



Sweet Venom (Heat, Prey, Love #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Bite me, if you dare.

In the disease ravaged ruins of New Eden, Nevada, survival is a game, and no one plays dirtier than Vasilis Vepres. An Alpha viper shifter in the Serpentine Syndicate. His bite delivers euphoric oblivion and the spread of Rotmor.

But when small town private investigator, and silver-furred omega, Soren Quillen, is tasked with finding missing omegas, he uncovers something so sinister his old wounds reopen. Soren knows this Alpha.

Plagued by fractured memories that ignite forbidden hunger; an Alpha with a venomous bite, and an omega who knows too much. Their desires are too dangerous, but one of them will submit.

With New Eden overrun by mutated horrors, predator and prey must choose: sever their bond and survive, or let the venom ravage them into something far more dangerous.

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It was tough out here for omegas. We accepted all the shit that was thrown our way and we had to sift the fuck through it just to find out what was of use. I couldn't fully relate to everything the omegas I came across in my travels went through, but it was enough for me to throw my family's wealth at whenever I could.

Five years ago, I quit my job as a nurse in a hospital because of the poor treatment of omegas in the area. Most of them never dared to even come in, especially when they were pregnant, and most opted for home births where their mates could be around to make sure their offspring weren't switch in the neonatal unit.

It was difficult to communicate with Alphas and let them know their young were in safe hands, and it cut complications of their omegas bleeding out after birth. They didn't care enough, it seemed, and I'd seen one too many omegas left on the hospital steps, only to die before being seen to.

My current line of work was sometime even more difficult to stomach. I was dealing with parents of missing omegas, and their search for their kids sometimes sent me down paths I'd never have traveled before, even with all my family's wealth, I couldn't always protect myself, or buy out of situations I got into.

Sat across from Mrs. Jeannie Berger in her one-story sandstone home in the middle of Nevada, she stifled her cried and blotted her eyes into a hankey she kept stuffed up her sleeve. "Noah wouldn't just cut contact," she said, and she'd said it several times before. "He would never leave us. He always told us where he was going, and we were always so proud of him."

Leaning forward as I scribbled notes, my brow furrowed. "We?" I asked. "I thought

you said your husband was out of the picture.”

She sniffled and nodded. “I meant my daughter. She looked up to her brother. He—he sent us money every week. It helped pay for childcare. You see, she’s still in school, and it’s impossible to pay for everything and then childcare between the time she finishes school and when I finish work.” Her hair was coiffed and coiled inside curlers.

“Listen, I’m going to find him,” I said, extending a hand and touching her knee. “I’ve been doing this for years. I’m pretty good at picking up a scent.”

“On your website, it didn’t really say much about what— type you are.”

“I’m from a family of flying squirrel shifters,” I told her. “I assume people knew who I was.” It’s why I wasn’t surprised whenever clients mentioned needing money, because people always needed money when they were talking to someone whose family was in the top richest in whatever magazine or article they’d read.

She shook her head, but the lacquered hair stayed still. “Sorry. I found you through a forum. Your website was mentioned, you’ve had success with these things,” she said. “You also said you do these for free, is that still right?”

“Yes, of course. This is free. I’m just here to bring families back together. Now, I have the email you send me,” I said, pulling a folded piece of paper from inside my notebook. “You’ve mentioned he worked odd jobs in Vegas and Reno, and he’s also been known to not have access to his phone for weeks at a time.”

She nodded to each point. “Yes, but he’s always sent the money. That’s why I know there’s something wrong this time. That’s why I know my son is missing. Please help.” She grabbed my arm. “I feel it in my bones.”

As did I, and I certainly wasn't a psychic. All the signs were there. This was clearly a missing omegas case. "I believe you. Ok. Now, if you can show me some of the most recent pictures of him, and any information on where he took this new job. I'll find him for you, don't worry. I'll find him."

I always felt a dread inside whenever I promised I'd find someone, because I never knew if I was going to find their missing omega dead or alive. I never wanted to deliver bad news, even as a nurse, giving bad news was—well, left up to the doctors, but it was still awful. There was such a large gray area in terms of what I could say and how much I could promise these families, it wasn't like they could sue me for promising them the world and delivering them a body bag. It was awful, but their closure was worth it.

After Jeannie showed me around her home and pictures of her son, Noah, she showed me his bedroom and even asked me to take some of his clothes, in the case I did find him, she wanted him to have fresh laundry. It was sweet, but I couldn't take it from her. I was already traveling in a fairly full car.

The kicker was when she handed me the contact card with the name of a company and a location. That was where Noah was supposedly employed, even though the phone was disconnected.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the first time I'd seen it.

The card listed the location as New Eden and the slogan was, building a better life for all , and I wondered just how true that was. New Eden was one of those ghost towns now existing in Nevada that had been a commercial project which fell through after millions of dollars were pumped into it.

Several other families in the area had been in contact, all of them in similar situations, and each one of them with the same creased, discolored card stock with the poorly

printed all caps words, NEW EDEN written on them.

It was difficult to tell these families all the rumors I'd heard, but they could hear them too if they searched the internet for half a second. This wasn't a place people went to for the new life that those cards promised. This was the place people went to and never came from.

Jeannie was the last person on my list of people to meet before I inevitably set off to the crumbly ruins of New Edens. Or what I assumed were going to be crumbly ruins. There was little information on the ghost town now, since anyone who got close to it was never heard from again.

I spent the night in a nearby town and the first heavy rain pour since I'd been in the deserts of Nevada came falling down. The motel on the side of the road had people standing outside their rooms by their trucks, staring up at the large clouds and embracing the full impact of the large raindrops.

I watched from my room as the sand outside turned dark. On the table in my room, I had a map of the state stretched open and pinned in place by a couple heavy items; my phone, two cups, and a plate.

"This could be the last time anyone sees me," I mused, checking the red dots on the map. Each of them occurred from the smaller towns around the larger cities, and each one had pulled at the omegas desperate enough to take on a job without checking it out first. "Or, I could be the first person to break the news of what's happening."

There was a lot riding on this, so much mystery, so many lives, each of them rested on my shoulders. My phone rang, my mom was calling. As I picked it up, the map curled up at the corner.

"Hey, mom," I answered. "Signal might be weak, so you might cut out."

“Sweetheart, when are you coming home?” she asked, her voice dripping in Southern charm. “I miss my baby. I don’t ever hardly see you now. It’s really awful sometimes because you know I like to have my home full.”

“I told you, I’m working,” I said.

She tutted at me in her signature way. “Not for us, you’re not. You’re just playing right now. And we let you, darling. But please, remember to come home. You know you’d easily take a position at the company, and maybe think about settling down.”

“I’ll think about.” It was better than going through the spiel of telling her time and time again how I didn’t want to bring life into this world. “I’m going to have to go now. It’s raining pretty bad here and I need to grab some stuff from my car and settle in for the night.”

“Where are you?” she asked. “I could charter a flight and come spend time with you. Maybe bring that peach cobbler I know you like.”

My stomach rumbled at the thought of some homecooked food, but it didn’t sway me. The last thing I needed was to be home where all my family cared about were their company. QuillAir was a private jet charter company. It was funny how we were all flying squirrel, even though we didn’t actually fly, we glided through the air. The entire family worked for the company, and my mom was now in charge of pilot training, hence her insistence on me coming back, hoping I’d rebrand myself for the third time. From nurse to private investigator, all the way to pilot. My brother, James was going to take over, so I didn’t need to worry about that, and my sister, Amelia was in marketing. They didn’t need me.

“I’ll be home as soon as I’ve finished this last case,” I said. “And for what it’s worth, I think you’ll be proud of me for it.”

“Well, baby, please don’t get yourself hurt,” she said. “Just because you know how to thread a needle through a wound, it doesn’t mean you’re invincible.”

I was thirty-three years old, but I was always my mom’s baby because I was the youngest. I didn’t mind it, it meant I got away with a lot, like being able to choose what I wanted for my life rather than being force into playing the part they wanted.

Once the call ended, another one came through.

Liam Barclay, my best friend of—too many years. “Your family are hounding me,” he said. “Your mom’s left me like a hundred messages. I think she’s using voice-to-text as well because some of these messages make no sense.”

“I just spoke to her,” I told him. “I don’t think I’ve had much signal the past couple of days.” In fact, I knew I hadn’t because the GPS on my car had gone weird a couple of times while driving between places. “I’m sure she’ll stop bothering you now.”

He chuckled. “And you know she absolutely hated to message me,” he said. “But who else was she going to ask, Zoe? Marcus? Your mom knows you broke up with Marcus, right?”

My eye twitched at the name. “I haven’t spoken to Marcus in years, and Zoe is busy in pilot training, she’s probably already got it every day from my mom.”

“I figured,” he laughed. “So, where the fuck are you?” he asked. “I’m not asking for her. I’m asking because the last time we spoke, you were in South East Asia. So, come on, what’s got you all hyper focused this time?”

Six months ago, I’d been in Thailand, the country of smiles, where I’d found one missing omega not quite as missing as his family had led me to believe. He was living a very happy life on a beach, thriving in the waters there. That one had been

easy to break to his family, even after he'd told me he didn't want them to know. He was a whale shark shifter and his family had been living in a landlocked American state.

"I'm probably going to keep that on the DL right now," I told him. "But I might be off the grid for a bit. You'll have to tell my mom that you've spoke to me if she asks. Tell her I'm fine, I'm working, and I'll call her when I'm free."

Liam sighed down the phone. I could feel him do that thing where he'd massage the inner eye with his knuckles. "Fine," he said. "But you owe me one, Soren. I'm being serious."

"And by one, you mean a free charter jet to the destination of your choosing."

He hung up. Liam was from a rival company, and our friendship was controversial in our parents eyes. It actually only pushed us closer as friends, but it's why my offer of him being given a free private jet flight was funny, since he had easy access to his own.

I was glad there wasn't another call coming through. Usually, from my experience, once I'd spoken to my mom about a job I was on, I would be immediately contacted by my aunt, her sister, Sophia, she was a lawyer, who worked for the family, and would advice me on how to stay out of trouble when I was conducting my private investigations.

There wasn't anything I needed to do now but wait. I had to wait for the rain to pass, and I had to sleep, but sleep didn't come easy when my nerves were all bundled up and tense. It was a sense of dread knocking me off-kilter. I knew something bad was going to come of my visit to New Eden, and I didn't want anyone close to me to be right about their predictions of me getting hurt, eventually.

Shortly after eating a cup of noodles with hot water, I napped. Waking to thunder claps and lightning strikes casting shadows of shapes through the closed curtains into my motel room. It was enough to rouse me and investigate.

Twitching at the curtain, I looked out into the parking lot directly outside the room to see a large black truck with two entwined red ouroboros snakes. I'd seen that before, ten years ago, marked on the arm of a young injured Alpha.

The Serpentine Syndicate were here.

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I stood out in the rain. The heavens were blessing my skin with all of its nutrient rich water from whichever region it had picked up all of the rain water from and drenched our cracked, barren land and my skin. In my slacks and open white shirt, I got drenched.

“Commander Vasilis,” a voice came from behind. “We have an envoy of new omegas on approach.” The Alpha was dressed in all black and carried a semi-automatic strapped across his chest. He was one of my underlings.

I turned to him and swooped a hand through my wet hair. “How far out are they?” I asked. “Is there room for them?”

“The lords have made room,” he said. “They’ve vacated bunker three. We’re going to need you to onboard all of them. Your brother—sorry, our Apex leader is otherwise occupied.”

With my head back once more, I let the rain water fire down on me. “Make sure you get each of them prepared for me,” I told him. “I’m going to be late. My body requires this connection with nature.”

“As you wish, Commander,” he said, giving me a salute and then dropping his hands to his side and marching off.

There wasn’t much to see on the surface, a bunch of broken down dilapidated buildings with crumbling wall panels that begged to be pushed to the ground. We kept them as is because they were great for tourists who frequented the area, although most of them never left, assuming they weren’t human. The humans came and went

as they pleased, the last thing we wanted was to make this us against them. We knew if it didn't effect them, they didn't fucking care. And we exploited that for everything it was worth.

New Eden might not have looked like much, but if you took a look, you'd see that all the action took place under the surface. The ventilated bunkers connected by long tubes underground, everything was connected, like a maze to some, and with only several entry and exit points, once you were in, you weren't getting out unless you were part of the syndicate.

I laid in the wet desert sand and looked up at the thunderous clouds as the heavy pour came on thicker and faster. I missed the rain. My species when shifted were meant to live in the lush tropics, we weren't meant for this dry, cracked, and unmoisturized way of living. It was inhumane, I didn't know how the other snake breeds managed it.

Another soldier approached with the same information. They were called fang soldiers inside the syndicate, there were also scale sergeants, venom lieutenants, fang commanders, which is where I was, and above me there were venom lords and my brother, our leader, the Apex.

"I'm very aware of the fact," I told them. "You know the drill. Strap them in, blindfold them, no sedation, and hiss. I like it when I can smell the fear sweats." My human tongue forked as it licked at the air and returned to normal.

"Yes, Commander." They said before stomping off.

I knew those underfoot in the bunkers would be able to hear every single stomp from above. It's what brought me up in the first place, all those heavy rain droplets. I knew something was happening, and I was pleased to see the sky and embrace the rain.

After five minutes of soaked up the rain, and having all my clothes carry the weight

oof what it had collected. I stripped naked at one of the covert bunker entrances under a floorboard in one of the abandoned buildings with a sheltered room still intact. I carried the clothes down into the bunker with me. I was proud of my naked body. I worked hard on every single muscle on me, almost like snake scales, they were my human armor. And if that wasn't threat enough, I was also gifted with something very few serpent shifters possessed in human form, two cocks.

Walking naked through the soldiers sleeping quarters was a show of power. We had omegas and Alphas bunk together, forcing them to confront their urges when they happened. It meant when one omega was in heat, all the Alphas would go at them until they became pregnant. It was their choice, the syndicate considered carrying a child and the future of the syndicate to be one of the biggest things you could do, and you were rewarded well for it. Everyone wanted to be that omega in heat, and the Alpha whose seed beat out all the others.

I had no kids and no want for them. I hadn't found the one, and I didn't want a kid if there wasn't love. I knew what happened to a kid that grew up without two parents in love, and that was someone like me. Their entire life and identity in constant question. It was an opinion best kept to myself though, and a secret I'd die with.

"Vasilis," my name was hissed at me as I stepped out into the hallway. "You know clothes aren't optional." Naja clicked her tongue at me as her eyes flashed an intense green. "We have standards to uphold here. And you're going to have to take them serious." Naja was one of the Venom Lords. The Head of Intelligence for the syndicate. She wore tight corseted outfits, made with the bones of those she'd killed. "Your quarters are that way. In case you forgot." She snapped her head in the direction of my room.

"Got it, Naja, you can always swallow that venom, you don't have to always spit it," I said as I walked passed her in the direction of my room. I knew she was looking at me, all of me. Everyone did. It was only natural, even for her, a fellow Alpha.

In my quarters, a replica build of the jungle with moss, branches, and vines growing around everywhere. There were fans and a constant spray of mist to keep the atmosphere nice and hydrated, but it was nothing like the hydration of nature. The water in the mist sprays were purified.

I laid on my hard mattress and looked up at the ceiling which showed the outlines of the metal frame of the box I was inside, removing me from my fantasy. It also pulled me together. I was Vasilis fucking Vepres, and I was a killer, I wasn't living in the unaware bliss of a jungle, I had a job to do.

The underground was constantly being worked on to expand. And at current, there were three bunkers connected to this main hub. They housed pods of omegas who had mostly volunteered themselves for this great cause.

In my syndicate clothing, a full black suit, capable of hiding any blood stain, I headed to bunker three. The newest batch of omegas were being offloaded and waiting on me, or my brother. Really, any Vepres, but since there was only me or my brother at the Nevada location, I was pretty busy.

The bunkers were capable of housing twenty omegas. This one only had six. They were strapped into the beds that lined either side of the bunker with a large pathway between them for another ten beds if we pleased.

"Commander Vepres," a soldier saluted me. "They've been bound, blindfolded, and we haven't administered the sedative yet."

I shook my head. "This group will not receive the sedative," I announced. "I want to see the full effects." The smell of fear consumed the room. It was bliss, my cocks throbbed in unison. Just because I didn't want to mate, it didn't mean I wasn't using them. "Listen up, you're not going to die here. You're not even going to remember half of what happens to you here. You are, however, going to become very weak, and

you will grow sick, but you will be kept alive because you are worth more to us alive than you are dead.”

“At least for the time being,” one of the Venom Lieutenants said from ahead. His teeth were blackened from over-exposure to Rotmor, a toxin carried through my bite. Other serpents didn’t feel the full effects of the disease my bite carried, they were immune to it, but it didn’t stop them from sneaking syringes of the stuff out for their own use.

“Tried and tested,” I said, approaching him. “But in future, I’d rather you didn’t set an example like that to the younger recruits.”

He bowed his head in a nod. “Of course, apologies.” He tried his best to keep his rotted teeth hidden this time. It was such a mark on the syndicate that we couldn’t clean, no matter how much we tried, and we tried, but Rotmor was far more toxic than any of us could’ve realized at the time.

I stalked the aisle, up and down my feet clamping on the metal tubing of the bunker, scaring each of the omegas strapped to the bed. My mouth shifted to fangs and my tongue into a forked shape. It inhaled the stench of their fear, and I wanted more of it. I needed more of it.

Starting at one side of the room, I dipped a knee in front of an omega woman. She was sniffing and sobbing, begging for her life. She’d been paid, whether or not she was getting any use of it was another question, but the funds were transferred. I pushed myself close to her face and flicked my tongue, licking at the sweat on her skin. Pure adrenaline, so sweet and salty, I would’ve torn her face over if I thought I’d be able to keep the high.

“I already told you,” I whispered in her ear. “You’re not going to die here. You will feel pain. You will think death might happen at any minute, and you will of course,

beg for death and beg for more.”

“Please, please, please,” she begged.

I sank my teeth into her neck and spray my venom inside her. I missed the artery on purpose, the goal wasn't death, the goal was to puncture the muscle and push the venom into the hardest working areas. All of that screaming doing all of the work of pushing the venom through her system. She wasn't even screaming because of the venom, and the puncture were like small needles, hardly painful. She was just scared.

It wasn't until a minute later when I walked across to the second omega when she felt the first wave of venom, and the initial hit of Rotmor. She was silent and frozen on the spot. I knew behind the blindfold, her eyes were cloudy as she went through the first stage, hallucinations.

“Keep her strapped in,” I said. “Tighten them. She'll hurt herself when she starts thrashing around.”

One of the soldiers stood by the bed and pulled the binding on her wrists tight. It wasn't the worst thing in a world, I had made them all a promise that they wouldn't die here, and I was going to keep it.

Biting each of the omegas and inflicting them with my poison and the Rotmor disease it carried, I was exhausted. I laid down on one of the uncomfortable bed and propped myself up on an elbow to look out at them as they all moaned and groaned under their own limbs that fought to gauge their own eyes out. I knew that's what they wanted to do because I'd witnessed it happen before.

“There's something so beautiful about seeing them go through all of this,” I said to whoever was listening. “It's just a shame I've never been able to experience it myself. Very sad, in fact.”

“It’s a great experience. It opens up your third eye. Like you can see the universe collapsing in on itself and then rebirthing in a loop until you’re back to who you are.” One of the black-toothed soldiers spoke to me, the waft of his dead teeth in his mouth drafted out and assaulted my senses.

I sat upright and swung my legs off the side of the bed. My upturned snarl showing just what I thought about the soldier speaking to me. Not only did we have to deal with the omegas thirsty for the venomous high, but our own kind were dealing with their own affliction.

The venom didn’t have the same effect on other serpent shifters. It was actually one of the sure ways we could test to see if any of the omegas had lied to us about their lineage. But that never happened, serpent shifters were proud of their heritage, nobody would ever hide that from the world.

“Let me know if anything changes in them,” I said, slapping both hands off my knees. “And that means any discoloration of their skin, lesions, or maybe a mutation.” Because in the end, that was one of the goals.

The entire Serpentine Syndicate’s operation was to take over. We had operations in California, Arizona, and here, in Nevada. They weren’t my choices, I’d have preferred somewhere more tropical, but the Vepres family, my family were all here, not natives to this land, we were an invasive species, and we were only just beginning to sink our teeth into the world.

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Ten Years Ago

I'd heard the crash when it happened. There were always crashes of small drones being piloted around the acres of family land around Peachtree City, Georgia. Sitting under a large tree as I worked through yet another medical textbook hoping that I would take in the information from sheer osmosis. I'd re-read the same page several times over on cesarean cuts, but my mind could only think about how everything was geared toward human anatomy in these books. I didn't think anything of the crash again until I heard a whimper.

Swinging into action, every day was a learning day when I was still trying to get my degree. I loved all hands-on experience I could get, and someone hurt was the perfect situation for me to try and help.

By the large red-brick wall, a bright contrasting blue snake slithered up the walls, leaving a trail of blood almost like it was a slug leaving behind slime. It dropped, twice while I watched it attempt to work its way up the wall again. And in the bush where it landed, a hand forced out of the greenery and the whimper came again.

"Hello?" I called out.

The voice came back strained but incoherent.

Approaching it, I knew this was someone who shouldn't have been on our land. "Are you hurt?"

It hissed. "Stay away."

“No,” I said, forcing myself forward into the bush, spreading the branches apart to see a man with a large bloody line, jagged through his face, jaw, and slashed down to his collarbone. “You’re going to need stitches.”

He hissed again, his intense green eyes had vertical slit pupils for a second, just as his tongue had been forked.

“Firstly, you’re in no position to refuse,” I told him. “And secondly, I don’t think you’re here because you’re working on the garden. If you want to die, I’ll leave you, but the last thing we need is a dead body on the property.”

“I just need a minute,” he said, his eye twitching as his pupils shifted back to vertical slits and once more to regular circular pupils. “I’ll start healing. I—” He dug his hands into the soil. “I’m going to.”

“Jeez, all you Alphas are the same, huh?” I sighed, dipping to a knee in front of him in the bush. “You’re going to need to stop struggling and let me help. You’re only going to make it worse for yourself. Whatever healing abilities you have, I don’t think they’re going to kick in. You’ve been injured.”

I looked around. There didn’t appear to be anyone with him, or anyone calling for him. It was possible they were in shifted forms.

“I can’t go to the hospital,” he spat.

“Don’t worry. I’m a nurse, well, in training,” I told him, and spotted more blood cling to the fabric of his shirt under his collar. “I need to assess the damage to know what I need.” Unbuttoning his shirt, I spotted a red-ink tattoo, raised on his tanned skin. Two ouroboros snakes connected to each other.

He tried to protest and hiss, but he couldn’t move. From my initial inspection, he

might've broken his collarbone. It could've happened from a fall over the wall, but the slash seemed intentional, and less like an injury sustained from crash landing here.

I could barely sleep with all the thoughts about the Serpentine Syndicate. I hadn't thought about them for many years. It was entirely possible they were still in operation and I wasn't imagining things. I didn't want to think about how much they must have grown since my last encounter with them, but if my memory of Vasilis Vepres was anything to go by, this was going to be a lot tougher than I expected.

Vasilis had been caught in an altercation near my family's home in Georgia, he'd sustained injuries that would've seen him dead if I hadn't been there to help nurture him back to health. I'd stitched him up and let him live in the guest house where I made him nutrient rich broth that saw him on his feet. I didn't learn about how dangerous he was until after he was back to full health.

The following morning was back to clear skies and a heat that sopped up all the wet earth, forcing it back to the arid sands once again. I made my way closer to New Eden, wondering if that's where the van with the two snakes had been going. My gut told me that's where they'd been headed.

There were fewer places to pitstop for refueling or food on the way. Most ghost towns around Nevada had become tourist attractions where people would come together and cosplay their Western fantasies where they walked around in Stetsons and chaps. It was almost like all the fun was being drained out of the environment.

According to my paper map which I played close attention to now that my GPS was truly dead and phone had zero signal, I was only thirty minutes away from the New Eden site. And almost as if my prayers had been answered, on the side of the road, a

small seedy looking bar next to a gas station and convenience store were within view.

The parking lot was full of motorcycles and vans, but not the van I'd seen last night, and none of them had the snake decals. I was disappointed, and questioned what I'd seen last night. Maybe it had all been a fever dream brought on by the humidity of the heavy rain.

Outside the bar, two women stood under the awning, spritzing themselves with water in one hand and fanning themselves with a small mechanical hand fan in the other.

"Hey, stud," one of them said.

"You looking for a little fun?"

Humans. They were covered in marks from scratches to bites. "No, thanks," I said, passing them to walk inside. The bar was cool, blasted by air conditioning from all angles. I sighed, barely noticing at all the people inside turn to me, as if I'd walked in on a private meeting. They were a mix of Alphas and omegas here.

A burly man in a leather biker jacket stood behind the bar. "What can I get you?" he asked, grabbing a dirty glass and rubbing inside it. "We don't do cocktails, if that's what you're after." He offered a wry smile, and looked at the tables of people behind me.

"I'll take a bottle of water," I said. "Or cola, whatever you've got in that fridge behind you."

He slammed the glass down on the counter behind the bar. "You don't want a beer?" he asked. "You're best off getting something on tap. It's expensive otherwise."

"I've got a drive ahead of me," I said. "Speaking of, actually, any chance you've got

information on what's happening in New Eden?"

The bar fell silent with the exception of the low thurm and buzz of the air conditioning units. The man behind the bar in his loose cutoff denim top, flexing his sand dirt muscles and the symbol from the van. Those two snakes were here. I didn't know if I was in the belly of the beast, but the beast was here, and I didn't know if Vasilis would be, but suddenly, I could smell him in the air. He was both sweet like a fresh apple, and rotted.

"New Eden is a dead zone," he said. "You're not going to make it there, if that's your goal. I'm not saying that to be an asshole. You are probably best turning around out there in the lot and going home."

It was conflicting with the information in my brain, the idea that they were kidnapping omegas, but also the idea that they didn't want me going there. I assumed they would've told me to keep driving and let me be ambushed on the road. Or maybe the ambush was already prepared in the bar.

The man grabbed me an icy cold can of cola and passed it across the bar to me. "Are you refueling as well?" he asked.

"I wasn't sure if that was functional."

He nodded. "Yeah, of course. This place is full service."

"Do I pay you or do I pay the machine out there?"

The man smirked. I didn't know what he was trying to suggest, that I go out to my car, that I leave, that I stay for this small talk. The room was still quiet, even with all the hushed voices around me. I didn't know if they were getting closer, but they were definitely talking about me. The hairs on my neck and a tickle at my inner ear were

on the verge of driving me crazy.

The bartender leaned in. “Nothing good will come out of this,” he said. “Not for you. If you’ve got any senses going for you, get back out there, start your engine and just go. It’s a dangerous place for an omega like yourself.”

Sipping the cola, the bubbles on my tongue had my eyes rolling from the hit of cold. “I’m pretty sure I can handle myself on the road,” I told him. “I’ll take your words under advisement. But, if you know anything about New Eden, I’d like to know. Please.”

He looked around and back to me. “There’s nothing there for you kid,” he said. “You’re best off leaving.”

“Why?” I asked. My tongue firm between my teeth. “I know you’re—” I glanced and nodded to the tattoo on his arm. “Are they operating?”

A single nod, but his eyes were filled with fear, for me, or for him? “Save yourself, before it’s too late. The Rotmor will get you if they don’t.”

Before I could ask him another question, a single bullet shot, smashing into the glass behind his head. He ducked and scurried off behind the counter.

Both groups of people in all the same matching biker jackets stood and circles me. The one who’d fired the bullet moving closer, his gun still out. A red headed man all of it attempted to being tamed and pushed back inside a black bandana.

“Now who am I going to pay for this soda to?” I asked.

He approached, his teeth blackened, the stench of rot without any of the sweetness I’d smelled on Vasilis all those years ago was present. “Someone will take his place,” he

said. “But you heard the man. You should be on your way.”

“I’m going to New Eden,” I said.

He shook his head. “It’s a dead zone out there. I don’t see why you’d be going that way. But if you want to, I’m sure my guys here can make a little hog tie between our bikes and drive you there ourself.”

“What’s going on there?” I asked.

None of them had an answer. None of them wanted to answer, from their hums and grumbles, I was on the right path. I was keeping it mostly together. The last thing you could show an Alpha was fear, they fed on that shit.

“You don’t wanna know,” another man said, pushing through the crowd. Shorter with red hair. His mouth was covered in the same darkened substance that coated his lips and teeth. “But you can tell whoever you work for that nothing is happening.”

They knew something about me then. “I work for?”

Another red head, a woman made her way through. “We ran your plates the minute you parked,” she said. “Soren Quillen, private investigator, and of relation to the family who own QuillAir. You should leave. This doesn’t concern you.”

That’s why they didn’t want me in here. I was too high profile for them to kidnap li they had the other omegas they’d snatched up from the streets with the promise of money. They couldn’t do that to me. They knew, or at least they assumed someone would have a search party out for me if I went missing.

“Then you’ll know that I don’t really listen to people,” I said. “Now, I’ll be going to New Eden one way or another, whether you tell me what’s there, or you let me find

out for myself. That's up to you."

They all fell silent.

"It's the Serpentine Syndicate, isn't it?" I asked. "That's what you're all out here trying to protect."

The first man, seemingly their leader nodded slightly. "If you know that, then why do you want to go?" he asked. "They'll rip you limb from limb."

"Well, you said it yourself. I'm a Quillen. Anything happens to me, my family will come down on you with the full force of the law," I told them, not quite sure it was true, because it would take them a while to even figure out what happened to me. It wasn't like I clued any of them in on what I was doing. "So, why should I go?"

"The Rotmor," another one of them said. "It'll kill you, eventually." The man tapped a cane in his hand, resting his entire body on it. "Will crumble your bones from the inside, turn them into blackened sludge. Please, leave."

The more they told me, the more I planned on going to see what the fuck Vasilis had done with his life. He owed me answers. I'd saved him from death, he owed me more than just answers. He also owed me every single omega he'd taken, and whatever Rotmor was.

"I guess I'll—" I began as the door of the bar open, the glass layer smashed.

Behind the light, standing like a god, carved from marble. A figure I'd recognize anywhere in the world. Vasilis Vepres was here, and the second everyone else noticed him, they scattered into corners of the bar.

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Of course, of all the people in this world, the one person who would have the ability to track me down and pull me out of my duties to the Syndicate was the one I'd tried to stop thinking about the most.

Without speaking to each other, I'd grabbed him by the wrist. He didn't struggle and into a van where he even buckled himself into the passenger seat. I drove us further from New Eden to one of the dilapidated warehouses we often used as a pitstop.

"After all of this, you'll have to drive me back for my car," Soren Quillen said in a huff. "We could've talked back there."

I took him by the wrist again and pulled him willingly into the crumbling warehouse. It was empty and we could talk without prying ears or eyes on us.

"I assumed you'd gotten yourself killed," he continued. "You know, you just fucking left one day. You didn't say you were going, you didn't even leave me a way to keep in contact with you. And before you get a big head, I didn't come here looking for you."

"Shut up," I snapped, taking us into a room with worn down sofas where most of the stuffing was flattened and pulled out of the cushions in chunks. I pushed him slightly onto the sofa, and he barely even moved, but sat himself regardless of the push. "You shouldn't be here. I know, I know, I know what you've done with your life, Soren. You graduated as a nurse, you saved lives, and then you got your PI license and started investigating whatever it is you decided was the thing to investigate."

"Looks like I'm doing the two things you hate the most," Soren said, folding his arms

over each other and showcasing some of the muscle he'd built in his forearms and chest. Since we'd last met, he'd massed more muscle. I was impressed. "You know, saving people who you're putting in hospitals, and investigating missing omegas who you're probably responsible for taking."

I sat beside him and placed an arm across his torso as if I was the mechanical arm of a rollercoaster, keeping him on the sofa. "You don't know what happened when I left. You don't know my duties. All you know is that omegas are going missing. But they're not. These omegas are being paid for the medical trial they're going through. So, whoever is telling you different, you're going to need to go back to them and let them know."

"Medical trials?" he asked, hooking his hands under my arm. "What type of medical trials? Does this have something to do with Rotmor, whatever that is."

I smirked. It shouldn't be known, but whoever had been at that bar definitely let it slip. "Rotmor is a blood-born disease. It's carried in my bloodline. I infect people with it."

"So?"

"So, you don't know what you're talking about," I said. "These omegas you're out here trying to find. They're not here because we've kidnapped them. They're here because they want to make money for their families."

His chest deflated as my arm rested against it. "No," he said. "That's not right. If they knew, they'd have told their families that's what they were doing, instead of some job."

I didn't like lying to Soren. He'd quite literally saved my life, but it was the answer we gave to anyone who asked questions. "It's all part of the documentation they

signed. They're under strict control. They can't talk to anyone outside their program they're undergoing. But trust me, they are being paid for it." That was true, and in some ways, this was a medical trial, but not to find a cure or antidote. This was a trial to develop the most lethal strain of Rotmor, and kill of the vampires in the north, or wherever they were collecting now.

"You're going to take me to them," he snapped. "You're going to take me to them where I can see what they're going through, and I can report back to their families that they're actually fine. I'm not doing it for a check, you know that. I'm doing this because I have a genuine care for these omegas, which is more than I can say for the reputation of your gang."

Something about seeing Soren took me back ten years. It was both a happy place, and a painful one.

Ten Years Ago

Soren had stitched me up. He continued to prod me with questions at every turn. Feeding me soup and pausing before I could actually sip it to ask me yet another question.

In the beige bedroom full of natural light, I'd been here a few days and nights already. My family must've thought I was dead, or I'd gotten away and was laying low. It could've been the former, but I was glad it was the latter.

"Who were you running from?" Soren asked, nearly spilling soup on my in the bed. "And why are you struggling to self-heal?"

"I don't remember." My stock excuse for him. "Is it that big of a deal?"

“Yes, because the tattoo says this might be gang related,” he said. “And I just want you to tell me the truth. Are you still in trouble?”

“I might be,” I said and attempted to shrug, but my collar throbbed with so much pain my limbs nearly lashed out and knocked the bowl of soup. “Just let me stay here and heal. Please. Does it matter who I was running from?”

Soren sucked the soup from the spoon himself. “Mhmm, it’s good,” he said. “But I’m worried about you. And I don’t mind helping you. Assuming you’re not some killer, but you don’t look or—smell like a killer.”

“And how do I smell?”

He leaned in close, his head to my neck. “Sweet,” he whispered, tingling in my ear. “Very sweet.”

I turned my head and we kissed.

On the sofa, I couldn’t keep combating each of his questions the way I had been. When he wanted answers, he would do anything to get them. I could only assume since we’d last met, he’d gotten even better at asking, or demanding answers.

“Do I smell different?” I asked, throwing a curve ball in his questions.

“Yes,” he said, plainly. “I should have let the gardeners find you and my parents would’ve called the police.”

Dropping my arms, I looked at Soren in his big eyes. “You think that’s what you’d do, but you got a lot of practice in.” I tilted my head and took his hand. “I healed up

nicely, don't you think?" With his forefinger, I controlled the tip of it to feel out the scars his stitching had crafted on my face, and then down to my collar behind my shirt. Soren pulled his hand away. "I never actually properly thanked you for all the help you did."

He shook his head and screwed his eyes. "No," he snapped. "You did. I know you did. You—you—you sent all those injured omegas to the hospital I worked at. I know it was you. I know."

My heart might've frozen in my chest with the moment all time could've stopped. He'd caught me, somehow. "How did you—"

"I could smell you on them," he said and grabbed me by the shirt collar. "You're fucking evil. You were never this evil. You weren't." He shook his head. "When I met you, when I saved you, you were—"

"I was always going to end up like this," I told him, giving in to the way he pulled on my clothes in his direction. "It's one of the reasons I could never answer your questions. I didn't want to implicate you in it all."

He scoffed. "Implicate me in what?"

"My life. My family. You think I wanted to leave? You think I wanted to do what I'm doing now? Because I'm going to tell you now. All I've ever wanted was my own life. I've never had that same luxury you've had. And if that makes me a bad person from doing what I have to, then sure, I'm a bad person, but I'm not going to let you come to New Eden, just to end up like—" My teeth clenched to keep me from saying anything else. I didn't want to see Soren strapped to a bed, going through all that hell.

"End up like what?" he asked, pulling me nearly on top of him. "Come on. You're actually close to telling me the truth. I can feel it."

My brow eased as I smiled at him. “Nothing,” I said. Even if he did make it to New Eden. He wouldn’t have found the base. I still didn’t want to take that chance, but he was going to do whatever he wanted, and I’d have to protect him from the hell that would rain down on him from anyone who tried him. He’d saved my life. I had to save his.

“I’m stronger now,” he said, as if he hadn’t been proving his strength with his hold on me and my shirt. “I can handle it. Just let me see the omegas so I can tell their families they’re ok.”

“No.”

