



# Valentine's with the Cartel (Nightshade Wolves #9)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Anan never expected to be married off to a cartel alpha.

Cast aside by his own aunt, omega Anan never imagined hed end up here—bartered away like property to one of the most feared alphas in the city. The rumors about Rafael Nightshade make his skin crawl: ruthless businessman, cold-blooded negotiator, and now his husband. At twenty-one, Anan thought hed have more time before being mated, especially to an alpha fifteen years his senior. But the moment Rafaels scent hits him—rich leather and dark spice—his treacherous omega instincts come alive.

Rafael always takes what he wants.

As head of the Nightshade empire, Rafael never expected an arranged marriage to shake his world apart. One look at his destined omega, and his alpha instincts roar to life with a possessiveness that stuns even him. Anans sweet honeysuckle scent drives him mad, awakening an uncontrollable need to claim and possess that threatens to overshadow his usual iron control. Every subtle shift of Anans body, every defiant flash in those grey eyes, only feeds the growing obsession. His young mate may defy him, but Rafael can sense the chemistry between them—the way Anans breath hitches when theyre close and how his scent spikes with unmistakable desire. The alpha in him preens, knowing its only a matter of time before his beautiful omega gives in to their explosive attraction. And when that happens, Rafael will make sure Anan never wants to leave his side. After all, whats the point of being the most powerful alpha in the city if he cant spoil his mate absolutely rotten?

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

# Page 1

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Anan

I stared out the window as the city blurred by, my reflection a pale oval against the streaked glass. Aunt Mara sat beside me, her hands clasped tightly in her lap as she gazed ahead with a grim expression. Why was she acting like this? It was her fault. All of it was her fault.

The silence between us was thick and heavy, laden with unspoken words that choked the air. We both didn't want to say what we were thinking. We knew it would hurt too much.

My mind reeled, unable to process the bombshell she had dropped only days ago. Only frigging days ago.

So, I was going to be married. And to some stranger in the cartel to boot? I was barely twenty-one, my life still stretching out before me like an endless expanse of potential. The thought of being tied down, of surrendering my freedom and identity to a man I'd never met, made my stomach churn with dread.

The surprising thing was that we knew my groom was in the cartel. That was actually everything we knew about him.

Aunt Mara, sensing my turmoil, reached over to squeeze my hand, but I didn't want it. I hated it, actually. She was feigning empathy for me, but we both knew that she did what she did because she wanted money.

"I know this is a lot to take in, Anan. But you have to trust me on this. It's for the

best."

Her words only fueled the resentment simmering in my gut. For the best? Really? I knew she didn't really think that.

She had no right to decide my future like some pawn on a chessboard. The bitter thoughts circled in my head, each one more vicious than the last. It was difficult to control them. It was actually getting possible to keep doing that.

Hadn't she promised to keep me safe, after all? To protect me after Mom and Dad died? And this was how she repaid that trust—by selling me off like livestock to the highest bidder? The truth was hard to ignore.

I wanted to scream at her, to rail against the injustice of it all. But the words lodged in my throat, stuck fast by years of ingrained obedience and the ever-present fear that still lurked in the shadows of my mind. I knew from experience where lashing out could lead.

But I really wanted to do that. I wanted to tell her everything I was thinking.

But I simply withdrew my hand and turned my face back to the window, letting the tears that pricked at the corners of my eyes fall unchecked down my cheeks. Aunt Mara sighed beside me but said nothing more as the car pulled up to the curb outside the pack house.

Maybe now I was finally going to meet my soon-to-be husband, but I wasn't really holding my breath for that. After all, whoever he was, he really wanted to keep his identity secret from me until the very last moment.

I stared up at the imposing facade with a sinking heart, knowing that once I crossed that threshold, there would be no turning back. The die was cast and my fate sealed

by my aunt's selfish desire for more money.

My mind drifted back to my childhood with Aunt Mara, a jumble of fragmented memories that I had long tried to suppress. I didn't want to think about them, but they were all coming back. Of course they were. This was the right moment to keep tormenting me.

She had taken me in after my parents' deaths, and for a while, I had been grateful for her presence in my life. But as the years passed, the cracks in our relationship began to show—as they always do. That's something that happens in every relationship eventually.

I remember the way she would snap at me for the smallest things, like leaving a dish in the sink or forgetting to put my toys away. Her voice was always sharp and biting, and it made me shrink into myself with fear and shame. I learned early on that it was better to stay out of her way when she was in one of her moods. And it happened more often than it should.

And maybe, just maybe, what was happening was an exit for me. Getting married to whoever was going to become my husband meant living with him, after all.

There were moments of kindness with her too, fleeting and infrequent as they may have been. Aunt Mara had a soft side that she rarely showed, and when she did, I clung to those tender moments like a lifeline. The gentle touch of her hand on my head as she tucked me into bed at night. The rare smile that lit up her eyes when I did something to please her. Those were good things.

As I grew older, though, the bad times began to outweigh the good. That wasn't a surprise.

Aunt Mara grew more distant and critical, always finding fault with everything I did.

She would make snide remarks about my appearance or my grades, chipping away at my self-esteem until I felt like nothing more than a disappointment to her. It was hell.

I started to withdraw into myself more and more, spending hours holed up in my room to avoid her biting tongue. It was in those moments I wished I had friends so I could spend time with them.

Even in my room, though, I found no solace. Aunt Mara would barge in unannounced, rifling through my belongings and making disparaging comments about the books I read or the music I listened to. Why did she feel she needed to know everything about me? I never did the same to her. I never would to anyone. Everybody had a right to their privacy, after all.

It was a lonely existence, filled with a constant state of anxiety and dread. I never knew what to expect from her, whether she would be the caring aunt one moment and the cruel tormentor the next. It was exhausting, always walking on eggshells and trying to appease her fickle moods.

No matter how hard I tried, I could never figure it out—it was beyond my capabilities. I gave up on it a long time ago.

Looking back, I realized that Aunt Mara's actions were a form of emotional abuse, designed to keep me dependent and obedient. She wanted to control every aspect of my life, from what I wore to who I associated with. And for the longest time, I let her because I was too scared to stand up for myself.

Even now, that was still kind of working. Less than before, but it was still present.

As a child, I knew that something was fundamentally wrong with our relationship. Anybody would have arrived at that conclusion, to be honest.

There was a hollowness in her eyes when she looked at me, a cold detachment that made my skin crawl. It was as if she resented me for being there, for being a constant reminder of the tragedy that had befallen our family.

But it wasn't my fault. I didn't have anything to do with what happened. Why would she think that way?

As I grew older and began to assert my independence, Aunt Mara's grip on me only tightened. She would fly into rage-filled tantrums when I tried to make decisions about my future, screaming at me until I cowered in fear. It was then that I realized the true extent of her selfishness and manipulation.

She never truly loved me; she just wanted to possess me, to keep me under her thumb for her own twisted purposes. And now, as I sat in the car beside her on the way to meet my unknown husband, I felt a wave of anger wash over me at the realization of just how little my aunt had ever cared about my happiness.

As the car pulled up to the curb, I hesitated for a moment before reaching for the handle. I didn't want to do it. I felt like it was the last step before absolute hell started to happen.

Aunt Mara's hand on my arm stopped me, her grip surprisingly tight.

"Anan, listen to me," she said, locking her eyes with me. "Whatever happens in there, just go along with it. Don't make a scene. It's for the best."

I stared at her, incredulous. Was she serious? How could she say that after everything I'd been through? But then I realized nothing was surprising about her behavior. It was expected, coming from her.

Before I could respond to her order, she was shoving me out of the car and onto the

pavement. I stumbled, catching myself on the side of the vehicle as I straightened up and smoothed my shirt. Just like that, the moment when she was showing sympathy for me, it was over.

The air outside was cool against my flushed skin, carrying the distant sound of traffic and the sharp tang of exhaust fumes. I took a deep breath, trying to calm the nerves that were twisting my stomach into knots.

Aunt Mara emerged from the car behind me, her heels clicking on the pavement as she came to stand beside me. She had her game face on, all poise and confidence as she surveyed the imposing facade of the pack house before us.

I followed her gaze, my heart sinking at the sight of the towering structure. It loomed over us like a monolith, its dark windows seeming to stare down with an almost predatory intensity.

Suddenly, my attention was caught by a figure standing in the distance, partially obscured by the shadows of the building. I squinted, trying to make out his features as he moved into a patch of light.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, his dark hair cropped close to his head. As he turned slightly, I caught a glimpse of a strong jawline and piercing eyes that seemed to bore into me from across the distance.

My gut clenched with a sudden, visceral reaction. This was him. I knew it with a bone-deep certainty. My unknown groom, the man who would be my husband in mere moments.

Aunt Mara must have sensed my unease, because she stepped closer and gripped my arm again, her nails digging into my flesh.

"Remember what I said, Anan," she hissed under her breath. "Don't do anything stupid. Just play along."

And I couldn't help but think that she had always known who my husband was going to be. Her reaction was telling me exactly that. Otherwise, she shouldn't have known that was really him and should be acting much more casually.

I tore my gaze away from the distant figure and met my aunt's eyes, seeing the steely determination in them. She was really serious about this. There was no backing out now.

With a deep breath, I straightened my spine and nodded once, telling her that, yes, I understood her. Whatever happened next, I would face it head-on. There was no other choice.

With me slightly behind her, we walked up the steps to the heavy wooden doors, our footsteps echoing in the sudden silence. The figure in the shadows watched us approach, his stance relaxed but with an underlying tension that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

As we drew closer, I could see him more clearly now. His eyes were a striking hazel, framed by thick lashes and set beneath a strong brow. There was a scar above his left eyebrow, a thin white line that only added to his dangerous aura.

He was dressed impeccably in a tailored suit that hugged his muscular frame, the material stretching across his broad shoulders before tapering down to his lean waist. Everything about him screamed power and authority, from the set of his jaw to the way he held himself with an almost predatory grace.

I never expected any different from that. I knew he was dangerous, considering that he was in the cartel.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am*

Rafael

The sun was just starting to set as I paced the length of my study, my mind preoccupied with the day's events. A lot was going to happen today.

The meeting with the pack elders had been tense, as usual, but I had managed to keep things under control for the most part. Not sure if it was going to work the next time, but it was a constant struggle to maintain order and keep everyone in line, and I was used to it by now.

I paused by the window, gazing out at the sprawling estate that stretched before me. The manicured lawns and carefully tended gardens were a stark contrast to the rough and tumble world of the cartel, but I took pride in maintaining this facade of civility. It was important for the pack to see that we could be civilized when we wanted to be, even as we dealt with the more... unsavory aspects of our business. It was important to me, too.

As I stood there, lost in thought, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at the screen and frowned at the unfamiliar number. Probably another supplier trying to cut a deal or some low-level enforcer looking for favors. I almost ignored it, but something made me swipe to answer instead. It might be a mistake, but it was too late to think about that right now.

"Nightshade," I growled into the receiver, not bothering with pleasantries. There was no need.

There was a pause on the other end before a gruff voice came through. "Boss, we've

got a problem, and it's a big one."

I stiffened, instantly alert. "What is it?"

"We just got word from the border. The fentanyl shipment... it's gone missing."

The words hit me like a physical blow and I gripped the phone tighter, my knuckles turning white. "What do you mean, gone missing?" I demanded. "How the fuck does a million dollars' worth of product just disappear?"

"I don't know, boss," the man on the other end replied, sounding shaken. "But we're looking into it. We'll find out what happened."

Well, he'd better find out. Otherwise, he wouldn't live for much longer.

"Not good enough," I snarled. "I want answers now. And when you find out who's responsible, I want them brought to me. Alive."

Alive, yes, because I wanted to make them regret what they did. And then, I'd end their lives.

I slammed the phone down before he could respond, my mind already racing with the implications of this news. A missing shipment meant a huge loss of revenue and potential retaliation from the other cartels who expected their cut. Not good, not good at all.

And more than that, it was a challenge to my authority. Someone had dared to steal from me, and that was a line that could not be tolerated. I would make an example out of them, that much was certain.

Striding out of the study, my jaw clenched with barely contained fury, I knew that the

coming night was going to be long. There were calls to make, men to mobilize, and a traitor to hunt down.

But first, there was a wedding to attend. My wedding, to an omega I had never met. It was my choice, so there was nothing to think about.

The marriage was also a political move, one meant to solidify our alliance with another pack, and I had been putting it off for weeks. But now, as I headed out into the gathering dusk, I found myself looking forward to it even more than before.

And that was because I wanted that omega all for myself.

Striding through the darkened corridors of my estate, my mind was awirl with thoughts of the upcoming wedding and the implications it held.

The marriage to this omega, Anan Ravenore, really was more than just a union of two individuals—it was a strategic move, one that would solidify my position within the cartel and forge a powerful alliance with his aunt's family. Maybe the omega didn't know this, but Mara Ravenore was a formidable figure in her own right, with connections and influence that stretched far beyond our borders. His parents had also had a lot of clout, but they were dead.

I had initially been hesitant to agree to this match, not wanting to be tied down by political maneuverings or familial obligations. But as the days passed and I considered the potential benefits, I realized that marrying Anan could be the key to securing my dominance over the cartel for years to come. Not to mention, I had grown obsessed with the omega. There was something about him that kept drawing me to him.

Mara's family was old money, with a pedigree that stretched back generations. By tying myself to them through marriage, I would not only gain access to their vast

resources but also cement my status as an alpha of the highest caliber. No one would dare challenge me then, knowing that I had the backing of such a powerful clan.

Something like the disappearance of the fentanyl order would never happen again. People would fear even the thought of doing something I didn't like.

At the same time, again, there was no denying the magnetism that kept drawing me to Anan. I had seen a photo of him once, a quick glance at an image on Mara's phone. He was young, years younger than me, with a delicate beauty that caught me off guard. I hadn't expected to feel a spark of interest, but there it was nonetheless.

It made me wonder if maybe he wasn't the one, but how would I know for sure? Not without talking to him face-to-face first. Until then, only a remote possibility remained.

Of course, I knew nothing about his personality or temperament. For all I knew, he could be a brat or a bore. But again, there was something about him that drew me in, a vulnerability in his eyes that made me want to protect him even as I wanted to claim him for my own. Both thoughts warred within me for control.

I shook my head, dispelling the wandering thoughts. This marriage was not about my personal desires but about power and prestige. I would do what needed to be done, just like always.

Still, as I entered the grand foyer where the wedding ceremony was set to take place, I couldn't help but feel a flicker of anticipation. Soon, I would meet Anan face-to-face and begin the process of making him mine in every way possible.

He possibly didn't like that was going to happen, but the marriage wasn't up to him. It was my decision.

Imagining him pinned beneath me made my dick twitch, and I straightened my shoulders, not thinking about the words I would say to him. It was nothing complicated. The marriage was just a formality. Once we were alone, what was truly important would begin.

But first, I had to deal with this fentanyl shipment problem. And it was going to be dealt with brutally, as always. That was my way of doing things, and no one could question that. It was the reason why everyone respected me so much.

Waiting outside now, my eyes narrowed as I watched the car pull up the drive, drawing to a halt in front of the steps that led up to the house's grand entrance.

A moment later, Aunt Mara emerged from the vehicle first, her head held high and shoulders squared. She looked just like I imagined—elegant with an undercurrent of coldness, as if she could cut you down to size just by looking at you a certain way.

My attention, however, wasn't really on her. It was already zeroed in on the occupant still in the car: Anan, my future mate and husband-to-be who I would be claiming here soon, for good.

Everything slowed as he got out of the sedan, rising up and turning to face me for the first time. And every thought inside of my head fled away immediately when I saw him properly for the first time, too.

He was exquisite—a delicate, otherworldly beauty who didn't seem like he should actually exist in real life. Fine features and soft curves that made me want to map his body out with my fingers—and later on with something else too. Delicate hands that would be perfect as they clung to me while I made love to him or struggled beneath them.

The sight of the omega stirred an unfamiliar ache inside of me, a hunger for

something more than mere physical possession or political gain. There was just an inexplicable pull toward this beautiful creature in front of me.

I found myself unable to move from my spot, as if my feet had taken root into the earth beneath them. My chest felt tight and hot all at once like my whole being reacted instinctively with pleasure, possessiveness, and urgency rolled up in one ball inside it for this omega I only now saw.

As I said, I'd seen him before in some pictures, but nothing equaled seeing him in person, even from a distance.

He was even more breathtaking in person, his youthful innocence clashing perfectly with what we both knew awaited him on our wedding night. The slight hesitation before he climbed out of the car showed how nervous he felt. I wished I could do something about that, but it wasn't the right time to talk to him yet.

Those grey eyes had a way of boring right into one's being in a second, his gaze softening as it clashed with mine. The slight furrow of his eyebrows gave a silent question I wanted to answer by any means, but couldn't.

Still standing in the same place, my gaze locked with Anan's, a commotion broke out behind me. My second-in-command, Diego, came running up, his face etched with urgency.

"Boss, we've got a problem," he said, coming to a stop beside me and lowering his voice. "It's about the missing shipment."

I tore my eyes away from Anan, annoyance flickering through me at the interruption. But I knew I had to deal with this, no matter how much I wanted to focus on the omega in the distance.

"What's going on with it?" I demanded, not bothering with pleasantries.

"We've tracked it down," he said grimly. "But we don't know who took it yet. We're still working on that."

I swore under my breath, frustration boiling up inside me. "And what about the men in charge of transporting it? Where are they?"

"They're gone, boss," Diego replied, looking uneasy. He knew that disappointment wasn't something I usually tolerated. "Disappeared without a trace."

Without a trace? He really wanted me to believe that? My eyes narrowed dangerously and I stepped closer to him, looming over his smaller frame.

"You mean to tell me that not only did someone steal a million dollars' worth of our product, but they also managed to take out the men guarding it? And you don't have any leads on who's responsible? Are you really that unreliable?"

"No," Diego said quickly, holding up his hands. "But we're close. I swear it, boss. We'll find them and bring them to you. Alive."

He emphasized that last word, knowing full well what my intentions were for the traitors responsible for this fiasco. And the other people would meet my wrath soon, too.

I stared at him for a long moment, my mind racing with possibilities and implications. If someone had the guts and resources to pull off something like this, it meant they were a formidable opponent. And that was a challenge I couldn't ignore.

"We'll talk more about this later," I said finally, straightening up and smoothing down my suit jacket. There was something else more important I needed to deal with, after

all. "For now, get back to work on tracking them down. And Diego?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Bring me the men you think are responsible first, before you do anything else," I ordered. "I want to deal with this myself."

Diego nodded, his expression grim as he turned to hurry away and follow my orders. I watched him go for a moment before turning back toward the house, my jaw clenched tight.

Stalking up the steps, with my mind already jumping ahead to the interrogation that would follow, I couldn't help but think of Anan and the way he had looked at me with those wide, innocent eyes. There would be time enough for that too, I promised myself.

I'd make him mine, in every way possible. And no one, not even a traitor, would get in my way of doing so. They'd all pay if they tried to do that. It was a certainty.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am*

Anan

As I stood in the middle of my bedroom, surrounded by a flurry of activity, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by it all. Aunt Mara had left me in the capable hands of her staff to prepare for the wedding, but the sheer number of people milling about was almost too much to take in. I never thought that so many people were needed.

Hairdressers fussed with my locks, styling them into a sleek coiffure that I knew would be ruined within hours. Makeup artists hovered around my face, dabbing and brushing with an intensity that made me want to flinch away. And seamstresses bustled in and out, making last-minute adjustments to the suit that clung to my frame like a second skin, and in a bad way.

I shifted uncomfortably as they worked, the fabric pulling taut across my chest and shoulders. White had never been a good color on me, I thought morosely as I eyed my reflection in the full-length mirror. It washed me out, making my skin look pale and sickly in comparison. I didn't want to look even deader than I already did.

But Aunt Mara had insisted on it, saying that it was the traditional color for a wedding and that I should be grateful for the honor of wearing it. I bit back a sigh, knowing that arguing would only lead to a confrontation I wasn't ready for.

As the minutes ticked by, I found myself growing more and more agitated. The suit felt constricting, like it was slowly squeezing the air from my lungs. And the way the seamstresses kept tugging at it, pinning and tucking, only added to my discomfort.

I wanted to tell them to stop, to let me breathe, but I knew that would only lead to

more lectures about obedience and duty. So, I gritted my teeth and endured, trying to focus on anything else besides the tightness of the fabric against my skin.

But it was hard to think of anything else when there were so many people in the room, their voices blending together into a cacophony of sound that made my head throb. It hurt. I wanted nothing more than to be alone, to have a moment to collect my thoughts and steel myself for what was to come. People usually drained my energy.

And yet, even as I longed for solitude, I couldn't help but feel a flicker of curiosity about the man I was to marry. I still didn't know his name, or anything about him really. Aunt Mara had been tight-lipped on the subject, only telling me that he was an alpha with a prominent position in the cartel.

As if that could change my mind about him, I thought. It meant he was dangerous, and I didn't want to live in a constant state of fear.

I wondered if he really was the man I had seen outside or if, perhaps in that moment, I was making baseless assumptions.

Was he intimidating? Kind? Cruel? The possibilities were endless, and I found myself both dreading and anticipating the moment when we would finally meet face-to-face.

As if sensing my thoughts, one of the seamstresses stepped forward and adjusted the collar of my suit, her fingers brushing against my skin. I flinched slightly at the contact, unused to such casual touches from strangers.

