Redux

by KnockYourSocksOff

Summary

Last thing Jupiter Jones remembered was sitting with Caine at a downtown dive bar at one in the morning... She didn’t know what had sent her back in time, but somehow it was the morning of the fertility clinic all over again. There were things she did know: Balem wanted to kill her, Titus wanted to marry her and then kill her, and —well, actually, she wasn’t exactly sure what Kalique wanted. But if Jupiter could avoid being kidnapped or killed, (or passing out from this strange exhaustion) maybe she could convince Stinger and Caine to help her claim her title and save the Earth all over again. What would she tell them though? Would they even believe the truth? She was the only one who remembered living through this the first time around...wasn’t she?
Waking Up

Jupiter woke to the sound of the alarm blaring and Mama commanding, "Jupiter get up. Make the coffee."

She dragged herself out of bed with a groan and went upstairs, automatically going through the motions of filling the water and measuring out the grounds.

She was exhausted. And sore—her muscles ached all over. Had she even slept last night? She slumped against the counter listening to the sputtering water, anticipating that first hot cup of coffee.

Something was strange, but she was so tired she couldn’t think straight.

She couldn’t recall coming home last night. Last thing she remembered was that dive bar downtown. She and Caine had flown around the city for hours, finally stopping to find a spot still open for burgers and beer. They’d snuggled into a booth in the back, and she’d been thinking about where to go for the rest of the night.

She switched on the overhead light in the kitchen.

“Hey,” mumbled Vladie from where he slept on the couch, covering his eyes to escape the glare.

There was something different about the room...but she couldn’t place it.

She didn’t remember how the night had ended with Caine. It felt like they were doing a dance sometimes. Two steps forward, one step back. It was hard to know where he was coming from. He was holding back, but she wasn’t sure whether that was just his nature, or if she should be doing something different.

Everything in her life had been changing so quickly. She didn’t want to push. She could be patient.

She’d been so euphoric all week.

Her family was safe. She’d escaped death so many times she’d lost count. She’d saved the whole freaking planet. She’d been in a bubble of pure joy. Even cleaning toilets made her smile.

There were things she was putting off. Whether she wanted it or not, she couldn’t really go back to her old life. Not permanently. But there were still things she needed to figure out.

Including her feelings for Caine.

Had she actually passed out last night? She’d only had one beer...

Vladie stumbled in, and Jupiter rolled her eyes as he grabbed a mug and took the first of the coffee before it finished brewing.

“Don’t forget about the clinic today,” he whispered. “It’s all set. I’ll cover for you while you’re gone.”

“What?”

“You know the...” he mouthed the word “eggs” and wiggled his eyebrows. He looked ridiculous, with his knock-off Green Lantern pajama pants, hair alternating between matted down and standing straight up. Maybe the memory wipe had affected his brain?
“Vladie,” she said patiently, picking up her cell phone and turning it on to check the date. “You know today is...”

“June 24th. Don’t tell me you forgot.” His voice turned whinny. “Come on Jupe. This could be a big break for us. You’re still doing it right?”

“Um,” Jupiter stared down at her phone:

4:55

Wednesday, June 24

But that didn’t make sense. It had to be at least July? Something was off here.

She looked around the kitchen and it hit her.

The hideous floral wallpaper. It was the same.

The same wallpaper that had been there ever since she could remember. It had been destroyed along with the kitchen wall when Balem’s people abducted her family. The keepers had repaired all the damage to the house, but they hadn’t bothered to recreate the exact same wallpaper—replacing it with an equally ugly print of egg yellow and puce daisies instead. No one else had noticed for some reason. But then again, their memories had been wiped once they’d returned to earth.

Hadn’t they?

She looked at the date on her phone and strained to remember exactly what had happened last night.

Never mind Vladie’s brain, had the keepers done something to hers?

“What, you gotta do it” Vladie pleaded.

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” She couldn’t deal with him now. “Just—don’t spend the money yet, okay? Don’t buy anything!”

“No, I’d never...”

She tuned him out, looking at her phone again, going through her contacts. She didn’t know how the space tech worked exactly, but the numbers had been programmed into her phone before: The Aegis, Stinger, Caine.

They were all gone.

She went to the dining room and turned on the light.

Her telescope was gone.

Feeling desperate, she went back to her phone to look through photos, and there it was: The picture of the keepers in Katherine’s apartment.

If those things could erase memories and rebuild skyscrapers, what else were they capable of?
The last few weeks hadn’t been a dream, or a hallucination. But somehow she was reliving the morning before her clinic appointment.

Could the Keepers also turn back time?

“What is that?” Vladie asked, leaning over to peek at her phone.

“Nothing,” she said, shutting it off. “I need to use your car today.”

“What?” he sputtered.

She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him expectantly.

“Oh, okay. It’s yours.”

One thing she knew for sure: She wasn’t going back to that clinic again. The last time, she’d barely escaped alive.
It was a four-hour drive to Stinger’s house. And other than working herself into a frenzy, looking in the rearview mirror for keepers and bounty hunters every five seconds, dealing with Chicago’s typically frustrating highway construction and traffic going out of the city, everything went surprisingly well. Really, the worst aspect of the drive was the absolutely horrifying stench and mess of Vladie’s car.

Jupiter didn’t even know what to look out for anyway: Sparkling blue beams that would pluck her from stop and go traffic? Blasts from air cannons? Keepers, which were invisible anyway?

Ideally, she’d spot Caine gliding in on his gravity boots, doing a midair flip before sliding in through the passenger side window to sit beside her and say, “Caine Wise. I’m here to help you.”

She’d left the window open—well due to the smell and lack of a functioning air conditioner really—but she could hope, right?

So far, no one was following her.

If Caine had could track a gene through the universe, he should be able to find her at Stinger’s house. At least, that was what she was hoping.

And how exactly would she could explain to Caine, or Stinger, or anyone, what was happening? They’d think she was crazy!

Or should she even try to explain?

She’d read her share of sci-fi books, watched Back to the Future and Doctor Who. You had to be careful messing around with time paradoxes and erasing yourself from existence. But how exactly could she avoid a time paradox? Just by waking up this morning, with her memories intact, things were different now.

At least, coming straight to Stinger’s house she’d be farther away from all the things that were trying to kill her, a few hours ahead of Balem Abrasax’s plans.

She’d play it by ear, she decided. Figure things out as she went along.

Jupiter parked the car behind the rusting cab of a semi-truck, picked a path between tiny wooden bee-houses and walked toward the dilapidated front steps.

The house was the same as she’d first seen it—before Stinger and Caine crashed through the porch railing and bounty hunters blew through the front door: Paint peeling and eaves dripping with honeycombs, but mostly intact.

She knocked hesitantly against the front door and waited.

And waited.

She raised her hand again and saw it trembling. She was shaking with nerves and exhaustion. She hadn’t had anything to eat since she didn’t know when. And really, she was so incredibly tired.

“Stinger Apini!” she called out, pounding her fist harder against the door. “Open the door! It’s really important!”
The door creaked inward and Stinger came slowly forward, shotgun at his side and a suspicious scowl on his face. Kiza stood behind him, arms crossed.

“Um, hi,” Jupiter said, with a small smile. She was trying for sincere and trustworthy. Judging by his expression she must have looked more desperate and deranged.

“I need you to contact the Aegis for me.”

“Why’d you come to me?”

“Caine Wise...”

The gun came up to eye level.

“I know this probably sounds strange. It’ll take a while to explain everything,” Jupiter said, hands in the air, slowly taking a step backwards. “But it’s really, really urgent. If you could contact the Aegis right away, I need their help to get off the planet before Balem Abrasax orders a blockade.”

Stinger’s frown just deepened.

“Oh!” said Jupiter. “And I need some sort of security for my family back in Chicago, so they don’t get abducted...”

“By aliens?” Stinger said.

“Yes!”

“That’s it! Get out!” Stinger yelled, shooing her off the porch and down the steps.

Jupiter stumbled back down the steps, into a patch of wildflowers and tall grasses, and looked up at him. She couldn’t leave, but she couldn’t think of what to say either.

She felt too strange, as if she were standing off to the side, watching herself dig a hole deeper and deeper, her mouth moving without the help of her brain.

All the things that should have been convincing made the situation worse. Like mentioning Caine. Or for that matter, the name Abrasax hadn’t helped either.

She was so tired. Her thoughts buzzing around like crazy. She felt like she could collapse where she stood.

Stinger turned to go back into the house.

“No wait! I—Kiza!”

“How do you know my daughter?” Stinger turned to look at her and stopped in his tracks. Stunned.

“Yeah,” said Jupiter, wearily, waving at the bees circling around her. “And there’s also that whole royalty thing...”

Stinger walked slowly down the steps and knelt before her, eyes flashing gold, “Your Majesty.”

And she fell to the ground.
She really had to stop passing out so much, Jupiter thought as she opened her eyes and looked around the room. Being unconscious so much couldn’t be good for her.

She was lying on an ancient velvet-covered settee in the front room. From the dust-filled rays of light slanting in she could tell it was still daytime. And—oh God—she had to pee!

She washed her hands afterward and combed them through her hair as she looked in the mirror. She looked like a normal, sane person—didn’t she? There were faint circles under her eyes, she could use a little lipstick... and there was a giant hickey on the side of her neck.

She actually remembered that happening pretty well. It was around the time that she’d thought last night was going to get really interesting.

Or not last night—next month?

At least, she had her favorite blue gingham shirt back; she’d put it on in the dark this morning. She thought she’d lost that for good somewhere in Kalique’s alcazar.

Actually, Jupiter thought honestly, giving herself a good stern Bolotnikov look in the mirror, she was feeling a little more crazy than she’d like—even if it didn’t seem to show. She took a deep breath and went back out to the sitting room where Kiza was waiting for her.

“Your Majesty,” she said in a concerned voice. “I'm so sorry. We had no idea.”

“Don’t worry about it, and please, call me Jupe,” said Jupiter, her voice cracking. “I’m sorry I collapsed in your front yard.”

“Do you want some water? Some food?”

Jupiter gratefully took the glass of water Kiza offered, gulped down the whole thing and reached for the plate of cookies.

“Dad’s contacted the Aegis. They’re sending a cruiser to escort you to the Commonwealth to claim your title,” said Kiza. “I hope it's alright that we took a sample and sent them your gene print. You were unconscious for a while, and you did say it was urgent.”

“Umph,” Jupiter replied, her mouth full. She resisted the urge to grab another handful of cookies, reaching for just one more. She might as well try to pull off being a little bit Royal here. “Excuse me. I mean. That’s fine. Thank you.”

“The cruiser should be here by tonight,” said Kiza.

Which left Jupiter where exactly? She tried to remember how previous events had played out. She’d have to make sure she had everything covered.

It would be so much easier, if she could just tell Stinger everything that was going on.

“Well, um,” she said, trying to swallow a crumb that had stuck in her throat. “All this space travel and alien tech is pretty new to me. Do you guys all fly around with jet packs and have like... time machines... and stuff?”

For all she knew, time travel was common in their world. Maybe Stinger had a contraption in the
back of the barn. He’d give it a few swift kicks to get it working and send her back to her date night with Caine. Maybe this kind of thing happened all the time. Stinger could tell her the usual Legion protocols; Captain Tsing might have to take her back to Orous to file the necessary time recalibration paperwork...?

“Time machines? Not really. We have FTL transmissions and portals. And our techs’s advanced compared to Earth’s, but people hold on to their old stuff too. I keep trying to get dad to upgrade our Vid player. It’s at least five hundred years old.” Kiza smiled and rolled her eyes.

“How long have you been here?” Jupiter asked.

“Three, almost four years. It’s a little quieter than I’m used to—but nice,” she added quickly, as if she didn’t want to offend. “Earth is really very nice, Your Majesty. --And jet packs?” Kiza was eager to change the subject. “Dad used to have wings...” She lowered her voice. “Maybe you shouldn’t mention Caine Wise again. I don’t know if it’s all his fault, but he’s caused a lot of problems. Last I heard he was in the Deadlands, but if he shows his face around here, Dad’s likely to kick his arse.”

“Yeah, “ Jupiter agreed, remembering. “I, um, I’m pretty sure he is on Earth somewhere, looking for me. Titus Abrasax hired him and part of his payment is a full pardon and re-instatement for your dad.”

“Really?” asked Kiza. “And you know Caine? Know about him?”

“I’ve heard about him,” Jupiter said, choosing her words carefully. “I’m hoping that once he finds me, I can convince him to work for me instead of Titus. I’ve been told he was one of the best soldiers in the Legion, the best tracker in the Universe.”

“Wise is a loose canon, Your Majesty,” grumbled Stinger, walking into the room. “You don’t know what you’re getting into there. And he hasn’t tracked you down yet. Maybe he’s gotten soft, lost his touch.”
Caine waited for his quarry to show at the clinic.

He’d surveyed the scene from a perch above the alley, planned his strategy, and calculated the number of seconds to fly through the door. He’d have to time it just right. If he went in too soon, they’d send for re-enforcements.

It was a warm summer afternoon, and the sounds and smells from the surrounding streets filtered up to him. The ripe smells of laughing teenagers, greasy food from street vendors, and engine exhaust. But underneath it all he kept the scent memory of the woman, waiting to catch it again.

He closed his eyes for a second and focused.

This job was already taking longer than he’d expected; the first lead a dead end. Katherine Dunleavy wasn’t the woman who’d signed papers at the clinic. Though he’d smelled traces of that woman in the apartment. There was a strong bleach smell too, as if someone had tried to cover it up.

There’d been something strange going on with Dunlevy when he’d gone in there. He’d seen the slight mark on her neck from the gene sampler. She’d been disorientated and confused, as if the Keepers had wiped her too quickly, carelessly. There were clothes scattered on every surface and she kept asking Caine if he had ever fallen in love.

“No,” he’d said, again and again. He didn’t bother to elaborate, to explain that relationships were difficult for soldiers in the Legion—much less defective splices.

He tried to ask her about her roommate, or sister, or friend. Tried to figure out the connection. But she only looked at him blankly.

Maybe it was his fault. Caine wasn’t at his best when talking to Terrsies—or to anyone really. He’d gotten out of the habit of speaking much at all; it felt stiff these days, unnatural.

After leaving Dunlevy, he’d followed the scent from one house to another. Always encountering that strong smell of bleach, and some strange fake citrus after-tone that kept making him sneeze.

Everything had been a dead-end so far. There’d been only one more trail left to check out when he’d headed back to the clinic.

Something didn’t sit right about this job. He didn’t trust Titus Abrasax; he knew the Entitled was withholding information. But Caine wasn’t in a position to choose. The important thing was to keep his head down, get the job done.

He could never make it up to Stinger entirely—wings stripped and stuck as a backworld Marshal all these years. But Caine would try to get him pardoned and re-instated if he could.

That was the least he could do.

He still didn’t understand why Stinger had taken the blame. He’d been his commanding officer, true, but Caine had never expected anyone to stand up for him like that.

Years ago, he’d thought he’d found his place in the Legion. He’d been closest to Stinger, but there
had been a sort of comradery with the other skyjackers as well. He’d had a built-in purpose, been part of a team. It was only a half-assed replacement for a pack, at best, but it had been something. He didn’t know what would replace it.

Maybe he’d go to the infantry. They’d take anyone or anything.

Titus had promised he’d be pardoned too, but Caine could hardly imagine going back to his old unit. How could they stand the sight of him now? He wasn’t just defective anymore. They’d declared him deranged.

Caine never expected to survive the Deadlands—going in was as good as a death sentence. But then, he’d developed a habit of surviving when he shouldn’t.

In the past, he'd been able to make the most of his disadvantages. Done his best to ignore the pitying looks from other lycantants— the whispers about the ill-bred half-albino without a pack. Deprivation made his senses keener. Being smaller meant he was quicker, more agile, able to think on his feet. He couldn't rely on instinct—his instincts were faulty—he'd had to figure out his own way of doing things.

He’d honed his skills, learned to savor the adrenaline rush of spinning in midair to dodge and shoot with dead accuracy. He’d trained his mind and body to work without hesitation, take in any situation, react to whatever came at him. He’d worked relentlessly, determined to be the best fighter, hunter, pilot possible. His reflexes would never be as fast as someone like Stinger—but he’d trained until he was damn near close.

Caine tensed as he scented one of the hunters he’d fought last night a few blocks away. All three were lurking out there, on the periphery.

Cheap labor hired as a redundancy—if the Keepers didn’t get to the woman first.

Gangs like that roamed the ‘verse. Scrabbling for whatever they could get. That might have been his fate, if they hadn’t taken him into the Legion.

It might be his fate still.

For the last few years there hadn’t been any planning for the future, no decisions to make.

Just survival.

But after this?

He could strike out on his own. Pick up this kind of work: kidnappings and assassinations. Find a band of renegade splices who’d welcome him. Though anyone sane wouldn’t want anything do with him.

If he were honest, maybe this sort of work was all he was good for anymore anyway. He couldn’t rely on his control, his self-discipline, the things he’d taken for granted in the past, before the attack.

The idea of being a hired thug repulsed him though. He liked the action, liked the hunt and the chase. He could do what had to be done, but he’d never quite developed a lust for the kill.

He stretched and flexed his muscles one by one as he waited, enjoying the weight of his old boots again, body relaxed, but ready. Resless.

He wore his heavy coat, had put it on automatically. It was protocol on underdeveloped worlds to
stay low profile, keep his wings covered. He’d forgotten he didn’t have anything to cover anymore.

He considered taking the coat off, moving to a spot where he could feel the mild warmth of this sun on his skin. So different from the burning heat of the Deadlands. But he stayed in the shadows instead.

On a day like this he missed his wings more than ever, the way the warm air moved through his feathers. He could have circled for hours on these hot updrafts.

He should have been used to their loss by now, but he still felt them at times, like phantoms.
Jupiter turned to glare at Stinger. She wanted to jump to Caine’s defense. He had not gotten soft or lost his touch. And loose cannon—what did that even mean?

But she held herself back.

In some ways, Stinger probably knew Caine better than anybody. And maybe he had reason to be bitter about the past; the two of them needed to argue it out, she figured—or fight it out more accurately.

And anyway, she couldn't get caught in a tangle of things she wasn’t supposed to know about.

It was overwhelming her, pulled in a million directions all at once, she’d basically spent the whole time driving here freaking herself out, thinking about every action and counteraction, every possibility. Maybe coming here hadn’t been the right thing to do. Maybe she should have gone to the clinic and trusted that things would work out the same as before.

What if she was unraveling the fabric of time, messing everything up?

Stinger looked at her expectantly.

“Um, you’re starting to go white in the face again,” Kiza said. “Do you need to lie down or something?”

“No. But, I really don’t feel well,” Jupiter admitted. “Do you have anything else to eat?”

Two grilled cheese sandwiches and a mug full of strong, honeyed tea later, she was feeling better.

Stinger sat with her at the kitchen table, filling her in on what had happened while she’d been out.

“As soon as the Aegis cruiser arrives, they’ll send a team out on protective detail for your family.”

“Oh, thank God!” said Jupiter. “I’m just worried Balem might get there first. When the Aegis get there can they let me know everyone is okay?”

“Of course.”

Jupiter had decided that she’d stick with telling Stinger as much as she could, being as honest as she could. She’d never been good at keeping track of lies. She’d have to keep her head on straight and figure things out if she was going to get through this.

Whatever this was.

Kiza gave a hacking cough, and apologized again that they didn’t have anything else for lunch. "Should I run to the store?"

“No, that’s all right, really. It was delicious,” Jupiter said.

“Do you want to go rest a bit?” Stinger asked Kiza.

“I’m all right, dad,” she insisted. Then she broke into another fit of coughing that left her doubled
over leaning heavily against the counter. "Well," she sighed, "Maybe just a few minutes."

Caine had explained about Kiza’s bug—and that it was the reason Stinger sold them out to Titus. He’d insisted Stinger was still trustworthy though. And Jupiter thought he was too—as long as Kiza was taken care of. Anybody else might have done the same thing given the opportunity. Who was she to judge? She’d been ready, at one point, to trade the entire Earth for the safety of her own family.

She still hated the very idea of Regenex. But she had seen how much of the liquid had already been “harvested”. There was so much of it just sitting in storage on Titus’s clipper, ready to be sold to the highest bidder. If it could go to some good purpose, at least it wouldn’t be a total waste of all those lives. Better to have it heal someone sick than to be used for just another Entitled beauty bath.

“So,” Stinger said after Kiza had left the room.”Caine Wise is out of Deadlands, working for Titus Abrasax and tracking you here? And you want to hire the two of us?”

He gave her a dubious look.

“I know this all sounds strange,” said Jupiter. "But now you know that I’m the recurrence of Seraphi Abrasax. And...well, there’s a lot of crap about to come at me because of it. I need help if I’m going to survive long enough to claim my title. I want to help you too. Kiza’s sick, I know she needs medical attention. Once things are settled, I can give you the money you need to take care of her.”

“How did you find out about all of this though? You knew Kiza’s name before you even came here. And Caine Wise? He’s not the type to lose track of his prey.”

“I don’t think I can tell you everything,” said Jupiter in frustration. “I’ve been separated from the people who were helping me before though. And I was told that you’re a Marshall for the Aegis. I was told that you could help me.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” he said gruffly. It seemed that, like the bees, Stinger also had a genetically ingrained response to royalty. “But it’ll be hard to help you if I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“That’s the thing,” she said. “I don’t really understand it either. I’m trying to figure things out, figure out what’s happening to me. I know the Keepers blanked me at least once before. And I’m afraid they might have done something else—somehow made it so that my sense of time is messed up—or I don’t know—can they do that?”

“Well, when a person is blanked they can’t remember how time has passed. I suppose that would feel like losing time. They can remove short-term memories. A few weeks at most. After that it gets tricky.”

“It could be something like that.” Jupiter said. “I don’t know. Is there some way I could maybe look it up, find out about keepers and... I don’t know what you’d call it... time disturbances?”

“Time disturbances...hmm... I heard you mention something about time machines to Kiza earlier.”

“Well, maybe it’s nothing—just the mind wipe thing, like you said.” Jupiter hesitated. “But, well, I’ve always been kind of a space nerd—you could say it runs in my family—and, your people can travel faster than the speed of light, right?”

“I don’t know that I’d call them “my” people. But yeah.”

“Well, on Earth scientists are still trying to figure out things like quantum entanglement and special
and general relativity. But it seems to me, with your space technology, time travel might be possible.” Jupiter gave a sheepish smile. “It’s an interest of mine, I guess you could say. And well, it might help explain some things.”

Stinger looked doubtful.

“ There’s so much I have to learn about this whole universe,” she said. “Anything you could give me to read, really, it would be so helpful.”

“I don’t know, Your Majesty. I don’t think I’ll find any information on time travel, but I’ll see what I can do. My equipment’s not working too well these days.” Stinger went into the corner to poke and prod at some of the gadgets there. She thought she heard him mutter something about “damn budget cuts.”

The woman never showed up at the clinic.

Caine followed his last lead to a house thirty miles outside the city. He spied a group gathered around a table in the front room, so he went around back and climbed through a window to the basement.

And there she was.

Or her scent, at least.

It was everywhere—surrounding him.

He took in the tangle of colorful blankets and pillows, the collage of photos and posters of space on the walls above her bed. Every surface crowded with books or toiletries or models of planets.

These living quarters were different than those he’d seen in his earlier search for her. They indicated a lower socio-economic status. Less luxurious, more cramped. She slept in close proximity to the others, her female kin.

But there was something nice—cozy?—he thought, for lack of a better word—about the place as well.

In any case, it was more appealing than any of the sparse bunks he’d had on base, and hell of a lot better than the Deadlands.

He crouched down near her bed and took in another deep slow breath.

There was something different about her scent here. Something strangely familiar. It teased at the back of his mind, but he couldn’t quite place it. He disregarded the cleaning smells now; he’d seen the station wagon full of supplies in the driveway.

Quickly and methodically he went through her things until he found a name: Jupiter Jones.

He heard the voices upstairs, footsteps and chairs dragging against the floor.

“And where is Jupiter?” a man complained loudly. His voice thick with something Caine’s implants identified as a Russian accent. “She should let us know she’s not coming for dinner! A nice family
meal together, this is all I ask…”

“For fuck’s sake Vasily, she’s an adult,” said a woman with the same accent. “Last thing she needs is to come home every night to your lectures on why she’s not married!”

“It is for her own good!”

“Oh, hey!… yeah,” said a smooth voice, a little too smooth Caine thought. This one was a younger male and without accent. “I let Jupe use my car to visit some friends. She mentioned that she might be back late.”

Caine could tell he was lying.

“Since when are you letting anyone use your car, Vladie?” said the woman. “Though why she’d want that piece of shit…” she muttered under her breath so faintly even Caine’s keen ears barely caught it.

Caine quickly plugged names and addresses into the planet’s surveillance network. Found a car licensed to Vladimir Bolotnikov, last photographed exiting an Indiana tollbooth three hours ago.

Fifteen miles from Stinger Apini’s place.

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Jupiter read everything Stinger could find for her on time travel. Unfortunately it wasn’t much.

There were old accounts of military pilots coming home after a year or two of space travel to find their families had aged decades in their absences. But procedures had been put in place to help prevent that happening anymore.

Most researchers had decided that time travel was way too expensive, too unpredictable to be of any practical use. There were no longer any studies being funded.

And no one could agree about time paradoxes. Could a person erase their own existence? Or would the universe change around them in response and always compensate? No one knew for sure.

Basically: traveling backward in time was hard.

Forward was easy.

And she was really missing Caine.

Where the hell was he?

The Aegis would be there any minute, and she couldn’t just sit around waiting for him to show up. She remembered how Balem’s shadows had blown that other ship out of the sky. She’d need every minute of head start she could get dealing with the Abrasax family. She couldn’t put off getting her title. Until she did, both she and the entire Earth were in danger.

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Caine pulled down the long dirt driveway an hour later.
A hundred yards away, he could see an Aegis cruiser, hovering above the fields of corn.

It was beaming two people aboard.

He sniffed the air as he leapt from the car, then sprinted through the rows of tall stalks. He jumped at the last second and caught and held on to a panel, pulling himself up into the outer hatch.

It was when they entered the thin upper atmosphere that he finally recognized it, and it hit him like a punch to the gut.

Jupiter Jones smelled like a lycantant.

No, not just any lycantant.

Jupiter Jones smelled like Caine.
Greetings, Your Majesty. I am Intergalactic Advocate Bob, here to assist you through the ascension process...

Okay, thought Jupiter, hours later, standing on tiptoe in an attempt to see how far they’d gotten through the lines. Her gaze was blocked on all sides by teetering stacks of dusty documents and tall ornate twirls of multi-colored hair, penned in by the rows of file cabinets that seemed to go on forever.

A rosy-cheeked Bob turned to beam at her.

She could do this: get her title, protect her family and the Earth, avoid all three of the variously creepy Abrasax siblings and return back home again. She’d be more or less back to where she’d thought she was when she first woke up this morning...Minus her boyfriend.

Was Caine her boyfriend?

They’d somehow never gotten around to talking about that.

She looked over at Stinger and he attempted a grim twist of mouth that was probably meant to be a smile, before looking off into the crowd again with a thousand yard stare.

If only Caine were here with them now. She was really feeling his absence this time around. Last time, they’d stood in these lines at the Commonwealth together. She hadn’t realized at the time how much she’d counted on checking his reactions to things, his wry lift of a furry blond eyebrow, the sardonic shake of his head. As the hours had passed, she felt a little sadder each time she turned and he wasn’t standing there just behind her.

She was trying not to worry about him. But where was he? What if something really bad had happened to him while he was waiting for her back at the fertility clinic? She tried not to imagine him injured, alone and in trouble. He was tough, more than able to take care of himself. He probably didn’t really need her there, nursing him back to health with feminine hygiene products. But still…

“Stinger, “ she said. “I want to find Caine Wise as soon as we return to Earth.”

“Alright,” he said slowly.

“I’d just really feel better having you both as my guards as soon as possible, “ Jupiter rushed to explain. “The Abrasax are going to be coming after me and I want to be prepared”

Stinger had agreed to be a part of her guard. Jupiter planned to buy his and Caine’s pardons and Legion re-instatements once she’d reclaimed her title.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Stinger said. “I just don’t understand why you’re so set on Caine Wise. Royal guard duty is considered an honor. You could have your pick of anyone in the Legion.”

“You said yourself Caine was one of the best soldiers you’d ever worked with,” said Jupiter.

“I don’t remember saying that,” Stinger frowned. “Though I suppose it’s true. I’m not exactly
against the idea of working with him again. It’s just—I don’t know who’s been telling you stories. I suppose Caine’s become something of a legend—but it’s not all good. Do you know why was sent to the Deadlands?

“Yeah, I do.”

"You know he attacked an entitled? " Stinger insisted. "He bit him."

“I know,” Jupiter kept her expression serious. She resisted the urge to lift her hand and cover up the mark on her neck. It wasn’t very obvious, she hoped.

“I trusted Caine,” Stinger continued. “And I’ve had my suspicions about the case against him. But he was court-martialed, and sentenced. We both were. Even if he weren’t damaged before—well, three years in Deadlands doesn’t improve anybody’s disposition.” He gave her a penetrating look. “I just hope you understand that.”

“I do understand.”

Stinger just huffed in response and looked back out over the lines that seemed to stretch into infinity.

The lizard splice behind the next counter droned something about geneprint identification from wills and trusts and Jupiter shook herself to keep from falling asleep. Even Advocate Bob’s smile was beginning to falter. Maybe she was in purgatory, she thought. Somewhere, somehow, she must have done something really bad to be forced to re-live this whole experience.

Should she bring up the idea of a bribe? It was going to happen eventually, Jupiter figured. Might as well speed things up, if they could.

And....Wait?

Geneprint identification?

She looked down at her sleeves—buttoned all the way down to avoid questions lately, but...She unfastened her right sleeve and there it was: her glowy blue space tattoo.

“Will this work as identification?” she asked.

“This is outside of normal procedures,” the splice said sourly.

Beside her, the gears in Advocate Bob’s head gave a nervous high-pitched whir.

“She’ll have to go directly to the Minster of Seals and Signets,” the splice announced, giving a glare that managed to be both disgusted and bored. “Sub-thirty-three.”
Jupiter remembered the damp cold smell that hit as they came down the last flight of stairs.

“Aren’t you coming?” she asked Bob as he hovered nervously, hesitating above them.

“Oh no, Your Majesty. Advocates aren’t allowed on Sub-Thirty-three.”

“Yeah, right,” said Jupiter.

She and Stinger went to wait at the counter as the wild-haired old man muttered and slowly walked toward them.

He looked at Jupiter through his square yellow lens and then suddenly shouted “You!” so loudly that she jumped back a little in surprise.

“Yeah, we’re here...” she started, holding up her wrist to show her tattoo.

He waved his hands in dismissal and mumbled, “Abrasax, Abrasax...” switching to an opaque green lens and scrutinizing her through it thoroughly.

Then he went back and forth doing some incomprehensible stuff with his machines, took a too-big bite of his sandwich and tried to shoo her away, mumbling through a mouthful of food, “All right then.”

“All right?” asked Jupiter. “Um, aren’t you supposed to give me my code and conduct guide, my official sheaves, that kind of stuff?”

He muttered under his breath a bit more and made a big deal out of collecting things from various cabinets before passing them over.

“Congratulations your Majesty,” he said. “Sleep with one eye open. And don’t come back again!”

Well, that wasn’t as bad as it could have been,” Jupiter said to Stinger as they made their way back to the cruiser.

Her Majesty had a bit of a bounce in her step, thought Stinger. It was good to see her happy. She’d been so desperate and wild-eyed he’d thought she was a madwoman when she first came to him.

For that matter, he still hadn’t ruled out the idea that she was at least a little crazed. There were all sorts of unanswered questions, things she wasn’t telling him. All that stuff about time travel. And who exactly had she been with before she’d come to him? A lot of it just didn’t add up. But then Stinger had worked with Entitled enough to know that they were strange and unpredictable. Combine that with Terssie hard-headedness, he figured, and the unusual event of a royal recurrence...

Well, there was definitely something peculiar going on with her, but he had to admit she was sort of endearing. And if working for her would get a re-code for Kiza and opportunities for them both beyond the corn fields of Indiana, he was all for it.

She had some kind of weird fascination with Caine Wise. But then there was no accounting for tastes, and the boy could do a hell of a lot worse for himself.
Jupiter walked into the next room before him.

“Hold up,” he started to call out.

But it was too late.

Caine Wise came flying out from a corner. In one movement he grabbed Jupiter up, activated his shield and turned his mauler toward Stinger.

Stinger had his own gun up in a fraction of a second, but by then there were bounty hunters coming into the room on both sides.

“Caine?” said Jupiter in a soft voice.

“Don’t do this boy,” said Stinger with a shake of his head. “You’re just fucking everything up.”

“I’m sorry man,” said Caine.

Jupiter stuck close to Caine as she was herded toward the golden-winged transport ship. At least one of the motley group of bounty hunters smelled like rancid latke oil and the monocle-eyed one kept leering at her in a way that made her skin crawl.

Luckily, none of them came on board. A matching set of ten black-robed android guards stood just inside the ship’s entrance though. And really, thought Jupiter, those things totally creeped her out.

Once aboard, Caine was quick to put some space between them.

“You’d better strap in,” he instructed, going to stand by the far wall.

“Okay,” she said.

Maybe she was in shock or something. She hadn’t thought to struggle when he’d scooped her up into his arms. Instead, she realized, embarrassed, she’d instinctively buried her face in his neck—just for a moment.

He was looking at her warily. Accusing—almost as if she had done something to him.

Was he mad at her for some reason?

He was the one doing the abducting. If anyone was upset it should be her with him.

But, no, she decided, she was saving it for Titus Abrasax. She was just too darn happy to see Caine. To have him safe and with her again.

Though their reunion wasn’t going as planned. To be honest, she didn’t know what she should have expected.

Caine didn’t know her anymore.

“Ms. Jones,” said Famulus, coming into the room with a saccharine smile. “I’m terribly sorry about
all this. Lord Titus hired Mr. Wise to retrieve you from Earth—for your own protection of course. But I’m afraid Mr. Wise has been a bit overzealous. We certainly never intended he abduct you. Lord Titus insists on speaking with you himself and doing his best to make up for this... misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” said Caine. Now he sounded mad. “I told you she was with the Aegis. You sent the back up. Told me Titus just wanted a chance to talk to her.”

Famulus gave him a condescending look and shook her head.

“You can save your stories for Lord Titus. Though you shouldn’t worry much, Mr. Wise. He isn’t intending to send you back to the Deadlands—just yet. I’m sure we can work things out to everyone’s... satisfaction.”

“I look forward to a very thorough discussion with Titus,” said Jupiter in her most Regal voice. It was only in her own head that she added “that little shit.”

Famulus sat down in a plush chair, leaned back and swung one leg to cross the other, all the while keeping a sharp eye on them both.

Jupiter wanted to drink in the sight of Caine: from his pointy ears to his clunky, black boots. There was just something so good about seeing him again. She tried to keep it to herself though. This wasn’t the time or the place to try to talk to him.

She remembered Titus’ smirk, “You’re in love with Mr. Wise, aren’t you?” She didn’t want to give anything away this time, give them anything to use against her.

Caine seemed to have a similar idea—that was, avoiding looking at or speaking with her. He stood against the wall, arms folded, eyes trained on the floor—other than the occasional glance, as if he couldn’t help himself. His expression was a combination of frustrated and confused that was somehow familiar.

Jupiter looked down at the sheaves of entitled code and conduct she still held in her hands. She supposed she’d better prepare herself. Start making some sort of plan. Was it statute twenty-seven-b-stroke-six—or seven?

Stinger had been left behind on Orous, but he’d be able to get back to Captain Tsing and the Aegis crew and hopefully they could figure out a plan to come get her soon.

In the meantime, Jupiter could deal with Titus again. This time, she decided, he was going to feel her wrath. There was no way in hell she was agreeing to another wedding.

She’d just have to stall for time or something, she thought, with another look toward the hollow-eyed guards. The odds for them making a quick getaway weren’t looking very good at the moment.

And... Caine was still working for Titus.

He really wasn’t hers anymore, Jupiter realized with a sinking feeling.
It surprised him how fast things had turned to shit.

Caine had only taken this job to earn their pardons, his and Stinger's. It was supposed to be a simple find and retrieve. He still didn’t know how it had turned into him abducting a Royal...and betraying his old commander.

He'd stood at the side of the hanger as Titus Abrasax bent to one knee and smoothly greeted Jupiter Jones as “Your Majesty.” Watched her recite rules and codes, and threaten to have the clipper impounded by the Aegis and levy fines against Titus’ holdings. Caine couldn't help admire the way she held her own, demanding rights from her kidnapper.

Titus and Famulus must have had a pre-arranged signal. The guards closed in around Caine so quick he couldn't take down more than a couple before they had him on his knees and in restraints.

“I completely understand your upset at this ordeal.” Titus said to her, his voice silky. “Please rest assured that Mr. Wise was acting against my instructions. He will pay for his transgressions.”

“Wait!” She called out. “I—I don’t want you to hurt him.”

Caine looked up and caught a glimpse of Titus’s surprised expression.

“I, um.” She cleared her throat. “As the aggrieved party it is within my rights to personally determine and oversee the punishment of your Splice. Statute forty point H twelve.”

“As you wish,” Titus said with a lift of eyebrows.

“In any case, I’m not sure Mr. Wise alone is to blame,” she continued. “You are currently detaining me without my consent, in direct violation of statute twenty-seven-b-stroke-six and I intend to file a tax grievance against you unless you take me directly to Earth.”

“Set a course for Earth Famulus.” Titus said. “Mr. Wise can be rather unpredictable; I’ll keep him safely contained until you’ve determined his punishment. In the meantime, since you’ve invoked code and conduct I trust you’ll do me the honor of dining with me?”

And they’d dragged Caine away, lowered him into this cell set deep in the subfloor.

He grasped the bars overhead, straining to break or loosen them, using the force of his boots—only to crash back down to the floor.

After a few more attempts, he sat frustrated, trying to catch his breath as he looked up through the bars. He didn’t know Titus’ game, but he somehow doubted he'd finished using him yet. Entitleds thought of Lycantants as hulking, loyal dogs, expected to run when called, expected to give total obedience to their masters. They were coded for it. Titus had probably counted on that aspect of Caine’s genomeengineering when he’d hired him, planned to use it against him if he could.

Problem was, that was another one of Caine's defects.

He was capable of loyalty, he craved it almost—and sometimes it worked out. He’d been there for Stinger and his unit. It didn’t come easily, though, automatically, as part of the package. He could follow orders, but obedience was a struggle. It wasn't second nature, like it was for most of his kind.
Caine should have known this job was too good to be true. He’d ignored the clues, the warning signs that something wasn’t right. Too caught up trying to wrap his head around the one thing that was driving him crazy: Why did Jupiter Jones have his scent on her? It must be a trick. He just couldn’t figure out how, or why.

Was she in on it? He didn’t think so. They way she’d clung to him in the Commonwealth, stuck to his side as they walked to the ship. He’d thought she was overwhelmed, intimidated—his usually dormant protective instincts rising up in response.

Whatever Titus was trying to sell her, she wasn’t buying it yet.

Still, Caine couldn’t figure out the weird looks she’d been giving him. When she’d asked to oversee his punishment it wasn’t anticipation he’d smelled, it was fear. As if she were trying to protect him.

There was something too appealing about her. Caine would have liked her—if she weren’t a Queen.

But why did she smell like him? So far, he hadn’t been able to figure out how that fit into Titus’ plan.

When Caine first came to the clipper—straight from the Deadlands—they’d taken his clothes and re-fitted him with his Legion gear. They’d brought him to a room where Titus reclined beside a table spilling over with jewel-encrusted platters of food and goblets of glowing silver wine—more food and drink than Caine had seen in years in the Deadlands. Titus, insisting Caine take his fill, had leaned in close to ask questions, particularly intrigued about his attack against the Entitled.

Titus Abrasax dealt in manipulation and lies. Had he been collecting Caine’s DNA when he’d run his hand along the tattoos on his arm?

Or maybe they’d taken Caine’s scent from his clothes somehow? It was possible. Splicers were always working on new ways to control their creations—Entitled paid extra for the ability to twist them to their whims. There were always new techniques being developed, ways to make Splices stronger, faster, keener than other humans. It was an arms race. The more powerful Splices were made, the more their creators needed ways to use those senses and abilities, their coding, against them, keeping them subdued and under control.

It didn’t make much sense, but it was the only thing he could think of.

It made more sense than the alternative: that Caine had somehow been over every inch of Jupiter Jones’ body—but didn’t remember it.

Jupiter wasn’t sure which dinner with Titus was more disturbing. The first, when she was half-convinced he wanted to seduce his own mother, or this second one, when she knew he wanted to kill her.

Things weren’t going quite as well as she’d hoped.

She’d always been a fast reader and this time she’d thrown every rule in the book at Titus. She hoped that she’d been able to protect Caine from being killed or sent back to the Deadlands at least.
Titus, of course, had readily believed she wanted to see to Caine’s punishment personally. It figured, she thought, looking down at the dress he’d given her to wear: all tight shiny black leather, and cut low in the chest, high up the front.

What kind of son dressed mom up as a dominatrix anyway?

The problem was he had her at a disadvantage, and he knew it. She was captive on his ship, and when it came to knowing the rules of his society, and how to get away with breaking them, Titus had thousands of years’ head start on her.

At least he wouldn’t be able to play on her sympathies anymore. And she didn’t plan on giving away her feelings for Caine this time. If nothing else, she’d stall for time. The fact that Titus wanted something from her, should give her some sort of power. He couldn’t actually force her to marry him and the Aegis would come after her before long...she hoped.

“It was certainly never my intention to abduct you.” Titus explained with fake sincerity, as he gazed at her across the long table. “I only wanted to ensure your safe passage from Earth—to help you claim your title, in fact. I was concerned that my brother Balem would not take lightly the loss of the Earth and might wish to do you harm. You must believe I would never have intentionally brought you here against your will.”

“I don’t believe you though,” she said in a hostile tone. “Your people could have left me on Orous as soon as they’d realized their mistake. It wasn’t just Mr. Wise,” she was careful to a keep a bit of anger in her voice as she said his name. “Your assistant must have arranged all of this with you.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Titus conceded with a small nod, changing his tack. “Indeed, I might have left you on Orous once I found that you had claimed your title. Though, I must say it was disturbingly easy to have you snatched up. Are you quite certain you would have been safe there Your Majesty?” He smiled at her, eyes sparkling. “From the moment I heard of your existence, I knew this moment would come. I knew that I had to see you, to talk to you. I can’t help but think that, in some respects, things have worked out very well.”

When she glared at him in response he merely laughed. “From the moment I saw your geneprint. I knew so many things about you—”

“Don’t even think about telling me that I’m like your mother.” She could be patient, bide her time, but she could only put up with so much from him a second time, and Jupiter was way past tired of being compared to Seraphi Abrasax.

“But it’s true!” he insisted. “I should know, because I was very close to my mother. So close in fact that I could tell by the way she raised her eyebrows...”

Jupiter should have remembered that the Abrasax brothers didn’t take her seriously unless there was violence involved. She lifted a delicate wine glass and hurled it at his head. Missing by inches, it crashed down to the floor behind him.

In response he merely tilted his head to the side, giving her slightly condescending smile. “Just like mother, always ready to see the worst in people.” He waved away a guard who had taken a few steps closer to the table. “But I have something very important to discuss with you, a question to ask.”

“Give me a call once I’m back on Earth and I’ll check my calendar, see if I can schedule you in.”

“That distrust in others, in the world” he tsked and shook his head, as if in sadness. “I know you do
not trust me right now. But I can promise that I am not your enemy. I only hope that I can convince you that it is safe to place your trust in me.” He came around the table and held a hand out to her. “Will you walk with me? There is something you need to see.”

He really did think she was that gullible, she realized in disgust. He was so arrogantly certain of her, so sure she’d be naïve enough to believe him. He was going to do it. He was going to ask her to marry him all over again.

She let him take her by the hand and rose gracefully to face him, a smile on her face.

Then she brought her leg up and kneed him hard and fast in the crotch, just like her mother had taught her.

Titus doubled over, groaning in pain.

“I’m not in the mood to speak with you right now.” Jupiter said as she walked away from him. “I’ll be in my room.”

She'd known that slit up the front of her dress had to be good for something.
“I’m afraid Ms. Jones isn’t nearly as agreeable as I’d anticipated, Famulus. She’s very angry, vicious even.” Titus said with a shudder. “She reminds me entirely too much of Mother, disciplining me for one of my youthful transgressions.”

He was recovering from his ordeal, feeling somewhat better as he sipped a glass of Nectar-infused wine. One servitant gave him a shoulder rub while two others hovered by his side, awaiting command.

He really didn’t care for this feeling of uncertainty though. Titus wasn’t used to being surprised. He very much preferred to be the one doing the surprising.

“She wasn’t at all swayed by my charm,” he complained with a pout.

“Really, My Lord?” Famulus sounded appropriately shocked at this information.

“Yes—if you can believe it. She is more interesting than I’d expected,” he continued. “Something of a puzzle. What did you observe on the trip here? Was there anything in particular that set her off?”

“No. She seemed quite calm. Cooperative even. She read the entire time and hardly said a word.” She paused before continuing, “Although, now that I think about it, she was rather interested in Mr. Wise.”

“Well, she is from an underdeveloped world. Naturally, she’d be unused to splices. I’d rather counted on her being naïve—amazed by all of this. Awed by my splendor, if you will.” He winced again, remembering the picture she’d made, walking away from him after the assault. “I shouldn’t have put her in Mother’s black dress,” he shook his head. “She looked so...vengeful...I can’t see how she will agree to the wedding by tomorrow.”

“Shall I stop the preparations?” asked Famulus.

“No, though we may have to postpone it a few days,” he said. “There must be some other angle I can try. Something to persuade her.”

“My Lord, perhaps you could redirect her anger?” she suggested.

“How so?” he asked, perking up a bit. There was something in Famulus’ expression of sly competence that always delighted him, her eyes glowing with mischief in the flickering candlelight.

“As I mentioned, she seemed quite fascinated by Mr. Wise—though not particularly curious about my own appearance,” she thoughtfully stroked her hand along the curved length of her ear. “She was quick to take an interest in him down in the hangar as well. Perhaps we could distract and appease her at the same time? I say we give her the opportunity to discipline Mr. Wise for his part in her abduction. Let her take out some of her frustrations on him. I must say, there is something very satisfying about seeing him in restraints.”

“Famulus, you are a treasure,” he chuckled. “Yes, let’s send him to her. And keep the wedding arrangements ready to go at a moment’s notice. I do hope to convince her yet.”

“And the pardons for Mr. Wise and Mr. Apini?” she asked.

“Hold on to them for the time being. We might make use of them yet.”
“Do you believe Mr. Wise will cooperate though? He seems surprisingly insolent for a lycantant,” Famulus sneered.

“He’ll have no choice,” said Titus dismissively. “No need to let him in on our plan, however. Better to just let him follow his own instincts—when the time is right.”

He considered. “You know, I’d hoped he’d kill her after the wedding...but if I can’t persuade her...we might have to settle for the alternative. Keep them both under surveillance —and check that my advocates have drawn up all the sheavework.”

“Of course, My Lord.”

“Have our spies sent word of Lord Balem yet?” he asked.

“Nothing new since the medical team was brought in this morning,” said Famulus.

“Keep me posted.”

Titus had no idea what had happened to his elder brother, but something unusual was happening. Balem was secretive and distrustful. Of course, he wouldn’t want his siblings to know if he were ill. He’d been looking rather grey and unappealing when last they’d met, but enough to suffer the effects of age?

If Balem were incapacitated, even temporarily, Titus would find a way to use the opportunity and manipulate events to his advantage.

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Caine was brought up from his cell, surrounded by a host of guards and pushed along the echoing hallways to where Titus stood waiting.

“You should have told me the truth about why you wanted her,” he said in a gravelly voice.

“What good would that have done?” Titus scoffed. “I hired you to rescue a poor, frightened Earth girl who’d been targeted for death—a damsel in distress. One who should have been grateful to go along with my plans.” Titus stepped closer, whispering so that the hairs rose along the side of Caine’s neck. “Instead you brought me a royally aggravated Queen.”

Titus pulled back so that they were face-to-face again, and he smiled—as if he could see the effort it took for Caine to hold back. “Mr. Wise you haven’t precisely held up your part of the bargain.”

“You didn’t complain when I contacted you from Orous,” Caine said through clenched teeth.

“I was merely giving you the opportunity to redeem yourself. I assume you do want another chance to earn the pardons? Or would you prefer I feed you to the void for your incompetence?” Titus gestured toward the doors as the guards stepped in closer.

“What do you want?” Caine asked reluctantly.
“Her Majesty is feeling vindictive. Apparently she has quite the temper. And since she seems inclined to punish you for her abduction, I see no reason why we shouldn’t humor her. We can only hope it will improve her disposition. I daresay you can withstand her ire better than I could. You’re...built for it.”

“And then you’ll give me the pardons?”

Titus smirked. “I’m sure we can work out something to everyone’s benefit...eventually.”

Caine gave a disgusted huff as Titus began to walk away down the long dark corridor of the ship.

“What did you do to her scent?” he called out.

The other man turned slowly. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean Mr. Wise.” He raised his brows, giving a wicked smile. “How would she smell to a creature such as yourself? I can only imagine...but I’m certain it’s delicious. Do try not to eat her up!” He laughed as he walked away.

Fucking Entitleds and their games. It didn’t look like Titus was going to let him go anytime soon.

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Jupiter still wasn’t sure how she’d gone from keeping her cool to kneeing Titus in the balls in the space of a few minutes.

Ugh, he was just so infuriating though, so smug—the way he lied to her face and grinned. It had been satisfying, if only for a moment, getting an honest reaction out of him.

Jupiter unwound the high-heeled shoes from around her feet and threw them across the room in frustration. She was lucky she hadn’t twisted an ankle, or fallen on her butt. Somehow she’d managed a dignified get away, in spite of tottering on the high heels, stomach nauseous with nerves.

Her mom and Aunt Nino had taught her some defensive moves, the kind of stuff a girl needed to know working as a domestic: a knee to the crotch, a quick elbow to the gut.

But she didn’t like this jittery out-of-control feeling, she didn’t think it was something she wanted to get used to. She didn’t feel powerful after hurting someone, just sort of upset and gross. And she’d be fine if she absolutely never had to touch Titus ever again.

She’d always had a temper, but before these last few weeks, she’d never actually slapped someone hard in the face—no matter how much of a rat they were.

She didn’t regret shooting Balem, at all. But remembering the sensation of beating him with the metal pipe, the dull thud, the crack of bone—it made her feel kind of sick.

Caine somehow made all the fighting stuff look easy.

And okay, something about watching him move just really worked for her. Maybe he could teach her some fighting techniques or something. She probably did need to learn how to defend herself better.

She imagined it might be fun sparring, having an excuse to wrestle around with him.—and she had to keep imagining, keep hoping that there was going to be a time when that was possible again.
She’d have to figure her way out of this thing, and maybe the next, and probably the one after that too. But eventually, she needed to believe she’d be back to flying lessons with Caine or grabbing a pizza or yeah...wrestling. Because being here, again, in Titus’s pleasure palace of doom was really getting her down.

And what was with all the dark cavernous spaces and candelabra everywhere? Couldn’t the guy afford some light bulbs?

Or maybe Titus kept it dark on purpose. In Jupiter's professional opinion, the room could definitely use some cleaning. Maybe skipping the vacuuming for a few months didn’t seem like a big deal, when you were thousands of years old. Judging by their outfits, Titus didn’t pick his servants for their housekeeping skills.

Jupiter didn’t even want to look at what kind of dust bunnies were hiding in the corners here. Also on the list of things she didn’t want to look at: the wedding dress lurking somewhere behind a closet door.

Yeah, Titus definitely deserved some violence from her, but it probably wasn’t her best strategy for dealing with him in the long run. And honestly, Jupiter wasn’t engineered for ass kicking. Even if she leveraged all one hundred and five pounds of righteous indignation, she probably couldn’t take down any of those guards.

She’d really prefer to flay Titus with sarcasm and dirty looks anyway. Or better yet get the hang of all these entitled codes and laws, because from her time at the commonwealth, it seemed like the legal system was the best form of torture in this world.

She would just have to try harder to keep her cool, she determined, looking out the enormous curve of window at the vast starry sky beyond. Let Titus think she might marry him, delay him somehow. Try to think of this whole ordeal as all-expense-paid gothic space cruise.

She changed into some more comfortable clothes and looked over at the wide, silk covered bed.

It was one of those monstrosities with curtain hangings and mountainous piles of pillows and blankets that would have been a real nightmare to wash and iron and make up again. She let herself fall into it with a sigh and tried to ignore the small cloud of dust that rose up around her.

An hour later, the guards had dragged Caine along the hall in his restraints. He could just see Jupiter Jones where she stood inside the threshold of her door, a wary look on her face. Titus was before her, flanked by more guards on both sides.

“Your Majesty,” Titus said. “I know we’ve had a less than auspicious beginning. You’re justifiably angered, but I sincerely hope you can believe me when I tell you that I want only to be your ally.”

He stepped closer and Caine caught the quick, sharp scent of primal fear coming from Titus as he pressed something into Jupiter's hand. She looked at Titus suspiciously as he hastily backed away again.
“I must apologize once again for the shock of your abduction. It’s fair and just that you punish the man responsible.” Titus smiled hesitantly as he turned from the door. “If you can believe anything Jupiter, you can believe your goodwill and trust are much more important to me than any Splice.”

The guards stepped up and Jupiter stood back as they pushed Caine roughly forward. He stumbled inside and the door was shut behind him.

“What the—?” She rubbed a hand across her face and stared at him with wide eyes, noticing his bare chest, his arms pulled behind his back in the restraints. “Why aren’t you wearing your shirt?”

“They took it,” Caine said. He was just glad they’d left him his boots.

He tightened his jaw and walked farther into the room, managed to sit down on a low bench near the fire.

She still seemed confused. There was something softened about her, her hair was tousled and a drowsy look in her eyes as if she’d been sleeping.

Caine knew better than to let down his guard though. She was an Queen, and there had to be a reason why he’d smelled Titus’s fear. Though she was small, she could do some damage with that whip. No doubt they’d taken his shirt so that she could see the marks she left on his skin.

Still, she’d seemed angry before, not sadistic. And he could withstand a few lashes. He’d taken a lot worse in the past.

She stood before the window, face shadowed. He really didn’t understand her, the way she kept looking at him—as if she already knew him, knew something about him that he didn’t.

The scent was still there too. His mixed with hers. Getting inside of his head. Although Titus was wrong, it didn’t make him want to eat her.

Well...not exactly...maybe.

He raised a brow, looked down at the whip bundled into her hand and then back up to her face again.

“Oh!” she said, looking down, surprised, as if seeing it for the first time. “Titus really expects me to...”

“You suggested it yourself,” he said, watching her.

She was suddenly furious. And he could see it in her now: A Queen, larger than life, eyes dark and fierce.

“But—he can’t just toss you in here like a piece of meat! What will he do next? Grind up his servants to make me a face cream?”

Probably, thought Caine, if Titus thought it would get him what he wanted.

She threw the whip to the floor with a frown and walked over to him.

“Caine, you could work for me,” she said urgently. “Help get us out of here and get me back to the Aegis.”

Maybe she just didn’t understand.
“Titus Abrasax has my pardon. I can’t work for anyone else until I get it from him.”

She opened her mouth, and then closed it again, pacing back and forth across the floor, still fuming.

What would she suggest next? he wondered. Would she ask him to kill Titus?

Caine might be able to get away with it—if he did belong to her. But she probably didn’t realize everything involved, wasn’t really offering to go that far. She couldn’t know that he was defective, a bad investment.

She came to a sudden stop before him, looking intent, standing so close they were almost touching. She looked tired and almost sad.

He tried to take in a breath that wasn’t filled with her, but he couldn’t.

“Is there something on my face?” he asked, clearing his throat.

“Yeah, actually,” she said. “You have kind of a um...” She reached out and touched her fingers to the side of his face. “...A nasty cut, right here near your eye. Are you okay?”

He hadn’t even noticed the cut.

The touch of her fingers, on the other hand, was making him nervous.

Caine flexed his arms behind his back where they were strained by the cuffs. He heard a clicking sound, and registered what he should have noticed when he first came into the room: They hadn’t locked his restraints. He could get loose any time he wanted.

“Come here,” he motioned.

“Hmm?”

“Come here,” he repeated, gesturing with his head to indicate she move in closer.

Finally, she leaned in, her fingers still against his temple, her mouth moving slowly towards his.

He turned and his lips dragged along her check before he whispered into her ear. “Titus is watching, listening to everything you do.”

“Oh!” That seemed to snap her out of her trance.

And then she was suddenly angry again.

“He really thinks, that I’m going to whip you because I’m mad at him!”

Caine shrugged. “I’m a Splice. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Well not this time,” she said.

Caine couldn’t figure her out. Couldn’t decide if she was the soft, sweet, bed-rumpled woman or the angry vengeful queen.

Couldn’t tell which one was real.

Or which one he liked more.
This Mess

Jupiter paced back and forth as Caine watched her.

How had she even gotten into this mess? All she wanted was to protect Caine; she couldn't forget that Titus had once tried to kill him.

When she’d found that section in the Entitled Codes about Splice penalties, well, she’d figured she could use it somehow. She hadn’t had time to think it through entirely. But seeing Caine shrug, that indifferent look on his face at the prospect of being whipped—like he really didn't care, he was used to stuff like that, expected it even. There was something too heartbreaking about it.

She was so infuriated with Titus! And the other two Abrasaxes, and the whole concept of being Entitled for that matter. Using other people. That whole sick idea that some people were intrinsically worth more than others. She’d dealt with people like them before. Cleaning houses, too many people had treated her like she was less than human, talked about her as if she weren’t there, pretended not to see her as she worked around them.

Just because Jupiter was suddenly a Queen didn’t mean that she’d forgotten all that.

The problem was she might have to at least seem as selfish and ruthless as Titus if she wanted things to work out in her favor here. She might need to demand what she wanted, act like she expected everyone to bow down before her.

Jupiter marched to the door and looked out at the six guards standing in the long, dark hallway.

“I want Titus,” she demanded. "Now!"

A minute later, Famulus was there, calm and composed, but maybe a little out of breath. “Your Majesty?” she asked.

“I appreciate the gesture here,” Jupiter nodded towards Caine. “But honestly, a tax grievance against Titus would buy me more than a hundred Splices to punish however I like. Where’s your boss? I'd rather use that whip on him, for bringing me here. ”

“I'm afraid Lord Titus is indisposed at the moment.”

Indisposed? Huh... Jupiter didn’t even want to think about that.

Famulus looked at her expectantly.

“Well, I’m going to... keep Mr. Wise for the time being then,” Jupiter announced. “And I want some food brought in immediately. And tell Titus I’ll talk to him in the morning—if he’s lucky I’ll be in a better mood by then.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Famulus with a smile.

**************************

“I’m not a pleasure splice.” Caine said out of nowhere, once they were finally alone again.
On Jupiter’s command a guard had released Caine’s hands from the restraints and servants had set up a table filled with food. She’d been trying some of the different space delicacies, which were actually pretty delicious in spite of their strangeness. She hadn’t had an appetite when she’d been with Titus earlier.

Caine had been quiet until now and she’d been happy to let him eat. She didn’t know if he had a different metabolism than hers, but he’d always seemed to put away huge quantities of food.

She paused, looking at him, a forkful of spicy sauce-covered cubes of...something...half-raised to her mouth.

“Pleasure splice?” Jupiter thought for a moment... “Oh!”

She didn’t know how things like that could still surprise her. Of course, they would totally have pleasure splices.

“I don’t have that kind of training,” he said. “I was bred for the military.”

“That doesn’t matter to me.” She meant to be reassuring, but he frowned. “I mean, that’s fine,” she added quickly, but that didn’t sound any better really.

She’d been half-asleep when they’d delivered him to her door, confused and sort of overwhelmed by the sight of him. And okay, she’d admit there’d been a thought or two, maybe a scenario she’d imagined in the past that had him shirtless, tied up and at her mercy—there’d been more than one reason she’d smiled while she cleaned those houses lately. But none of her fantasies involved Caine wearing this grim, resigned expression on his face. And they sure didn’t involve Titus watching on. Where were the cameras anyway? In the walls or something?

Had she done something to make Caine think she wanted to use him as a *pleasure splice*? Well, besides forgetting to ask for his shirt...Really, she just wanted to keep him with her, safe from Titus. And maybe she’d had the idea that he would keep her safe too, that they were still on the same side. She guessed they weren’t anymore, not exactly. But it didn’t matter. She still planned to keep him with her if she could—they’d figure out the rest of it later.

Of course, Titus would think that she wanted to use Caine somehow. If not to punish then for sex. And it probably was better to let Titus go on thinking that--she couldn't let him guess that Caine mattered to her. She had to think and act like an Entitled here. And that was what Entitleds did: they used people.

She was just so exhausted. Maybe time travel was really physically hard on a person, because she had this bone deep fatigue. She looked over at the giant bed across the room—and thought about how to fool Titus.

She finished her last bite of food before getting up to walk around the table to Caine. He stood immediately, looked at her expectantly as she drew closer, holding completely still, as she smoothed her hand along the freckles of his shoulder, down the tattooed design on his arm. She leaned in close to speak into his ear.

“Just play along with me,” she whispered. “I’m trying to keep you safe. That bed’s big enough for both of us and I’m not planning to do anything to you...um, like...that. But maybe we can just pretend—to throw Titus off.”

She drew back with a pleading smile and he slowly nodded in response.

She went around the room, first blowing out candles, then peeling back the top blanket on the bed
and tossing away some of the heaps of pillows. The sheets seemed clean, if a little musty; the dust had only settled on the surface of the bed. She tried tugging for a moment at the heavy decorative bed curtains, but they wouldn't pull closed.

Had this actually once been Seraphi’s room when she’d come to visit Titus—waiting for her empty all these years? A shiver passed through her at the idea. It was kind of cold, drafty, she thought, as she watched the velvet bed hangings settle back into place. If it could be drafty on a spaceship—wasn’t everything supposed to be airtight?

Once she'd blown out the last of the candles, it was dark except for the starlight. She could just see Caine’s outline against the window. She slipped into bed, pulled the covers around her and listened, as his boots dropped to the floor one after the other, felt the shift as he climbed in.

She scooted over and pulled the blankets over their heads, felt him tense as she put her mouth next to his ear.

“Do you think Titus can hear us now? Where do you think the cameras are?”

“I don’t think there’s any surveillance equipment under the blankets,” he said, voice dry. Was he teasing her?

“Do you think we should, uh, move around a little? In case anyone is watching?” she asked.

“Move around?”

“Yeah, um,” she moved closer, and then threw a leg over him and sat up to straddle his hips before she lost her nerve. “Like this,” she whispered.

But she wasn't ready for the feel of him underneath her, his body hard between her thighs. Suddenly, even pretending seemed too real. Her heart was pounding fast, and she felt too precariously balanced, like she could fall a lot farther than just the few feet down to the floor—and this time, unlike all the others, maybe Caine wouldn’t want to catch her.

She wished she could see better in the dark, see his face. But she could feel him, the way he held still beneath her, breathing slowly, muscles tensed, for what seemed like way too long.

And... maybe this had been an incredibly bad idea.

Slowly, he moved his hands around her waist to steady her and she sighed in relief. Then his grip tightened and he lifted her, flipping her over and onto her back so fast that she lost her breath for a second as he buried his face in her neck and took in a deep breath. She arched up against him and felt him hard between her legs.

He backed away a bit, lifted his head to speak into her ear. “Move around like this?”

“Oh huh. Yeah.”

“And what do you want me to do next?”

He whispered it and she couldn’t read the tone of his voice, couldn’t see his face. Dimly, she realized he was waiting for his instructions—for her to tell him what to do.

Oh... pleasure splice... she remembered with a sinking feeling. He didn't want this. Not really. It was only because Titus owned him, and had delivered him to her room.
“That’s—that’s probably enough.”

“That’s enough? ...alright,” The word came out of him in a long, low rumble as he moved, settling to lie down a few inches away, so that they were no longer touching. “What are you trying to convince Titus?” he whispered

“That we—that I...Oh—It doesn’t matter,” she said in a quiet, defeated sigh. “Like you said, he probably can’t see under the blankets.”

After that, Caine was silent and still.

Jupiter really didn’t have the energy to think straight anymore. She was all out of adrenaline, or nerves, or whatever had kept her running through this long crazy day. Caine was warm and solid beside her, and somehow everything was just too confusing.

She needed sleep and in spite of it all, she could feel herself starting to fade, her body so heavy with tiredness, it felt like she was sinking, filled with lead.

Maybe it didn't entirely make sense, keeping him here with her. Caine was dangerous, part of her knew that was true. But she couldn't help feeling safer with him at her side.

He’d saved her so many times before.

********************

Caine watched her in the dark, his pupils adjusted to the low light.

She fallen asleep almost instantly, only shifting after some time, when she turned to throw an arm across him —and whacked him hard in the face with her small fist.

He carefully moved her hand away—the first time. And the second time. Finally giving in when she reached out a third time and rested her palm against his chest.

No use disturbing her.

He couldn't help enjoying the smooth feel of her skin, slightly cooler to the touch than his. Though he’d liked her sitting on top of him even more. Bold and nervous at the same time—like she couldn’t decide if she was predator or prey. He’d been a hundred percent ready to play along then, curious what she’d do next. But her experiment had ended too quickly.

An hour or two had passed, but he didn’t need much sleep, didn’t think he could relax his guard enough to sleep anyway.

He didn’t know why she’d decided to protect him, but she seemed to mean it—misguided as it was. Caine wasn’t in any immediate danger here. He didn’t know why Titus would toss him into a room alone with her though. Had they meant to leave his restraints undone, or had it been a mistake? Even with them on, he could have killed her—gone for her throat. Titus knew he’d done it before.

Caine had never known why he attacked that Entitled, couldn’t guess what had triggered it. But he suspected Titus was setting him up to make it happen again.

Maybe that was the reason Titus had done something with Jupiter's scent. Was it somehow designed to make Caine want to attack her?

If so, it wasn’t working the way it was supposed to.
Jupiter emerged gradually from sleep, sprawled across Caine, shirt riding up, her bare belly pressed against his. Her body was liquid, like she was a puddle of water working its way into stone. Really liquid, she thought, waking completely—and wiping away the drool from where her cheek had pressed against his shoulder.

She lifted her face slowly, hoping he was asleep so she could make a quick get-away.

And caught his eye—he was looking right at her.

“Uh, sorry about that,” she said in a sleep-scratched voice, managing to roll off him and move back to her own pillow.

It was still dark, but the window was filled with a giant blue planet, glowing like the world’s biggest nightlight. Apparently, Titus was taking the scenic route back to Earth.

If he was even going to Earth at all.

She wouldn’t be surprised to learn he was cruising randomly around the universe while he plotted how best to marry and kill her.

“You were asleep for more than twelve hours,” Caine said, turning on his side to face her.

“Really? What time of day is it?” she asked. “Or is there a time of day when you’re traveling through space? Is it always dark in here?”

“The chamber presence isn’t operational—it’s an obsolete model—but normally it would regulate the temperature and light to your specifications through voice command and acclimate to your optimized circadian rhythms.”

She remembered waking up, floating midair in Kalique’s alcazar. It made her think better of this old oversized bed actually.

She watched Caine’s face, shadowed by the light of the planet. She was feeling more coherent now, but she still had to figure out what to say to him, how to explain things.

She started to scoot closer, and this time he was the one who brought the blanket up to cover their heads.

“There are eight surveillance orbs in the room, each about the size of a pea,” he whispered. “They emit a high-pitched sound, inaudible to humans. I located them all while you were sleeping. I could disable them, but we’d only have a minute before someone notices and tries to get in here.

“Four guards in the hall outside—I could take them without my mauler. Probably the next two farther down the hall too, before they send in reinforcements. I don’t know the entire layout of this place, I might be able to get you to a ship. But we’d have a hard time getting clear long enough to portal out of here. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have brought you to Titus if I’d known who you were, known what was going on.”

“Okay, but-“

“You don’t need to protect me,” he said. “I’ll try to help you if I can, but you’re probably better off
just staying away from me. The Aegis will track you down eventually.”

“But why would I stay away from you?”

“I have flaws in my coding, I’ve attacked Entitleds before.”

“And you think that’s why Titus left you here with me? So that you could attack me?”

“I don’t know. He’s probably got more than one plan in place. Titus is tricky—all of the Abrasax family are.”

“But you were with me all night and didn’t do anything,” she said.

She didn’t want him to go away. Even if he didn’t really know her anymore, even if they were forced to huddle like kids sharing secrets at a slumber party, it seemed better to risk keeping him with her.

“I’d rather have you here. Stinger told me...” But she stopped there. It was hard to remember anything Stinger’d said that would add to her argument. Stinger also thought Caine was dangerous, and she didn’t want to lie.

