attendants seated in a row across the pavilion, waiting patiently as the breeze fluttered hair and clothing. Stinger had assured her that the Stormbreakers were bound by oath to keep whatever they overheard to themselves, but she was aware that the other people flocking around her had nothing binding *them*. As far as she knew, like everything else, she'd have to get used to it.

For a little while they ate in silence, easy if not peaceful. Jupiter was glad to be outside again; the business section of the Tower seemed stuffy and claustrophobia-inducing even though it wasn't, and while Jupiter knew the effect was on purpose it was still hard to fight. *And what about the people who work there? Are they just used to it, or what?*

Though when she considered the offices she'd seen on Orus, the Tower didn't seem so bad…

"Is there an alternative to those communication implants you guys have in your necks?" Jupiter asked Stinger when they had both cleared their plates. "I mean, I love my iPhone, but…"

The batrachian Splice shot to his feet. "Your Majesty, if I may - "

Jupiter glanced at him in surprise. "Uh - sure, go ahead."

The attendant was almost quivering. "Her Majesty the late Queen had a number of comm devices meant to be worn rather than implanted. If your Majesty will permit, I will fetch them for you."

Her first impulse was to say it could wait until she got back inside, but the guy looked so *eager* that Jupiter didn't have the heart. "Okay, yeah. Thanks."

The Splice all but ran off the platform, hurrying back towards the Tower before Jupiter could tell him to use the jellybean transport that had brought them to the pier. When she turned back to Stinger he was snickering into his napkin, and she had to grin a little. "What?"

Stinger shook his head. "Majesty, I don't believe there's ever been an Entitled who said 'yeah' to a servant." His smirk widened. "Your manners are *deplorable.*"

Jupiter blew him a raspberry, which only made him laugh harder. "Just for that, you don't get any coffee," she said, reaching for the carafe to pour herself a cup.
"I'd rather have juice. By the way, get Sevet to get you some moloto - it's close enough to coffee. Caffeine and all."

"Okay." Jupiter added sugar to her cup - milk didn't seem to be a thing in space-dining, though she'd seen cheese go by - and stirred. "So is there anything else official you need to tell me?"

Stinger swallowed his mouthful and pulled out another sheave, and spent fifteen minutes walking her through the security system for Gabal. It wasn't that it was boring, but Jupiter had a little trouble concentrating - it was just more information, dumped on top of way too much data already. I think my brain has indigestion.

"Do I really need to know all this?" she asked plaintively when he was done.

Stinger tilted one hand back and forth. "Sort of. Most Entitled wouldn't know the inside workings of their security - unless they're the paranoid types, and you do have 'em. But they already understand the, um, structure underneath."

"Right." Jupiter nodded. "So this is kind of background."

"Exactly." Stinger shut down the sheave. "Besides, the best way to stay alive is to know this stuff. First rule of a long life is never to trust anyone entirely, even your own staff."

Jupiter made another rude noise, then sobered when he didn't smile. "Seriously? I mean, I take your point, but if I can't trust you and Caine and Kiza - "

Stinger rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll give you Caine, but he's special circumstances. I have to remind you, Majesty, I already betrayed you once."

Jupiter opened her mouth, then closed it, and organized her words carefully. "You betrayed Caine. I was just, like, a game piece. Besides, it was for a good reason. Stinger, you think I don't understand that?"

His face squinched up. "Yes, but - "

"Stop it," Jupiter said firmly, and decided to be royal, even if it felt weird. "Stinger, we're done with this. I forgive you, if you think you need it, and I do trust you. You're my Chief of Security, and my adviser and friend, and I swear if you bring this up again I'm going to make you eat jam with your breakfast instead of honey - "

Stinger sputtered a laugh, and buried his face in his hands for a moment, coming up flushed and still grinning. "All right, Majesty - Jupiter," he said. "I'll leave it be."

"Thank you." Jupiter sat back and drank the rest of her coffee.

Hurrying footsteps brought the froggy Splice, who practically bounded up into the pavilion and dropped to one knee in front of Jupiter. He was balancing a wide flat box on both forearms and looking hopeful. "Your Majesty - "

Before Jupiter could move, Stinger made a warning noise, but Forthwith was already stepping forward and unhooking a small device from her belt. She waved it over and around the box, glanced at its readout, and stepped back. "No organics, no explosives. It's fine, your Majesty."

The Splice looked indignant. "I would never endanger - "

"It's protocol," Stinger cut in shortly. "All staff is unsecure at this point until - "
"The Splice made a hissing noise. Jupiter cleared her throat loudly, and everyone stiffened."

"What's your name?" Jupiter asked the Splice, keeping her voice level.

He ducked his head in an abbreviated bow. "Col Sandalusi, your Majesty."

Jupiter nodded. "Nice to meet you. Now, personally, I figure just about everybody here on Gabal is fine, and happy to have me here - at least, that's what Sevet tells me. But Commander Apini is professionally paranoid, and since that's kind of what I pay him for, I'm going to go with what he tells me for the moment."

She smiled at Col. "When he says everybody, he means everybody, from Sevet on down. So don't take it personally. It's just the way we're doing things until I settle in, okay?"

Col nodded, poppy eyes wide, and Jupiter nodded back. "Now, please, stand up, that can't be comfortable."

The Splice rose slowly to both feet, and when Jupiter lifted a hand he did something that sprang the catch on the box. The lid didn't open; it drew back, vanishing into the sides in a way that looked totally CGI, revealing an array of six different bracelets in a variety of materials and styles.

"All of these will tie into the comm system, your Majesty," Col said, pride evidently restored to judge by the angle of his chin. "But if they do not meet your needs, I will be happy to procure new ones."

"No, no, these look good." Jupiter looked them over, fascinated, then pulled one out. It was made of some silvery metal and looked like a chain of stylized stars; when she drew it through her fingers she couldn't even find a button. A little regretfully, she put it back. "Pretty, but I don't want to have to fiddle with it to make it work."

Two of them were more obvious cuff bracelets in filigree patterns, and she selected one that had the slick smoothness and dull silver-black of hematite. Indicator lights winked like jewels in the carving, and the button was center-set like an ornament. "Yeah, that's easier."

Jupiter slid it onto her wrist, where her complete non-surprise, it fit perfectly. "Terrific. Thanks, Mr. Sandalusi. Hang onto the rest of them; I may want to switch styles later."

He bowed his head over the box and made it close again. "Of course, your Majesty."

"Very smooth, Majesty," Stinger said in a low tone as Col took his seat again; the corner of his mouth was twitching. "Unorthodox, but smooth."

Jupiter stroked the bracelet, enjoying the feel of it under her fingertips, and grinned.

When Kalique arrived that afternoon, she was dressed in a gown that graduated from navy blue at the bodice to black at the hem, and had her hair braided in a long plait woven with pearls. Jupiter wondered whether Kalique dressed for fun, or if changing clothes every five minutes was Entitled custom. "Guess I'll find out eventually."

"Can I talk to you in private?" she asked after Kalique had greeted her. "I mean, like really private - no, um, entourage."

Kalique's brows went up. "So serious, my dear. Of course - where do you have in mind?"

Jupiter didn't think Kalique would be very comfortable on the pier, given what the wind would do to her outfit. "How about upstairs? One of the balconies in the private quarters should work okay."
"Very well." Kalique took Jupiter's arm again, and they rose up in the hoverbeam elevator from the public area of the Tower to the suites near its top. Both Kalique's people and Jupiter's followed them, but when they reached the suite Jupiter had claimed she stopped them. "Guards only past this point," she told them. "Make yourself comfortable in the lounge; Sevet, can you see that everybody gets refreshments if they want?"

Sevet bowed, and Jupiter beckoned Kalique and their guards into the inner rooms.

They followed the curving outer hallway to the balconies that were set into each side of the Tower. Most of them had furniture of one kind or another, and all had forceshields that could be used to keep out the weather; Jupiter chose one that had only a couple of chairs, and adjusted the shield so that only a bit of breeze sighed in.

Laur and Forthwith exchanged glances with the three guards attending Kalique, and without words they sorted themselves out so that there were two each at either end and one at the door - as far out of hearing range as they could get, though the balcony wasn't big enough to prevent them from overhearing. Still, it was a nice touch, and Jupiter appreciated it.

Kalique drifted over to look through the screen at the ocean far below. "Here we are, my dear...what do you have in mind?"

Jupiter mastered a small surge of irritation at Kalique's indulgent attitude, and folded her arms, trying to figure out how to phrase things. "Um. You remember - look, I'm sorry to bring this up. But you remember how Balem died."

Kalique's smile faded, and she kept her gaze on the water and the sky. "In the ruins of his refinery, yes. If not at your hand, then at your Splice's, correct?"

Jupiter started. "Oh - no. He...he fell, when the place was collapsing. I...didn't see him - I didn't see."

Kalique's face was sad. "Are you looking for forgiveness?"

Jupiter cocked her head. "No," she said after a moment, unwilling to prevaricate. "He was trying to beat me to death, so no."


Jupiter rubbed one hand over her face. "Look, I'm doing this badly. One of the things he said to me while we were there - Kalique, he said he killed S - your mother."

Kalique went completely still. Jupiter watched her anxiously for a moment, then dropped her eyes when it occurred to her that maybe the woman didn't want to be stared at just then.

It was a little while before Kalique spoke again. "Do you have proof?"

Jupiter shook her head, though for a moment her jaw throbbed, remembering his blow to her face.

Kalique let out a long breath, and turned slowly to lean against the balustrade. "Then it's all speculation."

Jupiter grimaced. "He sounded pretty certain to me."

"Oh - I don't actually doubt you." Kalique looked tired suddenly, as if her actual age were ghosting up under her youthful skin. "I had wondered, to be truthful. He was getting more and more unstable..."
as Mother changed, and - but he was calmer, after her death. I thought I'd been mistaken."

She turned a little to face Jupiter. "He was mad, in his way, but that's not uncommon among Entitled, particularly as we age. Such things are eventually self-limiting, and his madness was not the sort that affected profits or politics."

There was so much embedded in her words that Jupiter couldn't begin to sort it out. "Well. I'm not looking to - accuse him publicly, I guess. I just thought you should know."

Kalique inclined her head in a formal gesture. "Yes. Thank you." She touched her fingers to her lips. "It's good to know the truth, I suppose."

"Yeah, that's what I figured." Jupiter leaned back against the balustrade, resting her elbows on the edge; the shield obligingly dimpled outward to give her space. "I don't know if this is the kind of information you want to release, or what; when I got here, everybody acted like the assassin was still lurking in the shadows or something."

"Does anyone else know what you've just told me?" Kalique's gaze went sharp.

Jupiter was a little taken aback. "Mr. Wise, Commander Apini. That's it." She thought for a second. "I can't speak for anybody who worked for Balem, though."

"You - mm." Kalique made a tiny motion, as if shaking herself out. "Jupiter, I request that you keep this information to yourself, and that you ask your Splices to do the same."

"Of course." Jupiter straightened, annoyed on their behalf. "They're completely discreet."

Kalique waved a hand. "Yes, I'm sure. My dear, I'm sorry to be so uncongenial, but I believe I need a little privacy to think this through. Do you mind?"

"Of course. That's fine," Jupiter said quickly, barely stopping herself from babbling. "Is here okay?"

"Yes, this will do." Kalique turned back to look out at the water.

Jupiter left her to it, slipping through the door with Laur and Forthwith falling in behind her. Jupiter was about to go back out to the lounge when a thought crossed her mind.

She deserves privacy... but she's out there with just her people.

"Hold on a sec," she told the Stormbreakers, and ducked into the big bathing room. "Hey, chamber presence."

"Your Majesty?"

Jupiter thought for a moment. "I want you to record whatever happens on the balcony where Lady Kalique is right now, but I don't want you to pay attention to it. Can you do that?"

"Yes, your Majesty. What access level do you wish assigned to the file?"

"I don't want anybody but me to be able to access it. Or - Commander Apini, if something happens to me."

"Yes, your Majesty." The flat voice fell silent, and Jupiter gave a silent sigh.

*I can dump it without watching it. But if somebody had been recording the last time, the whole mystery would have been avoided.*
She didn't actually think anything was going to happen, or that Kalique would do anything unexpected. *But better safe than sorry.*

She collected her guards and went back through the lounge; everyone looked up as she came in and started to rise, but she waved them back down. "No, stay where you are. Sevet, send someone to wait in the hall in case Lady Kalique wants anything, would you please? Then come sit with me and we'll talk about the household."

Jupiter took a seat at the far end of the room, beckoned Jahn to join her for note-taking purposes, and waited for Sevet to come over. *I've been meaning to do this, but it's nothing I can't drop when Kalique comes back out.*

*I hope she's okay.*

She mustered a smile for Sevet as the android sat down, and dove into household management.

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Urdur knocked on yet another personal-quarters door, waited five seconds for a response, and lifted their wrist to let their keypass clear the lock. When the door slid open, the room's lights came up automatically, but it was clear no one was in.

Urdur stepped back in the routine they'd developed, and Caine stuck his head into the room and breathed deep. And felt a now-familiar pulse of disappointment. *Splice, yes, but not the one we're looking for.*

"Nope," he reported, stepping back, and Urdur chuffed in frustration and tapped the panel to close the door again. "How many left?"

Urdur consulted the sheet in their hand. "Three," they said. "We're running out of possibilities."

"Maybe we should have started at the bottom," Caine said dryly, and peered at the list. "Up one level and over a bit?"

"There's another on this level," Urdur said, running a clawed finger along the last line of printing. "Just around the corner, in fact."

"All right." Caine loped down the hall, wondering what the next step would be if none of the names generated a hit. It was certainly possible to quarter the entire station, but it would take time, and he wanted to get back to Jupiter. *And the longer we take to find this trash, the further away they're getting.*

But the second they turned the corner he felt all his nerve endings quivering alert. The trace on the air, so faint it was hardly detectable, was *familiar.*

He held up a hand, signaling silence, and Urdur slipped up next to him. In best Skyjacker formation, they unholstered their weapons and woke their boots, and glided silently down the hall to the target door.

This time they didn't bother knocking. Caine's keypass opened the door with the usual faint beep - it couldn't be helped - but when they exploded into the room, weapons out and ready, they were met with another empty space.

In fact, the scent was stronger there but stale, and the room was truly *empty* - there were no possessions, just stripped furniture. Nobody had occupied it for at least a few weeks.
Caine spat a curse, and Urdur growled. "Now what?" they demanded.

Caine holstered his gun and shut down his boots, then gestured at the room's console. "Check the records. This - " He squinted at memory. " - Petala Elgin has to have gone somewhere."

Urdur woke up the console and poked at it for a few minutes, but eventually straightened with a frown. "All it says is that Elgin's contract was sold."

Caine scrubbed a hand through his hair. "We'd better go find Manager Traduce."

They ran the Splice to ground in a docking bay halfway around the station from the one the Neva rested in, consulting with a pair of powersuited Sargorns while a half-dozen more flitted around an orecrusher with a gash torn in its cargo hull. As soon as she saw Caine and Urdur approaching, she waved the workers off and hurried to meet the Skyjackers. "What can I do for you?" she asked as they neared.

"We need to find Petala Elgin," Caine said. "A neuter Splice whose contract was recently sold."

Traduce rubbed her nose. "The name's a little familiar, but I oversee too many to remember precisely. Let's go back to my office, if you will, and I'll call up their file."

Caine extended a hand for her to lead. "Urdur, ask Captain Tsing to join us, please," he said, and Urdur nodded and spoke quietly into their commlink.

Tsing was waiting for them outside Traduce's office, calm as always. "Progress?"

Caine huffed as they crowded into the little room. "Maybe."

Traduce was quick to seat them and call up Elgin's record. A scan of the suspect's face hovered over her desk, rotating so they all could see; round and smooth and bald. Probably a reptile Splice, Caine thought, maybe something from Outer Synge.

"Yes, I remember now," Traduce said. "Sa Elgin's contract period expired, and with no one to speak for them, they went back on the market." She sighed. "I hate to lose good people, but upper management was moved elsewhere after Queen Seraphi's death and I'm afraid Lord Balem never replaced them."

She tapped at the console. "Let's see."

"I already checked the file," Urdur objected.

Traduce shot them an apologetic glance. "Terminations are kept in a separate file, you wouldn't know to look there," she said. "I have no record of their purchaser, but Elgin left just - hmm. Just a few weeks ago." She frowned.

So did Caine. It wasn't common for a buyer to be left out of a terminated employee's records, but it wasn't unheard of, either. But the timing was starting to alarm him. "Any record of where they went?"

Traduce shook her head, her color fading slightly, and hooked a finger into the display to turn it so he could read it. "No. But they hitched a ride on the transport tug."

That's it. Caine bared his teeth, and heard Urdur's low growl. That has to be it. "Where's that tug now?"
In the end, it was Lieutenant Chatterjee who found the tug for them; it was an independent vessel rather than Abrasax Industries property, and its crew made a living running several regular routes and picking up odd jobs on the side. Moving a handful of ships to Gabal had been one such.

Caine watched through the bridge viewport as the tug obligingly slowed in response to the Neva's hail. The massive ship consisted mostly of a long straight staith, with a disk attached flat on one end to house the engines and crew quarters. It had portaling capability, but no speed, and when the Neva approached there were only a few ships clamped down on the staith, with one more anchored by force shield. Given the age of the tug, Caine was a little surprised that it had the shield tech, but apparently whoever ran it had sprung for the upgrade at some point.

"Yes, that's correct," the comms officer was saying. "This cruiser is part of Queen Jupiter Jones Abrasax's fleet and we are pursuing a matter on her orders. Request permission to board." He paused, listening to the comm through his headset, then turned to Tsing. "They will allow boarding, but only unarmed personnel."

Tsing cocked a brow at Caine and Urdur. "Will that be acceptable?"

Caine traded glances with Urdur, and nodded, and both of them unholstered their guns. Tsing turned back to the officer. "Let them know that we'll be sending over three, unarmed as requested." Her mouth quirked. "As much as either of you get, that is."

Caine huffed a silent laugh, and unstrapped his knife as well; Urdur was piling up a handful of small throwing weapons on one of the bridge consoles. "Do you need a box?" Tsing added innocently, and Urdur smirked.

"Almost done," they said. "Who's coming with us?"

Tsing jerked her chin at Lieutenant Chatterjee. "The lieutenant's about as unarmed as you. I don't expect trouble, but I don't want to have to explain to her Majesty that I lost two of her guards on a slug tug, either."

Caine grinned at her, a little fierce; he knew better than to take her concern as an insult. Good commanders didn't send in insufficient personnel, after all. "It's a straight line, Captain, we can't get lost," he retorted, and she smiled a little.

The Neva docked neatly with the tug, taking a berth very close to the engine disk. The welcoming committee outside the airlock consisted of four people, one of whom was carrying a pulse rifle and two of whom were armed with heavy metal batons, but Caine smelled only wariness as he stepped on board, not aggression.

The unarmed woman, burly and grave, stepped forward. "Anna Zabor. I run this tug. What does the Abrasax queen want with us?"

Caine gave her a courteous nod. "We're here about a passenger you picked up at Abrasax Fleet Substation 6-A. Sa Petala Elgin."

Zabor relaxed a little. "Oh, the mystery fare. Yeah, we dropped them off on Gabal - that was the last we saw of them."

On Gabal. On Gabal. Caine was more than dismayed now. Any sensible saboteur should have either gotten off before Gabal or stayed on the tug as it left; only the fact that he hadn't smelled that scent anywhere in the city was keeping him from even worse alarm.

"Captain Zabor, may I see their quarters?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even, and hoped that
the cabin hadn't been cleansed since.

Zabor frowned. "What's this about?"

Lieutenant Chatterjee spoke up, her artificial voice smooth and almost soothing. "Queen Jupiter has business with Sa Elgin, and we're attempting to trace them. Any assistance you render can be rewarded generously."

Two of the others looked hopeful at this, but Zabor hesitated. "This is the new queen, right? The Recurrence?" At Chatterjee's nod, she frowned. "Not sure I want us to get mixed up in any Royal concerns."

"I just want to examine their quarters," Caine said, carefully suppressing his growl. "To confirm that they're the person we're looking for."

"Come on, Ann," the man with the pulse rifle said. "You heard the lady. Since when do you pass up easy profit?"

"When it stinks of politics," Zabor muttered, but shrugged. "Looks like I'm outvoted anyway. Sami, take 'em down there, and stay with them 'til they're done."

One of the baton-wielders tossed off a cheery salute. "Follow me, folks."

She led them down the staith and into the disk. Glancing back, Caine could see the hollow length of the staith disappearing into the distance; it had a rail in the center for a car, but they didn't have far to go and there was no vehicle in evidence anyway.

The disk smelled...lived in. The air was even a bit stale, a far cry from Captain Tsing's strict insistence on absolute cleanliness, but it gave Caine hope. *The less they've cleaned, the more trace I'm likely to find.*

And as they approached what Sami called "guest quarters, unfortunately for them," the faint musky trace of Elgin was detectable even in the corridor. When she tapped the door open, Urdur and Chatterjee stayed back, allowing Caine to step into the shabby little cabin alone.

There were no personal possessions left, but as Caine had hoped, no one had gotten around to actually cleaning. The musk was mixed with another scent, one similar but sharper, and he prowled around the room, tasting the air and trying to sort them out. *Another Splice - a relative?*

He looked back at Sami, who was leaning against the far wall with a curious expression on her face. "Who was in here with Elgin?"

Her curiosity deepened. "Nobody. They stayed in their cabin the whole trip - didn't even come out for meals."

Caine scowled. "I smell two people." Two people, two Splices...two familiar scents, he realized, though familiar for different reasons. *I don't like this.* He couldn't quite place the second scent, but -

He waved open the door to the tiny 'fresher cubicle, and this time let the growl out. The little space was a mess - there was dust everywhere, dust and fluff and feather fragments. *Feathers.*

A mostly-empty pack of injectors sat on the miniscule counter, and several used ones had been tossed in the sink. "Urdur," Caine said tightly, and the felid Splice flowed into the room to peer past him. Caine could smell their scent changing from curiosity to a taut anger.
"That had to hurt," they said casually, but their ears were laid flat against their head.

"What is it?" Chatterjee's voice was as calm as ever, and Urdur backed out of the 'fresher.

"Elgin did a full body mod." Caine swiped a finger through the dust, lifting it to his nose. The odor had an acrid edge - serum and pain - but he finally placed it.

And it terrified him.

Chatterjee looked at Sami. "What did Sa Elgin look like?"

Sami blinked. "Couldn't say. They came on board wrapped up in one of those hooded robes, like from the Quarter systems. Left the same way." She cocked her head. "I thought a complete body mod had to be done at a medical facility or something."

"Only if you want it to be safe," Urdur said. "Wise?"

Caine was controlling his breathing very carefully. "I know who they became," he said. The body mod had changed Elgin's appearance and their scent along with it, but he had it now.

A small body, round and fluffy. Hiding in the background, just another servitor.

*Feathers.*

He bared his teeth. "We have to get back to Gabal *now.*"
This is surreal. And given the last few months, that's saying something.

The arboretum aboard Kalique's clipper was starry with little lights, setting every plant in the high-ceilinged room aglow and forming drifts of flame along the floor. It was a more random arrangement than the flickering sea in the shrine to Seraphi on Cerise, but it was equally gorgeous, Jupiter thought; even lacking the centerpiece of a statue.

She was just as glad for the absence.

Jupiter sat carefully still in the backless chair Kalique had offered her; the gown her dressers had chosen for her had a long enough train that she was afraid of it knocking over a candle and catching on fire if she moved. Kalique moved slowly along the arboretum's narrow paths, lighting yet more candles with a long wand and somehow managing her own skirts effortlessly. Jupiter watched her, admiring her grace, and reflected on the odd circumstance of being present at a memorial to the woman whose random genetic copy she was.

I wonder if this is a space thing, or an Entitled thing, or just a Kalique thing.

But whichever it was, Jupiter could understand the need for closure. So she sat, hands placed just so on the curved armrests, and waited to see what - if anything - would be asked of her.

Kalique lit a last candle and returned to the center where Jupiter sat, taking the chair next to her. There was no one else in the room besides the guards at the doors; Kalique had shed her entourage outside, and Jupiter had signaled her little assistant to wait as well. Whatever else this was, it was obviously private.

For a long time, Kalique said nothing, merely looking out over the dim, golden garden; her expression was distantly sad, Jupiter thought, and again it seemed as if she could see a hint of Kalique's true age beneath the youthfulness.

But she didn't want to stare, so she glanced away to watch the flames dance instead.

"I did wonder, you know," Kalique said at last, drawing Jupiter's attention back. Kalique was still half-turned away, as if looking back into time. "Mother and Balem had been so contentious, more and more as time went on. But he was crushed by her death, absolutely wild with grief, so I told myself it was mere fancy."

Jupiter tried to imagine Balem that upset, and suppressed a shudder. "Nobody...um, they couldn't do DNA evidence?"

Kalique shrugged, finally facing Jupiter. "Balem was visiting Gabal; it was expected to find his
"Getting there, yeah," Jupiter said cautiously. "It's all a little hard to imagine."

Kalique nodded, sitting absolutely straight in her chair. She was wearing the same gown she'd worn when Jupiter had first met her, champagne-colored and sparkling; it was the first time Jupiter had seen her wear something twice. *Maybe it's the color? Even on Earth not everybody wears black to funerals.*

"I didn't understand Mother, at the end of her life," Kalique continued softly. "She spoke of a need for changes, but what she was proposing was so radical that it nearly qualified as insanity in its own right."

"Stopping the trade in Regenex?" Jupiter asked, and at Kalique's sharp look, shrugged. "That's what Titus said."

"That boy." Kalique's mouth crimped with annoyance. "Yes, the impossible dream of revolution-minded rabble. Tearing down society for an out-of-date principle."

"Speaking as the product, I can kind of see their point," Jupiter said, trying to keep her tone even.

"Mm, yes, of course you can," Kalique replied, smiling the faintest bit. "But consider, my dear. Without the seeding of your planet, all its history and finest creations would never have existed at all. The independent evolution of intelligent life is vanishingly rare, you know."

No, I didn't. Jupiter felt her fingers tightening on the armrests, and wondered whether to point out that all that history would have been discarded and forgotten after the harvesting of Earth anyway, at least to judge by Gabal. *No; it's bad manners to argue at a funeral.*

"Kalique...why did you invite me here tonight?" she said instead. "I mean, I'm honored, but - "

Kalique's eyes glittered with reflected flame. "Because this is for you." She gestured at the sea of light. "You are Mother's Recurrence. Remember what I told you? You are her reincarnation. You are her."

A coldness spread in Jupiter's stomach, and she wished Caine were there, steady and wary. "Kalique, we've been over this. I'm not your mother."

Kalique shook her head, looking superior and *fond.* "You'll understand eventually. Think of it as a spiritual inheritance, if that makes it easier."

*It doesn't.* But before Jupiter could think of a counterargument, Kalique turned back to the garden, falling silent. Jupiter shifted in her chair, wishing it had a back, and wondered what had pushed Balem over the edge into actual murder.

"You begged me to do it..."

Was that the truth? Had Seraphi given up at the last and chosen to end a long life instead of take up a new fight? It was impossible to fathom the mind of someone so alien, and Jupiter wasn't sure she wanted to anyway.

*I'm not her. I'm not.*
At the door, one of the guards stirred, then paced silently forward, wings held at a formal angle; Rush. "Your Majesty, your Grace," he said as he approached. "I'm very sorry to interrupt, but Commander Apini says he must speak with your Majesty at once."

Kalique's chin went up in a look of haughty annoyance. "Is this truly necessary, Legionnaire? This is a ceremony of remembrance, not a dinner party."

Rush blanched, bowing his head, but held his ground. "I am under orders, your Grace."

Jupiter frowned. "I'd better take this," she said to Kalique, and stood. "I'm sorry, but Commander Apini wouldn't do this if it weren't important."

Kalique made an impatient sound, but waved a hand, and Jupiter took that for permission and gathered her skirts to walk back towards the door with Rush. "Why didn't he just beep me on this thing?" Jupiter complained in a low voice, holding up the wrist that bore the comm bracelet.

Rush bowed slightly. "If your Majesty will permit..." He reached out to grip the bracelet in two fingers, careful not to touch her skin, and rotated it on her wrist. "He did."

Jupiter looked down at the tiny blinking light that had been hidden on the underside, chagrined. "I wonder if it has a vibrate function. Okay, hold on." She tapped the button and raised the bracelet to her face. "Stinger, what's going on?"

The bracelet didn't function like an Earth phone; Stinger's voice sounded directly in Jupiter's ear, clear and urgent, even though she was holding the bracelet near her mouth. "Your Majesty, we have an ongoing security breach. I request that you return to the Tower as soon as possible."

"A - what's the matter?" Jupiter stiffened, alarmed. Is it Caine? No, he said security -

"This communication is not secured," Stinger said, and she could hear the tightness in his voice. "Please, your Majesty, we need you to come back now."

That definitely doesn't sound good. Jupiter hesitated, torn between the bad manners of cutting out early and Stinger's obvious tension. She looked up at Rush. "Do you know what's going on?"

He shook his head minutely, angelic face impassive, but one hand slid down to loosen his gun in its holster and the other called up the controls for his boots, though he didn't activate them. "All I know is that you're not safe here, your Majesty. But we're prepared to get you back safely - just give the word."

Not safe here? But Kalique doesn't want to hurt me. Jupiter was reasonably sure of that by now. "What about Kalique?" she asked, keeping her voice low. "Is she in danger too?"

"No," Stinger said, sounding as if he hadn't expected the question. "Not if you leave immediately."

"We're gonna have words about the whole mystery thing," Jupiter grumbled. "All right. Let me apologize to Kalique and we'll go."

She tapped the button to end the call. Rush bowed again, hardly more than a dip of his shoulders, and paced her back to where Kalique sat. The woman looked up as they approached, her annoyance smoothed away into cool politeness, and Jupiter grimaced.

"I'm really sorry about this," she said. "But I do need to get back. It's important." Which felt like a lie even though she didn't think it was one, but Jupiter didn't know what else to say.
"Very well," Kalique said, and rose, looking past Jupiter but not directly at Rush. "Leave us, Legionnaire."

Jupiter knew that expression, she'd seen it many times; the people whose houses her family cleaned often looked past those they called the help, as if meeting their eyes might give them delusions of importance. Jupiter bit back a surge of anger and looked directly at Rush, grimacing in sympathy, and jerked her head. He gave another impassive bow, and faded back towards the door.

"Just a word of warning, my dear," Kalique said, reaching out to stroke Jupiter's shoulder lightly. "Good security is priceless, but not hard to find. Don't let your servitors bully you."

Jupiter decided not to touch that one. "I'll keep it in mind." She had no idea if it was a thing in Entitled society, but she leaned forward and kissed Kalique briefly on the cheek. "Thanks for inviting me."

Kalique stood very still, brows up in surprise, but she didn't look offended. Jupiter gave her a quick smile, and went to meet Rush.

They collected Laur at the door and Sa Brem just outside, and Jupiter led her little coterie back towards the shuttle they'd come up in, feeling extremely nervous. I thought we got this whole safety thing settled -

But Stinger had said that there would always be threats. Jupiter tried not to hunch her shoulders or quicken her steps, though from the way Rush and Laur were just barely not stepping on her train, they were feeling about the same. Brem's expression was lost in feathers, but they kept up, shooting the occasional glance around as if nervous.

The shuttle took them down into Gabal's atmosphere, halting a couple of hundred yards above the landing area as was customary. Kalique's clipper was far too large to enter atmosphere, and Jupiter had asked why the shuttle couldn't just land and let her walk down the gangplank like the crew, but the shocked look she'd gotten had made her abandon the idea.

Sa Brem went first, dropping slowly down in the transport beam, and Jupiter stepped out next, conscious of Rush just above her. Laur dove out the side and was swinging outward in a slow spiral by wing, much as Caine had done on Earth weeks ago, and as Jupiter looked down she could see Stinger and the rest of the Stormbreakers assembled on the landing pad, along with an entire squad of gun-bots.

But no one else.

This is definitely getting weird. Jupiter felt a chill of true fear. She could see the faces below turned up to watch, though she was too far to make out any expressions, and she was abruptly aware of how exposed she was in midair, even with two guards on hand. I should have insisted on landing instead of taking the elevator.

Brem was just about halfway down to the ground when Jupiter saw a streak of movement out of the corner of her eye. Something was hurtling in from above, arcing in a curving dive, and only the blue glow at one end let her recognize it as someone wearing Skyjacker boots. Rush shouted something to Laur, but the streak was too low to be aiming at Jupiter.

Bronze-gold wings snapped open, braking at a speed that made Jupiter wince, and she'd know that form anywhere - but the ridiculous surge of joy disappeared into alarm as Caine slammed into Brem and pulled them out of the beam, dropping in a controlled dive towards the landing pad.
"What the hell?"

The beam was too slow. Jupiter watched Caine roll to a stop on the ground, crouching over Brem laid flat, and then the Stormbreakers were crowding in and she couldn't see anything. Jupiter craned her neck to look up at Rush. "Get me down there!"

He didn't hesitate. Jupiter wasn't sure how he managed to flip within the beam, but suddenly he was head-down and reaching for her, and a second later she was held bridal-style in his arms and they were out of the beam and moving downward at a speed fast enough to make her train snap around her ankles.

It felt subtly wrong, the shape of Rush's arms and the faint scent of him, though there was nothing offensive about either and Jupiter had no fear for her own safety in his grip. But she had no time to think about it. They came up quickly on the huddle of Stormbreakers, who gave way as Rush landed smoothly.

He set Jupiter carefully on her feet. She threw him a brief nod in thanks and stepped forward, slipping past the tall forms and the twitching wings to where Caine pinned the little Splice to the ground.

Caine was growling, a steady rumble, and his wings were still pitched back. Brem lay shivering beneath the heavy hands on their chest and throat, squeaking miserably in distress and looking utterly harmless.

Jupiter took a deep breath and glanced at Stinger, who had made his way to her side. "What's going on?"

"They sabotaged the skimmer, your Majesty," Caine said savagely, gaze fixed on the shrinking form in his grip. Jupiter couldn't see his face at that angle, but she was pretty sure his teeth were showing.

"Caine and Urdur found the trace on the station," Stinger explained, voice hard. "Seems Brem here hitched a ride on the tug that brought the skimmer to Gabal, and did a body mod along the way, which is why Caine didn't know they were here."

Jupiter wasn't quite sure what all that meant, but she was willing to take Stinger's word on it for the moment. Gathering her skirts, she crouched next to Caine and laid a hand on his arm - for her sake, not his. Now she could see his snarl, and it didn't abate, but she could feel some tension in him relaxing under her touch, even as he shifted a little to put more of himself between her and Brem.

She took a breath. "Let them up."

Caine glanced toward her, hesitating a second, and then jerked his head. "Move back, your Majesty."

"No "please", but Jupiter could see why not. She straightened and obeyed, retreating to stand next to Stinger. He was carrying a heavy gun, she noticed, and the Stormbreakers surrounding them all had weapons pointed at Brem; she hoped fervently that their aim was good enough to miss Caine if something went wrong.

She expected Caine to get up slowly, but instead he moved with such speed that she could barely make out his push to his feet; he brought Brem with him, spinning the little form around and yanking their arms behind them, presenting them to Jupiter and Stinger like a disdained prize.

Brem was sniveling, tiny whimpers making their way out through the ruffled feathers, but they didn't seem to be actually hurt. Jupiter regarded them for a long, baffled moment, trying to compose her
thoughts.

"Why did you sabotage my skimmer?" she asked at last. It was her biggest question; the whole thing seemed so random, particularly given that no one had been waiting at the other end of the portal to grab them up. And Brem's been waiting on me ever since I got here. If they wanted me dead, they could have killed me that first day -

Brem whimpered louder, and Caine shook them. "Answer her Majesty," he growled.

"I...I was hired," Brem said, voice faint and high. "It wasn't my idea, I was hired!"

I guess that makes sense. "Who hired you?"

Brem's whimper sharpened to a squeal, but there were no words in it. Jupiter frowned, and Caine shook Brem again, rough but not cruel.

"Please, your Majesty, don't ask me, don't ask me - " Brem gabbled, and Stinger made an impatient sound.

"We can take them to the brig, your Majesty. There are drugs - we can get answers right quick."

"No!" Brem wailed. Jupiter shoved aside the question of legality, because she had the nasty feeling that legal just now was whatever she said it was.

"Answer the question," she ordered, trying to use the same force she'd used when the Stormbreakers had arrested Caine. "Sa Brem, you don't have a choice here."

Brem squealed again, shoulders hunching. "He...he did." They pulled forward against Caine's grip on their arms, though it had to hurt. "Wise did!"

Caine gaped down at the little Splice, grip loosening, and Brem tore themselves away, spinning to point back at his captor. Caine pulled in a breath, and his expression shifted to utter bewilderment.

"They're...not lying," he said.

Brem's saying Caine hired them? "That's ridiculous," Jupiter began, but before she could go any further Brem coughed, and an astonishing spray of bright red flew from their mouth, splashing across the landing pad and spattering Caine's boots.

The Skyjackers jumped, several surrounding Jupiter and Caine and others turning outward, but Jupiter couldn't tear her gaze from that sudden scarlet. Wait -

Brem choked, and more blood fountained out to stain the fluffy feathers, dripping down their front. Caine shifted forward, but before he could close the gap Brem crumpled slowly to the ground.

Jupiter couldn't move. Caine went to one knee and tried to turn Brem over, but Brem curled up, making one last dreadful sound before going still.

Very still.

Jupiter pulled in a slow, controlled breath, because she was not going to puke, she was not. The bloody little form was pathetic, and Caine's stunned expression was no better.

Jupiter could hear Stinger just behind her. " - and we need medics here now, full kit, right now - " but she could tell that unless space tech had the ability to pull someone back from beyond, Sa Brem was dead.
Moving slowly, because her muscles felt frozen, Jupiter took the few steps to Caine and put her hand on his shoulder. She couldn't think of anything to say, but he reached up to touch her fingers, and that was enough for the moment.

It was a long, tedious time before Jupiter met with Caine and Stinger and Captain Tsing - and, at Jupiter's request, the Stormbreakers who had been present - in one of the smaller conference rooms in the private suite. Jupiter had been escorted hastily off the landing pad by nervous guards, even though whatever had killed Brem had been internal, and Caine had stayed with Stinger and the medics dealing with Brem's body, though they'd exchanged one strained and anxious glance between all the tense forms around them. Jupiter had changed out of her visiting gown into slacks and her Aegis jacket; the sharp and simple lines gave her a bit of confidence.

Caine, on the other hand, still had bloodstains on his boots, and had that expression she hated, guilt held behind a formal reserve. Because there is no way in hell he's actually responsible for this.

Jupiter looked around at the Sky Jackers seated at the table, and sighed. "Commander Apini?"

Stinger grimaced, folding his hands on the table. "We screwed up, your Majesty."

The absurdity of his statement almost made her snort. "I don't see how any of that could have been prevented."

That took him aback; Stinger's mouth opened, then closed. "It shouldn't have gotten that far," he finally offered, weakly.

This time Jupiter did scoff. "Is taking the blame for something you couldn't help an Entitled-plebe thing, or an Entitled-Splice thing?" she demanded. "Because, seriously, it's stupid."

Most of the Stormbreakers looked startled when Stinger started laughing, though Caine's lips twitched upwards. Jupiter folded her arms and waited tolerantly, and Stinger wiped his face with one hand, grinning. "Mostly the latter, Majesty, but I'll try to adjust my thinking. All right."

He sobered. "The medics are still looking things over, but as far as they can tell Elgin, Brem, whoever they were, was carrying a booby-trap. They don't think it was self-triggered, and we couldn't find any evidence of an intruder in our space, so it was probably either on a timer or set to a particular internal sequence."

The concept made Jupiter feel sick again. "So somebody hired Brem to sabotage the ship, and somehow set them up to die?"

Stinger shrugged a little, agreeing. "Pretty much, aye."

She shook her head. "That is fucked up. But why accuse Caine? He's never had the time to do something like that."

"Begging your pardon, your Majesty, but I have," Caine said, the look of guilt deepening.

"What?" Jupiter blinked at him, and even Stinger looked puzzled.

"When I got my insignia updated. I was gone an extra day." His hand went to his bicep, thumb stroking over Jupiter's sigil. "I would have had time then."

"Yeah, but you didn't." Jupiter flicked a finger at him. "Please."
Caine looked taken aback, and Stinger snickered. "Well, did you?" he drawled.

Caine straightened in his chair. "No."

"Well then." Stinger looked around at the Skyjackers, and his mouth twisted. "Yes, Mr. Orig?"

Rush sat stiff in his chair. "I'm not trying to accuse Mr. Wise," he said carefully, and as far as Jupiter could tell he was sincere. "But how do we know that?"

Stinger looked as if he had bitten something sour. "Point." He glanced back to Caine. "It might come up later."

Caine's wings ruffled, then went smooth. "I... I went on a personal errand, on Orus. Surveillance could show where I went."

"If we could get them to cough up the records before the next century," Tsing muttered.

Stinger sighed in agreement. "All right, we'll take it as read for the moment. If your Majesty permits." He looked at Jupiter, who nodded back. "The question is, why did Elgin think you hired him?"

Caine grimaced. "If I were a normal lycantant, it would have been easy," he said, sounding bitter. "Just use another pack member, or even someone from the same Splicer."

"Well, those likealyzer things - could someone have disguised themselves as you?" Jupiter suggested.

"Or their memory was tampered with," Forthwith suggested, then looked a little surprised at having dared to speak up. Jupiter gave her an approving look. "It could have been done when the trigger was implanted."

"All true," Stinger said judiciously. "But - why send a mechanic to take a job as a dresser? Why not just have them disappear?"

"Because they wanted Brem to get caught," Tsing said, and a little silence fell.

...She's right. Jupiter stared at Tsing; there was a hint of apology in the captain's face, but only a hint. The conclusion expanded out into Jupiter's mind, all those police procedurals Nino loved piling up the evidence, and -

She looked around the table at all of them, from Stinger's eyes narrowing in speculation to the various puzzled or guarded expressions of the Stormbreakers, to Caine's still-shadowed faith. She had no fears about Caine or Stinger, but as for the rest - Do I trust them with this?

She had to decide. They had all taken oaths to protect her, but she remembered Stinger's warning. And as the last couple of hours had demonstrated, nothing was ever simple.

But I'm tired of feeling alone. And I need them. And - trust has to start somewhere.

Jupiter leaned forward, laying her palms flat on the table. "I think this had better stay in here," she said, and waited for their nods before continuing. "Captain Tsing was right. Brem was meant to get caught, if we got this far, because I'm not the target. They could have taken me out any time since I got here if they wanted, but they didn't."

She took a deep breath. "Caine's the target."

Stinger sat back, blowing out a breath, and Tsing nodded in satisfaction. Caine looked puzzled at
first, and then his lips slowly drew up, showing his teeth. The rest of the Stormbreakers were variously baffled, or thinking, or - in Forthwith's case - coming to the same realization.

"But nobody's trying to kill him," Laur protested, and his twin rolled her eyes and elbowed him.

"No. They're trying to ruin him." Jupiter felt that strange cold anger rising in her, and closed her hands into fists, keeping her voice level. "It nearly worked, when we got here the first time." She ignored the various guilty expressions. "And if that didn't work, there was a second chance, with what Brem said. With them dead, we can't prove that they weren't actually telling the truth."

"But if Mr. Wise can prove where he was - " Glasta began.

Caine shook his head. "There's enough time unaccounted for," he said. "I could have done it - the timing would be tight, but it's possible, if things were arranged beforehand."

"Remind me never to let you defend yourself in court," Stinger grumbled. "Motive's wide open. Someone who has a personal grudge against Caine, either for saving her Majesty or for his attack on an Entitled; someone who wants to destabilize you, your Majesty - " He gave her an apologetic nod. "Or just somebody who doesn't approve of him being in your favor."

"That's half the universe," somebody further down the table muttered; Jupiter didn't catch who, but they sounded more exasperated than agreeing.

"Someone with money." Urdur spoke for the first time. "Body mods aren't cheap, legal or not. And this would require time as well."

"It would also explain why Brem stayed on Gabal," Tsing said. "They were part of the frame."

Caine was shaking his head, looking distressed, and the discussion broke into several parts, Skyjackers arguing the issue back and forth with a heartening enthusiasm. Jupiter leaned over to squeeze Caine's hand for a moment, then rapped on the table.

Silence was immediate. "Thank you for your input," Jupiter told them all. "But it's late, and I think we need to wait for the medical report before we go any further." She swallowed against the memory of that small body so limp and still. "I don't mind if you guys talk about this with each other, but don't with anybody else, okay?"

The rumble of agreement was reassuring. They all stood when she did, and when Jupiter looked to Stinger he shook his head, turning one palm up in the direction of the door. She glanced at Caine, who bowed his head.

"I'll be along in a minute, your Majesty," he said softly, so Jupiter nodded and slipped out of the room.

Since she was already in her suite, no one followed her, and Jupiter took a moment to lean against the wall of the corridor and close her eyes, reaching for calm.

"Can we just stop with the scares and the revelations?" she muttered. "Just for a little while?"

But someone could come along at any moment, so Jupiter pushed off and headed for the master bedroom. There was the usual collection of servitors in the lounge, all looking hopeful - though Brem's absence gave her an odd throb of pain - but she barely paused long enough to give them a wave.

As before, the door shutting behind her was a deep relief. Jupiter immediately shed her jacket,
dumping it on the nearest floating seat, and sat down on the next to pull off her boots.

She stood up again to stretch, and when the door slid open for Caine to step through Jupiter was bent backward in a shoulder-popping arch, and nearly fell over straightening up too fast. But Caine was across the room by then to catch her, and Jupiter wrapped him up in as tight a hug as she could manage, feeling his arms come around her close, hearing the snap and rattle of his wings as they followed to cocoon her in feathers.

He was panting a little, as if he'd been running, but Jupiter didn't think that was it. Her own heart was beating hard, and she pressed her face into his collarbone and curled her fingers into the fabric of his vest.

Caine's hands were moving slowly up and down her back, and he was mumbling into her hair; it took her a moment to make out your Majesty, and then Jupiter. She squeezed harder, feeling like she wanted to burrow into him, or maybe just cradle him for forever; it was a tossup.

But eventually it wasn't enough. Jupiter pulled back slightly; Caine held on, looking a little desperate when she raised her head, but when she rocked up on tiptoes to kiss him the sound he made was relief, and she was lost at once in his gentle fervor.

It took a while for his grip to relax, but Jupiter didn't care. This whole separation thing is bogus and I'm not gonna let it happen again. Which she knew was impossible, but that didn't matter just at the moment. The press of Caine's forehead against hers, noses just brushing - he loved to do that - was more important. "You're all right?" he asked, voice low.

Jupiter huffed. "I'm fine, I should be asking you that." She reached up to cup his cheek in one palm, feeling him move into the caress. "You were the one running around out there hunting bad guys."

The sound Caine made was half amusement, half protest. "When we figured it out - all I could think was that we'd be too late." His eyes closed and he pushed harder against her hand.

"You weren't." Jupiter let her thumb stroke the scar on his cheekbone. "You weren't." She was pretty sure Brem hadn't meant to hurt her at all, but there was no way Caine could have known that.

He let out a hard breath, and when his eyes opened again they were dark and wide and filled with a vulnerability that made Jupiter's throat ache. "Majesty," he began, then hesitated. "Can - can I - "

Caine halted completely, lips moving over whatever word he couldn't get out, and Jupiter leaned up to kiss them quickly. "What do you need?"

His wings curled even closer; she could feel the strange soft rasp of the feathers against her arms. "- Touch you," he blurted. "Please, can I - have to be sure - "

Jupiter smiled at him, trying to hold back a surge of hurt for him, because it was so little to ask. "Go ahead."

Caine shivered once, all over, and then lifted her up as Rush had, a familiar carry by now. He reached the bed in a few strides and laid her down as lightly as if she weighed no more than his feathers. "Stay there, your Majesty," he said, wings folding back and away. "Please?"

"Sure," Jupiter said, a little puzzled. Caine went over to the bench against the wall and sat, bending to remove his boots, and as his fingers moved over the catches Jupiter saw the rusty brown stains on them. Her cold anger surged a little, mixed with the pain and sickness the memory of Brem's death brought, but it wasn't until Caine set the boots aside and went into the bathroom that she understood. He left the door open, and the sight of him stripping off his half-gloves and washing his hands was
the key; he wanted to be clean before touching her.

Part of Jupiter wanted to pin Caine down and explain in detail why Brem's blood wasn't on his hands, morally at least; but she had the feeling it would take repeated efforts, and what he wanted was more important just then.

So she sat quietly, prepared to let him take the lead, and smiled when he came back out. Caine came slowly around the end of the bed, gaze fixed on Jupiter as if he were afraid she'd disappear if he blinked, and when he neared she held out her hands to him. His fingers were warm and still a bit damp when they closed on hers, and Jupiter drew him down to sit next to her. "Whatever you want," she told him. "It's okay, Caine."

He gulped - she could hear it - and reached up to touch her face. Jupiter let her eyes close as his fingertips slid gently over her cheeks, her nose, her chin; feathering over her eyelids and brows, gliding across her lips and pausing for an instant when she pursed them in a ghost of a kiss.

His breath was a tickle across her skin when he stroked her neck, touched her ears, worked his fingers into her hair; Jupiter couldn't help a sigh of pleasure at that, and opened her eyes just in time to see the corner of Caine's mouth tilt up in wonder.

He leaned in closer, cheek brushing hers; Jupiter shivered as he pulled in a deep breath, and wondered when his smelling her had gone from weird to intimate. For an instant she thought he was going to set his mouth on her throat, and was disappointed when he didn't, but the stroke of his hands down her bare arms distracted her.

Caine straightened, and the touch of his thumbs on the sensitive coves of her inner elbows made Jupiter giggle. His brows shot up, but he didn't stop, merely tracing the veins under her skin down to her wrists, looking down at them as if he needed to see as well as touch. When he reached her hands, he hesitated, then lifted his head.

Jupiter had had her chest stared at before, but the longing on Caine's face wasn't entirely sexual. She grinned, and tugged her hands free of his. "There's a lot of me left to touch," she told him, and pulled off her top.

Caine's gaze flicked up to hers, and the sheer adoration there struck her to the heart. He was exquisitely gentle as he explored her bared skin, from the slow drag of his fingertips down each bump of her spine to the way his palms spanned her waist, and somehow Jupiter could sense the tension ebbing from him with each touch.

When he reached the waistband of her trousers Caine hesitated again. Jupiter touched his chin to make him look up at her, and smiled.

"I think," she said carefully, "that we need a little parity here." At his confused expression, Jupiter rubbed the back of his neck, which made Caine's lids flutter in sudden bliss. "I was worried about you too, you know."

That made him go very still, and for a second Jupiter was afraid she'd upset him somehow, but then Caine let out a breath and reached up to unsnap his vest. For the first time Jupiter noticed the band of her own hair encircling his left bicep; it made her smile again, and she touched it with one finger, feeling a little shy at the sight. I didn't think he'd actually wear it…

She was distracted watching Caine shrug out of his vest, since unfastening it at the shoulders did something to the back around the wings that looked like magic to her, but when Jupiter looked back to his face his pupils were dilated, and with an odd little thrill she understood again that this man had
put himself entirely in her power.

It wasn't comfortable knowledge, but she figured that the best way to address the inequality was exactly what she was doing - easing him into the idea that it didn't have to be - wasn't - all on one side.

And in the meantime…

Jupiter rose up on her knees and took his head in her hands, laying tiny kisses on each inch of skin, hot and soft under her lips. His beard was silky to the touch, and she scratched gently at his scalp, prompting a shiver that made her grin.

Caine hadn't been trying to arouse her, but Jupiter had no such hesitation. She made her slow way down his torso, reveling in the chance to explore him in proper light, listening to his breathing speed up and watching his hands move restlessly against the bedcovers. She loved the smell of his skin, and Jupiter wondered briefly how much more intense it was for Caine with his enhanced senses. I bet he can tell what I'm thinking right now.

"Your Majesty…" It was a plea, and Jupiter looked up, satisfied.

"Whatever you want," she repeated. "And nothing you don't want."

A flush darkened his cheeks, and Jupiter had the sensation of being caught, pinned by the complete focus of his attention.

She liked it.

He moved so smoothly it seemed like speed. Jupiter found herself laid lightly down on the bed, Caine bending over her and his wings spreading out as if to encompass them both as he eased away the last of their clothing. Jupiter didn't have a huge amount of experience, but she was pretty sure that being thoroughly nuzzled and licked as well as touched wasn't quite Earth-normal.

But ask me if I care.

It always awed her on some level, that such strength could be so gentle. Jupiter tried to return touch for touch, but it was hard to concentrate; Caine's fingers tracing delicate patterns across her stomach and thighs, his mouth hot on the underside of her breast and then her throat - at last - she couldn't think.

So she gave up trying, and pulled him down into her arms. Jupiter kissed him as he slid into her, swallowing the sound he made, and his wings came down around them in a trembling cloak of feathers, and all she could see was his brilliant eyes, all she could feel was him.

And it was his whisper of Jupiter that drowned her.

"They really are beautiful." He could feel her voice as well as hear it where his ear was pressed against her abdomen, and Caine couldn't think of a reply, but Jupiter didn't seem to need one. The slow lazy stroke of her hand over the feathers of his left wing was an odd, pleasurable sensation; while Skyjackers occasionally helped one another groom, Jupiter was the first to touch his wings for any other reason, and it felt almost as soothing as when she ran her fingers through his hair.

It was even odder, and more pleasurable, to be lying sprawled face-down on the sheets, wings spread out limp and as much of his upper body as would fit snuggled in his Queen's lap and outstretched legs.
Naked.

In her bed.

Caine's life just kept getting stranger, but at the moment all he could feel was a drowsy gratitude.

Jupiter was humming to herself; not really a melody, more of a contented sound, and her other hand rested on Caine's shoulder, occasionally rubbing in absent circles. It seemed as if every centimeter of his skin were attuned to her, and all of it singing quietly back.

_I've never felt like this before._

Joy had been a rare thing in his life, and mostly related to the savagery of combat. Comfort - Caine had managed that from time to time, though not often; wonder had been reserved for the occasional beautiful view, or - once or twice - some careless kindness given him in passing.

Now he had all three in abundance, and they showed no signs of ebbing. The fear of a few hours past was just a memory, and while he regretted Elgin's death, a sharp word or two from Stinger after the meeting had reassured him that no one blamed him for it.

In fact, the meeting itself had been a surprise. Everyone had _believed_ him when he'd said he hadn't hired Elgin, even when he'd admitted that it was possible. Jupiter had dismissed the idea out of hand, and even Rush had been sincere.

Maybe they were all taking their cues from her Majesty, but it didn't matter, somehow. He didn't need anyone's approval but hers and perhaps Stinger's, but...it was good to have, all the same.

Jupiter's fingers threaded through one layer of feathers, and Caine couldn't help the twitch. She pulled away quickly. "Oh, sorry."

One of his arms was wrapped around her waist, but he reached up with the other to guide her hand back to his wing. "Please," he said against her stomach; it came out smeared, but her Majesty laughed and resumed her petting. Caine moaned a little in bliss; some part of him wondered how he'd dared to do that, but the rest of him was just too relaxed to care.

"Are you hungry?" Jupiter asked after a while. Her fingers had migrated from his wing to his spine, and were slowly moving up and down in a sweep that made him wish he could purr like a felid Splice.

Caine was, a little, but he couldn't bear to to make her stop, so he managed a negative noise. She chuckled again, a faint vibration against his cheek. "Good, because I don't feel like moving either." Her fingers didn't cease. "But can you roll over a bit? We do have to talk about this."

Caine bit back a sigh and complied, sneaking in one last furtive press of his nose against Jupiter's abdomen before shifting until he could see her face. Since her hand immediately settled in the center of his chest, however, the regret faded quickly, and he waited for her to speak.

"It really does look like someone's after you," Jupiter said, contented look fading. "Is there - do you have any kind of old enemy who'd want to do something like this?"

Caine shook his head, a brief movement against her thigh. "No; it's not…" He thought for a moment, and her Majesty waited patiently.

"No one would bother," he said at last. "A Splice isn't worth this kind of time or effort. They'd just have me killed outright."
Jupiter's mouth tightened. "Fucked up," she muttered, more to herself than to him. "So you think the motive is to mess with me?"

"Possibly," Caine said cautiously. Things had happened so quickly that he hadn't really had time to process the idea. "Stripping you of support would be one way to destabilize you. Also…” He hesitated again. "If you think you can't trust anyone, you're more vulnerable."

"Hmm." Jupiter nibbled on her lower lip. "Well. In that case, whoever's doing this doesn't have a clue how trust really works."

She reached out to run a finger over his brow, smiling a little. "Just for the record, though, if something else like this comes up, there's not a chance in hell that I'll think you're actually guilty." Her touch trailed down to his lips. "So keep it in mind, okay?"

How could she be real? It passed his understanding. Caine lifted a hand to cup hers and press it to his mouth, and the soft, almost shy look in her eyes made his heart brim over.

Words had deserted him again, but her Majesty was untroubled. "Whatever you want," she repeated, and bent down to kiss him.

So wonder took the lead, neck and neck with joy. He kissed and caressed his Queen until she was limp and laughing in his arms, and then curled up around her, wrapping them both in his wings to keep out the universe.

Just for a little while longer.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Ah, screw it, this is taking way too long. Have a short chapter while I argue with Splices about emotional upset and plan a murder.

Her Majesty was calling it a "breakfast meeting", but Stinger didn't think anyone was going to have much of an appetite. Nevertheless, there was food on the table in the little private conference room, and Stinger looked around at the others as they found chairs - Jupiter, Caine, Tsing, and the chief of the Tower's medical team. None of them looked very happy.

Stinger touched his comm implant, and the door slid open. Sevet's headpieces were moving so fast they were squeaking; as she stepped into the room, they stopped dead.

Sevet made her way slowly to stand in front of Jupiter, who had turned her chair away from the table to face her Head of Household. Sevet's face was even blander than usual, and her hands were clasped neatly at her waist.

"Your Majesty," she said quietly, "my existence is forfeit."

Jupiter's face twisted, and then she slammed one hand down on the table, making nearly everybody jump. One of Sevet's headpieces popped out an inch.

"What is it with you people?" her Majesty demanded. "What kind of a - " She stopped and drew in a breath. "Never mind. Okay, look, Sevet, did you know what Brem - Elgin - was when you hired them?"

Sevet shook her head. "No, your Majesty."

"Then it's not your fault. Holy crap, will you all stop thinking you're responsible for everything that goes wrong around here!"

The room didn't allow for a true echo, but one seemed to vibrate through for a second all the same. Everyone was staring at Jupiter, Stinger realized; she huffed, and sat back in her chair. "Now, how did you hire Elgin?"

Sevet didn't reply for a moment; her headpieces began to twirl slowly as she gazed at Jupiter. "Their name and credentials were highly recommended on several hiring lists," she said at last. "And one of the late Queen's team of dressers had recently died. They seemed a fitting replacement."

That sparked an alarm in Stinger's mind. "How did they die?"

Sevet looked his way. "She drowned in the ocean. Mr. Cal thought she might have killed herself, but I believe it was an accident - she was not young, and had a habit of drinking too much."

"Hmf." Stinger made a mental note to review the records on the woman's death, and gestured at Sevet to continue.

The android turned back to Jupiter, who was listening with her head cocked. "Sa Brem settled in
quickly and appeared competent in their duties," she said, almost as if she were reciting. "They offered no cause for complaint, and you seemed satisfied with their work."

Jupiter sniffed, almost amused. "Like I'd know the difference," she muttered. "But yeah. Anybody else have questions?"

No one spoke up. "Okay," her Majesty said, and leaned forward to pat Sevet on the arm, which made both of her earpieces extend. "You can go, and stop blaming yourself. You were set up just as much as Sa Brem was."

For the first time since she'd entered, Stinger saw Sevet's hands move, fingers tightening on one another. "I do not understand, your Majesty. You do not wish to punish me?"

Jupiter rolled her eyes. "You didn't do anything wrong. Sevet, will you please just go back out there and manage my household for me? 'Cause trust me, that is not a job I want to handle myself."

Sevet gazed at her for three long seconds, and then bowed, a full deep bow from the waist. "Thank you, your Majesty," she said, and went.

The Queen watched her go, then blew out a breath, turning back to the rest of them. "Okay. The next question is, did Sa Brem have anybody we need to inform about their death?"

Stinger blinked, because it certainly wasn't his next question, or really a question at all. He glanced around at the others seated at the table. Dr. Grevnari looked baffled, and Captain Tsing was taken aback; the briefest of smiles flicked past on Caine's face before his expression went impassive.

Stinger cleared his throat. "Ah. We don't know for sure, your Majesty, but it isn't likely. Most Splices don't have family at all."

Jupiter grimaced. "I'm starting to get that, but they may have had friends. Never mind for now." She sighed a little. "Dr. Grevnari, what did you find out?"

Stinger sat back as the physician went over what her team had found out. It was about what Stinger had expected; no evidence of a physical device, so most likely Brem's system had been programmed to self-destruct if they were forced to give up their putative employer. It didn't make him feel any better to know that the same thing would have happened in interrogation; he had no pity for the little quisling, but whatever other information Brem had held was now gone.

Dead end...literally.

Her Majesty was looking progressively sicker as Dr. Grevnari continued; Caine wasn't quite edging his chair closer to Jupiter, but he looked like he wanted to. "Is this kind of thing, um, usual?" she asked eventually, voice a trifle higher than normal.

Grevnari, a short and almost square pure human whose posture shouted ex-military, shook her head. "Not at all, your Majesty; it's expensive, and illegal in most places. It also has a failure rate that makes it a risky proposition to begin with."

Which meant, Stinger thought glumly, that whoever had used it on Brem had been confident; enough to risk whatever exposure Brem might have brought if it failed.

The Queen swallowed hard, visibly refocusing. "Okay then. What's our next move?"

Caine glanced at Stinger, who raised his brows. Stop asking me for permission, boy. You've got rank now, learn to use it.
“We can try to trace whoever was supposed to have bought Brem’s contract,” he said. "Manager Traduce didn't have a name on file, but there has to have been some kind of communication."

Tsing nodded. "Brem must have met with someone at some point. Their record indicated that they were employed at the station for five years - they can't have been planted there just to sabotage the skimmer."

"Brem couldn't just have headed out on the tug when their contract ended?" Jupiter asked.

Caine shook his head. "They would have needed an excuse to go. From what Manager Traduce said, she would have kept them if they hadn't been hired away."

"Not necessarily," Stinger countered. "They could have lied to Traduce, said they had a private contract."

Caine's mouth twisted. Her Majesty glanced at him and then at Stinger, brows drawing together in confusion. "Am I missing something here? I thought Splices weren't allowed to go off on their own."

"They're not," Caine said, but Stinger grimaced, tilting one hand back and forth.

"Depending on where you are, it's a grey area, Majesty." He ignored Caine's huff. "The law says that Splices must be under contract, aye, but there’s a thousand ways to slip through the gaps. For instance, if your contract's held by an individual and they die without leaving you to an heir - "

Jupiter's color was fading, and some part of Stinger's mind took note, for future reference. It was wise to know what fury looked like on one's ruler.

"Or a Splice can break their contract," Caine said, sounding contemptuous. "Go rogue."

Her Majesty opened her mouth, gave Caine a peculiar look, and then closed it again before taking a breath and speaking. "Those are the only ways a Splice can, um, get loose?"

"Not at all," Stinger said. "Their contract holder can drop them, or if they're up for sale as assets but nobody buys them and the holder doesn't want them, the law in general won't bother about them." He lifted a shoulder. "It's a hard life, though."

"The bounty hunters who were after you were mostly Splices, your Majesty," Caine added. "There isn't much legitimate work available to rogues."

The Queen held up a hand. "Excuse me a sec," she said distantly, pushed away from the table, and left the room. Caine made an abortive movement in her direction, but when she didn't look back he stayed put.

Dr. Grevnari looked back and forth between Stinger and Tsing. "Did - is she angry?" Her face was apprehensive.

"Not at us," Stinger said. *Looks like her Majesty's taken another bitter bite. Well, there'll be plenty more.*

The cynic in Stinger thought it was better that she know the truth as soon as possible; the core of him, deep down where he kept his resentment, was heartened by her revulsion. *She'll learn better eventually,* he told himself firmly.

But oh, wasn't it *good* to see someone in power understand a little?
Tsing's mouth tilted, a rueful look. "It's difficult to tell just what her Majesty already knows about the Gyre and what she still has to learn."