"Don't worry, young master," she murmured, her voice low and soothing. Younger master? I didn't like people calling me that. I hoped it wouldn't become the norm. "Everything will be fine. Your alpha will take good care of you." As if that could really be a good thing, I thought.

I met her gaze in the mirror, searching for any hint of deception or insincerity. But all I saw was a calm certainty, as if she truly believed what she was saying. And really, she probably did.

I wanted to ask her how she could be so sure, but I bit back the words, not wanting to encourage further conversation. I didn't want to talk about that right now.

So instead, I simply nodded and turned my attention back to my reflection, trying to ignore the way the suit seemed to tighten around me like a vice. It wasn't working, obviously.

The seamstress stepped back, her work apparently done for now. With her moving away, I couldn't help but feel a sudden rush of loneliness wash over me. In this room full of people, I had never felt so alone, so isolated and adrift.

But I knew that feeling would only intensify once I was married, once I was truly bound to a man I didn't know. A man who held the power to shape my future, to determine the course of my life, and could do anything he wanted to me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath as I tried to center myself. I couldn't let my fears and doubts overwhelm me, not now when it mattered most. The alpha would win the moment I started to doubt myself.

Opening my eyes again, I caught sight of Aunt Mara in the doorway, her expression unreadable as she surveyed the scene before her. She looked proud, but I was pretty sure it wasn't of me; it was of herself. She was proud to have put me in this complicated situation.

And she must have finished whatever business she had been attending to. I wondered what it was, but of course, wasn't going to ask her. She wouldn't like it.

I stiffened slightly, wondering what she would say, what expectations she would place upon me now that the moment of truth was fast approaching. But for once, she simply nodded approvingly, a rare smile playing at the corners of her lips.

"You look handsome, Anan," she said softly, her voice barely audible above the din of activity in the room. "Your alpha will be pleased."

My alpha. Goodness, I felt as though we weren't really people, but just mindless animals.

I swallowed hard, not trusting myself to speak, but I managed a small, fake smile. How could anyone smile honestly in a situation like this? The truth was, it was simply impossible to do so.

Aunt Mara stepped further into the room, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor as she made her way towards me. Shivers ran down my spine. Whatever else she had to say to me, I didn't want to hear it.

However, as usual, it wasn't up to me.

I watched her approach in the mirror, my stomach twisting with a mix of nerves and resentment.

She looked regal and imposing in a deep red dress that hugged her curves, her dark hair swept up in an elegant chignon. It was a stark contrast to my own pale, nervous appearance, and I couldn't help but feel like a child next to her. And I was pretty sure that, at least in part, that was how she saw me.

As she drew closer, I could see the satisfaction in her eyes again as she took in the sight of me in my wedding attire. It made me want to shrink back, to hide from her approving gaze, but I forced myself to hold still.

Not to mention, she probably saw it as proof that she won, not that I could have done much against it.

"You really look perfect, Anan," she said, circling around me with a critical eye. "Just like a proper omega should on his wedding day."

I gritted my teeth at the word 'proper', hating how it made me feel small and inadequate. But I knew better than to argue with her.

"What about my alpha?" I asked instead, trying to keep my voice steady. The words 'my alpha' felt bitter on my tongue. "Have you told him anything about me? About what I like or dislike?"

Aunt Mara paused in her circling, raising one eyebrow at me. "Why would I do that? It's not my place to interfere in your marriage."

I felt a flash of anger at her words, but I pushed it down, knowing that showing emotion would only earn me a reprimand.

"But this is my life we're talking about," I persisted, hating how desperate I sounded. "Surely he should know something about me before we're wed."

He probably did, I thought. He most likely knew everything about me.

Aunt Mara's expression hardened, and she stepped closer, looming over me in a way that made me feel small and insignificant.

"Anan, you will marry this alpha because it is what is best for our family," she said, narrowing her eyes. "He is a powerful man with connections that could benefit us greatly. You would do well to remember that."

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of her words pressing down on me like a physical burden. I knew she was right, that this marriage was about more than just my personal happiness or comfort. But then again, the only thing I really carried about was my happiness.

At the same time, the thought of being tied to a stranger for the rest of my life filled me with a deep sense of dread. What if he was cruel? What if he didn't care about me at all?

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Aunt Mara's expression softened slightly, and she reached out to touch my arm in what I assumed was meant to be a comforting gesture.

"Don't worry, Anan," she murmured. "I've heard good things about this alpha. He's said to be a fair leader with a strong sense of duty. You could do much worse. Plus, I've met him, and I think he's a good person deep down."

Could I really do much worse in terms of marriage? I wondered bitterly. But then again, maybe it was for the best that I didn't know anything about him. It would be easier to face this unknown future if I simply accepted it as my fate.

"Thanks, I guess," I said quietly, not trusting myself to say more. Aunt Mara nodded, seeming satisfied with my acquiescence.

And really, she should have been pleased. I was agreeing with her, wasn't I? I was playing along with the plan, like a good little omega should, even though I lied.

She stepped back then, surveying me once more before giving a final nod of approval. "You're ready," she declared. "It's time to go downstairs."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am*

Rafael

The moment I stepped into the room, Mara whirled around, her eyes widening in surprise at my sudden appearance. She hadn't expected me to show up quite so soon, I was sure of it. I had something important to do here.

I didn't care about her shock or her expectations. My gaze immediately zeroed in on Anan, taking in every detail of his appearance as he stood there in the center of the room, surrounded by a flurry of activity from the various staff members. It seemed they were just about done, though.

Anan looked stunning—there was no other word for it. The white suit hugged his slender frame like it had been tailored just for him (and really, it had been), and his hair had been styled into soft waves that framed his face perfectly. But most striking of all were those grey eyes that met mine in the mirror's reflection, wide and full of an emotion I couldn't quite name. It was a similar expression he had when he saw me in the distance before.

Mara quickly recovered from her surprise, stepping forward with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Alpha Nightshade," she said smoothly, inclining her head in a gesture of respect. "We weren't expecting you so soon."

I barely glanced at her, my attention still fixed on Anan. "I decided I wanted to see my omega before the ceremony," I replied, not bothering with pleasantries. "After all, this is a momentous occasion for both of us."

Mara nodded, stepping back and folding her hands demurely in front of her. She

knew better than to argue with me, especially on matters related to the marriage. I'd made sure of that not too long ago.

I took a step closer to Anan, my eyes roving over him once more as I drank in the sight of him. He was even more beautiful up close, his skin luminous and his lips soft and inviting. There was a vulnerability about him that called to something deep inside me, a protective instinct that I hadn't known I possessed. This was far from the first time I was feeling that way.

"You must be Anan," I said softly, finally tearing my gaze away from his face to meet his eyes in the mirror's reflection. "You look lovely."

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat as he met my stare head-on. There was a challenge in those grey depths, a defiance that I found strangely appealing. And if he wanted a challenge, I'd give it to him.

"Thank you," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "You're very kind."

I sensed he didn't really mean those words, but didn't say anything about it.

I felt a smirk tug at the corner of my mouth, also feeling amused by his polite response even as I sensed the undercurrent of tension beneath it. This omega was not as passive as he seemed on the surface, and that intrigued me.

"Do you need any more time to prepare?" I asked, glancing around at the flurry of activity still ongoing in the room. "I don't want to rush you."

Mara stepped forward again. "No, we're almost done here," she said firmly. "Anan is ready for the ceremony."

One important thing about this encounter was that it couldn't be happening at all. But



then again, I wasn't one to follow rules all the time.

I nodded, eyes locking with Anan's. He met my gaze once more, his expression unreadable as he waited for me to make the next move.

And really, what else was there left to do? It was time to get married.

I glanced around the room at the various staff members still flitting about, their voices a low murmur as they went about their duties. Mara still stood off to the side, observing our exchange with a critical eye that made me want to roll my eyes.

But I restrained myself, not wanting to start this new relationship on the wrong foot with Anan. And really, it wasn't the right time or place for that kind of behavior anyway.

"I think that's enough preparation for now," I said smoothly, turning to Mara with a slight smile. "Why don't you go and see to the guests downstairs? Make sure everything is in order for the ceremony." I wanted to get her out of there as soon as possible.

She hesitated for a moment, glancing between me and Anan as if debating whether to protest. But one look at my face must have convinced her otherwise, because she simply nodded and swept out of the room without another word. It was quite unusual, coming from her.

I waited until the door closed behind her before turning back to Anan, who had watched the exchange with a neutral expression that I sensed hid a great deal of tension. He was nervous, but trying not to show it. I could understand that. I felt that way sometimes, too.

"You must be tired of all this fussing and primping," I remarked, stepping closer to

him and gesturing at the various people still in the room. "Why don't you give everyone a few seconds to finish up their work, and then we can have some time alone before the ceremony? It's important that we get acquainted properly."

Anan blinked at my words, surprise flickering across his face for a moment before he quickly schooled his features back into a polite mask. I sensed he wanted to refuse, but he couldn't without appearing rude.

"That would be... nice," he said after a brief pause, clearly choosing his words carefully. "But are you sure? You have important guests to attend to as well."

I waved away his concern with a dismissive gesture. He didn't have to worry about something like that. "Let them wait," I said, shrugging one shoulder. "This is more important right now. After all, we'll be spending the rest of our lives together. We should start off on the right foot."

There was a flicker of something in Anan's eyes at my words—a flash of longing or hope perhaps—but it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared. He understood me. He didn't say that, but he understood me.

He then gave a small nod, accepting my decision without further argument.

"Alright," he said quietly, glancing down at his hands clasped loosely in front of him. "That sounds good."

I smiled, pleased with his acquiescence even as I noted the way his fingers trembled slightly. The reason for that was because he didn't know what to say next.

He was still nervous, but he was trying to be brave. It was admirable.

The seamstresses and hairdressers hurried to finish their work (there was still so

much to be done than I had thought previously), clearly sensing the tension in the air between us. Within a few minutes, they had packed up their things and filed out of the room, leaving Anan and me alone at last.

Finally. The moment I most longed for was happening.

I took a second to study him as he stood there, looking small and vulnerable amidst the opulent surroundings. He really was beautiful, with his soft features and luminous eyes. But there was also a strength in him that I sensed just beneath the surface, a core of steel that would be interesting to uncover over time.

"I must confess, Anan," I said softly, taking another step closer until I could smell the light floral scent of his cologne. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you better. You intrigue me in a way I can't quite explain."

Anan's eyes widened at my words, and he swallowed hard before speaking. "You do?" His voice wavered slightly, betraying his nerves even as he tried to keep his tone steady.

I reached out to cup his chin with my hand, tilting his face up towards mine as I held his gaze captive. He never thought I would do that.

"Yes," I murmured, my thumb brushing lightly across his lower lip in a gesture that was both tender and possessive. "From the moment I first saw you, I knew there was something special about you."

He shuddered slightly under my touch, his eyes fluttering closed for a brief moment before opening again to meet mine with a newfound intensity. It made me feel a rush of power and desire that I had never quite experienced before.

"I... I don't know what to say," he whispered, his breath hitching as he leaned

instinctively into my hand. "This is all so overwhelming."

I tilted his chin up further, my eyes boring into his as I held his gaze captive. "Anan," I murmured, my voice low and intimate despite the situation. "You don't need to be nervous. I won't bite... unless you want me to."

I smirked at my own joke, amused by the way Anan's eyes widened at my boldness. He never expected me to say something like that. Silly him. He should know better by now.

He clearly wasn't used to such direct flirtation, especially not from a man he had only just met.

He swallowed hard, his tongue darting out to wet his suddenly dry lips. It was an unconscious gesture that drew my attention to his mouth, making me wonder what he would taste like. I wanted to find out. And maybe I would now instead of waiting for the ceremony.

"I... I just don't think this is appropriate," he stammered, but there was no real conviction behind the words. He was torn between propriety and the undeniable attraction sparking between us. "We hardly know each other."

I chuckled softly, releasing his chin only to trail my fingers down the side of his neck in a feather-light caress. "And whose fault is that?" I asked, my voice husky with barely restrained desire. "You can't blame me for wanting to get to know you better, in every way possible."

Anan shivered at my touch, his eyes fluttering closed for a brief moment before opening again to meet mine with a newfound intensity.

"Rafael... this is too much. You're taking advantage of the situation." He sounded

breathless, and I could feel the heat radiating off his body in waves. He was as affected by this as I was.

I paused, my hand stilling on his neck as I searched his face for any signs of real distress or unwillingness. But all I saw was a deepening flush, pupils blown wide with want. He wanted me, even if he was too shy to say it outright.

"Am I?" I asked softly, my thumb brushing over his racing pulse. "Or are we both just too tempted to resist?"

I leaned in closer, my lips hovering a mere breath away from his as I waited for him to make the next move. The tension between us was palpable, a live wire of electricity crackling in the air.

Anan's chest rose and fell rapidly with each shallow breath, his gaze locked on mine as he seemed to war with himself. I could see the battle raging behind those grey eyes. He wanted me, but he knew I was too dangerous.

The intoxicating scent that clung to Anan's skin was a constant distraction, the sweetness of it mingling with something darker and more primal that made my blood heat in my veins. It was a scent that called to something deep inside me, a part of myself that I had long buried under layers of control and self-discipline.

As I inhaled deeply, letting the fragrance wash over my tongue, I couldn't help but think of Valentine's Day and the promise of romance and passion that the holiday embodied. It seemed fitting that this alluring omega would be mine on such a day, as if fate itself had conspired to bring us together at this moment in time.

The scent was changing subtly even as we stood there, growing richer and more complex with each passing second. I could almost taste the sweetness of his skin, feel the heat radiating from his body as he leaned into my touch.

It was an addictive experience, one that threatened to overwhelm my senses and make me lose sight of the bigger picture. But I forced myself to remain grounded, to keep one foot firmly planted in reality even as I let myself be swept away by the moment.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am*

Anan

How had I gotten myself into this mess? The irony wasn't lost on me as I stood there, my skin tingling with awareness under Rafael's touch. All my life I had dreamed of a fairytale romance, of being swept off my feet by a handsome prince who would cherish and protect me forever. I just never thought it would happen this way.

And now, here I was, on the cusp of marrying a man I barely knew, all because of a business arrangement and an aunt's selfish machinations. It was like something out of a tragic play, complete with the cruel twist of fate that had led me to this moment.

The absurdity of it all crashed over me in waves as Rafael continued to stare at me, his words still resonating in my ears. He wanted me, yes, but only because he thought he owned me now. I was just another prize to be claimed and conquered, like so many others before me. I was so sure of that nothing could change my mind.

And yet, even as my mind recoiled from the reality of our situation, my body betrayed me, arching into his touch with a yearning that made me want to weep with frustration. I couldn't help but respond to the sheer magnetism of him, the power and confidence that radiated from every pore. I lacked those things, and he had an abundant supply of them.

It was infuriating, really. I felt like a puppet on strings, dancing to the tune of a cruel puppeteer who cared nothing for my true desires or needs. Rafael might pretend that this was something special between us, but we both knew it was nothing more than a sham, a pretty facade masking the ugly truth.

And still, as much as I hated to admit it even to myself, there was a part of me that couldn't help but be drawn to him, to the promise in his eyes and the sensual curve of his smile. He was a siren's song, beautiful and deadly all at once, and I was perilously close to being dragged under by his charms.

I had to stay strong, to remember that I was more than just an obedient omega to be bred and broken to my alpha's will. I had dreams and aspirations of my own, a future that I refused to let be dictated by the whims of fate or the selfish desires of others.

But as Rafael leaned in closer, his lips hovering a mere breath away from mine, I couldn't help but wonder if I was already too far gone, if the pull of our connection was simply too strong to resist. And really, what would happen next? Would he kiss me now, right here and right now? What should I do? I didn't want that, but my body certainly wanted it. I felt torn in two. I wished this wasn't happening, but then again, I was still happy with it.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself as I gathered every ounce of courage I possessed. I didn't know if what I was going to do next was going to work.

With a sudden movement, I reached up to grasp Rafael's wrist, my fingers digging into his flesh with more strength than he probably expected from me.

Using that grip as leverage, I wrenched his hand away from my face and shoved him back a step, putting some much-needed distance between us. My heart was pounding in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I stared up at him defiantly.

"No," I said firmly, my voice shaking only slightly as I met his gaze head-on. "I won't let you do this. You may think you have the right to take whatever you want from me, but I'm not some helpless prize to be claimed. I have feelings and desires of my own."

Rafael blinked in surprise at my sudden show of assertiveness, a flicker of



amusement crossing his features as he took in my flushed cheeks and heaving chest.

"Okay, that was kind of unexpected," he drawled, tilting his head to the side as he studied me. "It seems there's more to you than meets the eye, little omega. I like this side of you."

I gritted my teeth at his condescending tone, refusing to let him charm me out of my righteous anger. "Don't patronize me," I snapped. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. This marriage may be a business arrangement, but that doesn't mean I have to roll over and submit to you like some obedient puppy."

Rafael threw his head back and laughed, the sound rich and full as it echoed off the walls of the room. "Oh, Anan," he said, shaking his head in mock dismay even as a gleam of admiration shone in his eyes. "You really are so much more than just a pretty face and a tempting body. You have spirit, courage, and a spine to match. It's incredibly arousing."

It was arousing? I never thought he would say something like that, but then again, I shouldn't be so surprised.

He took a step forward again, closing the distance I had put between us with an easy grace that made me feel suddenly vulnerable once more. But I held my ground, refusing to be intimidated by his proximity.

"You're playing a dangerous game, little omega," Rafael murmured, his voice low and tinged with warning even as his eyes sparkled with mirth. "You're right, this marriage is a business arrangement, but that doesn't mean I won't take great pleasure in breaking you down and remaking you in my image. It's what alphas like me do."

I shivered at the promise in his words, even as I lifted my chin in defiance. "You can try," I affirmed, my voice barely above a whisper but filled with conviction

nonetheless. "But I won't let you. I'll fight you every step of the way if I have to. This is my life we're talking about, and I won't let anyone dictate how it should be lived."

For a long moment, Rafael simply stared at me, his expression unreadable as he seemed to weigh my words. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face, wide and genuine in a way that made my heart skip a beat.

"You know," he said softly, "I think I'm going to enjoy this more than I ever could have imagined. You're not just a challenge to be conquered, Anan—you're a puzzle waiting to be solved, a treasure to be unearthed. And I'm going to take immense pleasure in unraveling all your layers, one by one."

I swallowed hard, a shiver of anticipation and dread running down my spine at his words. I didn't know what the future held for us, but I did know that Rafael would not stop until he had me completely under his thrall. And that wasn't going to happen. I wasn't going to allow it.

Still, as much as I hated to admit it, even to myself, there was a part of me that yearned for that very thing—the chance to surrender myself completely to an alpha who could command my body and soul with just a look, a touch. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

But I refused to let Rafael see the effect he had on me, the way my body responded to his proximity like a puppet on strings. I had to remain strong, to keep a grip on who I was and what I wanted out of this life.

No matter how much I may have wanted him, I knew that giving in would mean losing myself entirely to him. And I wasn't ready for that, no matter how tempting it might be.

So, I simply met his gaze with a steady one of my own, my expression carefully

blank even as my heart raced beneath my ribcage.

"I'll look forward to the challenge," I said coolly, locking my eyes with his. "But don't expect me to make it easy for you. I'm not just some omega to be claimed and bred."

Rafael's smile only widened at my words, a glint of admiration flashing in his eyes. "Oookay," he purred, "I wouldn't have you any other way. Your spirit is what draws me to you like a moth to a flame. And I will enjoy watching it burn."

Rafael was too quick for me to react. As soon as he caught sight of the fire in my eyes, I heard a low chuckle erupt from his chest. The sound was dark and amused, as expected. I felt his fingers close around the back of my neck, holding me steady as he crashed forward.

"I love you," Rafael breathed against my parted lips, "You are magnificent." He tilted my head, his lips covering mine without prelude.

The kiss started as a conquering act, but I refused to let my resistance dissolve. I felt his tongue slide along the seam of my lips, demanding entry, and I clenched them tighter, refusing to grant him access. Rafael groaned against me, a sound that resonated deep in his chest.

"You can't defy me," he growled. But instead of wrenching away in annoyance, Rafael simply continued his sensual onslaught, nipping at the sensitive corners of my mouth.

A broken whimper spilled from my throat as sensation bombarded me from all angles. The scratch of his stubble, the velvety sweep of his tongue, the minty tang of his breath...

My will power began to fray at the edges like a sandcastle against the incoming tide. I

found myself responding instinctively to Rafael's touches, even as my mind screamed that I needed to stay strong. But it was near impossible to do that in that moment.

With one last attempt at resistance, I sank my teeth into his bottom lip and bit down, not hard enough to draw blood but enough to send a message.

Rafael made a sharp sound, low in his throat, and I expected him to be furious. Instead, a deep, approving chuckle vibrated against my mouth. "Oh yes," Rafael panted, "Fight it, my love."

My love? Shock lanced through me at his choice of words, piercing right through my weakening defenses. My teeth lost their purchase and I found myself parting my lips, allowing him entrance.

Rafael didn't waste a single second, plundering the warm cavern of my mouth with his tongue. I had never been kissed like this before—not this deeply, possessively, desperately. It was something else, something I would always remember.

A shudder rippled through me as liquid heat pooled in my abdomen. I wanted to pretend that this was all for show, a performance on both our parts. Rafael's declaration of 'love' surely meant nothing... right?

No, it couldn't, I told myself. He was just playing with me. He found me funny.

