



Welcome to Bone Town

Author: *Thea Masen, Clover Holloway*

Category: Fantasy

Description: They were looking for treasure, not a pack.

Cora is an Omega on a mission. She's dedicated her life to archeology, and when she gets the chance to go on the dig of a lifetime, she can't refuse—even if the other lead archeologist is the grumpy alpha who hates her.

When there's a cave-in on the dig, Cora suddenly finds herself stuck in Lunara's temple with the grumpy professor, the burly ex-military alpha, the sweet nerdy beta scientist, and an unhinged treasure hunter.

In order to make it out alive, they must put aside their differences and work together to solve Lunara's puzzles. But when the dangers of the temple put Cora in heat, they find more than their lives at risk.

Welcome to Bone Town is intended for an 18+ audience.

Total Pages (Source): 61

PROLOGUE

The High Priestess shouldn't have entrusted this to me. I'm just a beta, a servant, nothing compared to the beautiful omegas who have dedicated themselves to Lunara's service. Yet, here I am, holding Lunara's most sacred relic.

My body trembles, hands shaking as I stumble away from the chaos of the ceremony. The High Priestess has already forgotten me. She throws her head back in pleasure as she rides an omega's cock while two others suck on her breasts. Her eyes are glassy and unfocused, like everyone else's.

The top level of the temple is a cacophony of moans and grunts and skin slapping against skin. Pheromones drench the air, feeding the writhing bodies, heightening their insatiable need. Heightening my own.

The relic feels heavier than it should, the weight a steady reminder of its power. So beautiful, shimmering in the dim light. The gems seem to flicker and blink, drawing me in. It would be so easy to... No. I've seen what this relic can do.

I need to get out of here or I'll never complete my duty.

With heavy steps, I rush down the hall.

Elia, a pretty omega who sought refuge at the temple last year, throws herself at me as I pass. Her naked skin is slick and feverish. Her bare breasts press against mine, making a moan crawl up my throat. Goddess above, she smells good. Feels good.

My control snaps as I give in and kiss her. Her lips are swollen and chapped, tasting of sweat and cum.

“More,” she whimpers.

I can feel the power of the relic in my hand humming in agreement. Ancient. Intoxicating. Demanding I listen and give her what she wants. More. Always more. Never satisfied.

A low growl sounds from behind me. I ignore it, lost to the way Elia’s body writhes against mine. My hands glide up her sides, thumbs skimming the edge of her breasts as we kiss.

The sharp pain of teeth in flesh has me jerking away. I look down to see one of the temple jackals. She releases her jaw from my calf, but growls again. A warning.

I push Elia away, scrambling out of reach and running down the hall, swerving around naked bodies, dodging omegas who beg and plead for alphas and knots they won’t find here.

I need to get the relic out of here. I need to save them. It’s already been five days of this insatiable fever, without rest, food, or water. We can’t keep this up much longer .

Running down the stairs, I charge for the inner sanctuary where the relic has lived for the past twelve hundred years, until the High Priestess removed it, donning it for the Ceremony of Moons.

She didn’t know what she was starting. The consequences it would have. Images of the past five days fill my mind, and I have to hold the wall for support as my needy core throbs and aches.

Focus. Must stay focused.

I reset each safety measure as I go, ensuring no one will get through who isn't supposed to, ensuring this relic never gets out again. I just have to pray it's enough. That everyone will recover once the relic is safely in the vault.

Even if it means I'm locking myself in forever.

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“F uuu-udge!” I catch myself just before cursing in front of my antiquities students. My hip smarts from where I smacked it on the desk while pacing in front of the class. It’s hard to focus on teaching when you’re expecting news on the most important opportunity of your life. Any minute now, the dean of Anthropology could call, email, or even walk through that door to tell me whether my application for the dig in Ekdoti was accepted—my first dig. A dig that could change more than my career, if my speculations are right.

Forcing myself to focus, I flip to a different slide on my computer, then scan the room for someone willing to answer my question about the significance of the goddess Lunara to early civilizations. The projector flickers across the faces of comatose students. Not a single hand raised. Eyes glazed over in the dim light of the lecture hall.

I point to a guy in the back row, an alpha jock who’s clearly only in the class to meet a humanities requirement. He probably thought it would be easy.

He gives me a numb blink. “Um... ‘cause... she’s important?”

The entire class laughs until I fix them with a stern glare, leaning back against the desk in the middle of the lecture hall. “Is that a question?”

“Uh, no?”

I glance at the clock on the wall. It feels like the minutes are crawling by at the speed

of a DMV employee. “That’s not an answer either, Matthews.”

A few people snicker quietly, so I point to one of them. “You. What role did the goddess play in society?”

The girl I’ve called on is an omega with perfectly applied makeup and prim posture. Everything I wasn’t at her age. Everything I’m still not. A textbook example of every alpha’s ideal woman.

“Belief in Lunara unified discordant tribes under a common belief system. It led to more centralized living and technological advancement.”

“Good.”

“Didn’t it also lead to wars and things?” A girl in the front row asks without raising her hand.