Stinger sighed in agreement, and silence settled in as they waited for Jupiter to return. Stinger took the time to contemplate Dr. Grevnari. He'd met her already, of course, both to vet her for security purposes and to make sure she was ready to treat his people should it be necessary, but the contact had been brief.

The physician was probably an inch shorter than her Majesty but half again as broad, and all of it muscle; her skin was a blotchy pink and she wore her blonde hair cut close to her head, very much a ready-for-anything style. In his previous encounter Stinger had gotten the impression that she didn't think much of Splices in general, but respected his position as Chief of her Majesty's security and as a Legionnaire - a familiar attitude.

As long as she did her job, he had no grounds to complain, and he wasn't inclined to make an issue of it.

At the moment, Grevnari was fiddling nervously with the sheave she'd brought in, obviously still worried that she'd offended Jupiter somehow. Tsing glanced at Stinger. "I take it you'll be glad to have your daughter close by again, Commander?"

The reminder that Kiza would be joining them soon made Stinger smile. "She can hardly wait to get back out into the 'verse. Has five years of vid history to catch up on, she tells me."

Tsing grinned a little. "You won't see much of her then."

Stinger shrugged. Getting them off a tertiary planet and out of that dead-end Marshal position was worth Kiza's distraction for a while. I suppose I owe the boy for coming to me in the first place. Not that Caine had really known what Jupiter would turn out to be, but -

The door slid open and her Majesty stepped through it, expression smoothed back to calmness. "Sorry about that. Where were we?"

It was jolting, sometimes, to trip over those little differences. Entitled simply didn't apologize to inferiors; it would never occur to them to do so. In Jupiter the habit was manners, but the feeling was sincere, and there were times when Stinger thought he'd never get used to hearing it.

"Tracing Brem," Tsing said. "With your permission, your Majesty, I can have some of my people handle that."

"Yes, please." Jupiter looked relieved. She rested her hands flat on the table. "But in the meantime, we still have to be prepared for the next attempt. If there is one."

"There will be," Stinger said. "Nobody would set up something so elaborate and then just give up."

"Great." Jupiter rolled her eyes. "Well, here's hoping we can find something to go on, because I don't like this."

Her tone made Stinger want to flinch a little, and he could see Caine swallow. Tsing dipped her head. "We'll do our best, your Majesty."

Jupiter nodded. "Thank you." She sat down, and the atmosphere lightened a little. "Are there any more issues? And why isn't anybody eating?"

Stinger smothered a laugh, and reached for the nearest platter.
The day seemed oddly stretched to Jupiter, who put it down to a combination of Gabal's slower rotation compared to Earth's and the events of the day before. But Caine was on hand no matter where she went, and there was also at least two other guards despite the fact that the threat had been removed, and she almost gave voice to her irritation before it dawned on her that they were worried. About her safety.

This is weird.

It was the first time she'd really felt it. The Stormbreakers had been in place for weeks, but while they'd guarded her scrupulously it had all seemed a bit like a formality - maybe because Earth wasn't considered very dangerous, maybe just because the whole thing was so new.

But now Jupiter could all but feel their concern - not just Caine's and Stinger's, which she'd grown to expect, but all of them.

It's not just a job to them any more. And she didn't know why that had changed, especially since Caine had been the one threatened, but it gave her a shy sense of pleasure as well - the knowledge that they cared about her personally.

It did mean she had to work around them, but they were all good at staying out of her path at least, and Jupiter resigned herself to one more thing to adjust to and kept going. She was nearly through her review of the business offices, and the more time she spent on Gabal, the less she liked it, ocean notwithstanding.

It's even creepier knowing Balem killed Seraphi here. Probably in the same room she and Caine were sleeping in, but Jupiter couldn't be sure and it seemed like too much hassle to move, at least if she wasn't planning on staying. And she just had too much on her mind to think about it for long.

And, rather to her relief, Kalique agreed to come down for dinner with no apparent hesitation.

Jupiter waited for her at the landing pad, this time with a little less formality - and no parade route, thankfully. Two transports waited to take them all back to the Tower; one had been enough to get Jupiter, Stinger, Caine, two more Stormbreakers, and two attendants down, but they'd need more space for the return trip. The squad of robot guards and the rest of the Skyjackers forming an honor guard on the pad had arrived on their own and could leave the same way.

But the slow drop of people from the shuttle looming overhead seemed to be taking longer than before, and Jupiter squinted at the figures in the beam and those already assembled on the landing pad.

"What's with all the extra guards?" she muttered to Stinger. "That's, like, twice as many as usual."

Stinger was already frowning. "I'm wondering the same, Majesty," he said, and touched his comm implant. Jupiter watched the next pair land, turning back in time to see Stinger's eyes flash yellow in anger.

His mouth opened, then closed, and she watched with mixed fascination and apprehension as he visibly rephrased what he was going to say. "Her Grace," he said finally, "is concerned for her safety."

Jupiter cocked her head, puzzled. "She doesn't know Sa Brem is dead?"

"It's not that." Stinger hesitated, then lowered his voice still more. "Lady Kalique fears that Mr. Wise
may...lose control again."

There was no way Caine, standing so close behind Jupiter, could miss the words. Through her shock of outrage, Jupiter heard nothing, but when she glanced back he had gone rigid, eyes distant. "It's a legitimate concern," he said, voice flat and empty.

"Bullshit," Jupiter snapped, and that brought his gaze back to hers, his eyes widening. "You wouldn't - "

Caine shook his head agitatedly. "I might," he said. "I don't remember, it might happen again - "

"Caine - " Jupiter started, but he straightened his shoulders, hands going behind his back.

"Your Majesty, I must request to be relieved of close-guard duty while Lady Kalique is here." His eyes flicked to Stinger. "Commander?"

Stinger licked his lips, still frowning, and Jupiter glanced back over her shoulder. The guards had given way to attendants, and she knew Kalique would be next in the beam.

"I'm not - " Stinger began, but Jupiter sliced one hand through the air to cut him off.

"Kalique can bring an army if she likes," she said, feeling herself slipping into that weird commanding mode that was a combination of natural and nervous-making. "But you are not relieved of duty, Mr. Wise. I want you with me."

Caine twitched, almost a flinch. Jupiter put a hand on his bicep, since his forearms were still behind his back, and met his gaze; the stifled misery there made her hurt. But there was no time to deal with it, not then.

"I trust you," she said firmly, and let him go. "We'll talk about this later, but for now, we stick to the protocol."

Before either one could argue - if they dared - Jupiter strode forward to meet Kalique descending, trusting that they would follow.

And they did.

Kalique stepped daintily out of the beam and advanced to take Jupiter's hand in hers, beaming as if their last parting hadn't happened, and Jupiter returned the smile. "I'm glad to see you well," Kalique said as they strolled towards the transport vehicle. "I must say, you're leaping into rule with strength, to already have so clever an assassin."

Jupiter hesitated. *I guess the gossip mill isn't completely accurate.* "I'm not sure I'm ruling anything yet," she said finally. Trying to explain the attempt to frame Caine seemed way too complicated at the moment, and anyway Caine wasn't something she wanted to discuss with Kalique, not right in front of him. He was there three paces away as protocol dictated, face blank, and he ignored the four extra guards who watched him as if they didn't exist.

*I'll fix this, I promise,* Jupiter thought in his direction, ignoring in her turn the whisper of doubt that she could.

Kalique laughed, and slipped her arm through Jupiter's. "Of course you are," she said. "Rule is more than just commanding. Simply showing your face to the Gyre is an act of declaration; every move you make in public, and often in private, furthers or undermines your power."
Jupiter wasn't at all sure how she felt about that. "How am I doing so far, then?" If the gossip had to flow, she might as well make use of it.

"You have a natural gift for it," Kalique said, and her expression was an odd mix of indulgent pride and a hint of - Jupiter didn't want to label it awe, but it was the closest word she could think of. "It's not surprising, after all."

Jupiter suppressed a shiver, feeling briefly as if Seraphi were there too. "Let's not go there right now," she said.

Kalique chuckled as they stepped into the vehicle, a larger, pinker version of the jellybean. Half the guards, including Stinger, peeled off to make for the second waiting transport, but all the seats were still taken between Jupiter, Kalique, and the attendants. The remaining guards stayed on their feet, and Jupiter was finding it a bit of a strain to ignore the ones still focused on Caine. *Think of it as practice.*

"You'll be pleased to know that I've made no end of plans for your debut," Kalique began as the transport lifted away towards the Tower.

Jupiter leaned back in her seat, part of her still uneasy without a seatbelt. "Yeah? What do you have in mind?" She still wasn't sure what was involved, but - *I have to do it. I might as well see if I can enjoy it.*

"The official start of the season is a formal gathering on Orus - not that anyone actually waits for it, the parties have already begun," Kalique said. "But the Opening is extremely exclusive. Naturally, we will be there."

Jupiter grinned, suddenly recalling bits from the Regency romances Katharine devoured like popcorn. "Invitation-only?"

Kalique waved her fingers, smiling back. "Nothing so obvious. No, everyone knows who should be there, and so we are. And as Mother's Recurrence you will be among the first of the first. But you must move boldly to keep your place; everyone will be taking your measure."

"Sounds kinda stressful." Jupiter nibbled on her bottom lip, trying to picture it.

"Politics, my dear." Kalique's smile sharpened. "You'll get used to it - the House of Abrasax always plays to win."

They ate in one of the larger rooms of the private suite; Sevet had pronounced the meal "charmingly simple", but to Jupiter it seemed wildly overelaborate, with more dishes than she could count and servitors everywhere, plus the all the guards. And it was *deeply* weird having to ignore them all, particularly Caine.

_But this is the game I have to play, at least for now._ And besides, handing Kalique a sandwich and a bottle of beer probably wouldn't fly all that well, much as the thought tickled Jupiter. _Anyway, part of being a good hostess is making your guests feel comfortable._

"I want to apologize for leaving like that yesterday," Jupiter said somewhere around the fourth or fifth course. "I didn't mean to insult you, or - or your mother, or anything."

"I am not insulted," Kalique said, her usual smile in place, and as far as Jupiter could tell she was sincere. "Indeed, I'm grateful. Commander Apini's alarm removed the threat from my clipper."

She turned a more distant version of the smile on Stinger, who was standing at attention at one side.
of the room, and he bowed his head, formal and shielded.

Jupiter relaxed a little. Most of the time she didn't know what to think about Kalique, but she needed an ally, and it really had been rude to leave the memorial so abruptly. "I don't think Sa Brem would have hurt you, but yeah."

"One never knows with such aberrations. I congratulate you on your security team, my dear." Kalique raised the glass she held in a delicate toast. "Such vigilance and loyalty usually takes decades to achieve."

Jupiter bit her tongue, and raised her own glass back. For all she knew, Kalique was correct; it wasn't like Jupiter hadn't fallen into this whole thing backwards and upside down. Learning on the fly, she thought, and had to smother a snicker.

"May I ask if you're planning on settling here on Gabal?" Kalique asked, waving away a servitor offering a plate of something that looked like golf balls covered in glitter.

Jupiter shook her head at the servitor in turn; she was a little curious, but she had no idea how to eat one of those things. "No," she replied. "No offense to your mother, but this place really is intimidating."

Kalique laughed. "It's just as well. There are many lovelier planets now in your possession, though if you wish to come stay with me for a decade or two I would be delighted."

Jupiter narrowly missed choking on a forkful of vegetable. "That's, um, that's really nice of you, but I'm gonna have to go back home before then."

"Perhaps later then." Kalique didn't seem put off.

Jupiter shrugged. "I was thinking of checking out her main alcazar next, on, what was it? Cher-

"Cherbodie," Kalique supplied. "An excellent choice. Mother was extremely fond of it." She paused to nibble on a slice of bread - at least, Jupiter thought it was bread. She was starting to wish for labels next to all the dishes.

"Yeah, that one." Jupiter had to smile, and it didn't feel strained for once. "I never thought I'd get to see another planet at all - now there's so many out there it's almost impossible to choose which one to see."

Kalique shook her head. "You'll have plenty of time. Learn to savor such things; there's no need to rush."

Maybe not to Kalique, but Jupiter still felt like she was trying to paddle up a waterfall - there was so much to learn, and undoubtedly lots more that she didn't know about yet. Kalique went on. "Speaking of travel, however, I'm afraid I must leave tonight; a small matter has come up that requires my attention over in the Lesser Arm."

From what Jupiter had been able to pick up, that was clear on the other side of the galaxy. "I hope it's nothing bad."

Kalique pursed her lips. "A squabble among board members, that's all. One must remind them from time to time that power rests with the director."

"My money's on you," Jupiter told her.
Kalique chuckled, and then her eyes widened. "Oh - I have been meaning to ask," she said, and leaned across the table to lay a hand on Jupiter's arm. Jupiter braced herself for something bizarre, inappropriate, incomprehensible - but Kalique just gave her an appealing look. "Is it possible to obtain more of that 'toblerone' foodstuff?"
"Whew." Jupiter curled up on the couch in her inner suite with a relieved sigh, and ran her hands through her hair, pulling it out of the elaborate arrangement she'd worn to dinner. "I thought she was never gonna leave."

Caine chose one of the backless chairs across from her divan, seating himself carefully. He would much rather have sat with her, but nothing about the forthcoming conversation was going to be easy and it might be best to keep his distance.

Stinger took the chair next to him with a weary grunt; standing at attention for hours could be tiring even for Splices. "As royal visits go, that was pretty successful, Majesty. Especially for a first-timer."

Jupiter made a doubtful noise. "She's cutting me a lot of slack, I think. Never mind, post-visit breakdown later, that's not what I want to talk about."

Stinger glanced over at Caine, jaw tightening. Caine wrapped his fingers around the edge of his seat, needing something to grip. He didn't think Jupiter was going to reject him, not for this, but it was a disaster in the making and -

"Relax." Her Majesty's gaze fixed on him, steady and calm. "Caine, relax, okay? I admit I didn't see this coming, but we can deal with it. Really."

He wanted to believe her so badly it was iron on the back of his tongue, but Caine couldn't see any way that she could make this problem go away, Queen and Entitled and Abrasax or no. But he took a breath and tried to obey.

"Now." Jupiter swept her hair up behind her head and twisted it into a sloppy knot. "Stinger told me a little about what happened, back when we all first met, but not the whole story. And I hate to make you talk about something you don't want to talk about, Caine, but at this point I kind of need to know."

Caine stared down at the carpet, feeling the old rush of shame rising in him. "I don't remember," he said stiffly, which was true. There had been - something - something off - and the next thing he could remember was a cell, and blood sour in his mouth. "I wasn't even on duty, it was three of us heading for the mess when we were stationed at City of Sea on Bree. You remember, Stinger."

He glanced at his commander, who nodded. Caine exhaled, keeping his voice steady. "Snorri wanted to take a shortcut, but it was blocked so we had to go through the forum after all." He could see it in his mind's eye, a huge space open to the sky, all dark stone with green veining, big enough that voices were lost instead of echoing; the three of them pacing along with their wings folded, talking about pay and when the squadron's next assignment might come through.

"It was busy. Lots of people. I wasn't paying attention, I was offduty." Caine squeezed his eyes
closed, as if that would blot out the memories, or bring them back. "There was something - I don't know - maybe it was a smell."

He opened his eyes again and focused on the carpet just in front of his feet. "I don't remember what happened after that."

He knew his voice was flat and without emotion; he couldn't count the number of times he'd tried to explain, first in bewilderment and then in panic. Finally all the urgency had drained away, when he found that being believed didn't matter. Feral Splices were put down, like the dangerous animals they were.

He'd tried so hard to forget the whole thing, the horror and shame of it and the terror of losing part of himself -

Caine heard a rustle from Jupiter's direction, and then her feet appeared in his view; before he could look up she slid to her knees, putting both hands on his thighs and peering up to catch his gaze. The position was so wrong - his Queen, kneeling for him - that Caine's protest caught in his throat. But she wasn't waiting for his words.

"I won't tell you it's okay," Jupiter said gravely, her brows drawn together. "But you're not alone, Caine. We're here."

How did she know? How did she know that was the heart of it, that he'd lost everyone as well as everything - squadmates and commander and even Kiza's friendship when he'd been sentenced? That as shallow as most of those bonds had been, they'd been all he'd had?

Caine nodded, swallowed, and managed to loosen one hand enough to cover hers where it rested on his leg. Jupiter smiled at him, a tiny quirk of her lips, and looked over at Stinger. "What's the rest of the story?"

Stinger shifted in his seat, smelling embarrassed. "I don't know all of it, Majesty - in fact, I don't know much more than that."

"Share with the group," Jupiter said, her tone gentle, and Stinger snorted. Caine lifted his head in time to watch Stinger rubbing his brand, a nervous gesture.

"It's not something I like remembering either," he said to Jupiter, and she nodded. "Aye then. First thing I knew about it was getting the news that Mr. Wise was in custody for attacking an Entitled. Took me about thirty minutes to reach him and debrief, which was as useful as skids on a clipper. Longer to find out who he'd attacked, and what had happened to 'em."

He grimaced and dropped his hand, fistng it briefly. "Prince An vo Tarr vo Kay of the Shinn Group. Bled out in seconds - the medics couldn't get him back."

"Did he have any connection to you guys?" Jupiter asked, her hands still firm on Caine's thighs. He could hear her heartbeat, and it was steadying, the slow pulse of it.

Stinger shook his head. "Not a thing, and I checked. He'd never had anything to do with the Legion at all, let alone our squadron."

"Mm." Her Majesty's mouth quirked. "Go on."

"After that there was no way I was getting Mr. Wise out of custody," Stinger's voice was dry, though whether he was concealing anger, regret, or both, Caine couldn't tell. "An' to be honest you were probably safer there just then anyway." He glanced at Caine and then returned his gaze to Jupiter.
"The Shinn Group - well, Entitleds tend to take matters into their own hands. As you know, Majesty."

She snorted softly, but didn't interrupt, and Stinger continued. "The court-martial was quick. I barely managed to get his sentence commuted and I'm still not sure why they let me get away with it."

His shoulders twitched, echoing pain, and Caine felt the familiar surge of guilt even though he'd mostly redeemed that debt.

"Hmm." Jupiter nibbled on her lip, thinking, then pushed to her feet and touched Caine's shoulder. "Want to come sit with me?"

Reflex tightened his muscles to obey, but...but she'd asked. And she kept saying it, kept telling Caine that he could choose -

It was hard to arrange the words properly, and they came out stilted. "I - I would like to stay here."

He braced himself for disapproval, disappointment, the slightest hint of a frown - but her Majesty just patted his shoulder. "Okay," she said easily, and resumed her seat on the divan, tucking her feet underneath herself and leaving Caine slightly dizzy with relief. "So was this really just random? I mean, I know you don't like Entitled, but nothing like this happened before, did it?"

Dislike wasn't the word for it, the prickly itchy distaste, the irritation shading towards anger if he wasn't careful, but at the moment it was close enough. "No. I was always - conscious of it."

Jupiter cocked her head. "Could somebody - " She hesitated. "Could somebody have messed with you, somehow?"

When they both stared at her, her cheeks went pink and she waved her hands apologetically. "I don't know! It's just, with Sa Brem and all - it seems to be easy to screw someone up."

Caine glanced at Stinger, who looked back at him, baffled. "I - it's possible, I suppose," Stinger said. "But why?"

Jupiter shrugged, looking at Caine. "You did assassinations, right? That's what the whole finding people but not saving them thing was about?"

"Yes." It wasn't anything he was ashamed of; it had been his job, after all, at least part of the time.

"So, maybe somebody wanted this Prince An guy dead but didn't want it traced to them." Jupiter shrugged again. "It's just a theory."

Caine wasn't sure what was worse - somehow losing control at random, or falling victim to an implanted suggestion he couldn't remember. "There's no way to know."

"That may not be true," Stinger said slowly, the lines of his face hardening. "Like I said, the court-martial was quick. I only got in at the last, right before sentencing, and I had to call in favors to do it. The proceedings were mostly sealed, but there'd be a medical report, it's standard."

The speed made sense, Caine knew; he'd been indisputably guilty, and the only reason he hadn't been executed out of hand was because the Legion stuck to protocol. Punishments all done in the proper order, to keep his crime from staining the Legion's record.

"So there's a chance there's an explanation." Jupiter grinned a little, a fierce look.
"A small one," Stinger cautioned. "Depends on what they looked for. And sealed court records aren't easy to obtain, Majesty."

"We won't know until we try." Jupiter looked back to Caine. "If you want us to."

There it was again, the casual assumption that he was a, a person, with the right to choose. He thought absurdly that the whole thing was backwards; queens were supposed to command, not offer.

There was no possible good answer to the question she was proposing to undertake. But it might just help his Queen, if he wasn't the feral rogue everyone thought he was. Caine licked his lips. "Yes."

Her smile was brilliant, and Caine felt his tight chest ease a little. "Okay then. I know I've got some lawyers around here somewhere; I'll put them on it tomorrow."

"It'll take time, just so you know," Stinger said, but he too was easing. And Caine realized that...nothing bad had happened. Jupiter wasn't upset, or angry. She just wanted the truth.

Caine found himself standing before he quite knew what he was going to do. He crossed the little space between their seats, but instead of sitting down next to her Majesty, he lowered himself to the floor, leaning back against the edge of the divan. The edge of its hoverbeam tickled faintly along the bottom of his wings, and a small hand settled on his shoulder with a brief squeeze. Caine let out a breath and felt his tension ease a little.

"Kalique keeps telling me I have plenty of it," Jupiter remarked dryly to Stinger. "I guess we'll find out."

Stinger laughed, smiling at them both. "If we're done then, Majesty, I'm for bed - with Kiza coming in the morning I'll need my sleep."

Jupiter waved at him, Caine could just see her fingers fluttering in his peripheral vision. "'Night."

As the door slid shut behind Stinger, Caine reached up to put his hand over Jupiter's once more, this time where she touched his shoulder. She hummed, smelling of fatigue and contentment; the warmth from her hand seemed to seep into his muscles, a subtle comfort. Eventually she slid her fingers into his hair, stroking slowly, and Caine leaned into the touch and let his circling thoughts slow down.

"Any particular reason you're sitting on the floor?" Jupiter asked lazily after a while.

This, Caine almost said, for the feel of her touch against his scalp, but in the end he substituted another truth. "I didn't want to be taller than you."

That made her chuckle. Jupiter's hand went away, and he heard her shifting behind him, stretching out on the divan with her head near his. Then her arm came around him, circling his collarbone, and a kiss landed on his ear.

Caine tipped his head back to rest against her chest, and let himself relax.

This time the little ship settled on the seaside landing pad instead of using a transport beam. Jupiter shifted from foot to foot, impatient, but it wasn't long before the hatch opened, and the first thing to emerge was an eerie yowl of absolute discontent.

Beside her, Stinger and Caine both flinched. "What the hell?" Stinger said.

Jupiter laughed, and hurried toward the ship and the two women stepping out of it. "I guess Edsel
doesn't like space travel, huh?" she said, giving Aggie a hug that was returned with one-armed enthusiasm; her other was holding a carrier that was still emitting upset noises.

"It might just be the carrier," Aggie said cheerfully, her eyes lit. Just past her, Kiza was wrapped up in Stinger's own embrace; after a long moment she wiggled free to hug Caine as well, and Jupiter was heartened to see him smiling down at Kiza's head.

"You have no idea how glad I am to see you," Jupiter told Aggie. It surprised her, how good it was to see her friends; they were a bit more familiarity in the midst of all the newness. "Welcome to Gabal, which actually isn't very welcoming."

"It's...a different world," Aggie said quietly, looking around at the buildings and the water. Her eyes were wide and amazed, though she was still smiling. "That's astonishing enough."

Jupiter nodded. "Yeah." It was true, Aggie was the only person who could really understand how amazing the whole thing was - to step onto the surface of another planet, breathe its atmosphere, after growing up believing the day would never come - not for them, anyway.

"Majesty!" Kiza came to give Jupiter a hug as well, and Jupiter laughed, squeezing back. "Thanks for the ride!"

"I'm glad you could make it." Jupiter grinned at her. "I'd ask you how the trip went, but it took, what, half an hour?"

"Twenty minutes," Kiza said, amused. "And half of that was dodging satellites."

Aggie waved at Stinger and Caine. "Yes, yes," she said to the grumbling carrier. "I'm going to take him out or we'll all be deaf in short order."

"Good idea," Jupiter agreed.

"That's the cat?" Stinger said with disbelief. "How can it even make that kind of noise?"

"Practice," Aggie said, and set down the carrier, pulling a leash from her pocket and extracting Edsel. He was already wearing a harness, and the yowling subsided as soon as he was out.

"Hey, Edsel," Jupiter said, crouching to hold out a hand, but the cat ignored her in favor of leaping up to Aggie's shoulder and looking around with very wide eyes - wary, but not frightened.

Jupiter scooped up the carrier to hand back to Aggie; behind them, some of her people were bringing luggage out of the little ship. "They'll get your stuff up to the Tower. You guys want a tour?"

"Absolutely," Kiza said, and Aggie grinned.

"My first alien world? I want to see everything."

"There's not that much to see on this one," Jupiter said wryly. "Maybe that makes it a good starter world. Stinger, can we do a little walking tour, or is Babayka gonna pop around a corner and grab us?"

Stinger didn't quite roll his eyes. "I'll call in a few more personnel, Majesty, if you'll excuse me."

Kiza snickered and elbowed her father, and he shoved her shoulder gently as he walked a little ways away.

"So how has it been going?" Aggie asked, and Jupiter made a face.
"Interesting. Complicated. I'd love to tell you about it, but let's do the tour first."

Aggie patted her arm. "I hear you."

"Nrrarr," Edsel commented, and Jupiter had to laugh.

The tour didn't take long; Jupiter got one of her attendants to lead it, and actually saw a few things along the way she hadn't gotten to yet, but since the island was mostly support for the Queen's Tower not a whole lot of it was interesting, besides the "alien" factor. The people were what caught Aggie's attention, though Jupiter could see her trying not to stare.

They ended up back in Jupiter's private suite, shedding guards and attendants in the lounge. Kiza caught Caine's arm. "Do you mind if I borrow Caine, Majesty? I brought some stuff for him and Dad."

Jupiter grinned. "That's up to him."

Caine looked a little startled, but pleased as well. "I should talk to Stinger anyway," he said to Jupiter. "Especially if you still intend to leave tomorrow."

"Absolutely. Go have fun," Jupiter told him, and Kiza laughed and pulled him out of the room. Jupiter waved goodbye as they left, then gestured Aggie into the bedroom. "Here, have a seat. You hungry?"

"Getting there," Aggie said, looking around before sitting - cautiously - on one of the hovering chairs. "Do you mind if I take the leash off Edsel?"

The cat had given up on his shoulder perch and was now cradled in Aggie's arms, still wide-eyed but blessedly silent. Jupiter shook her head and stretched out on the chaise, which had become her second-favorite piece of furniture in the room. "Go for it. Hey, chamber presence?"

"Your Majesty?" Aggie jumped as the voice spoke, and Jupiter shrugged an apology at her.

"The cat's Edsel. He's going to be loose in here for a little while. Don't open the outer door for him." She thought for a second. "He can go out on the balcony, but don't let him fall off. Oh, and order us some lunch while you're at it."

"Yes, your Majesty."

Aggie snorted, and set Edsel on her lap, unclipping the leash. He made a querulous noise, then stretched both front paws and leapt lightly to the floor. "Have fun," Jupiter told him too.

Aggie gave her a long look. "How are you really?" she asked. "You're looking a little stressed, if you don't mind me saying it."

Jupiter let out a long breath. "Just a little?" She turned up both hands, then let them fall to her lap. "Are you sure it's only been a few days? 'Cause it feels like a month."

"I bet." Aggie settled back in her chair, smiling a little. "At the risk of sounding like a therapist, why don't you tell me about it?"

So Jupiter did. It was a relief, a deep one, to unburden herself to someone to whom the whole thing was just as strange. She didn't cover everything, but there was plenty to talk about, from the sabotage to Kalique's plans to the horror of Sa Brem's death.
Aggie listened, asking the occasional question for clarification and stroking Edsel when he returned briefly from exploring to stalk across her lap. "I see what you mean," she said when Jupiter ran down. "That's quite a lot to have packed into a week."

"Your Majesty, your meal is ready," the chamber presence interrupted.

"Shoot, I meant to have them set it up in here. Well, we can kick them out." Jupiter stood up and gestured Aggie towards the outer room.

"Who's they?" Aggie asked as the door slid open, then, "Oh." The outer room had its usual complement of attendants, including Sevet, and the table spread with a meal and two places.

"Hi folks," Jupiter said. "This is Doctor Agnes Thompson, my financial advisor. Aggie, this is Miss Sevet, my Head of Household on Gabal, and that's Mr. Sandalusi, and Mr. Jahn..."

She introduced all the people in the room before giving them a smile. "Now, everybody clear out for an hour - go find something else to do or take a break, I don't mind. I'll call you back in when I'm done."

There were various bows and murmurs of "Your Majesty," but no protests; within a minute the room was empty except for Glasta and Forthwith, who were on duty. Jupiter jerked a thumb at them. "They're under oath," she said to Aggie. "Consider us private."

Jupiter gave the guards a quick grin, because talking about them as if they weren't there was rude even if it was customary; she thought she saw Forthwith's eyes crinkle back, but both of them stayed impassive.

Aggie nodded, and went to retrieve Edsel from one of the chairs, where he had put his front paws on the table and was eyeing their lunch with interest. Jupiter sat opposite, and spotted the dish on the side of the spread immediately; she wasn't even surprised. "Here, I think this is for him," she said, and handed it to Aggie.

Aggie eyed it, then smelled the contents, which looked unpleasantly raw and meaty. "Chicken livers?" she asked. Edsel yowled impatiently, stood on his hind legs on the chair, and pawed at the dish.

"Probably. Sevet has her job for a reason." Jupiter snickered at Edsel, who was hooking one paw over Aggie's arm and pulling. Aggie rolled her eyes and set the dish down on the floor.

"Don't make yourself sick," she told the cat, who ignored her in favor of his lunch.

Aggie sat down herself, and Jupiter looked over the food. "Looks like it's all Earth stuff, you don't have to worry," she said, but Aggie looked disappointed.

"That's hardly any fun. I wanted to try something alien. Is there food native to this planet?"

"Next time, and...no." Jupiter handed her a serving spoon, her humor fled. "That's...that's a long story and I don't want to go into it now, okay?"

Aggie's brows went up, but she didn't press, just taking the spoon and offering Jupiter a bowl of fruit in trade. "So we're leaving tomorrow?"

"Unless something comes up, yeah." Jupiter filled her plate. "Like I told you, I don't really like it here, and I inherited like a zillion planets and habitats, so I'm going to check them out as I go."
"Makes sense," Aggie said, waving a fork in agreement. "What's the new place called?"

They spent the rest of lunch talking about lighter topics, which was again a relief; Jupiter felt a little wrung out after the events of the week and the recap. And then Kiza called to say that she'd brought *Porco Rosso* and they were going to watch in Stinger's quarters, did Jupiter and Aggie want to watch too; Jupiter thought *screw it, I'm done for the day*, and they went. Edsel sat on Stinger's lap, Jupiter sat on Caine's, Kiza spent half the film trying to make popcorn in Stinger's little kitchenette, and Aggie dropped in random facts about the movie as they watched.

It felt almost like home, despite the sight of Stinger idly fanning his wings, or Jupiter's translator implant refusing to interpret the swear words Kiza was using. Part of her felt as if she were betraying her family, her own home, especially since she'd left her world just a few days before; but the cool quiet voice that was becoming more clear countered that this was a good thing. Jupiter knew she would need their support, this simple comfort, more and more as time went on.

But for the moment she had Caine's arm around her waist, Kiza tossing popcorn at the screen, Aggie laughing, and Stinger stroking Edsel cautiously when he thought no one was looking, and the story of a pig who flew a seaplane.

It was enough, for now.
Discerning readers may notice that I know very little about planetary physics. My excuse is that at this level of technology Entitled can no doubt alter entire planets at whim, not just the surfaces.

Many thanks to Cincoflex, who has given me some great ideas, and put patiently up with my whining!

"Holy crap," Jupiter said over the communications system. "Are you guys seeing this?"

Agatha stared at the little starship's screen, unable to tear her eyes away from the view of her second alien planet ever. "It looks like a Michael Whelan painting."

"I'm not sure it's real," Jupiter added, but Agatha barely heard her, or Kiza's indrawn breath. The little ship was flanking the Neva as they sank into Cherbondie's atmosphere, and the view was truly incredible.

The new world's horizon was much, much wider than Agatha had expected, but she barely noticed; what held her attention was above the dark smudge of land below and the intermittent clouds that veiled it.

Floating islands.

The largest of them, Agatha estimated absently, was probably a couple of miles across, but most were smaller than that; they were moving through the air, slow and serene, with no visible means of support or propulsion. They were roughly flat on top, but somewhat rounded underneath, and while she could see vegetation and structures on the top halves, she couldn't quite make out whether the undersides were rock, dirt, or something else entirely.

More than anything else she'd seen so far, more even than the Skyjackers' wings or the robot-people, this was alien.

And it's wonderful, Agatha thought, a bit dazed. From what Jupiter had told her - and the pattern of flinches she'd noted in the Splices - Agatha knew the larger universe was not a nice place. But she couldn't deny the beauty of what she saw before her.

As the ships came in to hover over the largest island, details came into focus; the top reminded Agatha of the European countryside, heavy on grass and what she took to be flowers, with trees and water here and there. In the center was a lake, and rising out of that was a building of golden stone.

The view disappeared as the ships dropped closer. Sheneto, the Stormbreaker piloting the ship, turned to Agatha and Kiza, her manner only slightly formal. "You're to go down before her Majesty," she said, her voice almost as deep as Stinger's; she was taller than him, and had amber-toned skin and eyes of very deep blue, and was one of the most gorgeous people Agatha had ever seen. "Protocol states you should wait with the local staff."
"Translation: find Dad and stand with him," Kiza said cheerfully, and Sheneto's lips twisted upwards in response to her grin. "Sure. You want to go first, Aggie?"

"You go ahead," Agatha told her; the transport beams were fascinating in their own right, but still unnerving, and Agatha felt a little better seeing someone else do it first. *Kind of like a roller coaster.*

She pulled Edsel off her shoulder as they walked the few yards to the beam hatch. He was wearing his harness, and had been silent since they'd come on board; apparently it was the carrier he objected to, rather than space travel. Agatha was relieved. She was used to the noise, but no one else was.

Edsel didn't like the transport beam, but fortunately he just stuck his head under her arm as if they were at the vet's, and it didn't take long for them to reach the ground. Agatha stepped out of the blue light, a transition that reminded her of getting off one of the flat people-movers at the airport, and followed Kiza across the landing pad. There was a small crowd of people waiting at the edge; Agatha recognized several of the Stormbreakers, including Stinger, but she barely noticed, because she was too busy trying to take in everything else.

The landing pad was about a quarter-mile from the edge of the island, Agatha estimated; it was surrounded by grass, and a few paths led away from it, all made of the same smooth gray substance that formed the landing pad and that Agatha couldn't identify. The grass looked like Earth grass, and the air was cool - almost chilly - with a freshness that made her want to pull it deeper into her lungs. It smelled almost familiar, as if it came from a place on Earth she'd never been. It sent a huge wave of excitement through her.

*Another world - I'm on an alien world. Again!* The dreams of childhood, the faint wistful yearning of adulthood that she'd known would never be fulfilled, were suddenly coming true, and it felt almost as if Agatha would wake from this dream and find it all gone after all.

As she caught up with Kiza at the front of the crowd, Edsel relaxed enough to resume his perch on Agatha's shoulder, and she reached up to stroke him, keeping a firm grip on his leash with her other hand. *The last thing I need is for him demanding cuddles from Mr. Apini while he's on duty.*

" - not a single one," Stinger was complaining *sotto voce* to his daughter.

Kiza patted his arm. "Don't worry, Dad, she'll cope."

A murmur ran through the crowd, and Agatha looked up to see Jupiter beginning to descend from the Neva, with one Skyjacker below her and two circling around the transport beam on the wing, and Caine above. Jupiter was wearing the glittery black vest and plain pants she liked so much, and cut a much less impressive figure than her escorts - except for the set of her shoulders. *She's growing into this.*

It pleased Agatha, though she scarcely doubted that Jupiter would be able to handle what the universe had thrown at her, but it also made her a little sad. *Very little about ruling will be pleasant, or easy.*

But it had been past time for Jupiter to grow up. And she had enough will - *and pig-headedness* - to survive this Entitled business. Agatha wasn't *sure* that Jupiter would be able to hold to her resolve long enough to accomplish change, if change was even possible.

*But if I were a betting woman, I'd bet on her.*

About ten yards from the ground Jupiter waved and smiled at the crowd, which murmured again. Agatha had to wonder what they were expecting; from what Jupiter had told her, Entitled treated
their staffs as almost subhuman.

Her escort touched down ahead of their new Queen, except for Caine, who spread his wings and did something with them that had him landing at the same instant and just behind. It was precise work, and Agatha had to admire the skill, but Jupiter was already moving forward, smile still firmly in place.

Stinger huffed a sharp breath and stepped out to meet her - not what Jupiter was expecting, to judge by her expression, but she didn't falter. Stinger said something Agatha couldn't make out, then spoke more loudly. "Welcome, your Majesty." He dipped in a shallow bow.

Jupiter's brows went up, and she looked beyond him to the crowd. "Hello, people," she said, pitching her voice to carry. "It's nice to see you all!"

Agatha glanced at those standing nearest; they looked confused, but not upset. "Is there anyone here who can give us a tour?" Jupiter continued.

There was some shuffling, and then a figure scarcely taller than Jupiter stepped forward. The Splice appeared female to Agatha's eyes, and possessed bulging, featureless eyes, wispy hair, and webby wings - all an iridescent white. "Queen Jupiter," the Splice said, bowing, "it would be my honor."

"Great," Jupiter said cheerfully. The Splice looked nothing like anyone Agatha had ever seen, but the overall impression was more like something out of *Labyrinth* or *Legend* than the uncanny valley. "What's your name?"

"I am Adias, your Majesty." Another bow, and Agatha couldn't read the Splice's expression at all.

"Adias, nice to meet you." Jupiter smiled. "Listen, I'm new to this Entitled thing, so I'm going to be asking some dumb questions along the way - just bear with me, okay?"

The Splice bowed once more. "What would you like to see first, your Majesty?"

Jupiter glanced around. "Let's start with the landscape. I've never seen anything like these islands before."

Adias' skin blushed a very faint pink and stood a bit taller, though she didn't smile. "This was her late Majesty's preferred alcazar," she said. "The staff here has done our best to keep it up to her standards."

There was the barest hint of apology in her tone; Agatha recognized it, the sound of trying to do too much with too little.

Apparently Jupiter heard it too. "Well, as soon as my head of finance gets back we'll go over the budget for this place." Jupiter turned to the crowd, which was watching avidly. "I'm sure I'll get to meet you individually later; thanks for coming to say hello!"

The murmur that came in reply was mostly made up of "your Majesty", and the assembled people seemed pleased enough. Jupiter turned back to Adias. "So what's this place like?"

Adias extended a hand. "The alcazar was designed by Gorodus Jorcani at Queen Seraphi's order; he is known for his unusual designs."

She began to walk, and Jupiter glanced over at Agatha and Kiza. "You guys coming?"

Agatha laughed. "Are you kidding? This I have to see!"
Jupiter grinned, and they set off to follow Adias, Caine pacing Jupiter on her left and Forthwith and Laur guarding behind, while Agatha and Kiza stayed on Jupiter's right. Edsel was still on his shoulder perch, and Agatha made sure to keep the leash in her hand.

"Good idea," Jupiter commented. "We wouldn't want to lose him over the side."

"That isn't possible, your Majesty," Adias said politely as they walked down a wide path away from the landing pad. "All the island rims have barrier fields - her late Majesty insisted on the highest quality. They are not perceptible to normal vision, but your Majesty may rest assured that they are scrupulously maintained."

"What's the height limit?" Caine asked, sounding interested; Adias glanced at Jupiter, as if wondering why her guard was speaking, but Jupiter merely raised her brows expectantly. The white Splice looked back to Caine.

"Twenty meters. If I may suggest it, anyone looking to fly past them should check the meteorological reports first. At this height the winds can be fierce."

Caine nodded, and Agatha heard the faintest chuckle from Laur. *I suppose Skyjackers would know how to deal with such things…*

The path wound away from the cluster of buildings nearest the landing pad, passing gardens and fountains and even a pond; there were clumps of trees and miniature meadows, laid out almost at random. *This is all a sort of garden,* Agatha realized. *It wouldn't surprise me if Queen Seraphi or the architect designed the layout too.*

When they neared the edge of the island Agatha strained her eyes, but as Adias had said, she couldn't detect anything between them and the open gulf of air. Two more islands drifted some distance away - it was hard to judge how far - but the one they were on simply came to an end, like a cliff's edge fringed with grass.

"I have to check this out," Jupiter said to Caine, and gave him a smirk. "Come with me, just in case?"

"Of course," Caine said, as if it weren't even in question. His face was blank, but Agatha got the feeling he was enjoying himself.

Jupiter walked slowly towards the edge, and Agatha pushed down a surge of instinctive alarm. *Even if the barrier does fail, Caine can no doubt catch her long before she hits the ground - possibly even before she goes over.*

Agatha supposed that any of the Skyjackers could do the same for her as well, but she wasn't tempted to run the same test. "Going to try it yourself?" she asked Kiza, but the young woman was staring at the ground under her feet.

"Not a chance," Kiza muttered. "Heights are not my thing."

"Ah." That was an interesting contrast with her father, but Agatha filed it away to consider later. "But you came down in the transport beam?"

Kiza grimaced. "I know that won't drop me," she said. "And I close my eyes."

Agatha grinned a little. "Makes sense."

About three yards from the edge Jupiter slowed even further, and she stopped a few feet from the
drop, actually leaning into the air as if it were a cushion. "Check it out!" she said, eyes and smile wide with wonder. "It's like walking through water."

"What do you see?" Agatha asked, and Jupiter craned her neck.

"Not much - clouds mostly. I guess we're too high up for details." She shoved one hand at nothing, and it went no further than her body. Next to her, Caine stood straight, wings folded back, but Agatha could see his boot soles glowing faintly. "What's down there?" Jupiter asked.

"Currently we're passing over the Roxian province, your Majesty," Adias replied. "It's mostly natural land, but there are a few settlements."

"So there are people down there?" Jupiter frowned. "Wait, this world isn't scheduled for Harvest, is it?" She edged back from the cliff, then waded back out of the field, Caine just behind her.

"No, your Majesty. Cherbodie is an agricultural world, producing rare fruits and vegetables for the luxury trade," Adias replied.

The frown disappeared. "Okay, good. I should know these things, but I didn't have time to look them up on the way."

Adias' wings shifted slightly, but her expression didn't change; Agatha was starting to wonder if her face simply wasn't very mobile. But she had a question of her own. "Aren't we too high up to be able to breathe properly?"

Adias cocked her head. "Are you not breathing?" she asked, sounding baffled.

Caine cleared his throat. "Cherbodie has a greater atmospheric pressure than your world, Dr. Thompson. The alcazar is probably near the upper limit for safety, but you shouldn't experience any problems."

"Ah." Aggie grinned. That explains that. And it was yet another indicator of just how far from home they'd come. "Good, thank you."

Adias took them around most of the island, which was mostly more of what they had already passed; it held the Queen's compound in the center of the lake, and a few other buildings for attendants and guards, but it seemed that servants and guests were housed on other islands. "The late Queen usually preferred to receive elsewhere," Adias explained. "Cherbodie was her retreat for solitude and reflection."

"No pun intended?" Jupiter murmured as they stood on the shore of the glassy little lake. They had passed few people during the tour; they had all stopped to stare and bow as Jupiter's group passed by, but none had approached. Agatha had noticed that many of them had wings. Jupiter raised her voice a little, looking at the building in the center of the lake. "How do we get over?"

Before she finished the sentence, light sparked from the wall nearest the shore where they stood, and something silvery and bright arced swiftly through the air, straight towards Jupiter. All three Skyjackers braced, Caine's wings snapping open so fast that Agatha felt their wind ruffle her hair, but the glittering object began to slow. It was drawing a metallic filament behind it - almost like a comet or a grappling arrow, Agatha thought with interest. It glided down to land on the lakeshore at Jupiter's feet - or where her feet had been before Caine had moved her protectively to one side - and the light died. The filament widened, unfolding in a fashion that seemed to defy physics, until a delicate arch of a bridge stood between the building and the shore. One that, Agatha noted, had no supports, merely the two anchor points.
The whole thing had taken about fifteen seconds. *And looked like an anime sequence. I wonder how it does that.*

"Well, *that* was interesting," Jupiter said, a touch dryly, and stepped away from Caine's protective looming, though Agatha saw her hand reach back to touch his arm in a brief caress. "Did Seraphi get seasick?"

For the first time, Adias showed expression - mild outrage - though her tone was still even. "There are boats, but they are for the servitants. Visitors approach on a footpath at the water level." She waved one hand at the bridge. "This is keyed to the Queen's presence and will, and no one may use it without her permission."

"Or else?" Jupiter said, still dry, but Agatha's attention caught on *will*. "Well, for right now we're all allowed to use this thing. Hear me, bridge?"

If it did, the bridge didn't respond. Jupiter bit her lip, staring at the span, which had no hand rails either. "If you guys don't want to try this we can find those boats," she said. "But I'm game."

Agatha grimaced. The bridge probably got no higher than twenty feet from the surface of the water, but it was narrow and looked very slippery, and she had Edsel to consider. Next to her, Kiza was looking a little sick.

Jupiter squared her shoulders and stepped cautiously up onto the slope of the bridge - and yelped as she was carried forward up the curve of its arch. Caine, looking not at all surprised, followed.

"Wow!" Jupiter twisted around to look back, grinning hugely. "It's like an escalator, except without the stairs. Give it a try!"

*Well...you came to space for the adventure.* And this certainly was one. Agatha reached up to give Edsel a quick stroke, which produced a rasping purr in her ear, and looked over at Kiza. "Want to hang onto me? Or you could wait for the boat, I suppose."

Kiza's freckles stood out against her skin, but she licked her lips. "I can do this," she said, with the air of one trying to believe. "Yeah."

She reached out and grabbed Agatha's hand in a grip that almost hurt, and together they walked forward up the curve of its arch. Caine, looking not at all surprised, followed.

"Here we go," Agatha said, and set her foot on the span.

Despite Jupiter's words, it wasn't at all like an escalator; there was no vibration, no moving parts, not even the sensation of movement. In fact, it felt to Agatha like she was standing still and everything around her was moving past her, which was its own form of disorientation.

She looked back at Kiza, who was directly behind her, fingers still tight on Agatha's; the girl had her eyes pinched shut, and Agatha smiled and squeezed her hand gently. "We're on our way," she said. "But keep your eyes closed, we're coming to the highest point now."

It was a lovely view, and Agatha had no doubt that everything around them had been engineered to make it so; the golden stone that almost glowed, the placid mirror below them echoing the sky above, the glimmering silver of the bridge - all ringed by a carefully sculpted landscape.

Edsel, fortunately, was not alarmed. He made one flat *mow* of a comment and kept to his perch, and
Agatha patted him with her free hand and hoped that the building would have a place she could put him down in. He was getting heavy.

The building itself wasn’t quite a castle; there were balconies and walkways and many windows on the outside, though the walls went straight down into the water, and Agatha had the feeling that they were part of a pattern she couldn’t quite make out. But they were rapidly coming up on the other end of the span, and Jupiter and Caine were already stepping off.

"We're almost there," Agatha said, squeezing Kiza's hand again. "Heads up."

The bridge ended at a sort of open balcony of stone some yards above the water; beyond was an archway that led into the building. Agatha was anticipating a jolt as they reached the end of the span, but instead they merely halted, again without any trace of force.

"Interesting," Agatha said, and moved cautiously down off the bridge, Kiza right behind her. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah." Kiza exhaled and let Agatha's hand go. "Thanks."

A flutter of white startled them both as Adias dropped out of the sky and folded her wings; Forthwith did the same on the other side of the balcony. Jupiter's voice drifted back through the arch. "Come on, guys, you have to see this!"

The building was hollow, Agatha found as they walked under the arch; it curved away in both directions, open hallways built of the same golden stone as the exterior, but straight ahead was a large atrium that went all the way to the top, roofed with something transparent. A fountain played in the center, and Agatha was reminded of Middle Eastern homes, that looked inwards instead of out. But the lines of the building were odd, subtly different than the design that an architect from Earth might have designed, and when the fountain's spray began to shift through a spectrum of colors Agatha was firmly reminded that they were not on Earth at all.

From this angle, the building appeared to be about three stories tall, with balconies and open halls surrounding the atrium. Jupiter laughed, and the sound sank away instead of echoing as she walked up to dip her fingers in the fountain. Its basin was made of the same golden stone as the building; the spray began to change patterns as well as colors, but when the drops touched the surface they resumed the natural colorlessness of water.

"Far out," Jupiter said happily. "I kind of liked all the water Kalique has around her place, though I admit having sky instead is even cooler, but I always wanted an indoor fountain. Hey, Adias, how does it change color like that?"

Adias' wings twitched again - her version of a shrug? "I don't know, your Majesty; that is a question for your engineers."

"I have engineers? That'll come in handy sooner or later." Jupiter's grin went wicked, and she flicked water at Caine, but by the time it reached him he was two feet to the side and looking faintly smug. Jupiter stuck her tongue out at him, and Agatha muffled a chuckle.

Edsel made an interrogatory prrrt sound and slithered down from Agatha's shoulder, leaping from her arms to the ground and then yowling when he hit the end of his leash.

Oh dear. "Calm down," Agatha advised him, with little hope of success. "We're guests."

Kiza, her color restored, laughed. "Does that ever work?"

"Maybe not," Jupiter said. "Adias, does this place have anything like a chamber presence?"

"Your Majesty," replied a smooth female voice, sounding as if it came from the air itself. "Welcome back to your alcazar."

A flicker of annoyance passed over Jupiter's face. "First off, I'm not Seraphi," she said. "I'm Jupiter Jones and you can damn well remember that."

"Of course, your Majesty," the voice said, without any hint of pique. "I am Cherbodie, and I am pleased to serve you."

Jupiter blinked. "I thought that was the name of the planet?"

"Queen Seraphi liked the conceit that I was the voice of this world as well as her home," the voice said.

"Right," Jupiter said, sounding skeptical, and pointed at Edsel. "Can you keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't leave the building or get into anything he shouldn't?"

"That is within my capabilities," Cherbodie said. Agatha frowned.

"Jupiter, are you sure? I know you let him loose in the Tower, but this is a much bigger space and I won't hear him if he decides to flush the toilet for ten minutes straight." Most people had no idea how much mischief a Siamese could get into.

"Cherbodie can handle him, if it's anything like the one on Cerise," Jupiter replied. "I don't know how they work, but they do."

"Her Majesty is correct," Adias said, bowing her head. "Cherbodie has control over all the building's systems, and access to the serv-bots if - "

Edsel's impatient howl drowned out her words; it didn't echo either, but judging from the set of his ears Edsel was going to try again at greater volume. Agatha sighed.

"All right, all right." She bent down to unhook the leash from his harness. "But don't blame me when you get locked in a closet."

Edsel stalked away from her, shaking a paw in disdain, and went to stand on his hind legs and peer into the fountain. Kiza snickered. "Nothing in there to hunt, Edsel."

He ignored her. Jupiter craned her neck to look up at the roof, then back down at Adias. "Stinger said that the top-level staff got sold off after Seraphi, ah, died. I'm gonna assume that means the Head of House or the equivalent?"

Adias nodded. "All the remaining personnel are third-tier support staff or below, your Majesty. Sufficient to maintain the alcazar, but no more. Lady Kalique did stop by some years ago for a brief visit, but she brought her own staff."

"Not surprised," Jupiter muttered. "What's your job?"

Adias shifted uncomfortably. "My task is to assist first-tier personnel, particularly when the alcazar has guests."

"A servant's servant?" Agatha asked, and Adias nodded, wings folding tightly inwards. The Splice
was clearly on edge about something, but Agatha couldn't make out what it was.

Jupiter gave Adias a small smile. "Well, I'm glad you spoke up, or I'd probably still be wandering
around in circles out there. I don't have much of a staff yet and I don't know how long I'll be staying,
so you may have to move up a tier or two. At least temporarily."

Adias' eyes widened, which was an eerie sight to Agatha. "Your Majesty, I'm not - I'm not trained
for - "

"Yeah, but I bet you know what has to be done." Jupiter leaned over to pat Adias lightly on the arm,
which made the Splice freeze. "And it's not like you're programmed, at least I hope not - "

She glanced back at Caine, who shook his head gravely, and then to Adias once more. "Besides, I'll
up your salary for the duration."

Adias looked at Caine as well, eyes still huge to the point of bulging, and he tilted his head, turning
one hand up in confirmation. "I...your Majesty..." Adias stuttered, "I...will try to obey."

"Good, that's settled," Jupiter said cheerfully, giving her another pat. "You're hereby my liaison with
the rest of the staff, at least until I can get things sorted out. And right now, I need you to liaise with
the kitchen. Can we get some lunch in here?"

"I...yes, your Majesty." Adias bobbed in place. "I'll see to - to that right now."

She turned and hurried out, and Jupiter frowned. "I freaked her out, didn't I? Crap."

Caine shook his head. "Her mandate is to serve you no matter what you ask, Majesty. Give her time;
she'll get used to it."

"Yeah, but I don't want to upset people." Jupiter grimaced, and Agatha shook her head.

"You'll be doing that no matter what," she pointed out, thinking of the long-term plans Jupiter
wanted to set in motion. "Get used to it."

Jupiter sighed. "You're right," she said. "Well, let's see the rest of this place - I'm sure Adias can find
us when lunch is ready."

She headed towards the far side of the atrium, and the rest of them followed. Agatha looked around,
but Edsel had disappeared, and she had to hope that Jupiter was right about Cherboodie keeping an
eye - or camera, or whatever - on him.

*She's been right so far, mostly. Which is a good thing, given what she's facing right now.*

*Poor child.*

Agatha puffed a breath, and hurried to catch up.

Jupiter found Caine on the roof of her alcazar - the term seemed to apply to both the location and the
building itself - staring at the sunset she'd managed to arrange, finally.

"It's got to be almost midnight. Somewhere," she said, skirting the atrium to join him where he leaned
on the low wall edging the roof. "I kept waiting for the sun to go down, and it kept being afternoon."

Caine smiled a little, and held out an arm; Jupiter walked into its curve and leaned against him,
sighing happily as he snuggled her close to his side. "I see we're still moving," he said.
"Yeah, that's too cool to stop just yet. I told the engineers to go slower for a while, that's all." The sunset really was spectacular at this height, brilliant color spilling all along the impossibly long horizon. "Makes for a longer day, but we had that on Gabal anyway."

Caine didn't reply, but he didn't have to. Jupiter turned her head to press her nose against his collarbone and inhale the warm musky smell of him, and wasn't it odd that it could be exciting and comforting at the same time?

She stood and watched the sun's glory shift and change, content for the moment. She'd conferred with Stinger and seen that Kiza and Aggie had guest suites; Edsel had been found wailing mournfully in what Jupiter suspected was supposed to be a library, and had been reunited with his mistress and fed a late supper. I earned this break.

Gradually the sunset faded to a mere line of light, and stars came out overhead, thick and dazzling and in no familiar pattern. A little glow came up from the atrium, and there were small gleams dotting the islands here and there, but for the most part the new world was dark; Jupiter couldn't even see any gem-spatters of city lights below.

"What do you think of this place?" Jupiter asked after a while. She was tired, but not as much as she expected to be, and it was very good to stand alone with Caine in the darkness, even though she knew that some of the Stormbreakers were patrolling the airspace around the islands.

"It's easy to secure," Caine replied. "The Neva can protect it alone from anything short of a fleet invasion."

"That's not what I meant, but good to know." Jupiter tried to imagine things from a guard's perspective. Makes sense. Limited access, easy to screen visitors, no way to sneak in…

His breath was almost a chuckle. "It's nice. Skyjackers love having an excuse to fly. This will suit them."

Jupiter smiled in the dark at his correction, pleased. "Well, I've been over about half the place, and aside from a severe lack of decor, it's good. I thought maybe the staff put the knickknacks in storage for safekeeping, but Adias says that the Abrasaxes took a lot of it after Seraphi died."

"Hm." Caine was moving very slowly, but eventually Jupiter felt his cheek press against the top of her head, almost as if he thought he had to sneak up on her. Jupiter merely grinned, and slid her arm around his hips.

"What's up here?" she asked. "I wasn't looking when I came up." She let her hand slide lower. "At the roof, anyway."

It was hard to tell, but Jupiter thought the skin an inch from her nose grew a bit warmer. "Some seating, a few trees in pots." Caine cleared his throat. "Very formal."

"Nothing soft? Darn." Jupiter laid a kiss in the hollow of his throat, and yep, he was definitely blushing. "Guess we'll have to go back inside if we want to...cuddle."

The vibration beneath her lips was laughter. "Skyjackers are tough, your Majesty. We don't need soft."

Jupiter pressed closer, letting Caine take some of her weight. "Oh yeah? Prove it."

"As your Majesty commands." Caine bent to lift her into his arms, and Jupiter could just make out his smirk in the faint light of the stars. She leaned in to kiss the raised flesh of his Splicer's brand,
which always made him shiver, and reflected that they'd come a long way since the first time he'd scooped her up.

She really remembered the second time best, panic turning to delight as they rose above Chicago, Caine's grip secure and his strength already a reassurance. Of course, then it all went to hell, but it was nice while it lasted.

And now there were no constraints between them, or at least fewer of them. Caine turned his head to nose against her temple, and Jupiter knew he was seeking her scent, something he wouldn't have dared to do then.

A few steps later he sat down on what looked vaguely like a chaise longue, though Jupiter couldn't make out any details, and she squirmed around to straddle his lap so she could kiss him properly.

It was so, so good, there in the strange cool night, to taste and touch him while his hands slid slow and reverent along her spine. He was always so gentle with her, this man whom she'd seen use his body as a deadly weapon; she could subdue him with a mere word, and the power of that was an uneasy twist in her stomach.

But right then Jupiter didn't want Caine restrained at all. She shifted her weight to bring them closer together and reached up to hold his head still for a deeper kiss. He made a soft sound against her mouth, and she felt his fingers clench in the fabric of her top.

She pulled back just enough to speak. "You good with this?" Because she wasn't at all sure that he really did accept the concept of consent, at least when it applied to him.

Caine tilted his head enough to speak the words against the corner of her mouth. "As you command," he repeated, and she could feel his smile.

Jupiter couldn't help smiling back, but she couldn't let it slide. She tightened her grip just a little. "Seriously. Do you want this?"

One large hand cupped her tailbone, sliding her closer still, and she couldn't suppress the happy sound at the evidence of wanting.

"Your Majesty, Jupiter," Caine whispered. "I can't imagine ever not wanting this." His tongue stroked her cheekbone, arousing and slightly gross at the same time, but Jupiter was getting used to the idea.

"Me either," she confessed, and went to work on the fastenings of his vest. "But if you do, you tell me, okay?"

Caine hummed, and she felt his hands moving beneath the hem of her top, warm and arousing. She let him pull it off, and before she could shake her hair back he was brushing it from her eyes, then baring her throat, thumb rubbing beneath her ear. Jupiter took the silent hint and tilted her head.

A kiss, another lick, and then she felt his teeth settling delicately against her skin. The tiny prick of his canines made her shiver and push her hips against his, and his moan vibrated through her as he bit down.

After that there were no words, only soft sounds and starlight, and heat and muscle pliant beneath her hands and lips. Jupiter lost herself in the taste of Caine, the little gasps he made as she moved against him, the delicate, delicious pain as he bit her again. He was all shadowed beauty in the fairy light of the stars, and Jupiter wished he could see himself through her eyes, just to know.
Then his gaze caught hers, dark and wide and vulnerable, and the pleasure washed through her until she could neither think nor breathe.

It took her a long time to come out of the sleepy daze, afterwards; Caine was still cradling her, and she could hear his heartbeat slowing under her ear, feel his hand wound in her hair. Jupiter sighed luxuriously, and then shivered, the chilly air making itself apparent, but before the reaction had ceased Caine's wings were draping softly over her, instant and slightly tickly warmth.

"Mmm." She lifted her head enough to kiss his chin. "'Nks. You warm enough?"

"Fine," he murmured back, and she could hear the same thick haze in his voice, the throaty remnants of ecstasy.

Jupiter was too drained to move just yet, and Caine made a very comfortable pillow. She watched the stars overhead, unable to see them move but knowing that they were, and listened to Caine breathe beneath her.

And when he moved to kiss her, solemn and sleepy on her temple and cheek, something deep and wondrous moved within her, and Jupiter lay silent, awed.
Chapter 17

Many thanks to Cincoflex for her betaing - I have ignored some of her excellent advice for this chapter - and an especially deep bow for Tami, who corrected my Googlized Russian!

Jupiter woke in a haze of sunlight, and rolled over to find herself in the wide bed of the suite she'd chosen the day before. Since the last thing she remembered was lying in Caine's arms on the roof, it was slightly disconcerting, but the conclusion was obvious.

"You could have just woken me up, you know," she said to the man curled half around her.

Caine's serous expression relaxed into a shy smile. "It is my pleasure to serve," he said, with just enough amusement in his voice to make her smile back. Jupiter leaned over to kiss him briefly.

"How late is it? Obviously I forgot to set an alarm."

"As late as you want it to be," Caine pointed out, smile widening, and Jupiter rolled her eyes and flopped onto her back.

"Just because I can make these islands go east or west - Cherbodie, is there any kind of local time going, or do we just make it up on the, hah, fly?"

"The late Queen often maintained a private baseline time for her personal use and that of her servants," the alcazar's presence replied placidly. "However, she did occasionally use the fluid nature of her alcazar to unsettle her guests."

Hm. "That's mean, but I get it," Jupiter said aloud, and felt another odd wave of revulsion for the woman who had preceded her. She sat up. "Cherbodie, I love having you guys around, it's like insta-Google, but can you change your voice?"

"Of course, your Majesty."

It was perverse and petty, but she didn't want the presence speaking to her as it had to Seraphi. "Great, use something male, okay? And...I don't know how to put this. Are you, um, conscious?"

"Not as you understand consciousness, your Majesty," Cherbodie replied in a mellow baritone.

"So you don't mind if I change things around, like your voice?" Jupiter bit her lip, remembering the surge of horror she'd felt at being told she could reprogram Sevet.

"Presences are intended to serve the needs of their owners." The voice was almost reassuring now. Next to Jupiter, Caine pushed upright and stretched, and she was briefly distracted by the sight, even if he was already dressed again; the wings, in particular, were impressive, extending past the edges of the bed. "You may alter any of my characteristics without causing me harm."

Jupiter blew out a breath. "Good to know. Okay, stop calling me 'majesty' while you're at it."
"What title would you prefer?"

Jupiter reached up to brush a finger along the line of feathers nearest her shoulder, prompting a ripple all along that wing. "Miss is fine. Or ma'am, I guess, even if it does make me feel like one of my aunts."

"Very good, Miss Jupiter." Did the thing sound satisfied? It was hard to tell.

"Thanks." Jupiter stretched in turn, then looked up at the odd protrusion from the ceiling above the bed. "What's that?" she asked Caine, pointing.

He glanced up. "Hoverbeam projector. The bed's dual-mode."

"Huh, okay." Jupiter filed that away for later, then followed impulse and leaned over to wrap her arms around Caine in a hug.

She felt his start, but then he was holding her close, his wings adding another layer of comfort. Jupiter sighed.

"I am really, really glad you're here," she said against his collarbone, and felt a soft sound vibrate through him.

Adias had learned to cope. Breakfast was spread out in one of the ground-floor salons, buffet-style at Jupiter's request, and it included Kiza, Aggie, Stinger, and Caine. Jupiter understood the need for her guards to stick to guarding - or at least, she understood that they needed the division - but if she was going to have a daily meeting with Stinger, breakfast was as good a time as any to do it. And I'd rather have friendly faces first thing in the morning.

As for Caine, well, they were going to have to work out how to handle...everything. But Jupiter was determined to start as she meant to go on, wherever she went. I don't know what label to use, but he's not just my guard, and if I want to have breakfast with him then I will.

Caine and Stinger both started out a bit stiff, but given that they were Legionnaires and food was involved, pretty soon everyone was sitting around the long table and most of them were chatting happily. Stinger set his plate next to Jupiter and sat carefully - the chair didn't have a cut-out back for his wings - and sighed a little as he settled into place.