My hands trembled as they fisted in the silky fabric of his dress shirt. A broken groan emerged from my throat, swallowed by Rafael's passionate murmurs.

I was drowning in sensation, helpless against Rafael's mastery over my responses. His lips were everywhere—skimming the curve of my cheek, nuzzling behind my ear, tracing the fluttering pulse point on my neck...

Lost in a haze of mind-numbing arousal, I failed to notice when Rafael had shifted us. Now it was me with my back against the door, trapped between him and solid wood.

The only contact points were where our bodies joined, a juncture of scorching heat and rigid lines. A moan spilled out of me as Rafael rubbed against the notch of my hips, dry humping in the most blatant show of masculine need.

My control was shattering with each slick drag of his lips on sensitive skin or husky murmur against fevered flesh. I wanted him with a burning intensity that frightened me even as it thrilled me to my core.

Rafael seemed to sense my impending surrender for he gathered both my wrists in one large hand above my head, anchoring them against the door with little effort. It was a blatant display of strength, and I had never felt so powerless—or safe.

"Let yourself go," Rafael urged silkily. His other hand crept under the hem of my shirt, the rough pads of his fingers finding tender nerves along my spine. "Give me you. I swear no one has ever wanted anything more than I desire you."

I shivered violently as his touch ignited pleasure sparks that raced along my nerve endings. The promise in his words -and the utter conviction behind them shredded what remained of my self-control.

With a whimper of surrender, I yielded completely to Rafael's seductive onslaught.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:26 am*

Rafael

I had to tear my lips away from Anan's before we both lost ourselves completely. But I also knew there was no need to rush things; tonight, once the ceremony was complete, would be time enough for consummating our union thoroughly.

Pushing off the door with a groan of regret, I reached down and caught him easily under his thighs, lifting him as if he weighed nothing at all. He squeaked in surprise before winding his legs around my hips instinctively, holding on tightly to my shoulders.

"Come now," I purred as I carried him towards the door leading out of this room, "Our guests are waiting and growing restless without us."

Anan blinked dazedly up at me for a long moment before comprehension dawned in his eyes. He bit down hard on his plush bottom lip and shook his head in a feeble attempt to clear it.

"Shit... the ceremony is happening now?" His voice quivered with uncertainty. What we had was so intoxicating to him that he couldn't think straight anymore.

I could see the fear beginning to seep back into his gaze, even as arousal still simmered there. Poor thing was so overwhelmed, I almost hated to subject him to all those people and scrutiny.

Almost but not quite. Let's be real here; this was all part of the fun and games for me—claiming my prize in front of witnesses, proving to one and all who he belonged

to now.

"Yes indeed," I confirmed with a grin as we exited the room. "Can't keep them waiting any longer."

Anan gulped audibly, his arms tightening around my neck like a vice as nerves coiled tightly within him once again. "But I'm not ready!" His voice rose in pitch and he wriggled against me, trying to squirm out of my hold.

I simply tightened my grip on his legs, securing them more firmly around my hips as I strode down the hall towards where everyone was assembled. It would be much simpler if I just carried him straight there like this, after all.

"There's nothing to worry about," I reassured him smoothly despite the amused twinkle in my eye. "You look perfect for your wedding day."

He opened his mouth to argue further but snapped it shut again a moment later, realizing just how absurd such protests would be at this point in time. Instead, he buried his burning face against my shoulder with a soft whimper of embarrassment.

"Well, I certainly can't have you running off before our marriage has even begun," I went on playfully as we drew closer to the room where all those witnesses awaited us impatiently. "It wouldn't do at all for your future husband."

Anan shuddered and clung to me even tighter if possible, hiding himself against my strong body like he could simply disappear into it. Little fool thought that would make a difference in our current situation.

"Besides," I leaned down to murmur hotly in his ear, making sure he alone heard the next words, "If you try to run away now, you'll only force me to chase and capture you. And then I might have no choice but to put you over my knee for a thorough

spanking until your pretty bottom matches the red of your face."

I punctuated that threat with a sharp nip at his earlobe and he yelped softly even as he pressed closer against me, body responding instinctively to the dominant command in my voice. Silly boy didn't know when I was joking.

Either way, it hardly mattered at this point because we were swiftly approaching the door to the room where everyone waited to witness our nuptials. A hush fell over the gathered crowd as they caught sight of us, Anan clinging to me so adorably and me holding him possessively against my chest. They never expected something like that.

"So sorry to keep you all waiting," I called out smoothly as I strode through the doorway unperturbed by the stares and murmurs that greeted our entrance. "But it seems our lovely omega groom was just too delicious a temptation for his new husband to resist sampling."

I winked at Mara where she sat primly in the front row, taking great satisfaction in her slight sputter of outrage as I made my claim on Anan plain to all present.

"Please, everyone take your seats," I continued imperiously, not giving them time to react further. "The ceremony is about to begin."

And it was—my new life with Anan at my side, ready or not. It was the perfect Valentine's Day gift, really.

I gazed down at him as he peeked up at me from beneath his lashes, still flushed and slightly stunned-looking. My heart clenched in an unfamiliar squeeze I refused to acknowledge just now.

"Shall we get married then?" I asked softly, only for his ears alone. "Seal our bond before these witnesses?"



Anan swallowed thickly, glancing out at the sea of faces with a mix of apprehension and something else that glimmered in the depths of his eyes. He met my gaze again and I saw it—that same heady desire mingled with trepidation that was so intoxicating.

"I look like such a fool right now," he breathed after what felt like an eternity but could only have been mere seconds. "So, do I even have a choice?"

And just like that, everything in me settled, a deep contentment suffusing my very being as I gazed down at the precious omega in my arms on the eve of Valentine's Day - our wedding day.

The ceremony room was lavishly decorated, with velvet-draped walls and gilded furnishings that gleamed under the soft glow of dozens of candles perched in sconces along each wall. A long aisle bisected the space, leading to an altar draped in white lace and adorned with cascading bouquets of blush pink roses. It kind of reminded me of someone, I thought with a smile on my face.

At the front of the room, two thrones sat side by side, waiting for us to take our places as husband and, of course, also husband.

As we approached, I spotted Mara again, a look of barely suppressed fury on her face. No doubt she was shocked to see me carrying Anan like some blushing bride, but that was hardly my concern right now.

The officiant was there waiting for us—a tall, severe-looking man with cold eyes and a thin mouth curled into a sharp smirk as he watched our entrance. He clearly thought this whole situation was laughable.

"Ah, Rafael and Anan," the officiant purred mockingly. "So lovely of you to join us at last."

I flashed him an easy grin in return even as my arm tightened protectively around Anan's waist. "Wouldn't miss it for the world," I replied smoothly. "As you can see, my omega and I got a little... caught up before the main event, if you will."

The officiant chuckled, eyeing Anan with undisguised amusement. "I can certainly understand that—such an exquisite specimen deserves to be savored thoroughly indeed." And meanwhile, I never thought someone like him would ever say something like that.

Anan stiffened in my arms at the bald innuendo, his cheeks flaming with embarrassment and outrage. But before he could respond, I forestalled him with a subtle squeeze of his hip.

"Not here," I murmured for his ears alone as I strode down the aisle with him held firmly against me. "Let's save such private... delights for after we're husband and husband."

I settled us on the thrones, arranging Anan on my lap with a possessive hand splayed across his lower back. He wriggled slightly against me in obvious discomfort but didn't try to pull away. He knew that doing that wouldn't be appropriate and that I wouldn't like it. As much as he hated me now, he knew that it wasn't really genuine. Much more than that, he wanted me. He wanted every inch of me.

As the officiant stepped forward to begin the ceremony, I leaned down to capture Anan's chin between my fingers, tilting his face up to meet my gaze. His eyes glared daggers at me.

"I will make you pay for this humiliation," Anan bit out under his breath, all bravado and sass despite the tremor that rippled through him. "Mark my words."

"Promises, promises," I chuckled throatily against his flushed skin, reveling in his

spirit even as it amused me to no end. This was going to be a wild ride indeed.

And with a sharp clap of his hands, the officiant began intoning the words of the wedding rite that would bind Anan and me together for all eternity, no matter what my little rebel may have thought about it in this moment.

With the officiant still speaking, I gazed down at my omega with an expression of pure adoration, knowing full well that he was already irrevocably mine.

My heart. My world. My everything.

And heaven help anyone who dared stand between me and what was rightfully mine on this Valentine's Day—as the officiant continued his drone—I would rip them apart piece by bloody piece with my bare hands if it came to it.

I didn't care about what he promised—he could make as many threats and vows of revenge as his little heart desired. It wouldn't change a thing.

He was mine now, bound to me in the most intimate and primal way possible. And I would enjoy unraveling him at my leisure over the rest of our lives together.

As he squirmed against me in outrage, I tightened my arm around his waist and pulled him flush against my chest, letting him feel how much I wanted him even now in the middle of all this ceremony nonsense. Let him writhe and rage all he liked—I would simply enjoy every second of it.

And when the officiant finally pronounced us husband and husband, sealing our fate with those time-honored words that would echo through the ages?

I sealed Anan's promise to me with a thorough kiss that left no room for doubt about who owned his very soul now. Who would worship him like a god until the end of

time itself.

Finally leaving the room, I gazed down at my husband with a blistering intensity that made even Mara pause in her seething displeasure to stare openly at us both. Her reaction was a delight to my eyes.

"I love you," I declared for all to hear without hesitation or qualm. "Forever and always."

Anan gasped softly against me, shock and something like hope flashing briefly across his flushed features before it was replaced by the stubborn set of his jaw that never failed to make my heart clench in a way I could no longer deny.

"Yes well," Mara cut in rudely, "Enough of this soppy nonsense. The deed is done and the alliance is sealed. What now?" Her voice was hard and calculating as she eyed us.

I almost laughed out loud at her brazen question; I thought she had more sensitivity than that.

I smiled coldly down at her even as my hand slid possessively across the small of Anan's back, rubbing soothing circles there to keep him grounded against me.

"Why don't we adjourn to a more... private setting to celebrate?" I suggested smoothly. "There are certain rituals and intimacies that can only be performed in the bedchamber."

Mara visibly recoiled at my blatant innuendo, no doubt remembering all too vividly what those 'rituals' entailed from her own marriage bed. To be honest, I was surprised she was married once.

I watched with great satisfaction as a delicate green tinge colored her porcelain cheeks.

"See that you don't mark the boy up too badly," she warned in an acid tone, arms still entwined. "He's meant to be a pretty plaything for guests as much as anything."

I bared my teeth at her in a savage grin, all pretenses of civility dropping away like a mask. "I wouldn't dream of touching a hair on his head," I growled, pulling Anan protectively against my side with a sharp glance thrown Mara's way that made even her falter slightly. "He is mine and mine alone to spoil as I see fit."

## Page 7

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Anan

I slammed the door behind me so hard that the hinges rattled precariously. But I didn't care; my anger was too intense, too all-consuming to give any thought to potential damage. Plus, nobody would care, anyway.

The bedchamber I found myself in was sumptuously decorated with rich mahogany furniture and plush velvet drapes pulled back from the large arched windows that looked out over the estate grounds below. It should have been a welcoming sight but all I could focus on was the fury seething inside me as I paced before the empty fireplace, my mind replaying the events of the ceremony in vivid detail.

Sometimes, it was a curse that my mind was so good at remembering things.

Had Rafael really thought it would be acceptable to parade me into that room like some conquered prize? To treat me so cavalierly in front of everyone there, laughing and joking about 'sampling' his lovely omega groom's delectable flavor as if I were nothing more than a side dish to be devoured at whim?

And the worst part was that I had actually let him! I had clung to him like some infatuated schoolgirl, reveling in the heat of his gaze upon me even as I blushed and squirmed at the blatant innuendo he used to describe our private activities for all to hear.

I should have been stronger. Should never have let him do the things he did to me. That was my mistake.

It wasn't like anyone expected anything else from me, of course. They assumed that Rafael would have complete control over every aspect of my life, including the most intimate details. And I had played right into their hands by acting like some submissive little wimp who couldn't even stand up for himself against such brazen manipulation.

I could almost still hear their amused titters echoing in my mind's eye as I recalled the knowing smirks and barely concealed snickers that had circled the room while Rafael held me against his body. They were all thinking the same thing: 'look at the little omega slut, too desperate for attention that he'll let his alpha treat him like property right there in front of everyone.'

And to make matters worse, I had no idea where Rafael was right now, off doing God-knows-what and leaving me stewing here all alone. He hadn't bothered to give any explanations about what would happen after the ceremony or where he would be.

I slammed my fist down on the dresser beside me, a strangled groan escaping from my throat as I fought to contain the tempest of emotions raging inside me. This wasn't supposed to have happened this way—me reduced to a simpering mess who couldn't even muster up the willpower to object when being openly disrespected in front of an entire roomful of people.

I collapsed back onto the plush bed, burying my face in my hands as the hot sting of shame and humiliation burned behind my eyelids. I wanted to scream, to break something, anything to vent even a fraction of the turmoil twisting me up inside.

But instead, I lay there motionless, staring sightlessly at nothing as I waited for the numbness to overtake me again—the same blessed emptiness that had carried me through so many difficult moments before. It was all I knew how to do when everything else felt too painful to bear.

Eventually, exhaustion began to weigh down on me, my limbs leaden and my mind hazy with exhaustion and suppressed tears. Rolling onto my side, I curled into a fetal position in the middle of the mattress, clutching a pillow tight against my chest as if it could somehow shield me from the cruelty of the world.

With sleep beginning to drag me inexorably down into its welcome oblivion, my last coherent thought was one of bleak resignation-

I was then startled by a sudden intrusion, bolting upright in bed with a gasp as my head whipped towards the door. But all the shock and fury evaporated into nothingness the instant I saw Rafael sauntering into the room as casually as if he owned it. Which of course he did. Why did I keep having such stupid thoughts?

"Well don't you look like a pretty little mess," Rafael purred as he came to a halt at the foot of the bed, drinking in the sight of me tangled up in the sheets with undisguised appreciation. "And here I thought we were going for 'happily married' vibes today." Of course he had to say that, the motherfucker.

I stared at him in stunned silence for a long moment, too flabbergasted by his audacity to formulate an immediate response. And could anyone even blame me for having such a reaction? No, nobody could.

Then the full force of his comment sank in and indignation flared hotly within me.

"You arrogant bastard!" I sputtered, surging out of the bed with my fists clenched tightly at my sides. "How dare you march back in here like nothing's happened and act like we're just playing some silly game! You completely humiliated me in front of all those people!"

Rafael arched one brow as he watched me stalk toward him, his smirk only widening in the face of my fury. It made me want to scream, and if I didn't know people would



hear me, I'd do it.

"Yes, I know exactly what I did," he agreed smoothly, not looking remotely apologetic or repentant for a single moment of it. "And judging by how you were moaning and writhing against me like a bitch in heat during our little display back there, I'd say the sentiment was mutual." He punctuated that taunt with a wicked grin that made my blood boil even as unwanted images flashed through my mind.

"I was not moaning or anything!" I protested hotly, hating how my voice wavered and cracked on the last word. But deep down, I knew it was a lie. Damn it. "You treated me like an object, like your personal fucktoy for everyone to see! How is that supposed to make me feel okay?" I shook with rage as I advanced on him, stabbing a finger against his chest in emphasis.

Rafael grabbed my wrist easily before I could retract the offending digit, wrenching my arm up behind me and spinning me around to slam me face-first into the mattress. Before I could even gasp at the sudden maneuver, he was leaning over me with one thigh shoved between my legs as his hands gripped my hips in an unbreakable hold. And the worst thing about that was that I liked it.

"Mmmm but you do like being my plaything, don't you?" He murmured silkily against my ear, his warm breath fanning over the delicate skin there. I shuddered violently at the direct stimulation, goosebumps erupting across every inch of exposed flesh. "The way your body responds to me is unmistakable. You were made for this."

"Shut up!" I cried, writhing helplessly against him as my mind screamed that he had no right, that I should hate every second of this degradation and yet-

"And don't even try denying it," Rafael continued smugly, rolling his hips against mine in a sinuous grind. "I can practically smell the wetness leaking out of you right now, all hot and bothered to be taken by your big, strong alpha."

A choked sob ripped from my throat as I squeezed my eyes shut, tears of frustration and self-loathing pricking behind my eyelids. It was mortifying that he could make such vulgar accusations, that the worst part of it was that they rang with undeniable truth.

"How do you manage to twist everything around like this?" I whimpered, voice muffled against the sheets as Rafael continued to grind against me. "I was humiliated and now you're using that against me somehow!"

"Yes, that is what I am doing," he agreed cheerfully even as his fingers dug into my hips with bruising force. "Because your tears and protests only spur me on more, little omega. The sooner you realize that, the better off you'll be."

Rafael punctuated his words by sliding one hand under the front of my body to palm the growing bulge straining against my trousers. I cried out at the unbidden pleasure, back arching sharply as my cock throbbed against his touch.

"And now it's time for me to fuck you until you scream," Rafael declared, releasing his hold on me only to tear impatiently at the fastenings of my clothing. "I think a thorough claiming is in order to remind you who owns this sweet body of yours."

I knew I should fight him, that some part of me had to object on principle alone. But as he shoved me down onto the bed and kicked off his own trousers with barely restrained aggression, all thoughts of resistance evaporated like mist beneath the scorching heat of my arousal.

His words alone were enough to melt my resistance away.

His eyes locked with mine again, and I knew he was going to say something ridiculous. I didn't want to know what it was going to be, but didn't have a choice, either. "You know, I'm so sorry for making you cry, baby," Rafael murmured softly

against my neck, his words belied by the wicked grin I could hear in his voice even as he gentled his touch on me. "You know I only want what's best for you. And that means taking care of this luscious body until you can't even remember your own name anymore."

I shuddered at the obscene promise underlying those honeyed words, even as a part of me screamed that this was still wrong, that he shouldn't be touching me like this right now. And the truth was, it was wrong. I just couldn't stop him.

"Why do you have to be so damn difficult?" Rafael sighed dramatically before I could muster up an adequate retort. "You're supposed to let me ravish you thoroughly, not put up such a stubborn fuss about it. It's really starting to affect my ego." He tutted, that same smirk still persistent on his chiseled face.

I glared at him balefully, hating how he managed to make even his apologies sound like smarmy seductions meant to wind me up and keep me off-balance. He was impossible. And the worst thing about that? It was working.

"Maybe if you treated me like a human being instead of some plaything for your amusement, I wouldn't have such issues with you!" I snapped, wriggling in his hold even as my treacherous body responded eagerly to the heat of him pressed along my back and thighs.

Rafael just laughed at that, clearly amused by what he perceived as my feeble attempt at rebellion. "Oh honey," he purred, dragging a finger down my spine from my nape to the dimple at the base of my back, "You're so cute when you pretend to be outraged like this. You should become an actor. You're really good at this."

## Page 8

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Rafael

"There are a few things you should know about me," I continued. I could see the way Anan's hackles rose at the sound of it, his small frame stiffening beneath me with a combination of residual outrage and simmering arousal that I found endlessly fascinating.

His body language screamed at me to get on with it, that he didn't have the time or patience for my usual games right now. But oh, he was so adorably transparent, my dear Anan, in so many ways.

"It's only fair, after all," I went on with a negligent shrug of one shoulder even as my fingers continued their idle path along his spine. "Seeing as we are now bound together for life and all."

Anan made a dismissive sound in the back of his throat, rolling his eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn't get stuck that way.

"Don't try to butter me up with this 'sharing' bullshit," he muttered, his tone as sarcastic as it had ever been. "I don't need to know anything about your sordid past in order to recognize what an asshole you are in the present."

I simply chuckled, enjoying the way his acerbic wit always seemed to sharpen and sparkle when he was fired up like this. He was so much more than just a pretty face to admire from afar.

"You say that now," I purred with mock sympathy even as I let my eyes trace over his

flushed cheeks and trembling bottom lip, committing every delicious detail of his anger to memory for later contemplation, "But we both know how much you want to know. I can practically smell your curiosity." That much was true, I could tell he was dying to know more about me.

"You're just making up stuff to have a reason to keep groping me," Anan grouched sulkily even as he arched against me like a cat seeking attention, his body betraying him even as his words denied it.

I shook my head fondly, my expression softening for a moment as I gazed down at the marvel that was mine. My husband. Mine to cherish and corrupt in equal measure over the long years ahead of us together. It was both exciting and terrifying, in a darkly thrilling way.

"Your mind is too quick for me sometimes," I admitted. "But this time, I think you're giving yourself far too little credit for your own desirability. It's not just about my desire to touch you that has me speaking so frankly. I want you to understand what you've gotten yourself into with me."

I saw the way Anan's eyes widened at my words, a flicker of real interest warring with lingering suspicion in their depths as he gazed up at me warily.

"You make it sound like some sort of dire warning," he remarked after a long beat. He was still on guard against me, but I could sense the way his curiosity was slowly overtaking his reservations.

"It is," I said bluntly, my expression turning sober as I cupped his chin in one large hand, tilting his face up to meet my gaze head-on. "I have done things in the past that would make most men cringe and recoil in disgust. I have killed for reasons both noble and base, I have tortured for answers and inflicted pain out of cruelty rather than necessity."

Anan swallowed hard at my words, the color draining from his cheeks as he stared up at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. But to be honest, was it surprising that I did those things? I didn't think it was.

Even though we had only just been married mere hours ago, the revelation of this dark side to me was clearly rocking him to the core. Quite a fascinating reaction it was.