“You were supposed to go to a clinic on Earth,” he said. “Did you have any other medical procedures done? Or loose track of time recently, like you couldn’t remember what you’d been doing? There are these creatures called keepers that can blank you-”

“What are you thinking?” Jupiter asked.

He was quiet for a moment.

“You smell like me.” He finally mumbled.

“What?”

“You smell like me. My scent is all over you.”

“We’ve been in bed for a while...”

“No, I noticed it when I tracked you on Earth. I think Titus is trying to trigger some response in me. I don’t know how he did it. I don’t understand how it would work. But it’s better not to risk it.”

But Jupiter knew. She’d looped back through time with her blue space tattoo and his scent too, apparently. And he had been all over her. The night of their date, in between flying with him all over the city they’d been kissing for hours. And that was just the part she remembered. She still had the feeling that she was missing time from that night. But how to explain it to him?

There was a pounding on the door.

“I know you don’t remember....” she started to say.

The banging on the door grew louder.

“But just trust me, I do not want to stay away from you.... you can tell that I’m not lying right?”

“Yeah.”

The door burst open.
They pushed the blankets away and sat up in bed to look toward the door.

Famulus stood there with the guards.

“I’m so sorry Your Majesty. We were worried there might be a problem.”

Jupiter just looked at her skeptically.

Famulus smiled, “Lord Titus would like to invite you to breakfast.”

*********************

Jupiter met Titus in a glass conservatory bright with artificial sunlight, thick with ferns and twisted flowering vines. A small wrought iron table set for two sat along side a bubbling stream.

“Your Majesty,” said Titus, rising as she entered. Two guards and a servant stood behind him.

Jupiter gave a regal nod and took one of the golden fruit-glazed pastries from a basket as she arranged her skirt to sit down across from him. She’d picked out one of the least ostentatious dresses from the oversized closet: a flowing sea-green silk with intricate crystal beading on the bodice.

It seemed Titus was trying to get in her good graces again and since she couldn’t think of anything nice to say, she’d just stay quiet. She wasn’t going to let her temper get away from her today. Titus had the pardons for Stinger and Caine and he’d given them to her before, maybe he’d be willing to do it again if she worked this right.

Titus watched her eat with an indulgent smile.

“I must say, Mr. Wise was an interesting choice. I can see the appeal. Though that military training is a obvious drawback.” He made a little tsking sound and shook his head. “Too goal oriented, I’m afraid. In and out quickly. Getting the mission done.”

Jupiter choked on her pastry and Titus chuckled.

Oh, God...That’s what Caine meant by asking if that was enough. And she’d been too out of her mind with exhaustion, or maybe just too out of her mind--- not even understanding what he was getting at.

Was she really going to have a morning-after critique with her pseudo-son about Caine’s sex stamina?

Wasn’t he even a little ashamed that he’d been spying on them?

Titus just grinned even wider at her frown.

Apparently not.

“I’m not done with Mr. Wise yet, actually,” Jupiter said in a stern voice. “I’m going to keep him for the time being.”

“If you like.” Titus said with a shrug. “I thought you might enjoy the conservatory—with the greenery and sunshine,” he said this with a slight grimace. “It was one of mother’s favorites. Though
I find it a little bright.”

Jupiter imagined Titus lounging around his dark spaceship, Seraphi calling him in here occasionally. There was definitely something vampire-like about him, Balem too for that matter.

“My comparisons to mother seem to bother you,” he said. "But she was a fascinating woman, aren’t you the least bit interested? I know that I’d want to hear every word about my past self.”

“But she’s not any form of me—past or otherwise, and I’m not her. Even if we do have the same DNA.”

“Granted,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind staying in her room. It seemed fitting somehow. Through it is a bit antiquated I suppose. Mother could be set in her ways...”

What could she say in response to that? She did mind, of course, being kidnapped and held against her will. Was Titus really that oblivious?

He set off on a glowing remembrance of “Mother” while Jupiter tried to tune him out for a bit.

The eggs—if that’s what they were—were delicious, scrambled with some sort of fluffy white cheese and brimming with fresh herbs.

She’d ordered breakfast for Caine when she’d noticed him grabbing one of the rolls left over from last night’s dinner. She’d wanted him to come along with her, but couldn’t think of a plausible reason. She hoped he’d still be there when she returned.

Listening to Titus was starting to give her a headache.

“Do you have any coffee?” she asked.

“Coffee? No,” he gestured a servant to pour her something glowing and blue. “Try this though. It’s quite invigorating.”

He wasn’t drinking it himself, she noticed and he hadn’t offered it to her last time...

“No, thanks,” said Jupiter, slowly. “I used to have kind of a Gatorade habit. I’m trying not to drink anything blue these days.”

“Perhaps that’s just as well,” he said, rising from his chair with a suddenly serious expression. “Come. There’s something important I need to show you.”

In contrast to Seraphi’s dusty and out-of-date room, the Regenex storeroom was surgically clean. Cold, antiseptic. It felt like being in a morgue, hundreds of the blue vials in pyramids stacked high for as far as the eye could see.

“It has many names. Regenex, Recell, Nectar” Titus was saying. “There are various levels of usefulness and quality but this is the most pure and most valuable solution made by the house of Abrasax.”

“How valuable exactly?” Jupiter asked.

“One unit is worth the more than half a million dollars in your currency.”
“I see,” said Jupiter slowly. She looked around the room, trying to keep her face expressionless. “Is it some sort of drug?”

“Oh no, something much more valuable than that. It's...time.” He smiled at her, “How old would you guess that I am?”

“I don’t know, forty, maybe fifty?” She said it to be mean and enjoyed his shocked look just a little too much. Being in this room again was getting to her, and she wanted to take it out on him in some way, even if it was petty.

It took Titus a moment to regain his composure. “Hmmm. No. Actually I am thirteen and a half thousand years old,” he said.

“Oh,” said Jupiter. She hoped she sounded suitably amazed. “I can see why people would pay a lot of money for this. If this is the family business I’m going to be a very rich woman.”

“Wealthy beyond your wildest dreams...” Titus said with a touch of sadness. “But there is something you should know... Regenex comes from people. Each unit is refined from approximately a hundred human beings.”

“What do you mean by refined exactly?”

“Your planet is a farm Jupiter. There are thousands of planets like yours set up by families like mine to supply an ever increasing demand for more time.”

“You're telling me that you kill people to make this.”

She should be used to the idea by now, she'd decided that she would play it cool. Maybe if Titus thought she was okay with Regenex he would try to make a different sort of deal with her—one that would be easier to get out of than marriage. But even the idea of Regenex made her skin crawl. Being surrounded by a storeroom full of it...she couldn't help remember her family hooked up to those machines in Balem’s refinery.

It was hard to look Titus in the eye and say calmly, “It’s something like we do to cattle, I suppose. “

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“I hope that it’s done humanely at least.”

“Of course,” Titus looked concerned. “I can assure that they feel no pain. Naturally the idea bothers you, there’s no need to hide it.”

“No, really. It’s okay.” Jupiter said. Did her voice give her away? She hated that he could read her so easily. Worried he’d just find a different way to manipulate her this time around. But it was true; she felt it, the weight of the hundreds and thousands of dead people pressing in on her from all sides.

“I can only assure you that you’ll grow more used to the idea with time,” he said.

“I assume, I can bring my own family safely away from Earth before it happens,” she managed to say it in a steady voice.

“Yes, of course. Of course. But I’m afraid it’s not that simple. You must realize that you are in extreme danger. Right now my brother and sister dominate the market. And they would do anything to maintain their position. I fear for my own life. As should you.”
"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I regret to tell you that my brother gave orders to have you killed. I’d sent Mr. Wise to rescue you in fact. Without my help and guidance, I don’t think you’ll survive long in this world. And the truth is that I need your help as well. I need someone I can trust."

"And you think that you can trust me?"

"More than that," he smiled at her. "I want to know that when I die you will be my heir. Which brings us at last to my question. Jupiter Jones...Will you marry me?"

"I..." she trailed off, uncertain how she'd answer him.

******************************************************************************

Jupiter slammed into her room minutes later, the door crashing closed behind her. Caine was sitting in a chair in the corner, fixing a circuit on his glove by candlelight. She strode over to him, hiked up her skirt to straddle his lap, sat down and leaned close, put her lips against his ear so she could whisper.

And then she told him everything.
Explanations

Jupiter half-crouched on top of Caine, skirt bunched, hands braced against his chest as she leaned to whisper into his ear.

“I want to explain something,” she said. “The thing is... I knew you before yesterday. You don’t remember it, or—you didn’t forget it exactly, but...” She was out of breath and coming down from being angry with Titus, getting tangled up in her explanation before she’d even started. She wasn’t sure where to begin, or if there was any chance Caine would really believe her.

She pushed back to look at his face, trying to gauge his mood from his narrowed, black-rimmed eyes and deepening frown. She needed to stop and think about the best way to explain this, get her bearings.

The room around them was glowing with firelight, his skin pale against the deep red velvet of the chair and his eyes seemed to change colors from gold to green as she watched. His chest was warm beneath her palms, thighs hard where she’d perched her butt.

And, oh, she realized. She’d done it again.

She’d stomped into the room, upset about Titus and the Regenex and this whole crazy situation, caught up in playing at being an Entitled and pretending that she was using Caine for sex.

But...when had her natural instinct turned to straddling him?

She had spent an incredible amount of time recently with her arms and legs wrapped around him—holding on for her life, clinging to his back like a baby monkey. Maybe the straddling was just some sort of natural progression at this point.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Are we pretending to have sex again?”

“Maybe?”

Sitting like this did make it easier to whisper—and she didn’t want Titus to pick up on what she was saying. But this was the second—or was it third? —time in the space of a day that she’d just gone and climbed on top of Caine. And she didn’t want him to think she was a crazy woman before she’d even started her story.

“I think your plan last night involved ‘moving around a little.’ I’ll let you be in charge of that,” he said. He leaned back in the chair, folded his arms behind his head and waited.

Umm. She hadn’t been expecting this.

And that was part of her problem really. She felt like she should know what to expect—how to deal with Titus and everything else better this time around.

And after everything she’d been through with Caine, shouldn’t she know him better, be able to convince him to trust her, and that she trusted him, and that they should work together?

They needed to keep pretending, to fool Titus. But more than that, they needed to talk.
He’d tilted his head back, watching her.

“I don’t think this is going to be enough,” he murmured.

“No,” she admitted.

He waited a moment, then slowly moved, putting his hands around her waist and lifting her so that she was sitting up higher. One of her knees slipped from inside the armrest and she felt the stretch in her thighs as her legs spread farther to balance on top of him. Then he was reaching for her skirt, a quick movement of his fingers rustling around out of sight, under the edge of it.

“That should do it,” he said.

“That should do what?” Had she missed something there?

She watched then, as he did something else with the controls on his right glove. “I tapped into the signal on the surveillance, fixed it to play on a repeating loop. It’s a good thing this chair is in a partial blind spot. I don’t think your ‘moving around a little’ is very convincing.”

She gave an apology of a smile as she awkwardly clambered off of him.

“You can do that? Tap into signals with those gloves?”

“I had to rig a few things to get it to work. It’s an old Skyjacker trick.”

“Oh.”

He stood and looked down at her with a serious expression. “You wanted to explain something?”

Jupiter looked around the room, thinking of what she could say.

Considering things had been left untouched since her death, the furnishings didn’t really reveal anything about Seraphi Abrasax. Everything was done in lush velvets and silks, variations of red wine and gold. It seemed royal maybe, but there was nothing individual about the room.

On the other side of the enormous curved window, opposite the bed, near the sitting area where they’d had dinner the night before, a fire had been built up in the hearth. It looked like someone had been in to clean and Jupiter’s jeans and shirt were washed and folded in a neat stack on top of the made up bed.

Caine stood patiently, arms folded, waiting for her to talk.

She had to start somewhere.

“The reason I knew you before the Commonwealth yesterday, the reason why I smell like you—I think—is because I’ve traveled back through time,” she said. “I don’t know how else to explain it. But the last thing I remember was flying around Chicago with you and having burgers together afterward. When I woke up the next morning, I’d gone back about two weeks into my own past. I’m reliving things that already happened for me, but the story is changing.”

Then she told him everything that had happened during the first time she’d known him- from her rescue at the fertility clinic to their escaping the exploding refinery through a last-second portal.

“The first time I lived through this, you helped me and we made it back to Earth together. You and Stinger got your pardons and your wings again. You saved my life so many times I can’t even count. That’s why I trust you now- that’s why I know that you won’t attack me.”
Caine just watched her silently.

She paced back and forth, full of nervous energy.

“When we first met,“ she said, “You told me it could be hard for people from underdeveloped worlds to believe in intelligent life beyond their own planets. Well, in an infinite universe, is it really so hard to believe in time travel? Can you honestly say it’s impossible? Because it’s the only thing I can think of that explains what’s happening to me. We barely got through this alive the first time around. I want us to be on the same side again.”

“All right Your Majesty,” he said—reluctantly, she thought. “I believe you,”

He’d explained to her once before that he could smell if someone was lying. Jupiter wasn’t, of course, though maybe she hadn’t told him everything.

She hadn’t told him why he’d gone into a ten thousand mile wide storm and faced winds hundreds of thousands of miles per hour to rescue her. She didn’t explain why he’d risked his life searching for her until the very last second. She didn’t tell him those things because honestly, she didn’t know for certain. They’d never had the chance to talk about any of that stuff. It had to be enough for now that he believed her. She wouldn’t try to convince him he’d had some sort of feelings for her too. She’d been burned before, making those sorts of assumptions.

If Caine did have some sort of feelings for her...well it was probably something they’d have to figure out all over again.

At least he’d called her Your Majesty. It was the first time she could remember him saying it since this whole thing had started up again.

“Well,” she smiled in relief. “I think we need to figure out some sort of plan besides just waiting around for the Aegis to come and rescue me. And, um, maybe I should have mentioned this when I first walked in, but—I told Titus I’d consider marrying him... if he let me keep you as my pet.”
Titus idly stroked the satin sleeve of his jacket as he watched Jupiter Jones on the desk module. His head had fallen back against the intricately carved chair—mussing his hair, no doubt—but that was of no concern; the tousled look suited him well. He’d drained the last of his sparkling Dioritian liqueur and thought about signaling for another. It was a sweet, heavy drink for first thing in the morning, but he needed something to enliven himself.

The problem was that the surveillance video was so monotonous he was falling asleep. Mother would have been appalled to discover her recurrence so lacking in sexual imagination.

At one point, Titus had planned to broadcast the wedding night as well as the wedding, but he reconsidered that now, watching Ms. Jones move atop Mr. Wise in that awkward, repetitive pattern.

He wasn’t sure what to think of her. She hadn’t reacted to the idea of Regenex the way he’d expected and she’d seemed rather calculating with her answer to his proposal.

At least, her temper had improved since they’d dined last night. There hadn’t been any more outbursts of violence.

Titus had played the part of congenial host well, proving his goodwill, suggesting she keep the ex-Skyjacker as her pet while she considered his offer. It had been Famulus’ idea. And she’d been right, as usual. There was something about Caine Wise that irritated. He was too insolent for a lycantant, insufficiently grateful and not nearly subservient enough.

It would be a pleasure to see him taken down a notch or two. And keeping them close fit perfectly into his plan.

Titus didn’t like the way the rest of the plan was progressing. There was always the contingency. However, that sheavework was still winding its way through bureaucratic channels—not to mention the decades of legal battles to would come afterward if he took that route.

And he did have his heart set on the grand wedding.

He’d put Famulus in charge of picking out complementary attire—red went exceptionally well with his coloring—coordinating the Sims and flowers for the great hall, arranging for airtime on all the major signals. The broadcast would be stunning—recorded from all his best angles.

This royal wedding would be the topic of conversation for years. It wasn’t often an Entitled of his stature married his own mother’s recurrence. Not to mention the tragedy of it all, if the deranged splice lover murdered her soon after.

Most of all though, Titus relished the thought of Kalique and Balem’s reactions to the marriage. Those alone were more than enough reason to wait for Jupiter’s agreement.

“My lord, everyone is ready for you in the chamber,” said Famulus, entering the room.

“Excellent,” said Titus. “Watching this for another minute would have put me off my lunch.”

“And Lady Kalique has signaled.”

“Put her through,” he said.
After a moment, the image of Kalique came through; rather distressingly large and clear considering his sister hadn’t had a recode recently—though she was wearing a rather lovely aqua and gold embroidered gown.

“Darling, aren’t you looking...distinguished,” he said.

“Titus,” Kalique greeted him with tight smile. “Some of us are busy maintaining our business interests. No doubt your lack of occupation in that area allows you to spend every moment on your appearance. Well,” she gave a small laugh. “I suppose if beauty were my only real asset I’d be inclined to do the same.”

“Oh, but we all know, Kalique dear, that your foremost asset is your kind and loving heart. Is that why you’re checking in on me, sisterly concern?”

“Actually, dear brother, I wondered if you were connected in any way to what happened at the commonwealth yesterday.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said smoothly.

Kalique studied him with raised brows.

Titus considered himself a master at subterfuge. Some said the best liars taught themselves to believe that every word they spoke was truth, but he had decided centuries ago to simply lie so outrageously and so often that even truths sounded like lies once they passed his lips.

“A royal recurrence was kidnapped yesterday after leaving the hall of titles,” she told him. “It just so happens that she was Mother’s recurrence. And you didn’t hear of it?”

“I had no idea!” he exclaimed. “How absolutely intriguing.”

“She was from Earth,” she continued. “The very planet that you happened to mention the other day.”

“What a coincidence! I just finished speaking to Balem about Earth moments ago. Unfortunately, he insists on keeping it for himself. I wonder... do you think he had anything to do with this abduction?”

“You spoke to him?” her eyes narrowed.

“Yes, we just got off the line. Though he didn’t mention anything about a recurrence. It was all talk of shareholder meetings and scheduled obligations. I’m surprised he didn’t bore you with the details as well.”

“No,” she said. “I haven’t spoken to Balem since we last met.”

“Well, lucky you,” said Titus with a smile. “But I do have something extremely important to attend to right now my dear. I’ll be sure to let you know if I stumble across this recurrence of yours.”

Kalique was frowning at him as he signed off. She wouldn’t do that, he thought, if she realized how it emphasized all those unfortunate lines around her face.

Titus gave a shudder.

She had neither seen nor heard from Balem in the last few days either then.

Interesting.

“Famulus,” he said, rising from his chair. “I believe you said the girls were ready and waiting?”
“Actually,” Jupiter said, “I only told Titus I wanted to keep you—“personal pet” was his term for it. But I can take you around the ship with me as long as you’re in restraints and—” she made a face. “I think there’s some sort of chain involved...

“But it’s still a good idea,” she continued quickly. “It keeps you with me and makes you appear sort of... harmless? It’s a chance to scope things out. Better than being kept locked away under guard.”

“You mean you’re going to take me out for walks, Your Majesty?” said Caine.

“Sorry,” she shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

“Alright,” he said.

It made some sense, he thought. And truth was, he had been acting like her pet. Staying where he was told and following her lead. He just hadn’t understood why until now.

He wasn’t sure what to think about the time travel idea. She was telling the truth, or at least she believed it—and he had to admit going back in time was one possible, if improbable, explanation.

Without anything better, he was willing to go with her theory for now. It made sense of things he hadn’t been able to figure out before: the fact that she’d skipped the clinic appointment and known to drive to Stinger’s house instead, the way she’d recognized him when he’d held her in the Commonwealth, the way she’d stuck to his side, looked like she was happy to see him and tried to protect him from the first.

It made even more sense if he included the part she’d left out, because he was sure she hadn’t told him everything.

She hadn’t mentioned the two of them having sex. And that was the only thing that could completely explain why she smelled like him. It was just, until now, he’d thought it impossible.

That had to be it though. It was also why he was responding to her like this. It was just biology. It had confused him, because he’d never been controlled by sex before. He’d never reacted this way in the past. But his nose had told him that he belonged to her from the moment he’d scooped her up in the Commonwealth. He’d wanted to protect her and do her bidding, even though he was supposed to be working for Titus and should have been focused on finishing the job.

That was probably why he’d had the urge to kill Titus for her—along with a lot of other urges...Biology aside, he’d still rather work for her than Titus, if there were a choice to make. At least now, he didn’t have to wonder if someone had engineered a faulty response in him.

There must be a reason she’d left that part out of her story though.

He watched her standing in the firelight, her dress worth more than ten year’s Skyjacker salary, her hair swept up into an gleaming, intricate machine-created configuration. It was hard to imagine he’d dared touch her. He should have found her unapproachable.
It must have been an impulse on her part, one that she probably regretted now.

He remembered the night before, when she’d inched her way on to his body, over and over again, no matter how many times he’d tried to remove her. Eventually, he’d just given up and let her stay—she’d seemed to fit somehow.

Maybe the sex had been adrenaline-fueled, or gratitude for him saving her life. Maybe she was confused about what she wanted.

Or more likely she knew exactly what she wanted. Caine had kidnapped her and now Titus held her prisoner and was planning to kill her.

She wanted out of this situation.

“Even with restraints and chains, I can kill Titus if I get close enough,” he said, thinking aloud, “It would be a death sentence for me—fines for you, if they can prove you’re behind it. But if he’s planning to kill you it’s a different story. If it’s in your defense...”

“I don’t want you to kill him. I just want to get us out of here,” she said.

“I could get you to one of the short-range vessels in the hanger then. But we’d be a sitting target in the time it takes to set a portal. He might just blow you out of the sky. I don’t think we should risk you like that.”

“Wouldn’t that be too risky for you too?” she asked. “There were hundreds of guards when they brought me in. I don’t want to endanger either of us if we can help it.”

“Then we wait for the Aegis. Time passes quickly for Entitleds; a few years are nothing to them. Titus might wait for your answer for a long time. The only problem is Titus trying to use me against you. I still don’t know how he’s planning to provoke me. If you want to wait him out, maybe it’s better if you don’t have me here.”

“No,” she said. “I’m keeping you. That’s non-negotiable.”

He had to fight back the urge to smile.

“But I can’t wait years. The Aegis is keeping watch on my family, but nobody knows where I am. It would kill my mom if I were missing a long time. I need to get back as soon as I can.”

“The Aegis probably doesn’t have a track on this ship yet. All outgoing comms are blocked. But if I can get to a control box I can shut it down and send out a ping to help them locate you.”

“Then let’s get you to a control box,” she said, giving him a brilliant smile. “They’ll probably be here in a few minutes to put you back into the restraints—so I can take you for your walk.”

She winked at him and he had to look down at the floor for a moment so he wouldn’t just stare at her like an idiot.

“But first I guess we have to...?” And she gestured back to the chair.

He sat back down in the plush velvet chair again leaning back and resuming his position.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

He was surprised that he (or some other version of him, in a different time-line? He didn’t understand how that worked exactly) had gotten involved with a Royal. Wondered how it could have happened,
why he hadn’t told her she was making a mistake.

It was going to make things awkward.

“I have to admit I didn’t really think this out,” she said. “But I’m not sure what other excuse I can think of to keep you with me. I don’t want Titus to know that I—

“That you want me here to protect you, to help you escape him if possible.”

“Well, yeah, that too. Um,” she climbed back into the chair, bracing her knees on either side of him, arranging her skirts and placing her hands against him. He noticed the mark on her neck again. From him? “Titus was actually watching us—last night—he as good as told me so,” she said.

“Yeah, I told you that he would be.”

“Shouldn’t he at least be a little embarrassed though? I mean, I look exactly like his mother.”

“I don’t know all about Earth customs but Entitleds aren’t shy about sex or nudity. They enjoy being on display.”

“I guess we have that on Earth too—sex tapes,” she said.

Caine frowned, and ran through a list of words from his time on Earth. There had been those rolls of silver adhesive in use around the tower where he’d been hiding out. Sex tape? It didn’t seem like it’d be entirely...comfortable—but maybe? He gave his head a quick shake to clear his mind of the images that had cropped up. This wasn’t the easiest thing he’d ever done, her sitting in his lap while they talked about sexual customs.

“Well,” he cleared his throat. "Entitleds don’t have prohibitions against sex with family members. On less developed planets, those mating restrictions help prevent genetic flaws in offspring, but since Entitleds can have their codes altered as they please..."

"I guess," she sounded hesitant. "The whole thing still seems weird to me."

"Weird or not, in spite of the fact that you look like his mother or maybe even because of it, Titus will probably invite you to his orgy chamber eventually... If he hasn’t already.”

He had to tamp down the weird reaction the thought gave him. It was useless to feel territorial about a Queen.

“No, he didn’t invite me...” she looked at him closely. “Wait did he ever invite you?”

“It wasn’t a condition of the job.” He’d leave it at that.

“Well what about splices, then? Do you have the same ideas about sex and privacy and all that?”

“That’s not relevant.” Titus didn’t care about what splices thought or felt. Most Entitleds didn’t. Not that Caine had ever been used to the concept of privacy- there was no such thing living in a military barracks.

“Oh,” she said, looking away. “I—I’m sorry you have to do this—with me.”

“It’s fine, “he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

He didn’t mind being close to her. If anything, he probably liked it more than he should. It would be awkward for her, but he’d determined he’d help her in whatever way he could. Because he’d figured
it out now, the reason she hadn’t mentioned the two of them having sex before. It was in her questions, the way she was still figuring out the universe opening up around her.

She probably hadn’t known, the first time she’d met him, but she was smart and at some point she must have figured it out. She must understand now, the difference, the huge untraversable divide between royalty and a splice.
Nine days later, Jupiter sat across the dinner table from Titus.

Again.

Her sumptuous, dark-gold dress, patterned in stars and swirls of galaxies, reflected the firelight. Fabric soft like velvet but smooth and lightweight at the same time, fit perfectly to her body, curving over her breasts before flowing down in a smooth puddle to the floor.

She didn’t feel comfortable in it at all.

In her left hand was a small silver cylinder, biometrically keyed to her palm print. Just behind her, Caine stood attached to the cylinder by a chain fixed to restraints around his wrists. If she released the cylinder, an electromagnet activated, locking the cylinder into the nearest metal surface—usually the floor.

It was a devise for theft prevention on heavy-duty military vehicles. More than sufficient, Famulus had explained with a smirk, to contain one undersized lycantant.

At least, his hands were locked in front this time. And Jupiter insisted on keeping the devise in her hand. She’d rather have Caine at her back than her feet.

The lock and chain were supposed to be safety precautions. But Jupiter was pretty sure it was in part just to amuse Titus. They’d given her the key to the restraints, and she took them off whenever they were in her room. And she’d noticed Titus’ malicious smile the time she’d lost her grip on the cylinder and it slammed down into the floor, Caine forced to crouch until she could release him.

It bothered her though, that Titus kept implying she liked the chain too, that she liked having Caine under her control.

Was it something she supposedly had in common with his mother?

It wasn’t that she liked having Caine chained exactly...But ...maybe she liked the fact that he’d agreed to it?

Caine wasn’t entirely happy with the situation, but he’d gone along with it. Rolling his eyes, as if there were something funny about being her pet. He wasn’t letting her in on the joke though, he just shook his head when she’d asked.

Anyway, it was all just for show. Caine told her he could break through the restraints with his gravity boots.

He’d had been quiet all day. Alert. Gathering information probably. He could sense the guards’ movements through the ship, and was memorizing their patterns.

Sometimes she’d turn and catch him looking at her.

She didn’t have to turn now to know his stoic expression as he stood behind her, his arms crossed. She’d felt a whisper of air across her bare neck and shoulders, her arms suddenly covered in goose bumps when he’d shifted his stance just a moment ago.
Her skin was becoming absurdly sensitized to his every movement, sensitized to him.

It had been her stupid idea to pretend they were having sex—it’d seemed like a good idea in the beginning. But all that sitting on his lap, huddling under the covers. Waking up mornings, wrapped around him in some embarrassing way—she was so frustrated she couldn’t think straight anymore.

The worst part of it all was that Caine seemed entirely uninterested in her.

He’d agreed to help her, but maybe just because he didn’t want to work for Titus anymore.

It was possible that once they got out of here, they could straighten things out, but everything was such a mess right now. She was nervous, double guessing everything, worried she’d never figure out what had sent her back in time, or if it would happen again.

One of the servants brought a tray piled high with crisped cheese pastry triangles. Jupiter tossed one up to Caine and heard the snap of teeth as he neatly caught it. He was addicted to the things—and it annoyed Titus when she fed him at the table.

Titus slowly curved his lips into a smile tonight though, something sinister about it. Was he wearing lip-gloss or just the rich foods and wine that had stained his mouth? He’d been oddly silent so far.

He’d stopped with the sex critiques a few days ago. He said Jupiter was a hopeless case and he couldn’t bear to think about it anymore. She wasn’t sure if that meant they should try to be more convincing or not to bother. At least Titus had never asked her to an orgy. No matter what the Entitled habits, she couldn’t get past the squick factor on that one.

He also hadn’t mentioned anything about a wedding recently. And that was starting to worry her.

She and Caine had explored the ship as much as possible. There were a lot of unused rooms, closed away and left neglected. Due to Titus’s money problems or just a lack of interest, Jupiter didn’t know.

The clipper was a strange combination of futuristic space efficiency and run-down opulence. Anything to do with the Regenex was meticulously maintained--or anything to do with Titus’s comfort or vanity for that matter.

She remembered the day Titus had shown her his bathing and wardrobe rooms: all high-tech wonders and iridescent pink marble as far as the eye could see...

Caine had gotten a ping out to the Aegis more than a week ago. They’d evaded a couple of guards, found a hall where he could disrupt a comm control box. It had taken less than a minute. She’d thought things were looking up then, and that they’d be rescued soon.

But since then, they’d walked down that same hall every day, sending out a ping every time. And still no response.

In the beginning, being careful had seemed the right thing to do. But it was starting to feel now like she’d made a mistake.

Again.

Ever since the first time she’d been swept up in all this, at the clinic, she’d felt like a game piece, moved around by the Abrasax family, by other things beyond her control. She kept trying to get her bearings, figure out the rules of the game, but everything kept changing.
Caine might be fearless—but she hadn’t quite figured out how to be that way.

It was one thing with gunfire, or explosions, big life or death, fate of the Earth, in your face, decisions. But somehow sinister marriage proposals with indefinite deadlines, and pretend sex in strangely luxurious spaceships, seemed to fall into some different category.

For the first day or so, Caine had been fine with her stalling until the Aegis came. He’d admitted it was protocol to wait for back up. But since then he’d been figuring out the layout of the ship, and every day he’d come up with alternate plans, better, more detailed ways of her escaping. He still wanted to help her, he was still willing to follow her lead, but she could tell he was getting restless.

“Your Majesty,” said Titus, putting down his wine glass and speaking at last. “I must apologize. I realize now that my marriage proposal didn’t take into account your...cultural sensibilities, and I can see that the sort of alliance I’d envisioned between us would be difficult at best. However, if you’ll agree to it, I would still like to make you my heir. I’ve had the sheave work drawn up. All you need do is sign.”

One of the servants brought a sheave around and placed it on the table next to her, and Jupiter looked at it warily.

“Okay,” she said hesitantly.

“So you’ll do it?” Titus looked pleased.

“Yes, I’ll be your heir.” She knew there must be some catch though, something strange going on. “But I’ll have to read this over and get an advocate to look at it for me.”

“Excellent. Take your time. And by all means, let Mr. Wise enjoy the rest of his... treats.” Titus stood and started to leave the room. Then he paused before reaching the door and turned to face her again. “You’ll be happy to know we’ll reach Earth by tomorrow. Good night, and sleep well Jupiter Jones.”

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After dinner, Jupiter and Caine walked into the conservatory garden. The artificial sunlight turned off, only the flickering light of two giant torches danced through the shadows of ferns. They followed the dark paths through a tangle of overgrowth, finally stopping at an overstuffed couch in front of a glass wall looking out to the stars.

It was as good a place as any to talk. The guards stood back near the entrance and the sound of running water covered their voices. They were shielded from view by an elaborate metal trellis above, covered by a curtain of flowering vines.

“How’s the surveillance in here?” she asked as they sat.

Caine listened for the distinct high-pitched whir that only he could hear.

“Just the one in the corner near the entrance, it recorded us coming in, but it’s too far away now.”

He was frowning though, as if still listening for something in the distance.
She put her hand over his to get his attention, reaching past the restraints, smoothing down to his bare fingers where they came out of his gloves.

“I’m sorry,” she started. “I know I’ve been too cautious, waiting for the Aegis all this time, when it should have been obvious no one is coming.”

“Something’s going on,” he said, distracted.

“I know,” she said. “I think Titus is done waiting. This thing he wants me to sign—it can’t be good. I didn’t want you to take risks, to put yourself in danger for me. But neither of us is really safe here. I’ve been delaying, but we can’t wait around forever. You’ve trusted me. And I do trust you to get me out of here, but you have to come with me. It doesn’t matter if Titus still owns you. Once we’re away, I’ll fight him for you—with lawyers or whatever we need to do.”

She waited for him to say something. Anything.

After a moment he whispered, “Shhh.”

“What?”

“The guards have gone away.” He was still listening to something though. Or thinking. A look of concentration on his face.

Fair enough, she could wait while he figured out a plan. She gave his hand an awkward pat, and picked up the sheave from her lap. It was difficult, with the cylinder still in one hand, but she figured out the light function to illuminate the words in the darkness. She read through the first lines, dense with legal words and alien terms. It made absolutely no sense. At all. And it just went on forever. She started scanning to the end just to see how long it was.

“Jupiter,” Caine’s voice was low, and she when she turned to face him he was closer than she’d realized.

The blue glow of the sheave lit up his face but his eyes were dark. He was staring right at her, almost as if he couldn’t help himself. And it did funny things to her stomach—a weird bubbling excitement that made it hard to remember to breathe. She’d gotten so used to him looking away whenever their eyes met.

He leaned in slowly, so slowly she thought she was imagining it at first. Then he touched his mouth to hers, just the faintest brush of lips, giving her the chance to back away if she wanted.

But that was the last thing she wanted to do. Instead, she leaned in too, letting her lips open up against his, remembering the feel and taste of his mouth. She was confused as to why this was happening now, but happy, so happy that it finally was.

She dropped the sheave and put one hand up to hold his face, fingers tracing the outline of his jaw. Why hadn’t they been doing this all along?

He caught her bottom lip between his teeth, gently biting down, as if testing the give of her flesh. His strong hands caught her by the waist and pulled her in closer, so that her breasts pressed up against his chest.

His restraints were digging into her ribs though and she backed up enough to say, “Hold on a minute.”

She reached into her pocket and took out the key.
And then he pulled away—moving as far as he could on the short chain.

“Something’s wrong,” he said, breathing hard.

Suddenly, he yanked hard on the chain and pulled the cylinder from her hand. It slammed back into the metal trellis behind them and locked into place so that his arms were pulled back overhead.

“I think Titus drugged me,” he said, and he was close to panting, trying to catch his breath. “He must have put something in the food.”

The cheese treats, she thought. And Caine had eaten the whole tray.

“He’s hoping I’ll attack you,” he said in a grim voice. “Just leave me here until I can calm down.”

“I’m not going to leave you.” She got up to kneel next to him, then leaned over, one hand resting on the back of the couch, straining to reach the lock. "I'll unfasten you and then we can go back to our room.”

He turned and nuzzled into her neck, opening his mouth and dragging his teeth along the sensitive skin there. She sucked in a sharp breath.

“Don’t unlock me,” he mumbled the words against the side of her throat.

“You really think you’ll attack me?” she asked, pulling back a little.

“No, not attack. But...I smell you and I can’t think straight. I’ll do something I... I shouldn’t.”

She sat back on her heels to look at him.

“Why shouldn’t you? You don’t want to?”

“I want to. But you don’t. Not now that you know—it would be the same mistake all over again.”

Wait, what mistake was he talking about here? She struggled with her dress, which was falling down in the front and bunched up everywhere around them on the couch. She still hadn’t gotten the hang of these princess type gowns.

"What do you mean?"

“Your Majesty, I have more in common with a dog than I do with you.”

“But I love—” she stopped short. God, was she really going to do this? She’d been frozen with fear lately, thinking about how their survival the first time around had depended too much on luck. Waiting had seemed like the smart thing, the safe thing to do.

She didn’t want to wait anymore. It was definitely time to start taking risks—but telling him she loved him? Things were complicated enough already. Maybe she couldn’t quite tell him that yet, not exactly.

“I don’t care about being royalty,” she said. “Or the differences between us.”

“Alright,” he looked at her, uncertain.

“Being with you wouldn't be a mistake, not for me,” she tried to explain. “Unless this is all just because of the drug...?”
“No. This can't be the reaction Titus was expecting. This is...It's been here since I met you, but I can't control it right now." He clenched his jaw, "I don't want to control it. I want..."

“You really don’t want me to unlock you?” she asked.

He shook his head and she dropped the key back into her pocket.

“And this doesn’t hurt your arms?”

“No,“ he said on an exhale. “I’m fine. I could stay like this for hours.”

“Perfect,” she said with a smile.

“What?”

“You don’t have to be in control. I’m not afraid of you. The guards are gone... What if we never get another chance?”

With that, she stood up and started to take off her dress.

It was meant to be seductive, but the material was difficult and clingy and got stuck in spots, so that she was breathing as hard as he was by the time she’d finally managed to pull it all the way over her head.

He didn’t seem to mind, judging by the way he focused on her breasts bouncing free after she struggled her way out of the dress.

“I’ll be in control for us both,” she offered. "If you want?"

He nodded slowly, watching her, as she ran her fingers through her hair, undoing the twists of space magic that’d kept it all in place, shaking it free so that it settled around her shoulders. After kicking off her shoes, she climbed back up to kneel on the couch next to him and placed her hand in the center of his chest.

“This shirt just sort of comes apart, right?”

"Yeah," he answered, voice rough.

She grabbed on with both hands, delighted when it came off with one hard tug. She wanted to explore every single inch of his body, she had wanted it for such an incredibly long time now. And somehow this was real now and he wanted it too, it wasn’t just another awkward game of pretend that would end in frustration.

She put a hand on his belly, just above the waist of his pants, and felt the tense of his muscles at her touch, the heat of his skin.

“Is this okay?” she asked.

He let out a long stream of breath. “You don’t have to keep asking, Your Majesty. Anything you want to do to me is okay.”

She ran her hands up over his abs, then smoothed her palms over his chest. Her fingers caught on his nipples, and she stopped to toy with one, pinched it just to see how he’d react, and smiled at his quick intake of breath.

She felt a little like she was torturing him, as she moved on to cup the bunched muscles of his
shoulders, and stroked up along the smooth hot skin of his arms straining up overhead, going so slowly while he was quivering beneath her. But maybe it was a torture that he liked? She watched his face: head tilted back, eyes half-lidded, biting his own lip.

Really, she could spend all night on just that mouth.

She darted in to taste him with a quick swipe of tongue. Then lingered in slow soft bites of his mouth, learning the feel of him all over again, fingers tracing the brand on his neck, the furry texture of his hair, the pointed tip of an ear.

He was almost trembling with the effort of holding himself back. For that matter she was aching at just the thought of having him inside of her. She probably didn’t need to work either of them up much more. She’d already been going crazy for days.

“Wait,” she said. “Do we need some sort of space condom or..?”

“Standard Legion shots—good for ten years,” he said.

“Good to know.”

She went for the fastenings of his pants, and he pushed his hips up to help her work them down his legs. Then she was climbing up on to his lap and taking the weight of him into her hand, hot and hard and heavy. It took only a moment to lift her hips and position him, squirming just a little as he slipped along her wet entrance, finding the right angle. And then she was sinking down onto his cock, stretching as he filled her completely.

She spread her knees and tried to find leverage, drawing it out, savoring the push and pull as she adjusted to his size, working a slow rhythm to start, moving back a little to look into his eyes.

What was going on inside his head? Physically, they’d been so close these last days, but he’d found reasons to keep a distance between them all the same.

Had he held himself back trying to protect her? She’d been the one who wasn’t brave enough. If he really thought he wasn’t good enough for her...well, she’d have to find some way to convince him otherwise.

She returned to his mouth, this time for lazy open-mouthed kisses as she focused on moving above him, lifting and falling in a steady rhythm. Her fingers dug into the thick muscles of his back as she sped up, grinding down on top of him.

It was hard to find the right angle though, and she curved her spine, burying her face against his neck as she strained.

“Help me,” she said.

And then he was moving, thrusting up underneath her, their bodies slapping together. She didn’t know if it was going to be enough for her, and she let go of him with one hand to work her fingers between them.

He gave a couple of mighty pushes beneath her then, so hard she wondered if she was going to catch air, and she had to focus on just holding on tight to him. There was the snap of breaking metal. The trellis around them creaking in protest as he gave one last hard thrust before falling still.

“You can unlock me now,” he said at last, when he’d caught his breath.
It took a moment to find the key, to reach up his sweat-slicked body to where he was fastened, and undo the mechanism that bound him.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, rubbing at his wrists. He took off his gloves, and flexed and stretched his long fingers. He looked normal, more himself again somehow.

He reached out to take her by the waist and hold her, gave her a sweet lingering kiss. Then he eased her down so she was flat on her back in front of him.

“You turn now,” he said, and moved down to bury his head between her thighs. He went to work on her with a combination of mouth and tongue and teeth and fingers that made her squeak in surprise before she melted into a helpless moan.

“Ummm, okay,” she said, surfacing after the fifth or sixth orgasm, trying to find the ability to form words again. “I’m uh, good.”

He looked up from between her legs.

“You sure?”

He studied her face carefully while he worked her with a pulling stroke and twist of strategically placed fingers that made her weak all over again.

She groaned and shook her head no.

So he lowered his head to settle back down to business.

Jupiter was going to die here, she thought a long while later. Caine was relentless. Maybe he was still out of control or something. She didn’t even have the will to stop him though.

Lethargy would wash over her, and she’d think for just a moment, that was it, that was enough. Then he’d just start winding her up all over again...

When he did stop it was to raise his head to listen to something.

“Oh shit,” he said. “We have to get out of here.”
The Drug

The drug didn’t make Caine want sex —not exactly— it'd have been a hell of a lot easier if it were simple as that.

It was some chemical designed to strip him down— until he was just one instinct, one basic, vital, essential thought.

He couldn’t push it away, couldn’t ignore it or use logic to get around it. It was there in the pounding of his heart, the jittery sensation in his stomach, the inability to catch his breath.

If he’d resented being chained to Jupiter, it might have been focused on revenge or violence. The drug might have worked the way Titus wanted. He’d have felt the urge to kill her, become obsessed with it.

But that wasn’t it at all.

He’d known something strange was going on for days.

It was like his loyalty and obedience coding, so long dormant he’d doubted their existence, had kicked in with a vengeance. He’d been territorial, focused on protecting her. He hadn’t known if it was still the scent thing or just something inevitable about Jupiter.

He wanted to belong to her. If that meant pretending to be her pet, well, he was more than willing to follow her lead.

He still didn’t understand why she was so determined to keep him. She just hadn’t figured out what a fuck-up he was yet. He should have tried to explain it better, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He couldn’t resist staying close. And it wasn’t as if she had anyone else to help her.

He’d looked at her sitting next to him in the darkness, the chemical rushing through him, and something washed over him.

The smell of her, getting inside of him.

He’d ignored it, pushed it to the back of his brain for days now, but because of the drug, he couldn’t escape it anymore.

It was like he’d discovered something he hadn’t even known he was searching for.

It was terrifying.

The drug had tapped into something primal, something he didn’t understand or know what to do with.

Sex was mixed up with it, sure, but he’d been dealing with that frustration for days.

And sex didn’t really freak him out.

That was just an easier way to explain it to her, something she’d understand. Less confusing than whatever this other thing was.

Anyway, he could smell that she still wanted him too.
No, he’d kissed her because she was there and he had to be up against her, to be close to her somehow, to do something about this overwhelming thing he was feeling.

If he were on the floor at her feet he’d have gone with rubbing up against her legs, butting his head against her even.

He half-remembered something like this from when he was just a pup. Something vague and pushed away, something he’d tried his hardest to forget. The feeling of wanting something he didn’t understand, couldn’t have, trying to nose his way into the huddle of other lycantants.

When she’d pulled off her dress and offered to take control for him, it’d been a relief.

Maybe he should have tried harder, for her sake, to convince her that it was a bad idea. That she didn’t want to make the mistake of getting involved with him again.

But he didn’t. He couldn’t.

Maybe sex would make sense of things, clear his head.

The feel of her hands, her lips, her body bouncing, pressing, moving against him, just intensified it.

Though he could feel the strange obsessive edge of it fading, the drug working through him.

He was able to shift his focus after a while, turn to the idea of tasting her, pleasing her.

The inexplicable feeling didn’t go away though.

He knew the drug had cleared his system entirely, at least, when other thoughts, other sensations were able to push through.

And he could hear the noise through the air vent, of massive numbers of guards moving in the hanger below.
“As soon as Titus finds out I haven’t attacked you,” Caine said, “He’ll go to whatever’s next on the agenda. I don’t want to wait and see what that is.”

He’d fastened his pants and was putting his gloves back on as he spoke. “There’re hundreds of guards in the hanger right now. We need to get out while they’re looking the other way---while you still have the chance.”

Jupiter had gotten back into her crumpled gown.

“Are you ready to get out of here, Your Majesty?”

“So ready,” she said.

“Then let’s go,” he took her by the hand.

He’d powered up his boots and shield and hoisted her onto his back before she knew it.

Then they were speeding down the garden paths, pushing through shadowy leaves and thorns, tendrils that grabbed at her dress and hair as they passed.

The blue streaks of Caine’s boots bright in the dark.

He paused, feet gathering speed, before sprinting out into the hall.

The crash of impact knocked Jupiter’s teeth together as he mowed down a group of guards---plowed right through an entire row of them, like they were bowling pins set up to be knocked over.

She held tighter against him as, seconds later, bullets exploded, ricocheting off the walls around them.

Behind the cover of his shield, they raced to turn a corner into a long empty hallway, Caine paused a split second to take in a deep breath and then ripped open an enormous wall panel, exposing an empty space behind.

"Hold on!" he said. Then he jumped inside.

And they were suddenly free falling down a service shaft, down so many levels Jupiter was dizzy with the blur of passing pipes and wires and circuitry around them.

He turned his boots to circle out---skidding off the sides---until they’d stopped in a stomach-twisting lurch, hovering in front of a metal grate.

One hard slam and the grate shoved free. They climbed out as it fell to the floor with a clatter, Jupiter’s dress catching on a twist of broken wire before she tore it free.

Caine opened a door and they ducked inside and closed it behind them.

She jumped off his back, looking around.

“We need weapons,” he said. “It’s in here somewhere.”

The room was small, lit by a dim orange bulb over the door, one wall curved inward, ribbed like the
inside of a giant worm. The other wall covered floor to ceiling in cabinets and drawers. Caine started breaking things open, riffling through and tossing stuff to the floor.

A swath of gold-spun fabric, a tiny silver cat with emeralds for eyes, some sort of sheave with elaborate engravings. Everything was in a jumble; drawers filled high like a treasure chest overflowing with pirate loot.

A dark body suit made of some heavy, woven material landed at Jupiter’s feet. It looked about her size...

She quickly kicked off her shoes, tried pulling the pant legs up one by one under her skirt, wiggled to pull her dress off—caught sight of Caine, who’d turned to look at her, distracted for a moment, before quickly turning back to his task.

“It’ll be better to move around in,” she explained, a little embarrassed. “More stealthy.”

A few seconds later, as she was putting her arms through the sleeves, she heard a clicking sound and saw a long metal box slide out from the bottom shelf.

It was filled to the top with weapons.

Caine took a gun and shoved it into the waist of his pants. Then he made a sound of satisfaction as he reached in and grabbed his mauler. He switched off the safety and listened to it fire up, ran his fingers over it carefully, as he held it up to the light.

There were raw abrasions around his wrists, Jupiter noticed, just above his gloves. She remembered the chain hanging from the broken trellis earlier, the restraints.

Had she hurt him?

She really didn’t think she’d been drugged, she didn’t have any excuse for being out of control...

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He looked at her curiously.

She reached for his hand and he gave it to her. He watched as she tentatively touched the broken skin.

“Maybe I took advantage of things back there, took advantage of you.”

Caine just seemed confused though, frowned at her.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Is the drug all gone? I thought you seemed better. I mean, your breathing is normal...”

“It’s all gone now. I have a quick metabolism,” he said. “I’m alright. You’re welcome to--- take advantage of me Your Majesty.”

He said it like he was testing out the words though; as if there was something he didn’t quite understand.

“But-“ she started, at a loss for words.

He tucked his mauler into its holster, turned to curve his hands around the tops of her shoulders, fingers reaching to adjust the fabric that had twisted at her collarbone.
He looked at her questioning before leaning in slowly and touching his lips to hers in a quick kiss.

“Really,” he said pulling back to look at her again.

********

Jupiter expected guards around every corner, but the ship was quiet, empty.

They quickly made their way to a small maintenance bay, above and to the right of the giant space where she’d first entered Titus’ clipper days ago. The far off glow of huge chandeliers barely reflected off the tops of the giant golden statues that stood between them and the main hangar far below.

She could hear the echo of footsteps marching in formation in the distance.

It was empty here though, just three small ships, some equipment and a double hatch door that led out into the vastness of space.

Unfortunately, the door was blocked by a grid of humming blue beams that would trip an alarm.

“I can get around and disarm it from the other side. Take this,” Caine handed her his mauler. She held it carefully in both hands “You need to flip-“

Jupiter turned off the safety and aimed it toward the door.

He smiled.

He flew up towards the ceiling, worked on picking his way through the beams, flipping up and around to the other side. In seconds, he’d deactivated it and was heading back down to her.

He was halfway down to the ground when they came back on again with an ominous sound, an electric buzz that held him trapped, caught inside the grid, suspended in mid-air.

An alarm blared out---and was quickly shut off.

Titus walked in with four guards.

Jupiter lifted the mauler to aim it straight at him.

“It looks like you’ve let your dog off his chain, Your Majesty. Fortunately, I’ve caught him for you.”

“Let him go,” she said.

Titus ignored her, didn’t seem phased by the gun.

“Apparently the drug didn’t work the way I’d anticipated.” Titus looked at Caine with a smirk. “What instinct did it uncover then? Did you learn something about yourself today Mr. Wise?”

Caine didn’t say anything, struggling against the trap. It flexed where he pushed against it, strained around him. But it held.

“I don’t suppose you were helpful enough to sign the sheave for me.” Titus said, turning again to Jupiter. “It’s not too late. I have another copy, right here. Cooperate and I will let you go. I’ll even let you keep your pet. I have his pardon and reinstatement. I can give them to you and send you both on
your way right now.”

“I’m not going to sign anything. “ said Jupiter, hands steady on the gun. “Just let us go and no one has to get hurt.”

“You’ll never use that thing,” he smiled condescendingly.

Jupiter fired the mauler and it kicked back so hard she almost stumbled. The bullet tore through the high collar of Titus’s jacket, grazed his neck and left behind a thin trickle of blood.

She’d been aiming for his shoulder.

He lifted a hand to touch his neck, raised his brows. “Well, well Ms. Jones, you do continue to surprise. However, you may also be surprised to learn that this isn’t merely a trap. I can eject him into the void with the push of a button. Are you willing to risk it?”

She resisted the urge to look at Caine. She could hear the snap of electricity as he fought against the trap. Focused on holding the gun steady, she kept her eyes on Titus.

“You’re in love with Mr. Wise, aren’t you?” Titus looked at her with false sympathy, shook his head and made a little tsking sound. “Beauty and her beast.”

“What is it you want?” she said, beyond disgusted with him and his games.

“I told you, I simply wish to make you my heir.”

“I’m not that gullible. I know better than to believe anything you tell me.”

“So distrustful. And after everything I’ve done for you?”

Jupiter just glared.

Titus gave a dramatic sigh. “Well, if you must know, signing this will also make me your heir.”

“And then you’ll kill me.”

“That was one plan. I’d rather hoped the lycantant would do the job for me. It certainly would have facilitated things,” he said. “I could have taken your signature from your dead body and Mr. Wise would have taken the blame. You were quite helpful--so insistent on keeping him by your side. But since he’s failed to live up to his reputation... I’m a reasonable man. I’m willing to negotiate. Cooperate with me and I’ll wait. Sixty, seventy, eighty years even. It’s not such a long time. I’ve heard that patience is a virtue.”

“You can’t trust him,” said Caine.

“I don’t,” said Jupiter.

Titus shrugged.

“I could have my guards kill you--- slowly. That way we can take your signature while you’re still alive. There’s so much sheavework involved if there’s suspected coercion though.”

She could shoot Titus again. The mauler was heavy, hard to control though. Even if she aimed for his smirking face, she didn’t know if it would get them out of there.

Or if it would even kill him. They’d probably just dump him into a vat of Regenex---that is, after the
guards had opened fire on her and Caine.

Titus took another step closer to her, reached out slowly, as if to grab her hand.

There was a growl from behind, sparks flying in every direction, an explosive burst of sound and light. Caine swooped down and tackled Titus and the guards, the impact driving them away from her.

Slowly, she backed away, toward the door.

After a few moments, Caine emerged from the pile with Titus held by the scruff, gun to the side of his head.

She sagged against the door frame with a sigh of relief.

And then she felt the cool slide of metal against her skin.

Famulus held a knife to Jupiter's neck.

"Ah hmm," she delicately cleared her throat. "Put the gun down Mr. Wise."

Caine turned in surprise, reluctantly started to lower it.

A roar of engines started up, humming, vibrating inside the walls of the spaceship.

"Ah," said Titus. "The sweet sound of the War Hammers, it's like music to my ears."
The roar of the War Hammers increased, as down the length of the ship came the sliding sound of metal, followed by a great swoosh of outward projectiles.

And then there was silence.

They were at a standoff.

Jupiter stood at the door, while Famulus, quiet behind her, still held the knife at her throat.

Caine seemed to reconsider lowering his gun, turning instead to press it hard into Titus’s ribs. But Titus didn’t seem to even care; a confident smile on his face ever since he’d heard the War Hammers.

“What’s going on out there?” Caine asked him.

“There is an entire field of War Hammers surrounding us now. Even if you managed to take a ship, you’d never survive long enough to set a portal. It would be impossible for you to make it through.”

But that wasn’t true, Jupiter thought. Caine had done it once before—when he’d stopped the wedding. He’d needed Stinger’s help that time though. Right now, their chances didn’t look as good.

The knife was sharp; it stung where it sliced into the soft flesh under her chin, but Famulus’ hand was unsteady.

She was a deer splice, an assistant, not an assassin. And the knife wasn’t actually anywhere near an artery...

Caine kept looking like he was signaling Jupiter to do something, but she had no idea what.

He was covered in blackened singe marks, a bleeding cut down the side of his arm. His shield had protected him from most of the exploding grid, but not all of it.

This time she could do something brave to save the day.

She tried to envision some complex series of moves involving solar plexuses or insteps, but her brain was suddenly foggy and weird. Nerves maybe? She’d just have to wing it.

She threw her head back into Famulus with a hard clunk, but the knife followed her motion and cut a little deeper before she could fling her arm up and back, knocking it away.

She raised the Mauler and stepped around to face Famulus, who was rubbing at her own nose, eyes watery and bright—and angry.

Jupiter didn’t particularly like her, but she didn’t really want to shoot her either. She was just another Abrasax family pawn—and it would be too much like shooting Bambi.

“Just go,” said Jupiter, aiming the gun at her.

Famulus didn’t hesitate, moving quickly out of sight.

Jupiter stumbled as she turned back toward Caine. He’d had taken a firmer hold on Titus again, dragged him back toward the far wall.
“Are you okay?” he asked, looking at her concerned.

“Yeah.” Why wouldn’t she be?

Maybe he hadn’t been signaling her to bust out with her smooth fighting moves...but what then?

The sounds of gunfire, then explosions, came from outside the ship.

“Something’s going on Titus,” Caine said. “Why are all the guards down in the hanger?”

Titus ignored him, looking at Jupiter with a conniving expression. “You might as well give up and take my bargain now Jupiter. It’s the only way you’ll get out of here alive. Sign the sheave and I’ll send you on your way.”

“Who’s out there?” demanded Caine, giving Titus a little shake this time.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re lying.”

Titus shrugged.

Jupiter eyed the guards. She’d never heard them speak, never figured out what kind of creatures they were exactly. The only thing she knew for sure was that they wouldn’t shoot at Titus.

Which meant keeping hold of him was probably their best bet.

“How about he comes with us?” said Jupiter backing closer to Caine, trying to clear her head so she could think straight. “Titus, send away your guards. Deactivate the alarms and the War Hammers and get us out of here. And if you promise to stop pulling this kind of crap, I’ll convince Caine not to kill you. We’ll drop you off somewhere once we’re out of here.”

“Is there enough room on one of these ships?” she asked Caine.

He shook his head absently, frowning as he quirked an ear to listen to something.

But that was the best plan she could come up with for now.

She wasn’t really feeling so good. The cut on her neck didn’t seem serious, but... She put a hand to her throat, her fingers coming away with a little bit of blood on them. She should be okay, but she felt dizzy—she’d never felt faint at the sight of blood before.

Something crashed down into the hanger below.

“All right,” said Titus, suddenly. “Maybe leaving is a good idea. How about the three of us go together right now.”

Jupiter heard shouting. Something was going on, but she couldn’t seem to focus. Her vision was narrowing, the peripheries going grey.

“I need a status report,” said a familiar voice and there were footsteps out in the hall.

“In here!” Caine called out.

Three uniformed soldiers ran in through the door, guns raised, then stopped short to take in the scene. Jupiter thought she saw the edge of—wings? Then Stinger Apini walked in to stand at their front.
“Your Majesty,” he said.

“Stinger!” cried Jupiter, running to hug him.

But she only made it halfway across the room before everything went black.

********************

Jupiter woke to the sound of the alarm blaring and Mama commanding, ”Jupiter, get up. Make the coffee.”

“Ugh,” she groaned. She felt horrible.

“Jupiter!” She pulled the blanket away from her face.

“Just two more minutes,” she pleaded.

“What is on your neck?” Aleksa’s eyes narrowed. ”You are bleeding. Did you hurt yourself?”

Jupiter sat upright with a start, reaching to cover her throat with her hand.

“It’s just a scratch. I...scraped it in my sleep.”

This just earned her another suspicious look.

She climbed out of bed and gave her mother a big hug, throwing her arms around her and squeezing her tight.

“I’m okay,” she said. She didn’t like lying to her though. “I’ll go make the coffee.”

Upstairs in the kitchen she looked at her phone to see the date.

It was June 24th.

Again.

This time she’d have to do some things differently.

******

This time, on the drive to Stinger’s house, she didn’t worry about aliens attacking her. After all, she’d made it there in one piece the last time.

Though something else might prevent her making the whole four-hour drive this time: it was a struggle to stay awake. At least, if things went the same as before, she’d be feeling better in a day or so.

She didn’t know what the heck was going on, but maybe that didn’t even matter. There were certain things she knew she had to do—no matter what: protect her family, protect the Earth, and keep away from the Keepers and bounty hunters.
She had to think practically. Step by step. Keep it simple. Because if she started thinking about what it really meant, living in some sort of time-loop, she was going to totally freak out—and that wouldn’t do anybody any good.

Caine had been okay when she last saw him on Titus’ clipper. Stinger had been there with the Aegis—or were they Skyjackers? She’d caught that hint of wings...

Or was the real Caine still with her in the future somewhere? Or waiting for her at the clinic right now?

It made her brain hurt to think about it all. She didn’t understand alternate timelines or parallel realities. She just had to keep moving forward.

She knew what to say to Stinger at least, planned it out carefully in her head.

After parking Vladie’s car, she started to walk through the bees and flowers and toward the front porch.

But she didn’t make it that far.

********

When Jupiter opened her eyes she was looking up at the ceiling of Stinger’s sitting room, lying on that same velvet settee. This time the sun was much lower in the sky though.

How long had she been unconscious?

“Your Majesty,” said Kiza, sitting on a chair nearby. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice was crackly, throat dry. She forced herself to sit up. “I think so.”

There was a condensation covered pitcher of ice water on the table next to her, along with a tall glass and plate heaped high with cookies.

“Can I?” Jupiter gestured.

“Of course,” Kiza rushed to pour her a glass and handed it to her.

Jupiter was guzzling it down when Stinger walked into the room.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “You’re awake.”

She nodded, grabbed for a few of the cookies, thinking of what she should say to him.

“I found you passed out in my yard, surrounded by bees.” He looked at her closely, frowning. "They recognize royalty, you know. Figured I needed to know what we’re dealing with, and you were in no condition to tell me anything so I took your geneprint and arranged for a cruiser to come take you to the commonwealth. Lucky for you I have contacts with the Aegis. But then I guess that’s why you’re here?”

“I know that you’re a Marshal for the Aegis,” she said. “I would have called you if I could—do you have a phone number? I mean, I know you have those implants,” she gestured to his neck. “But
I don’t. I might need a way to contact you.”

In case she had to do this over again. She didn’t know if she’d make it through the whole drive another time. She was lucky she hadn’t passed out on the highway.

“It’s not exactly a number...” He seemed to think it was a strange request and looked at her curiously. “I can program your phone to tap into the signal and direct it though to me though.”

“No,” she said, frustrated. “That won’t work.” Though she couldn’t explain why.

She wanted something she could see written down, memorize, write it on her skin in Sharpie if she had to.

“How about this?” asked Kiza, holding up an old rotary phone. She picked up the handset and they heard the sound of a dial tone. “It works.”

Jupiter scrambled to write down the number.

There was a whole list of things she was trying to remember. She’d gone over them in her head on the drive over.

How much time did she have before the cruiser came?

“Can the Aegis to send someone to protect my family?” she asked Stinger. “I think they might be in danger.”

“What else?” she asked Kiza, holding up an old rotary phone. She picked up the handset and they heard the sound of a dial tone. “It works.”

Jupiter scrambled to write down the number.

There was a whole list of things she was trying to remember. She’d gone over them in her head on the drive over.

How much time did she have before the cruiser came?

“Can the Aegis to send someone to protect my family?” she asked Stinger. “I think they might be in danger.”

“Of course,” said Stinger.

What else? She knew better than to ask him about time travel. That hadn’t done any good last time.

Kiza coughed.

“I’ll pay you to work for me,” Jupiter said to Stinger. She couldn’t think of anyway to say this stuff delicately—she didn’t know if they had time—so she’d just plow on through. “I’m going to need a security detail, and I think your daughter needs medical attention. Does she have the bug?”

“He’s not exactly a number...” He seemed to think it was a strange request and looked at her curiously. “I can program your phone to tap into the signal and direct it though to me though.”

“No,” she said, frustrated. “That won’t work.” Though she couldn’t explain why.

She wanted something she could see written down, memorize, write it on her skin in Sharpie if she had to.

“How about this?” asked Kiza, holding up an old rotary phone. She picked up the handset and they heard the sound of a dial tone. “It works.”

Jupiter scrambled to write down the number.

There was a whole list of things she was trying to remember. She’d gone over them in her head on the drive over.

How much time did she have before the cruiser came?

“Can the Aegis to send someone to protect my family?” she asked Stinger. “I think they might be in danger.”

“Of course,” said Stinger.

What else? She knew better than to ask him about time travel. That hadn’t done any good last time.

Kiza coughed.

“I’ll pay you to work for me,” Jupiter said to Stinger. She couldn’t think of anyway to say this stuff delicately—she didn’t know if they had time—so she’d just plow on through. “I’m going to need a security detail, and I think your daughter needs medical attention. Does she have the bug?”

“Yeah,” said Stinger. “How did you know?”

He was looking at her skeptically, and she felt bad that she couldn’t tell him more.

“Well, I’ve heard of it,” she said vaguely.

She knew she could count on Stinger's ingrained loyalty though, as long as Kiza was taken care of.

Then suddenly something else occurred to Jupiter, and she was horrified that she’d never thought of it before. What had happened to Kiza when they’d left her behind last time? Had the bounty hunters found her at home alone? Jupiter didn’t really know much about the girl. Didn't know how well she'd adjusted to living on an alien planet. Didn't know what she would do if Stinger left her behind.

How old was she even?

They better take her along, just in case.

“Let’s bring Kiza to Orous,” she said. “She can get a recode there, can’t she?”

“Yeah,” said Stinger hesitantly. “But I wouldn’t presume to—This is official business, Your
Majesty. I can’t just bring my daughter along.”

“I insist,” said Jupiter.

“Thank you,” said Kiza, smiling.

There was a humming sound overhead.

“That’ll be the Aegis,” said Stinger, relieved, like he wasn’t sure what to think of the crazy woman he’d found in his front yard and was glad someone else had come to help make sense of her.

Jupiter walked out with him and Kiza to the front porch and saw the Cruiser hovering over the fields of corn.

“Wait!” she said, pausing, as they continued down the steps. There was something else, but she wasn’t quite sure how to say it.

She knew they couldn’t linger here long. The Earth was in danger until she got her title sorted out. Balem would be arranging a blockade, sending in his shadows. But if she was right about this, it would only take a minute...

Seconds later, a car pulled down the drive. Caine Wise got out and started walking toward them across the yard. Long black coat swinging as he moved through the tall grasses, black-lined eyes squinting into the setting sun.

“Stinger,” he said, looking hangdog, eyes to the ground as he stopped to stand before him. “It’s kind of funny, both of us ending up on this planet.”

“Funny ain’t the word I’d use,” said Stinger, testosterone thick in the air, like he was gearing up for some violence.

“We don’t have time for this right now,” Jupiter announced, using her best Royalty voice. “We need to get out of here.”

They both turned to look at her, surprised.

“I’m Jupiter Jones,” she said, holding out her hand for Caine to shake.

He took it reluctantly, like he wasn’t sure what to do with it.

“I want you to work for me, along with Stinger. I need protection. You could say I’m having some problems with the Abrasax family right now. I’ll buy your commissions, pardons, reinstatements for the two of you, get you back your wings, whatever it takes. But we have to leave right now.”

Caine turned to look at Stinger and the older man nodded at him.

“Alright,” he said.

They walked over to the anti-grav beam underneath the cruiser.

“Hi Caine,” said Kiza, with a little wave.

“Hey Kiza,” he said.

He was looking at Jupiter though, nostrils flared, kind of confused or upset or something...
Oh, yeah.

Caine had told her last time that she smelled like him. He’d never actually explained *exactly* what he meant by that though. And now she’d have to figure out some way to explain it to *him*. Again.
Aegis Cruiser- Again

Once aboard the cruiser, Jupiter met the crew—it was surprisingly good to see them all again—and she arranged for a security team to watch over her family.

“If there’s anything else we can do to make the journey easier, Your Majesty, let us know,” said Captain Tsing.

“Actually,” said Jupiter. “I am really hungry right now, do you maybe have something I could eat?”

“Certainly,” she looked a little surprised, but hid it quickly. “Though I’m afraid we have only standard-issue rations on board.”

The four of them were escorted to the galley by Phylo Percadium, Stinger pulling Caine aside at the last moment, just outside the doorway, to announce, “We’ll be with you in a minute, Your Majesty. Got a few things we need to discuss first.”

He narrowed his eyes at Caine and Kiza gave a snort.

Fine, thought Jupiter, let the two of them sort things out. She needed food.

The galley was grey and utilitarian, not unlike a school cafeteria—if your school could fly through space and had windows with a galactic view. She was utterly stumped though, by the food machines. Standard Aegis issued rations turned out to be auto-heated, reconstituted cubes—a choice of brown or tan—half-floating in a mysterious liquid.

She stared at them, dazed for a moment, before something crashed into the other side of the far wall, startling her.

“That’ll be Dad and Caine,” said Kiza with a smirk. “Having their discussion.”

“Yeah.” Jupiter’s finger hesitated between the two buttons.”Um…”

“I recommend the brown, Your Majesty,” said Phylo with an apologetic smile.

“Thank you.” She was so tired she’d given up asking everyone to call her by name. She’d save that battle for another day. “I don’t want to keep you from your usual stuff. We’ll be fine on our own here.”

She had Kiza to keep her company.

He left with a small nod, Jupiter grabbing her food so she and Kiza could take seats at one of the long tables.

“Thank you so much for bringing me, Your Majesty.” Kiza’s braid swung from side to side as she moved, excitement pushing away her usual lethargy. “I can’t believe I’m actually going to get the treatment.”

Kiza talked while Jupiter ate, uninterrupted except for the occasional crashes and thumps from the next room. The girl’s chatter took Jupiter’s mind off her own spinning thoughts, her weariness—and the taste of the food. She needed to get something into her stomach—she was feeling so light-headed still—and the brown cubes didn’t taste bad exactly; there was just something unsettling about how
smoothly they slid down her throat. She noticed that Kiza hadn’t taken anything to eat. Smart girl.

“Maybe Dad will let me get an implant too while we’re there—I’m way past the usual age. You have no idea how bad it’s been, limited to Earth tech the last few years.”