"Everything okay?" Jupiter asked, poking her fork into a hot pastry that reminded her of a savory danish. "Caine says this place is easy to secure."

"Comparatively," Stinger agreed amiably. "The squad always likes the opportunity to stretch their wings. We've cleared all the physical security but we're still running checks on personnel; the records we got before we left Gabal weren't up to date."

"Why am I not surprised?" Jupiter muttered. The alcazar had clearly been neglected after Seraphi's death; Jupiter wasn't sure if it was on purpose, or just something the Abrasax siblings weren't interested in maintaining. "Anybody suspicious?"

"Not a one so far." Stinger swallowed a bite. "Not that I'm expecting any, your Majesty, but it's protocol for a good reason."

"Oh, I'm not arguing." Particularly after the whole thing with Sa Brem. "I don't even know how many people work here - I'll have to get Adias to give me a list."
"Will you be staying here?" Stinger asked, and Jupiter shrugged.

"No idea yet - I've barely seen the place, and I really don't know what I'm doing next anyway. Mostly I just wanted to get away from Gabal."

Stinger grunted. "Can't blame you there, Majesty."

They were most of the way through the meal when Adias came in. She was still holding herself stiffly, but she looked a little less tense as she bowed to Jupiter. "Your Majesty."

Jupiter hesitated, then made a snap decision. "The bow - you, uh, you don't need to do that." It had been different on Gabal, when everything was the first and she'd had to be in charge the moment she arrived, but Jupiter didn't think she could spend the rest of her life watching people do that every time they came up to her.

"I - I beg your pardon?" Adias' wings folded tightly behind her, and Jupiter suddenly read it as a cringe.

Crap. "You don't have to bow to me," she said, keeping her voice gentle. She's tense enough already. "It's not necessary."

Adias opened her mouth and then closed it, clearly searching for words. "Is...is that an order, your Majesty?" she finally said weakly.

Jupiter decided to wait on the whole "Majesty" thing. "No, no. It's just if you want to." Next to her Stinger had his eyes closed, and Caine's face was still, but Aggie was leaning back in her chair and watching with interested attention. Kiza looked doubtful.


"You're doing a great job," she told the Splice, trying to reassure her. "I'm supposed to be getting in new personnel soon, and then we can try and sort out things around here."

"Yes, that's part of this morning's briefing," Stinger said, opening his eyes. "Miss Virtu's due to arrive later today with your new acqu - ahem, personnel."

"Nice," Jupiter said, feeling a rush of relief at the news. She really wanted that structure in place. "I'm not sure how many people she's bringing, probably about ten, but they're going to need quarters too."

Adias nodded. "Of course, your Majesty," she said. "I'll see to that next."

"Oh good, thanks." Jupiter felt a pulse of uneasiness, but it was past time she called her mother and there was no sense in putting it off. "First thing after breakfast, I think."

Adias nodded again, and waited for Jupiter's wave of dismissal before turning and hurrying out. Jupiter let out the sigh. "I freaked her out again, didn't I?"

Stinger shrugged. "She'll get used to it," he said.

"You look like Queen Seraphi," Kiza pointed out. "If you looked different, it wouldn't disturb people so much."

It was an interesting idea. I suppose I could cut my hair or something - I could even put it back on with one of those grooming gadgets.
But somehow it seemed a better idea to stay as she was, at least for the moment. *I'm gonna be entering some pretty dicey situations, to hear Kalique tell it. If how I look puts people off balance, it'd be stupid to throw away an advantage.* "I'm still having trouble with the knowledge that she died when the U.S. was in the middle of the Civil War."

Which meant, now that Jupiter considered it, either Adias took Regenex, or she was built to live a long time. *I think my head hurts.*

"It's an interesting shift in perspective," Aggie said, spooning food onto an empty plate and setting it on the floor for the rapidly approaching Edsel. "The scale takes some getting used to."

"The whole thing takes some getting used to," Jupiter grumbled. "Okay - Stinger, you said you wanted to run checks on the incoming people too, right?"

"Aye." Stinger set down his utensil. "I trust Virtu will have done the prelims, but it's not her area of expertise, and anyway it's Security's responsibility. Assuming no surprises, we should have them cleared by the end of the day."

"Sounds good." Jupiter finished her pastry. "I want to look around after I call Mom - maybe go over to some of the other islands."

"The squad'll be ready." Stinger refilled his cup with the herb tea he preferred, and Jupiter grinned and helped herself to more pastry.

The room Adias had selected was small and cool, with empty walls and only a table and chair. The table was for the communications unit - apparently Cherbodie could handle audio anywhere in the alcazar, but video required equipment - and Jupiter had specifically requested a chair that didn't hover, even though her mother wouldn't be able to see it in the image. She'd pulled a plain shirt out of her luggage, something from Earth, and undone her hair because Skyping in a ponytail always made her head look like a ping-pong ball.

Soren was the other guard assigned to her for the day, so Jupiter had both her and Caine stand against the opposite wall, behind the table, where there was no chance that they would be caught on camera. Then she set her phone next to the communications device, took a deep breath, and glanced up. "Okay, Cherbodie, hook me up."

Her phone's screen flickered once, and then the device in front of her lit up. It took a few seconds to make the connection - long enough for Jupiter to wonder what the charges were on this kind of call - and then a holographic screen sprang to life, showing Mikka pouting dramatically in the Bolotnikov living room. "You - oh, Jupe!"

"Hey Mikka." Jupiter smiled at her cousin, glad she'd remembered to have Cherbodie check local time in Chicago before she'd scheduled the call. "How's it going?"

"Okay. Where are you, anyway? Aunt Aleksa just grumbles when I ask her."

"A spa in Tuscany," Jupiter said. The lie tasted bitter, but it was necessary, and Jupiter wondered abruptly how many more she was going to have to tell her family. "Not the kind you're thinking of, it's like a health resort."

Mikka wrinkled her nose. "And you have to take care of some old lady?"

"She's not old," Jupiter corrected. "And, I'm in Italy. Which makes up for a lot, let me tell you."

Mikka shrugged, flipping her hair back in a gesture that Jupiter knew meant she was envious but
unwilling to admit it. "Lots of hot guys?"

Jupiter thought about the male contingent of the Stormbreakers, and grinned. "You have no idea." She hoped Caine wouldn't take it the wrong way, but she couldn't spare him a glance just then. "Let me talk to Mom?"

"Okay, but don't take too long, I'm waiting for Cody to call back." Mikka leaned back in her chair to face the staircase. "Aunt Aleksa! Jupiter's on the computer!"

"No screaming in the house!" someone shouted back, but Jupiter also heard her mother's "Иду!" A moment later Aleksa was evicting Mikka with a ruthless shove.

"When this Cody calls from Italy, then I will be short," she told the grumbling Mikka. "For now, scram."

Jupiter snickered; Aleksa's use of outdated English slang never failed to tickle her. "Hi Mama."

"Jupiter." Aleksa settled into the chair, frowning hard, but Jupiter could see her eyes crinkling. "At last you call."

Jupiter instantly felt guilty even though it had scarcely been a week. "Yeah, sorry. I've been incredibly busy."

"You are never too busy to call home," Aleksa scolded, and it was comforting in its familiarity. Her face softened. "How are you, my baby?"

Jupiter swallowed hard, because bursting into sudden tears would reassure neither her mother nor the guards who could sense her across the room even if they weren't watching. As it was, she could see Caine stiffening out of the corner of her eye, and Jupiter forced the surge of emotion back. "I'm...okay. Doing okay."

"Yes?" Aleksa went back to stern, and Jupiter lifted her chin.

"Yes. I'm not going to lie to you, Mama, not now. Things are difficult, but I'm handling them."

Aleksa's eyes narrowed, but she nodded once, sharply. "Good, then. You are eating enough?"

As perhaps intended, Jupiter had to laugh. "Yes. Lots of new food to try, actually, some of it's really good." She leaned her elbows on the table. "So how are things going there?"

Aleksa snorted. "Terrible, as usual. You think things change when you're gone for a week, eh? Let me tell you..."

She went off on a rant about Vassily's usual perfidy, Mikka's latest attempt to break curfew, and the newest mess Vladie had perpetrated, and Jupiter put her chin in her hands and listened, finding contentment in something that would have bored her six months prior. It was all just so...home.

She scarcely noticed when Caine relaxed.

The tour of the other islands in the alcazar...flock, was the word that kept coming to Jupiter's mind, had much the same air of a minor procession as her initial landing. Adias, in a fine example of putting instruction into practice, delegated a tall young man to be their guide; he looked to Jupiter as if he'd come from Kenya, and it took her several minutes to notice the Splicer's brand on his neck. Whatever he was spliced with wasn't obvious.
He turned out to be one of the engineers, and took them from island to island in a little golden vehicle that looked like a schooner without sails, cheerfully answering all the questions Aggie and Jupiter could put to him. Aggie had elected to leave Edsel behind this time, after Cherbodie had reassured her that the cat would not be permitted to leave the building, and Jupiter missed him a little.

"Maybe I should import a few cats," she said to Sheneto as they made their way to the dock at the edge of the main island. "Or do they have them already?"

The Stormbreaker shrugged. "Probably somewhere," she said. "Any farmed world, sorry, your Majesty, gets picked over for possible Splice prospects and commercial opportunities pretty early on. But they're not that common - I'd certainly never seen one before."

"Hmm." Jupiter filed the data away and hoped to remember it. When you don't know what's going to be important, treat it all as important. "I never had a pet growing up, so maybe now's my chance."

"Oh, do you want to try it?" Aggie asked. "I've been a bit curious about what it would be like to fly for the first time."

"Yes," Jupiter agreed. "I'm ready to give it a try."

"Good," Aggie said, smiling. "Let's do it together."

Jupiter nodded and followed Aggie up to the ship. The little schooner that hovered over the cleared space was open to the air, which seemed a bit precarious, but there were half a dozen Skyjackers standing by and Jupiter had put on her gravity boots, just in case.

They paraded up the ramp one by one into the ship - Caine standing by to hand Jupiter in as was his habit - and Jupiter brushed past the ornate seat meant for her so she could peer over the edge.

There was nothing to see below but endless fluffy cloud, but Jupiter let out a hard breath all the same, because it was lit with the clear light of Cherbodie's star and it was glorious. "I've seen pictures," she said to Aggie as the latter came to the rail beside her. "But they're…"

"Yeah," Aggie said, grinning. "It's really something, even on Earth."

Jupiter flexed her toes and wondered what it would be like to fly out into that expanse of air, so much further above than she'd ever dared at home. We'll have to try it. She glanced at Caine, on guard on her other side, and he too was looking out - and not entirely for threats, she guessed. Yes, that was definitely anticipation in his eyes.

The ship cast off from the dock, gliding away without sound or a sense of movement - much like the bridge to the alcazar, Jupiter realized. Looking back at the big island and the growing space between made Jupiter's stomach dip a little, but at the same time she felt the exhilaration of adventure.

None of the other islands were very different from the main one in more than size; they held small neat dwellings for the people who took care of the alcazar, but most of the technology that ran the islands and supplied the people was internal. Jupiter had to ask several probing questions to find out that at least half the foodstuffs came up from the surface and most of the rest was imported, along with other supplies - the alcazar wasn't meant to be self-sustaining. Each island did have a water recycling system, which was somewhat reassuring; the flock seemed to be above any potential rainstorms and Jupiter didn't know if they could go any lower.

"Water reuse but no replicators, space portals but no transporters. Star Trek this isn't," Aggie remarked as they neared the last island.

"Mirror universe, maybe."

"Too bad we can't go down in person," Aggie said. Jupiter blinked at her.

"Why not - oh, the pressure. Yeah, I guess it would be like deep-sea diving."
"Your pardon, your Majesty, but you can visit the surface if you wish," the engineer, Eron, said. "There are a number of vehicles that can be taken down in a ship's bay and then driven, and at least two that can fly down directly, all designed to protect the passengers. The late Queen used them many times."

"Huh. Okay, thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Jupiter smiled at Eron, who bowed and turned back to the ship's controls.

"It didn't occur to me that a spaceship could handle it," Aggie said ruefully. "I'm going to have to readjust my thinking."

Jupiter snickered. "Tell me about it."

As they returned to the central island, Jupiter saw a small ship descending to land on the same pad she'd arrived on the day before; she didn't recognize the vehicle, but Caine was already talking to someone on his comm implant, and a moment later nodded to her. "Virtu's back, your Majesty."

"Oh good." Jupiter waved to Eron. "Can we go any faster?"

The resultant speed didn't produce any more wind, which just felt weird somehow, but they got back to the main island within a couple of minutes. Nevertheless, by the time her group drew abreast of the ship, it was empty, and the Skyjacker guarding the landing pad reported that Miss Virtu had taken her recruits up to the alcazar to await her Majesty's pleasure.

Jupiter rolled her eyes, and Aggie laughed. "It will probably make a better impression if you comb your hair first," she said teasingly, and Jupiter snickered; the ship might have had no wind but the islands all had a near-constant breeze.

"I suppose you're right. Okay, I'll clean up a bit, try to look royal. I wanted to send you along with Virtu to pick people, you know, but the timing was wrong."

Aggie snorted softly. "Give me a little time to get over the culture shock first. But I'll be very curious to see who she's found." She and Virtu had approved of each other quickly despite their differences in appearance and personality; their mutual regard had been a relief to Jupiter, even if Aggie said she was only temporary.

The bridge appeared as soon as they neared the lakeshore. "I have no idea how it does that," Jupiter remarked as they stepped onto it. "There's no camera that I can see."

"Adias said something about will yesterday," Aggie said. "Did she explain that to you?"

"No." Jupiter frowned a little. "I can ask her later. I wouldn't put it past this place to have some kind of creepy sensor or something..."

She could hear voices in the atrium when they entered the building, but Jupiter went straight up to her suite with Caine and Aggie. "Cherbodie, tell Virtu I'll be down in a few minutes to meet everybody," Jupiter said, undoing her ponytail for a quick brushing.

"Are you even required to interview all the incoming personnel?" Aggie asked, opening the door to the small room Jupiter was using as a closet for the moment. "Surely there are too many people on your staff for you to know them all."

"Probably." Jupiter grimaced at the image of herself in the screen that served as a mirror-substitute - it was slightly weird, looking at a live picture instead of a reflection. "But these people'll be handling the money, and that's important for our future plans." When Aggie's gaze flicked to Caine, Jupiter
shrugged. "He heard."

Aggie blinked at Caine, who straightened his shoulders and stared into the middle distance as if guilty of something. "Prodigious," Aggie said after a moment, and disappeared into the clothing room.

"Don't worry about it," Jupiter told Caine. "I'd rather have you in on things anyway."

Caine's eartips went pink. "Your Majesty," he said, and Jupiter winked at him.

Aggie reemerged with an outfit Jupiter had picked up on Gabal from Seraphi's wardrobe - a tunic and loose trousers in midnight blue. They were made from a silky material that felt to Jupiter a lot like Caine's undershirt, and had a subtle glitter worked into the fabric. "Wear this," Aggie told her.

"Okay, but I'm picking my own shoes." Jupiter took the clothing and went back into the dressing room to change. She had to admit that the outfit did look good - it definitely gave her a regal air, especially with boots in a matching blue. Jupiter added one of the silver filigree comm bracelets, and marched back out. "How's this?"

"Better," Aggie approved. Caine didn't say anything, but his tiny smile and equally tiny bow were just as clear.

"All right." Jupiter straightened her shoulders. "Let's get this show on the road."

Virtu's new hires - eight Splices, most of them obvious ones like Virtu herself - were waiting in the atrium. Virtu introduced three of the Splices as financial support staff for herself and the remaining five as business facilitators. "Mr. Gannat and Miss Tombu are trained for management as well," she said, indicating a man who looked remarkably ox-like and a scaly woman. "The choice of who should act as your business manager - "

"You decide," Jupiter interrupted. "At least for now. You know more about the job requirements than I do."

She half-expected Virtu to protest, but her head of finance was apparently more flexible than Adias. "Miss Tombu, then, on a preliminary basis," Virtu said. "We can review after the first period."

Both new Splices bowed; Tombu looked pleased, but Jupiter noted that Gannat didn't seem upset, merely speculative. The others were by turns obsequious, cheerful, and wary. Jupiter sent them off with Adias to get settled, and turned to Virtu. "Everything go okay?"

Virtu looked tired but satisfied. "Quite well, your Majesty. There was an abundance of talent to choose from, so I kept your strictures in mind; all my choices are experienced, and all of them grateful for work." She folded her hands at her waist. "Eventually I will want most of them to settle in one or two offices rather than travel with you - assuming of course that this meets with your approval - but for now it's best that we work together in person."

"Sure, whatever you need," Jupiter said. "Did they really only have one bag each? Please tell me there's a pile of luggage somewhere."

Virtu blinked at her, more resigned than baffled. "No, your Majesty. None of them have worked at a job long enough recently to accumulate possessions."

Jupiter pinched her eyes shut and didn't let the bad word escape. "...Right. Well, if they need anything, tell 'em to ask Miss Adias. We're still getting things straightened out here."
Virtu nodded. "If I might mention it then, your Majesty, will you be assigning your personnel a livery?"

For a second all Jupiter could think of was horses, and then her mind translated. "Is that a thing?"

"Among Entitled, yes. And I would add that your employees will expect it."

Jupiter rubbed her forehead. "Okay...let me do some research first. You're the first one to mention it." *Uniforms, crap. Really?*

"Of course. Do you wish an immediate review of this alcazar's financial status?" Virtu looked as if she were poised to dive into the issue right that second, but Jupiter shook her head.

"No, get some rest first! Tomorrow's soon enough."

Virtu's smile, stiff as the rest of her face, was still oddly pleased. "Yes, your Majesty."

She took herself off after Adias, and Jupiter sighed. "Uniforms," she said to the guards. "I have to do uniforms? I mean, sure, designing clothing is one thing, but..."

"They aren't like the uniforms you have on Earth, your Majesty," Caine said, amused. "Or they don't have to be. You can check the records to see what Seraphi was using before."

"Right." Jupiter shook her head again. "You know who I forgot to ask Virtu to find? A secretary."

She looked speculatively at the Skyjackers, carefully not smiling. Caine and Soren exchanged slightly shocked looks. "That's really not our brief, your Majesty," Soren said. "We shouldn't divide our attention like that."

She couldn't keep in the giggle. "Phooey. Okay, if I really can't..."

Caine blinked, and then his lips twitched. Soren, Jupiter was almost certain, was mentally rolling her eyes. It was unfair to tease them, Jupiter thought, but only a little, and Caine at least was amused. "Come on, let's go find some food."

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Her Majesty was looking skeptical. "You want me to what?"

Stinger turned up one hand. The airy little room she was calling her office was quiet, and he wanted privacy for this discussion. "Practice security drills. It's standard, your Majesty - any Entitled with sense runs security drills, just in case. Even the best guard force in the Gyre can be overrun with superior numbers, for instance."

"That...makes sense, I guess." Jupiter sat back in her chair and frowned, a thoughtful expression. "You think it's gonna be an issue."

It wasn't really a question, but Stinger treated it as one. "Eventually, yes, I do. May I be blunt, Majesty?"

Jupiter gave him a fond look. "Please."

Stinger managed to hide his chuckle in a cough. "Ah - Jupiter. You still don't know what kind of power you've got. You're at the top of a very big heap, and the slope is damned slippery. There *will* be attempts on your life, and frankly I'm surprised that your relations are the only ones who've tried so far."
Jupiter bit her lip. Stinger knew that she was still getting used to the idea, but she really had no concept yet of the arena she was entering. He hated to ruin her sense of security, but she had the 'verse's biggest target on her back, and it was his responsibility to see that nobody's shot landed.

"So what's involved?" Jupiter asked, a bit hesitant. "I mean, it sounds like a good idea, but -"

Stinger felt his wings relax. He hadn't thought she'd reject the idea outright, but it was much easier to protect a subject who cooperated. "That depends on you. Most Entitled are pretty passive when it comes to their security - what I mean is, they go along with the drills but they don't do anything active. Ideally, I'd like to have some of the Stormbreakers work with you in basic defence, just in case the unthinkable does happen."

"Oh, like self-defense?" Jupiter perked up a little. "Mama and I took a couple of classes a few years ago, the no-holds-barred kind of stuff. She's a demon with a keyring."

"Something like that, aye." Stinger shifted in his seat and wished that the alcazar had backless chairs; he hadn't found any yet. "But this would be working with your security detail, part of the team in a sense. Not just fighting - which should be a last resort anyway - but helping them protect you."

Jupiter cocked her head. "That makes sense."

Stinger nodded. "For instance, say you're an invited guest at another Entitled's alcazar, and they decide it's time for a coup. You'll have your own guards on hand, of course, and they'll be defending you, but the only smart move will be a retreat." He gestured, drawing an imaginary circle in the air. "Now, most Entitled would just have their guards surround them in a wedge and carry them out. Safer for the Entitled, assuming they have enough personnel, but a high loss rate for the guards."

"Oh, like self-defense?" Her Majesty winced. "Yeah, let's not if we can avoid it."

That warmed him, but Stinger didn't let it show. "With the right practice, however, as soon as the shooting starts you could be up out of your chair and taking cover behind whoever's closest, and taking the first escape option that opens up, at speed." He grinned a little, feral. "An' most royal guards aren't Skyjackers. Wings add an extra dimension. Caine could lift you out of danger right quick too."

Jupiter chewed on her lip again, eyes flicking back and forth, and Stinger could guess her thoughts - the practicality of such a plan versus the hazard to Caine. Get used to it, he thought at her. That's what he's for, and he'd not do otherwise anyway.

"Right," she said at last. "Then - where do we start?"

She wasn't half-bad at it. Clumsy as hell at first, Stinger was expecting that - he didn't think much of whatever feeble class she'd taken on her Earth - but she had good reflexes and was willing to learn.

He put her to work with the Stormbreakers right away, taking a couple of hours each day for it while he could, because he knew her schedule was going to fill up fast. They started with the passive stuff, where Jupiter basically let them carry her out of whatever hazard zone they'd set up; it was more a matter of cooperating with whoever was closest than of really doing anything herself.

Moving on to active avoidance was more physical, and while her Majesty was young and healthy, she wasn't used to that kind of intense activity, but she tried hard all the same. Her wry complaints about getting sweaty made Stinger struggle not to laugh, and he was glad to see the Stormbreakers becoming easier with her as they practiced. It's silly to be so formal when I've got my nose squashed
in your elbow, she told Absaba, and when he was done blushing he actually relaxed a little.

Stinger did have to admit that it took some self-discipline to allow oneself to toss an Entitled through the air to a colleague, but the fact that Jupiter whooped with glee every time they did it seemed to help.

He also woke up the alcazar's contingent of synth guards and put them to work. Synths didn't think well enough to be much use as guards as such, but they made excellent lines of defence once danger was manifest, and they were eminently expendable. Not to mention they're part of the show. Entitled used them lavishly as signs of their wealth, and Stinger had no qualms about putting them on display.

So when her Majesty came to him and asked if they could talk in private, without another guard in the room, Stinger called up a couple of synths to maintain protocol and complied.

His office on Cherbodie was one level below ground; the structure extended as many floors below the surface of its island as above it, but only the first three were used for anything besides storage and mechanics. Stinger missed windows and the open air, but a security chief really needed a location that wasn't vulnerable to snipers or long-range explosives.

"Nice setup," Jupiter said as she took a chair next to his desk and looked around admiringly. "Was all this here when we got here?"

"Not in this room," Stinger said. "But you said I could have my pick, so we moved the screens down here. Stuff's a little out of date, though."

"Talk to Virtu," Jupiter said. "We're working out a budget for this place, but I'm just guessing what's needed, so tell her what you think you'll need. Trust me, security is not something I want to skimp on."

"Very good, your Majesty," Stinger said, relieved and pleased. His office on Gabal had been better kept in the wake of Seraphi's death; this one had outdated tech, and fewer screens and comm links than he liked. "This place could certainly use some upgrades."

"You're so right." Jupiter grimaced. "I mean, I get not spending a lot on a place you're not using, but people live here."

Stinger shrugged, and didn't bother pointing out that underlings' quality of life wasn't the first thing on the Abrasax heirs' minds. Jupiter shook her head. "Anyway, money was what I wanted to talk to you about. Caine told me that it's easier to give you guys - Skyjackers - bonuses than raises."

"What isn't?" Jupiter said with an exaggerated shudder. "For a society that uses tablets for everything, you have a hell of a lot of forms. Anyway, Virtu said she could handle it, but that I should run it by you first, since you'll be notified as commander."

She leaned forward to hand him the sheave she'd brought in with her. "That's what I have in mind."

Stinger skimmed the names and amounts listed, then blinked again and went back to reread. "Your Majesty - that's - really?"

"Yeah." Jupiter folded her arms, and Stinger could see the now-familiar stubbornness settling over her. "Stinger, you guys are risking your lives for me every day, and from what you tell me it's just going to get more dangerous."
"Yes, but - " The bonus would double the salary of the best-paid of them, and as for the rest - "These amounts are unheard of."

"I don't care." Jupiter's chin went up. "I've got more money than I can even imagine, never mind spending, and it still makes me sick to my stomach to remember where it all came from. The least I can do is give some of it to people who deserve it."

Stinger shook his head helplessly. "And Miss Virtu didn't argue?"

Jupiter rolled her eyes. "She gave me a two-minute history of royal guard contracts and then asked me if I was sure. This is gonna happen whether you like it or not, Stinger."

He was too shocked to know whether he did like it. Jupiter gave him a pointed look. "And by the way, the fact that you guys get paid so much less than the pure humans, that is total bullshit. Splices need a union, I swear."

Stinger opened his mouth, and the laugh that emerged startled both of them. He tossed the sheave onto his desk. "I give up, Majesty," he said. "You are never going to make a proper Entitled."

Jupiter grinned, a wicked look. "I'll take that as a compliment." She scooped up the sheave. "Did I mention this'll be a quarterly bonus?"

Stinger choked. Jupiter winked at him, and was gone before he could muster words, leaving him to stare at the door and reflect on how much loyalty her sense of fairness was going to win for her.

*And she's not even trying. The 'verse isn't going to know what hit it.*

The thought was exhilarating...and terrifying.

Stinger rubbed his brand, and wondered in wry irony if he'd live long enough to spend that bonus.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Aaaand, we've broken 100K. *boggle* Apologies for the tardiness again. Family issues were taking up time and emotional energy (nobody died, we're good).

Many, many thanks to Cincoflex, splash_the_cat, and ufgator1977 for betaing this and telling me where I was going wrong!

Jupiter set down the stylus she'd been using to make notes on the closest sheave, sat back in the office chair she'd had to send someone to Earth to buy, and sighed. “Cherbodie, how long have I been here?”

The alcazar’s voice was, as always, soothing. “Approximately four Earth weeks. On your planet, your local date is November 8, two-thirty-two antemeridian.”

“Mm.” Jupiter rubbed her forehead. “Make a note; I can get out of Thanksgiving if I grovel, but I had damn well better make it home for Christmas.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jupiter sighed again and kicked idly, making the chair spin in a slow circle. The last few weeks had definitely been interesting, but not always much fun, and these days her brain usually felt overstuffed. There’s just so much to remember.

Everyone, even Aggie, told her it would get easier with time, and Jupiter fervently hoped it was true. You’re making connections almost like a newborn, Aggie had said. The first rush of data is overwhelming, but once you’ve really processed it you’ll be able to see the underlying patterns. She’d smiled and squeezed Jupiter’s arm. Don’t push too hard. One thing this society does seem to offer is time.

That much was true. Nothing in Entitled society was done with haste; planning for a simple dinner party could take weeks or months, and an exchange of messages often stretched out almost as long. I guess living for thousands of years puts your time-sense all out of whack.

Or maybe it was on purpose, because Jupiter had already observed that business tended to move much more swiftly. Maybe it’s because they have shorter-lived people to handle that for them?

Jupiter stretched, pushing away thoughts of companies and profit and instead focusing on the upcoming holidays. This new life was exciting and fascinating (and occasionally excruciatingly boring) but there were times when she missed home and family and normality so much that she ached. Christmas would be a good time for a break.

The trick would be integrating Security with staying under cover, as it were--even from here Jupiter could see that problem coming. “Stinger can handle it,” she muttered to herself. “It’s gonna be winter--nobody’ll be outside.” And the royal guard had equipment that would keep them warm in much colder circumstances than an Illinois winter.
No, the bigger issue was--Caine.

It wasn’t that Jupiter didn’t want to introduce him to her family. But that meant she would have to introduce her family to him. *He’s not going to run screaming,* she told herself firmly.

But it was going to be awkward and uncomfortable, and she wanted him to be at ease--

*Ach, screw it.* Jupiter tilted her head back until she could just see the tall winged form standing against the wall near the window. “Glasta, do me a favor and go fly a quick patrol, would you?”

The Skyjacker grinned, his smile full of very sharp teeth, and slid over one step before launching himself backwards out the window and vanishing.

Jupiter snickered. “Show-off.” She spun her chair to face the other attendant guard by the door. “He practices.” Caine raised a brow, but waited until Jupiter beckoned him to leave his post and stand by her chair. “Your Majesty?”

The question wasn’t particularly private, but Jupiter didn’t want Caine to have to decide while others were listening and possibly judging. “Want to come home with me for Christmas?”

“Your winter holiday?” Caine looked down at her, curious, and Jupiter nodded. “It’s a lot of things, but the big sticking point is that it’s a family event. I’d, um, like to introduce you to them.”

Caine brightened. “You’re telling them? Stinger says it’ll be easier to protect them all if they know about your position.”

“Oh--no.” Jupiter waved a hasty hand. “Nooooo--I mean, I want Mom to know eventually and I bet Nino could handle it, but please, do not ever let Vladie find out. No, as my boyfriend.”

The second she said it Jupiter flushed, because it suddenly sounded so *stupid* to give this astounding man such a label, but she didn’t know what other word to use. *Lover is too over the top and bodyguard is totally a no-go*--

But Caine’s expression had softened to that thrilled, disbelieving wonder that melted her every time she saw it. “Your Majesty--”

Jupiter couldn’t hold in the smile. “Yeah, you’ll have to drop that,” she said quickly. “If you decide to go, that is. I can’t explain it away as a nickname.”

Caine inhaled, then sank to one knee in front of her. “Your Majesty,” he said, very deliberately. “I would be honored to meet your family.”

And it should have been ridiculous, over-dramatic, but all Jupiter could do was stare at him and think how *lucky* she was. Finally she managed to pull some words together. “It’s going to be crazy. You can’t even *imagine* the invasive questions, most of which you’re gonna have to lie about. My mom will glare at you, my aunt Nino will fawn over you, my uncle and my aunt Irina will make insulting comments, and I have no idea what my cousins will do, except it’ll be embarrassing.” Jupiter sucked in a breath. “Are you *sure*?”

Caine was smiling now, small and *fond.* “Yes, your Majesty.”

“*Really* sure? I mean, do you want to go because you want to go, not just because I’m asking--what
am I saying, nobody really wants to meet my insane family--”

The smile widened, and Caine lifted a hand to Jupiter’s cheek, the stroke of his thumb across her skin light and warm. “I can handle it, your Majesty.” He leaned closer, and brushed a kiss over her lips, equally light and enough to stop her objections. “Jupiter. I want to do this.”

Jupiter blew out a breath. “Okay then.” She pressed into his touch. “Can you get another of those likealyzer things?”

“I still have the one I used when we went to Dr. Thompson’s house.” The way he was looking at her made Jupiter want to drag him off to bed, again.

But she had work to do, and he was on duty. “Right.” Jupiter kissed him once more, then made herself sit back. “I’ll set it up with Stinger.”

Caine rose easily, still looking delighted. “Should I call Glasta back in?”

“Yeah, sure.” Jupiter flapped a hand at him. “He’s going to return dramatically too, isn’t he?”

“No bet.” Caine touched his comm implant and murmured something under his breath, then resumed his post by the door. Jupiter started counting silently, and when she reached nineteen, a cylinder of feathers popped through the window and expanded midair, unfolding to let Glasta land lightly on his feet. He stepped smoothly into place, not a hair ruffled.

Jupiter snickered, and applauded before turning back to her work. Yeah, no bet.

It had been an interesting month. Jupiter had learned a lot more about her inheritance, and made day-trips to two more of her planets. One was solely an agricultural world, more like Earth than Cherbodie in size, and the other was just a--planet. A place where people lived, and not one intended for Harvesting.

There had been proclamations, and ceremonies, and receptions, and a day had stretched to three before Jupiter could extract herself from all the pomp; but the really disturbing part had been the realization that the entire population was her subjects.

Earth was one thing; nobody there knew. But everybody on Careye was aware of who Jupiter was, and everyone she saw there was enthusiastic about it. It made her feel like a princess in a fairy tale--one who had been a goosegirl until very recently.

But if there was one thing hanging out with Katharine had taught Jupiter, it was how to mingle with the wealthy and powerful without letting on that she was neither. She had certainly never expected the skill to come in handy so often.

“Fake it ‘til you make it” was rapidly becoming her mantra.

Jupiter had promised herself that she would spend an hour on Entitled protocols, and did, down to the second, before stacking all the current sheaves in the middle of the desk and pushing away so hard that her chair rolled for two feet. “Done,” she declared, and stood up. “What’s the weather like out there, guys?”

It was a running joke with the Skyjackers now, though some had taken longer than others to accept that an Entitled was joking with them. Glasta grinned again, while Caine kept an admirably straight face. “The same as yesterday, Majesty.”

“Excellent. Let’s go flying.” Jupiter picked up the control wristband for her boots and fastened it in
place, wondering if she could convince them to let her fly out the window.

Safety protocol won, and in the end they jumped off the nearest balcony instead, but she couldn’t care much as they soared up over the alcazar flock. The weather was, as promised, the same as yesterday and all the days previous—cold and clear, since they were above the clouds—and Glasta was joined by Honch, the two of them circling outward as perimeter guard while Caine stayed with Jupiter.

The matter of Caine being her most personal guard was causing fewer problems than Jupiter had expected. It turned out that many Entitled had one or two favorite primary guards; granted, most of them weren’t sleeping with their favorites, but at this point the Stormbreakers seemed to be willing to assign that to Jupiter’s eccentricity as a tercie and roll with it. She was bemused to learn that any side-eyeing was because of her choice, not the actual nature of their relationship.

It didn’t matter, because it was not a point she was going to give on. Jupiter turned up the power on her boots and moved faster, pushing against the air and squinting in the uninterrupted light of Cherbodie’s sun; the world was a brilliant spread of color, hard blue surrounding them and white and green below. The jacket she wore had a heating circuit that kept her warm enough, and Caine grinned and wove lazy spirals around her. Jupiter stuck out her tongue, and wondered what it was like to fly with actual wings.

They didn’t go flying every day, but Jupiter tried to fit it in as often as she could, because it was glorious. Racing Caine through the vast gulf of air, though she knew she could never outdistance him; slacking power enough to drop fifty feet or five hundred just for the thrill; letting him take her hands and spin them both around an invisible center; going so far that the islands faded to dots on the horizon, so that there was nothing around them but space.

It was oddly easy, then, to forget about the guards who flew above and below, or the small armed ship that paced them just outside the atmosphere in case of emergency. It wasn’t like she could see the latter, anyway, and Jupiter was getting fairly good at ignoring the Royal Guard when necessary, though it still felt vaguely rude.

Caine enjoyed it too; he was good at concealing his emotions, but during their private flights he let himself open up, and secretly Jupiter’s favorite part of flying with him was listening to his rare laugh.

Her second favorite part was letting him carry her back to the alcazar when she was worn out, and Jupiter suspected it was Caine’s favorite too. She would slide carefully into his grip and shut off her boots, and Caine would hold her close and soar back without haste, his heat warming her where she was pressed against him, his wings rising and falling in a slow sweep.

He always looked so happy.

She really, really liked that look on him.

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Agatha was getting used to the novelty of living in a palace on a floating island in the upper atmosphere of an alien world; it was a pity, she thought sometimes, but then constant excitement would have made it difficult to concentrate on her study of the new society’s economic system. Or systems; there were many. She wasn’t sure how much use her knowledge was going to be to Jupiter, but Agatha could see that her presence alone was a comfort. And a balance. I’m the only one who shares her worldview, after all.
Adias had assigned her to a suite whose blinding white walls had reminded Agatha of nothing so much as a vacation spot on the Mediterranean, especially with the vivid blue of the sky outside the windows. Rather than try to force it towards the coziness of her own home, Agatha had—with Jupiter’s encouragement—raided other unoccupied rooms for decor and furniture, and the end result pleased her; scattered throw rugs and hangings in vivid gem colors, glowing against the walls and floors, furniture that hovered (she never ceased to find it magical), and a desk in green and gold that looked like the designer had crossed Art Nouveau with Arthur Rackham and filled its guts with Apple. It was gaudy and impossible and she loved it.

She’d gotten back into the school-year habit of waking early, and usually when she opened her eyes Edsel was nowhere to be seen; he generally joined her at bedtime, but left at some point for night business. So Agatha would pull on the sweats she’d brought from home and take the antigravity beam elevator down to the ground floor, waving at whatever Skyjacker happened to be on guard duty in the atrium, and go out to the garden.

They hadn’t found it until the second day. It was hidden behind the swell of the palace, nestled within a loop of stone wall; if she stood at the far edge and strained her ears, Agatha could hear the faint lap of the moat on the other side. But the edge was hard to get to, since lack of direction had allowed the plants to grow as they pleased, and it was a bit of a jungle. So far, Jupiter had only ordered one part to be cleared, enough for a stretch of lawn and a few chairs.

The lawn was her goal. At this hour it was still in shadow, but Agatha didn’t need a lot of light. As she had almost every morning since they’d arrived, she took a moment to center herself, then began her exercises.

The shape flicking past overhead was by now a familiar sight, another Skyjacker on aerial patrol; Agatha didn’t bother to look up, because they were usually gone before she could wave. But a minute later another one appeared, this time slowing and then dropping down into the garden.

It was Caine. Agatha gave him a nod but didn’t stop; he nodded back, wings folding down behind his shoulders as he watched with what she realized was interest.

She didn’t let it disconcert her. For all he was present almost every time Agatha saw Jupiter, Caine was very good at making himself fade into the background; and on top of that, she got the feeling he was just shy. Agatha didn’t feel she knew him well at all, but Jupiter trusted him completely, and that was enough to go on with.

So she kept going, moving carefully through her sequence, wondering if Caine would break his reserve and start asking questions.

Instead, he began moving in sync, echoing her movements with a precision that startled her. Impressed, Agatha didn’t insult him by slowing down, but she did widen her gestures a little to make them clearer, reflecting with amusement that having to put more thought into what she was doing could only be good for her.

When she—they—finished, Agatha grinned at Caine. “Prodigious,” she repeated, and his ears went pink even as he gave her a tiny bow.

“What is it?” he asked, and Agatha returned the bow.

“Tàijíquán,” she said, careful to get the pronunciation correct. “It’s an ancient martial art. Ancient for Earth, anyway,” she added wryly.

Caine’s huff was acknowledgment, and he paced Agatha as she headed back inside. “I like it.”
She smiled again. “I’m not surprised. I’m no expert, but if you want to learn it I’m sure Jupiter could find you a teacher on Earth who could handle--all this.” She waved a hand at the situation in general.

Caine didn’t reply, but he looked as if he weren’t immediately rejecting the idea, which Agatha saw as a plus. Decades of teaching had taught her to spot the effects of abuse of all kinds, and Caine bore several classic hallmarks. It made her angry, and tired; Jupiter’s initial outline notwithstanding, it was deeply disheartening to find out that a civilization several million years older than Earth’s collective social evolution was still rife with prejudice and cruelty.

**Well. If anyone can shift the pattern--if it’s even possible--Jupiter’s in place to do it.**

Caine stepped politely past Agatha as they approached the palace’s nearest entrance--Agatha had learned that less-important people and guards sometimes went first to handle any threats--and she followed him through the opening, which had a forcefield instead of a door. *And they’re very good for one another.* It was blindingly obvious that Caine adored Jupiter with a focus that would have been unhealthy in less specialized circumstances, but since Jupiter was both sensible and equally obviously head-over-heels for Caine, Agatha approved.

And, deep within, she was bleakly glad that Jupiter had such a staunch protector. *Not that the Stormbreakers won’t do whatever it takes to shield her, but there’s a difference between an oath and a heart.*

“Is Jupiter up?” Agatha asked as they entered the atrium, and Caine shook his head. “Cherbodie is due to wake her shortly. Excuse me, Doctor,” he said, and strode a few yards away before unfolding his wings again. She appreciated the courtesy--the downdraft could be pretty heavy--and watched him spiral up into the non-echoing space of the atrium, presumably heading for their suite. He had to dodge the flying glass jellyfish that Jupiter had released into the space--a gift from Kalique, she’d said--but it didn’t seem to bother him.

Agatha returned to her own for a shower. Edsel was waiting for her on the bed, greeting her with a lazy yawn, and she detoured to pet him for a bit.

Tempting as it was to crawl back under the covers and drowse with her cat, Agatha instead washed up and dressed for the day, Edsel watching with lambent eyes. Jupiter had established the routine of having what she had named her “inner council” meet with her for breakfast, a habit that was both practical and allowed Jupiter to gradually transition into her Entitled role instead of having to pick it up right when she stepped out of her suite. *I wonder what new foods they’ll have for us today.* There was always an array of Earth-ordinary dishes, but Adias--or the chefs--usually slipped in some new dish from elsewhere. Agatha didn’t always enjoy the food, but it was fun to try it.

Only Jupiter and Caine were missing when Edsel escorted Agatha to the breakfast room. Whoever was seated nearest the buffet usually grabbed the cat’s dish and set it down--more, Agatha figured, to avoid the demanding yowls than out of conscious kindness--but it was a small thing, and clearly none of the staff would say a word against her pet as long as Jupiter was pleased with him.

This time it was Stinger who handed over the dish, and Edsel awarded him a cheek-rub as he did so. Agatha was almost certain she saw Stinger return a quick scratch behind Edsel’s ears, but she didn’t comment. “Good morning. What’s the surprise of the day?”

“Porova fruit compote.” Kiza pointed at a dish whose contents looked like a perfectly Earthly dish, albeit something more along the lines of a meat stew. “If you like, hmm, grapefruit, then you’ll probably like this.”
“That sounds pretty good.” Agatha helped herself to pancakes and a small spoonful of the compote. She’d been surprised to learn that the former were common in Gyre cooking, but it just made her remember the Emma Bull quote. “Pancakes…are a profoundly primitive and practically universal item, in one form or another.”

Of course, it was a phouka doing the talking… On the other hand, learning about the influence Entitled could have on tercie worlds had Agatha wondering just how much various mythologies, weren’t.

“Sorry I’m late, guys.” Jupiter strode in, Caine as close behind as her shadow. “How’s everybody doing?”

Various murmurs of “fine” came back as Agatha took her seat and Jupiter and Caine went to get food. Today the group was Stinger and Kiza, Virtu and Tombu, Captain Tsing, and Adias, though the latter would never actually eat with them. Agatha wasn’t sure if it was a protocol thing or a cultural one, but Adias was so reserved that she didn’t want to ask.

Tsing usually brought along one or another of her command crew, presumably so they could get to know Jupiter and vice versa, and today it was Officer Percadium. Agatha liked him; he flirted with anyone and everyone—even Jupiter, very delicately—and he and Kiza tended to get into long rambling discussions of video-drama series they both followed. But the two of them dropped their mild argument over a character when Jupiter sat down.

Stinger’s security brief was usually the first thing on the agenda. “Nothing new to report, Majesty,” he said this morning, slicing into the toast he ate with a fork. “But I have a lead on that weapons tutor you wanted me to arrange.”

“Weapons tutor?” Agatha hadn’t heard Jupiter mention that.

“Yeah, for me,” Jupiter said, spreading butter on her waffle. “Stinger’s practice sessions are great, but that’s all pretty passive stuff. He’s finding me someone who can teach me how to use some of the same weapons the Stormbreakers do.”

She gestured with the knife. “I mean, hopefully I won’t have to do it, but it’d be nice to know in a pinch. I was lucky with Balem.”

Stinger nodded. “The more layers of defence, the better,” he said. “This lady’s the best, if she’ll agree.” He gave Jupiter a slightly apologetic look. “Usually she’ll not have a thing to do with Entitled, but I think I can change her mind.”

“Who is it?” Caine asked. “Not Gorshak, Stinger—you know Sargorns don’t have the same optics.”

“No, no.” Stinger waved this off. “But I’m going to need to be able to negotiate the fee.” He looked pointedly at Virtu, who carried on eating with her usual aplomb.

Jupiter smirked a little. “Miss Virtu, any objections?”

“None at all, with your sanction,” Virtu said calmly.

“Consider it sanctionized,” Jupiter said, still amused. Agatha had to smile herself. She’d asked Virtu why, when security was so important and Stinger so trusted, the head of finance still made him run all his requests past her Majesty.

Virtu had turned calm eyes on Agatha. Protocol is important, and most important when it comes to money, she’d replied. Make an exception once, and you open the door to pressures and carelessness.
At this level the request isn’t burdensome. So we’ll maintain it unless her Majesty orders otherwise.

Agatha could see the sense in it. Stinger rolled his eyes, but didn’t argue.

Miss Tombu rattled off a brief report about various business interests; they were a tiny fraction of what Jupiter had actually inherited, but Jupiter had asked Tombu to report only on what Jupiter had already studied, unless something was going wrong. *Too much info’s worse than none at all,* she’d noted to Agatha. *I have to be able to keep track of what I’m doing."

Tombu’s scaly appearance had led Agatha to expect her to hiss, but she had a sweet and fluting voice, if a quiet one. She seemed almost as much in awe of Jupiter as Adias, but was as crisp and professional as Virtu. *So far, so good.* Sooner or later, Agatha figured, Jupiter would end up with a dud, but it hadn’t happened yet. *Unless we count that peculiar business with the dresser Splice…*

Virtu’s report was a little more in-depth. Most of Jupiter’s holdings were still proceeding as she’d instructed Lady Kalique’s majordomo, continuing in accustomed patterns until Jupiter had the time to look at them in depth. According to the head of finance, things were going well enough. “But if your Majesty continues to delay moving forward on Harvesting, we will need to find an alternate source of profit,” Virtu warned. “The Gyre market is already watching you with interest. There is some leeway given that you are new to your position, but all of your movements will be scrutinized, financial as well as social and political.”

Agatha frowned. “I thought there were no Harvests scheduled for at least a decade.” That was what Jupiter had said, anyway.

Virtu looked over at her, dabbing at her beak with a napkin. “There are not. But Harvesting requires a significant outlay in equipment and personnel, and typically the build begins years in advance. If her Majesty does not begin the process, she will have to show signs of making money in other ways, or lose the confidence of the market.”

Jupiter looked as if she had a sudden headache. “Not sure why I need the market to be confident anyway,” she muttered, then spoke more loudly. “I have ideas on that score, but I’m not quite ready to share. Don’t worry, Miss Virtu.”

Virtu didn’t look worried, to Agatha’s eyes, but she rarely displayed much emotion anyway. She dipped her head to Jupiter. “When you are ready, your Majesty; we are always at your disposal.”

Jupiter snorted at that, but didn’t argue. The conversation went to generalities, mostly concerning a game called spatball, and when Jupiter got up for seconds she brought her plate to the empty seat between Agatha and Stinger.

“I’m planning on going down to the surface as soon as I can arrange it,” she said to Agatha. “Today or tomorrow, hopefully. Want to come along?”

“Do you have to ask?” Agatha grinned. “I’ve been wondering if I was allowed to go down there without you.”

Jupiter returned the grin. “Can’t come all this way and not see the sights, after all. Right, I’ll have Adias set it up. She can talk to that engineer, what’s his name?”

“Aaron? No, Eron,” Agatha supplied, remembering the pronunciation.

“Right. Huh, I wonder if we can meet any of the people who live down there.”

“Of course you can, Majesty,” Stinger interjected from behind her. “You can have ‘em all line up for
inspection if you like."

Jupiter rolled her eyes and jabbed an elbow in his direction, which he dodged without effort. “Yes, because pulling people off their jobs to stand around watching me is so much fun for them.”

Stinger shook his head and swallowed a bite. “You’re still not thinking about this right,” he said. “You’re their Queen. For them it’s an honour.”

“It makes sense,” Agatha said when Jupiter looked doubtful. “Think of it this way if it makes you feel better--you’re their new boss. Of course they’re going to want a look at you.”

“I guess so.” Jupiter sighed and ate a strawberry. “Well, let’s see what Eron says.”

Getting down to the surface, it turned out, was a lot easier than Jupiter thought. There was what Eron called a “viewship” stored in the main island’s hangar, a vehicle scarcely larger than the skimmer that was mostly window. The interior had rows of seats facing outwards in one half, and in the other a low dais with a ridiculously plush cross between a divan and a throne. Jupiter ignored it and went to sit in the front row of the plainer seats, followed by Aggie, Caine, and Banti. Kiza had declined the invitation, and so had Edsel--or at least he hadn’t been present when it was time to leave.

Jupiter didn’t quite press her nose against the window as the viewship lifted away from the landing pad, but it was a close thing. “How long will it take us to get there?” she asked, and Eron’s voice came over the comm system to reply.

“Approximately ten minutes, your Majesty,” he said from the cockpit, which was set into the bottom of the ship. “Unless you’re in a hurry.”

“Nah, let’s do the scenic route,” Jupiter answered, her heart beating a little faster as they cleared the edge of the island and the gulf of the atmosphere opened up beneath them. “That never gets old,” she added to Aggie.

“I hope not,” Aggie agreed, her eyes wide as they began to drop slowly down.

The undifferentiated stretch of green and brown below them grew larger and larger as they descended, detail slowly emerging--first as vague contours, then as more precise delineations. Since most of the planet was a farm, Jupiter thought, it wasn’t that surprising to see straight lines emerge as they descended, but she couldn’t help wondering what the place had looked like before, in its wild state. Or maybe Seraphi built it from scratch. Though nobody’s mentioned being able to do that yet.

A black-and-blond streak zipped past the window, Absaba serving as half the perimeter guard, and Aggie frowned. “Is the escort going all the way down with us? Won’t that hurt them?”

“No, Dr. Thompson,” Caine said from behind them. “Skyjackers are engineered to handle a much greater variation in pressure than pure humans. They’ll be fine.”

“Really?” Aggie turned to look at him. “Is that something that comes with being a Splice--no, it can’t be, you’re not all Splices.”

Jupiter glanced over her shoulder. Caine looked a little surprised at Aggie’s interest, but he answered promptly. “Many Splices do have the capability bred into them, but no. Those Legionnaires who don’t have their systems altered when they receive their wings, though it’s a separate process.”
“That makes sense,” Aggie said after a moment’s thought. “Since you’re aerial fighters--I just didn’t think it through.”

She sounded chagrined, and Jupiter reached over to pat her arm. “Seriously, Aggie, how could you miss that, it’s not like there were a million other things to occupy your attention.”

Aggie snickered. “Touché. Okay then. I’d like to know more about Skyjacker modifications, Mr. Wise, if you care to explain, but later.”

Jupiter glanced back again and gave Caine a grin. “Consider that a request, not an order, Mr. Wise,” she told him, and got a small smile in return, a real one.

Aggie nodded in agreement and went back to looking out the window. “That sort of thing could have enormous implications for Earth’s medical technology,” she said absently, and Jupiter sighed.

“Totally. It’s already on the list.” The really, insanely, impossibly long list.

Aggie shot her a rueful look. “Of course. Sorry.”

Jupiter shrugged at her, and they turned back to the view.

Jupiter had never ridden in a plane, but she’d seen enough TV to still find the vertical landing aspect of a spaceship to be a little odd. The viewship descended towards what gradually revealed itself to be a small village surrounding a landing pad, with the by-now familiar crowd of people waiting and watching.

The ship touched down, and fortunately Eron had warned them about its other function, because it would have ruined whatever dignity Jupiter was trying to maintain if she’d jumped in startlement. With a low hum the main cabin of the ship settled down even further, almost to ground level; at the aft end of the vehicle, the pilot’s cockpit was rotating out from under the ship to lock in above and behind it.

“Guess we’re here,” Jupiter muttered, and waved; next to her, Aggie chuckled and slid out of her seat to move back a row. “Eron, is the intercom on?”

“Yes, your Majesty,” came the reply, and Jupiter lifted her chin.

“Hello, folks,” she said, skipping the formality as she always did, and wasn’t it weird that she actually had a habit for this now. “Thanks for coming out to see me.”

The nearest person stepped away from the crowd to bow respectfully. “Queen of the Abrasax, we are honored by your visit.”

It--he, probably--was tall, taller than Caine if Jupiter was estimating correctly, and had very wide shoulders and large, dark eyes set in a face too long to be natural; a Splice. In fact, they all had similar looks and builds, and Jupiter wondered if they were a family group or a Splice designed for the specific purpose of farming. For all I know, it’s both.

“I thought it was time I came down to say hello,” she replied cheerfully. “What’s your name?”

He bowed again. “My designation is Twenty-three,” he said. “Is your Majesty here to see the farms?”

Twenty-three? Jupiter pressed her lips shut against the automatic protest of a number instead of a name, reminding herself that she didn’t know enough yet. “Yeah, a quick look anyway.”
Twenty-three glanced back at the group behind him, then lifted his chin, smiling. “I will come on board.”

Behind her, Jupiter heard Caine’s wings rustle, but he didn’t speak; apparently the farmer wasn’t a threat. “Sure.”

It took about thirty seconds for the airlock to cycle Twenty-three in. He really was big, definitely taller than Caine and wide enough to give Honch a run for their money, but there wasn’t the slightest bit of aggression about him. In fact, he gazed at Jupiter as if she were—well, a goddess. It made her uncomfortable, but she was starting to get used to it.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, walking forward to greet him, and sighed a little when he bowed yet again. “You’re in charge down here?”

“I am the eldest,” he replied, straightening; his head almost brushed the ceiling. He was wearing a dark brown jumpsuit, very plain. “It is my duty and my honor to serve.”

Jupiter tamped down her instinctive reaction to that. At least he’s not calling me Seraphi. “Can you show us around? What do you grow here, anyway?”

As if he’d anticipated the question, Twenty-three pulled out a small sheave and held it out—not to her, but to Caine. Jupiter suppressed another sigh as Caine took it and checked it over; he had a wand on his belt like Forthwith’s, and apparently the thing passed muster, because he handed it on to Jupiter.

She thumbed it to life. It popped up a 3-D display, a spinning globe that sprouted the little info tags that one could touch to get more data. Jupiter poked one and got the image of a vegetable she couldn’t immediately identify and a scrolling list of text. Cool, but save it for later.

She shut the sheave off. “What do you have locally?” she asked.

Twenty-three spoke to Eron via the comm system, and the viewship glided off the landing pad and down a paved road that led out of the little village. Jupiter waved to the crowd as the ship passed them, and many of them bowed, but none followed.

Cherbodie’s landscape was a little disappointing, in that it looked almost exactly like Earth farmland, aside from the much more distant horizon and the odd poles spaced at regular intervals in the fields.

“They are part of the irrigation system,” Twenty-three explained as the ship moved along; his voice was very deep. “Most of the weather is handled by the satellites, but many crops require finer control.”

Jupiter nodded, trying to look as if she’d known about the satellites this whole time. Behind her, Aggie was muttering under her breath, and Jupiter knew there was going to be another item for the list.

All the open space looked very inviting; the crops they were viewing were waist-height and very leafy, and Jupiter wondered if the place smelled as clean and green as it looked. The islands above suddenly seemed small by comparison. A breeze stirred the leaves, pushing a ripple along the endless lines of plants, and her scalp tingled with the desire to feel it in her hair.

Relax, she told herself. Somewhere in all those planets has to be one you can walk around on. Or you can just go home and hike around Stinger’s property—

Twenty-three made a low sound, almost a groan. Jupiter looked back from the window to see that
the skin of his face and hands was growing mottled and dark.

*That doesn’t look good.* “Hey--are you okay?” she asked.

He smiled at her beatifically, and she felt cold flood through her at the sight of his eyes, which were now blood-red from iris to lid. “It is my honor to serve,” he repeated.

Behind her, Caine spat a curse that Jupiter’s translator implant didn’t handle. Agatha sucked in a hissing breath. “Barotrauma,” she said. “Jupiter, it’s decompression sickness!”

“Crap.” Jupiter started forward as Twenty-three swayed on his feet, but Caine was faster, catching him as he toppled. Blood was oozing from the farmer’s nostrils and ears as well, slow and thick, and Jupiter pushed away the memory of Sa Brem’s last horrific moments. “Can we get him back outside, will that help?”

“Probably not,” Caine said grimly, easing the big form to the floor. “His lungs are compromised, I can hear it."

Twenty-three’s breathing was slow and sticky. Jupiter’s heart thumped painfully once, twice, and then the cold took over. “Eron, get us back to the alcazar now.”

The flight upwards took barely sixty seconds, but the time stretched out like a nightmare. Jupiter was barely aware of Banti issuing crisp orders for physicians into the comm; all her attention was reserved for Twenty-three, who twitched when she knelt beside him and took his huge hand between both of hers.

“Hold on,” she told him. “We’ll get you to a doctor.”

But he didn’t seem to hear her. The crimson eyes were staring at the ceiling, and blood was puddling under his head, but somehow he was still smiling. “Honor,” he croaked, but that was all.

Eron brought the ship into hover above the palace roof, and Caine and Banti managed to lift Twenty-three and get him into the transport beam. The alcazar’s medical team was waiting below, and Jupiter watched from the hatch as they whisked the farmer away.

“Jupiter…” Aggie’s voice was low, almost hesitant, behind her. “You couldn’t have known.”

A warm hand touched her shoulder, and Jupiter flinched away. Her chest seemed choked with ice. “That--” She swallowed. “That doesn’t make me any less responsible.”

Her knuckles ached, and when she looked down Jupiter realized she was twisting her hands together so hard that her fingertips were white. She unlinked them and, driven by the protocol Stinger had worked so hard to implant, touched her bracelet. “Absaba.”

A breath later he was hovering outside the hatch. “Your Majesty?”

Jupiter stepped into the beam without looking back, and let it carry her down to the roof, the Stormbreaker circling the beam as a proper escort. Just at the moment she didn’t care whether Aggie followed or not.

Jupiter walked numbly past the servants in the atrium, ignoring their bows and queries, and headed up to her suite on autopilot. Part of her wanted to run to the infirmary and find out how Twenty-three was doing, and part of her--the agonized, guilty part--just wanted to hide. *You’ll only get in the way if you go to the infirmary,* she rationalized. *Stay out of the way and let the doctors handle it.*
The suite she’d chosen for herself and Caine was a light, summery blue on walls, ceiling, and floor, painted with a flowing pattern in gold that continued over each surface without consideration for corners. Adias had found two couches and a few chairs to fill the main room, though she continually apologized that they didn’t match, and now Jupiter sat on one chair and stared blindly out the window, seeing not the endless sky but the bruises flowering under Twenty-three’s skin.

Caine’s quiet throat-clearing brought her out of the trance of horror, and she looked up to see him standing at parade rest just inside the door. He had blood on his boots and hands again, she noticed distantly, and his eyes were wide with that submissive look he had when he thought he’d screwed up.

Jupiter wasn’t sure he hadn’t.

She had to force the words out. “Did he make it?”

Caine shook his head, somber.

Jupiter closed her eyes, feeling a rush of emotion that was something like grief, and a lot more like rage. When she opened them again, Caine was watching her warily.

“Did you know?” she asked, the words scraping her throat.

“Not until I heard his breathing change.” Jupiter saw the movement as he swallowed. “It didn’t occur to me that…”

“That he was a fucking willing human sacrifice?” Jupiter snapped her mouth shut as her voice climbed towards a scream.

Caine shook his head, just a little, then straightened, his gaze fixing on a point beyond her. “Majesty. I am--”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Jupiter knew she sounded petty, but she had no energy left for his guilt, misplaced or real; this entire new universe suddenly seemed cruel, sadistic, and she could feel the cracks crawling through her. She was going to shatter, and it was going to be ugly. “I can’t—I just can’t right now.”

Caine went very, very still. Jupiter took a shallow breath, pushed off the couch, and forced herself to walk, not run, into the bedroom.

She let the door-field go opaque before she began to weep.
Caine stood.

Part of him, the trained, disciplined part, was keeping watch on the corridor, proper and expected. He was on duty as the Queen’s guard, and would remain so for some hours. If she wanted privacy, the corridor outside her door was where he was supposed to be.

That was the surface. The rest of him was torn between desperate worry and a panic he was struggling to crush.

*She needs time to herself,* he told himself silently. The farming Splice’s death had obviously upset her, and Caine understood why; this was Jupiter, after all, who considered Splices to be *people,* as contrary and astonishing as that was. Twenty-three’s voluntary death had surprised Caine as well; he’d heard vague stories of such things, but as a career soldier he’d never encountered the practice himself. *It’s culture shock, just like the Legion protocols say.*

Instinct was insisting that he go back in, find Jupiter, hold her, comfort her. He *ached* with the need to do it, to ease her in any way he could.

But she’d essentially ordered him away; not in so many words, but the intent was clear. She wanted to be alone. He had no right to disobey that order.

And the old whisper had started up at the bottom of his brain. *She’s angry,* it said, insidious and relentless. *You should have known what was going to happen, you should have guessed. She’ll turn you away, dismiss you. She’s found out you’re worthless.*

*Nothing good ever lasts.*

Caine fought it as best he could, reaching for memories of Jupiter’s smiles, her touches, all the casual little things she did that proved she still wanted him around. Her words, telling him that nothing would come between them.

*I will not let you go.* She’d pressed her mouth to his throat and promised him, and Caine held the memory like a light in the darkness that wanted to drown him. He pushed it against the sight of her so cold and so angry, walking away; each repetition was a flick of the whip.

*Stupid, brainless, runty misbred. Why did you think you could have this? It was impossible from the start and now it’s over*--

Caine regulated his breathing, kept his wings still, called on every sweet moment he could remember. *She is my Queen. She has my loyalty.*

*And I have hers.* She promised, she promised-- And while a promise to a Splice was as hollow as vacuum, Jupiter was the exception to every rule.
The sunlight coming through the corridor windows gradually changed angle and color, becoming more golden, as Caine held his post. When the door-field depowered, it was a small shock.

Caine turned, bracing himself, but the door remained empty. The only additional sound was Cherboodie speaking quietly in his ear. “Queen Jupiter requests your presence.”

He swallowed hard, and stepped into the suite.

She was sitting on the long divan in the main room--it still looked a bit lost in all that space, there wasn’t much furniture yet--feet on the floor and her elbows on her knees, staring at the space between her toes.

The room seemed saturated with grief and anger--no longer cold, but hot and sore like a bruise. Jupiter looked up as Caine came in; her eyes were reddened and swollen, and the sight hurt somewhere below his breastbone.

He kept walking until he was in front of her, and then sank to his knees, wings trailing on the carpet in the proper expression of penance. Head bowed, he stared at the space between her feet. “Your Majesty. I--”

The thump of Jupiter dropping to the carpet in front of him cut off his words, and Caine blinked in surprise as she reached out to take his hands in hers. “Caine, I-I’m sorry.”

What?

He couldn’t help looking up, feeling his mouth dropping open at her words. She was staring at their linked fingers, and he could smell--he could smell shame rolling off her, bitter and sad. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I know you would have told me what Twenty-three was going to do, if you’d known about it.”

He’d expected anger, or indifference, or maybe forgiveness for not knowing. He’d never expected this. “Your--” Caine had to stop and clear his throat. “Your Majesty, this isn’t--”

Right, he wanted to say, or maybe proper, but Jupiter looked up and her brow creased. “Look, you know I’m going to screw up at this sometimes--I’m sure I already have--”

“No,” he managed. “I mean--you’re--you’re not supposed to apologize, your Majesty. You’re Entitled.”

That made her brows go up. “Entitled to what, be a jackass?” Her tone grew firmer. “Are you telling me that Entitled don’t admit it when they’re wrong?”

“Yes.” Caine blinked, and tried to phrase things more precisely. “Or, no, Entitled aren’t wrong. They...just aren’t.”

Jupiter squeezed his hands. “Bullshit,” she said crisply. “Balem was wrong about a lot of things, trust me on this. And I was wrong. I was upset, but that’s not an excuse and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Caine tried to organize his roiling thoughts. Once again she’d turned everything he knew to be true on its head--so easily--it was dizzying. But now that the surprise was ebbing, relief was swelling up to take its place. She’s not angry. She’s not--I was right. She won’t send me away. He tried to find the right words.

