

Fathoms

A Thorunn
Side-Story

by

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The day the news broke that Carmen Michelle Alexi's ex-boyfriend had been brutally murdered was one of the worst days of her life.

Not because she held some great love for the man—as handsome and decent as he'd been, she'd never considered him more than a passing amusement during her wilder, carefree college days—but because of how shocking the events surrounding his passing had been.

She'd kept up with news of the man every so often, had heard through the grapevine that he'd married and done well for himself—enough to book his new family's flight out to Thorunn, something she'd been desperately jealous of at the time, swamped with work, and unable to leave her position to go gallivanting off to worlds unknown.

When the news broke that every single member of the Apollo XXII colony had been savagely murdered by the beastly inhabitants of the far-flung storm-ravaged planet, time had stood still. Grey seeped into an already less-than colourful world, burdened as she was with stress and the cares of work and life.

She had thought she didn't care. That all he was was a burden to her. That his existence was a careless mistake, one she was glad was a thick file of legal papers and thousands of light-years away.

But somehow, she found herself silently weeping, staring stock-still at the holoscreen mounted on her wall, the cup of tea she'd been drinking overturned and leaking a dark stain onto her creamy carpets.

Her little son . . . was dead.

Ten years passed.

Carmen grew older, sadder, thinner.

She'd had a few dalliances here and there, but nothing much ever came of them, and she was careful to keep it that way. She didn't want more guilt piled atop the feelings she pushed down every day.

Sometimes she felt happy. For days, weeks, months, even.

She acquired a pet. A little grey-streaked cat that ran away in the middle of the night when she'd been kept late at the office desperately trying to hold the company together.

After that, fish, on which she spent a small fortune. Foolhardy, perhaps, when she was deeply mired in inherited scandals and nightmarish amounts of paperwork and misplaced

files.

But they, bright, glittering, enclosed within their glass walls, could not desert her.

She cultivated tropical flowers, and when those died, cacti, that didn't need so much care or attention to point their thorns toward the sky.

She coloured her long hair blonde, then black, then cut it into a severe bob that served her well in her flourishing career.

She tried to shut out all thoughts of Thorunn, of what the planet had taken from her. Of a desolate feeling that filled the void of an emotion she didn't know she'd had.

She pushed herself to the brink—almost suffering a nervous breakdown while effecting the greatest recovery and success of a company in the last fifty years—to ignore every breaking news update related to the place, hoped someday she could turn and see the images and graffiti plastered everywhere and not feel a pinch in her heart.

She tried to forget that her little son was dead.

She hadn't even wanted him to begin with.



"Ms. Alexi, you have a call on line three."

"Just take the message, Liam, I've a meeting in five."

"Ma'am, you'll want to take this. It's a direct call from Thorunn."

"I'm sorry?" She must have misheard. The work she did—she'd purposely chosen to direct a sector that would keep her from ever interacting with anything to do with that place.

"Yes, Ma'am." Despite how professionally he schooled his face, Liam's voice contained a barely restrained excitement. "From only the most notable person in our time."

"Liam, you know I refuse to keep up with off-world news."

"You can't have missed this!" Her secretary's tone was incredulous.

She massaged her temples, eyeing the drawer where she kept a bottle of ibuprofen, wondering if she could make it home without having to ingest more of the headache reducing medicine.

"I've missed it on purpose, whatever it is." She tapped her clip. Three minutes.

"Just, please. This's the hero of Thorunn we're talking about. Even discounting the fact that everyone and their mother would sell their right arms for this opportunity, you know I wouldn't forward the call if I didn't truly think it'd benefit you."

Carmen had never been weak to Liam's pleading eyes, but his instincts as a secretary were not to be despised. The last time she'd brushed him off had nearly resulted in the loss of a very important, very lucrative, merger.

"Fine, put him on. He has two minutes."

Liam responded enthusiastically in the affirmative. Then his face faded from the holoscreen, replaced moments later by a ghost.

"Adrian?" she whispered, before her brain caught up with her eyes.

No, it wasn't him. He was far too young, with longer hair than the man she'd long tried to forget had ever kept his, and his crystal-blue eyes matched her own.

The young man on the screen smiled gently.

"No. But many people have said we look alike. Hello, Mother."



It was an ordeal, working out the logistics of transporting all two-hundred and fifty-some odd aquatic creatures and their specialised habitat through space to an inhospitable planet. But Carmen Michelle Alexi wasn't the COO of a Fortune 300 company because she let seemingly insurmountable problems stand in her way.

Nineteen years ago, she'd had a chance to step out of mediocrity and into wealth and power, and now she wielded that same fortune and authority to discern if what she had so dispassionately discarded—if whom—would begin to dispel the void creeping around the edges of her awareness that quietly threatened to corrosively consume her if she lingered near it too long.

The flight was lengthy, the trek from the shuttle to the welcoming committee longer still. Carmen wondered at Thorunn's heavy gravity but refused to take the proffered stewardess arm.

She strode through the doors of the spaceport to the dusty wilderness without, stopping short at the small party of a half-dozen or so colourfully dressed persons that greeted her.

The sight was not unexpected—Liam had arranged everything down to the last detail—but nineteen years of carefully not caring, and burying feelings she pretended didn't exist, and then being forced to confront a truth suddenly made uncertain stirred unfathomable emotions within her.

She stood, frozen in place under the blazing sun, taking in the boy, the man, her son, standing at the head of the group, who was the spitting image of a long-gone dreamer, who could have been bitter, or resentful, or even apathetic, but instead, smiled that same gentle smile that had drawn her to his father in the first place.

Cautiously, oh so cautiously, she allowed herself to return his bright greeting with a controlled nod.

"I'm here," she said, as the wind caught her hair, grown out to shoulder length during the travel.

The man, the boy, her son, closed the distance between them, and gave Carmen a nod of his own.

"It is enough. Come, Thorunn awaits."

And sunlight flooded the darkness.