Jupiter made a face in response.

“Oh, I mean, I guess you do know about that,” Kiza stammered, catching herself. “I’m so sorry, Your Majesty. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay.”

“Hey,” Kiza said, changing the subject. “Maybe we can visit the Floating Panoply while we’re on Orous...”

Stinger and Caine straggled in then. They’d obviously exchanged more fists than words: Caine with a busted lip and Stinger holding his side and walking with a slight hitch. They both looked more relaxed though, as if the tension had eased between them. Apparently, they’d settled things well enough for now to turn their questioning frowns back toward Jupiter again.

The problem was she hadn’t decided what to tell them. Part of her wanted to tell them everything, wanted to have them all on the same page again. She preferred being honest, and they deserved to know.

But she hesitated. Maybe it was better to wait. She needed time to think things over, to get her head together, time before she sprung this on them. They didn’t know her yet and had no real reason to believe her.

And what if there was some sort of time paradox?

Would she mess things up if she told people about the future? What if she’d messed things up already, by telling Caine last time- maybe that was why she’d gotten sent back again?

It was impossible to know. And her eyes were still so tired, her head hurting and making it hard to think.

“You better take one of these, Your Majesty,” Stinger said, handing her a pill. “Portaling’s hard, and you’re going to need it after that stuff,” he pointed to her now empty tray.

Jupiter looked over at Caine, but he only looked back curiously, for a moment, before looking away again. He didn’t have anything to say about her Royal Bowels apparently.

For that matter, she probably wouldn’t get a chance to let him know exactly how much she loved dogs anytime soon.

It turned out there wasn’t time to tell anyone much of anything. Minutes later, they’d come through the portal and were up in the command looking out at Orous, getting ready to land at the Commonwealth.

When a beaming Advocate Bob greeted them inside, Jupiter merely said, “Thanks so much, but I’m headed straight down to sub thirty-three.” And his smile faded into a look of concern as they passed.
“It’s done, Your Majesty. As I told you the last time, if you’d been paying attention,” the Minister of Seals and Signets scolded her. "All of your sheave work is in order. You will receive Royal Expediting, as is your due, but nothing more. Do you think you’re the first time traveler to come here attempting to speed up the gears of bureaucracy?”

“No, I’m not—“ she looked back at Caine and Stinger who were standing solid behind her, pretending not to overhear everything being said. “I’m not doing this on purpose. I’m stuck or something,” she explained, exasperated. “I just want to—I need to know that I own the Earth, that Balem Abrasax can’t take it from me. I can’t let him harvest it.”

“As far as the Commonwealth is concerned, the moment you received your Sigil, all holdings left to Seraphi Abrasax’s recurrence were in your control.” He paused then, gestured her to come closer so that he could whisper in a conspiratorial voice, “I don’t know if you’ve been talking with Leonard over in Revenue Review, but he’s an incompetent fool, known for his shoddy sheave work, in fact. If he’s said anything about me...”

“No,” she said, pulling back in surprise. “I just want to make sure everything is taken care of.”

“Well, then,” he puffed himself up with all the importance of a petty official in charge of his own personal fiefdom, gesturing to the glowing blue mark on her wrist as if it indicated his own rank and power. “Everything here is done according to rule and code. My work **always** holds up.”

He turned away from her in dismissal, muttering and running his hands through his hair, agitated, as he began to sort through a cabinet stacked high with sheaves and ready to topple to the ground.

“Well,” Jupiter said hesitantly “I also need to find out about buying commissions and pardons...“

“Send your lawyers!” He turned to face her with a half-mad glare this time. “This area is chrono-locked. A time-traveler’s presence is destabilizing. Don’t return!”

“But...”

“Scoot!”

Jupiter hesitated, bewildered. Maybe there was something else she should do, but she didn’t know what. She wasn’t exactly steady on her feet right now, wasn’t ready to face the endless lines upstairs. As long as the Earth was hers, she guessed she could figure out the rest of the paperwork—no sheave work—another day.

She started back toward the door and saw Stinger and Caine, staring at her, perplexed.

“Time traveler,” Stinger muttered in a gruff voice, looking at her suspiciously as they slowly made the trip back to the surface.

Jupiter gave a sheepish smile. “I guess you heard that then.”

“Nobody was lying.” Caine said with a frown. “Do you know anything about time travelers?” he asked Stinger.

“No, not outside of stories.” he said slowly. “But it wouldn’t be the strangest thing I’ve ever heard. I reckon it might make sense... if you think about it.”

Stinger and Caine looked over at Jupiter and she smiled hopefully. Then they looked back to each
other again, seemed to consider the situation a moment... and both sort of shrugged.

“You met me before today?” Caine asked her.

“Yeah,” she admitted.

“Ah! That’s why you came to my house, how you knew I was an Aegis Marshal,” Stinger said. “That’s why you knew about Kiza having the bug.”

“Yeah.”

Caine looked at her closely. “And that’s why you smell like—

“Yep,” Jupiter cut him off with a cough; she could feel her face getting red. She didn’t want to get into that right now, not in front of Stinger. “I got to know you pretty well.”

Caine still looked disconcerted, but she’d have to find the chance to talk to him alone later.

“Hmm,” said Stinger, studying them both very carefully.

“Please don’t tell anybody,” she said as they walked upstairs and through the crowds again. “I’ll try to explain as well as I can, but I don’t really know what’s going on exactly. I trust you both, but...”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Stinger said. “I don’t know what I’d tell anybody in any case.”

Caine nodded in agreement, still looking at her closely.

The three of them were heading for the exit when Jupiter stopped, remembering something.

“Um, guys? Do you think we could leave here another way, another door maybe? I have a bad feeling about going through that passage again.”

“Good thinking,” said Stinger.

“Yeah,” Caine agreed. “That boiler room’s an easy place for an ambush.”

They went through a back door instead, out onto a curving ramp that sloped down to the docking area below. The air smelled different outside, charged with electricity—and kind of stinky.

Jupiter paused, “I’ll just need a sec,” she said leaning against a low wall to catch her breath.

The circle of Commonwealth buildings loomed behind them, jutting like black monoliths, impenetrable, nothing to hint at the levels of chaotic monotony inside. Here she was on an alien world--she wasn’t entirely used to the feeling yet. Wasn’t used to seeing moons like burning coals hanging close in the night sky, or blocks and mis-patched twists of metal curving rings onto the horizon.

Strange as it was, the universe was hers to explore now.

Maybe the time loop was just a temporary blip, something she could figure out or get around. The exhaustion was sure a killer though.

Still, Caine and Stinger were there at her side. She wasn’t sure if they believed that she was a time-traveler exactly, but they seemed ready to go along with her, in spite of the weirdness. She could get to know them both again. That wouldn’t be too hard.
She’d have to figure out what she wanted to do next though, what she wanted to be next. She had people looking to her for direction now.

Jupiter had never been any sort of leader before. Even her family barely listened to her. They cared, sure, but—Mom was so pragmatic it made her hard sometimes, and Aunt Nino’s head was high in the clouds... Nobody really tuned to in to what Jupiter wanted, everyone else was fighting too hard to be heard themselves. It didn’t bother her exactly, she could pretty much hold her own. But she’d never been anyone’s boss—even Moltka had been giving her sass lately.

So, she’d have to figure that stuff out—another day. She was so worn out right now she could fall over where she stood. Her bones, her eyes, even her teeth, ached. She had to take a minute to rest and look around, though, to let things really soak in.

Orous was incredible, somehow beautiful and horrifying at the same time. Cesspool didn’t begin to cover it. The air around them was a smoggy glow of reflected light, low hanging satellites casting shadows all around. Endless strands of wire strung everywhere, connecting everything, filaments spilling like gossamer strands of some glowing sea creature. A dirty yellow moon in the distance, smoldered faintly behind a tower that climbed so high she couldn’t see its end, pieces haphazardly pieced together, suspended in mid air.

Did people live up there?

Looking up, she tilted her head too far, and stumbled back a step, feeling dizzy again.

“I got you,” Caine was behind her, holding her by the shoulders to steady her.

“Thanks.”

A gust of wind came over the wall then, followed by a purple and blue pigtailed woman with aviator goggles on a floating moto-speeder. Her guns were trained right on them.

Caine was in front of Jupiter in a second, shield and mauler up, opening fire. Stinger was already shooting at the two men who’d come up behind them.

“Get her to the ship!” Caine yelled, “I’ll cover you!”

“No, wait,” she called out. “Caine!”

“He’ll be alright. Come on!” Stinger said, pulling her into a run down the ramp, while still shooting back into the fray. The cruiser was just in sight, when a bounty hunter with an air cannon stepped out in front of them.

That was the last thing she saw for a while.

********

For the second time in her life, Jupiter Jones woke floating, suspended in mid-air, dressed in a lavender gown of asymmetrical ruffles and rosettes, speaking to the chamber presence, in Kalique Abrasax’s alcazar on the red planet Cerise.

After she’d been flipped back up to her feet, she stood still for a moment, expecting to feel dizzy or
light-headed again. She’d passed out and been knocked unconscious so many times that she was kind of worried about brain damage at this point.

But instead she felt…great? Like, really, really good.

How long had she been out this time?

She looked out through carved marble pillars on the balcony to the flower covered mountains and waterfalls in the distance. Walked around to get her bearings.

She was feeling more than just well rested.

She lifted her arms, gave an experimental roll of her neck. The usual ache between her shoulder blades—from hours bent over scrubbing, all day, every day—was completely gone. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this good.

“Hello,” said a soft voice from behind her.

Kalique walked in, arm outstretched in welcome, reaching out to touch Jupiter, her ladies trailing in behind her. “I’m Kalique.”

“Jupiter Jones,” she answered.

“I’m sorry for staring, but it’s really quite astonishing.”

Jupiter just scowled at her.

“I do hope you’re feeling better now.” Kalique said in concern. “You had injuries when they brought you in, as well some mild cellular damage. We took the liberty of giving you a light restorative treatment.”

Restorative treatment?

Had they given her a re-code?
"What injuries?" Jupiter demanded. "And what's a restorative treatment?"

Kalique took a step closer and ran her hand along Jupiter’s forearm, examining the texture of her skin. The attendants, hovering behind, moved closer too, and Jupiter backed up until she ran into the edge of the heavy marble-topped table behind her.

"Hmmm," said Kalique, thoughtfully.

She looked older again, brow furrowed, graying hair pulled high and fastened into a glittering ornament to one side of her head. Calm, composed. Something about her face was like a mask though, something else breaking through when she suddenly flashed a too-bright smile.

"You had an untreated laceration on your neck and contusions from the air cannon—for which I sincerely apologize. Your med scan revealed the cell damage." She looked at Jupiter inquiringly.

"The doctor couldn't explain the cause however."

Jupiter couldn't explain it either. But it must be something to do with the time loop, that fatigue she'd felt both times after she was sent back into the past.

"We immersed you in a medicinal serum and held you in stasis for an hour while it took effect. You're not familiar with our technologies, but I assure you it is completely safe. We monitored you carefully throughout the entire process."

But Jupiter was more familiar with their technologies than Kalique knew. And not just from the Abrasax family—so ancient it was still hard to wrap her head around the very concept of them. She remembered Stinger boasting that he hadn't had a re-code in years. And the treatment Kiza needed to fix her bug. And there'd been that miracle spray that instantly healed Caine.

It seemed like it was everywhere she turned. And whether it was called, a treatment, a serum, or a re-code the secret ingredient must be the same: Regenex...and they'd used it on her.

She felt like she was going to throw up.

She pushed past Kalique and sat down on one of the sofas, bent over and held her head in her hands.

Immersed her in it, Kalique had said. Not just dabbed something on her cuts and bruises, but soaked her in the stuff. In over her head even? She imagined it leaking past her eyelids, creeping into her mouth. She wanted to scrub at her skin until it was raw. To get it off her, get it out of her.

She looked up and saw Kalique was watching.

Jupiter forced herself to take a deep breath and steadily meet her eyes.

"You gave me a re-code?" she asked, still uncertain. Did it even make a difference though? It was probably just a matter of degrees.

"A re-code? Goodness no!" Kalique gave a fluttering laugh, speaking quickly. "You only needed to heal and to rest. It would have taken hours to calibrate your optimal settings. I wouldn't dream of keeping you in stasis that long." She smiled. "Not when I've been so eager to meet you."
So not because it was wrong then. Or because Jupiter hadn’t asked for it, or didn’t want it. Just that it would have been inconvenient for Kalique to wait.

“Yeah,” Jupiter said. “So eager to meet me you that you had me knocked out and abducted,”

“Those hunters were hired by my brother Balem to kill you. Luckily, they came to me for a better payment,” she said. “I think the arrangement ended favorably for us both. Don’t you?”

“I guess so,” Jupiter said grudgingly. She hadn’t known they’d planned to kill her. “I don’t like getting so-called medical treatments against my will though.”

Although, to be fair, thought Jupiter, any of the other aliens she’d met might have done the same thing to her—assuming they’d had the resources.

And that was what they were to her really: aliens. It was obvious with the androids, and some of the splices. Sometimes she forgot though, that even the human-looking ones weren’t really like her. None of them hated Regenex the way she did. To them it was something useful, valuable. The way it was made just an unfortunate fact of life. None of them seemed to think it was disgusting or horrible. They all used it. Was there even any use in trying to explain it to Kalique? Giving someone medical care and clean clothes wasn’t usual considered a crime.

Jupiter would have to figure out a way to deal with it and move forward. Just like everything else that had happened to her lately.

She just was so sick of everyone doing things to her though. So tired of them moving her around from place to place and treating her like a pawn, like a dress-up doll.

"And I really don't like being dressed while I'm unconscious.”

“Oh! But the dress looks lovely on you!” Kalique said. “And it’s so important to me that you feel comfortable and welcome here. Come.”

She held out her hand.

Jupiter hesitated, she wasn’t used to being rude, but...She wiped her sweaty palms against the dress and stood up again. Crossing her arms over her chest, she gave Kalique a cool look and ignored the outstretched hand.

The older woman quirked a brow and gave a small shrug, walking towards the doorway.

“Follow me. I think it will be easier to show you than to explain...”

The two color-coordinated androids and an attendant with a sunburst of decorative spikes radiating from her hair all trailed behind her as she left the room, their faces serenely expressionless.

************

The statue of Seraphi Abrasax was somehow just as weird the second time around.

And there was something off-putting about the glow in Kalique’s eyes, the reflection of the thousands of candles surrounding them.
Jupiter wasn’t really her mother; Kalique must understand that on some level, no matter what she said about genes’ spiritual significance. And why would she keep this kind of shrine to her mother anyway?

“My mother and I did not always get along. But I hope this recurrence might mean a second chance for both of us,” she said.

A second chance for what? She seemed sincere, but who knew with the Abrasax Family? Titus and Balem wanted to kill her for her inheritance. What was Kalique really after?

“Is that why you brought me here?” Jupiter asked. "So that we could get to know each other?"

“I want to help accustom you to your new life, Jupiter. It can be very difficult for a recurrence—especially one from an underdeveloped world. I had planned to take you to the Commonwealth myself, but it seems that is taken care of—with astonishing speed in fact!” She gave a beaming smile. “However, claiming your title is only one step toward establishing your life in the First Estate. You have so much more to learn. I’d like to be your guide, to help you in any way I can.”

“Actually, I do need to hire some lawyers,” Jupiter said, thinking about her promises to Caine and Stinger. Titus still had their pardons. She’d have to get them eventually.

“Oh I have warehouses full of lawyers, ready to be activated at a moment's notice.”

“Ok-ay...but what if I don’t really want to be a part of this whole system—Entitled, or Royalty or whatever.”

Kalique looked sympathetic. “You may have mixed feelings about being Royalty—but I’m afraid you have no choice.”

“You’re planning to keep me against my will?”

“No!” Kalique laughed. “But whether you like it or not, you are Royalty now. You can’t go back to your old life. There are already people trying to kill you. And that is only the beginning. Once everyone learns of your recurrence...Well, I’m afraid it will be impossible for you to return to Earth as if nothing has changed”

Jupiter had gone back to her old life once. But in that timeline, Balem had died at the refinery and Titus had been under investigation. In this timeline, they were both still after her.

Maybe she should stick around here a little while at least, take advantage of Kalique’s offer of help, her resources. If anyone knew how to deal with Titus and Balem, it was probably Kalique.

Kalique had never tried to harm her—as far as she knew. She’d saved her life, even if it was probably part of some bigger scheme. Jupiter couldn’t exactly let down her guard, but it might be good to have another ally. It was worth a try at least.

Jupiter had no idea what would happen to her next. If, or when, she would be sent back in time again. She might as well learn what she could while she was here.

“You may as well embrace the opportunities before you.” Kalique was talking in an animated voice as they walked down a familiar hallway. "In fact, there is something else that I really need to show you.”

They’d arrived at the bathing room.
“Um, yeah,” said Jupiter. “I don’t want to intrude on your privacy or anything.”

“Privacy?” Kalique looked puzzled by the very idea. “Think of this as a demonstration. It’s just one of the many possibilities of your new life.”

Before Jupiter had a chance to say anything else, Kalique had shed her dress and stepped down into the pool.

The candles flickered, their wax forming stalactites along the marble ledges, dripping and flowing into puddles below. The lightning flashed through the room like Frankenstein’s monster being brought to life...

And then Kalique rose from her bath, young again and smiling mischievously, her attendants dressing and styling her in an instant.

Jupiter couldn’t help wonder how many hundreds of thousands of deaths it taken to fill that enormous bath. For that matter, how many people had been killed for Jupiter’s own restorative “serum”? Jupiter pushed away her revulsion. It only seemed to make her vulnerable when they knew how much the Regenex bothered her.

She was surprised at how easily she could meet Kalique’s eyes. But somehow she didn’t feel as sick to her stomach anymore. Instead she felt determined. And strong. Maybe too strong?

Maybe the thing that scared her most of all was how incredible she felt since the Regenex treatment. She was almost humming with energy.

She really didn’t want to like the feeling.

As they walked down the long marble corridors again, the view out across the canyons and waterfalls and mountains in the distance was undeniably beautiful, the mist-filled air sweet with the scent of flowers.

Unlike Titus, always lounging about, Kalique seemed constantly on the move, attendants trailing behind her, feeding her, dressing her, ready to anticipate her every need.

Jupiter hadn’t agreed to stay as her guest. But then, she’d never agreed to come in the first place. Kalique just assumed what she wanted and worked to make it so.

“You can attend the board meeting with me in a few days. It is important that you begin to get some understanding of our business interests. And then there is a gala the day after in the Corvialia cluster, a small event—no more than a thousand. There should be enough time to prepare you...”

Kalique was full of plans, but there were specific things Jupiter wanted to find out—if she could.

“Do you have a library? I want to learn as much as I can.”

“Certainly, dear. I have sheaves on every imaginable subject. We could download information directly—but of course you don’t have an implant.”

“No, I don’t.” said Jupiter.

Did she want one? She didn’t know how she could explain something like that to her family. And she’d have to contact them to let them know she’d be away for a while. She didn’t know exactly
how she would explain that either...

“I want to learn everything though.” Jupiter said. “How do the implants work exactly? And portals? We traveled through one to get to Orous. And Splices and androids, and your anti-aging bath...” Ugh, why had she even brought that up? She shoved the thought aside, to deal with another time. “Or what about time travel? Do you know anything about that?”

If Kalique wanted to be her mentor or something, then fine. She’d learn what she could. She might as well get straight to the point and figure out this time loop.

“Time travel,” said Kalique, slowly. “Now that hasn’t been in fashion for some time. My elder brother, Balem, was obsessed with the idea—six or seven millennia ago. Right after the Calliope disaster, if I remember correctly...”

Balem was still alive. And he’d be gunning for her. Jupiter would have to learn everything she could to get through this. So she’d missed out on what? —tens of thousands of years? —while the Abrasax family had been out dominating the universe. Maybe it wasn’t realistic to play catch up when everyone else had such a head start, but what else could she do?

Kalique had other details in mind.

“You’ll want to set up your own residence eventually and I’d be more than happy to help to you with that.” She said this with a satisfaction that was a whole lot more determined and deliberate than just the joy of being helpful though. “You’ll need a court—you’re welcome to take a few dozen of my attendants. Try them out while you’re here and take any of them that appeal. I insist on it. As my gift to you.”

“Um. A court?” Jupiter asked. She didn’t know what to say about the idea of Kalique offering people as gifts. No thank you?

“A group of advisors and assistants. Humans, splices, androids—I can make some recommendations. It’s always best to keep a mix really—for diversity’s sake—in case there’s any sort of viral outbreak. And you’ll need a security team of course. The Legion will assist with your Royal Guard appointments, but you’ll want a few hundred android guards. There’s really no such thing as having too much protection.”

They turned and watched then as Caine came gliding down the hallway on his boots, mauler in hand, a troop of guards running after him.

He slid to a stop in front of Jupiter and trained his gun on Kalique.

“See what I mean,” Kalique said, her smile only the tiniest bit nervous.

“Caine!” Jupiter said, happily.

“Oh, is this the hunter Titus hired then?” He was wearing his shirt this time, and Kalique didn’t comment on how he was made.

“Call off your guards,” said Jupiter. “He’s working for me now.”

“He has contacted the Aegis,” said Malidictes, coming down the hall toward them “They are entering orbit now.”

“Excellent!” Kalique turned to Jupiter, “I’ll let you check in with them while I make arrangements for your stay.”
Expression fierce, still trying to catch his breath, Caine turned to Jupiter for confirmation. Then slowly, he lowered his Mauler and stepped back, almost deflating, a frown of concern on his face as he looked from one woman to the other.
Jupiter grabbed Caine by the hand and walked to an oriel off the main hallway, a covered circle of stone arches looking out over the waterfalls. Hopefully, they could talk alone a moment here. Though Kalique and Maledictes were still watching from across the way.

“Is Stinger okay?” she asked.

“He’s alive,” Caine answered. “The Aegis picked him up after he was knocked out by the air cannon.”

He looked down at their joined hands and then back up to her again, cocking his head in that way of his—she’d given up on thinking of it as anything other than dog-like—and she realized she was still holding his hand in a death grip,

“Sorry,” she said, letting go.

He probably didn’t know what to make of the whole situation. She was still trying to figure things out for that matter. She was on a different world—again—and the whole Regenex thing. It was a lot to think about, but there were things she wanted to at least try to explain to him if she could.

“You shouldn’t trust Kalique.” Caine said. “She’s an Abrasax—and that whole family is ruthless. She’s got to have an ulterior motive for helping you.”

“I don’t trust her, but... I have to figure out some way of dealing with the Abrasaxes. And so far, she’s the most agreeable one.”

He didn’t look reassured.

And he was right; she would have to be careful. She’d told him once before that she was still the same person and that having a title wouldn’t change her. But now?

Caine didn’t even know her anymore—or at least he didn’t know who she’d once been. And so much had happened to her since that first time that she’d stood with him in the Commonwealth. She was beginning to think it was inevitable. Whether she wanted it or not, she might end up changing in some ways.

She could feel the Regenex, like a strange hum, coursing through her body.

She’d let go of his hand, but Caine was still standing close to her and it was like she could feel the heat radiating off his body. He looked down at her intently for a moment, before looking away toward a row of guards marching down the hall.

She took in a deep breath of misty air and felt the cold travel down her throat and expand in her lungs, her senses strangely heightened.

The light was different here, the air fresh, the sound of the water rushing far below, echoing all around them. A vase was overflowing with flowers in an alcove high above and it shed a tiny petal into Caine’s hair.

She resisted the urge to reach up and pluck it out.
He was flushed from his fight with Kalique’s guards. Blood had dried on his lip from where he’d busted it in the fight with Stinger.

She wanted to touch it, press her fingers against his mouth.

She remembered, all of the sudden, how easy it was to tear his shirt off him, how he’d looked that night in the garden on Titus’ ship—his arms held above his head, his body straining against her.

All that energy was surging through her body, flowing relentlessly through her blood. It seemed to change direction, suddenly becoming a throbbing ache, pulsing insistently between her legs.

Oh God! Was the Regenex some sort of aphrodisiac too? That was the last thing she needed right now.

“You said you knew me pretty well,” he reminded her.

“Yeah,” she answered. She had to get herself under control here. “I’ve met you twice before. I want to explain—as least much as I’ve been able to figure out, but—

One of those surveillance orbs came down the hallway and stopped to hover a few feet away.

“You know why I was in the Deadlands though.” He looked away and shook his head, before saying under his breath, “You know I attacked an entitled?”

“You won’t attack me. I know that.” She said it with absolute conviction in her voice. She wanted him to know that she was serious, that she believed it. “Do you think Kalique will be a problem?”

“I don’t like her, but I don’t particularly want to rip her throat out.” He frowned. “The problem is I don’t remember wanting to do it before either.”

“Well, when I knew you before, we were with Titus together for days,” she said. “And let’s just say he... enjoyed provoking you. I ended up doing him some unplanned violence myself. But you kept your cool. Stinger said he had suspicions about the attack. Maybe there’s more to it than you know.”

“Maybe,” he didn’t seem reassured though. “Titus’s people contracted me. They still expect me to bring you in.”

“Are you going to?”

“No. Not now that I know who and what you are.” That seemed to settle it for him. “Titus made some threats, but he won’t expect me to betray him. Lycantants are coded to be obedient and follow orders and he still thinks I’m working for him, it’ll buy you time before he sends someone else. “

“I won’t let Titus get you. We’ll figure out a way to get your commission from him and make it legal.”

Caine had never told her before that he was coded to be obedient though. That kind of spun her. She’d told him back at the Hall of Titles that she would explain why she smelled like him. But she didn’t really know what to say.

Only hours ago she’d been captive with Caine on Titus’ ship. So much had happened that night—and afterward. There were too many things she hadn’t had a chance to process yet.

She’d thought Caine actually wanted to kiss her, that he’d just been holding himself back. There’d been this life or death urgency, and somehow sex had seemed like a really, really good idea at the
time. Caine had been feeling out of control, but she’d been sure he was into it too.

Afterwards, he’d said she was welcome to take advantage of him though. What did that mean? Had he really wanted her? Or was it just that he didn’t mind- he’d had worse things done to him.

He was coded to be obedient, to follow orders. He said it so matter of fact--as if it there wasn’t something inherently wrong about the very concept.

And then there was the whole strange social hierarchy, that divide between Royalty and splices. There were just too many things she still didn’t understand.

And for this Caine, right here with her, now, none of those things between them had even happened. Which meant she’d never get the chance to clarify anything about that night with him.

She’d always been the one wanting more with him, just going for it...and he’d always seemed confused by her. Even before this time loop had started, she’d told herself to be patient and not push things. She’d lost sight of that, trying to keep him close while they’d been captive on Titus’ ship.

For now, it was more enough that he was willing to believe her, that he’d agreed to work for her. She needed to put her hormones on hold. Give them both time to figure things out. Let him be the one to make a move this time.

If he wanted to.

*****

Jupiter Jones was different now, Caine thought.

Steadier on her feet, for one thing. She’d been ready to fall over with exhaustion before, but now she was brimming with energy, her eyes bright. It probably had something to do with the smell of Regenex coming off her in waves.

She still confused him though. The way she’d taken him by the hand —and he’d just let her do it.

He’d watched them take her on Orous, unable to get to her on time, barely quick enough to grab on to the ship as it left the docking area. After they’d entered the atmosphere of Cerise, he’d contacted the Aegis, and made a plan to rescue her.

Instead, she’d decided to stay for a while, guest of her kidnapper, Kalique Abrasax.

Did she really know what she was getting into?

She kept looking at him closely, something open and seeking in her face that he wasn’t used to. It made him feel strange, uncomfortable--probably just a nervous response. It’d been too long since he’d been around anyone but criminals and jailers—and Titus Abrasax of all people. Too many of Caine’s responses were messed up at this point.

At least there were some things he still knew how to deal with. It’d almost been a relief when Stinger had come at him, ready to beat the shit out of him. He’d deserved it, after everything Stinger had been through. And as a way of communicating, it was easy to understand, cleared the air a hell of a lot faster than talking.
They’d talked afterwards and Stinger thought they should both work for the Queen.

It was a giant step up from a life sentence in the Deadlands. Caine hadn’t imagined himself with a job like it ever again. He wasn’t entirely sure it was a good idea, or that he deserved it. But he’d wait it out, see what happened.

The time-traveler thing had come as a surprise though.

“Kalique’s offered to let me use her lawyers,” Jupiter said. “I’ll need them to get the pardons for you and Stinger. And she probably has a better idea than anyone else on how I can get you away from Titus. She’s offered to help show me the ropes, and there are some things I need to figure out. Things, I think, maybe you and Stinger can’t help me with. But maybe you can still help me in other ways? Stay close to me. Let me know if she’s lying.”

She leaned closer, started to reach, as if to put her hand on top of his, before she caught herself and pulled back.

“Alright,” he said.

She turned to look over to where Kalique Abrasax stood talking to her advisor.

“Do you believe me?” She whispered, coming in closer to him. “About the time thing? I know I haven’t had the chance to explain things, but I don’t want to Kalique to know.”

“I don’t know what to believe, Your Majesty.” Caine said, honestly. “You believe what you’re saying. And the Minister at the Commonwealth knew something about it. You’ve told me that you know me pretty well. I may not know you, but I trust Stinger’s judgment. He thinks we should work as your Royal Guards for a while before getting back into another Skyjacker unit eventually.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well. Yeah, if that’s what you both want.”

She seemed suddenly sad for some reason though, taking a deep breath in, then straightening up, as if deciding on something.

“I really don’t know what’s happening to me, the way I’m looping—but I do want to get the pardons and wings for you and Stinger, and the treatment for Kiza as soon as we possibly can. It’s sort of creepy, but I don’t know what happens to you when I go, if I go. I want to make sure you three are okay, that I don’t just leave you...” She looked at him entreatingly. “Does that make sense, or is it too weird?”

“The whole thing is weird, Your Majesty.”

“I guess so,” she smiled.

The mist, heavy from the rush of waterfalls, made her dress cling to her skin. Her hair swung loose around her shoulders, curled against her cheek with the humidity—until she pushed it back impatiently.

She kept reaching out to touch him again, then stopping herself.

Touch wasn’t anything he’d welcomed since the Deadlands. Still, he was curious...

Beneath the Regenex was her own unique smell, the one he’d memorized, fixated on in order to find her. Now that he’d located her again, he should let go of it—but it somehow stuck.
She no longer smelled the same as when he’d first walked up to her, in the yard outside of Stinger’s house. When she’d held out her hand to him, introduced herself, announced that she wanted him to work for her, no matter what. When he’d met her there she’d smelled like...him somehow—and sex, and something else he’d half-recognized but couldn’t figure out.

But that was all gone now. Scoured away by whatever she’d had done with the Regenex.

Probably for the best. It’d messed with his head too much. It’d be easier to talk to her now. As easy as it was for him to talk to anyone these days.

He almost wondered if he imagined it before, his scent all tangled up with hers. But his nose, at least, had never been wrong before. And she’d said there was something to explain. Something that made her uncomfortable.

She still smelled like sex, but it was all her own scent now—and Regenex did that to you—everyone knew that was part of the rush. It didn’t mean she wanted to start anything up with him now, even if they had before.

Captain Tsing and Stinger came walking up the hallway and Jupiter ran to meet them.

“Stinger! You’re okay!” She threw herself into his arms for a hug and the older man returned it, surprised.

All right then. She was...affectionate? That was all it was.

Caine would just have to get used to it. Not take it as anything personal.
Jupiter drew back from their hug and grinned at Stinger.

“Take more than an air cannon to keep me down, Your Majesty,” he said.

“But where’s Kiza?” she asked looking around.

“Back at Medical Request on Orous. It takes half a day to get through the line there—and that’s to get a number to wait in the next line. It’ll be weeks to get her an actual appointment.”

“Some of the crew stayed behind as well, Your Majesty,” said Captain Tsing. “We’d planned to return immediately after retrieving you. However, Mr. Maledictes tells us that you’ll be remaining here as a guest?” She lifted a brow and looked over to where Kalique and her attendants were standing a few feet away.

“I’m so sorry. Jupiter grimaced. “I really have to stop getting kidnapped so often. But of course, we need to go back for Kiza and the crew. And apparently, I’ll need lawyers to take care of some things at the Commonwealth. Kalique has offered to help with that.”

Or was she supposed to call her Lady Kalique? Jupiter still hadn’t gotten over being “immersed” in Regenex by the Abrasax in question. She wanted to learn what she could, but maybe she’d save the polite forms of address portion of her education for later.

Kalique stood serene, surrounded by attendants, aqua gown glittering in the misty light, she observed Jupiter with a knowing half-smile. “Come with me,” she called out in a trill, beckoning them toward her. “And we’ll take refreshment while we make all the necessary arrangements.”

The group of them walked through another passageway and out onto an open patio where the walls were decorated in floral mosaics of variegated pinks and reds, colors blending with spills of flowers trailing from overhead. The glossy enameled tiles alternated with crystals and gemstones that sparkled in the light from three suns shining in the afternoon sky.

Jupiter peeked through one of the marble arches that were carved to resemble twining vines and looked out at the gardens on the other side of the Alcazar.

“No thanks,” she said to a servant carrying a tray filled with translucent blue snacks that looked like clusters of tiny bubbles.

On the left was an impossible hedge maze, studded with fat, waxy, indigo flowers. It seemed to somehow absorb the light all around it, the maze's interior surfaces dark as night. To the right, were intricate patterns of trees, and bushes in concentric circles interspersed with covered paths, stone columns and gazebos. Beyond these, stretching for miles in the distance, wild riots of flowers reached up into the foothills of mountains that built to tall jagged peaks on the horizon.

“You must try something to eat Jupiter,” Kalique laughed. “I insist!” She had taken a seat on one of the embroidered divans and plucked a crystallized sweet from a nearby tray. She bit into it with relish and licked at the sugar that stuck to her lips when she was done.

Jupiter accepted a glass filled to the top with golden liquid and sat tentatively across from Kalique. Captain Tsing, Stinger and Caine remained standing, their military training betrayed by their stances, and the way they’d automatically triangulated around Jupiter, ever alert to the surroundings.
It felt entirely too weird to sit and have a snack without them. Though, of course, all of Kalique’s attendants were standing behind her, ready to serve.

The drink was fruity and refreshing, bubbling and popping as it slid down Jupiter’s throat. The inside of her mouth, gums and tongue were overly sensitive to its touch though. Was that another side effect? She didn’t like to think about the Regenex being inside her. And she tried to unobtrusively swish the drink around like a mouthwash before swallowing it.

Captain Tsing gave her an inquisitive look from the corner of her eye.

“I appreciate your offer of the lawyers,” Jupiter said after one last fizzing gulp. “And...I’ll reimburse you for that as soon as I can. I really would like to make use of your library. But maybe I can get back to you about attending the board meeting and the gala...”

Jupiter didn’t know how many days she’d have in this timeline. She’d been on Titus’s clipper ten or eleven days--it was hard to know, they hadn’t exactly kept Earth time on his ship.

She’d just have to get as much done as possible, in whatever time she had.

The problem was it was so hard to focus. She was bursting with all this energy, resisting the urge to tap her foot against the marble floor. Maybe if she could just burst into a brisk jog up and down the patio for a few minutes--though it’d be hard in this closely fitted dress. The breeze flowed in through the open arches, ruffling the whispery light fabric around her sensitive skin. It wasn't quite enough to cool her off though.

She didn’t dare look over at Caine, a few inches to her left, the shape of his arms and shoulders outlined in the light of one of the smaller suns, that was glowing red and low on the horizon. She was afraid that if she so much as met Caine’s eyes right now she wouldn’t be able to hold herself back. It was like he was exerting too much gravity and she’d just slam into him full force and hold on tight, all clinging arms and legs and desperation. She shook her head to clear the away the images of what would come next. That really wasn’t what she’d been thinking of when she’d decided to give him some space.

Kalique smiled at her calmly, apparently unaffected by the Regenex. Was Jupiter having an unusual reaction to it then? Or was Kalique just used to it, immune to the side effects after thousands of years?

“The choice is yours, my dear,” said Kalique. “But you really needn’t return to Orous at all. Stay here while the Aegis retrieves the others in your party. I will send the lawyers on your behalf. And your people are certainly welcome to make use of my medical facilities here. I assure you they are far superior to anything in the public sector. Everything will be taken care of. I’ll even speak to Titus, about signing the Lycantant over to you. It’s the least he can do, that rascal.” She gave an especially big grin. “In any case, he does owe me a few favors.”

Jupiter worried how many favors she would owe Kalique after she was done here.

“I appreciate your offer of help,” said Jupiter hesitantly. “But I’d really like to learn exactly how everything is done, so that I take care of these things myself.”

“This is how things are done, Jupiter,” Kalique said with a little laugh and Jupiter bristled at the condescending tone. Kalique didn’t bother to call her by her title she noticed. Not that she wanted that necessarily, but...

“You’ll need to get expert advice and delegate when necessary,” Kalique explained. “Unless you
and your people are planning to spend the next fifty years in line at the Commonwealth.”

Stinger and Captain Tsing’s expressions of military discipline fell away for just a moment as they exchanged looks of utter and absolute horror at that idea.

“I don’t know what kind of business or management training you’ve had?” Kalique inquired silkily.

“The usual, I guess,” muttered Jupiter. She really didn’t feel like elaborating on her “business training” just then. She stood up, shaking her skirts out where they clung to her legs. “If you’ll just excuse us, I need to stretch for a moment and check in with my people.”

Jupiter walked back inside the Alcazar and gestured for Caine, Stinger and Captain Tsing to follow her down the hallway.

She didn’t want get as much done as possible, to make sure she didn’t leave Caine or Kiza or Stinger in the lurch if she disappeared. And she’d need to figure out everything possible to make sure Earth was protected. It irked her, but Kalique was probably right. If she could send lawyers in her place--well, it was no use standing around in line on Orous.

“Would you mind going back without me to pick up Kiza and the rest of the crew?” she asked, voice low as the other three gathered around her. “I do think that there are some things I could learn from Kalique here.”

“I don’t know that it’s wise for you to remain alone, Your Majesty” said Captain Tsing.

“I’ll stay with Her Majesty,” said Caine and the low rumble of his voice made Jupiter break out in goosbumps along her bare arms. A minute ago she’d been too hot, so why did the way he was radiating heat suddenly seem so appealing?

“Um, good.” She had to clear her throat so that she could speak again. “Would you..uh.. feel comfortable with Kiza getting her treatment here?” she asked Stinger. “It sounds like it might be faster.”

“I’m sure the facilities are better than on Orous,” he said. “But—

“You think it’s not safe?”

“I think it’s safe for Kiza. I’d worry about yourself, Majesty. Kalique Abrasax has a reputation for being charming, but she also has a habit of getting what she wants. You’ll need to be careful.”

“I will,” she assured him. “Any word on how my family is doing back on earth?”

“A team has set up a perimeter around the house and there have been no hostile activities reported, so far, Your Majesty,” said Captain Tsing. “After doing some research, two of the team members made contact with your family, in the disguise of something called Jehovah’s Witnesses. Unfortunately, they were met with an unfriendly reception.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“However, they were able to make visual contact and ascertain that the entire family was in residence,” she said. “The team also seemed very enthusiastic about the discovery of Deep Dish Pizza.”

Remembering Aegis rations, and the choice between the two colors of food cubes, Jupiter could really understand why pizza would appeal.
“What about the Keepers back on Earth?” she asked. “Is there any way I can get them off the planet? Actually, do you think they have them here?”

Jupiter wanted to know what sort of dangers she should be on the lookout for, though considering Keepers could be invisible, or disguise themselves as human, she wasn’t sure how she could be on guard against them really.

“Keepers are restricted to use on harvest planets, Kalique Abrasax wouldn’t have them on her home world,” said Captain Tsing. “Balem Abrasax owns those on Earth, but they are also under supervision of the Aegis and follow strict codes and regulations. Their commanders were notified of the change of planetary ownership as soon as we learned that Your Majesty had secured her title. They are currently in the process of withdrawal. You’ll be able to hire your own force, if you wish.”

“I think I’ll pass on that for now.”

It was good to know though. The Keepers could be called off, so long as she had her sigil and was able to contact the Aegis. That just left about a million other things for Jupiter to learn and take care of. But where to start next? She did want to see that library...

She was so restless right now it was hard to imagine actually sitting down and reading though. There was that rush of energy coursing through her. At least half her focus was fixed on just keeping herself from staring at Caine—though her gaze kept sliding back in his direction.

They returned to the patio where Kalique and her attendants were waiting.

“Excellent!” Kalique said after learning that Jupiter would stay. “I can have the lawyers activated immediately and give you a briefing once they have reported back. Maledictes will gather some informational sheaves for you to look over. You can start with the Entitled Codes if you wish.”

“I’ve already memorized those actually.” That was one thing she’d been able to do on Titus’s clipper.

“Oh,” Kalique looked surprised.

“If we’re going to a board meeting, I guess I should start learning more about the family business?”

Other than mentioning the opportunities available if Jupiter was willing to keep her eyes closed, Kalique hadn’t told her any specifics. Maybe she preferred not to think too closely about those genocidal baths?

“All in good time, Jupiter. I will be more than happy to guide you in every aspect of the business, but I can see that you’re feeling restless,” she gave a look toward Jupiter’s fingers, which unbeknownst to her had been drumming a pattern on the cushion of her chair. “It’s natural to have a little excess energy after a treatment, especially if you’re not used to the effects. Why don’t you make use of the recreation facility and we can make plans once you’ve had the chance to relax?”

“Okay,” said Jupiter.

It probably was a good idea to let off some steam so that she could think straight. And she was curious what kind of workout equipment would there be in a high-tech alien rec room: anti-grav treadmills or something?

She had been meaning to ask Caine to help her train, to learn how to fight better. Just in case it ever came down to mano a mano with one of her enemies again. (She didn’t have much hope of taking on a Sargon- but there must be a few things she could learn.) But even the idea of wrestling around or
practicing holds with Caine was way too much more than she could handle right now.

Maybe something like ping pong though. She’d gotten pretty good back in her school days, she could probably handle a sweaty hour of table tennis. There was nothing very sexy about that.

“But I’m not exactly dressed for...” Jupiter said, gestured to her lavender gown and everyone looked at her as if she’d said something strange.

“I’m sure they’ll have whatever you require on the premises,” Kalique said.

“Okay,” Like a fancy spa with free robes? They’d have what? Complementary gym shorts? The truth was she was totally out of her element here and she’d just have to be okay with not knowing everything immediately. She’d never been afraid to ask questions, she wanted to know how things worked—but she was also good with learning by doing.

Two silver and blue android ladies with diaphanous capes and pleasantly neutral expressions came forward to lead her away.

“I guess I’ll see you as soon as you’re back from Orous,” she called out to Stinger and Captain Tsing as she turned to leave the patio.

Caine was still standing next to Stinger though.

“Aren’t you coming?” she asked him. He’d agreed to stay close, so she assumed he’d be with her.

It was so weird to think of it, but she was probably too used to having him on a chain. Maybe that was why she’d just latched on to him earlier, used to grabbing on to that stupid metal cylinder that had connected them whenever they’d walked around Titus’ ship. She didn’t even want to think about Titus’ innuendoes about her and Caine and chains. And how it turned out he’d been right, there was something she’d really liked about certain aspects of that. She couldn’t even let her brain start down that path.

Caine looked surprised that she wanted him with her. “Alright,” he said reluctantly.

The androids started to lead them to anti-grav lift at the end of the corridor, but Jupiter wasn’t in the mood for that. Standing close to Caine in some glittery blue beam was probably more than she could handle.

“Are there any stairs?” she asked.

“Certainly, Your Majesty,” said one of them, though her face popped out and back as she looked at her companion in dismay.

“Oh no!” said Jupiter. “Can you walk down stairs?”

“Of course, we are capable of walking both up and down stairs,” she said determinedly. “Please follow.” And they took off down the wide curving staircase at an awkward trot, legs out to the sides and knees bending up and down as they hopped from step to step, capes bouncing behind them.

“I hope you don’t mind staying here with me?” Jupiter asked Caine. “I didn’t think to ask if there was anything you wanted to take care of back on Orous.”

“No, that’s fine,” he said. “I agreed to work for you, Your Majesty.”

“Yeah,” said Jupiter. He wasn’t too enthused about it though. He seemed tense and very reserved all
of the sudden. It would take a while for them to get to know each other all over again, she guessed.

“Well, for some reason I totally have the idea of ping pong stuck in my head right now.” She wasn’t going to bring up the other ideas her brain and body were stuck on. “So if there’s anything remotely like that we’re going for it first thing.”

Caine looked puzzled. How to explain?

“There’s a table with a net and balls and paddles?” Jupiter made a swatting motion with her fisted hand to demonstrate.

Caine just squinted at her a little before looking away in confusion. Maybe it didn’t translate.

And God, this Alcazar was enormous! The androids started to pick up some speed as they got the hang of things. They must have walked down fifteen or twenty flights of stairs before they finally reached their destination.

A short round splice in a peach colored apron, greeted them in front of the curtained doorway, her pattern of smooth white, brown and black swept-back facial hair suggesting she was part guinea pig.

“Welcome, Your Majesty,” she said in a squeaky voice. “Please come in.”

She led them in past marble pools of steaming water and what looked to be a massage area.

A contraption hanging from one wall looked *something* like that thing Uncle Vasily had been hooked into for traction at the hospital when he’d broken a vertebra...but it was somehow different.

There were rows of glass cabinets filled with androids in different color schemes. With really...detailed anatomy. One with a sort of squid shaped attachment at the crotch that made Jupiter do a double take and stare in spite of herself.

“I can have that activated for you if you’d like, Your Majesty.”

“Umm...no thanks,” said Jupiter, tearing her eyes away to continue walking forward.

The recreation room was totally not what Jupiter had been expecting. It was all very elaborately outfitted, with satin covered platforms, and round cushioned beds. There *were* anti-grav areas and actually quite a lot of vigorous exercise taking place...

Not a treadmill or ping-pong table in sight though.

“We also have pleasure splices,” squeaked the attendant, whiskers around her nostrils quivering, “if you require another one?”

Jupiter turned to look at Caine, if her face got any hotter there’d be steam coming off it.

“I’m not a pleasure splice,” he said, expressionless. “It’s up to you, Your Majesty. Did you want me to join in or just watch?”
Jupiter stood there, flushed and confused, as Caine waited for her response. The trouble was, he was probably expecting something coherent. And she’d been trying so hard not to look at him, to find some distraction, anything to help her ignore this compulsion that was coursing through her body, threatening to take her over.

Once her eyes met his, though, she was stuck.

Join in or watch? She was all tangled up in his, “It’s up to you, Your Majesty.” And the way his low voice reverberated through her with those words. Was it her imagination? Or did his face change as she stared at him? No longer quite expressionless—his green eyes now the slightest bit curious.

If it were up to her...

She had a sudden, intense vision of leading him into one of the alcoves across the way and pressing herself up against him. She imagined how he’d feel standing there, solid and unyielding. She was tempted to test him, see if she could crack that careful façade even further. Push her fingers through his hair and attack his mouth with her own.

She’d run her hands along his arms and chest. Palm the slopes of his shoulders before pressing him down, hard, onto his knees before her.

She’d shimmy back into a tall pile of pillows and let her legs, already weak at the thought, fall open to the sides. Draw him forward. Take his head in her hands and guide him to where she wanted him most. Gather her dress in bunches and handfuls to her waist and let it spill down to cover him. A quick snap of his teeth would be enough to tear away her panties.

It really didn’t matter that Caine wasn’t a pleasure splice; she already knew what he could do to her with his fingers and mouth. It was all too easy to imagine him licking and stroking into her, the memory of it already pulsing through her.

If it was a bad idea, why did it suddenly seem so incredibly good?

A loud groan from behind made Jupiter gasp in surprise. And she turned to see a threesome, writhing, on a rotating platform, elevated by anti-grav beams. A splice with dark purple skin and glossy silver feathers, hips undulating, butt thrusting back and forth in an almost hypnotic motion.

Oh God, was she actually panting? What was wrong with her?

She shook her head to snap out of it, and looked over at the guinea pig splice and two androids who were still waiting. She took a step back from Caine so that he was out of her reach—quickly, before she could change her mind.

“I didn’t know this was what...” she started. She felt a little crazed and then gave up entirely on trying to explain ping-pong again. “I—um...

The air seemed too heavy, too difficult to drag into her lungs.

“I have to get out of here,” she said, turning for the door. “Can I get outside?”
The androids escorted them out. And down one last, long flight of steps, they found double doors that led to the garden. A wide stone walkway, inlaid with swirling patterns of dragonflies and blossoms, made a path between bushes and trees.

“I just want to walk around for a little while,” Jupiter said, pausing beneath a flower-covered arch, before taking off with a brisk stride.

Two, three...seven hours should just about do it.

Caine kept pace, a step behind her, as they walked through corridors of flaming red and pink blooms, like an alien variety of giant azalea bushes pressing in along the sides of the path.

“I didn’t know what kind of recreation....” she started to say, floundering again. “I don’t want to... I mean, I totally want to, but...”

She turned to the androids, who’d fallen a bit behind. “I’m sorry, what are your names?”

She'd been to distracted to ask before.

“Stacia, Your Majesty,” said the one on the right. “And this is Marga.”

Marga nodded.

“Would you mind returning to the Alcazar and bringing me back a glass of cold water please?”

She desperately needed something to cool her off, and she wouldn’t mind a few minutes of privacy to talk.

“This whole situation is messed up,” she said to Caine, once they’d left. She couldn’t let herself look at him, and so she concentrated instead on the patterns of dappled sunlight that danced through the leaves. “You don’t even know me, and I do know you...” she tried, but that didn’t sound right.

Uncomfortable as it was, she had to tell him the truth.

“Something kind of like this happened to me before—with you. With us. There was some sort of drug in the food and...” she let out a rush of breath.

Better not to think in too much detail about that night, or she’d just be tempted to jump him all over again.

“It just makes everything too confusing,” she said, in frustration. “I don’t want that to happen again.”

She took a fleeting look at his face and saw the frown between his brows.

“We had sex after eating something drugged.” He didn’t sound surprised somehow. “And that’s why you smelled like me before?”

“Yeah, sort of... You did the—Wait, what do you mean before?” she asked. “I don’t anymore?”

“No,” he said. “You smell like Regenex now.”

“Oh.”
She’d actually liked the idea of smelling like him though. There was something sad and overwhelming about smelling like Regenex instead. It made her feel sick inside.

“I guess you know what they did to me, then?”

“No,” he said, and there was a growl in his voice. “What did they do?”

Caine was so protective of her, always ready to defend her, no matter what the time line. After all, he hadn’t known much more than her name the first time he’d caught her, the first time he’d risked his own life to save her from falling.

Maybe that was just part of his coding, or part of the job. It probably shouldn’t make her melt inside the way it did. She did want to get better at saving herself. Still, she couldn’t seem to help it, there was something she really, really liked about him protecting her.

And...

She had to focus, she thought, picking up her pace again.

“Kalique Abrasax gave me a Regenex treatment,” she said.

He didn’t say anything in response, still waiting to hear what’d been done. He didn’t get it.

“It’s doing all these things to me, to my body, things that I don’t want,” she started to explain.

“It’s a common reaction, Your Majesty. It’s stronger if you’ve never had it before, but most people don’t mind. They enjoy it. In the Legion, a soldier usually takes to their bunk for an hour or so after a treatment. It won’t last much longer than that.”

She let out a stream of air; she was still having a hard time breathing normally. But, okay, she could hold out for an hour—as long as she didn’t get stuck on the idea of Caine “taking to his bunk.” By himself? With someone else? Best not to imagine it in too much detail.

“It’s not just that though,” she said. “I didn’t want Regenex used on me at all. Ever. Not even a drop. I know how it’s made. I’ve seen people hooked up to the machines in a refinery. I realize that everyone in your world is used to it, but I don’t want to be. It’s disgusting and horrible.”

“I understand,” he said, slowly. “It is horrible. But...splices don’t get a choice—the option of whether to use it or not. At least not in the beginning. It’s an intrinsic part of us. It’s how we’re made.”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“No matter how skilled the splicer, the process doesn’t work without some small amount of Regenex. It’s like a catalyst, without it the splice wouldn’t take. They add it to the amniotic fluid we’re grown in, we breathe it during gestation.”

His words were flat, straightforward.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, feeling awful. “I didn’t mean—" It wasn’t his fault that had been done to him. It was something he’d had no control over. Just like her.

“It doesn’t matter,” he interrupted, shaking his head.

They walked along silently for a while, the breeze picking up minuscule flower petals that floated on the air and caught the sunlight all around them.
“Regenex is just one name for it,” he said. “It’s the cheapest, most common brand. But now that I think about it, I doubt Kalique Abrasax would use it on you, Your Majesty.”

She stopped in her tracks and couldn’t help but watch as he closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

“The scent is similar, “ he said. “But yours was actually Abrasax. It’s purer. More refined.”

“More refined? You mean they have to kill more people to make it?”

He nodded.

“I see,” she said.

“If you don’t want anything to do with it though, why are you here? Why get involved with the Abrasax family? They’re the most ruthless, the most powerful family in the galaxy. Abrasax Industries is the biggest producer.”

“I’m hoping—if I can learn enough about it—I can figure out a way to stop it, figure out a way to take the whole thing down.” She wasn’t quite sure if she smiled at him or winced. “Want to help?”

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Jupiter spent two hours with a sheave on the culture and customs of the micro-planet Heladffia before dropping it into her lap with a groan. On the table next to her was an enormous stack of the sheaves she hadn’t even got to yet. At this rate it would take her weeks.

“How does anybody do this?” she asked Caine. “How do they learn all of this stuff when there are so many different planets?”

He sat on the sofa on the other side of the fireplace, squinting at an enormous, black leather-bound book.

Jupiter was feeling more normal again, after an hour of walking in the garden—a little more energetic than usual maybe, but that was fading the more she read. Still, she’d thought it best to put some distance between Caine and her, just in case.

There was plenty of room in Kalique’s library. Ten stories tall, the circular tower was lined with shelves all along the walls and up to the very edge of the domed glass ceiling.

And there were even actual books mixed in with the sheaves. Though, for all she knew they were all written in languages she couldn’t understand.

An intricate golden contraption, elegantly entwined and curved around the shelves, delivered any book or sheave in the library within moments of speaking a title, author or subject. Jupiter had whispered, “time travel” into the delicate mouthpiece and an ancient, two-thousand-page monster of a book, written in an arcane, dead language had been delivered into the golden cage.

Caine had agreed to tackle it with help of his implant to translate and to report on anything important. But so far, it’d been slow going.

There’d already been an enormous stack of sheaves from Kalique, waiting for Jupiter when she’d
returned from the gardens. She’d kicked back in the comfy chair by the fire, determined to at least make a dent in it.

“I don’t read books or sheaves very often,” Caine said, looking up from the pages of his book. “I usually do a scan with my implant, if I want to find specific information.”

“Oh, but then, even if I were to get an implant, how could I talk to anyone, constantly having to scan for information and double check translations and connotations on everything I say? How could I have an actual conversation?”

He just looked at her for a moment.

Huh. Was he scanning through something right now? Trying to figure out Jupiter and her weird Earth customs?

Marga came in then and offered a plate piled high with crispy cheese pastries. The two androids had been cycling in and out of the library on some sort of set program, offering tidbits of food and drink and information.

Though they looked identical, Jupiter was beginning to tell them apart. Stacia was eager to please and wore her cape thrown back over her right shoulder. Marga was a bit tougher. She didn’t approve of Caine for some reason and therefore passed him by when offering snacks and rotated her faceplate toward him at a somehow disdainful angle.

“I don’t have that many conversations,” Caine admitted. “In the Legion, I sometimes relayed official information, but that was pre-scanned for cultural sensitivities. I memorized all the Legion protocols a long time ago, as part of my training.”

“Well,” Jupiter said, holding up her sheave. “Have you ever heard of this one? Apparently, any mention of waterfowl is a grave insult to Heladffians, something about the heritage of their Queen-God. Just another thing to cross off my list of conversational topics, I guess.”

Stinger and Kiza walked into the room. Kiza looking rosy-cheeked and with a new bounce in her step. The treatment seemed to agree with her.

“Your Majesty,” she said, stepping closer to stretch her hands toward the fire. “If you don’t mind me asking, how often do you usually talk about ducks at parties?”

“It’s not exactly my go-to,” Jupiter conceded. “It’s just--Ugh!” She gestured to the stacks of sheaves beside her. “I have more than three hundred planets to cover if I’m going to learn about all of the home worlds of board members and the guests at this supposedly ‘small’ gala I’m attending.”

“Queens don’t have to learn all that stuff,” said Kiza.

“I do want to know what I’m getting into... but never mind that. Are you feeling better? Did your treatment work?” Jupiter tried not to wince as she asked about it.

“I’m loads better,” Kiza said. “I honestly don’t know how I’ll ever repay you. For that, or for getting me out of those lines back on Orous. Except... maybe I can start with giving you a tiny bit of advice? From my perspective?”

“Go ahead.”

“It’s no use asking these two about things like conversations and galas,” Kiza gestured to Caine and Stinger. “They don’t keep up with any of that. Dad wouldn’t look at a gossip feed to save his life.
Weapon and tactical formations on the other hand... Well, military do have to deal with protocols and regulations. But from everything I've seen Entitleds can be as bad as they want to be, the more offensive you are, the more the feeds love you for it.”

“I don’t want to be offensive though—‘

“Trust me on this one. We’ll get a vid-player and you can take a peek at what everyone is up to in the gossips. Just don’t let me look at any porn feeds right now, I’m too charged up as it is.”

Kiza plopped down on the sofa and grinned at Caine.

“You stay the hell away from my daughter,” Stinger growled at him.

“What?” Caine said, all innocence, quickly scooting to the far corner of the couch. “I didn’t...”

“Please dad.” Kiza rolled her eyes. “We all know Caine’s more your type than mine.”

Stinger just sputtered .

Jupiter stifled a laugh as she bit into her pastry, then, unthinking, grabbed another one and tossed it at Caine.

He caught it in his hand, before it could hit him in the nose and looked at her in surprise. “Are you throwing food at me now, Your Majesty?”

“No more than you deserve,” muttered Stinger with a baleful look.

“No!” said Jupiter. “Well yes, obviously, but thought you’d like it. Give it a try.”

Caine bit into it. “It is good,” he admitted.

“Want another?”

He shrugged and nodded and when she tossed him the next one, he caught it in his mouth.

“I see you’ve found a use for the Lycantant I’d never even considered,” called a familiar voice outside the doorway. “And even got him reading a book no less. How quaint!”

Titus Abrasax sauntered into the room, his sister Kalique at his side.

“Ooh,” whispered Kiza, under her breath “That one's pretty though.”

Jupiter brushed off her hands and stood to face them, dreading whatever the Abrasax siblings were up to this time.

Caine had been on his feet, nostrils flared, before Titus even crossed the threshold, he and Stinger tensed and ready for a fight. But Titus was all smooth charm, ignoring them and focused on Jupiter.

“You Majesty,” he said with a bow, “I am Titus Abrasax, third primary of the house of Abrasax, and it is my profound honor to meet you.”

Jupiter held back what she really wanted to say in response, forced herself to give a polite smile as he took her hand and kissed it. She’d already noticed the glossy black sheave with Caine and Stinger’s pardons Titus held in his other hand.
Jupiter didn’t know how she’d got into this position exactly: Pinned against the library shelves with Caine pressed solid against her back. Maybe she’d spaced out for a second and forgotten a move. Maybe she should have been taking notes earlier.

She only knew that after hours spent reading, she’d wanted a change of pace.

If she squinted now, she could just make out the engraving on a sheave inches from her nose. She tried hooking her leg around, but Caine just shifted his stance to contain her without missing a beat, and so she sighed, relaxing and letting her eyes fall closed.

A week had passed without being kidnapped, held captive, knocked unconscious, given Regenex or pulled backwards through time again—so she’d had the chance to get a few things done at least.

They’d spent hours every day in Kalique’s library. Stinger approved because the place was easily defensible and Caine liked the height of the room, occasionally using his boots to explore the ten-story tall space. The light of Cerise’s three suns came in from different angles through the curved glass ceiling and made it bright throughout the day.

The stack of sheaves, left neglected next to the fire just now, had grown taller in the last few days. Unfortunately, she hadn’t found any secret manuals with instructions for bringing down the Regenex trade yet. Not that she’d expected to—but it would have been nice.

She was trying to prioritize, reading a lot, learning and memorizing everything she could. She’d assigned the gossip feeds to Kiza, who sat now, on a couch across the room, eagerly catching up on everything she’d missed during her Earth years. Kiza had been reporting back on Entitled life according to the feeds.

Caine had spent hours deciphering the ancient time-travel book before informing Jupiter with a frown, “This is only a science-fiction, fantasy story, Your Majesty.”

It turned out there was nothing in the library that could help Jupiter figure out her time loop problem. So Caine and Stinger had worked on defense—for Jupiter and for the Earth. Since they didn’t know how long she’d be with them, they were focusing on what the lawyers could get through at the Commonwealth in this timeline, and hoping that it would stick in others, making plans for if—or when—she’d loop around to meet them back on Earth again.

The androids, on instructions from Kalique, had gathered more and more sheaves for Jupiter to read every day. It was possible Kalique was trying to drown her in information, trying to wear her down so that she would fall for...whatever nefarious plan was up that glittering sleeve. Jupiter couldn’t tell for sure, but Caine hadn’t caught Kalique in any lies, and there was an incredible amount to learn.

Endless hours cramming her head full of facts, day after day, were almost enough to make her think fondly of cleaning toilets again. Her eyes were blurry and if she read another sheave right now, her head would explode...Which was why she’d decided to go for another quick round with Caine. Even though she’d have to get ready for the Abrasax board meeting soon.

When they’d started off a few days ago, he’d been hesitant, worried about hurting her, but she’d hoped she was getting better, that she was getting the hang of things. She hadn’t told him about the violent purple bruise on her hip from the day before yesterday when they’d crashed down hard to the floor.
Right now, she was utterly and completely stuck in place. Caine had her arm held above her head, and she could feel the delineation of his fingers and the texture of his glove through the fabric of her shirt.

Maybe it was pathetic, enjoying this, but it was nice having him pressed up against her, there was something soothing about his chest moving steadily as he breathed, the rumble of words as he talked. She’d slumped back into his warmth and was thinking about maybe taking a nap.

After so many nights on Titus’ clipper, she’d gotten too used to sleeping with Caine, and she hadn’t slept as well here in the Alcazar, always restless, and waking up floating in mid-air when the chamber presence caught her falling off the bed.

She missed him. But at least, after that first day, the effects of the Regenex had worn off and she hadn’t been entirely crazed with lust. She had been trying to give him some space, to let him make a move towards her if he wanted to, to give herself a chance to figure things out. Still, when she imagined him holding her, it didn’t usually include Stinger behind them calling out instructions, or Kiza chiming in with the occasional sarcastic commentary.

How long had it been now? Caine and Stinger were debating positions and leverage and she was beginning to wonder if they’d forgotten her.

“You need to put your weight behind it, Majesty,” Stinger instructed--for about the millionth time--and Jupiter let out a yawn.

“This isn’t working,” Caine brushed aside the strands of her ponytail that were clinging to his beard and stepped back to look at Stinger

“You were going too easy on her,” said Stinger. “That’s the only reason she brought you down last time.”

Caine and Stinger were trying to teach her how to fight.

It had taken her a while to convince them, because according to everyone Queens didn’t train for physical combat. They were her guards—it was their job to defend her. And she realized now that she’d inadvertently insulted them by even suggesting the idea, but they were too well trained to mention that part of it. In the end they seemed to chalk it up to Tersie eccentricity. It was taking them a while to figure out which sorts of techniques Jupiter should use though and how much of a challenge they should give her.

“You’re being too softhearted, Your Majesty,” Stinger complained. “You have to fight like you mean it. You’re not going to hurt him. Don’t hesitate. And aim for the soft parts!”

Jupiter winced. She was okay with punching Caine or knocking him down—it never seemed to actually hurt him. But she really didn’t want to gouge him in the eyes—or “soft parts” as Stinger kept saying. And she didn’t want to kick him hard in the leg once they’d explained she was aiming to dislocate a kneecap.

Ugh.

She should’ve practiced on Titus while she’d had the chance. But he’d been helpful—for once—and given her Caine and Stinger’s pardons as a gesture of goodwill in exchange for her promise to dine sometime soon on his clipper--not that she intended ever going back there again.

The problem was, she kept finding herself in places and times she hadn’t intended.
Jupiter was fine where she was for the moment, wearing her own jeans and plaid shirt which were comfortable and easy to move around in. She shook out her arms and legs a little as she paced the room and smiled when she caught Caine’s look of concern, “I’m fine, really. We’ll figure it out.”

He hesitantly returned a half-smile.

She stopped to grab a handful of tiny crystalline chrysanthemums from a bowl, popped them into her mouth and felt them melt as they touched her tongue. They had something like caffeine in them, crucial, since there was no coffee on Cerise.

Kalique and her ladies walked in, just after Jupiter had taken a second mouthful.

“Come, dear,” Kalique called with a smile and outstretched hand. “Let’s dress you for the meeting.”

There was one thing, beyond a doubt, Jupiter had learned in the last week: Kalique really liked to dress her up.

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A team of androids descended on Jupiter as soon as she entered the wardrobe galleries and within minutes, she was made-up with shining dark eyes and glossy lips, hair piled high and twined with something like diamond-studded barbed wire. They dressed her in a gold gown with long tight sleeves that pinched in at her waist and jutted out in angles of stiff metallic cloth around her hips and ankles. It came up behind her head in a collar that framed her face in gleaming sharp points.

Royal business-wear, apparently, meant metallic and somewhat threatening. She looked like an evil space queen, which was kind of cool, but also kind of uncomfortable.

“Perfect!” said Kalique, with a smile of delight. Her own outfit was a silver variation on Jupiter’s, with a lower neckline and different angles on the skirt and pointed collar. Jupiter wasn’t quite sure if she was trying for mother-daughter matching outfits or what.

Caine and Stinger met them out on the landing platform.

“You’re welcome to bring your people,” said Kalique, “Theoretically, they won’t be needed as XR47-9 is a class-two business planet, but I’ll be bringing along a few guards myself.” She had two rows of six guards each lined up, ready to go.

“I’d like to bring them,” said Jupiter firmly. “And the Aegis has agreed to meet me there—along with an Advocate in case I have any questions.”

“There shouldn’t be any difficulties,” Kalique said. “Everything will take effect immediately, upon your signature, it only needs to be witnessed by the board.”

Sheave work had been drawn up to cease operations on all the worlds Jupiter had inherited. Kalique seemed to think it was only temporary—and Jupiter hadn’t told her otherwise.

“I want it filed at the Commonwealth too though -- and what, exactly, is a class-two planet?” asked Jupiter.

Kalique waited until they’d settled into the seating area of the ship to explain. “It’s a neutral planet.
All proceedings there are tax-exempt, of course. Gravity is 130% and a calming gas in the atmosphere prevents violence. It also prevents anything very productive from being accomplished, but that’s to be expected.” Kalique smiled and said, “I have pills that counteract the effects. Would you like one?”

“No thanks.” It seemed like too many medicines contained Regenex. “I never did get a copy of the agenda.”

“It should be fine, Jupiter. Your presence is mainly a formality. You’ll sign to acknowledge your inheritance and the plans you want to put in motion. Titus and Balem may protest—after all, many of those planets had belonged to them—but there’s nothing they can do about it. We’ll all cooperate, and behave in a civilized manner and things will run smoothly.”

“And if one of us doesn’t cooperate, things won’t run smoothly?”

Kalique gave a small laugh. “I’m certain the Abrasax Corporation will continue on—as it has for millennia—regardless of any mistakes you might make. However, I’m here to look out for you, Jupiter, to make certain you have the life you’ve always dreamed of.”

They arrived a few minutes later, an anti-grav beam depositing them on the landing pad of a skyscraper surrounded by hundreds of other, identical dense steel and glass buildings. The stronger gravity and strange atmosphere were immediately noticeable and Jupiter felt suddenly slow and strangely heavy.

As Jupiter and Kalique entered the conference room, people pushed back chairs to stand. On one side of the long table, Famulus stood next to three dark, shadow-figures—odd humanoid shapes made entirely of some shadowy gray particulate substance. On the other side were Chicanery Night, Advocate Bob, another android, and a tiny old man with tufts of faded orange hair, crumpled, asleep in his chair. The rectangles of dim light emitting from the low ceiling made it difficult for her to see out the windows into the dreary skies.

“Your Majesty,” said Advocate Bob. “I am pleased to be of assistance. The Aegis crew is in orbit, awaiting your command.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I suppose Captain Tsing and the crew are fine where they are for now?” She looked back toward Caine and Stinger who’d taken positions at the door and Stinger nodded.

“Mr. Night!” Kalique sounded surprised. “Is Lord Balem not attending?”

“No, my lady,” he said obsequiously. “He sends his regrets and has authorized me to act in his absence.”