In a swift motion, he swung a leg around and straddled my lap, pinning me against the hard frame of the sofa. Just when I thought he was going to start beating down on my chest and face, he paused to stare at me. “How come your mouth isn’t like those people from the bar?”

“That’s one variant of Rotmor,” I told him. “It’s in my blood, my venom. It’s not something I want to expose you to.”

“I’m sure I already have been.” He placed both hands on my shoulders, digging his fingers into my collarbones. “Take me. Take me to them.”

I flickered my forked tongue at him. “I don’t want to have to do this,” I said. “But you’re going to leave me with no choice.”

“What do you mean?”

My fanged teeth and mouth opened wide as I shifted form completely into a blue lipped pit viper, right before him, I slithered off the sofa and up his leg, coiled myself around his thigh. He tried to grab at me and hit me, but I was targeting the artery in

his upper thigh, cutting off the supply of blood flow and for him to fall unconscious. I didn't want to hurt him, and he left me with no choice now.

After a couple of minutes, he was unconscious. I slithered out of his trouser leg and shifted back into my human form. Soren was positioned oddly, falling forward onto the sofa. His ass, a lot thicker than I remembered in the air.

I couldn't leave him like this. I couldn't see him left here for the hungry serpents that used this place in passing. But I also couldn't take him back to New Eden, where I was expected soon. I hauled him into my arms before flinging him over a shoulder.

"You're going to thank me for this when you wake up," I told him as I carried him out to the truck. I placed him in the passenger seat and fastened him in safely. "In doing this for you, I think that makes us even. I'm saving you."

I knew I'd have to tell him the same thing again when he woke up, but I was going to take him back to safety. I drove down the road, further from New Eden and found the motel he must've stayed at on his way here. I stopped and called the bar for them to bring his car to the motel.

"He's not going to be an issue," I said over the phone as I looked to his peaceful sleeping body in the passenger seat. "Just bring the car and I'll give you something for the trouble."

All those Rotmor intoxicated serpents were the same. Since it couldn't kill them, they were addicted to it. It was better than paying them in money when they would only ever ask for a vial of venom which they'd share amongst their group and get high from.

"Soren," I mumbled to myself as I turned my head in his direction. "I'm really sorry this is how it has to be. But you've got to understand. My family would kill you if

they knew what you did for me, and that would—” A sudden choked breath caught in my throat. “That would—break me.”

I heard his heart thump an extra beat. And I knew he’d heard me.

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I laid on a soft surface as Vasilis's serpent tongue whispered and told me stories about his life. I'd assumed we were in the motel given all the things he'd said, and he knew I was conscious, but being knocked out with whatever he did to my body had done a number to me. Granted, it was the best night of sleep I'd had in weeks.

"You know, I never wanted you to find me," he said. "I liked to think of the time we spent together as this perfect parcel of peace from my memory, stuck in amber like some artefact I'd uncover when I got older and realized the mistake I'd made by not following my heart."

A single tear surfaced from the corner of my eye. I didn't know if he'd poisoned me or what was happening for this emotional response, but whatever it was, my eyes were leaking and I didn't know if they were ever going to stop.

"Soren, you've got to hear me when I say to you, it's dangerous out there, I need you to stay here and go home when you're ready. Please."

My muscles worked overtime for them to summon words. A single word, in fact. "No." There was one thing he needed to remember about me. I was stubborn, and I wasn't going to let him smooth talk me into getting his way, again.

"That's not what I wanted to hear," he said. "And I think you know what I wanted to hear. It'll be easier if you just accept this."

Under the weight of my own body, I struggled to shuffle myself over on the bed. I huffed and sighed. "I'm not—going." I sucked in a deep inhale and blinked my eyes open to see the deep beige dirt walls and ceiling of the motel room I'd stayed in.

“Well, then it looks like I might have tie you up for your own safety,” he said.

“No,” I protested, pushing myself and falling back onto the hard cushion of the bed.

“I know you’re better than this. I know you’re not the family you have.”

The weight of the bed shifted as he sat on the end of it beside me. “Well, it’s not like I’m giving you much of a choice,” he said. “Soren. Please, for your own safety, stay here.”

That wasn’t going to happen. There wasn’t a world that excited where I gave up and gave in like this. Vasilis was clearly part of his family now, whether he was or wasn’t part of the syndicate before, he definitely was now. The man who’d gone from telling me the soup was too hot, to the man who was threatening to tie me to a bed and inflict me with whatever disease his venom carried.

“You’re not going to find anything,” he said. “You’re just going to end up getting yourself in danger, and I’m the one who will have to witness it. I’ve saved your life once already, at the bar. I’m not so sure I could comfortable do it again.”

My weakened limbs reached out and grabbed him, pulling on his arm. “I can protect myself,” I snapped. “Now, you owe me more than just telling me you saved my life. You owe me the respect of telling me the truth.”

Vasilis shook his head and pulled himself away, standing across from me. He paced the motel room floor in front of the bed. “I’m protecting you by not telling you,” he said. “I’ve already told you too much. If you know anymore, it’s my head on the block, and there are many people who would love to see it. They’d feast on my body, they’d put me on ice as they extracted venom from me until I died.”

I shook my head. “If that’s the people you want to be associated with, then go for it, but I’m going to find out what happened to all the people on my list,” I told him,

resting a head against my head as if keeping it upright. I was still suffering a bout of dizziness from the way he'd knocked me unconscious. "The alternative is, we can work together, you can be free, Vasilis. And don't worry, you won't even owe me for the second time I save your life."

A smirk appeared, thin on his lips. He shook his head and pressed his forefinger and thumb into his eye sockets. "It's in my nature to do what I'm doing for my family," he said. "I'm a predator, Soren. I'm the natural enemy to so many."

"To me," I said. "I know you are, it's why I kept you a secret in the guest house. If my family had known, they might've had you shot."

"Then they're no better than me," he said. "Killers."

I knew he was a killer, whether it was those omegas I was searching for was another question altogether. He'd told me he hadn't killed them, and I was inclined to believe his words, but I didn't want to be confronted with him lying to me. I was owed so much more than the bullshit I could feel he was about to spew in my direction.

"Would you try and kill me if I kept searching for an answer?" I asked in the quiet we'd used to contemplate who we were to each other.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't, but it doesn't mean you wouldn't get hurt."

"Then help me. Help me pull the curtain on this entire thing. You can get away from it all. It's not who you are, Vasilis. You're not the person your family is forcing you to be."

Before he could say anything else, a knock came at the motel door. I could only stare as he answered it to two of the red headed men from the bar. They'd brought my car back here. It was a set back, but I knew I had enough gas in the tank to get back to the

gas station at the bar and refuel.

“I’m going to need the two of you to stay outside this room and watch to make sure that when he leaves, he doesn’t come back down near New Eden,” Vasilis instructed the men, and walked right by them.

My heartbeat throbbed in my throat. “You’re not—you’re not serious right now,” I said, but he left, and didn’t turn back to me. This wasn’t the same man I knew, that was obvious, but it hurt nonetheless to know that I’d saved a man who was putting more omegas in the ground than would have happened if I’d let him die in that bush ten years ago.

The men closed the door and spoke to each other outside. They were stationed here now, and I didn’t like that idea. It was the only way out. I didn’t have the energy to fight it just yet. I would need to think, and possibly hydrate. My tongue and lips were dried out.

This was going to be difficult now. I had no plan on how to evade Vasilis’s men, but I could absolutely do some damage. As a flying squirrel, I was quite small, and my claws were sharp. I could scratch their eyes out and then I’d be no better than them.

With the small fridge unit, stocked with waters and sports drinks boasting the electrolyte content, I hydrated and got my mind right about what I was going to do. There was no straight answer to the actions I were about to utilize, but I just had to do it. I had to commit to the promise I’d made to each of those families.

I parted the window, it opened with only a slight shuffle. The two men were standing right outside, their voices louder now. I knocked on the door and within seconds, I shifted into my dusty gray and silver flying squirrel form. I crawled up the curtains and landed on the window frame.

“You can leave whenever you want,” they said, opening the door.

“Yeah, we’re not stopping you from leaving, just as long as you leave the way you came.”

They walked inside, and I jumped from the window frame outside, spreading my arms and legs to glide the short path out. There was a single motorcycle parked up beside me car. I clawed through several of the wires under the bike, and one of them leaked out a fluid.

Neither of the men had even noticed I’d left the room until I was in the car, keying the engine in human form again. They ran toward me, one of them jumping on the bike.

“You know you need to go that way,” one of them said, pointing left.

I raced out of the parking lot and went right. I wasn’t going to listen to some non-lethal snake types, I snickered to myself thinking they were probably corn snakes or something people kept as pets.

There was a sweet relief in the stifled warm air. I’d made it out of that room, back in my car, and Vasilis was probably going to be showing me the way to New Eden with whatever tracks he’d left behind.

Fifteen minutes on the road, I felt comfortable enough to play some music as a celebration of the relief. TLC ‘Waterfalls ’ was on the radio. It was right at the chorus. The melodic beats had me sighing and near the verge of tears after what had happened this morning.

“I’m fucking coming for you,” I spat. “You wouldn’t have tried this hard to hide if you knew what you were doing was fine.”

A crackle popped under the map on my passenger seat. Vasilis voice came through. “Turn the music down,” he said. “I’m trying to listen to all that anger.”

Under the map, there was a small device. “Hello?” I picked it up, there was a metal antenna on it, and a speaker.

“You know, I’m looking forward to you coming to find me,” he said. “But I told you not to.”

“You bugged me?”

“It’s not a bug, well, it is, but I left it on your seat,” he said. “It’s just one of the devices we use to stay in contact with vehicles on the road. I’m glad I knew to plant one on you though. You couldn’t resist.”

“This time, I’m not going to save you,” I said. “This time, I’m going to make sure you get sent away for a very long time, and if you don’t, well, I’m sure all the families of these omegas would be happy enough to each throw something sharp and heavy at you.” I threw the device out of the window before he could try and corrupt me any further. I had a lot of sympathy for Vasilis. I knew he didn’t want the life his family were giving him, but people changed.

My mind raced, trying to put this version of Vasilis in my mind. He was quickly replacing the man I knew in my early twenties, the man I’d even imagined a life with. A man who had once told me that he felt something special between us, only to leave.

Ten Years Ago

Taking care of Vasilis’s wounds was good practice, cleaning them, and making sure

there were no signs of infection. I wouldn't be able to count it as credit for my classes, but I knew it could handle high pressure situations.

"There's so much we don't know about healing for our kind," I said to Vasilis as I pressed a warm cloth that had been soaked in tea tree oil.

"You know, you'd make a great career out of healing our people," he said and sucked on his teeth. "I wish I knew why I wasn't healing properly."

"Maybe if you were open and honest with me, I'd be able to really look into it." I knew he'd been lying to me. Maybe it was just the deep green eyes that seemed to hypnotize me, or the way his breath, even without daily brushing of his teeth was oddly sweet. On numerous occasions, it had nearly had me in a haze where I could feel myself wanting to kiss him.

"I've been open," he said. "I've been—" He sucked once more, his eye twitching as I pressed the warm cloth against his collarbone. "You've got eyes. You've seen the marks on my body. You know more than you think."

I had known more than he was telling me, but I wanted him to tell me regardless. I wanted him to open him and express himself. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Alphas weren't known to express themselves, ever. "Nobody has come looking for you, still."

"Nobody will," he said. "So, if you're waiting on someone knocking t the door of your fancy mansion."

I scoffed. "It's not mine. It's my parents."

He smiled. "I know, I know. I'm just—"

“Give me one real emotion,” I said, dipping and ringing the cloth out. “Just one.”

“One?”

“One.”

Vasilis’s sweet exhale in my face had me almost falling across him as my eyelids fluttered. “Ok,” he said. “You make me feel seen. And not just as an Alpha, but as me.”

If only I knew who he was, really. I’d tried to see him, and maybe that’s what he was mistaking it for. “Is that really an emotion?”

He chuckled and tssked his teeth together as he moved too quickly and disturbed the cuts in the midst of healing on his collar. I still didn’t have an answer as to how he got it. It looked like a claw if I had to guess, but he wouldn’t confirm it.

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There was more to the reason why I was keeping Soren away from the compound in New Eden, and I couldn't tell him why. I could barely even tell myself the reason why, because I wanted to forget it had ever even happened. It happened back when he was taking care of me, and I was bound to a bed, unable to move, but in complete control of my mental faculties. Soren hadn't really seen what I'd done to him back then, and I didn't want him finding out.

Part of me wanted to drive back and intercept him on his drive, but I was needed back at New Eden to check on the newest import of omegas. I wracked my brains to try and figure out a way to keep Soren out, but without physically holding him down and injuring him, I was shit-out of options.

I exchanged vehicles from the van to my motorcycle to get back to the compound. I hoped Soren would see the van when he needed to refuel, and I'd be able to cage him up there. It was the plan I'd called in to the bar. They'd picked up a fair share of omegas for us in the past. The only difference being, they weren't allowed to injure him this time. No cattle prod or electric cages, or venom.

Arriving at New Eden through the underground parking, I was met by Naja in her all-black attire with her hair scraped back with gel. She hummed at me and rolled her eyes. Her manicured hands tapping at a tablet. "You're reckless," she said. "You're always reckless. I wonder how long it would take you to fuck this entire operation."

"I was dealing with someone," I told her. She was on the high council, one of my brother's three advisors, and she ranked higher than me. "It's not like I was out there for a social visit."

Naja tutted. "I know all about it. I have cameras everywhere. So, who is he?"

I approached her and glanced at the tablet screen. She wasn't lying. She had cameras everywhere. "Someone who once helped me," I admitted. "I owed him one. And I don't want us pulling him in here. He'll be the downfall of us all."

She clicked her tongue and laughed. "Vasilis, you don't take me as someone who needs help. I mean, you do help, but you don't admit it. You'll look weak."

"I don't need help, Naja. I'm just telling you what I'll be telling everyone else. That man you saw me with in the bar, he's not to be brought in. If he comes sniffing around. I want to be told, and I'll take care of him."

"A scorned lover?" she asked, tapping her nails on the tablet. "Did you get him pregnant? Is he looking for you to pay him something? Maybe he wants you to meet your offspring?" She snorted back and waved a hand. "I'm kidding, of course. I know you've got venom coming out of you everywhere. Anyone you mate with is surely already dead."

And there it was. The nail on the head. The nail in the coffin of my life. I'd never be able to find a mate because of Rotmor, and I'd never be able to have a kid either. An omega could never survive Rotmor and pregnancy, even someone as special as Soren appeared to be.

It wasn't so much that I knew he was special, but I'd tasted it on his skin, and smelled it in the air he breathed. I couldn't have anyone else getting on his skin before I had the chance. If an Alpha claimed him before I could, even after all the ample opportunity, I would rampage throughout the state in what would be known as the world's worst rut.

"You know, your brother is going to be back soon," Naja said, interrupting the

turmoil brewing throughout me.

“He’s the Apex to you,” I reminded her. “And why is he coming here? I thought he was needed in California.”

“Well, Vasilis, that’s on a need to know basis, and you clearly don’t need to know.” Her brows raised, she glanced off behind me. Of course, she hadn’t been here waiting for me, but someone else.

Two Alphas in their lieutenant attire walked toward her with big smiles on their faces. They gave me a nod before walking by, sweeping their arms around Naja as she went back inside the compound with them. Her harem, I mused with a smile.

There were so many different tiers to power. There was the natural order of power, which was Alphas and omegas, and the unfortunate circumstance of betas, who were often far too undiscernible and could assimilate with humans easier. Then, there was the tier for family, the older you were, the most power you had in your family, assuming you were an Alpha. And then, to the organization or coven you belonged to. I was firmly slapped in the center of all things.

Ten Years Ago

Family fucking sucked, especially the way mine were acting. Spitting words at me, laced with venom. They struck me every single time I was trying to do something with my life. Of course, my life wasn’t mine to live, it had never been mine to live. I was a Vepres, descending from the famed Medusa Vepres, my mother. She’d since retired but always spoke to my brother, Drakon. She advised him on everything. She’d groomed him to take off, and then he did, several weeks ago.

I left the family home from an underground forest outpost in Georgia. We enjoyed the heat and the way it could get slightly tropical for us. Being blue pit vipers, our ancestors were used to the tropics of Asian nations. I wanted to get back there, without knowing a lick of any of those languages, but as a viper, I spoke the universe serpent tongue.

It was the last time I was ever going to be part of the family. I just had to find somewhere else to go until they realized I'd left them. I'd gotten several miles from the compound when two of my brother's henchmen came upon me with knives, threatening to kill me if I didn't go home.

I put up a good fight, and after only taking a little damage to the face while spitting my intoxicating venom at the men, throwing them into a deep dreamlike haze, I managed to get away. I'd escape my family, and for what?

Over a large red and gray concrete wall, I succumb to the injuries and fell. My body flopping into a bush. Those blades they'd cut me with had been tipped with poisons. I knew the type of poison, and I knew my brother had wanted me dead if I didn't return home.

It was the first and last time I left home with the intention of making a name for myself. And I was twenty-eight then. I lived my life in my brother's shadow before, and if the wounds didn't finish me off, I'd have to go back into a life where my brother was spoken about as the coming of a God.

It was easy for me to recall events, even if some of them were filled with lies I told myself just to get angry about. Each time I retold something, I might've adjusted the number of people who were there, or overplayed how much power I actually had to appease my inner voice. I was probably the weakest most powerful Alpha in my

family. And I would keep telling myself that.

After laying in the tropical warmth of my room for a while, having the steam create dew on my skin, I got a call.

“We’re on our way to you,” the man from the bar said. “We used the small cage. You didn’t tell us he was a flying squirrel. Those things can squeeze through holes like rats.”

I smiled for a number of reasons. One, forgetting how adorable Soren had been the first time he showed me that he could shift. An omega who could shift was rare, although according to him, it was more of a burden. It was strange in some way, considering who we were. If we bot kept our animal forms, we were natural enemies, and even now, outside of those forms, we were still on opposite ends. Predator and prey, except he was the one coming to me without the fear of being prey.

“Is he in that form now?” I asked over the phone.

“Yes. We got him in a larger cage first, but when he shifted, we snatched that fucker up in one of the smaller cages. If he shifts back, he’s probably dead. And he knows that.”

It was looking forward to see him all small and adorable. “Ok. That actually helps me. I’ll come and collect him. Remember. Nobody can know.”

“Got it,” he said.

I put my shirt back on and looked at myself in the mirror. The nice glossy scars on my skin brought back memories, maybe they were real, and maybe they weren’t. I didn’t know. The amount of times I’d gotten second-hand highs from feeding on the omegas that were infected with Rotmor had tainted some of those memories like acid

eating away at a camera film.

Soren being trapped in his shifted form was actually a relief. Sure, he would've smelled like an omega, but it meant I could bring him in here, keep him locked away and stop him from causing any more issues.

Two men arrived at the underground parking of the compound. Not the same men I'd ordered to keep an eye on him, they'd failed me once, I didn't trust them to do anything more for me now. They were on motorbikes with a metal frame cage where Soren's silver shifted squirrel form clung to the frame with his sharp claws.

"You wanted to visit," I said, poking my finger through the small square of space that the wiring allowed. "You brought this on yourself, Soren."

The men stood and waited with smiles on their faces. One of them with the audacity to hold his hand out as if I was going to leave him a tip and a five star review.

"The Syndicate thanks you," I said, carrying the cage from the handle at the top. "You'll find a small thank you of toxin sent over. But I'm not going to send enough for everyone. So, split it amongst yourselves."

They looked to each other. I knew that look. They weren't going to split anything between their larger group on the fringes of New Eden. Not quite members of the syndicate, but still putting in the work for the occasional perk here and there.

Naja was in the doorway, stalking me, it seemed, or my paranoia was growing. "Have you checked on the omegas?" she asked. "And what's with the new pet?"

I clung the cage to my chest and felt Soren scurry around inside it. "Let me do my job. I don't need to be micromanaged. Unless that's what my brother has you doing now."

She looked me up and down. “I am his head of intelligence. It’s only natural that I know what’s happening in and out of the compound. So, have you checked on the omegas? Because the last I heard, a couple of them were convulsing and there wasn’t enough venom to go around to knock them out again.”

It was a veiled threat. The threat that if I didn’t go deal with them, she would tell my brother and he’d force me into a change akin to the one Soren was in and he would squeeze every drop and ounce of venom from me until it replenished itself. I’d half thought it would happen eventually, a fear, in fact. It was one of the reasons I’d left when I did. I didn’t want to be used. I needed to do whatever I wanted, to have free will seemed like such an illusion.

Taking the cage back to my room, I placed it on the bed and kneeled in front of it. “I want to take you out now and see what the fuck you were thinking,” I said, pushing my finger through the gap. Soren attacked it, his sharp claws drew blood. “Ow. You know, if you keep that up, you’ll be in this cage forever.”

He hissed at me, both tiny arms attempting to claw at me through the gap once more. I could only smile and stare at him. It wasn’t ideal. I never wanted him as a prisoner, but I was saving him from himself. And this was the only way I could do that. My tongue turned forked in my mouth before licking at the air. He scented the air just how I remembered it. This was going to be dangerous.

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I'd tried escaping in the way I knew best, but unfortunately, that wasn't the right way. I should've known, dealing with Alphas, they would've had traps of all sizes to accommodate for omegas of all shapes and shifts.

Vasilis's bedroom, where I found myself was incredibly warm. He'd left after talking at me about how he was trying to protect me and save me. I tried my best to claw at him where possible. And while he was out of the room, I clawed holes through the bedding where he'd put me. I rarely spent so much time in my animal form.

The door opened with a mechanical crunch, like metal folding in on itself. He walked inside and smiled at me. Blood on his lips. He wiped them with a sleeve and sat on the bed, placing his hand over the latch that kept the cage locked tight.

"You want out of here, right?" he asked. "I know you do, obviously. But I'm going to need you to make some promises to me first. And you can nod if you agree to them. Understood?"

I shook my head for him. I understand what he was asking, but that didn't mean I was going to agree to what he was going to request.

"Firstly, you've got to quit asking about this place. You're here, you're going to get yourself killed if people find you. Secondly, you'll need to wear my clothes to stop smelling like you. And third, now that you're here, you're probably unlikely going to leave, so you'll be staying in this room."

I nodded. I just wanted to be free from this cage, and from this form. I couldn't communicate under these conditions.

The moment he unlatched the cage, he noticed the scratched up linens beneath it. I leapt free and off the bed. From my tiny form into my five-nine with good shoes, I never felt so relieved, and seeing Vasilis resting on his bed propped up on an elbow. I realized I might've made a mistake.

"You're lucky the bedding is changed regularly," he said, patting the bed. "I think we might have something to talk about now."

I'd seen the way he came in and I knew the path we'd taken from the parking lot to here. I could've ran for my life and tried getting out, but I couldn't be sure I knew the actually route. And this place was a hub of serpent activity. The belly of the beast. "Well, unless you plan on freeing those omegas you were talking about, we don't have anything to talk about."

He shrugged. "That's not my business," he said. "My business is doing as I'm told, obviously. You haven't been paying attention, Soren."

"I have," I snapped back at him. "You've had as much choice to do what you want as anyone else in a position of power like you. To say that you don't is actually laughable."

He patted a hand on the bed that I'd scratched up when I was in my shifted form. I wished I'd done even more damage to it now. "I'm not the enemy. I'm far from it. I'm not having soldiers walk in here and drag you out. You know, some people might see you coming into the compound an act of wanting to be killed."

I sat on the edge of the bed. I didn't want to die, but I wanted to see the omegas back out there in the arms of their families where they belonged rather than in whatever situation they'd been forced into. "So, what's your plan, now that you've got me here? Are you going to tie me to your bed, gag me, force me into your sick little game?"

Vasilis's smile, a smirk, always got my stomach whooshing. "I had thought about tying you to the bed, but then you'd be in a position I only reserved for those who ask for it, and I'm not stupid enough to—to do what's already been done to them."

"So, you are hurting them?" I asked.

He sighed. "Nobody is being killed here. We—"

"Tell me." I reached out and grabbed his hand. "Tell me what you're doing and I'll try my best to understand. And then, all I ask is you let me see them. It's all I want to do. Please."

He pushed his fingers between mine and held my hand, squeezing my palm to his. "It's too dangerous for that," he said. "These omegas are here for research, they're here because they're being paid for it. And we—"

"What research?"

"Rotmor," he whispered. "My family carry it in our venom. We were hunted for a long time to eradicate it because it—it—"

It wasn't the first time I'd heard about Rotmor, but there wasn't a library of conditions and afflictions for our kind like they had for the humans with their influenzas and poxes. Ours seemed to be more dangerous, and now, I had more reason to be worried. "So, you're making them into weapons?"

He nodded, the thin smile on his lips returning as he dipped his head slightly as if to hide it. "I never said people weren't dying, but these omegas aren't going to die by our hands. They get paid to take on the disease, and then they get paid more when they can—"

Yanking my hand from his, I didn't want to hear anymore, even though I could've guessed what he was about to say. "There's no cure," I said. "So, you're just sending them out to die? Like bombs. You're setting them off and letting them go to explode in—in what, small towns?"

"No. Not specifically. They're pumped with venom, they take on as much Rotmor as they can handle, and then we send them to the clans that hunted us all those years ago. And that's why I didn't want you around, but since you're here, and there's no where for you to go, what else do you want to know?"

I backed up against the wet mossy wall, my fingers resting in the soft texture of it, almost calming on my senses. "My family," I said. "Did we ever hunt you?"

He laughed. "Without coming off in any way offensive to you, Soren, your family have never been a threat to anyone, even big aviation companies never found your family threatening."

I shook my head, still trying to come to terms with everything he was telling me about the Syndicate's plan to go around killing all of its enemies and spreading this disgusting disease. "What do you tell these families?"

"Well, this is only the second time we've carried out this plan," he said. "The first time was in Arizona. We had an entire town of desert wolf shifters wiped out. The omegas we sent in were all voluntary from the Syndicate loyalists."

Gulping hard, I looked for an exit, but there was only one present, and I didn't like my odds of escaping. "You're a terrorist organization, Vasilis, you're—" I pulled out a clump of moss from the wall. "Where's the guy I knew who was telling me all the things he was going to do once he was healed up? Who are you?" I threw the moss at him and tried to open the door.

It wouldn't budge.

Vasilis grabbed me from behind, his grasp on me was strong as he pulled me down onto the bed and placed a hand over my mouth. "Like I said, you've not been paying attention. This isn't what I want. This is what my family wants. You already know what I want, but I can never have it. I can never—have it." His words were broken up with slight sobs. His muscles contracted around my body, squeezing harder against me. And then I was out.

My dreams were mostly panicked running through a maze where snakes were chasing me. The walls of the maze were the same metal tubing of the inside of the compound. They were slightly ridged with doors that never opened and when they did, more snakes came out. All types with bright striped scales and some large like river anacondas. They swerved in their unique pattern of attack until they caught me, coiling around my wrists and ankles.

I woke in a hot sweaty panic, my vision blurred and my limbs constricted like they had been in the dream.

Vasilis was above me, his head tilting slightly as he watched my eyes open. He smiled and spoke, but his words weren't audible. My ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton, as did my tongue and mouth. Nothing came through to my senses until a crackle tickled over me and a fire breached my senses. It was relieving.

"What did you do to me?" I asked, tugging on my arms, but they were heavy and weighted.

"I'm not going to let you hurt yourself," he said.

My arms were tied to the bed posts. "You—you—"

“You can thank me later,” he said. “I’m going to get something to eat. Do you have any preferences? We usually had meat sticks. Don’t ask me what type of meat it is, because I never know.” He shrugged at me. “I assume you’re probably going to go for whatever vegetables are on offer then.”

I didn’t want to speak to him. I didn’t even want to look at him, even though he had my gaze locked on him. That dark aura he carried around with him like an accessory. I would’ve huffed and folded my arms over my chest if I had any control over my movement.

Vasilis left the room warning me not to shift because the binds on my wrists would shrink with me, and since they were spaced apart for my body, they would tear me in two as a flying squirrel. I knew as much not to mess with that even if it was just his words.

This was the sort of situation everyone warned me I would get myself into. My family, my friends, even people I picked jobs up for, they all warned me I would end up in a no-win situation where I’d be toyed with by some unforgiving Alpha. Except, Vasilis didn’t want me dead, he’d said so himself. In fact, he wanted me alive, for what I could only assume was something sexual.

As I chased myself around in circles, mentally, Vasilis came back into the room with a silver tray. There were skewered meats coated in sauce, rice, veggies, and even a pudding cup. I looked him up and down. “Is this prison?”

He laughed, sitting beside me on the bed. “I know we’ve already done this one before, but if I let your arms free, will you actually just relax and stop trying to escape?” he asked. “I don’t want to feed you, and as much as I really appreciated you when you fed me, I think this is a different situation.”

Staring into his eyes as his pupils changed into vertical slits and back again. He was

flexing his power in my face. “I don’t know if I can promise it,” I told him. “I’m here to free those omegas. I’ll buy them,” I let out. “I’ll pay you back what you paid them if you let them free.”

He shook his head and sighed. “You know, that’s not something we can do.” He grabbed a spoon and scooped up some of the rice. “If you’re going to keep asking for them to be free, which is something I can’t do, then we’re going to be going around in circles, and it’s best if I keep you tied here. Lucky for you though, this is when of the best beds in the entire compound.” He moved the spoonful of rice to my face.

I blew the rice from the spoon, scattering it all over the bed, and myself. “Then let me pay for you,” I said. “Let me pay your family for you. This isn’t the life you wanted. I can free you from it. Everyone wants money. Everything has a price.” IT was the entire reason they’d managed to go so many omegas in here, because of the impoverished state for many of them were in.

We fought on the topic of money for a moment, as we had back when I took care of him. He’d had a lot to say about how my family could live off the money we’d earned without having to work another day in our lives. I agreed, they absolutely could. I hated that I was lumped in with them, but it was better than being fodder for whatever operation was happening in this bunker.

By the time we got finished with our argument, I’d combated every spoonful of rice and vegetables to the point my chin was dripping in whatever oils the foods were cooked in, and not a single piece went passed my lips.

“I’m trying to keep you alive,” he said, waving a stick of cubed meats at me. “You need to eat. You’ll never leave if you’re dead.”

“Oh, I forgot, you don’t kill people don’t here,” I said, blowing air at my chin to get the hardened rice from my skin. “And if I can’t leave, then why are you trying to

keep me alive?”

“Because I fucking owe my life to you,” he snapped, jumping to his feet and whacking the tray of food across the bed. “I don’t want to see you dead or diseased. I just want you to go back to Georgia, go back to that hospital you were working at, and then I know you’re safe.”

“Then take me there,” I said. “But free all those omegas first. People are going to come looking for me. People know where I am.” It was a bold faced lie, and I hoped he couldn’t see right through it. But if he really thought he owed his life to me, then he’d do what I was asking, even if it seemed counter intuitive to the Syndicate’s operation.

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There was a giant pain welling in my chest from the way Soren fought back with me on everything. I hoped we had a connection where he'd understand why I did what I had to do to keep him safe. I owed him it, not like there was a score to be kept, but I'd saved him on multiple occasions now, and I'd been repaying him for years by sending injured omegas his way when he worked at the hospital.

A knock came at my door.

"I'm sorry I'm going to have to do this," I said before wrapping a cloth around Soren's mouth to keep him quiet. "Since you're not eating, you don't need to use that."

One of the black-toothed soldiers whose breath stank of death stood there with a smile, as if he wasn't filled with the shame of being addicted to my family's venom. "The Apex is here," he said. "He's requesting you in the main hall." He was barely unable to even look past me inside the room to even see Soren bound to my bed, and if he did, he probably cared even less to ask about it.

Of course. Naja had mentioned he was coming. My eye twitched, having to deal with my older brother and Soren. I liked a singular focus in life. I was easily distracted. "I'll be there once I've changed," I told him. I had oil and rice all over my clothes, and I didn't need my brother pointing it out to me in front of everyone. He rarely missed an opportunity to show everyone he was older and better than me.

Soren mumbled under the cloth I'd wrapped around his mouth, but I kept it in place. I'd already listened to enough of what he'd had to say.

“You wanna close your eyes while I change?” I asked, fingering my belt buckle to unfasten it.

He shook his head and glared right at me until I pulled my pants down and flashed him. His eyes grew wide for a moment before he screwed them shut. I had warned him I was getting undressed. It wasn’t the look I usually got when someone saw my two cocks.

“I won’t be long. Don’t try and get yourself noticed in here. I promised not to hurt you, but it doesn’t mean they won’t.” It was the same warning I’d given him before. “I’m being serious, Soren. You’ll have to trust me on this.”

He mumbled under the mouth binding some more until I removed it. “Fine,” he said. “But keep this out of my mouth. It tasted like dirt. And you can undo my arms. Please. I’m not going anywhere. I’ve already thought about it—”

“But can I trust you?”

“Can I trust you is the real question?”

I shrugged. “You should trust me, because I’m your lifeline. Should I trust you, is that question I need answered.” The last thing either of us wanted was someone catching him. I didn’t have an answer to hiding an omega in my room, other than for sexual reasons, and even then, I’d stopped entertaining those ideas when I realized Soren must’ve hated me.

He nodded. “If anyone comes in, I’ll shift. I’ll hide. They have more chance of finding me if I’m like this.”

“True. Fine. Well, don’t try and leave. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

I untied one of his hands. “Pinky promise,” I said, holding a pinky out for him. “And you know, if you break a pinky promise, your pinky belongs to me.”

He extended his pinky finger out to me, wrapping it around mine. “I pinky promise you,” he said. “And if you break it. I break your pinky finger.”

“How would I break it?”

“By not helping me leave.”

I did want him to leave, but he had to learn why he couldn’t stay first. “Fine.”

We tightened our grips on each of our pinkies for a moment, solidifying the promise. I trusted him because he’d never broken his word to me, well, assuming I was working on information from ten years ago. I didn’t know if I could say the same for me, for all I knew, I might’ve owed him my broken pinky if I didn’t keep up my end of the bargain.

The compound was structured almost like an ant colony, it was certainly modeled after one of them considering they knew how to have all the rooms and chambers set out in the best way possible. It wasn’t my idea, it was the people who were in charge of the logistics, and another one of my brothers advisors. The three of them, and Naja was one.

In the large hall down a floor but spanned two floors in height. There were rows of chairs, each occupied by a different class of the Syndicate, and each of them becoming quiet the moment I passed by. I was the last one to arrive, it seemed, walking down the middle aisle towards my brother on the raised platform with his fancy gilded chair. He was tall, black hair, orange eyes, and had a near luminous

green viper around his neck. Just a snake, or a prisoner forced to keep their shifted form.

“You’re late,” he said to me in front of everyone.

I bowed my head to him. “Apologies, I was dealing with something important. We had an attempted breach I shut down.”

“I hadn’t heard,” he said, glancing to Naja on his right.

“I didn’t—” she began.

“No, you wouldn’t have heard,” I said in a hushed tone. “It was something I was able to contain, but if you’d like, in future, I can absolutely let the information out to the rest of the Syndicate.”

Drakon nodded at me. “Be seated, brother.”

On the front row, an empty seat. They were fold away chairs, plastic, and painful to sit on for long durations. I wished I could’ve been alleviated of some of the pain through one of the means the soldiers found themselves in through my venom.

Beside my brother, at either side, he was flanked by Naja, head of intelligence, Zito, head of operations, and Puglise, head of finance for the Syndicate. Each of them had earned other names for themselves, and had attached to their roles with ease. Naja, being in everyone’s business. Zito, through demolishing towns just like New Eden. And Puglise, from a past life as a loan shark. They were the three snakes of the coming apocalypse, four if counting my brother.

Standing to talk, Drakon started with applause. “You’ve all been fantastic,” he said. “Each and everyone of you here has been an amazing help to this faction of the

Syndicate. We are growing stronger each and every single day. The world will know just how violent we can be when we're pushed into a corner."

This wasn't about being pushed into a corner. We were doing this as revenge for something that had happened to our family years ago. I realized quickly, I'd been left out of the loop, placated by my brother's forces into doing grunt work. I was on the outs of this family.

"There will come a time when I call upon each and every one of you," he continued. "You're going to be pivotal in the future of this Syndicate. We are going to kill everyone who crosses our paths until we find ourselves outnumbering the humans themselves. Once the omegas have successfully taken to the mutations of Rotmor venom, you are then all free to breed with them. We are looking to create a strong serpentine family."

My throat grew dry. I'd been lied to. I'd been selling a lie to everyone, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with a strange bout of guilt. I'd told Soren those same lies, that these people were free once the venom had cemented itself inside them. But in that, I'd also told him the truth, because they were still waiting on it, but for different reasons. They were going to bear offspring with the same mutated afflictions as my family. With hundreds more of us, there would be no stopping the Syndicate's power. And I'd be trapped forever.