“An argument could be made for that,” I reply, lifting the hair from my neck to tie it in a knot on top of my head, a subtle attempt to ease an all-too-familiar hot flash. “Religion will always result in conflicting beliefs, especially with other gods and goddesses being worshipped during that time. But Lunara is different. She was a peaceful goddess for all. An omega, whose temple was said to be a refuge for other omegas, especially the abused, unwanted, and grieving.”

“Didn’t her priests have magic or something?” A beta in the middle, wearing a shirt that says Knotty Book Lover , asks.

I grin, always liking when that question comes up. The stories about Lunara’s acolytes using magic fascinated me as a child, and even more as an adult. It’s part of why I began studying her history so extensively.

“That’s what many accounts record.” I fold my hands together in front of me, resisting the urge to dive into the topic. I’m eager to end class on time so I can check my email and see if there’s any updates about the dig. “On Friday, we’ll discuss some of those accounts.”

If I’m here, which hopefully I won’t be.

The bell rings—finally—and the students pack up. “Make sure you read chapter one in *The Historic Mysteries of Lunara*!”

Students push out of the classroom like sand trying to get through an hourglass. They can’t escape fast enough. I feel the same. This is far from the most interesting class I teach, and today I have much more pressing things on my mind.

The new dig in Ekdoti is less than twenty miles from where historians estimate Lunara’s temple once stood. Some kids were out playing in the desert and stumbled upon bones. Because the remains were found on public land, the site was taken over by government officials, who put out a contract to a number of universities including Woodhurst. We won the bid, but before that happened they’d already recovered the bones of five people of mixed gender. No signs of injury so far. No weapons. No grave markers. A mystery.

I pick up my phone. There are two notifications from the dean. First, an email, next a text.

I open the email, holding my breath, tension tight in my shoulders.

The email begins with an overview of the dig site and what’s been found so far. All things I already know. It proceeds to speculate on the potential historical significance of the discovery. Dean Anderson has always been long-winded.

Before I can finish reading, students begin pouring back into the room for the next class. Thankfully, it's one I'm not teaching. I hurry out, gaze still on my phone. This is too big to wait until I get back to my office. I glance up just in time to avoid running into a wall. A student I had last term gives me a funny look, but I ignore him, drop my gaze back to the phone, and keep walking.

"I need on this dig," I whisper to myself. A bad habit I picked up as an only child. Giving up on reading word for word, I scan to the bottom.

A squeal of delight bursts from my lips as I reach my office. More people look at me. Well, shit. I guess I'm cementing my reputation as the spacey professor today.

Swinging open the door, I hurry inside.

My office is dark and barely big enough for my desk, the bookshelf, and two armchairs. Cozy. Just the way I like.

I sink into the chair closest to the door, kicking off my heels and sighing as I reread the most exciting part of the email. I made it on the dig. I, Cora Whitlock, will be one of the lead archaeologists on the Ekdoti dig!

I've never been on a dig before. I've always wanted to go on one, but normally other candidates are chosen instead. Candidates who aren't omegas. Much as I hate it, there's still a lot of prejudice in academia. But Lunara is my specialty. I did my thesis on why the Goddess played such an important role in the sociological development of ancient civilization. I've read every original text we have that mentions her. Anything you want to know about Lunara, I know it. Guess they realized that might be helpful on this particular project.

Excitement thrums through my body as I return my attention back to the email and read the names of the rest of the team going. I don't get far before I pause.

Dr. Roman Slate . Of course, Roman Slate is going. I let out a frustrated sigh and stare up at the ceiling.

It's hard enough being an unbonded omega in this place without professors like Roman Slate refusing to work with omegas. I wonder what he thinks about me being on the team. I chuckle darkly. Bet he loves it.

“Oh,” I say out loud, sitting upright. “He won't go. If I'm going, he'll refuse. Perfect!” His own prejudice will make it so I won't have to work with him. “Unless...the dean decides it's better to send Slate instead of me.”

I fall back against the chair and groan.

I have to make sure that doesn't happen.

“Why the hell is Cora Whitlock on the Ekdoti dig?” I storm into the dean’s office without knocking. I don’t know what it is about the pretty professor of sociology that gets me so worked up, but just being around her feels dangerous. “She’s never been on a dig before.”

“Everyone has to start somewhere.” Anderson shrugs and picks up a paper from his desk, looking at it rather than me. A beta would cower from the energy rolling off me right now, even most alphas would, but not this one.

I glare daggers, silently challenging him to look up. “Let me get this straight. You’re sending two of your professors off in the middle of the semester? Why? Who’s going to cover her classes?”

“Who’s going to cover yours?” He still doesn’t lift his gaze. “How I manage my department is not your concern.”

“It is when it affects me. I can’t work with her. ”

“Why not?”

I growl and throw myself down in the seat opposite his desk without answering. He knows why not. Anderson has been more than a colleague since I started working at Woodhurst University. He’s been a mentor and a friend. He knows my whole sordid history and why I avoid working with omegas if at all possible.

He's always respected my preferences, or at least let me get away with them. Until now.