“If it will ease your Majesty,” he said finally, “you may blame me for whatever you see fit.”
Jupiter’s lips twitched. “Is that an offer, or a rule?”

Caine shrugged. “Both?”

She started to giggle, leaning forward to rest her head on his chest, and very tentatively Caine freed a hand to reach up and stroke her hair. “Bullshit,” she said again, still giggling. “I’m gonna have to teach you to how to fight, aren’t I?”

*That* didn’t make any sense, and was a borderline insult besides. He pulled his hand back. “Does her Majesty think I am not qualified to protect her?”


That...wasn’t any clearer, really. “I would never presume to disagree with you.”

“You just did, almost,” she pointed out, and Caine felt his perceptions wobble slightly for the second time in the last few minutes. It must have shown on his face, because Jupiter lifted an arm to wrap her hand around his nape. “We’ll work on it, but not right now.”

She bit her lip, the humor ebbing away. “I really am sorry for jumping to conclusions.” And the grief was back, darker without so much of the anger. “I just...how could he do that, how could he think it was--what was she like, expecting something like that?”

This time, when Jupiter started to weep, Caine wrapped himself around her, cocooning her in his arms and wings as she sobbed. It was so sweet and so terrible at the same time that it made him want to howl again--terrible, because she was hurting, but amazing, because she clung to him, because her tears wet his skin, hot and terrifyingly intimate.

She’d wept in his arms before, but not like this, not with such bitter pain. He was the only one who could do this, right now, offer her comfort--maybe it was only proximity, maybe Kiza or Dr. Thompson or her family could if they were there, but they weren’t, it was *him*. And it felt so good he wanted to never let her go.

So Caine held her close, drank in the scent of her sorrow and of her hair, and let time slide past until she hiccuped to a stop.

Caine didn’t move. He could be utterly still for hours at a stretch if need be, it was a hunter’s trait, and he would stay where Jupiter wanted him until she told him otherwise. And it seemed that she didn’t want to move either; she sniffled, rubbed her nose with the back of her hand in a very un-royal gesture, and spoke without lifting her head from his chest. “Cherbodie. What’s the holding-legislation portion of the Entitled code again?”

“Do you wish a summary or a reading, ma’am?” the presence asked.

“Summary, please,” Jupiter said, and nestled back into Caine as Cherbodie began an overview of the item she’d asked for. One hand crept out to comb absently through the feathers of the wing covering her, and Caine shivered with pleasure at the touch. It was no good chastising himself for it, it was a reflex, but Jupiter didn’t seem distracted.

Cherbodie’s recitation went on for a while. Caine didn’t really listen to it--Entitled law was not his area of expertise--but he didn’t mind the wait, either. Finally Jupiter cut Cherbodie off mid-sentence. “Thanks, that’s enough. Do I need lawyers to make a decree? Did we bring any lawyers with us?”

“No, and yes,” Cherbodie replied. “You need only record your decree. Verbal statements that are not
on record can be challenged or misinterpreted.”

“And we wouldn’t want that, would we?” Jupiter muttered, and sat up with a sigh. Caine swept his wings out of the way, but selfishly let his hands stay at her waist, and she didn’t brush them off. “Okay, Cherborne, record. Uh, I, Jupiter Jones...of the--First Primary of the House of Abrasax, hereby declare that none of my subjects are allowed to kill themselves for ceremonial purposes or to honor me, either deliberately or by, um, allowing themselves to come to harm.” She hesitated. “Stop recording. How’s that sound?” she said to Caine.

“Liberal,” he said honestly.

Jupiter wrinkled her nose. “I suppose I can update it later if I need to. Yeah, I can, I remember that part. Okay, Cherborne, shoot that to whoever is supposed to distribute my decrees and see that it gets sent to everybody. Including the folks downstairs.” She jabbed a finger towards the planet’s surface.

“At once, ma’am,” Cherborne murmured, and Jupiter sighed, leaning back into Caine.

“My knees are killing me,” she said tiredly. “Yours have to be worse.”

“No,” Caine said, simple honesty again, and flowed to his feet, bringing Jupiter with him. She laughed, startled, and it moved something within him, that such a small thing could make her smile.

“You need to eat,” he added. It was a familiar refrain now, as familiar as her little snort in return.

“I want a bath,” Jupiter said, sobering, and Caine understood. She wanted to wash the day off her skin, if not from her mind. “Cherbodie, will you set something up?”

The presence didn’t reply, but Caine could hear the gush of water start up in the bathing room. He carried Jupiter towards it, ignoring her slight squirm; she would have to tell him to put her down before he would let her go right now.

The room was on the other side of the suite, and was mostly tub, or freaking swimming pool as Jupiter referred to it. The entire room was done in blue stone with streaks of gold, the same color scheme as the main room, and the tub was an enormous half-sphere scooped out of the floor, ringed within with steps leading down. At its deepest point the water level reached Caine’s shoulders, which tended to make him nervous for both his own safety and Jupiter’s, even though she could swim quite well.

It was already half-full, the water level swirling higher as the tub filled from the bottom up. Steam wisped from the surface, and Caine saw jets of cloudy color spitting out into the water below. The smell was both astringent and soothing, and fortunately not too strong; he hoped whatever Cherborne had chosen would work on Jupiter.

He set her on her feet next to the tub and went to work on her clothing, the black glittery jacket she tended to prefer and the sleeveless blouse beneath it. Jupiter didn’t argue, though she did shimmy out of her trousers while Caine was folding her top.

When she was naked, Caine picked her up again and lowered her gently into the water; Jupiter let herself sink down until she was sitting on the topmost step, the water lapping at her collarbones. Her sigh seemed to come from her toes, and Caine felt himself relax a little at the sound.

Jupiter lifted her dripping hands and began scraping her hair back, twisting it into a knot that Caine knew would be falling down before she was done bathing. “Gonna join me?”

“Not yet.” Caine tapped his comm implant and subvocalized to Cherborne, then went to sit on one of
the benches built into the wall to remove his boots. By the time he’d removed his vest, the door was chiming, and he went to answer it and take the tray of food from the kitchen server on the other side.

Carrying it over to the bath, Caine activated the hover and set the tray delicately over the water, where it stayed, not even rocking with the ripples of Jupiter’s movement. She ignored it, tilting her head back to look at him. “That’s not part of your guarding duties.”

He crouched down at the side of the pool. There was no challenge in her voice; it was merely an observation. But he felt compelled to respond all the same. “If I am your--” He had to pause and form the word deliberately. “--partner, then it is my duty.”

Jupiter’s cheeks went pink, and Caine curled one wing forward to stroke the very tip over that color. “It’s also a pleasure.”

She flushed even darker, and sniffled, lips curving shyly. “Caine,” and her voice was hoarse, “I don’t deserve you.”

He could have argued against that absurdity, but sometimes the best way to win a fight was to avoid it. “Mm. You chose me anyway.” In every way that matters.

Caine straightened from his crouch long enough to strip off his pants, then slid into the water soundlessly, folding back his wings. He liked baths as long as he could stay in the shallow part, and the heat felt good as it soaked into his muscles.

Jupiter immediately scooted over to settle against him, and Caine let that continue for about ten seconds before he lifted her into his lap. It was different, the water providing a bit of cushion and lightening her weight, but she hooked her ankles behind his calves and he kept an arm around her waist, shifting his angle until her head rested back against him once more.

This was not a part of his service that he could ever have imagined, before. Certainly there were plenty of servant Splices whose duties were similar, and Caine suspected that some of them even loved their employers; loyalty was a breedable option, and not all Entitled were wantonly cruel.

It wasn’t a usual duty for guards, though. If he’d ever been assigned to an Entitled’s personal cadre, in the normal run of things, he might have been in the room while they were bathing, but he’d be expected to watch for threats, his focus outward from his charge rather than inward towards them.

Until he’d met Jupiter, Caine had not fully realized that protection could encompass caretaking as well. But the fact that he had someone to take care of—that was the true miracle.

He loved it. It meant he was needed, but more than that, it meant he was a part of something. Something smaller and closer than the Legion, something that couldn’t discard and replace him like a faulty part.

Something...something--

Jupiter shifted and sighed, and Caine refocused on her, letting the half-formed thought go. “I could sleep right here,” she said, her voice thick.

“If her Majesty wants to,” Caine agreed, and could just see the edge of her smile as he looked down.

“I’d get all pruny. Besides, if I don’t show up at some point this evening, people’ll get worried.”

There was no point in reminding her that a Queen wasn’t supposed to worry about what her inferiors thought of her. It didn’t matter, anyway; she did, and that was that. And it was one of the reasons he
loved her, anyway.

“And I need to talk to the medics, find out what to do with Twenty-three’s body…”

Jupiter’s muscles were tightening again, her mood turning dark. Caine offered a silent apology to the dead Splice as he beckoned the hovering tray closer and set to the task of distracting her. “You need to eat first.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said, a bit petulantly, but Caine ignored that and reached for the cup that sat waiting. It had the strong black tea with cream that she favored, a treat she’d brought with her from home; it had caffeine, but Caine knew Jupiter’s tolerance for the stimulant was quite high, thanks to years of Earth’s coffee at all hours.

He held the cup in front of her nose, knowing that the scent of it would reach her. “At least drink something, your Majesty.” He put just a touch of emphasis on the last two words.

Her grumble let him know she was aware of his dirty fighting, but she took the cup and sipped anyway, and he smirked above her head where she couldn’t see it.

When she’d finished half the cup he lifted one of the crisp bread squares she loved and tore off a piece, then pressed that to her lips until they opened for it. Jupiter immediately complained with her mouth full that she could feed herself, and Caine handed her the rest of the square and let her do it, glad she couldn’t see his face.

There were times when victories should be celebrated, and times when the best thing to do was to gloat internally, after all.

By the time they’d finished the meal—because of course Jupiter insisted that he eat as well—she was relaxed again, rubbing her palms absently up and down Caine’s arms under the water—a soothing gesture rather than an arousing one, though it wasn’t he who needed soothing. Nevertheless, Caine didn’t move. He would take any touch from Jupiter.

The water was still perfectly hot, and Jupiter’s hair had slowly come down from its knot to dangle and soak. Caine shifted one hand to comb his fingers through it, trying to relax her further. If she would fall asleep, he knew, she would wake more stable, the anguish of the day put at a bit of distance.

But instead Jupiter rolled her head around to look up at him at an angle. “Ready to get out?”

There was no good arguing, so Caine simply nodded. He slid his arms around her and stood, stepping out to carry her over to the drying niche. Jupiter huffed as he put her down, but smacked a kiss on his jaw in passing anyway. “You didn’t need to carry me.”

“I know.” She never quite seemed to believe how much he liked it.

She huffed again and tugged him into the niche with her as the warm air started up, and within seconds they were both dry. Jupiter put her arms around Caine and pressed her forehead to his chest, and he returned the hug, luxuriating in the feel of her gentle squeeze.

“Thanks,” she said after a moment. “Caine. Thank you.”

He never had words for this. Caine buried his face in her hair, drawing her scent deep into his lungs, and let his wings swing forward to wrap loosely around her. Jupiter squeezed tighter.

It was a long moment before she let him go and stepped back. “I guess we’ve missed dinner, but I do
Caine nodded, and Jupiter put a hand on his arm. “I know your shift has to be over by now, but will you come with me?”

“Of course.” She always asked, as if she couldn’t command him with a jerk of her head, as if she didn’t know he would follow happily. As if she wouldn’t have to order him to stay behind, under these circumstances.

Her fingers tightened, then released. “Good. Thank you. I don’t want--” Her voice wobbled slightly. “I don’t want to do this alone.”

Caine just didn’t understand how Jupiter didn’t understand, that she didn’t ever have to be alone if she didn’t want to be. But he couldn’t begin to explain that, and anyway she didn’t need to be distracted with his confusion. So he just nodded, and she smiled sadly, and led him out to the bedroom to get dressed.

Jupiter hadn’t thought much about the medical team before. There had been one in place on Gabal, for the people working there, but when Jupiter had moved her entourage (flying circus, her mind supplied) to Cherbodie, half of it had come along since there was only a skeleton crew of staff at the floating alcazar. She’d met a couple during the debacle with Sa Brem, but there had been other things to worry about then.

Now she looked at the semicircle of unfamiliar faces, all standing in the little sickbay in one of the underground levels of the alcazar, because of course she was expected to sit in the only chair. She had, because she was tired, and still angry, and it was easier to control that while seated. The presence of Caine behind her left shoulder, silent but palpable, helped too.

“Before we get started,” Jupiter said, “who are you all?”

She listened as the chief physician introduced them, four pure humans and two androids, but their names seemed to drop through the bottom of her brain and get lost. Jupiter kept her expression pleasantly neutral as the chief cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders.

“To begin with, your Majesty, I wish to apologize on behalf of my staff for our failure to resuscitate the Splice. The damage was extensive, and--”

“Twenty-three,” Jupiter interrupted, her anger spiking upward. “His name was Twenty-three.”

The physician’s face twisted a little in what looked like disbelief. “Um, yes. His damage was extensive, extending throughout most of his tissues, and by the time we were able to treat him it was too late.”

Jupiter frowned. “What exactly did you do?”

She didn’t really understand the list of tests and treatments the physician reeled off, but she hoped she would eventually--at least as much as an ordinary citizen of the universe would.

Behind her, Caine cleared his throat quietly, and Jupiter tipped her head back to look up at him. His brows were up in question, and she opened a hand, go ahead.

Caine looked at the physician. “You didn’t use Regenex.”
The man—brown-haired and brown-skinned and utterly ordinary-looking to Jupiter’s eyes—drew himself up indignantly. “Of course not. Not on a Splice.”

The little room was already quiet, but all sound seemed to fade away for Jupiter in that moment, as the cold rage rose up around her. This time it was mixed with the mental nausea that Regenex always brought, and she balanced for an instant on the knife-edge between outrage at the bigotry and outrage at the monstrousness, before choosing which side to fall down. This time.

“Why not?” she asked, her voice level.

The physician gaped at her. “Because he was a Splice. Your Majesty, you can’t possibly—”

One of the androids, a female one whose skin was blue-black and who possessed two sets of arms, put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Your Majesty,” she cut in evenly, “those were the standing orders of the late Queen. We assumed that you did not wish to change those; if we were in error, we apologize.”

Jupiter looked her over. Androids didn’t seem to have much emotion, and she didn’t flinch at the perusal, merely holding the calm expression Jupiter had seen on Gemma Chatterjee and Sevet.

“Let me get this straight,” Jupiter said, equally calm. “Seraphi told you not to use Regenex on Splices. At all? Under any circumstances?”

The chief physician pulled his arm away from the android, finally having the wit to look nervous. “Not ordinarily, no. For Splices under other commands, such as your Majesty’s Royal Guard, that’s different.” His gaze flicked past her to Caine.

Jupiter held up a hand. One small part of her was pettily pleased at how everyone simply froze, waiting for her to speak, but she tried to ignore that. “New order,” she said. “If someone comes in here to be treated, I don’t care if they’re human, Splice, Keeper, or a starving zmaj, I want them treated all the same, do you understand?”

She leaned forward in her chair, and the entire medical team straightened, looking as if they wanted to bolt. “Yes, your Majesty,” the chief physician said. “But—but the expense—”

Jupiter sat back. “See Miss Virtu about that,” she said, and tried not to think about the obscenity she was authorizing. They’re already dead, she told herself. You can’t help them. You can help the living.

It still made her want to vomit. But she’d known all along that there would be decisions to make with no good answers—it was one of the reasons she’d hesitated so long before committing to this whole thing. “Now. Where is Twenty-three’s body?”

The chief physician shrugged. “Still in the morgue—we didn’t want to dispose of it until you had heard our report.”

Jupiter gave him an unamused look that had him stiffening again. “Good, because I don’t want anything done with him until I talk to his people. Got that?”

The physician looked as if he wanted to argue, but fortunately for Jupiter’s temper, he merely bowed. “Yes, your Majesty."

There was something to be said, she thought sourly, for absolute power, if it made annoying people do what she told them. Jupiter pushed to her feet. “Good,” she said again, and pointed at the android woman. “You, Doctor—what’s your name again?”
The android bowed. “Crisp, your Majesty.”

“Doctor Crisp. See me tomorrow sometime. Talk to Miss Adias.” Jupiter didn’t wait for another bow, just hooked her arm through Caine’s. “Thank you all for your efforts.” The words seemed to stick in her throat, but they needed saying even if the team had treated Twenty-three like a broken toy instead of a human being. *I guess they don’t know any better.*

They murmured diffident replies, and Jupiter left them behind, rising back up the elevator beam on Caine’s arm to the open air of the main floor. The sky outside the windows was dark with night, and even the open space of the atrium felt constricted to Jupiter.

“Cherbodie.” Maybe it was silly and spoiled, but she was going to do it anyway. “Tell the engineers to take us to midmorning, okay? And stay there until I tell them otherwise.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cherbodie replied. There was no perceptible change underfoot when she and Caine reached their suite, but by the time Jupiter had finished brushing her teeth and changing for bed, there was a line of light on the horizon.

“Join me?” she asked, sitting on the edge of the huge bed, and Caine gave her a soft smile and sat down next to her.

She watched the sun rise from the safety of his arms, and when its beams touched her face, she let herself fall asleep.
“This is weird,” Jupiter muttered, but apparently the microphone in the helmet was good, because she heard Aggie chuckle.

“It is,” the economist agreed. Jupiter glanced over at her, but the edge of the helmet got in the way, and she had to turn her whole body to see Aggie.

When Eron had appeared at Adias’ summons, his answer to the question had been pressure suits. They were very similar to the emergency suits Caine had used in Balem’s refinery and were put on much the same way, which had left Aggie grumbling about another technology for the list, and while they were a lot more flexible than what Jupiter had seen of Earth’s spacesuits, they were still somewhat clumsy.

“There are better ones available, your Majesty,” Eron had said apologetically. “But we don’t have any on hand.”

It didn’t matter. Jupiter didn’t want to do anything particularly athletic, just explore a bit, and they would suit the purpose. The weirdness came more from walking down a country road in the sunshine, accompanied by two men with wings and no suits, on a sunny day that almost looked like Earth.

The little village wasn’t far away, just a quarter-mile or so, but Jupiter had wanted to practice moving in the suit before she met any of the inhabitants again. Asking Aggie if she wanted to come along had been impulse, but Jupiter hadn’t been surprised when she’d said yes.

They walked up to the top of a small hill. Jupiter had figured out a sort of shuffle in the suit, since its boots didn’t allow her to feel any part of the ground, and she’d only fallen once. Caine had picked her up almost before she’d hit the dirt, and the suit had cushioned her against any injury, but it had still been embarrassing.

Below the hill was the village and the empty landing pad. Jupiter turned again to Aggie. “You going to be okay?”

Aggie grinned at her, one springy curl escaping from the cap beneath her helmet. “I am going to wander around the surface of my second alien planet. I’m going to be just fine.”

Jupiter couldn’t help smiling back. “All right then.” She turned herself to look at Stinger, who jerked his head at Caine.

“You stay with Dr. Thompson,” he said, and lifted an arm to signal the two other Stormbreakers flying overhead. Caine didn’t object, though his brows pinched together, and Jupiter kept her mouth shut as well. Stinger had explained it, when the Stormbreakers first arrived; he understood Caine’s position, but he still wanted to cycle the others in and out from time to time, even when Caine was on duty. It made sense, and Jupiter hadn’t argued.

She waved goodbye to the both of them and trudged carefully down the hill, Stinger beside her and the twins patrolling overhead. Eron and the ship were already back in the air, Jupiter knew, waiting to be summoned when they were ready to go. It was all very safe.

It still felt weird.

She set aside the emotion, however, as they entered the village. The houses were all one story and
looked fairly primitive, but Jupiter supposed that a weather-controlled planet didn’t require too much in the way of insulation.

She hadn’t told them she was coming, this time, out of some irrational fear that they would figure out a way to put another dead body at her feet even though Cherbodie had assured her that her new decree had been delivered. And since it was the middle of the day, Jupiter wasn’t expecting many people to be around—presumably, they were mostly working.

But as they got to the middle of the cluster of buildings, people were starting to emerge from doorways. They gathered, wide-eyed, in a loose semicircle as Jupiter stopped at the landing pad, and Stinger gestured Laur down to stand with him behind Jupiter. She didn’t blame him; these people were big, in a way that was much more obvious now that she was on a level with them.

They didn’t seem threatening, however. They really did look a lot alike, with the same dark hair and big dark eyes, and overlong faces; their skins ranged from milk-pale to a sort of dappled brown-red, and one actually had patches of black on a yellow background, but other than that they looked related.

In fact, they were. Jupiter had had Cherbodie do a little research; all the farming groups on the planet were batches, purchased in groups from a Splicer who specialized in agricultural workers. There was some kind of standing contract to replace them when they died of old age or injury; Jupiter had bitten her lip hard, and set the problem of buying people aside for the moment.

“Hi,” Jupiter said after a long, awkward moment. “Sorry to just drop in on you all, but I need to talk to you.”

Ten minutes later she was seated stiffly in a large chair in the farmers’ communal meeting hall, with the four eldest in the village. It appeared that it was the oldest members who ran things, inasmuch as they needed running, and they had come in from the fields when they had heard of Jupiter’s arrival. Now she looked back at their mild, puzzled faces, and wished she didn’t have to have the barrier of the pressure suit between them.

“I’m sorry about Twenty-three,” Jupiter blurted, when none of them said anything. “I never meant for him to die.” Her words echoed just slightly in the open, white-painted space.

The elders blinked at her. “It was his privilege,” one of them offered after a moment. “He was pleased to give his life in your honor.”

“Yeah, no.” Guilt was giving way to anger again. “I don’t care what Seraphi did. I don’t consider it an honor and I don’t want it to happen again.”

They still looked baffled, even a little hurt, and suddenly words were pouring out of her. “Look, I didn’t ask for this Recurrence thing, but I got it anyway. And one of the things my mom taught me is that if you’re responsible for something, you take care of it.” She managed to cut off I didn’t ask for you all either before it got out of her mouth.

“You are my subjects. I am your Queen. That means I damn well value you, and not just for—for what you can do. I value your lives.” Jupiter would have leaned forward again if the suit had allowed it, but she was afraid she would fall out of the chair. “No more sacrifices.”

There was a long silence while the four of them stared at her. Finally Thirty-one—the eldest after Twenty-three—bowed her head. “We will obey.”

They all still looked confused, but as Jupiter watched, the one furthest to her left raised his head
slowly, eyes widening as if a new thought was dawning.

She hoped it was.

Jupiter asked for a tour of the village. There wasn’t much to see, mostly houses—apparently the farmers tended to form little family groups when given the option—and a couple of buildings for storage, and repair of equipment. Ships brought supplies of food, clothing, tools and the like, and there were comm consoles in each dwelling for information and entertainment, but it still seemed a very sparse and dull existence to her.

“Where’s your graveyard?” she asked, when the tour was over. *I want to see where they’ll put him.*

Thirty-one looked confused again. “Your Majesty? I don’t understand that word.”

Jupiter paused. “Um. The place you bury people when they die?” *Maybe they don’t do that. There’s plenty of places on Earth where they don’t—*

Thirty-one drew back slightly, looking a little shocked. “We would never be so wasteful. The dead are made into fertilizer, as they should be.”

“Oh. Well. That’s...practical.” Actually, as Jupiter thought about it, it sounded better than body preservation, if more than a bit gross. “But do you, uh, remember people?”

The elder’s gaze flicked away, and her reddish skin reddened further. She licked her lips nervously, and Jupiter couldn’t help stepping forward to touch her arm, even though it made Thirty-one stiffen. “It’s okay,” Jupiter said. “Look, whatever you do, I won’t be mad.” *I hope.*

Thirty-one stepped away, and Jupiter let her gloved hand drop. “We have a tradition,” the elder said slowly. “It’s against protocol, but…”

Jupiter gave her her best appealing look. “Will you show me? Please?”

Stinger coughed behind her, but Jupiter ignored him. Sure, she could order Thirty-one to do anything, but that wasn’t the *point.*

Thirty-one hesitated, then gestured for Jupiter to follow her.

It was a little ossuary beneath the meeting house, lined with stone shelves that were about a quarter filled with polished skulls. They weren’t labeled, but Jupiter had no doubt that Thirty-one knew the name of each one. “Truly, taking so little does not affect production,” she murmured, still stiff. “It isn’t practical, but…”

Jupiter shook her head quickly, then held up both hands. “It’s fine! Really. I think this is great.”

Actually, it was eerie, the dim light reflecting off the smooth ivory curves, but the whole thing seemed more pathetic than gruesome to Jupiter. She followed Thirty-one back upstairs and gestured her to follow out into the sunshine again. “What was Twenty-three like?”

“Like? He was a good worker,” Thirty-one said, looking slightly offended. Jupiter nodded.

**“Oh, I figured that! I just meant--what did he like? What did he do on his time off? That kind of thing.”** Asking about his dreams, Jupiter realized suddenly, was not a good idea, when these people were dumped on a planet and told to farm it and never given any choice at all. *Crap, they can’t even survive most places, even if they had a way to leave.*
“Oh.” Thirty-one relaxed. “He...liked to sing. Well, we all do, but he was a fine singer, in the evenings.” She smiled a little. “And he loved to watch the stars, to chart their paths.”

“That’s cool,” Jupiter said, smiling back. “My dad was the same way.”

“He remembered the stars,” said the youngest elder, stepping in from the side. “Most of us were brought here in suspension, but his batch traveled awake, and there were windows in the cargo bay. He would tell us stories about the stars he saw.”

Thirty-one made a disapproving sound. “Improper,” she murmured. Jupiter glanced over at Stinger, who was back to maintaining his usual impassivity, and wondered how much social conditioning went into keeping Splices from wanting more.

She turned to Thirty-four. “Did you like the stories?”

The elder shrugged, looking abashed. “When I was young. But after that--they were just stories.”

He gestured at the sky. “He would have liked to fly again, I think. But he was always a bit--odd.”

Thirty-one hissed, frowning, and waved Thirty-four away. “Please ignore him, your Majesty. I assure you that Twenty-three was a perfect worker in every way, despite his stories.”

“I believe you,” Jupiter said. “It’s okay, really.”

She left the village with a basketful of vegetables she wasn’t sure she wanted to eat, and the memory of them all gathering to wave her off. Caine and Aggie were already back on the little ship, but both of them respected Jupiter’s desire to be alone as she punched the button to remove her suit and moved to the window.

By the time they reached the alcazar, Jupiter knew what she was going to do about Twenty-three. I’m done.

Jupiter stared out the window of her suite, not really seeing the glory of the clouds spread out below the alcazar. It was all tainted, now; the whole place seemed haunted. Not by Twenty-three himself, but by the malevolent ghost of a woman who would accept casual death as a tribute.

She didn’t want to stay any longer.

“Well, you don’t have to,” she muttered to herself. There was no one to hear; Caine was off doing his morning exercises. “Just pick another planet and go.”

But the thought held little appeal. Jupiter shoved away from the window and went to get dressed, wondering glumly what the next one would be like.

Breakfast relieved her mood a little, but the question came up again afterwards.

“What’s next on the list?” Jupiter tapped the display button on the sheave she was holding, and a network of planets sprang into existence above the screen, all with the little tags she could pull for more information.

Stinger looked across the debris of the breakfast table and shrugged. “Any one you like, Majesty. They’re all hoping you’ll drop in.”

Jupiter made a face, and thumbed the sheave off. Just at the moment she didn’t want to have to deal
with another planet full of people who considered her one step down from a minor deity. “Hm. Is there any place I can go that I don’t actually own?”

The rest of the people around the table all looked at her with various levels of confusion or interest. Jupiter shrugged. “I just—I want a break, okay? Someplace where I don’t have to be Queen.”

Judging from Stinger’s and Tsing’s expressions, she’d just said something borderline scandalous, but Aggie was nodding. Caine looked uncertain.

“There are resorts,” Tsing offered after a moment. “The Entitled ones would probably, ah, not suit your taste, but there are others—you could visit incognito.”

Stinger nodded. “You’ve also got a yacht or two in your fleet. Wouldn’t take more than a day or so to get one of those freshened up and ready to go.”

Jupiter pictured something like Kalique’s baroque decorating scheme and hid a shudder. “Maybe later.”

Kiza sat up. “How about Earth?”

That sounded very good, but—“I really don’t want to have to deal with my family until Christmas.”

Kiza shrugged. “So don’t,” she said. “Dad’s place is still there—or you could go anywhere else, really.” She grinned. “Tuscany, maybe.”

“Huh.” Jupiter set down the sheave. I could, couldn’t I? She had all the money she could possibly need, and now she even knew that not all of it had come from the Regenex business. I could visit the places I’ve been hearing about all my life. That...sounds pretty good, actually.”

Kiza reached over to snag the sheave and turned it on again, clearly prepared to take notes. “Italy, then?”

Jupiter thought about it. “No, not yet,” she said. “Let’s go where it’s summer. Australia?”

Kiza sat up straight. “No—New Zealand!”

The same thought occurred to Jupiter and Aggie at the same time, and all three of them spoke at once. “Hobbiton!”

Everybody else at the table looked utterly baffled, and Jupiter burst out laughing.

It felt good.

“Your Majesty.” Adias bobbed a bow at the door to Jupiter’s office, as expressionless as ever.

“Hey,” Jupiter said, swinging her chair away from her desk. “Thanks for stopping by. I wanted to talk to you about the budget for this place. Miss Virtu says you guys have got it worked out, yeah?”

The Splice ducked her head again. “Yes, your Majesty. But if you wish to entertain in the previous style—”

Jupiter waved that off. “No. I’m not staying.”

She was pretty sure that Adias didn’t like her, and certain that Adias didn’t like having to be the person in charge, so why did she get the sudden feeling that the woman was disappointed? Adias’
face didn’t change, but something did, maybe the cant of her wings.

“Will your Majesty be returning?” she said after a moment.

“Dunno.” Some perversity in Jupiter made her want to be less formal to Adias. “Probably, after a while. This place is still pretty neat.”

Adias waited again, and when Jupiter didn’t continue she spoke. “Will you be installing first- or second-tier staff here, or should we fill the vacancies ourselves?”

“Huh. Good question.” Jupiter bit her lip. “I’m going to have to get back to you on that one.” Stinger’s admonition about needing more staff replayed in her memory. “Hold tight for now, and I’ll let you know.”

She regarded Adias, wondering for the hundredth time what the woman was spliced with, but it had always seemed rude to ask. *I’m sorry I’m not the queen you expected* hovered on her tongue, but what came out when she opened her mouth was “Did Seraphi go down to the surface a lot? I mean, I know there’s the ship, but there didn’t seem to be any pressure suits.”

The question had been nagging at her; surely Seraphi hadn’t required a sacrifice each time she’d gone down, or she’d be out of farmers pretty quickly, but both Eron and Adias had implied that it was a regular thing.

Adias’ voice was bland. “Her late Majesty did not use a suit.”

Jupiter blinked. “But—didn’t the pressure change hurt her?” She wondered wildly if Entitled were somehow immune to decompression sickness, or--

“She would bathe in Regenex immediately upon her return,” Adias said. “That restored her. I believe,” she went on thoughtfully, “that her late Majesty valued the effect her fortitude had on her visitors.”

*Gah.* Jupiter just barely kept the incredulous disgust off her face. *Is there anything Seraphi did that wasn’t awful?*

“I think I’ll stick with the suits,” she said finally. “Thanks for all your help, Adias, I know it wasn’t something you’re used to.”

Adias bowed once more. “It is an honor to serve your Majesty,” she said, and the echo of Twenty-three’s words turned Jupiter’s stomach.

Then she was gone. Jupiter watched her go, then turned back to her desk and bent down to thump her head against its surface, gently. Several times. “I swear,” she told the smooth hardness, “I *swear* I will never get used to this.”

Neither of the Skyjackers standing guard in the room spoke, but she could *feel* them being worried at her. Jupiter sighed and sat up. “Never mind. Time to get on to the next thing.”

And try not to think how many deaths had fueled a 90,000-year lifetime.

They were somewhere near the heart of what Jupiter had always referred to as the Andromeda Galaxy, chosen because it was the same galaxy that held Cherbodie and its sun. Nobody had so much as blinked when she’d said she wanted to make a stop on the way back to Earth.
It reminded her a little of the empty spot of space where she and Caine had been stranded, but only a little, because this location was filled with stars.

It was glorious, and more so through the face shield of her spacesuit than the viewport of the ship; globes and sparks and clouds of light and color, impossibly vivid, dizzying in their brilliance, to the point where there was more light than darkness surrounding her. No matter where she looked, there was stunning beauty.

Jupiter sighed, and carefully didn’t look towards her own feet. This was only her second spacewalk, and she was still prone to sudden bouts of disorientation when her brain groped for the stability of gravity. Caine and Absaba were just a few meters behind her, between Jupiter and the ship, ready to grab her if anything went wrong, but she didn’t want to freak out on them.

She looked down at the transparent box in her hands. It was made of something like Plexiglas, though Jupiter had been assured that it was much stronger; the contents were floating within, as weightless as she was.

“All right,” she told it softly. “I guess we’re here.” She took another look at the stars and nebulae that surrounded them. “I can see why you liked it—it’s amazingly gorgeous.”

The freshly polished skull had no reply, but Jupiter wasn’t expecting one. “I sent your body home to be part of Cherbodie,” she said. “But I thought you might like this instead of spending forever underground. You can’t see the stars from there.”

Her gloves tightened on the box. “I’m sorry,” she said, quieter still. “You shouldn’t have had to die; I didn’t want that.”

The orbits of bone gleamed a little in the cool colored light, and Jupiter let out a long breath. Twenty-three was beyond giving blame or forgiveness now, but she still felt like the apology was necessary. “Anyway. You’ll probably outlast Cherbodie out here, so enjoy it.”

She opened her fingers, nudged the box gently. Ever so slowly, it began to move away, and on impulse Jupiter reached out to tap it so that it began to tumble. “There, now you’ll get to see everything.”

She watched it drift until it was too small to see any longer, not caring what the Skyjackers would think of the whole thing, then turned to go back inside.

*Best I can do, for now.*

But deep inside, she made a promise. *I’ll do better, later.* For Caine, for Stinger, and now for Twenty-three and his people.

*I will.*

She had the power, now, whether she wanted it or not.

It was up to her to use it.

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Captain Tsing lent Jupiter Officer Percadium to handle the logistics of the vacation; it was one of his talents, Tsing said, and since it wasn’t one of Jupiter’s, she was glad to accept. She wasn’t sure how easily he would adapt to Earth-style business, but Percadium assured her with a cocky grin that he’d dealt with far worse; the only potential issue was the interfaces, and even then the systems on board the Neva worked pretty well with the Internet.
Unlimited funds did do a lot to offset the difficulties of trying to find bookings for a whole bunch of people at the height of summer. Jupiter hoped that Percadium hadn’t charmed anyone into bumping someone’s reservation just to give them space, but she didn’t ask, either.

The two weeks in New Zealand were just what Jupiter needed to relax. It was tremendous fun wandering around with the Stormbreakers in mufti; Jupiter felt much worse about making them wear the likealizers than they felt about wearing them.

Though she did know they took turns sneaking out at night to go flying.

Granted, touring Middle-Earth with a bunch of aliens, one of her high-school teachers, and occasionally a noisy cat was not what she’d had in mind when she’d dreamed about travel, but it was a lot of fun. And Caine really enjoyed the Weta Workshop tour, and Stinger loved the food, and Aggie kept going out to local pubs and getting into endless discussions about the economic impact of colonialism with the locals, and Kiza kept buying silly souvenirs and trying to talk Jupiter into a lightning trip to Tokyo. Jupiter took her telescope out into the countryside to look at the stars, and wondered with bewildered amusement what her father would have thought of it all.

For Thanksgiving, she went up to the Neva in the middle of the night to Skype her family. Lyudmila propped the computer on a stack of magazines on a chair so Jupiter could join them for dinner, and Jupiter enjoyed herself thoroughly and won two arguments since she wasn’t actually trying to talk and eat at the same time.

Captain Tsing was waiting for her when she left the little cabin where she’d made the call. “Did it go well, your Majesty?”

“It was excellent.” Jupiter beamed at her. “Mikka stepped up and initiated the annual food fight with Vladie, since I couldn’t do it.”

Tsing chuckled. “Sounds like the last night before leave in the Legion.”

Jupiter cocked her head. “Do you have celebrations like that--out there?” She waved a hand vaguely.

“Some worlds do,” Tsing said. “But each culture has their own festivals, and most are like Earth, with many cultures on one world.”

“Sure.” Jupiter felt herself flush a little. “I keep forgetting that.”

“Ascension takes time, your Majesty,” Tsing said with another smile, folding her arms and leaning one shoulder against the corridor wall. “There’s only one universal celebration, and even Orus Day isn’t observed everywhere.”

“What’s Orus Day?” Jupiter stretched a little, feeling the lack of sleep creeping up on her but too interested to quit yet.

“Supposedly it’s the day humanity first achieved spaceflight, leaving Orus’ atmosphere for the first time.” Tsing lifted her free shoulder. “No one now can be sure the date’s accurate, of course. But it’s observed once per Orus-year, clear across the ‘verse. In different ways, depending, but no one ignores it.”

“Why? Is there a penalty or something?” Jupiter wasn’t really serious, but Tsing nodded. “What, seriously?”

The captain hesitated, and Jupiter could see her choosing he words. “It’s a...reminder, Majesty. That Orus is the political and economic center of the ‘verse.”
The connection wasn’t hard to make. “And that the Entitled control it.” And by extension, everything else.

Tsing bowed her head. “Yes.”

Jupiter made a face, feeling the now-familiar weariness creep into her bones. “It’s Regenex, isn’t it? That’s the key to Entitleds’ power.” She’d already known that, but to hear it confirmed…

“The Regenex industry, yes.” Tsing was watching her carefully. “The desire to preserve one’s own life is one of humanity’s most basic instincts, your Majesty. Is it so surprising?”

Jupiter wanted to answer yes, because it was life from death, but it would have been a lie; there were countless examples on Earth to counter it. “It should be,” she grumbled, and Tsing’s lips twitched upwards.

“Take heart,” she advised. “You are one of the few people in the ‘verse who doesn’t have to submit to it.”

Jupiter eyed her. “That doesn’t really make me feel any better.” But she couldn’t help smiling back a little. Jupiter didn’t know Captain Tsing well yet--the woman was extremely self-contained--but she felt solid. Trustworthy, almost the same way Stinger was. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask--how did you end up in the Aegis from the Legion?”

“Oh--” Tsing pushed away from the wall, letting her arms drop. “That’s a long story, your Majesty.”

Jupiter shrugged. “I’m awake, you’re awake,” she pointed out. “If you want to. Unless you have something you need to get back to…”

They ended up in the small space of the officers’ lounge, with cups of moloto from the beverage dispenser there, and with the chairs arranged so they could look out the viewport at the curve of Earth below. Since the Neva’s orbit was synched to New Zealand just now, they could see little besides the gemlike spatters of night-lit cities and the faintest bloom of light reflecting from clouds or ocean, but Jupiter still found it beautiful.

It was just the two of them; Honch had come aboard with Jupiter, but Jupiter had promptly ordered them to stand down and relax, because if she wasn’t safe with a shipload of her own security, when would she be safe, and Honch had made a worried growling noise but acceded.

There’re times when Stinger’s two-guard protocol makes sense, but sometimes it’s just annoying.

And one of the nice things about being the Queen was that she could countermand his protocols. Not that she was going to do it arbitrarily, she wasn’t stupid, but there were moments, and this was one of them.


The captain looked thoughtful. “Well. I was born on a tradeship--it’s a vessel that travels from system to system, buying and selling goods,” she said to Jupiter’s raised brows. “Most tradeships are run by either clans or corporations; in my case, my family had a five-vessel fleet, which made us comfortable if not wealthy.”

Jupiter nodded encouragingly, and Tsing sipped from her cup before continuing. “Most of us grew up to be traders, but I always wanted something more than that.” Tsing’s lips quirked. “Adventure, if you will.”
“I get that,” Jupiter murmured. Tsing tipped her cup in Jupiter’s direction.

“Yes. Not being old or wise enough to understand the value of boredom, I took my due-share and applied to the Legion. It was tough—a tenth of the recruits don’t survive the initial training—but I loved it.”

She was smiling as if looking back at good memories, and Jupiter leaned her elbows on the table and kept listening.

Tsing talked about battles and comrades, missions and victories and losses, and—Jupiter could tell—added details she might have otherwise skipped, to fill in some of the gaps in Jupiter’s knowledge. Jupiter heard about Abukesh, and who fought there, and why; she heard about the great doomed charge of the Quartz Nebula, and learned in passing that every intelligent species that humanity met in the vastness of space was either conquered or annihilated; and she listened to Tsing’s dissatisfaction with the Aegis and how it was used—less an arm of justice than a tool of the establishment.

“Technically speaking, I’m the establishment,” Jupiter pointed out, amused, and Diomika—she’d given Jupiter permission to use her first name—snorted.

“You’re a new thing. And it seems I haven’t lost my taste for adventure.” She hadn’t quite brought herself to use Jupiter’s first name in return, but the your Majestys had slackened off over the course of the night.

Jupiter gave a conceding shrug and drank the last of her second cup of moloto. Out the viewport, Earth was revealing itself in the delicate light of dawn as they rolled towards the sun, and Jupiter couldn’t muffle her sudden yawn.

“Sorry,” she said behind her hand. “Have I kept you up all night too?”

Diomika rubbed a fingertip over one of the embeds in her cheek and smiled. “Only half of it, Majesty. Don’t worry about it.”

When Jupiter woke that afternoon, having landed in the dawn and gone straight to bed, the big house Percadium had rented for them all was...not quiet. Jupiter lay still in the wide bed in the master suite, too warm and sleepy to move just yet, and listened with some bemusement to the muffled thumps and footsteps and conversations she couldn’t quite make out. Something was clearly going on, but it couldn’t be something dangerous, or someone would have come in to watch over her by now.

Somebody laughed, an excited sound, and a door thumped shut. Jupiter sat up at last, curious, and then got out of bed to use the little attached bathroom and brush her hair before going to investigate, but she’d just come back out when a tap sounded on her door. “Yeah?” she called.

Caine stuck his head in. His eyes were lit with excitement, and he was grinning. “Oh, good, you’re awake,” he said, and came inside, closing the door firmly behind himself.

“Should I even ask what’s going on?” Jupiter put her hands on her hips and raised her brows, but she couldn’t help grinning back. He was just so adorable.

“No,” Caine said without hesitation, and held up what looked like a pair of wraparound sunglasses. “But if your Majesty will be kind enough to put these on, she’ll find out.”

“Oooookay.” Jupiter took them and slid them on, and discovered that she could see nothing at all. “Please tell me these aren’t peril-sensitive.”
“Um...no,” Caine said, sounding a little confused, and picked her up in one arm, like a child. Jupiter squawked and grabbed a handful of his vest, legs going around his waist, and felt him vibrate with amusement. “Ready?”

“Oh, sure,” Jupiter said dryly, but she was still smiling and she knew he could tell. Caine pivoted, and Jupiter clung tighter; it was harder to balance when she couldn’t see anything. Then his hand was on her head, pushing down a little, and Jupiter obediently ducked--presumably to go through the bedroom door.

He carried her down the stairs to the main floor, and though the house was now silent, Jupiter could absolutely feel the excitement. She lost track of exactly where they were until she heard a sliding door open, and then the warmth of the outside hit her skin, and Caine deposited her on her feet and lifted away the glasses in one smooth motion.

“Surprise!”

Jupiter blinked, and the back garden of the house came into focus. It was full of people, not just her usual crew but almost everybody who’d come to Earth on this trip, and they were all beaming at her.

And in the middle of it all was a long table, crammed with food--it took the sight of the turkey for Jupiter to realize what it was all for.

“Holy crap, you made Thanksgiving?” She gaped at them, and Aggie laughed and edged out of the crowd.

“We thought you shouldn’t have to miss out on the feast. It’s just as well you had a nap--we were going to have to lure you away today otherwise.”

Jupiter blinked rapidly, trying to clear her eyes of a sudden rush of tears. It was true that she’d been sorry to miss the actual meal, even if she’d managed to spend it talking with her family, but what mattered much more was that this motley group of people cared enough to set up a dinner in a tradition that was alien to all but one of them.

Just to make me feel better.

“You guys,” she managed, trying to keep her voice from wobbling. “You guys are the absolute best.”

Applause apparently wasn’t a thing in space, but there was laughter and a few whoops, and Jupiter’s cheeks hurt with the width of her smile. “So do I have to give a speech, or can we just eat?”

More laughter, and Aggie put a hand on Jupiter’s back and shoved lightly. “You’re the queen--you get to start.”

It was a bit intimidating with all those gazes fixed on her, but Jupiter stepped forward, reaching for one of the stacked dinner plates. The table was set up buffet-style, and Jupiter could see other, smaller tables with chairs beyond the crowd, which made much more sense than one massive setup.

There was a lot of food, but then there were a lot of people as well--Stinger and Kiza and Caine and Agatha, all of the other Stormbreakers, more than half the Neva’s crew, and the rest of Jupiter’s entourage, such as Virtu and her people. Jupiter hoped there would be enough for everyone to eat, but as she walked down the table making selections, it seemed so. There was the usual traditional foods to go with the turkey, but Jupiter also saw a number of Russian dishes and quite a few more that she didn’t recognize at all but that were clearly not from Earth. Bet they’re festival foods too...somewhere.
...How the hell did they get all this set up in a day?

She got about halfway down the table before noticing that they were all still watching her. Jupiter rolled her eyes. “Well? Come on, guys, it’s getting cold!”

There was a pause, and then Kiza chirped “Okay!” and grabbed a plate. Aggie started to laugh, and the crowd began sorting itself into lines on either side of the table.

There was enough food, in the end. Jupiter chose a table and was soon joined by Caine and Kiza (and briefly by Edsel, who was trolling for tidbits), but when she’d finished her first serving Jupiter got up to wander around and visit some of the other tables to chat. It seemed the thing to do somehow, to thank them all for putting Thanksgiving together for her, and it was fun to talk with people in a casual setting, though some of them were still intimidated by her.

Caine, of course, hovered quietly behind Jupiter, but that was fine too, especially since every time she would cruise back to the table for another bite of something he would eat more too.

When Jupiter settled at last next to Aggie—tugging Caine into a chair and then sitting on his lap, which he protested not at all—she put out a foot and nudged her former teacher lightly. “Don’t think I haven’t figured out this was your idea,” she said. “Thanks.”

Aggie was stroking the comatose Edsel, whose belly was swollen with handouts. “I admit to acting as advisor, but it was really Kiza’s idea,” she said, smirking a little.

Jupiter had to laugh. The sun had gone down and twilight was taking over, though there were lights on the back of the house; several of the Stormbreakers were setting up torches of some kind in the yard, though to Jupiter’s way of thinking open flame was hazardous with all those wings about.

“Are you doing okay?” Aggie asked quietly. Jupiter shrugged, feeling full and content and a little sleepy, and put her hand over Caine’s where it was wrapped around her waist, so she could push her fingers between his.

“I think so, for new and exciting definitions of okay.” She smirked back as Aggie chuckled. “I guess this is the kind of thing I’m going to have to learn to roll with,” and she waved at the sky, knowing that Aggie would understand that she meant the whole Cherbodie debacle, “but I really did need this break too.”

Aggie nodded. Jupiter cocked her head. “How are you doing? Do you want to stop by home while we’re here?”

Aggie stiffened slightly, and Jupiter bit her lip. “You can stay, too, if you want,” she offered, though the thought of losing Aggie’s sense and insight almost scared her. “I wouldn’t keep you if you wanted to quit.”

Aggie breathed out on a laugh and shook her head. “No. Thanks for thinking of it, honey, but I’ll stick with you for the moment. This whole thing does feel like a dream, sometimes, but--I guess I don’t want to break the illusion just yet.”

“Tell me about it,” Jupiter said wryly, and made Aggie laugh again. “Seriously, though, I’m glad.”

Aggie pulled gently on one of Edsel’s paws, producing no reaction whatsoever. “I haven’t finished my study, anyway. And you promised to introduce me to Kalique.”

“Your Majesty!” The interruption made them all look up at Stinger, who was holding a plate piled high with pastry. “Why did nobody tell me about this?”
Jupiter blinked at him. Stinger was a bit wild-eyed, and the fork he was gripping looked almost like a weapon. “Uh...tell you about what?”

Aggie squinted at the plate, and then snickered. “Baklava,” she said to Jupiter.

*Oh.* “I’m not really into Greek food,” Jupiter said apologetically. Stinger made an inarticulate noise through his mouthful; there were phyllo flakes on his vest.

Kiza materialized out of the darkness to corral her father. “Sorry about this,” she said. “He was doing okay with the glazed carrots, and then he got to the desserts.”

She peered around Stinger’s bulk. “A little help here, Caine?”

Jupiter felt more than heard Caine’s grumble, but she patted his arm, and he sighed and set her carefully on her feet before rising. He tapped his comm implant and muttered something, and a few seconds later Soren was there to watch over Jupiter as Caine helped Kiza guide Stinger away. “It’s all right,” Caine said back over his shoulder as they left. “It’s just that honey’s a stimulant for apid Splices.”

Jupiter watched them go, surprised and amused. “Learn something new every day,” she commented to Aggie, who shook her head with a smile.

“Y’know,” Jupiter went on, tilting her head back to look up at the deepening sky, “this is the first Thanksgiving meal I can remember that didn’t involve **arguing.**”

“That’s because you missed the prep,” Aggie answered, dry and amused.

“Mmm.” The stars were coming out, strange southern patterns to Jupiter’s eyes though she could only see the brightest past the lights, and stranger still because now she knew what some of them looked like from much closer. “Thank you. Again.”

She could hear the smile in Aggie’s voice, though Jupiter had her head tilted back to look up. “Happy Thanksgiving, your Majesty.”

Jupiter grinned, and kept looking.
Of all the places Stinger had imagined her Majesty might want to go in the weeks between her home’s Thanksgiving and its Christmas, the Grand Canyon was not one of them.

He was getting more used to her unpredictability, if that were possible, or at least he was letting it bother him less. It wasn’t exactly the most desirable trait in an employer, from a security standpoint, but so far it hadn’t caused any real problems. And it kept them all alert, which was a good thing.

But as the shielded ship slowed to hover over the moonlit gorge, Stinger finally gave in to his curiosity and turned to Jupiter. “Why are we here, your Majesty?”

Jupiter fastened up the heavy jacket she was wearing and fiddled with her wristband, bringing up the controls to her boots. She was practically humming with excitement. “To go flying, of course.” She gave him a huge grin. “Are you coming?”

“I--what?” Stinger blinked at her, startled, as the rest of the Stormbreakers crowded into the corridor, jostling and eager.

“I had Officer Chatterjee scan for lifeforms. There’s nobody close enough to see us.” Jupiter laid a hand on his arm. “Come on, Stinger, have some fun for once.”

“When’s the last time you stretched your wings, Commander?” Laur added cheerfully. “You haven’t been up since Cherbodie, have you?”

Taken aback, Stinger groped for a reason to refuse, but he couldn’t find one.

“All right, all right! If only to keep an eye on you lot--”

The Stormbreakers rumbled in approval, and Jupiter patted him. “Excellent. Okay, guys, somebody open the hatch and let’s go!”

And that was how it was. The belly hatch irised open, and the twins were out first, wings spreading in perfect synchronicity as soon as they cleared the ship; her Majesty dropped next with a whoop, boots igniting and Caine right behind her; and then there was some slightly undignified shoving. But within seconds they were all out, tumbling through the cold air and the silvery light, into the glorious space of the huge canyon.

Stinger had seen similar features on other worlds, even bigger ones, but that didn’t detract from this one’s beauty. It was large enough to make them all feel tiny, a glorious puzzle of endless rock and sharp-cut shadow, and they dove and rose and raced and chased through it, laughter and shouts echoing back from the hard walls and bouncing oddly off the water when they dropped that far.

Jupiter’s boots couldn’t offer the same speed and maneuverability as their wings, of course, but she didn’t seem to mind, and eventually Soren organized Honch and Absaba and Glasta and Caine into a boots-only race with her Majesty, who came in second and elbowed Caine laughingly for letting her pass him.
She was right, Stinger thought as he slowed to rest a bit, panting from the last dive and climb. It was fun.

And by the time they were all worn out and piling back into the little ship to return to the Neva, he could see it.

They were more than a unit, now. They were well on their way to becoming a family, pulling in around their strange little Queen.

It made Stinger sigh a little, because while they would work better and fight fiercer for the closeness, it meant also that they would hurt deeper when, inevitably, one of them was lost.

Grab air, old man, he told himself. It’s what soldiers are for, in the end. You know that.

And in the meantime, he had again what he’d thought was gone forever. Enjoy it.

While you can.

The next morning Jupiter and Caine and Urdur went down to explore the canyon a bit more closely—and slowly—while some of the others went flying a more circumspectly, and everybody else somehow ended up setting up a picnic buffet at the lip of the canyon. The ship was parked, still shielded, not far away, and while the air was cold even in the bright sun, a day in a non-hostile atmosphere was too rare to waste.

When Stinger wandered out, Dr. Thompson was the only person there at the moment, seated on a chair scrounged from the ship and bundled in a coat that was borrowed from a Skyjacker, if the wing-slits on the back were any indication. She was reading a sheave and jotting something in an Earth notebook, so Stinger loaded a plate with leftovers from the Thanksgiving meal and found a convenient rock to sit on nearby.

He was halfway through a turkey sandwich when she sighed and thumbed off the sheave. “Sorry,” she said in his direction. “I was somewhere else.”

Stinger swallowed his bite and shrugged easily. The sun was warm on his shoulders, so he unfurled his wings to soak up the heat. The rattle of the pinions made Dr. Thompson cock her head.

“I keep wondering about molting,” she said whimsically, and startled him into a laugh.

“It doesn’t work that way. They’re hybrids, more synthetic than protein.” Stinger curved one around to stroke the feathers with proprietary pride. “Self-repairing, up to a point.”

On impulse, he extended the wing towards Dr. Thompson, who very gently took the end feather between her fingers, stroking to test the texture. It tickled slightly, but he didn’t move.

She let it go and bent to retrieve the water bottle sitting next to her foot. “Hybrids. Like you?”

Stinger closed both wings and shrugged again. “If you like.”

“Aren’t hybrids sterile?” she asked, and then put a hand to her lips, wincing. “Oh—I’m sorry. None of my business!”

Stinger brushed a crumb off his shirt. Tercie conventions weren’t something he worried about, and he was feeling expansive. “Yep. We are. Splices can’t breed on our own, our genes belong to our
Dr. Thompson winced again, embarrassment becoming the same strange anger that the Queen displayed when the subject came up. “Sick,” she muttered.

“You’re wondering how I have a daughter,” Stinger continued, grinning a little, and Dr. Thompson relaxed somewhat.

“I admit the question has occurred.” She gestured with the bottle. “Spend enough free periods opposite a biology class with a half-deaf instructor, and you learn a lot.”

Most of that didn’t make any sense to him, so he just let it pass by. “Kiza’s not the daughter of my genes, no. About twenty years ago--stars, it’s been that long?” He had to shake his head over how fast the time seemed to have gone.

Dr. Thompson took a drink from her bottle, raised brows inviting him to continue. Stinger looked back into memory. “Well. We were patrolling for pirates--they’re a chronic problem on the edges--and came across a long-distance transport they’d already hit. Stripped it of everything, down to the oxygen.”

The memory still made him angry. The pirates had had no use for so slow a ship and no way to reuse the hull, but they’d taken everything else of value--air, supplies, fixtures.

But not passengers.

“They killed the crew and the passengers right off--slaves are too much trouble for that sort.” There had been bodies everywhere, grotesque twisted things looming out of the darkness whenever a light beam had found them. “It was a colonizer, you see, a poor one, no speed. Not much of value outside the goods they were hauling to their new world.”

Dr. Thompson’s mouth was tight, but she didn’t interrupt as he continued. “We went over the whole place, can’t remember why at this point--certainly there weren’t survivors. Except--“

He’d been assigned to sweep the sickbay deck, and had been startled to see tiny lights twinkling in the absolute darkness. What he’d found had made him even angrier.

“See, babies--they can’t handle portal travel. Until a kid’s about three, they get put in suspension if they have to portal somewhere.” The suspension pod had been small enough for him to hold in his arms, its battery power almost, but not quite, exhausted. Some fiend among the pirates had just left it to run down.

And some madness had seized him. When the Legion couldn’t find any surviving relations, the recharged pod was scheduled to be turned over to an orphanage on the ship’s originating station. The station was a poor place, in bad shape, overcrowded with desperate people.

“When we cracked the pod and woke her, she didn’t even cry. Just looked up with big eyes, like she was looking for someone who wasn’t there any more.” Stinger swallowed. “So I took her.”

No, Splices didn’t have children...but Legionnaires sometimes did.

“I found her a foster family on Grasht-Tek, which is where my squad was based, and visited as often as I could.” It felt as if he could remember every time she came running out to hug him, growing from knee-height to shoulder-height in just a few moments, more beautiful and dear every time.

“The daughter of your heart, then,” Dr. Thompson said after a moment, voice soft.
Stinger looked away, nodded. His plate was heavy on his knees, and he took another bite of sandwich.

“Thank you,” she added.

“Do you have children?” he asked around his mouthful, abruptly curious, but she shook her head.

“Only the students. Children of my heart, some of them, but not the same way.” She laughed, a little sour. “I had a husband for sixteen years, but no kids.”

“Mn.” There was obviously a story there, but she didn’t look inclined to tell it, and Stinger wasn’t inclined to ask. “Her Majesty one of ‘em?"

“Hah! No,” Dr. Thompson said. “Yes, she was a memorable student, but we didn’t have that connection. I was surprised when she e-mailed me; most of them, you know, one never expects to see again once they graduate.”

“Aye.” Stinger nodded; he knew that feeling, from recruits promoted away or squadmates transferred elsewhere. You might run into them again--like he had with Honch or even Caine--but you never expected to.

“Do you like working for her?” Dr. Thompson asked. “If you don’t mind saying.”

There were situations where having an opinion wasn’t a good idea, but this wasn’t one of them. Stinger swiped up a bit of sauce and sucked it off his fingertip. “So far, yeah. Granted, this unEntitled attitude of hers is like to get us all killed someday, but in the meantime it’ll be a wild ride.”

He was only half-joking, but it was only half the truth as well. Jupiter frightened him at times, with her ignorance of the world waiting to engulf her and her disregard for its principles, but at the same time she’d made Caine happier than he’d ever been and made Kiza a friend, and treated Stinger like an equal.

And he still just liked her.

Dr. Thompson chuckled. “Jupiter never was dull.”

Stinger regarded her. “So why are you working for her? Not just the money, is it?”

“Well no.” Her grin was sudden. “Mr. Apini, I grew up on a world whose avenue for spaceflight was very, very limited. It’s starting to expand, finally, but I’m too old and not wealthy enough to take advantage of it. Growing up dreaming of stepping onto another world and knowing it was never, ever going to happen...well. This was not an opportunity I was going to pass up.”

Stinger tried to imagine what it would be like to be locked down on one planet for one’s entire life, and couldn’t quite do it. “It’s Stinger. What d’you think so far?”

Dr. Thompson grinned even wider. “That I can hardly wait to see the next one.”

That made him laugh a little, and tell her about some of the more memorable worlds he’d seen. For someone from a provincial planet, Dr. Thompson had a quick understanding, and Stinger was starting to wonder if she was as much an exception as she seemed. Taking the marshal position on a tercie world had been a poor second to his life in the Legion, and since it didn’t require much mingling with the population, he hadn’t. Kiza had been the one interested in the local culture; Stinger had mostly stuck to the farm, even though the odds of being recognized as not human were fairly low. Not to mention, getting invested in a population that could be Harvested at any time was always
Well. Combat Splices were designed to be adaptable, and he would not fail his breeding. *When presented with new information, reassess.*

So he would.

“What methane, really?” Dr. Thompson shook her head at his last story, lips still curved. “I have to remember to ask Jupiter about assessing the solar system’s moons. It would be amazing to confirm life on one of them, even if we couldn’t release the information.”

“I thought you taught economics,” Stinger drawled, amused, and Dr. Thompson raised her brows.

“Product of a lifetime obsession with science fiction.” She glanced at her wrist chronometer. “Blast. I have to go make a phone call—would you excuse me, please?”

“You’re as bad as her Majesty,” Stinger said, still amused. “You’re a pure human, Doctor. You don’t have to excuse yourself to a Splice, and you’ll get funny looks for doing it.”

The half-smile vanished, and Dr. Thompson shot him a piercing look. “If you think that matters the least bit, you’ve got a lesson to learn in Earth history,” she said shortly, and rose to stride back into the ship.

Stinger watched her go, puzzled, but at the hatch she hesitated, then glanced back. “You can call me Aggie,” she said, just loud enough for him to hear, and disappeared inside.

Stinger squinted at the hatch, then shrugged, and made a mental note to ask Kiza for more information.

“Can I borrow Officer Percadium again?” Jupiter leaned closer to the hologram of Captain Tsing, still delighted by the technology. “I need to do some stuff, and he was really helpful with the whole travel thing.”

Diomika gave her a slightly exasperated look. “We all work for you, your Majesty. You can command us to do anything you please.”

“I know, I know, but it’s rude to just interrupt your schedule.” The little ship they were using to visit the Grand Canyon was only just big enough for the Stormbreakers and Jupiter and Aggie, but the former were all out flying and Aggie was in the passenger cabin working on a project. Jupiter had taken advantage of the elbow room on the flight deck to make her call.

Diomika chuckled. “As it happens we’re not very busy right now. Defensive patrols in such a peaceful sector require much less of personnel than our former activities.” She gave Jupiter a considering look. “Phylo’s due to come on shift in about fifteen minutes; I can reassign someone else to his duties and send him down then, if that suits.”

“Perfect.” Jupiter smiled. “Stinger says we’ll have to rearrange things a bit when I go home for the holiday, but I don’t think it’ll be too major. I’ll be staying at the apartment when I’m not at home.”

*Wait—* That last sentence was a bit confusing, but Diomika didn’t seem to have any trouble with it. “We should be fine, your Majesty. Commander Apini has already drawn up guard rosters.”
Jupiter grinned a little. “Of course he has.”

Approximately eighteen minutes later Percadium stepped onto the small ship’s deck, smiling widely and giving Jupiter a snappy salute. “Your Majesty, how can I serve you?”

He always made her laugh. Jupiter shook her head at him. “How much moloto have you had?”

Percadium smirked. “Not nearly enough.” He held up a cylinder that was the Aegis equivalent of a Thermos. “But I’m stocked.”

“Good.” Jupiter reached for the sheave she had waiting. “I’ve decided to move my, um, household to a ship. For now.”

She wasn’t sure where the idea had come from, but it seemed like a decent solution for the moment. *I want a home base that doesn’t have bad memories attached.*

Percadium nodded and took the sheave, which when he turned it on showed the list of spaceships Jupiter owned. “Does your Majesty desire a new vessel, or just to refurbish one you already have?”

“Refurbish if possible. Trouble is, I don’t know what most of these are, or where they are.” Jupiter bit her lip. “Kalique said I should get a new one, but really I’m not sure about it.”

Percadium scrolled down the list, then tapped a column to reorder it. “Lady Kalique may be correct, but she isn’t here. You have several yachts here, your Majesty; they would all be big enough for your household, and, ah, stylish enough for your rank.” He peered at the list. “Or they were stylish.”

Jupiter rolled her eyes. “We’ll worry about style later. Right now I want something mobile that can handle all of us, and has space for more people just in case.”

Percadium nodded, studying the sheave. “Would you like to look at them all?”

“Hell no.” Jupiter flapped a hand at him. “Pick three, and we’ll start with those.”

“Very well.” He set down the cylinder and poked at the sheave. “What other criteria does your Majesty have?”

Between the two of them they hashed it out. Quarters for all of her personnel, but also guest quarters, because as Percadium pointed out, at the very least Lady Kalique would visit again; a docking bay large enough for anything up to the *Neva* in size, at the least; support works and storage for all aboard; and space for entertaining, among other requirements.

“Take one of the Stormbreakers with you,” Jupiter said as she sealed the sheave authorizing Percadium’s task. “Because if I don’t let Security,” she coughed, “*Stinger*, have a say in it, he’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

Percadium snickered. “Aye-aye, your Majesty. I’ll see who Commander Security wants to assign.”

Jupiter couldn’t quite smother the laugh, and waved him out.

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Christmas.