My brother had a way with a crowd, rallying them all behind him like he must've done in Nevada and Arizona. I wondered what else I hadn't been made aware about, perhaps other hubs had taken over other states too.

"This is also our last call for omegas," Drakon said. "We want every last omega you can sniff, scout, and pull from whatever hole they're hiding in. They're either with us, or against us, and if they're with us, they will be given a first class seat to the world as it bows to them for what they're about to undertake."

There was only one omega untouched in the compound, and now, everyone was going to be onto him. My heart raced as if telling me to run and get Soren out, but my body stayed, forcing me to watch my brother's thrall of serpents in sync as they all hissed in applause for him. My brother wasn't just wanting to get revenge, he wanted to be the head of a dictatorship.

"Come now, brother," he said, gesturing out to me. I joined him on stage as he wrapped an arm behind my back and shoulder. His snake slithering across, connecting us. "Here. I am proud to call this man my brother. Vasilis will father the new generation right there, alongside you all. And I know we've all seen him slinging himself around in a shower." They all continued to applaud and laugh. "This is the start of history. We are Serpentine!"

They chanted with him. "We are Serpentine! We are Serpentine!"

Twelve Years Ago

Medusa Vepres was cold, she always had been. In her animal form, she had midnight black scales. She was still a pit viper like rest of the family, but her color was what brought so many people into the family. Everyone wanted to know her, everyone begged for her blessing.

In our small underground dwelling, my mother had gathered other serpents from nearby clans. She wore bright draped fabrics in beautiful floral designs. It was disarming to some, seeing all that color and design, only to know she'd slit your throat the moment you crossed her.

I watched from a distance. My brother, Drakon standing at my side.

“We are on the verge of something great,” our mother said to her group. “We are about to bless the world in ways it hasn’t been blessed before, for our people, for our kind. We are going to bite one hand and give them their apple with the other.”

Drakon snickered, not catching anyone’s attention. “I can’t believe she gets money from them like this,” he said. “I’d force people to give it. I’d corner them and get them to empty their pockets.”

“So would dad,” I reminded him. “And that’s how he died. That’s how generations of our family have died.”

He rolled his eyes. “You think that’s the reason. Nobody wants what we have.”

“And that’s why I’ll never mate,” I said.

“Yeah, but you have had sex though,” he said.

“No, and I don’t want to. It’s a disease, Drak. I’ve seen what happens. The addictions it creates in other serpents, and how other people get driven to madness from it. I’m not going to put anyone through that.”

“Shut up, you’ve got to have had sex,” he said. “You’re twenty-five and still a virgin?”

“I’ll die one,” I said, clenching on my teeth. “I’d rather keep whatever I’ve got to myself. You know, at least then it dies with me.”

“Yeah, well, not everyone goes through that. That’s why we have third cousins or something out there,” he said. “Mom said when we’re ready, she’ll introduce us. You know, since we need to carry on the family name, and the family line. It’s down to the two of us now, bro.”

“I’m not doing that either.”

I wasn’t totally against mating with someone, but I’d come to terms with it. I didn’t want to. The idea of bringing life into this world wasn’t right. Especially not when it’s life was going to be predetermined by this family. I knew I was stuck in it, and I’d hate for anyone else’s fate to be stuck in this family as well.

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I listened and obeyed what Vasilis had to say. I hated myself for it. He was an Alpha who'd needed saving before. I couldn't exactly take him seriously. Although if I knew he'd go running back to his family, I might have thought differently about it all. I wouldn't have let him die on the family grounds, that would've been a PR nightmare for everyone, and then I probably would've been told I'd neglected the oath I'd made as a duty of care.

Pacing the room, I made myself useful and cleaned the mess I'd made. There was still some of the meat skewers on the tray, which were surprisingly tasty. I didn't question the source of the meat because I hadn't eaten in a while.

"Everyone is going to tell you that they told you so," I mumbled aloud to myself. "They're going to let everyone know that I did this to myself." Assuming I made it out alive, my mother would definitely force me to work for the company, and maybe even force me to get my pilot's license. "As long as I get everyone else out." I didn't mind the repercussions if it meant sticking to my words.

The door opened. I jumped to my feet in a panic, forgetting what I was supposed to do.

It was Vasilis, panting and pulling at the collar of his shirt. His eyes were big and bugging out, his lower lip trembling. He pushed himself against the wall and tried to undress.

"You're having a panic attack," I mumbled as I approached him. "Are you—ok?"

He shook his head.

I helped him undo the tight grip of the collar, seemingly constricting the flow of air in his throat. He continued to pant until he was nearly fully undressed and on his knees, like a dog about to throw up, his back arched up and down with each big breath he took.

“You need cold water,” I told him, as I kneeled beside him. His skin was dripping with sweat, collecting mostly in his jet black hair. “Splash yourself. And stop inhaling so deep. Slow, through pursed lips.”

He gestured to a crate of bottle water in the corner of the room. I hadn’t seen it pacing around earlier. It was almost disguised into the fabric of the room. I drenched him with an entire bottle, pouring it over his head and down his back.

“Sip some,” I said. “Did you—get bitten or something?”

“I—” he said, sucking in deeper breaths, even after I asked him not to. “I’m sorry.”

Scoffing, I backed up slightly. “Go on, I want to hear this. What would have you on your knees like a dry-heaving dog?”

“My brother.”

“Your brother, the one in charge of this, right?”

He nodded and rolled onto his back. “He’s not doing what I thought.”

I leaned over him so he could have a view of my face. “You think that’s news?” I asked. “I could’ve told you that this place is worse than you thought.”

“I just—” he screwed his eyes and poured the rest of the water over his face. “I thought we were building something. I thought we were making this place into an

actual base.”

“What is it then?”

He looked me in the eyes and shook his head slightly. “They’re not going to send the omegas once they’ve been dosed several times, enough to mutate them. They’re going to breed them and create a generation of serpents with the Rotmor gene.”

I wasn’t quite as surprised by the news. I assumed something sinister was happening, more than what he’d already told me, which was still just as evil. “You were okay with them being used as fodder, what makes this different?”

He placed a hand on his chest. “I’m supposed to be—mating with them.”

“And why is that such a big deal?”

He took my hand and placed it on his chest over his racing heart, nearly strong enough to break through his ribcage. “I’ve never mated with anyone,” he said. “I don’t want to bring life into this world. I think it’s cruel.”

I burst into a fit of laughter. “You are not being serious, Vasilis. You are not a virgin. I’m sorry, but that’s just not something I can process. If you’re a virgin, then I’m in some near-death coma and this is all some weird fever dream I’ve made to process my impending death as my folks talk about turning off the machine.”

He smiled and shook his head. “This is real,” he said. “It’s a choice. I get urges, sometimes. All the time, actually.”

“Now that you mention it, it make sense why you never actually made a move on me,” I mused.

“You think I didn’t want to?”

“Oh, no, I knew you wanted to,” I told him. “I sometimes saw—whichever one was working get a little hard. I didn’t know there were two of them though.”

He shook his head, slowly catching his breath and heart rate resuming a normal pace. “You saw the tattoo, you wouldn’t have,” he said. “And as for that. It doesn’t matter, because I’m not fucking anyone. I refuse to. I don’t care what my brother says, I’m not going to sexual abuse those omegas.”

I cocked my head and looked at him dead in the eyes. “So, sexual abuse is where you draw the line. It’s nice to know that you actually do draw lines. But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re not the same person I saved, twice now.”

He lifted his head, almost colliding with mine. “I’ve saved you as well, remember that.”

“But did you have my life in your hands the way I had mine in yours?” I asked, pressing two fingers to the mark on his shoulder. I move to touch his chin, and the near his eye.

Vasilis touched my face, his soft touch like silk, caressed my temple. “That might be true, I haven’t stitched you up, but I’ve been able to stop that from ever needing to happen. But I’ve never noticed that mark before. What’s it from?”

“The crescent shape mark?” I asked, recalling the last time I saw it.

“Yeah.”

“My brother threw paper plane at me, except, it had metal on the nose of it. My mom thought he would blind someone with it. And he nearly did.”

He rubbed his thumb over the mark, as if rubbing it would remove it from my skin. “Thank you for calming me,” he said. “I’ve always hated being under my brother’s thumb, well, my family in general.”

“We bonded over that already,” I reminded him. “We’re both the youngest. We both have demanding families. We’re both—”

He craned his head up and kissed me. I leaned into it and accepted his tongue. We’d kissed before, but somehow, I didn’t recall it until he was kissing me now. Almost like he made me forget, almost like his tongue, coated in toxins were capable of that.

I was the first to pull away from it. “This isn’t what I wanted. I didn’t come all the way out here for that. You know what I’m here to do.” I looked down his body and saw the thickening bulge in his boxers. My curiosity had already been satisfied by what it looked like, and it was less impressive knowing the bulge accounted for two dicks. “Do you want to help me now? Or are you going to let all those people you’ve taken from their families be raped until they produce offspring for the Syndicate?”

“I’ll help,” he said. “But you’re gonna need to change out of those clothes. And this isn’t a ploy for me to see you naked.”

“I know, you think I smell like an omega, and I do, because I am.”

“Besides that, you’re not gonna be able to go out like that either.”

Cocking my head, I wasn’t a mind reader like he was working under the assumption of. “How?”

“I’ll need to keep you close, so you’ll need to be in your shifted form, ideally. And probably inside my shirt.”

I pressed a finger to his forehead, forcing him back to the ground. “I don’t know what fantasy that is of yours, but I’ll only do it, if you make me another pinky promise. And this time, if you break it, I’ll scurry around your body, up your leg, and make a little burrow inside your ass.”

He laughed. “And you think I’m the one with weird fantasies.” He extended his pinky finger again for me. “I don’t agree with what my brother is doing anymore. I feel like I’ve been sleepwalking, brainwashed until you came back. Until—”

“Until what?”

“Until I inhaled you again,” he whispered, smacking his lips. “That’s when I started to feel different. I—”

I wrapped my pinky finger around his again. “I promise to help Soren escape with all the captive omegas,” I said. “Repeat.”

Vasilis’s eyes were rolling, almost like he wasn’t completely present in what we were talking about. “I promise to help you free them, even if it means my family will tear me apart, limb from limb.”

“Ok, maybe enough of that, you’ve still got a reputation here, I assume.”

On a shaking inhale of breath he nodded. “Possibly. I don’t know anymore.”

The urge to slap him was right there, but I was in nurse mode, trying to keep him calm, even if I knew that a sharp jolt to his body like a slap could’ve helped, it would probably escalate the situation with knowing how quick to anger he got.

“You’re going to have to get it together if we’re going to do anything,” I told him. “I’m being serious, Vasilis.” I squeezed his pinky around my pinky. “You’re gonna

have to put whatever smug grin you had on when you first saw me, that Alpha look, like you were better than me. You're gonna need that back if you're going to get anywhere."

Locking eyes with me, he smiled and nodded. "I think you might be right about that."

"I'm always right." I pulled my hand away. "Now, I don't know this place like you, so how are we going to do this?" I stood and paced again. I'd tried doing the mental math about how big the room was, and how many people could possibly be housed in these places. I knew I could squeeze through some small and tight spaces, but this probably wasn't the place for me to try and demonstrate those abilities. Not with every natural predator out there wanting to stomp me out and fry me up.

"We'll have to wait for my brother to leave," he said, trying to empty the bottle of water over himself, but he'd already done that. "He'll brainwash me. He'll—"

"Do I need to kick you like I'm rebooting an old computer?"

Vasilis chuckled. "You could try it."

"I'm being serious. I need to know what needs to be done to you. You're all over the place. So, do you need to be kicked? Slapped? Maybe even a punch? I could pull your hair even, but you might be into that." I said behind him on the bed, my fingers running over the scratched marks I'd made in the fabric. "So, what's it going to be?"

"I think I need to take a nap." He huffed as he hauled himself on the bed, throwing down beside me. "There's too much going on in my mind right now."

"If that's the case, why don't I ask you some questions," I said, with a view from his feet up, looking directly up the inside of his boxers. There was a natural curiosity to his anatomy, but I couldn't get distracted now, especially not here, where it would

be considering sleeping with the enemy.

“Go for it,” he said, letting out a yawn as he rested on the pillow. “I don’t know how much help I’ll be though. My entire life feels like a lie right now. I don’t even know how much of it was mine, or how much of it was what they made me believe.”

My brows wrinkled together. “See, I don’t get that. What do you mean?”

“It’s like—” He demonstrated with his hand out in front of his face, waving it. “Like I can see the world, but I’ve never been able to do what I wanted. Like my body has been under someone else’s control.”

I knew Alphas were big babies on the inside, but I didn’t peg them for being this dramatic about it. “Ok, and you’ve just figured that out now?”

Screwing his toes and uncurling them in quick succession, he locked eyes with me again. “If you could understand what I mean, then it’s like my entire body was hijacked.”

“Ok, I guess I see why you’re getting bothered about the plans you’ve got for those omegas,” I grumbled. “You don’t want whatever happened with you to happen to them. You don’t want to co-opt someone else’s body for your plan. Huh?”

His breath continued to be shaky as he drew them in slowly. “But that’s the thing,” he said. “I wanted it. I—I wanted to see them hurt, to see them in pain. I—”

“Why?” The hard-hitting question. Why did people cause pain to others?

“Because I was told to,” he whispered. “I was told that they were getting what they asked for. I was told that it was my duty, my power.” A single tear shed. He wiped it away quickly. “The only different is—well, it’s you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know what you mean by that, but I’m not your savior. I’m just doing my job, and yeah, I am being a savior to them right now because they’re going through hell. It’s not right. And no, you’re not taking a nap.” I smacked his thigh.

“No, no, no, I don’t mean—I don’t mean that it’s you, I mean, it’s you, your scent. Your—”

“Spit it out then.”

He shook his head. “It’s not possible.”

“Go on.” I smacked him again. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You’re immune to the venom,” he said. “It’s what I always smelled on you. Why I always thought you were special. You’re immune. You cut through it all.”

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It was something I'd suspected when we first met ten years ago, but before I could realize it, I was dragged back off into the burrows my family lived in, they were surprised I lived, and while I didn't tell any of them I was saved by an omega, I did come out of it with what I called war wounds. I knew what my family appreciated, and they appreciated any show of dominance and power, as an Alpha should display.

Soren cut through all the toxins the venom had over me. One of the family traditions was to drink the blood of family, to keep our genetics strong. It was something I thought was the law. The alternative being death because every other species was impure. Soren taught me that wasn't the case, and it only took me ten years to realize it.

Snapping his fingers in my face, he stood over me, threatening to bind my arms to the bed in the same way I'd bound him there earlier. "I'm not immune to venom. If I was, I'm pretty sure I'd know about it. And no, before you get your rocks off on it, I'm not going to let your skeezy fangs penetrate me."

Memories were flooding my mind. They'd slowly pierced the veil when I was face-to-face with him again, but this was very different now. The last time I felt in control of myself was when I was with him in that comfortable bed, having my wounds treated. It was strange to consider that my last time this lucid, but I could see now that he'd seen how different I was.

"Are you mute, all of a sudden?" he asked. "Is that something else I'm capable of making you?" He smirked. "Come on. We need to plan a way out, a way of getting all the omegas out. And I'm sure there's more omegas than my list. So, before you think about only getting a small amount to safety, think again."

I grabbed his arm and pulled his wrist to my mouth. He tried to yank it free, but I used whatever strength I had left to keep him there. “I just need to smell you.” It was the reason I didn’t want anyone finding him, the reason I couldn’t handle the idea of him being used as one of the omegas. He was his own kind of venom, his own kind of toxin ran through his veins. “What makes you different?”

“Are you going to bite me?” he asked. “Then bite me. Bite me, if you dare.”

For once, I didn’t dare. Letting go of his arm, he nearly toppled back into my dresser. “Tell me what’s different about you.”

Inspecting his wrist, he shook his head. “Nothing is wrong with me.”

“Your blood is—”

“Bite me, see for yourself,” he said. “Just do it. So we can put this whole thing to rest. My blood isn’t special.”

We were stuck in a situation now. I didn’t want to bite him because I didn’t know if I could handle the repercussions of a bite. But at the same time, the idea that it would enlighten me had me in a chokehold, quite literally, choking me. Soren climbed on the bed, over my body, sitting almost on my diaphragm. I wheezed. “I’m not going to bite you.”

“I heal quick,” he said. “If I have to open a vein up for you, I’ll do it. I’m not going to will you, won’t you with me. So, get it over with.”

“But if you’re not special, my venom will hurt you, you’ll become infected.” It was everything I never wanted for Soren. He broke through all of my baseline desires to pounce and kill, even when he was presenting himself like such a pretty blood-filled parcel.

We stared into each other's eyes for a moment more, and then I did it. I latched onto his wrist, my fangs penetrating his skin, opening it up for the blood flow to fill my mouth, and my venom spraying inside him. I didn't want to stop gulping back the sweet elixir contained within his veins. My knees bucked, pushing him forward on me. I secured him on my body with an arm across his back. I didn't want him getting away, and if I'd been in my viper form, my body would've coiled around him, and my mouth searching for the narrowest part of his body to try and swallow.

Soren punched me square in the face, fortunately already against the pillow. He yanked his arm away and rolled off the bed, muttering to himself as he held his wrist.

The blood was all over my chin and mouth. My tongue worked overtime trying to lap it up. But I was right. His blood was unique. It was like drinking filtered ice water, there was something to it that I couldn't put my finger on.

"I hope you're happy," he said. "I think you're gonna leave a fucking bruise."

"I'm sorry." I said, wiping my mouth with the back of a hand and then licking it. The sweet after taste to his blood was like being hit with memories of childhood where everything had that same syrupy haze over it. Except, the haze was lifting, and I was seeing through the veil. Feeling through it all the strange happenings that occurred.

Soren whacked my leg again. "Get up," he said. "We need to figure out a route, and you need to show me a map. I don't really trust your memory, no offense."

Honestly, he had a good reason not to trust my memory, I couldn't even trust it. "Well, we still have to wait until my brother has left," I told him. "If he knows I'm—I'm thinking for myself, then he'll stay until I'm back under whatever it is he did to me. And my mom, come to think of it. She must've been the one who devised this entire thing." My mom had always been encouraging me to be just like Drakon, as if she needed a spare heir when Drakon had his entire life planned out.

“Fine, I have an idea,” he said. “Get dressed. I want a tour.”

I shook my head. He was acting wild now. “No chance. You’re not going outside.”

Soren jumped onto me, shifting into a flying squirrel form. He began lashing out at my chest with his sharp claws, swiping and sweeping long marks.

“No,” I pulled him, but he clung to my chest hair. He just kept hold of me until I was out of bed and standing. He pushed himself off me and went gliding across the room until he landed by the door, shifting into his human form.

“Yes,” he said. “You’re going to smuggle me by your chest. I want a full tour, every single room, and I want to see where all the omegas are being kept. If you tell me no again, I go for your dick. Sorry, dicks, plural. Twice the pain.”

My hand coiled to clutch at my cocks. “Jeez, I didn’t remember you being this feral. Is that a recent thing?”

“I know that if you want to get somewhere, you’ve got to act like the person you want it from,” he said. “So, what you’re seeing is me showing you your actions. I know, it’s a shame, right.”

There was no fighting with him about this. He wanted to go explore, and he wasn’t going alone. Besides, with my scent and my clothes masking him, we weren’t likely to be caught or noticed, but there was always that slim chance, and I didn’t like all the possibilities that lived there.

Soren’s flying squirrel animal form fit snug by my chest once I was dressed in my Syndicate attire. He stood out in comparison to the dark colors, and he left small fibers of fur, but nobody was going to get close enough to see that.

We're agreed that he would tug on my chest hair, the left side for me to go left, and the right side for me to right. It was less of an agreement and more that what he wanted, and I was too busy going through the mental turmoil of knowing everything in my life had been manufactured for me. The only real thing that had happened in it so far was Soren, or so I hoped.

The underground compound was a maze of passages, but if you kept on going, you were bound to circle on yourself. It helped that everything was signposted as well. That was a new addition to the piped interior after intoxicated serpentine soldiers would find themselves lost.

As we approached the first wing of omegas undergoing the Rotmor mutations, Soren scratched my chest, a signal we hadn't discussed, but I paused for him. I had a clear view through the porthole window of the soldiers inside, standing watch as the bound omegas in the beds were in semi-induced comas. It was my suggestion that they would sleep through the process, and progressively, the omegas were given less pain medication to see just the pain of the mutations.

"I know," I mumbled to Soren at my chest. "I don't know how I'll be able to free them all. And even if we do, they're going to be in so much pain, they might wish they're dead anyway. Is it really anyway to live?"

He scratched me once more and I walked inside the room.

The three soldiers came to attention in a sloppy military fashion. They stood with their salutes until I nodded at them to stand down. "It's just an inspection," I said. "Noticed anything unusual happening with them?"

Each of the soldiers had that same blackened film on their teeth. It had always disgusted me, but now, more-so. I felt like I was an imposter stepping into Vasilis's shoes. It was strange to see it now. "No, Sir."

“Did you hear the Apex’s talk earlier?” I asked.

All three of them smiled. They knew what that it meant for him to be here and speak, especially on the topic of impregnating these omegas, and these ones in particular, in their current state, I didn’t want to think about it.

“You’re all relieved,” I said. “I want to check each of them alone.”

Without question, they walked off, leaving the large room.

There were still conflicting emotions within me. The feelings I’d once found power in, which was seeing these omegas come in from the van and the smell of how scared they were being tied to the beds and bitten. It didn’t mix well with who I knew myself to be, and that was someone who didn’t want to infect anyone.

Since we were alone, I spoke aloud to Soren, even if he couldn’t respond, except with tugs on my chest hair and scratching at me. I assumed I would bleed out if he kept at it, or maybe he was biting me, I didn’t know.

“Do you think you could do what you did to me, but to them?”

I assumed there was a way he could, but since I didn’t even know how he’d done it to me, and since I was an Alpha, it might not have had the same effect. I had too many questions swimming around my head, and nobody to answer them with me.

There were twelve omegas in this room, the first batch were the most at peace, even with the disease ravaging them. I wondered what cruelty divined the other groups should be without pain killers. Soren was bound to have many questions when we got back to the room, and we still had a tour to continue. I examined each of the omegas and Soren made it known to my flesh that he knew the omegas we were near.

I left them untouched. I didn't know what they were being pumped with, and how it would interact with them. The last thing I wanted was for them to be in any pain.

The doors swung open and my brother sauntered inside with Naja strutting beside him, her tablet in hand tapping away.

"Three soldiers left their post," he said, walking toward me. "You wanted to start pumping and dumping little bro?" he laughed and grabbed my by the shoulder. "That's the spirit, but we should really wait until these ones are conscious."

"Don't worry, I—"

"We've got to make sure the Rotmor has really taken them," he said. "We did this in Arizona with a test size. The offspring they produce don't have any of the side effects, like us."

"What do you mean?"

He laughed, his hard hand squeezing at my shoulder. "Come on, you know."

"Know what?"

"Dad was an infected omega, mom was always the Alpha, she carried the Rotmor," he said. "I know you don't remember much about him, but before he died, he was swelling up and purple. Mom wanted more kids but he died beforehand."

I shook my head. "I thought he died from the wolves," I said. "He was taken and torn apart."

Naja looked away from her screen to look at me, she smiled. "That's the story we tell the soldiers," she said. "They come to us because their families have been through it."

They think we're the same, so they pledge themselves to the cause."

If my brother's hand hadn't been holding me down, I might've veered off kilter and fallen. "Yeah, right. But, I kinda assume it was still the case. Is mom around?"

Drakon snickered. "She's in Cali at the compound, we've had an amazing turn out there. She's been infecting at least a fifty omegas in the last week alone, but between us, I'm not sure how much her venom holds up to ours." He smiled, flashing a fang at me, and scaring Soren to pinch me.

"I feel like I need some air," I said. "What else might I be misremembering then?"

He stood at my side and pulled me into his arm. "You're still remembering to drink," he said. "I don't want you freaking out again."

"Drink?"

Naja held the tablet up. "Smile," she said. A light flashed on the back of the tablet.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm drinking," I said. "Why?"

"The blood you get sent?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"Good, good," he said. "I'm just worried you're getting in your head again, that's all."

"Again?" I asked. I'd clearly been able to combat this before, but that meant I'd also been put back under whatever haze again. I didn't like that idea, especially not with Soren around, or what might happen to him. Maybe he wasn't the cure after all.

“Yeah, last time you found some blanket,” he laughed. “It stank like some dirty rodent omega. Anyway, if you’re feeling up to it. We were going to head up to the surface and see how depraved some of those soldiers were for a little hit of venom.”

Nope. Soren was the cure. Or maybe he was just my cure. “No, I’m a little tired—” Soren tugged me. “Yeah. Sure.” I didn’t know if he wanted that, but it was one way I could get him out of this place alive, on the surface.

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It was glaringly obvious Vasilis was being manipulated and controlled by his family. I should've known, he was a completely different person to the man I'd met who planned a life with his new found freedom of faking his death it seemed. I still didn't have answers on how he got back to them, or how they found him, but I wasn't in any position to ask those questions.

Vasilis took me back to his room where I leapt out of his shirt. I stunk of him, it was not a scent I ever thought I'd carry, but here I was. In an underground bunker, surrounded by snakes, literally.

"Come on," he said. "You heard my brother, we're going up to the surface. I'll get you out. You can go, maybe find something to help. I'll do what I can from in here, and then we'll meet when you're back."

My eyes rolled, it was a reflex whenever he suggested anything. I didn't know if he was being plucked or pulled in one direction from something his family had poisoned his ears. "No," I said. "You can go, but I'm going to put on one of your outfits, and I'm going to go out there and see for myself. I want whatever it is you use to get in places, because I need to help these people. Without you, everyone knows you, so they flock."

He shook his head. "No chance. You're not going out there without me."

"For this to work, you're going to have to trust me. And that starts with you knowing that I've done this before."

"Not for the Syndicate."

Technically, true, but I had infiltrated corporations to uncover some of the tactics they used to practically enslave their omega workers. I'd gotten a small trophy for that, granted, it was given to me by the local newspaper, but it still sat on a shelf at the family home, right by my college degree certificate.

"Let's agree to disagree," I said. "I'm putting your clothes on. I'm going out there, and you're going upstairs to keep your brother distracted." I pressed a hand against his chest, knowing exactly where I'd scratched him up. "And don't drink anything they give you. I heard everything. I know I shouldn't leave you alone, the opposite way round, but I need to see this all for myself."

He looked defeated. He'd been weakened by the news his family had been fucking with his mind. And I was taking advantage of that by forcing him to submit to my will. "You're gonna get yourself killed," he whispered, placing his hand over mine. "Everything is up in the air right now, and if it all falls on you, I—I'm gonna feel pretty guilty."

"The only thing in the air right now is the people waiting for you to go up to the surface, they're gonna wonder what you're doing," I said. "So, hurry up. Scooch away. Well, tell me how I'm supposed to open doors, first."

He revealed a magnet in the end of his sleeve. "Common areas don't need special access, but the pods and stuff, they work from these. They're in the sleeves of all my clothes. So, just put one on. Although, I am significantly taller than you, so—"

"So, I'll just roll the pants," I said. "You don't have to worry. Although, it's an adorable look on you now that I can see how genuine you are about it all."

Pushing the tip of his tongue through his teeth, he smiled. "If anyone finds you, tell them you're my assistant, and make something up. Make them call for me. I'll—I'll clear it up. Assuming my brother doesn't know I'm conscious or—whatever it is I'm

not supposed to be.”

I’d already thought long and hard about that cover story, and I would be using Vasilis’s name all the way to the top. The top being his brother. The idea I could end the entire syndicate right here and now seemed like an opportunity, but I was ill-equipped to carry out something like that. My taser was in the car and I wasn’t about to have my entire life ended before I could free these omegas.

“Can I get one last taste of you before I go up?” he asked.

“A taste?”

“Well, just a—”

On my tiptoes I pushed up and reached him to plant a kiss on his lips. “There,” I said. “That’s your taste. Keep your brother upstairs for as long as possible. I’m going to mentally map this place out before anyone knows I’m not supposed to be here.”

The plan was simple. The plan had always been simple. The idea that I could come here, free the omegas, be hailed a hero, yet again. I never gave up, that wasn’t in my repertoire of actions. I did, however, know the limitations of my actions, and I knew I couldn’t physically fight my way through several Alphas, of any kind.

Once Vasilis left the room with a demonstration on how the sensors worked for the doors, I raided his closet. It was all the same tightly fitted style black shirts with smart jackets, some of them embellished with gold thread. I steered clear of those. I didn’t know the significance, but it wasn’t worth finding out. I looked like I was in a position of power, much like Vasilis. It would make me stand out, but I smelled the part, and that was all that really mattered.

Flexing my hand over the sensor, the door opened. It was a relief to feel freedom

almost, without being attached to Vasilis. All I had to do was channel all of my upbringing into walking around as if I'm better than everyone. I assumed that was what Alphas did, and I was even more sure that's how I could pass for one now.

It was strange to walk the hallways, almost in the same way that I'd had the night terror where the snakes were all over my body, pulling me down. I walked in the direction we went to the first large bunkered room where omegas were being kept.

Three soldiers were there. I opened the door and walked inside to see them. Offering them a smile. "I'm here to finish out the checks Vasilis started," I announced.

They glared at me, seeing them up close and personal with their blackened teeth and how dirty they smelled. I nearly gagged. The feeling was choked up in my throat. "You're not a soldier."

"No. I'm Vasilis's personal assistant, and I've been told to come in here and finish off the checks he started," I said, keeping my chest pushed out with a nearly held breath. "You're going to have to leave while I continue the check. Assuming that's ok with you all."

The three of them glanced to each other and almost as if I was giving them time off, they were happy to leave, and I was happy to keep on the air that I was actually better than them on the hierarchy.

Once they were out of the room, I walked around, skittish, looking at all the tubes going into their bodies. I'd worked in enough emergency rooms since graduating with my nursing degree to know these were people being put into comatose states. There wasn't much else going into their systems other than that, but there was a full vat of venom, as labeled and several syringes, some of them re-used, again and again, their ends turning to rust.

“Fuck you all,” I grumbled. I took the needles and stabbed them into the walls, forcing them to fly off. They weren’t going to keep injecting these poor omegas. I’d even thought about tipping the small container of venom as well, but I feared they’d all smell it and come running.

Inspecting each of the omegas, I found their bodies covered in bed sores from lack of movement. Their arms were strapped to the beds and their legs buckled in to the frames. I didn’t even need to think about it, I loosened each and every one of the binds around their wrists. I didn’t know what was happening to them in that state, but I also knew it could be more dangerous for me to turn off the machines that kept them in stasis. They would have to wait until I’d formulated a plan.

The soldiers came back, licking their lips. “We need to take our post,” one of them said. “Have you finished your checks?”

“What checks were you doing?” another asked. “If you don’t mind telling us. We won’t let Vasilis know you’ve said anything.”

“Just regulation checks, making sure they’re all ready for the next phase of the plan,” I said.

The three soldiers high fives each other, and then looked to me as if waiting for a high five in return. I didn’t want to, and I waited, almost hesitant to give them a high five in return. I did it anyway, and then brushed my hand off on the slacks.

“You smell strange,” one of them said.

“Might be because I’m not addicted to the venom like you three,” I snapped back. “You’re gonna have to clear your senses, soldiers. They might get you into trouble.” Their smiles faded as I tried my best to show power. “Is—is the Apex still above ground?” I asked, relieved to recall his title, and seem to solidify the fact I was

meant to be here.

“He is. And we are encouraged to consume the venom. As Vasilis’s assistant, you should know that.”

With a large smile and a slight chuckle, I tried to disarm them. It didn’t work. They were waiting for me to say something. “Yes, that’s true. But they want you in a position of addiction. If you exercise some personal strength, you might just get beyond being called a soldier. You know, thinking for yourself isn’t as underrated as some of you might think.”

They just stared at me like whatever I’d said was going above and beyond their feeble minds. I assumed they hadn’t always been so feeble, but after such a long time sucking on the venomous teat presented to them, they had no choice but to look like their brains were rotting.

“Everyone starts somewhere.”

“True,” I said. “And you have started here, so I’ll leave you to it.” Disengaging in conversation was difficult. I walked out quickly before they could sniff it out on me that I wasn’t meant to be here. I couldn’t even rest and collect my breath, I had to keep going, following the signs that often didn’t make sense. I nodded at everyone who nodded at me, seemingly the clothes were doing most of the work here, the scent on them, and the way they looked had people letting me go by without question.

And then I reached the second large room where another section of omegas were being housed. These once were a little more lucid since they didn’t have tubes coming out of them, only the one attached to the back of their wrists where they were probably being drip fed venom through the canula.

A man and woman in white lab coats were stood with the usual soldiers in the room.

They glanced at me, and then locked eyes as if trying to place me.

“I’m Vasilis’s assistant,” I said before allowing their minds to wonder. “I’m just doing a check of all the—” I noticed one of the people from my list. A woman who’d left her family with a single note saying she was going to make money, and she would be home soon. Her skin was almost translucent with purple bruising around her eye sockets and cheekbones. “The omegas.”

“Ah, well, the Syndicate have just made their announcements about the future, I hope that means we’re not discontinuing with our experimentation,” the woman, Doctor Rathe according to her name tag, said. “The third group have barely had time to let the venom settle. The Rotmor has barely consumed a third of them.”

“And this group?” I asked, locking eyes with the other doctor, Doctor Payne, quite apt considering what these people were going through. “How are they doing?”

“Well, we’re studying the healing responses currently,” he said.

Of course. They were humans. Whatever means, they’d been pulled into this scheme to study us. “And out of curiosity, has a cure to Rotmor been discovered?” I asked. “Or an antidote to the venom?”

They laughed together, as if I’d told them the funniest joke they’d ever heard. It caught the attention of the soldiers who were walking up and down the beds, teasing the omegas, some of whom were muttering to themselves.

“We’re not here to do that,” Doctor Rathe said. “You’re trying to trick us into saying something, aren’t you?”

“No, no, I’m not. I was strictly curious about any potential antidote,” I said. “We need to second-guess what our enemies are going to think. If we’re not, then we’re

failing. But if you have an answer, then we know how to—”

Doctor Payne snapped his fingers and pulled out a pen from his lab coat. “That is smart thinking,” he said. “Although not our area of expertise. We’ve not even managed to create a synthetic version of the venom yet. Everything we’ve got is from the Vepres family. They’re the ones who hold the key to the antidote too, I’d assume.”

“So, all of that venom, is made by—” I struggled to count how many alive Vepres members I could recall. “Well, not many of them.”

“No, not at all,” she said. “It’s why the next step in this is attempting to create as many offspring as possible. We need as many new Vepres babies as this compound can house.”

It made sense as to why all of the beds weren’t being used. I assumed they were waiting to ship more omegas in, but they could’ve had countless rooms just like this, even if Vasilis had only told me there were three. I couldn’t rust what he knew, because it was all second-hand from whatever he was being controlled to do by his family.

“From Vasilis or the Apex?” I asked.

“Both,” Doctor Payne said. “I have a great fascination of omega gynecology, or whatever department of science it would fall under, but I’m excited to see. The other infected Syndicate members will contribute in other studies. We want to know if them being infected will produce similar results.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know, especially in the genetics of your people,” Doctor Rathe added. “Especially how those other sexual characteristics are formed, the Alpha and omega, and of course, betas. But we’re most looking forward to observing

the male omegas and their impregnation journeys.”

I felt sick, light-headed, and suddenly numb from my ankles up. Glancing to my feet, I wondered if my nightmare had come true where I was being pulled down by the grip of snakes, but that wasn't the case at all. I'd exerted a lot of energy today shifting, and I hadn't replenished much back. “Perfect,” I said, nodding. “I'll let Vasilis know these—omegas are all under your watchful eye.” I needed to let him know more than that, but until then, I had to find my way back to the room before I passed out and got found out.

The route back was filled with soldiers as obstacles, each one demanding a nod as I passed them and full eye contact. I wanted to run, but my feet felt clunky in Vasilis's shoes. I couldn't recall the way back, not by any of my senses. I was going to get myself killed, and all because I'd been reckless.

Pausing a hall that split into two. This was the end for me. I could feel it.

“Soren,” a whisper prickled at me from behind, following by a firm arm hooking mine in its grasp. “How'd you get this far?” Vasilis asked, hauling me to stand straight. “You're lucky I came back.”

Through blurry eyes and panting for breath, I looked up at Vasilis, and without another word, I shifted and squirreled away inside his jacket, seeking comfort against his hairy chest like a nice burrow.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:52 am

I'd been above ground for thirty minutes when I knew Soren wasn't ok. I didn't know how it came to me, but it was like a punch to the gut, and Soren's face flashing in the peripherals of my vision.

My brother had been shooting golf balls through the dry sand and forcing the soldiers to run after them in the scorching heat. We stayed in the shade where we were had an ice bucket filled with different drinks, including a specific bag of blood cocktail my brother had left aside for me and nearly forced down my throat.