"Why are you telling me this?" He breathed, his voice barely above a whisper as he struggled to process the enormity of what I had just confessed to him. "What could possibly have possessed you to think I would want to know such horrific things about your past? About the man I've bound myself to for the rest of my life?"

I shrugged lightly even as something tightened in my chest at the raw vulnerability shining in Anan's eyes. This was the moment I had been leading up to all along—the pivotal juncture where he would either recoil in revulsion or accept me for who I truly was, dark spots and all.

"I'm not asking you to condone the things I've done," I said softly as I stroked a soothing hand down the side of his face. "But neither am I willing to hide from you. You deserve to know the man you're stuck with, even if that man isn't perfect or clean-cut." There was no denying it—Anan did want to know this about me.

"You are either brave beyond words or foolish in a way that is truly staggering," I mused aloud with a wry quirk on my lips. "I have yet to determine which."

Anan blinked rapidly, clearly taken aback by the compliment even as he tried not to let it show on his face. The scent of his arousal spiked noticeably at the praise, the coppery tang of blood mixing intriguingly with the sweet musk of his excitement.

"You can be both," he murmured almost dreamily after a moment's consideration, a

small smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "Perhaps it's not such an absurd thought that you're not irredeemably wicked, despite how much I may have come to believe it."

I leaned down then, capturing his lips in a slow, deep kiss that had him gasping into my mouth and arching up off the bed in wanton need. As we tangled tongues and teased each other with nips and licks, I reveled in the feel of him pressed against me—the hot slide of his skin, the way he fit so perfectly in the cradle of my larger frame as if we had been made for this moment. And maybe we had been.

"I will never claim to be anything less than wicked," I murmured roughly against his lips when we finally broke apart, my voice gravel and heavy with desire. "But I do swear on my life that I will always be loyal to you above all else." And those words were true, as much as anything else had ever been. I would never betray my husband.

Anan made a low noise of pleasure deep in his throat at the vow, his eyelids fluttering shut as he savored it like a fine wine on his tongue. "I think that's a start," he breathed when he could speak again, his arms coming up to loop loosely around my neck with a sense of acceptance that I knew would only grow stronger over time.

I grinned fiercely at that, all the love and devotion I already bore for him shining out in my eyes. He was going to be so much fun to break apart piece by piece until he was raw and exposed before me.

"You know," I murmured languidly as I trailed my fingers along the sensitive skin at the nape of his neck, relishing the way he shivered against me. Oh, how I loved his reaction. "There are a few other things you should be aware of when it comes to my past and the cartel."

Anan tensed slightly in my arms, no doubt expecting more gruesome confessions or some sordid revelation about how I had personally slaughtered dozens of people. I

was impressed by his imagination. It wasn't too far from the truth.

But instead of dwelling on my bloody exploits, I wanted to give him a glimpse into the complex web of family and loyalty that defined my life within the cartel's hierarchy.

"My father and brothers have not always seen eye to eye with me," I began carefully, knowing that this could be a delicate topic for Anan given his own experiences. "There were tensions there long before I ascended to leadership."

Anan made a small sound of acknowledgment in the back of his throat as he listened with the utmost attention, his body language telegraphing the depth of his focus even if his expression remained guarded.

"What kind of tensions?" He prompted when it became clear that I wasn't going to elaborate without some prodding. I wanted him to interact with me in this way, too.

I smiled thinly at his directness. There was no getting around it—my husband had a spine of steel concealed beneath all that delectable softness. It made him all the more irresistible to me.

"Political ones, largely," I replied. "Disagreements over the direction of the cartel's operations and how best to maintain our position in the city."

Anan nodded slowly, his brow furrowing as he processed this new information. He clearly knew from Mara that there were those within the organization who had opposed my ascension, but perhaps not the full extent of the family strife involved.

"What does that mean for me?" Anan asked eventually, and I could hear the hidden question in his voice—was I still concerned about these factions potentially using him as a pawn in some power struggle? It was understandable for him to worry given



Mara's machinations, but I wasn't going to let her meddling destroy what we had. What he had with me.

"There will always be those who seek to undermine me," I said, meeting Anan's gaze. "But as my husband now, you have the full weight and protection of the Nightshade family behind you. Anyone foolish enough to target you or try to use you against me would be declaring open war." And make no mistake—I would raze cities for anyone who dared lay a hand on him. It couldn't be any different. The more time I spent with him, the more I realized how important he was to me, despite the little time we'd been together.

"More importantly," I continued in a softer tone as I cupped his face, "I need you to trust that I will always have your best interests at heart. In every decision I make and action I take, you come before anything else. You are my priority now and nothing can ever change that."

Anan blinked, emotions flickering across his expressive features—shock, hope, tentative joy mingled with residual wariness. He never expected to see me behaving this way.

It was a complex mix that spoke volumes about how deeply he yearned to believe in me even as years of conditioning and pain made him wary of taking the leap of faith that I was asking for. But I didn't have anything to worry about. I was nothing if not patient.

"I... I want to," he whispered eventually. "But it's still hard for me to fully trust that you mean what you say. That I'm really not just some pawn for you to move around a game board, especially after what happened today."

I felt my heart clench at the raw vulnerability in those words, knowing that the road to truly healing the wounds of his past would be long and winding. But I was more

than willing to walk it with him every step of the way.

"You're not a pawn," I swore. "You are my reason for being, the missing piece that completes me in ways I didn't even know I was lacking until I found you."

I brushed away an errant tear that had slipped down his cheek with my thumb, marveling at its preciousness.

"Give yourself time," I urged. Time was needed, especially for things like what we were talking about. "Trust will come in its own right."

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Anan

Still positioned between Rafael's arms, my head swimming with all the revelations he had just shared about his past and our future together within the cartel, I couldn't help but be struck by how utterly different this conversation was from what I had been expecting.

I thought he was going to keep ridiculing me and make me feel further humiliated, but he was... actually kind of trying to understand me. Maybe I'd been too harsh in my initial judgment.

The way he stroked my skin and cradled me against him was so tender, almost reverent, like he couldn't quite believe I was real. It made my heart race in a way that had nothing to do with fear or panic. It was all about this need to stay with him no matter what.

And the things he was saying—that I was his priority, that I completed him... it sounded too good to be true after all the pain and betrayal in my life. Was I really starting to let myself believe this? That maybe Rafael wasn't just another cruel manipulator out to use me for his own gain? I didn't know, but something was different about me this time, and I kind of liked it.

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Rafael chose that moment to trail his fingers down over the bulge of my erection, palming me through my pants with a teasing pressure that made me gasp and arch toward his massive body. A bolt of pleasure shot up my spine at the contact, my cock throbbing urgently against his hand as he rubbed and stroked in just the right way.

"Mmmm, yes," Rafael purred. "You like that, don't you? You like it when I touch this needy little dick." He punctuated his words with another firm squeeze that had my head falling back against the pillow with a guttural moan. It was so good. I couldn't believe he was so proficient in doing that.

I was dimly aware of how debauched I must look right now—lying limp and pliant in Rafael's embrace as he fondled me with expert ease. I'd told myself this wasn't going to happen, but it was.

I was too lost in sensation to care, my mind going hazy with each stroke of his fingers along the sensitive length of my shaft.

"There you go," Rafael encouraged huskily as he continued, his other hand coming up to tease and circle my nipples through the thin fabric of my shirt. "Let me see how badly you need it. How much you want everything I can give you right now."

I shuddered and bucked against him, chasing more of that delicious friction even as I clung to his wrists. It was too much and not nearly enough at the same time. Even now, he was still toying with me, and the difference this time was that I didn't mind it.

And I knew I was going to hate myself for what I was going to say next, but I couldn't hold it back any longer.

"P-Please," I whimpered, the word ripped from my throat without conscious thought. "Rafael, please don't stop."

He chuckled darkly in response, a wicked glint in his eyes as he leaned down to nip sharply at the shell of my ear. "Oh, but we're just getting started, little omega," he growled teasingly. "I'm going to take you apart piece by agonizing piece until you can't even remember your own name."

His voice dropped into a deep, commanding rumble as he pinched and rolled the sensitive buds of my nipples between his fingers, making me cry out in shocked ecstasy at the sharp spikes of pleasure-pain it sent rocketing through my nerves.

"And when I finally drive this thick cock into your needy little hole," Rafael continued hotly as he rubbed and squeezed in just the right places to wring intense shivers from my overstimulated body, "I want you begging so sweetly that there will be no doubt left in either of our minds who you belong to." He punctuated his words with a firm roll of his hips against mine, letting me feel how hard he was for me even through the barriers of clothing separating us.

The thought of him finally sheathing himself inside me, stretching and filling me until I screamed my pleasure for all the world to hear—it was enough to make my head spin. I almost fainted.

The ache at the base of my spine grew unbearably intense as my climax hovered just out of reach, my muscles locking up as I teetered on that razor's edge of oblivion.

"I... I can't," I panted even as I fought against the impending crest, not wanting it to end quite yet but unable to hold back for much longer. "Don't make me cum without you inside me!" The demand was torn from my very soul and I knew with sudden clarity that nothing could ever feel as right as Rafael's cock splitting me open while he poured himself deep within my heart. I never thought I'd ever say something like that to him.

I was dimly aware of the way my words hung in the air between us, a declaration of trust and devotion far more powerful than anything I had ever said aloud.

And I knew with a bone-deep certainty as I gazed up at Rafael's triumphant, adoring face that it was true. I belonged to him completely—body, heart, and soul. Whether through love or coercion was irrelevant in the face of something so absolute and

unstoppable. All that mattered was that we were bound together for eternity, two halves of a whole that would never be torn apart. We were destined to be together.

Rafael's eyes flashed with savage satisfaction as he read the surrender in my expression, a feral grin splitting his features as he loomed over me like a conquering king surveying his hard-won prize. "Such a good boy," he rumbled approvingly, his voice deep and thick with lust even as tenderness suffused his gaze. "So quick to learn your place at my feet." He punctuated the words by capturing my mouth in a searing kiss that swallowed me up whole, plundering ruthlessly with tongue and teeth until I was dizzy from lack of air. And to think there was still so much more awaiting me.

When he finally released me long minutes later, gasping for breath as I stared up at him, Rafael simply smirked down at me with smug male pride, one hand coming up to stroke possessively over the wild tangle of my hair. "Now let's see how loud we can make you scream for your alpha." The words were spoken in jest but there was no denying their underlying sincerity as he gazed into my eyes with a heat that stole my breath all over again.

I didn't have time to respond before he kissed me once more, only this time it was deeper, rougher, a claiming that left me with no doubt about who owned me. My body yielded eagerly beneath him, opening up like a flower to the sun as I wound myself around him, desperate for his hands on every inch of skin.

With Rafael continuing to plunder my mouth and pump his hips against mine in a deliberate mimicry of sex, I realized with a sudden sense of wonder that maybe, just maybe, this could be real after all. That somehow during all the pain and heartache, I had found someone who wanted me for more than just my body—someone who saw me as an equal and a partner rather than just a plaything to be used.

It was a dizzying thought but one that filled me with a fragile sort of hope even as

Rafael's fingers continued to drive me toward the edge of climax.

His hands moving in a blur, he divested us of our remaining clothes. In a matter of seconds, we were both fully naked.

A few seconds later, as Rafael's thick cock slid into me inch by torturous inch, I felt my body stretching around him like a vice, my walls clenching and fluttering as they tried to accommodate such an imposing presence. It really was almost too much.

The burning stretch was unlike anything I had ever experienced before, the fullness of it making my head spin even as my hips bucked up involuntarily to take him deeper.

I couldn't help but moan raggedly with each thrust, my voice raw and needy as it echoed off the bedroom walls. There was a dull ache deep in my abdomen, the painful pleasure of it only amplifying the electric heat that sparked through every nerve ending as Rafael filled me.

"Are you okay?" Rafael paused his movements for a moment, his eyes searching mine with a mixture of concern and barely restrained lust. I could see him trembling with the effort to hold back, to be gentle despite the instinct urging him on.

I managed to nod even as my fingers dug into the flesh of his shoulders, my nails biting into his skin like a brand as I clung to him for dear life. I felt stretched to my limit and then some, every nerve in my body alight with sensation as I struggled to adjust to his girth. But even through the pain, there was a deep welling pleasure, an exquisite fullness that made me feel complete in ways I didn't know were possible.

"I'm... I'm fine," I managed to rasp out, my voice thin and wavering. "Just... Don't stop." I punctuated the plea by rolling my hips against his, the movement sending sparks of pleasure racing up my spine.

Rafael's answering groan was low and guttural, making me shiver with desire even as it resonated deep inside me like a physical caress. He started to move again then, slow and deep thrusts that quickly gained in speed and intensity as he lost himself in the tight clutch of my body.

My world narrowed down to nothing but sensation—each drag of his cock along my inner walls, each slap of flesh on flesh as he drove into me over and over. The headboard slammed against the wall with every snap of Rafael's hips, the bed creaking beneath our combined weight. It might break, but I didn't care. I wasn't the one who bought it, after all.

Rafael's hand found my cock as he pistoned above me, his fingers wrapping around the hot flesh and stroking in time with his thrusts. I arched my back until it almost felt like it might snap, my head thrown back as I chased that elusive peak of ecstasy that hovered just out of reach.

"The moment has come. Cum for me," Rafael growled, his voice strained and rough with impending release. "I want to feel you spasm around my cock as I fill you with my seed." His words pushed me over the precipice and I was lost to the waves of pleasure crashing through me.

My vision whited out at the edges as my orgasm hit with the force of a runaway train, my back bowing off the mattress as I screamed Rafael's name to the heavens. Ribbons of blinding ecstasy pulsed from where we were joined, radiating out to set every nerve ending ablaze. I felt myself tighten around Rafael's pistoning length like a vise as I convulsed helplessly in his hold.

Rafael continued his ruthless pounding even as my climax crested and ebbed, driving me through it with an intensity that left me gasping and shaking beneath him. With a final, brutal thrust he buried himself to the hilt inside me, his cock pulsing and twitching against my inner walls as his release surged forth in a scalding flood. And



of course, there was his knot. I knew it was going to make its presence known.

We collapsed together a few seconds later, our bodies still intimately connected as we gasped for air and shuddered with aftershocks. Rafael's face was buried in the crook of my neck, his lips moving feverishly over the sensitive skin there even as soft grunts of satisfaction rumbled from deep in his chest.

I could feel the weight of him pressing me down into the mattress, his larger frame enveloping mine like a cage even as the softness of the sheets beneath us cushioned the impact of our lovemaking. It was almost overwhelming to be pinned under his solid bulk, but at the same time, there was something incredibly comforting about it—an assurance that I was safe and cherished in his arms no matter what might happen outside them.

"Mine," Rafael murmured against my skin, the word vibrating through me like a mantra as he licked and nuzzled into my sweat-slicked flesh. There was no denying the possessive note that rang out in his tone or the way his body seemed to instinctively tighten around mine at the very thought of anyone daring to try and take me away from him.

And I loved that about him, as much as I thought I would never admit it.

Rafael

Still tangled together following the events of our sex, my seed still pulsing hotly into his clasp channel even as he slowly softened and slipped free, I gazed down at Anan with a softness I rarely let show on my face.

He was sprawled across my chest, his smaller body molding perfectly to my larger frame in a way that made me feel... content. More than content, really—complete in a way I hadn't even known I'd been missing until I had him lying there in my arms.

I stroked one hand down his spine, marveling at the silky slide of his sweat-slicked skin against my palm. "Tell me more about you," I murmured, surprising myself with how much I truly wanted to know every facet and nuance of this fascinating creature who had captured my heart so completely in such a short time.

It was time to get to know each other a bit better now.

Anan blinked up at me with drowsy eyes, a flush still high on his cheeks from the intensity of our mating. Even like this—limp and sated against me—there was an undercurrent of strength in him that I found incredibly alluring.

"There's not much to tell," he said softly after a moment, his fingers tracing idle patterns over my chest as if he couldn't quite believe I was real, either. "I'm just a boring omega who was sheltered by his aunt for too long. I know I should've done something about that before it was too late, but I couldn't, and I hate myself for that."

I snorted at that, amused by the way he downplayed his own importance and worth.

Did he really think I saw him as some dull prize to be collected and set aside? Nothing could be further from the truth. Though, if I remembered correctly, I had kind of said that. Well, never mind. It wasn't important anymore.

"You're not boring," I corrected firmly even as I continued my movements along his back, reveling in the little shivers that followed in the wake of my touch. "And I will never believe that you were only sheltered by your aunt. There is so much more to you than that."

Anan ducked his head, a bashful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he buried his face against my neck. "Well... maybe I am not boring," he conceded reluctantly, nuzzling into the crook of my shoulder like he couldn't quite resist touching me any more than I could resist him. "But what am I supposed to say? That I have big dreams and aspirations that I'm afraid to admit even to myself some days?"

I tilted his chin up with one hand, gazing deeply into his eyes as I brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen across his brow. The vulnerability shining back at me made my heart clench in a way I had never experienced before.

"You should say those things," I told him softly but firmly, letting him see the sincerity and support in my own expression. "And then you should take steps to make them a reality. Because that is what you deserve—a life filled with purpose and fulfillment." And I would help him get there if it was the last thing I did.

Anan's eyes widened slightly at my words, a flicker of hope mingling with disbelief in their gray depths. "You really mean that?" He breathed after a moment, hardly daring to believe what he was hearing from me. "You wouldn't just be saying that because we're in this moment right now?"

I shook my head firmly, cupping his face in both hands as I gazed at him with unwavering intensity. "No, of course not," I murmured. "What I'm telling you has

nothing to do with the pleasure we just shared. This is about who and what you are to me now—a partner and confidant whom I trust implicitly. And that means I support your dreams wholeheartedly." He needed to understand that and I was going to make sure he did.

He blinked a few times against the sudden burn of tears, his lips parting soundlessly as he struggled to process my declaration. "I... Thank you," he whispered after a moment. He never thought I'd say something like that. "No one has ever made me feel like I mattered more than anything else in their world before. Not even my parents when they were alive."

The pain of that admission was evident in the way his shoulders curled inward on themselves, as if trying to retreat into himself and avoid any further rejection or hurt. It made me want to crush his aunt for all the damage she had inflicted upon him with her cruelty and neglect. But I wouldn't do that. Anan would probably never forgive me.

"You do matter more than anything to me," I vowed, pressing a tender kiss to each tear-stained cheek before capturing his lips in one soft, sweet brush of mouth on mouth that held so much promise for our future together. "And I will spend the rest of my days proving it to you if that is what it takes."

Anan rested his head in the crook of my shoulder, his fingers absently tracing patterns over my chest as he probably thought about something important. Maybe he was thinking about our future together? It was likely that he was. I wondered, within that context, how he imagined us a few years from now.

Everything was happening so fast, but there was no denying that we would still be together years from now. My entire body told me that.

The intimacy of the moment felt surreal even to me, considering everything that had

transpired between us since our wedding ceremony just hours before.

"What would we do if we became parents someday?" He asked after a long pause, his voice soft and wistful in the dimly lit room. Ah, so that was what he was thinking about. "Would we be good at it or would we repeat the mistakes of our own families?"

The question caught me off guard, both because it was so vulnerable and open from him and because I had never truly considered fatherhood as an option before now, not with any seriousness.

Not to mention the comparison with our own parents. My parents weren't good. His parents hadn't been present for him. His aunt was a bitch. He wanted to do better for his kids, if he ever had them.

Hearing him ask that question like this, with such fragile hope shining in his eyes even as he braced himself for disappointment—I found myself wanting to explore the possibility in earnest.

I was going to be sensitive about it. Not my usual style, but it was required in that moment.

"I don't know," I replied honestly after a moment's reflection. "But I like to think that we would approach parenting from a place of love and support rather than fear and control."

Anan nodded slowly, a wistful smile playing about his lips as he imagined that future for us. "You mean like being present and understanding instead of distant and punitive? Letting our kids be their true selves without trying to mold them into some preconceived ideal?"

I grinned at his description, marveling at how perfectly it encapsulated my own nascent vision for parenthood. It was clear that he had put a great deal of thought into this already, perhaps even before meeting me.

"That's exactly right," I agreed. "And not shying away from difficult conversations when our kids have questions or need guidance—really listening to them and trying to understand their perspective."

Anan chuckled softly at that, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he looked up at me. "Sounds like a tall order," he remarked, but there was genuine appreciation in his voice. "But one I think we could pull off with the right dedication and open-mindedness."

"And patience," I added, stroking a hand down his back in a soothing caress as I held him close. "It's important not to get discouraged if things don't go perfectly right away. Parenthood is a lifelong journey of learning and growth for both children and parents alike." And, wow, I never thought I was capable of saying things like that. It really made me look different to people.

Anan hummed thoughtfully at that, seeming to savor the sentiment as he snuggled further into my embrace with a content sigh. "I like the sound of that," he murmured after a beat, his voice softening almost imperceptibly. "Having a partner who understands the value of hard work and the importance of maintaining an open dialogue."

There was something vulnerable and touching in the way he looked at me as he said it—an unspoken admission of trust and affection that warmed me right to my core. And for the first time, I found myself longing not just for a future with this amazing omega by my side but one where we could build our own family together someday.

And maybe we would sooner than I thought.

"That's the key," I affirmed with a tender smile. "Being able to talk openly about hopes and fears, successes and failures—that will give our kids the foundation they need to navigate life with resilience and emotional intelligence."

