

in
DIFFERENT
UNIVERSES

A MA Z O N B E S T - S E L L I N G A U T H O R

A N N A A N D R A D E

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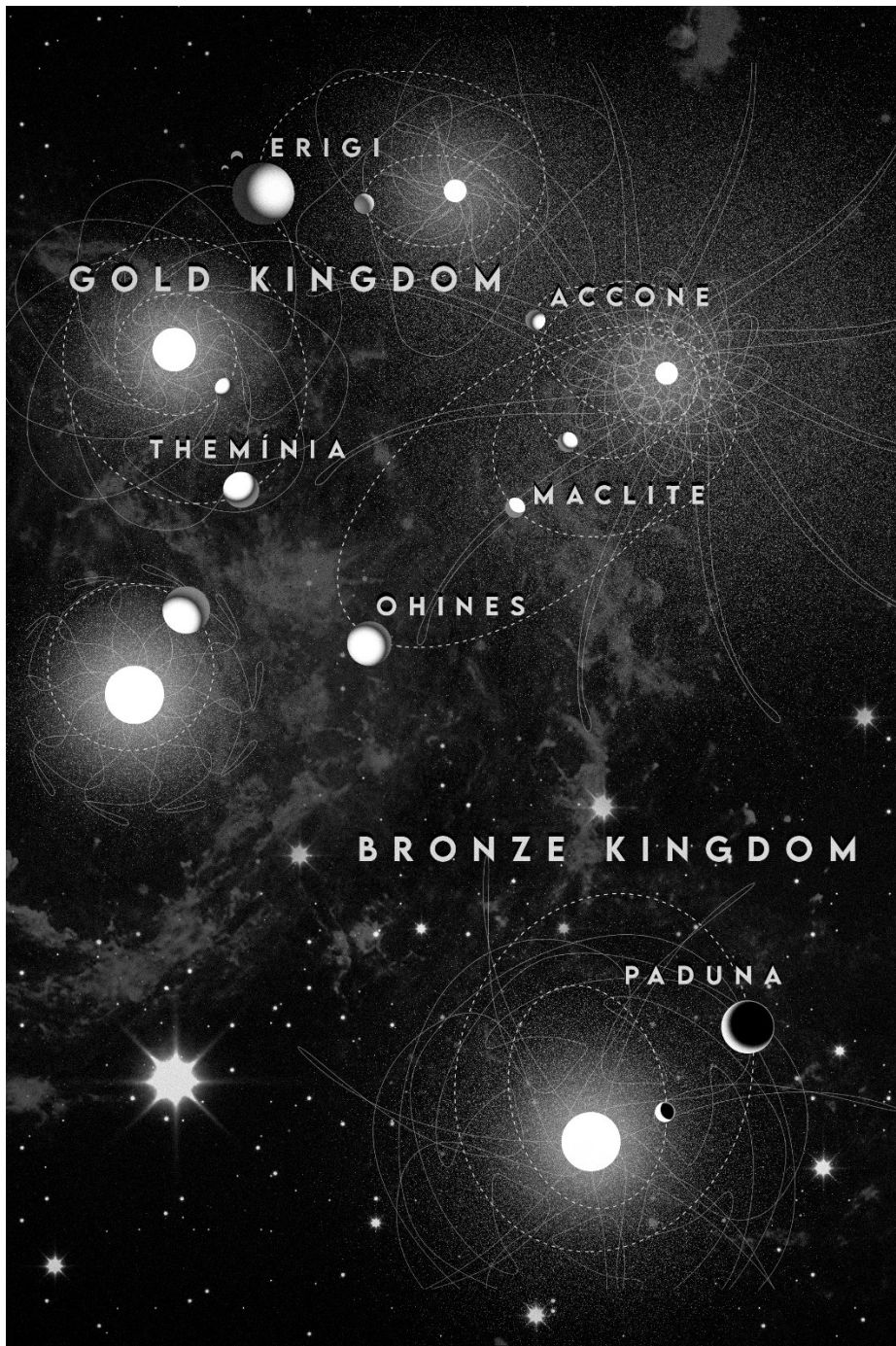
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SUMMARY

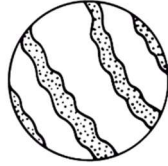
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*To everyone who believes in impossible
dreams to escape reality.*







PROLOGUE

CARINA SANTOS' BODY WAS FREE. It floated through the Space's singular vastness. She could see the stars of the most diverse colors beside her reflection on the control room window. The silver uniform adjusted on her tall body, and the metallic drawings under her face showed much more than any warrior could dream of having.