He finally meets my eyes, crossing his arms on his desk and leveling me with a hard look. "You need to get over your hang ups. This is a big opportunity for the university. The fact we've been invited to take lead on this dig is a miracle unto itself, not to mention the potential funding and notoriety that comes along with it. We're going to be the ones to figure out what happened to those people. Us . We need all our best minds on it." He tilts his head and lifts his eyebrows. "And frankly, I want you to stop being such a stuck up asshole and work with omegas for a change. This will be good for you."

He's got it all wrong. I'm not being stuck up. I'm being cautious. I thought he understood that. I've seen the way sensible alphas can fall apart over an omega. I won't risk it. I have no intention of getting my heart ripped out the way my brother did.

But it's clear Anderson isn't going to listen to reason.

I stand up and stomp to the door, turning back to him with my hand on the doorknob. "Just make sure she takes her scent blockers."

It's a university policy that everyone takes scent blockers. No one needs a professor scent matching with a fucking student. But those same rules don't always apply in the field.

"I'll pass that along." Anderson nods his head.

"If I catch one whiff of her scent?—"

"I understand. She's a very reasonable person. I'm sure she'll see the necessity of

keeping such things under control in a work environment, as she always has during her tenure here.”

“She better.” I slam the door behind me with a sick, foreboding feeling stirring in my gut as I storm down the hall. Fucking biology.

Pulling out my phone, I quickly search flights to Ekdoti International Airport. I might not be happy about who I have to work with, but Anderson isn’t wrong about the importance of this dig. The mystery of it all has me eager to get there and see it for myself. I can be out of here nearly as soon as my last class finishes for the day. A quick trip home to grab my go-bag, and I’ll be on my way.

I’m so preoccupied looking at airfare, I barrel right into someone. My phone slips from my hands just as I hear a feminine squeak and the clatter of metal on tile.

Dr. Cora Whitlock drops to her knees, picking up her phone before I can set my thoughts straight and realize what happened. She’s wearing blue dress slacks and a blouse buttoned all the way to her throat. For a moment, I wonder if it’s hiding a bite mark, but I know she’s unbonded. We all might be required to keep our scents under wraps while at the university, but our designations and bonding status are well documented and known.

Her brown hair is in a neat bun at the top of her head, and for some inexplicable reason I have the urge to pull it out and mess it up. She’s too put together for a dig site. She might fit in here at the university, but she’ll never survive out in the wild.

She looks up at me through long lashes with a scowl that has my blood heating.

“Don’t you watch where you’re going?” she snaps.

“Don’t you?” I reply, coolly bending to pick up my phone, holding my breath just in

case. But I don't catch any scent coming off of her. Good. At least she follows the rules here.

She doesn't look chastised by my curt remark. She's staring too intently at her phone, which thankfully isn't cracked. I'd pay for a new one if it was. Not that I'd be happy about it, but I can admit I'm as much at fault as she is.

"They found two more bodies," she says so quietly it's not clear if she's talking to herself or to me. Until she looks up again, still on her knees, eyes all wide and excited.

Fuck, I need to get out of here. The image of this pretty omega on her knees isn't something I need in my mind.

"Get the fuck off the floor. You're in the way." Against my better judgement, I offer her a hand up.

She frowns like she only just realized she's on the floor in the university hallway. Is she really this dull? She looks back at her phone and doesn't bother to stand. I let my hand drop.

"Aren't you curious?" she asks. "How many died there? What were they doing? What else we'll discover?" Her voice shakes a little at the end in a way that makes me curious, but I can't quite read the emotion behind it. It's probably idealistic hope that we'll make some kind of grand discovery.

I cross my arms and stare at her. I've worked in this field long enough to know most of the time all we'll find is old pots and cutlery. Important things, helpful for learning more about where we come from, but nothing like the movies. No monumental reveals. No booby traps and rolling stones. Just dirt.

A helluva lot of dirt.

I smirk, thinking of the prim little omega covered in dust and mud, salty sweat and torn clothes. Sun burnt and broken, ready to run home with her tail between her legs back to her plush little university position, never to be seen on a dig again.

Maybe it's fine if she comes along. She won't last long.

"See you in Ekdoti, Professor Whitlock." I walk away with my hands in my pockets and a smile on my face despite the image of professor Cora's parted lips and wide eyes lingering in my thoughts.

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You'd think, with as much as I've flown, I'd be more composed right now, but there's something about the airport that brings out the worst in me. So many people and scents—even with most people opting for scent blockers, it's overwhelming. It makes my nerves feel all crackly. I want to curl up in a ball and hide under a chair. "That'd be too weird, Cora. Pull yourself together."

Ice cubes rattle in my iced latte as I dig out my boarding pass to confirm my gate number. I've checked it at least four times, but I want to be absolutely sure I'm in the right place. I can't miss this flight, it's the last one out to Ekdoti today, and I'm not willing to wait until tomorrow.

I'm not going to be the last person to arrive on my first dig. I'm going to be prompt and punctual and on top of things.

"Gate 61, 62, 63... oh! Gate 64, that's me!" An older gentleman gives me a weird look as I shimmy in excitement, reminding me I'm in a public place and should probably tone it down. Giving him a brief nod and one of those awkward, tight lipped smiles, I hurry past him toward an empty chair in the waiting area. Falling into the hard plastic seat, I take a deep breath of relief.