We were talking in general terms, of course. Things would become more specific when the moment to become an actual family was closer.

Anan leaned into me more fully at that, his body molding against mine as if he couldn't get quite close enough. "It's like you're describing an ideal world," he murmured almost dreamily, his fingertips continuing their absent dance over my skin in mesmerizing patterns. "One where we're not afraid to be open and vulnerable with each other, where strength is measured by the courage to empathize rather than dominate."

"It is ideal," I agreed solemnly. "But it's also very possible if both partners are committed to growing and evolving together. And I have no doubt that you and I have that in us."

He gazed up at me then with eyes gone soft with wonder and something much deeper, his lips curling into a smile that made my heart flutter wildly against my ribs.

"God," he breathed almost reverently, "I never thought I'd find someone who could make me believe in possibilities I had long given up on. But you do it so effortlessly, as if it's the most natural thing in the world." He shook his head, still smiling, even as a sheen of unshed tears glimmered in his eyes. "How did I get so lucky?" And in the meantime, I never thought he'd say something like that.

I cupped his face tenderly, wiping away one errant tear that managed to escape with my thumb before leaning down to place a soft, lingering kiss on each eyelid in turn.

"You're the lucky one," I murmured against his skin, savoring the way he trembled

under the feather-light caress of my mouth. "To have so much hope and openness after all you've endured—you are truly incredible."

He closed his eyes briefly at that, his breath hitching almost imperceptibly in his throat as if my words touched something deep within him, something he had kept carefully hidden away for far too long.

"And no matter what happens, nothing will separate us," he whispered finally. "You and I together—we could be everything we've ever dreamed of and more."



Anan

Rafael was still gazing up at me, his expression uncharacteristically tender as he stroked the fingers of one hand through my hair in a gentle caress that made my scalp tingle. He knew how to make me feel good so expertly. It was one of the best things about him.

But even as I reveled in the intimacy of the moment, a thought occurred to me—that we had somehow let Valentine's Day slip by almost entirely without any celebration or special acknowledgment.

We got married, and a lot happened before and after that. But remembering today's special occasion, I couldn't go to sleep without doing something to 'commemorate' it. I just didn't know exactly what.

It seemed absurd now, considering all the passionate declarations and promises we'd just made to each other, but earlier that day we had been so caught up in wedding preparations and then... well, everything that had transpired between us afterwards. I couldn't help but feel a flicker of regret that we hadn't paused to do something expressly for Valentine's.

"I know this might sound ridiculous considering everything that's already happened today," I began, not wanting to break the spell of closeness that surrounded us, "but it's Valentine's Day and we haven't really done anything special together yet." There, I had said it. And now my face was burning red. My embarrassment was through the roof.

Rafael blinked a few times as if coming back from a faraway place at my words before his brows knitted together in confusion. He clearly hadn't even considered the oversight, so focused as he had been on claiming me. And he did, but I still wanted to do something else with him. It couldn't all be just about the sex and talking about forming a family.

"You're right," he murmured after a beat, stroking his chin contemplatively with one hand even as the other continued its idle tracing over the bare skin of my back. "It would be a shame to let such an important occasion pass without some sort of tribute."

I felt myself relax slightly at his acknowledgment, relieved that he agreed and wasn't dismissive of my concern outright. And then I brightened considerably as a wicked glint entered his eyes, hinting at a devious idea taking shape in that brilliant mind. I knew he was going to think of something.

"How about we remedy that situation right now?" Rafael proposed with a slow smile that made my heart race even as it set me on edge slightly. What was he cooking up? How good was it going to be? And was it going to involve sex again?

He shifted our positions suddenly then, rolling us over until I was pinned beneath him on the mattress, my wrists captured in one large hand above my head. I gasped at the sudden move, my body arching involuntarily as a spike of heat lanced through me.

He might be answering my last question right now. It might actually involve sex.

Rafael's grin widened at my reaction, a predatory gleam entering his gaze as he gazed down at me. "I love how you look like this," he purred approvingly, his voice dropping to a low, seductive rumble. "Helpless and flushed with need under me. It's enough to make me want to devour you whole all over again."

He punctuated the words by nipping sharply at the sensitive skin of my neck, drawing a shuddery moan from my lips as my head fell back.

But even as desire began to pool molten hot in my core once more, a part of me rebelled against being reduced to nothing more than Rafael's plaything yet again. This was Valentine's Day, for heaven's sake! Surely we could find a way to celebrate the occasion that didn't involve me spread out like some feast awaiting consumption?

"My hands are free now," I pointed out breathlessly, squirming slightly as his erection brushed against mine in a deliciously teasing slide. "And I have a few ideas about how we might pass the rest of the night that don't necessarily require you to keep me pinned down for your own amusement."

Rafael arched an eyebrow at my words, clearly amused by the edge of petulance in my tone even as he hummed thoughtfully, considering my suggestion.

"Oh? And what kind of ideas might those be, little omega?" He inquired silkily, leaning down to ghost his lips along the side of my neck in a maddeningly gentle caress that had goosebumps erupting across my skin. "Do you think yourself capable of entertaining me with your wits alone? I'd be impressed if so."

I could tell he was just teasing me now, trying to goad me into proposing something outrageous and debauched. But the truth was, there were a few things I had always wanted to try but had been too shy or intimidated to suggest before now.

Drawing in a deep breath to steel my nerves, I met his gaze head-on with a coy smile playing about my lips. "Maybe," I hedged, letting the word hang in the air between us as I arched invitingly toward him, desperate to feel him pressed against me once more even as I yearned for something different this time.

"I've heard tell of these special massage oils," I began slowly, letting my voice trail

off suggestively as Rafael's eyes narrowed in intrigued interest. "Apparently they make the skin feel so slippery and smooth that two people can slide together with the greatest of ease without the need for lubrication."

His brows shot up at that, clearly not expecting me to come out with such a bold proposition. And if I was being honest, I wasn't quite sure where this bravado was coming from myself. Not to mention, when he penetrated me, I hadn't felt the need for any lotion to help it. What I wanted this time was more purely for the novelty of it.

"But you have to be careful," I continued breathlessly as his expression darkened with hunger, "Because it's said that the oil heightens every sensation tenfold, making pleasure feel so intense it can almost be painful. Think you can handle it?" I knew he was definitely up for it.

I barely recognized myself as I said all those things, but Rafael's expression made me feel like this was exactly what I should be saying.

"Is that right," Rafael mused slowly, his tone a low, approving purr as he studied me with blatant male appreciation. "Well well, little omega, you certainly are full of surprises tonight, aren't you? First the bold talk about open communication and co-parenting and now this? You're impossible to predict."

I felt a flush of heat creep up my neck at his words even as a thrill of excitement raced down my spine in anticipation of what was to come.

"It seems you bring out sides of me that I never knew existed," I murmured. "I think it's only fitting we should try something different."

Rafael chuckled darkly at that, his expression turning fierce and possessive all at once as he rolled his hips against mine with deliberate pressure.

"And you say I'm the wicked one?" He growled teasingly.

I watched curiously as Rafael reached for the phone on the nightstand and dialed a number, clearly calling one of his men based on the way he greeted the other person on the line. But what were they going to talk about? I couldn't help but wonder.

"Yes, I need you to set up something in my bedroom," he said briskly, not bothering with any pleasantries. "An oil massage with special scented oils—you know the ones I mean? I want everything ready for me within the hour. Understood?" He paused for a moment, listening to the man on the other end before nodding curtly.

"You have free reign to choose whatever oils you think would be most appropriate for the occasion," Rafael continued smoothly as he glanced over at me, his eyes glinting with promise and mischief. "But make sure they're something sensual and arousing. I plan to take full advantage of the enhanced sensations later." Oh my goodness, yes. Please do.

He hung up without any further ado after that, tossing the phone aside carelessly as he turned back to me with a wicked grin spreading across his face. I shivered slightly at the intensity of his expression, suddenly feeling nervous butterflies dance in my stomach as I considered exactly what I had set myself up for here. It was equal parts scary and exciting.

"You heard him," Rafael rumbled, prowling towards me with the lethal grace of a jungle cat hunting its prey. "We'll be having the most decadent massage oils imaginable within an hour. And then, my naughty little omega," he purred silkily as he reached out to hook a finger under my chin and tilt my face up to meet his gaze, "I'm going to spend the rest of the night exploring every inch of your glorious body with my hands and tongue until you're writhing beneath me in ecstasy."

I whimpered softly at that promise, already feeling myself beginning to grow hard

again even though we had only just finished a 'marathon session' not that long ago. Something about Rafael's voice never failed to send shivers down my spine directly to my core.

"I can hardly wait," I breathed shakily as he loomed over me like a dark prince from a gothic fairytale, his eyes blazing with an almost feral intensity as he stared at me hungrily. "But first..."

I trailed off purposefully, reaching up to thread my fingers through the silky strands of his hair and tug him down until our mouths were scant inches apart. His lips parted automatically in anticipation of a kiss, only for me to tease him instead by simply blowing a soft puff of air across their surface.

"I think you promised me a very thorough Valentine's Day celebration," I murmured wickedly, my voice dropping an octave as I held his gaze steadily. "And so far? No chocolates, no flowers, not even a cheesy card with a mushy declaration."

Rafael blinked in surprise before throwing his head back with a bark of laughter that rumbled up from deep in his chest.

"You little minx," he accused, even as he looked genuinely delighted by my cheeky teasing. "Here I thought we had already consummated our union thoroughly enough times for you to be satisfied, and yet you're still trying to wheedle more out of me. Is this the start of a lifetime pattern for us, do you think?"

I could tell from his tone that he was utterly thrilled by the prospect of many years ahead filled with me playfully challenging him at every turn. He couldn't wait. And of course, that was my plan.

"One can only hope," I replied, fighting back an urge to giggle like a schoolgirl at the sheer absurdity of it all. "Though in all seriousness, you don't have to go to any

particular trouble for me." That wasn't true though, but I had to say that. He had done so much already.

"Oh no," Rafael objected firmly as he settled more heavily over me, effectively trapping my smaller frame beneath his much larger one on the bed. "After everything I just put you through? After the way I took and claimed every inch of your luscious body? There is no way I'm letting you off the hook that easily." He punctuated his statement with a pointed roll of his hips that had me gasping out loud as he ground against my now painfully hard erection.

"There's got to be a limit," I gasped breathlessly, already feeling my resolve beginning to waver in the face of such blatant stimulation. "We can't go all night without breaks!"

Rafael

I grinned at Anan's words, clearly amused by his teasing and playful challenge even as I felt my own resolve beginning to weaken in the face of such blatant temptation.

"Very well," I conceded, rolling off of him onto my back beside him so we were both sprawled lazily on the bed. "You've made your point clear—Valentine's Day deserves at least some token gestures of affection and celebration."

Anan brightened at my admission, sitting up with a cheeky smile playing about his lips as he gazed down at me.

"So, you'll get me something?" He asked, his eyes sparkling with naughtiness even as they traced over my body. "Not that I need it, of course. You've already given me the greatest gift imaginable with your body."

I chuckled at his bravado, propping myself up on one elbow to smirk back at him roguishly. "Your ego is truly as insatiable as your libido," I teased. "But yes, I suppose a few trinkets are in order to commemorate the occasion properly. I'll be back shortly."

With that declaration, I slid out of bed and began gathering my clothes from where they lay scattered on the floor, dressing quickly while keeping one eye on Anan to ensure he didn't try anything foolish in my absence.

Within minutes, I had pulled on fresh trousers and a shirt before heading out into the hallway towards the guest suite where I kept my personal stash of valuables. I needed



to get chocolate, flowers, and a card for my omega. It was Valentine's Day after all. I would do anything for him, no matter how ridiculous it was.

The safe opened with a smooth hiss as I keyed in the combination, revealing a small chamber lined with velvet and housing a variety of precious items accumulated over the years. I sifted through the contents quickly, selecting a box of high-end chocolate truffles and a bouquet of rare, midnight-blue roses that I knew Anan would appreciate for their beauty and uniqueness.

With those secured under my arm, I moved swiftly to the desk where a stack of pre-written valentines sat waiting to be gifted. I had these items from my previous adventures with other omegas. They never made me feel what Anan was, though.

Selecting a card with a particularly saccharine message and overly frilly design, I sealed it with a flourish and slipped it into my pocket before striding out once more towards the parlor.

The butler greeted me with a deferential bow as I entered, immediately setting about preparing a silver salver upon which to arrange the flowers and chocolate for presentation.

"See that these make it to my room within the hour," I instructed, nodding at the offerings. "And do send word when the masseur has finished setting up the oils."

The man bowed again and hastened to comply with my orders, scurrying off to fulfill them posthaste.

Satisfied that everything was in motion, I turned my steps towards the kitchens, knowing that the cooks would have prepared a special Valentine's dinner by now that I could share with my new husband. They were pretty good at doing things for me, even when I didn't explicitly say what they were.

As I made my way through the mansion's winding corridors, I reflected on the whirlwind of emotions and sensations that had overtaken me since our hasty wedding ceremony mere hours ago. To think that I would find myself in such a position—wedded and bound to an omega who challenged me at every turn, yet inspired me like none other ever had before.

It was a dizzying prospect, one that filled me with equal parts trepidation and exhilaration for the future ahead of us.

But for the time being, I had chocolate, flowers, and a card to present to my darling Anan as a token of my affection on this most romantic of nights.

However, there was something else that needed to be done before going back. It couldn't be delayed.

The moment I stepped foot into my study, my phone immediately began buzzing with incoming messages and missed calls. I groaned. Shouldn't have brought my phone with me, I thought immediately. I didn't want to be bothered by cartel shit.

It was Diego, though, my second-in-command. It was probably important, so I couldn't ignore it.

I answered, putting the device to my ear as I slumped down into my leather chair behind the massive oak desk that dominated the room. "What is it?"

Diego's voice on the other end of the line was tight with tension. "Boss, we have another problem with the missing fentanyl shipment."

My jaw clenched at his words, a surge of anger flooding through me. I knew I'd have to deal with another issue regarding the missing shipment, but I didn't think it would be now.

"What have you found out?" I demanded, my hand already curling into a fist atop the desk as I waited for Diego's response.

"We traced the shipment to an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city," he explained. "And we have more reason to believe that one of the other cartels may be involved somehow." Of course they were. This was war between us and them. We were always at each other's throats.

I stood abruptly from my chair, striding to the window as I gazed out at the darkened city skyline. "Assemble a team and meet me there in thirty minutes," I barked into the phone without hesitation. Anan was going to have to wait, I thought with a feeling of disappointment in myself. "It's time we send a clear message that this kind of betrayal will not be tolerated."

Diego acknowledged the order before ending the call, leaving me alone with my thoughts as I stared out at the glittering lights below.

Turning from the window, I strode to another safe and input the code to open it. Inside was my arsenal—a variety of weapons ranging from handguns to submachine guns. I selected an automatic rifle along with several spare magazines before closing it again and securing it under my arm. I was ready.

Checking my watch, I saw that I had just enough time to meet with Diego and take care of this threat before returning to Anan and our Valentine's celebration. The thought of my omega waiting for me in our bedroom made my heart clench. I couldn't believe that my cartel life was getting in the way of my happiness.

Minutes later, I was roaring down the highway towards the designated warehouse, Diego and the assembled strike team following behind in separate vehicles. As we pulled up outside the derelict structure, I could see that it had been abandoned for years, its windows boarded up and graffiti spray-painted across its brick exterior.

Nothing surprising there.

Emerging from our vehicles with weapons at the ready, we advanced as a unit towards the main entrance, breaching the rusted metal doors with explosive charges to gain entry. As we poured inside, I immediately saw the scene of chaos that awaited us—the remnants of the stolen shipment strewn across the concrete floor along with broken crates and packaging material.

And there, in the center of it all, was the man himself—a member of the rival cartel who had orchestrated this whole scheme from the beginning. He was on his knees, hands bound behind him, a gag shoved roughly between his teeth. A clear message from Diego that he was to be interrogated first before anything else. He'd read my mind.

As I approached with my gun trained on him, I saw the hatred and defiance shining in the man's eyes even as fear coiled in the depths. Good. He would not go easily, which made this all the more entertaining for me.

"How much did they pay you for this?" I snarled as I jabbed the barrel of my gun against his forehead hard enough to draw blood. "To betray your own kind and sell us out? You must have been pretty desperate."

After removing his gag so he could answer me, the man spat at my feet, an impotent gesture that made me want to put a bullet through him right then and there. But not yet.

I signaled to my men, who quickly hauled the traitor up off the ground and shoved him against the nearest wall, pinning his arms above his head as I stepped forward.

"Now you listen here," I growled, jabbing two fingers under his chin to force his gaze to meet mine. "You're going to tell me everything you know about this operation and

who your contacts were in my organization. And if I don't like the answers you give me..."

I trailed off, letting the unspoken threat hang heavy in the air between us. The man blanched at the implied violence in my words. Finally, he was showing me the reaction I wanted to see.

"You don't understand," he gasped out. "They made me do it! They threatened my family!"

I snorted, unconvinced by his excuses. He thought I cared about his family? "Poor you," I sneered. "Didn't you realize you were just a pawn to them? They never had any intention of keeping their end of the bargain."

As I interrogated him further, demanding names and locations and every scrap of information he possessed about my enemy, I found myself glancing at my watch more and more often, counting down the minutes until I could return to Anan.

By the time we had wrung all the useful intelligence out of the man and left him bloody and broken in our wake, over an hour had passed since I had left our bedroom. No doubt my omega was starting to worry about my delay, especially given the intimate celebration that awaited us upon my return.

Pushing the prisoner's fate from my mind for now, I hurried out of the warehouse and back to my car, barking orders to my team as I went about securing the site and neutralizing any potential evidence.

"I'll meet you back at HQ in two hours," I instructed Diego briskly as he moved to secure the captured man. "You know what to do."

Then I was behind the wheel of my car, peeling out of the warehouse lot with tires

squealing against the asphalt as I raced back toward the mansion and the promise of Anan waiting for me there.

As I drove, I reflected on how swiftly the night had gone from a passionate reunion to an ugly reminder of the ongoing cartel war. It was a stark juxtaposition that left me feeling restless and on edge even as anticipation built in my gut at the thought of returning to my omega's side.

And when I strode back into our bedroom mere minutes later, a fierce grin splitting my face as I took in the sight of him sprawled across our bed amidst a sea of chocolate wrappers, crushed flower petals, and scattered cards, I knew he felt the same.

"I thought you might have forgotten about me," Anan teased as he beckoned me closer with an outstretched hand. "But then someone came with these delightful surprises for me." He held up a handful of the truffles and roses before popping one into his mouth with a wicked wink.

I couldn't help but laugh at his antics, marveling once more at how easily he could charm me even when I was on edge from dealing with cartel business. It was a refreshing change that I never thought I'd want as badly as I did now.

"I may have underestimated just how much of a sweet tooth you possess," I mused as I settled myself on the edge of the bed beside him, plucking a rose from the bunch and twirling it between my fingers. "But don't let it go to your head or you'll be finding out firsthand exactly what this alpha does with an overindulgent omega."

Anan's eyes widened at the threat, a flash of excitement sparking in their depths before he caught himself and tossed me a playful smile instead.

"Promises, promises," he singsonged back at me before reaching out to loop his arms

around my neck. "Now are you going to ravish me with your mouth or just keep teasing?"

I growled low in my throat, a purely animalistic sound of approval as I surged forward, capturing Anan's lips with mine in a brutal kiss that stole the very air from his lungs. He tasted divine and I couldn't get enough.

Anan

The sharp rap of knuckles against the bedroom door startled us apart, a breathless moan spilling from my lips as I struggled to regain my equilibrium. What was going on? I asked myself before realizing what it might be.

Rafael's gaze flicked towards the entrance, narrowing as he clearly debated whether to ignore the interruption in favor of continuing what we were doing.

But then another, more insistent pounding sounded and he released me with a groan of frustration, striding towards the door with obvious reluctance. He hated it as much as me.

"What is it?" He barked sharply as he threw it open, revealing a tense-faced butler standing anxiously in the hallway beyond. I felt sorry for him. I wouldn't want an angry alpha glaring at me.

"The masseur has arrived, sir," the servant stammered out hurriedly, eyes darting between Rafael and me where I still lay sprawled on the bed. "Everything you requested for the massage is set up in your private spa suite." His gaze lingered just a moment too long on my nude form before hastily averting, cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

I flushed hotly myself, remembering that we had left the door unlocked in our haste to reconnect after Rafael's unexpected departure. And of course I was completely exposed, skin glistening with sweat and desire.



But even as mortification threatened to swamp me, anticipation also surged through my veins at the mention of the massage awaiting us. I had, however, thought it was going to happen in this room, but maybe I had misheard. In any case, it didn't matter.

The special oils, the promise of Rafael's hands on my bare flesh once more—I shuddered just thinking about it.

"Well?" Rafael growled at the butler, clearly growing frustrated with the continued delay. "I'm sure you have more important things to do than lurk outside my bedroom door." There was a definite edge to his voice that made it very clear he expected the servant to scurry away posthaste. I did, too.

And indeed he did, bowing quickly before turning on his heel and hurrying off down the hall. I couldn't help but smirk at Rafael's commanding presence even as my heart raced with anticipation for what was to come. I just couldn't help but wonder what it was going to be like.

"So," I murmured once we were alone again, struggling to sit up amongst the tangled sheets even as I kept my eyes fixed hungrily on him. "This spa suite of yours... What exactly are the amenities there?"