I took the bag and left, telling him I'd been suffering from awful stomach cramps all morning, it was a great excuse for why I might not have seemed like myself, but I knew he wouldn't buy it long-term. My brother could sniff out a lie, he'd always been able to uncover the truth ever since we were kids and my mom used him as a bloodhound almost, using him on her counsel. It was strange to feel all these memories I could've sworn I always had, but now, shed life in a different light I wasn't too pleased to see it in.

Finding Soren came instinctively. He'd managed to find himself across the other side of the compound, nearly as far as you could get from my room. If he hadn't shifted the moment I found him, he might've been discovered by everyone else. My brother had been sniffing around with questions above ground, all of which I brushed off, but it didn't stop me from mulling over them once I was away.

"I knew it was a bad idea," I muttered to myself as I walked back to my room. Everything was distinguishable heavier, like the lightness in my steps had been removed, and I was now carrying the weight of all my actions. I didn't condone of it, but it was my nature to bite, I shouldn't have felt such shame for doing what nature

had intended of me.

As soon as I got back to the room, I discovered Soren was asleep against my chest. His sweet and soft furred flying squirrel form was precious, but I saw how easily he could be squashed out of existence. I undressed out of my jacket and shirt to better see him as his sharp claws clung to my chest hair.

“I don’t know how possible this is going to be,” I continued to mumble and hope he didn’t hear. I laid on the bed, resting my head on the pillow and looking at the darkened light scatter blue hues across the ceiling as if they were stars. Some nights, they were the only way I could rest was pretending I wasn’t underground breathing in all of this hot recycled air. I stroked the back of Soren’s furry form. “I hope you found out some interesting things I didn’t know. I’m still trying to figure things out myself.”

He didn’t answer, his body was all snug and even offering a gentle snore. If I could’ve bottled the moment up, I would’ve. As we laid there, I eventually succumb to sleep and found my thoughts wandering in all directions. This could’ve been reality to me, considering how my life had played out so far.

Rotmor was an hallucinogenic at its heart, you could live forever within the dreams as your body on the outside succumb to decay and death, but you’d be none the wiser. My body knew it wasn’t poisoned like those omegas, but it had no real way of knowing if that was true, only memories I had which didn’t shed much light or trust.

I didn’t recall waking, or more, I didn’t feel myself roused from sleep, but potentially considered myself still asleep when I found myself in bed and Soren, in human form sat on the side of my bed with his head in his hands.

“Hey,” I said, reaching out to stroke his back.

He turned, his face deformed and pale with large sunken holes for eyes. His mouth opened wide, but he didn't make sound, only showed the large blackened teeth coming out and rotting inside his mouth.

That's when I actually woke.

Soren was in human form, nearly naked, sleeping beside me on the bed. He grumbled and turned his head to face me on the pillow. "You're hogging the blanket," he said, tugging it from under me.

"Sorry." I lifted myself off the bed and gave him the blanket. "Are you awake? Do you want to talk?"

He groaned harder, cocooning himself in the blanket. "I don't feel too good."

"Why?" I pressed the back of my hand to his head. He was burning up. "Fuck. Did someone do this to you? Were you caught? Did they—" I caught myself unable to process how he got sick if the venom didn't effect him. "Was it the food?"

He shrugged. "My entire body is—" He bit his lower lip and as he opened his eyes to look at me, they flashed a light amber, almost twinkled at me. "I don't get like this."

I felt it, in more ways than one. I didn't want to say it, because I didn't want to be right about it. "You're in heat," I said, taking my hand away. "Jeez, I thought you would've been on blockers or something considering you're not with anyone."

Glaring at me, his eye twitched. "My body—" his drying lips smacked, nearly cracking them in the process. "It does what it wants."

"And I guess being around me, a very attractive—"

He kicked out a leg from the blanket. “Don’t even think about it you double-dicked venom-peddling asshole.”

I touched his forehead again. “You should drink some water,” I said. “I haven’t dealt with an omega in heat, but I’m assuming you burn through calories quick, right. In the name, heat, hot, warmth, right?”

Soren’s eyes rolled as if they were in a marathon sprint with weapons in my direction. “Alphas really don’t know anything about the world. Just—get me some water, and then maybe yourself useless and leave the room for a little bit.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m gonna have to—”

“You need something else?” I asked. “Food?” I didn’t want to leave him alone if he was in need, especially not while he was in heat and any opening of that door could alert every hungry and horny Alpha—myself included to him, but I couldn’t smell him in that way.

“Ugh, I need to masturbate myself into oblivion,” he said.

The reason I felt weird earlier and could locate him had another meaning, one I hadn’t really thought about. That bite I’d taken, and that venom I’d injected into him. It bonded us. It wasn’t an intention I’d had, but now it had happened, there wasn’t any going back.

I placed a hand on his arm. “I’m not sure I can leave you alone,” I said, feeling the fury of heat takes swipes at me with hitched breaths in the back of my throat. “I—”

With deep-set frown lines almost carved into his forehead, Soren stared at me.

“You’re not saying what I think you’re saying.”

That was right. I hadn’t needed to say it now, because my body was saying it for me. We were connected on another level and another plane now. Our lives had been intertwined once before, and once more, they were knotting roots around each other. And my cock was throbbing to get at those exposed root nerves and see just what they felt like. “I want to help you.”

Soren stroked a hand against mine, rubbing it up my arm. “And I—” He pulled me down on top of him with the blanket blocking our bodies from truly connecting. “I want you.”

Mushing my face against his, my tongue explored the depths of his mouth and his barely fought back. I was searching for a sweetness, and it felt like he was hiding it under his tongue almost with how reserved he was now being.

We rolled over in the bed until the blanket was now strewn across the floor and I was only competing with the tight boxer, growing tighter as he tried to hide his arouse, but exposed more of his ass in the process. Tugging on the waistband his underwear slipped off down his ass cheeks. Two round smooth domes of flesh releasing that sweetness I’d been searching for in the back of his throat with my partially shifted tongue.

“I need to taste you,” I said, forcing him on his stomach. I pressed a hand to his back, pushing him against the mattress. “I need to know what it feels like.” I’d never mated with anyone before, although I wasn’t strictly sure about that anymore considering everything I thought I knew was being pulled into question now.

Soren turned his head slightly, panting. “Then taste me,” he said, arching his back up in my face. He’d either given in, or he knew this was the hand fate had dealt. “But when you want to fuck me, I only want one of those things in me.”

Both my cocks were throbbing, almost against each other, like heart beats out of sync, one throbbed, then the other. If I'd laid them out across Soren's ass, it would've been like they were playing the drums on his flesh.

Parting his legs, I dipped between them and pushed my head in deep, my tongue tasted his sweet slick, so much of it lubricated him to the point I actually entertained the idea of fucking him with both my cocks. I explored with both hands and used them to spread his cheeks further with fingering his hole and stopping him from tightening it around my tongue.

Finally, he let out soft moans against the pillow, and maybe against his will. I couldn't imagine this is what he'd wanted when we first came back in contact with each other. I was dead certain he hated my guts, and wanted to use them like breadcrumbs to find his way out of here. And now, here I was, about to entertain his guts.

"I need to—" he started, clenching his clench around my shoulders and arms.

"What?" I asked.

"I need to taste you," he said, red faced as he looked at me. "I need to—to see them."

No more questions needed, I pulled myself away onto my knees and began forcing my boxers down while he flipped himself around and watched as both my cocks bobbed, his head and eyes bobbed slowly with it, like he was mesmerized by the action. I wasn't that kind of serpent, but maybe my trouser snakes were another story.

Soren pushed me from my knees onto my back. He position himself between my legs, spreading them uncomfortably apart so he could have access. And I wasn't sure I liked the inclination he had to being near my hole. That wasn't up for play. "You're gonna like this," he said, cupping my balls and massaging them like a fidget toy.

“Mhmm.” I chewed my lips together and closed my eyes. Explosions of color were going wild behind my eyes. They grew even more intense when both of my cocks were grabbed and tugged with both hands, one, then the other.

“I like that you’re uncut,” he said. “ Both of them.”

Glancing through slight openings, I watched Soren’s tongue lick one of my exposed cock heads, and then the other, he went back and forth with it until pushing them together, both hands around them, he tried his best to masturbate me with that action, and even attempted to wrap his mouth around them, unsuccessfully.

I rested on my hands, pulling at the sheet covering the mattress. My eyes closed again to experience the fireworks of bliss going on throughout me. I’d masturbated and gotten off before, but this was completely different. I was in heaven.

Soren worked me over with his mouth, giving me all of his attention with his sloppy tongue and wet kisses. He worked up from my cock to my chest where he made amends with the blood and scratch stained parts of my chest. He licked them, as if licking them clean. Then, he wrapped his hands around my neck and latched himself to my face, this time, he was in control as I fell on my back.

“I wanted to do this to you years ago,” he whispered, pulling away for a fleeting second before reattaching himself. He straddled my body, his thighs clenching in and his feet bucking around my hips like I was a horse, and he was trying to get me to thrust.

Pushing my hips forward, my cocks aligned together as they touched Soren’s hole and became sticky with his slick. I didn’t need to touch them to know they were stuck together, and Soren continued to clip his feet into my hips.

Both cocks rammed inside him with little resistance as they were guided in with all of

his natural sweet lubrication. Soren's fingers around my neck tightened for a second before loosening. He sat upright, making sure my cocks were buried deep inside him.

"I—" I began before Soren pushed a finger to my lips, hushing me.

"No," he said. "I'm doing this for me." Grabbing my hands, he placed them on his hips and rode me, back and forth, swaying his body so hypnotically.

Sensory overload, I hit capacity when my cock began to knot in unison. Soren leaned into it, seemingly without worry that I could rip his hole open if they were both going to swell and knot like I knew they could.

"Don't stop," he said, yanking my chest. "I said. Don't stop."

"I don't—I don't want you—"

His fingers knuckled against my chest, ready to pull hair right from the follicle. "What?"

"No, not—" Words were difficult when I was unable to process a single thought. "I don't want to get you—pregnant." I said and my fingers dug into his hips, and one of my cocks came inside him.

Soren bore down on my cock and I struggled to keep myself from trying to pull him away. I didn't want this to end up wrong. His head went back and his eyes closed as he probably received an enormous amount of pleasure from the weak throb of the cock that had come, and the other cock as strong as a beating heart, building steam inside him, and getting ready to explode.

"I'm gonna—" I began as he bucked his heels against my thighs again, harder as he continued to ride my cocks and rub his against my torso.

“Do it,” he said, reaching down to grab his cock. He only had it in his hand for a second before I was sprayed with several thick pumps of cum, hitting my chin, and then my chest, before it turned into a dribble.

Those fireworks were back, hitting my vision in full force. My head pushing back and my vocal chords burning from the moans. My second cock sprang into action, this one I could feel wasn't going to stop cumming.

Soren groaned, pulling me from my bliss to see his stomach growing full, a strange look to see his abdominal muscles expand in the same formation like a balloon being inflated, his body was loaded up with my seed now. And there was nothing I could do about it.

The knot my cocks had created at the base of Soren's ass acted as a plug, keeping all my cum inside him, and they wouldn't release until they were sure his omega body was accommodating for my offspring.

His exhausted expression, panting as he stared at me offered me no information about how he felt about the potential repercussions to what we'd just done.

“It's ok,” he said. “But you're gonna have to pull out soon.”

Stroking his legs, I didn't want to hurt him, and I knew it would if we didn't wait for my cocks to reduce their engorged states. “I'll give it another minute.”

He smiled. “I feel... better.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:52 am

I didn't want Vasilis to think he was about to be on the hook for whatever was going through his mind about my stomach right now. It was also a feeling, something about the bond we'd now cemented had his bound by an emotional tether. It wasn't what I wanted, but something about me couldn't not like it.

We laid in bed once it was over, staring at the light show on the ceiling from the lights, acting like we were in the lush tropics, which was far from where we actually were. I had to applaud him on being able to create this place and trick my mind.

"To answer your earlier question, I am on a suppressant," I told him. "It's an implant. It stops me from getting pregnant, but it doesn't stop me from going into heat." My stomach was still swollen from where I was full of his seed.

"I still don't like that it's in there," he said, glancing at my stomach as if already carrying his child. "I don't want to bring life into this world. Or, my family. You—you don't know all the stuff I think they've done to me over the years."

After seeing the scars on his body from taking care of him, and the way he was willing to die rather than be saved, it was actually very telling what his family had done to him. "I'm not going to pretend I do," I said, even if my mind was always guessing at it. "But I need you to know that this is going to be flushed out of me, and I'm probably going to be in pain walking. I didn't think you'd put both of them in there."

He smirked for a second before it vanished, I got the feeling through that he was ashamed of his actions. He had no reason to be ashamed, what we'd done was partly my fault, I'd asked for it. Technically, my body had asked for it. I only sprung out

into heat cycles like that when I felt an active attraction.

I reached out and touched his face, my thumb caressing his chin. “There’s nothing for you to be worried about. I’m not going to let it go any further than what we’ve already done.”

“Now, I feel like I should propose to you for what I’ve done to your body,” he said, placing his hand over mine. “I’m sorry.”

Staring into his eyes, he was slowly becoming the Vasilis I’d met and knew from ten years ago. His skin was a little more weathered, and his hair had a little more grays to it, only visible up this close. I wondered how much stress he’d gone through, and how much mind alteration his family had been forcing on him. “You don’t have to be sorry,” I said. “But you are going to have to show me where the bathroom is. I need to shower and to—”

“There are private bathrooms. I’ll—” he paused again, biting his tongue. “Can you shift like that?”

“No. But I can once it’s out of my system. It’s like when an omega who can shift falls pregnant, they can’t shift in that state. It’s considered foreign material,” I told him. “It’s something I wanted to study when I became a nurse. I wanted to go into research, but ethical stuff, not—” My stomach cramped, conscious of needing to flush out all Vasilis’s cum inside me. “Not the type of stuff you’re doing here. Those doctors who are experimenting.”

“They’re just here to make notes,” he said. “They’re not—” I felt his body drip cold as a new memory surfaced. It was strange to have someone else’s emotions connected to my own. I didn’t want it affecting what I knew to be true.

“Show me the bathroom,” I said, bolting upright in the bed. “This is going to come

out of me.”

After Vasilis put one of his bathrobes on me, and got dressed quickly in one of his shirts, he opened the door and we walked out. Thankfully, there wasn't anyone around to see. I was taken nearly halfway down one of the underground tubes before coming to a door and inside it, another place transformed to not look like the space I was supposed to be in. A bathroom with the same textured moss on the walls and spaces on the ground as if used like a bath mat.

“I don't want you to stay here while I'm—you know.”

Vasilis looked me up and down. He sighed. “I have to stay,” he said. “If don't, the room looks like it's available, and someone else might come in. And I can't wait outside for you.”

There wasn't much choice for me then. “Fine, but you've got to close your eyes and maybe turn the shower on.”

“No, you only get five minutes in the shower,” he said. “We're in the desert, these things are timed.”

“I guess that means you're going to be showering with me then,” I said, holding the bathrobe against my stomach. The rumbles were becoming a little more than I could handle now.

“Not if you don't want, I can wait, usually it resets itself after ten minutes,” he said. “I'm here to make sure you're ok. I'll plug my ears if you need to do your business. But for what it's worth, I really don't care. I'm—”

I understood. It was something non-verbal happening between us, and I knew it was a bond we weren't able to break. At least, I hoped it was a bond, because now I trusted

everything he had to say, even if his memories had been played with.

Vasilis stuck to his word, turning to face the door and plugging his ears while I used the toilet and felt like I was being used a suction cup to get rid of everything he'd tried implanting in me. The notion all of his little swimmers were just serpents caught me in a shiver.

Once my insides were empty, I was beginning to feel hunger, and I had no concept of the time. It could've been midnight, or eight in the morning. There was only so much my internal body clock could tell, but that was before I'd been bound to a bed and passed out unconscious from our newly attached bond.

We showered together, rubbing all of the dried cum out of his body hair was fun, even if it was a little painful for it. It felt like small tingles on my own body in the spaces he was being hurt. The shower cubby wasn't built for two, but we made our best to squeeze ourselves inside it.

No words were exchanged in the quick shower, conscious of the time we had to get cleaned before the water would stop. Vasilis's bursts of energetic thoughts increased my own panic, but it was fine.

I shifted once I was clean and Vasilis carried me in the pocket of the bathrobe as he wore it back to the room. Greeting several soldiers on the way. I made out some of their figures through the fabric, and I smelled them better than anything else, they were sour, like off milk or battery acid.

There wasn't much I could say to him while I was my flying squirrel self. I enjoyed shrinking to such a size, but I hated how I didn't have the ability to communicate with it, unless he was also like me, which wasn't the case at all.

Back in the room, I regained my form, still damp from the shower and completely

naked as I laid on the bed in a near fetal position.”What time is it?” I asked. “I feel like we’re running out of time to rescue everyone.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked in return. “It’s probably around two in the morning. I’d have to check. We don’t really keep time, only in the omega bays for the doctor’s records. They need it to make sure they’re being dosed at regular intervals.”

“Why aren’t—” my mind was being attacked by a haze of thoughts. “Why—” I could form the question. “Why aren’t you dosing them?”

Vasilis pulled the bathrobe off and placed it over me, sitting on the end of the bed. “The first dose has to come from me, or from a Vepres, it’s because it’s the most potent, and carried the most lethal part of the bite, the Rotmor.”

“But I don’t have it,” I said. “I don’t know if you’re telling me the truth, or if you don’t know the truth.”

He laid beside me, his body curving around mine as the big spoon. He cuddled me. “I really wish I had an answer to that,” he said. “I really wish I knew what the fuck was going on with me. I only know what I know.”

“I got rid of all the needles in the first omega room,” I said. “I got close to each one of them, hoping whatever I’ve done to you will rub off on them as well. I’m hoping it’s as simple as that.”

The truth was, we didn’t know why I wasn’t infected the same way they were. Vasilis was clueless too, I could feel it from him as I spoke about it. He didn’t know why I had that effect on him, but he also didn’t know a lot of things, admittedly.

“I know we’re going to get them out of here,” he whispered in my ear. “I just—I don’t know how. I feel like—”

Reaching around, I pulled Vasili's arm to wrap around me. "I know how you feel." At least I hoped I had it right. My interpretation of it was a feeling of pulling a film or mask away and having all of his raw nerve endings exposed to the elements. Luckily, I was a nurse practitioner, and I could tend all of his wounds, even the ones he couldn't see.

"Tomorrow, we'll make a move," he said, as if he had any say in what I was going to do.

"As long as you know what I'm going to tell you," I mumbled. "I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize those omegas."

"I promise."

"You might have promised me once before," I said. "I'm not sure how much weight there is to a promise like that now." And I really didn't know how much stock to put in his promises, considering he might change at any moment. It was entirely possible that he wasn't the same person when he wakes up again. "You still have that blood your brother gave you to drink?"

"It's in a cup," he said, moving his head to gesture to the stock of water bottles that was also being used as a laundry pile. "I don't want you drinking from it."

My mouth winced at the idea of consuming anything his older brother, and the so-called Apex of the syndicate had prepared for him to drink. "I'm thinking, the doctors here, they must be working from somewhere with medical equipment, and if we manage to go in there, we could see what it is inside that cup," I said, eyeing it up. It was a white take out cup with its lid in tact. I'd seen vampires use them in some of their bespoke fast fooderies.

"I'm not taking you anywhere that dangerous," he said, as if, again, he had a choice.

He'd already committed himself to saving the omegas with me. Now, I needed to protect him, and see what was going on in that drink, as it could be the key to solving everything.

"Lucky for you, I don't take up much room," I said, shuffling around to meet his face again in the bed. "You'll take me and the drink, and we'll get them to leave."

"How are we—"

I pressed my mouth against his, shutting him up with a kiss. It might've been a little harder to know he was the Alpha with his stream of anxious thoughts combating me whenever I had a great plan. "Trust me," I said. "Your name and who you are has power."

He smirked. "I've been told that my entire life," he said. "It's—it's different coming from you."

"And, if you'd have told me that when we first met, I wouldn't have had a clue who you were."

"Yes, but didn't you say you knew who the syndicate were then?" he asked, his eyes seeming to glow a pearly yellow like a nightlight.

"Everyone had heard the Serpentine Syndicate," I told him. "Especially when your family is looked at as prey, you have to know all about the people who could come through and snatch you out of your beds. That's the stories I grew up hearing about."

Vasilis kissed my forehead and pulled me into his arms, his strong arms. I didn't think he knew the amount of strength he actually possessed. He'd potentially been softened over the years with whatever he'd been consuming, perhaps not to challenge his brother. "It was created as a way to protect us," he said. "Nobody wants to fuck

around with the snakes that had all these horror stories spoken about them. Do they?"

"You've got a point."

"And for what it's worth, I knew about your family, QuillAir was on the news a lot. It's another reason why nobody can know you're here. They'll ransom you off, if they don't all—" He screwed his eyes.

"Finish your thought," I said. I knew the feeling behind it anyway. I just needed him to say it.

"All try and mate with you. My brother would. But we're bonded. So, I think he'd do it to spite me for it."

"We won't let that happen. We can't let it happen."

"But it might," he said. "There's so much about this place I don't know, and I'm not sure I'll ever know."

They'd really done a number on his head, screwed with how he saw the world, and all it took was the sympathy of his past to come back and let it be bitten for him to realize that everyone in his life had been lying to him.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:52 am

I don't know how long it had been since Soren had been back in my life, but everything in my body now hurt. A throbbing ache like I'd been on a machine working me out for a solid week and the respite was just hitting now. I made it known from the moment I opened my eyes how much I was in pain, nearly in tears from the searing pain attacking me from all angles of my body.

"Hush," Soren's soft and sympathetic tone washed over me, as did a cool wet cloth, pressing to my forehead and rubbed down my chest. "You don't look good."

Opening my eyes, my entire body was breaking out in a small blotchy red spots. They didn't itch, they just felt like hot poker had been applied but without any of the actual burn markings, or branding.

"What did you have to eat? Or drink yesterday?" he asked.

"Only what you had," I said burning turning my head over the side of the bed and throwing up. "I don't know what it is. Oh god. I can't take this."

Soren continued to press the cold cloth to me, at the nape of my neck. "I hope it's not my fault," he said. "But it might be your bodies way of flushing out all the toxins you've consumed. You just need to keep throwing it up. Is there something you can—"

I threw up without thinking on the floor, and I would do it again if it meant the feeling left my throat and chest. And it did, there was an immediate relief after the spicy bile left my throat, coating my tongue and the inside of my mouth. "I think that's it," I said, coughing up the saliva now.

“Sip this,” Soren said, and as I turned my head, he was right there with a bottle of water, prepared the cap off. “Like yesterday, you need to take slow sips, and you need to practice breathing. These look like hives. What were you dreaming about?” He took my wrist and applied a small amount of pressure as he held it. “Heart rate is extremely elevated. If this was another panic attack, you’re gonna have to tell me what it is you’re so worried about with your family.”

I didn’t even know where to begin with that. My family weren’t going to let me go free. I couldn’t recall my dreams, but that wasn’t a new development. On the nice occasion when I had perfect recall of a dream, I was lucky, but this wasn’t one of those times. Whatever it was, it had been awful enough to provoke my body into betraying itself.

“Breathing,” Soren continued, softly over me. “And then, we need to actually eat. I wasn’t going to say anything last night because it was so late, but I’m actually really hungry.”

“We can go get food,” I said, even if the idea of putting anything solid in my mouth made me feel like I would immediately throw it back up. “As long as you’re ok with helping me get dressed. And coming with me.”

Soren quickly dropped the cloth. “Say less. I’ll sit on your chest, no scratching this time, I promise. And I’ll get to finally see all the food options. You might need to get more than enough.”

“Don’t worry,” I told him, sipping the water. The sharp acidic taste lingered in the back of my throat, forcing me to gag slightly. “I’ll make sure we get enough food.”

He was busy picking out my clothes from the closet, humming and nodding as if he wasn’t taking in anything I’d said. “Is there something special about the different clothes?”

“Not really,” I said. “I mean. Some of them are more uniform and look like what the others are wearing, but I’m not everyone, so I like to have my flair on everything.” I dressed like one of my brother’s advisors, rather than one of the commanders, another perk.

“Get all of that vomit up,” he said. “Otherwise, you’re gonna make a scene out there.”

“Well, being sick might not be the worst idea, it could get us into the doctors lab,” I said.

Soren paused and looked at me. “I didn’t think of that. I’m actually kinda surprised you did. I mean, not saying you don’t have good ideas, but considering everything you’re going through, it’s probably not the area of expertise. Making plans and all.”

There was no disrespect from it. I’d never been the greatest at making plans, hence why I fell in a bush and nearly got myself killed. It wasn’t even the first time I’d tried running away from home. Another memory flashed. Another repressed feeling, it all came up with another bout of vomit, this time, more liquid.

“You’re gonna have them wheel you out of the bedroom at this rate,” Soren said, stepping away from the side of the bed. “And if that happens, your brother will be right here and seeing that you haven’t been drinking his poison punch.” He gestured to the cup. “Speaking of, do you have anything we can take a test sample of.”

“I need to get my head on right before we do anything.”

“Ok, but we are in the viper’s pit.”

“I’m a pit viper, so the pit viper’s pit,” I joked, still hanging my head over the side of the bed in case my throat had that telling tingle again. “You’ll probably find

something in a drawer. You just need a vial. There are vials.”

As I continued to sip the water and wait for my stomach to accept it, Soren searched my bedside table at the other side for vials, similar to the vials that were used to carry venom. These were unused and without any trace of venom. Wrapping my head around the suspect idea that my brother had poisoned me was still a shocker, and brought yet another tingle up where the cool water should’ve quelled.

No vomit arrived, just a dry heave.

My body stopped feeling like a thousand lit daggers had been plunged into me and the taste of vomit vanished from my mouth soon after. Soren got me dressed as he continued to waltz around the bedroom in a pair of my boxers. He claimed they were freeing, and proceeded to ask how my cocks didn’t slip out of the bottom, or the pain of a wedgie going between them. It had happened and it was painful, but not nearly as painful as having two cocks that sometimes got hard at the same time.

With Soren shifted and settled against my chest, and me dressed and smelling nice once more, we headed to the canteen area. There was a single vial of the blood from the cup in my left pocket, I just had to remember that, in case I dipped a hand in there.

“Ok,” I whispered to Soren on my chest. “Left side of my chest means yes, right side means no, remember. So, whatever you want, just let me know.”

The canteen was busy during peak meal times. I should’ve known, but it didn’t take an Alpha with my level of hearing to know Soren’s stomach had been rumbling, or the bond we had that caused my stomach to rumble with sympathy in sync with him.

Doctor Rathe spotted me as I walked in. She had a clipboard in hand and waved at me. “You’re looking awfully pale,” she said. “I thought you managed to get more sun

than most of us yesterday.”

“I’ve not been feeling too well,” I answered her. “I think it might’ve been all that sun, in fact. It’s the reason we’re burrowed so deep. All of that sun poisoning us isn’t good.”

“Sun poisoning is a very real fear,” she said.

“In fact, you’re just the person I wanted to speak to,” I said.

“Really? Well, we spoke to your assistant yesterday,” she said, leaning in and looking around the canteen. “Or at least someone claiming to be your assistant, they were asking a lot of questions. If I see them, I’ll point them out.”

Soren tugged at my chest hair, on the left side. “My assistant. Yeah. I’ve been taking one of them under my wing so to speak. I’m sure whatever they asked was for their own education. I did ask them to check on the omegas. I know there’s been a lot of curiosity since my brother announced his plans for them.”

“His plans,” Doctor Rathe chuckled. “You make it sound like he’s made all the decisions unilaterally. You know the plans. Well, if you need to come and take any medical tests at the lab, I’ll happily run them. Your life is important to us, Vasilis. This place wouldn’t be up and running without a Vepres at the head.”

Soren tugged on the right side, seeming to disapprove of her words. “You’re right,” I told her. “The Syndicate wouldn’t be the same without a Vepres. Is my brother around anywhere?”

She shrugged. “Last I saw of him, was early this morning. He wanted to know if we could make any progress faster. Which brings me to another thing. Someone took a lot of needles from omega bay one. So, if you see any of the soldiers out there

particularly high, let the Apex know.”

I could feel Soren giggling, although not a physical giggle, but the manifestation of one. It forced me to smile in the face of bad news. “I will do.”

“Great,” she said. “And we’re all looking forward to the offspring this experiment will bring. Things are being set up at the place in Georgia. Will you be relocating?”

“Georgia?”

She laughed. “I’m sorry, I’m asking too many questions. This is far too early, and I’ve been awake far too long already.”

Soren had promised not to scratch up my chest today, but he was certainly making it up for it with all the hair pulling as if I’d left him out of some seriously big secrets. I didn’t know half of it.

As Doctor Rathe left, I went to the buffet style serving stations. My mind trying to process what I’d been told, and also feeling out what Soren wanted. I piled a tray with mostly rice and vegetables. He declined all the meat options I mentioned. I didn’t blame him, I didn’t know where the meat came from, and they could’ve been closely related to his current shifted form. It was a horrible thought, it weakened the pit of my stomach.

Naja caught me before I could leave with my tray of food. She stood at the large open door with her tablet pressed to her chest and a smug look on her very painted pretty face. Or, the natural blood rouging she applied daily with a pinch and a bite. “The people need to see you in here, mingling with them,” she said. “If they think you think you’re above eating with them, they might begin to hate you, more than they already do.”

“They don’t hate me,” I said, glancing into the canteen full of soldiers under my command. “And if they do, they’ll soon find out that hating me means they can find somewhere else to live and mooch from.”

She smirked. “And no meat, what is this?” she asked. “These aren’t going to give you the necessary boost you need to fulfill your duties.”

“Why are you on my back, Naja?”

“Because I’m your brother’s eyes and ears.”

“The Apex,” I corrected her as she had done to me many times before. “Yes.”

“Yes. While he’s occupied, I’m here to make sure everyone stays in line.”

All I wanted was for Soren to eat, and he couldn’t do that here. “What do you know about the Georgia compound?”

Her eyes widened. “That’s on a need to know basis,” she said. “Your family home is being transformed for the offspring. They can’t exactly grow up here underground. They need to be around prey they can snap the tiny necks of.”

“Like who?”

“There’s a lot of people in this world the Syndicate plans to take care of, and once there’s more Vepres pit vipers in this world, I’m not so sure your position within the organization will be so safe,” she said, screwing her lips together like she was mashing lipstick on them. “Just something to think about while you’re elsewhere eating, and these soldiers think you’re abandoning them.”

The more information I got now, the better I could combat it later. I didn’t like this

new approach which seems to have been the approach this entire time. Obviously, I was the black snake in the family, cast aside, or under the strict supervision of someone I dreamed of tearing scale by scale.

Once we got back to my room, I nearly threw the plate of food across the bed. I placed it with my shaking hands. Hot under my collar and an itch at my neck all happened in quick succession. Soren was right there, shifting into human form and pressing his mostly naked body to me in an embrace.

“It’s ok,” he said. “These people are wicked. And you’re going to get back at them.”

“I just—” my fingers fumbled to undo the shirt, and I was slapped away from undressing.

“Apply the cloth,” he said. “And breath. You need to practice your breathing, otherwise you’re going to frustrate yourself and make it a million times worse.”

Soren was the only person I could trust right now. He might’ve been using me to get what he wanted, but it wasn’t like he was manipulating me to bring life into this world, going against one of my core beliefs. I shouldn’t bring children into this world when my blood was a curse, and yet so many thirsted after it. It was difficult to seek sympathy from anyone who was the same type.

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Every time Vasilis spiraled, it hurt me, not a physical pain, but a vibrational throb in the back and frontal parts of my head. Each time he opened a wound of a memory, I seemed to know it before he did. I wasn't going to admit to being glad for the bond because I'd always refuted the idea that I would ever connect or owe my life to someone else, and that's exactly how I saw an Alpha and omega bond.

We ate the rice and vegetables as I told him how little I trusted the food from this place once again. I had wished the food I'd thrown yesterday had actually made it past my lips so I would know what I was in for. It was seasoned heavily with lots of salt and pepper, as if the only two seasonings that existed in the world.

"Rice is a safe food when you're sick," I reminded Vasilis. "You're gonna want to line your stomach with enough of it. It'll help balance all the stress going on in that area."

With a spoonful of rice he'd had for the last couple of minutes, floating by his lips and then moving away pretending to eat from. "You feel it too?"

"Of course, I've been feeling it," I said. "You're one of the most—actually, that's a lie. I was going to say you're one of the most emotional Alphas I've ever met, but it's not true. Alphas in general are emotional."

"How so?"

"Well, you go through periods of anger and destruction," I laughed, beating on my chest like I was a gorilla. "You call it a rut, leaving your mark, or whatever it is you're trying to achieve from it. I'm not gonna say it's not entertaining, but I feel like

you're all a bit diva-ish. I guess we're all one-step away from the next big reality TV sensation where they just house Alphas from all different groups, and see what happens."

Vasilis puffed out his cheeks and stared at me. "Only half of what you said actually went in," he said. "I don't watch TV, so I don't know if would be a good idea, I mean, that, and from all different groups, meaning tribes, clans, and shit. That would be fucking chaos. Everyone would be killing each other."

"Only when the plot twist of the season happens, the introduction of one omega, like one that wears those short tiny pants and gets all the big aggressive Alphas sprung," I said, presenting it to him like he was a TV executive. Trashy reality TV was a pleasure, sometimes guilty, other times it was worth telling everyone I met about, assuming they weren't talking about something serious. But everyone watched those shows. "The real house Alphas of, whenever. New Eden."

"Again, I am not the audience for that," he said. "But if that's something you like, then I'll support you with it."

He really wanted to pay attention, I could see it in his eyes. It was more of an entertaining idea for myself at that point, trying to get my mind off everything happening here. The world was going to shit, and like roaches, trashy TV would be the only thing to survive it.

Vasilis chuckled anyway as I continued to go on and on about how predictable Alpha and omega behaviors were. An Alpha would always spring to action around their mate and spiral into uncontrollable rages, while the omega would bat their lashes as the show of their Alpha's force would send them into heat. I assumed that's what happened to me after Vasilis found me and protect me from being caught in the never-ending tunnel system.

“Don’t eat too much rice though,” I said. “Your body will not thank you if you do.”

“Ok, what is it? Should I eat the rice or not?”

“Ys, finish that spoonful, and then we can think about going to the doctors, hopefully they’re out of their lab, and I can get a closer look at everything going on in there because—as much as I know you’re coming to terms with everything again in your life, I don’t think you know what’s going on in a research lab.”

He nodded. “I definitely don’t,” he said. “And I am actually feeling a lot more free in my thoughts now. Like, there’s no funnel there, forcing me into single ideas of giving my venom and feeding on omegas.”

“You fed on them as well?”

His smile faded. “That’s one of the ways it spreads in the soldiers,” he said. “I just—I forgot—or I—”

At this point, he didn’t even need to tell me what his thoughts were because, he didn’t know. He was a giant ball of Jell-O that had been thrown against a wall so many times, I was just glad it had kept its shape all these years. I reached out to him, my hand caressing his face. “Finish that spoonful of rice, and then we go to the lab. You know the way, right?”

“Of course, I know the way.”

“Good. And I’m going to wear your clothes again. As much as I trust you to keep me on your chest. They’ve already seen me. I think it’ll be good if we can solidify that I am part of the—” I pretended to vomit. “Syndicate. Ugh.”

Surprisingly, Vasilis also agreed to that. I thought I’d have to do much more pushing

on the idea than I actually did. I was ready to see what they were doing in the lab, and to figure out what they were using on Vasilis to control him. It had to be something strong.

It was nice to wear Vasilis's clothes. I often played a part when I had to dress a certain way to investigate, so this felt just like that. I got into character as we went over the plan together in the bedroom.

"I'm going to have like a big frown," I said. "That way they know I mean business."

"Yeah, you keep that up. I'll do the speaking. If they speak to you, just nod."

I agreed on that, even though I didn't want to be caught taking instruction from an Alpha who wasn't directly related to me. And even then, I'd disobeyed my family in many aspects of my life. It's one of the reasons I was in this situation in the first place, knowing I needed to have a hands-on job to change the world instead of donating to charities that paid more to their CEOs than the people they were helping.

"You're gonna have to tell them you want to see all the room, and hope they leave," I reminded him. "Unless you can get them to run the test on the blood. But, you know, they could always show your brother the results, and he might see what you've been up to."

"We'll figure it out," he said. "Let's just get out and hope you smell enough like me. And less like an omega in heat."

"Since we mated last night, my heat was all concentrated in that moment," I told him. "I know some omegas who go into heat for weeks at a time, even with all the sex, they're still stuck in that until it goes, or they get pregnant."