She wasn't by herself; the presence of the Silver heir made her heart beat faster by instinct. It could be another ordinary day as a commander, but nothing drove her away from Aries. His brown eyes stared at her with desire on the other side of the room as if they read her thoughts, concerns, and intentions. They were alone, and that made her joyful. By heavens, she would have him for a few minutes! She desired nothing else.

Or almost nothing else.

When she saw the computer control panel, Carina had an alluring thought of using it to cling closer to Aries. The Silver would press her against his body while their mouths would stick together, and it would only stop after she went wild.

No matter how much her mind condemned her, Carina was bold for openly desiring her leader. And the truth was that she didn't care. She wanted to seduce him, answer her longings at the same rhythm of her rapid heartbeats, and make her yearnings come true.

"Commander," called Aries with a dry voice.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Carina thought she might offer her mouth instead of assistance.

"I want the report of the last expedition." Aries got closer without taking his eyes off her.

“We got reinforcements and mineral supplies.” Carina touched his clothes with her finger. “They will be sent within three days.” Her finger started dancing through his thorax, making him shiver. By the hunter’s look of Aries, he seemed to like the strokes. Carina smiled with victory. “And they’ll be delivered to the main ship to be distributed as needed.”

She was so close she could smell the warm breath of the Silver, who strangely reminded her of beer and snacks. But under no circumstances would she lose her focus.

Aries gazed at Carina’s fingers. “Where are the figures? I want to stay informed.”

“I’ll get them,” she answered with sadness as she stopped touching him.

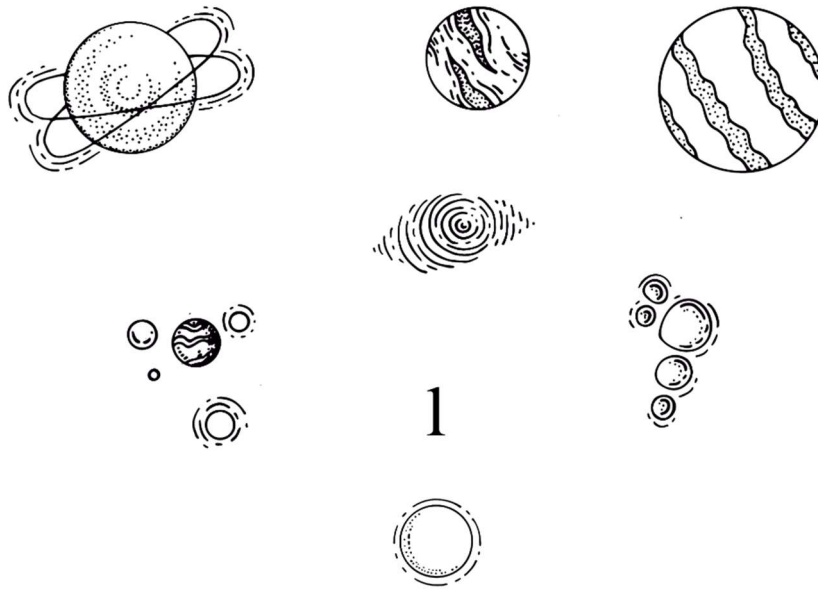
Carina went to the desk to pick up the paperwork and saw Aries following her. She felt his hand go by her body without direction; his touch numbed her skin and tainted her addiction. A sigh of sadness escaped Carina’s lips when the hand of the Silver came out of her back to touch the sheets. Aries caught all her attention and left her stunned.

In a quick stroke, she was pressed lightly against the desk. Carina shook and bit her lower lip. In her head, she saw everything with movie-like vibrant colors, sensations, and even a soundtrack.

“Sir, I...”

“Aries,” he whispered in her ear. “Call me Aries.”

Carina turned to kiss him but saw the disturbing image of her real boss with a floral-printed shirt, tight-high socks with heart prints, and dog slippers. None of it made any sense.