“That is unlike him,” said Kalique. “I do hope he’s well?”

“Certainly,” he said with a stiff grimace, but he didn’t elaborate further.

“Who are they?” Jupiter whispered, pointing at the shadows as she struggled to sit down gracefully in her spot between Kalique and Advocate Bob.

“Each one represents a faction of many smaller shareholders, Your Majesty,” said Bob in an excited voice. “They may change in number depending on the course of the meeting.”

“And him?” she gestured to the sleeping man. “Should we wake him?”

“He is—
Kalique shushed them. “Do let him rest.”

The other android started the meeting in an officious, droning voice that soon had Jupiter fighting off sleep herself.

“I have an additional item for today,” said Kalique as things were drawing to a close. “A transfer of property and deeds to record.”

There was a sudden uproar as the shadow figures began grumbling louder and louder, splitting apart and reforming, doubling in twos and fours until they filled that entire side of the room.

“This is highly unusual, My Lady,” Famulus stood in protest.

“Go ahead and sign it dear,” said Kalique, placing a sheave in front of Jupiter with a determined smile. “It is everything we discussed.”

“I need to look it over and have my Advocate read through it,” Jupiter said, but she wasn’t sure anyone heard her. Everyone was trying to talk all at once. Apparently, she was the only one here who hadn’t taken something to counteract the sedative gravity.

“Seraphi!” cried a thin voice, barely audible over the noise. It was the tufty-haired old man, awake and looking straight across the table at Jupiter.

“No,” said Chicanery. “It’s just the recurrence.”

“Your Majesty,” the man said in a creaking voice. “Will you continue with our plan?”

“She’s not Seraphi,” said Chicanery dismissively before turning to Kalique. “Lord Balem will not stand for this My Lady.”

“Lord Balem is not here,” she answered. “Go ahead and sign it Jupiter.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jupiter, trying to be heard over the uproar of voices. “But it might take me a while to look at everything.” Kalique had done everything she’d claimed so far. But Jupiter still didn’t trust her entirely, and she was suspicious of everything she was given to sign.

As she lifted the sheave with her left hand, her right arm twitched and tingled, like she’d suddenly lost control of it. The long golden sleeve started constricting and twisting it around as it propelled the sigil on her wrist toward the sheave.

Jupiter quickly handed it off to Advocate Bob. “Would you mind looking at it first, actually?”

She looked at her arm then, confused. Had she imagined it? Was it some result of the extra gravity? Everything felt normal now.

“Maybe you could summarize things while we’re waiting?” Jupiter asked Kalique.

“It goes into quite a bit of detail.” Kalique said with a sigh, “I’m afraid it will take a long time to go over everything.”

“Lord Titus would be more than happy to have you as his guest and assist with absolutely any legalities required,” offered Famulus.

“No, I—

“Your Majesty,” called the old man again. “We have matters to discuss.”
“I’m sorry what is...” Jupiter wanted to ask his name, but her dress was suddenly unbearably heavy, pulling her down so that she could hardly stay seated, constricting around her ribs. She gasped for breath, her heart beating too fast, her chest too tight.

Caine was behind her in an instant, lifting her from the chair and into his arms. Then something released and she shifted up with a lurch and slammed into him.

“I’m afraid Her Majesty is having a bad reaction to the atmosphere,” said Kalique. “Let us return to the ship immediately.”

The shadow figures were dividing ever more rapidly, taking over the room.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Jupiter agreed weakly, able to stand now with assistance.

As she walked from the room, she turned to look behind her and saw the sheave in Advocate Bob’s hand explode and burst into flames.

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Caine responded to a muffled scream from Jupiter’s room later that night and found her trapped, wrapped tight in a blanket and floating above her bed. It took only a second to untangle her once the chamber presence had released her.

“Caine?” she said, confused.

“You were screaming,” he explained, setting her down on the bed. In spite of the dark, he could see her face was flushed. Her breathing was quick, the sharp edge of adrenaline pushing through the smell of sleep. He was determined to ignore the shape of her body beneath the thin fabric, the bare skin where her nightgown had ridden up her thighs. He tore his gaze away and looked to the floor.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“This has happened before,” she admitted. “I get tangled up and start to fall off the bed. Not usually screaming, but I had this dream tonight where everything was exploding and my dress was attacking me—I guess it was just the blanket. Kind of a crazy meeting, huh? And you came to my rescue. Again. Thanks,” she finished in a small voice.

She had explained to him, about all the times he’d saved her in her past. It was the reason she trusted him, it was the reason she wanted him to work for her.

The only problem was that hadn’t really been him. And tonight hardly qualified as a rescue. It didn’t seem right somehow, for her to thank him for it.

“I’ll let you get back to sleep,” he said, turning to leave.

“No, I’ll never sleep now,” she said with a groan. “Stay.”

He stopped.

“Please, stay,” she smiled. “God, I’m getting bossy. I have to watch out for that—giving too many orders. I just want to stand on the balcony and get some fresh air for a while. Will you come with me?”
He nodded and followed her out though the carved marble arches.

The air was carrying her scent to him, so he moved to stand on the other side of her—upwind, so it wouldn’t be as much of a distraction. He looked off at the mountains in the distance, struggling to find some topic of conversation.

“What do you want to watch out for that, Your Majesty? How can you give too many orders? You are the boss.”

Boss was a strange word though, an Earth term, not exactly right. He knew what it meant, but there wasn’t any real equivalent for him. Entitleds were Lords. Caine’s splicer had been Master. The Legion had owned him too, but that was slightly different, there was a chain of command. Jupiter was Her Majesty—boss didn’t come close to covering it.

“We’re all more than ready to follow your commands,” he told her.

She was quiet, still looking out at the dark night, at the small stone buildings lit up on the other side of the canyons of waterfalls and hydro-generators. It was hard to resist studying her face, her eyes and the loose tangle of her hair.

“Yeah. But I want to give you a choice. I want you to say no, if there’s something you don’t want to do.” She turned to look at him, her face intense, “You can say no, can’t you?”

“No,” he said, deadpan.

Her eyes started to widen in horror, and he couldn’t keep his face entirely straight.

“Ha! Okay, I get it,” she said with a rush of breath. “But seriously, I don’t want to command you to do something you don’t want.”

“If you command me, if you want me to do something, I want to do it for you,” he said. And he meant it. It surprised him, but it was clear to him that it was that easy, that simple for once.

“And that’s the obedience, that thing that Lycantants are bred for?” she broke off and turned away from him, shaking her head.

Something was wrong—had she been talking to Stinger?

Stinger was the only one who’d ever figured out Caine’s obedience coding was faulty. Stinger said it didn’t matter to him; the whole thing was bullshit anyway. Caine followed orders well enough. It didn’t matter that he occasionally questioned things, that he liked to figure out how to do things his own way. Bee splices made the best soldiers, as far as Stinger was concerned, and they’d never been coded for obedience.

Stinger liked Jupiter though; he probably thought she deserved to know exactly what she was getting into with Caine. And he was right.

“Lycantants are bred for a lot of things,” he said hesitantly. “Sometimes it works out better than others.” She had said that she knew them both, that she trusted them. She knew about Caine’s attack against the Entitled. But maybe she hadn’t known everything. Maybe, when she’d offered to buy his commission and have him work for her she hadn’t realized how defective he really was. “I guess, buyers want loyalty and obedience,” he said slowly. “We are like dogs that way.”

She took in a deep breath and he waited for her words; there was something she was holding back.
“I don’t know exactly what Stinger told you,” he said after she’d been silent for a while, “But I am defective. I probably haven’t even figured it all out yet, all the ways that I’m messed up.”

“I don’t think you’re messed up,” she said in a rush. “You can’t help the way you’re made. I just—I just don’t know what to think about you being obedient to me. It’s really throwing me.”

“It’s not that important,” he said. Except he knew it was. It was one more flaw in a list that was already too long. That’s why he’d always hidden it. “I can be loyal, I’ll follow your orders without question. It’s not a problem. It’ll be the same as with Stinger.”

“It’s not the same to me,” she said.

And maybe she was right. It felt like it wouldn’t be a problem obeying her completely, but he might just mess up again when he least expected it, maybe without even knowing why.

“What if I didn’t own you? What if I didn’t hold your commission?”

“You don’t want me to work for you?” His throat was tight for some reason. It made sense she didn’t want him anymore—he wasn’t sure what had changed, but she’d been under some stress in the beginning, maybe she was just now seeing things clearly.

He hadn’t been very useful to her in their time here. He could research, but that wasn’t his strong point. He was good at tactics, but Stinger was more experienced. He could save her from tangled blankets and heavy dresses on business planets, but she didn’t need a defective Lycantant for any of that.

“I do want you to work for me,” she said. “I just don’t want to own you. Can we do that? Would that make a difference?”

“Whatever you want,” he said. “It doesn’t make any difference for me. I’ll follow your orders the same, either way.”

The wind was coming up cold from the water and it must have stung her eyes suddenly wet. She wiped at them quickly before looking away again. Goosebumps had sprouted along her bare arms and he wanted to run his hands up and down to warm them. But he didn’t know where that impulse had come from. In spite of her easy affection with Stinger and Kiza—and even the androids—she had been keeping her distance with him.

“Well,” she sighed. “We’ll figure out a way for you and Stinger to hold your own commissions if we can. You’re set to get your wings next week. Maybe we can just see what happens after that. You can decide if you want to go back to the Skyjackers or work for me. I might not even be here...”

“You don’t have to worry about Stinger and me, Your Majesty, we’ll be alright.”
“But... you should be able to do what you really want,” Jupiter pressed against the cold marble ledge until her hands were like ice, the chill sinking through to her bones.

“It’s up to Your Majesty,” Caine said slowly, his arms crossed in front of him like he was holding something back. “Whatever you choose is fine.”

She was still trying to understand, trying to come to grips with what he’d told her. She had liked that Caine deferred to her, that he followed her lead. But she didn’t know what to think about all this. She couldn’t quite comprehend what it meant for him to be obedient, for him to be forced to follow her commands whether he wanted to or not.

How could they have done this to him? Or to anyone for that matter? Even the concept of it was horrible.

And all those times he’d saved her... even flying into a hurricane to get to her—had he actually wanted to do any of it? She’d hoped he had risked it because he felt something for her. To find out now that something else was compelling him... That all along there had been some strange biological imperative forcing him, controlling him...

Did that mean that when she’d kissed him—?

No. She couldn’t have gotten everything so completely wrong... Although, it wouldn’t be the first time she’d gotten her signals mixed up. She’d always been cursed with stupid wishful thinking and bad luck when it came to men.

She couldn’t believe it though. She didn’t want to believe it. Not this time. Not with Caine. There had to be something she could do, some way to get around this. He said it didn’t matter whether she owned him or not. Was it something to do with his Entitled instinct then? He was upset, at Stinger’s, that first time when he’d learned she was Royal. And he’d always switched allegiances from Titus to her—because she was higher in rank?

Genetically ingrained loyalty and obedience...How did that even work? But then, how did any of it work? How could he track a gene through the universe or smell when someone was lying? She wanted to ask him more, to get to the bottom of it, but she could tell it was a sore point. And...what if he just told her what she wanted to hear? Was that part of being obedient too?

“Caine,” she said, “do you—

“Your Majesty,” Stinger called from the doorway, walking out to where they were both standing. “Is everything all right?” he looked from one to the other of them, frowning.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she explained. “I was having a nightmare about that dress.”

“Well I got the results back from the material scan,” Stinger said. “The fabric of your dress had nano-bots to maintain the shape—but no more than usual. It’s possible someone hacked into them, but there was no sign of tampering.”

“Okay,” said Jupiter. Nano-bots in the clothing--and that was usual. “Anything else?”

“The man at the meeting,” he said. “Sir Erkanbald Keteri. He was Seraphi Abrasax’s chief advisor, been presumed dead for the last five hundred years. Apparently, not as dead as everyone thought. He
sent an FTL an hour ago. He’ll be at the Gala tonight and wants to meet with you there.”

“And you think it’s still safe for me to go, after that last meeting?”

“The entire moon of Zao is shielded. Inaccessible to any transport without the proper authorization code,” Stinger said. “The guest list has been run through security clearance. We’ll go over the layout before we get there, but it should be safe enough. There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Caine’s record came up. They won’t let him in without a muzzle.”

“What? There must be—

“It doesn’t matter,” Caine interrupted in a tight voice. “I’ll do it. I didn’t plan to use my teeth anyway.” He turned away from them both and started back inside. “I’ll meet you in the library when you’re ready,” he called out as he walked through her room and out the doorway.

“Something wrong?” asked Stinger.

Jupiter shook her head, she didn’t even know where to begin with that one.

“Well,” said Stinger, “Kiza had an idea for you. I think you’re gonna like it.”

A little while later, Jupiter had changed into a simple black shirt and leggings (they didn’t have any nano-bots—she’d checked) and stood facing Kiza and Marga the android in the library.

“So what are we doing here exactly?”

“Well,” said Kiza, “You’re having a problem with your training. Dad says you’re too softhearted. You don’t want to hurt the big puppy.”

“I can hear you, Kiza,” Caine said from the far corner of the room where he was looking at some kind of schematic.

“I know,” Kiza called out.

He grumbled something under his breath and Jupiter thought she caught the word “puppy”.

She didn’t want to think about that right now though. Hurting Caine. The possibility, the probability, of somehow doing that, whether she meant to do it or not.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” she started—but then she thought of Titus and Balem, still out there gunning for her. “Actually, I take that back. There are definitely a couple of people that deserve pain from me, but...” She looked over at Stinger, standing by the fire, and tried to think of how to explain it to him. “It’s not that I’m softhearted exactly. But—even when I do want to hurt someone, I don’t feel triumphant afterwards, when it’s all done—I’m just jittery, shaky, like something’s wrong with me.”

“That’s an aftereffect of the adrenaline,” said Caine.

“It’s normal, Your Majesty,” Stinger said. “Happens to a lot of people. You’ll get used to it after a while. In the meantime, you have to figure out a way around it, or a way to use it. You want to learn how to use everything you’ve got.”
“So,” said Kiza, “I figured out something else you could use, if you want. I asked around and Marga volunteered to be the one to train with you. She uploaded a combat module and adjusted her sense receptors so you’ll get accurate responses—as if you were hurting someone. We can adjust the difficulty according to the data she collects during practice.”

“Okay. Sounds good,” said Jupiter, looking at the android, considering.

Marga’s usual diaphanous half-cape was gone and she'd cocked her faceplate at a mocking angle. She took a fighting stance as she announced, “I have come here to chew bubblegum and kick ass, and I’m all out of bubblegum.”

“Oh, yeah,” Kiza said with a grin, “We, um, uploaded some Earth one-liners. I’m not too sure about that part yet.”

“It’s cheesy, but—I actually kinda like it,” said Jupiter. “Thanks.”

She needed some way to work through all this stuff, to get away from the turmoil in her head.

“Yippee ki-yay, motherfucker;” said Marga.

“Okay, that might get old,” said Jupiter, tightening her ponytail. “But let’s do this.”

Kicking ass sounded good about now.

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It was probably a good thing Jupiter had a chance to pummel something earlier that day. She should have known better than to expect the Gala would go well.

The setting at least was beautiful: A floating island on an ocean-covered moon, a pale green gas giant dominating the entire night sky overhead with its eerie glow.

But things had gone bad right from the start.

Sir Arkenbald died minutes after they’d arrived. They found him alone, collapsed in a chair, and by then it was too late.

Jupiter swore she caught a glimpse of a familiar rat splice, skulking on the edge of the crowd that gathered while the doctor performed a scan. But it turned out there was nothing suspicious about what had happened. Though it was highly unusual.

He’d died of old age.

“How very perverse of him,” said Kalique, as she dragged Jupiter away from the scene.

Kalique was in her element here, the Second Primary of the House Abrasax, flitting from group to group, smiling and charming, and showing off her mother’s recurrence.

Jupiter tried to enjoy the rest of the evening. Breathing in deep lungfulls of the cool, salty air, observing the strange costumes and rituals of the crowds moving through the pale green night, the faint sounds of waves crashing endlessly in the distance. She was in an entirely different galaxy—the kind of thing she’d always dreamed about. All of these people hundreds or thousands of years
—they’d seen so much of the universe, done so many things people on Earth couldn’t even imagine. The night should have been at least somewhat interesting...

Instead, it was like being back in middle school. Couldn’t anyone talk about anything other than the fact that Jupiter looked exactly like Seraphi Abrasax?

The food was delicious, at least. There were icy, bite-sized sour melons, thin fritters dipped in a sauce so spicy she could feel it burning a path right through her, and flaming skewers of tangy fruit, caramelized on the outside and like cream when she bit into them.

She wanted to share some with Caine, who’d been standing patiently behind her the whole night. But she couldn’t since he was wearing that muzzle. Maybe the thing wasn’t as bad as it could have been—just a curve of vertical bars that wrapped around the lower half of his face. At least he could still talk.

“It’s only for form’s sake,” Kalique had declared. “And that’s quite an elegant one really.”

It was from somewhere in the depths of her Alcazar—part of a collection apparently. Jupiter hadn’t asked what kind of collection.

Caine said he didn’t mind. But she worried that he would say that, even if he hated it.

She was tempted to sneak him bites of food—there was space to slip her fingers between the bars to his mouth. But he probably wouldn’t take it the way she meant it.

And there was one other thing, actually, that Jupiter heard, over and over again, whispered behind her back, everywhere she went that night: How ignorant the new Abrasax Queen must be to keep a defective splice.

“I thought that went exceedingly well. All things considered,” Kalique said, once they were back on her ship.

Jupiter, sitting in a frothy pile of skirts, had paused in the struggle to remove her shoes and looked over to where Caine and Stinger were talking quietly in the opposite corner. Kalique caught her watching, as Caine removed the muzzle and ran his hand over his beard and mouth.

“Jupiter,” she said. “I know that you’re quite fond of the Lycantant, however, splices are valued for the level of skill in their breeding, the possession of certain traits. Now that we know he is defective —

“Yes, I am “quite fond” of him,” Jupiter interrupted.

Caine looked up and caught her eye.

“I know you’re still accustoming yourself to how things are done,” said Kalique. “And, I will admit, I’ve grown rather attached to my own Maledictes over the years. However, you must remember that they’re not like us, my dear. Splices are really little more than animals.”

“I don’t see it that way,” said Jupiter.

She yanked the shoe off with a vicious tug and pushed herself up out of the chair, walking barefoot over to Caine and Stinger. She needed to talk to them about the one useful thing she had learned at the Gala: A conversation she’d overheard between two guards about various types of planetary
defense.

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Eight more days had passed and Jupiter hadn’t looped back through time again.

She watched from a window far below as Caine soared through the sky, sunlight shining through his feathers. She’d caught sight of him a few minutes ago, flying toward the Alcazar after he'd been dropped into the atmosphere by a passing Legion cruiser.

She’d missed the sight of him flying, more than she’d realized.

He landed high above and stood a moment, extending his wings and shaking them out, before folding them down against his back and turning to walk down the landing pad toward Stinger.

"Caine's back," she said. “I’m going up to meet him,”

“I’ll be right behind you,” said Kiza, as Jupiter headed for the stairs.

It was a long way up, ten flights of stairs to the top. She liked the climb though, liked the feel of her muscles working. She’d been getting stronger, honing herself.

She’d gotten better at self-defense, spending hours training every day. (Primed to fight as soon as she heard any of a dozen one-liners. That particular programming hadn’t actually lasted beyond the first few days, but she swore she’d heard Marga muttering under her breath just this morning: “Go ahead, make my day.”)

Caine had finally returned from getting his wings—and Stinger had gotten his a few days before. They were both now commissioned to work as her Royal Guards through the Legion.

Jupiter had wanted to find a way for them to own themselves, to buy a way out for them. But the laws were written so that splices couldn’t be independent. They’d revert back to whoever owned them last: Titus, the Aegis, the Legion, their Splicers. Even the penal system had a claim on Caine, in spite of his pardon, and could yank him back to the Deadlands if someone else didn’t take him first.

It seemed impossible.

Working for Jupiter was their best option for now. And they could go back to the Legion this way, if they wanted. She’d been meaning to ask them about that again, waiting until some of the sheave work had gone through.

There was something else she had been meaning to ask too, something she had been completely stuck on. She kept trying to think of a way to talk to Caine, some way to figure things out with him. It would have been good if there were something she could ask him that wasn’t stupidly, ridiculously awkward, but she was worrying less about that these days.

He worked for her. And he was compelled to obey her. She was more worried about finding something she could say that wouldn’t take unfair advantage of his genomgenering.

And the more she thought about it, the more complicated it became. Because it really did seem like Caine would do absolutely anything for her. Which probably meant it was unfair to ask him for anything at all.
There was something going on with him and Stinger, some tension about seeing their old unit, about working with command again. She’d noticed he was restless the other day, before leaving for the Legion outpost.

Stinger had told her an hour ago that they needed to talk; he’d only been waiting for Caine to return.

She stopped to catch her breath a moment and heard their voices from above her.

“So,” said Stinger, “that fucker Grent ask you to come back to the unit or not?”

“Yeah, you were right about that,” said Caine.

What? She couldn’t make out anything else as she turned to continue up the stairs, just a low rumble of voices. But their words were clearer when she came around the next landing.

“We need to go,” said Caine.

“I don’t know how Her Majesty’s going to take it,” Stinger’s voice was grim.

“She won’t be happy,” Caine said.

Kiza caught up with Jupiter a few seconds later as she stood there, stunned.

“Your Majesty?”

“Tell them I—I’ll be there in a few minutes,” she said, turning to go back downstairs. “I just have to... go and do something.”

Jupiter ran down the long winding staircase until she couldn’t go any further, then went outside to a long overlook near a waterfall’s edge.

She needed a minute to think, to calm down.

It was totally possible they were talking about something else entirely. Maybe it only sounded like they’d decided to go back to their old Skyjacker unit. But she wanted them to have a choice. And if they had chosen to go back... She needed to prepare herself. She needed to figure out a way to convince them that she was happy about it, and that she’d be fine without them.

*****

Caine was surprised the old unit wanted him back. He’d known they’d take Stinger in a second, but him?

He hadn’t been there to talk to Grent or the others though. He’d been busy, between getting his wings and digging for information, busy going through every channel he could.

As a Royal Guard, in charge of Her Majesty’s security, new resources, new intel had opened up to him. It’d taken a while, but he’d gotten access through a backdoor into some of Abrasax Industry’s restricted files. It would take days to go through all the information, but the bottom line was that Jupiter wasn’t safe there anymore.

They needed to leave Cerise.

“Where’s Her Majesty?” he asked Kiza as she came down the hall toward them.
Jupiter turned at the sound of footsteps behind her on the walk. The last thing she expected was to see Balem Abrasax stepping through a shimmering portal.

“There you are,” he said in a rasping whisper. The long, bat-like sleeves of his gleaming black jacket shifted sinuously as he moved toward her. Greeghan stepped out behind him, and the portal closed.

“What do you want?” she asked, edging away from them.

“I am—

“I know who you are,” she said.

“Do you?” Balem asked thoughtfully. “I suspected as much.” A pained, sinister smile slowly cracked the surface of his face. “This doesn’t have to be difficult. I have brought the notice of abdication with me.” He held the sheave out toward her. “Sign it now and you will never hear from me again.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me? Like you killed your mother? You can save your breath. I won’t sign anything for you.”

He stepped closer, staring at her with an intensity that made her skin crawl. “You were there... when the device was triggered,” he whispered.

“What do you mean?” she asked, backing away further. “What device?”

“My failsafe.” He smiled. “Did you think I wouldn’t have one? It was my mother’s very last lesson to me.”

He looked down a moment, as if collecting himself. “My mother seemed invulnerable, immortal even. She’d reached the pinnacle of existence, she ruled all that she surveyed, and for far more than the span of your wretched so-called civilization. She did it with a style and grace you could never hope to achieve Jupiter Jones.”

He spat her name, looking suddenly as if the very sight of her gave him pain.

“And do you know how easy it was—in the end? To crush her, to reduce her to nothing?” He smiled again, gently, horribly. “I learned from her... ending... that one must have a last resort against death. I knew it would be dangerous, however it took a far greater toll than I’d anticipated. I was in stasis for days recovering. How did you survive it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Don’t you? We’ve been through this before—you and I.”

“I’m not your mother,” she said stonily.

“No, you’re not.” He looked at her, unblinking. “The last thing I remember you shot me in the leg—when that Lycantant came to your rescue. But that wouldn’t have triggered it... What happened next? What did you do to me?”

Jupiter just glared at him, silent as he came closer and closer to her.

“I could kill you now. I still remember it... the way you looked at me the last time. Your eyes...”
She hauled off and punched him, all her weight thrown into the impact of fist against mouth, so hard the skin of her knuckles tore on his teeth.

Greeghan growled.

And still, Balem stared at her, unwavering, bringing a hand up absently to touch his bloody mouth. “It is tempting to finish you right here and now. However I wonder... is it preferable to wait, to watch you suffer, to enjoy your pitiful struggles?”

“Jupiter!” Caine called from above and she looked up to the sky. He was flying fast in their direction, closing his wings to dive, dropping down like a bullet to reach her. He landed in front of her shield up, the impact of the landing shaking the ground.

His mauler was trained on Balem. “May I kill him?”

Jupiter hesitated a second too long with her answer, and Greeghan launched himself forward in burst of brute strength, pinning Caine and Jupiter behind the shield, crushing them back against the stone ledge.

Caine pressed the Mauler into Jupiter's hand as he fired up his boots. Then he kicked off the wall, ramming Greeghan with his shield.

An instant later, they had taken the fight mid-air, and then disappeared out of sight around the side of the building.

Balem advanced on Jupiter, making a grab for the gun.

“No!” She kicked out viciously, heel slamming into his knee. The force knocked him stumbling back. She really hoped she had dislocated something. “You will never get the Earth from me!” she aimed the gun at his head.

“That planet is my right.” His voice was choked, straining. ”You cannot keep it from me. I have a vast system in place, everything designed to ensure my supreme position in this universe. I will send endless armies after you. I will bathe in Regenex every day if that is what is required. I will only emerge from this stronger.”

Caine and Greeghan came around the other side of the Alcazar, tearing into each other. Jupiter watched horrified, heard the awful sickening sound, as Greeghan snapped Caine’s wings back. She saw them hanging, broken, as he and Greeghan, still tangled, went plummeting into the falls.

She shrank back as something touched her face. Balem had reached out to stroke her cheek.

She struggled to pull herself together, pushed Balem away and lifted the mauler once again. But she felt suddenly, strangely weak.

“You can’t hurt me now,” he sneered, ”It’s happening again. Can’t you feel it?”

He came closer, so she clocked him in the nose with her elbow, and watched as he fell back in pain.

“I will hurt you,” she said, panting. “And I’ll stop you.”

“You will be hurt, damaged irreparably,” he taunted. ”You will age and decay. You have neither the resources nor the will to do what is necessary to stop me.”

“You Majesty,” Stinger was there in a blur of golden wings, pinning Balem to the wall.
She was trembling again. From adrenaline, or worry for Caine, she didn’t know.

Then everything went black.

***

Jupiter woke to the sound of the alarm blaring and Mama commanding, ”Jupiter get up. Make the coffee.”

This time she’d do some things differently. This time she had a definite plan.

She’d made the plan with Caine’s help--he wouldn’t remember that, of course, but as long as he was still alive, as long as he was here, they could work the rest of it out.

She made her way in through the maintenance entrance to the Willis tower, took the freight elevator up to the ninetieth floor and walked toward the east end of the building, to where she could see him, standing in the shadows.

Her breath caught when he turned to face her. Just the sight of him--mauler in hand, the light from the window falling across his face. The relief that washed through her was so strong she could fall over.

Or maybe that was the exhaustion—it was back again.

“Katherine Dunlevy?” he asked.

“No, my name is Jupiter Jones. We need to talk.”
Jupiter watched as Caine came away from the window, moving past walls of plastic sheeting and steel beams. His stride as he walked toward her in his boots, long black jacket and gloves, his black-rimmed eyes and pointy ears—all the details, all the things that made him so him—she took them in one by one. She was so incredibly relieved to see him again...but also feeling so incredibly lost and tired.

She took a deep breath, trying to focus.

“I’m supposed to say ‘Drexfall 9’—as proof that you can believe me, as proof that everything I say is true—even if it sounds too strange to believe.’”

“Drexfall 9?” he said with narrowed his eyes. “Stinger Apini told you about that?”

“Not just Stinger, you both told me. I realize you don’t know me, and that this will seem incredible, impossible to you, but I’ve met you before. I’m a time traveler,” she ended on a sigh.

How many times would she have to meet Caine all over again and see his lack of recognition as he looked at her? It really hurt this time, knowing it was only going to keep happening, again and again.

“I don’t know what Drexfall 9 means,” she admitted, leaning heavily against the doorframe. “Kiza badgered you for days, trying to figure it out—I only know it’s a some secret—and that you and Stinger both thought we could use it as a kind of code.”

“Alright,” he said, hesitantly.

“You can’t take me to Titus Abrasax” she said. “He’s hired you to find me because I’m a Royal recurrence—his mother’s recurrence.” She rolled back her sleeve to show him her glowing sigil. “Titus plans to trick me into marrying him and then kill me for my inheritance.”

He frowned, but he was still listening.

She didn’t mention that Titus hoped Caine would be the one to kill her, that Titus planned to use his faulty coding against him, that Caine hadn’t been hired for this job just because of his tracking abilities.

“That’s just the beginning of the story,” she said. “This whole thing’s a crazy mess, and we have to get to Stinger’s place as soon as possible. I’ve got a car parked a block over, I can explain it more on the drive.”

He just stood there, looking at her curiously, as if trying to figure something out. They didn’t have time to hesitate though. Wasn’t he supposed to be obedient now that she’d told him she was a Queen?

She took a step closer to him, then stumbled and reached out to steady herself by grabbing his arm. The feel of him, warm and solid, gave her some strength.

“We really need to go now,” she said.

“Your hand is bleeding,” he looked down to where she touched his sleeve. “You can hardly stand. What’s happened to you?”
“I’m okay,” she said. “Or I will be, once I get some rest.”

At least, she hoped she would be. Her hand did sting. Punching Balem hadn't been like the self-defense she’d practiced, more like some deep-seated instinct to hurt him, the way he’d hurt her—but her injured hand was the least of her problems now.

“Alright,” Caine finally said, “I’ll go with you.”

Warily, she wondered if his response was due to his obedience coding, but she really couldn’t tell.

***

During the drive she started to fill Caine in on everything that had happened to her, and to him, in the other timelines--everything they’d been able to figure out.

She called Stinger—and after about fifty rings Kiza finally picked up the farmhouse’s old rotary phone and got her dad on the line.

It took a while to get Stinger to listen to her, but they’d gone over it all together—all the things she should say that would convince him this was real. By the time she got off the phone he’d agreed to contact the Aegis.

Caine had been mostly quiet, listening to her explanations as he drove, intent on weaving his way through the Chicago traffic the same way he must have dodged and cut his way through the field of war hammers, fast and unnervingly close.

Jupiter, after struggling to remember everything she needed to do and say for the last hour, was trying not to fall asleep, or more likely pass out. In spite of the quick turns and accelerations of the car, she could feel herself drifting off.

“You smell like me,” Caine said out of nowhere, “That, as much as anything, convinced me that what you’re saying was real.”

“You never explained that part to me,” she said groggily, “that Lycantant sex smell thing...” Oh god! Had she actually said that out loud? She sat up straighter, tried to shake herself awake. “…But, um, uh, that was weeks ago and you told me it was gone, washed away by the Regenex.”

He gave her a quick glance before looking back at the road. Not quick enough, she thought, to miss her bright red face. He didn’t say anything though.

“Basically, I jumped you,” she blurted, and once the words had escaped she couldn’t seem to hold them back. “You kissed me—but you were chained up and you couldn’t help it and I... it really shouldn’t have gone down that way. I didn’t know. I mean, would you ever...? Would you really even want to...?”

“Would I want to do what?” he swerved into another lane and hit the gas hard.

His kept his eyes on the road, his face inscrutable. He must have some idea what she was talking about, but he didn’t say anything else. And what could he say really? And what was she even doing,
bringing this up—and with this version of Caine, who’d only met her an hour ago.

“I don’t know what I’m—why, uh...” she babbled hopelessly, tiredly. “I didn’t understand back then, about Queens and Lycantants—and your coding...” she ran out of steam and stumbled to a finish.

“It’s not sex,” he said slowly, as if the jumbled mess of her words had finally filtered through to him. His eyes were still forward one the road ahead. At least he didn’t look horrified by the idea, just confused.

“Well,” she said. “From my perspective, we’ve been together almost every day for weeks. Maybe that’s what you smell.”

It felt like only hours ago—had it been? —when they’d stood together behind his shield. She didn’t want to remember the horrible sight of him, wings broken, tumbling out of sight down into the waterfall.

“It’s not that. It’s something else—I don’t understand—” he shook his head. “I can’t identify—” He started to inhale, but stopped part way with a grimace, “The smell of this car doesn’t help.”

“Yeah, sorry ’bout that,” she mumbled. She’d been better prepared to leave home this morning, packed herself a small bag and taken a few precious minutes to clean the garbage from Vladie’s car. In this summer heat though, the car really smelled—in spite of the rolled down windows. It must be torture for Caine.

This whole situation was torture in some ways, living the same days over and over, trying frantically to escape danger and protect the Earth when she felt like she could fall over at any minute. And dragging Caine into this mess alongside her—because it was no use trying to avoid him, he’d just track her down and take her to Titus.

Not that she wanted to avoid him, but she was still trying to wrap her head around things, trying to understand whether or not it was even fair of her to ask him for help.

Him being obedient might be all right—as long as he really didn’t mind it. As long as she could somehow make sure she wasn’t taking unfair advantage of him. But how was she supposed to figure it all out now?

It had been tricky enough when they’d gotten the chance to know each other a little bit. Now she’d have to start all over again.

And anyway, she couldn’t even let her brain get stuck right now on wondering whether Caine would ever actually choose to be with her. She had more than seven billion other people she had to focus on protecting.

And she hadn’t even finished telling him everything yet.

“We made our plans before I knew Balem Abrasax was the one behind the time loop,” she said, gathering her thoughts. “But that doesn’t change too many things, I guess. My top priority is still to keep the Earth safe—and my family, and you and Stinger and Kiza.”

She’d hoped before that if they could take care of those things everything else would be okay. Maybe because that was the only thing she could think, the only thing that would allow her to keep going through all this.

But she didn’t feel quite so hopeful anymore.
“Balem can’t decide whether he wants to kill me or watch me suffer more. But either way... I don’t understand why... Why create a time loop? Wouldn’t it have been better to go back earlier in time—without me—back before anyone else had learned I was a recurrence?”

“You said that he’s not entirely sane.”

“Well, no. I mean, he’s fixated on me—or on his mother—I don’t know if he can entirely tell the difference between us, if he can decide, whether he thinks I’m her or not. He’s arrogant and he’s definitely unstable, but I don’t think he’s stupid—unfortunately. So why would he go through these same few days over and over again?”

“What if that part was an accident?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said there’s no information, no current research on time travel. If it’s experimental, maybe something went wrong for him, or that part is beyond his control.”

“Maybe,” she said, with a sigh. “I need make more things go wrong for him. Find some way to stop him. He said he’d send armies after me.”

“I can go after him,” Caine's voice was suddenly dark. “I can stop him before he has another chance to get to you.”

“No,” she said. “I can’t ask you to do that again. Last time, he was caught off guard by the ruptured grav-hull. But that won’t work again. And he’ll be prepared for an attack.”

She didn’t want to say it, but it might be a suicide mission. And if anyone were to do it, this time it should probably be her—especially if she were trapped anyway, stuck in this time loop for the rest of her life.

“I’m not ready for anyone to go after him yet,” she said. “There’s too much I don’t know about his time device: How it works, if he can trigger it again. And even if I bought my own armies, even if I started an all out war against him, would it change anything? Or would he just escape again? I don’t know what’s at risk. Every time I’ve looped, you and Stinger have gone back to exactly how you were the first day I met you. But we can’t count on that always happening, this must end somehow, someday—right?”

He didn’t answer. They’d made it through the city traffic, the open interstate stretching out before them; he was looking forward, focusing on the horizon.

“I can get hurt,” she said softly. “If I die, I’m guessing that’s it for me. No do-overs. But Balem? I just don’t know. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt by going after him, not when we have no way of knowing how it all works.”

“Then you stay with your original plan and fight him with laws and injunctions. Hope that you can stick it out until this is done.”

“Yeah, “ she said. “It’s not safe for me on Cerise anymore though. He can get to me too easily there.”

“Then we’ll find a way for you to go into hiding once we reach Orous,” he said.
Jupiter woke blurry eyed, staring at a familiar grey ceiling, a sound ringing from the door across the way.

“Come in,” she called out, pushing herself up to sitting.

She recognized her surroundings as a room onboard the Aegis cruiser. The door slid open and Caine and Stinger walked inside.

“Your Majesty, you’re awake,” Stinger's tone was deferential as went to his knee before her.

“No, it’s okay,” she rubbed her eyes, still feeling a little dizzy. “You don’t have to do that. And please feel free to call me Jupe.”

Not that anyone ever took her up on that.

“Caine filled me in on the plan while we were waiting for the Aegis,” said Stinger. “Captain Tsing has sent a team to protect your family back on Earth. And we’ve checked in with the Commonwealth, everything’s in place.”

“You both have your pardons and Legion re-instatements?” she asked.

“We’re now listed as under your command: Royal Guard,” said Stinger.

“I hope that’s okay,” she said.

“It’s an honor,” said Stinger, and Caine nodded his head in agreement from where he was standing back near the door, arms behind him and eyes to the floor.

“Did Kiza come too?” She didn’t really know whether it was safer for Kiza to come or stay behind, so it’d been left up to her to decide.

“Once she knew she was invited, I couldn’t convince her to stay,” he said with a rueful smile.

“I’m not surprised.”

“Your portal restrictions have also taken effect,” said Stinger. “No registered craft can portal in or out of your system without approval now. It might not keep everything out, but close enough.”

Jupiter, it turned out, had inherited not only Earth, but the whole solar system from Seraphi. Everything within two light years of Earth’s sun (including her namesake planet- which only seemed fitting) belonged to her now. If Balem wanted to send anyone to threaten the Earth, it was going to take a long time to get there without portalling.

“I don’t know if that will be enough to keep Balem trapped at the refinery,” she said. “He had some kind of personal portal that he could just walk through last time I saw him.”

“The restrictions won’t keep him there forever, but they’ll slow him down,” said Stinger. “No one can portal without a code. He might try accessing illegal location codes, but those don't often work, and if he wants to get to you he’ll have to find out where you are first.”

“Okay then,” Jupiter said, relieved. “Wow...I guess we actually pulled it off. Thank you so much for going along with all of this. I know this whole thing must seem so bizarre.”
“Majesty, I’ve been around long enough that this doesn’t even rank in my top ten for bizarre assignments. Yesterday this time, I was headed to Wal-Mart,” he said it with a look of pain. “Reinstated with honor? Getting back my wings? I’ve got no complaints.”

*****

A short while later, Jupiter and Caine came round the far side of Orous, landing their short-range craft at a run-down docking area. They’d taken off from the cruiser a few minutes earlier, with directions from Captain Tsing to an Aegis safe house for the night. Stinger would be in contact again with them later, after he’d had a chance to check in with the Legion command.

Caine reached to give Jupiter a hand, and she climbed out of the ship, taking a moment once she’d stepped out on solid ground, to steady herself and look around.

There were elaborate structures twisting high overhead, made of gleaming glass and steel, but the squat buildings down at street level were mostly decrepit, crumbling stone. Overcrowded streets, thick with people and splices and androids of all varieties pushed along in chaotic rhythm. Everything around her was moving fast and humming with sound. It was hard to know where to look first.

As they left the docking area, stepping into the flow of pedestrians, Jupiter caught herself staring at some species of alien. It had tiny obsidian eyes and black velvet skin, dark and saturated with rainbows of color where it absorbed the sunlight. The alien met her eyes and purposely jostled as it passed, brushing up against her arm. The velvety skin was prickly like the minute tentacles of a sea anemone, and an electric tingle passed quickly through her. Caine growled and the alien walked hastily away.

“We don’t have to walk through this, Your Majesty,” he offered in a dark undertone. “I can carry you and fly you straight there.”

It was tempting, but...

“No thanks,” she said. “I am tired, but I don’t think I could sleep again right now. And I really want to see everything--do everything I can. What if I don’t get another chance?”

She stopped for a moment, wobbling, looking up to watch the spinning bundles of brightly wrapped packages for sale, the passing displays suspended mid-air over the heads of men wearing silver caps with anti-grav beams.

It would have been hard for Jupiter to move forward even one step if she didn’t have Caine at her side, pushing a path through the throng for her. Vendors shouted over each in languages she couldn’t understand, 3D hologram ads twisted and danced before her eyes, noise and light exploding from all directions.

Her dark glasses protected her from the glare at least. They were part of her disguise, in addition to a scarf around her face that did double duty as an air filter—in case someone recognized her as Seraphi Abrasax. (It turned out there were statues of the former Queen on hundreds of worlds.) She’d been excited when Captain Tsing first suggested a disguise, imagining some cool space tech. But it turned out Aegis tech would draw too much attention to her in this area—it was better to keep it simple.

She heard a low bark at her side and turned excited, expecting to see her first space dog—maybe
something purple, floating on an anti-grav leash... but it was only Caine, covering his mouth in a
cough.

“What?” he asked, abashed to find her staring all of the sudden.

“I thought I heard...something.”

“The air’s not so good here,” he mumbled.

The air was thick with smog, but she wanted to be out in this, experience all it. She knew Caine
would protect her, and she didn’t want to miss anything--crowded and smoky as it was. The frenetic
energy, the hustle of being on the busy streets was somehow catching and it counteracted her fatigue
a little.

They passed a cat splice selling spinning skewers of plump orange fruit and grilled white meat. As
usual, after looping through time, she really needed some food.

“Can I get one of those?” she asked. “Is it safe to eat the street food?”

“Yeah, it should be alright.” Caine passed over some money and handed her a skewer.

She lifted the scarf away to take a first tentative bite. “Oh my god, this is delicious!” she said, mouth
full of the salty sweet charred food.

Caine handed her a napkin to wipe the juice from her chin.

“Is this chicken?” she asked, “Or do I not want to know?”

“It’s...something like chicken,” he answered.

“Do you want a bite?”

He shook his head.

“Well, we have to get something for you. How about those,” she said, pointing to a stall selling those
triangular cheese pastries. “I know you like those.”

“I do?” he asked, uncertain.

She kept getting confused, thinking he already knew her, and that she already knew this version of
him. But he was the same person wasn’t he? And she couldn’t help being happy to be here with him,
happy that they were both still alive, in spite of everything.

“You absolutely do like them,” she smiled.

She insisted on getting a big batch of them. They were hot and crisp, and she ate one before passing
the rest to Caine. When she looked over a minute later they were all gone.

It was only a short walk to their location. She stood close to Caine as he tapped in a code and they
were beamed up into a building suspended in the sky.

“What is this place?” she asked, after he’d keyed in another code and they entered through a door
into a set of shadowy rooms.

“It’s an apartment, Your Majesty,” he said simply. Then he called out “Lights fifty percent, security
setting ten,” as he walked quickly through, checking things out, and calling out other commands for
temperature and time settings.

“So this is normal? A place like this?”

She followed him, walking from room to room. There were two sleeping areas, a living room, and a wall of gadgets that was probably a kitchen. Everything was simply furnished, with less elaborate looking versions of the tech she’d seen in Kalique’s and Titus’ dwellings. There was one of those weird robo-toilets in the bathroom. She’d been caught before by its disconcerting habit of shooting warm water into her face when she leaned over and activated the wrong sensor. At least it was always clean water. It wouldn’t get her this time, she vowed, glowering at the thing from across the room.

She looked out the wall of windows and saw the rings and satellites hanging in the darkening sky. Caine stopped to stand beside her.

“Normal?” he’d taken a moment to think about her question. “I think only an Entitled could afford something like this. The Aegis must keep it for the higher ups. It’s probably not up to Royal standards though.”

“It’s fine for me. I’m not fussy.” she said, walking back into the living area to look around. “All I need is a safe place to sleep, I just hope that by tomorrow I’m feeling more myself again.”

She plunked herself down on the sofa and took off her shoes, watching Caine as he stopped to take off his coat before doing another scan of the rooms.

“It is kinda hot in here though,” she said.

“The temperature should come down quickly now that the presence has been activated, Your Majesty.”

She leaned back into the sofa, lulled by the heat, overwhelmed by another wave of fatigue, . And she remembered—she had to call her mom.

She had no idea how it worked, something to do with FTL satellites, but her phone actually worked—at least for calling back home. She took it out and stared at it a moment, bracing herself. Aleksa had been skeptical the last time she’d called, but she’d seemed to believe the story Jupiter had come up with back on Cerise.

“Hi mom,” Jupiter said when she picked up. “I’m so sorry I’m not there with you and Nino, but something came up last minute.” She spoke quickly, hoping she could get it all out before her mom had a chance to cut in, struggling to remember everything she’d said the last time she’d made this call. “Katherine had these tickets to a two-week Bahamas cruise and her friend bailed at the last minute. She’s paying me to come along and keep her company—so I can make it up to you when I come back home. We took a flight out first thing this morning. I’m on the ship right now, sorry I didn’t call sooner.”

“Jupiter! What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s a free cruise mom—

“We are at the Dunlevy’s house now,” her voice was grim. “Cleaning the bathroom since you are not here. I can see Katherine in the living room. Should I get her on the phone for you?”

Crap! It was the wrong time—a day too early!
“Oh, no. Did I say Katherine, I meant Katrina, remember, from High School, I...” God, this had been so much easier to pull off last time.

“Jupiter, what is going on?” Aleksa asked.

“I...

“You are an adult now,” she said reluctantly. “I cannot force you to tell me the truth, but do not insult me by lying to me.”

“Umm..I”

“Are you safe?”

“Yeah, I am,” for the time being at least, she thought.

“Is it a boy?”

“I—

“Is he a good boy at least?” she said wearily, as if she didn’t have much hopes for the possibility. She’d yet to approve any of the men Jupiter had gone out with.

“Yeah, he is,” she said, looking over at Caine. “He’s a very good boy.”

Caine looked at her curiously from across the room.

“Well,” Aleksa said reluctantly. “Two weeks? We will be talking more about this when you get home,” her voice was ominous.

“Okay, I promise. Love you.”

Jupiter hoped she would get the chance to tell her mom everything...someday.

After the call she did her best to settle in, brushing her teeth and hair and changing into cotton shorts and a comfy tee shirt to sleep in. She could hardly hold herself up any longer, but she dreaded the thought of trying to sleep. She’d passed out earlier, on the drive to Stinger’s, but it might not be so easy again, in spite of the exhaustion.

Caine was across the room, talking to Stinger through his implant, making plans for the next day. She couldn’t face the thought, just then, of everything that was before her though.

“I’m going to sleep,” she called and he nodded in response.

She went into one of the bedrooms, pulled back cool clean sheets and climbed inside the bed, feeling the heaviness of her body, sinking down.

No matter what it took, she couldn’t let Balem win. She had to do this, too many people were counting on her, too much was at stake. She didn’t know what the time travel was doing to her body —some kind of cellular damage, Kalique had said. For now, she could handle it, she could keep pulling herself together, over and over again, day after day... But how long would this go on? She didn’t even know anymore... Would she use Regenex again--if it came down to that, if that was the only way. And what if she did and in the end, it wasn't enough?

At least, she didn’t have to make that choice today.
An hour later, she woke in a cold sweat unable to catch her breath.

She’d been afraid this would happen. No matter how tired she was, she couldn’t sleep through the night anymore, ever since the Regenex treatment, ever since Cerise.

During the day, she could keep it together, but most nights she was filled with terrors; the worries and doubts she’d pushed aside coming back to haunt her. She would dream of falling—endlessly, never stopping. Or of being trapped beneath dead bodies. Weighted down by cold slack limbs, she’d push against ribcages and tangled hair, gasping for breath. And always, when she escaped them, when she looked back at the piles of the dead, she’d see the faces of her family.

“Your Majesty?” Caine stood in the doorway, even in the low light of the burnt lemon moon outside her window she could see his look of concern.

“I’m okay,” she said, though he could probably hear the lie in her voice. “Really, you should try to get some sleep.”

“I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Then what are you doing? Sitting in the dark keeping watch?”

He nodded. “I’m listening, tracking patterns in the environment. Looking for discrepancies. I can hear that your heart rate is too fast.”

“Yeah,” she admitted.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Not really,” she said.

“Alright.”

But when he turned and started for the door she felt a sudden panic at the thought of him leaving.

“Actually,” she called out quickly. “Could you sit with me, a few minutes, if you’re not sleeping anyway? I don’t know, maybe tell me a story. Something to take my mind off things.”

“I don’t know any bedtime tales,” he said slowly, as if he were choosing his words carefully. “I don’t think any of the stories I know would be useful for soothing fears.”

“Oh,” she wanted to protest, but maybe he was right. “Could you read me something then? Look up a story on your implant?”

“A story from Earth?”

“Or from your planet, if you like. What is it called? I can’t believe I’ve never asked you that before, I don’t even know where you’re from.”

“There’s not much to know. It wasn’t a planet, only a small artificial satellite, no stories associated with it that you’d want to hear.”

“There must be...” she trailed off, stopped by the look on his face. “I’m sorry. An Earth story would be great then.”
It took him a few minutes before he settled on something. “Maybe this will suit Your Majesty,” he said and started to read aloud:

“It was a dark and stormy night. In her attic bedroom Margaret Murry, wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, sat on the foot of her bed and watched the trees tossing in the frenzied lashing of the wind...”

She lie awake for a long, long time as he read to her, thinking that he would stop eventually...but he didn’t.

It soothed her, listening to the sound of his voice in the dark, her tensed muscles slowly relaxing, her racing heart slowing bit by bit, until it no longer felt like it was crawling up into her throat.

“Caine you can stop if you want,” she finally said, after what might have been hours.

“Do you want me to?”

“Not really.”

“Then I’ll keep going. Don’t you want to hear what happens to Meg and Charles Wallace?”

“Yeah, I do,” she murmured settling back down into her pillow.

At some point in the story she must have finally drifted off to sleep.
Balem surfaced from sleep.

Turning over, black silk sheets sliding slowly from his body, he sat up in bed and took notice of his surroundings. Once again, he had returned to his bedchamber at the refinery.

He felt lethargic, body heavy. He hurt—and when he lifted a hand to his face and felt it crusted with blood, he remembered why.

It was because of her.

“Mr. Night!” he called out.

A moment later, the rat splice scurried into the room and stood hunched before him. “My Lord?” His voice quivered with nerves.

“What report have you on the recurrence?”

“The woman never arrived at the clinic yesterday. She has disappeared, My Lord.”

Yesterday—which meant that Balem had slept an entire day. Once again.

“However,” Mr. Night continued, "An Aegis cruiser was tracked leaving Earth for the Commonwealth. I have initiated a planet-wide search of Orous and am receiving continuous updates."

“And why wasn’t I informed of all this sooner?”

“There had been an outburst—last time. But it had brought Balem little satisfaction then; he wouldn’t waste time repeating it now. The fact of the matter was he’d woken too late, once again, giving her an advantage. He suspected that as long as this counter-reaction continued he would wake at this time, on this day. His servants were too well trained to interrupt his sleep.

He held back his frustration, reminding himself that he still held all the other, more important advantages.

His first journey backwards through time had left him gravely damaged—seconds from death, with days of stasis required to repair the trauma. However, these last two trips had been merely tiring, and without additional memory loss, so far as he could tell.

In the end, it would not matter that she had escaped him at the clinic. In fact, it was her absence there that had first suggested a change, suggested that she had somehow changed. Everything else had remained consistent, only she had deviated from her past actions.

He had wondered before if she had somehow been caught within the field of his device. Now he knew it to be true.

He would track her down more quickly this time, hire more hunters, send spies to ensure she hadn’t taken refuge with Kalique.
“Have my re-coding bath readied for me at once,” Balem said. “And I will want another update on the recurrence within the hour Mr. Night.”

“A re-code? So soon, My Lord? Your last was only two days ago.”

Balem merely narrowed his eyes in response.

“Certainly. Of course. I’ll see to it right away.” Chicanery Night had backed halfway out of the room before he hesitantly said, “I am afraid that I have one other problem to report.”

“Yes?” This was new.

“It seems the recurrence has claimed her title and properties with unusual speed and...” Mr. Night gulped. “She has passed portal restrictions, My Lord. We are under a ban in this location.”

“Get me illegal codes then.” He gritted the words in a harsh whisper. “As many as possible.”

“Yes, certainly, but...”

“I want them IMMEDIATELY!”

“But My Lord, surely you understand the danger. The slightest error and you would disappear into the void, and the danger of a collision, I can’t imagine you would risk—

“They will be tested first, of course. Have Mr. Skallikan report to me once you have the codes. He can be our first volunteer.”

“Yes, yes, very good,” Mr. Night practically ran from the room.

Balem sat for a moment, rubbing thoughtfully at the minute imperfection on his right hip. The small golden disk imbedded beneath his skin had imploded upon activation. The only remnant of the fail-safe time device now was the tiny scar of too-smooth flesh—and with the next re-code, that too would be gone.

He had been warned that an erratic counter-reaction was a possibility. In any case, there was no remedy now but to see it through. No matter. If it took millennia, he had determined that he would outlast it, outlast her.

Slowly rising to pull on a robe, he walked over to stare at the portrait facing his bed, gazed at her features, still youthful, as he preferred.

“You no longer have the luxury of time Mother. You wanted to give up everything that we had achieved, to renounce all that you had taught me.” The memory of her treachery washed over him anew. “I do wonder... if you will regret that betrayal now.”

He smiled in anticipation and was startled by the sting of discomfort to his mouth.

Since her death, no one else had been able to injure him. That had changed, however, the day he met Jupiter Jones.

He pressed his lips together hard and felt the broken skin crack freshly open. It was right somehow that she bring him pain once more.

*****
Jupiter was on Orous a few more days before the bounty hunters finally caught up with her.

She sat with Caine to her left, at the ship’s controls—he’d opted for a small, fast, Legion-issued craft. It was just the two of them for now—Stinger and Kiza planned to catch up later.

Caine had lifted off and pulled around in the docking area when Jupiter saw the three of them through the window: the crow splice, the monocled man with the air cannon and the pigtailed woman on the moto-speeder—a hundred feet away.

“They must have come in right behind us,” she said.

She didn’t know if they were working for Balem or Kalique now—and she didn’t want to find out. For once, she actually wanted to make it off Orous without being abducted.

“I ran into those three before,” Caine said. “At the clinic, the night before you came to me.”

The woman on the moto-speeder pulled up beside them mid-air, purple hair blowing in the back draft. She flipped her goggles over her eyes and trained her guns.

Caine pulled back on the controls, gaining more altitude—just as they were hit, rocked by a blast from the air cannon below.

“I got this, Your Majesty.” He turned to Jupiter,”You buckled in?”

“Yeah.”

He took a split second to look around, as if quickly charting a course. And then they accelerated so hard that Jupiter felt like someone was pulling her backward by the skin of her face.

That was when the sensors really started going wild, warnings screaming, lights flashing.

“Looks like they brought some company this time,” said Caine.

Four larger ships had appeared on the screens, suddenly in pursuit and closing in from behind.

They raced them through the crowded skies, dodging and weaving. Caine threw his whole body into controlling the ship. Picking up more and more speed, he steered them around sky-high buildings and slow moving craft, the shapes starting to blur as they passed.

Jupiter saw a spindly, cloud covered tower dead ahead—coming up way too fast. And for a crazy moment, she wondered if Caine somehow didn’t see it, as he looked left and right, eyes darting to the control screens, looking everywhere but straight in front of them.

“Um...Caine—

He swerved inches from crashing, as they squeezed through an impossibly tight spot between two satellites at the last second. Sparks flew as they side-swiped a rusted-out section of Orous’ ring and an explosion burst behind them, visible in the peripheries as they came out into empty sky.

And suddenly the screens were clear. They’d lost their pursuers.

Jupiter felt light headed with relief, and she almost had the chance to let out a sigh—but that was when Caine pulled back so hard on the controls she could only wonder vaguely whether she was going throw up before or after she’d passed out.
She was somehow still holding it together, a few quick maneuvers later, when they’d made it up above the highest structures. Orous was growing small in the distance behind them. Caine set the controls for a portal away, and she braced for the stomach-wrenching lurch. A moment later, they’d come out the other side, hopefully, leaving all the hunters far behind.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. It didn’t sound too much like a groan. She looked around anxiously for a few moments more, waiting for someone or something else to appear in the space around them.

“Looks like we lost them,” said Caine.

They’d made it. She’d actually left Orous on her own, without being abducted—for the very first time. That had to be a good sign, right? It might be another minute before she was able to take a deep breath and draw it all the way into her lungs though.

Looming before them, growing closer and closer, was an entirely new planet, glowing ethereal in the darkness of space.

“What did Stinger call this place?” she asked.

“Kh 3710b.”

“Not exactly a catchy name, is it?” she murmured, looking out ahead of them.

Erie wisps of bright clouds grew larger as they flew into the atmosphere and the ship was suddenly surrounded by curls of pale green light that streaked the night sky.

“Is this normal?” she asked.

“They’re clouds of solar particles. When they collide with the atmospheric gases they emit photons.”

“Photons?”

“Colored lights, Your Majesty. It’s safe to fly through, it won’t interfere with the craft.”

“Oh wow—it’s an aurora! We have them on Earth too, but I’ve never seen them in real life.”

The lights were beautiful, edged with violent pink fire in the distance, and illuminating the snow-covered ground now visible far below.

“And just so you know, I’d trust you to fly us through anything,” she said. “But what exactly is this place that we’re going to?”

“According to Stinger, it’s uninhabited. A reclusive King lived here and everything went to the Commonwealth after his death. It’s under Aegis control now, so it should be a safe place.”

“No bounty hunters then?”

“Shouldn’t be any.”

“Good.” She’d been feeling restless, cooped up in that apartment on Orous for days. Trapped there after Stinger had heard rumors of hunters searching for her across the entire planet. She’d been busy at least: able to hire more lawyers in her war against the Abrasax family and put more of her plans into action—and get some sleep.
She’d woken feeling hopeful again this morning—ready to see and do what was next, ready to face the day. Except, of course, for the fact that it was now night again. It took some getting used to, keeping track of the passage of time with space travel.

At least she wasn’t totally exhausted anymore. Tired, yeah—but years of alarm clocks blaring at five AM meant tired was nothing new for her. And the fears that took her over sometimes—the fears that she wouldn’t be able to save the Earth, that she’d spend the rest of her life inside this time loop, or that she’d have to use Regenex—well, those worries were a little easier to push aside after a few restful nights.

Talking to Caine now, sitting beside him, reminded her of the sound of his voice wrapped around her, reading to her in the dark. He would hardly look at her in the light of day, though. He didn’t seem entirely sure what to think about all of this—or what to think about her for that matter.

As they flew lower, she could see the reflected glow of snow-covered mountains, and shadows of crumbling stone structures in the meadows and clearings between enormous trees.

“This place must have been inhabited at some point,” she said. “There’re ruins down there. Do you think it was Harvested?”

“It might have been, a long time ago,” he said. “Either that or the population was moved off-world, so the King could have the whole place to himself.”

A castle rose up, suddenly, out of the forest in front of them, pale stone towers illuminated by the green skies overhead, the hundreds of windows reflecting the night like dark eyes.

“Really? A whole planet?” she mused, as they slowly came into the landing area. She did like that explanation better than the alternative though.

They stepped out into the icy night air and walked down a wide cobblestone path to the courtyard before the entrance of the castle.

It was incredibly beautiful, like something out of a fairy tale. On closer inspection, it was kind of spooky though, as if it had been locked away deserted for a hundred years. Capped with snow, long icicles dripped from the turrets and crenellations.

“Nobody’s here at all?” she asked, shivering.

“Probably some staff inside. They might need to be activated though.”

There was an ornate metal portcullis covering the thirty-foot-tall entryway—and apparently it was locked tight.

“Stinger got cut off part way through the transmission,” he said. “So I didn’t get complete details on the place. Geo-thermal energy source though, everything’s supposed to be operational.”

Caine was fiddling with some sort of controls in the stone wall—it didn’t look like it was working though.

“Geo-thermal means heat though right? Cause I’m freezing here. I guess I should have brought a jacket, but it was ninety degrees and humid when I left Chicago.” She was rubbing her arms up and down to stay warm, at this rate she’d have frostbite soon.

“Power’s off here, Your Majesty,” he turned to look back at her. “I’ll have to let you in the side door.”
He took a blue-lit gadget and placed it against the wall then, creating a glowing opening that allowed them to step through five feet of solid stone.

“Nice,” she said as she stepped through.

Inside they faced the same problem though. It was still freezing cold—and a whole lot darker once the wall had closed up behind them. She turned around and walked straight into Caine—who, she noticed, was definitely warm.

“Sorry.” She stepped back. “I can’t see anything in here.”

He found her hand in the dark and took it in his. “I can see well enough. There’s a hum coming from the power source. Sounds like it’s down a few levels.”

They walked together through the maze of shadowy rooms and down a long black hallway, their footsteps unnervingly loud in the stillness.

“The lifts are off,” he said from beside her.

“Stairs?”

“This will be easier.” He hoisted her up into his arms. “If it’s all right with you, Your Majesty.” His lips moved against her hair as he spoke.

“It’s fine,” she said, swallowing.

He stepped into empty air and they dropped fast for a second before he slowed their fall with his boots. Several stories down, they reached the bottom and he set her down to her feet again.

“There must be an access point down here somewhere,” he said.

She could hear him moving away from her in the dark as he spoke.

“What’s that smell?” she asked.

“Sulfur.”

Sulfur?

It had been dark upstairs, but it was impossible to make out even a shadow here. The area must be large though, the way it echoed, the timber of their voices bouncing off the walls and ceilings from far away, a strange indescribable quality to the sound.

“Here it is,” he said, and she heard something opening on metal hinges.

She reached a hand in front of her, but couldn’t tell the direction of his voice anymore. She’d gotten turned around and startled at a sharp crackling sound. Then she somehow did a series of exact bad moves involving steps in the wrong direction, a trip over a small ledge, and a surprisingly long fall backwards.

With a splash, she was engulfed, over her head in hot liquid.

She found her footing and stood, sputtering for breath a few seconds later, in liquid that was chest-high and dragging at her sopping wet clothes.

Then Caine turned on the lights.
“Do you need a hand, Your Majesty?” he asked from across the room.

She’d fallen into a hot spring, it was like a sort of giant indoor pool. And what she’d assumed was a room was actually more an underground cavern, the ceilings curving high overhead. Warm steam rose off the water in front of her. It was...actually really nice. The perfect temperature. A shiver of relief passed through her as her skin reacted to the warmth.

“No,” she called over to him. “I’m okay. I think staying in here is my warmest option at this point actually. I mean—it's just water, right? Not some alien goo?”

“Just water,” he confirmed, turning to look at her and take a breath in. “And some sulfur smell, and a lot of other minerals.” He turned back to working with the control panels, adjusting different settings.

It was a struggle for her to pull off her waterlogged shoes. She stripped all the way down to her panties and a tank top, and reached up to put her heavy, wet clothing on the tiled floor before ducking back down into the warmth of the pool. Floating on her back, she could see the gleam of the vaulted rock ceiling, studded with natural formations of green and blue crystals. Her hair spread out in a circle in the water and she stretched out her arms to do a lazy backstroke.

“This is _so much_ better than walking around in the freezing cold,” she called out.

“It will warm up quickly in here. Now that the is power on. I’ll go and get you some dry clothes from the ship.”

“You don’t want to swim too? It’s really nice in here,” she said. “And I’m not getting out until it’s a whole lot warmer out there.”

“That’s alright, Your Majesty.” He’d walked to the edge of the pool, but was looking at his feet instead of over at her.

“Don’t you know how to swim?”

“That’s not—

“I’ll teach you then! Really, I don’t mind at all.”

“No, I—

“It’s a safety issue,” she stood and placed her hands on her hips. “I insist.”

“Your Majesty,” he started. Then he seemed to give up, shook his head with a sigh and started undressing.

Okay. That was more like it. And um...she swallowed a few seconds later, that was _really_ more like it. Caine was really, very, inexplicably good at—taking off his clothes... how had she not noticed _this_ before?

Though she probably shouldn’t just stare at him with her mouth hanging open. She ducked her head backward into the water to smooth the hair back out of her face, and when she’d stood up again he was swimming toward her.

He surfaced a few feet away with his eyes closed, water running down his skin...there was a lot of skin... He smoothed a hand up over his face and through his hair to clear the droplets away, then opened his eyes to look at her.
“I can swim, Your Majesty. It was part of basic Legion training. I wouldn’t mind if you skipped the dog-paddle jokes though. Pretty sure I’ve heard every variation by now.”

“Oh, but you don’t—” He swam pretty well from what she’d seen.

“I don’t swim that way anymore,” he said.

“Oh, well that’s not fair,” she said. “Everyone swims funny when they’re starting out.”

“I wasn’t the only one learning to swim, but I was the only Lycantant in the group. It made me an easy target.” At least, he didn’t seem particularly bothered by the memory.

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” she said, somewhat distracted. Because there were other things she could see too now, as the steam shifted in the air around them. But she was trying to look at his face, not gawk down below at his other parts. “Um, you’re naked,” she blurted.

“I didn’t want to get my clothes wet.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” she said, like a broken record. She somehow held herself back from saying, “You’re naked” again.

Maybe she should be taking off the rest of her clothes too? Maybe she’d been over-thinking things with Caine.

She took a few steps closer to him and felt the water smooth against her skin, her nipples suddenly pushing out hard against the fabric of her wet tank top, the warm currents swirling around her thighs as she moved.

When she’d come to stand right in front of him, she opened her mouth and then closed it again; not sure exactly what she wanted to say to him.

He’d tilted his head to the side, watching her, eyes following the movement as she licked the water from her lips.

Leaning closer, she lifted up on to her toes and brought her face toward his... “Do you want—

“There you are!” Stinger’s voice boomed out unnaturally loud. He came down the last of the stairs in the far corner of the room. “You don’t know how many ships I had to shake off our tail to make it here,” he stopped short, taking a closer look at the two of them.

“We brought supplies,” said Kiza from behind him. “Captain Tsing said they had only Aegis rations here.”

“All okay?” asked Stinger. “Everything was dark up above.”

“The power was down and Her Majesty decided to test the water temperature.” Caine said, stepping away from her. “She wanted me to prove that I could swim as well.”

“Hmm,” said Stinger.

“I can help bring in the supplies,” Caine said, walking back toward the edge of the pool. “And I’ll get you those dry clothes from the ship Your Majesty.”

“Good idea,” Jupiter said quietly.
Several hours later, they’d managed to get most everything up and running. They’d had a simple meal in one of the smaller dining rooms. It was comfortable, bright and warm now, with a table for four set next to a fireplace that chased away the last of the chill. The room was decorated in vibrant reds and golds, and deep forest greens. Elaborate patterns were cut into the wooden ceilings overhead, carved moldings and pillars of forest animals, flowers and trees.

“Diomika tells me they powered things down last month when the crew were here on patrol,” Stinger was saying. “Birds kept nesting in the shield sensors and setting off alarms.”

The household servants had been activated and were going about their duties around them now. A golden android with huge dark eyes and a button nose smiled shyly at them as she cleared their plates from the table. Stinger had set out a stack of sheaves from the Commonwealth on the table before them.

“We got the defensive shield back up again, Your Majesty,” he said. “And since you said you didn’t want the android guards too close by, we set them up to stay on the outer perimeters of the castle.”

“And that will be enough?” she asked. “When Balem Abrasax said he would send armies after me, I imagined I’d be stuck in an underground bunker somewhere, surrounded by spaceships firing lasers or something.”

“We can find you a bunker if you want—but this is probably safer, and more comfortable. The planet’s coordinates are uncharted. I reckon only a handful of people even remember it exists anymore. The Commonwealth is trying to keep this place a secret until they decide exactly what they’re going to do with it.”

“I still can’t get over the idea of someone having a whole planet to themselves.”

“It’s more common than you’d think,” said Stinger.

“Yeah, I suppose. Kalique has her own planet too, now that I think of it, but she didn’t move the rest of the population away. This just seems so much more isolated.” She stood up to stretch her legs and went over to look through the window at the glowing green skies. “It is beautiful here, but twenty hour nights? That’s gonna take some getting used to.”

“Only in the dead of winter,” said Caine. “And there would be twenty hour days in the summertime.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see that, but I don’t think I’ll be here that long.” She went back over to the stack of sheaves on the table. “Maybe long enough to get through most of these if I’m lucky.”