Relief that's short-lived as the gate agent's voice comes over the loudspeaker. "Last call for Flight 2431 to Ekdoti International Airport. Doors are closing in three minutes."

"Shit!" I jump up, nearly spilling the remainder of my iced coffee all over my lap

when I realize that's my flight. How the hell did I end up this late? I swear I left in enough time!

Haphazardly grabbing my carry-on and drink, I scurry to the gate, waving my boarding pass in the air. "I'm here! I'm here! Don't leave without me!"

The gate agent gives me the same look the old man did as she takes my ticket and scans it. My face is bright red by the time she responds, gesturing toward the jetway. "Okay Ms. Whitlock, you're all set."

I squeak out a quick thank you before running down the ramp to the plane. Checking my ticket one more time as I cross the threshold, I head down the aisle, trying not to bump into everyone already boarded and settled in. My gaze flits over the seats, searching for an empty one. I really should start flying on airlines that give assigned seating. It's not a big plane, and it's crowded. There are only two seats per row, so as soon as the broad-shouldered man in front of me takes a seat, I see him .

Dr. Roman Slate. Just my luck. He's staring daggers at me. A look that I'm sure kept anyone from sitting next to him, which means it's the only place still vacated.

He doesn't move from the aisle seat to let me in. Glancing back at my boarding pass, I hold it up helplessly, waving it in front of him. A move that may have made sense if my ticket had anything other than a boarding group on it—a group I missed because I was late. My smile is left unmet as he stares at me wordlessly, jaw tightening by the second.

"Could you just....uh... could I squeeze in here?"

He closes his eyes as if I'm on his last nerve before heaving his large body out of the tiny plane seat, stepping into the aisle just enough for me to smush by. It's tight quarters, so I can't help but brush against him as I slide in, another flush rising to my

cheeks when I feel the hard planes of his chest against my back. Settling in next to the window, I try not to spill my coffee as I shove my bag under the seat in front of me. But when I go to buckle my seat belt, I realize I need both hands. I briefly try to grab one end of the seatbelt in the same hand as my coffee, but the metal slips from my fingers, and I worry if I try again, it might be the coffee instead.

Scrunching my nose, because I don't want to ask him for help, but know I have to, I turn to the gruff alpha beside me who is already stuffed back in his narrow seat. "Um, hey, Dr. Slate?" A shiver rushes up my spine as his cold gaze lands on me. I hold my cup out to him. "Would you mind holding this? I need to buckle my seat belt, and I didn't really think this through, and I'm worried if I try while holding this, I'll spill everywhere and then you'll have to sit next to me for nine hours while I smell like coffee, and I'll be wet, and..."

I trail off when I realize he hasn't moved or said a word. Biting my lip, I wiggle the cup in his line of sight, the ice cubes clattering against the plastic. His expression doesn't change as he slowly reaches over me, grabs the seatbelt, and buckles it across my lap, glaring at me the whole time.

"I'm not a child. I could hav—"

He tightens the belt, silencing me, apart from a harrumph. Before I speak again, my tray table slams down and my coffee is unceremoniously plucked from my hand and set on it. To add insult to injury, the flight attendant chooses that moment to do his checks, stopping at our row to look pointedly at me.

"Tray tables must be put away and chairs in the upright position for takeoff, ma'am." He continues down the aisle as I hastily latch the tray table up and lean back into my seat with a sigh.

This is going to be a long flight.

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“ Ladies and gentlemen, we have begun our descent into Ekdoti. Please turn off all portable electronic devices and stow them until we have arrived at the gate.”

This has been the longest flight I’ve ever experienced, and I’ve flown to every continent in the world and been on trips three times as long as this one. Time seems to crawl by as my body remains tense next to the little omega sitting to my left.

With the announcement, Cora startles awake and hurries to slide her seat back up.

When she first appeared in the aisle of the plane, I thought for sure the dean was fucking with me. Until I remembered that we booked our own flights and this was just the worst sort of kismet. I’m not one to cause a public scene, so I didn’t try to get someone to switch seats with me, but I also had no desire to have casual conversation with the omega in question .

She realized pretty quickly I wasn’t going to engage with her after all my replies were a series of grunts or silence. Once she got the hint, she finally plugged in her earbuds and pulled out a novel. I couldn’t help noting the title. Knot Guilty . A thriller horror novel that seems completely incongruent with the sweet omega. It’s one of my favorite books. I wonder if she’s gotten to the part where the main character realizes she knows her stalker.

My ears pop as the plane descends below 10,000 feet. The aircraft bounces as we hit a bit of turbulence. Cora clutches the armrest and stares straight ahead, a light sweat breaking out on her forehead. The need to protect and comfort her surges inside me

like a wave, and before I know what I'm doing, I've put a hand over hers.

She gives me a confused look, but her shoulders noticeably relax. I remove my hand and she grimaces, tension radiating off her body again.

"Sorry," she rubs her hands together, "I don't like flying."