Caine had looked it up, when he’d had time, but there was so *much* information that it was hard to discern what was important. Jupiter had been busy for a few weeks, first looking over the two yachts
and the clipper Percadium had brought, and then visiting several locations on Earth for shopping. *I need to hit someplace in Italy*, she’d explained as they left Tokyo--Kiza having finally talked Jupiter into the stop. *They’ll expect presents from Tuscany.*

*They* being her family, that much was clear. Caine watched with interest as she made purchases in several different countries, complaining under her breath about not having time to be a real tourist. In a cafe in Rome she wrapped her fingers around a tiny cup of coffee and smiled at him as they sat at a small table. “Did I ever say thanks for the translation thingie? Because it is coming in *way* handy.”

Caine sniffed cautiously at his own cup, but the contents smelled delicious--much less bitter than her Majesty’s drink. The first sip rolled over his tongue, rich and sweet and much thicker than he was expecting. “What is this called?”

“It’s hot chocolate.” Jupiter peered at it. “Looks a little different than I’m used to, but hey, we’re in Europe.” She lifted her cup in a gesture of salute. “If it weren’t different, it’d be disappointing.”

“If your Majesty says so.” Caine drank again, savoring the taste. “I’ve never had anything like it.”


They were outside despite the chilly air; Jupiter had asked Caine if he wanted to sit inside or on the sidewalk, and he’d chosen outside because it was easier for the rest of her escort to guard her. Two other Stormbreakers were further down the street, and one of the *Neva* crew was across it; Caine knew that there was a fourth guard somewhere above. *Just because it’s a tertiary world doesn’t mean it’s safe.*

And in fact, Earth might be *less* safe than a more advanced planet; the potential threat wasn’t its inhabitants so much as it was easier to slip in an assassination team on a world without sophisticated security.

*That won’t happen on our watch.*

“Can I have a taste?” Jupiter cocked her head, and Caine immediately pushed the cup across the narrow table. She picked up a spoon and captured a bit of the heavy liquid, and her brows went up at the flavor. “Wow, that’s intense.”

Caine opened his hand, indicating the cup, but Jupiter laughed and pushed it back. “I can get one of my own if I want it, but thanks.”

He took it back, a little regretfully--offering food and having her accept it always made him feel good--but it was delicious. “Have you finished your list for Christmas?”

Jupiter took another sip of her own drink, wrinkling her nose. “Hmm. Almost. I want to swing by a toy store closer to home--Mom says Moltka’s totally into Star Wars right now.” She tapped her fingers on the table. “Might be easier to use Amazon, but I’m not sure I’ll have the time.”

Caine knew what Star Wars was, thanks to an epic couple of days when Jupiter had decreed that it was a part of Earth culture he had to know about, but Amazon was an unknown, though he’d heard the term a few times. He didn’t let it worry him. “You should take Kiza along for that too.”

Jupiter snickered. “I might. I’m glad she’s having fun.”

Caine nodded. “May I ask a question, Majesty?”

Jupiter gave him a wry look. “Someday I’m gonna say no, just to watch your face. Of course.”
It felt a bit odd, indulging his curiosity; sometimes he had to remind himself that he didn’t have to keep his mouth shut. “Why did you bring her along? Was it only for Stinger’s sake?”

Jupiter blinked. “What? Oh.” She leaned back in her chair, looking a little troubled. “Why, does somebody have a problem with it?”

“No.” At least not that he’d heard. “It just seems...there are a number of positions you could hire her for, but you haven’t. You’ve found a place for everyone else.” Anyone who fell into her orbit, it seemed.

“Yeah, that. Well.” Jupiter shrugged, then leaned forward again and captured Caine’s hand in hers. Her fingers were cold despite her cup, and he automatically surrounded them with his own to warm them. “This is not meant to be critical of you, okay? You’re the exception to just about every rule.”

Caine nodded, holding on to her words, and Jupiter bit her lip and continued. “Part of it is, she wanted to come along, and why should I say no. Part of it…” She took a breath. “I wanted somebody who...doesn’t have an agenda. One person who’s just my friend, not an employee too.”

Her fingers laced with his and tightened. “Do you get what I’m saying, Caine? You’re still the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I consider you a friend way before I remember that technically I’m paying you. But Kiza--well, she was kind of my first space friend after you. The only thing she wants is to make sure that you and Stinger are happy.”

Her naming him friend was still almost overwhelming, but Caine nodded again. Kiza was his friend too, again, and he treasured that almost as much as he did his Queen’s regard. “She’s that way. Kiza is...brightness.”

“Exactly.” Jupiter’s gaze searched his face; satisfied, she squeezed again and let go, sitting back once more. “Plus, she has good ideas.”

“Most of the time.” There had been that whole thing with the aircar and the zapball team from the next district over, but no one had actually been arrested. “Coming back to Earth was a good one, then?”

“Yeah.” Jupiter smiled, her face softening. “It was.”

The little covertly-doubled apartment was fresh and clean when they arrived in the middle of a snowstorm--and stocked, Caine discovered when he opened a cupboard. He knew Jupiter had hired another resident of the building to look after the places while she was gone--she’d obediently informed Stinger so that Surveillance could take it into account--but bringing in fresh food was outside the parameters. “Did the Keepers do this?”

Jupiter stood on her tiptoes to look over his shoulder, and laughed. “Nah. Had to be Aunt Nino.” She pointed at one brightly colored packet. “Nobody else would think of ramen.”

Caine wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of an unsanctioned person coming into the apartment while they weren’t there, but she was Jupiter’s family. “You gave her a key?”

“I gave Mom a key.” Jupiter planted a kiss on his ear and settled back on her feet. “It made her feel a little better about me moving out. Don’t worry--I told her if she comes over here without calling first while I’m here I will move to Tuscany until she’s eighty.”
Caine thought about that for a moment, because clearly it was an empty threat, then filed it under *pure human* and let it go. There were some things he would just never understand.

He closed the cabinet door. “I have another question.”

“Shoot.” Jupiter was filling the kettle; she glanced through the pass-through into the other apartment. “Anybody else want some tea?” she called.

A few *No, your Majestys* floated back, and Caine shook his head when Jupiter cocked a brow at him. “If I understand it properly,” he began, “the region of Earth your mother’s family is from primarily celebrates Christmas next month.”

“She’s right; I’m not all that religious, you know? We mostly just focus on the, ah, secular aspects. Food, presents, the tree, that kind of thing.”

She reached for the tea canister that sat on the back of the stove. “Lyudmila goes to church on Orthodox Christmas, and usually one of us goes with her to keep her company. But for the rest of us it’s just one big food-and-presents orgy.”

Jupiter’s mouth twisted as she measured out tea. “Trust me, you haven’t lived until you’ve seen Vladie in nothing but tighty-whities and a Santa hat.”

Caine considered *that* one, and decided to be honest. “I have no idea what you just said, your Majesty.”


Later, he curled up with her in the big bed, remembering the last time they’d stayed in the apartment and how he’d never dreamed that this would really be possible, all Jupiter’s kisses notwithstanding.

“Y’know, this is why I bought this size of bed,” Jupiter said drowsily, her breath fluttering against his collarbone. “I hoped we’d get to share eventually.”

Caine hid his smile in her hair.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know that it's more-or-less canon that Kiza's a bee Splice, but if I have to watch very carefully to see her eyes flash and it takes five repeats of the film to spot it *even when I know it's there*, it's not very convincing. She doesn't even have stripey hair.

Also, yes, I stole a large part of that backstory from *Lifepod*. Great, dark little film, watch it. Adam Storke, CCH Pounder, Robert Loggia.

...Come to think of it, it's been a while since I've seen that one, but it could probably fit into the JA universe. Especially the Toolies, it's just what that society would do.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

A short chapter, but it's been too long since I last updated.

The morning was cold but still when Kiza dropped them off a block from the Bolotnikov house. Caine spotted colored lights in many windows as they walked, harbingers of the holiday. The city had been frantic since they’d arrived, but now it seemed calmer, almost hushed; the sky was iron-grey, but no snow was falling.

“I still feel bad about telling them I couldn’t make it sooner,” Jupiter said next to Caine, fingers linked with his and both their opposite hands occupied with bags of gifts. “But I swear it would have been three solid days of cooking and Moltka whining, and I’d never see you. We’ll catch up this week.”

He made a soft sound of agreement, not liking the idea of her being apart from him even for a few hours, but knowing it was necessary. Caine could sense Jupiter’s nerves as they neared the house; she was on edge about seeing her family again, but he supposed that was understandable. Jupiter had undergone a lot of change over the last few months, and whatever image her family had of her, she would no longer fit it. The need to keep most of those changes concealed would not help.

Caine himself wanted to make a good impression, for her sake, but he felt a little like he did at the start of a combat drop, nerve-free. There was nothing he could do to change the situation, and he would simply deal with things as he encountered them.

Jupiter let go of his hand as they halted on the sidewalk outside the Bolotnikov house. “Let me take a look at you.”

Caine stood still obediently, the corner of his mouth curling up as she looked him over. His likealyzer hid his eartips and his sharper teeth, not that the latter were obvious if he wasn’t grinning or snarling, and it made the slight hump of his wings disappear. The jacket he was wearing was almost capacious enough to conceal them anyway, but he would be removing it as soon as they entered the house. He trusted that the device hooked over his ear could cope with the distortion of his dress shirt as well.

He felt slightly strange in the clothes she’d picked out for him, though the crisp trousers fit well enough, and Jupiter had told him that the tie matched his eyes. Caine had even agreed to wear shoes instead of his boots, though he’d insisted on keeping his shield bracer, and he had several weapons concealed even if he couldn’t carry his mauler openly.

“You look good,” her Majesty told him, and he felt his cheeks heat a trifle. It was always good to have her approval, but he still wasn’t used to it. “Got the story straight?”

“Have you, your Majesty?” Caine smirked at her, amused even as Jupiter covered his mouth with one hand.

“Uh-uh! As soon as we walk in that door the rest of the universe no longer exists.” She smiled back, wry, and he pressed his lips against her palm.
It was a simple enough lie, mixed with a bit of truth; Caine was supposedly the head of security for Jupiter’s wealthy and feeble employer, and the two of them had hit it off when Miss Apini had hired her. Miss Apini was visiting relations for the holiday and had released them both from their duties, and since Mr. Wise had no family to speak of, Jupiter had brought him home with her.

It was close enough.

“I do. *Jupiter,*” he said, slightly muffled, and she nodded.

“Now remember,” his Queen continued, her hand dropping, “Nino and Lyudmila will love you, Vassily will go all dominant, Irina and Vladie will hate you, and the kids will probably think you’re neat.”

“And your mother?” Caine asked.

Jupiter shrugged. “She’ll glare at you worse than Vassily. Just be polite, and she’ll have to go along with it.”

As if he would be anything else. Caine leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead, and she took his hand again and led him up the stairs.

He’d been there before, of course, but the memory was of dimness and disaster, and the stink of fear and Sargorn. The house was brighter now, a thick jumble of scents and noise, and he could smell suspicion and interest and the surges of testosterone as Jupiter’s family gathered to greet her. Caine stood aside for the first frantic hugs of her mother and her aunt Nino, and noted that the other aunt, Vassily’s wife, made no move to embrace her niece despite months of separation.

Then Vassily was stepping forward, extending one hand. “You’re Caine Wise, then,” he said, and his challenge was obvious.

Caine returned his grip with precisely the same amount of pressure; the challenge wasn’t about Jupiter, and he had no interest in anything else. “Mr. Bolotnikov.”

Vassily gave him an assessing look, and then released him to start introducing his family. It was a bit strange, pretending that he’d never seen any of them before when Caine had held each one of them in his arms, limp forms that were precious because they were dear to his Queen; but his usual method of speaking as little as he could get away with paid off.

Jupiter’s assessment was spot-on. Vladie reeked of fear and hollow bravado, while Irina was sourly resentful and the older cousin, Mikka, was warm with a blush Caine could pick up from across the room. Nino was pleased and amused, and Aleksa--well.

When Caine shook her hand, he gave her a tiny bow as well, half strategy and half instinct. He could all but feel the sharp spines of her protectiveness for Jupiter, and he respected that.

The youngest one, Moltka, waved at Caine and went right back to his electronic game, until Jupiter held up the bags. “I brought presents, Moltka, want to help me put them under the tree?”

The boy bounced to his feet and ran over to rummage through the packages. The tree was already set up in one corner, vivid with lights and colorful ornaments, and its base was hidden by a ring of wrapped gifts. That was one detail Caine did recognize from his research.

“Come, sit!” Vassily boomed, slapping Caine on the shoulder and looking slightly disappointed when Caine didn’t flinch. “*Jupiter has never brought home a friend for Christmas before. Tell us about yourself.*”
Caine sat cautiously, keeping his back straight. Jupiter glanced across the room and rolled her eyes, clearly a comment on Vassily, before Moltka took her attention again.

Vladie handed Caine a glass. The contents reeked of ethanol, and Caine was silently glad that his system metabolized most intoxicants quickly. He would not have to refuse what was offered him.

“So, what is it you do for Ms. Apini?” Vassily asked, outwardly jovial. “Jupiter said you are her bodyguard?”

“Head of security,” Caine corrected mildly. “That’s one of my duties.”

“Who is she, anyway?” Vladie broke in. “Why’s she need security? I’ve never heard of her.”

*Feel free to squash Vladie all you like, Jupiter had told him earlier. Physically, if you need to.*

And since Vladie had all the hallmarks of a lower life form, Caine felt no qualms. “You wouldn’t have,” he replied, putting just a hint of stress on the first word.

Vladie colored angrily, and Vassily coughed, lips twitching. “I am not sure that I like this,” he said to Caine, tone going stern. “Jupiter being in danger.”

Caine blessed the fact that pure human noses were too dull to read emotional chemicals, and lied. “She’s not, Mr. Bolotnikov. Ms. Apini is, shall we say, a touch overcautious.” He smiled. “But in any case, anyone seeking to reach Ms. Apini will have no interest in Jupiter. They are more a nuisance than a danger.”

“Hmm.” Vassily subsided, and lifted his glass. “Будем здоровы!”

Caine returned the salute, watching Vassily blink at his perfect accent, and finished the drink in one swallow. It was strong enough to burn going down, but he’d had stronger, and he didn’t so much as twitch.

Vassily’s brows went up, and Vladie cursed under his breath. Jupiter’s uncle smiled, reluctant but true. “Vladie, get the bottle. Our guest needs another drink.”

“One for me too, please,” Jupiter requested sweetly, dropping into the seat next to Caine and smirking at her cousin. She reached over to lace her fingers with Caine’s. The slight pressure felt good; Caine knew he could cope with her family, but having her close was better. “It’s vodka,” she added in an undertone. “Just so you know.”

Caine squeezed back, and listened as Vassily began asking questions about Jupiter’s putative job. She gave a few vague answers and managed to lead her uncle into a rant about house-cleaning that sounded well-worn to Caine’s ears. Vladie handed them both drinks and collapsed on Jupiter’s other side, legs spreading wide on the couch and knee nudging hers; Caine was about to take offense at that when Jupiter shoved him with her own leg, a move as practiced as Vassily’s complaints, and Vladie grumbled and desisted.

Caine didn’t know much about families, but he did understand group dynamics, and it was interesting to observe the currents of this one. Vassily clearly regarded Jupiter as a somewhat errant child, but a beloved one, and his attitude towards Vladie was indulgent and a bit exasperated. The noisy voices of the women in the kitchen veered back and forth between instruction, argument, and affectionate insult; the smells coming forth were foreign but appetizing, and Caine felt his stomach rumble despite the alcohol.

The arguments in the kitchen were reaching a peak when the elderly woman, Lyudmila, made her
way down the stairs; she smelled of age and powder and lingering sleep to Caine, and summoned Jupiter for a hug with loud exclamations and beckoning hands. Jupiter embraced her carefully, and Caine wondered if she was thinking about Regenex and what it could do.

Her scruples were foreign to him; Caine understood the reasons behind them, but he didn’t share her revulsion, not when his own life and that of his comrades had been saved by the stuff. And Kiza’s life as well.

It didn’t matter, though. For Jupiter he would be willing to refuse even Regenex. Her regard was worth any sacrifice.

Moltka, the youngest child, finally abandoned his game and came to slide onto his father’s lap. “Can we open presents now, Papa?” he asked. “You said we had to wait for Jupe and her boyfriend, and they’re here.”

Vassily laughed, squeezing Moltka in a brief hard hug. “Sure, sure. Go get the ladies out of the kitchen.”

Moltka cheered, pushing off Vassily’s lap and dashing into the kitchen. “Mikka! Mama! It’s presents time!”

Within moments the room was crowded with twice the people, the vodka fumes redoubling. The two children dove for the pile of gifts beneath the tree, ripping into many of them and periodically passing others to the adults. Much to his surprise, Caine found himself the recipient of two packages, and he looked to Jupiter for instruction.

She grinned at him and sat down between him and Nino at the other end of the couch, her thigh pressing close and warm against his. “Just open them,” she said. “The blue one’s from me.”

Caine stared at her, astonished, because while Entitled were known to give their underlings gifts from time to time, he’d never expected it to happen to him. Jupiter’s smile twisted, and she patted his knee. “Did you think we were going to leave you out?”

Caine swallowed. “No, I--” He hadn’t thought that. He had simply never considered being included.

Her fingers closed gently, then released. “Open it,” she told him softly, and under the clambor of her family she smelled somehow sad and joyful at once.

And it was, after all, a command, so he did.

The thin paper crackled as he removed its fasteners, tearing slightly, but since everyone around him was ripping with abandon it seemed that was acceptable. The box it covered was long and narrow, and when he lifted the lid Caine found a polished wooden cylinder resting on a bed of something fluffy.

“It’s a duduk,” Jupiter told him. “An instrument from a place in Europe called Armenia, sort of traditional. It sounds something like your double-pipe.” She shrugged. “You don’t have to actually play it, but I thought it might be interesting.”

Caine blinked down at the pipe, restraining the urge to slide off the couch and kneel before her, though to bow or to put his head in her lap he wasn’t sure. Aside from Stinger’s luckstone and a couple of drawings from a small Kiza, the only other gift he’d ever received was the little music player Jupiter had obtained for him months before, and she’d implied that was necessary equipment rather than a present.
And for it to be something so carefully chosen, something she’d thought about--

He tried to make his throat work, to thank her somehow, but the words wouldn’t form. Perhaps fortunately, Nino leaned over to peer at the box. “That’s what you bought your boyfriend?” she asked Jupiter, sounding disappointed. “We need to work on this, Jupiter. How do you expect to keep a fine man if all you get him is...whatever that is?”

Jupiter laughed and elbowed her aunt. “Shush, Nino. He’s a musician.”

Nino peered suspiciously at Caine over her glasses. “I thought you said he was security?”

“It’s a hobby. What?” Jupiter said as Nino looked skeptical. “He can have layers.”

Nino snorted. “And what did he get you?”

Caine froze, because he hadn’t. Entitled were given gifts, certainly, by those trying to curry favor, but such things were inevitably costly and rare and far beyond the means of a Splice. Jupiter had bought something for Caine to give her family, but it had simply not occurred to him to--

Jupiter’s hand landed on his knee again, a reassuring grip. “Not telling,” she said to Nino, laughing. Nino hooted.

“Well, he do something right then. Not bad.”

She turned to accept a package from Mikka, and Caine bit back the instinctive your Majesty.

“Jupiter--”

“Relax,” she said, stretching a little to speak almost into his ear. “I wasn’t expecting you to. This isn’t your holiday, Caine, I know that.”

He breathed out, reassured, but it still felt vaguely wrong, as if he were missing a cue. Jupiter planted a quick kiss on his jaw. “Now open the other one, it’s from the family.”

That package was heavy and gurgled when he lifted it, and Caine was not entirely surprised to find it was a bottle of vodka. Since the gift Jupiter had assigned to him for her family was an alcohol called grappa, it seemed to fit. Certainly Vassily seemed pleased when he opened it on behalf of all the Bolotnikovs.

Eventually all of the gifts were finished. Everyone seemed pleased by the things Jupiter had brought, items ranging from sweets to jewelry. Jupiter was quietly smug when her aunt Irina was reduced to speechlessness by a pair of impractical-looking shoes that Jupiter had spent an hour shopping for back in Italy.

“You can afford those?” Aleksa asked in a low tone as the women all got up. Jupiter shrugged.

“There was a sale. Caine, we’re going to finish with dinner now--don’t you have to call in?”

He nodded and rose also. “Excuse me, please,” he said to the room at large, and went outside.

It was a matter of moments to check in with Tsing, who was running her Majesty’s security detail for the day, but Caine lingered for a few minutes outside, relishing the quiet and the crisp air. Jupiter’s family wasn’t unfriendly, but all together they were more than a little overwhelming.

He could see why she felt ambivalent about being apart from them. Only Aleksa seemed to have noticed any change in Jupiter, to judge by her searching looks at her daughter; all the others seemed
oblivious, treating her as—trivial. It put his hackles up.

*It’s not your business,* he reminded himself. What little experience Caine had of family was with Stinger and Kiza, who loved each other fiercely and obviously, and while Aleksa was clearly an expert in *fierce* the rest of the Bolotnikovs seemed to be held together by genial bickering. *It works for them. If her Majesty is content with it then you let it lie.*

Caine sat down on the front steps, ignoring the chill that seeped through his thin trousers, and centered himself. He was here because Jupiter wanted him to be, and that was all that mattered. And while he wasn’t comfortable, everyone was treating him like--

--Like a pure human, now that he thought about it. Like someone completely ordinary. And while he could tell that Aleksa didn’t think him good enough for her daughter, it had nothing to do with his genes or his flaws; she was just being a parent.

A slow warmth unfolded in Caine’s chest, a strange new feeling. All the world that he knew would look on him with scorn and disdain for standing at Jupiter’s side; but these people didn’t think twice about it.

Footsteps inside made him raise his head, and when Jupiter opened the door and came out Caine leaned back into the hand that touched his shoulder. “You okay?” she asked. “They’re too much sometimes.”

He took her fingers in his, kissing them lightly, there in that cold private space. “I’m fine.”

Jupiter sat down next to him, pressing close, and Caine put an arm around her. “I kind of have to stay, but really, if you want to leave we can say you got a call or something.”

Caine snorted. “I won’t abandon my post,” he said, only half-teasing, and Jupiter poked him.

“*You know* I’m spending most of the week here without any of you, right? I don’t need protecting from *them*.”

“I know.” And the fact that she was trying to be kind added to the warmth in his middle. “But I’ll stay.”

“Okay.” Jupiter patted his leg again. “In that case, come in and wash up, it’s almost time for dinner.”

That, he could get behind. Caine rose and followed her back inside.

Jupiter kept a weather eye on Caine as the afternoon darkened into early night, but he seemed to be coping well—minor crisis over gifts notwithstanding, and she was annoyed at herself for not thinking that one through ahead of time. It was hard to tell, sometimes, what Caine knew about American culture and what he’d never heard of. *And I don’t know enough about space culture to tell which way he’ll jump.*

But they’d gotten through that, and as Caine was directed to the seat at Vassily’s right, Jupiter set a dish full of salad on the table and gently hip-checked Mikka away from the chair she’d chosen. She wanted to be on the other side of the table so she could *see* Caine without having to be obvious about it.

Her cousin rolled her eyes but moved down one chair as they took their places. Irina was opposite
Caine and Zeno was on his other side; Jupiter didn’t expect any trouble from the latter, since Zeno preferred food over family drama, but Irina might get snide if she recovered from Jupiter’s present in time.

Caine settled gingerly into his seat--Jupiter knew his wings kept him from sitting back all the way--but he didn’t look too uncomfortable as Vassily started the meal. She’d coached him a little ahead of time; Christmas dinner had a lot of dishes but they were usually the same ones, and Lyudmila’s kholodets wasn’t for the faint of heart.

But as the platters went around the table Caine seemed undisturbed. He took small helpings of every dish and waited until Vassily had begun eating to taste them, but she didn’t catch any reaction that meant he was choking something down to be polite.

But she couldn’t watch him all the time; her end of the table had endless questions about Tuscany, her new job, and her employer, and Jupiter had to make sure not to contradict herself. It had been smart of Kiza to suggest actually visiting the place--none of the Bolotnikovs were likely to go to Italy, but truth always sounded better.

Jupiter might almost have enjoyed telling them all tales, except that Aleksa was unusually silent, watching Jupiter as much as Jupiter watched Caine, and Jupiter knew that her mother was wondering what the stories were hiding.

But dinner was, as always, both delicious and far more than anyone could eat, and as the afternoon faded into evening, the focus shifted from Jupiter to all the things she’d missed while she was gone. She listened happily to stories of school, Mikka’s latest swain, Lyudmila’s kidney troubles, recalcitrant employers, and the most recent episode of Vladie making his mother cry. The masculine rumbles at the other end of the table, when Jupiter listened, were mostly about cars, though she did catch Vassily boasting to Caine about her high-school GPA. The unexpected pride put a small lump in her throat; he’d always complaining about her extra studying.

Just then Caine glanced her way, and she could just make out the crinkles around his eyes, the restrained expression that said he was pleased. Jupiter felt her lips crook upwards in response, and the crinkles deepened before he turned politely back to Vassily.

Jupiter helped herself to more beets and relaxed.

By the time they all made it out to the living room, everyone was sated; even Caine was looking full, and Jupiter hadn’t seen that even at Thanksgiving. Only Moltka wasn’t slowed down by digestion, and was waving his new toy lightsaber and making vwoop noises.

“Come on, I’ll show you my old room,” Jupiter said, snagging Caine’s arm before he could be waved to a seat, and guiding him towards the basement stairs. He followed her obediently down the narrow staircase, ducking his head slightly to miss the ceiling.

There wasn’t much left to show, really. Jupiter had moved all the posters and books to the apartment, and most of them were still there for appearances’ sake; when she’d packed to leave Earth she hadn’t adjusted to the thought that there wasn’t a weight limit on her luggage. The computer was still there since it was a family possession, but her bed was gone. The space was filled with another shelf of cleaning supplies.

On some level it should bother her, Jupiter supposed, but mostly what she felt was relief. She no longer had to sleep in a chilly space dominated by Nino’s soft snoring and the faint undertones of artificial lemon; she had a heck of a lot more to look forward to than yet more cleaning, and she could even sleep in if she wanted to.
Though it was amazing what the whole space-queen thing did for her energy level...or maybe it was her bedmate.

The bedmate cocked his head as he turned to take in the space, breathing in that *tasting* way he had when he was paying attention to the smells in the air. “You’re still here,” he said at last.

“Moved down here when I was twelve,” Jupiter said. “Zeno tried to convince me that Babayka lived behind the furnace, but I was on to him.”

Caine made an amused sound and paced slowly through the open doorway into the sisters’ bedroom. “She smells like you,” he said, and he didn’t have to point at Aleksa’s bed for Jupiter to understand. “Not entirely, but it’s obvious that she’s your mother.”

“How does that even work?” Jupiter straightened the comforter on Nino’s bed, wondering if Caine could have smelled her in her father if Maximilian had still been alive.

Caine shrugged. “She brought half your genes,” he said. “Grew you, birthed you, cared for you. She’s in your blood.”

Jupiter sighed. There had been times when she’d felt shut out by her mother’s hard grief, but she’d never doubted Aleksa’s love. “I’m glad Mom got to meet you, but I wish Daddy could have too.”

Caine regarded her for a long moment, looking somehow remote, more alien than she’d seen him as in months. “It would have been an honor.”

Jupiter sighed again, and went over to hug him. The strong, infinitely gentle clasp of his arms was a comfort, and made him *Caine* again, real and beloved. “This is weird,” she complained to his collarbone.

He seemed to understand what she meant; a chuckle rumbled under her ear, though the sound barely made it past his lips. “It’s two worlds,” he said. “I don’t fit in this one.”

She knew what he meant. Two worlds, almost two realities, one the small safe one of her past, the other the wider, much more dangerous one; and there was no telling now whether Earth would find out about the bigger universe within their lifetimes—however long those might prove to be.

And part of her still wanted to fit back into the safety, the part that was horrified by Gabal’s fate and still ached for Twenty-three. It would be simpler to turn her back on all of it and pretend it never happened; Jupiter was willing to bet she could even keep Caine.

No. *I have stuff to do.* And the past was small, safe...and stifling. Whatever else galactic rule offered her, adventure was certainly part of it.

*Room to grow.* It was a good thought.

“Did you like dinner okay?” Jupiter let him go and stepped back, because she just wasn’t in the mood to be teased by the first family member to come down to see if they were making out. “You can be honest.”

Caine looked faintly surprised. “It was very good.”

Jupiter cocked a brow. “All of it?”

This time his smile was definite. “Trust me, Jupiter. When you live for years on scraps and whatever you can catch, just about anything else is *delicious.*”
Jupiter winced a little. “Touché. Well, that’s good then, because you’re going to get loaded down with leftovers.”

“Works for me.” Caine made another slow circuit of the basement, occasionally reaching out to touch something with a careful finger. “You’re still planning on visiting with them for four days?”

“Mm-hm. But I’ll be back at the apartment in the evenings; even if I wanted to stay, there’s no place for me to sleep.” Jupiter absently rearranged a row of spritzer bottles. “Besides, I’d miss you.”

She looked up to see Caine looking back, his smile gone soft and his eyes wide with that disbelieving pleasure that always made her heart ache.

*Screw the family. I can live with the teasing.*

Jupiter closed the distance to kiss him.

Thoroughly.
Hello folks! Sorry for the long absence (since August, yikes!); work has been consuming my energy and attention. All hail the end of the fiscal year, etc. I’m doing my best to get back to this monster, but just so you don’t think I’ve abandoned it, have a very short interlude chapter.

I do have more written, but not hooked up, as ’twere. This may tide you over.

As always, thanks so much for reading! It's you who keep me going on this thing...

It felt a little weird to be cleaning houses again, but Jupiter figured she might as well pitch in for a bit, since the week after Christmas was a busy one and it was a chance to spend time with her mother and Nino. The latter was cheerfully grateful for the help, and mostly wanted to tease her about Caine, but Aleksa gave Jupiter searching looks instead, visibly refraining from comment.

They were washing windows in the White-Smith place when Aleksa finally broke her silence. “So I said I wouldn’t ask, and I won’t, but you...look well.”

The melodic Russian was a sweet familiarity to Jupiter’s ears, though her translator implant gave it a weird echo for a few seconds before she shoved a finger in her hair to tap the device off. “I am well,” she replied. “Things are stressful, but—not too much. And I’ve made some new friends.”

Aleksa snorted. “Your Caine Wise being one of them. No, no.” She waved a dustcloth at Jupiter to cut off her protest. “I’ll give him this, he’s respectful. A nice change.”

Jupiter stuck out her tongue at her mother, though Aleksa did have a point. You have no idea, she thought wryly.

“But I still worry. Yes, you call, but it’s not the same as knowing where you are.” Aleksa’s jaw was set.

Jupiter sighed, and spritzed another pane, watching the cleaner slide down the glass. “I can’t tell you yet, Mama. I want to, but...it’s not the right time.”

She wanted to, desperately; wanted to pour the whole situation into her mother’s ears and get both comfort and Aleksa’s brand of brusque advice. But not yet. Because Aleksa wouldn’t be convinced without seeing it all, and Jupiter wanted a solid base under her feet before she let any more people she loved out into space with her.

She didn’t really know what was coming, yet, and it just didn’t feel safe enough.

“It’s not illegal, though,” she added, and Aleksa’s mouth twitched.

“Good to know. Are you keeping enough money? Vassily’s happy with what you send home, but I don’t want you stinting yourself.”

Jupiter smothered a snicker. “Yes, I’m fine.” If you only knew. She made a mental note to never let
Vladie find out how much money she actually had. *He’d implode. Or worse, start spending like it was all his.*

They polished in easy silence for a while, listening to the faint sound of Nino singing along with her mp3 player in the next room.

“Are you sure?” Aleksa asked presently. “Because the lawyer who came last month to get information from me and Nino—she wasn’t the sort who has commercials on TV.”

Jupiter shrugged carefully. “What did she say?”

Aleksa gave her a long look. “That it would take time but she thinks she can get us green cards. At no charge.”

“Miss Apini knows about us,” Jupiter said, the story she’d constructed. “It’s a favor.”

“That’s good for the rest of us, malyshka, but you’ll have to tell me the truth eventually.” Aleksa fixed Jupiter with a maternal glare.

Jupiter took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy. “Mama, I will. When I can.” She held up a hand when Aleksa started to glare. “I will. I promise.”

Her mother clearly wanted to argue, but after a moment she let the glare fade, muttering something under her breath. Jupiter bit back a sigh, feeling both relief and guilt. Being treated like an adult was pretty cool...but also oddly lonely. For an instant she wished she were back in Rome, sharing a hot drink with Caine, just the two of them with no greater concern than where to have lunch.

*Get real. To go to Rome, you have to be the grownup.*

The lawyer, though...that was a good sign. Jupiter watched Aleksa out of the corner of her eye; Aleksa was working with the easy swiftness of years of practice, but all of a sudden it seemed wrong, somehow. Aleksa had cleaned houses all of Jupiter’s life, and her professorship was just a story to her daughter; but if things could just change a little, Aleksa’s life might expand almost the way Jupiter’s had.

*Six months ago I thought nothing would ever be different. And look at it now…*

...Hey, I wonder if she’d like to teach in space. They must have colleges out there somewhere.

And the vision of a stern-faced Aleksa facing down a mixed class of humans, Splices, and Sargorns kept Jupiter stifling giggles for the next half hour.

*Okay, I have to make this work now…*
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Not much really happens in this chapter, but if Kalique has her way, things will pick up soon...

Jupiter was actually kind of glad when the week was over. It was great to see her family, and just be ordinary for a bit--well, as ordinary as she could get while constantly being shadowed by enormous alien soldiers--and she was grateful for the break from space weirdness. But at the same time, it all felt slightly dreamlike, as if her two lives couldn’t really merge properly, and the itch of needing to get things done persisted.

So all in all, it was kind of a relief when Officer Percadium reported in with the yacht Jupiter had chosen from her inherited fleet.

As Caine piloted the skimmer away from Earth and towards the looming vessel, Jupiter all but pressed her nose against the viewport to get a better look. The sheave containing the yacht’s specs hadn’t given her a true sense of how enormous it was; every time she thought they were getting close, her perspective shifted to show they were still a distance out, and it just kept getting bigger.

She’d had a similar view before, but she’d been too preoccupied at the time to pay enough attention. The newly christened Windy City was slightly larger than Titus’ ship, Jupiter thought, and built along cleaner lines than his weird combo of a sonic screwdriver and an art museum; it looked more like a butterfly, except that the wings weren’t attached. A butterfly over a mile long, with six wings; but she couldn’t think of anything else it really looked like.

Well. A spaceship, I guess.

It was just under a century old, which, Percadium had given her to understand, made it something like last year’s model of Mercedes, and it came with its own crew, from pilot and flight deck personnel all the way down to the robots that cleaned everything. And they were all waiting when the skimmer slowed to a hovering stop in the yacht’s landing bay.

I swear, I’m actually getting used to the welcoming committees. Jupiter smiled and waved at them all as the transport beam sank her slowly to the deck. Four Skyjackers were waiting for her, snapping into place as her guard, and Jupiter wondered distantly whether the smiles of the ship’s crew hid a mole like Sa Brem.

I hate having to think like that.

Fortunately, the group was large enough that she didn’t have to personally greet everyone. The pilot, Captain Bishop, was an elephant Splice like the one on the Neva, though her trunk was longer; Jupiter couldn’t read her expression very well, but she seemed pleased to show off the vessel.

Like Kalique’s clipper, the ship’s interior was more like a terrestrial building than what Jupiter thought of as a spaceship, except that it had almost no windows. In fact, it reminded her mostly of a couple of the mansions her family cleaned--huge, high-ceilinged rooms with expensive decor and furniture, and the occasional piece of incomprehensible artwork. It kind of made her afraid of leaving
fingerprints on the walls, and Jupiter had to keep reminding herself that she could *spray paint* the whole thing if she wanted to, and they would all just cheer her on.

The tour group kept growing. It began as Jupiter, Caine, Kiza, Soren, Urdur, and Captain Bishop, but then Officer Percadium joined them, and when her shuttle docked Aggie and Edsel caught up. *It's like a parade*, Jupiter thought, and caught herself imagining a drum major’s shako on Bishop’s dignified head, and had to cough to cover the laugh.

The ship might have been out of date, but it had just about everything Jupiter could imagine needing—personal quarters for herself and her staff, several gyms, two armories, and a swimming pool that could apparently be made to operate in zero-g, though Jupiter wasn’t clear on how one avoided drowning. There were also conference rooms, guest quarters, lounges, ballrooms, a game parlor, a dining hall that could seat two hundred, an enclosed garden five times the size of the one on Kalique’s ship, and a number of other spaces whose purpose Jupiter didn’t know yet.

The tour ended in the Queen’s Suite, which was almost a mini-mansion in itself, even bigger than Seraphi’s space on Gabal. By the time they reached it, Jupiter’s feet hurt and she was hungry, and her mind was a whirl of alien color schemes and the weird scent of whatever they used to clean the carpets. She wanted a drink, a snack, and a chance to sit down, not necessarily in that order.

“I hope we have pleased you, your Majesty,” Captain Bishop said, hands clasped behind her back very like Captain Tsing, though Bishop was half again as large. She squinted anxiously at Jupiter. “If there’s anything that doesn’t meet your requirements…”

“No!” Jupiter said, raising both hands. “No, trust me, it’s all fine, and if it stops being fine I’ll let you know, no problem.” She cut off her babble and took a breath. Her feet were complaining, but the tour seemed to have left out something important. *Oh well, I can always ask Caine to carry me...sure. “But what about everything else?”*

Bishop’s trunk twitched. “I...I beg your pardon, your Majesty...else?”

“The rest of the ship.” Out of the corner of her eye, Jupiter saw Stinger’s grin spreading across his face, decidedly feral. “What about where everybody else lives? What about the laundry room, or the kitchen, or whatever?”

“Good girl,” Aggie muttered, just loud enough for Jupiter to hear her. Captain Bishop was still gaping, so Jupiter raised her brows, and it was both heartening and scary to watch the woman’s spine snap straight.

“Of...of course, your Majesty. If you...ah, right this way.” She gestured, and the parade was off again.

It was much later before Jupiter got her snack and the chance to kick off her shoes. The reception room of her suite was done in tasteful white and gold, and possessed a lot of surprisingly comfortable floating furniture; Jupiter slumped back on a couch, flexing her bare toes, and looked around at the remains of her entourage. Caine, of course; Aggie and Kiza; Stinger and Captain Tsing and Officer Percadium. The rest, except for Edsel, had peeled off outside the Queen’s Suite; the cat was currently investigating the rooms, occasionally cruising through with a muttered comment while he sniffed everything sniffable and rubbed his cheek against most of it.


Percadium grinned and saluted, though he didn’t sit up to do it; Tsing looked like she wanted to reprimand him, but she said nothing. “My pleasure, as ever, your Majesty.”
Jupiter grinned at him, then looked up at the ceiling--it was reflexive, somehow. “Hey, ship?”

“Yes, your Majesty?” The ship’s presence had a rich tenor voice, smooth and vaguely British-sounding.

“Can we get some snacks in here, please? Oh, and what’s your name?”

“At once, your Majesty. I have not been assigned a name.” The presence didn’t sound upset about the lack.

“Thanks. Okay, let’s call you Jeeves, then, until I can think of something better.”

“Very good, your Majesty.” The voice didn’t waver.

Or maybe Jarvis. Oh well, think about it later. Jupiter stretched and held in a yawn. “So what do you all think about it?”

Everyone glanced at each other, and she smothered a snicker. Finally Stinger took the lead. “Speaking from a security standpoint, Majesty, it’ll do fine--the weaponry is good and the shielding’s up to date.”

Caine nodded. “I read Officer Percadium’s report; all the evacuation pods are in repair and the airlocks are fully stocked with emergency equipment. Though I’d recommend purchasing new,” he added. The tentative confidence in his tone heartened Jupiter.

Captain Tsing cocked her head. “It is a bit out of date for your consequence, Majesty, but not overly so. The drive is sound and the portal generator is almost new.”

“We’re still vetting the crew but Captain Bishop’s record is exemplary.” Stinger looked pleased. “They all seem glad to be back at work.”

“And did you see the entertainment center?” Kiza chimed in, smirking, and everyone laughed. “I claim the first movie night.”

Jupiter glanced at Aggie, who raised her hands. “No comment; accommodations aren’t my department.”

“Fair.” Jupiter let the yawn out this time. “You guys do what you need to on the safety front; I’ll sign whatever Virtu puts in front of me for it.”

Caine’s small smile widened, and Stinger nodded. “Thank you, Majesty.”

They discussed the ship and its features for a while. The staff quarters had been deemed acceptable—not that Jupiter knew what she was looking at, but everyone else had seemed to like them. Captain Tsing wanted to bring more small ships in to escort the yacht, which Stinger endorsed, and Jupiter couldn’t see a reason why not. In a short time servers appeared with a substantial array of food, and they all got plates and settled back into their seats to continue talking. Jupiter made sure to sit next to Caine, snickering quietly when he had one of his periodic stare-offs with Edsel, and let the discussion continue around her.

It felt good, she decided, to be moving forward again.

Jupiter jerked awake, and for an instant nothing in the near-darkness was familiar, but then memory
cut in and aborted her panic. She was in the big round bed in the Queen’s Suite aboard Windy City—at least, what little she could see in the dimness fit her new memory of that room.

She was alone in the bed, but the space next to her was still warm, and when Jupiter listened she could hear water running in the bathing room nearby. She relaxed.

Her adrenaline was still up, though. Jupiter sat up slowly, crossing her legs beneath the covers, knowing she couldn’t go right back to sleep and blessing Caine for not turning the lights off completely when he’d come to bed. Ever since coming to space she’d avoided sleeping in darkness; it was too disorienting, and she wasn’t used to it. There was always some light leakage into the Bolotnikov basement.

But it didn’t surprise her that he’d taken note of her preferences.

“Jeeves,” she said softly, “what time is it?”

“Midway through fourth shift, madam,” the presence replied, equally quiet; she’d already instructed it to use a less formal honorific than the usual majesty.

“I meant on Earth, but okay.” She rubbed her eyes.

“What part of Earth, madam?”

Oops.

“Chicago.”

“Eight fifty-seven ante-meridian.”

Wow. Guess I was pretty tired. She could, of course, sync the ship to any time she preferred, but Jupiter didn’t see any need to disrupt the existing schedule without a good reason.

The sound of water had ceased; a door swished open, and Caine came back in, stretching his wings out to the sides as soon as he cleared the threshold and then folding them back in with just a quiet shush of feathers.

His head lifted at the sight of her; Jupiter couldn’t make out his expression, but she guessed he was scenting her fading alarm. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Jupiter shook her head. “I just popped awake and for a sec I didn’t know where I was.”

Caine’s outline seemed to relax slightly. “Oh. I know what you mean.”

“Yeah, I guess you’ve woken up in lots of different places.” Jupiter flipped back the covers as he came to the bed, and let him slide in before she wrapped herself around him.

“Mmm.” It was an agreeing sound. Caine was deliciously warm, and he immediately covered her with one wing, which always felt like a stiff, light blanket.

“Tell me about a few?” Jupiter stroked his chest, an automatic caress. Caine was stingy with stories about his history, though Jupiter didn’t know whether he was shy on the topic or just didn’t think she wanted to hear them. She always left the choice up to him, however.

Caine was silent a long minute, and she thought he was going to refuse, but finally he let out a long breath. “My first night in the Legion.”

Jupiter kept her own breathing under strict control. She knew very little about Caine’s early life, just hints here and there, and the few facts she’d gleaned from his medical records—most of which she
hadn’t understood when she’d read them. And she wanted to know.

On his terms. It has to be on his terms.

“I...it was…” Caine made a faint frustrated growl, and Jupiter curled closer, offering reassurance in the dark. “I didn’t know, until they came to get me for the handover, that I’d been sold. I mean...buyers saw us all the time, even me, but the only thing that saved me from reject disposal was my tracking skills. And I wasn’t sure…”

He swallowed, and pressed his cheek against Jupiter’s hair. “I wasn’t sure, until that day, that I wasn’t slated for disposal anyway. You know my Splicer sold me at a loss.”

Jupiter controlled her fury and the now-familiar sick horror as tightly as she’d regulated her breathing. “Yes.”

“The Legion rep collected three packs of lycantants and a squad of giganthorpes, and me, and rushed us off to the recruiting ship. They put us through decontam, and preliminary orientation, and all the rest, and it was so much to process. I’d been trained for it, but it was still the first time I’d been...anywhere.”

Jupiter could see him in her mind’s eye, a little younger and skinnier, wide-eyed and silent, absorbing all the changes as best he could.

“The tyro barracks are huge, they hold hundreds in triple bunks, and Splices are put there even though we can all pass the entry-level tests automatically. That’s where we stayed until we were sorted into our units, but that first night…”

Caine swallowed again and was quiet for a while. Jupiter rested her ear against his chest so she could hear his heartbeat, and wrapped her arm around his hips, and waited.

“I’d been alone for so long,” he said at last. “When my Splicer culled me from my litter, I was put in a room by myself, and I thought I would die there, but I didn’t. And eventually I got used to the silence. But the barracks, all those lives, the sound of their breathing...I was so tired I couldn’t stay awake, but when I woke up again, I didn’t remember where I was.”

His voice grew softer still, as if afraid to let the words out. “I just knew I wasn’t alone any more.”

And she could imagine it, a vast dark room filled with the whisper of life, and young Caine lying awake in the middle of it, listening to the sound of his life changing.

Of his life continuing.

“What happened in the morning?” Jupiter asked, and Caine made a quiet sound of amusement.

“Formation, to start with, and then exercises. Eventually they fed us. It was tough on the pure humans, but the Splices knew what they were doing, we just had to catch the cues.” He sounded satisfied, and Jupiter realized it was one of the few times he’d expressed something other than shame or inferiority about what he was. “The pure humans got aptitude tests, but Splices are usually set up in their own squadrons right away. Except for me.”

His voice dropped on the last words, the amusement fading. “It’s--combat Splices tend to come in groups. Packs, clutches--most Splicers don’t bother with one-offs, the profit’s too small if they’re selling to the Legion. But I didn’t have a pack. So they had to find a squadron that was looking for a tracker and would tolerate a misbred Splice.”
Faint bitterness tinged his tone, and Jupiter bit her lip. The wing covering her pressed a little closer, as if Caine were reminding himself that his circumstances were different now.

“Stinger?” she asked quietly, and felt his breath gust against the crown of her head.

“No...he was later. There...there were a lot of them, at first. Until I started to have a reputation for tracking.” He had gone very still, and Jupiter found herself wondering suddenly whether all the scars on his body had come from combat. “But once I did, I was valuable, and...things changed.”

Jupiter waited, and when he said nothing more she bit her lip before speaking. “What happened?”

The wing covering them trembled the slightest bit, and Jupiter could feel Caine’s muscles drawing tight. “I...I…”

Abruptly she was alone in the sheets. Caine withdrew to sit up, presenting his back to her, wings folded tightly down. Alarmed, Jupiter sat up. “Caine, what’s the matter?”

His shoulders hunched. “Your Majesty,” he said, and she could scarcely hear him. “I...I don’t want to say.”

“Okay!” Jupiter couldn’t fathom why refusing was making him so upset. She scooted forward to lay a hand between his wings, and almost pulled it back when he flinched. “Okay, you don’t have to!”

“I’m sorry,” he said, choked, and cautiously she slid her arms around his waist, trying not to put too much pressure on his wings.

“Caine, it’s okay, it is. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. And you don’t have to apologize.” He wasn’t relaxing, but he wasn’t pulling away either, and Jupiter rubbed her face against the nape of his neck, feeling the crisp hair rasp against her cheeks. His skin was hot and flushed, and she kissed it lightly.

He shuddered hard, and then strong fingers wrapped around her hands, clasping them tight and pressing them against Caine’s abdomen. Jupiter let herself lean harder against him, and gradually he relaxed, breathing slowing again.

I hate this. Jupiter bared her teeth at the unknown soldiers who had hurt Caine to the point where he couldn’t tell her what had happened. *If I knew who they were, I’d build a dungeon just to put them in.*

But she didn’t, and as far as her powers reached, Jupiter was pretty sure it wasn’t *that* far. Besides, for all she knew she *had* dungeons somewhere; it seemed like the sort of thing Seraphi would have, for show if nothing else.

She’d find out later. Jupiter coaxed Caine to lean backwards until he was more or less in her lap. He rolled over enough to wrap an arm around her waist, and Jupiter petted the soft skin between his nape and his wings, letting her fingers trail over old scar tissue and just immersing herself in his presence for a while.

“...possible,” Caine muttered eventually, and Jupiter blinked down at him.

“What?”

His wings flexed, then spread wide as he rose gracefully to his knees, the pinions surrounding her without touching her. His head was above hers, especially since Jupiter was sitting cross-legged, but somehow he managed not to loom. “You, your Majesty. You’re not possible.”
“People keep telling me that,” Jupiter said wryly, but Caine was actually smiling, so it didn’t matter at all.

Caine shook his head, reaching out to lift an errant strand of hair from her cheek. “You don’t see it. No Entitled would ever behave as you do. Not to Splices, not to anyone. It’s…”

“ Weird?” Jupiter offered, and he gave a snort of laughter.

“ Amazing.” Caine’s hand drifted across her face, thumb brushing her lower lip. The touch felt reverent. “You will change the universe, Jupiter Jones, First Primary of the House of Abrasax. And it will be an honor to stand at your side.”

She could feel his faith, like a warm pressure on her skin, and it was simultaneously terrifying and strengthening. “I’m probably going to get us all killed,” she said, and it was less than half a joke.

Caine shrugged, and his wings rustled, a whisper all around her; his smile widened. “We won’t let that happen.”

His barely-there touch was maddening. Jupiter looked up at him, and the love and distress and confusion and even the fear swirled together inside her, bubbling up until there was only one thing to do.

He bowed easily when she grabbed his hair and pulled him into her kiss, his hands finding her skin with a promptness that bordered on the eager she so wanted from him.

His wings flicked away as Jupiter let her weight carry them both backwards; they framed his head, flaring up like the heat in his eyes, and for a moment he looked utterly alien—neither man nor beast, but simply other, crouched over her and hers for the taking.

She loved it.

“Get down here,” Jupiter said, and he obeyed, his smile feral and delighted; and there was no more talking for a time.

“Mail?” Jupiter stared at the tray full of ornate packages, held by an impassive servitor. “We’re in outer space. How did we get mail?”

The faces around the breakfast table mostly looked tolerant. “By courier, your Majesty,” said Captain Bishop cautiously. “You didn’t decree that our location be kept private, so…”

“But I didn’t get any mail before.” Jupiter pushed aside her plate, but before she could take the tray the servitor had set it down and stepped back. Caine was already rising to wave his scanner over the pile.

“Most likely it hadn’t caught up with you,” Tsing said. “Such things are usually sent by Entitled, and you didn’t have an official residence as such until recently, Earth being a tertiary world.”

“No ZIP code,” Jupiter muttered, and poked gingerly at the top package as soon as Caine sat back down. The bundles were all different shapes and colors, and looked like a Christmas gift display done by someone with lots of money and wildly eclectic taste. Or none.

She picked up the top one, a cylinder that seemed to be made out of cloisonne in red and orange and
gold, and removed the stopper at one end. A crisp, pleasant smell drifted out, and Jupiter pulled out a scroll of delicate paper and unrolled it.

The calligraphy on it was a work of art, beautiful flowing lines, and she couldn’t read a letter of it; the alphabet wasn’t from Earth. “Huh. Okay, anybody want to translate?”

Tsing’s brows shot up, and Stinger coughed. Percadium bounced to his feet. “Allow me, your Majesty,” he said, and demonstrated how to make her sheave scan the page and render it into her choice of major Earth languages. Jupiter chose English, because she was out of practice with Cyrillic, and felt her own brows go up as she read.

She lifted her gaze, and looked at the array of people who were watching her, only half of them pretending they weren’t interested, and settled on the one furthest from pretending. “Kiza, would you come here and read this thing? I need a second opinion.”

Kiza was at Jupiter’s side before she’d finished speaking, and all but snatched the paper out of Jupiter’s hands, eyes lit. Stinger rubbed a hand over his face, looking pained, but kept his mouth shut.

Kiza read quickly, blinked, and read again a little more slowly. “Wow,” she said.

“I know, right?” Jupiter set down her sheave so she could gesture with both hands. “Who does that?”

Halfway down the table, Aggie laughed. “Okay, give,” she called. “We’re all perishing of curiosity, what is it?”

“I think it’s a marriage proposal.” It was couched in such flowery language that Jupiter wasn’t positive, but it sure sounded like one. “I mean, I haven’t even met the guy.” She squinted at the signature. “Or girl, or sa. Not real sure here.”

“That won’t matter,” Tsing said. “You are possibly the most eligible Entitled in the ‘verse right now.”

Oh crap. “Well, Their Noble Entitledness Triflay Verdoon, Marchon of the Seven Systems, can just...I don’t even know.” Jupiter shook her head and shoved the paper a little further away. “Do I have to tell them no in person?”

Caine was glowering. Stinger whistled. “Marchon Verdoon, not bad. Oh, he’s overreaching,” he said when Tsing raised her brows at him. “But you have to admire his, ah, confidence.”

“You may do anything you like, your Majesty, including taking legal action against him if you feel it’s warranted,” piped up Virtu from the other end of the table, and Jupiter absently made a mental note to get in a round table instead of a long one. “I am not up to date on current Entitled courtesies, but I believe a complete lack of response is considered an acceptable move in such things.”

“Might make him try harder,” Kiza said with a grin, and Stinger rolled his eyes.

“That’s just vid-drama trash, you’ve been watching the cheap channels again--”

Jupiter sat back in her seat and regarded the pile with a sinking feeling as several people began debating the issue. I really, really hope these aren’t all proposals. Sure, she’d had her dreams of being swept off her feet in some moonlit venue, what girl hadn’t, but after being literally swept off her feet several times by someone who probably would never consider himself worthy of proposing... Screw it, I still wouldn’t change things.
Caine was still glowering, but the hunch of his shoulders told Jupiter that he was already starting to doubt. She let out an exasperated breath, then picked up the proposal and held it out. “Caine, would you mind disposing of this for me, please?”

He blinked at her, then grinned—the one with all the teeth—and plucked the page away to begin shredding it methodically. Jupiter watched the tiny colored bits drift down onto his plate and hummed with pleasure before choosing another package.

There were no other proposals. They were mostly letters of introduction or pleas for favor from people Jupiter had never heard of. Some had gifts included—a tiny box of solid perfume, gems set in a web of brilliant metal, a blossom exquisitely carved from some dark green wood, no larger than her thumbnail—and they were all unctuous enough to make her skin crawl.

The last one, however, was flat, and looked like paper if paper could be brocaded; Jupiter wasn’t sure what it was actually made of. The fold was sealed with a knot made of some impossibly delicate thread; the intricate tangle looked vaguely familiar to Jupiter, but she couldn’t quite make it out, and when she lifted the flap it broke into a flutter of strands.

The page in her hand stirred all on its own, and Jupiter flinched, dropping it—and as it fell it twisted and folded, coming to rest on the table still moving. Caine already had a knife poised and ready to stab it, but Jupiter put a hand on his arm, because the flips were slowing, and when the page ceased to move it was folded into the intricate form of a bird.

“Wow.” Jupiter gaped at it. “Space has instant origami?”

Everyone was staring at the little figure, which was about as big as Jupiter’s hand; the pattern on the paper cleverly mimicked feathers and wings. Caine made a low sound that wasn’t quite a growl, but didn’t put down the knife.

Very carefully, Jupiter reached out to touch the bird with one finger. The little stiff beak opened, and a sweet voice spoke as if someone—Kalique—was standing in the room.

“Hello, Jupiter dear,” it said. “Congratulations on your winter festival! But it’s past time you got back to business—the Season is almost upon us and we’ve done nothing to prepare for it.”

Jupiter blinked at the bird, which flapped its wings once and continued to speak. “I’m hosting a small gathering for you, an informal way to meet some influential people, so do get in touch—or better still, come to Cerise. We need to set up your design team as soon as possible, but in the meantime mine will do.”

*Design team?* Jupiter mouthed in puzzlement, but the bird wasn’t finished. “It’s past time you took your place, my dear. Don’t delay any longer.”

The bird fell silent. The message had been delivered in a light tone, but Jupiter wondered if the last bit was *supposed* to sound like a threat.

“That has to be the weirdest invitation I’ve ever gotten, and that’s counting Vladie’s girlfriend’s all-emoji save-the-date texts.” Jupiter poked the bird again, but this time it didn’t move or speak. “Guess it was a one-off.”

There was a little silence. “Will you be wanting to go to Cerise then, your Majesty?” Captain Bishop finally asked.

*I...suppose I’d better.* Jupiter reminded herself firmly that she had a dozen people ready to back her up if she wanted to put her foot down with Kalique. “How long will it take? Twenty minutes again?”
“Er...nearly two hours, your Majesty, though we may be able to improve that time if--” Bishop sounded slightly alarmed, and Jupiter flapped a hand at her.

“No, no, that’s fine. Look, let me get back to you, okay? I need to get some stuff done first.” She looked around the table, organizing things in her mind. Kalique’s right about one thing. It’s time to get to business.

It was fascinating, watching her Majesty really step into the role.

Stinger had seen her do it before, of course, first when she threw the guide team off of Earth and then later on Gabal, but she was more decisive now, with a firmer grasp of what she wanted and how to go about obtaining it. Oh, he didn’t fool himself that she was anything but the rankest tyro, but fifty percent of command was confidence, and Queen Jupiter was gaining that rapidly.

The post-breakfast meeting was a lot like the breakfast meeting, except Jupiter had dismissed the Windy City personnel to their duties and sent the junior accountants away as well. That left Stinger, Caine, Virtu, Kiza, Dr. Thompson, Miss Tombu, Captain Tsing, and Officer Percadium. Given the personnel in the room, there were no other Stormbreakers; Stinger knew that he and Caine and Tsing were enough muscle, should circumstances require it.

“Okay, here’s the thing,” her Majesty said without preamble, and Stinger sat up to pay attention. “I admit I’ve kind of been half-assing it through this royalty thing up to now--it’s been a lot to get my head around, and while I have a little more idea of what I’m doing, it’s not much. But.”

She looked around at them all; the table had been removed, and they had all taken more comfortable chairs in a loose circle, but there was no question as to who was the focus.

“Kalique wants to present me to Entitled society, which I assume means more visibility. So I’m going to have to start acting more like an Entitled, I guess. Making my...my presence felt.” Her Majesty scrunched up her nose as if the idea didn’t please her. “I’m gonna get serious.”

“If you’ll forgive the question, what does that entail, Majesty?” Diomika asked.

Jupiter gave her a quick smile. “Good question, and the answer’s partly ‘I’ll figure it out as I go along’. The other part is, to start with, getting organized.” She shrugged. “We’ve kind of been bouncing around randomly. It’s time to actually do some hardcore planning.”

“Like what?” Dr. Thompson had her arms crossed, but her eyes were lit.

“Like--hire the personnel you keep telling me I need,” Jupiter said, directing the words towards Stinger. “Officially make this place my home base, though we seem to have done that already. Figure out what legal obligations I have besides the Ways and Means committee. And start research on--a whole bunch of things, I have a list.” Her gaze darted around the gathering, and Stinger knew she wasn’t sure of them all.

Well, he wasn’t either; as her Chief of Security he was supposed to be paranoid, though practically speaking he was fairly certain of everyone there, and more than when it came to Kiza and Caine.

“Excellent, Majesty,” he said, before she got nervous. “I’d like more in the way of guards, and you really need to have a medical team on board.”

“And a major-domo,” Diomika added. “It’s not quite protocol to, ah, go without.”
“Right,” Jupiter sighed. “Well, we’ll brainstorm on that, but more importantly, I need a secretary to help me keep it all straight. Diomika, I hate to do this to you, but–Phylo, I’m stealing you. If you’re willing to take the job.”

Stinger reflected wryly that her Majesty would just not accept that she could command any of them to do anything she liked, but he was actually getting used to it. Used to it, as if a Splice could ever expect such freedom, and yet she dispensed it so easily--

Percadium blinked rapidly, glancing at Diomika, and whatever he saw in her face was apparently answer enough. He rose to his feet and performed his flashy bow, but when he straightened his expression was sober and sincere. “Your Majesty, I would be honored.”

“Good. Thank you.” Jupiter blew out a breath. “As for the medical team, call Dr. Crisp back on Cherbodie and have her put one together; she can lead it. I liked her.”

Percadium grinned. “Task number one, yes, your Majesty.” He sat back down, looking interested, and Stinger approved of Jupiter’s choice. He’s smart and thinks on his feet. He’ll do.

“What else do we need to do to get this thing fully functional?” Jupiter gestured at the ship surrounding them, then glanced at Caine. “You said something about the emergency equipment?”

He nodded. “It should be updated. In fact, all the systems should undergo checks. No offense to Officer Percadium--” Phyto waved casually, clearly taking none. “--but the ship’s been in gas for several decades. It should be looked over by experts.”

Caine took a deep breath, and Stinger knew he was nervous. “If I may suggest it, I know a good place to have it done.”

“Great!” Jupiter said, and Stinger could see Caine’s spine straightening at her approval. “Let’s set it up.”

In the end, her Majesty acceded to just about every one of their suggestions–hiring supplementary guards, arranging for Tsing to comb her fleet rolls for appropriate escort ships and crews, and promising to consider upgrades to the Windy City’s drive and systems, should they be suggested by the inspectors. Jupiter and Phylo eventually got sidetracked into a discussion about a major-domo, and under cover of that Stinger leaned in closer to Caine. “Where d’you have in mind?”

A slight smile quirked Caine’s mouth. “Substation 6-A.”

Stinger squinted at him. “The place the traitor came from?”

Caine shook his head. “Elgin’s employer didn’t come from there; whoever hired them is way above that level.”

Stinger nodded, conceding, and Caine went on. “Her Majesty didn’t order any executions, or even contract sales. She didn’t even shut down the station. Stinger...the manager there will do anything for Jupiter, and if she told her personnel, they will too.”

“Good point.” It was true. Their Queen inspired loyalty, just by being herself. And Stinger was beginning to see how it might be her biggest asset.

Then Diomika came over to confer about ship crews, and Caine slipped away to talk to Kiza, and the hum of busy conversations was almost hive-like, purposeful and soothing.

Stinger settled back, and hummed along.
“Again.”

Jupiter’s arms ached and her eyes were watering, but the firm voice was implacable. She took aim, fired, and missed. As usual.

“Again.”


“Again.” Off to her left, Caine was obliterating a target with smooth, unhurried skill, his weapon barking in rhythmic pulses; the hologram disintegrated steadily until it flickered out. Jupiter’s own hologram had a faint scratch along one edge, nothing more.

Gritting her teeth, she took aim, fired.

Missed.

This time, the shot went nowhere near the target. Jupiter really wanted to throw the gun at the target, but she wasn’t five.

 Mostly.

“Weapon down.” The owner of the cool voice stepped into view. “That’s enough for today.”

Jupiter set the safety on her gun (flip the switch by your thumb) and laid it down on the low wall that delineated the edge of the firing range. Then she ungritted her teeth, took a deep breath, and shouted. “Блять!”

Her instructor didn’t laugh, but a small smile curved her lips. Dayna Mellanby was tall, slim, pure human, and austere; she had skin the color of turned earth, and wore lavender jumpsuits and a pair of silver boots that Jupiter envied badly.

“Skill is only gained through practice,” Dayna said, and picked up the gun. “Even your Splice practices.” Though Caine had stopped shooting and was looking their way worriedly, presumably because of Jupiter’s swearing.

Jupiter sighed, and shook out her cramped hands. She would have objected to Dayna’s use of “Splice”, except that there was no condescension in it; in her mouth it was a descriptor and nothing more. Jupiter was quickly learning that Dayna cared about one thing only. “Yeah, but I’m not getting any better.”

“You will,” Dayna said, checking the weapon over with smooth ease. “You’re building new neural
Jupiter sighed, but didn’t argue. Dayna--she preferred to be called by her first name--was one of the first non-Entitled Jupiter had met who was ready to treat Jupiter as an equal. Jupiter wasn’t sure if it was her status as a teacher or just her personality, but it was appreciated.

The weapons expert had agreed not only to stay aboard Windy City and coach Jupiter through basic marksmanship but to work with her Royal guard as well, expanding their skills with different weapons. Jupiter was more than willing to pay for it, and when Kiza had asked to join them Jupiter had added her to the roster. It was all very satisfactory--except for the part where Jupiter was abysmal at it.