The way Vasilis looked at me, I knew he had no concept of omega reproduction, and

since there was still very little written about it, it wasn't a surprise. The human doctors eager and excited about offspring had a good idea to be curious, but not in the way they were curious, this wasn't for a textbook or manual. This was to start a small armed forces, and hope they were all genetically similar to Vasilis.

The moment the bedroom door open and we walked out into the hallway, we were greeted by moving soldiers, two at a time. They didn't bat an eye as we walked together. I had been dressed in his clothes, so his smell was imprinted on the fabric.

We were quiet as we walked. Vasilis a step ahead of me, leading the way. His nerves, all bundled in his belly were clear through the way I had nerves bundling in my belly. I was nerves, but maybe not for the same things he was nervous about.

After nodding and greeting several more soldiers, we reached a green door with a white plus symbol, or cross painted on the front of it. Vasilis gave me a nod before he opened the door and we were greeted by both doctors at different stations. The room was long, filled with computers, machinery, glassware, and microscopes.

"Doctor Rathe, Doctor Payne," Vasilis said. "I'm here to show my assistant your work station, and also because I was looking under the weather earlier. I want to make sure everything is ok. I don't want to get sick this close to everything happening."

Doctor Payne stood, nearly falling over his feet as he approached me. "We spoke when she came in. I have been curious about getting a sperm sample from you. I want to know if it's at all possible for you to fill up a little cup for me. It would help us to see what count you're dealing with."

Doctor Rathe took up a spot beside him. Neither one of them acknowledging me. I walked on ahead as they spoke about Vasilis's sperm count and my eyes perking up as they were trying to catch a glimpse of his cocks. A natural phenomenon in all of

the animal world. I had wondered about it myself, considering snakes were said to have two dicks, Vasilis was an anomaly to keep that trait as human.

“Do they both ejaculate from the same place?” I overheard them ask. “Does it mean double the testes, or prostate. Maybe if we could give you a physical examination, we’d be able to anticipate potential mutations.”

As I kept focus, as well as anyone could when flashing images of Vasilis’s hard cocks were present in my mind, and the idea that they were a mutation. I didn’t know if they were his thoughts or mine, but they were eating away at my attention, trying to find out what it meant.

The doctors had been busy in here. They had a lot of high-tech equipment at their disposal, including a centrifugal machine that could spin and separate blood. It would definitely help find out what was in the drink Vasilis had been helping himself to for the last ten years.

He caught up to me on a mental wave. “Is there a way you could see what’s in this?” he asked, presenting them with the blood. It wasn’t the plan. It was far from the plan. We’d already discussed how that was a bad idea. “Without letting anyone know what you’re doing. And in return, I’ll let you see my body and examine me as you wish.”

I didn’t support that type of trade deal. I didn’t want anyone else getting their hands on Vasilis’s body, let alone inspecting it. That was now mine to have, to hold, and to stare at whenever I pleased. And yet, I couldn’t say anything.

“Of course,” they said in unison. “The centrifuge can take thirty minutes depending on the state of the blood,” Doctor Rathe said as I approached them. “If you know which machine you’re using, you can. As long as you don’t make a mess, and you’re not going to cut into an active vein in here. Please, don’t.”

“Maybe,” I said to Vasilis. “You have the sample. And I think another sample would be good. It would help see what’s in your system.”

“Well, there’s more to it than that,” Doctor Payne said, unable to take his eyes off Vasilis. “But sure, and please, we like to keep a clean work station.”

“If you want to examine me, we’ll try and be as clean as possible.”

They were magnetized by him. I didn’t quite understand it, but at the same time, I knew exactly what it was they saw in him. It was like tasting a fresh strawberry plucked straight from the vine. You know tasting it is going to be a flavor explosion, but you also know it might leave you in a chokehold, quite literally choke you.

Vasilis handed me the vile from his pocket and with a spare vial they provided, he bit into his wrist and carefully extracted the blood into the vial. He didn’t flinch or wince at the pain, even if I knew it hurt, because it tingled my wrist in the same position.

When he turned again to the doctors, they were pulling together a blue partition wall and snapping powder blue latex gloves over their hands. It was nice to see them distracted, but it wasn’t the plan we’d gone into this with.

The machine was easy to use. Insert the samples into the slot, making sure the rubber stoppers were secure, and then double checking the settings which were all preprogrammed. I knew from my time as a nurse that fresher blood took a shorter period of time to separate than the blood from the cup that had slightly clotted.

Once the machine whirled up, making a small racket of sound and draining the conversation of admiration for Vasilis’s cocks, I looked around the lab a little further. The blue partition had kept them completely hidden from me, almost like they were doing it to respect Vasilis, when they were just helping me get more privacy as I rummaged through their things.

All of their work data was readily available through notebooks which they kept in meticulous order. And I realized this had been going on for years in all different states. Now, I wasn't so sure this was going to be as easy as I'd thought. These people had been helping the Syndicate one way or another for seven years according to the files.

Taking one of the notebooks, I flicked through it until I spotted the map layout of the compound, inside it, there were maps for each of the omega bays. I read through a small passage.

‘ Vasilis has been following his duties and keeps coming back to us for top ups. There has been significant changes in his behavioral swings right after injections. He is quick to anger, which we believe increased the sperm count. His count is already high, but with more dosing, we believe he could be the key to helping the Syndicate create a super species of serpents.’ My finger following along the line as I read it.

This was a trap.

A thwack collided with the back of my head, and like a sack of rice, I dropped, my vision blurring until darkness took over.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:52 am

A woke from a sleep I didn't know I'd been in. Hardened crust glued the corners of my eyes together, and I couldn't move to scratch it. A film coated my eyes as I tried to open them.

"Brother," Drakon's voice cut through the silence. "You've always been such a disappointment to the family." In a darkened room with a single spotlight, my brother appeared under it. "I knew it before you even knew it. I felt you pulling away from the plan. Maybe it was when you looked surprised, or maybe it was when Naja caught you with a rat."

"Soren is not a rat," I snapped and tugged my arms. I was bound by ropes, and they were laced with single-spun threads of metal, no doubt, that's what they used here to keep everyone at bay. And I was definitely no different now to someone they'd pulled in off the street to treat as a criminal.

"Well, no, Soren Quillen is a flying squirrel, from the QuillAir family," he said. "You know, brother. If you said you wanted to mate with someone from a ridiculously rich family, I wouldn't have even stopped you. My issue, and I'm sure it's an issue to every single member of the Syndicate, is how Soren isn't actually part of that family anymore. He's off making a name for himself and a reputation as someone who likes to disrupt businesses."

"No he's not. And you better not hurt him."

Drakon laughed in my face, getting closer to me. The smell of decay on his breath wasn't something I thought he'd do, but we all had our vices, and his was clearly drinking the venom like the soldiers. "I'm not going to hurt him. You're going to hurt

him. Once we've dosed you up again and again, oh, did I mention, we're going to keep dosing you up until you forget all about him. Then, you'll tie him to a bed, poison him, and then, we'll even let him be the first to carry the new generation."

There was one thing wrong with that, but I couldn't say it to my brother. Soren was an exploit in making me better. "Do it," I said. "Don't say it. Do it."

"We are already," he said.

Suddenly conscious of every feeling on my body. Completely naked, a still breeze traveling in from the convection fan in the room. Both of the doctors appeared in view with my brother.

"He does have an impressive set, you have to admit," Doctor Rathe said, her eyes on my cocks. "You'd think he would get twice the omegas pregnant with it. But one of them is practically useless after the first load is shot."

"What?" I asked, trying to tug my arms and legs on the constraints, and feeling of tubes and needles inside my muscles became increasingly painful and stung with each motion my limbs took.

"Well, we've inspected you several times already," Doctor Payne said. "The fact that you didn't recall told us you hadn't regained full consciousness of your memories yet. There were a lot of things you would never do."

Doctor Rathe bit her lip and hummed. "Like me, for one," she said. "But any time I was able to get you willing to undress, I took it. I actually didn't realize the assistant was an omega, but alas, I am yet a humble human who is unable to see the differences."

"Or smell them," Drakon said. "We're going to try this again, Vasilis. We're going to

pump you with all of these hormones and amp up the venom in your system so you'll rut, like you usually do after your injections. It works though, it keeps the soldiers in line, and fearing you."

My brain felt detached from my body, spinning around in my skull. I didn't know how to believe or if what they were saying was true. I had no memories of that, even as they mentioned it and I searched, I couldn't find it.

"Where's Soren?" I asked as my limbs grew heavy with pain.

"He would be in your room," Drakon said, turning his nose up. "But that place stinks, so we've put him in with the other omegas. You know, you shouldn't leave your room like that. Vomit, food, bedding everywhere. I know if mom was here, she'd have you on clean-up duty for a month. But you wouldn't even remember it, so what would be the use."

"What are you—" Saliva built up in the corners of my mouth, slobbering out over my lips. "What are—" I was on the verge of vomiting, but also passing out. "Putting in me?"

Doctor Rathe in all the haze she belonged to raised a clipboard to me. "This is a double dose of the cocktail we created. It's been worked to target the parts of your brain specifically, shutting off the cortex capable of storing memories, and pushing high levels of the venom back into your body."

"No, no," I struggled, slurring my words as I shook my head. "No. I don't want it." My head dipping to my chest now, staring at the floor and my feet. They'd had me standing upright, my legs and arms spread apart like the Vitruvian man.

"Good night, brother," Drakon said, his finger hooking under my chin and pushing it up to see me. "When you wake up, I hope you'll feel different about the plan.

Remember, we're doing this to take over. We're doing this to become the biggest and beastliest organization the world has seen."

As the world around me faded into black, my brother's words echoed like an ache in my brain. But so did Soren's face, he was right there, almost like I had a live feed to him. We were bonded after all, and it was going to either save me, or kill me.

The world stopped spinning long enough for me to open my eyes and the comfort of my air purifier going off had me smiling. Today was a good day. I couldn't put my finger on it, but everything smelled ten times sweeter, and that was just from the moss on my walls.

On my nightstand, my morning glass of blood, temperately warm, just the way I liked it. It was what had perfumed the air so nicely. A delight on my senses. The only thing better would be to have an omega on hand and on tap to suck from and poison at my will.

A knock came at my door just as I was getting dressed.

My brother stood in the doorway with a smile.

"You're awake," he said.

"Apex," I greeted him.

We embraced in a big hug. "It's good to see you up and about," he said. "You weren't feeling too well. Has it passed?"

"It must have," I laughed. "I don't feel sick, if that's what you're asking. I heard

we've got a third batch of omegas coming in. I didn't think you'd be here for that. I love the onboarding process. You know, seeing the light dull in their eyes as they give in to the addictive toxins."

"That happened days ago," he said. "You were quite sick. Feverish, if I recall. Well, I'm glad you're better. That's all that matters. Right?"

"Right." It must've done a number on me not to recall it, but I wasn't going to stress over it. "Must've been whatever mystery meat they're serving up here. They're really getting careless with their cooking."

Drakon hummed and nodded his head. "I'll have a word with the people in charge of food," he said. "Also, don't forget to check in with the doctors. They're in the third omega bay. After you being sick and all, they want to check up on you. We don't want anything spreading, and we need to make sure that venom is still potent. There's a straggler omega in there who needs to be given a bite."

I licked my lips. It felt like I hadn't bitten anyone in years with the way my mouth salivated over the idea. "I'll get right to. Need something to eat first. I'll—" I stared into my brother's eyes, there was a flash of something, but it was probably just the light in hallway playing tricks on me. "I'll probably stick to the rice. I heard if you get sick, it's good to stick to the plainer foods."

"Where did you hear that?" he asked.

"It's just something I know." I shrugged. "But it's what I always do after I've been ill. I just wolf down some rice and then I'm fine."

"Ok. Well, as long as you get yourself to the doctors afterward, that should be fine," he said. "I'm sad you missed my speech though. Well, you were there, but you were looking a little sick, so we sent you back to bed."

“Right. Yeah, I remember. I’m sorry I had to miss it. I know they mean a lot to the Syndicate to see the family together looking strong.”

Drakon patted me on the shoulder. “Well, mom wasn’t there, so it wasn’t too big of an issue. Anyway, I’ll see you later. And if you feel anything strange, let me know right away. I’ve got to make sure my little brother and my second-in-command by birth is ok.”

“Thank you.” I knew I wasn’t his direct second-in-command, that was mostly made up by his counsel, but if anything major happened to him where he couldn’t operate the Syndicate like it needed to be, I would be called into command, or my mom, but she’d retired from control.

Once I was dressed, there seemed to be a pleasant upbeat music singing in my ears, like pop punk music with a catchy beat and mumbled words I couldn’t place. I walked right to the canteen where all my soldiers were eating. It was impossible to tell which meal since the same serving was given at all meal times.

“I’m glad you’re looking more like yourself,” Naja said, standing beside me as I piled rice on my tray. “Your brother was worried, as was the rest of us. The soldiers didn’t notice it, but you’ve got to be more careful with what you consume.”

I gestured to the rice going on my tray. “I think I’m already onboard with the caution,” I told her. “I’m not going to be eating anymore of whatever that is.” The meat was coated in a glaze that my body actually craved, but it wasn’t worth getting sick over. “So, you can report back to my brother that I’m taking care of myself.”

“And once you’ve finished, the doctors want to see you,” she said, tapping away on her tablet. “We don’t want you getting the entire compound infected.”

I rolled my eyes and was almost ready to stick my foot out and hope she tripped over

it. I stopped myself from it. She wasn't the most popular person here, given her position as director of intelligence, and overseer of the cameras and whatever other devices she used to keep track on the soldiers.

At a table, I sat and ate as soldiers flocked to me with their trays of food, each of them asking how I was doing, and definitely attempting to brownnose me like I was going to offer them more or less of the venom they were all so addicted to.

"How have all the omegas been?" I asked.

"We're all ready," one of them said.

"Ready?"

"Yeah," another answered. "The big news your brother brought with him. They're being used to create the new generation. And we all get a chance at trying."

"I'm not following. What's happening?" I asked, taking a quick look around the canteen. It was both the same and different, like an overlay of the place I'd been in several times before. They all spoke over each other, and I couldn't make sense of a single one of them. My hand raised to my chest, placed across it, I rubbed at something painful like wounds. "Can one person speak?"

The soldier in front of me I locked eyes with. "We were operating with the idea that we would be using the infected omegas like bombs to send into groups of vamps and such, but they're actually much more useful than we all thought. So, we've had to stop feeding on them." He snort-laughed. "They're actually going to be used as hosts for your offspring."

"Mine?" I laughed and shook my head. "I'm never having kids. I don't remember that happening." I unbuttoned to look at my chest, and in areas where there was no hair, I

discovered small claw marks etched into me, not quite healed over yet. “Can you repeat that?”

Another soldier took over. “Technically, the Apex said we would all be mating with them, but you mainly because you’re of the bloodline. You and the Apex are the reason we’re able to become the kings of this earth. New Eden is a stepping stone. We’re all going to create something bigger.” Most of it didn’t go in at first because I’d become preoccupied with the look of black teeth and the smell emanating from their mouths. But as they went on explaining it, I was beginning to understand that this wasn’t what I’d signed up for, and my brother knew more than well that I never wanted to produce any offspring in this world.

“I’m going to double check that,” I said, after barely managing a spoonful of rice. I raced off out of the canteen in search of the doctors. They would probably tell me what was really going on. They were humans, they weren’t going to lie to me.

After clocking in a couple hundred steps, I made it to the bay where the new omegas were kept. These were the ones who weren’t being sedated. I recalled that much at least.

Three soldiers and the two doctors stood in the center of the room, surrounded by the beds, most of them with omegas in, and one of them with an omega who was unconscious, a sheet covering their entire body. They were breathing, I saw the sheet moving.

“Is that one dead?” I asked, not sure of anything anymore.

Doctor Rathe laughed. “Oh, no. They should be in bay one. But they need you to infect them.”

“The sheet is so that we remember,” Doctor Payne said.

“How do you decide who goes where?”

“Well, random draw, mostly,” Doctor Rathe answer, shrugging it off. “Anyway, we want to see how you’re doing. We hate to see you out of commission and sick.”

Doctor Payne stood by and nodded as Doctor Rathe asked me questions about my symptoms. I didn’t know what they were symptomatic of, but I answered each to the best of my knowledge. Although, everything felt like a giant case of Deja vu.

“Ok,” they finished with, leading me to the omega with the sheet over them. “This one is new in. We just need to make sure your bite is still functional after being sick.”

I took my position by the omega, and pulled an arm out from the sheet. Their body was warm, and strangely familiar in scent. I pulled it to my mouth and inhaled, dragging my nose from the wrist up to the elbow. “Soren,” his name rolled gently off my tongue.

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The world around me faded in and out of color with the voices around me. They were like echoes, vibrating around my skull. Each one a distinct vibration to it. There wasn't much I could do in my state. They'd gotten to me, captured me, put me under whatever they had the other omegas under. I wondered if this is what a medically induced coma felt like, considering I couldn't move but I was very aware.

I heard everything they said. I couldn't keep track of it all for long. I didn't know how long I'd been under for, but I knew it had been a while. Some voices elicited different associated phrases. The doctors specifically, they spoke freely around me, as if they'd forgotten I was in the room with them, them, and all the other groaning omegas who were suffering hallucinations.

"He'll be here soon," Doctor Rathe's upbeat voice was shaped like a firework in my mind, rockets of dull purple.

"I'm not sure we dosed him enough," Doctor Payne's voice dripped with a sludge green-yellow. "He's got a lot of muscle. It's possible he's metabolizing the toxins much faster now. It would make some sense as to why he was able to pull himself free from the effects last time."

I wanted to sprung awake in the bed and tell them it was me. It was al me, for whatever reason, it was me. I was the reason Vasilis was able to break out of their mind control. And yet, I probably wouldn't want to volunteer that information at all. I knew it was dangerous for anyone to know that I could get rid of the venoms and toxins they clung to with plans of world domination.

The only thing missing from their plan was for Drakon to be a mustache twirling

villain. I hadn't even seen him, so in my mind, that's exactly the role he took on.

"I'm not going to mention anything about the omega," Doctor Rathe said. "We'll just tell him it's a new addition. They're going to be wheeled into the first omega bay once they've been dosed. If he's still under the Syndicate's control, he's going to do it without asking any questions.

"And if he doesn't?" Doctor Payne asked.

Their voices, almost crushing as if they were having this tea time together across my chest. I was only existing in my mind, unable to even manifest a physical twitch or motion from my muscles.

And then his voice appeared. He greeted the doctors and they had a little back and forth chat with each other before they directed him to me. He was eager to get to biting. It wasn't going to do anything but break him from their control. I welcomed the bite. If I could, I'd have told him to bite me, harder this time. I just wanted to feel something, and make sure I actually had feelings.

Vasilis's words grew soft near me, mumbled almost. "Soren."

That was me. He knew me. He was about to wreak havoc on them for what they'd done to me.

"Is everything ok?" Doctor Rathe asked, her voice annoyingly closer now, and almost the same sludge as her partner in doctored crime. "We promise the blood is still pumping in it, regardless of the way we've dressed it."

It. I was an it now. I wanted to break free and begin my own tirade. And yet, even as I tried to just tell myself to sit up and throw a fist, my body was betraying me and refusing all actions.

“It’s all good,” he said. “I was just thinking of another omega with a similar scent. It’s fine, I haven’t seen them in years.”

All he had to do was bite me and this would all go away, or just stay close enough for whatever pheromones I’d been putting out into the world around him came back and did their magic again.

“On second thoughts, maybe it’s not good if you do it,” Doctor Payne said. “We don’t want you getting even more sick. Especially after everything you’ve just been through.”

Vasilis’s laugh was different in cadence. He wasn’t listening to them, that was the type of laugh. “I’m Vasilis Vepres. I’m going to do my job and infect every omega. And then, we’re going to have a great party to celebrate. We are, after all, going to be welcoming a host of offspring. Right?”

They applauded him. Fuck. He wasn’t the same person anymore. And he needed to bite me now. Right now. I couldn’t have him going around thinking he wanted to impregnate all of these omegas when we were bonded. I wouldn’t let him mate with anyone else.

“I’m also letting everyone know that nobody is to feed from any of the omegas, especially not this one,” he said. Was it a hint? Was he trying to tell me that he knew I was in here. He had said my name. Or was I imagining things? Maybe all of this was a trick of my brain. I couldn’t trust anything anymore.

Sloppy slurping sounds came into my sphere, they were tainted with deep rouges, like the color of blood. Vasilis’s moans were covered in the color. If my ears were still working, he’d definitely bitten into me, even if I couldn’t process the penetration of his teeth into my skin.

“Is that everything?” Vasilis asked with a heavy sigh. “Because I’m actually feeling a little tired now. I don’t mean to push you on it, but could you check him and make sure the poison has taken. Please.”

Both of the doctors were over me and around me at the same time it seemed, almost inside me.

“You can remove the sheet,” Vasilis said. “He’s unconscious. Right?”

“He,” Doctor Rathe said. “We didn’t mention whether it was a man or woman.”

“I could taste it,” Vasilis said. “You don’t need to be an Alpha to know. There was a lot of signs that it was a man in there. Least of all the obvious, his flat chest, not to sound like someone pointing out physical attributes, but in some cases, it’s true.”

“Well, I suppose you’re able to differentiate from smell as well,” Doctor Payne said. “Which is remarkable. I have always been curious on the ways in which someone like you, and like them can tell so much just from the animal side of your being.”

I wanted to reach up and punch him. Humans shouldn’t have any part of our lives, even if it meant they would put more funding into researching us. We didn’t need it, I didn’t need them poking around my body. I’d seen what they’d done to the omegas already in those beds, this wasn’t the way anyone should be kept. And I definitely didn’t want it.

“You should really count yourself lucky that we allow you this time with us,” Vasilis said as if feeling my thoughts. “I’m capable of things you cannot even wrap your minds around. It’s impressive for you to be stuck in those shells you call bodies that have nothing, spectacular about them happening at all. Don’t you feel out of place here?”

“Well, putting it like that, I’m pretty sure it’s the reason we’re here in the first place,” Doctor Payne answered. “We’re not involved in your world, we’re just here to observe, and of course, do as the Apex commands. We want to be on the good side of history, Vasilis. The same as you.”

I could feel the hesitation in Vasilis, our bond was reconnecting. We were cementing ourselves. If only I knew how to use it to tell him what was going on in my head right now. I hoped he’d know, even if he wasn’t saying it.

A loud bang thundered out, sending a cascade of grays grumbling in my mind. It was followed by a soldier’s formalities speaking to Vasilis, the commander. “One of the omegas in the second unit has gone mad. They’ve pulled one of their eyeballs out. I—”

If I could function, I would’ve jumped to my feet to help them. These so-called doctors didn’t sound too bothered by it.

“There’s nothing we can do about that now,” Doctor Rathe said. “Make sure they’re strapped in, and make sure the rest of them are bound as well.”

“Don’t you think you should check it out?” Vasilis asked. “It could be serious. It might be a complication. And, we need these omegas ready for the plan.”

Hearing his words talk about a plan and supporting the Syndicate after everything made me want to throw up. Pastel puke yellow fizzled around my mind, and suffocated me where I laid.

There was no sound at all, and then suddenly, right in my ear, Vasilis whispered, or at least I assumed it was in my ear. It was quiet, yet intense.”I’m getting you out of here,” he said. “Things are coming back, but we’re gonna have to leave right now, and I don’t know how to unplug any of this shit. So, I guess we’re just gonna have to

give it all a shot.”

I wanted to guide him through it, but without seeing the layout and setup of it all, I didn’t know exactly how to get myself out of this state.

Everything went black.

Vasilis had been in the bed for days, still seemingly too scared to tell me everything he’d been through to get to the point where he was trying to hide out in my parents shrubbery, and in that, he might’ve died, but even death didn’t make him speak.

In the kitchenette of the guest house, where I’d told my parents I would be spending time now because I needed some independence, I made Vasilis soup over the hob. It wasn’t the first time I’d done it, and they didn’t care, not while they were dealing with my brother and sister as they were groomed into roles at the company.

“Is there anything with meat in it?” he called out.

“I only do meat on the weekends,” I replied with a chuckle. It was a lie. I didn’t want him getting a taste for me while I was around, and then him turning on me and thinking I looked like the perfect midnight snack. And while it was true, I kept myself tight and right, I was not going to be some serpent boy’s plaything, even if he was very attractive.

“I’m not going to heal fully without some proper protein in my diet,” he said.

That was code for, feed me meat, or I seek the meat right from your body. “You can’t even chew,” I remind him. “Unless you’re forgetting that. You know, since your jaw is still very sensitive. If you keep moving it, you’ll never heal.”

“Or it’ll heal faster because it knows I’m using it.”

The soup had been warmed through when I transferred it to a bowl and some slices of bread on the side for dipping. That was as solid as he would be getting for food. Carrying it in to him, he had a big smile on his smug face, it always looked smug, even when I could feel him trying to be sincere.

“As soon as I’m able to see recovery in the affected areas, we’ll go to something else,” I said, placing the tray on the bed. “Let me have a look at them.” I pulled back at the gauze on his chin to see it still struggling to heal. His collarbone had been the same. “Are you sure you’re going to heal? It shouldn’t take this long for an Alpha, right?” I reached for the cut near his eye and he flinched.

“Please, just give me the food. I’ll be fine. I just need—”

“You just need,” I mocked him. “You just need to tell me what’s going on.”

“My family would kill me. They’re not like your family.”

Nobodies family was like my family. I rolled my eyes and sat on the chair I used every day to help feed him from. He hated it, sometimes even refusing to open his mouth and telling me I should just throw him out onto the streets.

“The moment you stop feeling sorry for yourself, I bet you’ll begin to heal,” I said. I didn’t know a lot about Alpha physiological make up, but I was assuming that there was something stopping him from healing in the form of a mental block. Anything was possible when it came to shifters. It was fucking annoying.

“I don’t feel sorry for myself,” he said and pursed his lips before scowling. “Everything hurts. Everything is on fire. And I’m—”

Another large eye roll incoming. “If you took the pain killers, you might actually feel better, maybe that’s why.”

Vasilis was a strong headed Alpha, stubborn in whatever lessons he’d learned about pain management. “Then get them for me.”

I’d already created an argument, but he’d agreed with me. I wasn’t prepared for this. “Ok. Finally, we’re getting somewhere. Now, do you want the tablets and the creams? I know you didn’t want those, but I promise they’re good. I have stuff made by local witches that helps healing.”

“No. Just the pills.”

We were getting somewhere. It was slow, but we were getting there. Now it was the pills, but soon, he’d want the creams, and then he might even open up to me about why he left his home. An Alpha with his looks. The only thing I could imagine would be a forced marriage, but that was mostly a thought from watching telenovelas at some of the hospitals I’d worked in.

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Soren was good at making plans. He just knew what to do whenever something was going wild. He'd known since he helped me all those years back, without any sign of worry, he carried me almost. I was limping, but he took me into his home where he made me a bed, and through all of my scowls and trying to keep to myself, he broke through. He broke me then, he broke me now, and he would break me again, breaking the shroud in front of my eyes like an iron curtain, the chinked chains snapping to show me everything I already knew.

Soren was my mate, and he needed saving.

The machine he was hooked up to probably needed someone with a little knowledge of how they worked to operate them, but where I failed at that, I knew that a machine couldn't work if it wasn't plugged in. I yanked the wire from the socket and the machine stopped its whirring.

I needed him to speak to me and tell me what I needed to do now. He had a tube down his throat and monitors on his skin. And one injectable in the back of his hand. I didn't know what to do, and I didn't have long to decide.

The throat tube was first. I began pulling on it and the length of it surprised me. But the moment I pulled it out, Soren began sputtering and coughing. His eyes partially opening. "Hey," I whispered. "Hey. Are you ok?"

He sucked in deep breath and as his eyes opened slightly, they were rolling back.

With a hand pushed under his back, I lifted him slightly hoping it would help him take in more oxygen with each breath. I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't

like not knowing. It was scary. “Hey,” I whispered. “Come on. Let’s—” I remembered the advice he gave me. “Slow, deep, purse your lips.”

Soren was listening, he followed my instructions which were in turn his own instructions. “What—” he let out with a pant. “The fuck is going on?”

“Ok, you’re ok.” I stroked the side of his face and planted my lips on his skin to embrace him with a kiss. “I need your help.”

He smiled. “You need my help?” he coughed up as he laughed.

“Yes. I don’t know what they’ve done to you, and you’re much more knowledgeable about this stuff than I am.”

He stared at me with a big smile. “I was worried there for a minute. I could hear you all talking. I thought they’d done something to you. I didn’t think you were going to come back to me.”

I pressed my nose and forehead to his. “It was weird. I was me, but I was also watching myself. I kinda bit you again and that’s when I really felt everything slot back into place. So, I might not have come back, if it wasn’t for that bite.”

Soren lifted a hand, tssking his teeth in pain. “They were dosing me with something,” he said, slowly pulling at the needle embedded in the back of his hand. An immediate spurt of blood followed it.

“No you don’t.” I licked the wound clean on the back of his hand. I wasn’t going to waste good blood, especially not Soren’s. Although I was entertaining briefly the idea of putting his blood in each of their bodies to see if it would have the same effect as it had on me. I didn’t want them infected.

“How long have I been out?” he asked.

“No idea. I just woke up, and felt like everything was the same. We don’t have a calendar around, so it’s impossible to tell.”

“I need to get out of here and back to my car,” he said. “I have to check in with people. If I’m off the grid for too long, they’ll come looking for me. I always tell them not to, but they’re not going to leave without me. And I don’t want them to come here. They’ll end up like them.” He gestured to the docile yet lucid sputtering of the omegas in the beds at his left. “We’ll come back and save them.”

I closed my eyes briefly, seeing the time we’d spent together, everything from the moment we’d been in bed to the conversations we’d had. I knew he wanted to rescue the omegas, he was adamant about not leaving until he could leave with them, but now, he was acting different. “They haven’t done anything to you, have they?”

He shook his head. “Not that I know of. What do you think they’ve done to me?”

“I—I don’t know, Soren. But if we leave, I don’t think we should come back. The Syndicate will eat you—us alive if it knows what we’re planning.” My brother probably wouldn’t kill me, but I could imagine the torture he’d put me through, mainly because I’d already been living in his torture chamber, which was to be used and unable to take any real control over myself. “We can get them all out. There are vans. We can take them, drive as fast as possible until we reach a major city.”

Soren’s big eyes looked into mine as he smiled. “Look at you now, making the decisions,” he said. “I can’t say I’m surprised. That was my idea, so I’m gonna take credit for it.”

I nodded. “Please. Take credit for it, but I’m not going to let you give up now. I’m not even going to let you look defeated right now. We’re going to get out of here with

all these omegas, and you're going to be hailed in the papers."

"Oh, now you are reading my mind or feelings," he giggled and then sighed. There was a pain in his chest, I felt it reflected in my own body, a tightness, constricting him. I suppose having a tube rammed down his throat hadn't helped with things.

I rubbed a hand against his chest. "We need to get you dressed as well." He wasn't completely naked, but I wasn't even going to think about them undressing him. My knuckles turned white as they wrapped around the metal frame of the bed. It was too late, I was pissed off.

Soren was defeated, it was written all over his face and body. He was one are you ok? question away from breaking in front of me. This wasn't the person who threatened me, this was someone who'd nearly surrounded to everything this place was putting him through.

I tried my best to talk him around. I knew it was going to be difficult, the bond we had was here to stay. It said everything on his behalf. If I could've said or done the thing that helped him out of this, I would've done it. But there was no miracle cure to the funk he was in, not like he was the miracle cure to everything in my life.

The doors opened and the three soldiers that had left with the doctors arrived back in. They rushed over to us, questioning what Soren was doing awake.

To my feet, I stood in front of him. "Who undressed him?" I asked. "It's a simple question. Who put their hands all over his body to undress him?"

They looked to each other, raising their hands to point, none of them pointing to the same person.

"They all have to be undressed," one of them said. "It's one of the rules."

With fists formed at my waistline, I was gearing up to bring them to the sides of their heads where they would wish they never set a finger on Soren's precious skin. "This one is mine," I told them. "So, which one of you did it?"

Two of them pointed to the third. He stumbled as he took a step back. "He did it," they said.

I didn't care anymore. "Pick him up," I said.

My soldiers, my lackeys. They did as was asked of them, grabbing him from the ground and pulling him to his feet until he was stood in front of me. They all seemed to have excuses as to why they weren't the one who touched him, and I didn't care for any of it.

Just as I was about to show them how little their life was worth. I heard a crunching from behind. I didn't have time to turn around before I saw Soren with the metal bar from the side of the bed. He thrust forward, impaling the soldier in the middle on the end of it. The sweet spot of the belly button, not protected by the small protective vest all the soldiers wore.

I snapped my fingers. "Don't move," I told them. Soren's shaking hands were wrapped around the steel bar, hesitating whether to push it further through him, or pull it out. "And don't look at him." His full naked body on display. I didn't like him being displayed to anyone but me. If they wanted to see him naked, they would have to pay with their eyes. That was the current price of admission.

The decision was made the moment it crossed my mind. Their eyes had seen too much, and fresh on my mind from that poor omega who'd gone feral plucking its own eye out. I released an inner rage I'd bottled up for far too long. A rut that could've beaten down a complete concrete wall to rubble.

In the past, when an explosion of energy ran through me like that, I wouldn't have much memory of it. It made sense now why I didn't have those memories, but similarly, I went into a rage and locked in on my target.

It can't have lasted that long because we were leaving the room before anyone else was on their way to it. The soldiers bodies were pinned to the wall with their faces caved in. Soren had been covered in blood before he shifted and cuddled up inside my inside jacket pocket.

Minutes later and the alarm sounded.

The bodies had been found.

In my room, an exhausted Soren flopped around on the bed, stressed by all the commotion and an inability to think. At least, that's how my brain was interpreting his emotions like a static fizzle from an old television unit.

"They're going to be looking for you," I told him. "We have one option, and that's to leave before they find us."

He shook his head, slamming it back against the pillow on the bed. "We have another option. We could both shift. We could both slip away and plan our attack from somewhere else."

I sat on the foot of the bed and grabbed his ankle, tugging his naked body down the bed slightly. Blood from my hands staining his skin. "You need to stop changing your mind."

"I'm not. I am. But I'm not. I'm just—"

This wasn't good. His thoughts were bleeding into mine, and mine into his. We had

competing ideas, and just like polar opposites, one of us was always going to have a different want to the other. “I’m saying I agree with your first plan. Let’s leave, you can contact who you need to contact and let them know you’re ok. Then, we can come back here, plan, and get these omegas out.”

The continued blare of the alarm was like a pressure, forcing us to decide our next action.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m—”

“You’ve been through a lot. But you were always the best at making decisions,” I said. “And I think whatever you want to do, we’ll do that, and I won’t second-guess it. So, tell me what you want to do, Soren. Please.”

“I want to kill your brother,” he said.

Of all the things he wanted, it was the one thing I hadn’t even thought of him suggesting. “But—”

“He’s the head the Syndicate. If he dies, the Syndicate will—” He stared at me, I knew he was hoping I’d finish the sentence, but it was as simple as that. There wasn’t a definitive answer, and I know he wanted me to say I would take over, but in reality, it could’ve been anyone now that all those omegas were primed to create more Rotmor infected serpents.

I shook my head. “It’s not me,” I told him. “We can kill him, but we need to—”

“You just said whatever I want, we’ll do.” He sat upright and glared at me. “So, that’s what I want to do.”

“Fine. We’ll kill my brother.”

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After what I'd gone through, I knew what those omegas were dealing with, and popular sayings were a thing for a reason. Cut the head of the snake and everything else will crumble. It was going to be a hail Mary of a shot considering everyone was now going to be on alert, but I wasn't going to let any more omegas go through the pain of not having control of their bodies.

"And I will agree," I said to Vasilis as his face dropped with the realization we would be murdering his brother. "We need to save the omegas first. So, you're going to need to distract your brother. You're not going to kill him. That what I'm going to do, just so we're both clear on that."

He nodded. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"I've got claws. I'm the cure. Nobody is going to want to get near me when you tell your brother that little bit of information," I said, raising my hand and through my nail beds sharpened claws pushed through. They were upsized from my shifted form. I rarely partially shifted, but this called for it. "I need you to push his focuses away from the omegas. Tell him I plan on killing the soldiers, one by one."

"What happened to the plan of you needing to call your friends and tell them to stay away?"

"If we're lucky, we'll get this done quickly, and my friends won't have even touched down," I said. "Unless they charter one of the fast jets, but even then, I'm going to focus on what's happening in front of us right now, not what could be happening."

I understood my mind was all over the place with thoughts, back and forward with

what I wanted. The decision was made, the goal was set, and I would become a murderer once it was all done. I'd never killed anyone before today, but after going through everything in that bed, and knowing what those omegas were going through, there was no alternative now.

"You know, I'm gonna have to try my hardest not to hurt my brother myself," he whispered, stroking a hand against the side of my face. "And what excuse will I use?"