"I can see that." Against my better judgement, I offer her my hand. "Here. Squeeze. It'll help."

Her fingers wrap around mine, tentatively at first, but when the plane bumps again, she grips me with surprising force. In an unexpected twist, the firm pressure of her hand settles something inside me I didn't even realize was off-kilter.

Neither of us speak, and the moment the plane skids onto the tarmac, we let go of each other. Dangerous. That was too fucking dangerous. I need to get away from this woman.

A round of claps breaks out, and I resist the urge to groan. Of course it's that kind of flight, just the happy little cherry on top of my overstimulated sundae.

As soon as the ding sounds and the seatbelt indicator turns off, I'm up and out of my seat, grabbing my bag from the overhead bin and impatiently waiting for the plane door to open. I need to get away from everyone, but especially Cora. She's not far behind me, but she can't keep up with my long stride as I head out to the taxi stand.

Or at least, that's what I thought. But the little omega has some speed on her, and when I lift my hand to hail a cab, she's right next to me, a little out of breath. Sweat glistens on her brow from the desert heat, and she's flushed from our power walk out here.

“We should share a cab to the dig site, right?” Her timid voice shakes me into focus. As much as I want to say hell no , I need to be nice to Dr. Whitlock. Well, I need to be professional. We’re going to be stuck here for at least a month together, and if Ms. This-is-my-first-dig over here complains, I could face some serious repercussions.

Taking a deep breath, I respond. “Fine.”

The omega looks up at me with her brows raised in surprise, but doesn’t comment. When the cab pulls to a stop at the curb, I grab her bag and mine to throw them in the trunk while she stands there stunned. Walking back around to the side, I gesture to the open cab door. “Well? Are you coming?”

That startles her into action and she scrambles into the back seat. I follow her in and give the cabbie directions. The blood drains from his face when he hears where we’re going, but he nods and pulls away from the airport.

It’s only another hour to the site. The drive goes by in a strangely comfortable silence. Maybe now that I’ve accepted my fate of being stuck working with Cora, my anxiety has decided to take a chill pill.

Gravel crunches under the tires as the cab slows to a stop. Wasting no time getting out, a wall of heat and dust blasts into me immediately upon opening the door. Fuck, I forgot what desert digs were like.

After paying the driver, I grab our bags from the trunk, and he zooms away, leaving the two of us staring at base camp. Before us, against the backdrop of the lowering sun, is a sea of off-white canvas tents, some with open flaps whipping in the desert wind, but most of them buttoned up tight to protect their contents from the sand.

Just beyond the tents, there’s a path that leads midway up a sand dune, lined by bright pink marker flags. At the end of the path is a square, taped off area, covered by

another tent—this one open on all sides.

The bones.

Eagerness fills me when I realize how close I finally am to them. Keeping hold of both my bag and Cora's, I swiftly stride to the tent with a yellow flag flying from the top. That would be the headquarters, so to speak, and the most likely place to find someone to check in with.

Lifting the flap and ducking into the tent, it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the lack of sunlight. Sure enough, there are boxes of files and supplies strewn around the tent, and a large rectangular table in the middle with topographical maps sprawled across it. A lean man is hunched over one of the maps, but he whips his head up when he hears me enter.

He's wearing jeans and combat boots, plus a long-sleeved black shirt, which seems impractical in the desert heat. A logo for the musical group Knotty by Nature is stretched across his chest, and I nearly chuckle. Vintage. He's got dark skin and deep brown eyes, which are magnified by the square-framed glasses sliding down his nose.

He straightens, pushes up his glasses with a friendly smile, and begins to round the table when his gaze darts behind me. Without having to look to confirm, I know Dr. Whitlock has entered from the fresh batch of dust and the sound of coughing. She comes to stand next to me, brushing off her khakis as she does. The other man stops a couple feet from us, and a wide grin spreads across his face.

"You must be Dr. Slate and Dr. Whitlock. My name is Archer Hale. Welcome to Bone Town."

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Dr. Slate makes a choking sound and Dr. Whitlock's eyes widen, though she manages to hold in her mirth and recovers the fastest. "Bone...town?" She asks hesitantly.

One hand rubs the back of my neck as I answer. "Uh, yeah. I know we're technically in the Ekdoti Sands, but a lot of the guys out here have been calling it Bone Town because the only thing around for miles is sand, and...well, bones."

"Real mature." Dr. Slate mutters under his breath. Dr. Whitlock, however, snorts out an unexpected laugh, snagging both my and the other professor's attention. That sound shouldn't be attractive, but I find it endearing coming from Dr. Whitlock.

"Sorry! Sorry." She reins in her amusement. "It's just that of course a bunch of men jumped on the opportunity to give it an inappropriate nickname. Honestly, we should be glad it was bones and not something else, or they would have tried naming it Pound Town."

Dr. Slate pinches the bridge of his nose as if he's frustrated and trying to tune her out, but I think there's a hint of a smile hiding under his large hand. We're toeing the line of professionalism, though, so I need to change the subject. The last thing I want is one of my idols in the field thinking I'm an immature beta with nothing to contribute to this dig.