Rafael quirked one brow at me in mocking surprise, moving towards the bed with a predatory roll of his hips that made my mouth go dry.

"Why don't you come find out for yourself, little omega?" He purred silkily, holding out a hand in blatant invitation. "I promise I'll guide you through it all."

As much as I wanted to stay in the relative safety of our bed, I found myself drawn towards Rafael like a moth to a flame. Not to mention, I was the one who brought up the massage with special oils.

I placed my trembling palm against his and allowed him to haul me up into a standing position, bracing myself against his broad chest as he curled an arm around my waist. Gosh, he was just so good at this.

"Lead on then," I breathed, already tilting my chin up in a blatant offering for a kiss that I knew he would not refuse me. "I trust you to make this the most unforgettable Valentine's Day present ever."

Rafael chuckled low and richly at that as he captured my lips with his, but it quickly turned into a groan of desire when our tongues tangled.

"Oh I will," he vowed fiercely against my mouth before nipping sharply at my bottom lip. "I'm going to worship every inch of your body until you're screaming my name to the heavens again."

Then he was steering me towards the door, one large hand splayed across the small of my back as we exited our bedroom together in a tangle of limbs.

With Rafael ushering me into the spa suite, my breath caught in my throat at the opulent sight before me. The room was a dream come true for anyone who loved luxury and sensuality—twin steam showers flanked a massive jacuzzi tub set into the floor, while plush chaise lounges and velvet-upholstered stools provided comfortable seating around the edges.

But it was the central feature that drew my eye most insistently—the massage table draped in rich purple satin with built-in supports for arms, legs, and even a padded donut for the head. It looked like it had been specifically designed for all sorts of intimate positions and I felt my face flush at the mental images conjured up by that thought alone.

"Is this up to your standards?" Rafael murmured as he led me towards the table. "This

is where we'll start—with a full-body massage using a very special selection of oils that will make you feel things you've never experienced before, just as you asked."

I shivered slightly under his touch, anticipation warring with a flicker of nervousness in the pit of my stomach as he guided me onto the plush surface. The oil bottles on the side table looked foreign and exotic, their labels scrawled in looping script that I couldn't quite decipher.

"What kind of oils are these?" I asked as Rafael began pouring a generous amount into his palms, rubbing them together to warm it up before applying them to my skin. "And what exactly will they do to me?"

Rafael grinned at my question, amused by my apparent lack of knowledge even as he worked the fragrant substance into the muscles of my back and shoulders with strong, confident strokes that quickly had me melting against the cushioned surface beneath me.

"Oh, just trust me, and you should already know, anyway, since this was your idea," he purred, leaning down to murmur hotly in my ear as his hands slid lower. "By the time we're done here, you'll be begging for more in a way I'm sure you've never dreamed of before."

I shuddered at the blatant promise in his words, my hips lifting off the table in response to the sensual slide of his slick fingers over my skin. He was right—whatever these oils were doing to me, it felt incredible and I couldn't wait to explore more of their effects.

"What do you feel?" Rafael demanded as he continued kneading and stroking with those masterful hands of his. "Tell me what your body is telling you in this moment."

"I don't know. I'm so sensitive," I gasped out, my voice thready and breathless even

as pleasure began to coil deep within my core. "Every touch feels amplified tenfold and my skin... it's like live wires are running just beneath the surface. It's overwhelming in the best way possible."

"Good," he rumbled, sliding one hand around to the front of my body as he cupped me through my growing erection. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear. The oils are heightening every sensation for you so that each brush and stroke brings you closer to ecstasy without any actual physical stimulation. But we're going to change that now, I think."

Without warning, he grasped my hips and flipped me over onto my stomach in one smooth motion, my face pressed into the plush pillow as he continued to tease the back of my thighs and the rounded globes of my ass.

"Ohhh," I whimpered into the fabric as he kneaded those sensitive muscles with ruthless precision, coaxing them to relax even as he left no inch untouched or unexplored. It was pure bliss and agony all rolled into one exquisite package that had me squirming against his palms. I didn't want this moment to stop or anything.

"There we go," Rafael groaned above me as my movements became more erratic, the thick oil slickening our flesh so deliciously that I could feel every ridge of muscle and tendon shifting beneath my skin with each roll and thrust of his hips. "You were made for this—made to be worshipped and pleased like the divine creature you are."

I never imagined he would say something like that about me, I thought as I arched against him in surprise, a choked moan erupting from deep within me as he thrust two oiled fingers knuckle-deep into my fluttering hole without warning or preparation. Asshole move, but I kind of liked it.

"R-Rafael!" I cried out, fisting my hands in the sheets as my entire body drew taut

like a bowstring poised to snap. "You can't—ahh!" However, deep down, I knew he could.

"Shhh," he crooned even as he began thrusting and twisting those probing digits deep inside me with devastating accuracy. "Let it happen, little omega. Stop fighting the pleasure and just feel. I know you want what I'm doing to you. You can't lie to me."

As if on cue, my muscles went lax around his invading fingers, allowing him to plunge even deeper as he targeted that special spot within that made stars burst behind my eyelids in a kaleidoscope of color.

"Yes!" Rafael growled above me, angling his wrist so that his thumb pressed firmly against the sensitive bundle of nerves at the front of my channel on every inward stroke. "Cum for me, Anan. Give me your release right now like a good little omega."

I was so far gone in sensation and ecstasy that I had no choice but to obey him. With a hoarse shout of his name, I shattered, convulsing around the fingers buried inside me as I erupted like a geyser all over the massage table.

The force of my climax hit me with the intensity of a freight train and I saw white hot for a long moment, my entire being consumed by the sheer pleasure of it as I bucked and thrashed in Rafael's iron grip.

Even as my orgasm began to recede into smaller, twitching aftershocks that left me boneless and trembling, Rafael continued to work me through the tremors with ruthless efficiency. He had no mercy for me. That much was clear.

He never once stopped moving his fingers within me or stroking over that sweet spot that guaranteed my pleasure would only intensify with each passing second.

"Mmmm I can feel you fluttering around my fingers so prettily," he purred as he

slowly withdrew them from my channel with a wet squelching sound that made us both groan. "Like your greedy little hole just doesn't want to let me go."

And truth be told, it didn't, I thought as I whimpered brokenly at the sudden emptiness inside me, trying to clench down and keep him lodged deep where I needed him most even as I shuddered through the last vestiges of my climax.

Rafael chuckled and flipped me back over onto my back in a fluid motion before crawling up the length of my body with a predatory gleam in his eye that made my spent cock throb weakly against my stomach despite everything.

"We're just getting started here, omega mine," he rasped as he settled himself between my splayed thighs with a wicked grin. "And by the time I'm done with you, you'll be ruined even more than you already are. Isn't that what you want?"

Rafael

A few weeks after our wedding and the subsequent massage session with its mind-blowing intensity, I found myself sitting across from my new husband and his aunt Mara at an intimate table in a posh restaurant downtown. The atmosphere was tense, to say the least.

Mara had requested this dinner as a chance for us all to become acquainted with each other now that the marriage was official. However, based on the icy glare she kept shooting me over the rim of her wine glass, I suspected she simply wanted an excuse to grill Anan about his habits and routines in the hopes of catching him out in some misdeed. What she would gain from doing that, I had no idea.

"So tell me, dear nephew," Mara began as though nothing threatening was happening, but I could hear the underlying steel in her voice that signaled this was anything but a casual query. "How are you finding life married to Rafael? I know he has very particular needs and desires..." She trailed off, one sculpted brow arched as she looked at me.

She didn't know anything about me—the bitchy liar, I thought. Meanwhile, without showing it, I merely pretended we were friends.

Beside me, Anan shifted in his seat, the color rising in his cheeks as he ducked his head. I wanted to reach out and squeeze his hand in reassurance but knew that it would only make matters worse.

"He's been very generous with his time and consideration," Anan mumbled after a

pause, clearly struggling for the right words. "I've never known someone so attentive or caring before." The pride and genuine affection in his tone made my chest swell with emotion even as Mara scoffed. She really thought so little of him.

"Yes, well, I'm sure that's all very touching," she said with an exaggerated eye roll. "But a man of Rafael's caliber has very specific... demands, shall we say." Her gaze flicked to me before returning to Anan. "Tell me, nephew, have his nocturnal habits begun to interfere with your own sleep cycles and recovery? It would not surprise me given the... intensity of his desires."

Anan paled visibly at that, squirming even more in his seat as he cast a desperate glance my way. I wished I could help without causing a scene.

I could see the mortification warring with confusion in his eyes, clearly unsure how much to reveal about our private activities to his aunt. There was nothing to be revealed, I thought.

"He hasn't mentioned anything like that to me," Anan hedged before adding, "Not that it's any of your business what goes on between us behind closed doors." The defiance in his voice surprised even him as he stood up to his aunt in a way I had never seen him do before.

Mara snorted at the challenge. "You forget yourself, young man," she snapped, leaning forward to jab a manicured finger at Anan's chest. "I'm still your aunt. His behavior is very much my concern if it impacts your well-being and health. I care about you, after all."

"And that's where you're wrong," I cut in, reaching across the table to catch Mara's wrist in an unbreakable grip as she was about to slap Anan. "Anan is a grown man now—married to me—and his personal life is none of your concern unless he invites it." Her eyes flashed with rage at my interference but I held her gaze, refusing to back



down.

"The boy needs to learn discipline and control," Mara argued hotly even as she struggled to pull free of my grasp. "He has a terrible habit of indulging his whims without any thought for the consequences or propriety. It's time he was taken in hand-"

"I've had quite enough of this conversation," I interrupted, releasing her wrist.

Mara leaned back in her chair, schooling her features into a mask of calm serenity once more as she smoothed a non-existent wrinkle from her pristine dress. She was not used to being spoken to in such a manner, but she knew better than to push further when faced with an alpha like me.

"Very well," she conceded, her smile brittle yet determined. "If you insist on changing the topic, then let us discuss something far more pleasant—a trip down memory lane, perhaps?"

What the hell was she planning? I wondered.

Anan glanced between us, sensing the abrupt shift in tension while not voicing it. He was smart. Better not to make a move unless he was certain.

"My dear nephew," Mara continued, turning her attention fully onto Anan as if I wasn't there anymore. I wondered for how much longer she could keep pretending that. "Do you remember those lovely summers we spent together at our family estate when you were just a child?" She reached out to pat his hand, a gesture that made my hackles rise despite knowing she was putting on a show for her benefit.

"What a charming little boy you were," she reminisced, her eyes taking on a distant glow as if lost in a fond memory. "Always running around barefoot and full of

energy, exploring every inch of the property while I watched over you with loving concern."

I groaned at that.

Anan nodded slowly, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he seemed to relax under her renewed affections. Hmm... what? Was he really falling for her lies and manipulations? I thought he knew better.

"Yes, I remember," he murmured more to himself than to her. "Those were happy times."

It was clear that he was too wrapped up in nostalgia to notice the subtle manipulation happening right before his eyes. I knew he could be nostalgic sometimes, but didn't think it was going to cloud his judgment like it was now.

Mara was painting herself as the doting aunt who had dedicated her life to raising him and nurturing him, leaving out the part where she neglected him until he ended up in my hands. Being with me was when he finally felt happy for the first time in his life.

"But do you also recall how often you would wake up in the middle of the night, crying and disoriented?" Mara asked, her expression turning serious as she fixed Anan with a concerned gaze. "The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with you, so they suspected it might be some sort of psychological trauma. I was so worried."

Anan paused, frowning as he tried to dig through his memories for any hint of what she was talking about. "No, I don't think I ever did that," he said after a few seconds of ponderation, shaking his head. "At least, not that I know of."

Mara sighed so loudly that other people stopped what they were doing just to glance at her, reaching up to press a hand to her forehead as if overcome by sudden

exhaustion. "Oh, how I wish that were true," she lamented. "But unfortunately, it happened frequently enough that I started keeping a journal of all your strange behaviors and habits during your formative years. You were always such a sensitive soul, after all."

She reached into her clutch bag and pulled out a small leather-bound notebook, placing it on the tablecloth between them. Anan stared at it with wide-eyed disbelief, caught off guard by her revelation. I couldn't blame him.

"You kept a record of... of my nightmares?" He stammered, reaching out to trace the embossed letters on the cover. "Why would you do that? And why am I only hearing about this now?"

Mara shrugged, as if it was no big deal. "As your guardian, it was my duty to document any unusual occurrences that could impact your development or mental health," she explained as though there was nothing wrong with her behavior. "And as for why I'm sharing it with you now... Well, I suppose I wanted you to understand the lengths I went to ensure your well-being, even when you may not have been aware of it."

She shot me a pointed glance, daring me to contradict her. As if I would stoop to her level and argue about who cared for Anan more. That was beneath me. Plus, we both knew the answer.

"So, tell me, nephew," Mara pressed, leaning forward eagerly as she opened the journal to some random page filled with neat, precise notes written in her own handwriting. "What do you make of these observations here? Does anything jog your memory or shed new light on your past?"

I watched as Anan scanned the lines, his brow furrowing deeper with each passing moment. Whatever was written inside that book, it troubled him.

And in the meantime, I wished we could communicate using only our minds. I would be telling him everything that was going on, and how he was being manipulated.

"It doesn't say much really," he muttered, closing the journal before pushing it away across the table towards Mara. "Just dates and brief descriptions of dreams I supposedly had. Nothing concrete or specific." His voice wavered, betraying his unease.

"That's because your subconscious mind didn't want to reveal its secrets too easily," Mara replied, tucking the journal back into her bag. "But now that you're older and hopefully wiser, maybe you'll start to see patterns emerging from the chaos. Perhaps you'll begin to understand yourself on a deeper level."

Or maybe you'll realize just how fucked up your childhood truly was thanks to your neglectful aunt, I thought. But I kept my thoughts to myself, allowing Anan to grapple with whatever revelations he was having.

Anan sat back in his chair, his face pale and tense as he absorbed Mara's words. The mention of his supposed night terrors and the existence of the journal had clearly shaken him, leaving him looking almost haunted. I could see the way his stomach churned, making him appear a little green around the gills. It was like he was reliving something deeply unpleasant.

"Anan," I began, reaching out to take his hand under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Are you alright? You look a bit pale."

He looked up at me with those large, grey eyes filled with turmoil, and I saw the flicker of gratitude pass through them at the break he was getting. At least he still trusted me despite his aunt's best efforts to sow doubt.

"I'm fine," he murmured, trying to sound more convinced than he probably felt. "It's

just... unexpected, that's all. I never knew about this journal or my supposed nightmares. Why is she only bringing this up now?"

His aunt answered before I could. "Well, dear, I thought it was important for you to understand your past better," she said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to spring something like this on someone during dinner. "Especially now that you're married to Rafael. These insights might help you both navigate certain challenges that may arise in your future together."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at her ridiculous explanation. She was grasping at straws to try and insert herself back into Anan's life, and I wouldn't stand for it.

Anan

Mara watched me with eagle eyes as I sipped my wine, gauging my reaction to her revelation about the journal and my supposed night terrors. It was unexpected. I didn't know how to react.

I felt like a bug under a magnifying glass, every twitch and micro-expression analyzed for hidden meaning. That was probably not too far from the truth.

"How interesting," she murmured after a long pause, tapping one manicured nail against the side of her glass. "Your husband doesn't seem quite as surprised by this new information as I would have expected given his general demeanor." Her gaze flicked to Rafael's impassive face before returning to mine.

I bristled at the insinuation in her tone, a flicker of anger sparking in my chest despite the nausea that had settled in my stomach at the thought of discussing my mental health with this woman. She made it sound like my very sanity was in question simply because I was married now. As if that had anything to do with the content of my dreams years ago.

"I don't think Rafael's reaction should be analyzed too closely," I replied, hating how defensive I sounded even as a flush crept up my neck. "He and I have an understanding." And he would never doubt me or my perceptions of reality no matter what Mara claimed about the past.

"That remains to be seen," she sniffed, waving a hand as if to brush away the significance of my bond with Rafael. "Time will tell how solid that 'understanding'

truly is when faced with the real world."

I ground my teeth together, swallowing hard against the sudden rush of bile that rose in the back of my throat at her ominous words. History had a way of catching up with people in the most inconvenient of ways sometimes.

"And what does that mean exactly?" Rafael interjected. "From where I stand, Anan's only relevant history is the moment he was placed in your care as a child and the years of neglect that followed."

Mara recoiled at the venom dripping from every word, her jaw clenching in irritation even as she forced a brittle smile onto her face. "You're hardly an objective observer, Rafael," she pointed out with a wave of her hand as if his mere presence was offensive. "It's only natural to see everything through the lens of your newfound attachment." She paused, allowing that jab to sink in before turning back to me with an almost pitying look. "But I assure you, nephew—our past is far more complicated than he could ever understand from his limited perspective alone."

A wave of dizziness crashed over me as my stomach lurched at the tension stretching between them. I clenched my jaw hard against a groan of distress, knowing that Mara's words were calculated to unsettle and confuse me, but still unable to stop the insidious doubts from creeping in.

"It is getting late," Rafael said all of a sudden, his eyes narrowing as he noted my pallor and the sheen of sweat beading at my hairline. "I think it's time for this conversation to conclude, don't you agree?"

Mara opened her mouth to argue even as I nodded, eager for an escape from the stifling atmosphere and mounting pressure on my insides. But before she could utter a sound, my vision started to swim and black spots danced at the edges of my field of sight. With a strangled cry, I lunged up from my chair only to stagger to one side,

barely managing to catch myself on the table before collapsing to the floor in a heap.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I gasped out, bile rising swiftly up my throat as the room began to spin around me like a top. "Please..." The last word was swallowed up by a wrenching retch as I lurched upright and stumbled blindly toward the restrooms, praying I wouldn't be too late.

Behind me, I heard Rafael swear loudly even as Aunt Mara called out my name in concern, but the sound faded into insignificance compared to the roaring in my ears. My entire body had gone hot and cold, icy sweat plastering my shirt to my back as a wave of intense nausea crashed over me like a tsunami.

I slammed through the restroom door without a second glance behind me, barely making it to the stalls before I was violently sick, retching up what little I had managed to eat that day in great heaving spurts. Tears streamed down my face as I clung to the sides of the toilet bowl, sobbing even as my stomach convulsed with each harsh contraction.

During all that, a terrifying thought kept looping through my mind with increasing insistence—could this be the morning sickness I had read about? Was my body truly betraying me at such a critical juncture in my life?

The idea made no logical sense—I was nowhere near ready to raise a child. But as another spasm wracked my frame, wringing painful groans from deep within my heaving chest, it became harder to ignore the insistent voice of intuition screaming that I was pregnant with Rafael's child, or even children.

My head spun as I clung to the toilet, barely registering when the door slammed open and Rafael's enraged bellow cut through the air like a whipcrack. The sound of running footsteps followed before his large form dropped to its knees beside me in one fluid motion, strong arms encircling my trembling frame with protective ferocity.



"Anan?" He rasped my name against my hair as he gathered me close, the urgent concern in his tone belying the gentleness of his hands. "What is happening? Talk to me, baby." He sounded terrified even as he worked to soothe me, one hand coming up to cradle the back of my head as if I were made of porcelain.

I shook my head, unable to form coherent words even as the last violent spasms subsided and I slumped against him, exhausted beyond measure. His muscles shifted and flexed around me as he adjusted his hold, rocking us in the cradle of his arms while crooning low reassurances into my ear.

I didn't know how much time had passed before the worst of the storm eased enough for me to be certain I could speak without risking another round of retching. Rafael seemed to sense my renewed stability at the same moment, loosening his hold just enough to allow us both a modicum of mobility even as he continued to cradle me.

Rafael's arms tightened around my trembling form as I began to regain control of myself, my sobs dwindling into hiccupping whimpers even as he kept me anchored against his broad chest. Without him right here and now, I didn't know what I'd be doing.

"Shhh, it's alright sweetheart," he murmured into my ear, one large hand stroking the nape of my neck in slow, repetitive patterns meant to comfort rather than arouse. It wasn't something he was used to doing, to say the least. "I've got you. Whatever's troubling you, we'll get through it together."

Even as his words filled me with a rush of tenderness and relief that made my throat ache, I couldn't help but flinch at the blatant lie I was forced to perpetuate against him. He deserved so much better than my silence and evasion, especially after all the trust he had placed in me thus far.

But I just couldn't bring myself to reveal what I suspected about my condition when

there was still no solid evidence to back up my suspicions beyond some queasiness and an overly sensitive gag reflex. Not to mention, the mere thought of having a child with him at this point in our marriage filled me with equal parts elation and abject terror.

On top of that, what would my aunt say? Probably not anything nice. She never had anything nice to say to me, and it would only be worse if my suspicion turned out to be true.

Rafael and I had never explicitly discussed starting a family together beyond the vaguest hints about one day wanting that life as part of our happily ever after. I could hardly expect him to leap at the prospect now, especially not with Mara still hovering out there like some vulture waiting for us to collapse into pieces so she could swoop in and pick up whatever remnants remained. Bastard.

Rafael's expression darkened with suspicion as he searched my face, his eyes narrowing as if trying to read the thoughts flitting behind my eyes. "You can't just expect me to believe this was a random case of food poisoning," he growled, the steel undertone belying his true feelings on the matter. I knew he wouldn't be easily fooled. "Something else is going on here and I want the truth." It wasn't quite an order but close enough.