She sighed again and stretched to ease her shoulders and back. The shooting range was part of a convertible gym, with the ship’s presence supplying the targets--very handy, especially when the Skyjackers could also use it on their off-time for sparring practice. Jupiter had sat in on a couple of those and come away very...impressed. And thinking about ways to create a space they could actually fly in, to stretch their wings if nothing else.

But none of that was making her any better at shooting. Nor was practicing with Kiza, who stretched the limits of the target generator with half a dozen different weapons.

Nonetheless, Jupiter persisted. Partly out of sheer stubbornness, and partly out of a desire to not look bad in front of her Royal guard--childish, but Jupiter figured she was allowed a caprice or two.

“We’ll continue again tomorrow,” Dayna said, gesturing to disappear Jupiter’s target; Caine had gone back to his own practice.

“Oh. After lunch, right?” Dayna insisted on daily practice, but Jupiter’s schedule meant it moved around in the day.

Dayna nodded. Jupiter took that as dismissal, and fled, leaving Caine to finish his practice undistracted.

It was almost five minutes’ walk back to the Queen’s Suite. Jupiter didn’t hurry; the Windy City was still new enough that she was still taking in its details, though at least with Jeeves always available she couldn’t get actually lost.

She’d upgraded her initial impression of the ship to a mashup of a mansion, a museum, and a really high-end hotel, but without the familiar Earth layout of either a house or a hotel. There seemed to be a lot of sweeping staircases and architecture for its own sake, and if Jupiter hadn’t insisted on a tour behind the scenes, she’d never have guessed that there was an entire network of strictly functional corridors behind the walls--all for the servitors not considered senior enough to be seen.

Jupiter had promptly told everyone that they could use any hallway they damn well pleased, but she suspected that most of them stuck to what they were used to.

Now she wandered down one of the plushly carpeted halls, trailed by the usual Stormbreaker shadow; today it was Honch, who could move in complete silence despite their bulk. Jupiter was getting used to that, too, the need to have a guard at all times outside her private quarters; Stinger had admitted that it probably wasn’t necessary on board ship, but then he’d added tartly that neither he nor Caine were willing to bet Jupiter’s life on “probably”, and anyway it would be protocol everywhere she went, so if her Majesty pleased she might as well practice that too.

Jupiter had rolled her eyes, and agreed.
A crewmember heading in the other direction bobbed in an abortive bow as he passed, and Jupiter waved back, which made the man grin a little. She smirked and kept going.

The next person they passed, however, was a hunched Splice a little bigger than Jupiter, who reminded her vaguely of an armadillo, though armadillos weren’t usually dark red. When the Splice caught sight of her, he froze, eyes wide, and when she waved, he made a meeping sound and vanished back the way he’d come, only faster.

Jupiter grimaced. *It’s times like these that I wonder about this whole “servant” thing. It seemed ridiculous that so many people were needed to support just her, and ten times as weird when half of them seemed to think she was something supernatural.*

*Remember what Aggie said,* Jupiter reminded herself. *You’re a job provider, and a better employer than most of these poor бедняги would have anywhere else. And as soon as I figure out how, the Splices’ll be real employees, not slaves under a different name.*

Though, she thought gloomily, it might be a while before she did figure out that “how”. *Hell, I wanted to be an astronomer. Not a lawyer.*

Honch preceded her into the Queen’s Suite, standard protocol to check for intruders, but then halted just inside the door. Jupiter ducked around him to see Caine in the outer reception room, just stripping off his gloves.

“Holy crap, how’d you do that?” She squinted at Caine. “I left the gym before you were even done.”

His expression hovered between shy and smug. “I’m a Skyjacker, your Majesty.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re all supernatural.” Jupiter stuck her tongue out at him and patted Honch’s arm. “We’re good, you can go.”

Honch bowed, which was sort of like having a large granite boulder salute her, and took themselves out. They would remain on duty in the corridor, and every last one of her guards refused to let her put something out there for them to at least *sit on,* but Stinger had assured her it was easy duty.

“Are you all right?” Caine asked, tucking his gloves away into a pocket, and Jupiter flopped down on the nearest floating lounge chair and sighed once more.

“Just frustrated. It feels like I’ll never learn to shoot.”

Caine raised his brows, then came over to where she lay and gestured, rotating one hand. Jupiter promptly flipped over onto her stomach, and smothered a grin in the cushions as Caine knelt to straddle her hips. She *loved* it when he did this.

Those broad, gentle hands started with the back of her neck, kneading lightly. Jupiter moaned a little, and tried to stay verbal. “Not gonna tell me it’ll just take time?”

Caine made a rueful sound. “I wouldn’t know. My skill is bred into my genes.”

Jupiter would have winced, but she felt too good. “But y’still practice.”

“Practice hones skill.” His thumbs edged down onto her shoulders, easing away the cramps from her lesson. “Gene-skill is only baseline. To be worthy of a Skyjacker commission, we have to be the *best.*”

“Mmmhh.” Jupiter gave up on words. She didn’t get neck-rubs every day, but since moving her
entourage to the *Windy City* Jupiter had asked Phylo to schedule in a bit of down-time each day if possible. Granted, it had been less than a week so far, but he’d always managed to wedge it in somewhere.

Caine’s hands kept moving. Jupiter would have felt guilty, except she knew the expression he was wearing even without being able to see it; a narrow-eyed look of quiet pleasure. The hair on the back of her neck was swept delicately aside, and Jupiter felt a puff of warm breath in its place as Caine bent to inhale her scent. It still seemed weird to her, but Jupiter wasn’t going to argue.

When she was limp and drifting on the edge of sleep, she heard Caine’s wings open, and then he was lifting her up, tilting them both backwards so that Jupiter was cuddled against him. He tucked his wings down over her, and she managed to rub her cheek against his chest.

“Tell me about the repair substation?” she asked at last, trying to stay awake. In theuproar surrounding Sa Brem’s death, Jupiter had never gotten the whole story of the place they were about to visit.

“Well...they fix ships there.” When Jupiter elbowed him, Caine let out a small grunt. “What? That’s what they do.”

But when she peered up at his face, his lips were twitching, and Jupiter elbowed him again, more lightly. “The biggest ship on Earth would fit into the docking bay here, Wise. Gimme some *detail*. Tell me what it looks like, at least.”


That made sense; never in her life had Jupiter seen an auto garage, for instance, that was anything but greasily functional. “And people actually live there?”

“Most of them will probably spend their entire lives there,” Caine said, sounding the slightest bit superior. “But they’re well-treated. Tech maintenance is a skilled position.”

“Nice to have our own repair shop.” Jupiter wondered how the workers—*what do you call them? Mechanics? Shipwrights?*—felt about the transfer of power. *But I’m willing to bet I’m a better boss than Balem.*

“That can be my slogan,” she muttered, more to herself than to Caine, but when he made an inquiring sound she laughed. “Triple B. A Better Boss than Balem.”

Caine gave her a slow smile. “Your Majesty,” he said, “give them thirty ticks and they’ll know it for themselves.”

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*He’s right,* Jupiter reflected a few hours later, looking at the viewscreen of the *Windy City’s* bridge. *It isn’t pretty.*

*Abrasax Fleet Substation 6-A* looked like a ball of clay with a handful of straws stuck into it, as if someone were sculpting an abstract version of a porcupine. Lights shone on some of the straws and in some of the dimples on its far side; and it was enough larger than her ship to make her mind ache trying to take it in.

Nevertheless, the yacht eventually came to a halt to dock at one of the staiths. “We’re not going inside?” she asked Captain Bishop.
“Protocol dictates otherwise,” the Captain replied. Her earlier nervousness had given way to a sort of obsequious formality that tended to set Jupiter’s teeth on edge. “This substation is not important enough to host your Majesty’s ship in such a fashion.”

That sounded completely illogical to Jupiter and snooty to boot, but it didn’t seem worth arguing about just then. There was no sound or vibration, but a second or two after the screen image stopped moving one of the bridge personnel turned their way. “Captain, we’re docked.”

“Great!” Jupiter said before Bishop could say something else smarmy. “Stinger, remind me who’s coming along?”

Stinger stepped up from where he stood at the back of the room. “Basically the same team that came to investigate, Majesty.” As Jupiter strode out of the bridge, he fell in beside her. “Mr. Wise, Sa Urdur, and Captain Tsing. Also I’m sending along Banti and Absaba and a squad of synths. In essence this is a state visit; you need to have some real presence.”

“So everybody keeps telling me.” Jupiter had considered one of the fantastic outfits brought along from Gabal, and decided she had better keep them for parties. Instead she wore her Aegis jacket and trousers, with a long sleeveless vest made out of some floaty, sparkly stuff on top. It felt, she admitted in the privacy of her own mind, like wearing cloth made out of stars.

Stinger gave her a grin and surprised Jupiter by patting her arm. “You’ll do fine.”

The shuttle ride into the substation took about three minutes and was too short; Jupiter considered asking for a close-up flight around the thing on the return trip, just so she could see the details of her first-ever space station. The hangar, once they got past the force field holding in the atmosphere, was huge; and there was a crowd waiting. Of course.

Jupiter had enough time to look them over as the transport beam lowered her to the deck. It was a mixed group; some obvious Splices, a number of Sargorns, and a handful of people who looked like ordinary humans, though as Jupiter got closer she could see that a lot of them had implants of some kind or even mechanical limbs.

But she had only just stepped out of the beam when the entire group, in a ragged wave, dropped to their knees.

Jupiter halted. Wait, what?

The nearest figure, a tiny brown Splice with a familiarly pointed face, looked up. “Your Majesty,” she said breathlessly. “Thank you for our lives.”

It took Jupiter a second or two to work that out, and when she did a surge of that weird cold anger overtook her—not at the woman, but at the whole fucked-up situation, that had all these lives hanging on her whim.

She closed the distance between them with a deliberate stride. I’m on display. Might as well make use of it. Bending, she took the little woman’s trembling hands, and pulled her gently to her feet. “Manager Traduce,” she said, grateful for Caine’s briefing, “I’m pleased to meet you.”

The woman’s eyes were huge, and for a moment Jupiter thought she was going to pass out. Jupiter gave her a smile. “Mr. Wise tells me you helped find the, uh, person who sabotaged my ship. I wanted to say thank you.”

Traduce blinked rapidly, her nose twitching. “Your Majesty,” she said weakly. “I--we--”
She glanced around. None of the others had stood, but they were all staring, and what expressions Jupiter could read were mostly stunned. Traduce’s narrow shoulders straightened.

“We are happy to serve, your Majesty,” she said more firmly, her voice carrying. “And--and we are glad that you are, are unharmed.”

“She too.” Jupiter looked around. “Please, guys, stand up?”

With a vast rustling, the crowd did so, looking at one another uncertainly before staring at Jupiter again. She squeezed Traduce’s hands and released them. “So, I’ve got this yacht that needs inspecting. Think you can help me out?”

“Of course, your Majesty.” Traduce bobbed a bow, but it looked like habit. “We will begin at once.”

“Great! In the meantime, can I get a tour of this place?” Jupiter waved at the cavernous space. “I’d like to see what it all looks like.”

Traduce blinked again. “A--a tour? Certainly.”

She turned away to beckon to someone in the crowd, and Jupiter glanced back at her entourage. Most of them were impassive, but Caine--

Caine was wearing his rare, full-fledged grin.

The tour was fascinating, though Jupiter could tell that the inhabitants didn’t quite understand why she was so interested. Manager Traduce was clearly torn between acting as Jupiter’s guide and personally supervising the yacht inspection, but duty won out and she assigned one of the assistant managers, a tall young man called Flat, to walk her Majesty through the station.

It was a self-contained world all on its own, with everything its personnel needed to survive, up to and including hydroponics and some kind of food replication system, and a small ore refinery, though Flat assured Jupiter that they imported most of their raw materials.

However, personnel were only at about a third of their strength; after Seraphi’s death business had slacked off, and personnel had not been replaced. The hope in Flat’s voice when he explained the situation was palpable, and Jupiter nodded, reserving judgment for the moment.

Most of the place was given up to operations--the sphere was a lot less solid than it looked, with hundreds of bays to handle almost any kind of ship--but it also held living quarters, common areas, exercise rooms, medical facilities, and a sort of company store, though apparently most people just ordered what they needed and had it delivered. There was no library, but there was a tiny star-gazing dome.

It seemed a restricted sort of life to Jupiter, but as she stopped to talk to various people she gradually realized that for most of them it was what they were used to. Many of them had never set foot on a planet at all, and they all seemed fairly content.

“It’s not as shabby as I expected, given the lack of funding,” Jupiter said, trailing a hand along one slightly dingy wall, and was startled to see Flat’s dead-white skin flood with crimson. And nearly smacked herself in exasperation. Duh. Of course they’re using the ship-repair stuff to keep the place looking nice!
“Good job,” Jupiter added hastily, and patted the wall. “We wouldn’t want the place looking rundown.”

Flat gulped audibly, and managed to smile back, the blush fading. “We do our best, your Majesty.”

Later, after dinner with Traduce and some of the other personnel in one of the cafeterias—and one of the blandest meals Jupiter had ever eaten, apparently Entitled got all the interesting food—Jupiter met with Captain Bishop in the bridge’s retiring room.

“They want to replace the atmosphere generator and tune the engine,” the captain reported, sounding impatient. “As if it weren’t in perfect condition already.”

“They are the experts,” Jupiter said neutrally. Bishop made a rather rude sound through her trunk.

“Your Majesty’s fleet deserves better than a third-rate refurbishing station at the dark end of the Arm. Why here? The House of Abrasax owns many finer places.”

“It came highly recommended.” Bishop was really getting annoying. “And apparently they can redecorate the place in a day, and freshen up the crew quarters.” Crew included the serving people; Jupiter figured that if her suite was getting carpets replaced, their areas should too.

“If you’ll forgive me saying it, your Majesty, you’ll give them ideas above their station. The servitant areas were more than adequate.”

“You think that just because they’re servants they shouldn’t have nice things?” Jupiter kept her voice even with an effort. In Bishop’s words she heard the endless echo she’d grown up with, the idea that if you were poor you shouldn’t have any luxuries, any pleasures, because that meant you were lazy, self-indulgent, wasteful--

Bishop’s ears twitched. “Everyone has their place in the ‘verse. Indulging the lower orders just makes for discontent and disruption.”

Jupiter regarded her for a moment. “Okay.” She pushed to her feet. “Excuse me, please.”

Three minutes later she was pacing up and down the manicured paths of the yacht’s garden room, Laur a respectful and somewhat cowed presence standing guard at a distance.

Jupiter wasn’t quite sure why this, out of all the injustices of space society, made her so mad. Maybe it’s because she’s one of the oppressed, but she’s still trying to push other people down.

Jupiter made a face. You’ve seen it before on Earth all the time. Why shouldn’t it be any different out here?

She could have shut Bishop down with one sentence, but it felt unfair. Out here, I’m the one with all the privilege.

“What’s up, Majesty? Jupiter.” The voice brought Jupiter out of her thoughts; Kiza was standing at the end of Jupiter’s path, her hands full of flowers.

Jupiter blinked, and Kiza waved the bouquet. “I was just getting some stuff for Dad’s quarters, he misses his bees. You look like you’re about to blow plasma; what’s the matter?”

Jupiter opened her mouth, then closed it. She wanted nothing more than to pour the whole thing into friendly ears, but—Bishop was her employee. It didn’t seem fair.
“I’m, um, having issues with Captain Bishop,” she said eventually.

“Mm.” Kiza waited, and when Jupiter didn’t continue, she shrugged. “Can you solve them?”

Jupiter thought about that. “I...don’t think so.” Not easily, anyway.

Kiza buried her nose in the bouquet, then pulled out one flower and handed it to Jupiter. “Then move her.”

Jupiter blinked again. “Move her?”

“She came with the ship, that doesn’t mean she has to stay with the ship,” Kiza said matter-of-factly.

It was funny; Jupiter had got the idea that she could hire people, but aside from the group steering societies on Earth, she hadn’t really thought about firing anyone. “I...she’s a Splice, she’s got a contract, hasn’t she?” Jupiter said doubtfully. “I don’t want to just cut her loose.” The idea of essentially selling someone was even worse than the idea of buying them, but she remembered Stinger’s words about a Splice without a contract holder. It’s a hard life...

“You’ve got lots of ships. Put her in charge of one of the other ones. Or buy one for her to run,” Kiza suggested. “Diomika can take command, or you can find another captain.”

“Huh. I...I guess I could do that.” Jupiter considered the idea while absently sniffing the flower, which smelled like green pepper. Having Captain Tsing’s cool nerve and quiet understanding in charge would be a relief.

“Have Phylo handle it, if you don’t want to.” Kiza tucked another flower into her own hair. “He can make it sound like a promotion.”

“Stinger did say I should delegate more,” Jupiter admitted.

“There you go then.” Kiza gave her a bright smile. “Problem solved, you can stop scaring your royal guard. Oi, Antinari, it’s safe now!”

Laur, face impassive, didn’t stir, though Jupiter saw his wings move in a subtle gesture that had Kiza giggling. Jupiter reflected on what it must have been like to be essentially raised by Skyjacker, and grinned.

All right. Let’s give this a try. “Jeeves...find me Phylo, would you?”

“At once, madam,” came the reply.

“Good.” Kiza cocked her head. “Now come sit down, and I’ll show you how to make a crown out of these.”

“What do I need a flower crown for?” Jupiter asked wryly, letting Kiza herd her towards the closest bench.

“To put on Caine, duh.” Kiza grinned again, and Jupiter had to laugh.

They sat down, and Kiza filled her hands with flowers. “Now you start with these, they have the toughest stems...”

As a distraction, it worked well.
Chapter 26

So two years ago today, give or take a few hours, I started posting this monster. It still isn't the longest thing I've ever written, but it's rapidly approaching that point. I'm averaging just over a chapter a month (ouch). Why are you people still even reading this thing?!

Seriously, though, thank you all for reading and commenting. We may write for ourselves, but we post for our readers, and you guys are the absolute best. *hearts*

This was going to be fun.

Caine kept his face straight as he and Stinger and six more Stormbreakers escorted Jupiter up to the topmost deck of the *Windy City*. Somehow she had managed to keep the details of this last modification from the other Skyjackers, and Caine was really looking forward to their reactions when they saw it.

The rest of the party included a wildly curious Kiza, and Dr. Thompson, who mostly smelled amused. Stinger was puzzled and a little suspicious, while the others were intrigued, and Caine carefully kept his face straight.

*I'd have liked to surprise you too,* Jupiter had told him back when she’d first explained her plan. *But I need a Royal guard with me when I consult with Miss Traduce, and this way I can check on progress without having to try to hide too much.*

It made sense, and Caine was happy to be of service in any fashion, but he’d also been a little surprised at how good it felt to be in on the secret. It wasn’t often that he had inside knowledge of anything pleasant.

Manager Traduce was waiting by the big airlock that had been fitted into the wall. Nearly the entire deck had been converted into one space, with just a corridor ringing it, but there was no hint of what lay within, and Caine had been truly impressed with how quickly the station personnel had modified the ship.

*I was right. They will do anything for her.*

The little Splice’s hands were clasped in front of her, and she smelled a trifle nervous, but nothing like she’d been before--just the anxiety of an artist whose latest work was about to be revealed.

“My Majesty,” she said, and bobbed her head. “It’s ready for your inspection.”

Jupiter’s small grin belied her excitement; judging from the pheromones rolling off of her, his Queen was primed tighter than her yacht’s retuned drive. “Go ahead, Miss Traduce,” she said.

Traduce bobbed again and touched the ‘lock’s panel. The huge circle opened in a twisting motion, and a rush of rich, humid air blew out and over them all. It smelled of moisture and greenery and *life*.

Jupiter’s grin widened, and she beckoned, and they all followed her through the ‘lock and into the
gigantic space beyond.

It was a garden, but it was as far beyond the Windy City’s garden room as the yacht itself was beyond a skimmer. It took up almost all of the deck, a distance Jupiter referred to as a “mile”, and the hull, paneled to produce light like Earth’s star, was almost a third of that distance above.

The space was landscaped within; soil had been brought aboard to cover the deck, and there were slopes and valleys, paths and beds of plants and groups of trees. And everywhere, there was grass, lush and green.

It was stunningly beautiful, and everyone but Jupiter and Traduce was gaping. With every breath, Caine could scent different flowers blooming, and he knew from seeing the plans that there were plots throughout the garden, mostly Earth-native plants and a few others that were compatible.

Jupiter started to laugh, a bright happy sound. “Miss Traduce, it’s amazing.”

Traduce flushed with pleasure and bowed. “We are glad to serve,” she said, and Caine could hear her sincerity.

A low hum reached his ears, a familiar sound; Caine saw several Stormbreakers go on alert, but they too knew it by now. Jupiter held out her arms.

And the bees came.

They formed a haze around Jupiter, a living smoke that haloed her head and eddied back and forth as she moved. Jupiter turned up her face to them, murmuring something Caine couldn’t quite catch over the vibration of so many wings, but some of them broke off to go whirl around Stinger and Kiza.

Kiza was laughing too, and cupped her hands for the bees to climb into, but Stinger just stared up with the air of a man dreaming as bees surrounded him. His eyes were gold, and they glittered with something more than light before he closed them.

Jupiter lowered her arms, though most of the bees lingered. “Pretty cool, huh? It’s big enough for flying, so you all are hereby ordered to make use of it any time you want to stretch your wings.”

One by one the Stormbreakers turned to look at her, and Caine noted that every one of them had let their mouths fall open. Then Honch stepped forward and bowed low, wings swept back, before leaping into the air.

That did it. The others did the same, each one giving Jupiter a deep bow before taking to the air, Soren and the twins, Sheneto and Banti and Rush, and the rich air was made wind by the beating of their wings.

Jupiter laughed again, a happy sound, and nudged Caine with one shoulder. “You too,” she said.

Caine smiled down at her. “You have no idea what you’ve done for them,” he told her, as the whoops and shouts faded into the distance.

She laughed, and waved off a few bees. “Maybe a little. Go on--I know you want to.”

Of course he did; Skyjackers were built to fly, after all. Caine took a step backwards so he too could bow, wings held at the correct respectful angle, and then sprang upward.

It was no open sky, of course, but in the depths of the Void it was far more than any one of them could have thought to ask for. Caine spiralled upwards almost to the ceiling before cutting back
down at an angle; he could see Kiza running down one of the paths towards a small meadow full of some white-petaled flowers, and even at that height he could hear her laughter. Dr. Thompson was following more slowly.

And Stinger was kneeling at Jupiter’s feet, head bowed. Caine felt warmth swell up in him at the sight, because he knew that half the reason Jupiter had called the garden into being was to give Stinger and Kiza someplace that felt more like home; and now Stinger knew it too.

_Every time I think I cannot love her more, she surprises me._

Jupiter crouched down to catch Stinger’s hands and pull him up and into a hug, and Caine watched his commander’s arms carefully close around his Queen.

Satisfied, Caine shot away down the length of the ship, to obey Jupiter’s command; he’d go back for her in a few minutes, to lift her up into the little space she’d created and try to show her how much it meant, to have someone who cared so much for all of them.

But first he would show the others how to _really_ put on some speed.

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Much later, Jupiter climbed the grassy little hill that formed the highest point in her new garden, admiring the stone path that had been laid to make the climb easy. At the top was a little patio, also stone, with benches; and in the center sat her telescope.

The Stormbreakers had worn themselves out chasing each other before the twins split off to go get the rest and show them the garden. Jupiter had wandered around with Manager Traduce, discussing details and possible future changes while she looked the place over; Kiza had darted back at one point to present them both with flower crowns and a wild grin, and Jupiter secretly treasured the memory of Traduce with a ring of blossoms set on her tidy brown hair.

Now they were all gone, and she was alone but for the guard at the airlock. Jupiter sat on one of the benches and looked around, satisfied at what she saw. _They really did do a terrific job._

It felt good, to have a piece of Earth with her, however artificial it was underneath. And the garden had one more trick up its sleeve…

“Jeeves,” Jupiter told the air, “give me the window, please.”

“Of course, madam,” the ship’s presence replied, and Jupiter swung her legs back and forth as the room’s light gradually faded.

Just before it reached complete darkness, the ceiling went away…and the stars appeared.

It was why the room had an airlock, though the hull window was as strong and resistant a material as could be had anywhere in the known universe, or so Traduce had assured Jupiter. It didn’t matter; what she cared about was the view.

And it was spectacular. Substation 6-A was all by itself in a long orbit around a planetless star, but it was much closer to the center of its galaxy than Earth’s solar system, so what Jupiter could see of space was thick with stars.

She sighed happily, and bent to look through the telescope. Jeeves was on hand to give her any information she wanted about what she saw, but at the moment Jupiter was content to just look, and
admire.

It seemed a bit silly to use an old-fashioned glass-lens instrument to observe stars that she could see up close and in person if she chose, but Jupiter didn’t care. Doing it this way reminded her of home, and her father, and the family she loved. For a little while, she could tuck being a Queen into the background, and just be an aspiring astronomer and Maximilian’s daughter.

It was quite some time before Banti, who was on duty at the airlock, signaled her; Jupiter pressed the correct button on her bracelet this time. “Your Majesty,” his artificial voice said in her ear, “Mr. Wise would like to enter.”

Since she was out of his sight, Jupiter rolled her eyes. “Sure, let him in.”

A few minutes later she felt the air stirring. The Stormbreakers could fly silently if they wanted to, but even the most experienced Skyjacker couldn’t defeat physics entirely. Jupiter smiled, not turning until she sensed the faint shock of Caine touching down behind her.

“I told you you could come in any time.” He was barely visible in the starlight, a tall shadow with eyes that reflected just a hint of light.

His wings were still half-extended, a deeper shadow behind him. Caine cocked his head. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Jupiter didn’t bother to point out that he could have flown through ninety percent of the garden without her even noticing he was there. “You don’t. Want a peek?”

Caine obediently bent down to look through the telescope, but even in the darkness Jupiter could tell he wasn’t really interested, so after a few stars she put the instrument away in the storage space inside one of the benches. No one would bother it if she left it out, but the garden had a rain function and she didn’t want it to get wet.

Caine watched her as she broke the telescope down, and despite the dimness she could feel the weight of his gaze on her skin, speeding her heartbeat.

As soon as the lid was closed, Jupiter stepped up into Caine’s space, flattening her palms on his chest. Beneath the vest, his heart was running as fast as hers, and she smiled up at him. “What do you want?”

His hands rested lightly on her waist. “To fly with you,” he said softly, the words a bit hesitant still.

Jupiter let her smile widen. They’d flown together earlier, in a wild game of chase with Laur and Forthwith and Sheneto, but now they were essentially alone. “Just flying?”

Slowly, Caine smiled back. Jupiter stood on tiptoe to put her arms around his neck, and he lifted her and spread his wings in the same smooth motion, crouching and then springing up.

It took them a long time, afterwards, to find Caine’s pants in the flowerbeds below, but in Jupiter’s opinion it was completely worth it.

The receiving airlock of the Windy City was so heavily ornamented that it was hard to tell its purpose. Agatha’s eyes, used to the blunt functionality of NASA’s designs, found it all distracting, but as two of Jupiter’s crew worked at the control console she focused on the coming meeting. My
“You ready for this?” Jupiter glanced back at Agatha, looking a little worried, and spoke softly. “She can be kind of, well, snooty.”

“I’ll be fine,” Agatha assured her. Of course, there was no guarantee of that, but one didn’t teach high school for over a decade without picking up survival skills.

_Besides, she’s an aristocrat, and Jupiter outranks her. She can hardly order my beheading._

The airlock door spun open, and two guards came through first to take up position on either side of the portal. Next was a crowd of people, all wearing strange clothing, but it wasn’t hard to pick out Lady Kalique; all of them focused on her, almost as if they were living, conscious ornaments to her beauty. And she _was_ beautiful; beauty as sharp as a knife.

Agatha stayed to one side as Kalique clasped hands with Jupiter; it was easier to observe that way, and there really wasn’t room for her among Kalique’s entourage. But she could see enough to pick up some of the dynamics between the two…and they were interesting.

Jupiter had spoken enough about Kalique for Agatha to see that she liked Kalique, but was wary of her; quite a healthy reaction, in Agatha’s opinion, given the huge unknowns of the situation. At the same time, Kalique’s expression was both fond and condescending, but something about the intensity of her gaze made her look--hungry.

But not, Agatha thought tentatively, in a predatory way; more as if she wanted something from Jupiter. Agatha made a mental note, and then stepped forward as Jupiter gestured.

“Kalique, I want you to meet my financial advisor, Dr. Agatha Thompson. She’s from Earth,” Jupiter added; from the slight rise of Kalique’s eyebrow, Agatha didn’t think that was news to her.

“Lady Kalique,” Agatha said, and bowed slightly. It went against the grain, but… _When in Rome,…_ etcetera. She was here to support Jupiter, and that meant conforming to necessary protocol.

Kalique inclined her head, polite and disinterested, but spoke to Jupiter. “My dear, I’m glad you’re increasing your staff, but from _Earth?_ The complexities…”

Agatha bristled, but silently. She couldn’t tell if Kalique was insulting her origins, or just concerned for her lack of galactic knowledge. _Possibly both, but I suppose if it’s the latter, it is somewhat justified._

Jupiter’s chin went up. “I need someone who shares my perspective. And she’s not the only one I’ve got, Kalique…but you know that, don’t you?”

Kalique’s laughter was a chime of bells, as carefully presented as the rest of her. “A touch, crude as it is. Well done. You’re making progress, though we still need to assemble you a proper retinue. I’ll introduce you to some distant cousins, minor nobility of course, but worthy of attending you…”

Jupiter’s nose scrunched up, but she didn’t refuse, instead taking Kalique’s arm and guiding her down the corridor towards the reception room. Curious, Agatha followed them, figuring she could continue observation since she hadn’t been dismissed. Two of the most elaborately dressed of Kalique’s entourage immediately moved to cut her off, drifting subtly in ahead of her at a diagonal.

_Hmm. Minor nobility?_ It would be interesting to see what happened if she put Jupiter’s higher rank up against her own status as a mere employee. _Why not._
Agatha kept it equally subtle, merely lengthening her stride enough to stay in front of them, and kept her gaze forward. And to her satisfaction, they gave way.

*Definitely interesting.*

She wasn’t a sociologist, but any in-depth understanding of economics required a certain knowledge of how human beings behaved. *And from what little I’ve seen, this Entitled setup isn’t far off from many of Earth’s societies.* Plus, years of teaching had taught her plenty about hierarchies...and it hadn’t all come from the students.

Jupiter had solved the rank issue for lunchtime, anyway; the meal was set up in one of the yacht’s dining rooms as a widespread buffet, and everyone in Kalique’s group was invited to partake as they pleased. Agatha noted that all of them still waited until Jupiter and Kalique had made their selections, and then sorted themselves out in a pattern she couldn’t quite make out. Agatha lingered within earshot of Jupiter and Kalique, nibbling on fruit and listening.

Kalique was mostly talking about a series of events she had planned for Jupiter, completely ignoring the others standing about. Jupiter was nodding as she listened, asking the occasional question, and Agatha wondered if she’d give in on the entourage question. *It’s a sure bet that anyone Kalique provides will report back to her, but from what Jupiter says she’s already got spies in the household...I wonder if that’s an official title with these people, Spymaster.*

And should Jupiter be sending out her own spies in turn? It seemed alien to the girl’s straightforward personality, and Agatha wasn’t sure that they could provide any useful information at that point. *Jupiter believes that Kalique doesn’t mean her harm at this time, that she genuinely wants to help. So far, that looks to be the case. Kalique had already had several opportunities to capture, harm, or otherwise subvert Jupiter, and she hadn’t. It may be that what Jupiter says is true, that Kalique sees her as a shiny new toy to play with.*

Which didn’t make Kalique *safe,* but at least she wasn’t an immediate danger.

*You’re getting paranoid.* Agatha shook her head over her own thoughts, and then suppressed a snort. *Is it paranoia if they’re really out to get her?*

The trouble with being on top of the heap was that there was always someone trying to knock you off…

Agatha handed her dish to a passing servitor, with a nod of thanks that made the man blink, and chose a target. The older-looking Splice with the beaky face was holding a sheave and watching Kalique, and everything about him shouted *employee* rather than nobility. Agatha strolled over to one of the Skyjackers posted on guard around the room. “Who’s that?” she asked, pointing with her chin.

Soren’s blank expression didn’t change, but her voice was easy. “*Malidictes, Lady Kalique’s majordomo.*”

“Thanks.” Agatha tucked her hands in the pockets of her blazer and moved slowly in the man’s direction.

He was interesting. Agatha had seen quite a few Splices by then, but most of them were mostly human-looking like Stinger or Caine. She didn’t know Urdur well, and Virtu simply didn’t draw the eye the way the majordomo did. But Malidictes wore his feathered hair and beaked face as if they were a sign of rank. *They may be. Assumptions are dangerous, here.*
Agatha was both amused and slightly irritated to observe that the majordomo ignored her completely as she neared—not ostentatiously, or with obvious intent, but simply as if she didn’t exist, in the same fashion as the servants coming and going with platters for the buffet.

Agatha wasn’t having it.

She stepped up next to him, preparing to clear her throat, but to her surprise Malidictes turned to regard her. “Dr. Thompson,” he said, his voice rich and cool.

Agatha cocked her head. “Mr. Malidictes. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh.” The majordomo’s glance was not rude, exactly, but it was a definite summing-up. “How are you finding galactic society?”

“It’s fascinating,” Agatha said honestly. We’ll leave out “horrifying and really strange” for now. “Sometimes extremely beautiful.”

Malidictes nodded. “You are seeing the best of it,” he said. “There are few who can equal the House of Abrasax, and none who outrank them. In time your mistress will eclipse all but the brightest.”

“Employer,” Agatha corrected, giving him a smile as cool as his voice. “Yes, I expect she will.”

If Malidictes noticed the reproof, he didn’t show it. “Lady Kalique was so pleased to find her mother’s Recurrence,” he said. “It is a pleasure to see them together again; one does hope that her Majesty will see fit to continue the relationship.”

*He’s fishing.* “Mm,” Agatha said. “That’s not my remit, I’m afraid. You remember Queen Seraphi?”

Malidictes’ gaze slid briefly to one side, looking into memory. “I do. She was...magnificent, a power.”

“I suppose she had time to achieve it,” Agatha said. *Might as well do a little fishing myself.*

“Yes.” Malidictes took a glass from a servitor and sipped the contents. “The House of Abrasax is not only one of the most powerful dynasties in the Universe, it is one of the oldest as well. Your employer—” There was the barest hint of emphasis on the word. “—has much to live up to.”

“Yes,” Agatha agreed wryly. “She’s noticed.”

For a moment they were both silent, watching Kalique introduce a pair of her bejeweled ladies to Jupiter; they looked Jupiter’s age to Agatha, but she doubted they were anywhere near that young.

“Who are they?” Agatha asked.

“The twin Duchesses of Maladra Gornfrie,” Malidictes replied. “They are cousins of the House of Abrasax, not closely related but quite suitable to attend her Majesty.”

“And what does ‘attending’ involve?” Jupiter’s expression was polite but less than enthusiastic, though she greeted both women with a smile. They were beautiful, but seemed a little overwhelmed as they curtseyed to her.

“They will serve as courtiers and—should she so choose—handmaidens. Her Majesty has shown innovation in gathering a court already, but her choices are...eclectic.” Malidictes’ expression was very muted distaste. “Rank requires consequence. Useful as they are, a mixed rabble of guards and commoners will lend her no prestige. Indeed, they will detract.”
Agatha wasn’t sure he intended to insult her specifically, but she let the comment slide by, faintly amused. “Does that sort of detail really matter, if she has so much power?”

Malidictes’ look hinted at shock. “Protocol is essential. It is part of--” His gaze shifted again. “Pardon me.”

He stepped past Agatha and was gone, hurrying to Kalique’s side with a dip of his head to Jupiter. Agatha pursed her lips, and then went to find another snack.

And another target.
Thank you, thank you all, for your lovely notes about my last chapter. *hearts* As I said, you are all the very best. And I may inch along with this thing, but I have no intention of stopping any time soon.

(I did finally notice that Aggie's name changed from Agnes to Agatha, but she seems to prefer the latter, and I can't be arsed to correct it right now. Eh.)

Cerise was as gorgeous as Jupiter remembered, rich and cool with moisture and the scent of flowers. This time, she got a good look as the transport beam lowered her slowly to Kalique’s reception committee on the wide terrace below.

For all that this was supposedly an informal visit, and despite Kalique’s visit to the Windy City the day before, Jupiter’s honor guard was out in force, formal in their sleeveless vests and bristling with weapons. Jupiter made sure that the skirts of her elaborate green gown were not drifting away from her legs, and counted six Skyjackers on the terrace, braced and waiting for her arrival. Four more circled around the beam as she descended.

Gotta admit, I feel pretty protected.

Beyond the guards waited Kalique and her retinue, along with a whole bunch of her security and three ranks of synth guards, all lined up and shiny. It reminded Jupiter a little of her arrival on Titus’ ship, but fortunately all the sunshine and fresh air made a difference. Even if her adrenaline was running almost as high.

Nevertheless, she shot a quick glance to the side to make sure Caine was still there.

Fortunately for Jupiter’s nerves, no one stomped this time when she touched down. Her dress—one of Seraphi’s, actually, and didn’t that feel strange—settled into place around her with almost conscious precision; Jupiter wouldn’t put it past the fabric to be somehow programmed to move on its own.

The beam shut off, and Kalique bowed her head, while everyone else made a deeper obeisance. Jupiter, acting on a tip from Kalique the day before, merely nodded back, then stepped forward to take Kalique’s outstretched hands.

“Welcome back to Cerise,” Kalique said in a carrying voice. “I’m so glad to see you again.”

Jupiter smiled. “I’m glad to be back,” she said loudly, and it was mostly the truth. In her peripheral vision she could see the various guards shifting around as the two groups meshed, but she didn’t turn her head. It was one of the things Stinger had drilled into her during their escape practices; trust your people, he’d told her. At least to know where they’re supposed to be when.

Kalique’s smile was approving. “Good,” she said in a more normal tone, and drew Jupiter’s arm through hers. “I won’t tax you with introductions just yet. Come and see my beautiful alcazar; there’s so much you missed the last time you were here.”

“Mmm.” Jupiter decided not to comment on the last “visit”, and let Kalique lead her on a tour. There
was a lot she hadn’t seen; the place was a maze of interconnected buildings, largely built out over the waterfalls and most of it at least partly open to the air. There were people everywhere, too—Splices and androids and pure humans, nearly all of them in elaborate clothing. Their own party was trailed by at least a dozen members of Kalique’s un-introduced entourage and almost as many guards, six Stormbreakers looming over most of the others even though they were keeping their wings furled. Neither Stinger nor Caine were among them, but Jupiter didn’t let that worry her.

Much.

Since Kalique ignored them all as if they weren’t there, Jupiter tried to do the same, and concentrated on Kalique’s amiable monologue about the architecture and the interior decoration.

“Does this place have winter?” Jupiter asked after a while, slowing in an open spot to admire the spectacular view of the river far below.

Kalique laughed. “Not as such, though it does have a rainy season. I usually repair to another of my holdings then.” She reached out to trail her fingers along one pillar. “Mother always said this was overdone; it was my first major design effort, you see. But she still liked to visit.”

Her glance at Jupiter hinted at appeal, which was baffling. “I think it’s gorgeous,” Jupiter said honestly. “But how do you not get lost?”

Kalique laughed again. “I assure you, in twelve thousand years I’ve had time to memorize it.” They paced onwards, in and out through a long verandah, and Jupiter tried and failed to imagine that much time passing.

“Oh, come and see the rose garden,” Kalique said, distracting her, and steered Jupiter along a corridor that led into a space open to the sky. It was full of sculpted bushes, most of which were in bloom, and the smell was heady.

“Space has roses?” Jupiter asked, smiling a little at seeing something so familiar.

“Oh yes. In fact, we planted them on your world,” Kalique said, releasing Jupiter; the paths were a little too narrow for two to walk side by side. “Did you never wonder why they are significant in so many of your cultures? Resonance, my dear.”

“Seriously? Wow.” Jupiter bent to sniff one blossom, not sure how she liked the idea. “What else is from, um, out here?”

Kalique shrugged. “I don’t know the details. But the ecosystems of seeded worlds are always adjusted so that humans can survive there. We import any number of species for that purpose.”

Jupiter heard a familiar sound, for the second time that week. She straightened and looked up, and held up her hands; it was becoming reflex, now, but a good one.

The bees gathered over her head—nowhere near as many as in the Windy City’s new garden, but enough to form a little cloud that pulsed in time to Jupiter’s movements. “Hi,” she murmured, and they hummed back.

When she lowered her hands and they swirled and scattered, Jupiter realized that Kalique—and all her people—were staring. Kalique’s eyes were wide, and something about her expression made Jupiter uneasy, though she couldn’t pinpoint why. Then Kalique shook her head.

“I had forgotten what it was like, when Mother visited,” she said. “Well, my dear, that should put any doubts to rest.”
They did that with Seraphi? Jupiter bit her lip. She didn’t want to be anything like her predecessor; yet there was something innocent about the swarms that greeted her. *I guess it doesn’t matter to them, what people do; they just know royalty.*

“You must be tired,” Kalique said brightly. “Malidictes will escort you to the guest wing, unless you wish to return to your yacht.”

“No, I’m happy to stay down here,” Jupiter said. Which was true; she was a little nervous about it, but—I’m out here in part to learn how to be what I need to be. I can’t do that if I hide on the ship.

She wasn’t actually tired, they’d done nothing more than stroll around for a while, but Jupiter could follow a cue when one was handed to her. She gave Kalique another smile and returned her odd not-quite-a-handshake, and let the majordomo lead her party off in a new direction.

Jupiter had seen Malidictes the night before at her reception for Kalique, but now he reminded her more of the first time she’d spoken to him, in the exhausted aftermath of the refinery collapse. The memories were pretty fuzzy, but Jupiter did recall his polite patience with her numb-brained efforts to understand his explanation of her holdings.

“We are most glad to receive you here on Cerise again, your Majesty,” he was murmuring, and Jupiter grinned a little.

“It’s nice to see you too. Did I ever say thanks for helping me out?”

Malidictes’ smooth expression didn’t change—in fact, Jupiter wasn’t sure that it could change much—but she still got the feeling that she’d surprised him a little.

“No thanks are necessary, your Majesty,” he said after a second’s hesitation. “It is my purpose to fulfill her Grace’s desires.”

In anyone else’s mouth it would be a double entendre, Jupiter thought, but Malidictes’ dignity was too deep for that.

“Everybody needs to be appreciated,” Jupiter countered, and then felt awkward when he merely regarded her calmly. She fumbled for more words. “Hey, I meant to ask, did you know Seraphi?”

Malidictes inclined his head. “I was honored to serve her whenever she visited, yes.” Which made him probably a couple of centuries old at the least, but Jupiter tried to roll with it. “Her first incarnation was the embodiment of power and elegance. I’m sure your Majesty will quickly encompass the same.”

His words sent an unpleasant chill down Jupiter’s spine. Kalique’s weird belief that Jupiter was the actual *reincarnation* of Seraphi had been easy to ignore, but now she was reminded that it wasn’t just Kalique’s idea. *Entitled think Recurrences are the same people.*

And the idea still filled her with a cold horror, even though Jupiter was reasonably sure she wasn’t really the reborn spirit of a millennia-old monster.

*But I might have to act like I believe it.*

That thought was even worse.

She wrenched her attention back to Malidictes. “It’ll take some practice.”

Malidictes made an agreeing murmur. “Her Grace will be glad to guide you as you ascend,” he
added. “She missed Queen Seraphi very much.”

Jupiter tried not to flinch. “So she said, yeah. I would like to get to know her better.” Which was even the truth.

Malidictes left Jupiter and her escort at the entrance to the guest wing, bowing and then striding off with brisk dignity when she nodded dismissal. Jupiter was tempted to change clothes and go off and explore on her own, but that was clearly a very bad idea, so she just let Sheneto and Honch open the double doors to the wing, and stepped through them.

It looked a lot like the rest of the alcazar, luxurious and alien, but all the familiar faces were something of a relief. Stinger saluted Jupiter as she came in, grinning a little. “How’d it go, Majesty?”

Jupiter sighed, barely letting Caine finish his own salute before going over to hug him. “Pretty good, I think. So how’s the setup?”

Stinger laughed, and took her on another tour, mercifully brief. There was a central suite for Jupiter and smaller rooms for her people, including bathing facilities and even a sort of kitchenette area. Stinger approved of the latter.

“The best guards bring and prepare their own food,” he explained as they maneuvered around two Stormbreakers running security checks. “That eliminates one angle of attack.”

“Right.” Jupiter grimaced, but she could see the sense in it. If I want to think really awful things.

She had to admit, though, that the building was beautiful. It was off by itself on the edge of the complex, perched over a waterfall that fell far enough that its bottom was lost in mist; a long bridge led across the water to enter, looking vaguely Japanese to Jupiter. Given the heights, she was glad that Kiza had elected to stay on the Windy City.

“It’s not exactly defensible,” Stinger went on, “but with your royal guard it doesn’t have to be--we can retreat in almost any direction if circumstances call for it. An’ Lady Kalique’s security is superior.” He smirked. “Caine got through, but he wouldn’t be able to do it twice.”

“So all we have to worry about is Kalique herself?” Jupiter asked dryly, and Stinger gave her an approving nod.

“Right. You’re starting to think like a queen, your Majesty.”

Which was different, Jupiter thought, than thinking like an Entitled. I’ll take it. Because it wasn’t just her safety she had to worry about.

Laur entered the receiving parlour where they had ended up. “The building’s secure, Commander,” he said, giving them both a quick nod. Stinger swung out a wing to smack him lightly on the shoulder.

“Company manners, soldier. We’re reflections of her Majesty here.” His tone was easy, but Laur’s spine straightened. “Let’s do her proud.”

“My apologies, Majesty, Commander.” Laur bowed to Jupiter, then saluted Stinger crisply.

Jupiter sighed and patted Laur’s arm, smiling up at him. “Sorry about this. Hopefully it won’t be too long.”
He smiled tentatively back. “It’s not a problem, your Majesty.” He saluted again and went back out onto the verandah, and Jupiter looked around.

“This outfit is surprisingly comfortable, but I want to change. I’m going to go see if the moving crew unpacked my luggage yet.”

The moving crew was a team of five Splices who were part of the Windy City’s crew; Jupiter didn’t know what they were spliced with, but they reminded her of chipmunks, being small, bright-eyed, and cheerful. They could also lift and carry at least five times their mass with ease, which was slightly unnerving.

But when she reached the central suite there was no sign of them, just her wardrobe neatly put away. Jupiter changed out of her gown in the airy dressing room, then went back out to the more public area. She sat on the nearest divan and sighed again, just barely managing to ignore the synth guards stationed around the room and the presence of Sheneto and Urdur on either side of the main doorway—there weren’t a lot of actual doors in the place.

Since she hadn’t addressed them, the Stormbreakers ignored her; the synths had no attention to pay. Jupiter still felt weird about being in her personal quarters with people standing around, but Stinger insisted it was necessary when they were on “neutral or hostile ground”, and Jupiter figured it was wiser not to protest.

She liked Kalique, at least most of the time, but until she understood more about what Kalique really had in mind, more trust than she had already given the woman was going to have to wait. Besides, there could be another mole like Sa Brem lurking around.

“Your Majesty?” Sheneto said, and Jupiter looked up to see Aggie standing just outside the doorway, looking thoughtful. Jupiter waved her in.

“I feel like I should be carrying a doorbell with me,” Aggie said as she chose a chair, and Jupiter laughed, feeling a little lighter.

“I think the idea is that you always have minions around to do the announcing. I’m starting to wonder if Entitled ever spend any time really alone.”

Aggie shrugged, amused. “Good question. What’s bothering you, honey?”

Jupiter sighed again, shrugging in turn. “I don’t know. I guess I’m nervous. It’s stupid, but--”

“Nervous? Why would you be nervous?” Aggie said lightly. “Just because you’re in a strange place surrounded by potentially hostile aliens and due to be publically revealed to a bunch of powerful people you’ve never met? How could that make you nervous?”

Jupiter had to snicker. “Well, when you put it like that.”

Aggie grinned, then sobered. “I know it’s hard,” she said. “And I’d love to tell you it will get easier, but honestly I think you’ll just keep facing new challenges as soon as you master the old ones. But bear in mind that, according to Entitled culture, you’ll be the most powerful person in that room the moment you walk in.”

Jupiter grimaced. “Even if I don’t know what the power is?”

Aggie nodded. “Societal power is largely about perception. They know you have power. They respect it. Therefore, you benefit from that respect without having to exercise it.” She turned up one hand. “Of course, that only goes so far. But at that party, you’ll be the queen bee. It’s up to you to act
“Sure.” Jupiter laughed sourly. “I’ve never been the queen bee of anything.”

“Then now’s your chance.” Aggie tapped the arm of her chair. “I’d say it wouldn’t matter since Lady Kalique insists this is informal...but I think it does.”

Jupiter made a noncommittal noise. “D’you miss Edsel?” she asked.

Aggie chuckled. “Of course, but he’s much safer aboard ship. I shudder to think what trouble he could get into down here.”

“This is true.” Jupiter glanced around, imagining the havoc the cat would create when--not if--he escaped into the main wing of the alcazar. *Not to mention the noise...*

“Fredda will take good care of him,” Aggie said, naming the servant looking after Edsel; Jupiter had asked for volunteers for that duty. “And it’s much better than boarding at the vet’s.”

“If you want to visit him, feel free to go back up any time,” Jupiter told her. “Seriously. It’s not like it’s a long trip, after all.”

Aggie shook her head in wonder. “Isn’t that a thing,” she said softly, and Jupiter had to agree. Casually visiting a spaceship in orbit, she thought sometimes, was just never going to get old.

“I wish you could come to the party,” she said. “It’d be so cool to dress you up too.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Aggie said with a laugh. “Not the party--I’ve had enough stuffy cocktail events to last me a lifetime--but I’m not too old to enjoy playing around with outfits.”

Jupiter felt her spirits start to rise. “Great then, come on!” She bounced to her feet and grabbed Aggie’s hands to tug her up. “You have to see this thing Kalique has. I don’t know why I didn’t know about it before, but it’s so great!”

She towed the laughing Aggie out of the main suite and down the hall to one of the rooms intended for servants. Since she had brought approximately a third of the staff expected of an Entitled, there were a lot of empty rooms.

“It’s this thing,” Jupiter said, and waved a hand in front of an ornate object that looked like a carved cabinet; it lit up with jewel-toned lights. “According to her, Entitled only wear handmade stuff, but screw that, because this is amazing.”

“What does it do?” Aggie looked it over.

“Watch and learn.” Jupiter grinned, and stepped forward to let the machine’s scanning beam run over her from head to toe, turning slowly so it could read all of her. The cabinet then flipped open a viewing panel, and Jupiter beckoned Aggie closer to look.

“See, it gets your measurements and your skin and hair tones, and then gives you choices, but you can edit them.” Jupiter tapped at the screen, choosing a potential dress and then altering the hemline with a few touches. Then she hit the print button, and seconds later the dress slid out of the machine’s slot. Jupiter held it up against herself, and enjoyed the smile that spread over Aggie’s face.

“Let me try that,” Aggie said, and Jupiter laughed and ducked into the little attached bathroom to change.
Forty-five minutes later Caine walked in, eyes widening at the sight of so much clothing strewn around the room.

Two hours after that, Phylo cleared his throat at the doorway. Jupiter was wearing a short skirt that she thought of as Jane Jetson 2.0, and a t-shirt that read “Flat Mars Society” in shimmery letters. Caine was sitting quietly on the bed, trying and mostly failing to look embarrassed in a yellow basketball jersey with the number 42, and board shorts emblazoned with tiny rocket ships. And Aggie was resplendent in a Gomesi made of a fabric that kept cycling through a spectrum from sapphire blue down through ultraviolet and back again, which made her look to Jupiter as if she were wrapped in a periodic black hole.

With remarkable calm, Phylo consulted his sheave. “Your Majesty, it’s almost time for dinner. Lady Kalique sends that she’s sure you’re fatigued and require time to rest, so you may dine in private this evening.”

Jupiter’s stomach muscles ached from hours of giggling, and while she was hungry and she knew Caine was hungry, she didn’t want to stop just yet. “How about we just have a picnic in here? What do you think, guys?”

The vote was unanimous, and it didn’t take much effort to get Phylo to stay either; he drew the line on clothing after one rather snazzy outfit with the same subtle sparkle of the Aegis uniforms, but was happy to offer suggestions and compliments. Eventually, he and Aggie got into a contest over who could come up with the most insane hat, while Jupiter designed rude shirts to send anonymously to Vladie, and Caine kept producing random shoes because he enjoyed watching them print flat and then pop open into shape.

When Stinger finally found them, he stood in the doorway with his mouth open for a full fifteen seconds, before shaking his head and walking away.

“Not going to join us?” Caine called after him, and Stinger just sped up.

Jupiter laughed so hard she started wheezing, and Caine made her sit on the bed. It’s too bad Kiza isn’t here, she’d have loved this, she thought ruefully. Oh well. There’s probably one of these things on the ship somewhere, and if not, I can have one installed.

And then she thought how much fun her family would have with one. Irina would go nuts, and Mikka, and even Mom would enjoy it.

Someday, she promised them, scooping up one of Caine’s printed shoes to try on.

Someday, she’d show them all the good stuff.

Later, Jupiter stood on the verandah overlooking the waterfall, listening to the rush of water and catching random gleams of white in the darkness. Cerise’s moons were absent; the only thing besides stars in the sky was the beautiful arch of the planet’s rings, but it didn’t shed a lot of light. Jupiter knew there were Skyjackers posted around the building, along with some of Kalique’s own security, but none were visible from her angle, except for the one coming out of the bedroom behind her.

Jupiter leaned back as Caine’s arms came around her. He hadn’t put a shirt on after bathing; his skin was warm and still a bit damp, and she turned her head to nuzzle his collarbone out of sheer pleasure.

She heard him swallow before he spoke. “…Jupiter?”

He sounded nervous, and she shifted around so she could see his face. “What’s the matter?”
“Are you sure you want me at the party?” he asked in a low voice. “Lady Kalique will assign extra guards, and it will be, ah, obvious.”

“Don’t care,” Jupiter returned immediately. “That’s her problem. I want you there when I do this, so unless you don’t want to—”

Caine’s arms tightened. “You know I’d stay with you always if I could.”

“There you go then.” Jupiter reached up to stroke his face. “That’s how we’re doing this. Caine…”

She hesitated, and he raised his brows, nuzzling into her palm. Jupiter took a breath, trying to sort through her thoughts.

“I don’t know what I’m doing—I know I keep saying that, but no matter what I learn it keeps being true. But I do know a few things, and one of them is that you won’t hurt me.”

He swallowed again, lashes fluttering as his eyes closed. “I…it might not be you, though.”

“It’s not going to be anybody.” Her firm tone made him look at her again. “Caine, think about it. This happened once, without any provocation, in a society that has all kinds of ways to mess with someone. Yeah, okay, you don’t like Entitled, but you handle that.”

Caine was staring at her, and Jupiter slid her hand around to cup the base of his skull, trying to drive her words home. “The only logical explanation is that you were set up. Which means that you won’t do it again.”

His mouth opened, closed. “But...my genes—”

“Bullshit,” Jupiter said, trying to make him believe. “They’ve been telling you you’re defective your whole life, but look what you’ve done anyway. But whatever else your genes are responsible for, they’re not why that whole thing happened. It doesn’t make sense.”

Caine bit his lip, and Jupiter let him think, trying to hold in more words. You have to let him work it out for himself.

“You don’t know that for sure,” he said at last, but his voice was weak.

“No,” Jupiter admitted. “But I believe it.” She leaned in, feeling his breath on her skin, trying, trying. “I believe in you.”

His tiny whine put a lump in her throat, and Jupiter hugged him hard, squeezing back a rush of tears. Feathers tickled as Caine’s wings swept around her, smelling of spice and metal, and for the thousandth time Jupiter vowed to protect the man who now stood at the core of her heart.

Well, along with a half-dozen or so Bolotnikovs, but she was sure there was room. He’d just have to block the elbows.

Caine pressed his face into her hair, inhaling deeply, and then his wings flared back and away. “Your Majesty,” he muttered against her scalp. “Will you come flying with me?”

Jupiter grinned. “Want me to get my boots?”

For answer he lifted her easily, letting Jupiter wrap her legs around his waist, and then stepped up onto the low railing of the balcony before dropping off.

Jupiter held in her whoop, barely, and hung on tight as Caine arced up and out of the gorge. The mist
from the waterfall was cool on her skin, and she could just see two more winged shapes lifting from the alcazar to pace them at a distance.

She set herself to ignore them, and let Caine go where he willed.
“This,” Kalique said, “is where we begin.”

She leaned forward to touch the console on the low table in front of her, then sat back on her plush, floating couch. Jupiter had an identical couch all to herself, and she glanced quickly around the room for reassurance that her guards were all where they should be.

It wasn’t a room as such; like most of Kalique’s alcazar, it mainly had pillars instead of walls, and the effect was like a semi-enclosed verandah. Sweet, cool air moved through the space, but with only a hint of moisture; according to Kalique, what she called a weather shield kept out most of the humidity rising from the waterfalls.

Not that Jupiter could see anything of the kind out there…

People began filing in, all of them bowing to Kalique and Jupiter as they approached. Kalique nodded to the first one, then turned to Jupiter. “As I told you, Entitled of our rank are always attired in the best and most unique creations. Each of us has our own style and symbols. As you embark on ascension, you must display that style from the very beginning.”

“Okay…” Jupiter absorbed that. “I guess I’m not supposed to use, ah, Seraphi’s?” Not that she wanted to.

“Not as such. You can incorporate some of those designs, but you’re expected to establish your own.”

Why, if I’m supposed to be the same person? But Jupiter didn’t ask. That’s not a discussion I want to have right now. Or possibly ever. The assertion didn’t make sense to her, but that was true for a lot of things these days.

Kalique nodded again, and the woman who had entered first straightened. “I am Sopho Parata, the head of Lady Kalique’s design team, and we are glad to serve you.”

“Since you don’t yet have a team of your own,” Kalique interjected. “I can help you select one; you’ll need to work closely with them, and you’ll want only the best.”

Parata’s face took on a look of restrained pride. She was medium height and dressed in long sleeveless robes; she had very pink skin, and the first plain brown hair that Jupiter had seen at Kalique’s place, though it was wound up into a smooth pouf around her head and studded with gold. “Shall we begin, your Majesty, your Grace?”

There followed two hours of the weirdest brainstorming session Jupiter had ever experienced. She was quizzed on her preferences in color, fabric, texture, and design, which was fun at first and then exhausting; finally Jupiter had a burst of genius and started calling up pictures on her iPhone. Thank goodness I didn’t go for cloud storage. She had a whole folder of her favorite dress designs culled from all over the Internet, and Jupiter thought dryly that the next time Vladie teased her for her
“obsession” she was going to bop him with one of Seraphi’s impossible shoes.

Choosing a symbol was harder. “I have to pick something today? What if I change my mind a few years down the road?”

Both women eyed her as if her question made no sense. Jupiter resisted the urge to tug her hair in frustration. She sat back, letting out a breath, and rubbed a thumb over her wrist sigil instead, an automatic motion. And paused.

*It’s like a tattoo. Something you like but that you’ll have to live with indefinitely.*

She thought for a few minutes, not really listening to Kalique and Parata discussing jewelry trends. “What was Seraphi’s symbol?” she asked finally.

It couldn’t have been obvious, or she would have noticed, but Jupiter was learning that Seraphi had rarely been *obvious.*

Kalique glanced at her. “She used a flame motif. Not quite... regular, but such things never concerned her.”

Kalique’s was a dragonfly-style creature, that was easy to see just from looking around. Jupiter couldn’t remember anything standing out either on Titus’ clipper or in Balem’s refinery, but it wasn’t like she wanted to imitate either of *them.*

Hmm. Getting a tattoo had been on Jupiter’s list of *maybe someday* goals, when she had the money and was feeling up to dealing with the sarcasm from her family, but she’d always planned on an image of her namesake planet, and after what had happened there she didn’t feel like putting *that* on her skin any longer. And while getting CW done in elaborate script might be fun, it probably wouldn’t work as a symbol.

*Not to mention everyone at home would think I had a fetish for a cable station.* Jupiter snickered to herself, and then inspiration struck. “Hey, how about a bee?”

Parata looked intrigued. Kalique’s brows went up. “That might do, but--it’s not in the catalogue, is it?” The question was directed at Parata, who shook her head.

“No, your Majesty, your Grace. No one is currently using it.” One of her assistants, who was paging through a sheave, murmured in her ear. “Nor ever has, apparently.”

Kalique sat back, touching a finger to her lips. “It *is* an indicator of royalty. This could work.”

Parata’s assistants immediately began calling up various images of bees, and presenting them to Jupiter with deferential bows. She sorted through the sheaves, poking at the ones she liked the most, while Kalique and Parata discussed how best to work the theme into Jupiter’s wardrobe. She kept picturing the clouds of them, in Kalique’s garden, on board the *Windy City,* in Stinger’s cornfield…

“Make it three of them,” Jupiter said suddenly, and the conversation paused.

“Your Majesty?” Parata asked.

“Three of them,” Jupiter repeated. “I mean, not all the time, but bees come in swarms, don’t they? Not just alone.”

“That’s...yes, that will work well,” Parata said approvingly. She took one of the sheaves and sketched a quick image, three bees forming a sort of triskelion with their heads pointing inwards.
“Yes,” Kalique agreed. “That’s excellent, actually.”

Jupiter grinned.

The rest of the afternoon was more fun. Jupiter had dreamed for years of owning the gorgeous outfits and jewelry that she’d seen in clients’ homes, but while Seraphi’s belongings were dazzling, they still seemed to belong to her.

This wardrobe—which kept getting bigger as the day went on—would be all hers. And, Jupiter told herself a little guiltily, it was necessary. If she wanted to protect Earth, she had to play the part. And the part needed clothes.

There were scanner wands to measure her—without Jupiter having to do more than stand up, it was very cool and she approved—and sketches that turned into holograms of dresses. Kalique snacked on an endless array of finger foods and spoke of various events and ceremonies Jupiter would need outfits for.

Jupiter took notes, and reminded herself to have Phylo hire her a design team. *I’ll ask Kalique for suggestions, maybe.*

After an elaborate lunch Jupiter found herself gently dismissed as Kalique withdrew to rest. It puzzled her a little; if Regenex restored everyone to perfect health, why did Kalique need so many naps?

“That’s weird,” she said to Aggie, back in the guest suite’s reception room. “I mean, I saw her come out of that bath, minus about thirty years. And she keeps making it sound like we have zero time before things start, but…” Jupiter waved a hand.

Aggie shrugged. “It could just be a skewed sense of time,” she suggested. “Living so long could certainly change one’s perception of urgency.”

She cocked a brow. “I have no idea about the naps, though.”

Jupiter snickered. In the nominal doorway, Stinger cleared his throat. “She’s probably not sleeping, Majesty.”

Aggie turned in her seat to look at him. “Polite fiction?”

He nodded to her, stepping into the room at Jupiter’s wave. “Pretty much, aye. When I served in the Noltorian guard, it wasn’t unusual for Entitled to go whole days without seeing each other, even when they were close. My guess is they spend so much time together, over the centuries, that they space it out.”

Aggie scrunched up her face in either distaste or disbelief, Jupiter wasn’t sure. She just sighed, herself. “Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

But it was a relief in a way to have the afternoon off, and stop bearing up under the scrutiny of Kalique and her minions. Jupiter took reports from Stinger and Virtu and Miss Tombu and Phylo, and told the latter to start researching a design team.

“That could be a design team,” she explained. “I’d rather set up my own.”

Phylo made a note on his sheave, nodding. “Shall I request advice from her people, Majesty?” he asked. “They’re likely to have access to Entitled-only resources I’m not familiar with, yet.”
“Sure.” Jupiter grinned at him. “We need all the advantages we can get.”

She leaned forward a bit, and the floating couch she was sitting on stayed exactly in place. “There’s one thing, though. I am not buying anybody for this. I want the best, but I want them to be able to choose.”

Phylo raised his brows. “May I say, Majesty, that I’m not surprised at all?”

Jupiter snickered. “Good.”

Yeah, I picked the right guy.

The whole thing was unsettlingly like a dream.

Jupiter turned carefully in her elaborate gown and greeted yet another of Kalique’s guests. Kalique had called it an “informal gathering” with a dismissive flip of her hand, but to Jupiter it looked like a cross between a costume ball and a garden party, with a big dose of Alice in Wonderland thrown in.