JANUARY
Los Angeles, USA

THE DREAM WAS STILL PLAYING IN CARINA'S mind when she awoke. She fought against the urge to lie down for five more minutes. She had to lose the habit of imagining herself with her favorite characters. The frequency of those dreams had become greater and greater. The second Ricardo Rodrigues, head of her department at work, appeared in a very random outfit, they turned into nightmares. If that wasn't a sign of desperation and overworking, she had no clue what it was.

It was a sunny and not-too-cold morning for a winter day. The sunlight coming through the half-opened curtain hit her face. She was so exhausted the previous night that she didn't have the strength to close the curtains completely, wishing only to throw herself onto the first surface she saw.

Not that the couch she slept on was terrible. Even though it was a bargain from the vintage shop on the last Black Friday, the padding had just been changed. Sarah, Carina's best friend, said red furniture was classic. At the time, Carina thought a hundred dollars on an old couch

weren't worth it. Even so, Sarah had convinced her that it would look perfect in the living room. And it did. It was often useful for binge-watching her favorite shows on weekends—which for Carina meant zeroing out the Netflix catalog and drinking a lot of beer.

To her misfortune, that couch was not comfortable enough for overnight use. Her back ached as she sat, still sleepy. Her head hurt, and Carina cursed herself for drinking too much.

“Great, how will I do my work today?”

She grumbled again for waking up from such a good dream, enjoying Aries' presence. No matter how delusional, it was worth it. The show *Aries*—had the same name as the main character, Carina's favorite. She knew every detail about the kingdoms and their sovereigns from the show's eleven seasons by heart.

Carina turned to the phone lying on the carpet. The time was not right; it said it was one o'clock in the morning. She remembered with frustration that she had to deliver three articles to Ricardo that day. “No exceptions,” he had warned her the previous Saturday.

It was funny to think that they had studied together at the same school for years, but she and Ricardo went out to different places and didn't hang out with the same people.

Carina was Brazilian, where she lived until she was twenty-three. Her parents were in a car crash that year and passed away. She became an orphan the same year she got a job at a U.S. advertising agency. She passed the online interview and bought the plane ticket without hesitation. Even if she didn't get that job, she would try others abroad.

Nothing else tied her to Brazil. The house where she had lived with her parents since she was a child used to be full of happy memories. Now, it was nothing more than a place full of ghosts that tormented her. Maybe even more than Ricardo.

She smiled at that thought. The comparison was absurd. Ghosts wouldn't call her at Christmas to ask about tasks, much less make her work extra hours on her birthday.

The best solution to deal with the loss of her family was to start life from scratch in another country. As if it was meant to be, as Sarah would say, she got the position at the well-known agency, which she learned later, was where Ricardo also worked. Until that day, she believed that the second interviewer during the job hiring process had

employed her because of her legs since he had not taken his eyes off them during the entire face-to-face interview.

She got her work visa as soon as the documentation from the agency was ready. She bought a small house in a modest neighborhood in Los Angeles with the inheritance money. Carina wanted no annoyance and followed the required immigration protocols.

Being documented in the U.S. was an issue soon resolved. The shock was even greater when she discovered that the interviewer was Ricardo's husband and worked at the agency's human resources department. Carina barely saw him, and it was not her place to get involved in other people's marital concerns—even more so because she and Ricardo did not have a good relationship.

Carina's cell phone rang, showing "Sarah" on the screen. She thanked the stars that it was not her boss.

"*Chica!*" Sarah said with excitement. "Did you sleep well?"

"Hello to you too, Sarah."

Carina looked at herself in the mirror and tried to arrange her unruly honey-blonde hair while turning on the speaker on her phone. Her make-up from the night before was smeared; anyone would be frightened to see her like that. Luckily, she was home alone most of the time.

The room was messy, and her clothes were scattered all over the furniture. There was even a sock on the lampshade. She looked at herself and saw she was wearing only a shirt and panties.

"Are you still hungover? You sound terrible. You don't even smoke, but it sounds like you finished two packs of cigarettes in a day," Sarah said, a little worried.

"What an overstatement! Thank you very much for the kind words," Carina said with irony. "After you left in the morning, I stayed up all night drinking. You know how the Gourbetts love to party. They invited me for one beer, then another..."