I swallowed hard, hating how my heart raced at the accusation in that gaze even as my palms began to sweat against his shirt where they rested against his chest. "It was just too much rich food," I mumbled, despising myself for the weak excuse even as I clung to the lie like a lifeline.

Rafael made a low, thoughtful sound deep in his throat, clearly not buying it but unwilling to press the issue any further for the moment. "Mmhm," was all he said, the noncommittal noise belying his true sentiments better than any overt argument ever could.

But as he reached up with one hand to gently wipe away the remaining moisture from my cheeks with an almost tender caress, I couldn't help but marvel at his restraint and patience in not demanding a full confession right then and there. He really was different.

Most alphas would have dragged me bodily out of that stall to confront me in front of the entire restaurant if they thought their omega was lying to them.

I could feel Rafael's eyes boring into me as he helped stabilize me and guide me back toward my waiting aunt, his hand splayed over the small of my back in an unmistakable show of possession and support.

Mara herself looked equal parts relieved and suspicious at our reappearance, her gaze flicking between us with laser-like intensity as she took in Rafael's proprietary stance and the lingering pallor of my cheeks. Whatever conclusion she drew from the scene, it was clear that she would not let it rest easily.

Plus, she was smart. She already had a lot of suspicions about what was happening.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better," she began, folding her hands before her on the table as if she were merely making pleasant conversation rather than preparing to pounce like the predator she was. "I do hope whatever ailment struck you so suddenly won't interfere with your appetite too severely this evening. After you ran to the restroom, I was just telling Rafael how delighted I am at the thought of you extending our family."

If not for my queasy stomach and the lingering tremor in my limbs, I would have laughed out loud at her bald-faced hypocrisy. Here she had been openly speculating about the fragility of my mental health only minutes before, implying that my very grasp on reality was tenuous at best—and yet now she was cooing over the prospect of me having children.

Rafael's grip on me tightened almost imperceptibly at her words, his thumb tracing a soothing circle over the nape of my neck, reassuring me as much as he could.

I was happy for his support. Without it, I didn't know what I would be doing. I felt stronger against my aunt because of him.

No doubt he too had caught the subtle undercurrents of malice lurking beneath Mara's honeyed tone, but was wise enough not to openly challenge her in front of me lest she seize on any perceived weakness.

"Indeed," he rumbled. "The thought of fatherhood fills me with a sense of purpose and anticipation unlike anything I've ever known."

Rafael

And so we were sitting down again with his bitch of an aunt, pretending like nothing was wrong even as I could feel my instincts screaming that something was very wrong indeed. I couldn't put my finger on it, but the way Anan had taken ill and bolted from the table—I knew this wasn't a case of mere indigestion. Something more was going on here. However, he didn't want to tell me. Later, I would make him.

But before I could dig into it further, Mara leaned forward with a shark-like smile spreading across her face as she fixed us both with that predatory gleam that never failed to set my teeth on edge.

"I hope you have saved room for dessert," she purred even as her eyes flicked between our joined hands atop the table. "Because I do believe the chef has prepared something rather special in honor of the newlyweds." There was a heavy emphasis on that last word that made me want to smash my fist into her perfectly sculpted face. Not to mention that we got married weeks ago. Hardly still 'newlyweds.'

I didn't like where this was going, but before I could protest, a waiter materialized beside our table and began laying out an assortment of decadent treats—rich chocolate tortes dripping with ganache, flaky croissants layered high with whipped cream, and delicate pastries dusted in powdered sugar. She'd made the order when we were in the restroom.

It all looked divine, I had to admit. But the sight made my stomach churn uneasily as I recalled how violently Anan had rejected his earlier meal. No way would he be able to handle such indulgence now, not when his body was already so clearly rebelling.

As if on cue, Anan shifted slightly beside me, a soft groan escaping him as he pressed a hand to his midsection with a grimace of discomfort.

My hackles rose at the sound and I turned my full attention to him, reaching out to cup his chin in my hand and tilt his face up so I could gauge his expression.

"Baby," I murmured, "We don't have to stay if you're not feeling well. We can go back to the mansion and continue this conversation there."

I was trying hard not to alarm Anan, but internally I was screaming that we needed to get him out of here RIGHT NOW before Mara realized what was actually happening and tried to interfere somehow.

But as I searched his face for any hints of reassurance or denial, my heart nearly stopped as the truth hit me like a sledgehammer.

His pupils were blown wide with more than just simple queasiness—his entire demeanor screamed exhaustion and trepidation as he stared up at me with those guileless grey eyes.

And beneath his skin, I could scent the subtle change in his pheromones that could only mean one thing...

Anan was pregnant, no doubt about it. It was too soon for the changes to become so evident that they couldn't be denied anymore, but they were already there—the retching, the lightheadedness, even the clamminess of his skin.

He must have been carrying my child for weeks already, which begged the question: how long had he known? And why had he said nothing to me about it?

I wanted to roar with triumph and caveman pride at the thought of breeding my

perfect omega, but I restrained myself—this was not the place for such a display. Instead, I simply tightened my grip on his chin and gave him a meaningful look.

"We're going," I rumbled enough that only Anan could hear me. "And you are going to explain why you didn't tell me about this earlier. Now."

I didn't wait for his response before rising from my seat and tugging him up with me, ignoring Mara's sputter of indignation at our sudden departure. She could go fuck herself sideways for all I cared right now.

I had an omega to take care of, one who was apparently already growing my cub, and she wasn't going to interfere in that sacred bond no matter what her objections were. I wouldn't let her.

As we strode toward the exit with Anan tucked beneath my arm, I caught sight of my driver lingering near my car. Soon, the interrogation would start.

We were going home where he would give me the straight facts about his condition and why he thought hiding it from me was a good idea in the first place.

If I had been anyone else, I would have flipped shit and yelled at him until I got my answers. But I loved Anan too much for that. I would get what I needed out of him as calmly as possible so he wouldn't be more upset than he already was.

I could never be too angry at him. I would never forgive myself if I let something like that happen.

I couldn't wait to get him home in my bed where I could worship his pregnant body properly and remind him who he belonged to.

And his aunt had no choice but to accept that. His pregnancy was the real reason

behind her insistence on staying to talk for so long at dinner. She must have figured out something was wrong with Anan when she saw his face earlier. Fucking bitch.

Anan, on the other hand, just looked miserable and guilty as I all but hauled him into my car. He couldn't look me in the eye now that I had realized what he had been hiding from me. And it was more than the fact that he hadn't told me about the pregnancy. This went deeper than that. There was something else going on with him, and I would find out exactly what it was later tonight.

"Drive," I growled at the waiting driver as I shoved Anan into the backseat, ignoring his soft cry of surprise. "And if you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone, I will end your life. I promise you that."

The poor bastard nodded in terror as he scrambled behind the wheel and started the engine. I could smell his fear, which was good for him.

He knew I wasn't joking around right now.

Sliding into the backseat beside Anan, I gathered him into my lap with a firmness he couldn't mistake for anything other than what it was—a silent command to give me the answers I demanded.

There would be no more hiding from me or lying about what his body was going through. We were in this together as husbands. No more secrets.

He shivered against my chest, burying his face in the crook of my neck as if he could hide from me that way. But I wasn't having it. Not now when I had finally put two and two together about why he had been feeling so sick.

This conversation was coming whether he wanted to have it or not.



The drive back to the mansion was tense and quiet, broken only by Anan's occasional whimpers and my own dark brooding as I plotted how to extract a confession from him without breaking his fragile state of mind in the process.

But even as rage burned white hot beneath my skin at the thought of being kept in the dark about such a crucial development in our relationship, I knew I had to approach this with care.

My omega was vulnerable right now in a way I had never seen before, and pushing too hard or coming on too aggressively would only damage the fragile trust between us.

No, I would have my answers... but it would be done on MY terms and at MY leisure when Anan was at his most relaxed and receptive.

Forcing him to talk now when he was clearly upset wouldn't end well for either of us.

As the gates of our estate came into view, I felt some of the coiled tension draining from my body as I gazed down at his bowed head.

First things first though—we needed to get him settled and comfortable before I broached this sensitive subject. And that meant no more upsetting talk or stressful situations until after I had a chance to care for him properly like the omega he was.

After all, he was carrying our child now... and there would be no greater privilege in life than caring for my pregnant husband with every ounce of strength and devotion I possessed.

Again, no more hiding from me though. Anan was in for a long night. He may have wanted to play coy and hide how bad the queasiness had been, but he should know that he can't keep secrets from me for long.

But my plans could wait until after we got him settled in our room. There would be plenty of time to discuss all of this later, once his stress levels had significantly diminished.

I knew I couldn't do anything but love him now and prove that whatever happened in the future, he was the only one who mattered. He was going to be a father... MY husband was going to be a father. And we would face that monumental change together as a unit, no matter what anyone said about it.

His aunt had overstepped her boundaries for the last time, though. I didn't know why he had ever listened to anything she said in the first place when she always brought him down instead of lifting him up like any normal relative would. Well, that was over now. He was mine, and no one else would ever get a say again.

After pulling into the driveway of our mansion, I took a moment to drink in Anan's peaceful expression as he lay draped across my chest, his breathing having slowed to a more relaxed rhythm thanks to the gentle swaying of the vehicle on the road.

I marveled at how my heart could feel so full to bursting with love and yet ache so keenly from the knowledge that something this monumental was happening to us right under my very nose and I had been kept in the dark about it for so long.

It was just difficult to hate him, even though he had lied to me. And well, after learning the truth, I would make sure he never kept anything else from me.

I had claimed Anan's body, mind, and soul... but now it was time for me to prove that the vow I made all those weeks ago before God and witnesses had not been made lightly. I loved this omega more than anything in this world, and that bond would only deepen with every passing day.

Sliding my fingers beneath his chin to tilt his face up again, I gazed down at him with

a fierce intensity that bordered on ferocity, my heart expanding almost painfully at the adoration shining in those brilliant grey eyes.

"I love you," I rasped. "More than I ever thought possible."

Now all we had to do was get him up to bed where I could properly pamper and care for my very precious omega and our equally precious baby. It was time to make love...

In every single way imaginable, until the sun came up and then some more on top of that just because I could.

"Come," I urged as I nudged Anan out of my lap and into a standing position with a gentle push of my hands. "You need a good time and that's exactly what I'm going to give you now."

And then? Then it would be time for answers.

Anan

I followed Rafael upstairs on trembling legs, my heart pounding a rapid staccato rhythm against my ribs as anticipation coiled tight in my stomach. I knew he had figured out what was really going on with me—how could he not when I had been so violently ill right in front of him like that? But I was still surprised by the patience he showed in waiting until we were alone to address it.

He was always like that. He would be patient with me as long as he felt it was necessary. He didn't want to do something he would later regret.

Instead of demanding immediate answers the moment we crossed the threshold of our bedroom, Rafael guided me gently towards the bed with a tenderness that made my breath catch. He sat me down on the edge of the mattress and knelt before me, his hands coming up to frame my face almost reverently.

I blinked a few times, locking eyes with him but quickly finding it difficult to maintain the battle of stares. His gaze was much stronger than mine, and I knew he was right while I was wrong.

"My beautiful husband," he murmured, his thumbs stroking over my cheekbones in a hypnotic caress as he gazed at me with such raw devotion that I felt tears sting the back of my eyes. "You look absolutely exhausted."

I blinked rapidly, trying to stave off the urge to weep at the sincerity in his voice. It was rare for him to show this level of concern and gentleness, especially when he had been so blatantly worried about me earlier.

The contrast made me feel cherished beyond measure. It further made me realize how special I was to him, that he couldn't live without me.

"I'm okay," I assured him even as I leaned into his touch like a sunflower craving sunlight. "Just a bit overwhelmed, I think." It was an understatement, but one that felt safe enough given the intimacy of our position. Later, I would have to confess the truth about my suspicions regarding my pregnancy—there was no way around that now—but for the moment, I simply wanted to bask in the warmth of his adoration.

Rafael hummed as if weighing my words, his eyes never leaving mine even as he continued to cup my face like a delicate treasure. "Mmh," he rumbled low in his throat. "I can imagine how you must be feeling, given the way you ran from the table like that. And now, here you are, looking ready to collapse any second."

His hands slid down to grip my shoulders, squeezing almost imperceptibly as if gauging my stability.

I couldn't help but shudder at the blatant reminder of how vulnerable I had been in front of everyone downstairs—not just physically but emotionally too, with all those ugly memories about my past resurfacing because of Mara's manipulations. It was mortifying to think about.

But Rafael seemed more concerned than disgusted by my weakness, his gaze turning almost fierce as he drew me closer by the lapels of my shirt until our noses were practically touching.

"Never forget that I would do anything in my power to protect you from pain or discomfort," he growled softly, the raw intensity in his eyes making my heart clench. "You are mine to cherish and nurture always."

I swallowed hard around the lump forming rapidly in my throat, hardly daring to

believe that I could ever be worthy of such devotion from a man like him. But as he continued to cradle me so carefully, almost reverently, it became harder to doubt the sincerity in his words.

I knew he was telling me exactly what he felt in that moment.

"I love you," I breathed, the truth of those feelings welling up inside me with such force that I could no longer contain them even if I had wanted to. "More than anything."

And then Rafael was kissing me like a man starved for sustenance, devouring my mouth with a hunger that made me dizzy and weak in the knees as I clung to him.

Our lips moved together in a fevered dance of give and take, tongues twining in slick glides as he explored every inch of my oral cavity with devastating thoroughness. Our saliva mixed, making our kiss feel messy—but in a good way.

I whimpered into him, lost to the raw passion and longing he was igniting inside me with such ruthless precision.

This man would be the ruin of me if I didn't die first from sheer ecstasy.

But even as the kiss deepened into something darker, more carnal in nature, Rafael continued to touch me with an almost worshipful reverence.

His hands skimmed down my sides and over the curves of my ass as if memorizing every contour by rote, kneading and squeezing the firm globes.

"You mean everything to me," he groaned against my lips before trailing them down the line of my jaw to nip sharply at the juncture where it met my throat. "And you will never let me forget it."

I gasped as his teeth sank into my delicate flesh hard enough to mark but not quite break the skin, arching into him even as I grabbed handfuls of his hair and held on for dear life.

"Please," I begged, hardly recognizing the desperate edge in my own voice as he licked over the abraded skin with soothing strokes that made me shudder. "I need you inside me. I can't take much more of this teasing."

I couldn't help but be surprised by my own statement. A few weeks ago, I would never have said something like that. Back then, he was the reason my life felt miserable. But everything changed when he began to show me the depth of his feelings for me.

Rafael chuckled even as his hips surged forward to grind his hardening length against mine with deliberate purpose. The friction sent sparks of pleasure-pain shooting through my core, making me keen and writhe against him like a wild thing.

"Oh? And what makes you think I'm teasing you, little omega?" He purred as his fingers found the waistband of my trousers and flicked them open with quick efficiency. "Perhaps this is exactly where I meant to take us from the moment we stepped foot inside this room."

The rasp of denim against flesh as he pushed my pants down to mid-thigh filled the air with the smell of my arousal, making me clench hard around nothing in a visceral need for completion.

"Because I know something you don't," Rafael continued with infuriating smugness as his fingers dipped into the crease of my ass to ghost over my twitching entrance. "I can scent your secret on you now that you've been sick—this sweet, heady musk telling me that you're ready to become a father."

He punctuated his words with a firm press against my hole that made my eyes roll back and my mouth fall open in a silent scream even as my cock throbbed between our bodies.

"You're..." I choked out, unable to form a coherent thought through the haze of lust that fogged up my brain. "How did you know? I haven't told anyone yet!"

Rafael's eyes flashed with feral triumph at my revelation even as he pressed two long fingers knuckle-deep into my quivering channel in one swift, smooth thrust.

"I had my suspicions from the moment you ran to the bathroom and started retching like your life depended on it," he growled, scissoring his digits deep inside me in a deliberate stretch that stole the breath right out of my lungs. "But I didn't think it would be this soon. You are barely showing any signs yet. Other than the change in your scent, there's very little."

He was right, of course. My body had only begun to change subtly over the past few weeks—my stomach flatter than usual and my nipples more sensitive—but nothing that could be considered definitive proof of pregnancy... until now.

"Please," I whimpered as I rocked down onto his fingers, chasing more of that intense stretch he was so effortlessly inflicting on every upstroke. "I need you to fuck me now! I can't take the teasing anymore!"

Rafael's eyes flared with lust at my crude entreaty, a guttural groan tearing itself free from his chest as he surged upright and captured my mouth in another brutal kiss.

At the same time, his cock sprang free of its confines to slap heavily against my stomach, thick and throbbing with urgent demand as it sought out my weeping hole like a missile locked on target.



And then he was sinking into me, his massive girth parting my flesh with ruthless precision until he was buried balls-deep in one powerful thrust that had us both crying out at the suddenness of the penetration.

I could feel every ridge and vein dragging against my sensitive inner walls as he began to move, stoking that spark of ecstasy higher and higher with each deep plunge of his hips.

"You are MINE," he snarled into my mouth as he gripped my thighs hard enough to bruise and hauled them wider apart. "And I will never let you forget it for the rest of your days, not even if I have to ruin your perfect little ass hole every hour on the hour until you are too sore to walk!"

He punctuated his words with a vicious grind of his pelvis that made me see stars and swear in multiple languages even as my fingers scrabbled against the sweat-slicked skin of his back, leaving angry red welts in their wake. Oh God, how I loved everything he was doing to me, and he was so relentless.

"I love you," I screamed at him even as he drove into me like a man possessed. "God help me, but I love you so much it's killing me!"

And then Rafael was kissing me again, his teeth and tongue clashing against mine in a battle for dominance that I could never hope to win... not when I had no desire to fight him on this, anyway.

"God, Anan," Rafael groaned as he slammed home inside of me. "The way you squeeze around me—it's like your body was made for mine, to take everything I give you."

His statement might not be too far from the truth, I thought. I was pretty sure we had always been destined to be together.

I could only whimper in response, my back arching off the bed as he hit some spot deep inside that made my vision go white around the edges. He wasn't wrong—the connection between us felt so absolute, so right that it almost hurt to breathe sometimes.

"Please," I gasped out, writhing beneath him as he set a punishing rhythm, each thrust shoving me up the mattress with the force of his movements. "I need more—need you to make me forget everything but this feeling, this perfection."

There were a lot of things I wanted to forget in that moment, especially the fact that I lied to him and he had to find out the truth himself before I could fix my mistake.

Rafael let out a feral growl in response to my plea, one large hand fisting in my hair as he jerked my head back at an almost painful angle, exposing the delicate skin of my throat.

"My little slut," he rasped even as he latched onto the juncture between neck and shoulder, biting down hard enough to leave a mark. Him calling me 'slut' didn't feel inappropriate. I actually liked it every time he did it. "Always so desperate for me, always begging for more like it's your sole purpose in life."

And that might not be too far from the truth, and so I keened loudly at the sting of his teeth sinking into my flesh, the sharp pain blending so perfectly with the exquisite pleasure coiling in my gut that I could scarcely tell one from the other anymore.

Breathing grew more difficult by the second.

"Yes!" I cried out, my fingers scrabbling against Rafael's sweat-slicked back as he continued to pound into me with single-minded intent. "I was made for this, made to be your slut, your whore!"

The words tasted like a revelation even as they spilled from my lips, as if I had finally come to some fundamental understanding about the nature of our bond. And perhaps it was true—perhaps everything that had led us to this moment had been building towards this revelation all along.

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Rafael

I was lying curled around my omega as he drifted off to sleep following our intense lovemaking session, marveling at the way his body fit against mine so perfectly like two puzzle pieces clicking into place. There was nothing else I would rather be doing.

We had made love with an abandon and passion I had never experienced before, lost in a world of sensation that transcended the physical. And it happened because I knew he was pregnant. It had been different because of that.

As I listened to the steady thrum of Anan's heartbeat, my mind drifted back over the events of the evening. What a day it had been—full of revelations and new beginnings. Things were going to be different now, knowing he was pregnant.

There was that confrontation with Mara and her blatant attempts to sow discord between us by dragging up painful memories from Anan's past. What a bitch, I thought. She never had anything positive to share with us.

I still fumed at her audacity in trying to use those private moments against him like some weapon to undermine his stability. I was relieved it didn't work because of me. I was there to make sure he got through her attacks.

But then, as if to balance out that ugliness, we had shared such a profound emotional and physical connection in the aftermath. I could still remember everything.

The way he clung to me as if I was his lifeline even as I poured every ounce of love and devotion into claiming his body once again—it was enough to make even a

hardened man like me feel tender inside, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

And then there had been that moment when everything changed—the instant when the scent of his arousal mingled with something new, something primal and instinctual that called to the deepest part of my alpha nature. I knew it would happen to me one day, but when it did, I was still not prepared.

I hadn't recognized it at first, too caught up in the raw need pulsing between us. But deep down, even before he confirmed my suspicions aloud, I had known. After all, we had sex every day. It was bound to happen eventually.

My beautiful omega was pregnant with our child—a precious life we had created together through the very depths of our passion for one another. It was the ultimate expression of our bond, and I couldn't believe that it had happened on Valentine's Day itself—almost as if the universe was smiling down upon us in its benevolence.

I pressed a tender kiss to the back of Anan's neck as he slept, savoring the feeling of his soft skin against my lips.

We would have much to discuss in the coming days and weeks once he fully awakened again—much to plan and prepare for as we welcomed our firstborn into the world.