"I read your last paper on Lunara, Dr. Whitlock. It's an honor to have you on this project." I hold out my hand to Dr. Whitlock first, then Dr. Slate. They seem haggard

and tired after traveling, but the way they're both looking around tells me they're as eager to be here as I am.

"Thank you." She smiles, but there's a slight scrunch to her nose like she's embarrassed by the compliment. I've followed the woman's work for awhile—even seen a talk or two of hers online—so I knew she was attractive. But she's also surprisingly... cute? There's not really another word for it. Her cheeks are pink, she's chewing on her lip, and she keeps stuffing her hands in her pockets, then taking them out, like she doesn't know what to do with them. It's adorable. And familiar. She looks about as nervous as I feel.

"A paper on Lunara? Who published it?" Dr. Slate asks.

All that awkwardness vanishes as she glares at him. "Oh, because no one would possibly publish a paper of mine, is that it?"

"I didn't mean it like that. I just didn't know." He huffs and crosses his arms. If he wasn't such a massive man he would almost look petulant.

"It was the National Academies of Omega Sciences," I offer, trying to be helpful before turning my attention back to Dr. Whitlock. "Your hypothesis revolving around the exact role Lunara played as the omega goddess was truly fascinating."

Dr. Slate scoffs. "Everyone knows the myths that Lunara created omegas."

"Of course, but that's not what my hypothesis was." She doesn't elaborate.

His jaw tightens like he's trying not to ask, but his curiosity is as obvious as a penicillin microbe in a petri dish. It's almost comical.

I'm tempted to explain the thesis to him and put him out of his misery, but Dr.

Whitlock shoots me a look that makes it clear I shouldn't. Seems like she wants to make him work for it and ask for himself, which I can appreciate.

Having grown up around a lot of alphas, I like that she doesn't bend to him. She's got some fire under that nervousness. I think working with her is going to prove to be a lot of fun.

Dr. Slate picks up one of my thermal infrared cameras. I snatch it from his hand, then sheepishly set it on the table. I don't like people touching my equipment, but there was probably a subtler way to do that. My things shouldn't even be in here. This is the headquarters tent, and all the forensics equipment should be in the smaller tent next to it. Whoever the buffoons were who unloaded everything got it all mixed up. It's an organizational nightmare that's had me on edge since I got here last night.

"Uh... why don't I show you both around a little?" I motion back the way they came and let the two of them go out first.

Despite the late hour, crew members are working diligently to get the site set up because during the day it's too hot to do anything laborious. The main tent is set in the middle of camp, but we're headed to the west side where the mess tent and sleeping quarters are. Well, less sleeping quarters and more a field of identical tents made to provide us with the bare minimum to sleep and change.

You'd think with the millions of dollars they're spending on this project they could afford to give us something slightly better than a dorm-room mattress, but it is what it is.

It doesn't take long to get the two anthropologists situated. As of right now the site is still relatively small, and there's not much to say about tents and dirt.

There's plenty to say about bones, but with the sun setting and the flood lights not up

yet, there isn't much we can do tonight.

After leaving Dr. Whitlock and Dr. Slate at the mess tent, I return to headquarters, anxious to get back to my task. It's gonna take me all night to move my things. Maybe longer since whoever unloaded them did so without any rhyme or reason. They put microscopes next to shovels, the Lidar next to the sample collection kits. It's more disorganized than the room I shared with my brothers in elementary school—and there were five of us crammed in there!

I've already spent all day trying to take inventory, and I'm still missing things.

Eager to set it right so I can actually get to work, I dive into my task. The main tent at least has a generator, so I can work here as late as I want. Maybe even listen to my music without disturbing anyone, as long as I keep it down.

As I shuffle through boxes of equipment, trying to set everything straight, a shadow falls to my right.

"If you're here with the radar, set it over by the table," I say, not looking up.

"You use radar for this shit?" The voice is deep, drawing my attention to a man in tactical gear. An alpha, if I had to guess, though everyone here is supposed to mask their scent while on the dig, so I can't tell for sure. He's tall, muscular, with a boy-ish grin that makes me want to know what he's thinking. He even has dimples, which seem in complete opposition to his formidable build. I bet he could carry this stack of boxes in one hand while lifting me with the other, easy.

Not that an alpha would take much interest in lifting me.

He raises an eyebrow.

“Um...” What did he ask?

“Radar?” he prompts with a mischievous smile.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Ground-penetrating radar. It’ll give us a better sense of where to dig and what we might find. It’s pretty cool, actually. There’s this new device that uses electromagnetic pulses to generate an image of underground features and anomalies. It can even...” I stop myself before I can delve any deeper into technobabble, not wanting to bore him until he zones out. My family always gives me this droll, unfocused stare when I try to share the things I love with them, and I hate it. “Sorry.”

“No problem. You’re passionate about this.” He sounds sincere, I think. Right? It’s hard for me to tell sometimes.

“Most people don’t like listening to me talk about nerdy things.” I shuffle a few things around on the table, avoiding his gaze.