Stinger had checked in with the Legion on Orous. His golden wings were folded up against his back now, gleaming in the firelight when he stood to walk across the room. Caine planned to get his own wings on the next trip out. They’d put through the sheave work for Kiza back on Cerise and she’d been able to get her re-code treatment expedited this time around.

Kiza was curled up on a sofa, glowing with health again, her nose buried in a vid player, looking at the feeds. Jupiter wondered if every time they met, the girl would spend the first week away from Earth catching up on the same gossip. Probably.

In some ways, Jupiter was just spinning her wheels, doing the same things over and over again. But
most of those things were easy enough to accomplish, even if only temporarily. She might be stuck in place, but she wanted to repay Stinger, Kiza and Caine for helping her.

If only everything else were as easy.

Sometimes she imagined what it would be like going back to the refinery on Jupiter. If she could somehow make it through the hurricane, she’d search out Balem’s time machine—his fail-safe device, as he’d called it. She’d confront him, mauler in hand. When she shot him this time, she wouldn’t aim for his leg.

But how could she make sure Balem was really dead? What if he only escaped again?

And even the idea of that place was a whole other nightmare of its own. She could still see the piles of bodies when she closed her eyes, still feel the heat from the explosions, feel her lungs straining for oxygen, limbs flailing desperately for something—anything—to grab on to as she fell.

She wasn’t ready for that yet.

Not as long as there were still other plans, other ideas she could tackle first.

She’d been slowly working her way through a series of sheaves on tax laws, wondering if she could find any way to trigger an audit on Abrasax Industries, maybe freeze the company assets. And she had filed an affidavit yesterday, saying she’d witnessed Balem’s confession to the murder of Seraphi Abrasax. Jupiter’s word might not be enough to convict him, but at the very least it would start an investigation, maybe cause him some problems—apparently Regicide was a crime taken very seriously.

Caine stood to join Stinger across the room and the two of them spoke in low voices so as not to disturb her reading. She watched them for a moment and Caine turned to look at her in inquiry before she smiled and shook her head and pretended to go back to her reading.

It was probably for the best, that Stinger and Kiza had walked in on them when they did, down in that hot springs.

Or so she kept trying to convince herself.

Caine didn’t mean anything, by stripping down and jumping into the water with her. Everyone in space seemed to take off their clothes at the least excuse—way more casual about nudity than she was used to on Earth. She should have remembered that.

And Caine had been great about working for her, going above and beyond. He’d helped her with everything she’d asked of him since she’d first explained her story. He still seemed a little wary of the fact that she was Entitled—but he probably had good reason to be.

The last thing she wanted to do was abuse her power over him. She didn’t want to start thinking it was okay to use people, the way the Abrasax family did.

Anyway, Caine would going first thing in the morning—for who knew how long. And she didn’t want him leaving with anything weird between them. She didn’t want him to leave at all really—but he was definitely the one for this mission. Once he’d got his wings, he was going to track down Seraphi Abrasax’s former chief advisor, Sir Erkanbald Keteri.

Sir Erkanbald had been trying to tell Jupiter something before he died, maybe something important. Especially if what Titus had said was true—that Seraphi had been making changes, renouncing the Regenex before she died. It was worth a shot, now that Jupiter had another chance.
The problem was, no one else had seen or heard from the old man for hundreds of years—which was where Caine’s tracking skills would come in handy.

Hours later, still night, Jupiter lie looking out the window, watching as the lights gradually, almost imperceptibly, changed shape and color in the bright sky. She was tucked into the fancy carved bed that had belonged to the King, the velvet curtains and bedding embroidered with golden lions and swans. The walls of the room were painted with scenes of the forest that surrounded them.

In the distance, she could hear the sound of wolves, or something like them, howling. This planet was only uninhabited by other humans it seemed.

“Why do they howl like that?” she asked.

Caine was sitting across the room from her on a wooden bench set into the window. He’d been reading until a few moments before, when he’d stopped to listen to the wolves.

Still, she was surprised he when he actually answered her.

“One of them is separated from the rest of the pack,” he said. “They’re calling out to find each other.”

“Really? So much noise just for that?”

“They howl more when it’s a wolf of high value—one they all miss.” She saw the outline of his shrug against the window.

He’d come in a while ago to sit with her and read, like he had every night since that first night on Orous. She half-suspected Caine felt sorry for her, thought of her as a child afraid of the dark, lost in time. Still, he seemed to enjoy choosing the stories to read—he must have found out from somewhere that children’s books were Earth custom for bedtime reading.

His voice sounded too far away tonight though, with him sitting all the way across the room. And she kept remembering that he would be gone in the morning. Or whatever passed for morning here.

“You should get some sleep.” She’d heard him stifling a yawn earlier. He might not need as much sleep as she did, but he couldn’t stay up reading to her every night.

She didn’t bother saying that she’d be fine without him tonight. He would know that she was lying. And anyway, she’d be alone tomorrow. The nightmares were bad, but she always woke up from them—eventually. She would have to start getting used to it again.

“I’m fine, Your Majesty,” he said. “I told Stinger I’d be in here with you, and you set the other guards far away.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” she was feeling unaccountably grumpy. “You can’t just sit on that bench all night long and then fly out in the morning. What if you have other ships chasing you again? Don’t you need to be alert?”
“Skyjackers are accustomed to 72 hour shifts.”

“And how long have you been awake now?”

“Longer,” he admitted. “But I can close my eyes for a little while and still be in an alert state, be on guard, while you’re sleeping. It’ll be enough. And they’ll put me under for hours when I go to get my wings back tomorrow.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound restful,” she said. “That bench looks pretty hard and it's cold by the window. At least come sit over here. You’re too far away over there.”

He was silent for a moment before he finally said, “I can probably find a chair somewhere.” He got up and started to leave the room to find one.

“No. Stay,” she said.

He turned to look at her and she scooted over on the bed and patted the spot next to her. “Right here is fine. I won’t bite.”

He nodded and walked slowly toward her, pausing to take his boots off before he climbed up on top of the blanket. There were soft pillows pilled against the head of the bed, and he leaned back to sit against them and stretched out his legs next to her.

“That's gotta be more comfortable,” she said. “You can close your eyes now if you want. I don’t need you to read to me anymore tonight.”

“If you’re sure, Your Majesty.”

“I’m sure.”

He did close his eyes then, and they were both silent for a moment, listening to the wolves again, howling in the night.

“It wouldn’t bother me,” he said after a while.

“What?”

“If you bit me. You’re teeth aren’t very sharp.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You’re the one who mentioned it.”

She lay there on her pillow, looking up at his face. His eyes were closed, but his ear quirked now and then, listening to the sounds outside.

Did he want her to bite him?

The idea was...interesting. She imagined doing it, biting him—and somehow the urge became more irresistible, the more she thought about it.

She ran her hand along his arm where it rested on the bed next to her. He opened his eyes and watched her slowly turn toward him and take his hand.

She lifted his arm and brought it nearer. Looking into his eyes, she held his wrist and opened her mouth around the thick of his forearm, in the spot where the muscle bulged below his elbow. Her
teeth sank into his flesh—just the tiniest bit—and she immediately felt silly. It had been a joke, or a dare, or... something... right? She was starting to pull away when something in his eyes stopped her. Something made her reconsider...

So, she bit down harder, pressing her teeth just short of breaking the skin. His eyes widened and he drew in a sharp breath.

When she slowly drew her mouth away, she could see that she’d left a mark.

“You’re of high value to me, Caine.” She felt the heat rise in her face and her voice was suddenly gruff. "And I'll miss you when you're gone, really. I wish you would get some sleep though.”

He closed his eyes again, after she'd put his arm back down and turned to lie flat again. He was quiet, but she didn’t think he had gone to sleep.

She settled back in to look at the night sky. Honestly, sometimes she didn’t know what she was doing—with Caine—or with a lot of other things in her life for that matter. But that didn’t seem to stop her much lately.
Caine sat with eyes closed, listening to the dark. The calls of the wolves had faded, only the sound of the wind outside the castle now, and closer by, the deepening breath of Jupiter asleep on the bed beside him.

He couldn’t make sense of her—couldn’t understand the meaning behind her actions. There was the scent of her: always changing, though it remained constant underneath. Nights her heart raced and she smelled of terror. Days she was fierce with determination, occasionally looking toward him with some question in her eyes.

She said she wanted to keep him and that she depended on him as part of her team. He knew that she was reluctant to send him away. Was that why she’d bitten him? To stake a claim? To remind him that he belonged to her? He’d liked her mouth on him, he could still feel the slight sting left behind by her teeth.

Nobody had ever bitten him before.

He’d spent a while afterwards looking at Earth customs. He’d found nothing about biting beyond advice for misbehaving children, stories of vampires and something called love bites—none of which were relevant here.

Turning in her sleep, Jupiter threw her arm across his belly, and he opened his eyes to see her face pressed against his hip. His pants were rough against her soft skin, and he’d edged away before, slowly, not wanting to wake her. She kept following his movements though. At this rate, she’d chase him off the edge of the bed.

This time he stayed still and allowed himself to reach down and push the hair back from her face so he could see her.

He would miss her too, the strange little Tersies Queen. He didn’t know how she’d sleep at night when he’d gone. He didn’t think she’d ask anyone else to sit and read to her, she wouldn’t want them to know she was afraid, that the weight of her world was too much for her sometimes.

She was stubborn. Maybe that stubbornness was why she’d pressed her teeth hard into his skin—maybe she thought he’d challenged her to it. Maybe he had. He wanted something from her, even though he should know better.

He still didn’t understand why she smelled like him though, what that odd variant on his own scent was, or what it meant. But he didn’t feel the need to instinctively push it away, to try and resist it anymore.

At first, his scent on her had been too overwhelming, his heart speeding up whenever she was near, that strange feeling in his gut. But he’d got used to it as he came to know her. He’d got so he liked the feeling, sought it out even, sought her out. He realized it was somehow inexplicably good just being near her.

Hours passed, and slowly, inch by inch she moved closer toward him, pushing her half of the heavy blanket over him, kicking out her small foot to latch around his leg. It grew time to leave, but she’d somehow managed to trap him beneath her. He couldn’t justify staying any longer. He’d tried to lift her away without disturbing her but she’d grabbed on and wouldn’t let go.

“Your Majesty,” he said.
“Hmmm?” she looked up at him sleepy eyed.

“I need check in with Stinger before I leave.”

“Oh.” She started to move away—then stopped when she saw the mark on his arm. She softly brushed it with her lips, then sighed as she lay back to watch him put on his boots.

“I wish things were normal,” she said her voice so quiet he wasn’t sure if she’d meant him to hear. “I wish that we were normal.”

“You don’t want to be a Queen?”

“It’s not everything it’s cracked up to be.”

Caine had never been considered normal. But he'd thought about it—aabout being a normal Lycantant, not defective—thought about what that might mean. There was a time he’d wanted it more than anything, but somehow it didn’t seem as important anymore. If he had the chance now—the chance to go back and be in a squad with the others, to take the place he would have had if not for his flaws, to be a part of the pack...He didn’t know if he’d want that anymore.

“If I were normal,” he said. “I wouldn’t be here with you.”

“Yeah, I know,” she sounded sad for some reason.

Did she know though? Caine wasn’t sure he knew what he meant; the idea was so strange, and yet somehow right—that he preferred being defective, if it meant belonging to her.

“You’ll be alright here, Your Majesty,” he said, putting on his coat. “Stinger won't let anyone get to you while I’m gone.”

“Yeah, and it’ll be good for you to have your wings again,” she said quietly. “You should go.”

There was something else he should say to her, but he didn’t know what it could be.

A few moments later they said goodbye and he walked out.

*******

A week and a half later, Jupiter looped around through time again.

And then, after a couple more weeks, it happened again.

Six, seven—was it eight more times in all? She was losing track...

She thought about putting a mark on her arm for each loop, to note the passage of time. But in the end, that idea was just too depressing.

In any case, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. What good would it do?

She must be getting older, but not by much. It had only been a few months probably, less than a year. She was a little more tired each time, but it was only debilitating for the first two or three days. It wasn’t so bad; she could still pull it together.
She didn’t know how she continued to beat Balem every time it happened though. She kept expecting him to walk through a shimmering portal one morning just after she’d woken back at home. Kept expecting that one day he’d abduct her before she’d even had the chance to get out of bed.

It hadn’t happened yet.

Each time she was able to contact the Aegis, re-claim her title and put her protections in place through the Commonwealth—all before Balem could make any move against her or the Earth.

Each time she evaded the bounty hunters and made her way into hiding at the snow-covered castle. Each loop she carried through with more of her plans, figuring out new ways to thwart the Abrasax family. She read sheave after sheave, trained hard and continued to learn how to fight.

She still woke with nightmares most nights, but she was getting more used to that.

Each time she assembled her team to help her—and she did everything she could to help them too.

She still wanted to find a way to be with Caine—but she’d never been very good at subtlety, she couldn’t quite figure it out. She was worried about forcing him into something he really didn’t seem to want.

Caine went away to get his wings, and to hunt down Sir Erkenbald—which was starting to seem like an impossible task.

Maybe someday it’d be possible, the two of them together—if she ever found her way out of this time loop.

Anyway, there were endless lists of other things to do. Important things. The things that should have been her entire focus, her top priorities.

She had tried asking Stinger once, about Lycantant obedience coding, wanting to get more details, trying to understand exactly what it all meant. But Stinger wouldn’t say a word on the subject—as if he were indignant on Caine’s behalf. And when Jupiter tried reading about it, learning about how splices were coded, and about genomgineering, she was horrified, overwhelmed with sadness—not just for Caine, but for all of the splices, the way they were used and manipulated, the fact that they had absolutely no rights of their own.

And there was something else that left her horrified and sad when she dared to think of it: Though she didn’t mean to feel this way, she was growing more and more distant towards everyone, the longer this all went on.

Her family were always the same: Vladie whispering about the fertility clinic, Nino talking about Venus forming an aspect with Mars, Aleksa cursing that someone had used up the last of the whole milk.

Every morning the same, each time Jupiter came back.

In the beginning, it had been poignant: seeing their faces, knowing each time might be the last she ever saw them. But she was always so tired those mornings. And after a while she’d started to feel more cranky than anything—and then annoyed with herself for being cranky.

And then, slowly, bit by bit, she started to feel numb, as if she weren’t really there at all anymore.

She grew weary of explaining the same things to Caine, Stinger and Kiza. Over and over again.
She was changing, but nobody else ever seemed to.

It wasn’t any of their faults. They couldn’t help it—any more than she could—but she was feeling more and more that they were all trapped in this time loop, in their own different ways.

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Caine heard the elevator. He caught a scent on the air and turned to watch a woman walking toward him from down the hall.

“Katherine Dunlevy?” he asked.

“No,” her voice was weak. “My name—

She crumpled in on herself and he had to fly fast to catch her head before it could hit the floor.

Holding her in his arms, he shook his own head to clear away a strange scent, one that didn’t make any sense. Putting his finger to the implant point on his neck, he said “Tell Titus I have the woman.”

****

Jupiter woke with a start, trying to catch her breath.

She looked at her surroundings—the room was strangely rustic: the walls a pattern of round, bright, variegated stones, high rafters with thick metal beams overhead, and a large silver pipe running from one end of the ceiling to the other.

In spite of her heart racing from the nightmare, her muscles ached with fatigue. Which was a good thing actually—it meant no one had used Regenex on her again.

She was lying on a bed, still in her own clothes. Caine’s mauler was on a side table next to her. And across the room, Caine sat looking out a window, the innards of some tech spread out on a table next to him.

She swung her feet off the bed and reached out to take the gun.

“I thought it would make you feel better when you woke up,” he spoke without turning to face her. “But be careful, you’ve been asleep for twenty hours.”

She started across the room toward him, the mauler heavy in her hand.

“It works better if you flip the switch by your thumb.” He still hadn’t looked in her direction.

She put the gun down on the table in front of him. “I’m not planning on using it—not right now at least.”

“It’s up to you.” His voice was lower, rougher than usual, a large, half-empty bottle sat on the windowsill beside him.

Had he been drinking? She’d never seen that before. He’d always wanted to be alert when he was with her, when he was on duty.
“Where are we?” she asked.

“We landed here yesterday. It’s a small agri-moon—run by two sharecroppers. We can stay with them until the next transport comes.”

She went to stand across the table from him, next to the window and looked outside. They were on the second floor of the small cobblestone farmhouse (could you call it cobblestone if they were moon stones?) surrounded by a yard blooming with herbs and flowers, and paths leading out in all directions.

Looking up, she saw a ceiling curved a hundred feet above, made of geometric patterns of transparent material, bright artificial sunlight shining down from glowing rods. The deep black of space was the only thing visible beyond.

In the distance, the paths led to a series of smaller interconnected domes, each filled with green, and stretching out into infinity.

She looked over at Caine, confused.

“I think it’s what you’d call the middle of nowhere,” he said, still facing the window. “Twenty million acres of food crops. We won’t go hungry.”

She had been preparing to give him her speech, the same one she’d given time after time lately, every time when he first met her again. But something was wrong here. Something more than waking up in a strange place. Something seemed wrong with Caine.

“But how —? I mean...why are we here? I must have passed out, but we were in Chicago last thing I knew.”

“It’s not a pleasant story,” he said. He picked up the bottle, took a swig from it and finally turned toward her as he held it across the table in offering. “It’s root alcohol, not bad once you get used to it. You might want some.”

“No,” she shook her head. How much of it had he had? “Just tell me what’s going on.”

He was scaring her though; she’d never seen him with this hopeless expression.

He looked away again.

“Titus Abrasax hired me to find you,” he started slowly. “I guess he must have wanted me to save you from the attack. I didn’t know about it beforehand. He didn’t tell me... Titus might have known it was a possibility—that if he told me what was going down I’d try to save them instead of you.”

He was quiet, the silence stretching for a while before he continued.

“There was an attack on your planet, on Earth. Everyone within a two-hundred-mile radius of Chicago was obliterated in seconds.”

“No, it can’t...” Her voice was small, pathetic and weak in protest.

Her family.

All of them gone.

Obliterated.
Icy cold spread through her, turning her body heavy as stone.

“Some people I knew, someone who used to be a friend of mine...” Caine broke off. “They didn’t survive. They couldn’t have, there was no warning.”

Stinger and Kiza.

“We were aboard one of Titus Abrasax’s ships when it happened.” Caine continued. “The ship was damaged by incoming fire. I got you out in an escape pod before the second blast hit and the ship exploded. I slipped us out through a portal behind one of the Harvesters. The pod took some damage too. I’m surprised we made it this far—a second later and we wouldn’t have made it at all.”

“Harvesters?”

“There were thousands of them. I’m sorry, but everyone on your planet has been taken by now.”

“Everyone?”

He nodded his head slowly. “You’re safe here though. No one will be looking for you, no one will imagine you survived.”

She was safe, only her. Only one person alive, out of a planet of seven billion. She couldn’t grasp it, the number too huge, suffocating, an impossible weight pulling her down. Too much, too many people dead—everybody dead—because of her.

It couldn’t be true—she wanted to think that it couldn’t. But, of course it was true. She’d been dreading something like this, every day since this started.

She’d finally messed up.

Balem had had his chance and he’d taken it—more quickly than she’d imagined. She’d somehow thought he’d capture her again if it came down to it. She’d figured he couldn’t resist torturing her with some horrible deal. She’d thought she would get another chance, even if he did catch up to her...

But did it matter now?

Everyone on Earth dead –and it was her fault.

She’d imagined endless variations of this, night after night in her sleep, death and destruction everywhere. Time after time. Somehow, she still wasn’t prepared for it to be real.

“But it’s not real though,” she said softly, in realization. She was surprised to hear laughter and realized it was coming from her, she was hiccapping with it, choking on it all of the sudden. “None of this is real,” she gasped. “It will all go back again. Everything will be okay.”

Caine took another drink from the bottle, watching her now, waiting for her to catch her breath. “You’re in shock,” he said.

“No, but—

Maybe he was right though. She felt like she was in shock. There were tears streaming from her eyes. Maybe she was on the verge of totally freaking out. But that didn’t mean that she was wrong. That didn’t mean it couldn’t be true. Everything could go back to the way it had been.

She wiped her face and tried to take a deep breath.
None of it had to be real. Not permanently.

“We made an emergency landing here yesterday,” Caine continued his story. “The pod couldn’t make it any further. Their FTL satellite is down here. I’ve been looking over the unit from the pod, trying to fix it, but there’s too much damage.” He gestured to the piles of wires and microscopic circuit boards before him; she could see that some of them had melted in spots. “We’re stuck here for now, the next transport ship is due in three weeks.”

Jupiter didn’t want to be here in three weeks though. She needed to go back to Earth again, go back in time, have another chance to make things right. After hoping to escape it for so long, the only thing she wanted now was for the time loop to happen again, at least one more time.

“I’m a time traveler,” she said, the words coming out too quickly, frantically. “I know it sounds impossible, but Balem Abrasax caught me in a time device. And I keep looping around, going back into the past, over and over again. It seems hopeless right now, but this can all be undone. I can be faster next time and fix everything.”

Caine didn’t seem to be listening though. She knew she was flustered and explaining things out of order, she wasn’t saying anything right.

“We can save Stinger and Kiza!”

That got his attention at least.

“How do you know about them?” he asked.

“I’ve met you all before, and each time you’ve helped me save the Earth—more times than I can remember. We can do it again.”

And if by some chance, she weren’t still stuck in the loop, she would go after Balem in three weeks and make him reset the device one more time. Whatever it took, she would do it.

What other option was there?

At least, if she were forced to go to him that might be an end to this. She was so tired of it all.

“I don’t know,” Caine said. Was he was slurring his words?

“You can believe me,” she said with a sigh. “You know that I’m not lying. We can fix this—somehow. I promise you. I can explain it all later, answer all your questions—maybe when you haven’t been drinking...” she trailed off. “I guess there’s no hurry now.”

“I don’t know how you got mixed up with the Abrasax family,” he said carefully. “But something strange is going on with you. I don’t know how Titus did it—but there’s something about your scent, or my scent...”

That again.

“It’s nothing to do with Titus,” she said, exasperated.

Caine watched her, waiting for an explanation. But he had never explained it to her. It was sex—or not sex—that part seemed to change. Maybe depending on whether or not they’d had sex recently? But she’d hardly allowed herself to be near Caine in the last few time loops. It was too painful anymore, and she’d sent him away each time, after they’d been together for the first few days.
So what was it he smelled?

She was so frustrated with herself. She couldn’t believe she’d let this happen, time after time. All the things she’d wanted to tell him, all the things she’d wanted to ask—and she’d let herself get stuck every single time.

“You want to know why I smell like you?” She felt the sudden need to move, to shake off the fatigue and the frustration, everything welling up inside her as she paced the room in front of him. “I really don’t know,” she said on a laugh that came out wrong. “Maybe it’s some kind of warning—from your future self—to watch out because I’m desperately, hopelessly in love with you...” she stopped, realizing her voice was breaking and somehow it wasn’t as funny as it had seemed a few seconds earlier.

It wasn’t funny at all.

He stared at her silently.

“I’m sorry,” she said with a sigh. “I’m probably still in shock.”

Everything was wrong and she’d had to go and say that. What could she possibly expect?

Nothing.

She didn’t expect anything. He didn’t know her. It was all too weird—just like it always was when she met him again.

“Just—never mind,” she said. “If I’m right, if we’re lucky, time will re-set and this will all go away. Someday soon, you won’t know me anymore, won’t remember that we ever had this conversation.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

She opened her mouth to say the lines she’d memorized, the same things she’d told him so many times before—but did it even matter anymore? She didn’t want to deal with any of it right now.

“I’m nobody,” she said.

In spite of everything thrust on her, wasn’t it true? She was supposed to be the Queen, supposed to save her world. Except she hadn’t been able to pull it off this time.

Right now, she might as well be nobody.

“Balem Abrasax wouldn’t incinerate twelve million people trying to kill a nobody,” Caine said.

“You’re right. That’s my fault. I take full responsibility for it and I’m going to find a way to fix it.”

She refused to believe it couldn’t be done. Somehow, she would find a way...

But it wasn’t going to happen today.

“You can call me Jupiter, if you want.” She slumped down in a chair next to him. “I already know you Caine Wise.”

She reached out a hand toward him, but it was her left, she wasn’t looking for a handshake from him this time.

“Could you pass the bottle? I think I do need a drink.” She took a long swallow; it tasted like vodka
and gave her a warm feeling going down. “And can I get something to eat?”
Jupiter followed Caine down the narrow staircase at the end of the hall, the bottle of alcohol gripped tight in her hand. She really did need food—she was light-headed, weak with hunger.

She stumbled on a stair and he turned to catch her, their faces suddenly close. He’d been slurring his words before, but he was steadier than she was, his hands firm where he wrapped them around her upper arms.

“Thanks,” she said.

His eyes were intense, focusing on the movement of her lips as she spoke. Heat radiating from his hands as he stood there, completely still. Then he shook his head, seemed to realize she’d found her footing, and turned to continue down the stairs.

The large open room below was an odd combination of rustic charm and weird space tech—the same colorful stone walls as upstairs, wooden furniture, a fireplace and an entire wall filled with kitchen gadgetry that looked like it belonged in a science lab.

A woman walked toward them from beside the rough-hewn table in the middle of the room. Everything about her light and flowing, her swaying silvery hair, translucent pale skin with the slightest tinge of green to it, her faded skirts and long draping sleeves rustling as she moved.

“Remarkable,” she said, grey eyes piercing, examining Jupiter closely.

“Io, this is Jupiter.” Caine looked between the two of them.

“Io?” asked Jupiter in surprise.

“Yes, Ionidine Trembt,” she replied.

“Oh—um, it's just that Io is one of Jupiter’s moons. That is, the planet Jupiter, not me, Jupiter.” Was she babbling? The effort of making herself understood suddenly seemed too much.

“Is Jupiter a planet of some significance then?” Io asked.

“Significance? I guess not really.”

The universe was so vast...and Jupiter still knew so little of it. It was overwhelming sometimes, how much she still had to learn. The planet Jupiter had always seemed important to her of course. And it was the biggest in her solar system; anyone else from Earth would think it significant. But then it hit her again: There was no one else from Earth, there was no one else left alive but her.

She needed to find a way to save them all permanently. The time loop would bring them back, but she never wanted to wake again and find that she was the only one left.

Her knees felt wobbly, as if she’d suddenly forgotten how to stay upright when she wasn’t moving forward.

“Sit down,” Io said in a gentle voice, “And I’ll get you something to eat.”

“Thank you. That would be great.”

“No one ever comes around here other than transport pilots,” said Io. “It was a welcome surprise to
see your face.”

Io walked over to the wall of translucent tubes, metal knobs, control screens and drawers. An array of incomprehensible gadgets.

“Do you care for grunyaquats?”

“I don’t know.” Jupiter answered. “I’ll try it...them?”

She watched as colorful items flew through the tubes, ingredients entering whole on one end, jets of water and flashes of lasers as foods moved along various paths. A minute later, Io opened a door and brought out a steaming bowl of food.

Jupiter took a bite of the spicy vegetable stew with mummer of appreciation, watching Caine as she ate. He was slowly pacing the edge of the room, restless. He’d declined the offer of food—for once, he didn’t seem to have an appetite.

“I did suggest giving you something for your fatigue,” said Io, looking closely at Jupiter’s face, “But Caine wouldn’t let me near you. He’s very protective.”

“I appreciate it,” Jupiter said to him. “I really prefer not having any medical treatments.”

His only response was a nod.

Io watched her, unnervingly. Then, in a sudden swish of fabric, she moved to open a cupboard, brought out some glasses, and plunked them down on the table.

“Will you join us in a drink?” she called over to Caine.

He shook his head. And she shrugged, gently took the bottle from where it was still clenched in Jupiter’s left hand and poured out generous portions for them both.

Then she lifted her glass in a toast.

“In celebration of your arrival,” she said, and tossed back her drink in one gulp.

Once Io began to talk, and it was like a spout had opened, her words pouring quickly out.

“It’s been nine-hundred and eighty-six years here,” she mused. “We stayed behind after everyone else left. I couldn’t have done it without Ell, of course. She’s the real genius, keeps everything running—I don’t know if you had the chance to meet her before.”

“Um, no,” said Jupiter, swallowing a mouthful of stew. “I just woke up a few minutes ago.”

Io just stared. There was definitely something strange about her. Other than the faintly green skin, she looked human—but who knew what sort of creature she might be. Maybe she was just out of practice talking to strangers. Anyway, she seemed friendly enough, giving them food and a place to stay.

“We’ve kept everything self-sufficient,” Io continued. “Expanded the agri-domes, increased profits. It’s kept corporate from looking too closely into any of our practices.”

She didn’t seem to require more than an occasional nod, as she spoke, so Jupiter focused on her food. She had that odd yet familiar feeling of waking up in a new place, fatigued and wondering what sort of world she’d found herself in. There was nothing she could do right now but eat, try to rest, try to build herself up for the next time around.
In spite of the odd manner, there was something soothing about Io’s voice as she talked.

"The residential complex was too large for just the two of us, so Ell designed this house. We built extra rooms for when the children came, but they’ve all grown up and moved away now, families of their own, five generations."

“It’s a very nice house,” Jupiter murmured between bites.

“We’ve continued the research, of course, kept the project going,” said Io.

“Are you talking about our research, dear?” a voice said as the door swung open. “There’s no end once that gets started.”

The woman who entered had close-cut fuchsia hair and a wry smile. A tattoo of iridescent flowers curved around her left eye and temple, the intricate rainbow pattern bright against her dark brown skin. She unfastened a heavy bag of equipment from around one shoulder and hung it on a hook by the door, revealing a pink vest that matched her hair and tan pants, their multitude of pockets overflowing with yet more gadgets.

“Hello.” She held a hand out to Jupiter as she came closer. “My name is Ell.”

“Jupiter,” she said in response, noticing the firm handshake and the way the other woman took her measure.

Ell walked over to Io, smoothed a hand down her hair and leaned in for a quick kiss. “Are you sure?” she asked quietly.

“I’m sure,” said Io.

Ell fixed herself some food and Jupiter watched in a daze as the whizzing wall of tubes went into action again.

After a quick bite to eat, Ell headed back out, muttering something about checking the lines in sector 439. And Io continued on with her strange, mostly one-sided conversation. Maybe she just wanted someone new to listen to her theories? Though Jupiter was far from the best audience right now. She let the words wash over her.

Slowly, hours passed with food and drink and talk.

Caine looked on, mostly silent. Since he’d passed Jupiter the bottle upstairs he hadn’t had any more to drink himself.

Day faded into evening and everything seemed more and more hazy, unreal.

He was keeping his distance, Jupiter realized. She shouldn’t have told him that she loved him; she should never have let that slip. But maybe it was for the best. She’d always wondered before—if his obedience coding would kick in once he knew how she felt. She’d worried he’d be forced to follow her lead. She’d feared she might coerce him into a relationship without realizing it.

That didn’t seem to have happened.

Although, she realized with a sinking feeling, she hadn’t told him that she was a Queen yet.

What if he suddenly changed once she told him? It was horrible, imagining he’d somehow be compelled to love her in return, or to pretend to. She didn’t know what she would do if that
happened. But at least she would know. She’d make sure, if need be, that she never said anything about it ever again.

Right now, he just looked troubled, and maybe confused. By her? By the whole situation? She hadn’t even told him their whole story yet... He was even quieter than usual though. Maybe he blamed her for what had happened to Stinger and Kiza. He probably should.

Or maybe he wasn’t entirely put off by her after all.

When the room started to feel like it was spinning again, Caine scooped Jupiter up and carried her back upstairs to lay her down gently on the bed.

***

She woke headachy; her mouth felt like it was pasted shut. She’d hoped the drinking would knock her out cold. Instead she’d been sunk into an endless dream state, dragged down into nightmares, pulled under until she was gasping for breath.

Still, she’d had some sleep, and she felt marginally better for it. She got herself together as best she could and went downstairs to find Caine sitting alone.

“Can I get you something to eat?” he asked.

“Yes, please.”

She walked over and stood next to him at the wall embedded with gadgets, watching as he punched in a few numbers and the ingredients flew through the tubes.

“How does this work exactly?”

“I’ve never seen anything quite like it before,” he said, turning to see her standing close by. “Ell invented it. She suggested this combination for you.”

He drew out something that looked like a fruit covered pancake and handed it to her.

She sat down at the table with her food, as he programmed more numbers into the machine.

“I asked about this one in particular,” he said, looking over at her.

She watched as tiny brown dots flew through the tubes, puzzled as a minute later he drew out a steaming cup and put it before her expectantly.

“You’ve been asleep for a long time,” he explained. “I thought you’d want something to revive you.”

Then the smell hit her.

“Oh my God, is this coffee?”

“Isn’t it a favorite drink on Earth?”

“Definitely for me, but how? I’ve never had coffee anywhere else before.”

“I don’t know how closely you were listening to Io. But apparently they grow everything in the ‘verse here.”
“Yeah, I was fading in and out for a while there,” she admitted.

“She was very intent that you know about their research—interesting, considering they told me they were only sharecroppers.”

Jupiter took a sip of the hot coffee. There was something slightly different about it, but it was actually pretty good.

“Thank you for this,” she said, something else occurring to her. “If you know about coffee, that means you can still look up information about Earth? It’s all still out there somewhere?”

“FTL satellites are constantly collecting information—from all around the universe. I can’t access anything new, but I uploaded everything from your online computer systems two days ago.” He touched his implant. “I can store more than a thousand times the data of your internet in here.”

“Okay,” said Jupiter taking a deep breath, “I’m more than a little crazed right now and probably need some perspective here, but somehow, knowing there’s coffee and the Internet—well it actually helps a little.”

“You said that you could bring them all back, that there were things you wanted to explain to me?”

“Yeah.” She took another bite of food and a fortifying drink of coffee and then she began her story.

She told him all the things that always convinced him she was a time traveler—she’d memorized her lines. She watched him closely as she spoke. It was strange, how she missed him when he was right there in front of her. She had to hold back sometimes from touching him, keep from reaching out to see if he were real.

She told him about the first time she’d met him, when he’d saved her at the fertility clinic. She told him the story of how he’d stopped her wedding with Titus, and how they’d escaped Balem’s exploding refinery and made it safely back to Earth.

She told him about her first loop backward through time, when they were captive on Titus’s ship. She told him about her time with Kalique and getting lawyers to work for her at the Commonwealth, how she’d filed his and Stinger’s pardons and reinstatements, gotten them their wings and made them her Royal Guards.

She explained that she’d gone into hiding after Balem told her about his fail-safe device, and then begun sending endless bounty hunters after her. She’d been training in combat, reading histories and laws, putting through more sheave work and protections each time.

“You’re a royal recurrence?” he interrupted at one point. “You’re a Queen?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid so,” she said. “But I know about your entitled instinct and all your so-called defects and I trust you completely. You’ve saved me so many times it’s ridiculous.”

She wanted him to know that she didn’t consider him a danger to her—at all.

“It sounds like you’ve done just as much for me,” he said, still frowning.

“I don’t know how I’ll be able to put through your pardon and re-instatement this time around or get you your wings.”

“That doesn’t matter. I wasn’t expecting to ever get my wings again.”
“It matters to me,” she said. “If I could contact the Commonwealth, everything I’ve done in the other time loops would go into effect. I don’t understand how it works exactly, but the Minister of Seals and Signets said it’s all time locked. There’s sheave work filled under my title, but none of it exists until I officially exist, until I scan my sigil. That’s why Balem was able to beat me this last time. I didn’t get to the Aegis in time.”

She thought she’d gotten good at telling this story—at convincing him. Usually, after the first few minutes, Caine came around, but this time he looked so skeptical—and she wasn’t sure quite where she’d gone wrong. She let out a long sigh. Maybe it helped going to Stinger’s place, meeting up with the Captain Tsing and the crew. Everything was out of order, off kilter this time. Too much had gone wrong.

“But why would Balem Abrasax re-set the time device again?” Caine asked. “He has what he wants now. He’s survived, he’s harvested the Earth, and he believes that he’s killed you.”

“It’s not that he’ll re-set it, exactly... It’s that—I don’t think he knows how to stop it. He told me his device was a fail-safe against death. When it was triggered at the refinery, I think I just got dragged along in its wake.”

She took another bite of her food, tried to think about how she could explain it.

“We don’t think it’s in his control,” she said. “Because if he could have stopped it, he would have. I’m absolutely sure of that now. There are other ways he could get at me, better ways. The time loops—going through this over and over again—it doesn’t make any sense.”

“And why haven’t I gone after him?” he asked. “Why haven’t I killed him for you?”

She knew Caine had wanted to go after Balem. He’d suggested it before. Time after time. But she’d never wanted to risk him. It wouldn’t be right, not when he had no real choice in the matter—when his coding obliged him to protect her. And she didn’t want him going on another suicide mission just because she was a Queen.

“There are always other things to do,” she said. “New ideas, new plans to put into action against Balem, against Abrasax Industries. That, and the problem of, well, I don’t know if killing him would even work. He might have another fail-safe device.”

Caine still didn’t seem convinced for some reason though.

“You have to believe me,” she said reaching out, putting her hand over his where it rested on the table. “The time loop will happen again. And when it does we’ll have them all back: Stinger and Kiza, my family, everyone on Earth.”

“I believe that you’re a time traveler,” he said his voice low, quiet. “And that you’ve met me before. There are too many things that you know.”

“Okay...”

“I’ll help you in whatever way I can,” he said, “for as long as you’re with me. But how—

He broke off as the door opened and Io and Ell came into the room.

“You’re awake!” Io said with an excited smile. “Please come with us. Everything is ready for you to see.”
They walked down a path in the yard outside, and over into a neighboring dome filled with flowering trees.

“We’ve accelerated the growth factor by a hundred in here,” Ell said. “The fruit will be ready by tomorrow.”

“Wow,” said Jupiter, kind of automatically, truth be told. When she considered the wonders of space, she hadn’t really thought about space agriculture. But it was only polite, to let their hosts show them around the place. Even though what she really wanted was the chance to talk to Caine some more. She could tell there was something still troubling him, something about her story he didn’t seem to believe.

A large metal disk slid open in the ground as they approached, a blue anti-grav beam shooting up from inside.

“Please, follow us,” said Io, and she and Ell stepped into the beam and began to lower down slowly.

Caine’s eyes widened as he sniffed the air, his hand hovering over his Mauler.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“It’s...strange,” he said slowly. He took his hand away again. “But it’s alright I think. I can go down first and check it out if you want.”

“I’d rather we go together,” she said.

They stepped into the beam. It was a long trip down, thirty or forty feet. The space was huge and dim, spreading out below them, with wall to wall banks of rectangular tanks that radiated the only light in the place.

Once they’d landed, Jupiter stepped forward, drawn toward the mysterious green glow, trying to make out the shapes behind the semi-transparent material.

She put a hand against one of the tanks, and found it was smooth and damp, fibrous. It moved against her palm, almost seeming to breathe. She pressed closer to see what was inside.

Then she screamed.

There was an eyeball, and once she’d recognized that, she saw the shapes of organs and something that looked like a sheet of skin, everything floating in a jumbled incomprehensible mass.

She backed away in horror as the lights came on all around them, everything suddenly bright.

“I’m so sorry Your Majesty,” said Io, coming to stand by her side. “That’s only the recycling. Please come this way. I’ve prepared the labs for your tour.”

“What are you recycling?” Jupiter asked in disgust. “What is this place?”

“We’re recycling the cloned materials. We’ve grown and isolated those parts for research, to compare the effects on various tissues and organs. We’ve stopped producing the cloned Regenex here of course.”
Regenex. Jupiter couldn’t seem to escape it. It was everywhere she turned.

“You produced cloned Regenex here?”

“Yes,” said Io. “We did for quite some time. Ell needed it in order to maintain her longevity and we continued to the run tests. We were able to prove conclusively that there is no difference between the laboratory product and that of the farmed harvests.”

“Farmed harvests?” said Jupiter in disbelief. “That’s what it’s called when an entire planet is killed?”

“Yes,” Ell said, matter of fact. “And other than color and consistency, the cloned product is identical. We’ve proved it most conclusively.”

“I’m afraid,” said Io, standing by her side, “that the lie about genetic in-plasticity was far too effective however. Those rumors may have helped Abrasax Industries corner the market, but the public will never believe cloned product is safe now, Your Majesty.”

“Why are you calling me Your Majesty?”

“Ell only ever saw you from a distance,” said Io. “But I recognized you right away. I’ve kept the research going in anticipation of your return. We’ve been able to develop the plant-based alternative that you hoped for Seraphi. Or do you prefer the name Jupiter now?”

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“It’s plant-based?” asked Jupiter, holding the glowing green vial up to the light. “Like juice?”

“Something like juice I suppose,” said Ell. The two women seemed to trade off talking as they explained everything. “It’s actually microscopic flora, suspended in a growth solution. When consumed it establishes a living plant-microbe symbiosis within the human body, reversing cellular decay. One dose of the VegeCell will completely reverse your illness, Your Majesty.”

“I prefer the name ‘Abrasax-Green,’” said Io. “It has a better ring to it, I think. But we’re just the bio-engineers—we’ll leave that part to the marketing department.”

“And that’s why you’re green?” Jupiter asked Io. “From drinking this stuff?”

“No, Your Majesty,” she said with a smile. “I’m a tree splice—naturally long lived. I take some benefit from the formula, but it is optimized for use in animal based life forms. Please do try it, it will help you.”

Jupiter looked at Caine, uncertain. There was definitely something mad-scientist about the two women, but that didn't necessarily mean they were evil mad scientists.

“Are they telling the truth?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he answered simply. “Do you want me to try it first?”

“Um…” she hesitated. He was always putting himself at risk for her, and she couldn’t entirely decide how she felt about it.

He took the vial, dipped the tip of his finger inside and licked it clean as she watched.
“It’s good,” he said with a small smile.

Still, she hesitated. She knew she needed to be faster in the next time loop—though she hadn’t wanted to think about exactly how that would happen. If this was a possible solution, she had to try it.

She braced herself, put the vial to her lips and drank it steadily down as the three of them looked on.

At first, she didn’t feel anything. Then, slowly it spread through her, from her chest outward, like perfectly warm spring sunshine after a long winter. It was different than the feeling of the Regenex, lighter, happier, she felt somehow buoyant.

“I like it,” she said, giggling.

****

Io and Ell wanted Jupiter to stay in the lab and look at graphs and reports with them, but she just couldn’t do it. For the first time in months she actually felt good. She needed to be outside in the sunlight—even if it was artificial. She wanted to be moving, not stuck down in this basement looking at numbers.

“Later, I promise, I’ll look at it all,” she told them, holding back another laugh.

She grabbed Caine by the hand and pulled him along with her toward the anti-grav beam.

“I’ll be able to survive this now,” she said happily, standing close, grinning up at him. “I can do this!”

Caine smiled, caught up in her excitement. She just felt so giggly and giddy. And, well, she’d already told him that she loved him...

She grabbed him by the ears, brought his face down toward hers and kissed him for all she was worth.

They must have stopped floating through the air at some point and stepped out of the anti-grav beam, because eventually, when she felt the shower of tiny fruit blossoms fall down around their heads, and they pulled back to look at each other in surprise, she realized her feet were back on the ground.

She couldn’t tell when it had happened though. She still felt like she was floating.

“I don’t know, if you really understand what it means,” Caine said hesitantly. “The fact that I’m a splice and you’re a Queen.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, suddenly heavy again, weighted down. She could have sworn he was just as enthusiastic as she was, the way he’d leaned into her kiss, the way he’d tilted his head and opened his lips so that she could taste him. “Just because you’re obedient, you don’t have to...”

“I’m not though,” he said with a frown. “You said that you knew that.”

“What?”

“I’m not obedient, not the way Lycantants are supposed to be. That’s never worked out for me—I
can follow orders, but...I assumed that Stinger or I had told you. You said that you trusted me in spite
my faulty coding.”

“I...” She didn’t know what to say to him. She was stunned. All this time she’d thought...

“I thought something must be wrong,” he said quietly. “It didn’t make sense—that you knew me,
that you could know what I am and what I’ve done. It didn’t make sense that you could be, as you
said, hopelessly desperately in love with me.”

“What? That’s the thing you can’t believe? You can believe that I’m a time traveler, but you can’t
believe that I’m in love with you?”

“I’m defective and you’re—

He reached out a finger to brush away one of the tiny white flowers caught in her eyebrow. “I think
you must depend on me, because of the time loop, because of everything that’s been happening to
you. But once you find a way out of this, you’ll understand, you’ll learn what it’s really like to be
Royalty. And then...”

“You’re wrong,” she insisted. “I see now that I misunderstood some things. And it’s true I’m still
learning how everything works, but I am in love with you, that’s not going to change.

He still stood close to her, he hadn’t backed away yet, but he looked as if he didn’t know what to
believe.

She slid her hand up his chest and felt his heart beating fast beneath her palm, felt an echoing pulse
inside of her.

She was giddy, with this new energy, with the idea of him and all that was suddenly possible.
Everything he’d done in their past, she realized, had been his own choice, his own free will.

And there was an alternative to Regenex.

Jupiter was a force to be reckoned with.

“We’ve got two weeks,” she said, sure of herself for the first time in far too long. “If you don’t
believe me now, I’ll just have to find a way to convince you.”
Through Another's Eyes

Chapter Notes

This one's for the Jupiter Ascending Fic Challenge #12
Short
Kind of weird.
Maybe too much science stuff?
(I'll blame my researcher husband- who likes graphs WAY too much)

Io stood beside Ell in the underground laboratory, watching as Jupiter and Caine ascended in the glowing anti-grav beam, eyes widening as the new Abrasax Queen pulled the Lycantant in for a kiss.

Interesting, thought Io.

And not particularly surprising, considering what she’d seen of them so far: Caine’s careful, protective manner, the way Jupiter’s eyes followed his every move.

Would history repeat itself?

Caine didn’t look anything like the other Queen’s Lycantant. Io still remembered him—as if his image had been seared into her brain. More than seven feet tall, he’d dwarfed his Queen as she stood before him. Dark haired, with fierce black eyes and dusky olive skin, so hard and distant he could have been carved from rock. Though that adamantine stillness had been so eerie, so unnatural...under the circumstances.

The two Lycantants were so different. Caine much paler, smaller, more human in scale—except...maybe something similar in his eyes when he first came to them—something stoic and pained.

Io shuddered to think of it. For all of their sakes, she hoped that this time, there’d be a happier ending.

It had been a risk bringing them down to the labs, exposing the secret of the Abrasax-Green. For such a long time, no one but she and Ell had known what lay beneath the surface of this moon.

Hundreds of years ago, in the chaos and confusion following Seraphi Abrasax’s death, Sir Erkanbald Keteri had contacted Io, offered funding to continue the research in secret.

She’d made a choice. Instead of turning over the research, the facilities, turning herself over to Balem Abrasax, she’d hidden it all—faked her own death and taken on a new identity in order to continue the work here.

They’d known that Balem would shut everything down if he ever learned of it. After all, Abrasax-Green was designed to replace Abrasax Industry’s most profitable product.

It was fortunate that the Abrasax holdings were so vast and far ranging. This small self-sustaining agri-moon was unremarkable in and of itself. Plagued with meteor showers and unable to maintain an atmosphere, terra-forming had never taken hold outside of the geodesic domes.

It was fortunate Seraphi had been so secretive about the project. It had been surprisingly simple to
Everyone involved in the operation had been mind-wiped and transported back to Orous. Everyone, that was, except Ell, who had noticed Io missing from the transport line and slipped away to find her. The young bio-engineer, dreading finding her next research position, pleaded with Io to let her stay on and help. Io hadn't realized at the time how instrumental Ell would be in keeping everything going—or that the two of them would eventually fall in love.

Io looked over at Ell, her fuchsia hair standing out bright. She’d been through every color of the rainbow in their hundreds of years here together, but the hot-pink color was a favorite.

Hand in hand, they walked the length of the giant subterranean lab; each lost in their own thoughts, passing through the rows of tanks, the walls of refining equipment, metal doors that lead to cold storage rooms. Io's skirts and long sleeves flowing around her as she moved, soothing. Sometimes she imagined them as an extension of herself, like a distant sense memory of rustling leaves.

In the end, her subterfuge had bought her nearly a thousand years of freedom—no easy feat for a splice. She’d never intended to remain here forever though. It was time the rest of the universe learned their secret. Time to see what would happen next.

“I trusted in your decision,” said Ell. “But...it’s still difficult to believe she's the new Queen. I rarely saw Seraphi Abrasax—I remember that she appeared older, her hair was going grey. Mainly, I remember her energy, the air electric around her, how everyone always jumped to her command.”

Io thought of Jupiter at their kitchen table yesterday, hardly able to hold herself upright, her eyes dark with purple shadows. She'd been like a ghost, insubstantial, not quite there.

“Jupiter has been ill, ” Io said, “And traumatized. Caine told us that her home was destroyed, her planet was harvested.”

“I’m not sure what I was expecting,” Ell said. “It’s been so long... Don’t you worry about what will happen?”

Io opened one of the cold-storage rooms and switched on the light. Inside were rows of glowing green vials as far as the eye could see.

“She seemed very pleased with the Abrasax-Green,” Io said, checking the temperature readings.

“VegeCell,” Ell insisted. “And—she didn’t even look at the projections, or the graphs...”

Io turned off the lights and shut the door, and they continued on their walk.

“Not everyone appreciates a good graph as much you do my dear.” Io smiled at her. “It may take her some time to recover completely, but I think she has a certain spark. She responded well to the treatment. And perhaps we’re better off if the recurrence is less commanding. Seraphi Abrasax was unpredictable. Changeable. If the air was electric around her, it was often with trepidation. She could be swift and cruel.”

“Yes, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that,” said Ell. “Yesterday, I went into the data stores and looked up the histories on the Abrasax family. Some of the stories about Seraphi... You never mentioned Splice Rights—or the execution...”

“That was more than four thousand years ago,” Io said hesitantly. “I was very young when it happened and I'm afraid it wasn’t a pleasant memory.”
“You knew then? It’s hard to believe Seraphi Abrasax once proposed giving splices equal rights.”

“It hardly matters now. Anyway, I doubt it ever would have happened,” said Io with a sigh. “There was some public sentiment in favor of Splice Rights, but also tremendous opposition. The Entitleds insisted it would destroy the economy.”

They walked into a room full of controls and monitors. Io checked moisture levels while Ell fine-tuned the heat in the temperate zones.

“In the end,” Io continued, “Seraphi Abrasax was only interested in her own agenda. She wanted one of her Royal Guards—a Lycantant—to be her Prince Consort, and it was illegal for a splice to hold such a position. That was the only reason she was interested in changing the laws.”

“And then she decided to turn on him and kill him instead,” Ell said grimly.

“Well,” Io turned to look at her. “He was plotting to murder her. Of course she was upset.”

“Upset!” Ell scoffed. “She carved out his heart!”

“I know,” Io said quietly, sitting down. “I saw his execution. It was required viewing, even for children. A cautionary tale to put splices in our proper place.”

It had given her nightmares. The blood spattering Seraphi’s face and gown. The image of him standing so straight and still. Why hadn’t he moved? Or screamed? Why hadn’t he simply taken the knife from her hand? If someone that strong could be taken down, what chance could a tiny splice, lying alone in her bed at night, have against a Queen wielding a knife that cut through bone like water?

The memory was still too vivid, primal, even though she was too old for such childish fears now.

“How horrible,” said Ell.

“Some of the older girls thought it romantic—if you can believe it. The fact that the Queen desired to kill him by her own hand.”

Ell made a face of disgusted disbelief. “She made an example of him, and then did everything in her power to destroy Splice Rights afterward. I never even knew... How could you work for her, after all that?”

“She owned me,” Io said simply. “I was terrified when I watched the execution. But as I grew older, I realized that she was no different than any other Entitled—and he had planned to kill her after all.”

“No, he didn’t,” said Ell.

“What do you mean?” Io shook her head in confusion.

“The histories said Balem Abrasax manufactured the evidence against the Lycantant. It was discovered, centuries later, but Balem claimed he’d done it to protect her—and he was widely praised for his initiative.”

Io doubted that Seraphi had praised him for it. Though perhaps she had forgiven him—eventually. Had Balem really hated splices so much? Or had it been ambition—or some sort of twisted love?

“When Seraphi Abrasax first spoke to me about this project,” Io said. “She looked like a much younger women—but she was worn down, as if from tragedy or some terrible knowledge. Perhaps
she had learned by then what Balem had done. Or perhaps, she finally regretted the many other things she herself had done. She bloodied her own hands with that execution—but her real death toll was far greater."

“I’d never understood it completely,” Ell said with a sigh. “Never understood why you didn’t want our children to have any part of your genome, why you didn’t want them to be splices. I guess I’ve been away from the world for too long, I’d forgotten what it’s like.” She reached out to take Io’s hand. “I only hope it wasn’t a mistake to trust Jupiter with our secret.”

“She’s our best option,” said Io. “And perhaps she’ll feel indebted to us now. I do believe her ailment was fatal. We saved her life.”

"Indebted?” Ell scoffed. “Entitleds don’t think that way.”

“She’s from an underdeveloped world. A Tersies, not an Entitled.”

“If she’s the Queen’s recurrence, she’s an Entitled.” Ell insisted. "She's the same person, and that will come through eventually.”

“That is what they say,” Io agreed. “But Entitleds are actually quite primitive in their scientific knowledge. There are many things they use but don’t fully understand. They are old-fashioned, superstitious—epi-genetics doesn’t fit into their dogma. They don’t consider that genes can express themselves in a variety of different ways—external signals can change an organism without changing its genome.”

"External signals? Oh, like growth factors, hormones..."

"Our children have your DNA, but they grew in my uterus.” Io said with a wink.

“You’re right of course. I don’t know why I hadn’t considered it.”

“Well...Few do.”

“But—the splicers—they must know.”

“Oh, I suspect they’ve got their own games to play.”

Io thought again of Caine’s eyes—their expression reminding her of that other Lycantant from so long ago. Seraphi had once declared her lover the epitome of his kind—the perfect Lycantant. In retaliation for his betrayal, she’d had all the others from his gene pool destroyed. But what if some splicer had found the stock and thought it safe to breed his kind once Seraphi had died?

Or was Io merely feeling superstitious as well?

On one of the far monitors, she could see them, Jupiter and Caine standing close, beneath an apricot tree that had just shed its blossoms. Her hand was resting over his heart.

“I don’t know exactly who Jupiter Jones is yet,” Io said. “Or who she will be, but she’s not Seraphi. She’s from an entirely different time and place, and that will shape her. She’s more than a genetic sequence.”
“You don’t have to convince me,” Caine said.

He’d leaned closer again—or had she? Through his shirt, Jupiter could feel the heat of his chest, hard beneath her palm. She couldn’t quite read his expression, but he was _here_, standing in front of her. Though when she thought about it, she realized: _She_ had been the one missing in action lately...lost.

Not anymore.

Another laugh bubbled up and she bit her lip to hold it in, unsure exactly _why_ she kept giggling—though he did look a little silly, a few of the white blossoms still stuck his hair.

“Maybe I _want_ to convince you,” she said with a smile.

She had so many pent up thoughts and feelings, all this _stuff_—held in for too long, ready to let loose. If words could prove she loved him, she would supply them—give a speech, a catalogue of reasons, a litany, a bullet-pointed list. She was overflowing.

The longer she’d known Caine, the harder it had been to resist him. Dose after dose of him flooding through her veins. The heat of his skin, the sound of his voice, her heart picking up speed whenever her eyes met his. She was exquisitely attuned to him.

But it was more than those things. It was everything. Everything he did, everything he was. The very fact of his existence—the way he’d survived everything that should have destroyed him. His supposed defects only seemed to make him stronger, better.

In every single timeline, she’d been caught up in him. She couldn’t seem to help it. Even worn down and focused on survival—convinced she should keep him at a distance...

But she had hope now. She was bursting with it.

She wanted to choose the right words. Wanted to understand the expression in his eyes—some combination of a smile and a frown.

Was it too much? _Was she_ too much? He’d only known her for two days now. And she’d been unconscious—or in shock, or drinking herself into a stupor. Not exactly at her best...It was _all_ too much—There was no way he could feel the way that she did. Not yet. But... he seemed interested.

She realized she was beaming up at him, her smile too big and goofy. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, trying to decide _exactly_ what she wanted to say.

He glanced down before bringing his eyes back to hers.

“I believe you,” he said, though there was something uncertain in his voice. “You have all the chemical markers, the physiological signs of love. I can smell—

“Are you sure?” she challenged, pulling her hair to the side and tilting her head. “Maybe you need another sniff?”

That got her a small smile—a quick glimpse of sharp canines that was over too soon. He shifted his stance and she was sure he was going to say no, to step away.

Instead, he lifted his hand and brushed it along her shirt collar. A skitter of blossoms fell, tickling and
catching inside her bra, as his hand curved the slope of her shoulder. His head moved toward her slowly—aching slow. And when he took in a deep breath, tiny hairs rose up in response, a whisper of sensation along the length of her neck.

Then he drew back again, and they were face to face.

“Everything’s messed up,” she said quietly, “It’s all out of order. I know that. I realize that you don’t know me.”

“It seems that I should know you somehow.” There was something intense in his stare, the way he was looking right into her, searching.

She wasn’t prepared for it, couldn’t resist it. She couldn’t resist him—pressing up into another kiss before she’d realized what she was doing, getting lost in the texture of his lips, his taste. It was familiar—but not familiar enough. She’d learn him again and again if that were what it took.

Or did she need to slow down and give him time?

Reluctantly, she drew her mouth away again. Though it was hard to pull away completely, and she lingered a moment, their foreheads touching, his exhale soft against her lips, the scruff of his bearded cheek beneath her hand.

“It’s not just me, is it?” she asked, pulling back to look at him.

“There’s something—“ He shook his head, and seemed to realize that his hand was pressing firm into the curve of her back, holding her still. He let go, and took a step away, looking concerned. “I don’t think it’s a good idea though.”

“It’s a great idea.”

“Your Majesty,” he said, looking down at his gloved hands. “It’s a bad idea for you, I’m defective, I’m dangerous.”

“No. You’re not.”

“From what you’ve told me,” he said. “Titus must have hired me because he wanted me to kill you.”

“Well...that was a part of his plan,” she admitted, “but obviously it didn’t work.” She thought back to that night. What had Titus said? “He gave you a drug designed to tap into your instincts. He thought you would attack me...”

“What happened?”

“You kissed me,” she said simply.

His was quiet, frowning in thought.

“Caine, I trust you with my life. It doesn’t matter to me that you’re a splice—No” she caught herself. “I does matter. Everything about you matters. I just—I wish it didn’t matter that I’m a Queen. I didn’t ask for any of this Abrasax stuff. I don’t want it factor into this, the two of us.”

Probably her words weren’t enough, weren’t coming out quite right, but at least he seemed to be listening, considering.

And strangely, she wanted to laugh again, maybe just because they were here together, and her lips were still tingling from their kiss. She couldn’t keep from smiling.
“Can I just?” She reached out a hand towards his head and he tilted his head to the side, looking puzzled.

She reached up to smooth the flowers from his hair and he watched her face while she did it, leaning into her touch.

He’d always been receptive to her, she realized; he'd always let her in close, let her into his space. She’d thought it was part of his obedience coding, but that wasn’t it after all. And she’d noticed he kept his distance with everyone else.

She’d tried giving him time before. She’d wanted to give him a choice, didn’t want to come on too strong—but maybe he needed strong.

She brushed away the last few blossoms and smoothed her hand down his bare arm. When she got to his hand, she twined her fingers through his and grabbed on tight, as if the feel of him would anchor her. She halfway felt like if she moved away from him, she might spin out, flying into the sky, and stick like a balloon against the top of the dome.

Was it a side effect of the Abrasax Green? Or some euphoric rush—just from feeling healthy and full of energy after dealing with exhaustion for such a long time?

Maybe not entirely.

It was also him.

“I know this out of nowhere,” she said. “The two of us are totally out of sync with each other, but—if do you believe me, why not give it a chance? Maybe it will sneak up on you. Maybe I’ll sneak up on you.”

“Your Majesty doesn’t seem particularly sneaky.” His voice was dry.

“No?” She smiled again, couldn’t hold it back. “Well, maybe that’s just to put you off your guard, so I can surprise you later.”

He seemed to consider and was starting to say something else, when a siren blared. Three sharp blasts of ear splitting sound pierced the air.

Caine let go of her hand and straightened up, instantaneously snapping back into Skyjacker mode.

“Something incoming,” he had focused on the distant sky.

There was an electric sound buzzing somewhere high above them. Above the trees-- branches already filling with half-grown leaves and tiny green fruits—there was nothing too see but the top of the dome and clear black sky beyond.

Then she saw it: hurtling forward, and growing larger by the second. A giant rock was flying, tumbling and falling, gaining speed and on a trajectory straight toward them.

It was vaporized in a sudden blue flash that shook everything around them. A cloud of dust and debris fell down, pelting the outer surface of the dome like a hard rain. Then everything was quiet again.

Caine listened for another moment before he looked back at her, his expression serious.

“You’re safe for now,” he said, voice grim. “But if you want to surprise someone, surprise Balem
Abrasax. Kill him before he has another chance to get to you. Better yet, let me go after him and kill him for you.”

“I—

The large metal disk opened up in the ground beside them then, and they moved back as the blue anti-grav beam shot up from inside.

Ell stepped out with her tool bag, looking up toward the debris-covered dome, before turning her gaze toward Caine and Jupiter.

“The shield defense destroyed it in time, doesn’t seem to be any damage to the dome—though there is a bit of a mess.” Ell took a device from her bag, punched in some codes and an army of miniscule drones appeared out of nowhere to clean and inspect the surface. “I thought you were going for a walk, Your Majesty?”

“Yeah,” Jupiter felt her face turning red. How long had the two of them been standing here together? She took a few steps down the path before turning to Caine. “Will you come with me?”

As he nodded, and walked toward her, she couldn’t help but notice Ell’s troubled look—as if the sight of them together worried her. Jupiter remembered the Gala with Kalique: Caine forced to go muzzled, and the Entitleds’ shocked whispers behind her back, their surprised dismay that she would keep a defective splice as her guard. She might bring Caine around to her way of thinking, but the rest of the universe probably thought it was a bad idea too.

In which case, Jupiter would just have to accustom herself to their disapproval.
Convincing

Caine walked with Jupiter on a path through fields of iridescent purple—the tall stalks bending heavy overhead with grain.

“You’re right,” she said quietly.

She’d been silent for several minutes, her earlier laughter fading away. It was as if she’d been spooked by the sudden meteor strike. Caine wasn’t sure what he’d been right about, but she didn’t sound happy about it.

“Balem should be dead. It’s my fault—what happened to Stinger and Kiza.” She turned to face him, eyes dark. "I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” He had thought about it, over and over again, in the days since it happened. If anything, the fault was his. Stinger would never have been on Earth in the first place if it weren’t for Caine.

“I can fix it,” she said. “I will. But it never should have come to this, ever. I thought, if I learned enough, I could outmaneuver Balem. But he’ll never accept that Earth is mine. Killing him is the only way to keep everyone safe. I realize that now.”

There was that grim determination, that glimpse of steel, he’d noticed before, when she’d vowed she’d save them all.

She didn’t sound anything like an Entitled though—she seemed more concerned for her planet than for herself. He’d never heard of a Queen apologizing before. Or using power to defend the weak. Most Royals had no concept of duty to others, only what they demanded as their own due.

In some ways, it might be simpler if Jupiter were selfish, if she focused more on her own safety—and on vengeance.

“It’s not only about Earth, Your Majesty. It’s personal. Balem Abrasax will kill you if he gets the chance. For that alone he needs to die.”

Caine didn’t know why the need to protect her was so overwhelming, but it had been ever since the moment he’d caught her falling.

“Balem’s not the only one out to get me,” she said. “I don’t even know how many people have me on their hit list right now.” She looked up, past the prickly clusters of purple above, towards the blackness of space beyond the dome, her eyes distant. “I can’t kill them all.”

“Then I’ll do it for you,” he said, matter of fact.

His other reactions to her were too confusing. He'd shied away from them, kept trying to push them from his mind. He’d caught himself yesterday, mesmerized by the thick sweep of lashes on her heavy-lidded eyes, her bottom lip, wet from her tongue— Time after time he’d forced himself to look away...But he hadn't been able to ignore the instinct to keep her safe.

Leaving Earth, once they’d boarded the ship Titus sent to retrieve them, Caine had justified the need to stay close to her—convincing himself that he was only watching over his target. He realized now, that if he’d allowed them to take her away, she would have been lost when the explosions hit. A cold weight settled in his gut when he remembered her: unconscious, helpless. He’d do what it took to
make sure she wasn’t in that position again.

“I know you would do it.” She covered her concerned look with a smile, caught his hand with her cool fingers and gave it a squeeze. “You’ve always done a great job protecting me.”

He looked down at their joined hands, flustered by her words as much as her touch.

“And it might come down to that,” she added with a sigh. “But I’d rather you didn’t kill anyone if we can avoid it—if it isn’t absolutely necessary. And the problem is we still don’t know that Balem can be killed. He’s like Voldemort that way. Who knows how many devices he has to escape death?”

“Who’s Voldemort?” Caine’s hackles rose at the name. “Another of our enemies?”

She turned to grin at him, her smile so big he couldn’t help but hesitantly return it—even though he didn’t understand. The path had narrowed, the tall purple stalks curving in to form a tunnel around them, and she was standing close, her eyes full of mischief.

“Voldemort—so far as I know—is not one of our enemies. He’s an evil wizard, from children’s books—you’ve read some of them to me before, actually.”

“Alright.” He stared at her, unsure. She kept telling him things outside his previous experience. Different versions of him that were somehow specific to her. It was unsettling—and he couldn’t quite tell if he liked the feeling or not.

“What if trying to kill Balem starts another time loop though?” she asked, serious again as she turned to walk. “Who knows when or where I’d wake up next. And what happens if you get dragged in too?”

“If Balem’s death is the trigger, I’ll keep him alive and question him until we find out how to stop him.”

Caine had been trained in Legion torture techniques, and he'd used them on occasion. He didn’t take pleasure in inflicting pain the way some did—but Balem Abrasax might be the exception.

They walked through rows of translucent vegetables, and thorn covered trees filled with glowing red orbs high in their branches. “Weird space fruits,” Jupiter called them, and gave him a sheepish look when her stomach grumbled.

“Do you think they’re okay to eat?”

Caine activated his boots and flew a few feet up to pluck one from overhead. He gave it a sniff to check for toxins before landing in front of her and holding it out in offering. “Your Majesty?”

“Thanks.” She smiled, pleased, as she took it from him.

He watched as she bit into it, saw the red juice bright on her lips. He kept thinking about her mouth on his—remembering, wondering if she would kiss him again.

“Mmmm,” she said. “It’s like some kind of half-raspberry, half-plum.”

A bee hovered around her head—attracted to the juice, Caine first thought. But it was actually
attracted to her. It lit on her forearm and she stilled, watching it dance across the surface of her skin. More bees came, in twos and threes then, until a swarm surrounded her and she circled, playfully lifting her arms to move and sway among them.

After a few minutes, she shooed them away with a gentle pass of her hand and went back to eating the fruit. A few flew off in erratic circles as they departed, slowly, as if drunk from her presence, but obeying her unspoken command.

She talked to Caine as they walked, telling him things from her different timelines. Their different timelines, she insisted. Though none of it seemed quite real, he could somehow imagine it all happening. It felt like a distant dream.

And she was constantly reaching for his hand or to touch his arm, smiling at him. She planted a kiss on his cheek when she caught him staring at her. It was as if he were a skittish animal she planned to tame, and she was accustoming him to her hand. It might have been amusing if it weren’t so effective. His response to her was already too strong. She’d somehow trained him to her touch, imprinted herself on him before he’d ever met her.

What could it mean that she was in love with him? There was something in it he couldn’t comprehend. He recognized each of the chemicals—the dopamine, norepinephrine and oxytocin, vasopressin, adrenaline and endorphins. Taken individually, each one could have a variety of explanations.

The molecules surrounded her in clouds of color. Radiating out, pulsating around her. The glowing scents, the vibrant hues, drawing him inexorably in. The aura was unique to her, and stronger every time he looked at her, every time she stood near.

His own scent was so tied up in it all, so intertwined with hers, that he couldn’t distinguish where she ended and he began... It had never happened to him like this before. He should be able to unknot it, to pull it apart and analyze the strands one by one. But he was somehow stuck. He was the one coming undone.

It felt dangerous—like a warning, as she’d said. But he was beginning to think it was something else entirely.

It wasn’t a good idea. He knew that—even if she wouldn’t admit it. But if it was what she desired, he might not be able resist it, might not be able to resist her. He didn’t want to anymore.

****

That night, after dinner, Jupiter spent some time looking at the charts and figures, the sheaves spread across the table, listening to Io and Ell as they explained their research in more detail.

“Please, call me Jupe,” she said. She didn’t know if they’d take her up on it, but it was worth a try. “Your Majesty” got old after a while—from everyone but Caine.