The open plan of Kalique’s terrace at least kept it from getting hot and stuffy. Jupiter had to admit it was gorgeous, with flowers everywhere; the guests seemed almost like flowers themselves.

And Kalique is the queen bee? The thought didn’t quite feel right. Kalique’s manner, as they moved among bowing nobility and swirls of subtle music and subtler perfume, was both proprietary and deferential, a weird mix that defied simple categorization.

Jupiter really wished she could have Caine at her back. But Kalique had looked shocked at the thought of bodyguards on the floor, my dear, really--they stay on the perimeter at informal events, and are you sure you can’t choose one of your other--oh very well…

So Caine stood at easy attention against one pillar, looking more like a statue than the guard-bots that took up other pillars. There were two other Skyjackers and six of Kalique’s guards as well, but it was Caine Jupiter’s eyes kept returning to, quick little peeks of reassurance, because his immobile expression was the friendliest face in the room.

I wish Kiza could be here too. Or Aggie. She’d love to have the humor of the one and the dry commentary of the other. But it was, apparently, out of the question to have them attend.

It wasn’t until Jupiter saw a tall man wearing a headdress that suggested horns that the odd familiarity of it all snapped into place.

Holy crap. I’m stuck in the Labyrinth.

Though whether she was Sarah or Jareth, she couldn’t tell…

As long as I’m not Hoggle, I’m probably doing just fine.

Jupiter nodded regally as Kalique introduced her to yet another Entitled--it had to be regally, or her own headdress would fall off, or at least that was what it felt like. The gemmed creation wasn’t quite as large as the thing she’d worn at that horrible abortive wedding ceremony, but it was heavy enough to make her neck ache. I wonder if everybody else feels as uncomfortable as I do.

“Let me present Lady Donlet, Marquise of Abyssal Twelve,” Kalique said, smiling at the woman, whose gown was intended to make her look as much like a fantastic bird as possible. She had feathers everywhere including her hair and her skin, so thick that its pale tone was almost impossible
to see; there were even feathers on her eyelashes. Only the knowledge that no Entitled could be a Splice told Jupiter that the tiny iridescent plumes had been applied rather than grown.

The marquise dipped in a tiny curtsy, her eyes bright. “Your Majesty,” she said, her voice high and fluting. “I am honored.”

Jupiter gave her a small smile in return. “It’s a pleasure,” she murmured, which was all she needed to say according to Kalique’s earlier instructions in etiquette. “A conversation confers special honor,” Kalique had told her. “Everyone at my parties is worth knowing, but it would be best to wait until you have a better grasp of politics.”

Jupiter had felt halfway insulted, but she had to admit now that not having to make small talk with a bunch of probably ancient, definitely alien people was a good thing. Though I don’t know how I’m supposed to get to know anybody this way. Do Entitled even have friends?

The marquise drew back, and Kalique guided Jupiter on to the next person, somehow managing it without actually touching Jupiter or saying anything out loud. She looked youthful and elegant in a gown made of lavender gauze, so thickly larded with crystals that she twinkled like light on water. Jupiter herself was wearing one of the design team’s first efforts--a silvery gown embroidered with flowers, with an overlay of silky stuff in ruby that reminded Jupiter of the petals of an iris. Silver embroidery set with gems covered her collarbones and ran down the loose sleeves to her wrists, and among the blossoms of the gown were tiny bronze bees, so small that one had to look hard to see them.

It was like nothing Jupiter had ever owned, but it looked amazing, and unlike the headdress (silver leaves and flowers and yet more bees, woven up in a sort of halo), it was comfortable. She had no idea how, but it was.

A woman dressed in an elaborate outfit that looked mostly like decorative plastic wrap drifted up—one of Kalique’s servants. She bowed, extending a tray holding tiny cordial glasses, and Jupiter took the nearest one cautiously; Kalique claimed the other. She’d already given Jupiter a lecture about methods of poisoning people and when and where to use detectors (at the Entitled level they were apparently built into jewelry), but Jupiter figured this was safe enough since it was Kalique’s own party.

She took a tentative sip. The thick stuff spread over her tongue, tasting like jasmine tea smelled, and then wham—the burst of flavor was so intense that for a second it was all Jupiter could sense.

There was nothing but the taste; no sight, no hearing. Only the incredible flavor.

Stunned, Jupiter swallowed reflexively. Blinking brought the world back into focus, and she glanced at Kalique.

“What—what’s in this stuff?” Jupiter kept her voice low. “Is it supposed to do that?”
“Oh yes--it’s a mild psychoactive. That’s the entire point of it.” Kalique took a larger swallow, eyes drifting shut; her smile turned sensual.

Jupiter stared down at the tiny glass in her hand, resisting the urge to throw it as far as she could. She’d done a little weed in her time, and the occasional party drug even with Vladie’s bad example in front of her, but nothing she’d ever tried had worked so fast, or so completely.

And none of them had produced an instant craving, either.

This is not good.

Jupiter looked around, beckoning to the first servant she spotted. The woman hastened over, and Jupiter handed her the glass; Kalique was lost in another swallow, eyes closed again, and didn’t see.

Jupiter smiled at the servant, who bowed and retreated. A ghost of the flavor lingered on her tongue, and Jupiter wished for something to wash it away, but she could see people watching her. If I ask for a glass of water I’ll look like a wimp.

Jupiter straightened her spine instead, and waited for Kalique to come out of her cordial-induced trance. Glancing across the room, Jupiter could see Caine over the heads of the people between, his wings mantled precisely and the dark glitter of his jacket setting off his pale coloring.

He wasn’t looking her way just then, gaze directed instead at the perimeter of the room to watch for threats, but just the sight of him made Jupiter feel more in control.

I’m not alone. Even here, I’m not alone.

But the party was more alien now, and Jupiter found herself wondering if she was going to wake up from it with a rotten fruit in her hand.

Jupiter was beautiful.

Caine always thought so, even when she was sound asleep with hair in her face, but her new gown became her superbly, and Kalique’s highborn guests made a suitable frame for her, a setting for the jewel she was.

Watching her move around the pavilion was distracting; Caine had to concentrate to divide his attention between those around her and the perimeter. Not that Stinger truly expected threats to come in from outside, and other Skyjackers were also watching, but a proper guard took nothing for granted, even local security. Sometimes, especially local security.

The party itself was a swirl of sound and scent and low murmuring voices, expensive perfumes and the rich mix of hormones and emotion. On one level, Caine could watch them all as he shifted his gaze, glittering scions drifting languidly back and forth, pausing to chat with one another and to watch Jupiter. On another, they were a moving sea of odors and heartbeats, sparkling with life; he could take them all in without turning his head. Over there were the solid familiar presences of his fellow Skyjackers; here was the inert metal and oil of the synth guards set to guard against him.

Technically, Caine supposed, the synths were an insult. But he actually found them reassuring. The layers of Entitled scent set his nerves on edge, rasping in the old familiar way, irritating rather than enticing as they should. He didn’t think anything was going to happen, but he certainly hadn’t thought that the last time, either.
Still, the irritation was manageable, and Caine had had a lot of practice. He could set it aside to concentrate on more important things, like making sure that the raised heartbeats among the guests were nervousness at meeting the new Abrasax queen, not the prelude to an assassin’s strike.

Jupiter was the brightest note in all of them—somewhat stressed, but not distressed as she and Kalique moved through the throng. He was glad to see the deference paid her, the way the guests bowed and acknowledged her rank.

*She is a Queen. She deserves to be treated as such.*

Caine knew that if Jupiter declared that she was done with the entire ‘verse and was going home to Earth permanently, he would follow her; he would follow her anywhere, as long as she allowed it, and be content.

But seeing her take her rightful place, seeing her step into the power and place that she had inherited, was satisfying. It was *right*.

Caine’s attention snapped back to the center of the room as Jupiter’s scent—a familiar, unmistakable thread amidst all the others—went half-sour with alarm.

No one besides Kalique was near her, and she was staring at the glass she held—Caine took a deeper breath, but nothing about her scent spoke of poisoning, and he restrained his own alarm. He didn’t recognize the scent of the liqueur, but it didn’t seem to carry any toxins.

Jupiter gestured for a servant to come and take the glass, and Caine let out a breath and looked away to scan the room. Whatever was troubling her wasn’t physical, and the physical was what he was there to guard against.

But he kept half his attention on her. Just in case.

When he looked back again, she was taking a dainty from another tray and smiling at the server, whose scent was filled with awe. Then Lady Kalique stepped in, obscuring Caine’s view, and they disappeared behind a cluster of chatting nobles.

It didn’t matter. He could still hear her heartbeat.

Caine shifted his stance, and kept watch.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the extended absence. Holidays, and then my laptop died, and there was this sea monster...never mind. I'm trying to be more timely in future.

The necklace concept is cheerfully and blatantly lifted from L.M. Bujold's marvelous novel *Komarr*.

It was one of the weirdest times of Jupiter's life - and given recent events, that was saying something. She’d often dreamed of high-society dinners and parties, the gatherings Katharine described and that she and her family often cleaned up after.

She’d imagined being the center of attention, charming a circle of wealthy admirers with wit and style, wearing something extremely gorgeous and expensive, dripping with jewelry. Being *it*, if only for the space of a dream.

*Be careful what you wish for, I guess?*

Now she *had* all that, and it was a weird mix of really cool and really *disturbing*.

Sure, she was technically the most powerful person in the room - but despite Kalique’s patient instruction and endless sheaves about Entitled etiquette, Jupiter still felt like she was missing all the cues.

*And this is the informal stuff. What’s it going to be like when the Season really starts?*

Part of the problem was that the society of the First Estate had endless layers, and each interaction, no matter how casual, involved a subtle balancing between rank, circumstances, and history. And Entitled had a lot of history.

Jupiter could definitely see that Entitled were constantly jockeying for power and influence, much more than they were trying to enjoy each other’s company. *One good thing for me; I’m starting at the top.*

“Tell me again why I need all these people?” Jupiter skimmed the sheave she was currently taking notes on. “I mean, I get the guards, but - ”

Kalique smiled. “Your retinue provides service and consequence as well as protection. You require servants to tend to your needs as well as courtiers to attend you.”

Jupiter didn’t point out that she couldn’t imagine needing six people to do things for her at any one time, let alone in the middle of a party. Besides her rotating cast of Stormbreakers and sometimes a set of synth guards, she had chosen a few people from *Windy City* to trail her around and look useful, as a stopgap measure until she got a handle on the whole thing.

The position of courtier, on the other hand, was currently handled by the duchesses that Kalique had assigned to her. Hector and Dorcata (both women, though Jupiter’s brain kept hiccuping over the former) were, Kalique claimed, distant cousins of a sort. They were both very beautiful, in the
smooth fashion that Jupiter was beginning to recognize as a trait of someone who used Regenex; they were older than her by several centuries, but Jupiter suspected that their age was the equivalent of the late teens in an Earth human.

*And Aggie agrees with me.*

One of the weirdest things about the whole situation, Jupiter decided, was feeling *older* than a couple of girls who were more than ten times her age.

“Your rank really requires more, though,” Kalique continued. “I can recommend any number of worthy young women, or men or sa, if you prefer - peers of impeccable reputation and perfect manners.”

Jupiter hid a grimace and scrolled further down her sheave. “I need to think about that.”

Kalique didn’t press the point, but Jupiter could tell Kalique was impatient with Jupiter’s delay on the matter. *It might be different if I’d met anyone I could actually be friends with. But so far they’ve all been...artificial. Masks.* And Kalique kept warning her not to trust anyone until she had more experience.

A gentle throat-clearing had them both looking up. Officer Percadium stood in the nearest archway of Kalique’s room, bowing deferentially. “Your pardon, your Majesty, your Grace, but it’s time for her Majesty to leave.”

“Oops.” Jupiter shut off the sheave and stood up, shaking out the skirts of her gown so they settled around her feet. “Kalique, sorry, I have to go if I’m going to make that meeting.”

“Not at all.” Kalique rose too, with languid grace that Jupiter studied covertly, with an eye to imitating it. “You’ll return afterwards for my little soiree?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Jupiter said, smiling, and leaned over to press her cheek against Kalique’s. There was only one more party on Kalique’s roster before the big one that opened the Season; Jupiter was thinking of swinging home for a quick visit between the two, but she wasn’t sure she’d have time.

Kalique smiled back and waved Jupiter off. Phylo escorted her out of the room, and Jupiter had become familiar enough with her guards falling in around her that she didn’t count heads any more.

“Sorry, Majesty,” Phylo said, less formal but still apologetic as they moved briskly towards the alcazar’s landing pad. “I waited as long as I could.”

“No, my fault.” Jupiter handed him the sheave so she could catch up her skirt. “I totally forgot.”

The meeting was some kind of tax committee thing, somehow related to taxing planets - Jupiter wasn’t clear on the details despite her studies. It was going to be her first official appearance as a ruling queen; not quite proper, according to Kalique, since Jupiter hadn’t formally been presented to Entitled society, but the committee only met once a decade. *So it’s now, or wait until I’m past thirty.*

She’d survived so far. She could survive this.

The mistico was waiting above the landing pad, with more Skyjackers in the air around it. Jupiter could see weapons in their hands, though Cerise was supposed to be safe; but there was no gainsaying Stinger’s edicts when it came to safety. Her escort swept along to the transport beam, with Jupiter going first and the Skyjackers circling around her in the air. She pulled her skirts close as Phylo stepped into the beam below her - not that she thought he would peek, but it was still weird.
Aggie was waiting as Jupiter stepped on board the mistico. “Are you absolutely sure you want me along for this?” she asked, sounding nervous.

Jupiter patted her arm. “This is economics,” she pointed out. “And apparently I’m expected to bring a bunch of people with me even to one of these things. So if you really don’t mind pretending to be an attendant…”

Aggie snorted. “You can carry your own sheaves.”

But she looked more relaxed, and Jupiter grinned. “Somewhere in all this universe somebody has to have invented a virtual notebook or something. We’ll have to find them.”

The mistico had a small private suite, and Aggie waited outside the door while Jupiter changed clothes. The full-skirted gown she was wearing had been deemed by Kalique to be fine for “casual wear”, but business apparently required something more formal. Which, according to the design team, was something a lot like what she’d worn to visit the ship repair station - a top and slacks, and an ankle-length coat over it. It all felt like silk but looked like dark blue velvet, and the coat was embroidered with golden thread and heavy with gems.

The best part about it, Jupiter felt, was that the three-bee symbol was worked into the design, though it wasn’t obvious. The more she saw the bees, the more she liked them. *They got me into this, in a sense. They saved my life.*

They don’t lie.

*I hope.*

Jupiter pulled on the coat, settled a narrow diadem of gold set with sapphires on her hair (*always wear a token of rank in public, my dear*) and popped back out of the suite to collect her anti-nausea meds from the mistico’s first mate, in preparation for portaling. Aggie toasted her with a glass of water, and swallowed her own pills.

“Does one’s stomach ever get used to portaling?” Aggie asked when she set down her glass.

“I have no idea,” Jupiter admitted. “It’s supposed to be only an Entitled thing, but Kiza takes them sometimes.”

Aggie made a face. “Given how it feels with the pills, I’m not inclined to experiment.”

“With you on that,” Jupiter agreed. She didn’t have a clue how portaling actually worked - there was way too much other stuff to learn about right then - but her stomach definitely noticed when they did it.

As if prompted, the first mate touched their comm implant. “Your Majesty, we are ready to portal.”

“Let’s go,” Jupiter said, and a few seconds later her stomach rolled unpleasantly. She swallowed firmly and grinned. “Aggie, you have to see this!”

She led Aggie to the mistico’s bridge, and enjoyed the sight of Aggie’s mouth dropping open at the sight of Orus spread out on the screen, all its rings and satellites and ships in a dizzying, tangled array.

“That’s...not...possible,” Aggie said faintly, and Jupiter just grinned wider.
The committee meeting was fascinating, and Agatha was glad she’d learned how to use the quicktext function on sheaves, because she was taking continuous notes - partly for her own use, and partly because Jupiter was spending more time trying to look royal and in control than in making her own notations.

That was fine; it was, after all, her job, and Agatha knew Jupiter had to project power right off or lose points. And the overarching theme of the meeting was apparently pretty much to maintain the status quo, which was the taxation of certain kinds of planets. Not the planets’ production or population, but the planets themselves, which was also interesting; the taxes were paid by whoever owned them.

Agatha had no idea how a small group of Entitled had the power to decide this particular taxation scheme, but that could be researched later. In the meantime she listened, and observed as best she could in between notes.

The meeting room was more like a small ornamental greenhouse than anything else, except not quite so humid, and there was no part of it open to the sky - or, more to the point, to space, since they were outside Orus’ atmosphere. But vines cloaked the walls, and small trees stood in the corners, and there was some kind of fragrant moss underfoot.

The committee members reclined on floating couches, except for the three who were present through hologram images. Various guards and assistants stood along the walls. All except Agatha, who had a chair, because when they’d come in and seen the situation, Jupiter had muttered something rude under her breath and requested that their guide to the location find another chair.

And after a startled and frankly disbelieving look, the guide - an android - had bowed acquiescence and summoned a servitant. With a chair.

When the meeting concluded, most of the participants left immediately - two of them steered their couches right out the door without even getting up - but one of them drifted over to Jupiter. Agatha sharpened her ears as she shut down her sheave.

“Seraphi. It’s good to see you again,” the tall man said languidly, exchanging a touch of hands with Jupiter. “Your presence has been missed.”

Jupiter’s eyes narrowed, and Agatha waited for her to correct the man, but instead she cocked her head. “Thank you, Governor Furnor.”

The governor had black hair braided in intricate patterns down to his waist, and looked to Agatha as if he might have hailed from Peru if he’d been born on Earth. “I wanted to inquire if you are still of the same mind on that little matter of the Rever system and its environs.”

The name sounded faintly familiar to Agatha - it might have floated past on a list of Jupiter’s holdings, but there were so many of them - and she winced a little, since Jupiter probably had no better idea of what it was.

But Jupiter’s expression of cool interest didn’t change. “I’ve been a little busy lately, I’m sure you understand. Tell you what - why don’t you send me a precis on the issue, and I’ll look it over and get back to you. Refresh my memory.”

Furnor inclined his head. “I’ll do that. As ever, a pleasure.” He bowed slightly; Jupiter nodded, and he turned to leave, drifting out without so much as looking around to make sure his guards followed.
His exit left Jupiter and her entourage in possession of the room. Agatha stood up and went over to Jupiter, shutting down her sheave. “Well, that was interesting.”

“Parts of it, anyway. I think my butt is numb.” Jupiter wiped her hand on her coat. “Ugh, that guy was, like, psychically slimy.”

She glanced around. “And why didn’t anybody tell me we could phone in to these things? I so would have done that.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Agatha, amused, and Jupiter shrugged, lips quirking.

“Okay, maybe not the first time. Anyway, let’s get out of here before somebody comes back to talk to me about something I’m clueless about.”

Moving from planet to planet did make it difficult to keep track of time, but Agatha’s analog watch still worked fine; she glanced at it. “You’re not due back at Cerise right away, are you? Can we look around a bit?”

Jupiter made a face. “This is the place Caine and I spent a day standing in lines. It’s not exactly a tourist attraction.”

Caine, who was one of the four Skyjackers chosen for this particular guard duty, cleared his throat. “There are portions of Orus that are, your Majesty. Bureaucracy is only one of its functions.”

“Really?” Jupiter looked up at him. “What else have they got?”

Twenty minutes and a shuttle flight later they were walking down a wide arcade that looked to Agatha like a 1980s dream of a solarpunk future crossed with...well, she couldn’t quite think of what it was crossed with, unless it was the Champs-Élysées. Shops lined the arcade on either side and rose several stories overhead; various holographic displays on ground level showed goods, and melodious voices murmured sales pitches if one got close enough. Blue transport beams waited to lift shoppers to the higher locations, and various richly dressed people stood around - either to entice potential shoppers or to keep out those not worthy, Agatha saw.

It took her a little while, though; the whole thing was dazzling, and while the displays of clothes and jewelry were obvious, she couldn’t begin to guess what some of the other things were.

The other shoppers were equally interesting. There were groups much like Jupiter’s, with one or two Entitled surrounded by guards and assistants, most of them dressed in outfits that looked insanely dramatic to Agatha; there were single shoppers, or the occasional pair or trio, but still obviously very wealthy.

Others darted through the thin crowd, androids and Splices and pure humans - employees or servants on errands, she guessed, since they were dressed more plainly and didn’t stop to look at the displays.

Jupiter dropped back a step to walk at Agatha’s side. “See anything you like?” she asked with a grin.

Agatha shook her head, more in wonder than denial. “It’s dizzying. Have you noticed how the shops seem to be stratified by class? The most exclusive ones are the highest up.”

Rush, on Agatha’s other side, nodded. “The top tier is for Entitled only, no matter how wealthy a shopper is. Watch - ”

He nodded towards a transport beam ahead on their left. As they watched, a portly man in thick robes was smoothly diverted from it by the large, uniformed Splice with wide horns who waited by
the beam. The Splice stood impassive to the shopper’s angry words, and stepped back into place as soon as the man stomped away.

“How did he know?” Jupiter murmured, and Rush smiled faintly.

“It’s his job to know who’s Entitled and who’s not. Also, he may have an infrared implant to check for sigils like your own.”

“That would make it simpler, yes.” Agatha shook her head.

“How about that place?” Jupiter was staring at a jewelry store, one on the ground level. Rush blinked.

“If your Majesty wishes, of course,” he said cautiously. “The ground-level shops are not usually frequented by Entitled, though.”

“Don’t be snobby.” Jupiter punched his arm lightly, and Agatha noted with amusement that this garnered only a slightly put-upon look. “Come on.”

Jupiter wasn’t “on” as an Entitled when she stepped into the store, Agatha noted, but that didn’t keep the owner from nearly having a panic attack at the sight of four Skyjackers and one economist surrounding the young woman wearing the gold diadem. Agatha wasn’t sure how the man knew, since Jupiter’s wrist sigil wasn’t showing, but in a flash the two other browsing customers were ushered out, the door was closed, and the owner - who reminded Agatha vaguely of a shorter and smarmier Paul Newman - was bowing and scraping to Jupiter. *Maybe he has an implant too.*

Agatha knew Jupiter didn’t like being toadied to, but there wasn’t anything Agatha could do about it, and she seemed to be coping, so Agatha drifted off to look at the jewelry on display.

It was spectacular stuff, quite different from the Earth styles Agatha had seen. Impossibly delicate webs of metal, many with gems that were polished round instead of faceted; necklaces whose pendants hovered instead of being attached to the chain; rings with floating stones. There were ornaments that didn’t seem to be anything she was familiar with, neither necklace nor bracelet nor brooch, and there were some she stared at for almost a minute before realizing that they were for more intimate areas - not something one usually saw in a high-end jewelry shop.

It was the hovering necklaces that drew Agatha back, though. Some used chains, while others used thin collars of metal, but the astonishing part was the pendant - whether a chunk of rough-cut wood or a gem cut into a infinity-loop shape, they all floated in the air near the necklace, with no visible attachments. Agatha had no idea how it was done, or even if it was actually some kind of illusion, but the effect was amazing.

“Ooh, those are cool,” Jupiter commented behind her, and Agatha turned a bit to see Jupiter peering over her shoulder. “How does that work?"

“You’re asking me?” Agatha said, amused. “For all I know it’s an illusion caused by the shop lighting.”

“Let’s find out.” Jupiter waved at the proprietor, who was currently fussing behind the bulk of Rush and Banti, who had formed a discreet buffer zone. The man bustled forward at the gesture, his smile nervous and gleaming, and Agatha braced herself.

Unfortunately, the explanation was technobabble as far as she was concerned, though Jupiter nodded and made encouraging noises. Agatha didn’t try to listen too closely, instead playing with the necklaces and rings that the man retrieved from the case. The effect wasn’t an illusion; she could
pinch a pendant between her fingers or even hide it in her fist, but no matter how she pulled it wouldn’t go more than two inches from its chain.

“Fascinating,” she muttered.

Jupiter shot her a grin. “Analysis, Mr. Spock?”

Agatha rolled her eyes. “Dammit, Majesty, I’m an economist, not an engineer.”

Jupiter laughed out loud, baffling the proprietor. “Check this one out, it looks like a little planet.” She held up a necklace whose sphere pendant spun lazily. The shifting white patterns on its lavender background did look like clouds, Agatha had to admit.

“It is, your Majesty,” the proprietor said eagerly. “Sentus Seven, in fact. We have quite an array of them, in necklaces, rings, and bracelets - would your Majesty care to see Orus itself?”

Jupiter blinked. “How do you get all the satellites and rings in?”

“Allow me to demonstrate.” The man tapped at the counter, and a hologram sprang into life; a catalogue, Agatha saw, as it began to display various pendants much larger than life. Orus was vastly simplified, with just its artificial rings displayed, but it really would have to be, Agatha admitted. At such a small size, including all the traffic would just make it a cloud, and not an attractive one.

“Huh.” Jupiter eyed it. “Hey, do you do custom ones?”

When the man assured her that they did, Jupiter grinned at Agatha again. “How would you like to wear Earth?”

“That’s - ” Agatha halted, suddenly aware that she would like it, but also aware of what had to be a mind-boggling price tag.

Jupiter gave her a sympathetic glance. “Look,” she said quietly. “We can use funds from some of the manufacturing side. But we might as well get some fun out of the whole thing, you know?”

There were so many reasons she should refuse; but Agatha decided to be selfish for once, aware that it was probably a bad idea but too tempted to care. “I...all right. But you have to get one too.”

“Holy crap, yes,” Jupiter said gleefully, and Agatha had to laugh. “But not Earth. Here, let me see the catalogue - ”

It took a little discussion, and Banti’s assistance with galactic coordinates, but eventually they came away with two gaudily packaged boxes; one containing Earth on a necklace for Agatha, and one holding Jupiter’s choice - a ring of her namesake planet. Behind them the proprietor was nearly incoherent with joy over the sale - and the cachet, Agatha suspected.

Jupiter herself looked almost sad as they headed back down the concourse. “What’s the matter?”

Agatha asked quietly, and Jupiter shrugged.

“I was just thinking how much my father would have loved this,” she said.

Agatha nodded, and patted Jupiter’s arm sympathetically. “Do you want to check out one of the more exclusive stores?”

Jupiter tilted her head back to look up at the one they were passing, whose sign glowed softly two stories above their heads. “Let’s leave it for later.”
Agatha nodded again, and didn’t press.
Chapter 30

“I can’t sanction this.” Stinger was frowning, but Jupiter refused to give way.

“I understand that, but I want to do this. Look, I’ll wear the likealyzer, okay? It can make me look like, well, somebody else, can’t it?”

“That’s not how it works.” Stinger ran a hand through his hair and glared at Caine, who was standing guard near Jupiter’s desk. “Wise, give me some support here.”

Caine pursed his lips, looking faintly amused. “He’s right,” he said to Jupiter. “But the risk is minimal.”

Stinger muttered something that Jupiter’s translator implant refused to handle. “That’s not helping.”

Jupiter spread her hands, feeling some sympathy for Stinger’s dilemma but unwilling to give way. “I want to go along this time, and help pick out people. A design team isn’t as important as a financial crew, maybe, but for once I want to have a say in it.”

She blew out a breath. “It’s not like I don’t trust the people doing the picking, but Virtu’s swamped and so is Phylo. And I’m curious about these job markets.”

“Aye, that’s half the problem,” Stinger said exasperatedly. “I know you, Majesty. You’ll go looking for a design team and come back with a dozen broken-down Splices who can’t so much as stand up straight.”

Caine coughed. Jupiter glanced at him; he looked caught between alarm and amusement, and she rolled her eyes. “Give me some credit, Stinger, I’d come back with both.”

“If you’re going as a buyer, your Majesty, that would break your cover,” Caine pointed out.

“Yeah, yeah.” Jupiter hid her wince at the term buyer, though she knew that was essentially what it was. “Still going.”

Stinger threw up his hands. “All right then. But you can’t go like that.” He gestured at Jupiter’s outfit, which was one of the “casual” items designed by Kalique’s team. It was surprisingly comfortable, and Jupiter liked the way the embroidery on the skirt seemed to move with the fabric, but even with her limited experience she could tell it was something only Entitled would wear.

“Okay, what should I wear then?” Jupiter tapped the surface of her desk, thinking, then batted away the hologram the motion called up. “I don’t think this is a jeans and t-shirt situation.”

“If I may, your Majesty - ” Caine raised his brows, and Jupiter nodded. “I suggest we consult some experts.”

“Good idea,” Jupiter said, relieved, and Caine touched the implant behind his ear.

Stinger grunted. “With your permission, Majesty, I’ll go make the assignments for this jaunt.” He didn’t wait for her dismissal, instead stamping out the door still in a huff.

Jupiter winced again. “How mad is he?” she asked Caine.

He shook his head, half-smiling, though it faded quickly. “More worried. It’s on his head if something goes wrong, and Lady Kalique will have no mercy if it does.”
“Oh.” Jupiter bit her lip, looking at the now-closed door. “Should I…”

“No.” Caine spoke firmly, drawing her gaze back to him. “You are his Queen, and you have every right to take the risk if you please.”

Jupiter gave him a cockeyed look. “You’re not making me feel any better.”

Caine shrugged. “It is minimal. And he forgets that anything that reaches you will leave us dead in its wake, and beyond even Lady Kalique’s wrath.”

“Definitely not making me feel better.” Jupiter swiveled her chair to look at him directly. Standing, he towered over her; even with his wings mantled he was an impressive sight. But she didn’t feel so small next to him any longer. He just...was what he was, every inch of him precious. “I mean...if it’s dangerous, I don’t want to risk you guys.”

Caine regarded her for a moment, then slid to his knees with easy grace, now looking up at her. “It’s what we’re for,” he told her softly. “And...Jupiter...we would far rather pour ourselves out for you, who thinks of us as equals, than for any other Entitled.”

His words knotted Jupiter’s throat and made her want to curse, or wail out loud, because it was what they should have had anyway. And what makes me so special anyway? Nobody should die for me!

Except people had already, on Earth and off. And that had been part of her reasoning all along, a dark tally in the back of her mind. Don’t waste them.

It’s like Aggie says. If I have all this power, I have to do good with it. And good is dangerous in this universe.

But I can’t do it alone.

“Okay.” Jupiter leaned over to cup Caine’s face in her hands and kiss him. “Okay.”

She released him as the door slid open again. Caine rose from his knees with as much ease as before, and no embarrassment, as Phylo and Kiza came in. “Your Majesty?” Phylo asked, pressing a hand to his chest and giving her a half-bow.

“Hey, Jupiter. Hi, Caine.” Kiza had flowers in her hair and a smile on her face. “What’s up?”

Jupiter smiled back at both of them. “I’m going along on the run to pick up a design team, but I want to go incognito. So what do I do, and what do I wear?”

“Ooh, this’ll be fun.” Kiza elbowed Phylo, who merely grinned, amused.

Forty-five minutes later, Phylo and Jupiter had settled on the persona of a mid-level hiring manager for an Entitled’s entourage, and Kiza had chosen clothing to match. She designed Jupiter’s makeup as Phylo explained.

“You’ll have to hire under your real name, so to speak; anonymous hiring is done, but certainly not for this order of worker.” He scrolled through a sheave as he spoke, calling up files. “And normally a design team would be chosen by someone at my level, if not by the Entitled themselves. But since you’re hiring individuals instead of an established team, it can be done.”

Jupiter nodded as she absorbed the details. Phylo frowned.

“Really, you should still just book a suite and go through resumes, but I guess a little face-to-face
comparison would be all right. Eccentric, but all right.”

Jupiter snickered. “Weird. You can say it.”

Phylo smirked, but didn’t take the bait. “I’m transferring requirements and suggestions to your sheave now.” He tapped his own. “And Virtu’s suggested budget. Of course, since you’re actually you, you can spend whatever you like.”

“I’ll try to keep myself in check,” Jupiter said dryly.

“Ready, Majesty,” Kiza said, and swung out of her seat at the dressing table. Jupiter sat down in her place, and leaned forward.

The applicator was a convenience in the same line as the clothing machine, and Jupiter considered it just as nifty. Entitled were supposed to use servitors who applied makeup manually, but this time Jupiter simply leaned into the applicator frame and closed her eyes. Thirty tickly seconds later, the machine chimed, and she sat up straight and looked in the viewscreen.

Kiza had done a good job. The machine had highlighted Jupiter’s cheekbones and colored her lips, but the main focus was her eyelids, which bore a blend of colors that swept out past her eyes and echoed the leggings and caftan she wore. It was much brighter and bolder than anything she would have chosen for herself, but Kiza knew what someone at her persona’s level would wear.

Kiza programmed her hair as well, though she had the grooming device cut it shorter. Jupiter didn’t mind; a newer version of the one that had given her Rapunzel hair back on Gabal, it would lengthen her hair again whenever she wanted. The result was a set of rigid curls done in an arc across her head, ear to ear; privately, Jupiter thought it was appalling, but it didn’t have to please her as long as it made her look right.

“There,” Kiza said with satisfaction when it was finished. “An’ remember, Majesty, you’re supposed to be haughty. Anyone working for royalty makes the most of their rank.”

Phylo nodded in agreement, mouth quirking wryly. “At least in public, yeah.”

Jupiter sighed.

The employment hall was equal parts fascinating and appalling. Jupiter wished that Aggie had come along, because she would have had a lot to say about it, but Aggie had turned down the invitation on the grounds of too much work. Jupiter had to admit that it was good to have at least one person around whose automatic impulse wasn’t “Yes, your Majesty,” but she still missed Aggie’s pungent commentary and her insight.

They were back at Orus...again...because apparently Entitled would never think of hiring from any place but the center of the universe, at least if they weren’t dealing directly with a Splicer or supplier. The hall for artists and designers took up one satellite all on its own, ten or twelve levels of hopeful candidates arranged, in theory, by skill level.

“It’s more like bribe level, your Majesty,” said Soren, who had appointed herself guide for the trip; Caine and Urdur were the other two guards Stinger had assigned, but they knew less than Soren about the setup. Kiza had elected to go along as well, pointing out cheerfully that Jupiter’s role would need a secretary, and Jupiter was happy to accede.
The shuttle docks were at the bottom, and the elevators - not transport beams - ran through transparent columns on all sides of the satellite. It gave Jupiter and her party an excellent view of each level as they passed through it.

At the bottom was the cheap labor, a thick crowd of people waiting in a room that took up nearly the entire length of the satellite. The sight gave Jupiter unpleasant flashbacks to her first visit to Orus, except that there were no visible lines in the mass below; just people shifting wearily from foot to foot as they waited. Most of the ones close enough to see clearly were shabbily dressed; some looked ill, or old.

The second level had slightly fewer people and more seating; the third was better still, and so on up, until they reached one of the top tiers. A cold and efficient android showed them to a viewing room and offered refreshments and a personal shopper.

Jupiter accepted the first, because it was clearly going to be a long day, but turned down the second. Then, as the door slid shut behind the android, she gave her companions a bewildered look. “How do we even start?”

“With data, your Majesty,” Soren said confidently. “Please take a seat, and we’ll get started.”

Jupiter sat down in one of the plushy chairs that surrounded the empty space in the middle of the cool blue room; she was getting used to space tech, and could tell a holographic console when she saw one - at least as long as it wasn’t disguised as something else.

Kiza sat as well, but Soren did not, just reaching down to manipulate the controls on the arm of an empty chair. “When I first joined the Legion, before I was made a Skyjacker, I was assigned to Procurement for a while,” she explained. “I don’t know how many of these trips I made, though we weren’t on the prime tier and we sure weren’t looking for fashion experts.”

Images flickered and danced in the space above the console, too fast to make out, and then vanished again. “What’s your criteria, besides what you want them to do?”

“I want to make agreements with them,” Jupiter answered promptly. “Not their Splicers or their current owners. I want people who want to work for me, not people who don’t have a choice about it.”

Soren quirked a black brow. “That’ll cut down the selection a bit,” she muttered, and worked the controls some more. “Are you sure, your Majesty? You won’t get the best workers that way. All the most skilled are in teams and probably contracted through agencies.”

“Don’t care,” Jupiter said, and Soren shrugged. After a few minutes she straightened.

“The preliminary search is complete; you can call up each portfolio at will,” she said, gesturing at Jupiter’s chair. “When you’re ready, if you want, you can interview your picks.”

Jupiter regarded the controls a bit dubiously, then took a breath. “Right,” she said, and began.

Her first impulse was to take people in alphabetical order, but she immediately ran into the issue of a dozen different alphabets - the ubiquity of the translator implants meant that there was no need for one standard one. So she told the system to present the portfolios in random order.

Face after face, history after history formed in the air above the console; most were Splices, though there were some pure humans and a scattering of androids, and even one of the scary dragon-people. They ranged from famous experts currently between gigs to putative artists whose skill, if any, had never won them any decent place. The faces were beautiful or bizarre or sometimes both, smooth
with artificial youth or worn by time and worry; there were horns and scales and skin of every color of the rainbow - literally.

Jupiter tagged potential candidates as she went along, but the task quickly grew overwhelming; there were just too many of them. By the time an hour had passed she was blinking blurring eyes, while the Skyjacker's waited in patient silence and Kiza worked her way through the platterful of dainties brought by a servitant.

Sighing, Jupiter rubbed her face. “This isn't working.”

“Time for a break then,” Kiza said, and pushed the plate towards her. “Try the green ones, they're pretty good.”

Jupiter scooped up one of the small cakes and nibbled on it; it was good, with a flavor faintly reminiscent of cotton candy. *I hope this doesn't have as much sugar as it tastes like, or I'm going to be crashing in another hour.*

“What's the issue, Majesty?” Kiza asked, licking her fingers without shame; she shared Stinger's fondness for sweet things.

“Not sure,” Jupiter said, wishing that Caine could come over and give her a neck rub, but he was on duty. She sat back and tried to focus.

Stinger was right; the various histories didn’t obviously spell out the miserable lives of some of the candidates, but even she could read between the sparse lines, and some of the holographic faces were downright desperate. Jupiter kept thinking about that lowest level, and the tired, close-packed crowd…

*You can't take them all home, малышка,* said Aleksa in Jupiter's mental ear. *So focus on what you need.*

Jupiter glanced over at Kiza, who still wore one blossom over her temple. It made Jupiter think of the bees on board the *Windy City,* and she hoped idly that Kiza had checked for small stowaways before she'd left the garden deck.

*That was a good idea,* she thought, scooping up another cake. *What I need is...more good ideas.*

*Hmm.*

Thoughtfully, Jupiter dismissed the current image and called up the search parameters again. *What if I look by design instead?*

It was shockingly easy after that - on almost every candidate, Jupiter either liked the examples of their work, or she didn’t, and it was simple to winnow her list down to a tenth of its size. That was still unmanageably large, but - *It's better than what I started with.*

Each candidate had a long list of scores for various attributes; Soren had walked her through them early on. They included creativity, intelligence, cohesive ability - which meant teamwork - knowledge of trends, and submissiveness, among others; that last made Jupiter twitch, but she supposed some people found it useful.

*People I'd like to kick in the nuts, but never mind that now.*

She wanted a team, so it made sense to look for people who worked well with others. Jupiter scrolled through the list several times, hesitating over a few names before making her final choices.
Ten portfolios were left; Kalique’s team was three times that size, but Jupiter didn’t think she had that much work for a team, at least yet. And we can always hire more people later. Though, if it was going to take this much time…

“Kiza, remind me to hire a hiring manager, would you?” she asked, bundling the ten into one package and sending it to the call system with a flick of her finger.

Kiza snickered, and made a note on the sheave she’d brought along. “Sure thing, Majesty.”

It would take a few minutes for the system to connect all the applicants, so Jupiter stood up to stretch and get a drink of water. The style Kiza had chosen for her hair would take a minor windstorm to mess up, and the cosmetics didn’t smudge, but Jupiter made sure to straighten her outfit before she resumed her seat.

Soren had given her tips as she’d gone along, so Jupiter knew what would happen, more or less; and in fact, the system chimed readiness as soon as she sat down. She took a deep breath, let it out, and cued the display.

Ten holograms sprung to life above the console - not static images this time, but heads that blinked and breathed. They were, in the end, all Splices, and none of them had come from the top two tiers. Most of them had neutral expressions, but the holograms were excellent, and Jupiter could see hints of curiosity, wariness - and desperation.

She remembered just in time that she was supposed to be incognito. “Um, greetings. I’m hiring for the Recurrence of Queen Seraphi of the House of Abrasax.”

That won her widened eyes and at least one dropped jaw. Jupiter hit the button that would send each one a copy of the contract worked up by her lawyers, with input from Virtu’s people. “She needs a design team for her personal image,” Jupiter went on. “You’re the first picks.”

According to Soren, the candidates were free to ask questions, negotiate, or refuse, but most of them just goggled at Jupiter. Since she’d kind of been expecting that, Jupiter let them process.

“You’re not being haughty enough,” Kiza murmured, amused, and Jupiter flapped a hand at her below the console. Finally one of the images, a woman with a bony, silver-furred face that reminded Jupiter vaguely of a borzoi, spoke.

“Are - are you sure you are not in error?” Soren had said that unless Jupiter blocked the function, the candidates could see one another too. “The House of Abrasax?”

Jupiter couldn’t help the smile, though she managed to keep it a small one. “Check your contract. It’s legitimate.”

The faces, all of them, dropped their eyes to look at their own consoles. A moment later, one of them vanished, withdrawing from the interview; but the others remained.

“If you accept the job you’ll be working together,” Jupiter continued. “The Queen needs a team that can create styles for her as well as work with her own ideas.”

I know I’m supposed to interview these people, but I don’t even know what to ask. And they’re mostly desperate - they’re gonna say whatever they think I want to hear anyway.

“All questions?” she added.

There weren’t, mostly because they all seemed to be still struck dumb; but in the end, all nine
accepted the contract and blinked out.

Jupiter blew out a sharp breath, tried to run her hands through her hair, and winced when the curls didn’t give way. “Okay, done. Can we go home now?”

“As you command, your Majesty,” Caine said, amused, and Urdur went to summon their escort.

The contract offered to each designer included transportation to Windy City and a day to settle personal affairs. As they made their way back to the shuttle, Jupiter wondered what the new hires would think when they found out her actual identity.

But mostly she hoped the new team would work out. *I can’t help everybody. So I help who I can.*

It would have to be enough.

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Agatha leaned back in her chair and scrolled through a long list of First Estate-owned corporations, only half paying attention; she’d been working all morning, and her brain was tired.

Idly, she hit the combination that made the sheave’s display go three-dimensional, and expanded it so that she could line up corporate blurbs side by side. *This never gets old.* And the tech would be a wonderful classroom tool, once the students got over the novelty of it. Agatha smiled and added it to the list of technology to introduce on Earth; Jupiter had finally rolled her eyes and made it the equivalent of family access after Agatha had mentioned one too many things she wanted to bring back home.

*Looks like Kiza’s been in here recently too.* At least, judging from the three kinds of holographic entertainment devices at the bottom of the list. It made Agatha smile wider; it was good to know that at least some small part of the greater universe wanted Earth to share in the bounty.

Agatha made the tech list go away and returned to staring at the blurbs - logos, stock information, ownership, and so forth - but her eyes kept focusing beyond it to the far side of the lounge she was occupying. Jupiter had given her an office of her own on board *Windy City* - and at this point Agatha wasn’t surprised, though to be sure there were more rooms available than people to fill them - but with an enormous spaceship to explore, Agatha was hardly going to spend all of her time in one room.

The ship’s staff had accepted her almost more readily than they had Jupiter, and treated her like they did Virtu and Phylo and Stinger; with prompt and courteous service, and a level of deference that made Agatha a little uncomfortable.

*I’m an observer, for pity’s sake. Not one of these galactic castes.*

But to argue would make them uncomfortable, and so Agatha just reminded herself that she was part of the effort to destroy the whole system, and was courteous back at them.

She sighed, took a drink of the tea the staff kept supplying, and refocused on the holograms. It was reassuring on some level, Agatha thought, to see that Entitled came in all shades of skin; there was as much a mixture of races in the company founders and executives as there was among the rest of the galactic population.

*But no Splices, ever.*
Well, it was logical in a twisted way - the overarching society’s obsession with genetics and genetic purity would preclude admixture. Not to mention that Splices all seem to be created, not born.

The idea was so bizarre that it nagged at her. Certainly there were parallels between Splices’ place in galactic society and nonwhite people in Earth’s Western world - it was not possible to miss them. But her attempts at discussing the situation with any of the Splices she knew had been fruitless. Most of the Skyjackers politely declined the conversation, Virtu merely said she was content as she was, and Caine had looked so desperately uncomfortable that Agatha had withdrawn the question.

She sighed again and shut down the sheave, leaning back in her chair for a stretch, then got up. “Time for a break,” she muttered to herself, and finished her tea before heading out the door to stretch her legs as well.

Two corridors over and three decks up, Agatha’s calves were aching slightly and the cobwebs had been swept away. She was considering turning around when Stinger and two of the ship’s staff stepped out of one of the elevators at the end of the hall.

“See to it,” he told them. “We may not be armed but by the First World we’ll be secure.”

Both of them nodded and hurried off, and Stinger inclined his head to Agatha. “Aggie.”

“Armed?” she asked, curious. “I thought the Skyjackers always carried weapons.” She could see the knife sheath strapped to his thigh, in fact.

Stinger chuckled. “I meant the ship. It has no offensive capabilities, but plenty of defensive ones, and they all need to be live.”

Agatha hesitated. “Are we under attack?”

“Hm? No.” Stinger blinked at her, and then his face relaxed. “No, and not likely to be; Entitled don’t make war on each other directly, and pirates stick to the fringes. But it’s my job to keep her Majesty safe, and that includes the defensive systems.”

Agatha nodded. “That’s fair.” She considered for a moment. “Are you busy? I have a question.”

“No, I’m just headed to the garden to stretch my wings for a bit. Kiza threw me out of my office,” he added, rolling his eyes.

Agatha snickered. “Far be it from me to interfere. I’ll just walk with you, if you’ll permit.”

“A’ course.” Stinger tipped his head towards the elevator, and they rode it upwards and forward - the things could move in several directions, which reminded Agatha of Star Trek. “What was your question?”

Agatha hesitated again, trying to frame it. “Do you really believe,” she said at last, “that you - that Splices are truly genetically inferior?”

Stinger’s face went expressionless, and he gave her a long, long look. Agatha didn’t interrupt whatever he was thinking; she’d tried to avoid offense, but she was still feeling out the Splice culture as expressed in the limited medium of Jupiter’s ship, and there were a lot of unknowns.

“What has that to do with economics?” he asked finally, a touch dry.

“On some level, everything has to do with economics, just as everything has to do with history. It’s all connected, from the major players in any financial system down to the current favorite flavor of
ice cream.” Agatha shrugged. “But right now, I’m trying to feel out how this intergalactic society works. Research tells me there are more pure humans than Splices, but there are a lot more Splices than there are Entitled. So why - ”

Stinger held up a hand, brows snapping together, and shook his head just slightly. The elevator doors opened, and he gestured her out. “Hold that question, Doctor.”

The reversion to her title sharpened Agatha’s curiosity, but she obeyed, and let Stinger lead her down the corridor to the big garden airlock.

There was a guard outside; the man wasn’t someone Agatha knew by name, though his face was vaguely familiar, and he gave Stinger a deferential salute as they approached, touching the controls to open the ‘lock.

“Anyone else in there just now?” Stinger asked casually as the wheel untwisted, and the man shook his head.

“No one since I came on shift, Commander.”

“Good.” Stinger nodded and passed through, and Agatha gave the guard a smile and followed.

The rhythmic clicks of the ‘lock closing was muffled on this side, deadened a bit by the open space and the tons of soil, but as usual Agatha barely heard it, her attention taken up by the vast space and her never-fading amazement at the skill and technology that had created it.

Stinger tilted his head, and they walked away from the ‘lock and down one of the branching paths. A few bees buzzed past, circling Stinger once and passing by as if to check in, but he ignored them.

“I’m guessing you want to know why we haven’t rebelled,” he said at last, voice low.

Agatha nodded, and Stinger glanced around, eyes shifting gold for a breath or two. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt, Aggie, and assume you don’t know that just entertainin’ the idea is a capital crime for a Splice.”

Agatha flinched. “I - no, I did not.”

Stinger grimaced. “Now you do.” They walked another few steps, and Agatha was about to apologize when he spoke again.

“It’s happened. It does happen, when the memory of the last time has dulled a bit. And every time, it’s cut down and burnt out. Sterilised.” One corner of his mouth twitched, a bleak look. “Usually they purify the entire population, if it’s centralised enough.”

Agatha really didn’t want to believe him, but there was no reason to doubt his words. She wondered vaguely how upset Jupiter would be if she threw up in the closest rosebush.

“To answer your other question,” Stinger went on, staring up at the roof with the air of a man who wasn’t seeing what he was looking at, “part of me knows it’s shit. The rest of me has inferiority literally coded into my cells. Since it’s the latter that keeps me alive - well.”

Agatha nodded. The parallels were rising thick and fast, but all she allowed herself to say was “I’ll keep this in confidence.”

Agatha dipped her hands into her pockets. “Yes.” She returned his smile, and they walked on. It was encouraging to see that he could learn, if he chose to.

*A white man without white privilege, who looks at a woman of color and automatically thinks of her as his superior.* The greater universe just kept getting stranger.

Stinger sighed after a while, his wings unfolding. “Not to be rude, but I’m goin’ up before I lose my chance.”

Agatha chuckled and stepped back. “Have fun.”

He rolled his eyes, crouched, and was gone, curving upwards more slowly than the other Skyjackers but with a measure more of grace. Agatha watched him out of sight and then kept walking; the garden was as good a place to think as any, and beautiful to boot.

It was when she was leaving, the airlock closing behind her, that Agatha saw the small crowd drifting down the hallway, and her garden-induced sense of peace fled. A few times, she’d encountered the twin duchesses that Lady Kalique had assigned to Jupiter as attendants, and each time had left her both amused and irritated. *They clearly saw Agatha as inferior, but since her status was higher than “servant” they couldn’t express themselves as bluntly as they wished.*

*If I were the age they are emotionally, no doubt I’d be crushed.* However, Agatha had survived both academia and high school - from both sides - and shifted between contempt and a sort of distant pity.

This time the two swept past Agatha as if she weren’t there, their gaggle of attendants taking the cue and ignoring her as well. “Open the airlock,” Hector ordered the guard. “We wish to walk in the garden.”

Agatha glanced back to see the guard’s spine straighten. “I’m sorry, your Grace,” he said deferentially. “Only certain members of her Majesty’s household are permitted entrance.”

The girls stared at him, as if disbelieving his words; then Dorcata sniffed. “Clearly that doesn’t apply to *us.* Open it.”

Agatha frowned. The guard’s light skin was turning paler, but his chin rose. “Your Graces, I am not permitted to do so.”

Hector, on the other hand, was flushing with anger. “Nonsense. When the Queen hears of your disobedience, you will be severely punished. Open the airlock!”

*This isn’t good.* “Jeeves,” she muttered, trusting that the ship’s presence would hear her; out of all the tech she’d encountered so far, this seemed the most like magic. “Please tell Commander Apini what’s going on out here.”

“At once, Doctor,” Jeeves’ mellow voice murmured in her ear.

“I don’t have that authority,” the guard was saying.

“This is intolerable,” Hector snapped, actually stamping one admittedly pretty foot. “The garden is accessible to Splices. It cannot possibly be restricted!”

“Absurd,” Dorcata added scornfully. “What use do they have for it?”

*Good grief. They’re hitting all the petty villain buttons at one go.* “That’s the Queen’s business,” Agatha said loudly, and retraced her steps to stand next to the sweating guard. “But if you want to
stay in her good graces, you’d better not push your luck.”

The stares were appalled this time. Agatha let them get as far as opening their mouths, then with timing honed by decades of teaching, broke in. “Trust me. If you hassle her people she will not be amused.”

Dorcata sputtered. Hector’s gaze narrowed, suddenly icy. “You have no true idea of our rank, tercie,” she said coldly. “I could have you executed for that.”

*I wonder if that’s true.* “I suppose you can try,” Agatha said mildly.

Before either duchess could reply, the ‘lock spun open. Both girls looked obscenely triumphant, moving towards it at a pace faster than their usual stroll, but the figure revealed in the opening halted them. Agatha stepped back out of Stinger’s way, silently admiring the spread of his wings and how he’d framed them perfectly within the airlock. The sheer presence of him was palpable.

“Is there a problem, your Graces?” he asked, stepping out with his wings still spread. At his small gesture, the guard hastened to close the airlock again.

“This insolent minion thinks we’re not allowed into the garden,” Hector said. “Correct him immediately!”

Stinger folded his wings slowly. For someone who’d presumably raced through the air at Jeeves’ summons, he was remarkably unruffled.

“Silvari can’t exceed his instructions,” he replied, folding his hands in front of him and managing to sound respectful and firm at the same time. “He may only allow certain people to pass, and your Graces are not among them.”

Agatha wasn’t sure why one of the duchesses hadn’t just pushed the poor boy out of the way and opened the airlock herself - surely he wasn’t permitted to touch Entitled - but it didn’t seem to have occurred to either of them.

“Then do it yourself,” Hector demanded. “And quickly! We’ve wasted enough time on this nonsense.”

Stinger’s face was blank, but despite the nasty tension that hummed in the air, Agatha thought he was enjoying himself. *Well, why not? I would.*

“Regrettably, your Graces, I too am subject to her Majesty’s orders,” he said, voice calm. “If you wish to visit the garden, you must speak with the Queen.”

The tension rose. Hector stepped forward, and for a second Agatha thought she was going for the controls - but instead she lifted a hand and slapped Stinger, *hard.* Once across each cheek.

“Rest assured she *will* hear from us on this matter,” she said, voice scaling up with fury. “And when she’s done, you’ll be heading for the disintegrators, *Splice.*”

She spun in place and flounced off with all the dignity of an outraged five-year-old, followed by her glaring sister and their tittering handmaidens. Agatha felt like applauding.

As soon as they rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, the tension dissolved. “I’m so sorry, Commander,” Silvari started, still pale. “They wouldn’t *listen* - ”

“It’s fine, boy,” Stinger interrupted, shaking out his wings and shooting Agatha a rueful look. “You
haven’t worked around Entitled much, have you? That’s pretty much the laid-out course. You did fine.”

He rubbed a thumb over the red mark now decorating one cheek. “Next time, call for backup as soon as you see them coming,” he added. “If you can’t get me, go for Captain Tsing or Sub-commander Jorie. You don’t have to face them alone.”

The guard was blushing now; he was fairly young, Agatha thought, though of course it was hard to tell in this society. “Thank you, sir. And - and she won’t - ”

“If you’re worried about Jupiter, don’t be,” Agatha said, giving him a smile. “Trust me, she’ll see you did the right thing.”

Silvari blushed harder, and gave her a small bow. “Thank you, miss.”

Stinger chuckled. “Dr. Thompson should know. I’ll be getting back to my office; if there’s any other problem, you call me right away.” He waved a hand, gesturing in the direction away from the duchesses’ path, and Agatha fell in beside him as he started down the hall.

“Are you all right? She wasn’t pulling her slap,” Agatha said, only half-serious.

“Ah, had worse from Kiza when she was teething,” Stinger said easily. “And better me. Commanders are supposed to take the crap from on high.”

“That’s fair,” Agatha said, amused. “And if you’re worried about how Jupiter will react, don’t be. The only time she got sent to the principal in high school was when she got into a fight to protect a bullied kid.”

“That’s good to know.” Stinger made a faint buzzing sound, which made Agatha swallow back a laugh. It seemed absurd to think that anyone could doubt the girl - but when Agatha considered the environment Stinger lived in, it made more sense.

Still, he didn’t seem worried. “Are all Entitled like that?” she asked.

“No, some are dangerous.” Stinger said it casually. “Those two have no real power. It’s the ones like Lady Kalique that you have to watch out for.”

Agatha nodded. “I don’t know why they didn’t just open the airlock themselves, though.”

Stinger snorted. “Them? They don’t know how. Won’t learn, either,” he said to her shocked look. “If we had an emergency on board, they’d better hope their attendants stay close, or they’ll get stuck outside the lifepods waiting for someone to push the button.”

“That’s...appalling.” Agatha could picture it, though. “...Can you arrange one?”

Stinger gaped at her, then burst out laughing. Agatha grinned at him, and kept walking.
“So.” Jupiter looked around. The ship-board salon was big enough to hold all twelve Stormbreakers comfortably, though several of them still looked uneasy; Jupiter liked the space for its green decorating scheme and comfy chairs. “Lady Kalique says I need to get you guys into uniform for the big party. What do you want to wear?”

Eleven blank stares was a lot, but Jupiter was getting used to it. “I’m sorry, your Majesty,” Rush said at last. “I...we don’t understand.”

Stinger was wearing his professional “I have no opinion” face, giving no hint that Jupiter had already talked to him ahead of time, but everybody else besides Caine looked baffled. Jupiter lifted a shoulder. “If I’m going to make you all wear the same thing, you should at least get a say in it, don’t you think? I mean, I can design clothes all day long, but it’s your bodies.”

More stares. But gradually Soren began to smile, and several of the others exchanged looks of dawning comprehension. Caine didn’t go as far as a smile, but the drop of his eyelids meant, Jupiter thought, satisfaction.

“You want us to choose our own livery, your Majesty?” Soren said, leaning forward a little in her backless chair.

Jupiter cocked her head. “Well, come to a consensus anyway, since the basic idea is for you all to look the same. I mean, I’ve got a dozen different concepts at least, but I don’t know if you’ll like them.”

“The kilt is still a no,” Stinger murmured on her left, almost too soft to hear, and Jupiter wrinkled her nose at him. Okay, it hadn’t been practical for people who flew, but still.

“If I may show them the designs, Majesty?” Stinger said more loudly, and Jupiter nodded. A word with Jeeves, and her potential ideas were projected into the middle of the room - some rough sketches, some images pulled from Earth’s Internet. Jupiter wasn’t yet comfortable with the Gyre’s version of the Web, and she didn’t want to step on anyone’s copyright, so it seemed safer to stick with what she knew for the moment.

“I like that one,” Glasta said, pointing a clawed finger at the decorated tabard Jupiter had lifted from a Three Musketeers movie.

“The sleeves would get in the way in a fight,” Laur countered immediately, then glanced nervously at Jupiter. She waved both hands reassuringly.

“Please, say whatever you want. If it’s stupid, it needs to go.”

It took them a little while to get going, and a few still watched Jupiter cautiously, but eventually the debate got under way. She sat back and let them discuss the various designs, and grinned when Absaba fetched a sheave and started sketching additional ones.

“Thanks for letting me do this,” she said to Stinger when they all paused for snacks.

He snorted. “As if I could tell you no.”

Jupiter elbowed him, and won a reluctant smirk. “All right then, yes your Majesty, it was a good idea.” He popped a small cake into his mouth and swallowed it nearly whole. “Most Royal Guard
units are more...shall we say, uniform. An’ almost none of ‘em have wings. Even so, a lot of liveries are to please Entitled taste.”

Jupiter made a face. “I can imagine.”

Stinger nodded at the images floating in the center of the salon. “This way, we’ll not only look good, we’ll be able to conceal all the arms we want and still be able to use them. Very shrewd, Majesty.”

Jupiter tried to look modest, and went to make sure Caine was eating something.

It took some argument, but in the end the Stormbreakers settled on a uniform not too far from what Caine had been wearing when Jupiter had first met him - close-cut but flexible trousers and sleeveless tops. The latter, they assured her, was intended to display their Legion tattoos and Jupiter’s sigil, both as identification and as a point of pride. On top was a long, light vest that went to mid-calf, with wing-slits and a high collar; there was a long discussion over whether the collar counted as trying to conceal a Splicer brand, which was apparently illegal, but in the end it was concluded that Entitled requirements trumped that and it was borderline anyway. Jupiter saved her rant about the law, and let them wrangle.

The weapons, she found out, were part of it. Everyone used customized Maulers, but the modifications were small enough that the guns all looked sufficiently alike; then there were arguments about knife length and number of visible blades, with half the group pulling for swords for ceremonial occasions and half not wanting to be bothered.

“Put it to a vote,” Jupiter suggested, and they did - six for and six against.

“Looks like you’re the tie-breaker, Majesty.” Stinger said with a smirk. Jupiter hesitated, but both Stinger and Caine had voted yes, which surprised her a little, and she was pretty sure that Urdur and the twins were voting no just to annoy Honch and Rush. Sheneto didn’t look all that invested in the outcome, either, more occupied with poking Banti with the tip of one wing while he wasn’t looking.

*They’re like a bunch of kids,* Jupiter thought, and was torn between laughter and a weird grief. “Um...yes, then.”

Laur sighed, but no one argued.

When they’d settled the basic design, Jupiter saved it and sent it to her design team. “I’ll have them come see you for fittings,” she promised. “And let them know what mods you want for the weapons and stuff.”

The Stormbreakers nodded and murmured, rising, and Honch and Banti touched their temples to her before leaving. Others bowed, just slightly, and the rest nodded again, even Stinger, as they departed. Only Caine was left.

“What was that about?” Jupiter asked, holding out a hand to him.

Instead of sitting next to her, Caine knelt, sliding his arms around her waist and resting his head on her lap. Jupiter rubbed his shoulders and spine, working carefully around his folded wings. “You don’t see it?” he asked, a little muffled.

“They didn’t expect to be asked,” Jupiter said, and felt the huff of his laugh against her hip.

“On no world would they expect to be asked. Even the pure humans.” He rubbed his cheek on her thigh. “You see us.”
It was no good trying to explain *it’s not a virtue, it’s just the way I was raised* again, so Jupiter just smoothed the feathers that shivered and clouded beneath her touch. “You’re worth seeing,” she said at last, and meant it on all its levels. “All of you.”

Caine sighed and tightened his arms, wings expanding to trail down to the floor, and Jupiter toyed with one strong bronze plume and let him hold her.

Her Majesty’s design team was settling in well, Stinger had to admit that. Even if he’d been right about their condition.

He’d run the deepest background checks he could manage, of course, but all of them had come up clean - not surprising, since anyone trying to plant another agent on Jupiter would have gone with someone much more famous and high-caste than the raggedy bunch she’d picked. Still, he’d given orders that she never be left alone with any of them, at least for now.

And the same went for Caine.

Stinger watched from the archway of her Majesty’s suite on Cerise as a handful of the design team swarmed around Jupiter, two more taking direction from Lady Kalique and one stitching busily at some length of fabric. They were housed on board the *Windy City*, of course, but came down every day to work with her Majesty to work on the gowns and outfits she would need soonest. Stinger had to suppress a snicker every time he remembered their faces when they’d found out that the minion who’d hired them was actually their royal employer.

*I thought a couple of ‘em were going to bolt for the airlock.*

But they’d adjusted, and seemed to be working together well enough. *She does have a gift for it, no doubt about that. They’re devoted to her already.*

They even had a name of their own; Jupiter had dubbed them the Timesavers, saying it was because there were nine of them to do the stitching. It made absolutely no sense to anyone else besides Aggie, who had started laughing as soon as she heard the title.

Jupiter was grinning at the little Splice who was swathing her in gauze; Stinger pushed away from the wall to resume his patrol, but his implant beeped softly. “Commander Apini,” Tsing’s voice said in his ear, “we have news. Can you come up to orbit?”

Stinger’s amusement fled at her flat tone. Diomika wouldn’t interrupt for anything unimportant. “On my way.”

He exchanged a nod with Soren, watching from the opposite archway, and withdrew, making his way to the first open balcony and unfolding his wings. *One thing about Lady Kalique’s alcazar, it never takes long to get out under the sky.*

Wings took him to the shuttle’s hoverbeam; the shuttle lifted him to *Windy City*; and eight minutes after Tsing’s call he was waving her and Officer Chatterjee into his office and sealing the hatch after them.

“So?” Stinger settled into his seat; Tsing and Chatterjee had already taken theirs with the ease of a comfortable working relationship.

Diomika gestured to Gemma, who inclined her head and faced Stinger with her habitual calm expression; he wasn’t entirely sure she was programmed with any *other* expression. “My team has completed our research into the events leading up to the death of Elgin.”
Stinger let his brows go up. Judging from Diomika’s grim expression, the news wasn’t good. “Report.”

Gemma handed over a data solid. “I regret to say, Commander, we have almost no useful data.”

Stinger wasn’t surprised. Whoever their shadowy enemy was, they were obviously thorough - and had the funds to support their caution. “What did you find?”

“We tracked Elgin’s records back through their time at Substation 6-A and to the engineering consortium from which they came. The consortium purchased their contract from their Splicer, Tomatisoria Limited,” she added. “But we gave that minimal attention since Elgin’s suborning had to have occurred more recently.”