First, there was the matter of the name. We still needed to choose one. And right now, I already had some ideas.

But for now, I simply wanted to bask in this perfect moment—the two of us entwined together in peace and satiation after a night filled with both intense passion and raw, unguarded emotion.

It was a precious gift, one that I knew would sustain me through all the joys and

challenges of fatherhood ahead.

My love for Anan was greater than I ever thought possible, and it only grew stronger with each passing day we spent together.

It was the most important thing in my life, even more so than the cartel.

To think that I once believed he would be a mere plaything in my life, destined to warm my bed and nothing more... The very idea now filled me with shame and disgust at my own arrogance and stupidity.

He soon became so much more to me than that.

"Anan?" I murmured into his hair, my breath hot against his scalp. He had been asleep for hours now following our explosive sex, completely unconscious from sheer exhaustion after everything that transpired between us. And I couldn't blame him.

I felt a thrill rush through me at the feel of him all limp and pliant in my arms as he continued to snore softly—still half-asleep despite what my hand was doing.

Sifting my hand downwards across the curve of his ass, I couldn't resist palming the rounded globe possessively even as I rubbed soothing circles against the abused skin. He let out an endearing little grunt of discomfort at the contact, causing me to grin in the darkness—he had been quite vocal about my handprints on this particular part of his anatomy earlier.

But he didn't pull away from me—quite the opposite actually as his body pressed back into mine in a deliberate display of affection that made my chest feel impossibly full with emotion all over again. How I loved this male so deeply was still an almost incomprehensible feeling to me at times, especially after all the ugliness of our early association.

He meant everything to me now—was the very air I breathed and the purpose behind each beat of my heart. And the thought of bringing new life into this world together with him was already sparking a fierce sense of longing and anticipation deep in my gut.

It was what I most wanted.

"I want us to start thinking about names for our baby," I said softly once he seemed half-awake at least, my hand now gently stroking along his flank like a contented feline rubbing against his beloved human. "We should probably pick something special that can represent what they will mean to the both of us from the very beginning."

Anan made a sleepy sound of assent as he slowly blinked up at me with bleary eyes, reaching back to twine his fingers with mine in a gesture of solidarity and connection even as he arched languidly into my touch.

"Yeah, that sounds good," he mumbled, yawning as if trying to clear the lingering haze of slumber from his mind. "We definitely want something perfect for them." He paused. "Though, I thought we would do that another time."

I nodded at that, already mentally running through various possibilities even as I nuzzled into his hairline and breathed in the unique scent that was so distinctly him—a mix of honey and warm spices that never failed to make my mouth water. My baby would smell just like him.

"But what if there's more than one little peanut in there?" Anan piped up a moment later, sounding slightly dazed as he stretched beneath the sheets in a manner that left very little to the imagination. I couldn't wait to start exploring every single dip and curve of his body all over again soon. And maybe I wasn't going to have to wait much.

"That may be why your scent has changed so abruptly," I mused aloud, my voice dropping an octave even as I continued stroking and kneading his stomach with almost reverent fascination. The idea of more than one baby—maybe twins or even triplets—was overwhelming but not wholly unappealing to contemplate.

Anan shrugged in response, his lids fluttering shut again as a lazy smile spread across his face like sunshine breaking through storm clouds. "I guess we won't know for sure until the doctors can see inside," he yawned, patting his soft little tummy as he snuggled even closer.

"That's true," I conceded with a low rumble of approval for this adorable display of domestic bliss. "But whatever happens, I will love and cherish each new life you bring into this world just as fervently and unconditionally as I do the father who helped create them."

I meant every word of that oath, I thought, feeling my heart swell with emotion behind my rib cage like it might burst out of its prison.

I really would do anything for our family.

Anan would never have to worry or doubt where he stood with me—for me, he was literally the center of my world from now on. Everything else existed in service to his comfort and wellbeing, no exceptions made.

I just needed a name. And more than one name if this pregnancy ended up with twins or triplets. Anan would give us such a big family that quickly!

"In any case," I continued into the charged silence of our bedroom, "we have months before we'll need to settle on names. First things first: I will make an appointment with your doctor as soon as possible to confirm what's happening."



Anan just grinned up at me, reaching for my face with both hands to cup my cheeks as he gazed deep into my eyes with pure adoration shining back at me from his own.

"You always take care of me so well," he murmured. "I don't know what I did to deserve someone as incredible and devoted as you by my side, but I thank the heavens every day for bringing you into my life."

I leaned into his touch instinctively as I captured one of his wrists to turn his palm up so I could place a reverent kiss in the center of it. The taste of salt on my tongue brought a profound smile to my lips that felt almost religious in its intensity.

"You deserve so much more than this," I countered, laving the spot with the flat of my tongue as I gazed down at him with open awe and appreciation in my eyes. "But since you seem to like what you get so far..."

I took a deep breath, remembering something important. I didn't think it would cross my mind now, but since it did, I couldn't simply ignore it.

"Changing the subject," I murmured after another long moment, my thumb still idly tracing patterns on Anan's palm even as my mind drifted to the weighty matters that had been occupying my thoughts of late. "There have been some troubling developments with the cartel lately—specifically surrounding the missing shipment of fentanyl that was stolen a few weeks ago. You remember, right? It happened on our wedding day."

Anan stiffened almost imperceptibly at the mention, his eyes widening with a flash of concern even as he frowned slightly in consternation. I could practically see the gears turning behind that expressive gaze as he tried to process the implications of what I was saying.

"That's dangerous business, Rafael," he said after a long pause, his voice tense even

as he tightened his grip on my hand as if anchoring himself against the swell of anxiety rising within him. "Fentanyl is one of the most lethal substances out there right now. The people who traffic in it... they're ruthless and will stop at nothing to protect their interests."

I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at his astute observation, even as I wished I could shield him from the harsh realities of my world. He was so quick to grasp the gravity of our situation—it was one of the many reasons why he was such an invaluable partner to me both in and out of the bedroom.

"Yes," I agreed, my free hand coming up to cup his cheek as I gazed down. "Which is exactly why it's so important that we get this shipment back under our control before things spiral even further out of hand. The cartel has enemies who would love nothing more than to see us weakened and vulnerable."

Anan's jaw clenched, his eyes flashing with a fierceness I knew well from our early days together when he had been so determined to fight me at every turn. But now, that fire was directed inward as he wrestled with the knowledge of just how precarious our position truly was.

"I want you to get out of the fentanyl business entirely," he said fiercely after a moment, his voice shaking slightly with the force of his emotion even as he gripped my wrist like a lifeline. "I know it's not that simple, but I can't stand the idea of you putting yourself in harm's way for something so deadly and destructive."

Anan

My heart clenched at the thought of Rafael putting himself in even more danger than usual by pursuing this missing shipment of fentanyl. I knew there would be more than just one, too.

It was one thing to know that he was involved in dangerous activities as the head of a criminal cartel—but to have it rubbed in my face like this, with the very real threat of violence and retribution hanging over us...

I shuddered, my fingers curling around Rafael's hand as if I could anchor him to safety by sheer force of will alone. He was so strong and capable, but even the most indestructible man could only withstand so many blows before succumbing to the weight of it all. And that was something I couldn't let happen.

"I can't lose you," I whispered, my voice cracking with the intensity of my feelings even as tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. "You're everything to me now—my whole world revolves around you and our future together. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you because of this."

My free hand came up to press against his chest, right over the steady thump of his heart beneath my palm as if I could somehow keep him tethered to life by touch alone.

Rafael's expression softened at my outburst, one large hand coming up to cup the back of my head almost protectively even as he turned his face into my touch with a sigh.

"I know this isn't easy for you," he murmured, stroking his fingers through my hair in soothing patterns that never failed to calm me no matter how agitated I became. "But I need you to trust that I have the situation well in hand and that I won't let anything happen to me."

I wanted to believe him—I desperately wanted to put all my faith in his abilities and expertise. But the rational part of my brain knew that even with all of Rafael's strength and cunning, there were still too many variables beyond our control for me to feel entirely at ease.

And he should know that better than anyone. I shouldn't have to argue about this.

"You say that," I continued, my voice rising in pitch as my agitation grew, "but you can't guarantee anything for certain. And if something happens to you because of this..." I trailed off, unable to even contemplate the possibility without feeling physically ill at the mere thought.

Rafael's grip on me tightened, his eyes flashing with a fierce light that made my breath hitch in my throat. "If something happens to me, it will be because I was too weak to protect what is mine," he growled, locking his eyes with mine. "And I can assure you, little omega—I am anything but weak."

I shivered against him, both from the sheer force of his conviction and the way his body molded against mine like we were two halves of the same whole. It was intoxicating and terrifying all at once.

"You're not weak," I conceded, my voice softening even as I lifted my chin. "But you're not invincible either. No one is. And I'm not going to sit back and watch you put yourself in unnecessary danger just because you have some misguided sense of machismo to prove."

There, I said it. I didn't know how he was going to take it, but whatever happened, he

now knew what I thought.

Rafael's eyes narrowed at that, a muscle jumping in his jaw as if he were grinding his teeth together in frustration. It was clear that my words had struck a nerve with him even as I could see the wheels turning behind his gaze as he sought a way to counter my argument.

"You're not just my husband now," he said slowly after a long moment, his tone mild even as a dangerous glint entered his eyes. "You are also the father of my unborn children. And as such, it is your duty to respect and support the decisions I make in order to keep our family safe and secure."

I recoiled slightly at the harshness in his voice, a chill running down my spine at the reminder that even in the throes of passion, Rafael could still wield his authority over me like a weapon when he chose. But I refused to back down, not when so much was at stake.

"I respect you as my alpha and my husband," I shot back, my own temper flaring in response to his high-handed tactics even as I struggled to keep my voice steady and level. "But I do not respect the choice you're making here. And I will not sit by idly while you court danger for the sake of some misguided sense of loyalty to a corrupt institution."

Rafael's expression darkened at that, his eyes narrowing into dangerous slits as he leaned in closer, caging me against the headboard with his body even as he gripped my jaw in one large hand. "Careful, little omega," he purred. "You're skating very close to the line of insubordination here."

???

I stood at the kitchen counter, stirring a pot of my famous macaroni and cheese while humming an old lullaby. The rich aroma of butter, cream, and aged cheeses mingled

with the savory notes of the slow-cooked tomato sauce bubbling on the stove beside me.

It was a recipe I had perfected over the years, one that never failed to soothe my nerves and fill my stomach with comfort when life felt overwhelming. And right now, as my heavily pregnant belly strained against the apron tied around my waist, I needed all the comfort I could get.

The twins were due any day now, their energetic kicking and punching growing more insistent with each passing week.

Rafael had been out of town for the past few days, dealing with yet another missing shipment of fentanyl that threatened to destabilize the cartel's grip on the city.

I tried not to worry too much about his safety, knowing that he was more than capable of handling whatever challenges arose. But the constant stress of his line of work had taken its toll on both of us over the past few months, and I longed for the day when we could put it all behind us and focus solely on our growing family.

I couldn't help but wonder when that would finally happen. I needed it so much.

As I poured the creamy sauce over the tender pasta noodles, folding them together until they were coated in a velvety sheen, my mind drifted back to the heated argument we had shared about Rafael's involvement in the cartel.

I still stood by my conviction that he needed to find a way out of the dangerous business before it consumed us both.

But I also knew that change wouldn't happen overnight, and that I would have to be patient and persistent in my efforts to guide him towards a better path.

For now, all I could do was love and support him. I just hoped it was enough.

Just as I was about to turn off the stove and dish up our meal, a sharp cramp seized my abdomen, doubling me over with a startled cry.

The pot clattered to the floor as I gripped the edge of the counter for support, my breath coming in short gasps as another wave of pain crashed through me.

This was it—the moment we had been anticipating and dreading in equal measure for the past several weeks. I was going into labor, and Rafael wasn't here.

With shaking hands, I fumbled for my phone on the kitchen counter, dialing his number even as I struggled to remain upright. It rang once, twice, three times before he finally picked up.

"Anan? What's wrong?" he barked into the line, his voice tight with concern, even as I could hear the roar of traffic in the background. I wondered where exactly he was. Was he far away? "Are you okay?"

"I'm in labor," I gasped out, fighting to keep my voice steady even as another contraction ripped through me, making my vision go white at the edges. That was the best I could have said, too. "You need to come home now. The babies are coming."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end, followed by a flurry of activity and muffled voices that I could barely make out over the pounding of my own heart in my ears.

"I'm on my way," Rafael growled, his tone brooking no argument even as I heard him barking orders to his men. "I'll be there in ten minutes. You stay put and don't try to move too much until I get there."

The line went dead before I could respond, leaving me clutching the phone to my chest as I fought to catch my breath through the lingering pain. He was coming—I just had to hold on long enough for him to arrive.

But could I? I didn't know. I was going to try to do my best.

Even as I tried to focus on my breathing and not giving in to the urge to panic, another contraction seized me with ruthless intensity, stealing the air from my lungs as my body began to bear down with a force that defied description.

This was no ordinary labor—something was wrong, and I knew it deep in my bones. The twins were coming too fast, too soon for me to handle on my own.

I had to get to the hospital now before it was too late. But how? Rafael had taken the car keys with him when he left, and I was in no condition to drive myself anywhere. We didn't have any other cars present; they had been taken for his mission. I also couldn't see any of the guards who kept the property safe.

Feeling my chest tight, I stumbled towards the front door of the mansion, praying that I would find a way to make it to safety before the worst of my contractions hit, or at least find one of the guards so they could help me. I couldn't do this alone—I needed Rafael now more than ever, or just someone equally capable.

I stumbled through the halls of the mansion, my heart pounding as I sought out any sign of the guards who were normally stationed throughout the property at all times. But the silence was deafening, broken only by the sound of my own ragged breathing and the occasional groan that escaped me as another contraction seized my abdomen.

Where were they? I asked myself, but I knew that no answer was going to come anytime soon.

It was surreal to think that just moments ago, I had been standing in the kitchen, humming happily as I prepared a comforting meal for myself and Rafael to share together.

And now here I was, alone and in labor, with no one around to help or guide me



through this terrifying ordeal. I never thought something like this would ever happen.

As I reached the front foyer, I paused to catch my breath, one hand braced against the wall while the other cradled my swollen belly.

The pain was intensifying rapidly now, each contraction more powerful and prolonged than the last, making it increasingly difficult to think clearly or move with any degree of coordination. And to top it off, there wasn't much I could do to remediate the situation.

I needed to get to a hospital right away—that much was clear. But without a car or any means of transportation, I was trapped here until Rafael returned. And God only knew how long that would take given the nature of his current mission.

He told me he was going to hurry and even though I knew he was trying to get back here as quickly as possible, I didn't know if he was going to make it in that time.

A fresh wave of panic crashed over me at the thought of trying to deliver these twins on my own with no medical assistance whatsoever. I had never even attended a birthing class or learned anything about the process beyond the most basic information. How was I supposed to handle this?

And the answer to that question was that I couldn't handle it on my own. I needed help.

I was still grappling with that terrifying realization when the sound of tires screeching on the gravel outside caught my attention, followed by the slam of a car door and the rapid thump of footsteps approaching the house.

Someone was coming, finally.

"Anan!" Rafael's voice boomed through the foyer a split second before he burst into

view, his expression a mask of pure anguish as he took in my disheveled state. "What happened? Are you alright?"

I opened my mouth to respond but was cut off by another vicious contraction that stole the breath from my lungs and left me gasping against the wall. Rafael was at my side in an instant, one strong arm wrapping around my waist to support me as he guided me towards the door.

"I'm here now," he murmured fiercely even as he hustled me out onto the front porch and down the steps toward the waiting car. "I've got you, baby. Just hold on a little longer."

As we tumbled into the backseat, Rafael already barking orders to the driver to get us to the nearest hospital as quickly as possible, I clung to him like a lifeline even as I struggled to remain coherent through the haze of pain.

It was difficult to do that, to say the least. Almost impossible.

"I'm scared," I whimpered, hating how weak and pathetic I sounded but unable to stop myself. "The contractions are coming so fast now—I don't know if I can make it to the hospital in time."

Rafael's expression hardened with grim determination even as he gathered me closer against his chest, one large hand splaying over the dome of my belly.

"You will make it," he vowed, his voice brooking no argument. "I will not allow anything to happen to you or our babies, do you understand? You are my everything—my heart and soul—and I will move heaven and earth to ensure your safety."

I nodded against his shoulder, too overwhelmed by emotion to form a coherent response. And then another contraction hit, stealing the very breath from my lungs as

my body began to bear down with a force that defied description.

"Fuck," Rafael swore, his eyes widening in alarm as he felt my muscles clenching and fluttering beneath his palm. "We're not going to make it to the hospital in time. The babies are coming right now."

I could only whimper in response, too far gone in the throes of labor to do anything but hang on for dear life as Rafael barked out a string of orders to the driver and the guards who had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

"Pull over!" He commanded with his voice raised. "We're going to have to deliver these babies right here in the car. Get me towels and hot water stat!"

Where were they going to get those? I asked myself. Then I realized it didn't matter. Rafael was going to find them somewhere and bring them here. I knew he could do it; he was capable of anything.

As the vehicle screeched to a halt on the side of the road, I could only pray that Rafael's medical knowledge was as extensive as his confidence would lead me to believe. Because if not... well, I didn't even want to think about what might happen.

But then he was there, cradling my head in his hands and gazing down at me with an intensity that stole the very air from my lungs.

"You are the strongest person I know," he declared with his eyes locked with mine, his thumbs stroking soothingly over my cheekbones. "And you will get through this because you have to—for our babies and for me. I believe in you, Anan."

I wanted to believe him too. I had to.

So as the next contraction crashed over me like a tidal wave, I clung to Rafael's words, letting them anchor me against the relentless tide of pain and fear that

threatened to sweep me away.

I could do this. We could do this.

Rafael's hands were steady and sure as he guided me through the most intense pain I had ever experienced, his eyes never leaving mine even as he murmured words of encouragement and love that seemed to seep into my very soul. He was my rock in this stormy moment, the one constant amidst the chaos.

"Push now," he urged as he positioned himself between my legs, ready to catch our firstborn child as it emerged from my body. "You're doing amazing, baby. Just a little bit longer and we'll have him out."

I gritted my teeth against another wave of agony, bearing down with all my might even as I clung to Rafael's arms for dear life. The pressure was immense, like trying to push a watermelon through a straw, but somehow, our baby slipped free into his waiting hands.

It happened so fast, faster than I thought.

"He looks so precious," he breathed, cradling the squirming infant against his chest with an expression of pure adoration that made my heart swell even as I gasped for breath. "Our first son."

I couldn't help but smile at the sight of them together—my strong alpha and our dear child bound by blood and love already.

But then another contraction seized me, stealing my momentary respite and forcing me to focus once more on the task at hand. The second baby was coming fast now, his tiny body eager to join his brother in this world. With some luck, everything was going to be okay with him too.

"Here he comes," Rafael growled, positioning himself again as I bore down with all my might. "Push, Anan—push him out for us."

And so I did, gritting my teeth against the pain and straining every muscle in my body until finally, with a last desperate cry, our second son slid into his waiting arms.

"He's perfect, just like his brother," Rafael murmured, gazing down at the tiny baby wriggling in his hands even as he quickly cleaned him off before wrapping him tightly in one of the towels he had prepared earlier.

I couldn't help but laugh through my tears at that, leaning back against the seat with a sigh of relief as the worst of the labor seemed to be over.

But then Rafael's expression turned serious, his eyes darkening with determination even as he reached out to take my hand in his own. "Anan," he began, his eyes shining differently, telling me he was about to tell me something he'd been thinking about for a long time. "I promise you this—what happened today will never happen again."

I blinked up at him, confused by the sudden shift in his demeanor. What was he talking about? He had to clarify.

"I mean it," he continued, squeezing my hand tightly as if to emphasize the sincerity of his words. "You should never have been left alone and vulnerable like that—especially not when you were carrying our children."

He paused, taking a deep breath before continuing on with renewed fervor. He regretted leaving me alone so he could deal with the problem of other missing fentanyl shipments.

"So I swear to you now—I will change the way we run things within the cartel," he vowed, his gaze burning into mine. "No more putting my own needs above yours or

risking your safety for the sake of business. From this moment forward, our family comes first—always."

I felt a warmth spread through me at those words, filling me with hope and love even as I struggled to grasp their full implications.

"What does that mean?" I asked softly, searching his face for any hint of uncertainty or doubt. But all I found was pure conviction and resolve.

"It means," he said, choosing each word, "that I will delegate more responsibility to my most trusted lieutenants—men who have proven themselves loyal and capable over the years. They can handle day-to-day operations while I focus on what truly matters."

He paused, his gaze flicking briefly towards our newborn sons before returning to me with a soft smile.

"I want to be present for every moment of their lives," he continued, "from their first steps to their first words—and everything in between. And that means being there for you too, my love—supporting and cherishing you as you deserve."

I felt tears well up in my eyes at the pure emotion in his voice, overwhelmed by the depth of his commitment even as I struggled to process it all.

"Really?" I whispered, hardly daring to believe that this was truly happening. "You won't go back on your word?"

Rafael chuckled, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to my forehead before pulling me close against him once more. "I never break my promises," he murmured into my hair. "And I will make sure you have everything you need and deserve from now on."

As we sat there in the backseat of the car, our sons cradled safely in Rafael's strong

arms while I leaned against his chest, I knew that this was just the beginning of a new chapter for us.