The conservative neighborhood in which Carina lived had its outlaws. The Gourbetts and Carina herself were one of them. They had nothing in common except for their interest in alcohol and indie music.

"Take it easy. Don't have so much fun without me, or at least invite me over. I promise to behave well so you won't get in trouble at the neighborhood meeting."

"Only if you promise to stay until the end." Carina tucked the phone under her arm and walked to her room. She didn't want to be

late for work. “Do you know what time it is? I need a new phone. This one isn’t showing the right time.”

“Seven-thirty.”

“Seven-thirty?” Carina almost screamed. “I gotta run! I can’t be late today for love or money.”

She hurried to the first door in the hallway. The room had only a few pieces of furniture, and the closet occupied a good deal of the wall. The woman took out the first outfit she found. She left the phone on the bed and listened to Sarah’s laughter as she hurried into the shower.

“I knew you were going to be late. I’ll stop by your house in a little while to give you a ride,” Sarah said as soon as Carina picked up the phone again and wrapped the towel around her body.

Sarah ended the call shortly after that, and Carina dressed as quickly as possible. She made a contract to herself to clean up the mess in her room when she returned home, but it was a hollow promise. The house was usually a mess until she invited someone over, which was rare since she rarely had dates of any kind. Sarah said the disorder of the place didn’t bother her, but she would leave the objects on the floor to force Carina to put them away.

Within minutes, she was down the stairs holding her purse and phone in one hand and her heels in the other. She heard the horn of Sarah’s car, letting Carina know she had arrived. Outside, the white 2008 car made strange sounds. Carina stepped on the somewhat tall grass with bare feet, guessing that the neighborhood association would complain soon.

The music was deafening inside the car. Sarah liked Brazilian music more than Carina herself. In the morning, they always listened to “Ana Vitória” or “Melim.” The neighbors complained about the noise, but Carina ignored them since they didn’t pay her bills. Even so, she received fines once in a while, usually from the association that insisted on controlling what she did. Very few of her neighbors tolerated the excesses because they liked the music, even during restricted hours, which made it easier to live there.

“This basic taupe suit is hideous.” Sarah grimaced as she adjusted her rounded glasses. “It’s really not your color.”

“Next time, you wake me up earlier. That way, I’ll have more time to think of something better to wear.” Carina said, fastening the seatbelt.

“What a sweetheart.” Sarah laughed mockingly and started the car. “I’ll burn these clothes. Your days of making bad excuses will soon be over.”

“I don’t have many clothes for you to get rid of. Leave my closet alone,” Carina rolled her eyes.

“A wonderful vintage shop just opened in my neighborhood. That’s what we need, a shopping spree. Let’s do it after work. Problem solved.”

“I have to do a few things first. You know how Ricardo sends out tasks that are impossible to finish during my regular working hours.” Carina started to put on one of her heels, but the seat belt got in the way, so she huffed and looked at her friend, annoyed. Then she stretched her body once more and put on her shoes.

“You need to relax. Take an hour of your day to do something you enjoy.” Sarah accelerated the car and drove through a red light without realizing it. “Oops...”

“Although I don’t want to see Ricardo’s angry face early in the morning, I would still like to arrive in one piece.”

“Fine.” Sarah tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, paying little attention to her friend’s drama. “We’ll go shopping tomorrow, but no excuses, okay?”

Carina gave Sarah a weak smile.

“Agreed.”

The two met at the agency, and Carina couldn’t have wished for a better friend. Both liked to say whatever was in their minds, often without running their words through a social filter. Most of the time, it caused them problems, but nothing that they didn’t have a good laugh about afterward.

Sarah’s insistence on socializing made Carina uncomfortable. She would rather be in the attic of her house, drawing and listening to loud music. Maybe tunes from the bands *Fall Out Boys* or *Walk the Moon*. She felt the need to connect with distant, other worlds, like the one she saw on the show “Aries.” Imagining life in space was her hobby, and she often illustrated each thought on a canvas. She believed that universe was much more fun than her own.

The traffic was terrible, typical for one of the largest cities in the country. But Sarah defied the laws of physics to make them arrive on time. The car stopped in the building’s parking lot, and Carina realized she was holding onto where she could. Without exchanging another