"I'm obviously stronger than anyone gave me credit for," I reminded him. "Unless you don't remember what I did with that metal bar."

Vasilis leaned in close, pressing his forehead against mine. I wondered if this was some ability he had to read my thoughts through. I didn't get any of his thoughts from the act, so I couldn't be too sure it was just a one-way street for him. "You best get dressed then. The alarms are going to keep going until you've been found. If I tell my brother you escaped, then he'll believe me. But Naja will no doubt have some form of camera tracking everything. So—"

"Take her tablet. Destroy it," I told him. "We need to blind them at every corner now. We can't be weak, waiting for them to make the move against us."

"You're right."

"And you should probably bite me again, maybe get some of my blood on a cloth, just in case. I don't want you reverting back."

"You're very smart," he said, furrowing his brow as he stared at me. "If I never got on board with your plan, I wonder what you would've done."

"Lucky for you, you don't have to found out." I pressed a kiss against his stubbly cheek. "But let's just say, you might've been at the other end of that metal bar," I

whispered in his ear.

“I thought you weren’t going to tell me.” He nibbled at the bottom of my ear. “But I think I’d have put up a fight.”

Raising my hand with the claws, I tapped the end of his nose. “I’ve got more where this came from.”

“Yeah, but you can’t poison people,” he said.

“But I’m obviously immune to whatever poison you carry,” I reminded him. “And if I’m immune to yours, then I’m probably immune to whatever other snakes live here.” I shouldn’t have been too cocky about that considering I didn’t know for certain where my immunities lied, or how I had them.

The alarms continued, keeping us from having a moment together. Vasilis dressed me in his nice clothes, the ones that smelled just like him. It was divine to inhale him, but I couldn’t find myself being caught in another heat cycle, or better described as a cyclone of hormones. I knew he didn’t want to leave my side. We went over the plan, again, and again until he eventually left the room. I waited before as was the plan. Five minutes went by, pacing, the alarm continued to go off. Ten minutes went by, I’d downed an entire bottle of water from the stack. The alarm continued.

At the twenty minute mark, the alarm stopped, and I walked right out of the room. I couldn’t use the same excuse that I was Vasilis’s assistant anymore. I didn’t know how many people were in on the secret that I wasn’t his assistant, and that I was in fact an omega here trying to free all the other omegas.

I recalled the map I’d seen in the doctor’s lab, and it was the first port of call. Depending on how long it had been, those vials of blood would be around, and I could get some closure on what was going on in the blood Vasilis was being made to

drink.

Soldiers walked by with their heads down, everyone was focused, and not a single person looked up at me. The alarm had everyone on alert, but I didn't exactly stink like a typical omega, especially not while in the best disguise, a disguise of the senses.

Through the porthole window into the doctor's lab and office. Doctor Payne was alone, looking over a book and papers. The hallway was clear at either side. I walked in, and darted right for him.

"You shouldn't—" he began. They were his last words as I slashed my claws at his neck, severing an artery in the process. He tried to compress it, but it didn't work, the blood continue to pulse out between his fingers and spray the room.

The black clothes the Syndicate wore made more sense now. I couldn't even see the blood on my skin. Although a mirror on the far side of the room informed me that he'd sprayed my face. It was war paint of sorts.

"You over stepped," I told the lifeless body on the ground. "You've been playing in a world you shouldn't have even been allowed to spectate." I grabbed a white lab coat and wiped my face before laying it over Doctor Payne's body. I didn't want to see it again.

The lab was full of research, and I couldn't take my time like I wanted to go around and investigate every nook and hidey hole to find the good stuff I knew they were hiding. I knew they would've had information on every omega brought through the doors. And they did. In a ledger. Each of the omegas was listed with their location of capture, the money deposited into their accounts, blood types, ages, and whether they'd had a child before. Alongside being an omega, they all had one other commonality, none of them could shift.

“Fuck,” I muttered, flipping through pages. This had been going on across the other states. There were already cases they had written in the notes, calling it a success and a failure. After another moment of rummaging, I uncovered what they were changing, and what they’d done differently at each of the other compounds in Arizona and California.

‘ We now know that infecting the omegas wasn’t transferring the Rotmor successfully. They were infected with all the negative traits and none of the immunities. These omegas have been terminated and a new crop of omegas should be brought in where newly Rotmor infected omegas are forced into carrying the offspring of the Vepres family. We believe this is the only way to preserve the lethality and deadliness of the disease can successfully be transferred without all the downsides. Vasilis Vepres is our case study.’

Vasilis was the difference now. He’d been played, every moment of his life, until right now, until whatever they had planned for him here. He needed saving just like those omegas.

The door opened. I clutched the ledger and notebook as I dipped to hide beneath one of the partition screens. I’d killed my second person, and I was well on the way to adding more and more to that figure if I had to.

“Doctor Payne must’ve already left,” a voice said before leaving and the door shutting behind them.

I stayed behind the partition for a moment longer, shuffling in my crouch across to the space in the screen. I had a clear view of the door, and they had gone. Everything was set to high alert, I couldn’t stop for even a second or get caught and I was probably more hassle than another omega to keep alive. In reality, capturing me could’ve been a bargaining chip, I had a rich family, I had blood that seemed immune to the Rotmor and poison.

After being sure nobody had stayed behind because Doctor Payne's body had been visible, at least his legs were, even with the lab coat over him. I stood, and to my surprise, I'd been crouched in a squat for nothing.

I grabbed a map and kept my back flush to the wall with the door. If someone came in now, I'd be prepared to strike, at least with one hand. My other hand was keeping the ledger to my chest. I couldn't lose that.

From the map, I was able to plan where I had to go to see all the omegas they'd taken. They couldn't have put them further away from each other even if they tried. There wasn't any rhyme or reason to the layout, except for the canteen which seemed functional in the center of the compound.

"Ok, Soren, you've got this," I said, preparing to leave. "Wait. The blood." I couldn't see the machine, and I'd already spent too long in here. The longer I stayed, the more I risked being caught.

Only one soldier was standing in the hallway, he was walking away from me, he hadn't even noticed me. I walked in the opposite direction and placed myself on the map. The third base room for the omegas was up ahead after several left and right turns.

The tunnels were probably strategy to keep their enemies out and their captives in, I was both it seemed. The closer to the omega bay, the more soldiers I saw walking around, and still none of them looked at me longer than a couple seconds.

I tucked the ledger down the front of my slacks and folded the map before slipping it into a pocket. The omegas in this room were all awake, whining and moaning about the pain they were feeling. The soldiers on watch in that room seemed indifferent to their sounds, standing around in the center of the bay, they were talking to each other.

There was little time for me to make any hypotheses and try out any experiments. I had an idea, and if it worked, this would go a lot more smoothly.

From scent alone, all three soldiers stood to salute me as I walked into the bay.

“How long have they all been like this?” I asked them. “You know the rules, right?”

A woman, standing forward from the three soldiers nodded. “Yes, Sir. They’re dosed twice a day with injections. We’re waiting on Doctor Payne before they get their next dose.”

“Waiting on him to tell you to inject them?” I asked.

“No, he checks them,” the man at her side said.

“Well, they’re all—” I looked around the room, each one of the omegas were sat upright in the bed. Those with longer hair had become knotted and unkept. They had cream sacks, acting as clothing, and it was covered in spittle and blood. I had to keep my composure in the face of it all. “They’re all definitely infected.”

“Yes,” the woman continued. “I don’t know what he checks them for, but I know they are checked before they receive another injection. It usually calms them down for an hour.”

“Do you three just stand and watch them?” I asked. “I heard about the omega that pulled out its own eye. Was that from here?”

They glanced to each other before nodding back at me.

“They were taken from the room,” they said.

I saw one bed that was covered in blood, and the doctor's lab didn't look like it had been performing any type of surgery. I was afraid to ask what had happened to the omega in question. I feared I knew what had happened to them, and I didn't want to be affirmed.

"Killed," another added.

"Great," I said, my teeth gnashing together. "Well, I'm here because I want to check each of them. If you want to make sure the injections are ready for them. I don't want them to miss their dose because of Doctor Payne."

They nodded and turned. At least they were obeying me. Now, the tough part. How was I going to cut myself, feed it to the omegas, and keep them from getting another injection without any of the soldiers noticing, and without anyone who'd seen my face walk through the doors?

It was going to be a challenge, but I'd once given CPR to someone for five minutes until their heart restarted. I could absolutely bring these omegas back from the brink as well.

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My brother occupied a large room in the compound. It was his while he was there. There was a large chair in the middle of the room and a water featured. There were sofas, directly opposite him where I sat, right beside Naja. It was a converted bedroom where several soldiers would've been bunking together. He had a separate room to sleep in while he was here as well. This was a make shift throne room, and it worked magic on his ego.

"We've got to send a party out after that fucking omega," he said, rapping his knuckles against the arm of the chair.

I tried paying attention to everything he said, but I was more concerned with what was going on with Naja's tablet of information. All that access to the cameras, and not one sign of Soren on them according to her.

"I wish I'd been there when he killed those soldiers," I said. "I don't know how long after I'd left it happened. Seems like something to do with my bite pulled him from the coma he'd been in."

"It's no surprise," Naja said. "He seems resistant."

"Anything I can do to find him, I'll take it," I told them. "Nobody has ever not taken to my venom. I definitely want to make sure it wasn't my fault."

Drakon stared at me and nodded. "I highly doubt this was because of you," he said. "That omega was actually found wandering the compound. I don't know how they got in, or how they got out. We think someone on the inside might be helping them."

It was me. I was the one helping, but if he was telling me that, then he didn't suspect me currently, even if he knew. And I knew that he knew it was me. My brain was spinning to keep up the act that I was actually going to do any harm to Soren when he was found.

"Do you have any recordings?" I asked, turning to Naja. "I'm assuming it's something you'd have access to. Right?"

She rolled her eyes back. "We know he's an omega who can shift," she said. "What we don't know is what form he takes. We could be looking for a fucking ant. We don't know. Now, if someone did know, I'm sure they would tell us."

I looked to my brother on his throne. "Do you think it's possible to have ant shifters?" It was a genuine question. I hadn't heard of them before. I wondered how it all worked considering how ants were as part of the animal kingdom. "I don't think he is. Maybe a spider. I've seen those types of shifters before."

Drakon placed his forefinger and thumb to his eye socket, massaging him. I'd clearly not been giving him any good information. And I wasn't going to. The whole plan hinged on me keeping my brother occupied for as long as possible. It was better since Naja was in the room with us, and she didn't want me seeing the cameras, so her tablet stayed at her chest.

"Do all the soldiers know who they're looking for?" I asked.

"No," he answered with a huff. "They're all already panicked from the alarm. I don't want them all trying to become superheroes. This omega, whoever it is, has trained."

"An omega assassin," I snort-laughed. "Isn't that a bit far-fetched? Omegas aren't really the violent type."

Naja coughed into a fist, seeming she wanted to add to the conversation but lulled her head. The corners of her lips were turned up into a smile. She feared my brother as much as the rest of us. Except, I knew him as my brother. I never saw him as the Apex, even my mom. I saw all of them as who they were over the roles they played.

“Naja,” he said. “Please. You’re the head of intelligence. What stories have you heard about violent omegas?”

“I’d like to hear it as well.”

“Apex, Sir,” she said, pulling her tablet nearly in front of her face. “There is the Valenti family operating out of Chicago.”

“Valenti,” he said, his tongue flickering. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“They warred with the Salinger family, a famed serpent tribe,” she said. “Not much is known about the Salinger family anymore, all of them thought to be wiped out.”

“By omegas?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, no, the current Valenti family, wolf shifters, are made up of the father, an Alpha, his husband, an omega, and their three omega sons. Those three sons have a reputation. I heard they slaughtered several Alphas from around local gangs.”

“Well, the omega we’re looking for isn’t a wolf, are they?”

“No, Sir. Well, another thing about them,” she said, the light of the tablet glowing in her face. “None of those omegas can shift. Partially, maybe, but they don’t possess any real abilities, other than a reputation.”

Drakon shrugged. “Coming all the way here from Illinois doesn’t sound likely, but I’m intrigued by them.”

As was I. It felt like I didn’t know anything anymore. I’d never heard of those omegas, or what they were doing in Chicago, but everyone else seemed to know they had a reputation. I wondered just how far back my family had been fucking around with my memories. The front of my head began to twinge with stabs of pain.

“There’s something odd about this entire situation,” Drakon continued. “I’m curious whether you should go out and see if you can smell him. It would mean a lot to the Syndicate to have him found and taken in.”

I nodded. I couldn’t let this plan happen. There was far too much on the line if I left this room. I knew Naja would be on those cameras and trying to throw me under the bus at every turn. Or maybe not, she must have known it wouldn’t work. The only thing he would do it—

“Also, don’t forget to keep drinking that cocktail,” he added, finishing my thought for me. He would force me to drink more of that poison mind controlling cocktail. I still didn’t know what it contained.

“I have been,” I lied. “I’m more curious now about whether the omega got out. Have you checked the security footage?”

Drakon leaned forward on the throne chair, his elbows on his knees, propping up his chin. “I am curious about that, actually,” he said. “Or have you been inviting those men from the bar into your bed again?”

The only person I felt could talk to her like that and not get a tongue lashing, myself included. “Are you jealous?” she asked, and proved me wrong, my brother wasn’t above her sassy response. “The last time we mated was months ago. You can’t

seriously assume I've been out here waiting for you to return, or following you around like a lost omega, because I'm not."

Silent.

He laughed, startling me. "I'd never treat you like an omega. You deserve more than that. But, I don't see you getting the same amount of pleasure from me as you would those others."

Naja was an Alpha, and because she was also a woman, a lot of people took that to call her weak, and one of the reasons she was probably the way she was now, as a defense mechanism. I stayed quiet, watching the exchange unfold and trying to keep myself from analyzing them too deep. I had to stay here, and I wasn't going to be forced out of the room by the potential they had to spring into action and start fucking.

"I saw her bring two men," I said and could've slapped myself for getting involved.

"I need two men," she said. "To replace you."

He applauded the comment. "Well, now I'm ready to replace them," he said. "But I want that omega found before I celebrate. And I might not even choose to celebrate with you, we'll see how I'm feeling."

Now, I was firmly getting into uncomfortable territory between the two of them. "So, let's see the footage," I said, almost wanting to tear the tablet from Naja's hands. "It should be easy to spot him. He wasn't wearing any clothes."

They both looked at me, their intense glares digging holes in my skull.

"How do you know he wasn't wearing any clothes?" Drakon asked.

“Because I wanted to see what the omega looked like before I bit him,” I said. It wasn’t technically true, I knew who it was from scent alone, and I only found out afterwards that he was naked. “And then I peeled back the cover. I didn’t know they were kept naked.”

“They’re not,” Naja said. “He had been wearing a—a—a soldier’s outfit.”

I knew that was a lie. I knew he’d been wearing my clothes, but I couldn’t let on that I knew. “Great. That would’ve been good to know,” I said. “It’s going to be difficult finding a soldier. I don’t even know their names. How are we going to line them up and see who is supposed to be here and who is trying to infiltrate us?” It was a good idea to misdirect them. “I think it’s somewhere we can start.”

They looked at each other. I hoped neither of them were clocking on to the idea that I was aware Soren wasn’t actually in soldier’s clothes.

The door opened, pouring amber light into the ambient purple of the room. Zito, head of operations walked in and bowed his head to Drakon. “We’ve discovered another body. This one was in the doctor’s office. We don’t know who did it, but the throat was attacked with such a force that the—” he paused to count me and Naja with nods of his head. “Doctor Payne died almost immediately. The jugular was severed.”

He’d gone back to the lab. He must’ve remembered seeing something there the last time we went.

“You think it’s the omega?” I asked.

Zito, like the others, didn’t seem to know what to tell me. It wasn’t like they could trigger me into remembering everything, I was already there. I was the one on the inside, infiltrating the Syndicate. “We aren’t sure who, but an omega couldn’t have possibly done that,” he said.

Naja pulled the tablet up and opened it with facial recognition. To all of our surprise, the cameras weren't functional. Each of them on her screen had a black screen with no service in bold white across them. "I—" she shook her head. "I don't know what's going on with this. There's no service for any of the cameras. We've never had this issue before." She stood, stubbing her fingers on the screen as if it was making it work.

"I've not had any reports of cameras being tampered with," Zito added. "But this does appear to be a situation we should all be wary of now. This omega, wherever he is, is probably still in the compound."

All the work I was putting in to assert the idea that Soren had left was now in the trash. "Anyone have any leads then?" I asked. "I won't show any mercy. You said it seems like a soldier's work? I wonder if he's got a mate on the inside doing all the grunt work."

There was a moment where my brother appeared shocked by the news. His eyes settled on me, wide, nearly unbarely to hold contact with. "It would make sense."

"Of course it would," I said, trying my best to sow the seeds. "A soldier betraying the others would make all the sense. They gave the omega the outfit, and then they told him where to go. Nobody knows these tunnels like a soldier who has to walk them. I know I'm not one of your advisors, brother, but I would definitely take a closer look at the newest soldiers. Considering how all of this happened so quickly." My logic was sound, and since I wasn't a suspect because of all the mind control they thought I was under, I had to do everything to keep up the rouse I hadn't found my memories again.

They all seemed to nod as if agreeing with me.

"It's clear they're working with multiple others," Zito said. "If you've noticed

anything, please, let me know and I'll have them squashed with the full force we wield."

Drakon stood and gestured for me to stand. We were nearly the same height. He had an inch on me, maybe from the shoes. "They are your soldiers, brother," he said to me. "You are their lieutenant. I am hoping if you address them all, you'll get somewhere. What do you think?"

"I can hold a meeting in the hall," I said, nearly slipping up with reminding him I remembered he'd been in there when he arrived at the compound. "We'll probably need to get it made up, I don't know what kind of state it's currently in." I saved it.

With an arm around my shoulder, he patted me. "I think it might still be made up from my talk," he said. "But it's a good idea, we can take a count, see if anyone is missing, and then we'll know."

"I'll need to reconfigure the cameras first," Naja said. "I don't want everyone moving out into the hall before I can get eyes on them."

I didn't want her to leave the room, but I couldn't think fast enough for a reason for her to stay. "Are you all coming to watch me?" I asked. "I want to show you that I'm able to command these soldiers. And then I want to be responsible for killing the traitors." The irony that I was traitor wasn't lost on me, but it sold the narrative I was with the Syndicate, and they were all buying it.

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After successfully dosing each of the omegas with my blood, and then pretending to inject them, when in reality I was pushing the needle into the mattress. They were completely unaware, and before I left, I could see some of the glossy glass eyes return. My blood was the cure, but I still didn't know why.

These doors were unlocked with a single swipe of my arm. They might've had some technological advances, but at the root of it, they were using for evil. I'd managed to destroy the entirety of the tech room. A similarly sized room to the doctor's lab. There was an entire wall of screen and a motherboard, all exposed for my claws fingers to scrape up until nothing was salvagable.

It wasn't even a stop I'd intended on making, but I did because I remembered that woman from the canteen who'd threatened Vasilis. I knew if she didn't have access to her cameras, she was practically useless.

My next stop was the second bay, that's where I'd killed the soldier. The blood was still on the floor. It looked like they'd tried to take a mop with water to it, but water seemed precious here, especially with the situation above ground.

Three soldiers, same formation, same ability to only smell the Alpha on me. They welcomed me in the room, and questioned if I'd heard anything about the doctors.

"Are they running behind schedule?" I asked.

"Since we've been on duty, we haven't seen either of them," one of them said. "They're usually here when we change so we know about the ones who have been acting up."

Another grumbled. "I prefer the sleeping ones," he said. "We get to feed on them."

"I thought that rule was removed," I said. "Since the Apex arrived, we're no longer feeding on them. The canteen has enough food options for us not to need these omegas as a resource."

"Except to mate with," the third chuckled with a big smirk.

I wanted to claw the smile from his lips, like one of those wax candies, I wanted to yank it from his face and to see the large enflamed redness it would leave behind. "Well, except, that's actually only for our commander, Vasilis."

They all looked at one another before back at me, the sudden shame in their faces, like I was here to reprimand them. And I should've done.

"I'm going to check on the omegas. If I see any fresh bites, I will be informing the Apex," I threatened them, not a real threat, but to them it was. "So, if you want to confess now, please do."

For a moment they were all quiet, and then one of them raised their hand. "It was the wrist," he said, gesturing to one of the beds against the right wall. "I didn't take much, just a taste."

Raising my brows, shaking my head, and clicking my tongue, I had my parents signature style of disappointment on my face. "Well, for this, I'm going to ask you stand against the wall over there. All three of you."

They followed my orders. I could see why people loved Alphas so much, they could command and get what they wanted with no pushback. I was jealous of it. This time it was different. I told them to turn and face the wall, not wanting to tempt them, I reasoned as the excuse.

These were a little more difficult because they were semi-conscious and moving. They weren't in any visible pain or suffering from the Rotmor, which had sent them into hallucinogenic trances. I wondered how many of them believed they were seeing visions of the future, but it was all about to stop.

With only a couple drop of my blood, spared from my wrist, dropped from a fingertip into their open mouth, I hoped it was enough to counteract the poison. As I went around, the idea I'd once heard about holy water from the Vatican was in my mind. Any amount of blessed holy water dropped into in any body of water would immediately become blessed. It's how I was viewing my blood, and hope I was right.

Once I was done, I tugged my sleeve down to cover the mark on my wrist. Tingling in pain from being sliced open. "Ok. If anyone comes, let them know they've been seen," I said. I knew Doctor Payne was dead, and I now had to deal with the other doctor, wherever she might be.

"Please don't tell the Apex," they begged.

If my looks could kill, I might've added more bodies to that tally, but they'd listened to me, so they would be spared. "As long as you promise not to touch them," I said. "And that goes for restraining them. If I come back and see even a single new bruise on them, I'll have each of you hauled in front of the Apex." I pretended to take a note of the numbers on the lapels, but in reality, I was running too high on adrenaline to even care if I ever saw them again.

From the second bay of omegas, I was going to try and find the first bay, wherever that was. As I walked, I spotted more soldiers. I knew I couldn't get the map out and consult it in front of everyone, they would know for certain then I wasn't supposed to be here.

As I walked, I found one of the rest room units. Most of the doors were undiscernable

from the others. The bathrooms were different. I could tell them because they were a different color, and they offered a space to be without someone prying on me, even if the cameras were down, I couldn't trust the snakes around me not to spy over my shoulder.

I could take a breath in here without thinking someone was going to barge in and see that I was faking it. I took the time to scan the map, seeing where I was from all the turns I'd taken and comparing it to where I had to get to. I also used the time to look at myself and while I had small trace amounts of blood rouging my skin, it wasn't too noticable. I kept it, in case it was helping to keep me concealed against the soldiers.

Once the finaly bay of omegas were dosed with my blood, they would be useless to the Syndicate. I didn't know how long it would take for them to figure out, and if they were quick, it could mean a permanent end to the people I'd come here to save.

A mechanical crunching and static sounded through a speaker system above, coming in from the corner of the rest room.

" Hello, Syndicate, it's Vasilis Vepres, your commander, " his voice, sending a trill of excitement through me. " All soldiers are required in the large hall. We will be conducting a headcount. And our leader, the Apex, will also have an announcement. Make sure you're all here. You have ten minutes. Any soldier not here within that time will be considered working against the Syndicate. " He was trying to get everyone away, but part of me wondered what his plan was. There was only so much I could feel from him, and it wasn't very decisive.

From the bathroom, I headed in the direction of the firsty bay of omegas. I knew these were all in comatose states. I didn't want to see them, I didn't know if I could really stomach inspecting their bodies again. They'd been fill of sores and now what I knew to be bite marks.

As I entered the room. There were no soldiers, but there was Doctor Rathe in her lab coat, bck turned, but there was only one person alive I knew who would be wearing one. “All the soldiers have gone to the meeting,” she said before turning to see me. “Oh.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m doing the work of two now,” she said. “And I’m guessing you’re here to finish the job. Right?”

“You know it was me?”

She rolled her eyes back. “Who else was it going to be? All these soldiers are loyal. It was obvious you were going to go back there. Just a shame my research partner wasn’t better prepared.”

“You’re not scared of what I might do to you?”

“Listen, I’ve been playing with fire for a very long time,” she said. “Sometimes, you’re going to get a little burned, sometimes it’s the fingertips, othertimes it scars. I know you’re going to do what you’ve got to do.”

“I won’t kill you if you help me cut there machines, take them off those support systems, and wake them,” I said.

Doctor Rathe seemed to mull it oven, her tongue flip-flopping inside her tonuge from left to right and back again. “You see, I think the plan we had was great here, and I don’t want to let them all go,” she said. “The genetic research we’re conducting has been so vast. It could help the rest of the world.”

I stuck a hand into thfront of my trousers and pulled the ledger out. “I know,” I said

“You’ve been doing this for years. You’ve been experimenting on omegas who need the money, who need shelter. You’ve been preying on them for so long that I want to—”

“Don’t kill me,” she said, raising both hands above her head as if to surrender. “I just don’t want this to all be for nothing. The world doesn’t know you all the way we should. With just a little bit of prodding, we might even be able to use the gifts you have to help us.”

“You want to use us. Like everyone does. And I’m not going to let you for research. There are more ethical ways to go about this,” I told her. “So, help me, and I won’t kill you.” I didn’t want to add another death to my conscious. The only one I was preparing for was a man I’d only see through Vasilis’s chest hair.

Doctor Rathe nodded. “I’ll help you, but I need to keep my research.”

“The research in the lab?”

She nodded. “Please. There’s already so much we’ve learned.”

“Fine, but I want your help first.” I agreed to it, but I for my own selfish reasons. I wanted to know what she knew. I wanted to help people, and if she’d found some secret advantage to helping, I had to see it.

As we went around, I kept a careful eye on her, knowing she could turn and attack me at any moment.

“What’s special about your blood?” she asked as I led a droplet of it into an omega’s mouth and smeared my wrist to their lip.

“I don’t know.”

“I can help you with that.”

“I don’t need your help with that,” I told her. “All I need is to have the rest of these omegas conscious.”

“How are you—”

“You’re asking too many questions,” I snapped, my claws coming out like a response to her voice now shrill.

She nodded, but she wasn’t going to stop. “Is this what you were testing on the machine?” she asked. “I looked at the results for you. One of them was full of poison. I couldn’t place it at first. It wasn’t snake venom, that’s for sure.”

“Poison?”

“Like a berry, I think.”

With a chuckle, she pressed a finger to her lips. “I forgot, I was asking too many questions.”

“What berry?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? I don’t. All I know is that there wasn’t any of the same poison in the other.”

It made sense. One of them was from the drink. That had to be filled with poison. The second was Vasilis’s blood, and that was clean. I had more question about the berries, but she could’ve been making it all up just so she stayed alive.

The thing with humans was they didn’t have the same hierarchical respect levels as

we did as omegas and Alphas. It meant Doctor Rathe wasn't scared for any threat of me telling Drakon or anyone else, and she would probably be dead if she tried to ingest venom or diseased blood. In some ways, I wanted to keep her to experiment on her like she had with the omegas, but humans were messier, and more respected out there in the world. I'd end up imprisoned for several lifetimes just on her word alone.

"What's your end goal?" she asked as we finished unhooking the last one from the machine.

"My goal is to get all of them home."

She smirked. "You know, that's impossible. Right?"

I took the book out again and ran my fingers across the leather binding of it. "I know. Some of them are dead. Some of them are elsewhere. But these here, these are alive, and they're all going home. And if you stand in the way of that, our agreement goes out of the window."

"I'm going to tell people I was taken hostage," she said. "So, can I go now?"

"Don't mention me," I told her.

She scoffed. "I don't even know who you are. But I'm taking my research, and I'm going. And—if possible, that ledger as well."

That's precisely where I drew the line. She wasn't getting her hands on it. It was the only solid data source I had that listed each of the omegas by name and location. It was the single-handed most precious piece of information anyone in this compound could possess right now. "No," I said, firm with it.

She shrugged. "It was worth a shot." She walked off, out of the doors.

I didn't know if I'd just made the worst decision ever in letting her go, and letting her not explain the results she'd found, but before I could run after her in regret, one of the omegas woke, gasping for air and screaming.

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The entirety of the hall was occupied with soldiers, and I was stood where my brother had been. He was now standing at my side, commanding all attention that should've been on me, but I didn't quite care for their eyes. I was just seeking solace in the idea that Soren was out there getting around without anyone getting in his way.

My brother's advisors were on the raised platform alongside him, and Naja was still grumbling about the machines that had been destroyed and how much it would cost to have new mech shipped in because it was far from being repairable.

"Close the doors," I commanded now that the time had crossed the deadlines, anyone outside was a traitor, at least in my brother's view of it.

I tried my best to rely on any bond I had with Soren, but besides the odd tickle on my skin, I was completely unaware of how well he was doing outside of this room. I wanted to speak to him, but it was far too dangerous to break everything we'd created so far.

"We've been infiltrated," I announced. "There's a traitor amongst us. Someone in this room. Someone next to you, perhaps. It's impossible to tell."

Naja cleared her throat, standing beside me. "I have a list," she said. "When I call your number, I want you to move to the left side of the room. One of the commanders will look over your information and make sure you're clean."

"Clean?" I mumbled to myself. "I don't want to be judging them based on their hygiene. I know a lot of them don't use those bathrooms."

My brother chuckled. "Of course, we're not looking for their body odor," he said. "We're sweeping them to see if they've got any bugs. You know, like anything that's telling that little omega out there what we're doing. It's probably in the interests of any soldier out there to stay out now since we all think they're working with him."

"It's what they deserve," I said. I knew it was just something I'd have to say, given who I was supposed to be in the eyes of my brother, the man who'd created and crafted the mean personality I'd been known for. "And how will they know when they've found something?"

Naja rolled her eyes, the way she did it, I thought she might've struck out at bowling. "It's not really anything to concern yourself with," she said. "But we're working on the assumption that whoever it is has modified their communications devices. So, we're just searching for some soldiers who have issues with their outfits, stuff that looks like tampering."

I knew she wasn't going to find anything. But I had to keep doing my job of asking the questions and keeping them all occupied. I hoped that wherever Soren was, he was getting some headway with it all. The increased twinges of pain in my wrists were only a slight worry because of the bond we had.

After about twenty minutes, I almost felt like I was the one being watched like a toddler, trying to be flanked at every corner so I didn't bump into an expensive vase. I was nowhere near any of the soldiers who were being talked to. The idea that I was capable of planting evidence on the soldiers from just talking to them was exciting, but this seemed like it was all for show when I knew that my brother hadn't stopped watching me, and didn't bother batting an eye at anyone else in the room.

"Who do you think it is?" I asked him quietly.

He shrugged. "We're halfway through the list, according to Naja. You know, you're

going to have to make an example out of whoever it is,” he said. “I’m talking, this stand here, maybe bringing in some chair to use and then a full guillotine moment with the offenders. The only way to show your commitment to the Syndicate is to be on the side of the Syndicate.” He spoke directly at me, knowing it was my commitment up for question.

“Exactly.” Quick on my feet with it. “And I hope we have a nice line of heads we can stick on pikes outside. You know, to warn anyone else away.”

Drakon smirked, seemingly pleased by the suggestion. “Well, brother, it looks like you’ve got the balls to match those swinging dicks.”

In some way, it should’ve been me at the head of this Syndicate. When people found out about my mutation, they praised me for it, sometimes it was weird, being a teenager and having all these people know about it probably made me shy away from the fact I was wielding so much power.

“You’re not going to see me disagree with that.” It was tough putting on the act, no wonder they’d needed to force poison down my throat to control me.

“That’s a nice change,” he said. “From all the times you have.”

A memory hit, like a flash flood it came and knocked me sideways. I held myself strong in my stand, but my brother noticed it.

“Everyone good?” he asked.

Twelve Years Ago

Walking back through the field into the denser woodlands, I picked up a branch and batted it against the tree trunks I passed. With each thump, I went harder, hoping it would splinter off with force.

“Stop it,” Drakon snapped from behind. “Mom will kill me if you get hurt.”

“You’re almost thirty, why are we even still bothering what she says?”

“Because she has the full force of the Syndicate on her side,” he reminded me. I didn’t need reminding. “And she can choose not to pass it on to me, or you. She might choose one of her advisors. They’re older, wiser, and have more connections.”

At twenty-six, I felt like I’d seen enough of the Syndicate, and the world, even if I hadn’t been allowed to travel much, and the travel I did undertake never led to anything with the lush rainforests my shifted form craved to be in. “Well, nobody else has our blood,” I said.

“Don’t count on that for the rest of your life,” he said. “If you think we’re the first, you really don’t know anything.”

“What do you mean?”

He yanked the branch from my hands and raced on ahead up the worn trail through the forest.

“Tell me!” I shouted, running after him. “Tell me.” I hated feeling like I was being left out, and Drakon knew the buttons to push with me. I just wish I knew his buttons, because I wanted revenge badly.

Chasing after my brother, I shifted into my blue-lipped pit viper and was thrown against him, I slithered up his back and around his neck. I wasn’t a constrictor, but I

could coil around him and make breathing uncomfortable.

He dropped to the dirt with the branch and began clawing at me. I hissed and went to bite him, not like my venom would do anything to him, but he flinched and fought back against each time my jaw snapped at him.

“Vasilis,” he said under a strained breath. “I’m gonna—kill you.”

I slithered down his back and shifted back into my human form, where I swiped a leg under his legs, sending him to the side, toppling and with his reflexes, he caught himself before whacking his head. “Tell me what I don’t know,” I said.

“You’re an asshole,” he said. “You know I’m not allowed to hurt you. But we’re far from home. I might just string you up out here and wait a couple days, pretend you ran away. You’ve done that before.” He pushed himself up from his knees, dusting his hands off.

“What did you mean, we aren’t the first?”

He held a hand out for me to take, pulling me to my feet. “Mom and dad were experimenting way before the two of us were born. The whole reason mom doesn’t want you out there knocking up omegas is the same reason you’re scared to mate.”

“The disease?” I asked. “And I’m not scared. I just don’t want to pass it on.”

“Well the disease is something mom and dad cooked up to make our venom more lethal,” he said. “How can you not know this? You’re an adult. You’ve got to be curious why nobody else knows what Rotmor is.”

“It’s because we’re sick,” I said. It’s how I viewed it. A sickness, something that couldn’t be cured. It wasn’t going to kill me, but it would kill everyone else. “I know

it's how dad died. Right?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, and don't ask mom, I don't want her knowing we've been talking about this stuff."

"So, if I'm not allowed to mate, then who was that omega woman you met the other day?" I asked. "Unless I'm being treated different, yet again."

Drakon shot me daggers with a single look. If only he possessed a single latent magical power, then we might know more about our father's heritage, because he certainly wasn't a serpent shifter.

After twenty minutes of walking in silence, and with the occasional whack of a branch against a tree trunk, we came across the strong barbecue smell in the air. I didn't know what meats were on the grill, and I didn't care. My stomach was now grumbling, and all those questions I'd been mulling over on the walk back home with Drakon were gone, at least, they weren't going to come out and ruin dinner.

The compound was within the tree tops and underground. We occupied a nice portion of the forest, but it took forever to leave it, and even longer to find the nearest town or city.

Our mom was behind the tree, using a large grill that didn't send smoke through the canopy, but sucked it up and held it to keep the rooms in the tree tops above warmed. "You boys look like you've had a journey," she said, hobbling on her good foot over to us. "I told you to not to be out there fighting." She grabbed me by the wrist. "You've been bleeding." She slapped my hand. "You know better than that. You're gonna have people coming to us."

"I'm sorry," Drakon said. "It wasn't Vasilis's fault. But we managed to get nearly a thousand dollars for the venom antidotes."

Her face softened as her focus turned to my brother. Of course, he had to give her the good news. Our current grift was procuring the antidote to snake venom, and with all the Syndicate connections, our mom was farming some of the most venomous snakes in a pit just for their venom. A couple of them were shifters, forced to keep their form just for money. I tried not to think about them, the idea never settled right within me. It also instilled fear it could happen to me one day. I never wanted that. Nobody would.

The doors to the hall were walloped with force. Three heavy thuds had the commanders in the Syndicate approaching it with caution.

“Do you think the deserters are going to ask us to go lenient on them?” Drakon asked with a smirk. “I think the first one should be done slowly. You’ve got put on a show for these people.”

“I’ll make sure they all get a show,” I said, hoping it wasn’t Soren outside the doors banging to get inside. I wished I could’ve guessed how he would behave, but he wasn’t like any other omega I’d met before, even though my memories couldn’t be trusted, I knew that what omegas were supposed to be like. Submissive and non-confrontational.

The door opened and Doctor Rathe stood, panting, nearly at her knees in front of the Syndicate’s weapons. “He’s waking them up,” she said, eventually bowing her head and raising her hands. “I tried to stop him. I tried.”

“Where?” Drakon shouted, his voice boomed as if able to command space, forcing people to move as he walked towards the doctor. I followed, quickly behind Naja who seemed to have been stepping directly into my brother’s steps as he left them.