Stinger nodded, and dropped the solid onto a read-pad on his desk, letting it download. “Makes sense, go on.”

Gemma tilted her head, a few lights flashing near her crown. “Elgin’s record is unexceptional; they were a steady worker specializing in airlock and docking systems maintenance. They worked almost twenty years at the substation, and left it only three times, on purchasing runs. Only one of those was within our projected timespan.”

She made a soft beeping sound, and data fountained up over Stinger’s desk, a galactic map and a timeline in a glowing three-dimensional image. “Elgin and two of their coworkers were sent by Manager Traduce to oversee the purchase of certain components the substation was unable to manufacture economically. They went to the trading hall in the Ten-Twenty system to offer bids, and returned six days later with their cargo.”

Diomika frowned thoughtfully. “Do we know why Traduce picked Elgin in particular?”

“It was their turn, she said,” Gemma said. “Apparently it’s a rotating duty.”

Stinger snorted. “Fair enough. And?”

Gemma beeped again, and the data display changed to show video footage. “We were able to access security footage for the public areas of the trading hall, but nothing was available for private areas or lodging due to security concerns regarding business deals. The public footage shows nothing suspicious; Elgin met with a number of manufacturer representatives, but never alone.”

Diomika’s mouth twisted in frustration. “So they could have been approached during their off-time.”

“Or even at the substation,” Stinger said. “If we don’t know when it happened - ”

Gemma shook her head. “It’s unlikely. Communications on the station are not monitored, but they are logged; that would leave too strong a trail for someone so careful.”

“Beeswax,” Stinger muttered. He poked at the data display for a moment, but the Ten-Twenty trading hall was a decent-sized satellite, and trying to pick out one suspicious character from a rapidly shifting population of some fifteen thousand would be an exercise in futility. “That’s a dead end, then.”

“I’m afraid so,” Gemma said. “The false entries on the hiring lists were created by a coder for hire, paid by anonymous cash drop. We also looked into the berth on board the transport tug, but it seems Elgin made their deal at the last moment and in person.”

Stinger sighed. “Pretty good at this for an amateur.”
“They were probably following instructions,” Diomika pointed out. “The only remaining clue is the body mod.”

“The best use of our time and resources,” Gemma said carefully, “would be to hire outside help.”

Stinger had to agree. Tracing the supplier of the drugs for an illegal body mod would take time, and knowledge that his people didn’t possess. *Not to mention, with several galaxies to cover -*

It would be expensive, and results would not be quick in coming. This was not really something that was covered by his section’s budget. “I expect her Majesty’ll authorize the funds.”

“It affects Mr. Wise. She’ll probably provide an unlimited purse,” Diomika said dryly.

Stinger snorted. “True. Nice job, Chatterjee, I’ll put in commendations for all your team. You’ll brief her Majesty tomorrow morning.”

He watched the two of them take their leave as he pondered the problem. He’d hoped for better results, given that tracing Elgin back to the substation should have been impossible, but the odds had been against them from the start. *If we had a physical trace we could put Caine on it...but if wishes were feathers we’d all be flying.*

Stinger flipped off the display and locked the information. If this had just been some single mad attempt to frame Caine, for whatever end, they could close the file on it and have done. But all Stinger’s instincts said otherwise.

*We’ll have to wait.* For the next attack, the next frame, the next lie. *And we’ll be ready.*

He would accept nothing less.

The light was as golden as Jupiter remembered.

She walked slowly down the aisle that parted the sea of candles. She’d had to ask the chamber presence, Sendi, for directions to the shrine, but Jupiter wanted to go alone this time, without Kalique’s knowing gaze watching her every expression. The statue of Seraphi, perhaps fortunately, had blank eyes.

Jupiter had dressed carefully for the visit, choosing pants instead of skirts, but she kept equally carefully to the center of the aisle. The flicker of the myriad tiny flames was a low sough in the room, and the hot air smelled of honey and roses.

Jupiter came to a halt in front of the statue. It was hard to look at, in a way, though made a bit easier by the fact that she was pretty sure she’d never worn that look in her life. *I’m not even sure Seraphi ever did.* Though in ninety thousand years one probably ran through all available expressions….

Movement made Jupiter glance to her right. The sphere she’d seen on her previous trip drifted up, offering an unlit candle, and while Jupiter wasn’t at all sure about making any tribute to Seraphi, it seemed rude to refuse. She took the candle; the sphere spun to present a niche with a tiny flame.

Jupiter lit the candle and placed it on top of the sphere, then watched in fascination as it glided away to the wall, somehow transferring the candle into a row of similar ones. But the light was too uncertain for her to figure out how it was done.

She glanced back at the door, where Forthwith and Laur waited in perfect parade rest, then turned back to the statue.
She really did look like me. Same height, same shape. Same round cheeks, same too-large eyes. Jupiter wondered why the woman hadn’t found a way to make herself taller, but maybe the Regenex baths took that sort of thing away.

“Who were you, really?” she muttered under her breath, knowing there would be no answer, but needing to make the point that they weren’t the same person.

And wondering. Seraphi seemed to have spent most of that very long life behaving much as Balem had, ruling worlds with a cold and hard hand, interested only in profit and power.

But if what he’d said was true -

You can’t know that. He was completely psycho at that point.

The words were hollow, though. Balem had almost certainly killed Seraphi, and Jupiter was pretty sure he’d had to have some kind of reason, even if it wasn’t a sane one.

So in the end, you changed your mind.

The empty, serene face didn’t look as if it had ever hesitated over anything. Jupiter tried to imagine Seraphi at twenty-two, and failed; had she had parents like herself, immensely ancient and powerful? Siblings? Doubts? Was a twenty-two-year-old even an adult in Entitled society?

What would Seraphi have done if she’d lived a little longer?

“You planned for me,” Jupiter said softly. “You wrote me into your will. What did you think I’d be?” Had Seraphi expected to wake in Jupiter’s body, a soul reborn?

And what had she meant to do then?

Well, I’m here instead. With all this power and wealth and position, like some bewildered Archimedes poised to move the world.

Jupiter folded her arms, letting her eyes focus on the flame cupped in the statue’s hands. A faint breeze from the open arches beyond stirred the heavy air and made the golden light flutter, but Seraphi was silent.

I don’t want to be you. That was the stubborn truth of it, and Jupiter held on to it. I’m going to unmake everything you made, break it all up and dance on the pieces.

Her thoughts seemed to fly out into the scented air and dissipate. The flame’s waver was hypnotic, and Jupiter forced herself to blink and look away.

She rubbed her eyes and considered flipping off the statue just on principle, but that too seemed rude, so instead Jupiter turned away.

As she neared the door and her silent guards, Jupiter spotted something she’d missed before; on the left side of the entrance was a shadowed niche, only one candle burning at its base.

She had to squint to make out the statue within, and the sight made her stomach drop. Balem stood straight and composed, hands pressed together, a small smile on his lips. Empty eyes stared out over Jupiter’s head, much like his mother’s, and she had to suppress a shudder.

Fuck manners.

Jupiter raised both hands, middle fingers extended, and then leaned over and blew the candle out.
The voices were muffled by the door, but Caine could still make them out - Miss Mellanby’s calm tones, and Jupiter’s occasional swearing. It almost made him smile.

Caine didn’t, of course. Being banished to the corridor because his presence was distracting her Majesty was annoying, but no more than that; he’d simply switched places with Honch, who was now acting as close-guard until the practice session was over. Caine could watch the door just as well. Danger was unlikely, on board the *Windy City*, but protocol was protocol, and this way he’d be on hand when practice was over.

A whoop from the other side of the door threatened to make him smile again, but then voices further down the corridor distracted Caine. A wave of scents preceded the group approaching, and he knew who it was before they came into view - Jupiter’s ladies in waiting and their entourage.

He braced himself, because he knew what was coming. Being ignored was the best possible result in this situation, but he could smell the boredom and the spite, and Caine knew he might as well have *target* painted on his forehead the moment they rounded the corner, arm in arm, trailing attendants.

Caine kept his face impassive - that was second nature, or maybe first, he’d learned it so early that he couldn’t remember. But the words poured into his ears, each one a drop of cold that gathered in his stomach.

“Do you perceive, Seraphi with a *Splice*?” Dorcata’s tone was a mix of horror and salacious delight, and while her voice was low Caine suspected he was intended to hear it.

“Not just a Splice, darling, that’s not so unusual, it’s that *particular* Splice.” Her twin wasn’t bothering with the horror. “A misbred *killer* Splice.”

Caine maintained his position. The duchesses strolled towards him, slow and languid; neither glanced in his direction, but the fact that they were as far across the hallway as they could get from him was a statement as obvious as shouting.

Hector’s pretty lips curled in a sly smile. “Lady Kalique did warn us that she’s nothing of what an Entitled should be.”

“Well, that’s natural, coming from a tercie planet,” Dorcata countered. “You know the only reason Mother agreed to our coming was because of her position.”

Hector nodded, then dropped her voice further. “Association with royalty, even tercie royalty, is always beneficial. Lady Kalique says she’ll learn, and we’ll be there as she rises.”

Caine didn’t think he was supposed to hear *that*, but it didn’t matter. Hector spoke again, louder. “Don’t fret yourself, Dorcata. She’ll discard the beast soon enough when she sees what things are really like. It’ll go back where it belongs…”

They disappeared out of sight around the corner. Caine listened until they got out of hearing range as well, but he didn’t relax.

After all, every word they’d said was, in a sense, correct. Jupiter’s choice of him *was* shocking, bordering on scandalous. And she was still an awkward novice in the protocols and expectations of Entitled rule and society.

*I will not let you go,* she murmured in his memory.
Strange as it was when compared to the rest of his life, Caine believed her. Jupiter would not betray him.

But he couldn’t help dwelling on that astonishing conversation in the aircar their first day on Gabal. *It will be a thousand times harder if you have me by your side.*

That was also true, and Jupiter was only just beginning to realize it.

Caine loved her with everything that was in him; sometimes he felt like his entire life was a flame meant to burn in her honor.

*But maybe...maybe it would be better if I weren’t her lover.*

*Better for her.*

Because it would never be better for *him*, not ever; but if it would help what she wanted to do, the search for a replacement for Regenex and even the crazy dream of improving conditions for Splices…

Maybe, his ultimate duty would be to leave.

Caine crushed the panic that the thought brought. Jupiter had sworn she would keep him...but he knew her now. *If he* chose to leave, she would not stop him.

The idea made him want to howl, or break something. But Caine was a soldier, bred and purposed, and soldiers were ultimately sacrifices.

It wasn’t a decision to be made lightly, or quickly. But it was something to think about.

Caine kept his eyes and nose open, and his ears sharp; he *was* on duty.

And he thought, until a muffled cheer broke his concentration and the door slid open. “*I did it!*” Jupiter said, flushed and beaming, and grabbed his arm to pull him inside. “Five kill shots in a row! Come and see this - ”

Caine put the notion aside, and followed, glad to think of something else.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

This chapter did not want to be written. *sigh*

But I won.

Stinger looked at the package on his desk and felt like rubbing his eyes, because this sort of thing had never happened to him before...not like this, anyway.

But there it sat, gleaming blue and silver, solid and indubitable in its Entitled elegance. Stinger chewed on his lip, tapped his console, and finally just paged Urdur and Caine.

Urdur’s eyes widened when they saw the package; Caine blinked. Stinger waved a hand at it. “Lady Kalique’s compliments. Her Grace sent this over as a reward for our actions in taking down that assassin before it could get to her.” Their actions, really, but it was always politic to include the immediate superior in this sort of thing. The fact that the incident had taken place months ago made no never mind, Stinger knew; in terms of Entitled time, this was downright brisk.

Urdur hesitated, then reached out to touch one of the cylinders with reverent fingers. The raised dragonfly sigil on the lid meant it was the highest quality, purest and most potent of that brand—and Abraxas Regenex was some of the best on the market.

And while Splices might get Regenex for medical care—the Legion was particularly good about that sort of thing—they never got this sort, the life-extending, youth-returning kind. Not unless it was in their contracts, and very few Splices had that kind of luck.

“Go ahead,” Stinger told Urdur. “One each.”

Urdur breathed out, then lifted the cylinder out of the holder with delicate care. Caine didn’t move, gaze fixed on the remaining units.

“With your permission, Commander?” Urdur murmured, and Stinger nodded. Urdur vanished out the door, and Stinger wondered if they were going to break the seal and try the stuff on the spot. Maybe not; they’re still young. They might hoard it for later, for when age crept up on them. Or portion it out, drop by drop, to stay at the peak of fitness for as long as possible.

“Well?” Stinger regarded Caine, who was still frozen.

“Her Majesty…” Caine looked up. “She doesn’t like Regenex.”

Stinger snorted. Jupiter was revolted by it. But what she felt now might not be what she would feel later. “This is Skyjacker business, it’s none of hers.”

Caine grimaced. “Is it a bribe?”

“No officially.” Technically speaking, Lady Kalique didn’t have to ask Jupiter’s permission to reward her appointed employees, and the delivery had been as official as possible, with two guards and a receipt. Given that Brem had almost certainly meant no harm to Kalique at all...it was a bribe.
But refusing it would be an insult, and would damage her Majesty’s standing.

Caine still didn’t move, and Stinger blew out a breath, annoyed. “Just take the thing, Wise. You don’t have to use it if you don’t want to, but better to have it than not.” He bit his tongue on she doesn’t have to know.

Caine’s jaw shifted, a sure sign of discomfort, but he finally picked up the cylinder. For an instant Stinger thought he was going to drop it, deliberately, but whatever sense protected idiot lovesick Splices cut in, and Caine accepted Stinger’s nod of dismissal and went out.

Stinger waited until the door slid shut to roll his eyes. The last one was cool and glassy when he hefted it, and part of him wanted to open it then and there.

No. Save it. Because life was uncertain, and his daughter was cured now, but bad things happened all the time. This could be her salvation someday. Or his own.

Stinger sighed, and set it carefully back into the case. It could wait in their quarters.

For now.

The image on the holographic stage in Kalique’s guest suite was...amazing. Jupiter stared at herself, and lifted a hand just to watch the three-dimensional illusion mimic her, before wrenching her attention back to what the image wore. “It looks fabulous, guys.”

Her design team beamed. Five of them were still so in awe of Jupiter that they could barely speak in her presence, but the others—including the team lead, Fionvin, the silver-furred Splice—were bolder.

“Thank you, your Majesty,” she said now, giving her awkward small curtsey. “This is, of course, only the preliminary design.”

“Looks good to go to me.” Jupiter touched the control that made the image rotate, and marveled.

Kalique had raised a judgmental brow at Jupiter’s choices for her team, but she hadn’t argued, and Jupiter had decided that she herself didn’t care what Kalique thought. Very much, anyway. She did want to make a splash in Entitled society, no matter what she thought of their ethics.

This is my chance to be Cinderella at the ball. With Kalique as the fairy godmother, I guess... And the design team as the mice? None of them were Spliced with mice. Maybe I shouldn’t take that metaphor too far.

Still, with the gown she saw in the hologram, Jupiter figured she would have no problem making that splash.

The traditional attire for the Opening, Fionvin had explained, called for elaboration and detail, to the point where some outfits didn’t allow for walking or even much motion.

In this dress, though, Jupiter would stand out without even trying.

Compared to Fionvin’s examples, it was shockingly simple in cut and ornamentation, though it would still qualify as a red-carpet gown on Earth. The bodice was sleeveless but relatively modest, widening into a skirt that was neither straight nor full, but fell in smooth folds that lengthened to a short train. The hem and the edges were embellished with tiny clear gems that threw back glitters
when the holographic Jupiter moved.

But the fabric itself...glowed.

Jupiter had never seen anything like it. The dress seemed to be made of rippling sheets of soft blue light that brightened or dimmed as the wearer moved. It drew the eye irresistibly.

“Fabulous,” Jupiter repeated. She glanced over her shoulder. “What do you think?”

Kalique’s brow had gone up again, but her expression this time was cool approval. “Surprisingly good.” She waved a languid hand, and one of the team hastened to increase the size of the hologram. “Hm. Yes, this just might do. With some modifications, of course.”

Fionvin blushed, and one of the shyer dressers had to sit down in a corner and put their head down. Jupiter made sure they got a glass of water, and then walked around the stage. Now that her first flush of dazzlement was past-- “How would it look with sleeves?”

There followed more than an hour of suggestions, discussions, and modifications of the design, but in the end the stones were removed and sleeves were added, tight to past the elbow but with larger ones suggestive of wings behind.

“Minimal jewels,” Kalique decreed. “The dress is a statement all on its own, and most jewelry would lessen its impact. You want one or two only.”

She tilted her head to regard the hologram. “In fact, I believe I have just the piece.”

Kalique touched her comm implant and murmured something inaudible; a few minutes later, a servitant hurried in bearing a box the size of a dinner plate. Kalique directed the servitant to Jupiter.

The box was made of some smooth cool substance that felt like metal, but wasn’t heavy enough, but when it sprang open Jupiter forgot the incongruity.

The crown was made of some reddish metal; the gems glittering in crimson and saffron and cinnabar drew the eye to the intricate, finely wrought decorations and the delicately curved wings. The sight was so dazzling that it took Jupiter a moment to remember where she’d seen it before.

“This is the crown on the statue, right?” She looked up at Kalique.

“Yes.” Kalique’s voice was soft, even melancholy. “I meant to give it to you regardless, but this is the perfect moment to wear it. It will be as much a statement as the gown.”

At that, she turned to Fionvin and raised her brows. “Make it red.”

It was time.

Jupiter still hadn’t hired more personal dressers, so it was her design team that helped her into the Opening gown as the Windy City slipped into orbit above Orus.

When she saw herself in the imaging panel that served as a mirror, Jupiter felt a pulse of absolute pleasure.

It was stunning.

There was definitely something to be said for having personally tailored clothes. The gown fit exactly; the skirt flared out from her waist while the outer sleeves, stiffer than the rest, suggested
wings. And every movement brought a ripple of light like a living caldera, or a splendid sunset.

“‘You’ll do, Majesty,’” Kiza said cheekily from her perch on a chair. “‘Just.’”

Jupiter turned, carefully, to wrinkle her nose in pretend hauteur. “You sound like your dad.”

Kiza made a derisive buzzing sound that she had definitely learned from him. “Da has the fashion sense of a stone. But he’ll like that.”

Jupiter spun slowly back for another look. Kalique had sent over a makeup artist since Jupiter hadn’t hired one of those either, but the results were much subtler than what she’d worn to the employment hall. Her hair was swept back into an artful braided knot, ready for the crown she had yet to put on. “I wish you could come along.”

“I don’t,” Kiza said. “I’d just be background, too scared to squeak. But you’ll have a good time.”

*I hope so.*

“Amazing job, guys,” Jupiter told her design team again, because it was. They murmured and bowed in reply, and Jeeves had to speak a little louder over them.

“Madam, Lady Kalique’s clipper has just docked.”

“Thanks. Okay, gang, go get some lunch.” Jupiter shooed the design team out of the dressing room. “Want to stay?”

Kiza slid off the chair and shook her head. “I’m going to go check on Da, he likes me to look over his wings when he’s in dress uniform.”

“Okay. Hey, if you see Caine out there, send him my way?”

“Aye, will do.” Kiza tossed her a mock salute and vanished out the door, and the room was suddenly quiet.

*One more thing.*

The box sat alone on a small table; none of the design team had dared to touch it. When Jupiter opened the case, she had to spend a moment just looking at the contents again.

The crown seemed almost a living thing, glittering in her dressing room’s flattering light; living, and dangerous with the weight of history and the power of its former owner. It was far beyond the sort of jewelry Jupiter had once dreamed of possessing, and yet--

She lifted it out. The crown, like its case, was lighter than it looked, though still solid, and the light flared and gleamed on the gems’ facets until she had to blink to clear her eyes.

Jupiter placed it carefully on her head, watching herself in the imaging panel. The crown fit as if it had been made for her; because, of course, it had been. In a sense.

The feel of the tiny grippers built into its framework taking delicate hold of her hair sent a shiver down Jupiter’s spine. But when she turned her head cautiously, the crown stayed in place, with no sensation of sliding or wobbling.

Slowly, she stood.

The woman she saw in the imager bore more than a passing resemblance to the silent statue in
Kalique’s shrine; Jupiter’s gown was cut along similar lines, and there were the same large eyes, the same lift of chin.

But the image before Jupiter palpated with color, red and orange and gold, the black of her hair, the flush on her cheeks. Something had shifted, and the power of the statue, the implied weight of ages, had become a backdrop. She was wearing Seraphi, Jupiter realized, not the other way around. She was taking the ancient monarch and using her to strengthen her own power.

*I look like a queen.*

And for the first time, she felt like one.

The sound of the door made Jupiter turn. Caine stepped inside, already dressed in his parade uniform, and the sight of him almost distracted her; but as *he saw her*, his expression shifted to something very like awe.

“Your Majesty,” he said, and with that effortless grace dropped to one knee.

Weirdly, it didn’t feel wrong or uncomfortable this time. It felt *fitting*. Moving slowly, because the dress and the crown demanded dignity, Jupiter walked to him, lifting a hand to touch his cheek. His own hand came up to press it closer, and for a long moment Jupiter was lost in his lambent eyes, the brilliant adoration that underlay his quiet devotion.

And then she smiled at him. “I guess it works, huh?”

Caine’s eyes crinkled, though his lips only twitched. “It would seem so, your Majesty.”

Jupiter tried to kiss him on the nose, but the crown got in the way, bumping his forehead. “Oops, sorry!”

“It’s nothing.” Caine somehow scooted backwards a few inches before rising to loom over her. “Are you ready?”

“I am.”

Jupiter laid her arm over his, and Caine escorted her out to meet Kalique.

Jupiter thought she should be more nervous, but either her nerves had overloaded and shorted out, or she was finally getting a grip on things, because it was *Kalique* who was getting twitchy. In a very restrained and decorous manner, of course, but she still kept adjusting the heavy folds of her dress, or lifting a finger sharply for one of her servants to bring her something.

Jupiter figured that somewhere underneath she herself was probably gibbering, but at the moment she felt surprisingly calm.

“How big is the Opening again?” she asked as they settled into the shuttle that would carry them down to Orus from the *Windy City*. It was a big shuttle, about the size of a few tour buses, but the main deck was actually crowded with all the attendants, servitants, last-minute hair-and-makeup people, and a few crew. The guards were mostly on the lower deck, besides Soren and Rush posted at the edges of the mob.

Kalique’s ladies in waiting, a round half-dozen women in what Jupiter thought were pretty weird outfits, were alternately primping or dancing attendance on Kalique. Dorcata and Hector were busy reassuring each other that they looked fine, though they kept darting glances at Jupiter in case she wanted something.
“It’s the most exclusive event of the Season,” Kalique said, a little distracted; her skirts were so extensive they spilled over the edge of the chaise longue she was sitting on and rippled across the floor. “So only about ten thousand people.”

Jupiter felt her mouth fall open. “Ten thousand?”

“Oh, don’t worry, you won’t have to meet them all,” Kalique said, holding out a hand for one of the little flat monitors she used in place of mirrors.

“I hope not,” Jupiter muttered, and resisted the urge to twitch her own dress. Kalique was resplendent in a thickly embroidered gown in white and silver; her hair was piled high and threaded with brilliant but colorless gems. The ensemble set off Jupiter’s gown very well, and she suspected that after the glowing design had been settled Kalique had gone back to adjust her own choice.

Jupiter’s dress did look amazing. She kept moving one arm or the other to watch the light swell and fade. It was like wearing a sunset, she thought; at least she knew she looked good.

_It’s going to be crazy moving this mob around._ The ladies in waiting, plus the guards, was more than a dozen. _How do you party like that?_

Not, Jupiter suspected, that this party would be much like the ones she was used to, or even Kalique’s events. But it still seemed way too awkward.

The shuttle ride didn’t take long--Jupiter suspected the pilot was using their status to bypass the traffic--and when they docked, the airlock opened to a plush hallway that had at least a dozen people bowing to welcome them.

Jupiter walked forward through the airlock, balancing her skirts carefully and watching out of the corner of her eye as all twelve Stormbreakers fell into place around their little mob; Kalique’s own guards, a mere eight, fit in so well that she knew they all had to have drilled for it.

Kalique came up on Jupiter’s left, nodding graciously to the hallway people. “Our guides,” she murmured so only Jupiter could hear. “They’ll take us to our launch point.”

“That sounds very...technical,” Jupiter said, and Kalique chuckled, patting her arm.

“All will become clear. Have patience.”

Jupiter refrained from rolling her eyes, and followed the guides. Two of them looked Spliceish, but they were all wearing the same uniform of trousers, jacket, and very large hat, so it was hard to see details and Jupiter certainly didn’t want to stare.

Jupiter wasn’t sure why they needed that many guards, but according to Kalique their rank required it. The Stormbreakers looked good themselves, Jupiter thought with pride. The formal outfits they’d designed together set them all off very well, and the swords added the perfect touch of ceremony.

The launch point turned out to be a room large enough to accommodate them all, barely. It had a plush carpet and strangely blank walls; there were reclining couches for Kalique and Jupiter, seats for their ladies in waiting, and various decorated objects that Jupiter knew by now were the space equivalent of fridges and drink dispensers. _I guess everybody else just stands?_

The whole thing was weird and getting weirder, but Kalique was perfectly serene, and Jupiter eyed her suspiciously and made herself wait. They arrayed themselves on the couches, with the guards spacing themselves around the perimeter of the room--or rather, Jupiter arranged herself with a bit of fussing from the twins, while the two servitants who had carried Kalique’s train settled their mistress.
in place and placed her skirts to her exacting standards.

When that was finished, Kalique checked the time and then tapped the comm plate on her couch. “We’re ready.”

“Yes, your Grace,” came the reply. “Two minutes.”

Kalique’s lips twitched. “Augaur’s playing for time again,” she murmured, as if to herself. Jupiter remembered vaguely that Augaur was a baron of some kind, immensely wealthy and much older than Kalique, but anything else she’d learned wasn’t coming to mind just then.

Before she could ask, though, Kalique gestured, and the servitants and underlings bowed and left. That meant a little more room, but the space was still very crowded, and Jupiter didn’t see how they were supposed to receive people in it, if that was what they were going to do. 

If all the rooms are this size and everybody dresses like Kalique, there’s no way they’d fit--

A chime sounded, and the wall opposite the door split down the center and parted. And Jupiter’s jaw dropped.

The space beyond their room was so big that for a moment she thought it was outdoors; it took her eyes several seconds to focus on the far wall, which was actually hazy with distance. Ditto the floor; the ceiling was closer, but not by much. It was almost too much to take in.

Jupiter was still blinking at it all when she realized that the walls were receding and the Stormbreakers were dropping away in formation, curving up gracefully on their boots to escort the--

not a room, a floating barge--out into all that empty space.

In the back of her mind Jupiter reflected that it was a good thing that flying with Caine had worn away whatever fear of heights she had originally possessed. The rest of her was wondering how they’d done it.

When she looked over, Kalique was actually giggling, and Jupiter made a face at her, though it was unexpectedly amusing to watch.

“My dear, your expression,” Kalique said, dabbing delicately at her eyes with a fingertip. “It was everything I hoped for.”

“Fine, you got me.” Jupiter almost stuck out her tongue, but the surroundings distracted her. They weren’t the only barge in the air; there were many, all quite a distance from each other, and as she watched still more appeared, gliding out from the walls with ponderous smoothness.

The air wasn’t entirely empty, either. There were faint clouds of tinted mist drifting here and there, and muted colors bloomed and faded on the distant walls. The barges were moving closer together, forming a sort of hollow cylinder, and as if programmed their own barge drifted to one of the top positions.

Jupiter really wanted to ask what was going on, but the amusement had vanished from Kalique’s expression as if it had never been, leaving the smooth youthful face that had nothing to do with being young. So Jupiter waited as the barges slowed to a stop; the Stormbreakers kept pace without effort, coming to a perfectly timed, perfectly spaced halt in open air.

There was a long moment of silence...and then a peal of bells that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, sweet and sonorous. At the bottom of the cylinder, a golden glow appeared, then slowly rose upward; it seemed to be a fountain of light, a firework that didn’t die out.
It streamed upward towards the ceiling, forming a core of glowing mist that obscured most of the barges from view. The peals rose to a crescendo, and on the last note the mist exploded silently into sparks and disappeared.

Kalique gave a sigh that was almost a purr. “Now it begins.”

Jupiter shook her head. “When you said it was a party, I was thinking something a little more...horizontal?”

Kalique laughed. The barges moving through the space reminded Jupiter of fish--slow-moving, colorful, sparkling fish that didn’t school, instead cruising over and past one another and occasionally meeting briefly. Like sharks.

“How do you know who is who? The decor?” Jupiter doubted it; most of the barges were too far away to make out that kind of detail.

“Each barge has a sigil on its underside,” Kalique said. “Of course, the higher the rank, the higher the barge.”

“So we’re expected to just know?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes, of course. By the time one is old enough to be presented, one knows all the families on sight.” Kalique waved a hand. “But don’t worry, my dear, I can prompt you.”

I sure hope so. Jupiter could barely keep straight the people she’d already met. I guess when you have a few hundred years to practice, it’s easier.

One barge, in fact, was already rising towards them, ponderous and graceful. As it neared, Jupiter saw that it was designed like a stylized garden, with various small trees and an actual tiny lawn.

Her guards came to attention as it drew level; Stinger glanced back at Kalique, and at her nod drew them back to make way. “Oh, it’s Thomas,” Kalique said, pleased. “The Marquis of Algon and Tretis, you recall?”

Jupiter vaguely remembered a pale, shortish, sturdy man from a couple of Kalique’s parties. “Yes?”

Kalique gave a small smile. “As you are higher in rank, we shall receive him. Remain seated, my dear; you will rise for very few at this gathering.”

That made only a little sense, but Jupiter obeyed, not moving as the Marquis’ barge leveled out next to theirs and the guards on both vehicles maneuvered into a receiving corridor, with a certain amount of eyeballing of one another. The Skyjackers remained airborne, though, and alert. Jupiter wasn’t sure if that was alarming or reassuring.

The Marquis floated across between the guard-rows on a moving divan, and Jupiter was surprised to see that he too was wearing a gown. Or maybe it was robes; but either way, his elaborate outfit included almost as much skirt as Kalique’s. Kalique herself rose to her feet with a languid grace that worked with her dress, and held out her hands.

The Marquis took them both and bent over them in a salute much more stylized than the kiss Titus had placed on Jupiter’s hand. She pushed the memory--and a shudder--away, and brought up a smile as the Marquis turned to her.

His return smile seemed refreshingly real. “Your Majesty,” he said, beaming. “It’s so good to see you looking so well.”
Jupiter laid her hand in his and was relieved when he didn’t air-kiss it. “And you.”

He waved his free hand. “Ah, when you pass the ten-thousand mark it’s all maintenance. How are you enjoying the Opening?”

“All’s beautiful,” Jupiter said honestly. “And unique.”

“I do enjoy these rituals,” the Marquis said, glancing over at Kalique, who was resettling herself on her couch. “It’s good to remind ourselves of who and what we are.”

Jupiter stiffened. In his words she heard the echo of far too many clients, eager to maintain their status among their peers and in front of “the help”. It was bullshit then, and it’s bullshit now.

But saying so would be a bad idea. Jupiter smiled sweetly instead. “It’s very educational.”

If the Marquis heard the edge of sarcasm, he didn’t react to it. “I hear your world is extremely beautiful,” he said. “What’s it like? One hears so little about these tercie worlds, particularly when they’re interdicted.”

A tray of hors d’oeuvres floated across the barge to them. Having been coached on the protocol by Kalique, Jupiter chose one first, rather than allowing her guest first crack. “It’s...varied,” she said, watching as the Marquis selected two of the little pastries. “But yes, it’s very beautiful.”

Even Chicago had its moments, she thought, in between the traffic and the nasty weather. For an instant homesickness swamped Jupiter, sharp and painful, but she pushed it aside.

“You should redo the Grand Tour soon. Visiting all the best worlds is an education in itself.” His eyes, bright and inquisitive, were watching her carefully, at odds with his easy posture.

Kalique had warned her that many Entitled would be curious about Jupiter. Recurrences were rare, and given that they were considered actual rebirth, people would want to know what, if anything, Seraphi had retained during the process.

“I haven’t had time yet. There’s a lot to catch up on.” Jupiter bit into her pastry, which mercifully was not crumby.

“Mm, and you’ll have time later.” The Marquis flicked a finger. “The young are impatient.”

Jupiter swallowed her bite, and put her smile back in place. “So I hear.”

The Marquis chuckled, and started talking about people Jupiter didn’t know. She let him rattle on, relieved when Kalique came to join the conversation, but after a couple of minutes he bowed, still sitting. “Delightful as ever, but we’ve only just begun. Perhaps you can honor me with a visit sometime next year.”

“Perhaps,” Jupiter replied, which made him grin. The Marquis floated back over to his barge and a moment later it drifted away. Jupiter watched it go, and shook her head. Definitely not the party I was expecting.

Kalique gave her a wide smile. “That went well, don’t you think? I must say, having guards with wings does add a certain something. You may start a fashion.”

Jupiter blinked. “I thought the Royal Guard appointments were handled by the Legion. Commander Apini says that Skyjackers aren’t usually given this assignment.”
“Oh yes, but that doesn’t mean others won’t imitate.” Kalique reclined on her couch. “Perhaps we should warn the Splicers.”

Jupiter bit her tongue.

Another barge was rising up to their level, some forty yards away. It was shaped and decorated vaguely like some kind of fantastic bird, in contrast to their own more boat-like model, and held only one Entitled and a handful of attendants.

Jupiter tensed, but the barge came no closer; the Entitled, who was wearing heavy robes that didn’t indicate gender, bowed from their seat. Kalique lifted a languid hand, looking bored. “Just nod, my dear,” she said in a low voice. “They are bold, but not worth your attention.”

Jupiter obeyed, doing her best to appear regal and wondering exactly what Kalique meant by that.

“Your rank means that you choose whom to allow to approach,” Kalique went on as their barge sailed past the bird-ship. Behind her, Jupiter could hear the twin duchesses whispering to one another, but she ignored them to look around. “I will of course be happy to instruct you.”

Her expression was serene, but Jupiter was learning to read her better, and underneath that was pleasure. *This is her kind of thing,* Jupiter thought. *Being in the top rank of society, knowing just what to do and who to talk to.*

“Is Governor Furnor here?” she asked, more because it was someone she could name than because she wanted to actually talk to the man.

“Oh yes, but he too is not high enough in rank, unless you want to show him special favor.” Kalique looked inquiring, and Jupiter shook her head. The longer she could put off talking with him, the better, in her opinion. *He’s slimy.*

The Opening lasted a long time. Many of their interactions were similar, with various nobility docking and coming across to nibble or sip and pay their respects, though from time to time several barges would link together for mingling. That part was more interesting; each one was lushly decorated, but all of them were different, and many had themes. About half of the Entitled--and they really all were wearing gowns of some kind, regardless of gender--never got up off their couches, but Jupiter and Kalique both walked, followed by attendants. Or strolled, as it were; no one was in a hurry.

That part was sometimes fun. Many of the Entitled were overly curious, condescending, or suck-ups--sometimes all three at once--but some were just friendly, or silly, or amusing. It was hard to tell actual age, of course, but Jupiter suspected that the ones she liked best were probably closer to the young end of the scale.

*Whatever that means around here, anyway….*

It was too bad she couldn’t take photos, but Jupiter tried to impress the prettiest designs in her memory, and to take note of the people she met. Kalique had a particular posture when they encountered someone who was important, and Jupiter watched for it.

The Opening stretched on, and on. Jupiter didn’t get bored, exactly, and there was always food and drink to be had, but she quickly lost track of time. She was relieved to find out that there was a small lavatory cleverly hidden within the body of the barge, though.

The most memorable encounter was with a barge whose interior was mostly hidden by what looked to be an elaborate tent. When Kalique spotted it drifting near the top of the room, she directed their
barge up to it, and waited nearby until a set of twinkling lights on the edge indicated where to dock.

“Prince-Magister Jaquinn,” she said in an undertone to Jupiter, and gestured for their ladies-in-waiting to come to attention. “He is the oldest of us who still appears in public.”

The oldest? What does that mean exactly?

But that clearly wasn’t the moment to ask. Jupiter had never seen Kalique deferential before, and it seemed wise to follow her lead.

The tent had two guards standing at attention outside it, and the inside was a dim, sweetly scented cavern of sheer fabrics and muted colors. Jupiter didn’t see any more guards, just a tall slim figure on a throne-like seat at the far side of the space.

They crossed the tent at a graceful slow pace, followed by half-a-dozen ladies-in-waiting as well as Caine and Rush, and Jupiter echoed Kalique’s curtsey with as much skill as she could muster.

“Queen Seraphi,” the figure said. “Lady Kalique; it is good to see you again.”

The light brightened somewhat. Prince-Magister Jaquinn wore black robes encrusted with gems; his hair was blond and long, cut in a strange spiky style. But it was his face that arrested Jupiter’s attention. It was as smooth as her cousin Mikka’s, as young as her own; but the blue eyes were alien, regarding them from a distance so far as to be almost immeasurable.

“You honor us,” Kalique said, and his thin lips curved in a small smile.

“Few here have any wit, Kalique. I don’t waste my time on the boring.” He turned his head to look at Jupiter straight on, and she realized that he was so still she couldn’t even tell if he was breathing. “Seraphi. Are you finding your new life a trial?”

Jupiter bit her lip, unnerved, then lifted her chin. “No, your Highness.”

It was even the truth. *Ridiculous, scary, frustrating, but not a trial...exactly.*

Out of the corner of her eye, Jupiter saw Kalique give the merest shiver of a wince, but the Prince-Magister’s smile widened. “Recurrence must be refreshing,” he commented.

“I’m finding it so,” Jupiter said, which was complete nonsense, but she had to say *something*.


The question seemed to freeze time for a breath. Others had danced around the issue, but no one had dared to *ask* whether Seraphi’s memories had carried over into her rebirth.

And Jupiter knew she couldn’t tell the truth, that there was nothing of Seraphi in her—not to those ancient, distant eyes. That was too much power to give away.

So she searched for the chill place inside her, and smiled, cool and slow. “Do you really expect an honest answer, Prince-Magister?”

His chuckle was as dry as parchment, but genuine. “Ah, you haven’t changed, not truly. Use my name, Seraphi. I like to be remembered.”

Jupiter dipped her head, regal but respectful. “Jaquinn.”

Kalique let out a tiny sigh of relief, and the Prince-Magister lifted a finger. “Drink with me, Seraphi,
Kalique. Interrupt my tedium for a few moments.”

Couches grew from the floor with magical speed. The cordial brought by an unsmiling android had a scent of what Jupiter imagined a desert smelled like, dry and infused with sun, but it tasted like basalm and pepper, reminding her of a long-ago bottle of spirits gifted to Vassily from a client. She sipped it carefully, though the glass barely held three swallows’ worth.

The Prince-Magister conversed with Kalique while they drank, parrying her fine wit with that same still amusement, but his eyes were on Jupiter. She let the words flow past her as if they were of no moment, wishing that she could give Caine a taste of the liqueur.

When the visit was over, Kalique rose and bent over Jaquinn’s fingers as Thomas had, but when Jupiter took the extended hand the pressure against her fingers kept her from doing the same. Jupiter met Jaquinn’s gaze, but he said nothing, only smiling.

Emerging from the draperies of his barge felt like waking from a dream. Jupiter inhaled the cooler air surreptitiously as they crossed back over to their own barge.

“Just how old is he anyway?” she asked Kalique when they were settled back in their places.

Kalique’s eyes narrowed in thought. “At least two hundred and forty thousand. I can’t give you an exact date without looking it up.”

*Holy crap…* Jupiter felt dizzy at the very idea. “How long do people really live?” she asked hesitantly. “I mean, I can’t really see someone just going on forever…”

Kalique shrugged. “It varies, though you’re right, there are very few who are older than, say, five hundred thousand years.”

The number was just too large to comprehend. Jupiter set it aside, delicately, as if it might bite her if she looked at it too closely.

Kalique glanced around, but the ladies-in-waiting all seemed to be occupied with tasks or their own appearances. “Simple attrition accounts for much of it. People lose their funds, or meet with accidents too severe or sudden to recover from, there are a few rare illnesses…”

She frowned, a thoughtful look. “Occasionally one’s body ceases to react to Regenex, but no one likes to talk about that.”

*How many of those “accidents” are assassinations?* Jupiter wondered. All the guards weren’t just for show…

Kalique touched her lips with one finger. “Some just choose to…stop. They grow strange and distant, and sometimes weary of life, I think.” She glanced away at the vast space surrounding them. “Mother was always strong and vigorous, right up to her death, however. And—“ She smiled as she looked back at Jupiter. “It will be quite some time before you have to concern yourself with such things, my dear. You have a very long life ahead of you.”

Yeah, we’ll see about that.

Jupiter smiled back, and said nothing.
...I’m back?

_Deepest_ apologies for being gone so long. Real life events upset my equilibrium for some time (ultimately good! but stressful) and a minor health issue (now resolved) left me only enough energy to come home from work and stare half-blind at Tumblr. The muse took a long vacation until things settled down.

I’ve felt so guilty I haven’t even been reading comments for months. So apologies also to everyone who hasn’t heard back from me.

Have a chapter, if you’re still reading. It’s not terribly exciting, but I have more interesting things planned for soon.

_I really ought to go home for a visit._

It was a frequent thought, but it seemed as though every time it crossed Jupiter’s mind it was quickly lost behind a distraction of some kind - a message, a meeting, a request, another fitting. The Season was in full swing, and every day brought a flock of new invitations. (Once literally, with an entire chorus of tiny insect-like creatures that sang the request in harmonizing voices. Aggie had had to hold Edsel back from trying to catch one.)

She knew vaguely that it had to be getting on towards spring in Chicago, but she didn’t have time to find an Earth calendar, and it wasn’t a question she could ask during the space-Skype sessions with her mother. There was just too much going on. If it wasn’t another Entitled business meeting, it was Kalique with a plan for an intimate soiree or an elaborate dinner. The ever-increasing pool of names and faces and ranks was getting too much for Jupiter’s head to hold, and she was very grateful for the quiet presence of Phylo at her elbow and his genius idea of putting briefs on each guest onto her sheaves.

At the moment, though, he wasn’t in evidence, because the current meeting was closed - the only non-Entitled allowed were guards and personal attendants. _I don’t know why. We haven’t discussed anything anyone couldn’t figure out._

Jupiter smothered a yawn and tried to pay attention to the other Entitled around the meeting table - all of them there in the flesh, for a change. One of them was droning on, and on, and on about a series of laws governing investments and Regenex production, and Jupiter could see she wasn’t the only one who was bored.

_It’s not like we’re going to change anything._ The Ways and Means committee was, as far as she could tell, just one of the ways Entitled kept themselves in power, and after such a long time, they didn’t really have to change anything to stay on top - they just had to maintain what they had already put in place. _I don’t even know why they bother with the meetings. Unless it’s just to be smug together._

It turned her stomach. Jupiter stayed quiet for the most part in such meetings, trying to look regal and
distant while she stored up information. Breaking the hold of Regenex on the ‘verse economy was going to take some epic planning, and the more she knew, the better her leverage would be in the future.

*Except I can’t see how to do it. People aren’t just gonna give up eternal youth.*

Or, for that matter, the cure for just about any disease or injury. Jupiter had to admit, at least to herself, that it would be a hard temptation to resist. *I can say no for me, but what if it was Caine? Or Mom, or Mikka? Hit by a car, maybe, or cancer?*

*Wait long enough and it will be,* whispered a small hard voice in the back of her mind, but Jupiter pushed it away, along with the sudden brief imagining of what might have happened if Regenex had been available when her father was shot.

What she really wanted to do was stand up, climb on the table, and scream at the committee that they were all monsters and evil and just plain *gross. But that won’t get me anywhere.* Jupiter wasn’t counting on Regenex, but she was starting to understand that whatever she might plan to try to do to loosen the Entitled grip would require playing the long game.

*Maybe longer than I have. But there’s only one way to find out.*

So she sat and tried to look almost as bored as she felt, and took meaningless notes, ad when the matter came up for vote she said “Abstain” in a languid voice, as if the whole thing were beneath her. *I can’t vote No without breaking character and I fucking will not vote Yes* -

Finally the meeting broke up, and Jupiter gestured her Skyjackers to escort her out without stopping to talk to any of the committee members. *I am not in the mood to make nice with these people.*

As if sensing her irritation, the five guards were all silent and deadpan as they swept along the corridor towards the nearest shuttle bay, one of the hundreds of thousands that studded Orus’ atmosphere-piercing skyscrapers. Jupiter kept her head up and her stride long. There were plenty of people around, and she didn’t want to break character yet.

The faint vibration of her phone became detectable just as their shuttle’s airlock came into view, and Jupiter plunged a hand into the pocket - she’d insisted on pockets in all her outfits - and pulled it out. She didn’t use it for calls in space, but the apps were still handy.

The notification on the screen made her swear under her breath. Caine glanced her way, and she shook her head. *Crap. I forgot about that.*

*Get more patches!!!!* had slipped her mind entirely. *And I’m I don’t know how many millions of lightyears away from the nearest pharmacy.*

Jupiter had always considered herself one of the lucky ones. She could use birth control patches without major side effects, and she usually limited herself to one or two periods a year, but she’d been way too busy recently to think about it.

*Well, there’s gotta be some kind of birth control out here. I think.* She very carefully didn’t look at Caine again. They’d never had that discussion, thanks to her method - Jupiter knew no birth control was a hundred percent, but Caine was always a risk she was willing to take - and she had absolutely no idea how he would react to it.

*Some things, I understand with him. Some are just...who knows?*  

It was times like these that Jupiter remembered she was actually dating an alien, human genes
Caine relaxed a little when the shuttle hatch closed behind them and the vehicle dropped away from the airlock. No place was perfectly safe, but her Majesty’s own vehicle was at least less dangerous. And while it wasn’t impossible that an assassin had gotten on board, the most likely threat came from outside, which was the pilots’ responsibility.

He knew what the engines sounded like under normal propulsion, and where all the emergency evac suits were stored. His duty was to stay close to Jupiter, in case something did happen.

_Not a problem._

As she always did on leaving Orus, Jupiter had gone to the big viewing window and was looking out at the shape of the world falling away beneath them. The view meant little to Caine, who had lost track of how many planets he’d seen long ago, but she’d explained it once. _It was the first world I saw that wasn’t Earth - from space, I mean. It’s always going to be special that way._

It was another reminder of the vast differences between them, subtler than rank, or Splice and pure human. Jupiter was a tercie, born on a farmworld, and the wide-eyed, wondering delight she took in each new planet and experience brought home just how little of the ‘verse she had seen yet.

Caine did enjoy watching her enjoyment, though. It was amazing how much pleasure he could find in her happiness, and he drank in every drop.

Now he stepped up behind her, marveling privately at the privilege that let him surround her with his arms and lean down just enough to inhale the scent rising from her hair, warm and satisfying.

“Mmm.” Jupiter snuggled back against him. “Hey, remind me to find that doctor when we get back to Windy City. What was her name, Dr. Crisp? Crunch? I can’t remember.”

Cold washed through him, and Caine controlled his reaction with an effort. “Are you injured?” She didn’t smell sick or in pain -

“What? No,” Jupiter said, sounding puzzled, and twisted a little to look up at him. “Oh! No, I just need to see her about, um. Birth control.”

Caine blinked, not quite understanding. Her cheeks were pink, and she smelled acrid now, embarrassed though he couldn’t see why. “The translator isn’t working on that term. Too general?”

Jupiter’s embarrassment intensified. “Um. The thing I use so I won’t get pregnant.”

Caine felt his muscles lock. A roaring storm of thoughts chased each other through his head, and he couldn’t separate them out. Splices were sterile by design, she _couldn’t_ get pregnant by him, did that mean she was planning to discard him - _she is Entitled, she can do as she pleases - no, no, she wouldn’t do that - she promised_ -

Experience told him he was a fool, unworthy of an Entitled and stupid for ever thinking otherwise. The courage she’d woken in him fought back, insisting that she meant what she said, that she would not betray him. The struggle left him frozen. “I. I don’t understand.”
More puzzled than embarrassed now, Jupiter stared at him. “Uh, I don’t know how they do it out here, but on Earth women can get pregnant if they’re not careful, and I am so not ready for kids.” She patted his wrist. “It’s not like I’m counting them out, I’m sure you’d be a great dad - I mean - I just -” She stopped, flustered.

Caine gaped at her, his panicked tangle of emotion whited out by astonishment. The notion of himself as a father was stunning; the idea of him as the father of Entitled children was almost incomprehensible.

Jupiter winced. “Sorry, sorry - this is probably the wrong time for that conversation, but -” She squinted at him. “Are you okay?”

Caine shook his head, trying to make his brain settle. “I - your Majesty, I don’t - Splices don’t have children. Can’t have children.” That seemed the most important thing, to let her know that was a desire he couldn’t fulfill. The rest of it - he couldn’t think.

Jupiter just looked more confused. “Stinger and Kiza.”

“She’s adopted. Your Majesty, Splices are made to be sterile. We can’t breed on our own; it would bring down our value.”

That brought on the now-familiar burst of anger, her narrowed eyes and tightened lips. “Oh, of course it would. This society, I swear.” She threw up her hands. “Look, if you want to - no, I mean - ugh, Jupiter, definitely the wrong time for that conversation.”

She blew out a breath and shook her head. “Later. I still want my patches. Unless space has something similar.”

Caine let out his own breath, slow and careful, and stepped back to try to get his emotions under control after their hurricane ride. See. She didn’t know. She promised.

He swallowed and cleared his throat. “I’m sure space does, your Majesty. I’ll summon Dr. Crisp as soon as we dock.”

Jupiter’s brows arched. “That’s three ‘your Majestys’ in the last two minutes, and not the good kind. What’s the matter?”

Caine tried on a small smile, and was surprised when it actually worked. “Nothing.” Now. “Your Majesty.”

That won him the usual response, and he couldn’t keep his smile from widening, just a bit. Jupiter rolled her eyes, but her mood lightened. “Come on, give.”

Her fingers were warm on his cheek when she reached up, and he couldn’t help leaning into them. “It’s not a concern. Jupiter.”

She grinned at him. “Nice try. Look, you know I don’t want to hit a sore spot, but you were upset. What did I say?”

The desire to demur was strong, but not as strong as the habit of obedience. She won’t - you have to tell her, she won’t be angry. At you. “I didn’t realize you weren’t aware of Splices’ sterility, your - um. I...I thought for a second that you were going to take another lover.”

“I’m not really into polyamory,” her Majesty said, then blinked. “Oh. Holy crap, no.”
Caine, startled, found himself backed rapidly up to one of the lounges and made to sit down, so that his lap could be filled with his Queen. Small firm hands gripped his jaw and made his eyes meet hers. “Absolutely not,” she said, and the iron in her voice made his bones seem to tremble inside him. “I will not do that to you.”

Caine breathed out, tipping his head forward to meet hers, hands slipping up trace the straight path of her spine. “I know. I do know.”

“You better.” She kissed his nose, then his lips, a light brush. “And even if I were into polyamory, I wouldn’t do anything without talking to you first. Except I’m not, so.”

For some reason, that made him smile. “Yes, your Majesty.”

The corners of her mouth curved, and his trembling eased. “Good.”

Dr. Crisp was as fascinating as Jupiter remembered her, her dark skin and android-calm demeanor set off by the second set of arms. The medical suite on board the Windy City was plush and luxurious, not at all the sterile space Jupiter expected, but somehow it still had a faint medical scent.

“Yes, of course, your Majesty,” she said when Jupiter had explained the problem. “Hormonal regulation is a standard practice in the wider ‘verse.” She didn’t look baffled, but Jupiter got the sense that she was surprised by the query.

“Great. What have you got?” Jupiter shot a quick glance at Caine, standing guard by the door - even here she would not be unguarded unless she ordered it - but he was wearing his professional deadpan face. She’d thought about requesting privacy, but as her lover she figured he had a right to know what she was doing. Besides, I’ve got access to all his medical records, even though I don’t know what they say half the time. Only fair.

“The standard implant is calibrated to the user’s DNA,” Crisp said, and went on using terms that Jupiter’s translation module could handle, but the English words mostly flew over her head. Jupiter just nodded along, letting the explanation of how the thing was calibrated to continue working through Regenex use pass by.

No side effects, really long-term use okay, one hundred percent effective, and possibly best of all, still no periods. I can get behind this.

In the end it was simple, a spray injector of some kind pressed to her abdomen, and it didn’t even hurt - the sensation was tickly, much like the application of her tattoo all those months ago. “How long does it take to become effective?” Jupiter asked, tugging her top back down.

Dr. Crisp looked up from the device she was adjusting. “Immediately, your Majesty. It’s handling the remnants of your previous method, and should adjust perfectly.” Androids couldn’t wrinkle their noses, but she still managed to project mild disdain for the “previous method”. “You will have to have it renewed in a decade, but your medical provider will remind you.”

“That’s...good to know.” Jupiter let the grin out. Ten years without a period. I’d take it just for that. “I’m definitely not ready for babies.”

She managed not to glance at Caine this time, though she felt her cheeks heat a little. That’s another conversation we’re going to need to have, but not right this minute...
Crisp cocked her head, upper hands clasping while the lower set the device on its tray. “The implant does not impede conception, should you choose to reproduce. Egg cells can be harvested at any time.”

Jupiter blinked at her. “What, for IVF?”

Somehow the translator managed that. Crisp’s lower hands went into the pockets of her smock, which was almost fascinating enough to distract Jupiter. “Your Majesty, Entitled do not have children any other way.”

Jupiter opened her mouth, then closed it. “Oookay then.” I think for this I need the subject-matter expert. “Thank you, Doctor Crisp. How’s your budget looking?”

Crisp smiled, as close to warm as Jupiter had seen an android get. “Quite sufficient, your Majesty. We are prepared to treat anyone according to the standards you set.”

“Glad to hear it.” Jupiter grinned back. “Keep that up, and let me know if you have any problems.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Crisp said, and bowed. Jupiter gave her a wave, and collected Caine to leave, one hand brushing the injector spot on her abdomen. It isn’t even sore. Wow.

“Is all well, your Majesty?” Caine asked, pacing her as usual as they left the medical suite behind.

“Yeah, for now. I think I need to meet with Kalique though.” Jupiter bit her lip, thinking. “Jeeves?”

“Yes, madam?” the ship’s presence said.

“Ask Phylo to set me up a meeting with Kalique when she’s available, okay? I have some questions.”

“As you wish, madam.”

Jupiter held in a snicker. Faster than texting and I don’t walk into anything. Not that Caine would let me.

She glanced up at him. “I’m probably going to hate the answers, but at least I’ll have them.”

Caine’s lips quirked, silent agreement. Jupiter smirked. “In the meantime...I need your help with something.”

“Of course, your Majesty. What is it?” Caine straightened a fraction, then blinked as Jupiter looped her arm through his and steered him towards the nearest room along the corridor. It was a cozy little lounge room, and fortunately unoccupied.

“I wanna test this implant out. Think you can help me with that?”

Caine’s smile was quick and delighted, and a flick of his wing locked the door behind them. “I am at your service, your Majesty.”

“Good.”

Kalique’s response to tell me more about Entitled reproduction was to arrange a field trip.
"This wasn’t what I was expecting.” Jupiter looked around the big room, forcing her voice a bit louder to be heard; the sound dampening was excellent.

"Of course not.” Kalique’s smile was serene. “Your planet has barely begun to explore the concept of extracorporeal reproduction. We perfected it long ago.”

"If you say so,” The place might almost pass for a hotel meeting room, Jupiter thought, except for the…things…hanging from the ceiling at regular intervals. I feel like I’ve walked into the set of Aliens. But with more glitter.

The objects looked mostly like giant, golden, static raindrops, hanging down from the ceiling but never falling the last few feet. They were subtly shimmery, and translucent enough that Jupiter could see vague shapes within, though nothing defined enough to identify as a fetus. “So you were, um, grown in one of these?”

“Gestated,” Kalique corrected. “Yes. No member of the First Estate would be so crude as to have a body birth.”

She shuddered delicately. Jupiter blinked. “So some people do do it the natural way?”

Their guide, some senior executive of the laboratory, smirked. “Few can afford even the basic extracorporeal services, your Majesty,” she said. “Certainly not our premium services.”

Jupiter suppressed a sigh. Ask one little question about reproduction and end up in a tour of a literal baby-making factory. “Do you do, like, genetic manipulation too?”

Kalique’s smile faded, and she flicked a finger at the executive, who bowed and melted away. Kalique waited until he was out of earshot before speaking. “Entitled do not rewrite their genes. We are, by definition, perfect.”

Jupiter felt her mouth drop open as the vision of Balem, ungainly and faintly frog-like, came to mind. Kalique’s brows twitched, and she sighed. “Yes, I know what you’re thinking. But it simply isn’t done, to the point where promising House alliances have failed due to genetic incompatibility.”

Jupiter squinted. “You mean,” she gestured at the golden droplets. “All this technology, and you won’t even fix your own genes?”

Kalique’s lips twisted slightly. “It’s done by the lower classes, certainly, but Entitled do not.”

“That’s…” Shooting yourself in the foot, Jupiter wanted to say, but it was pretty clear that Kalique was aware of that. “Huh.”

Kalique turned up a hand. “Wholesale genetic manipulation is reserved for Splicers. Those of the lower classes who can afford extracorporeal reproduction often request particular traits, and certainly corrective practices are common. But Entitled do not.”

She sighed. “Oh, I remember the debacle of the union of the House of Sabra and the heir to the Encelade Corporation. Two ancient lines, and every conception carried lethalties. Eventually they had to give up and dissolve the partnership. Tragic, really.”

Kalique began strolling along past the golden droplets, and Jupiter went with her, wondering uneasily if any of the fetuses inside were developed enough to sense their passage. “Entitled reproduce very rarely, Jupiter, and doing so is a decision made after much consideration. In nearly a hundred millennia, Mother made only three children, and some would say she should have stopped at two.”
Jupiter coughed, and Kalique shot her a glance of veiled amusement. “It has nothing to do with Titus’ personality, my dear. Merely that the more heirs to a House exist, the more potential there is for conflict.” She shook her head. “There are Houses that go in the other direction and have many heirs at once, but they tend to be minor dynasties. Wise Entitled understand that power is best kept...concentrated.”

“Mmm.” They walked for a bit; for all that Entitled were supposed to reproduce rarely, there were quite a lot of the droplets. *But I still don’t know how many Entitled there really are.*

“It is a burden, in a sense,” Kalique went on softly. “The lower classes may manipulate their genes as they please, pick and choose their traits, even utilize somatic cells if they wish. Entitled do not modify, and we use only germ cells.”

“Wait.” Jupiter had to think that one over; her memories of high school biology weren’t the best. “You mean people can have kids using, like, cells from anywhere in their bodies?”

Kalique inclined her head. Jupiter blew out a breath. “Yeah, that’s a game-changer.”

“Indeed.” Kalique strolled on. “Entitlement is a grave responsibility. Part of that is maintaining the purity of our genes.”

Jupiter felt so many responses rise up that they choked each other, which was probably just as well. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Can I ask a personal question?”

Kalique raised a brow. “Of course you may ask.” The hint of amusement, bizarrely, made Jupiter feel better, or at least less homicidal.

She took another breath. “Do you all...I mean, do you and your brothers all have the same father?”

Kalique raised the other brow. “Not the question I was expecting. You do surprise me, my dear.”

She gestured languidly, giving the impression of a shrug. “Mother...did not care to share power with a partner. She employed the technique used by partners of the same gender, and had us created from two of her own egg cells. Not, strictly speaking, permissible, but Mother only obeyed the rules when it suited her.”

She smirked. “Balem was Mother’s favorite, but he most resembled one of Mother’s cousins who died in deeply compromising circumstances. It made him furious to be reminded of it.”

Jupiter couldn’t help grinning a little at the image. “I just bet.”

Kalique’s smile went wry. “It’s an advantage in its way; all the power of the House was divided between just three of us, though of course Balem held the bulk of it. And he was even less inclined to share, which was one reason why he had named no heir.”

Jupiter chose her words carefully. “You...don’t seem like you want more power.”

Kalique cocked her head. “All Entitled want power, Jupiter. It is what we are, and it is our immortality.”

Her voice lowered, going softer. “Even you want power. You think you don’t, but it was power that saved your planet, wasn’t it? You took it from Balem, and came into your own.”
Her words felt like a slap across Jupiter’s cheek, and again she didn’t know what to say. *That’s not true, it can’t be* - But it was nauseatingly plausible.

Those calm eyes looked her over, and Jupiter knew that Kalique had marked her shock even though she’d managed to keep her face mostly straight. “You’ll understand in time,” Kalique went on, turning away again and using the sweet reasonable tone she’d employed when they’d first met. “You’ll have all the time you need.”

Jupiter swallowed. “What if I don’t want the time?”

“You will,” Kalique said, coolly certain. “It’s the only way to protect your Earth.”

Jupiter shook her head. “It can’t be true. I won’t let it be true.”

And if she didn’t yet see how...well. She was smart; everyone kept saying it.

Kalique went back to details about the extracorporeal reproductive process, beckoning the executive back to expand on the topic, and Jupiter went with it, hiding both the anger and the sneaking fear that Kalique was right about power.

But underneath...she kept wondering.

Later, back on board *Windy City*, she curled up with Caine in the dimness of their suite. “So were you, um, gestated in one of those things?”

His gaze moved slowly over her face, eyes narrow with pleasure and what she hoped was contentment. His hand was warm on her side; Jupiter could feel his thumb stroking the delicate skin over her ribs. “Not exactly.”

She sighed, fond and only slightly exasperated. “Not exactly how?”

Caine chuckled. “Nowhere near that fancy. And there was a lot more of it.” His hand spread wide, as if measuring the space between her waist and her collarbone. “The equipment was almost as good - you don’t get good product if you stress the embryos - but it wasn’t pretty.”

Jupiter wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, I can see that. Entitled never seem to do anything that isn’t over the top.”

Caine made a small hum, an agreeing sound. “Also, lycantants are gestated in litters. There were nine of us.”

“Nine?” Jupiter gaped at him. “Wow. It must have gotten crowded in there.”

Caine shrugged a little. “I don’t remember.”

He looked sad, Jupiter thought, and she reached out, drawing a heart in the center of his chest with her forefinger. “Do you miss them?”

For a while she thought he wasn’t going to answer, but eventually he sighed. “I did, for so long. I thought I would die of missing them.”

She remembered Stinger’s words, how a lycantant without a pack usually died, and snuggled closer, sliding her leg over his to draw him in.
“It’s not like that any more,” Caine said, barely more than a whisper. “And it didn’t change things anyway. I was culled, that was all there was to it.”

Jupiter nodded, and felt his breath against her cheek. “Do you stay in touch?”

“No.” Caine blinked, then seemed to hunt for words. “I...it’s not forbidden. It’s just that no one would. A culling...it’s shameful. It casts doubt on the value of the remaining pack.”

Jupiter frowned. “Still bullshit.”

Caine didn’t answer, only extending one wing to cover them both. In that shadow Jupiter pressed a kiss to his sternum. “Y’know, even if you’re sterile, you could still have kids, couldn’t you? I mean, with the somatic cell thing.”

“No.” Caine leaned into her touch the slightest bit. “Splicers make sure to build it into our DNA. Any attempt to use a Splice’s cells will generate a null result.”

“That’s really fucked up.” Jupiter decided she wasn’t really surprised, but she was disgusted. “I wonder if there’s a way to get around it.”

“That would be breaking copyright,” Caine murmured, and she couldn’t see his face at that angle, but she would have sworn he was amused.

“Well, everybody keeps telling me I rule the universe. I can break the rules if I want.” She planted another kiss and felt the shiver run through him. “Do you think Kiza would like a little sister?”

That made him snicker. “She’d love having a little sister. Just one thing, your Majesty…”

“Hmm?”

“If you’re going to offer that to Stinger, please let me watch.”

Jupiter laughed. “You got it.”

His hand slid up to stroke the side of her neck. “There’s one thing about Skyjackers you should know.”

“Oh?” Now she could hear the humor lacing his voice.

“We take our assignments very seriously.” Caine’s lips touched her temple. “Shouldn’t we test the efficacy of your implant again? Just to be sure.”

Oh. It was the very first time he’d done more than follow Jupiter’s lead, and she was delighted. “Absolutely, Mr. Wise.” She caught his mouth in a kiss. “Please be thorough.”

“Always, your Majesty.”

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