“It was customary,” said Io, “for recurrences to take their predecessor’s name. Is that no longer the practice?” She looked up from her graph, pushing the slide of silvery hair from her pale green face, and looking at Jupiter inquisitively.

“Umm...no one’s suggested it,” said Jupiter, surprised. “Maybe they were waiting to spring that one
on me.”

The idea was creepy. But then the Abrasax family had built their empire on creepy. Kalique asking to call Jupiter by a dead woman’s name was nothing compared to those candlelit Regenex baths.

Still, a shiver passed through Jupiter at the thought of being called Seraphi.

“You appear to be doing much better,” said Ell, watching her from across the table, eyes narrowed. “Your energy is definitely improved. Have you noticed any side effects from the VegeCell?”

“Would the urge to giggle be a side effect?”

“I haven’t noticed it myself, but it’s certainly possible,” Ell said, inputting a note on one of the sheaves.

Jupiter had also had the urge to touch Caine, over and over again today, whenever she was near him. But she didn’t mention that. Anyway, she was pretty sure it was only her normal impulse—and nothing like when she’d had the Regenex and practically wanted to crawl out of her own skin.

“Would you allow me to do a med scan on you?” Ell stood up to take a tool from her endlessly useful bag. “I am trained as a doctor.”

“Sure,” said Jupiter.

Ell’s air of expertise, her competence, were undeniable, but Jupiter could tell the other woman was still suspicious of her, still reserving her judgment. She hadn’t accepted Jupiter nearly as easily as Io seemed to. Both of them had been observing her carefully—but while Ell was wary, Io seemed more curious than anything else. Maybe tree splices were just easier going by nature?

A few moments later, the results came from the med scan, and Jupiter let out her breath in relief when she found out she was in perfect health.

“Based on recent tests,” said Io. “Each dose of Abrasax Green should remain effective for at least one hundred years.”

“It’s been 117 years since I had it last, Your—Jupe,” said Ell. She looked no older than her early twenties. Her dark skin was completely smooth and without wrinkles, not a single line to mar the bright tattoo encircling her eye.

“I had some sort of...cellular damage before,” Jupiter said. “If I were exposed to the same conditions, would I need another dose?”

“What sort of conditions?” Io asked.

“I’m not sure exactly,” Jupiter hesitated. She was wondering if the exhaustion would come back after she looped through time again. “But for instance...um...radiation...space radiation? Would it protect against that?”

“First of all, I would suggest you wear a protective suit,” Ell said with a frown. “But no, another dose shouldn’t be necessary. Constant extreme conditions might reduce the efficacy by a few years. We haven’t tested for such scenarios—though there could be a use for that.”

“I’m sure that we’ll branch out into different uses, different formulas eventually,” Io said. “Our first challenge will be getting consumers to accept the very concept of Abrasax Green.”
“I don’t understand,” Jupiter said. “Why wouldn’t everyone accept this?”

“Entitleds are slow to change,” said Io. “Their technology may appear advanced, but many are fixed in their ways. They have their rituals, their established habits that they will be loathe to relinquish.”

“The discovery of VegeCell might also bring more scrutiny to the problems with Regenex,” said Ell.

“Problems?” Jupiter scoffed. “Well, the whole genocide thing is an obvious drawback.”

“Yes, certainly, but I was actually referring to the cognitive problems,” said Ell.

“What sort of cognitive problems?” asked Caine, who’d been mostly quiet until then.

“Luckily, these problems have never arisen in splice development,” Ell said with a sympathetic look. “But in mature humans there are adverse reactions in one out of every ten thousand uses—perhaps more. Unfortunately, the research has been suppressed. We just don’t have all the data.”

"Most tolerate Regenex well long term," Io said. "But in others...well, it affects the brain cells, and the mind can adjust in ways that are...unpredictable."

“Huh,” said Jupiter, “that actually might explain a few of the people I’ve met.”

*****

Hours later, Jupiter climbed the stairs to bed. Today seemed almost like a dream—and she hadn't had enough good dreams lately. Actually finding an alternative to Regenex? It was the solution she’d been looking for—the solution to her one of her problems, at least.

She hadn’t told Io and Ell that she was a time traveler, that she was looping over and over again, out of control. From Jupiter's perspective it might be months, even years, before she could come ever back to this moon again. But at least now she’d live long enough to find the next solution. And she would be back...eventually.

She let out a yawn. Even with the magical green elixir working inside of her, she was still ready to call it a night.

“Your Majesty,” Caine said from behind her, as he reached the top of the stairs. She turned at the sound of his voice and he stopped in front her, some fleeting question in his eyes that was lost when he looked down to the floor.

“What is it?” she asked. She was happy that Caine had agreed to help her, and to protect her, but she really hoped he didn’t plan to sit outside her door all night guarding her again. “Caine?”

It was hard to figure him out sometimes—but she couldn’t let herself get stuck again. And maybe...possibly he wanted the same thing she did. Maybe he just needed her to make the first move.

She came forward, one hand on his shoulder as she leaned into him, up on her toes, brushing his lips with a soft kiss, a question. He answered by pressing back eagerly, and she ran her hand through his hair, pulling him in closer.

An edge of impatience was suddenly riding her, and she barraged him with quick kisses, everywhere she could reach, little teasing pecks on the corners of his mouth, his chin, nipping at his jaw. And then suddenly more insistent than she’d intended, coming back to his mouth to tangle her tongue
with his. Feeling urgent, almost desperate.

And it wasn’t just her. As she pulled back to suck in a deep breath and smoothed her hands down his arms, she felt his muscles quivering with restraint beneath her. But why should they restrain themselves, either one of them? She didn’t want to hold back anymore.

She’d hated sending him away, hated putting distance between them. Hated the feeling that she couldn’t approach him, that she shouldn’t—for his own good.

Emotions swelled in her, overwhelming. And she let them out in another deep kiss, devouring him. He made a sound low in his throat as she cupped her head in his hand, biting at her lip just enough to sting, his other hand against her back, fingers splayed, as she arched closer into him.

She couldn’t get close enough. Every bit of her was up straining against him, breasts pressing into his chest, hips and thighs pushing against his, seeking. Closer. Backing him against the wall until the heat of his cock was hard against her belly.

“Do you want this?” she asked, breathing hard. It had to be his decision too. And when he was silent for a moment, she worried she’d somehow messed things up, or misunderstood, or gone too fast.

Then he ducked his head and put his mouth against her ear. “I do want this.” His voice was a low rumble that reverberated through her, bringing goose bumps to her skin.

She led him to the bedroom and shut the door behind them. She could see his chest expanding and falling with each breath, as he stood before her, otherwise motionless, his eyes gleaming in the dark. She propelled him back onto the bed and followed him down. Her knees driving into the mattress on either side of him as she leaned in for more openmouthed kisses. She moved on top of him, grinding—but it wasn’t enough. They both had too many clothes in the way.

She sat upright, and Caine lifted forward onto his elbows, following her, the move thrusting him into the spread of her legs. A moan overwhelmed her, so breathless and strange that she laughed at the sound of it. Not quite sure if she were happy or nervous or excited. All of it, she decided.

He was watching her, waiting to see what she would do next. She caught a fistful of his shirt and wrenched it away in one quick tug.

“I love this shirt,” she said with a smile, dropping it to the side so she could smooth her hands down his torso. Her fingers were at the waist of his pants, when she stopped, considering. She wanted him naked, fast. And her own jeans were way too constricting.

“My Majesty?” he asked.

“Take off your clothes and just...wait here.” She gulped. “I’ll be right back.”

She forced herself to walk instead of run to the bathroom, turned on the light and looked back to see Caine taking off his boots as she shut the door.

Then she rushed to get her clothes off. The skinny jeans were the problem. They had thwarted her before: trapped in her own pants, denim turned inside out and stuck bunched around her ankles... Though that date would never have ended well.

She hopped on one foot, frantically yanking at the fabric, pulling it hard over her instep. Once she’d tugged the other leg free, she scrambled to find the hygiene wand, quickly passing it over the crucial
areas. Thank God for space tech, she thought, giving a quick sniff at her pit.

Though...maybe Caine liked her a little stinky? He inhaled a lot when he was near her. And he’d never seemed particularly squeamish—now that she thought about it.

Hmm...Well, if things went right, she’d be sweaty again soon enough.

She left the light on in the bathroom, kept the door cracked open so she could see him when she walked into the dark room.

He lay back on the bed, naked, hands folded behind his head. Her breath caught at the sight of him. She knew he was strong, he was engineered to take more than a regular human. But it hit her again just how strong he was—and the idea was strangely exciting. She was curious exactly how much he could take. She already had some idea of what he could do to her. What could she do to him?

He held perfectly still as she came closer, watching her cross the room. He’d probably stay like that all night if she asked him...but she wanted his hands on her now.

She knelt on the bed and then leaned into him, the tips of her breasts teasing against his hot chest, her hair falling around them as they kissed. She ran her hands up his arms and caught his wrists, holding them pinned for just a moment before pulling them toward her.

“I want you to touch me,” she said sitting back again on her heels.

“Where, Your Majesty?”

Anywhere. Everywhere.

“Wherever you want,” she said.

He sat up beside her—and surprised her.

His look was focused, as he swept his fingers along her hairline and around the curve of her ear, then into the hollow at the base of her throat where her pulse rose up to meet him. He stroked her face as if he wanted to memorize it. Down the slope of her nose, the pads of his fingers tracing the line of her jaw, then gently resting his thumb on her bottom lip to part her mouth.

It was too much. Or maybe not enough. She couldn’t quite tell. She needed to feel him up against her though, heat and muscle and skin, taste him—

She licked his thumb, and then nipped at it. And she noticed something darken in his eyes. She climbed to straddle his lap and kissed him again, deeply. Taking his hand, she guided it between her thighs and his fingers found her there, sliding against her slickness, pressing into her.

Her head was spinning, as she pushed against him, a gasping sound escaping that didn’t sound quite human. She needed him inside of her, she decided. Now.

With the slightest push of her palm against his chest, he fell back on the bed, and watched as she took his erection into her hand. She bit her lip as she maneuvered her hips, pressing down on him, shifting so she could work his full length inside of her.

He cupped her butt and spread her as she settled onto him. His fingers wrapping around to pull her in tighter to him.

“Oh God,” she whispered, sitting back a moment.
Then she tilted forward, moving over him, slowly at first, then riding him hard and fast as he rose up to meet her. She was so full and aching she was shivering with it already, somehow already so close to coming she couldn’t catch her breath.

He reached for her, finding her clit with the pad of his thumb, working her with just the right pressure as she rose and fell on top of him. She whimpered softly, deep in her throat, her body slowing on his, unable to move, as she hovered above him, caught.

His hips circled slowly beneath her. His size enough for friction in spite of her wetness, a delicious pressure as he dragged against her, torturously slow, pulling at her, breaking her apart. She shuddered, and melted as it washed over her. Unable to hold herself upright anymore, losing her balance, she slumped into him, boneless.

She didn’t know how long she lay there, sprawled on top of him, his hand slowly stroking up and down the length of her back. She’d stay here forever, she decided, she didn’t want this to end.

Though, she might not be resting for long. She could still feel him, hard and deep inside her.

“I think I’ve figured it out,” Caine said softly. The sound of his voice made her shiver and clench around him all over again. “My scent on you, the way I react when you’re close...”

She pushed up, bracing against his chest so she could look at him “It is a Lycantant sex thing then.” She smiled and moved against him again. “I sorta figured that one out already.”

“Not exactly.” His hands went back to her hips and he tilted up into her again. His eyes were serious though, cautious. “It could be a Lycantant thing. I wouldn’t know.”

“Okay.” she said hesitantly. She already knew he didn’t have a pack, that he had lived apart from other Lycantants.

“I never thought—” There was something, hesitant, almost shy in his voice as he broke off. “I don’t know how it happened. But it’s not a warning. It’s a more like a... clue, a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?”

“That I belong to you.”

“That you...work for me?”

“No.” He shook his head, closing his eyes as he thought about how to say it. “The chemicals that I can smell on you, your physiological responses to me...mine are the same.”

He opened his eyes again, looking at her intently, as if willing her to understand.

He hadn’t said he loved her—not exactly. But was that what he meant? It didn’t matter about the actual words—not right now at least—this was already more than she’d expected. She smiled at him, something warm going through her, something she hadn’t realized she was missing.

“I don’t know why I—” she started to say, then leaned in to kiss him, overwhelmed. “I should have asked you before...”

“You can ask anything of me, Your Majesty.” He took her hand and kissed the back of it, then turned it to press his mouth against her palm, her wrist. “I don't think it matters if I’m out of sync with you. I can catch up.”
There was a lump in her throat, and her eyes were suddenly wet. She blinked hard and took a deep breath in, trying to get a hold of herself.

“And I can ask you anything, huh?” she said, sitting up straighter. She slid her hand down his abdominal muscles, and then lower, her fingers finding where they were still joined together. There was still more work to be done here.

“Yes,” he said on an intake of breath.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she grinned wickedly. She shifted, rolling her hips in a slow grind, until he let out a soft growl. “Do you like that?”

“I like everything that you do.”

His hands slid up to cup her breasts, shaping them against his fingers. Her skin thrummed with the sensation. He moved down the sides of her waist, curving around her hips. His strong fingers kneading her thighs, her muscles slightly trembling with the strain of balancing on top of him. He smoothed down her calves and then grabbed on to each of her feet, enveloping them with his hot hands.

She looked at him, questioning.

“Let me take care of this,” he said.

“Uh...okay.”

He hinged forward at his hips, his back lifting off the bed to sit up beneath her, bending his legs so that she moved with him, settling into his lap. Suddenly they were face to face, noses bumping—so close her vision blurred his two eyes into one. She smiled and closed her own eyes and kissed him as he unfolded each of her legs and wrapped them around his hips, one by one.

Then his hands encircled her waist and lifted her, slowly, shifting her on top of him, sliding her down around him, against him.

He was moving underneath her. Curving up into her, thrusting and retreating. His hips working impossible circles, like some perpetual motion machine set into action, and picking up speed. His abdominals clenching, rippling as he ebbed and surged, coursing into her. Pounding and sliding. Waves of strength, moving steadily through her, building into her. Until it finally burst through her all at once, and hit her so hard, she couldn’t bite back a scream.

“Your Majesty?”

“No,” she groaned. “I’m good. Don’t stop.”

He did slow down, between times, so she could catch her breath. But he was good at following her directions—he didn’t stop. She was beginning to think he never would. And she buried her face in his neck, light headed, after she’d come the fourth time.

“What do you want?” she said against his skin.

“This is good.”

Okay, yeah. This was good—incredibly way more than good, she thought, pressing kisses to his neck. But she was starting to worry about walking tomorrow. And she wanted to get to him. Wanted to make him lose it.
She held his shoulders, fingers digging into his muscle for balance, her teeth scraping down the side of his neck—and he stillled for second to suck in a sharp breath.

Huh.

Then he pulled her into him so that they were flush, her nipples and belly and hips all up against his hot skin. His cock still so hard and full inside her. And he started to move again, picking up speed. Building the momentum, slowly at first, until it was he was surging into her once more with that maddening rhythm, everything barreling through her again before she knew it.

She bent her head, her lips finding his trapezius where it sloped down thick from his neck, and she opened her mouth around it. Then she bit down on him hard, teeth sinking into his skin. She hummed against his skin in satisfaction as she felt his body shake in climax beneath her.

Afterward, he collapsed back with a groan, dragging her down with him.

“Your Majesty,” he murmured, rolling them over sideways, kissing a hot trail across her breasts. His hand came up and cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking over her mouth, his eyes gleaming in the low light.

She turned into the heat of his hand, smiling, as they lay there, tangled together, breath slowing.

“You asked me what I wanted,” he finally said, his lips moving against the underside of her breast as he pulled away from her.

“Hmmm?”

He kissed his way down to her navel, then lower, his hands finding her knees and parting her legs. He stopped, his mouth just above the spread of her thighs, taking in a deep breath.

“May I?” he asked.
Jupiter was drifting. Completely worn out—deliciously so, every inch of her body warm and heavy and sated—a little sore, but in the very best way.

Caine had shifted from between her legs and curled against her side, resting his head on her belly.

It was nearly too much effort to lift her hand and run lazy fingers against his scalp, through his hair, along the tip of his ear as he turned to nuzzle into her with one last scattering of licking kisses that were halfway to being bites. The scruff of his chin might have tickled if she weren’t so drowsy. Or maybe she’d gotten used to the feel of it moving against her—it was softer than it looked, just the slightest bit abrasive as he pressed his mouth into her skin.

Anyway, she was all out of giggles, the most she could muster was a sigh that curved her lips into a smile, as the weight of his arm across her thighs, his hot hand curving around her hip, pulled her down into sleep.

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When she woke hours later it was with a start, catching herself, her muscles tensed, surprised to find the bed was beneath her at all. In her dream, she’d been screaming, her lungs on fire, limbs flailing as she fell—endlessly —toward piles of bodies far below.

Her throat was still tight, the sound trapped inside, as she turned toward the wall and pulled her legs into her chest, pressing her forehead hard against her knees, the sheet was sticking to her skin where she’d drenched it in a cold sweat.

She remembered where she was—that she was safe. But the strange night outside the window felt too heavy, the black sky pressing down on the shell that encased them. Why weren’t there stars? she wondered, suddenly frantic, unable to catch her breath, trapped like a bug in a terrarium.

The answer came slowly, pushing through dense layers of dreams and sleep to reach her, as she looked blurry eyed at the stone wall gleaming faintly with streaks of silver blue...reflecting the light from distant domes. Sunlamps—good for growing green things in space, she thought dimly, not so good for stargazing.

The stars were still out there, though, somewhere.

She forced herself to suck in a deep breath and then let it out slowly.

The bed shifted beneath her, a blanket covering her, and she turned her head to see Caine as he settled back down beside her, his expression worried.

Worried for her—though something about that didn’t quite sit right.

“I’m okay,” she insisted, her voice cracking, strained, as she unlocked her arms from where she’d clamped them around her shins, and unfolded her legs so she could turn to face him.

He was naked.
They both were, she realized. And she was way more out of it than she’d known. For a moment, she’d completely forgotten everything that had happened that night.

She scooted closer to him and shifted the blanket to cover them both, immediately warmer next to the heat of his bare skin.

“Why were you all the way over here?” she said, trying to sound normal, to feel normal, wondering if she could summon up a smile. She touched his arm, her hand slightly clammy, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“You were kicking in your sleep,” he said softly.

“Sorry,” she said. “I guess I’m not the easiest person to sleep with.”

He dismissed that with a small shake of his head. “What’s wrong?” he asked, smoothing her hair back where it stuck to her face. He did it slowly, somewhat unsure, as if he were still getting used to the idea of her, of them. If all this was new for her, it was even more so for him.

“It was just a dream,” she said, her voice stronger. “A nightmare, but it doesn’t matter. I’m okay, really.”

And she was. For the first time in months she was actually good. She wasn’t the one they needed to worry about.

The dreams had happened so many times before. She knew they weren’t real. She was used to telling herself that. Over and over again. She wasn’t at the refinery. Wasn’t falling through burning air, grasping desperately for something, anything, to hold on to.

That part wasn’t real. Although this time...

The other images, the ones she could walk through scene by scene, like a horror movie she’d watched too many times...

The grotesque machinery. All the people of Earth herded like cattle, collected and strapped to conveyor belts, tubes inserted beneath their skin. The discarded corpses, piled high in stacks, like garbage, once they’d been drained of life.

At this very moment—as much as she hated it—that part was probably real. And she couldn’t completely shake it off, couldn’t quite escape that part of the dream.

She remembered the rat splice boasting about processing capacity as they’d walked down the refinery’s endless, echoing halls. By now, Balem Abrasax had probably killed everyone.

Next time, she’d take the fight to him, find a way to eliminate him as a threat—one way or the other—make sure it never, ever happened again. But she couldn’t exactly undo it—not here and now, not in this timeline. All she could do was hope. Hope that by saving everyone the next time, they’d somehow all be okay in the end.

The problem was she’d never understood how it all worked. Causalities. Paradoxes. Everything about this was impossible. She’d never run into another Jupiter Jones. As far as she knew, there was only one of her, and too many ways for her to fail.

She had to push the worries away, ignore the things she couldn’t deal with or understand. Some part of her brain wasn’t satisfied with that solution though, wanted to work the problem—bringing her back to it, over and over again, every night in her sleep.
Still, she knew from experience that her heart would stop racing if she only waited long enough. She didn’t want to think about the nightmares anymore tonight, really didn’t want to talk about them.

Caine was silent, stroking her hair, tentative at first, before she’d leaned into it with a tilt of her head and a sigh.

There was one other thing that she didn’t know what to do about either, or how to deal with. Still, she was surprised to hear herself say it out loud. “I don’t know what happens to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I leave, when I loop back through time, I don’t know what happens here. Do you keep going forward in this timeline without me? Or does this all just disappear once I’m gone?”

He didn’t have an answer of course.

“I mean, I know it sounds stupid,” she continued. “Egotistical to imagine that this whole universe only exists while I’m in it. But I think that’s sorta how it works. I think everything just re-sets. Goes back to that same morning again, as if none of this had ever happened. The only thing that changes is me—and Balem—and the sheave work that gets put through at the Commonwealth, oddly enough.

The problem is that I don’t know for sure. Most other times, I was able to get your pardon, have you reinstated into the Legion—just in case. But now...I can’t stand to leave you here without even that.”

She knew how vulnerable splices were in his world.

“You don’t have to worry about me Your Majesty.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that to me before,” she smiled at him sadly. “But, let’s just say—not worrying?—isn’t as easy as it sounds. And I don’t like even the remote possibility of you stuck with Titus still holding your pardon. If there were some way for me to contact the Aegis, I could make sure you’re protected, but...”

“You said that you’d chosen me for your Royal Guard,” he said with a frown. “That would mean it’s my duty to protect you, but—Queens don’t—you’re not obliged to—

She quieted him with a kiss, lingering soft and slow against his lips, before drawing back to give him a serious look. “It’s not an obligation.”

“Jupiter, I— He stopped, at a loss for words. She knew he wasn’t used to anyone else looking out for him or wanting to take care of him. Except for Stinger maybe. But in this timeline, Stinger was gone.

“I think it re-sets,” she said. “And that everything starts over again. It’s the only thing that makes any sense to me somehow. But I don’t have any real way of knowing. There could be parallel universes, or multiple versions of everyone. There are way too many things I don’t know.” And the uncertainty was so frustrating. “But I do know Stinger and Kiza and my family are out there somewhere, and I’ll find them when I go back to Earth. I’m sure of that much.”

She didn’t want to leave Caine here—or have to start all over with him again. But this time, for everyone’s sake, she really had to hope that she would go back in time.

“You’ll be there again too,” she said, “And I’ll find you. Or you’ll find me. We’re always the same people. That part doesn’t change.” She wasn’t entirely sure if she was trying to convince herself or him.
“Are you the same?” he asked. “Even after everything that's happened to you?”

She’d told him a lot of her story, but she wasn’t sure if even she remembered it all anymore really. The last few time loops, things had started to blur together, time passing in a haze of weariness.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I never wanted to change. I didn’t want to become a typical Entitled—or worse, an Abrasax. But I’ve just been making it up as I go along. Trying avoid being kidnapped or killed, trying to learn enough to protect everyone.”

“I don’t think there’s any danger of you becoming a typical Entitled,” he said. “An Abrasax wouldn’t concern themselves with protecting an underdeveloped planet—or a Splice.”

She couldn’t help being concerned about those things, worried about being able to protect him. Still, she didn’t want to let those worries take her over, to get in the way of being with him here and now. Sometimes, when she’d woken from nightmares, the idea of being light years from home had been overwhelming, made her feel incredibly small and alone, worn down and hopeless. But tonight, lying here with him, she wanted to remember the excitement, the wonder she’d felt when this had all started. She thought back to all the days of cleaning toilets, when traveling to distant worlds had been an impossible dream.

“I keep thinking everything will work out in the end,” she said smiling again, and this time it felt a little more natural, almost real. “I don’t know how it can happen exactly. But things have got to be better now. I was just too tired before.”

His eyes were dark in the low light, something new in the way he looked at her tonight, something she’d caught in glimpses before, fleeting hints before he inevitably looked away. Something she’d hoped for, but feared wasn’t possible. The fact that Caine was here with her now—shouldn’t they take advantage of that while they could?

“Your Majesty said that I...read stories to you,” he said it as if the idea were strange. “Would it help for me to do that again?”

“Um, you could,” she hesitated.

She knew he’d enjoyed the stories, always curious and slightly surprised as they unfolded. The childhood adventures and happy endings foreign to him, unlike anything he’d known in his own hard life. He’d read them for her sake. But maybe they’d appealed to him more than he would have admitted.

She liked the stories too. But some nights, what she’d liked most was just the sound of his voice, knowing he was near once she’d closed her eyes. She didn’t need an excuse, any reason to keep him here tonight. Didn’t have to wonder if there were somewhere else he’d rather be. He was right where she wanted him: Close—though he could be closer.

She moved into him, closed the last few inches of space between them and pressed her lips against his clavicle, her legs stretching out to tangle with his. He slowly stroked up and down her back, running his hand along her spine until the chill from her dream had completely eased from her bones.

It wasn’t exactly relaxing though. If anything her heartbeat had picked up speed again.

“Caine,” she said, touching her fingertips to the spot where she’d bitten him earlier, where just the faintest indent was left behind on his skin.

His breath caught, and he was completely still for a moment.
“Your Majesty?” He shifted so they were farther apart, looking at her in question.

“Sorry, am I too close?” she asked.

There was something about him she still hadn’t figured out. Some caution in his manner, somehow different than simple shyness or reserve. He’d told her once before that she could take advantage of him, but what exactly did that mean? More Queen and Splice stuff? Or was it something more about the two of them? Maybe it was impossible to entirely separate the two. But she needed to be careful with him, she wanted to be sure.

“No, you’re not too close,” he said, resuming the slow stroke of his hand down her spine.

“This is nice,” she said. “But—maybe instead of a story, we could try something else.”

“Alright,” he said, voice husky.

“What I have in mind,” she said, slowly kissing her way up his throat, over his chin, until her mouth had found his. Her hand moved over his chest and abs, down to his waist, and she pulled back just enough to say against his lips, “It might take some work on your part.”

“Whatever Your Majesty requires.”

When she reached down to wrap her fingers around the length of his cock he was already completely hard.

****

The next morning Ell asked Jupiter to accompany her out into one of the domes, a determined look in her eye when she said the Queen should learn how they programmed their swarms of drones.

“Okay,” Jupiter said, feeling agreeable as she nursed her second cup of coffee. She waved Caine away when he offered to accompany them. She had the feeling there was something Ell wanted to tell her in private. Maybe it was too trusting of her, but so far, she’d felt safe enough with them here. They were only a few minutes from the house when Ell brought up the real purpose of their walk.

“Your Majesty,” she said, handing Jupiter a sheave, “I formally request your consideration of this offer to purchase the Splice Ionidine Trembt.”

Last night Ell had seemed like she was loosening up a tiny bit, taken to calling her Jupe and even cracking a few dry jokes. Her tone was stiff again now though, her words careful. “We’ve calculated her worth according to all relevant parameters. You’ll see in the charts and tables here an estimated payment schedule, the interest rate calculated in the third quartile.”

“Ok-ay.” Jupiter was surprised when she first understood what the other woman was asking. She wanted to buy her own wife? But that was how things worked, of course. Io couldn’t own herself. If anyone had to own her, if there were a choice, it should probably be Ell.

“And this what Io wants too?” Jupiter asked.

“It would be considered inappropriate for Io to approach you about this matter, but yes, it’s both of our idea.”
“I don’t care about being appropriate, I need to check in with her on this before I decide anything.”

Jupiter scrolled through the figures in front of her. She’d learned some things about space currency, but she hadn’t covered anything exactly like this. There was an amortization chart scheduling payments going forward eight thousand years. Which couldn’t be right. Kalique had told her most Splices were cheap—a well-crafted android could run nearly twice as much. But apparently, working for the Abrasax family didn’t pay very well.

“Once we get the Vegecell out into the market,” Jupiter said. “And all the patents or trademarks, or whatever the space equivalent is, are sorted out…the two of you will be rich.”

“I don’t understand,” El said, her face carefully expressionless.

“You invented it.”

“We invented it while we were working for Your Majesty. We have no claim on the product. All of the rights will belong to you.”

“Well…I’ll obviously have to give you a bonus then—for work well done. And a raise too, it looks like.” Jupiter frowned. “That is, if you choose to continue working for me.”

“We’d both like to continue the research,” El said hesitantly, as if she couldn’t quite understand what Jupiter was offering.

“Okay then. We can go over the necessary sheavework once I’ve had the chance to talk to Io about all this. But I don’t see any reason why we can’t do this.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. You’re very gracious.”

“I do have one condition though,” Jupiter said, her voice suddenly serious. “I want your promise that if anything happens to me, Caine Wise can stay here with you, in secret, for as long as he chooses.”

“Certainly,” El said, puzzled. “He’s more than welcome to remain. But what could happen to you? You’ve fully recovered your health.”

“I don’t know, it’s only a just in case. But I want your promise on it,” Jupiter said, resolute.

“I promise, Your Majesty.”

“Good,” she smiled. “And actually make that two conditions. I really do prefer you calling me Jupe.”

***

The days passed quickly. Jupiter kept herself occupied, finding things to do each day that took her mind off the uncertainties ahead.

She continued her reading, as she’d done in the previous time loops. She dutifully learned everything there was to know about the agricultural operations, and the production of the Abrasax Green, as Io called it. (She had decided she preferred the name Vegecell too—but chose not to pick sides in that battle for the time being.)

She convinced Caine to help her with her combat training. She’d learned some new fighting moves
since the last time she’d trained with him, back on Cerise. Her work with the androids had been paying off, but she still had a hard time getting the best of him for more than a few seconds at a time.

Until she made it a challenge—for them both—to figure out how she could get him on his back and at her mercy. Which led, not surprisingly, to the absolutely best distraction of all—her very favorite new way to spend all of her time. Well, not all of her time.

There were other important things to do—she had to be responsible. So she’d decided they should spend no more than a few hours each day in bed. Not including sleep, of course.

Or naps.

She wasn’t tired anymore, but it turned out an awful lot of naps were required during the day.

“Are you sure your obedience coding doesn’t work?” she groaned, rolling off him to collapse, slightly out of breath, on the bed beside him. “You’re kinda scary good at following orders.”

She’d figured out by now she had to be careful telling Caine not to stop when he got started with something—for fear he’d take her too seriously and end up killing them both.

He was unnaturally still beside her, the tips of his ears going red.

“Oh God, I didn't mean—

Her stupid mouth, she hadn’t actually even meant to say that out loud. She knew this was sore point with Caine, though not in the way she’d once thought. It was a sore point with her too for that matter. A stupid misunderstanding that had kept them apart for no reason.

It was just—he never minded her telling him exactly what she wanted from him, if anything, he seemed to get off on it.

“I am sure that my coding is faulty in that area, Your Majesty.” he said in a careful voice. “If I seem obedient, it is perhaps because I enjoy doing what you ask of me. And your requests are quite reasonable. If my coding worked properly I wouldn't have a choice. I’d be compelled to follow your orders, no matter how abhorrent I found them.”

“So if I ask you to do something that you don't want, you won't do it?”

This was what had been so confusing before. Even if it was awkward, she wanted to understand this, especially now that it was out in the open. It was hard enough meeting him over and over again—she didn't want to be going around with bad info anymore.

“It is slightly more complicated than that,” he said. “If I work for you, I am supposed to follow your orders.”

“But say it’s not in a Queenly capacity, and I give you a choice, if I asked you to...” she strained to think of something he’d hesitate over. She already knew he had no qualms killing for her. So...maybe something off-putting and gross. But not too gross or obviously horrible “Say I asked you to...clean some gunk out from under my baby toenail.” She waved her foot up through the air. That seemed innocuously unpleasant enough, didn’t it?. "In a totally non-sexual way," she added quickly, she didn’t want him thinking she was trying to hint at some kink.

"Your "baby toe-nail"?" he questioned.

"Yep, the littlest piggy, the smallest one."
“At times, Your Majesty’s brain works in very strange ways,” was all he said.

“But would you do it?”

“I can think of worse things, but I don’t feel the slightest bit compelled to do that for you. I might well pass on that interesting offer Your Majesty. Unless, of course, you were in danger and it was poisonous, life-threatening— toe-nail...gunk—as you called it,” he said, giving her a look, as if he found her extremely odd, but still somehow more appealing than he could quite understand under the circumstances.

***

Jupiter was almost asleep; one arm flung over Caine, her face smushed between the rumpled sheet and his shoulder, when a strange sensation, a tingling buzz, like a mild electric shock passed suddenly through her body. Opening her eyes, it took a moment in the dark to realize where she was.

Caine was gone.

The red numbers of the digital alarm clock glowed 2:36AM, and she could hear the snores of Mama and Aunt Nino from across the room.

She’d gone back three hours earlier than in the other time loops. Or maybe she’d always come back this early, and slept until the alarm went off?

This time she wasn’t exhausted though. She felt fine.

She crept silently around the dark house, checking on each of her family in turn: Mama and Nino, Vladie, Mikka and Moltka, Vassily, Irina and Lyudmilla.

She didn’t know what she’d say if any of them woke and found her staring at them in the dark, but she really needed to see each of their faces.

Luckily, no one woke.

She scribbled a quick note saying that she had to leave in a hurry, and that she’d be back as soon as she could. Vladie would explain everything, she wrote.

It served him right, she thought, remembering how he’d talked her into going to that clinic in the first place, demanded the larger cut of the money.

Anyway, he was so much better at bullshit than she was. And it might keep him busy for a bit; maybe prevent him from buying that stupid TV.

She took his car and drove out into the night to find Caine.

*****

Stinger Apini prided himself on his ability to handle anything that came at him—and handle it well.
He had a reputation for doing as much, and during his time in the Legion it had served him well. Much as he'd complained about being stuck on that backwater planet called Earth, he’d known he might have ended up somewhere a lot worse if it weren’t for that reputation and the connections he’d made. He was known for being pragmatic, someone who could get the job done.

Once he’d been satisfied that Jupiter Jones was a Royal, and that her story was real, he hadn’t bothered to question it much further. He'd shifted his focus to how he could prove himself of service, how he could work this unexpected change to his and Kiza’s best advantage.

Still, he thought, looking across the room to where the Queen stood with Caine Wise, there was something strange going on here that he didn’t quite understand.
Stinger

Back on the farm, in the dark hours of morning, Stinger held the heavy telephone to his ear. While Kiza looked on, arms folded across her chest, he’d listened to the voice emanating from the primitive Earth tech.

He’d been suspicious at first. But at some point, the story of the Royal recurrence and her time travels—well, it hadn’t exactly made sense—but there were things she told him that couldn’t be ignored or explained away.

“Sorry if I was a little abrupt over the phone,” Jupiter Jones said, walking up the steps of the front porch an hour later. Caine Wise was a step behind her. “It’s just that—from my perspective at least—we’ve been through this a whole lot of times before,” she smiled at them.

Standing in the cool, humid air of dawn, she was somehow smaller than Stinger had expected. She was young, hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, simply dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt with sleeves rolled partway up the arms. Older than Kiza, but not by much.

The sun was rising beyond fields of corn in the distance, and something else, like a thick shimmering mist, was swirling up around them.

Bees.

Stinger felt the buzz in his own blood then—that unbidden response to Royalty—and he bent to his knee before her, bowing his head.

“Your Majesty,” he said.

“Please, that part’s totally not necessary.”

He rose to his feet, squinting into the light, suddenly uncertain of the protocol.

“But, maybe...” she hesitated, “brace yourself, cause I’m gonna hug you.”

There was a quick impression of soft yet strong arms, silky hair as the top of her head brushed his jaw—it was over by the time he’d patted an awkward hand to her shoulder, his stance still stiff.

“You too,” she said, going after Kiza and wrapping an arm around her. Kiza threw him a look of surprise, but remembered her manners enough to hold back making a face at least.

Royals were often eccentric. Hugs didn’t usually enter into it, but he could think of worse.

Her Majesty came away with damp eyes, looking between the two of them as if memorizing their faces.

“Sorry, but getting to know people the normal way—over and over again. I guess I’ve kinda lost patience for it,” she said it with a shrug. “I’m diving in head first these days.”

It made sense, he supposed—though it was a bit off-putting.

Caine was silent, carefully expressionless by her side and Stinger wondered how her introduction to the Lycantant had gone earlier.
“The thing nobody tells you about looping through time?” she said. “After a while, it makes you kinda weird. I mean, I know I’m a complete stranger to you—well, a stranger stranger now than I was a minute ago,” she rolled her eyes. “But it’s so good to see you again. Really, you have no idea.”

Aboard the Aegis Cruiser, Jupiter Jones immediately accessed Commonwealth records and activated files with her sigil.

Stinger studied her carefully as she spoke with Captain Tsing and the crew. So far, he hadn’t been able to fit her into any familiar category. She didn’t seem to fall under any definition of Tersies or Royal he’d ever encountered before. It’d be best to figure it out as soon as possible though, to know what to expect from her going forward.

It was obvious to him that she was familiar with the ship and everyone around her, though she made an attempt at hiding it.

“I want to hold off on the portal restrictions for now,” she murmured.

Portal restrictions were one way to keep enemies from entering her territories. Crude, but effective. According to her, they’d have at least a full day before the restrictions needed to be in place.

She scrolled down an endless list of other edicts while he and Diomeka Tsing exchanged looks of surprise behind her. It must have taken years to put so much sheavework through.

Diomika was tactful enough not to say anything about it. He’d already told her there were things he couldn’t divulge, and the two of them knew each other well enough to leave it at that. She’d told him she was playing everything straight from the book these days. Keeping her nose out of the sort of Entitled politics that cost people like them their jobs.

Easier said than done, Stinger had found.

Still, it was a relief to see his old comrade-in-arms again. Good to know she and Caine were both at his side in case things got ugly. Though truth to tell, he wouldn’t mind a bit of action, getting back in the thick of things. Cornfields and beehives were all right for a spell, but they weren’t what he’d been trained for. Earth wasn’t where he belonged. For one thing, Stinger’d never been able to keep a goddamned grin plastered to his face—as protocol suggested at all times in order to blend in with the planet’s inhabitants.

Aegis weren’t same as Legion, but if he knew Diomika, she’d gathered a good crew here. Gemma Chaterjee showed Kiza something from the latest feed that made her burst out giggling. Her laughter turned into a cough, but it was over soon. And for the first time in years, Stinger didn’t feel that wash of dread pass through him at the sound. Instead, something like relief took its place.

Her Majesty was a bit strange—something distant in her eyes when she looked at them all, and the way she anticipated questions before they were asked. But, if anything, that seemed to prove her story true. And she was otherwise straightforward, easier to deal with than any Royal he’d ever met.

He’d have to get Caine alone, to get his take on her. Though the Lycantant had been sticking close to her side so far.

“Well, it’s official,” she said, turning toward them. “You’re both my Royal Guards.”

“It’s an honor, Your Majesty,” Stinger said.
Caine exchanged a quick look with her before nodding and turning his gaze to the floor.

Once they hit atmosphere on Orous, Her Majesty and Caine split off to the Aegis safe house while the rest of them headed for the Commonwealth.

Stinger and Kiza went to the Health Authority to get her re-code. He held his breath while the clerk checked the sheavework was in order.

Somehow, this was the hardest thing to believe out of all of it.

A time-travelling recurrence of an Abrasax Queen?

Sure, he’d had heard of weirder things in his day.

But an expedited re-code for Kiza?

*That seemed too good to be true.*

In his experience, nobody did that for a Splice—at least, not without expecting something big in return. Maybe Jupiter Jones was only doing it to help them, as she’d said. But knowing she’d survived this long with the Abrasax family gunning for her...Well, it was likely she had hidden depths. He wouldn’t be surprised to find there was some catch, some agenda she hadn’t yet revealed.

Not that it’d matter to him. Long as Kiza got what she needed, he’d do what Her Majesty required. He’d do anything for his daughter. Kiza was all he had anymore. These last years on Earth, it’d been just the two of them. And once they’d realized she had the bug...well, he’d kept her close. Worried she would fall ill without him, or that someone would treat her with primitive medicine—or worse, discover she wasn’t the kind of human they’d been expecting.

It would be a while before Stinger felt right being separated from her again. But she’d been bursting with excitement when he left her there—bouncing on her toes, her low-pitched buzz vibrating through the air around them. The scraggly ostrich splice next to them grunted in annoyance at the sound—between bouts of adjusting an ugly hat and poking at a neck tumor the size of a koobafruit. Stinger took in the scene one last moment before leaving—a smile of reassurance for Kiza, and a glare of warning to the bird—before heading out the door to find Jupiter and Caine.

Orous smelled bad as he’d remembered. But it had been good to be back, good to fly, wending his way through crowded skies, testing the speed of the ship he’d picked up from Legion Command. He’d taken a circuitous route to his destination. Kept an eye out for bounty hunters along the way. The Aegis safe house was in a distant hemisphere—half a world away from the Commonwealth—but someone would pick up on the trail eventually.

He’d paused in the entry, arms full of gear, the acrid, chemical air still thick in his lungs, as he looked at Jupiter and Caine standing close together across the room.

He’d come into the middle of something, but he wasn’t sure quite what.

The dwelling met with his approval at least. Reinforced walls and blast proof windows. Double coded entry. Not the sort of place anyone would expect to find a Queen, but comfortable by Earth standards.

Caine had been in contact since they’d arrived and given no reports of trouble. Still, he looked worried—an unusual expression for him. Stinger had mixed feelings when the other man walked up
yesterday morning—back from the goddamned dead. They hadn’t had a chance to hash things out yet. Stinger holding back on his first urge—to give him a sound thrashing.

So far, other things had taken priority.

They’d always worked well together in the past. Been through hell and back on some missions. Under normal circumstances, there was no one he’d rather have watching his back. Stinger’s instinct was to trust Caine again, in spite of everything. But following his gut had got him in trouble before where Caine Wise was concerned.

Stinger rolled his shoulders as he walked further into the room—and he couldn’t help but notice the pull of tight, scarred-over flesh where his wings had once been.

“Got the gear you requested, Majesty,” he said, clearing his throat. He put everything down on the table next to a stack of sheaves. “Top of the line tech: grav boots and body armor, distortion shield. The weapons should fit your hands nicely.”

“Thank you Stinger,” she said.

“We do our job right and you won’t need to use any of it though. The long-range ship is ready in the dock and we’ll move you to the next location soon.”

Caine stepped away from her, walking the length of the room, looking out the windows, as if checking the perimeter. But after the first pass it was apparent he was pacing. Restless—though it was unlike him to let it show. Caine usually kept it bottled in, waiting to let loose in battle.

Jupiter looked like she’d been preparing for something—and considering the story she’d already told, Stinger couldn’t help wondering what came next.

“We have a change in plan,” she said, throwing a brief look over at Caine before focusing her attention on Stinger. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Kiza or the crew. But... maybe this way, if something goes wrong—well you can just say you didn’t know what I was up to either.”

“What are you up to?”

“We’re going after Balem Abrasax,” she said.

“All right,” Stinger said slowly, confused. He’d figured it was something worse. “But if you don’t mind my saying, Majesty, there’s no need for all this.” He gestured to all the military gear she’d requested. “We can’t get the Aegis involved in a Royal assassination, but Caine and I can get the job done once you’re secure at the long-term location.”

Caine should have suggested as much already.

“I’m going,” she said. “That’s already been decided. I need to be there in person to confront Balem and find out about the time loops. And it has to be now, before he finds out I’m still alive. Caine’s coming with me, but there are some things for you to do from this end.”

She’d surprised him again. He’d never heard of a Royal risking their own skin when they could send someone else in their place.

Stinger looked over at Caine, still pacing. He hadn’t thought much of his silence before. Figured it was his wariness around Entitleds. Or things left unresolved between the two of them. But something was strange here.
It was possible the Deadlands had changed him, that he wasn’t up to the task. Hard to believe, but maybe he’d gone soft.

“I can go in Caine’s place—if there’s some problem Majesty.”

“Is there a problem?” she asked Caine.

“No,” he said, his voice low, coming to stand at her side. “We’ve been over the plan. We’re good to go.”

“Okay then,” she said with a look of relief.

Stinger watched as she took Caine’s hand in hers, running her thumb over the back of it, and the Lycantant took in a slow breath and seemed to settle back into his skin.

“Could you go over things with Stinger while I change?” she asked, and she went to gather up the gear and started for the other room.

“Oh! I almost forgot,” she turned back to them. “Can you two wait until later to beat each other up? Let’s save it for the bad guys right now, huh?”

“Alright,” Caine agreed, looking oblivious.

“Bad guys?” Stinger changed the subject.

“She has a list— broken down into different categories. It’s here somewhere,” Caine said, indicating the stacks of sheaves.

“So what’s my part in this?” Stinger wanted to know.

“Once we make planet, I’ll contact you to put her portal restrictions in place—that will prevent Balem from ordering any strike on Earth. Once he finds out about it, he’ll know she’s still alive. But we should have a while before he notices. After that, everything stays on lock down until she gives the word.”

“Seems easy enough. Not much of a job there.”

“If you don’t hear back...” He handed Stinger a sheave along with a cream colored envelope. “These are instructions, and a letter she wants you to give to her mother.”

“Did you try talking her out of it?” Stinger asked.

“I offered to go alone, but she wouldn’t let me do it. I’ll make sure she comes out of this though. We’ve got a good plan. Gone over the layout, tapped into surveillance. There’s regular traffic on and off the planet right now. Getting through the gate should be simple—long as they’re not looking for her.”

“Does she know how to use the gear? Grav boots are tricky for beginners.”

“Says she’s used them before. She mostly wants them as a back-up against falling.” Caine frowned. “I’ll operate the distortion shield. She’s been training in combat, but I don’t want it come to that.”

“Good. Training isn’t the same as being battle tested,” Stinger said. “A little knowledge might be dangerous, make her overconfident.”

“I think she’s the right amount of confident about it.”
Stinger thought it though. “A quick strike on a unsuspecting target. You could do it alone in your sleep. But it still doesn’t feel right sending in a civilian, much less a Royal under my guard.”

“It’s her decision,” Caine said.

“And you’re good to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what’s going on here, man?”

Caine just looked at him, face impassive.

“Is her story true?” Stinger questioned.

“She’s not lying —the time loop, knowing us—that’s all true.”

“And what’s your read on her?”

Stinger didn’t know exactly how it worked. All Lycantants had a keen sense of smell, but with Caine it went beyond. He could smell a person’s intentions, their character even. There was some sort of chemistry behind it, years of practice. But he had an uncanny ability to translate scent, to understand it in ways Stinger had never heard of before.

Stinger watched in surprise as Caine opened and closed his mouth, starting and then stopping, as if he didn’t know what to say.

“There’s an undertone of green. Growing things, forest and grass, something flowering.” Caine looked into the distance for a moment, and Stinger stared at him. Wondering if he was going to start reciting poetry.

Caine shook his head and came back from it. “I haven’t come across that before. It’s something new she said, a kind of green Regenex formula. It binds with her cells and protects her from the time-travel.”

“Well, what else?”

“She’s...good,” he said slowly, the worried look returning to his face.

Maybe Stinger should have left it there. But he’d been Caine’s commander for a long time. It was still second nature to try and help if he could. “That’s it?” he asked. “She's good?” He couldn't see the problem.

“She told me she—

Stinger waited. But whatever it was, Caine seemed incapable of saying it.

“She smells like me.” The words escaped him suddenly, in low rush. “It’s something instinctual—bees don’t—you don’t have any sort of—?” he stopped short, catching himself.

“What are you asking?” Stinger tensed. You didn’t ask another type of Splice about their ways. It wasn’t done. And Caine knew that. There were certain things Splices only talked about among their own kind.

But then, Caine had always steered clear of other Lycantants.
“Nothing,” Caine said. “Forget I said anything.”

“It’s already forgotten.” But it was obvious Caine needed help. Even bringing that kind of thing up in the first place...

A lot of information about Splices was common knowledge. For instance, everyone knew Lycantants needed a pack—though Caine had seemed the exception to that rule. Most likely there were other things Lycantants kept hidden though, things they wouldn’t want used against them.

Most Splices had figured out ways of communicating among their own kind. Secrets passed down. Mating habits? Stinger thought, looking at his old friend. Was that what they were talking here? Apis Splices had these intricate dance rituals, and all kinds of—well he sure as fuck wasn’t getting into any of that...

“She smells like you huh?”

“She said she belongs to me—” Caine shook his head. “But that’s got to be bullshit. A Queen can’t belong to a Splice. She doesn’t know what it means either. She’s trying to be...nice. She’s nice to me.” He said it almost miserably, as if the idea of someone being nice confounded him.

“I don’t know about your stuff, man,” said Stinger slowly, “and I’m not going to tell you about mine. But I don’t see any problem here. If she’s on board with it...”

Caine didn’t seem convinced.

“You’ve gone your whole life never having what you needed, but even you can’t fight your instincts forever.”

“My instincts are the problem. I’m all kinds of fucked up, Sting. You should know that well as anyone. What if my instinct is to kill her?”

“Is it?”

“No,” Caine said, with a sigh. “Right now it’s the opposite. My instinct is to keep her away from Balem Abrasax—but that’s where we’re heading anyway.”

“Then let’s get through this and you can figure the rest out later,” Singer advised. “Let me look over the schematics, show me what you’ve got so far. Sounds like you could use another pair of eyes on it.”

A few minutes later, Jupiter came out dressed in black body armor, boots and gloves. Stinger had to admit she looked a lot tougher in the gear—but she was still just a tiny thing.

Activating the boots, she lifted until she was foot off the floor, her face breaking out into an enormous smile.

If Caine were right about her—well it’d be a shame to see someone who was good ruined by the likes of Balem Abrasax. It didn’t seem right to let her go in there. Especially not when she’d hired him to do this sort of job for her.

“Majesty, it’s not too late for me to take your place. You don’t have to do this.”

“I do have to do this.”
She was stubborn; he’d give her that.

“Chances are, anything you run into is going to be a lot bigger, faster and stronger than you are. Doesn’t matter if you’ve had a bit of combat practice. You don’t want to engage unless it’s a last resort.”

“That makes sense,” she said.

“If anyone grabs you—the body armor will only protect you so far, there are vulnerable spots.”

“Show me,” she said, lowering to the floor and stepping toward him.

“Here,” Stinger said, reaching out to point—

She lunged forward in a quick burst of speed, drove her shoulder into his gut, flipped him over and sent him flying. The wind knocked from his lungs as he slammed hard to the floor. And when he looked up, she had a gun trained on his chest.

Her aim was slightly off.

“Wow! I’ve seen how fast you are Stinger.” It soothed his ego that she said it in a genuine tone of amazement. “I didn’t think I could actually pull that one off—and don’t worry the safety was on the whole time,” she tucked the gun back out of sight as she powered down the boots again.

He drew in a wheezing breath.

“Sorry, It didn’t hurt, did it?” she winced .

“No,” he grumbled, disregarding the urge to rub at his tailbone. He jumped to his feet, just as spry as if his bones didn’t ache, and turned and scowled when he caught Caine in a big tooth-baring grin.

“That was pretty good. But next time aim a little more to the right,” he said sternly,

“That wasn’t fair, I know you weren’t expecting it, but surprise was my only advantage—so I used it. You’re the one who taught me that, by the way. Right now, Balem isn’t expecting me either—I need to go after him while I have the chance.”

“Still better if you don’t engage at all, Majesty.”

“You’re right. I have absolutely no intention of wrestling with Sargorns.”

“Hmmph.”

“I didn’t want to go back there ever again, but I can’t avoid it anymore,” she added, more seriously. "I don’t expect you to take the fall for this, if it goes wrong. You have no reason to trust me, and you have your own priorities, but..."

This sounded like something new. Some part of the story she hadn’t told him yet.

“I trust you. In spite of any differences we...you—you’ve always come back in the end—maybe even against your own best interests.”

He couldn’t imagine what differences they would have had. What priorities would interfere. He had no other allegiances... except Kiza. And suddenly it made sense—why she’d insisted on taking care of his daughter.

"Family has a way of complicating priorities, making us do things that...I don't know why. But I do
know that you understand the importance of family, Stinger. That's why I'm trusting you to look after mine if anything happens to me."

“You have my word, Majesty.”

He surprised himself how much he meant it.

There was a lump in his throat, or his chest maybe, like she’d lodged something there when she’d sent him flying head over heels a minute ago. Stinger’d never had much in the way of family—none but what he’d made for himself. He’d given Caine up for dead once before, watched them sentence him to the Deadlands and drag him away in chains—so sure it was the last he’d ever see of him. For that, as much as anything, he’d wanted to knock his fist into that blockhead when he’d first seen him again.

Years ago, stripped of his wings and banished to Earth, Stinger had decided. From there on out, he wasn’t looking out for anyone but himself and Kiza. Anything else was too risky.

Last thing he needed was someone else worming their way into his heart.

***

“Are we good?” Jupiter asked Caine.

The two of them were in the ship a while later, almost ready to go. Sitting close in the little cockpit, as Caine familiarized himself with the controls. Something seemed to be bothering him though. He’d said he needed to tell her something, just before Stinger walked in. He hadn’t brought it up since though.

She studied his face, his pale skin reflecting colored lights from the control panel. He leaned over, and she met him halfway in a kiss that was sweet and lazy and slow. She got lost in tasting his mouth for a minute.

“You’re very good Your Majesty,” he said against her lips.

“Mmm. Don’t try to distract me,” she said, trying to ignore the goose bumps his low voice sent sliding along her skin. “You were going to tell me something before.”

He hesitated. “Maybe when we’re done with this,” he reluctantly pulled away.

“Just tell me now. I insist,” she softened her command with a smile, waggling her eyebrows.

“When you found me in Chicago...” he stopped.

She thought back to that hour in the dark with him in the Willis Tower. Her breath caught as a wave of sensation ran through her at the memory of it.

“Yeah,” she gulped, “That was pretty intense.” Was he trying to distract her again?

“My blood was running hot back there,” he said, dragging his hand across his face.

“Well, sure. Mine too I guess.”
“No, you don’t understand,” his voice was grim. “It’s not—it’s a physiological state that Lycantants... It helps us heal faster. But I don’t remember it coming on— maybe I thought it’d be safe, I thought I’d be alone when I did it, but....”

He’d been hit by a blast from one of the bounty hunters. She’d seen the wound on his shoulder, along with the feral look in his eyes when she walked into the room. He’d been healed by the time they’d left for Stinger’s though.

“It’s not safe for you to be near me when I’m like that. I won't let it happen again. But if you come looking for me again, next time, at the same time...”

“Caine. I trust you. Completely. That’s not even an issue for me.” She’d told him this so many times before. It wasn’t his fault she was the only who could remember it.

“That's what I'm trying to tell you though. You shouldn't trust me—not when I’m like that.”

“It was fine,” She wanted to reassure him, didn’t understand why he was upset. “More than fine. I liked what happened. A lot. I thought that you did too.”

“I wasn’t in control. We were just lucky nothing bad happened.”

“But—

“It’s too dangerous, Your Majesty,” his voice was dead serious. “I've never remembered how it happened—but they told me afterward: My blood was running hot when I attacked that Entitled.”
Yesterday’s Morning Meeting

Chapter Notes

Toward the beginning here, "the Loop" means a certain area in downtown Chicago—just to be clear that it's not a time loop (except for when it is).

“Wait,” said Jupiter, “you attacked someone when you were like *that*?”

Caine looked away and fitted his fingers to the ship’s controls. For a moment, the faint hum of the engine was the only sound in the cockpit. “I tore his throat out,” he said, his voice flat. “They told me I was feverish, I was unaware of my surroundings, that it was a defect in my genomegenering. The fact that I can’t remember any of it...my blood running hot is the only thing that explains all of that.”

He turned to look at her cautiously, as if expecting her to be repulsed by him, now that she knew.

She remembered yesterday morning, remembered his skin had been unusually warm—but him *attacking* someone when he was in that state?

“Caine,” she said, totally bewildered, “that doesn’t make any sense at all.”

*****

Driving into the Loop at three in the morning had been different. Everything was quiet and deserted. She’d had no trouble finding a parking spot across the street from the Willis Tower.

Jupiter was different too. This time, instead of worn down from time traveling, she was wide-awake and full of energy—which meant the Vegecell was definitely working.

She had been ready to fall sleep for the night in the last time loop, so that was probably going to hit her eventually. She was too excited to be sleepy now though, excited to be back on her own planet, and have everyone else back too.

The Earth was safe, her family was alive. She’d make sure everything stayed this way—permanently, if there was any way possible.

She walked along the sidewalk, past piles of black, plastic-bagged garbage and rows of concrete planters. She slipped past the parking lot attendant wearing ear buds in his booth and went through the unlocked maintenance door.

In the elevator up she thought about everything she would say.

It would *hurt*—when Caine saw her and didn’t know her—all over again. But she was trying to convince herself this time wouldn’t be as bad. She knew he’d believe her story and agree to help her. And this time, she would tell him how she felt about him. Maybe not the very first second she saw him—she didn’t want to completely freak him out—but sometime soon.
She walked from the elevator and the hallway was dark other than the glow from a few fluorescent tubes. At the door, she stopped to look around.

Everything seemed empty, but a faint noise came from the shadows in one of the far corners.

“Hello?” she called out softly. She stepped between two metal beams and around a spool of wire, walking toward the sound.

Caine sat there on a blanket on the floor. His boots were planted wide, and he was leaning forward, chest resting against his bent knees, his head hanging low.

“My name is Jupiter Jones,” she said, approaching him. “I’m the one you were hired to find.”

He slowly lifted his head, but he didn’t turn to look at her. His shirt was off and he was sweating, breathing hard. She could actually see his ribs expanding and falling. His Mauler lay on the floor in front of him, untouched.

He was paying attention to something in the distance, like maybe he’d just come from a fight and was still listening or waiting to catch some scent, perceiving something beyond her senses.

She’d noticed before that it took time for Caine to come down from his hyper-alert battle mode. For that matter—even though he tried not to show it—he was usually dialed up to ten on the vigilance, ready to react to anything that came at him. She wasn’t sure whether it was from his years with the Legion, or his time in the Deadlands, or maybe just something in his nature. It could be all three.

But no, she realized, her eyes adjusting better to the dark as she stepped slowly toward him. He wasn’t on the alert for anything right now. If anything, it was the opposite.

Did he even realize she was here?

“Caine?”

He tilted his head and there was some strange look to his face. It wasn’t suspicion or a lack of recognition—she was actually used to those by now, that was how he usually looked at her when she first saw him—but this was different.

“I just want to talk to you,” she said, keeping her voice calm, palms up and out to show that she wasn’t a threat. “I want to explain...”

But he wasn’t listening. Or he didn’t understand her words. He took a deep breath in, his nostrils flared.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He sat up, and something dropped from his hand: A crumpled piece of fabric soaked with blood—a lot of blood.

“Oh my God, Caine, you’re hurt!”

She knelt beside him to get a closer look.

It looked like a weapon blast had hit him in the shoulder. The skin near his armpit above his tattoo was all torn up...but there wasn’t actually all that much blood there.

“Where are you bleeding?” she asked.
He was completely silent, he still hadn’t said a word, but he looked at her directly, finally, for the first time since she’d walked in. His eyes were black, pupils completely dilated. And there was something else strange. She knew he was a Splice, but aside from his teeth and ears, his face had always looked human to her. Stinger’s eyes flashed gold, but she’d never seen anything like that from Caine.

Until now.

It was like a wild animal looked out from his eyes. Or maybe not wild exactly, but it was like his normal human consciousness had been stripped away. Not dangerous, more like unguarded...vulnerable.

“Caine?”

His gaze fell to her neck. And when he moved it was fast. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her in, pressing his face into her throat.

It was too fast and she pulled back, ticklish, twisting them both off balance so that he fell, taking her down with him.

“Ow!” Her head knocked back as he toppled into her, the blanket hardly softening her impact with the floor.

He’d landed half on top of her, pinning her down, the weight of his leg holding her trapped. She squirmed a bit to work free and he shifted, buried his nose deep into the crook of her neck, and wrapped an arm around her.

Then he let out a sigh as he closed his eyes and melted into her completely.

Was he asleep?

She tried moving again and he tightened his hold and gave a small whine.

Which meant he wasn’t unconscious, she guessed. Unless something had changed with this timeline he should be okay. He always had been before.

She checked his head, fingers searching for injuries, vaguely remembering something about dilated eyes and concussions—but she couldn’t find any blood or bumps. Carefully, she moved her hand over his body, inspecting as far she could reach. There was nothing. He felt...fine. Though she might have a hard time explaining why she was running her hand over his butt if he woke up right now.

His breathing was heavy, but it was even. And the wound on his shoulder looked better than it had a minute ago. It seemed to be knitting itself together, healing as she watched.

So maybe that was where the blood had come from?

She put her fingers next to the injury; his skin was warm, vibrating where she touched it, giving off a sort of buzz. He must have used Regenex on it. Maybe it was taking longer, some different formula than what she’d seen at Stinger’s house.

Caine was a little heavy, but it wasn’t too much. It was actually comfortable the press of his weight against her side, strangely endearing, the way he’d nuzzled into her after looking at her with those wild dark eyes.

Maybe she should let him sleep a while. He hardly ever rested. She stroked her hand through his hair again, this time just to feel it beneath her fingers.
She’d been prepared to talk—ready to go with her usual speech. Naptime with her favorite Lycantant wasn’t exactly part of the plan. But it was nice. She traced the brand on his neck with the pads of her fingers, thinking about what lay ahead of them.

The furrow was gone between his eyebrows right now, his eyelashes soft against his cheek. Tenderness welled up, as she studied his sleeping face. Sometimes he seemed invincible—a one-man army—but something had hurt him this morning. She didn’t like to think of him injured and alone.

And all that blood...

So- short nap, and then he probably needed food—and they really did need to get going soon.

What were her options though? She couldn’t exactly get him down to the car like this.

She let herself relax a moment, just enjoying the feel of his big body pressing into her. She’d been in bed with him, what? An hour or two ago? But then that was entirely different Caine. She had to remind herself that this one didn’t even know her yet.

His skin was getting warmer. And that sort of tingling sensation was getting stronger, going through his whole body and then passing into her everywhere they touched. Her skin was strangely alive now too, like she could actually feel the blood running through her veins and capillaries, as if her whole body was somehow glowing.

Was this what Regenex felt like? This electric surge?

Jupiter hadn’t been awake when Kalique had used it on her before; she’d only experienced the aftereffects. At the time she’d been disturbed—and really grossed out, but she still remembered the powerful feeling flowing through her, remembered how she’d liked it in spite of herself. And every time she’d looked at Caine that afternoon—well obviously it had been some kind of aphrodisiac.

And... that line of thought really wasn’t going to motivate her to move anytime soon.

She needed to clear her head.

She could call Stinger. Have the Aegis meet them here? Balem’s people were looking for her in Chicago though so it would be better to get out of town if they could...

She squirmed enough to reach her phone from her pocket and Caine grunted in response, moving up against her. His thigh shoved closer between her legs, heat pressing firmly down into the flesh of her labia. She instinctively shifted to open her legs to him and a button on his pants slid up and settled right against her clit.

Whoa! This was an interesting development. She wasn’t sure if she should try to move again or just hold still—and breathe. She swallowed and blinked and stared at the phone blankly for a moment.

Her skin was tingling everywhere Caine was touching her. And a lot of places she really, really wished he could touch her right now. These ripples of energy just kept passing through him—and steamrolling into her, filling her entire body. He pulsed into her again and it was like he’d pulled a trip-wire, a dart of sensation shooting through her, connecting the ache between her legs to her nipples, suddenly hard and tight.

Another wave of vibrating warmth moved through her, and she gasped and dropped the phone from nerveless fingers. Her hips strained up against him—but she wasn’t trying to get free anymore. If she wasn’t going to get out from under him any time soon...well she’d just have to ride this thing out.
That was her last coherent thought, before she thrust up against him in an orgasm that slammed through her in waves.

*****

Caine emerged slowly, breathing in tandem with someone else, a heartbeat fast beneath his ear. His skin was singing, his cock throbbing hard in his pants, his face pressed against fabric and cool skin. Someone was moving, quivering underneath him. On his lips was the salt taste of sweat.

And the scents.

They were everywhere. Barreling through him, filling him up, surrounding him.

He didn’t remember where he was, or how he’d got here. But whatever this was, it was overwhelming and perfect. He wanted more—as much as he could get before he woke up and found out this was only a dream.

He opened his eyes and saw a woman with dark hair, her eyes closed, scent emanating from her in waves of color, the chemical rush overpowering. Her head was thrown back, face flushed.

She opened her eyes and a wide beautiful smile broke over her face. “Oh good, you’re awake,” she said with a relieved laugh.

She was happy to see him. No, more than that, he thought, confused. There was some synthesis here he couldn’t grasp. The sight of him pleased her, was somehow entirely and unequivocally good. No one had ever looked at Caine like that before. Or been relieved to see him—unless there was fighting involved.

Was there fighting involved?

He smelled blood, but was his own and not enough to matter. Stronger than that, was the smell of arousal on her.

“How long was I asleep?”

“I know you Caine Wise.” She pushed lightly at his chest and he rolled off of her.

“How long was I asleep?” He frowned.

“Only for a few minutes” she said. “I kinda think you needed the rest. Do you feel better now?”

“Yeah.” He felt wonderful, but strange.

“Good, because we need to talk.”

She sat up and he felt a moment of panic that she was leaving him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know...” He wasn’t sure what to apologize for though.
She brushed tendrils of hair back from her face and looked at him closely.

“It’s okay, really.” She rested a smooth hand against his cheek and leaned over to kiss him.

He pressed up into the fleeting brush of her soft lips, reaching for her and she came back and kissed him harder, opening her mouth so he could taste her.

There was something...

Her tongue ran the edge of his teeth while his hands circled her waist and pulled her on top of him. She stillled for a second when she felt him hard, pressing between her legs, and he wondered if he’d gone too far.

She pulled back, so that she was sitting up on top of him but then she was smiling again, eyes sparkling as she circled her hips and ground down onto his erection.

“Just help me get all these clothes off,” she said, already working at the buttons of her shirt. “We’ll have to be quick.”

He was up and out of his boots and pants in record time, watching mesmerized, as she shimmied out of her own things and tossed them aside in a rush.

Each thing about her was a new revelation. The slide of her naked skin against him, her sleekly muscled arms pulling him close. The feel of her tight around him after she’d taken his cock in hand and drawn him into her warmth. The strength of her thighs as she rode him, soft curves pressing, bouncing on top of him, hair a tangle, sweat slicking her skin.

He wanted to touch and taste her everywhere.

They weren’t quick.

Afterward, they searched the room for her clothes and she spotted his hygiene tech in with his gear

“Oh, thank God!” she said, giving herself a fast once over before reaching for her jeans.

He noticed the imprint of his teeth on the inside of her thigh. He vaguely remembered it happening, but he hadn’t meant to leave a mark. She had tender skin, and he’d bitten her harder than he’d realized. He’d let himself lose control somehow. Overwhelmed by his reaction to her, forgotten to be careful.

He still felt strange, like he was half-asleep.

She’d been talking to him, explaining some things. Her voice washed over him, warm and soothing, but he had the feeling he hadn’t caught her every word.

“There’s actually this whole speech I have memorized,” she said. “Code words and existential arguments to convince you that everything I’m saying is true.”

Jupiter.

Her name was Jupiter. He remembered that.

She still seemed like a dream, one Caine couldn’t entirely believe was real.
“I’m all discombobulated,” she said, buttoning up her shirt. “But that was pretty crazy just now.”

He finished connecting his boots and grabbed his Mauler.

“We probably shouldn’t have stayed here so long,” she said, “but I’m hours ahead of when I usually wake up and there won’t be any traffic this time of day. Let’s get down to the car and I’ll tell you everything else on the way to Stinger’s.”

“Alright,” he agreed.

She’d told him the Abrasax family were all trying to kidnap her or kill her, and that she needed to get to the Aegis for help.

“And, oh, we should get you some food. You lost a fair amount of blood.”

He didn’t remember what had happened, but that probably explained why things were fuzzy.

“Do you like donuts? That’s probably the only thing that’s open this time of day.”

Donuts? He looked over at her. She was fixing her hair back into a smooth tail and for the first time he noticed the glowing blue sigil on her wrist.

His heart sank into his stomach.

“You’re an Entitled.”

“Yeah,” her voice was soft. “I told you that. I’m a Royal recurrence, which is the reason why everyone is after me.”

Cold fear passed through him then. She was an Entitled and he’d bitten her. He hadn’t been thinking straight. Anything could have happened...

She must have seen the worried look in his eyes.

“I won’t say it doesn’t matter—that I’m Queen and you’re a Splice. But it doesn’t matter to me.”

Not only an Entitled then, she was a Queen?