“What?” she asked, looking up at him. “I—I said he’s waking them up. He’s trying to free them.”

“Where is he?” he asked again.

Shoving my way through to be in front of her as well. “How many of them?” I asked.

“All of them,” she said. “In bay one.”

I snapped my fingers in her face. She didn’t know where to look, her eyes seemed firm and fixed in my brother’s direction. “How many people are working with him?”

She looked at me now, and then back to Drakon. I hoped I’d successfully stumped them into believing I was on their side. My brother had called me out nearly every year of my life for not paying attention, and yet where it mattered, I was locked in.

“Just him,” she said. “It’s one guy. The omega. I think, that’s him. He’s wearing—”

“Go get him,” I said, snapping my fingers before she could finish her words. I knew where they were going, and it’s probably why she looked me up and down for a moment before looking back to Drakon. She knew I was on Soren’s side in all of this, she had to know.

The Syndicate mobilised only on my brother’s orders, and I really hoped Soren was out of there before they got to him. The other omegas were going to be fine, nobody was going to hurt them, not after Drakon’s big plans were in place.

I just needed to think like Soren and figure out his next move.

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I did as much as I could until I felt the pressure build in the back of my neck. I knew I could pass out at any minute. I'd lost too much blood, it seemed, but at least the omegas were waking, and after the first one woke, they were capable of waking the others in the bay.

Leaving them unattended hadn't been the intention, but I knew it wasn't worth me sticking around until I could get them out. I headed right for Vasilis's room where I could finally breathe and remove the clothes that constricted around my chest.

Wriggling around on the bed to undress, I was burning up, and no amount of clothes were going to cool me. I laid on the bed, completely naked, pressing a bottle water soaked piece of fabric against my wrist where it burned the most.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I muttered, screwing my eyes and pressing hard on the wound until I was seeing stars imprinted behind my eyelids. "Just take control, Soren. Just heal." I never had an issue healing, it was something my body did well, but those times hadn't been self-inflicted like this one. My claws were responsible for this burn.

Outside the room, a low voice broke through. I shot upright in the bed, my head swinging back slightly. I didn't know if this was a real voice, or something I'd created. I knew my mind could be a strange place when it felt itself fighting a virus off, or whatever it was battling from the wound on my wrist.

"I think he's left," the voice, Vasilis's voice. "We should check the hallways." Thumps, heavy in a rhythmic pulsing sounded like the headache breaching the corners of my mind were creating an aura of sound.

The door opened. A bright spotlight shone on me and quickly vanished with Vasilis's broad shouldered stance, imposing on the light and giving himself the view it had over my naked body on the bed.

"I don't know what happened," I whispered, my head falling back on the bed in exhaustion.

It was quick but took forever all at the same time. Vasilis was by my body, his cold hand on my forehead. "Shit, you're burning up," he said. "I thought we dealt with your heat."

His innocence, at his age and with all those brood on his face was adorable. "I doesn't work like that all the time," I told him. "I think I've really hurt myself." With a limp wrist, I lifted it in his face.

"Well, fuck." He kissed the cut, keeping his face against it for a moment. "An infection."

"How?" I grumbled, knowing full well I'd been slicing into myself with the hope that I'd heal nicely. "I don't know."

"I can take one big guess," he said, humouring me with a big smile. "How can my venom not have any affect on you, yet, a little cut will send you into all this pain. I suppose, your claws might have different properties to what I would've thought."

Through all the warmth traveling through my body, I was slowly losing all the thoughts I'd had. They were on the tip of my tongue, and as my mouth searched for them, I was just muttering false starts.

"I'm going to tell everyone you left," he said, licking at the wound on my wrist and then kissing it. "But the omegas are awake, so we know your blood has the cure, or at

least a cure to—” he kissed up my arm, sending a light trickle of tickles. “The cure to me.”

My eyelids were heavy, unable to stay open any longer. A yawn stretched at the corners of my mouth and I was fading.

Ten Years Ago

I continued to make Vasilis soups and breads, in some ways we were playing house together. The only thing we weren’t doing was fucking. I was surprised how naturally I took to the omega role of making a house a home, or whatever bullshit I’d grown up hearing about my kind.

“You can’t get too close to me,” Vasilis said. Since he’d been able to move around and his collarbone had healed up, we were both fighting our urges. At least, I was fighting the urge to actually like an Alpha as a potential mate. “You know we can’t do anything.”

“Relax,” I said. “I’m the one who was getting all aroused just the other week.”

“Well, you were touching up all over me,” he said.

“I was blotting the soup stain you made on the blanket.”

“That wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t fussing over feeding me,” he said.

I had been treating Vasilis like a patient, and I took patient care seriously. “I had to, otherwise you could’ve done permanent damage to your collarbone, and then you might have had some deformed bone structure forever.” He stared at me, almost like

he wasn't even taking in the words I was telling him. "Or never be able to shift again. Did you think about that?" I didn't know it that was true, but as with everything in my life, there wasn't a research guide on how Alpha operated, which would've come before any omega guide, that was for sure.

"I'm just—" He shook his head, his eye twitching almost like he was winking at me.

"You need to enjoy the sun," I said.

"No, no, I can't do that, I'm happy to stay indoors."

"Forever?"

In my mind, because he wouldn't confirm anything I asked him, I was under the assumption he worked for the Serpentine Syndicate but had defected, and he knew if they found him, they'd have killed him.

"Just for as long as it takes until I'm back at full potential," he said.

"And what if that never happens?" I knew he didn't want to think about that, but it was a possibility. "You sustained some pretty bad wounds on that fall. The only time I've seen wounds heal that slowly are from, well, when my brother scratched at my face, trying to show me his ability."

Vasilis stepped closer, for the first time, rather than stepping away. "The crescent shape," he said. His warm gaze caressing the mark on my temple. "Now that you mention it, it does look like a claw."

"Yeah, well, he shifted his hands into claws, and it was an accident, but he hit the side of my head. It was an open wound for weeks. My mom couldn't do anything to help it heal."

“So, how did it heal?”

“Eventually, all things heal,” I told him. “But we learned that my brother probably had a chemical in his claws that burned skin, which just kept my skin burning in that specific area. He’s lucky.” I’d never tell him that to his face, James already had a big head, he didn’t need a bigger one. “If I had skills like that, maybe my family would actually respect me.”

“I’m sure they respect you plenty,” he said. “You’re able to live out here and nobody has come to see you, not once.”

A smirk formed on my lips as I wondered about what would’ve happened if they had taken an interest in my life the way they did my siblings. “They wouldn’t,” I told him. “They put all their works into my brother and sister, and trust me, they’ve spoken at length about how much they want me to work for them, but I’m committed to my nursing degree.”

“Well, if you’re ever going to need a review, I’ll give you five stars for the service,” he said, and now I wasn’t completely sure if he was flirting or not, but I desperately wanted to jump on his body and see. He snapped his fingers. “You good?”

“Huh?”

“You kinda just stared at me,” he said. “Like blank.”

“Oh. Yeah, I was just thinking what would happen if my folks came down from the house, and then I was wondering what they’d say if they saw you,” I mused aloud to him. “They wouldn’t know what to do, I don’t think. My mom would probably pull me aside, scold me privately about having a guy over, and then obviously, telling her you were part of the Serpentine Syndicate would—”

Vasilis let out a grumble as he shook his head. “Don’t tell anyone that,” he said. “It’s not who I am, and I definitely don’t want to be known for that.”

“I wouldn’t immediately tell her, but I’m not going to lie,” I said. “She deserves the truth when it comes to someone living here. And she’d probably be sympathetic towards you as well. You know, you’re leaving that life behind.”

He continued to shake his head. “There’s no leaving that life behind when people keep thinking of you with them,” he said. “So, is that all you think of me?”

“You said it yourself, I gotta keep my distance from you,” I reminded him of his words only moments ago. “Almost like you think you’re gonna be unable to control yourself and will attack.” My eyes rolled. “I can be pretty vicious too, you know how small I can go when I shift? My claws are like razors.”

“I believe you,” he said, stepping closer, his big smile spread across his face like he was entertaining my belief I could’ve been dangerous. “But I really don’t know how long I’ll be able to stay here. I’m a viper, you’re a squirrel, we—”

“Flying,” I butted in.

“We shouldn’t even be hanging out.”

“We’re not hanging out.” A lie, of sorts. I enjoyed spending time with him when I wasn’t out at the clinic I was interning at. “I’m your nurse.”

“My nurse,” he snickered. “Speaking of, do you have any pain relief? My collarbone is aching. I don’t realize how much pressure is put on my body from just standing.”

Vasilis needed me. He was in no position to be running around, and definitely not asking me to stay away from him. I gave him a little all-knowing smirk. “Go sit down

then,” I said. “I’ll get you the pain killers and more soup. Obviously.”

“Come on, give me something with meat, at least.”

I clicked my tongue. “Maybe I’ll grab some chicken after my shift tonight.”

“Fried chicken?”

“Yeah, if that’s hwhat you want.”

He laughed before his smile faded and he sucked on his teeth. “Ok, now I’m actually in pain.”

I clapped my hand at him, as if to chase him away. “Go, go. Have you been drinking plenty of water too? That’s why the soup is important. You’re not hydrating.”

My eyelids fluttered open to see Vasilis applying a cold cloth to my forehead, compressing it and cooing. I was running warm, my skin on fire, burning like a fire unable to fizzle out, fixated behind my skin.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you,” he whispered. “I can’t stay here long. Do you need anything?”

I needed to be both covered up andd undressed completely. I didn’t want to be awake right now, but I also didn’t want to go back to my dreams that were filled with painful memories I’d long since buried.

“I feel something off, but I can’t put my finger on it,” he said, pulling the cloth away and then back to my forehead. “Do you want some of my blood? Maybe that will heal

you.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to dabble in his blood. I knew it was toxic, even if I was supposedly the cure. “Maybe you can go find something in the doctor’s office for me,” I told him. Everything blurred for a moment, almost like my eyes were swelling inside my skull, and deflating with each breath.

“Fuck, I don’t want to leave you like this,” he said, pulling the cloth away again and replacing it with a kiss. “I’m going to leave this on your head, and I’m going to set some bottled water with the cap off on the bedside.”

“Yeah.” I knew I had to keep my fluids up, because the hot and cold shivers across my body meant I was definitely sweating them all out. “You should go. Don’t let anyone find me.” I couldn’t protect myself from this onslaught of sickness. It was my fault, and in hindsight, I should’ve known not to use my shifted claws on my human skin.

“I’ll be back once I’ve found something,” he said. “And I need to check on the omegas. I believe they’re all awake. Hopefully, none of them have Rotmor left in their system as well. My conscious would feel a little lighter.”

I stared up into Vasilis’s sympathetic eyes, they were the eyes of the man I’d met all those years ago. They weren’t the cruel pinched glances I’d seen on him when we met again in that bar. And a memory flourished to the front of my mind. It was our first kiss, again.

“I’m trying to remember the advice you gave me,” he said. “Deep breaths, fluids, and I guess pain killers, but I don’t have around. Fuck, this is why I knew I’d make a horrible mate. I’m not prepared to take care of anyone else. I could barely ever take care of myself.”

Reaching his face, I touched his chin with my sweaty palm. “It just needs to work

itself through me. I'll be fine. Plus, I liked taking care of you.”

He gave me another kiss on the lips, a strange taste to it. Sweet, yet bitter. As he pulled away, I saw the blood from his tongue, redden his lips. “It’s the only thing I could think,” his voice grew distant as I fell back into a deep sleep.

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I felt like an absolute failure to Soren, for leaving him, for telling him I would do everything in my power to keep him safe and free the omegas. There was a comedown effect from all the memories sliding back into place, all the things I'd seen myself doing, but with these eyes and a mind that wasn't so clouded with the anger my brother and doctors had been poisoning me with, I was on the verge of total collapse myself.

"Oh, there you are." Naja, of all people, it was Naja to see me pause in the hallway and rest with a hand on the wall, trying to ground and center myself. "The Apex and Doctor Rathe want to speak with you. They're in the lab."

"In the lab?"

"Yes. I'm not sure what they've found, but—"

"Cut the shit, Naja. You know everything that goes on in here. What have they found?" I was done with it all. She was my brother's advisor, and yet she hadn't left this compound since I arrived to lead it. I know realized how stupid I'd been in thinking I had any real say in what happened here. "Is it the omega? Do they need me to deliver the final blow?"

She smirked, showing some lipstick on her teeth. For once, a flaw on what she plucked, primped, and primed so not a single hair was out of place. "No, we think he's left the compound. But the omegas left behind, something very strange has been found, and they need you to look at it with them."

Of course, she wasn't going to be straightforward with me at all. "Ok," I said. "Are

you going that way as well?" I knew she would follow me to make sure I went anyway. Those cameras seemed to only have been in place so they could keep an eye on me.

My world was in a tailspin, trying to control what people thought of me and if I was acting in the same manner I'd always been acting, but then there was the people who knew I'd already broken from it before, and they were going to suss me out easier now. Something in my gut told me.

In the doctor's office and lab where a sheet covered the dead body of Doctor Payne, my brother and Doctor Rathe were standing over a microscope. They waved me over and Naja followed.

"Is everything ok?" I asked. "I'm pretty sure the omega has left. I couldn't find them anywhere, so it's looking like they've up and left."

Drakon turned to me and scoffed. "Not chance," he said. "They woke all those omegas and then they're just going to leave. That doesn't make much sense now, does it?"

"No, but I haven't been able to find them, and nobody else seems to have found them either," I said. "Unless they really can shift into the most miniscule of animals, in which case they might still be here, but otherwise, I don't think they are." They both glared at me. I didn't know if they were buying it, but I forced my brows into a frown in hopes of conveying the seriousness. "Unless Naja found something you wanna let me in on."

Doctor Rathe shook her head before glancing at my brother, as if they were both trying to gauge whether or not to share this information. He nodded. "We need to find that omega," she said. "He's going to ruin everything. We need him dead."

“Just—” I paused, a sharpness in my throat. “Point me in his direction and I’ll deal with him.”

“Don’t you want to know why?” Drakon asked.

“I assumed you’d tell me if it was important,” I said. “But my main goal is to find him, take him out, and keep the Sydnicate on track for our plans.” I tried to read the room, hoping that was what they’d wanted me to say.

He nodded. “Ok,” he said. “Well, that omega somehow has been able to eradicate the Rotmor from those omegas. It’s wiped the full disease from their blood. None of them have any of the effects now. They’re all lucid and smiling, even in the face of potential death.”

“Well, we’re not planning on killing them, are we?” I asked, looking around to see Naja smirking as she stared daggers into me. “We need to use them for the plan.”

My brother shook his head. “Well, omegas are a dime a dozen out there,” he said. “I don’t want them to go to waste, obviously not, but if they’ve been cleared of the disease, then whose to say if they can be infected with it again?”

I didn’t know if it was the same for me, considering I didn’t know what had been going on with me. I was born with Rotmor, unless, now it had also gone from my system as well. A pit welled in my stomach. I grabbed the counter, keeping myself balanced. “We can try, right?”

“We don’t want to try,” Doctor Rathe said. “If you or your brother try and bite them, you might also lose the Rotmor.” My exact thoughts, but it didn’t bother me. I’d already bitten Soren, I was probably already in the clear, which nearly brought a tear to my eye.

“It’s not the end of the world, brother.” Drakon smirked.

“But all this work, for nothing,” I said, forming a fist against the counter. “I don’t think we should kill the omegas though.”

Naja cleared her throat. “They’re witnesses,” she said. “We can’t just let them go, and we definitely can’t just let them live here. We’d need more resources. Unless you know of a secret surplus the rest of us don’t.” She stood on the side with my brother and the doctor. Those three against me.

“No, but where would we bury them all? The goal wasn’t to kill a bunch of helpless omegas. The goal was—” the words swelling in my throat. “We’re here to create an army of Vepres serpents.”

“I already called mom,” Drakon said. “She’s advising we get rid of them. Leave no trace. And it was something I’d already thought.”

Staring into Doctor Rathe’s eyes, I needed her on my side. “What about—” the entire lab was filled with research. It was obvious. “The research,” I said. “Kill them, and the research dies too. I think they’d be better to keep alive. We can use them. Free labour. And the soldiers can get laid.”

“The resources are the problem,” Naja added.

“Why are you fighting this so much?” Drakon asked.

My cover was almost blown. In the moments of quiet, I wished I knew how to respond without baiting out the idea that I wasn’t the cruel and ruthless Alpha my brother and the Syndicate had tried moulding me into.

“I think Vasilis has a point,” Doctor Rathe said. “Since we’re no longer using them

for their intended purpose. They would make great subjects for me to study. And there are a lot of other toxins we could potentially try out on them to make sure they stay docile.”

“We shouldn’t make quick decisions,” I said. “They’re just omegas. What’s the worst they could do?” I forced my mouth into a smirk. “Anyway, that’s what I think about it. I should probably go and keep searching. We can’t afford anymore mishaps,” I said, nearly turning to head out of the door, forgetting the entire reason I was glad to be coming to the lab. “But while I’m here still here, what antibiotics do we have around? And pain killers?”

The change of subject raised their brows in my direction, and then to each other. I didn’t want to be so suspicious, but I needed to help Soren heal before my brother acted as the Apex and executed the omegas.

“Why would you need those?” Doctor Rathe asked. “We have an entire medicine cabinet, but those are reserved for dire needs, like myself, or—” Her eyes glanced to the body under the sheet, it was behind the partition, but since there was so much space beneath it, he was still very visibly a lump beneath it.

“And pain killers?” I asked.

“Come on, brother,” Drakon chuckled. “You don’t need painkillers.”

“I think I might,” I said. “I don’t know what it is, but after being wiped out for the past couple of days, my body is sore. I figured it might be something it’s trying to fight off. That’s all.”

They bought it. The doctor nodded and agreed to get me some medication from the cabinet, and after handing it me, she stood and nodded at me to take it in front of her. “This should help, and you can come back if you need any more,” she said.

With the tablets in my hand, I reacted to the words and moved my hand to my mouth, pretending to shove them on my tongue. I didn't need to do much but keep all focus on me as I dry swallowed them, or so they thought while I actually slipped the tablets into my pocket. I didn't know what they were, they could've been to knock me out, but I trusted them in that moment it would help fight whatever Soren was going through.

"Brave," Drakon said with another one of his widening grins. "You used to have swallowing tablets."

"Did I?" I recalled it, somewhere in the back of my mind. "Maybe when I was a kid, maybe eight or something, but I'm not a kid anymore, Drakon." I was in my thirties, and yet, he tried to infantilize me at every opportunity. I was his way of plying people off against me, he'd always done it. I hated how non-linear the memories were coming back. I could barely create the timeline, or how I was aging.

"Like when you were twenty," he laughed. "I always remembered you doing that thing like you'd gotten a bone stuck in your throat where you were hacking for ten minutes. It drove mom crazy."

"Everything drives her crazy when it's not coming from you," I said, hoping I wasn't breaking their trust in me by snapping back at him when I was supposed to be under his control. "Anyway, we've got a—rat problem to fix. Assuming that's what he is." Soren would've clawed my eyes out if he heard the word I used. I even suppressed a smile at the idea of him throwing himself at me, hands going everywhere, only for us to fall into bed and I would assert my Alpha self over him.

Drakon clapped his hands once. "Yes," he shouted. "Go deal with that and stop whining then. Naja, I need to speak with you about the cameras and the security of this place."

Finally, my window to leave without her beady eyes. I didn't run, but I moved with purpose back to my room. In the short trip back, I looked back a couple of times to make sure I wasn't being followed, and I didn't stop for any of the soldiers who asked what they needed to do. Soren was high priority, not only because we were bound, but because he'd saved my life before, and I owed him that.

As the door opened, I saw Soren at the foot of the bed, collapsed into a heap, balled up with a blanket covering his back.

"Jesus, Soren." I dropped to my knees at his side as the door behind me closed. "You were supposed to stay in bed."

"I was—" he muttered. "Your voice. I was following."

I was never taught bond mechanics or what feelings were mine and which were his, but I assumed it had something to do with it. "I got some pills, I don't know what they do, but I think they'll help." I placed the back of my hand to the back of his exposed neck, the hair on his nape was soaked in sweat.

"You're back," he grumbled. "Where did you go?"

Stroking the back of his head and neck, my hand became soaked in his sweat. "You're burning up." With my other hand, I grabbed the tablets from my pocket. In the darkness of the room, only illuminated by the night light and my superior vision, I counted four tablets. Now, I know why my brother made the comment, that would've made me gag. "Come on, let's try and sit up. I need you to take these. They should help fight any infection." But I was confused about how he'd been able to help everyone else fight off the Rotmor, and yet, he was now stuck with an infection because of it. He'd already told me about how it was a wound he'd made with his claws, but it felt silly that his clearly superior immune system had faults.

As soon as Soren was upright, his back against the foot of the bed, I forced him to take the tablets, just as he had once done to me. Individually with sips of water, he took the tablets and fussed about how he was still burning up.

“You’re gonna be ok,” I whispered to him, pulling him into my arms and embracing him with a hug. “You need rest. You need to stay in bed. I’m going to take care of what you started.”

Soren could barely lifted his head and look at me. He his rolled around in all directions, struggling to keep them open or even a straight gaze. And his speech had slowed to a slurred slurry of syllables.

I couldn’t stay in my room, I knew that much, I had to be seen out there with the soldiers, I had to pretend to look for traces of Soren outside, hinting to his escape. And I had an idea to get the scent seeking soldiers to search for his sweat stained clothes outside.

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The pain throbbed through me almost like I was an explosive triggered to detonate and each throb was a second of time being counted. It throbbed from the corners of my eyes, vibrating in my peripherals, and all the way down and deep in my marrow, cooking me from the bone.

Through the pain, my body shifted and I was my flying squirrel form. It was the first time I'd been able to look through my eyes and see properly. The throbbing vanished, although my skin continued to receive phantom sensations.

I scurried around on the bed, sniffing at the sweat I'd poured into the fabric of the sheet and mattress. I had been infected by my claws, but that was my human skin. I was lucid and my thoughts weren't all jumbled together with the pressure of a collapsing star on my brain.

Shifting back, I saw the wound on my wrist still open, but I was better.

The cold of the sweat wetting the bed had me shuddering. I climbed out of bed, my limbs aching in recovery. I quickly came to reason that my immune system in human form was compromised by my shifted abilities, and they reset once I went through the transformative shifting process and back again.

Inhaling deep breath as I tried not to allow the thoughts to continue imploding on my brain, I pushed myself up on my feet and went to Vasilis's wardrobe. I had to be back out there, helping with all the omegas. I had one job to do, and everything was going to shit. I could feel it.

The door opened on Vasilis. He rushed to me, knocking a bottle of water in the

process. “What are you doing?” he asked. “Did the tablets help?” He grabbed my wrist, flipping it to see the slice mark where I’d been bloodletting myself to heal the omegas of Rotmor. “Ok, you’re still not well enough to be on your feet.”

“I am,” I said, only a slight stumble, and trying not to prove a point to anything he said. “I need to be out there, leading them to freedom.”

Vasilis cradled a hand around my back, gently guiding me back to sitting on the bed. “The soldiers are on a wild goose chase for your scent,” he said. “The omegas are going to be fine for another day, and you need that day to really get better.”

My head shook, it was out of my control. I disagreed on a fundamental level. “No,” I said. “I was serious when I said people are going to come looking for me. We don’t have another day.”

“Well, you’re still not ok,” he said. “I’ll get you something to eat, and maybe then we can try something.”

I snatched a grab at his hands and rubbed it down the front of my naked body. “I have another way I might feel better. I read studies on how an orgasm can help when you’re feeling sick.”

“I asked you earlier if you were still in heat,” he said. “You said you weren’t. Is that what all of this is?”

There wasn’t an answer to it, because I didn’t know. The slow healing could’ve been part of it. My body was all focused on conserving its energy for reproduction, which I would only partake in the orgasms and less of the getting pregnant part.

“I think it will help,” I told him, lowering his hand until he met my cock, becoming harder with the length of contact he made with my skin. “Please, just try it.”

“You know, I’ve always been against mating, because I don’t want anyone getting what I have,” he said, using his other hand to stroke my cheek. “But I think I no longer have it. And we’ve already done it once. I don’t see any harm in helping you, and also helping myself.”

“One condition,” I said, grabbing at his crotch. “I’m only taking one of these. If both of them go inside me again, I’m going to clamp down hard and tear them off inside me.”

He pushed me back on the bed right into the cold sweat patch. “Don’t tempt me,” he said. “That sounds like a great way to get me to cum faster, practicing how hard you’re going to squeeze down on me. I bet your ass would be able to replicate a perfect 3D model of my cocks if you squeezed hard enough.”

My cock was solid, curved up against my belly.

Vasilis undressed at the side of the bed and pushed me up on the bed, knees at my chest. He went down to my exposed hole. “You’re still so warm,” he whispered, his mouth tickled at the inside of my thighs where his facial scruff touched. “I’m only doing this to help you. And not because I really like you.”

“What?” I parted my legs to see his face.

“I mean, I would mate with you because I like you, but right now, I’m doing it to help you,” he said. “Just in case you’re trying to reason why you’re letting me fuck you. I don’t want either of us planning a life together, you know.”

He was playing with fire right now. My fire. The eternal flame that burned bright for moments like this with him, and it all started when we first met. That flame had been fed once, and it was about to be fed again, and I knew it was going to grow deeper inside me.

Vasilis's tongue flickered between my legs as he parted my ass. He buried his mouth deep like he could've gone on for miles inside me. With my head buried in the pillow and my lips tight together to keep me quiet, I could already begin to feel myself healing.

I hated and loved the effect Vasilis had over my body. I couldn't complain given what I'd done to his body, which was saving it from the effects the Syndicate had forced it under. I couldn't help feel like I'd saved him twice now under dire circumstances.

A moan escaped me as I reeled in the thoughts of our past where we tried to stay out of touching distance from each other. The fear of accidentally bonding seemed high on both our minds back then, but the joke was on us, it happened anyway.

He pulled my legs away and spread them at the knees. "We've gonna have to make this quick," he said.

"That's romantic," I said, hooking both arms around the back of his neck and pulling him on top of me. The moment his face was near mine, I latched my lips to his lips and tasted myself on his tongue. I was divine.

A couple of Vasilis's fingers were deep inside me, hooked as he felt around inside me. I knew he was trying to see how big my ass got, or search for any sign of tearing after we'd fucked last. I was resilient down there, it was literally in my nature.

"I feel like I'm about to replace forty-nine percent of your DNA with what I'm going to do to you," he said, his forked tongue licking the air as he spoke.

"That's the plan," I told him. "How am I going to heal if you're not filling me up with your Alpha seed?"

He chewed on his bottom lip and his eyes rolled back. "Can you go on your stomach? I need a better angle."

"You know, you should just throw me around," I said. "I know you're having a bit of an identity crisis, but come on, you're still an Alpha. Aren't you?" Looking down my chest to see his body and both of his cocks hardened and ready to fuck, they twitched with my comments.

"Fine." And with a hand slipped around my side, Vasilis flung me onto my stomach.

It gave my head a nice cushion with the pillow, and I could've happily still fallen asleep even with his fingers playing inside me. Without wanting to sound needy, I pushed my head into the pillow. I couldn't speak now, but I really wanted him to take more decisive control and penetrate me already. But I still begged, "fuck me" although muffled, I knew he heard.

Vasilis teased my hole with his fingers, stretching me with more and more of them, like I was a slim Thanksgiving turkey that needed all the help it could get to look bigger. He'd told me it was going to be quick, he told me his thoughts told me he was going to screw me into oblivion, and yet, he was more concerned with digging around inside me and pressing himself against my back, his body like a weighted blanket as he got closer to my ear. "You taste so sweet," he said with a nibble on my earlobe.

Pushing my hips up, I wanted his cock deep in me already, swelling in my guts. Knowing the sensation of what his two cocks felt like going inside, I was slightly disappointed when I felt just the one cock throb at the opening of my ass. And the swell of his cock head had my hole throbbing in return.

"Fuck me," I said once more, demanding it now.

He gave it to me, thrusting deep, with one cock inside and the other between my

cheeks and up against his abs. He was slow to begin with, pulling out slightly and pushing it in, but then he stopped and he began pounding, his balls slapping against my balls, his body forcing my body to go back and forth against the mattress, masturbating my cock for me in the process.

“I never want to leave your warm hole,” he said, his mouth nipping at my ear again as if he was closer to biting me. He licked at my lobe and I couldn’t make out what he was whispering, but in the midst of it all, I felt a hot explosion of cum shoot up my back. It felt like a shower, raining down on me.

Our entwined bodies, stuck together with the glue of his cum as he continued to fuck me with his cock, knotting up inside my hole, swelling to the point I was sure it would never shrink back down to size. I had to take out all of my energy on the sheet, pulling it into tight fists and tugging it out from under the mattress.

“Hush,” he whispered, pulling both my arms up and behind my back. “You’re healing.” He kissed at the wrist of my twisted arm, and then he bit me. A flurry of tickles trickled down my throat as if readying me to vomit, but that didn’t happen. Instead, I came, my cock, untouched by either mine or Vasilis’s hand blew its load into the sweat soaked sheet.

It was out of body, almost, experiencing the flush of emotions as they settled on my skin and buried deep inside my muscle tissue like fireworks dissolving into the atmosphere out of the sky. I’d already surrendered, but after cumming, I was just laid there at the mercy of his cock, lodged inside me.

I felt him cum. It was a stab of pain at first. And then he groaned in my ear and deflated across my back. My insides filled with his seed, lifting me almost from the mattress. I yawned from the exhaustive process. It had only been a theory that his magical Alpha cum would heal me, just like an orgasm would for me, and I think it worked.

“It’s a weird feeling,” Vasilis whispered as I was nearly nodding off to sleep, under his weight and the feeling of my guts stuffed, I didn’t have the energy to keep my eyes open.

“Huh?”

“Cumming twice,” he said. “I usually only cum once. I only usually play with one.”

His cocks were a fascination of mine, and everyone who knew Vasilis had two cocks. And just as I was forming a response, his cock slipped out of me. He pulled his weight from me and laid beside me.

I groaned, turning my body around in the bed to see him. “You bit me,” I said, wrapping my arm around his chest.

“It healed though,” he said. “Just like I thought it would when I said my bite might help.”

It almost made my theory defunct. “No, that happened because we had sex. Again.”

I’d had sex with a number of men before, and not a single one of them had bound to me. It made sense, none of them had bitten me either, and none of them had saved my life. Vice versa, I hadn’t saved them the way I had Vasilis.

“This bond,” I whispered. “I don’t know how it’s going to work once we’re through with this.”

“Hopefully it means there’s a future for us,” he said, tipping a finger under my chin to see my face. “That’s what I want.”

My family would crucify me for it. A serpent. They’d think I was truly lost and force

me back into the fold where I'd be put to work for the company. "I don't know what I want, except for a world where omegas aren't being kidnapped and put to baby farms."

Vasilis sighed, unable to look me in the eye. "We're going to get them out of here, you know," he said. "I promise. I'm not going to let them be harmed."

He could keep on promising me all of that, but he was susceptible to his brother's commands, and if his brother wanted them dead, I was sure he would just do it. It's why I had to be back out there, and why I needed to kill him and anyone who got in my way.

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I didn't want to leave Soren alone. I never wanted to leave him alone, and yet, he didn't care what I wanted. But he was right in any point he made, he was always annoyingly right. His final point before I left him alone in the room was about how if we were seen together, we'd both end up caught.

And it was a good job I left the room alone because Naja was walking down the hallway, aiming for me it seemed. Dressed in a shirt, almost fully unbuttoned and a pair of black slacks, I was clearly desheveled.

"You stink," she said, snarling at me. "What have you been doing?"

"Masturbating," I said, hoping she didn't smell omega on me as well. "Going for a shower now."

"Good."

"So, are you purposefully stalking me?"

"No, I was heading to the omega bay when I saw you," she said. "The omegas have been cuffed to their beds. We're still trying to plan what happens next with them. And Doctor Rathe believes she might be able to knock them out if we plan on sending them somewhere else."

"Where?" I asked.

Naja shrugged. "Ask someone in operations. But they might end up in California or Arizona under your mother's command."

“Keep them here,” I said. “Don’t make any moves until I’ve showered, unless you want me to come to a meeting smelling, or stinking as you put it.”

Her mouth in that constant snarl didn’t give any of her thoughts away. “The Apex isn’t sure why they would be kept here when we can begin recruiting more omegas in,” she said. “And while they would be great to have around to fix things, like my office, I’m inclined to side with him because they are a drain on our resources, which you haven’t given anyone an idea as to how we would make up that shortfall.”

Looking her up and down, I tried to mimic the same snarl. I probably couldn’t pull it off in the same vein of disdain she did. “Considering you don’t work in the operations area, of course, you don’t see how we’d make up that shortfall,” I said. “But I have a plan.” I didn’t, but I would use the time showering to come up with one.

I didn’t. Once I was in the shower, all I could think about was how we would manage to get all the omegas out of this place. I didn’t have an accurate count of them, and I didn’t know if the cargo vans had already been driven off somewhere else to keep the omegas from leaving that way.

All dried and dressed, the buttons of my shirt done up to the collar, I headed to the first bay of omegas. The ones that had been placed into comatose states while Rotmor ravaged their bodies. There was one soldier to each omega bound to the bed with cuffs.

One of the sergeants approached me. She nodded and smiled, her teeth were perfectly white. It might’ve been the only thing separating the soldiers from the sergeants. “The soldiers are getting a little antsy,” she said. “They’re scared to take anymore of the venom, and the doctor has told them they cannot feed from the omegas.”

“They shouldn’t have been feeding from them in the first place.”

She nodded. "Of course. But since they were, and now they can't, I think they're going through withdrawal."

"Ok," I said, nodding as I thought about how to resolve the issue. "If any of them are suffering really badly, send them off to the hall where I'll happily help them get their fix."

"Thank you," she said. "I'll make sure to do that, but only when we have enough soldiers here to keep the omegas pacified."

"I wouldn't wait," I told her. "The omegas aren't going anywhere."

"Yet," she added. "I heard they're readying the trucks for transport."

I was supposed to be running this place, and yet, I had no clue what was going on here. I just smiled, nodded, did my wave, and then left. I had to hurry my ass around all the bays, tell each of the sergeants on watch the same deal, and hope to cull as many black-toothed soldiers as possible.

It took half an hour before I was in the empty hall, staring at the replica large chair my brother had brought to the room. I approached it with the intention of sitting in it, before he arrived, standing in the doorway.

"Brother," he said. "You know that's only for the leader. And you're not the leader of the Syndicate. Men have been killed for what it looks like you're about to do."

Standing behind the chair, I planted my hands on the wood. "Well, I'm not going to make the mistakes of lesser men," I told him. "Why are you here?"

"Heard you were asking soldiers to come here, something about you helping them," he said. "We have much bigger problems to solve before we attack the issue of

addiction running rampant within your compound.”

My eye twitched. I’d been sleepwalking through everything. If I’d been conscious enough to decide what was going on, I wouldn’t have let them become addicted, and I wouldn’t have let them fill omegas with Rotmor with the intention of breeding them to produce infected and maybe mutated serpents in the same way I was. My cocks were a mutation, I didn’t know about until later in life, as I assumed everyone had two.

“Maybe you’d like to stay here and give the soldiers venom,” I suggested. “I probably have bigger things to be doing, like planning on what to do with all those omegas. And I’m not going to be killing them. That’s just wasteful.”

Drakon walked into the room, and in the doorway, shrouded in the darkness of my clothes, Soren appeared. I glared at him, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks. It was really him.

“You know,” Drakon began. “You’ve always tried to go against me. Even now, painting me as wasteful. Look around, brother, mom isn’t here, nobody is going to take your side. I won, I’m the Apex.”

The light from the room caught the glint of a knife in Soren’s hand. I wasn’t taking in anything Drakon was saying. I just watched. Soren didn’t even need me, it seemed. From behind, he plunged the knife into Drakon’s back, and then with his clawed hand, he sliced at his throat. Drakon turned immediately, the knife plunged into his back revealed. He grabbed Soren by the throat and pushed him against the wall. Soren slapped the button for the doors, enclosing the three of us inside.

“Kill him,” Drakon said. “You said you wanted this.”

I raced across to them, eyeing the knife in his back. It must’ve narrowly missed his

heart with where he'd plunged it.

Soren's face turned red, but he kept his eyes on Drakon.

"Is this the omega?" I asked.

"Yes!" he snapped. "Now, take the knife and kill him."

I could've finished my brother off, here and now, but I'd made a promise to Soren that he could, even if now the reality was my brother would be dead, and I would be the only Vepres besides my mother to take over the Syndicate. Frozen with choice, I glanced from Soren struggling to breathe to the blood traveling down the black garb my brother wore.

"I can't do that," I said.