“Well, I’m not most people.” He leans against the table, making it creak and drawing my attention back to his face. “I might not understand what you were talking about, but I liked the way your whole face lit up. It’s clear you care about this stuff, and that’s...” His head gives one shake as he exhales a puff of air. He doesn’t finish the thought, but the look he’s giving me has my skin tightening everywhere.

“Are you the archeologist in charge?” He pauses like he’s trying to remember something, then snaps his fingers. “Dr. Slate, right?”

“I’m not an archeologist. Although, I do have a degree in anthropology.” And biology and forensics and chemistry. But I keep my mouth shut on all that. It tends to intimidate people. “I’m the technician. A forensics specialist. Gotta know if these bones are really as old as we think, or if this place is something to be more worried about.”

He stares off through the open flap in the tent, a wrinkle creasing between his brows. “The locals call this place the Sands of Blood. Seems with a name like that there’s cause to be cautious no matter how old the bones are.”

“You’re superstitious?” He doesn’t look the type.

He shrugs.

“The name actually refers to the way the sand changes when it rains heavily. Not often in the desert, but it does happen,” I say. “If the ground is saturated enough, localized iron oxide deposits in the sedimentary rock cause streaks of deep red to appear in the sand where the rivulets of water run. Hence, you know, the whole Sands of Blood thing.” I wave my hands to emphasize the spooky nature of the moniker.

His lips quirk up in a lopsided smile. He doesn’t respond to my explanation, though. Instead, he holds out his hand. “Bear. Head of security. Medic, too. So, if you need anything, just let me know.”

“I’m Archer. Archer Hale.” I shake his hand, warm skin heating mine, holding just a second too long before pulling back. Our eyes catch for a brief moment, his a light sandy brown like the desert behind him. His hair and beard have the slightest hint of red to them, and it makes me feel like he belongs here, amid the desert sands and hot sun. “Bear is a unique name.”

He chuckles. “It’s a nickname, but it’s what I’m used to.”

“And your full name is...” I trail off, leaving the sentence open-ended in hopes he’ll fill in the rest.

“Hmm. Like I said, you can call me Bear. Maybe one day I’ll tell you, if you’re good.” He sends me a wink that has my blood stirring before continuing. “There are

jackals out here at night, so be careful and stay close to the well-lit areas.” He strolls across the tent, pausing at the entrance to turn back. “It was nice to meet you, Arch.”

“You too,” I say, but the words come out soft and clipped. He’s gone before I’m sure if he heard me.

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O f fucking course they have decent security on this dig. The plastic casing of the binoculars groans as I clench them tighter, squinting through the bright light of late afternoon. They look like ants down there in the valley, all scurrying around, setting up camp. Trucks moving shit tons of equipment. Specialists who've probably never touched a real artifact outside of a museum. They're probably shitting themselves with excitement right now. This will be the shining moment of their entire lives. Maybe mine, too, if everything goes to plan.

No, digging around in dirt isn't going to be the highlight of my life. This is going to be the low point that leads to the glory of the mountaintop. The struggle that's going to set me up for good.

I've been searching original texts and pouring over maps for years trying to find the temple of Lunara and the wealth of treasure rumoured to be hidden there. This is the closest I've ever come. Historians all claim it was around here and now they find bodies—human bodies—near a temple where they think hundreds of omegas once lived.

This is it. I can sense it.

The temple is somewhere under all this sand, and if I can get close enough, I can find it.

I'm good at this shit. My mom used to say I had a nose like a bloodhound. It's how we all knew I was gonna be an alpha long before all the hormones hit. It was a given.

But it's not really a sense of smell that helps me locate things. It's more than that. I get this itch in my fingers, this feeling like something good is close by, and if I follow that feeling, if I get close enough, all I have to do is grab it.

But getting close will be a challenge this time. It's not a small dig, and now they've brought on a security detail. I zoom in with the binoculars and note the massive man leaving the biggest tent. I'm pretty sure he's the head of security. He's been giving orders to other brawny looking guys and going tent-to-tent all morning. Probably introducing himself. He seems the type to do that. Always smiling, but with a sharp look in his eyes that makes it clear he's alert and ready for anything.

By the way he carries himself and the gear he's wearing, I'd guess he's ex-military. And an alpha. The other three circling the perimeter probably are, too.

Even if there wasn't security, twice as many people have arrived on the dig site since yesterday. It'll likely double again by tomorrow.

I groan and tuck my binoculars into my bag, rolling from my belly to my back in the sandy dirt. The sun is setting, painting the sky a vivid gold, like the treasures buried in that temple.

My fingers twitch anxiously. I've snuck into dig sites before, but they were always small, with only a few people. All I had to do was wait until they were asleep, sneak in, let those senses of mine do the work, dig up some ancient vase or some shit, and get out. Most of the time, I try to get ahead of the bureaucrats altogether and find things on my own. I walked the halls of Misophet's tomb long before anyone else "discovered it." Took all the good stuff, too.

But a score like Lunara's temple... that would be something else.

This kind of job isn't done overnight. What I need to figure out is if the temple is

right here where they've set up, or close by, and for that, I'm gonna need information. The kind of information all those fancy machines they've been hauling in all day can give me.

I'll just wait for nightfall. Then, I'll strike.