She stood and placed her hand against his chest, looking up at him with big eyes. She swallowed hard. “I love you.” Her voice was strained. “I guess...I thought you recognized it, or recognized me somehow. You told me before that you could catch up with me. I thought...”

He wanted to reassure her, but he was suddenly unsure himself.

She loved him? That was what this was?

“I know that I smell like you,” she said. “You told me before it means...it means that I belong to you.”

But her words were uncertain.

“You do smell like me,” he said finally. “And I do recognize you, I think...”

He slid his hand over her hers and she let out the breath she’d been holding in.

He kissed her. He wasn’t sure what else to say, but he’d figured out that she liked his kisses.
From now on though, he’d have to be a lot more careful.

***

It turned out Caine did like donuts. But not nearly as much as he liked Jupiter Jones.

She bought him a dozen and insisted that he eat them while she drove them out of the city. He devoured the warm sweet dough and watched her face while she told him her story. The food helped, he was starting to feel more coherent by the minute.

At Stinger’s place, she brushed the powdered sugar from Caine’s beard and kissed him again briefly before he steeled himself to go and see his old friend.

It wasn’t until that night, when she’d curled up trusting next to Caine on the bed in the Aegis safe house, and he’d watched over her sleeping, that he realized what must have happened that morning. His blood had been running hot.

She said he’d been injured when she’d found him, but he didn’t remember using Regenex, didn’t remember any of it. He must have slipped into it, not felt it coming over him, not fought it off in time.

Running hot would have been alright for any other Lycantant, nothing more than a way to rest and heal. He’d seen it from afar when he was just a pup. The way the others watched over anyone injured or ill, looking out for them while their guard was down.

Caine never let himself run hot though—he couldn’t if he didn’t have a pack to watch over him—and so he’d fought it off the few times he’d felt it coming on. He got medical help when it was available, and when it wasn’t learned to tolerate the pain.

He had only slipped and let his blood run hot once before that he knew of. He’d learned the hard way he couldn’t trust what he might do in that state.

He’d had a lot of time to think about it while Jupiter slept, sifting through everything he could remember from that morning, worrying about the parts that he couldn’t. He’d agonized over what might have happened to her. He had to warn her. He had to let her know the danger—even if it meant she’d never look at him the same way again. The only a question had been whether he should tell her before or after they went after Balem Abrasax.

***

“I don’t understand it either,” Caine said. “I don’t know why I attacked him when I was like that. I only know what they told me.”

Jupiter couldn’t believe it though, something about the whole thing seemed off.

“I hurt you yesterday,” he said in a grim voice. “It could have been worse, Your Majesty. Please don’t risk it again.”
“You didn’t hurt me,” she started, but she knew she had to be honest with him. “I mean, okay, I did bump my head when you fell on me, but it hurt for like a minute. The only real danger was severe snuggling.”

She couldn’t stand to see him looking so miserable and ashamed. ”And, um, I might have humped your leg a little—or a lot—which is funny if you think about it..." She gave him a cheesy grin, trying to lighten the mood, but his face was still somber.

“Even after I woke up,” he said. “I wasn’t completely in control. I bit you, I saw the mark that I left.”

“I wanted you to bite me,” she said. She’d actually been expecting him to do it for a while now. She knew he’d considered it, and she had wondered why he’d never done much more than graze her with his teeth. “I liked it. You don’t have to be that careful with me. I’m not fragile. I’m not afraid of a few bumps and bruises.”

“It’s not just bumps and bruises. I could kill you.”

“You would never.”

“I’ve killed a lot of people,” he looked away from her, his voice strained. “I wouldn’t hurt you on purpose, but I don’t know what I’m capable of doing when I’m like that. If it happened once, it could happen again.”

“I’m starting to doubt it ever did happen that way Caine. I really don’t see how you could have attacked anyone. When I found you, you could barely sit up.” The more she thought about it, the more the whole thing seemed fishy to her. “Maybe someone used you. After all that’s the way things work in your world, isn’t it? Everybody using everybody else for whatever they can squeeze out of them. Did you ever consider that maybe somebody got away with murder because they were able to blame it on a Splice?”

“I don’t think it’s only my world that works that way, but yeah, I suppose what you're saying is possible,” he didn’t look like he believed it though.

She wasn’t sure what made her angrier, the idea that someone had used Caine, or the way the whole thing had made him doubt himself, made him doubt his own worth.

But there were other things going on here. And she’d already hit him with a ton of stuff in the last day. Maybe he could catch up to her, but she needed to be patient. She couldn’t expect him to understand at once— how important he was to her, how much she needed him.

Or maybe it wasn’t that she needed him. She’d learned enough now to go it alone if she had to, if that were the only way. But she didn’t want to do it without him.

Caine had been without a pack for a long time though. It might take him a while to learn how not to be alone anymore. She trusted him—but she couldn’t expect him to trust her, not completely, not yet.

“You’re a good person Caine. I trust you. And I know that you would never hurt me. But if it makes you feel better, I promise to steer clear when or if your blood is running hot—at least until we figure it out better.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Are there any other secret wolf-y traits I should know about while we’re at it?”

“No,” he said. His face had turned a bit red though.
Huh.

“Wait,” she said. “I just thought of something. How much could you heal if you’re in that state? I mean, can you grow back a finger, or a limb, if it gets chopped off?”

He looked surprised, and took a moment to consider her question.

“Only if it’s a full moon, Your Majesty,” he said in a slow, careful voice. “And unfortunately, two more limbs would sprout back in its place.”

“Oh. My. God. Are you serious?”

He was completely straight-faced for a moment, and then he smiled at her.

“Ha ha!” she laughed. “You got me. Well if you’re sure there’s nothing else... Are you ready to go kick some Abrasax ass?”

***

The craft was Legion designed, built for speed and agility but disguised to look like a standard delivery ship. They had no problem getting in through the Stormgate and landing in one of the side docking bays in the lower levels of the refinery.

The second they were in, Caine contacted Stinger to have him activate the portal restrictions.

Earth was safe now, no matter what. Jupiter, on the other hand, felt anything but safe.

Caine would defend her, and she’d been learning to defend herself—but there was something primal about being back at the Jupiter Refinery again.

The smell of the air, the hum of the generators, the dark orange clouds that filled the skies. It was the scene of all her nightmares.
Balem Abrasax woke at the Jupiter refinery, looking through heavy-lidded eyes at the vaulted ceiling of his bedchamber. Reluctantly, his gaze moved down the wall—and stopped on the portrait of Seraphi.

The familiar, cold dread washed through him.

He’d had her painting removed—time after time. In one timeline, he’d even destroyed it, tearing at her face in his rage, desperate fingers rending the canvas until the paint flaked and crumbled, the particles so thick on the air that they’d choked his throat and left a rancid taste in his mouth.

Despite it all, Seraphi smiled down from her vantage once more.

Mother was back again.

And so was Balem.

“My Lord?” Chicanery Night spoke from across the room. “I am afraid the recurrence never arrived at the clinic.”

Of course she hadn’t. Jupiter Jones never did go back to that clinic, not after the first time his Keepers had attempted—and failed—to kill her there, the first time she’d slipped through his fingers...

Balem held back a groan. It was happening all over again. He ignored the rest of Mr. Night’s words, the pathetic string of explanations and excuses. He’d heard them all before.

He was so very weary of this. He lie there, averting his eyes from her, watching the relentless fall of burnt orange light through the leaded glass windows overhead. It filled the room with a smoldering glow—as it always did.

But—Balem had been...elsewhere.... Hadn’t he?

He felt an odd expectancy, as if something had changed—something important. Though, time after time, nothing changed here.

Had it been a dream? He couldn’t remember.

Everything in this place was suffocating him, the air pressing down, the silk of his bedclothes weighing too heavy against his sensitive skin. Keeping him in place. Holding him captive.

It was unbearable.

Moving deliberately, Balem pushed the sheets aside and sat up. He was determined to ignore the panic bubbling up beneath his fatigue. He would maintain his calm; ignore the cold trickle of sweat dripping from under his arm—so undignified. He would not bother asking yet again if the atmospheric controls were properly set. He knew they must be. He’d had them checked, and re-checked, so many times before...
And still, Mr. Night’s voice droned on, unheeded.

_Something_ had happened in that last timeline though, something that had broken through this endless monotony. Balem felt so certain of it. And yet...

At last, the memory came to him:

_Jupiter Jones was dead._

He collapsed back into his pillows with a sigh of relief—no, triumph—as he remembered. It _hadn’t_ been a dream.

***

In the last timeline, he’d woken and found the recurrence had not yet claimed her title. He’d immediately ordered an attack on her city—and soon after his Keepers had sent him the images from Earth.

Balem had walked through the scene of her destruction, he’d looked on the ruined skeletons of steel protruding from heaps of crumbled concrete, saw the desiccated beds of vaporized lakes, the fields burnt black, stretching to the horizon.

She’d been incinerated instantly.

Had there been a moment, even one second, he wondered, for her to realize, to understand that Balem had defeated her?

Perhaps it had happened too quickly.

Soon after, he’d watched from his window as the fleets of Harvesters came down through the Stormgate, the ships filling the docking stations on every level of the refinery. There had been more than enough of the population left alive after the attack to ensure a profitable Harvest.

He looked down upon the multitudes of Earth, streaming from his ships in wave upon wave, flooding into every entranceway. Their bodies had been made bare, their skin still wet from the decontamination process, their bald heads gleamed in the golden light of the storm. The heavy, flesh sounds of their footfalls, building, and gathering like thunder, until they reverberated through the buildings all around.

A shiver went through him.

He was not disturbed by the realities of production. Their _deaths_ gave him _life_. The strong prospered. The weak submitted to greater force.

Balem Abrasax _was_ the greater force.

He had never witnessed this compelled march though, the enormous mass of an entire planet moving as one.

The word genocide passed through his mind—in a whispered voice that sounded like _hers_. But that was nothing to do with a Harvest. They were grown for this very purpose. Each and every one of them belonged to him.

This was his _right._
The Harvest administrators oversaw everything from their stations around the refinery, ensuring that all was done to code. One of them turned in his direction, and Balem instinctively slunk back into the shadows. It was uncouth for an Entitled to observe the Harvest. Balem should keep his distance.

But something was compelling him, some heretofore unknown need. Something left unsatisfied by that unseen death. He could not turn away from the opportunity to experience what was happening here.

And so he called for his chariot.

Balem kept his expression coldly superior as he rode through the great hall. He knew very well that his presence was in poor taste, but none dared speak a word in protest. It was unheard of, for one of his stature to be directly involved in the processing. If rumor surfaced, it would detract from Abrasax Industries’ reputation for strict quality standards—perhaps even go so far as to lower their stock price.

But then, if time was rewritten, who would ever know?

Balem traveled further into the great hall, closer and closer to the crowds, watching as Earth’s former inhabitants jostled awkwardly forward, step-by-step. An old woman with bony elbows and drooping breasts, a knock-kneed teenager with too large hands and feet—at close range, they were disappointingly ordinary.

There were a few pleasing specimens: a broad shouldered man with powerful muscles and satin skin, a sleek, long-limbed woman with plump lips and cheeks.

But they may as well have been corpses.

Even without this Harvest their primes would have been all too fleeting, their lives ridiculously short.

A boy passed close to the chariot, ears protruding from the sides of his head so that they glowed translucent pink where they caught the light.

For a split second, Balem was tempted to poke one. Would it feel anything? Could it react?

The urge was quickly overridden by revulsion, then a panic, as someone bumped against Balem’s golden vehicle and he wobbled erratically there, floating, helplessly as the crowds grew thicker, and began to surround him.

“Guards!” he called out.

The red robes stepped forward in formation and formed a barrier around him. And then they parted the seas going forward, so that he could continue on, unmolested.

Balem could not stomach the thought of that doomed flesh actually touching him.

There was something else that drove him, something much more than crass curiosity. He watched the blank faces and glazed eyes, their brains overridden to remove fear and sensation, programmed to cooperate. Unaware of what awaited them.

Balem was aware—of everything.

Everything that they did. Everything that they were and would become. It was all at his command.

They took their places in the machines... and it was beautiful.
He was doing them a mercy.

He watched avidly as vial after vial was filled to the top with the precious fluid. And everything was clear to him once more.

This was an affirmation.

Each drop of their life drained, proved his own superiority—his own power in this universe. Among these vast hordes, Balem alone was eternal.

They were naked and weak—stinking of disinfectant—no more than the raw material for his machinery.

Trapped in the loop of repeated days, Balem had grown dull; overwhelmed by forces that he did not understand. But with his dominion over them—and his victory over her—he had regained control.

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“My Lord,” Chicanery Night’s voice brought Balem back. “I have ordered more hunters to search for her.”

“You needn't bother,” Balem said. “The recurrence is dead.”

“But, My Lord—

“It is done.”

“How—

“I am not in the mood to be questioned further, Mr. Night.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

It was frustrating that he did not know how he had gained the advantage. It must suffice that she was gone—turned to dust.

The Keepers had searched—grey fingers sifting through the ashes of countless dead—but only microscopic bits of burnt flesh and bone remained after the walls of fire had passed through the city. And with another time loop begun, even that dust was now gone—erased—as if it had never existed. It felt incomplete, but would have to be enough.

For now.

Balem smiled at her portrait, although his eyes slid quickly away, unable to meet hers.

It had been an ignominious death—impersonal this time—but no more than she deserved. He had defeated her. Exterminated her—along with her precious planet.

It was his planet now.

With time reset, Earth’s population was restored, but the recurrence could not come back to life. She had been made vulnerable, taken out of time—like Balem...
“Ready a Regenex bath for me,” he ordered.

“But...”

Balem sat up again and glared, narrowing his eyes at the worrying movements of the rat splice’s fingers, the nervous gulp.

“Yes, My Lord, right away.”

“And have my ship prepared to leave.”

“But—”

“Now!” The whispered shout stained his throat.

There was nothing he wanted here. Re-harvesting the Earth could wait. Fifty years, a hundred—it hardly mattered now. This planet had become his prison. Time after time, he'd been dragged back to this same morning.

Trapped.

In the last time line, he’d finally escaped the refinery, and made a brief trip to Orous before spending time at his alcazar...

Balem might have been brought back again, but he refused to remain. He'd put this place behind him...for as long as he was able.

**********

Somewhere in the refinery, halfway down a corridor lined with forty-foot tall stone columns and lit by only the shifting skies overhead, Jupiter Jones stood in the shadows.

Caine had stopped beside her, listening—or maybe he had smelled something on the air?

He must smell her fear, though he hadn’t said anything about it. He'd given her a concerned look when they first stepped out of the ship, and then a small nod of reassurance. It probably wasn’t Legion protocol to mention that one of your team smelled anxious—not exactly good for moral when they were on a mission.

And they were on a mission, as surreal as it seemed. It was hard to believe they’d actually come back here, and that this wasn’t just another bad dream.

Jupiter was still trying to get over the nightmare feeling of this place. The grav hull was intact in this timeline, she reminded herself. Nothing was exploding or on fire—yet, at least. The floor was solid beneath her boots. It might turn transparent and show something creepy happening beneath her—but at least it wouldn’t be happening to her family this time. They were safe at home, guarded by the Aegis crew.

Maybe that weird feeling along her skin was from the constantly raging storm outside. She didn’t want to think about how the grav hull counteracted the crushing gravity of this planet, how it
managed to hold back the poison gasses. When she wondered too much about things like that, it was suddenly hard to breathe.

And okay, she hadn’t quite talked herself out of this feeling—but it didn’t matter. This had to be done. Balem needed to be stopped. Jupiter needed to get some answers from him. And if she had to inflict pain to get him talking? Well—she’d been practicing.

She didn’t fear Balem. She feared what he could do to Earth. And she might not be ready to go up against his Keepers or Sargons, his armies of guards—or some of those bounty hunters for that matter.

But Balem? Ever since she’d whacked him upside the head with that pipe she’d seen the cowering man-baby he really was. She didn’t fear him....

But this place really got to her.

At least, it had been easy so far, flying straight in and walking around unchallenged. No blaring alarms, or creepy android guards firing at them. Surprisingly easy...Too easy?

The sound of footsteps—a lot of footsteps—came echoing through the hall.

Oh great—she’d jinxed it!

A line of guards came around the corner in their direction and Jupiter stepped back closer to the wall and held her breath.

“Take this,” Caine whispered, handing her the distortion shield.

The shield made them invisible. Looking closely, someone might notice the illusion warping around the edges, but it was dark enough here that they’d definitely be okay.

Jupiter watched, incredulous, then as Caine stepped away from her then and right into the guards’ line of vision. He pulled something from his pocket and—dusted the carvings in the stonework?

The guards continued on, as if they hadn’t even seen him.

“You should breathe,” Caine said softly, once they had all marched past.

She sucked in a deep breath, then said on the exhale, “How did they not see you?”

“Stinger got us into their system. We’re tagged to register as cleaning crew. Anything tech-based can see us, but will probably just ignore us.”

“Well, yeah, that would work,” she said rolling her eyes. Even in space, no one noticed the people cleaning their toilets. “But if it’s that easy then why—

“Why what?” He cocked his head, uncertain what she was asking.

“Never mind.”

“Alright. Better if you stay behind the shield. We don’t want your face on the surveillance. But unless we run into someone, we can talk quietly—and breathe.”

“Gotcha,” she said.

It was just that this whole operation was going a lot more smoothly than she’d expected. All the
times she’d seen Caine flying into action, gun in hand, chaos breaking out on all sides. Who knew he
could be stealthy? Or had she just not noticed it because it he was being...stealthy about it?

What stuck in her mind most were those do or die moments—most of which left her feeling ready to
barf actually. Chases through canyons of skyscrapers in Chicago. Last minute rescues—way too
many last minute rescues.

He’d stopped her wedding by literally crashing it, with a spaceship, through the ceiling. Not too
subtle. Though, admittedly, that had been spur of the moment.

This vibe was totally different though, more like a super sneaky high-tech jewel heist. Too bad the
thing they were here to steal was Balem Abrasax.

“Something’s happening,” Caine said, turning to look from one side of the long hallway to the other.

He’d been focusing on something when he’d stopped before, but he seemed to know exactly where
to go. Which was way more than Jupiter could say. After all those nightmares, couldn’t she have at
least memorized the layout of the place? Apparently not. It all looked the same to her. Cavernous
rooms, one after the other— and all with the same death cathedral theme.

“I guess Balem might smell kinda like me,” she said, in case that was any help.

Caine frowned at her in confusion. But she must have told him? She forgot exactly which parts of
the story she’d gotten to this time around, but--

“Because I have the same exact genes as his mother...” she began.

She really didn’t like it—but if she was genetically identical to Seraphi, then half of Balem’s genes
were the same as hers. Did that mean he sort of was her son?

Ugh, no.

Blue lightening flashed from the window of a building far above them.

“He’s having a re-code,” said Caine. “That got in the way of his scent for a minute, but I’ve got him
now—his scent is similar to his brother Titus’.”

Caine created a glowing blue opening in the stone wall and they stepped out together into the sky.

Jupiter was unsteady as she adjusted her boots to hover and Caine wrapped his hands around her
upper arms as he said, “But no, Your Majesty, Balem Abrasax doesn’t smell anything like you.”

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Balem rose, invigorated, from his bath, fingers trailing through the viscous liquid as he pulled free.
Servitants stepped forward to dry him, removing the last of the unctuous fluid that clung to his
eyelashes and rested sweet on his lips.

He contemplated the situation. The re-code had put him to rights, soothing his unease on waking at
the refinery again. And calmer now, he wasn’t actually surprised to be back again.

Something had been different in the last timeline, something that allowed his victory. But he’d seen
no other changes to indicate that the counter reaction to his fail safe device was faltering.

The time loop might, in fact, continue on for a while.

Now that he was free to travel again—free of her miserable portal restrictions—it shouldn't matter. He'd find some way to turn this anomaly to his advantage.

Balem absently lifted one foot, then the next, as he was dressed in sleek black trousers. A heavy, jeweled cape was fastened in place, and the fabric settled around his shoulders in a pleasing manner.

“Is my ship ready?” he called to his chamber presence as he strode to a floating divan.

“It is being prepared My Lord.”

He slouched against the low back of the seat, cape falling aside as he folded his fingers over the smooth pale skin of his abdomen, thoughts drifting, as they too often did, to her.

Her defeat had been inevitable, considering Balem’s vast resources, his superior knowledge. And he’d been right to strike when the chance presented. He’d wasted the opportunity to kill her at Kalique’s alcazar, so many timelines ago. He should have commanded Greegan to shoot her on sight then.

He’d wanted her to see him, to acknowledge him…and he’d paid for that indulgence. After that, she’d escaped, claimed her title, and disappeared from Orous without a trace, time after time. Balem had wanted her to fear him, wanted her to understand that his trap was closing around her—instead she had trapped him.

He had searched endlessly for functional portal codes, thousands of ships at his disposal—thousands of lives. He’d sent them off, one by one. The possibility of escape excited him at first. The anticipation, his heart picking up speed, as each vessel paused at the mouth of the Stormgate, a portal opening before it

Or was it something else that excited him? That moment, when the portal closed around a ship, a frisson would pass through him, as it disappeared into nothing—forever—the comm lines falling permanently silent. He had always wondered about death, wondered what it felt like, what that silence held...

He would never experience it himself, of course.

He’d sent them to their deaths, one by one, in search of his escape route. Surprised to find them alive again in the next time line—to find he had an endless self-renewing resource to use in his search.

After that, the amusement scarcely satisfied for long. Though he still took pleasure in killing Mr. Tskallikan each time. It had become a ritual. Sending the Sargorn into oblivion, crushing him into nothing, despite his size and strength. He’d never forgotten Tskallikan was to blame for Jupiter Jones escaping him the very first time.

Balem unclenched his fists.

It was over now. He had won.

One of the hovering servitants brought a drink, though the cool liquid failed to soothe the tightness in his throat.

Eventually, everything would return to the proper order. Balem had time. With his stores of premium
Abrasax, he had all the time in the universe. And when this ended, as it must, he would ensure that he came out of it more powerful than ever.

“Pardon me my lord,” Mr. Night’s hurried forward, “but it would seem the new Abrasax Queen has placed portal restrictions in this system.”

"Impossible!” Balem voice broke and he struggled to get it under control. “I need to leave this refinery now!”

“At top speed your ship will reach the interstellar medium in approximately forty-seven days. Once there, you will be free to portal, in spite of any restrictions, My Lord.”

“I don’t have time for that!” He wouldn’t make it halfway before he was dragged back through time again.

“Perhaps you would like to negotiate with Her Majesty then?”

“She is dead! I saw it. I killed her myself!”

“My Lord, I am speaking of Jupiter Jones, your mother’s recurrence, not your mother, the former Queen.”

“How dare you!” Balem kept his voice cold, but he could feel himself shaking. “Get me portal codes, unauthorized codes, as many as you can find. I want them now!”

“My Lord, the risk—

“Now!” he said, demanded. “And send Tskallikan. Immediately!”

“Yes, My Lord.” Mr. Night walked quickly from the room.

Balem seized a heavy crystal vase and heaved it hard at her portrait, knocking the edge of the frame as it cracked against the wall and left the painting askew. Then he turned on the servitants, hovering anxiously nearby.

“Leave me at once, all of you!” They weren’t fast enough, and he grabbed more objects to hurl as they fled for the doors.

Alone, at last, he let out a scream of pure frustrated rage.

***

“That’s him,” Jupiter whispered to Caine. Hidden behind the shield, they hovered just outside his window. “Just guessing here, but I think maybe he’s figured out I’m still alive.”
Sorry this story didn't update for such a ridiculously long time.
I injured my neck at the end of last summer, which combined with my usual chronic spine problems prevented me from sitting at a computer much. I kept thinking I'd feel better and get to this story right away.
The next chapter should be up MUCH sooner...
As always, feel free to point out stupid mistakes, inconsistencies, etc.
I think I'm a little rusty, but hope to pick up speed on this again.
Thanks for reading!
Jupiter stepped onto the narrow ledge next to Caine and powered down her boots. She could see Balem through the window, his face pale in the shadows. His dark cape fluttered behind him as he moved through the room like some kind of big-headed bat.

All they had to do now was sneak inside, grab him, smuggle him to the ship and fly out through the storm gate before anyone noticed. What could possibly go wrong with that scenario?

She tightened her grip on the distortion shield and smiled at Caine, relieved they’d made it this far—even if she was uneasy about what came next.

Caine grinned back, looking more bloodthirsty than nervous, with the points of his teeth peeking out at her.

The sight of him—with the dull orange storm swirling overhead and the vertical drop looming below—it pulled at her memory. She remembered that other time, even if he didn't. She remembered them catching their breath together after he’d found her in the collapsing refinery, she remembered them smiling at each other, when the world was falling apart all around them...

Back then it had been explosions, and space suits forming around their burnt and battered bodies, and—well, this was totally different. Good different—she hoped. Jupiter felt the reassurance of her boots’ controls beneath her fingers. At least this time she wouldn’t be falling.

How long had it even been since that day? Months, definitely... A year? More? Honestly, she had no idea anymore.

Her hair was a lot longer. It had been growing shaggy at the ends, but she hadn’t exactly had time to ask Nino for a trim. She had been growing, learning—trying to at least. Was she still the same person? Had she changed?

Her first time here, she hadn’t been able to kill Balem. She’d been threatened and beat up, running for her life, gasping for air. She’d felt the urge, that primal instinct: to finish him off, to protect herself and her family. And part of her had wanted to hurt him, yeah, but she’d stopped short at bashing his head in. She’d felt sick at the thought of cracking his skull with that metal rod, throwing it away in disgust instead.

This time she’d have to see it through somehow, to make absolutely sure that Balem could never threaten any of them again. She needed to get some answers first though. There must be something he could tell her about the time loop. Caine had offered to interrogate him—which probably meant torture. At this point, that didn’t sound as bad as it probably should have.

Balem deserved pain.

But then what? She couldn’t turn him over to the Aegis. Not after everything he had done—everything he would do again if given the chance. He’d had too many thousands of years to devise his plots and escape plans. Who knew what other tricks he had up his sleeve? She couldn’t allow the possibility of him ever coming after her or the Earth again.

Caine had offered to kill Balem, and that was the obvious solution. But then, if that was the right thing to do, shouldn’t she do it herself? Being Queen meant doing what had to be done, not just
ordering others to do it for her. She could pull the trigger as well as anyone. Wasn’t that what she’d been training for?

Jupiter set her sights on her victim, listening as Balem’s voice rose and fell in harsh whispers that broke as they grew louder.

***

“It’s always you,” he said. “Tormenting me!”

Mother’s portrait stared down at him, silent and reproachful.

“I gave you everything you ever asked for,” Balem insisted.

She’d groomed him to please and obey her. To adore her...And he had.

Was it his fault that he had never been enough?

To truly conquer, she’d taught them, one must inspire both fear and love. Balem had taken it to heart—all three of her children had. In those early days they hadn’t understood—she meant to conquer them as well.

Only Kalique had dared challenge her, attempting to overthrow her control. Mother had ensured she suffered for it, of course.

Balem had devoted himself to Mother, devoted himself to the Abrasax name. He’d wielded the power that came with his birthright, learned how to inspire fear, and to relish it. But that other thing...

Love.

It was so much more difficult. He’d never had Titus’ slick charm, or the bright smiles Kalique could summon at will—both were lies, of course, which only made it all the more frustrating that Balem’s attempts should fall so short. Balem never learned how to hide his contempt for others. He’d strain to curve his lips upward, to pretend delight, but no one came eagerly when he summoned—not as they did for his siblings. His appearance was as it should be: handsome, elegantly clad, refined—he’d been assured of that. His smiles were off-putting, however. People cringed when he beckoned. He’d adjusted, learned to use it to his advantage, but...

“Did you laugh at my efforts?” he asked her.

She’d always played the three of them against each other, made them compete for her attention. Balem had other strengths though. He thought he’d proven it to her.

He watched the shadows in her eyes. Something hidden in her expression, a secret knowledge that eluded him. It didn’t matter. He would have the last laugh.

“I understand now.” He tore his gaze from her face. “It was never enough to kill you. You only find new ways to torture me.”

Whether it was in memories or dreams. Or this recurrence from Earth. It made no difference, it was always her.

“Titus and Kalique might charm and smile, but I will do what is necessary. I will do what they would never dare. I’ll bend you to my will, once and for all.”
“There are guards in the outer corridor, Your Majesty,” Caine whispered, looking in. “There’s no one in the room with him though. If he’s talking into his comm, I can disable it...”

But Jupiter had noticed Balem turning to a painting on the wall as he ranted, a portrait that looked like—

Oh my God! What was it with these Abrasax kids and their shrines to her?

“I think he’s talking to that painting of his dead mother,” she said.

“Allright.” Caine was all business. “Do you think he’ll tell it any information that you can use?”

“Maybe?”

She’d made out a few of his words through the glass. Torment and torture. Bending someone to his will. Typical Balem stuff, she guessed.

“A Sargorn’s stopped just short of the door,” Caine’s voice was suddenly intense.

“Can we wait here a sec and see if he goes away?” She’d just as soon avoid them getting tangled up with one of those things again.

Caine studied her face for a moment before nodding in agreement.

Who knew, maybe she’d get lucky and Balem would divulge his evil secrets while they waited, though he’d need to speak a little bit louder—and with better enunciation—those sibilant whispers made it sound like he was speaking in parseltongue.

Jupiter watched as he talked to a portrait of her dead doppelganger. She wasn’t eager to rush in, but they couldn’t wait forever. She so needed to get this over with.

****

In the corridor outside Balem’s chambers, Chicanery Night was arguing with Mr. Tskallikan.

“You will relay my message for me Mr. Night,” the Sargorn growled in a low voice.

His cold, loamy breath washed over Chicanery’s face as he spoke, the smell ancient and disturbing, like an unearthed tomb. Chicanery’s nose quivered involuntarily. However, he wasn’t that easily intimidated, not with Lord Balem’s guards behind him, ready to enforce orders if need be.

“I won’t go in when he’s in this mood, Mr. Tskallikan. My Lord Balem has summoned you.”

“I am occupied with the search for the Earth woman.”

Tskallikan’s hulking, scale-covered body, loomed over him, effortlessly radiating pure menace. Impressive—but it would do him little good with Lord Abrasax indulging in one of his temper fits. If anything, a show of strength would aggravate him further.

“He’s called off the search. I don’t know why. Perhaps you could reason with him Mr. Tskallikan,”
Chicanery offered. He’d found manipulation and guile to be most effective in dealing with their master at such times. Though perhaps Tskallikan lacked skill in such areas. Chicanery had never been able to judge the intelligence, or lack, in those reptilian eyes.

Tskallikan frowned at the door. “Who is he talking to now?”

“No one.” Chicanery refrained from rolling his eyes.

He had caught Balem Abrasax talking to that portrait more than once before.

****

“I will create my own destiny Mother!” Balem hissed at her. “Random chance will have no place in my designs.”

Even if it took a million years before another recurrence appeared, it would be too soon. And yet…

He still remembered the last time he’d touched her—the cool flesh of her throat, the delicate structure of her trachea against the palm of his hand, the thrash of her arms and legs struggling against him. Her enormous eyes.

Jupiter Jones was nothing like her. Nothing.

And yet somehow she managed to survive, again and again.

How much longer must he endure this? Dragged back to this hellscape where he’d nearly died? Reliving the same progression of days? All of it due to that woman, that genetic fluke.

“I will control it next time Mother,” he warned her. “Control you. Create you. Build you anew,” He grew more and more excited. “Shape you to my whims. Give birth to you in all of your beautiful monstrosity. Make you my creature.”

To clone a queen was abomination, but it could be done—for the right price...Balem would ensure that no trace of genomgeneering tainted her—and that no one else involved in her creation survived to tell the tale.

When it was done, he could rule with her once again—as it should be. His mouth watered at the thought: Seraphi, as he had never known her, young and vulnerable, malleable to his will. Who better than he to guide her, to teach her the Abrasax ways?

“You summoned, my Lord?”

Balem startled, and turned to see Mr. Tskallikan stepping into his chambers.

As the doors closed behind him, the Sargorn lifted his weapon and scanned the surroundings, his massive arm swinging quickly round, his line of fire stopping abruptly—an inch short of Balem’s head.

Balem steeled himself, straightening his stance instead of shrinking down as he was so tempted to do. “How dare you raise your weapon in my presence!” His voice was like ice.

“Forgive me, My Lord, I sensed—“ Tskallikan frowned at the window, and then lowered his weapon, looking confused.
Something was not right, Balem thought uneasily. Usually, when he summoned Tskallikan, he sat in one of the vast, great halls, surrounded by his guards. He'd called him here on impulse today. He hadn't anticipated the impact of the Sargorn, alone, and at such close range. Tskallikan towered over him, completely dominating the smaller space.

However, Balem refused to cower before any Splice. And this one had already proven worthless.

“Mr. Tskallikan, you have failed me,” he announced sharply. “Under your command, a simple seek and destroy operation has turned into an expensive and unsuccessful interplanetary chase.”

Instead of the usual excuses, Tskallikan was silent, tilting his head this way and that. He seemed to be studying something in the distance.

“I will allow you one last chance,” Balem continued, annoyed. “However, you must ensure you are successful in this new task.”

Tskallikan was all but ignoring him, and that was new, Balem thought, troubled. It shouldn't be new. Everything had always gone the same way before. It was never new.

Tskallikan should have been subdued, defeated, begging for his life... Instead, he flared his nostrils, and his clawed hand hovered above his holstered weapon. Under his breath, almost inaudible, came a single word: “Lycantant”

What treachery was this?

“Are you in league with the Lycantant?” Balem demanded.

“I do not associate with Lycantants My Lord,” Tskallikan spat the words in distaste, his wings flaring out behind him in agitation. But there was something shifty in the way his small eyes moved around the room. He seemed to be waiting for something.

“Did Lord Titus pay you to betray me? “

“I have belonged to My Lord for over two thousand years,” he answered, wings settling back down again. “Lord Titus does not pay well enough for my betrayal.“

“Then he has tried to bribe you?”

“Is this a test?” Tskallikan asked, scowling.

A test! Balem was the one being tested. They were all plotting against him. The recurrence. Titus, Kalique.

Mother and her Splices.

“It is too late for tests!” Balem said. “Time after time you have failed them all!”

“My Lord?”

At last, he had the Sargorn’s attention.

“Do you know how many times I have killed you?” Balem enjoyed the way the words formed slowly on his lips. “The number of times I have listened to your pathetic screams? Begging me for mercy. Your cries of fear. I’ve watched as you were crushed into nothing. Obliterated over and over again.”
Tskallikan looked straight at him then, his gaze dark and fathomless, meeting his eyes for much longer than was proper. And something cold traveled the length of Balem’s spine. Did the animal dare to judge him?

At last, Tskallikan lowered his eyes and said carefully, “My Lord, forgive my mistake. What is the task that you have set me?”

“It is not merely a task. It is the only way for you to redeem yourself after your failures.” Balem straightened to his full height and pushed out his chest as he spoke, more than ready to reassert his authority. “Mr. Night has a ship waiting in the hanger. He will provide you with a special portal code to enter into the navigation system.”

“A special code? Only the Commonwealth can generate authorized codes. Anything else is a death sentence, My Lord.”

This part Balem had heard before. First would be the grumbling, then would come the whining, he thought, bored.

Instead, the Sargorn narrowed his eyes and slowly lifted his weapon.

Balem leapt across his bed and dropped to the floor on the other side, seeking cover.

“Guards!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Seize him!"

Footsteps thundered in as the red robes entered the room and Balem cowered in hiding, expecting a melee. He'd witnessed Sargorns take down a phalanx of guards before.

Instead of a battle, he heard only the quiet voice of Mr. Night, "What shall they do with him My Lord?"

Struggling to untangle from his cape, Balem peeked cautiously over the edge of the bed. He was surprised to see Tskallikan calmly surrendering his weapon, and then crossing his arms behind his head.

“Forgive me, My Lord, I was overexcited, but I will accept your task without further trouble.”

“See that he is on that ship, Mr. Night.” Balem commanded, straightening his collar as he rose to stand.

Tskallikan walked from the chamber, surrounded by guards, pausing only to take one last look out the window and then back at Balem.

“Very good My Lord,” Chicanery said.

“That will be all,” Balem said.

“I... heard voices inside earlier,” the rat splice said tentatively, looking nervously around before clearing his throat and continuing, “And your chamber presence indicated—“

“Leave me, Mr. Night, I am weary.”

When he was alone once more, Balem whispered. “Chamber presence deactivate.”

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Jupiter and Caine stepped through the window then, and into Balem’s sight.

"Whew! That was close!" she said. “That big Sargorn was looking right at us.”

“You,” Balem whispered.

How did he manage to make his voice sound so creepy all the time?

She lifted her gun and trained it on him.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he said.

“We’ve already been through this.” She stepped closer and pressed the muzzle into his bare chest, digging into his sternum. He winced at the pressure. "I won't make the mistake of shooting you in the leg again. This ends now. You don’t get another shot at the Earth. Or me, or my family.”

“Only I control when and where this all ends,” Balem smiled. “Nothing you do can stop me.”

“He’s lying,” said Caine calmly.

“I see,” Balem whispered. “You brought your pet Lycantant. Mother was fond of her playthings as well, but I’m afraid it never ended very well for them.”

Caine ignored the taunt.

“I can put you out of your misery now,” said Jupiter. “Give me one reason not to do it. One piece of information I can use. I don't believe you can control the time loop. If you could, you would have ended it by now. I think you’re bluffing.”

"You're not capable of killing me. You're nothing like her." He gave her a calculating look. "She found a visceral pleasure in taking life with her own hands. She said it connected her to the sacred, that brief taste of mortality. She never flinched, never hesitated, even with those she loved.” His eyes closed in fond remembrance, “Who do you think I learned it from?"

Jupiter just stared at him, speechless.

“You understand so very little,” he said. "Your life span no more than that of an insect. So ignorant, so self-righteous. You have no idea——

“Oh my God,” she groaned, "You really do love the sound of your own voice don’t you?"

She hadn’t come here for another round of Balem’s inspirational life talks. She didn't know if there was anything he could tell her—or if he was trying to goad her into killing him, so he could somehow escape into time again. Jupiter didn’t have time to figure it all out now.

She pulled the trigger and Balem fell toward to the floor with a stifled yelp, a look of surprise frozen on his face. He lie there, motionless, except for his eyes which moved slowly from her to Caine.

“I'm looking forward to interrogating you,” she tried giving a wicked smile, but it just felt inappropriately goofy, and so she shrugged. “You'll have to start talking eventually.”

“It'll be a few minutes before this wears off enough for him to move his mouth again,” Caine said. “Let’s get him out of here.”
A minute later, Caine had shoved Balem into a large bag and dragged him over to the window.

It was nice, having a boyfriend who could heft your enemy over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, she thought, admiring the flex of Caine’s bicep...but was Caine her boyfriend? They never had got around to talking about that...

A muffled grunt came from inside the bag.

And she really couldn’t get distracted by that line of thought now. They still had to make it out of here alive—and figure out a way to deal with Balem.
Looking down a grav shaft that fell thousands of feet into nothing, Jupiter felt light-headed, she forced herself to drag her eyes away and focus on the feel of the new boots, and keeping to the shadows with Caine.

Otherwise, she felt fine as they descended to the lowest levels of the refinery. The ship was waiting for them there and she powered down her boots and got into the cockpit. Caine stashed the bag with Balem in the back before climbing in beside her to take the controls.

At least, she should have felt fine. She really was trying to keep her cool through all of this, but looking up made her suddenly dizzy again, and she broke into a cold sweat. It was the weight of all that ominous space tech, all the death machinery—pressing down heavy on her chest. And the endless stretch of arches and towering spires—everything hanging over her head, taking up every inch of the sky. She could see it falling down, feel it crumbling apart beneath her fingers.

“Your Majesty?” Caine’s voice was far away. “Jupiter?” His warm hand on her arm brought her back. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” she swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I’m fine.”

“Ready to go?” he asked gently.

She nodded. “Can you call Stinger and tell him we’re on the way out?”

Caine sent a quick message while he pulled the ship around to take off.

That nightmare feeling was fading, but she was still tense, holding her breath, waiting for something to go wrong. She eyed the Stormgate as they approached it, half-expecting the entrance to sputter shut in front of them.

It didn’t, but flying into that thing was eerie enough anyway, the light dimming as it surrounded them. Inside of it, they were safe from the storm, but they were also totally closed in, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. At least they were headed away from the refinery this time. She was more than ready to be off this planet and never ever come back again.

Lightning cracked around them and the hairs rose up on her arms in response. It was hard to believe Caine had flown through that hurricane once...

No one else had ever done anything even remotely like that for her before. Risking themselves for her. Somehow, despite impossible odds, he was always saving her. In every timeline. And okay, maybe protecting her was his job description now, but she didn’t want to take it for granted, didn’t want to take him for granted—any version of him.

“Thanks for,” she gestured kind of randomly. “You know—all of this.”

He looked at her, surprised.

“I mean, it’s—you’re—” she flailed her hands around even more wildly as he watched her, confused, but it was way too much to explain. Especially with Balem probably listening in.
“You’re welcome.” Caine said hesitantly—but he seemed pleased.

She smiled and he returned it. And maybe that was enough... for now.

She knew that she’d been taking too much for granted, stuck in these time loops. She’d felt like she was sleepwalking sometimes, or in a reoccurring dream—or nightmare.

But she was better since taking the Vegicell. It had healed the cell damage or whatever it was, the effects of the time travel that had been grinding her down. She just needed to make sure she really saw everything going on around her now—and that she didn’t take anyone or anything for granted.

One thing she needed to see was a way out of this mess. Kidnapping Balem was a place to start. But honestly, it was hard to imagine how all this played out. It was possible Balem knew how to control the time loop—but it just didn’t make sense. If he knew how to stop it, why would he live through it, over and over again, for so long?

But then a lot about Balem didn’t make sense.

The slim chance that he could tell her something.anything—useful was keeping him alive this far. There was no way in hell he was getting another shot at Earth though. Just the memory of that last time, the sound of Caine’s voice as he described the aftermath of Chicago and the harvesters coming down to Earth—she reached to touch the gun strapped to her thigh. She couldn’t afford to show Balem any more mercy.

When they flew out of the Stormgate, the atmosphere was thick with crystallized gas, clouds swirling all around them. One by one, other ships became visible, ten, maybe twenty of them, spread out in the skies.

“Do you think they’re all Balem’s ships?” she asked.

“Probably most of them.” But Caine didn’t sound concerned.

Another ship came out of the Stormgate behind them, closing in suddenly... but then it fell away as they pulled farther out.

Jupiter let out a long breath. “Sooner or later, they’ll notice he’s gone.” And the stun would wear off too. She looked back to the bag where Balem was tied up. So far he’d been a motionless and—thank God—silent lump. She lowered her voice, “Would they shoot at us with him on board?”

“No one’s making any move yet.” Caine was focused on flying out clear of the crowd.

Behind them, the other ships grew smaller and smaller in the distance, until, looking back, they were like pieces of space debris lit by the orange glow, suspended above the twisting bands of clouds that wrapped around the planet.

“Well, why are they all just floating out here?”

“They probably weren’t expecting the portal restrictions, Your Majesty. Now they’re stuck waiting—like us. You got anything yet, Stinger?” Caine asked into the comm.

“Your code’s almost there,” Stinger’s voice came over gruff but reassuring. “They were giving me grief about the turn-around time. Had to remind ’em I’m working for Royalty now.” He gave a small chuckle. “Not everyday I can pull rank on those sheave stackers at the Ministry.”
Caine pushed the ship out farther into darkness. And then they floated, still waiting.

“It’s coming through now,” Stinger announced.

Setting the controls, Caine accelerated toward a tiny glimmer, the portal opening barely visible in the distance ahead.

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Jupiter gave a whoop as they came out the other side, a new planet suddenly right in front of them.

“Thanks Stinger, you totally came through.”

Caine still wasn’t used to hearing an Entitled say “thanks”—not the way she did it: so simply and so often—and as if she actually meant it.

Before Jupiter, he’d navigated minefields of reprimands and petty complaints. Constant condescension and back-handed compliments. He’d sniffed out ulterior motives layered in the sickening sweet scents of over-perfumed Royals. Caine had been weary of Entitleds long before the incident that brought him down.

In spite of himself, he kept bracing for something like that from her. From the amount of sheavework she’d pushed though the Ministry, they estimated she’d been Queen for at least year now—probably more. More than enough time to adopt Royal behavior—if she were so inclined.

She kept surprising him though. She seemed more concerned with taking care of everyone else than herself, and she showed no interest in standing on ceremony or flaunting her status. Maybe she’d never needed to.

Stinger, Captain Tsing and her crew—they’d all been ready to help her out. Of course, Stinger had that Royal deference coded right in. Caine should have had something like that, but past times he’d always been forced to grit his teeth and pretend obedience, to make sure he held back from letting the likes of Titus Abrasax know what he really thought of them.

Entitleds had always rubbed him wrong...Until Jupiter.

“Least I could do, Your Majesty,” said Stinger. “Ping if you need me.” He signed off.

“Whew! I still can’t believe we actually made it out of there,” she smiled at Caine and then stretched her seat restraints to the limit, leaning over to plant a kiss that just caught the edge of his lips. Her fingers lingered on the scruff of his cheek a moment before starting to draw away.

He punched the autopilot and pulled her back quickly, all but diving into her mouth. And she came back for the second kiss just as eagerly, leaning in open-mouthed, tangling her tongue with his.

He tasted the slick inside of her mouth, warm and sweet...and unexpectedly, vividly, he remembered licking into her in other places, places where she was hot and musky. He remembered her scent the night before when his nose was buried deep in her folds, her hips moving, inner muscles clenching and unclenching as she pushed up against his mouth.

His teeth tugged at her lip now and he heard that same low catching sound in the back of her throat—the one she’d made when she was about to come.
Her hand was starting to stroke its way up his thigh when an alarm blared from the panel, loud and insistent, and he pulled away dazed.

It was a proximity alert... but they were miles from the ground, and empty skies all around.

Clearing his throat, he double-checked the controls as they both settled back in their seats.

His face felt hot. He didn't know what was happening to him. He needed to maintain control. He should be focused on the mission...

But then he’d been off kilter ever since he woke up with her in Chicago. She kept kissing him—and smiling. And he wasn’t sure what to do about it. The last thing he wanted was to push her away though.

It shouldn’t matter so much, it shouldn’t matter that she held his hand in hers or that she fell asleep on top of him, her face nuzzled into his chest, a little humming sound on her lips. It shouldn’t feel like it could crack him in half and leave him wide open.

It was overwhelming, somehow too much. But the truth was he wanted more. He wanted to pull her closer every chance he got.

Being with her felt right. He knew it couldn’t be—not for him, not for very long. But he wanted to give in, wanted to let it take him over completely. He didn’t understand if it was some primal sense memory, or a lycanant instinct... or if it would it be this way in every timeline, every time he met her—just because she was Jupiter.

Feeling this way though? That giddy sensation that bubbled up when he looked at her. He knew it was dangerous. And he knew that he didn’t deserve it—not after everything he’d done.

He couldn’t afford to relax his control. Bad things always happened when he did. Not just to him, but to people he cared about.

He watched as she pushed back a strand of hair that had escaped her ponytail. Her eyes were wide now, curious about the new planet below them, but she wasn’t always so soft. He remembered her testing the weight of her gun, her expression grim as she’d aimed down the sights.

She was determined to protect her planet—that made sense. The strange part was, for some reason, she’d decided to protect Caine as well. It was almost as strange as the idea that she loved him. He believed it, but he couldn’t understand it. She’d said something about him catching up to her, but that hadn’t happened yet...

His first priority now had to be protecting her. And finding some solution to her time jumping. She couldn’t keep re-living these same days forever. He’d smelled the fear and desperation seeping from her skin while she slept.

Sooner or later she’d realize that the two of them being together was a mistake— he was a mistake— but that didn’t matter now. She’d be looping back through time in a matter of days...unless she found a way back to her proper timeline. Either way she’d be leaving him soon.

They came in through atmosphere and flew over stretches of rust-colored sand, pillars of rock sprouting up from the desert floors and canyons carved deep by ancient dried rivers. There were no signs of habitation. The Legion had shut down the only base here a while back, before moving on to yet more distant reaches of the Gyre.
A noise came from behind them as Balem shifted in the bag. The stun was starting to wear off now. Good—they’d be landing soon. Caine looked forward to throwing his Entitled ass into a cell where no one could hear him scream. A little time alone might start him talking.

“Abrasax was trying to get into your head before,” Caine said. “Taunting you about the old Queen’s taste for the kill. It could be he’s trying to provoke you into something.”

“He is provoking,” Jupiter said, she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Do you think he really wants me to kill him though? To trigger another time loop or something?”

“I’m not sure what he wants. Some of what he said at the refinery was true, or at least he believed it to be true.”

The only sure thing was that Balem was a threat to her. One that needed to be eliminated.

“Don’t let him—” Caine hesitated, unsure how to broach it. It shouldn’t matter if she killed Abrasax—the man was no better than a worm—but somehow it would matter—especially to someone like her. Killing left a mark on a person, no one knew that better than Caine. And when it came down to it, he should be the one to do it. What else justified him being here with her? He was here to protect her, to take things on so she wouldn’t have to. Another kill would hardly add to his damage. He’d long ago lost track of his body count...

“It’s not something...” he fumbled. “It’s dirty work, Your Majesty, killing a person.”

“Lucky for me then that I’m used to dirty work.”

“It’s your choice—of course,” There must be a way to explain it, though he’d never been good with words. “But vengeance doesn’t matter to you. Your family and your planet are safe now.”

“It’s my responsibility, Caine. I put it off for too long already. I should have gone after him a long time ago.”

“Yeah, but I can—

From the corner of his eye, Caine caught a shadow. The outline of a ship ghosted along the ground for a split second and then disappeared.

“Did you see that?”

“What?”

“A shadow,” he frowned. “It could have been a trick of light.”

One sun shone high overhead and another burned bright on the horizon in front of them. There was nothing on the sensors now...but a cloaked ship might not show. Had someone followed them through the portal? There had been that proximity alert.

And he’d been distracted.

There was no shadow now, but there was something moving below them. Vibrations crawled up the back of his neck and tickled at the tips of his ears... Flying lower, he squinted toward the dessert sands.

“Um, Caine what are those?”

He quickly accessed and scanned a file.
“They’re...clobsters, Your Majesty.,” He read aloud to her, “A crustacean form. Up to ten feet in length and extremely aggressive.”

The dessert floor was scattered with pods of them everywhere. Their segmented exoskeletons dragging across stone and sand with a scraping sound that made his teeth ache. Their giant claws snapping and clattering in the thin air. Thick articulated legs wriggling, shells clicking with their every movement. The noises echoing from the canyons and bouncing off the rock walls all around them, until the delicate sensory hairs in his ears were overwhelmed by the input.

“Ew,” Jupiter said.

He agreed.

They pulled in to land on a high, flat-topped bluff, with a group of weather beaten sandstone buildings standing at its center. It looked like typical Legion construction: stark and utilitarian, there would be no decorative flourishes for a base this far out. The tall sonic gate that encircled the compound was deactivated, even rusted away in a few spots, but that would be a quick fix. Beyond it, the cliffs dropped off to the desert below.

It was primitive, but it would suffice for now.

“So, this place is like Alcatraz or something?” Jupiter said as they stepped out and looked around, “but with space lobsters instead of sharks.”

“Clobsters, Your Majesty.” The scraping sounds...and the smell: some combination of mineral and shell and fermenting flesh. And there was something else—an almost imperceptible high-pitched buzz, distracting him...“Alcatraz?”

“Yeah, it was this old-time, island prison, surrounded by shark-filled waters,” she explained. “Maximum security, for the most dangerous criminals.”

“There’s a block of containment cells here but,” he paused, uncertain. Had he been here before? It looked same as a hundred other outposts on isolated backworlds. “It’s only an old Legion base. The dangerous criminals, as you call them, end up elsewhere.”

A vague memory surfaced of being beaten and thrown into a cell before his sentencing. He’d been heavily sedated, and his trial had passed by in a blur—the whole thing over before it began. The only vivid memory was the sick wrenching tug, then the burning agony as they tore out his left wing. He’d blacked out from shock before they’d done the second one. The next thing he'd known was waking up in the Deadlands.

“What is it?” Jupiter was looking at him.

“Nothing,” he shook his head to clear it. He needed to recalibrate, adjust to the sounds and scents, everything coming at him all at once, from all directions. “It’ll be safe here, no tracker will expect you in a place like this. It’s not up to Royal standards though.”

“You’d be surprised at this Royal’s standards,” she shrugged. “Roughing it is totally fine with me.”

A hiss of air sounded behind them, and Caine turned to see the hatch of the ship slowly opening, something oozing out and tumbling to the ground as if the ship had expelled a turd.

Balem Abrasax.

Pale fingers poked from the small opening at the top of the bag, fumbling with the knot. After a
feeble attempt they fell limp...and then the bag began awkwardly twisting and pushing its way agonizingly slow along the ground.

“What are you, competing in the world’s most pathetic sack race?” Jupiter said. “We can see you there Balem.”

He was still a moment, then began wriggling faster, yet moving more slowly if that was possible.

“I could stun him again?” she wondered.

“Perhaps allow him to wear himself down? He can’t talk if he’s stunned.”

Abrasax had seemed more than half deranged back at the refinery. But if there was information to extract, Caine planned to do it.

“You won’t get a single word out of me,” Balem’s voice came muffled from inside the bag. “And I’ve been trained to resist neural transfers,”

Something skittered along the edge of the cliff and Caine took aim at a pair of undulating antennae, a razor-sharp claw, pushing at the gate. He blew it away in one shot and Abrasax gave a little shriek.

“There are giant space crabs looking for human flesh,” Jupiter said. “You’d better slither your way over here and tell me what I want to know. Maybe we can make some kind of deal if you agree to turn yourself over the Aegis and sign a confession...”

“He’s an unacceptable threat, Your Majesty. You can’t trust any deal he’d make.”

“I know that,” she whispered. “But he’s not going to talk if I tell him I’m going to kill him—Oh! Wait... are we doing a good cop/bad cop here? Or—“

“May I kill him for you, Your Majesty?”

“You cannot kill me!” Balem’s voice came again. “I am immortal. As soon as I regain full use of my limbs I will activate another portal through time and—

“I know it’s not a portal,” Jupiter scoffed. “It doesn’t feel anything like one. For one thing, it doesn’t effect your bowels.” She threw Caine a look then, as if there was something significant about the word bowels. Some reference he should understand? But they hadn’t discussed disemboweling... had they?

“And even with your time device, you need a body Balem,” she continued. “What if I have Caine pull you apart, piece by piece? Scatter you so that all the King’s horses and all the King’s men can’t put Humpty together again.”

There was definitely something strange in her words. Caine wasn’t familiar with the Humpty she’d referenced. Maybe she was thinking disemboweling? “He’s lying about the time device,” he offered.

“You don’t intimidate me,” Balem said, but he didn’t sound as sure as before. “I’m only valuable to you alive. Without me you’re stuck in this time distortion forever.”

A voice came over the Caine’s comm then, surprising him. “Hello, this is Legion patrol ship Delta-4037-T. You are in a restricted area. We’ll be landing shortly.”

Caine could just make out a ship approaching them in the far distance. He should have noticed it earlier though... all those scraping, clicking, echoing sounds were getting to him.
Balem must have heard the hail over from the patrol ship too. “I demand an immediate—”

Caine took a silencer from his pocket and lobbed it fast at Balem, and a glowing red grid engulfed him in the bag for a moment before dissolving around it and disabling his comm.


“What’s going on?” Jupiter asked, watching the ship approach.

“It’s just a patrol,” Caine assured her. “Now that they’ve seen us they have to come over. It’s standard procedure.”

A minute later, two black-suited Legion stepped from the ship. Their faces were obscured by dark helmets, but from their insignia they were Lycantants.

Great. Hopefully this would be over soon.

They were only Scouts, and as Royal Guard Caine far outranked them. He had outranked them years ago most likely—he hadn’t pulled a Backworld patrol duty since his earliest days in the Legion. And he’d long ago learned to shrug off that territorial stuff that happened in meeting Lycantants. They’d size him up and find him lacking, probably try goad him into proving himself in some kind of pissing match. He’d do his best to ignore it.

Or maybe that wouldn’t happen here, with them all acting in their official capacities. Still, he didn’t particularly like craning his neck to look up at the two of them, both of them standing over seven feet tall.

“Are you in need of assistance here?”

“I am Queen Jupiter Jones. Inspecting this planet for a possible purchase. A classified request, authorizing my presence, went through this morning.”

“I’ll run a check on that,” a woman’s voice came from their ship.

“I am Bal—“ started from the bag before Jupiter quickly stepped over and kicked at it. Hard.

He groaned, “Abra—“

She kicked again and hissed, “Shut up or I’m going for your balls next.”

Caine forced himself to smile at the other two, unconcerned. “Her servantant has been unruly and needs to be disciplined,” he kept his voice deadpan, he didn’t know how good they were at scenting truths, but at least their helmets were blocking their senses for now. “He’s been telling lies and...” he thought of the things he’d heard Entitleds complain about. “Stirring up trouble with her competitors. Her Majesty wishes to keep her presence here quiet. It’s on a need to know basis only.”

One of the the Lycantants reached for his helmet and Caine braced himself for trouble.

The other man was darker than Caine—as nearly all Lycantants were—light brown skin, black hair and beard, both kept short, he had a strong nose and dark, deep set eyes under a heavy brow.

He drew in a deep breath and suddenly grinned.

And Caine, for some reason...relaxed.

It sure as hell didn’t make sense, but he suddenly felt okay about the situation. Strange, when he’d
never felt at ease around his own kind before.

The Lycantant looked from Jupiter to Caine and nodded, “Gotcha,” he winked, “Keepin it quiet, the two of you here. And the little guy in the bag.”

“What the hell, Chee?” a woman’s voice came from the other helmet, and she elbowed him in the gut. “Please forgive him Your Majesty. My brother isn’t used to exalted company.”

“Nah, It’s ok,” he nudged her back, and then whispered incredulously, “These two are pack.”

“What?” Her voice full of outrage, she turned and took him aside. “Did you?—I swear to you Chase, if you picked up another—“


“Oh, it’s just this place! “ she said exasperated, “It's messing you around. You're happy to smell any Lycantant this far out. Put your helmet back on and apologize you idiot.”

He turned to them with a sheepish grin. “Sorry, Lupe’s probably right. It's not the best planet for our kind. Clobsters get all up in your nose. Fuck with your head with those skritching sounds.” He gave a shudder. “You should really have a blocker helmet man.”

“Chee, behave,” Lupe growled, her voice low.

“Their sheavework checks out.” The other woman’s voice came from inside their ship. Stern, no nonsense. “Time to leave.”

“You sure you don’t need any help?” Chase offered again. “There’s nothing to see here. Nothing to do. Another Backworld planet. Unless Your Majesty just wants a wide open space to do her kicking.”

Jupiter turned to look from Caine to the other Lycantant, back and forth, as if she were solving a puzzle. Caine still didn’t feel territorial, but there was something about the way she was comparing them that made him feel uneasy...

“Your Majesty, is there another ship in your party?” her voice came tense from inside the Legion ship. “It’s coming back around again and they aren’t responding to our hails.”

“Another ship?” Jupiter asked.

“Approaching from the east, cloaked...a Sargorn at the helm.”

“Shit,” said Caine.

Chapter End Notes

FWIW I saw Thor Ragnarok again last week, and for some reason, when the Lycantant Chase's helmet came off, his voice became Taika Waititi doing Korg ??? Take that as you will.

I noticed my version of Jupiter keeps referencing Earth things that no one else will get- I figure that’s because she’s missing home.
The cloaked Sargorn ship flew in low, visible only as a distortion on the horizon as everyone on the ground took up defensive positions. Caine drew Jupiter behind his shield, and they stepped back under cover of their own ship as gunfire broke across the ground.

A line of bullets tore through the sandstone, ricocheting and scattering shards of rock that bounced harmlessly off the shield. Not one direct hit—as if Jupiter wasn’t even a target.

“Oh no! Balem!” she cried out.

He lie in the bag a few feet away from them, motionless. A spot of blood was blooming slowly on the surface and she ran to it, activating her own shield for cover. Caine followed but she turned and called over her shoulder, “I’m fine, just—shoot that thing down if it comes around again.”

There’d been a low buzzing sound as the ship passed, with it sputtering in and out of sight as Caine got in a few shots, but there was nothing now—nothing to be seen or heard. The Legion ship had taken off to follow it. The two Lycantant scouts were still on the ground with them. They were using the entryway of a nearby building for cover, and scanning the skies overhead.

Jupiter untied the bag and pulled it over Balem’s tousled head.

“Where’s the blood?” She uncovered him cautiously. He lie motionless, his cape twisted and bunched around his body.

Caine was dividing his attention between her and the skies above them but he caught the instant Balem pushed free of the bag and lunged for Jupiter’s throat, hands outstretched like claws. Jupiter fell back and kicked out hard at Balem, catching him in the gut and knocking him back against the fence.

She could take care of herself, Caine thought, his smile vicious.

Balem pushed his hair from his face as he slowly stood. “You cannot defeat me,” he sneered. He was clutching his stomach, short of breath and favoring his right leg. “I will always—agh-aagh—

He was knocked from his feet, as a giant claw latched onto his cape from behind and dragged him under the fence.

Balem scrabbled against the edge of the cliff, hanging on to a shrub. Caine fired off a shot and blew away the Clobster, the remains of its claw left dangling from Balem’s cape.

Caine lifted off, ready fly over the fence and catch Balem—but that would leave Jupiter out in the open. She’d already dropped down to lie on her belly, shield discarded, holding the fence with one hand and reaching out for Balem with the other.
“Take my hand you idiot!” she yelled at him.

From the sound of it, the Sargorn ship was coming around again.

“Jupiter your shield!” She was too intent on reaching for Balem to hear him though.

Caine moved to shield her, squinting at the blur of the ship. He got another shot in as it approached and the cloaking failed. More gunfire hit the ship and Caine glanced back, surprised to see the two Lycantants were covering them from behind.

The ship pulled to a stop and hovered next to Balem. Then the hatch opened to reveal the Sargorn at the helm.

Caine took another shot, but he'd need more firepower to get through that thick hide anytime soon.

“Tskallikan,” Balem rasped. “Get me inside immediately,”

“No my Lord,” the Sargorn hissed. He shot Balem point blank, then closed the hatch and took off as the Legion ship came up from behind in pursuit.

Balem was still alive though, still holding on, if barely.

“Come on,” Jupiter stretched further to reach him.

He looked at her, his face surprised. “Mother...?”

Reaching for her too late, his voice echoed as he slipped and fell away.

In a moment Caine had torn over the fence and gone after him.

But it was moment too late. The hungry pod of Clobsters below had already smelled blood. Caine saw them tear Balem to pieces before his body could even hit the ground.

Caine returned to Jupiter a minute later, still fighting down revulsion at the sound and smell of it. By then she was already back on her feet and dusting herself off.

“I’m not his mother,” she said, her face and voice expressionless.

“No,” he agreed. “He’s dead Your Majesty. And I don't think there was any way he could have portalled or—time shifted. From what I observed—

“It's ok.” She swallowed. “I think I saw enough. You don’t have to—”

“He was lying, about being immortal.” Caine said carefully. “He wanted it to be true, I think, but he was afraid.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

The Legion ship returned and the black suited pilot stepped out, wearing the same helmet and Lycantant insignia as the other two. She approached Jupiter, giving a stiff bow. “I pursued the attacker until he portalled just out of atmosphere. We would be...” there was an awkward pause as she cleared her throat inside the helmet, “most pleased to file a report for the destruction of your property. I’ll take your statement whenever you’re ready Your Majesty.”
“Chase,” she turned back toward the other Lycantant. Caught up in the action, he’d never put his helmet back on. “I’ll need you to collect Clobsters samples so that we can file proper gene record of the incident.”

“Incident?” said Chase. “I say we drop the whole thing. Save us the sheavework. Your Majesty?”

“Um—” Jupiter said. She turned to look at Caine, uncertain.

“Are you crazy?” Lupe whispered, nudging her brother, hard. “And you wonder why we get these shit assignments.”

“Pshh, “ he said. “I know why we get these assignments—and it’s not my sloppy sheavework.” He reached and took off her helmet before she could stop him, then raised an eyebrow and looked over with some significance over at Jupiter and Caine.

Lupe looked at them from behind coils of black hair, dark eyes wide, as she took a deep breath in, as if she were spooked. “They can’t be,” she said softly. “I told you it’s just this place.”

She took her helmet from him and put it back on, walking back to the ship, muttering and shaking her head.

“What say you Majesty?” Chase asked.

“We are not just dropping this,” the pilot insisted. “Protocol dictates—“

“Rosa, come one now.”

“Where’s the rest of your squad?” Caine said, “Why are there only three of you here?” Lycantants were sold to the Legion in packs of four. Something was off here.

Caine had spent so many years on edge; ready to attack anything that came at him, that not being on edge with the other Lycantants was making him edgy. He didn’t know what was he doing, stirring things up with personal questions. If they were willing to look the other way he should have left it there.

Chase shrugged and said matter of fact. “We’re a man short.” He smiled, but there was a little more tooth in it and it wasn’t quite the easy grin from earlier. He turned and stepped toward the pilot.

“If you touch my fucking helmet,” she growled at him.

“And some of us don’t play so well with others.” Chase said to Caine, before turning back to her. “Take it off yourself then, Rosa. Get a nose full of the situation. It’s the least you could do before you send me after those foul monsters.”

The pilot, Rosa, yanked off her helmet with an impatient huff, hair falling into her face before she shoved it roughly aside. A scar ran across her left eye, old and poorly healed. The kind of scar Lycantants didn’t have. Not usually, Caine thought, shifting his shoulders and feeling the stiff tissue where his wings had once been.

She glared at him, as she took in a deep breath, her nostrils flared.

“Rosa?” Chase’s voice was gentle. “I say we leave it—with your permission Majesty?”

Jupiter nodded, looking between them all curiously.

“She called you Caine.” Rosa insisted, eyes still fixed on him.
“Caine Wise,” he said slowly.

“Oh, hey man, I’ve heard of you—“

“Shut it Chee,” Rosa snapped at him. She jammed her helmet back on and turned away from them, stalking off toward the ship. “Let’s get the hell out of here then. Last thing we want’s another reprimand on our record. “

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As they took off in their ship, Jupiter looked off into the cloudless sky. She didn’t look down. She didn’t want to see those Clobster things crawling through the sands below them.

“Are you all right Your Majesty?” Caine’s voice was quiet. He’d been silent since the others left.

“No—I mean yeah—I needed to stop him—“ Her eyes were wet though and she stopped to wipe at them. “It’s good. This is just—frustration or something, I mean before there was at least a chance that he knew something—“ she shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It was a long shot anyway. I’m glad he’s dead. Really. It’s a relief.”

She should feel triumphant though, shouldn’t she? She’d lost count of how many times Balem had tried to kill her...

But she hadn’t learned anything about the time loop. And now she was right back where she’d started.

Or she would be, in a few more days’ time...

“It’s my fault,” said Caine. “I was only concerned for your safety. I didn’t realize that Balem was the target.”

Caine looked miserable at the idea that he’d failed her.

“It’s not your fault. Neither of us knew. I mean why would his own guy shoot at him? Every other time that Sargorn’s been trying to kill us... Or was that a different guy?”

But Caine wouldn’t know, he hadn’t been there those other times.

Something else occurred to her then. “Caine, have you met them before?”

“He was in Balem’s room with us at the refinery, pointing a gun while we hid behind the distortion shield. He must have known we were there then.”

“He was? He did?” Jupiter was trying to keep it all straight. “No, not the sargorn. I mean those Legion guys. The Lycantants. They’d heard of you.”

But Caine wouldn’t know, he hadn’t been there those other times.

“No,” he shook his head. “I had a reputation as a tracker, or could be they heard about the attack. Lycantants aren’t supposed to... A defective one reflects badly on the rest of them.”

“You’re not defective.”

He frowned and looked away. “Well you’ve seen proper Lycantants now.”

“Doesn’t seem like much difference to me. Yeah, you’re a little shorter, but that’s just saving me from a crink in my neck. You look—I mean that guy Chase could have been your brother. And Rosa had your killer look down pat. I wouldn’t want to meet her in a dark alley. Your coloring’s different, but
“Your expressions...Are all Lycantants supposed to look the same?”

“You think we all look the same?”

“Oh my god Caine no, I’m so sorry, first I’m saying all Sargorns look the same—and I have to admit I don’t look too closely at them, there’re totally off-putting—but then Lycantants--No! --is that species-ist of me? Is species-ist a thing?”

What was that acronym from Bio class? Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order...?

“We’re the same species Your Majesty.”

“I know, I know! And I can tell you apart. I mean totally, you’re...you’re you.”

“I’m aware.” He was looking at her like she was strange. She’d gotten used to that look though, maybe even liked it from him. She smiled, next she’d be telling him how much she loved dogs. At least he wasn’t looking like a bad-dog anymore. She didn’t like to see that miserable expression on his face.