"Vasilis, you said you wanted to kill him," he said. "I can do it here and now. But I'm saving him for you."

I pushed the knife into his back, deeper, pressing his body against Soren's on the wall. His arm fell from around his neck just as Soren gained movement with his hands at Drakon's throat. He could barely choke out a word.

"I'm not going to kill him," I said, twisting the knife inside my brother's back. "You've been controlling me for years. Why?"

He sputtered up blood, coughing it into Soren's face.

"Why?" I demanded.

Soren loosened his grasp and moved out of the way for Drakon's body to become

flush with the wall.

“You’ve always been weak,” Drakon said.

“I’m not weak. I’m different. I’m—I’m better.”

“You were never able to kill like us,” he said. “It’s why you needed a little brain boost.” He laughed, more blood flying out from his throat.

Soren caressed his neck at where Drakon’s hands had been firm. “I want to do it,” he said. “I’m going to kill him, Vasilis. You promised me.”

I let go of the pressure I put on my brother’s back, giving Soren what he wanted.

“See,” Drakon laughed. “You’re weak.”

Soren yanked the knife out and as Drakon turned, he swiped, slicing a line across his neck. Blood sprayed him in the face and then he flopped to the ground, shifting into a blue pit viper, his body darting left then right, slithering fast with trace of blood on his tail.

“Where’s he going?” Soren asked, his hand shaking with the knife in it. “He’s going to—”

“He won’t get far,” I said. “But we should use this as an opportunity to get the omegas out. I’ll go find my brother.”

Soren nodded. “I’m glad I picked this up from the kitchen now,” he said. “I didn’t even intend on doing it then, but I—”

“It’s ok.” I pulled my sleeve into my fist and cleaned the blood spray from his face.

“You just work on getting the omegas to safety. Use that if you need. Soldiers are going to start coming in here any minute. They’ll wait, so it’s fewer people to fight against. I’ll make an announcement, if I can to help.”

He leaned in and gave me a kiss. “I’m not going to use my claws again on myself, don’t worry.”

“You should on others though.”

“You should go find your brother. I still want to be the one to deliver the final blow.”

My brother was cunning, and since he probably helped create this compound, he would’ve known how to get between places. I didn’t know what shifting would’ve done for him, maybe it saved his life until he shifted back, or maybe he was still dying. There was only one way to find out.

As Soren went to gather the omegas, I tried sniffing out Drakon. The trail of blood stopped abruptly, either he’d been picked up, or the trace of blood had ran its course from his scales.

I went to his office space where Naja and Zito were talking. Sat on the sofa together, their brows furrowing as their glares became intense. Both very quiet but still loud in the way they stared as if I was trespassing.

“I need to make an announcement,” I said, approaching the small desk area with a microphone. “We’re transporting the omegas. So, I need them all in the back of one of the transport trucks.”

“Where’s your brother?” Zito asked.

“The Apex?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“He’s somewhere. Surprised he’s not here. We just talked. He’s approved the plan. We’re trucking the omegas to California,” I said, thinking quick. “My mom is going to be working to find out what happened to them.”

“Still no sign of the little bastard that did it to them?” Naja asked. “Because you know finding him would solve a lot of those issues. Maybe like finding out why he was able to clear them of the Rotmor.”

I hummed and forced a smile on my face. “Sure, sure, I know, but I’m pretty positive he’s already left,” I said. “Do you want to stay here while I make the announcement? Or do you want to actually help the Syndicate and get the omegas prepared to leave? I know my mom will be happy to hear you were helpful.” Although, she was never going to forgive me for what I’d done to Drakon, and I would never forgive her for what she’d done to me either.

They both left the office, making remarks I couldn’t focus on through the blood rushing to my head and thundering in my ears as small bouts of panic settled around me. The idea that they could call my bluff, or that I was making a mistake hung heavy above my head.

From the speaker, I cut all of that noise in my head off and made the announcement. “All omegas are to be loaded on the transport trucks. No questions asked. This is a direct instruction from Apex Drakon. I will be transporting the omegas myself and leaving operations to Zito while I am absent.” The idea came to me suddenly. He couldn’t leave if I was putting him in charge, and no doubt, Naja would stay with him. “Soldiers addicted to the Rotmor infected venom should quarantine in the large hall. We will be purging the addiction from you. Don’t be alarmed, it will not hurt.” That’s the lie I’d been telling the omegas. It wasn’t going to hurt. It was all going to be ok. I wasn’t going to do anything to them, least of all give them Soren’s blood.

They could kill each other for all I cared, as long as I was out of this place.

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As relief came in from the message Vasilis sent out over the comms, I could've broken down into tears, but I didn't. I kept my head high and with the scent of Drakon's blood on my skin and Vasilis's sweat on my clothes, I was able to command everyone else. It also helped that I had a knife in my hand, which nobody asked about.

"Uncuff them, take them to the van, as we've all been instructed," I said. "I need all three of the bays to be bringing the omegas out. Single file down the hallways. We need to get them all loaded. Nobody wants to be around when the soldiers are going through withdrawal." Directing the remaining soldiers and sergeants who hadn't found addiction in the Rotmor blood was nice.

In the faces of the omegas, I wondered if any of them knew I was the one who saved them. I wasn't doing it for their recognition, but I needed them to know I was saving them. I wasn't going to take them somewhere else to be hurt.

From the front of my slacks, I pulled out the ledger of names. "We have twenty-five omegas," I said. "I want all twenty-five of them on that truck."

"And how many soldiers will be taking?" a man asked. "We don't want them to cause trouble en route to the next destination."

"Don't worry. We'll have forces keeping them in check," I said.

In the ledger, I forced the map of the place in against pages to help me navigate, and the only place I needed to find now was the exit. It should've been easy, but I knew thinking something was easy was going to make it ten times harder.

The first bump in the road came when a man in similar clothes to what Vasilis often wore arrived at the first bay of omegas. Standing right behind me, he also had a ledger.

“Is everyone ready to leave?” he asked, glaring me down, his eyes lingering over the knife. “You better be careful with that.”

“Zito,” a surprised soldier spoke. “Council member, Zito. We’re gathering them. Some are struggling to stay on their feet. I suppose that’s what happens when they’re in bed for too long.”

It’s what happened with Vasilis once, but all they had to do was stretch it out. “Yes,” I said. “We’re taking them now. Is the truck ready?”

Zito shrugged. “I assume that’s something you’d be able to tell me. You are in commander clothing.” He reached out and plucked at the collar, as he removed his hand he looked at the trace contact of blood he’d collected. “I see Vasilis wasn’t lying when he said he was going to have all the infected soldiers culled, well, he didn’t say it, more implied.” He pulled the blood to his nose to sniff it before licking it clean. “Vile stuff.” He grinned.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m here to follow out Vasilis’s orders. As well as the Apex Drakon.”

“Of course. Speaking of, have you seen him?”

“No, maybe he’s getting the transport ready,” I suggested. “I should be checking on it. I’ll let him know you’ve asked about him. I’m not sure if he’s coming with us.”

“Please do,” he said. “I’ll make sure these omegas are sent out. I’ll just need to check them against my list beforehand.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want some of the soldiers sneaking in with them. We’ve got to be cautious.”

“Oh. But they’ve pledged themselves to the Syndicate,” I said. “Why would they be sneaking anywhere?”

Zito’s smile faded. “Which serpent clan are you from?” he asked. “You’re asking far too many questions to be part of any that I know, and trust.”

The immediate urge to stab him and run was vibrating on the tips of my fingers. “Orphaned,” I said. “I was taken in by the Syndicate.”

“Oh,” he snickered. “Well, some of these are not as lucky. Some of them were sold to us by families, well, technically, not sold since they were a debt paid to us with their labor.”

The omegas weren’t the only prisoners here then, it seemed. Some of the soldiers were as well. I’d never been able to get much of a read on them. They all stunk like egotistical Alpha scum, although some of them could’ve been betas. I didn’t smell an omega amongst them, so I quickly decided they weren’t for me to save.

Zito walked ahead into the large room, commanding attention and giving me space to leave.

I went straight for the exit, marked according to the map where the vehicles were parked. I recalled that much from when I arrived inside the metal cage. I was so excited to finally breath fresh air again, a relief to my lungs over this recycled crap.

There was nobody on patrol anywhere, not a single soldier had come by or stared at

me like they knew me from somewhere. I made my way out of the compound and a small fleet of vehicles were all parked in a line from smallest to biggest. I was clearly a size queen in all aspects of life and walked down to the largest truck at the bottom of the lot. I tried to keep myself on alert, looking at either side, and glancing behind in case Drakon was going to show up again.

But we were finally doing it. We were escaping.

This place needed burning, maybe not to the ground, but definitely to the ceiling.

The truck door was open and the keys were in the most obvious placement in the sunvisor. I wondered whose big idea it was. To think this was the extent of their security, it was laughable. If this place was run by the humans, they would've had secure locks on every single door, and patrols on either side. But since we were considered advanced by some, Alphas smelling omegas out, and omegas hiding behind Alpha scents, it was far from an advanced security system.

Climbing into the driver seat, I placed the knife on the dashboard and kept the ledger on my lap. "We've got to dismantle this entire operation," I mumbled aloud before keying the ignition.

The door opened but nobody came out. Except someone had. On the ground, the glint of the blue pit viper slithered on up the ramp into the light. I floored the acceleration pedal, trying to catch its tail and crush it, but then I stopped halfway through, unsure if it was Vasilis. It caught me in a moment of uncertainty, right before he appeared at the door.

"Oh good, you're here, did you see him?" he asked.

I should've ran him over. "He's gone," I said.

“Are the omegas are coming?”

“Yes.”

“We need to blow this place up,” I said.

Vasilis nodded slowly. “I’m sure we can arrange that. Are the omegas coming?”

Almost like he was summoning them, the first batch appeared in the doorway, each of them dressed in beige sacks, like dirty bedding with holes cut through the head so they weren’t naked, but they were as close to naked as they could be. I wished they could’ve been dressed, but that might’ve been asking too much. I wanted them to trust me, even though I couldn’t say who I was, or that their families had been looking for them. I wished I could’ve made this easier on them, but they just had to trust me.

“Pillows,” I demanded. “They’re gonna need pillows and comforts for the back of the truck.”

Vasilis passed my commands on to the soldiers, just in time for the second crowd of skittish omegas to appear in the doorway. A world of fear and fury in there eyes, and I had to keep on pretending I was working for the Syndicate.

It took an hour until all the omegas were checked off my list with a special notation for the one who had stabbed themselves in the eye. It plucked at a sickly string in my stomach, knowing the extent they’d done to in order to free themselves from this situation.

Vasilis told me to leave once the truck was full. “I need to clean up a couple of things,” he said. “I’ll find you again once I’m done.”

Sat in the driver's seat, I stared out of the window at him as he stepped closer to the doors of the compound. "No. Come with me." It had been the plan. He'd even announced it over the speaker. "Vasilis, come with me. We're leaving."

"You want this place destroyed." He walked back to me and stepped up to face me. "I don't want anything to survive."

"But your brother is gone. Just come with me."

"I can't. I need to destroy this place."

He wasn't doing this for me. He was doing this for himself, and I had to honour that. He wasn't going to tell me, but it was buried so deep that he didn't have to tell me. I just knew it. "Be safe."

Through the open window, he leaned in and kissed me. "You be safe too," he said. "Take them home. Take them and don't look back."

This had been the plan the entire time. I couldn't wait around for him. I had to do what I came here to do. I had lives to save and people counting on me. I grit my teeth as not to begin crying. The heightened sense of emotions was strong in the air, like pollen, except we were so far into the Nevada desert that plants didn't grow here. This is, however, where they died.

"I'll find you," he said. "I promise. I'll find you."

Something about it felt final, like we weren't going to find each other again, even if he knew my parents home address, he wasn't going to get out of this place.

Once a tear formed, the floodgates opened and I drove off. I looked at the open ledger on the passenger seat, right where Vasilis was supposed to be sitting. All the names

were ticked. All of them accounted for.

It was bright out. The clock on the dashboard revealed it was the middle of the afternoon. It was also scorching, but the air conditioning was already at the minimum setting. Of course it was, these serpents were cold-blooded, they didn't need the air conditioning unit like the rest of us.

I drove for about fifteen minutes, trying not to look back in the rear-view mirror.

But after those fifteen minutes, a rumble shook the surface of the earth and in the distance, a giant plume of dust and smoke rose into the atmosphere. An explosion even in the pit of my stomach.

I kept driving. I had to keep driving. Tears turned my cheeks sticky. Passing the bar and gas station where my car was, I couldn't stop. I knew if I stopped, I wouldn't get back in the car, and I needed to keep going for the sake of those omegas.

"I'm going to take you all home," I mumbled to myself, and in the grated view that looked into the back of the truck, I saw all of their faces, they were huddled together, not a single one of them uttering a word. "I'll make sure you're all helped out," I continued mumbling. My family's wealth would be useful for something.

Driving until it grew dark, my body finally gave in and as I parked up near a motel, I stepped out and my jellied legs almost had me collapsing against the side of the truck. There were vacancies at the motel, and I was suddenly realising I didn't have a phone or wallet to do anything about it. All I had was a truck full of omegas and a worn look of guilt pained across my body.

I opened the back of the truck. It was about time I told them all they were free, I'd left it long enough. And the Serpentine Syndicate probably didn't have anyone close by to try and make a move for them. They didn't immediately respond to me, each of

them, stared as their huddle grew tighter, and they formed a sea of beige sacks.

“I’m going to call someone, I’m going to get you all clothed and we’re all going to stay here for the night,” I said, even if I knew the math couldn’t accomodate for all of them in the limited number of avaialble rooms. “Trust me. I’m not one of them.” I tore the shirt open, as if I somehow wore proof beneath it that I was an omega. It was just my bare chest. “I’m Soren Quillen, and I’ve saved you. All of you.”

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I was close to death. I'd barely managed to escape before the tunnel system collapsed right behind me. It wasn't something I recalled until it was right there on the tip of my tongue and the edge of my brain. The compound was already primed for implosion. A technique and tactic my brother had used in the past to lure and mass exodus his enemies and former allies he felt betrayed by.

It was a countdown of one minute.

It took longer than that to leave the office where the countdown was initiated.

I assumed he would've moved the control for it elsewhere when he actually decided to destroy a compound, and in flash floods of memory, I recalled compounds being destroyed and leaving behind systems of caved in ground like they were all part of an archeological dig site across the West Coast.

The initial blow wiped me out with the blow of rubble, and subsequent explosion of cars and other combustibles trapped beneath. The only thing I was trapped under were memories, filling my brain like toxic honey, slowly dripping and melting, infecting me with former dreams I now knew to be acts I'd committed for the Syndicate.

Part of me wanted to die.

Living with this knowledge wasn't a life I wanted to live.

It was completely dark out when I came to full consciousness on the surface. I'd been in and out, raising my head, lifting my hands in front of my face, quickly surveying

the destruction before passing back out. A nip at my skin had brought me back this time. Bugs had already thought I was dead and down for the count.

The acidic stink of smoke and burning singed in my nostrils. Around me, in sunken parts of the desert, smoke continued to plume and rise in the air. We were so far away from all civilisation that nobody was ever going to see the damage until all the bodies it had consumed were already fossilised into the sand and debris.

A tug of pain twinged in my chest.

“Soren,” my first word, sour in the back of my throat from the pain of inhaling sand. He was sad. I couldn’t place where he was in my heart or mind, but he was sad, and he must’ve witnessed the place go under.

There was nothing I could do now but push to my feet, and start walking. I assumed I was the only survivor, that, and wherever my brother had gone, hopefully another tragic loss of the implosion. The excuse for it was already built in. My mom would be none the wiser, but I could play dead in this entire situation.

“I’m dead,” I announced with laughter. “I’m dead.” It was the perfect way to leave the Syndicate once and for all. All I had to do was actually play dead. They’d never find me. They’d never know.

With a slight limp and a master plan brewing, I walked.

I walked for ninety minutes until in the pitch black of night, not that dark on my Alpha senses, but to anyone else, very dangerous. I walked until I reached the bar and gas station, it was right where Soren had left his car, still parked up. I’d never seen my blessings appear right before my eyes more than I did in that moment.

“Thank you,” I said, a single wet tear rolled down my cheek, collecting the dust on

my skin. I was glad he hadn't taken the car when he passed it, but it wasn't like he could load it with the omegas.

More blessings came in the form of the car being unlocked, and the keys to it were covered in sand by the tire. This must've been where they'd snatched him up and he'd tried fighting back. I climbed into the car and on the passenger seat, his wallet and phone. The phone was dead. Another surprise to know he hadn't stopped for either of them. I wondered where he'd gone to without his things, and how long it would take for me to catch up to him.

With a full tank of gas, I drove off and began charging his phone from the plug-in at the console. Soren had mentioned family might've tried to contact him, and with everything I knew of the Quillen family, I didn't want them making anymore noise than what was necessary. All I needed was for the report to say a base was blown up, all were dead, and my name listed as one of the deceased. That was it.

Once the phone booted up, a flurry of texts arrived, as did missed calls. I couldn't access a single one of them since they were behind a code locked screen. I wanted to send them a message, telling them Soren was ok, but I knew it might've been more hassle. I just kept driving.

I continued driving until the sun rose and my legs had stiffened numb almost on the pedals. It was shortly after the sun rose when I spotted the large truck, dirty with dust from the terrain, parked outside a motel I was sure had been a mirage of sorts.

If I had the fluids in my system, I might've cried.

Soren stood by the side of the van, staring at me the same way I've been staring at the lump that had been the motel in the distance. He was dressed in an oversized t-shirt and some denim booty shorts I could only just about make out. His bottom lip trembling as I parked up beside him.

“I thought you were—” he began, sucking in air through his teeth. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Almost,” I said, my knuckles aching from the way I’d been wrapping my hands around the steering wheel. “I nearly died.”

“No, no, no, not that, but yes. I—” Soren glanced at his phone on the passenger seat. It ached for me to reach over and grab it for him. “I had to call a friend, and he called my entire family. So, everyone is here. We’ve taken over the motel.”

That was a predicament, because I was to blame, and I should’ve been punished for what I’d done to those omegas who were probably so emotionally scarred from everything they would attack me if they saw me, and Soren’s family even more so, given we were mated now.

“I—” the words were bloated in my throat.

“But you’re here,” he said. “And you’ll have to meet them eventually. Just—get changed first. Please. I don’t want them all smelling that on you.” I gestured to my body as a whole, and I didn’t blame him. I’d sweat so much on the drive that he would need to have it professionally cleaned. “And I see you helped yourself to my snack bars.”

The wrappers were in the footwell of the passenger side. “It wasn’t like you were using them,” I said. “I needed to keep driving. Gas tank is almost empty too, but I did full it all the way up.”

Soren leaned on his car, patting it. “I think after I’ve got all those omegas home, I’m going to retire this for a little bit,” he said. “I need a long vacation, and I need to get my folks off my back.”

I looked into the motel as much as I could from my current angle. There were figures walking around, but nobody approaching. I didn't know who was family and who was recently saved from the compound. "Do I fit inside those plans?" I asked. "I'm ready to—to pretend I was wiped out in all that mess back there."

With a finger under my chin, Soren pulled my head out of the window and closer to his face. "I guess I can fit you in somewhere, but you'll have to know that I'm in charge now, and you're gonna have to be a good little Alpha for me. Ok?"

Like a fucking puppy, I was nodding and bowing my head at him just for the chance to be good. It's what I'd always wanted to be. "What should my new name be?"

"You have a middle name?"

"No, but we can think of something. What do I look like to you?"

He smiled. "Right now. You look like someone who needs to a good wash, and a change of clothes. Thankfully, you brought my clothes with you, so we can find something for you in that lot." He nodded to the mess in the back of his car, filled with strewn clothes. The smell of them had been getting me through the entire ordeal. I was obsessed with the way he smelled, and I part of me didn't want him to move them, but I didn't mind the alternative option of wearing them instead, like he'd been wearing my clothes.

The motel was still quiet when Soren walked me through to his room that was being shared with others. He'd told me it was four to a room, over occupancy, but his family had agreed to shoulder any fines the motel received, which they wouldn't, it's not like anyone was around auditing them.

After the shower, I was dressed in a nice bright blue button up shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. It was the first time in a while I'd worn something with so much color to

it. The way I looked at myself in the mirror and how it glowed against my skin put the biggest smile on my face.

That smile quickly faded when I heard Soren talk to his family. “And I have someone I’d like you all to meet,” he said, loud enough to prepare me for it.

I still didn’t have a name. I walked out of the bathroom where a man and woman in suits stood behind Soren. They were smiling at me. And thankfully, the motel room was empty now. No sleeping omegas in their pile on top of each other on the beds anymore. It meant fewer prying eyes on whatever was about to go down here.

“Hi, I’m Vas,” I introduced myself, I was really bad at coming up with names. Vasilis was the only name I’d known myself by. I extended my hand, and was left hanging for a solid moment.

His father stepped forward and pulled me in by the arm and gave me a hug. Two giant pats on the back. “I heard you helped save Soren,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” his mother added. “What was your name again?”

I held myself together, not wanting to cry in the face of all the affection I was receiving. “It’s Vas, or you can call me V, I don’t mind. It’s a name I’m not really all that attached to.”

Once we were standing across from each other again, I could feel their eyes assessing me. “So, you’re the guy our Soren was hiding all those years back,” his father said. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Soren has hidden so much of his life from us. I’m just glad we’re finally being introduced.”

His mother chuckled. “You know, we had wanted to meet you all those years back,” she said. “We knew he had someone over in that house, but we’ve always given

Soren a bit of a wide berth when it came to his life. He's always had his own path in mind, and as much as we've wanted him to follow in his siblings footsteps, or even his father's, we knew he was destined to do his own thing."

"So, you approve?" Soren asked, looking from his mother and father at either side.

"Well, you're mate bonded," his father said, grabbing my hand and shaking it firm. "I assume you'll be getting married, moving back to Georgia, and we can discuss putting the two of you in positions at the company."

"No," Soren said.

"I haven't asked," I added.

"No," Soren countered again. "I only called you because I needed your help. You just admitted I have my own path to walk. I'm not going to follow your plan. Thank you, both, for everything you've done for me here. But what we're doing isn't about to be dictated by the two of you. I'm sorry, but it's not."

His parents both glared at him

"For what it's worth, I—" I began, and with a single look, Soren cut me off. He hadn't been lying when he said he was going to begin wearing the pants in this relationship. It was fucking hot. I needed more of it, but not quite as much in front of his folks.

"As much as I want to support you, Soren," his mother said. "The reason we came was because you were in trouble. We thought you'd understand that meant we were going to take you back home with us."

"Elizabeth," his father said. "I think Soren has made it clear. We've done what he

wanted, and we're not needed now."

"Listen," he said, turning to them both. He pulled them both into hugs with his arms around their necks. "I love you both, but I'm needed here right now. I need to make sure these omegas are safe and are back home, and I'm going to be giving them money. My money, well, money from my trust. I hope you can understand this is what I have to do."

I could only watch and hope they understood. I was jealous he could have such an open conversation with his family, it seemed whenever I'd done that in the past, my family would just drug me and force them to comply with their commands. I was nearly broken into tears but the time the hug finished, only for Soren to pull me into it.

If there was ever a time to find family, being in my thirties and escaping the Serpentine Syndicate was probably a good time.

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My family had always been understanding, maybe they wouldn't have been if I wasn't the youngest and the only one in the family they felt they could give the freedom to do whatever I wanted. If I'd been my brother or sister, I knew I wouldn't have ever been able to stray from the path of success, or so they put it.

Thankfully, I was my own person, and even after they stressed me about changing my life, they knew they couldn't sway me, not even slightly. I wasn't going to join the family company, and I wasn't going back to Georgia with them. Although one of the biggest surprises to come from them showing up had been them acknowledging Vasilis as the guy I'd been housing all those years ago. I didn't question it, I didn't need to know how much they knew, just that they approved, even if they were pushing marriage on us, and I was not ready to rush into anything right now. I was in my thirties, but getting married now still made me feel like I was losing my autonomy. What if I wanted to be alone?

My parents left with the promise they would send money to the omegas who had been dealt the awful hand by the Serpentine Syndicate. They had admired my commitment to using my trust fund, and wanted me to save that for when I eventually settled down, which they definitely hoped was sometime soon.

Vasilis drove my car and I continued to drive the truck. The omegas trusted me now, although they didn't trust Vasilis, but they didn't say anything to me directly, only stuff I overheard from them talking to the others. I didn't blame them, he had been an asshole, and I hadn't really explained to them what had happened with them, but that was more because I didn't want to emasculate him by telling them he was so easily poisoned and mind controlled.

We dropped each omega off at their home and gave each of them my cell number in case they ever needed anything. I wanted to help in whatever way I could, but money was the biggest thing for them, and I'd already promised them all large cheques to see them go without for at least a couple of years.

After the last omega left, we took the van to an impound lot and got them to destroy it. It was in condition, they fought us on the destruction of it, claiming they could sell it and get more than they could if they sold it for scrap metal. But I'd made the promise to myself and to everyone who had been thrown into the back of it that it would never be used again.

I stood with Vasilis by my car as we watched a man operating a large machine throw the large excavator head on the truck down against it and tear chunks from its side.

"What's next on our agenda?" Vasilis asked me, with his arm hooked in at my side, he pulled me in and kissed my forehead. "I think taking down the Arizona and California branches of the Syndicate."

And something I hadn't mentioned to him yet. "Right. Well, you're probably going to hear about it on the news soon anyway, but—"

"What?"

"My aunt, Sophia, she filed a lawsuit against your family, well, the Syndicate, and we're using the testimony of the omegas kidnapped, alongside the ledger of names I still have," I said. "We're going to put everyone else in prison. That's the hope, and plan."

He smiled at me, after telling him I was about to put his mother in prison, he still smiled at me. Near giggled and kicked his feet too if he could. "I guess I need to reinvent myself," he said. "Unless, she's going to come for me as well."

I squeezed him into my side. “We’re going to play the card that you died in that explosion,” I told him. “And I never want to see you dressed in dark clothes again. They’re far too depressing on your skin. You’re already glowing with color.”

“I feel like I’m already glowing,” he said, kissing the top of my head again. “I don’t think I could have done any of this without you.”

We could agree on that. “For starters, I don’t think you would’ve ever broken free from whatever they were using to hold you in that contro,” I said. “That’s a lie. The doctor had notes made about some type of berry. I’m wondering if it was a native berry to where you’re from. Well, where we’re both from.”

“I still don’t know how you managed to cut through all the poison like you did,” he said.

I had inklings of ideas as to why I had been able to do it, but nothing I wanted to tell him about. This was supposed to be a time we were saying bye to all the bullshit. We were ready to start fresh, and if we were still thinking about the past, we were never going to leave it.

We enjoyed watching the truck being crushed and pounded by the excavator until it was small enough to fit into the large press machine that would cube and crush all the metal into something that I imagined would one day be used for something good.

There was no plan now. I’d burned myself out running on adrenaline since I was stuck at the compound, shifting constantly was a drain on my energy, and being thrown into a heat cycle and then a sickness. I was desperate for a vacation now.

Vasilis drove us as we headed up out of the state, trying to find ourselves in the mountains of Idaho and probably further to Montana where the air wasn’t so dry and the earth wasn’t covered in a thick layer of sand and dust.

“I love you,” I told him. It came out in a blurt. “I love you.” And now I couldn’t stop.

“Don’t make me stop this car and show you how much I love you,” he said, swerving on the empty road as if demonstrating how distracted my words had made him. “I will absolutely pull over just to make sure I heard you.”

“I said what I said,” I shouted from the top of my lungs. “I love you!”

He wasn’t lying. He pulled over on the road of the road and turned to me in the driver’s seat. “Soren Quillen. I’ve known for you ten years, and I don’t know how long I’ve felt this, but I do love you. It’s—”

“I thought you were an asshole when we first met,” I said before he could finish his thought. “You were so adamant you wanted to die and then I saw the tattoo, which we’re gonna have to get removed, by the way. I just thought you were another Alpha who wanted to throw his power around everywhere.”

Vasilis stared at me. “For a long time, I think that’s exactly who I was. An Alpha, throwing my power around, and showing off for the Syndicate.”

“Showing off?” I wiggled my brows. “Is that what they call it?”

He placed his hand on my leg and squeezed my knee, pinching in above at my thigh. “That’s a very naughty thought,” he said. “I don’t know exactly what you mean by it, but I know what you mean , by it.” He winked at me.

“Yeah, I was talking about your dicks, plural.”

His fork tongue flickered, which I now knew was a reflex of how excitable he was. “If we weren’t so close to the border and getting out of this state, I’d have—” he glanced into all my clothes and other mess in the back of the car. “Maybe not.”

I planted my hand on his thigh now, squeezing it, going further up until I found one of his cocks. “Are they separated?” I asked, feeling around outside the shorts to feel the other cock snaked down the other pant leg. “Oh my god.”

“They need space to breath as well,” he said. “It’s boiling out here. I’m sweating up a storm.”

“Great, now I’m turned on,” I said, giving the head of one trouser snake a whack. He flinched forward. “Keep driving. I really want to fuck, and I need a bed.”

At that point, it was just teasing, but I had been serious about it. I didn’t want to be fucking in this poorly air conditioned car where neither of us were going to be able to move around enough to have the fun we wanted-

We headed to the border, unfortunately, not into the state we assumed. I’d been far too distracted to realize we were headed up to Oregon, but it didn’t matter too much. We stopped over for the night at the border in the small town settled there. There were motels and a couple stores alongside a very small sprawling neighbourhood.

The room we booked was nice with fresh linens and a large air conditioning unit in the window.

As soon as we got into the bedroom, we started kissing and undressing each other. Ultimately, falling asleep on each other within minutes of getting into bed. The exhaustion of everything we’d done finally caught up with us. Both the mental and physical toll was greater than either of us imagined.

We slept for fourteen hours, waking for brief moments of clinging to the other and being pulled into a giant chest-hugging hold. I hadn’t realized how much time had passed until I was seeing the sun, at first, I thought it was setting, and then saw the time. It was rising. And the light was splashing over our bodies, holding us with its

light.

Sat on the edge of the bed, Vasilis came up behind me and held me. “I think your father had a point,” he whispered in my ear. “We should get married.”

“Just because he said that, it doesn’t mean we should,” I told him. “But if we were ever going to get married, we should’ve just done it in Vegas.”

“Well, we—”

“I’m joking. When and if we get married, it’s going to be a spectacular event,” I told him. “That’s just not what I know will happen, it’s what my family will want.” I’d done a lot of life my way, but there were definitely parts of my life my parents would have more say. “The one thing I am solid on is no kids. I don’t want to bring life into this.”

“I don’t want to bring kids into this world,” he agreed. “Although that was when I thought giving them the Rotmor was a death sentence.”

“Which you have me to thank for,” I said, spinning myself onto the bed with one swift motion and pouncing on him, pinning him back onto the mattress. “You don’t have to thank me for it.”

Vasilis exercised his strength, wrapping his arms around me and turning me over into the bed until I was the one pinned under his weight. “I’ve thanked you more than once.” He stared at me and lowered his face to mine, planting a kiss on my lips. “I will thank you every single day for the rest of my life, if that’s how long it takes.”

I didn’t need him to thank me all the time. I just liked playing with him. He was the Vasilis I knew from ten years ago, even if I never really knew him at all. “Are you going to tell me why you left?” I asked. “It seems like you never gave me a straight

answer before.”

He hold on me grew relaxed and he nodded. “I didn’t want my family going to war with your family,” he said. “I knew they would try and kill you all. But I guess that was silly of me because you would’ve saved me years of pain and torture as I infected omega after omega with that fucking disease.”

“But they wouldn’t have found you,” I said. “They didn’t—”

Blinking, he nodded, his eyes screwed shut for a moment as a single tear formed in the corner. “My brother knew,” he said. “He’d found the blood. I remembered seeing him through the window, he drove up to your house and delivered a package. Someone showed him out, but he looked right at me through the window. I had to leave.”

I pulled Vasilis’s head into my chest. “It’s all ok now.” It’s all I could offer him. My words of support were just words, and I hoped he felt them deep down, reassured by my actions where I’d saved his life, tiwce, or three times now, and knew for certain that everything was going to be ok now.

This felt like it was how it was always supposed to be, except we’d taken the long way around, and his family had tried to take over the world with disease in order for us to get to this point in our lives. It forced us together, again, and I never wanted to leave him alone again.

“You can cry,” I whispered. “Let it out.”

All Vasilis needed was encouragement to express himself however he wanted. No judgements, just years of emotional abuse expelled through heavy sobs in the duvet cocoon I created to keep us together.

We were healing together.

Forever.

Six Months Later

We'd set up in a small parcel of land in Montana. I hadn't realized just how cold it got here, but the clean air was incredible. I'd promised the omegas opportunities and life beyond what happened to them from the Syndicate. That led me to setting up a small town, or village of sorts on the land I'd bought. It wasn't too expensive for the woodland area, but there were many stipulations to it. In the end and in a short period of time, I'd been able to build twenty log cabins across the land and give each of them to the kidnapped omegas, some didn't want to live out here, but others took the opportunity to be around nature and not pay rent. Thirteen in total were being used, including ours, which was double the size of their cabins.

Recently engaged, I shared the largest cabin with Vasilis, who was now going to Silas. It was his current name of choice, and we waiting for it to grow on us. He'd since grown out a bushy beard and dressed in checkered shirts like a lumberjack, and with the force of one too.

In the kitchen of our very insulated cabin, I cooked up a storm. I never just cooked for the two of us now, we were cooking for the entire village, not out of obligation, but because we were a community that helped each other out. But tonight in particular was special, the meal was going to be held our house and all thirteen omegas who'd decided to live with us were joining.

"Has the court decided what's happening?" my fiance, Vas-Silas asked as he came in from the cold, bringing in a nice chill with him. He settled his snow covered axe by the door. "I think I've cut enough of the wood store up we'll all have enough to last us through to the next week."

“Not yet,” I said, presenting him with a spoon of soup from the pan. “My aunt is going to call when they know, but we’re pretty sure they’re going to find them guilty.”

It wasn’t quite a televised event, but everyone was paying close attention to what was happening with Vasilis’s mother, Medusa, and Puglise, the other high standing member of the Syndicate were going to be charged with. A lot of conversation had centered around finding Drakon and Vasilis, but nobody was going to point their finger in his direction, and we were all pushing the narrative that they’d both died, even if I’d seen Drakon’s snake shifted form slither off out of the underground entryway.

The feast I was helping to prepare was a hopeful one to celebrate the arrest and the punishments we were sure would be doled out. Everyone was preparing something like a potluck specifically.

“When do you think we’re going to find out?” he asked. “Some of them were asking.”

It had taken all of them a little time to get used to speaking with Vasilis, even through all of his name rebrands. They knew who he was and what he’d been part of, and slowly, over the last six months, each of them had grown to speak with him and think of him as a different person completely. IT was true, he was a different person now to whoever had been inhabiting him all that ago.

“Probably in the next hour,” I said. “My aunt said there isn’t really a set time they’ve got to decide on these things. It could go on for days if the jury doesn’t all agree. I think, I’ve no clue, I’m trying not to think too long or hard about it.” I went back to the pot of soup and stirred it a little more. It was mostly done. There was bread in the oven that needed to be taken care of as well, but that was on a timer, and I wasn’t going to open the oven doors until that timer dinged.

Vasilis pulled off his snow-covered jacket before hugging me from behind. “It could use a little bit more garlic,” he whispered in my ear. “We have that wild garlic growing out back.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were a professional chef,” I said, smacking his hand from trying to get more of the soup.

“I didn’t realize you were.”

I scoffed. “All of those courses say otherwise.” My new thing was cooking. It was the way to the heart and soul of a person. I’d gone from nursing, to investigating, and now, I was cooking.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered, smooching the side of my face.

Just as I tried to combat him again with the hot spoon, another reminder that he shouldn’t be in my kitchen, the phone rang.

We both fell quiet as it rang again, and the only other sound was the bubbling of the soup pot.

“I think that’s her,” I said, gulping hard.

Everything was about to either come crashing, or we were going to be setting fireworks off—in the clearing, and not anywhere near the trees. We didn’t want a national accident.

My aunt was on the other end of the phone.

“Sophia,” I said. “Is everything—”

“Guilty!” she screamed. “They’ve been found guilty. Twenty-five years. Both of

them. And anyone found with the Syndicate tattoos will be brought in for questioning and potentially added to serve out a similar sentence.”

As the words went in, I wanted to both scream and sigh. Vasilis waited for the answer. I was happy with it, but I had to remember that it was his mother they’d locked up now. I couldn’t show too much joy. But as I gave him the results, he physically jumped with joy, nearly knocking the light fixture from the ceiling.

“And you need to get that tattoo lasered, like yesterday,” I added.

But it wasn’t like anyone was coming to our neck of the woods. We would survive for now. And for tonight, we would celebrate because the heads of the snake had been chopped off. Clean.