She wasn’t miserable herself exactly, more deflated—with maybe a slight edge of panic when she thought about the time loop. But she was pushing that away for now.

“Stinger says they found a safe place for us,” Caine said, changing the subject. “A deserted planet that Tsing and her crew have been watching over.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I’ve been there before.”

She could be there again if she had to. There was always more sheavework to be done. And there were still so many things she hadn’t learned about this universe yet. Thousands and thousands of years worth... And the hunters would still be after her, Kalique and Titus on her trail. She could hardly go back to Orous. Too many people were looking for her there, too many people who knew—or maybe Orous was exactly where she needed to go.

“But first,” she said. “I think there’s someone I need to talk to back at the Ministry.”
The Minister of Seals and Signets

Back on Orous, Jupiter and Caine snuck in through a back entrance of the Ministry under cover of the distortion shield. Quickly blending into the crowds inside, they made their way unnoticed to level sub thirty-three.

The Minister of Seals and Signets looked up from behind a shelf and adjusted his eyepiece as they walked in. The strange, white-haired man was the only person—other than Balem Abrasax—who’d ever realized that Jupiter was a time traveler.

He groaned at the sight of them... and then took a bite of the enormous sandwich he held in his hand.

“Is that the same sandwich?” Jupiter asked, uneasy. There was something about this level. Advocate Bob had seemed spooked by it and said he wasn’t allowed. Had she ever seen anyone else down here? The Minister had told her once that it was “chrono-locked” (How many timelines ago had that been?) But she had no idea what he’d meant. Did this place exist in a different dimension or something?

“Are you in a time loop down here too?” she asked.

The Minister muttered something under his breath and took another bite before putting the sandwich down and getting up from his seat.

“No. I’m on lunch break,” he sounded irritated. “And I happen to like sandwiches.”

Jupiter looked at Caine. “Can you sense anything...?”

Caine took in a slow deep breath. “He’s telling the truth Your Majesty. He—“ Caine’s stomach made a loud grumbling noise, “likes sandwiches.”

He shrugged with an apologetic look.

“Your Majesty,” the Minister said sternly, approaching the counter. “I warned you about coming back again.”

“Yeah, my presence here is “destabilizing”. But what does that mean exactly? Destabilizing for what or who?” she frowned “Or is it whom?”

“The chrono-lock is delicate,” he grabbed at his hair until it stood up at an even crazier angle. “It was pieced together over millions of years. Every second you are here requires re-calibrations, new calculations to keep it from running into error mode.”

“Error mode?”

“Oh, they’ll try to fix it, “ he said ominously. “But those idiots don’t even know the original code. And every so-called patch creates an new set of problems.”

“What kind of problems?” Caine asked, voice low, eyes narrowed as he looked for potential danger.

“Time paradoxes?” Jupiter wondered.

“Worse,” The Minister’s voice was grim. “Dates on sheavework start changing. Or the file numbers go missing, one by one. I’ll get a departmental audit, have to put a call in to IT...”
“Are you kidding me?” Jupiter said. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“You have no idea the nightmare involved!”

“Well,” she crossed her arms across her chest with a huff. “I’m not leaving until I get some answers.”

“I don’t have any answers,” he grumbled turning away. “If your sheavework goes missing it’s your own doing!”

Off muttering under his breath again, he turned a handle that rotated a gear—back and forth, seemingly at random. There must be something more he could tell her though.

“Who else knows about time travel?” she called to him.

“Oh, everyone knows about it, in theory.”

She looked around the dark, cavernous space. She couldn’t actually stay down here too long. Stinger had set up a diversion, but the bounty hunters would track her here eventually.

She turned to Caine. Since she’d explained their destination, he’d been mostly quiet, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. He’d follow her lead, as always, but he was leaving the questions to her.

And...he might not actually be much help anyway right now, she realized, following his gaze. He’d fixated on the sandwich over in the corner—Jupiter probably needed to remember to feed him more often.

Caine would threaten the minister if she asked—for that matter she could pull out her own gun—but violence hadn’t exactly worked out well getting information out of Balem... She pushed that thought away with something that felt too much like guilt.

The Minister was annoyed, but at least he was talking. If only she knew the right questions to ask.

“Well, why is there a chrono-lock in the first place?” she tried.

“All sheavework must be to code. Temporal disturbances are no excuse for disorder at the Ministry.”

“And this place gets a lot of time travelers—er, people suffering from temporal disturbances—coming in?”

“Not so many. A few hundred, I’d say. The last... hmmm... two thousand years ago?” He nodded to himself. “Yes, yes, yes, I remember, I’d just purchased this suit.”

Jupiter stared wide-eyed at his suit, so covered with dust-bunnies they were ready to form full-sized rabbits and jump to their escape. Had he been wearing that thing for two thousand years?

She shook her head. “What happened to the others then?”

“Once their chrono-discrepancies came to an end, they found the Ministry had their sheave work in proper order. As will you—if you leave!”

“But how did it come to an end for them? How do I stop this thing?”

“That’s not my department,” he sounded bored now. “But I wouldn’t concern yourself Majesty. It always comes to an end—one way or the other.”

“What do you mean?”
“Well sometimes it ends for them by...” he drew a finger across his throat and gave a strange cackle. “That would save me the trouble of your sheavework.”

“Okay then,” she took up pacing in front of the counter. She’d already guessed that she might die before this was over—and Balem had threatened as much—but that wasn’t what she’d come here to learn.

She was still feeling shaky, overwhelmed by everything else that had just happened. And maybe there’d never be a time when she wasn’t looking over her shoulder, running for her life, but she couldn’t get caught up in that now, she needed to think.

“Sometimes they die, but means sometimes they don’t. So what’s another way to stop it? If it’s not your department, then what? Somewhere else at the Ministry? The physics department?”

“Here?” he scoffed. “We’re bureaucrats, civil servants. The Commonwealth hasn’t funded science for millennia.”

“No science?” She thought of her mother the mathematician and her father and his love of the stars. “That doesn’t make sense, someone must want to..”

“Only Entitled can afford such expensive hobbies,” the Minister said. And she thought of El and Io with their underground laboratory—funded by Seraphi Abrasax.

“So your universe figured out portals, immortality—for the privileged few who can afford it and don’t mind committing genocide—and, and floating couches and then everyone just decided that’s enough, let’s call it quits?”

Why exactly was she still surprised by these sorts of things?

And maybe it somewhat explained the whole steam punk vibe going on down here, she thought, looking at the odd hand-cranked brass mechanisms.

“No science, Your Majesty. Not here at least.” He waved his hand at her in a shooing motion to leave.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.” Her voice sounded small even to her own ears.

“You have everywhere else to go. See the universe. You can entangle the Abrasax family with your legal maneuverings from afar—“ he tilted his head with a thoughtful look. “I have heard you’re doing quite well there by the way.”

“Um, thanks?”

He walked over and stood so they were face to face, throwing her a look of challenge. “Buy. Sell. Manufacture. Incorporate. That what Entitleds want—to create, to possess, to consume...entire worlds even. That’s what we all want.”

“No, I don’t want--”

“Don’t you?” he lifted an eyebrow.

“I do want things,” she admitted. She thought of the houses she’d cleaned, full of designer clothes and jewelry and how she couldn’t help comparing them to her uncle’s house at the end of a long exhausting day, the lingering smell of onions and cabbage and the damp of the shared basement
bedroom.

“I don’t want to consume other people though,” she said.

“Then why even claim your title? Why do you keep coming back?”

“Because people are counting on me!” she yelled frustrated, her voice so loud it echoed off the walls. She could feel tears threatening again and she took a deep breath. “People are counting on me,” she repeated softer. “Nobody on Earth realizes it—and they’d think I was crazy if I explained it, but I’m all they have. I have to fix things for the rest of them—if I can.”

“Then fix things!” He slammed his hand on the counter and she jumped back into Caine, surprised at the noise. “But you won’t fix anything standing here bothering me.”

“Stinger’s spotted a few hunters in the vicinity,” Caine murmured next to her ear, steadying her with a hand on her shoulder. “We might want to head out of here soon Your Majesty.”

She nodded.

“You could try the splicing facilities,” the Minster said. “I believe they are actively involved in scientific... research.” He gave a small shudder as he pronounced the word and threw a quick glance at Caine.

Jupiter narrowed her eyes and wrapped her hand around Caine’s.

There was something utterly depressing about the idea that this universe’s scientific advances were focused on engineering a separate class of people to be used as slaves.

“Come on,” she sighed. “We might as well get out of here while we still can.”

“Wait,” the Minister called out as she turned to the stairs.

“What?”

“Take this with you.” He rummaged in his cupboards before throwing a sheave that Caine caught in mid-air. “Time protocols,” he grumbled. “Came with my orientation materials. Dry reading—I never got past the first chapter—but maybe you will.”

Did he actually look sympathetic? More likely he was just happy she was leaving.

“Thanks.”
Jupiter and Caine escaped the Commonwealth without any hunters on their tail, and minutes after leaving Orous they’d portalled away and come in through atmosphere on Kh 3710b.

“Captain Tsing sent a team in earlier to set things up here,” Caine relayed to her. “They were called back to Orous, but Stinger’s says he’s on the way in soon.”

“Okay.” Looking up from the Time Protocols, she saw the auroras spread out before them in the sky. No matter how many times she’d flown to this planet, she still loved the colorful lights, the streaks of ethereal green clouds and fuchsia swirls radiating out as far as the eye could see. She knew they would fade away after the first few nights here, as the solar winds shifted and left dark skies in their place.

They flew on, and far below she could make out the vast snow-covered forest. Alien animals lived there, some sorts of wolves and a type of...owl? —and whatever they preyed on, she guessed. She’d never actually seen much more than their shadows, but she’d woken in the night and heard their eerie cries.

Caine landed the ship on the platform that jutted from the mountaintop, overlooking the valley. The castle rose tall, directly in front of them, the crenellated stone walls covered with ice and snow. The windows were already blazing with light—a welcome change for Jupiter, who’d always come creeping in through frozen dark hallways before.

The portcullis was open and she took Caine’s hand as they stepped through the high, arched entryway. She shivered as a drop from a melting icicle splashed her neck and dripped down into the back of her shirt.

With luck, it would already be warm inside.

“Welcome Your Majesty.” A flash of gold came from the shadows as an android approached them. “We’ve been preparing for your arrival. I am Lhayz, former servitant to King Coleanthus. I have a fire warming the Green room if you’d like to follow me there.”

Jupiter already knew the way there of course—for that matter she’d met the button-nosed, dark-eyed Lhayz many times before, but she didn’t bother to explain any of that now.

Lhayz was one of six servitant androids in a rainbow of metallic skin tones. Hidden away on his private planet, Old King Cole (as Jupiter had taken to calling him) kept only a small household before he died. The solitary type, he’d apparently preferred staff he could shut down with the flick of a switch.

His servitants were all top-notch though—variably programmable, multi-utility models. (Unlike some in Kalique’s large retinue which were purely for aesthetics and changed out to match different outfits and seasons.) Sweet-natured and super-knowledgeable, Lhayz and the others not only coordinated domestic life in the castle, but had taken turns in the past timelines helping Jupiter with combat training and sheavework. They could discuss galactic economic and political history and had even explained the origins of a few of the more bizarre Entitled customs.

The golden android looked back over her shoulder and winked at Jupiter. Lhayz was the definitely
the flirtiest of the bunch and—now that Jupiter thought of it—probably had some kind of programming for...

Huh.

Jupiter must have been pretty tired never to think of it before—but was *that* why Kiza and the android had always been sneaking off giggling together?

“Let me know if there’s anything you require Your Majesty,” she smiled dark-eyes sparkling as they walked down the hall.

“Um...yeah, thanks Lhayz.” Jupiter started towards a door that led to a hygiene chamber. “I’m just gonna pop in here a sec actually.”

Jupiter’s body-armor was lightweight and actually more comfortable than her usual clothes, but it was still dusty from the clobster planet. (And maybe it was only her imagination, but she swore she could somehow still smell the Refinery clinging to her skin...) Anyway, a quick pass-through would clean her of all that now—and maybe there’d be time for a swim in the hot springs down below later—especially if she could convince Caine to join her.

“Do you need anything—?” she started to ask him. “Oh! A meal would be good—any chance the Aegis brought in fresh food supplies?” She was hungry enough to eat *almost* anything, and she knew Caine wasn’t picky, but nobody exactly enjoyed Aegis rations.

“Yes. Officer Percadium brought several crates of provisions in from Orous. He left instructions for their preparation in the kitchens.”

“A meal would be *great* then,” she said relieved. She knew Phylo wasn’t fond of those food cubes either. “For four please. And let the Apinis know where we are when they arrive.”

After she’d cleaned up, she found Caine in the wood-paneled room that was decorated in shades of green, the walls covered by murals of animals and trees. He was standing by a multi-paned window, looking out to the forest far below.

“I’m just going to look through this a bit more before the food comes,” Jupiter said, Time Protocols in hand as she walked towards the enormous fireplace, plopping down into a velvet chair and looking for the place she’d left off reading before.

“I should check the security controls,” Caine said, but he hesitated as he started toward the door.

“Or...” She beckoned him closer. “You could stay and guard me here?” She smiled and patted the chair. “Sit.”

Hers was the only chair by the fire though, and obviously too small for the both of them. She drew one foot up to tuck beneath her and patted the front of the cushion again. “I’ll need you close by in case any of those creepy Android guards are around,” she said.

He regarded her a moment before settling down on the floor in front of her, his shoulders resting back against her folded leg, his side pressing down the length of her calf as he stretched his feet toward the fire.

“Anyway,” she ran her fingers through his hair, stroking his head. “Stinger always wants to do the security here. He’ll just insist on double checking everything when he comes in.”

“Hmmm,” he agreed, leaning back into her touch as she started to read again.
It wasn’t much later that Stinger greeted them both from the door. “Your Majesty, Caine, Glad you both made it in one piece.”

Caine stood and clasped hands with Stinger and Jupiter got up to give him a hug. Kiza walked in, eyes glued to her Vid-player and commandeered the seat by the fire.

“Kiza!” Stinger called, and she looked up a moment to wave and flash a brief grin at them.

“Apparently she’s catching up with...something important there. Told me she’d have an update when she’s done,” Stinger explained.

“Yeah,” Jupiter said. “I’ve probably heard it before actually.”

“Right,” he said. “Well, I checked the security set-up first thing. The shield defense has been activated and scans are running, though nothing’s shown up on them yet, Majesty.”

Jupiter shared a look with Caine and said, "Thanks for checking on that Stinger."  

“Droid guards are stationed on the perimeters,” he continued. “Though I wouldn’t mind a few closer in.”

“We’ve always been totally safe here,” she said. “I’ll leave it to you, but I really don’t like those guards in the room with me though.” She couldn’t get over their hollow-eyed stares. They reminded her too much of all the times she’d been abducted and held captive.

Stinger nodded. “It’d be best to assemble a complete Royal Guard for you as soon as possible. Caine and I can make do short term, but...”

“I don’t think I’ll have enough time for that—assuming the time loop is still in effect. But we could start planning it? Make some notes and brief me so that I can be ready if—when this thing ends.”

“Any headway there?” Stinger asked.

“Well, Balem Abrasax was a dead-end.” She winced. “I meant, as far telling me anything about the time loop—but he is dead now for that matter. Permanently, I think. So that’s one less person trying to kill me at least...” She gave a small sigh.

A silver-blue servitant (Jupiter thought her name was Rhayz) brought in platters of food then and started arranging them on the table for four that had been set up in front of the window.

"Anyway, I managed to pick up some more reading material from the Ministry." She held up the Time Protocols and made a face. "Maybe it’ll give me a clue. So far it’s all about interdepartmental cooperation. Did you know that there’s both a Department of Regulatory Taxation and a Department of Taxing Regulations? Apparently they don’t get along.”

Jupiter snatched a piece of roasted vegetable and popped it into her mouth as she and the others took their seats. She was hungrier than she’d realized, she couldn’t even remember when she’d last eaten.

She took a fork-full of a layered dish, rich with ground meat, cheese, and herbs in white sauce, the edges toasted brown. It melted in her mouth. They’d eat well this time around—thanks to Phylo—she’d always kinda suspected he might be a foodie.
“I totally need to give the Aegis crew some kinda bonus or—Could I hire them? Do you think they would they want me to do that?”

“It’s up to you Majesty,” Stinger answered. “You have the authority to requisition them for personal use.”

“Well, no—it’d have to be up to them. But there must be something nice I could do.”

“I’m sure they’d appreciate a Royal commendation,” Singer said off-hand, most of his attention was focused on chasing down a dumpling in iridescent broth.

“How about some paid leave? So they could see their families,” Kiza suggested. “Or maybe a trip to the Floating Panoply... I know I wouldn’t mind going there.”

“Yeah, something like that might be good,” Jupiter said. She took a sip from a crystal glass of ice cold, lemony—something like wine, but stronger. It burned a little, going down her throat, and left a warm feeling in her chest in spite of the cold.

She’d always planned to do something for Captain Tsing’s crew once the time loop ended. But why wait? She had accounts she could access now. Why not throw her money around and make people happy if she could? It might all be undone again—but it might not. And if she owned entire worlds, well... she could more than afford to give them all a few days off. Even if, in this timeline, they wouldn’t understand exactly all the reasons why she was so grateful to them.

Silence fell over the table for a moment as they all dug into their food. Then Kiza laughed and then attempted, fruitlessly, to explain a meme about a baby and an Entitled and a three-headed goat to Stinger and Caine—getting only looks of bewilderment in return.

Jupiter had heard it all before.
She had the castle routine down. And it was cozy and bright inside now. She could do this part of it all. She had been doing it—practically in her sleep—for a long time now.

And there were frosty bunches of yellow and purple striped grapes. And stacks of miniature fruit-filled pies. She ate until she was almost full to bursting.

When she stood up a while later, Caine and Stinger did too.

“Don’t mind me. Please sit and eat as long as you like.” She plucked a triangle pastry from a plate and tossed it to Caine who caught it with a snap of teeth, his eyes lighting up in appreciation at the taste. “I need to move though or I’ll end up with a food coma,” she explained, walking to stand next to the window.

And she should get back to her reading of course.

There was so much to be done. There always was. It was endless really, trying to catch up to the rest of the Gyre when she was tens of thousands of years behind. And as long as this time-loop lasted she would always be on the run, at least for the first few days of it.

“It does make sense to set up here again,” she said. “It’s safe at least. Balem’s gone, but Titus or Kalique will still scoop me up if they get half a chance...”

“I can go after Titus,” Caine offered.

“Yeah,” she laughed. “If nothing else, you could give him a stern talking to.” Not that there was
much chance Titus would listen to reason. And she really didn’t want Caine going around killing everyone on her behalf. Not unless it was an absolutely necessary, end of the world kind of thing.

Caine was already smiling in anticipation though. His idea of a stern talk would, at the very least, involve scaring the shit out of Titus—maybe literally.

“But...unfortunately,” she said. “Anything we say or do to Titus would probably just be undone again.” she sighed. “I could talk to Kalique for that matter. I still haven’t quite figured out what her game is...But I think I should focus first on things that will...um... stick...for lack of a better word.”

Her sheaves from Orous were set in a daunting tall stack on a side table. All the laws, codes, and procedural stuff that she’d been working on before...

She picked up the Time Protocols again.

“It’s going to take a while just to read through this whole thing,” she said.

“Are you sure I should leave for my wings then?” Stinger asked. “I could stay and help with your reading.” Not that he sounded very enthusiastic about the idea.

“No, you should definitely get your wings.” Stinger had been stripped of them because he’d stood up for Caine, prevented Caine from being put to death after the attack. She could hardly forget that.

“It’ll be good to fly again,” Stinger said, holding up his glass to the light, the golden yellow of the liquid was almost the color of his wings.

It had been way too long since she’d seen Caine flying through the skies, his brown feathers warm in the sunlight.

“Did those Lycantant scouts have wings?” she asked him.

Caine choked and had to clear his throat before answering. “No.” He didn’t elaborate.

“Backworld scouts?” Stinger scoffed. “Not bloody likely! Bio-neural-synaptic’s expensive. Backworlds they’re lucky to scrounge out enough to survive. Maybe time-off to get back to an inner planet every few years.” He turned to Caine then. “Did I tell you they offered me a spot out there? Said I could work my way back in eventually. Ha! Better off Marshal on a third-rate harvest planet, surrounded by ignorant—” Stinger caught himself mid-rant. “No offense Majesty.”

“Third-rate, huh?” she raised a brow. “So there’s a rating system then?”

“Not an official one,” he mumbled, taking a bite of pie to occupy his mouth before he could get himself into any more trouble.

Caine seemed preoccupied with something other than the food though. The idea of his own wings? Or was he thinking about those other Lycantants too?

“It was a little weird, wasn’t it?” she said to him. “The way they took turns sniffing the air and then just skedaddled on outa there. Like they smelled what—trouble? Danger? Can Lycantants smell danger?”

“Maybe they just smelled Caine,” Kiza said and Caine turned to look at her. “Well, you can get a bit ripe coming off mission—I’ve noticed it.”

“Kiza,” Stinger warned, but it was only half-hearted.
She sniffed and shrugged, “He’s alright now though.”

“To answer your question,” Caine said slowly. “Lycantants can smell danger—in a manner of speaking.” He put down his fork and napkin and got up from the table. “Excuse me a moment.”

Jupiter nodded and he left the room.

“Was there some problem with those Scouts?” Stinger asked. “With Caine it’s—Well, you could file a complaint if they were out of line.”

“No,” she said. “It wasn’t anything like that. I mean—I think they were doing me a favor by leaving when they did.”

“Doing themselves a favor, more like. Any fool knows better than to get dragged into Entitled business. End up a scapegoat like as anything.”

What would have happened if those Legion scouts had taken and filed the gene samples from the clobsters? Would Jupiter have been charged with kidnapping Balem? Was she an accessory to his murder? If it had gotten back to the Commonwealth...was that the kind of thing that would stick, even inside a time loop?

Probably better not to think about it.

“Is it really that bad on the Backworld planets?” she asked.

“It varies.” Stinger shrugged. “Backworlds are good places to get away, escape attention. Some like the lifestyle, the freedom out there. It wouldn’t do for me—not with Kiza and all.”

“Thanks Dad,” Kiza said, voice ever so slightly sarcastic, as she shared a fond look with him.

Kiza deserved to be happy and healthy, living in a place where she could be surrounded by flowers and bees—maybe even a trip to the Floating Panoply one of these days.

But then who didn’t deserve all that?

“It was pretty desolate out there,” Jupiter said. “If those scouts are living hand to mouth like you said, maybe they could use some help.” It wasn’t just because they reminded her so much of Caine. “I mean, they helped me out there.”

“Rescue ’em if you want to Majesty,” Stinger shrugged. “I can’t complain about your generosity, not when Kiza and I have been the beneficiaries of it. But if you’re thinking of hiring them—well, you should know... Caine rubs other Lycantants wrong. I don't think he can help it—it’s something instinctual. Maybe the fact that he’s different... Being around them puts him on edge too. Just—something to consider if you’re collecting Lycantants.”

“Collecting Lycantants?” Caine walked back into the room.

“I’m not collecting anyone,” she said. “I just thought I could look up those Scouts, and...try and return the favor. Help them out in some way if they need it. I didn’t know being around them bothered you.”

“No. It didn’t bother me.” He said it as if it surprised him though. “It’s a good idea.”

“Yeah?”

He shook his head and looked down. “Your Majesty will do what she thinks best,” he said, all of the
sudden ridiculously formal.

“Well, yeah, I will probably.” She drew him over to stand with her at the window, her voice softer, “but I do want to know what you think about it.”

He was silent, looking out at the sky.

“What is it then?” she asked. His face was inscrutable. “Are you bothered about not being bothered by them?”

“What?”

Maybe she should leave it, but... “He said you smelled like pack.”

“That was a mistake.”

“Well what did they smell like to you?” she asked, voice gentle.

“I don’t—I don’t know.”

How was that even possible?

“Were those suits blocking their scent or something?”

He shrugged.

“And... pack’s like...family?”

“Something like that,” he nodded, warily. “It’s...” he trailed off.

She snuck her arms around his waist and lifted up on her toes to whisper, lips against his ear. “What if—what if your scent on me, maybe that’s...” She hesitated. She didn’t understand the connotations being pack, or what it meant to him really. Maybe it wasn’t what she thought.

Her turned to look at her, inquiring, and she sank back down to her heels.

“Well, you know, you like me..” she attempted.

“I do.”

“I mean, you know, you like me like me.”

Kiza snorted and rolled her eyes at them.

“Yeah,” Caine mumbled, his face turning red.

“Well,” she pressed a quick soft kiss to his mouth and leaned into him, forming the words against his lips, “Maybe we—?”

Stinger cleared his throat. “Alright Kiza. We should leave then,” he gruffed, getting up from the table. “Let's go see that our rooms are fixed up.”

“Noooooo,” said Kiza. “I want to stay and watch.”

“There’s nothing to watch,” Jupiter stepped back from Caine. She wasn't sure at this point if it was him or herself she was taking pity on by dropping it—temporarily at least.
She turned to Kiza. “But if you are staying, how about help me look for something?”

“Okay.”

“In one of those stacks of sheaves are descriptions of all the Abrasax holdings. Could you make me a list of any agricultural moons?”

“Sure,” Kiza walked over to the table and began to look through them one by one.

The castle might be a safe place for Jupiter, but she couldn’t just stay hidden away here forever. For one thing, she’d need to make a trip to Io and Ell’s laboratory. She wanted to at least get started on whatever sheavework was required for copyrights, patents, space drug regulatory what’s-its for the VegeCell.

And she’d have to find the coordinates to somehow get there again.

She grabbed her drink from the table and went back to looking through the Time Protocols.

It really was dry reading.

Stinger and Caine rounded up more chairs to place near the fire and she half-listened to another conversation that she’d already heard, skimming ahead through the sheave for anything interesting.

_The Duration of any Chrono-Disturbance is Directly Proportional to the Length of Initial Displacement multiplied by the Energy Input._

Initial displacement—did that mean how far she’d gone back the very first time?

She had no way of knowing the energy input, but it couldn’t have been _that_ big. The time device had been small enough for Balem to carry with him when he fell at the Refinery—unless he’d been keeping a neutron star in his pocket...

On the bright side, this did back-up what the Minister of Seals and Signets had said: her time-loop would end—eventually.

In some ways, for now, maybe it’d be easy to just pick up where she’d left off in the loop before the last one. Before she’d woken up and been told that everyone else on Earth was dead, before she’d learned there was an alternative to Regenex that might actually help her live through this thing.

Well, _easy_ wasn’t the right word when it came to bureaucratic protocols and mind-numbing sheaves on tax and inheritance laws. But it’d be easier than before at least—and she’d have the energy for it now.

There were a lot of things she’d already taken care of. She’d long ago stopped Harvest orders on all the planets she’d inherited.

There _was_ a process for turning a planet into full-fledged member of the Commonwealth. Not like it was complicated or anything. Alright, it was almost impossible as it stood now. She’d have to prove Earth was ecologically stable and self-sustaining. And that all of it’s inhabitants were peaceful and fully worthy of citizenship in the Gyre.

Well... maybe she could at least get ball rolling on figuring some of it out?
The mummer of Caine and Stinger’s words washed over her.

She re-focused on the reading:

*The Ministry has recorded Chrono-Disturbances as long as $3.6^{10}$ seconds in duration. However this is no excuse for error. All departments must fully cross-reference time signatures in order to avoid duplication. Sheavework double filled due to re-entries into Originating Timelines will be grounds for Administrative Action during Quarterly Review.*

And ugh! This thing just went on and on and on. But wait... recorded Chrono-Disturbances as long as—

“The longest one ever recorded or...?” Jupiter muttered to herself. “$3.6^{10}$ seconds...What would that work out to?”

“Converted to what time standard Your Majesty?” Lhayz was standing behind her chair, waiting to re-fill her glass.

“Um, converted to Earth standard I guess? We have twenty-four hours in a day. 365 days in a year.”

“1141.552511”

“A thousand what? Days? That’s—”

“A thousand years, Your Majesty. 1141.552511 years to be precise.”

Jupiter felt the glass slip and fall from her fingers.

“Everything okay?” Caine asked.

“Yes,” she swallowed, but her mouth was suddenly dry. “I'm just figuring out a kind of worst case scenario here.”

A thousand years looking over her shoulder, waiting for bounty hunters to catch up with her.

Or maybe that part didn’t have to do entirely with the time-loop? Now that she was Queen someone or something was always going to be after her. That was why she needed a Royal Guard after all.

But re-living the same days over and over again...

She looked around room at Stinger and Kiza and Caine—and beyond them out into the glowing night skies.

Somewhere out there was Earth.

And her mom and Aunt Nino.

And *actually*, for that matter, they were out there waking up every day before dawn, vacuuming the same carpets—over and over again—wiping down the same counters, bundling up the garbage, and coming back to find it re-filled again. Week after week...Jupiter had hated her life before this all started. Hated the drudgery of those other endlessly repeated days.
What had Kalique said that first time they met?

“Time is the single most precious commodity in the universe.”

The Abrasax family was willing to fight, to kill for it.

But Jupiter had all the time she wanted now—right at her fingertips.

She lifted her hand, imagining she could see inside. Imagining she could see all the tiny glowing molecules of that weird green plant juice, binding with and protecting her cells.

All she that she had to do was wait this thing out.

She reached to stretch her arms up overhead and Caine looked over, following her movements. She caught his eye and smiled.

Now that she knew that Caine’s genetic engineering didn’t compel him to obey her, that he actually had a choice in the matter. That, in spite of all the craziness, he could somehow return her feelings. Well...there were probably a lot of other things she could be doing besides sheavework—if need be—just to keep herself busy.

“A thousand years,” she said to herself. “I’ll just have to hope that my own so-called Chrono-Disturbance will be a lot shorter than that. Hope for the best case scenario.”

Lhayz picked up the glass, which had fallen on the thick carpet and rolled across the floor.

“In the meantime, I could probably use another drink,” Jupiter said. She’d already noticed the VegeCell was pretty good at preventing a hangover.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who's read this far through! I'm sorry this story has been taking me so long, I promise it won't be a thousand more years to finish writing it :)

Edited to add: Jupiter's not going take anywhere near a thousand years to finish it either. Don't worry, I wouldn't be that hard on her!!!
A Thousand Years

A few hours later, Jupiter was tucked away cozy in the old King’s bedroom—her usual room at the castle—sitting up against the pillows in bed. She’d been reading more of the Time Protocols, wanting to finish them in this time loop—she doubted the Minister of Seals and Signets would offer them again if she went back.

It was slow reading though, and her eyes were starting to glaze over. She looked up to where Caine was standing guard in the far corner of the room, following his gaze out the window.

Just past the curving streaks of bright green auroras, a planet was glowing in the sky, big as a full moon shining on an Earth night. It must be fairly close by—who knew, maybe they could go there some day. She’d have the time...

“A thousand years,” she mused softly to herself.

Caine turned to look at her. “You said that earlier. What is a thousand years?”

She’d been trying not to feel sorry for herself, not to complain about the situation. But she’d forgotten about Caine’s super hearing—of course he’d pick up on her words.

“It’s just—Well, there’s this formula in the Time Protocols. I don’t have all the information to plug in, energy input and um...initial duration I think it’s called—who knows maybe Balem could have told us, but somehow I doubt it—Anyway, a thousand years was the longest one on record at the Ministry, the longest a time distortion has ever lasted.”

“And what was the shortest?” Caine asked.

“I didn’t actually find anything about that.”

“Do you think there’s a formula to stop it?”

“If there is, it’s not in the first 300 pages,” she sighed. The more she read through this thing the harder it was to imagine she’d find a fix. Basically, so far, it was just an incredibly long, boring employee handbook. Still, she had to try. “It’s only that...Balem, and the Minister—they both talked about waiting for it to end....”

“Your Majesty, Entitled are so old...”

“I know. A thousand years is nothing right? And I can handle it without dying now at least,” she forced a smile. “I’ll just have to tough it out.”

“I meant to say that time passes differently for Entitled. They could travel back a hundred years and it would still be their recent past, but you said you only went back a few days, right?”

“Yeah, a couple of weeks,” she agreed.

“Then it makes sense that yours should last a shorter time.”

“You’re probably right. I don’t know why I keep trying to brace myself for the worst, it doesn’t actually seem to help me any.”
The worst had already happened once, her home destroyed and everyone else on Earth killed—and her nightmares hadn’t exactly prepared her for it.

Caine was watching her with concern.

“Will you lie down with me while I read?” she asked. “You can still guard me while we snuggle.”

“Snuggle?” he pronounced the word carefully.

“Yeah, you like snuggling.”

He frowned at her, uncertain, but he did walk toward the bed and start to unfasten his boots.

“Sorry,” she said. “Is it too weird—me telling you things about yourself?”

He considered her words before he climbed up and settled down next to her.

“It is strange Your Majesty, but not entirely unpleasant. It’s good that you already know me—and that you know about my past.”

She ran her hand down the length of his arm and twined her fingers with his. She’d known a lot of versions of Caine by now, but while there were definitely things about him she hadn’t quite figured out yet, there was something reassuring in the fact that he was always the same person, in every timeline.

Except...

“Oh! You can go and get your wings after Stinger comes back tomorrow if you want.” She would miss him for those days, but this time he could come right back to her. It had never worked out sending him off to find Sir Archinbald. She’d have to figure out something different there.

“You hired me to guard you. I’ll hardly need wings to do that here.”

“No I guess not. But having wings is fun isn’t it?”

“Your Majesty, the Legion doesn’t equip its elite forces with wings in order for them to have fun.” he smiled as he said it though.

“Well, they’re definitely fun.”

She remembered the way he’d stood, the first time he spread them out before her in the sunshine on top of that tower—it was as if he’d found his balance again. She’d noticed the way he shrugged his shoulders sometimes, as if still surprised that they were missing.

“You’ve been pardoned now,” she said. “You should have your wings back if you want them. You earned them.”

He still looked hesitant, but she wasn’t sure why. Maybe there was something more to it. She’d leave it up to him to decide.

She rubbed at her eyes, not sure if she was tired or overtired at this point. Too much had happened today—or had it been yesterday? It was always hard to keep track of time here.

Still, everyone on Earth was alive again and she’d dealt with Balem—in a manner of speaking. She’d taken the fight to him at least, maybe eliminated him as a threat, once and for all. Things were looking up. So what if Titus and Kalique still had hunters out searching for her and she was
hunkered down here in hiding—

Jupiter had to figure out some way of existing in between these extremes, dealing with uncertainties. Which meant it was probably good to relax and enjoy being safe here for a while. She could get back to figuring out the universe in the morning.

She put the Time Protocols aside and curled into Caine’s side.

“Assuming you’re still looping through time, how many more days will you be here?” Caine asked her quietly.

“Hmm...” she’d already been starting to drift off, lulled by the warmth of his big body up against hers. “Twelve I think?”

“Then, if you want me to, I’ll go and get my wings on that last day.”

*******

“They say it’s no fun out here,” said Chase. “But where else but Backworlds are we gonna run into kickin’ little Queens and Sargorns shooting up ‘My Lord’.”

Lupe looked over at her brother as he shut the console, fell backwards onto his bunk and kicked his feet up against the wall. It was cramped quarters in here, too small for their seven-foot frames. Their ship wasn’t designed for Lycantants, but when they’d taken it, they’d gone for the first Legion standard ship that Rosa knew how to pilot.

“Did you clear the logs or not Chee?” Rosa was all business as she set the portal to the next system on their patrol.

“I got ‘em before the transmit. Seems we had a slight data malfunction.” He grinned. “Probably have to head back to Base soon, spend some time there while it’s checked out.”

“Trust you to turn it into a vacation,” Lupe smiled and Chase waggled his eyebrows in response.

“Still don’t understand what the hell that was back there,” Rosa said, her face grim. “Getting involved with Entitleds. Shoulda been out the second her request cleared.”

“We could hardly leave ‘em under attack,” Lupe reminded her.

“Yeah, I know,” Rosa agreed reluctantly.

“And we woulda missed that action—and the two of them? That was the most excitement we’ve had in months,” Chase said.

“I don’t need that kind of excitement.” Rosa said, but her heart didn’t seem to be in it entirely.

Lupe still remembered those olfactory waves coming at her once her helmet was off. Chase wasn’t the only one who thought they’d smelled like pack. Not only the other Lycantant, Caine—the Queen as well. The sense of it had been so strong. Lupe brushed the thought aside again though—it had to be that place.

And there’d been that other thing too, she’d smelled it emanating from the crumpled red-stained bag,
airborne molecules of it still drifting as the sands settled far below. Even if the Sargorn hadn’t called him “My Lord” she’d have known it, recognized it like a bad dream: Entitled blood.

Still they’d made a clean get away. And she didn’t want Rosa to dwell on it too much. Rosa put on a tough front—but that was half because she worried too much.

Lupe tried to lighten the mood again.

“You didn’t see this one chatting ‘em up.” Lupe pointed back at Chase. “Always thinking with his dick. As if he’d have a chance. You’re pretty, Chee, but even you can’t compete with a Queen. You got too used to those boys back on—“ She stopped short.

They didn’t say *that* name anymore.

But Chase smoothed it over. “Ugh! No thanks. He smelled like one of us. I was only being friendly. Cooped up in these suits all the time...but if I do get the chance, I’ve got my eye on a burly Tech back at Base."

Even stuck out in Backworlds Chase was easygoing, eager to please. A typical Lycantant in most ways. Sure, he was a beast when necessary, able to turn it on at the drop of a hat in a fight... but really, most of the time, he’d rather roll over and have his belly scritched.

“Long as we don’t get trouble for this,” Rosa grumbled under her breath.

She’d been quiet; distant even with the two of them lately—so it was probably a good thing Lupe and Chase had learned to keep a running commentary. It helped fill some of the quiet out here at least.

“Don’t worry,” Chase said. "We did the two of ‘em a favor—and it smelled right, even you have to admit it Rosie. Got the hell out without leaving a trace. Best of both worlds really."

“Only you could see it that way,” Rosa said with a bark of a laugh.

The three of them got along well—always had. They had their own styles, a tendency to think things through differently, but they’d learned long ago to settle those differences with their noses.

When a thing smelled right—it usually was.

Which made it all the harder these few last years, on their own and being on blockers.

*****

Days later, Jupiter went back through time again.

She left the house before anyone else was awake and drove Vladie’s car into the Loop while it was still dark outside.

She remembered her promise to Caine, and so she didn’t go in to see him while he was running hot. She waited for him to heal and sleep, alone, after his gunshot. It didn’t seem right leaving him there vulnerable, but she reassured herself that he’d always been okay before.

She watched the tower from where she sat at the donut shop on the street far below though, her eyes
trained on that high corner window, while she sipped at the last of her iced macchiato. (*God* she missed coffee when she was in space. She hesitated, then went and got a second one, caramel this time, to pass the minutes while she waited for him...)

After another hour, she sneaked through the service entrance and went up the back elevator to find Caine. He was just slipping into his long coat, his eyes still sleepy as he ruffled a hand through his hair and looked over at her standing in the doorway. He seemed fine.

“I’m Jupiter Jones,” she introduced herself.

And then she walked toward him and started in with her usual speech. He watched her, curious the whole while, listening. It was pretty much like it had been all those other times; she knew how to be convincing by now. The only difference was, since she’d had the vegecell she woken up and come to him a little earlier and she wasn’t ready to drop with exhaustion. And...

“Also,” she added in a sudden rush of words at the very end. “You’re kinda-my-boyfriend,"

“*Boy* friend?” he said it carefully.

“Um, yeah. But only if you want to, I mean...”

Caine looked like he had no idea what she meant though.

Oh! Maybe it was a translation problem?

“Boyfriend means the two of us are—um...” she gestured back and forth in a sort of *way* and made a face that was supposed to express...

Oh God, she wasn’t going to have to actually use the word *lovers* here was she?

“We...?” Caine said slowly, cocking his head towards her. He took in a deep breath and sort of flared his nostrils.

It seemed to be dawning on him.

“Yes! The two of us. Totally!” She nodded enthusiastically (and somehow held herself back from giving a thumbs up. Maybe she’d had too much coffee?) “And um I smell like you. And I brought some donuts too.”

She took the bag and held it out to him with a smile.

“A dozen of them, which means thirteen for some reason. They’re for you. You can eat them while we talk more in the car, but we really should get going now...”

******

Just yesterday Lord Balem Abrasax had traveled to the Jupiter Refinery in his biggest ship, riding through the great halls in his golden chariot, inspecting the facilities and demanding full reports on everything.

This morning he was gone.

Chicanery Night didn't know what had happened, but, somehow, inexplicably, Lord Balem had disappeared before his very eyes.
“Replay the recording,” Chicanery called out and he watched again as Lord Balem slowly faded from sight. “You see it too, don’t you Mr. Tskallikan?” he demanded nervously. He was deathly afraid that he would be called upon to explain it—and no doubt held responsible for it as well.

“There is nothing to see,” Tskallikan said. “He has gone.”

“Well we’ll need to keep this quiet until we can find out what happened to him. Search every millimeter of the planet.”

“Lord Balem is not that small Mr. Night,” Tskallikan’s voice was careful, as if explaining something to a child. “Searching every meter should be sufficient.”

“What? – Oh, just find him!”

“An FTL has come through for Lord Balem,” a servitant announced. “But he’s not responding.”

“Put it through to me,” Chicanery said.

The woman who appeared on the screen looked exactly like Seraphi Abrasax—he’d seen the portrait on Lord Balem’s bedroom wall enough times to recognize her.

“I want to speak to Balem,“ her voice came through crisp and authoritative. “If he’s there.”

“And you are?”

“He knows who I am.”

“I’m afraid Lord Abrasax is occupied at the moment, but I can give him your message.”

“I’ve claimed my title and put portal restrictions on this system—it belongs to me now. Balem can contact me through the Aegis—if he ever wants to leave the planet again.”

She signed off before Chicanery could answer. Not that he had a response.

“What shall I do about the Earth woman?” Tskallikan frowned at the blank screen.

“Lord Balem won’t care that we’re stuck here. Or that he’s disappeared. He only cares about results. You’re still under orders to eliminate her. Hire more Hunters to track her on Orous. She can’t run forever.”

Chicanery shuddered to think of Lord Balem’s reaction when he learned the recurrence had escaped and claimed her title. But she was the least of Chicanery’s concerns now.

There had been times in the past when Lord Balem had seemed unhinged. He’d been distressed at the idea of his Mother’s recurrence. Perhaps he had actually found a way to disappear in order to hide from her?

No, that didn’t make any sense. He had to be somewhere.

But with portal restrictions in place—well there was nowhere else he could have gone that wouldn’t show up on their scans...

Of one thing Chicanery was bitterly certain. He would be blamed for all of this somehow. He was in charge of this facility, and it would be his head on the chopping block.

The whole thing was so far-fetched he wouldn’t have believed it himself if he hadn’t seen it with his
own eyes.

How could a person vanish into thin air?

*****

Jupiter closed her connection from aboard the Aegis Cruiser. If somehow he had come back to life when time re-set. Well, she guessed he’d contact her eventually. She’d wait and see...

In the meantime, no news was good news when it came to Balem Abrasax.

The crew had prepared the shuttle for her and Caine to take to the Aegis safehouse on the far side of Orous. Again. It was always the same routine, even when Jupiter had other things she wanted to take care of instead.

Io and Ell had prepared sheavework for her to file for the Vegecell—but with their FTL unit broken, they’d been stuck waiting for the next transport.

And then Jupiter had looped around again through time.

She’d since found the coordinates to Io and Ell’s moon, but she didn’t want anyone following her there.

Sometimes, trying to sort out the tangled logistics was enough to give her a headache. For now she needed to split off from the Aegis Crew and lie low until Stinger could requisition her a ship that could outrun any Hunters.

Luckily, Stinger and Kiza never had any problems on Orous. Nobody was trying to abduct them.

Kiza coughed from across the ship and Jupiter looked over at her. Maybe...?

“Stinger, I’ve already put through Kiza’s order for an expedited re-code.”

“Your Majesty,” Stinger bowed. “I’m in your debt.”

“No, please don’t bow, really, but—I’m just thinking.” Jupiter half-remembered something Ell had mentioned about testing they’d done with the Vegecell. “Kiza, could you come over here a moment?”

The girl walked over, stopping to cough again on the way.

“I’m okay dad,” she insisted when she saw his expression.

“We were just talking about your re-code,” Jupiter explained. “I think...there are sometimes problems with Regenex, right? A chance the bug might come back again?”

“It’s possible,” Kiza nodded.

“A thirty percent chance,” Stinger admitted reluctantly.
“And if it comes back, you’d need more treatments,” Jupiter said.

“Yeah,” Stinger’s voice was suddenly grim. “It’s expensive Your Majesty. I understand. But Kiza’s young—and the sooner she get’s it the better she’ll do. We wouldn’t presume to ask for more—”

“No, no! That’s not a problem—but what if there’s a better alternative? There are these scientists—one of them is a doctor—and they’ve developed something that might work better. I’d just need to put the word in for you.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I need you to take them a new FTL unit—and probably bring me back some sheavework afterwards too. I planned to ask you later, after Kiza’s re-code. But maybe you should go there first. You could talk to them. It’s up to you, Kiza, if you don’t like the sound of it, you can always go back to Orous instead.”

“I think it’s worth checking out if there's another treatment,” said Kiza.

“And you want me to take them an FTL unit?” Stinger asked.

“Yeah, and maybe some bees—I think Ell said they were running low. Can you even get bees on Orous? Never mind, the bees aren’t essential. I just thought—as a gesture of goodwill?”

They could always bring some bees from Earth another time.

“I can probably round up a few hives on short notice. I’ve got some contacts.” Stinger said.

“Great!”

“That’s it though?” Stinger said, doubtful. “And you’ll see that Kiza’s rid of her bug—one way or the other?”

Stinger was always suspicious about Kiza getting her re-code. The only solution for that was actually having it happen though.

“Yes, that will be all that I require,” Jupiter watched him straighten up in response to her tone, and stand at attention, his face suddenly carefully blank.

A few times recently, she’d found herself drawing that mantle of authority around her, using her Queen voice when she got impatient with all the repetition, but she didn’t like to do it too often. She probably should keep in practice—it did expedite things—but she wasn’t sure she liked how it sounded. She really preferred to treat people as equals.

“Well,” she smiled at him, softening, “I require that, and that you fly fast enough to keep anyone from trailing you. But I have confidence you can manage that easily, Stinger.”

“That I can Majesty.”
How many times had she made this trip? Jupiter wondered as they came into the docking area on Orous. She turned and smiled tentatively as she caught Caine’s eye. An awkward silence had somehow settled in after they’d left the others on the Aegis Cruiser.

She’d done most of the talking, actually, during the drive to Stinger’s earlier, filling Caine in on everything from the previous timelines... and maybe she’d been extra talkative after all that coffee.

She still couldn’t believe she’d blurted out first thing this morning that he was her boyfriend though. It was so completely not what she’d planned. Not that she’d ever had a plan for that part of things...

Anyway, they were alone again together now—starting out all over. And starting over wasn’t the end of the world (she’d sort of been to the end of the world with him). It’d be okay getting to know each other again—or him getting to know her—but it was like whiplash sometimes, falling asleep one night, all wrapped up in each other, only to wake up in a new time loop and have him looking at her like she was a stranger all over again.

She kept forgetting, kept having to hold herself back from reaching to kiss or touch him...

Caine did seem curious about her at least. She’d caught him watching her more than a few times— but then watching her was his job now, so...

How could it be that after all this time, she somehow still didn’t know how to get with her own boyfriend? Would it always be like this? She knew she had to be patient, give him the chance to get to know her, but that didn’t make it any easier.

Jupiter put on her “disguise”, slipping on the sunglasses and adjusting the scarf around her face before climbing out of the ship and starting toward the street, Caine falling into step behind her. Ever since she’d had the Vegecell, she had so much more energy. It was a good thing, of course, but today she was feeling restless. She didn’t really want to go into hiding again.

At least it was a bit easier navigating through the throngs of people in the streets here. She wasn’t as overwhelmed now, able to take in more of the details around her. Though the excitement of walking on an alien planet had worn off a little—after all she was always going down the same exact streets.

“Hey, how bout we go this way?” Jupiter pointed in the opposite direction from their usual route. “We’re only a couple minutes from the safe house and I want to see something new.”

“Alright,” Caine looked slowly down to where she’d—oops! —taken him by the hand. He didn’t pull away though.

There were more vendors in this direction, selling everything from random spaceship parts to space tacos. There was glowing ocean-colored jewelry and some kind of live...lobsters?

Ugh.

Jupiter averted her eyes and walked on.

A pair of green-skinned girls sat on a crumbling wall in front of a flickering holo screen, making
shoes from some soft metallic material. Jupiter stopped to admire the way they quickly wove pieces together, fingers silhouetted in the light. As she drew closer, she saw their fingers were slightly webbed, and that both girls had tiny gills in the sides of their necks. Were they like tadpole splices? And how did they breathe out of the water? She knew better than to ask intrusive anatomy questions though, and so she just watched a while before continuing on.

A few minutes later, she and Caine were standing in line for cheese pastries when a thumping bass beat vibrated through the air around them. A murmur went through the people in front of them, who nodded to each other and then left the line to walk across the street.

Jupiter watched them skirt around a kiosk and walk down a cascade of stairs toward a dome set into the ground.

Was that where the music was coming from?

The structure was huge, with hexagonal windows protruding from the sides, the whole thing grown over green with vegetation, like a giant barnacle encrusted sea rock, shadowed by all the skyscrapers and satellites high overhead. She could see an entrance gate on one side, shuttered over and covered with corroded signs.

The music got louder and she strained to see what was going on over there. A steady stream of people kept walking over, but where were they going?

No one else seemed to be paying much attention, but then the whole area was so busy: spacecraft flying loud from every direction, a building overhead shifting and groaning as it twisted on its axis and cast them into deeper shadow.

She watched as a man with a tuft of golden feathers approached the dome and disappeared—and then so did the tabby-cat-faced person behind him.

She turned to Caine who was holding out pastries to her.

She took one. “The rest are for you,” she said and waited for him to eat a few before asking him, “You do see what’s going on over there, don’t you?”

“That?” He hesitated, taking another bite and swallowing before answering slowly, “It’s an old train station.”

“Okay, but what do you think’s going on inside?”

“It’s probably a ...music event.”

“Can we check it out?”

“Your Majesty...” Caine looked uncomfortable at the idea.

The windows of the dome lit up from within with flashing colored lights, and cheers came from a few of the people outside.

“Just for a little while?” Jupiter was so tired of playing it safe all the time. “If anyone’s looking for me, it’s on Earth, or over at the Ministry. There’s no way they’ve tracked us here yet. Plus, I’ve got my nifty disguise.”

Caine looked skeptically at her.
Jupiter took a few steps backwards towards the kiosk and someone brushed up against her in the crowd. A strange tingle passed through her, and the beat of the music seemed to intensify.

Caine growled at the offender, and Jupiter turned and saw that same alien she’d bumped into before, velvety black skin glinting with rainbow lights.

The alien hurried along, pushing against others as it passed, jostling through to the front. No one else minded though. They turned and grinned at its appearance, reaching out for a feel of that prickly soft...skin? ...Hair?

“What’s—“

“We shouldn’t,” Caine said.

“Why not? We’re like a five minute walk from the safe house, less if we fly.”

“It’s not—” Caine hesitated, and then said in a lower voice. “It’s a...splice...entertainment. Unauthorized. Not appropriate for—”

“One thing you’ll get to know about me? I really don’t care about appropriate.” She pulled him along in her wake for a moment before turning to ask, “Is this special extra-sensory splice music? It’s like I can feel it in my bones.”

“That Tragllon dosed you,” Caine said, shaking his head. “Their tentacle-fur carries a toxin.”

“It’s poisonous? I feel okay though.” Maybe the Vegecell had protected her?

“No it’s more like a –recreational drug. Splices are more attuned, but you’ll feel some effect. It...lowers inhibitions,” he sounded grim.

“Well, okay then. I need something to take off the edge, if you know what I mean.” She winked, before she remembered the glasses were covering her eyes.

He looked at her straight-faced.

Maybe he didn’t he know what she meant?

“Caine, what’s the use of being a Queen if I never, ever actually get to do anything fun?”

“You want to have...fun?” he asked, as if the concept were foreign to him.

“Yes!” She stomped her foot for emphasis.

Caine had that half-amused, half-bewildered look he often got around her.

She knew that look.

She decided to take it for agreement and tugged him along by the hand. “Come on, you’re going to have fun too.”

As they walked closer, Jupiter could see there was some sort of distortion field in front of the gate, and that the entrance to the train station was actually wide open.

They passed through behind three very pretty boys with tall tufted ears, walking for a while down a ramp leading underground. Jupiter paused to perch her glasses on her head so she could actually see in the low light. The stone was cracked and water stained, plants sprouting up along the edges. It
seemed a little ominous, but also exciting. The music was growing louder as they descended.

When was the last time she’d been to a club even? It felt like a thousand years ago. Even before everything that had happened to her, there’d been all those early mornings cleaning houses... All work and no play made Jupiter a very dull Queen indeed.

It got darker and darker, but Jupiter’s footsteps felt lighter and lighter the farther down they went.

As they turned the corner, the scarf floated up and off her head, and her hair stood up around her face.

Ooh!

Before her was the biggest train station she’d ever seen, and people were floating everywhere in mid-air, spinning and moving to the beat. Anti-grav was shooting out in overlapping beams filling the entire space. Skin of every color reflected the flashing lights, iridescent scales shining in the blue glow.

“Totally cool,” Jupiter breathed.

She turned and saw that Caine was frowning still, eyeing two Tragllons who were bouncing from group to group.

“Maybe we should get you over there,” she called out over the music, “Loosen you up a little.”

His voice in her ear made her shiver, “I can’t loosen up around an Entitled,” he said. “I need to stay in control.”

“Or what?” She pulled back to look at him, “You’ll wanna bite me?” She meant to it to be flirty, but he looked concerned.

Did Caine always worry about being in control around her? Or would that worry fade once he got to know her better?

“I only want to stay a little while,” she said. She couldn’t hear her own voice over the music, but she guessed that he could. “Just dance, you know, blow off some steam.”

He seemed to consider her words. “Blow off some steam,” he repeated, nodding and then he moved forward with determination.

A tall, muscular woman with a Rhinoceros horn stepped forward and blocked Jupiter’s path, eyeing her disapprovingly.

“She’s with me,” Caine told her, raising their joined hands, and the woman stepped aside for them.

Jupiter stepped forward onto the station floor and her feet came out from under her, spinning her out sideways into mid air.

“Whoa!”

“Stay close,” Caine said, still holding her hand.

“Will you dance with me then?”

He stepped into the beam and caught her by the other hand, somehow pulling her upright to face him.
The problem was, she wasn’t quite sure how to dance in this.

From the inside, the music was more layered than she’d realized, bouncing off the curved walls, washing over her, everywhere all at once. And the beat she was trying to find was more like a million little beats and sub-beats interwoven, with parts that she couldn’t exactly hear but really intensely felt.

She listened, absorbing everything, Caine floating with her, watching all around them.

It was like a puzzle, she thought, as they drifted slowly sideways. How to dance without being connected to the floor?

All around them were swooping feathers and sinuous tails. Some people just floated, listening with blissed out expressions, but others were flipping wildly, falling for a split second when they hit an empty patch of air, before being caught up quickly again.

Caine didn’t have his wings, or his boots turned on, but she had the feeling he could move through any kind of air. His fighting was like a dance, after all, the way he knew to twist and turn at just the right time—never mind his determination to be all control and vigilance and Royal Guard type stuff now.

A group in a far corner was upside down, jumping and bouncing off the ceiling together in slow motion. How did they move? she wondered, uselessly pushing her feet against air.

A Tragllon drifted past and Jupiter reached out idly to brush it with her fingertips, the music shifting again, something clicking.

One of the boys from earlier pushed hard against the other two and they all went flying out in different directions, giggling wildly. They were moving in reaction to each other, off each other...

She tugged Caine toward her and they came together with a slide of denim and leather and skin that drew his attention from the crowd around them.

“Hi,” she smiled.

Caine hadn’t liked the idea at first, but it seemed he wasn’t entirely opposed to spinning her through the blue anti-grav beams, using the push and pull of their muscles as impetus through the three dimensional space.

The crowd added to the intensity, the energy. Everywhere around them people were shedding layers—literally, in the case of one snake splice. Heat was generating in the enclosed space—everything escalating, letting loose in a sort of desperate frenzy. Jupiter wasn’t the only one feeling it.

But then the crowd around them wasn’t really her focus.

A few times she slammed up into Caine hard, and he gave a smile that showed his sharp teeth. He seemed to like the impact, the feel of them crashing into each other.

Once she’d got the feel for it, they were moving faster and faster—and he was happy enough to follow her lead.
Until he suddenly stopped still. She realized his lips were moving but she couldn’t hear a word he was saying.

“What?” She pulled closer.

“We should leave.”

“But—“ Jupiter had lost track of how long they’d been dancing, maybe she’d “accidently” bumped into a few more Tragllons. But Caine was having fun — in spite of his determination to avoid them.

“They’re coming to shut this down, I hear a tank pulling in.”

“Tank?” had she heard him wrong? “Who’s coming? The Aegis?”

They could just talk to the Aegis, couldn’t they?

“Street troops,” Caine said, and something “...when they come in.”

“What?” A new song had started; She didn’t want to leave yet. “A few more minutes...”

“Your Majesty.”

“What?” she tried to flip, but Caine wasn’t moving along with her anymore. She sighed. “I suppose you think I should be... prioritizing the safety of the Earth or something?”

But even as she said finished saying the words she knew that was true.

“Maybe?” he answered.

She was jolted, falling as the antigrav flickered for a second.

Caine powered up his boots.

“Oh crap! There’s got to be another exit right?”

Caine had them out in seconds, speeding down an abandoned train tunnel with Jupiter holding fast to his back. It’d been a while since she’d traveled this way, but she still remembered how to hold on for dear life.

A minute later Caine had punched in the code for the safe house and the two of them were inside.

“Sorry,” Jupiter said, “I guess maybe we should have left sooner.”

“You wanted to have fun.” Caine shrugged, looking down at her. They were standing inches apart, both panting and out of breath.

“Yeah.”

“You said that I’m your boyfriend?” he had some question in his eyes that she couldn’t quite
understand.

“Yeah,” she repeated. She remembered his objections from before... Queens and splices. None of it seemed to make sense just now, but somehow she’d talked him around before, hadn’t she? “Um, I guess you think it’s a bad idea?”

“It is a bad idea,” he said, his eyes drifting down to her mouth.

She stretched up on her toes to kiss him.

“No it’s really really not—not for us,” she said the words softly, against his lips, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Luckily, Caine didn’t seem to need a more coherent argument.

He pulled her into him and deepened the kiss.

*******

A week later Jupiter had settled into the castle on the dark planet again with Caine and Stinger—and Kiza, who was completely healthy after she’d had her dose of Vegecell.

Jupiter had gotten everything done that she’d planned. Stinger had taken the FTL drive to Io and Ell’s moon without any problems and Jupiter had communicated with them from the safe house a few days ago.

Io immediately accepted Jupiter as Seraphi’s recurrence and started going into details about sheavework and patents. Ell was more suspicious, but seemed to warm up a little when Jupiter mentioned that she wanted to name their invention Vegecell instead of Abrasax Green.

“Have you talked to Sir Archenbald?” Io had wanted to know.

“Um, no he was having some health problems last time I saw him.”

Being dead counted as a health problem right? Although he might be alive again now, somewhere out there in this new time loop.

“There were plans...Well, he’ll get in touch with you,” Io insisted. “Send him to us if he’s having health problems.”

Jupiter had filed the sheavework for the patents at the Ministry. It was travelling through that vast bureaucracy now, she guessed.

It would be interesting to see if that set anything in motion...

But then how would she be able to tell?
“It’s incredible,” Kalique said from the screen, her voice warm, and eyes bright with excitement—in
despite of her grey hair and lined face. “You have no idea how I’ve longed for a second chance. I have
so much to show you, to teach you about the opportunities of our world. I can come to you if you
prefer it Jupiter dear. Just let me know your location and I’ll be there straight away.”

“Um... thank you,” Jupiter said. “I’ll think about it.”

Jupiter had run into the same problem she always had with Kalique. She seemed friendly—and
helpful, in her own strange way, and Jupiter didn’t want offend her exactly—she just wasn’t sure that
she could trust her.

Caine was listening to their interaction from outside of Kalique’s view. He’d insist Jupiter couldn’t
trust any Abrasax. But it was so tempting, the thought of having Kalique as an ally. Just one Abrasax
who wasn’t outright trying to kill her.

She let her rattle on for a bit about preparing Jupiter for galas and introductions, outfits and estates.
Jupiter remembered those ordeals from the last time though. She had no intention of going to another
Entitled event any sooner than she absolutely had to.

Anyway, she’d called to get very specific information—if she could. But how to be subtle about it?

“I read something about our family holdings, production facilities,” Jupiter tried. “I wonder if you
could answer some questions for me?”

“I’d be delighted, of course. Though there’s so much to tell—really a demonstration would be the
most illuminating for you I think.”

“Ok-ay,” Jupiter didn’t need to see Kalique in another Regenex bath though. “I think I read
something about plant cells, a sort of alternative resource?”

“Alternative? Hmm, that may have been referring to the attempts with cloned materials. Growing
cells? But that failed quiet spectacularly-- due to genetic implasticity. I doubt anyone would attempt
an alternative after that mess.”

If Kalique had Ministry spies who’d heard about the Vegecell, she wasn’t giving anything away
about it.

Jupiter decided to try another tact.

“Well, I found the name Sir Archenbald, listed in some sheaves as Seraphi’s advisor, maybe he could
come advise me? Get me up to speed on things?”

Kalique laughed—nervously? “Oh, I’m afraid Sir Archenbald passed on a very long time ago.”

“She’s lying,” Caine said softly.

“But I’m more than happy—Did you say something dear?” Kalique asked.

“No,” Jupiter answered. “Um, I’ll have to get back to you on that.”
She closed the connection a few minutes later, with no more information than she’d started with.

Except...

In all of their time on Cerise together, Caine had never caught Kalique in a lie before. Maybe because she’d known to be careful around a Lycantant?

Or was there was something about Sir Archenbald that flustered her?

****

Jupiter looped through time again...

She sat at the donut shop on the corner across from the Willis Tower as the sun began to rise, feeling frustrated... even though there really wasn’t any reason to be.

Everyone was safe. She was doing everything she could—and should—do. Everything was going pretty much according to plan. Except for the fact that she was still stuck in this time loop...

At least she seemed to shifting better these days.

Where once she’d felt faint and passed out, or needed to sleep a bit every time she looped, now she seemed to travel back in the blink of an eye.

Maybe the Vegecell was still adapting inside of her, making her stronger or something?

She didn’t feel much different though. She wasn’t exhausted all the time, and she guessed she wasn’t going to be dying any time soon—as long as she stayed out of trouble—but she was still the same Jupiter, not super-powered in any way as far as she could tell.

Just feeling super stressed, whenever she really stopped to think about the enormity of it all, her whole entire world depending on her.

She tried to stay busy so she didn’t have to think about it too much of the time.

******

Rosa flew in over another dessert planet. Another routine patrol.

They’d been here before, she hadn’t recognized the alphanumeric for this one at first—they all blended together after a while—but she recognized those moving sands, those snapping clawed creatures waiting just below.

They’d made the mistake of landing here just once, getting out of the ship to stretch their legs at an abandoned base. They’d had to put their helmets on just to think over the incessant clicking and scratching. And the smell...
“Same shit planet as always,” Chase groaned from the back, reading the scans for activity.

“Wake me up if you find anything,” Lupe said, rolling over in her bunk.

Chase just grunted in response, busy running the diagnostics.

They’d never once found anything here but the crustaceans though.

Rosa went in lower, skimming the sands, just for the hell of it. A few giant claws came snapping in their direction, but she had utter confidence in her piloting skills. Flying craft was easy—even if other things came harder to her.

Chase wasn’t wrong about this place being shit—most backworlds were. The thing was, out here they were safe.

That last time they’d stopped in Flinehold for supplies though...

Rosa hadn’t seen him, but then there was nothing distinctive, nothing that made him stand out in a crowd. The problem was she’d felt him, which was infinitely worse. She’d felt that pull, that urge to do what he’d command. The feeling she’d been free of since the night they’d left.

She hadn’t told Lupe or Chase. They might think she was imagining things, try to reassure her.

Reassurance wasn’t what she needed though.

She needed to keep them safe.

She remembered the explosion, the fire. She brought her hand up to her eye and traced the scar. It had been worth it, escaping him.

Rosa had read the files Lupe snatched; they’d been corrupted in parts, but mostly intact.

They’d always known his plans for the three of them. He’d told them, thinking none of them were capable of betraying him.

But the other thing.

Lupe and Chase had been surprised. As far as they knew, it’d always been just the three of them. That was their flaw as a pack; they were an odd group, a man short.

But Rosa had always had dreams of the little one, for as long as she could remember.

Now they knew it’d been real.

Rosa had been the first-born, always the biggest and strongest of them.

According to the file, the second had been born small and “culled for defects”.

He’d been pack, but Rosa had been too young to save him.

And even if she had been fully-grown...Lupe was the only one actually capable of defying their master.

The only way Rosa knew was to fly fast and far away, the three of them on this ship together.

That was the only assurance she could count on.
They passed over the abandoned Legion post. The same as always. There was nothing here, nothing on the entire planet but sand and rock and those fucking clobsters.

It didn’t matter how many times they’d been here, this place was always the same, always empty.

“Are we done here?” she asked Chase, ready to set the portal for the next planet on their patrol.

*****

“All done in here,” Nino called out.

“Good, I just finished the upstairs.” Aleksa passed the bathroom and saw her sister, scrub brush in hand, flushing the toilet water down with a satisfied look—the open toilet of course.

“Aerosolized shit,” Aleksa muttered under her breath, taking a step back and shaking her head. They had to clean it, yes, but that didn’t mean they had to breathe it in like steam at the bathhouse.

It didn’t matter what Aleksa said though, Nino enjoyed watching the water run clean. She would never listen about some things.

Just like Jupiter.

And what, Aleksa would very much like to know, was going on with that girl? Leaving the house before they had woken. It was unnatural. There was nothing in this world Jupiter Jones loved as much as her morning sleep.

It wasn’t as if Aleksa could believe the half-ass story Vladie made up this morning—more shit. Maybe Jupiter had a soft spot for him, the two had grown up together, but Vladie was entirely too shifty lately for Aleksa’s liking.

Something was going on, she knew this.

And Jupiter asking Vasili for an advance last night...

Was it for shoes or a phone? ...Or could she be in some trouble?

Aleksa had money, not much, but she’d been hiding it away. She knew how to save her money and be miserable. She knew she wouldn’t able to clean houses for another... twenty-five years...?

How had it been so long?

“I’m glad to be heading home,” Nino said. Aleksa didn’t miss her wince as she straightened on her bad knee, but Nino always covered it with a smile.

“Four houses is too much for one day,” Aleksa grumbled. “Especially with Jupiter gone.”

“Oh, our Jupiter is destined for romance and adventure,” Nino said with a far away look. “We can’t hold her back from greatness.”
“Hmph,” Aleksa scoffed, she’d heard it all before. Never would she hold her own daughter back—but what exactly was this greatness, she wanted to know? It wasn’t in Vladie’s schemes of getting rich—or Nino’s astrology charts...

She gathered their supplies together and loaded them into the car, insisting her sister sit and rest for a moment while she did.

Nino could have her dreams. But romance? That was asking for trouble. Aleksa knew that better than anyone. There was no “happy ever after”. Life was hard and love was nothing but a fairytale for little girls.

They were stuck in traffic, on the drive home. In danger of being late for another “family dinner”.

Aleksa looked at her hand on the steering wheel. She’d jammed the middle finger earlier and it had swollen up so that she couldn’t bend it anymore. With her mood today she might as well be flying the bird. Too bad the only one here to see any rude gestures was Nino.

Vasili on the other hand, pressuring them to take on too many houses... He knew Aleksa wanted money to someday move out and get a place of their own. Family should stick together, he liked to say—but he wasn’t living in the basement, was he?

And all his idiot talk of marriage last night. If he’d chased her daughter into the arms of some low-life who didn’t like smart women...

Jupiter was old enough to know better by now, wasn’t she? Aleksa liked to think so. But something too strange was going on.

Vladie’s car was still missing from the driveway as they pulled in.

Where was Jupiter?

Chapter End Notes

Well here's some more of this thing. I have it planned to end at 47 chapters-unless I break some into smaller bits.
The end is in sight!!!!
I'm a physical disaster lately, always injuring myself in new and stupid ways for some reason, so thanks for patience with my slow updates. And thank you, as always, for reading -and commenting!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!