C ollapsing onto the cot in my tent causes a small dust cloud to puff up, as if no one has used it in decades even though it was likely set up today. At least no scents cling to it, so I might get a decent night's sleep. Well, an okay night's sleep. I've had a migraine since we landed, and this thing has seen better days. It isn't exactly the soft mattress of my nest at home.

I'm not one of those omegas that needs plush things at all times to survive, but I'm still an omega. Groaning, my muscles protest as I lean forward to pull out the one fuzzy throw blanket I allowed myself to bring on this trip. It's been a long day of travel, people, sounds, and scents, so I bring the blanket up to my face and bury my nose for a deep inhale. It smells like home, and something in my chest loosens.

I should be exhausted, and my body sure is, but my mind is just too excited to be here and get started. There isn't anything to do until tomorrow, though. Glancing around, I take in the tent's interior.

Thick, beige canvas walls surround me, rippling in the harsh wind but managing to stay intact. Some light comes through, but not much, thank goddess. This tent is smaller than some of the other sleeping barracks I passed on the way here. Because I'm a woman and an omega, they likely figured this tiny tent at the far end of base camp was fine. Ugh.

The cot is low to the ground, low enough that I can plant my feet firmly on the floor while sitting on it, which is not usually the case given how short I am. The bedding is the same creamy beige theme the walls are—well, really what almost everything is. I

guess with the desert heat they have to use light colors everywhere.

I can't help but wince when I notice the single pillow on the end of the bed. It looks so sad and lonely, and a little flat. Next to the cot is a small table that looks as if it was made from a wooden crate, a simple lantern set in the middle. The main tents have generators, but I guess that luxury doesn't extend to the sleeping areas.

That's...it. Bare bones. Essentials only. My choice to bring my blanket was a good one.

The sun has set, so I flip on the lantern and trudge over to my bag to change for bed. Finding the sage colored shorts and tank set, I quickly strip off my traveling clothes and slide the soft, bamboo fabric over my skin. As much as I want to see the bones right away, there are protocols in place. On the plus side, that means Roman Slate can't see them before me. He would totally pull something like that .

It's a shame he's such a dick, because he sure is nice to look at. You'd have to be blind not to notice his broad shoulders and thick thighs. Even through the sweaters he wears at work, it's obvious he's fit. Add a jaw that could cut glass, the touch of grey around his temples, and the hint of tattoos peeking out from the collar of his shirt, and you have a combination guaranteed to set anyone on fire.

But then he opens his mouth and ruins the illusion. Ugh.

There's a clatter from somewhere nearby, and I wonder if it's him. His tent is the closest to mine. The government officials running the dig probably think we're friends, considering that we work at the same university. They have no way of knowing that couldn't be further from the truth.

Another noise has me peeking my head out front. A curse comes from Roman's tent, followed by his vast shape in the entry, silhouetted by the light from within.

“What the hell are you doing?” he growls.

“Me? You’re the one making all the noise.”

Another crash has us both glancing toward the headquarters tent where we met Archer earlier.

“Think we should check that out?”

He sighs, already heading toward the large tent in the center of the site. “Go to bed, Miss Whitlock.”

Fat chance of that. “It’s Dr. Whitlock.”

And I’m not going to go back to my tent and stare at the ceiling while Roman Slate goes off to investigate. What if Archer needs help? Besides, sometimes all it takes to get ahead is being in the right place at the right time, staying a little later than everyone else, and responding to the unexpected.

It doesn’t matter that my body is revolting after the long day of travel. All that matters is not letting Roman Slate discover something without me, leaving me behind in the dust.

I hurry after him, slipping on the loose sand in my haste and barely managing not to fall.

“Go back to your tent,” he growls without looking back. Maybe I should be glad there’s no bark to the command, but I’m tired of him pushing me away all day. I’m as much a part of this team as he is, and he better get used to that.

“I don’t take well to commands.”

He swings around to glare at me. “What do you take well to?”

I put my hands on my hips and square off with him. “Being treated with respect for one. I’m a good researcher and an expert in my field. I deserve to be here just as much as you do.”

He curses under his breath and rubs a hand over the top of his head, messing up his hair in a way that makes me want to smooth the strands back down.

“You’re right,” he says.

Too shocked to speak, I stand there gaping at him.

“It’s not about you, okay? I just...” He doesn’t meet my gaze, instead looking out into the pitch black desert. “I don’t trust omegas.”

I roll my eyes. Of course, he thinks like every other man. “I have no interest in seducing you, Dr. Slate.” The arrogance !

His gaze drops to the tank top I’m wearing, eyebrows lifting as if to say, really? I cross my arms over my chest in defiance. “It’s hot!”

“Yeah, it is,” he growls darkly.

I glance down and realize the position of my arms is pushing up my breasts, giving an even better view of my cleavage. I uncross them and rest my hands on my hips. “Get your head out of the gutter and act like a professional, professor.”

“Take your fucking scent blockers,” he snarls.

“I did!”

“And your heat suppressants. We don’t need you causing a riot while we’re here.”

“That won’t be a problem,” I mutter, half to myself. He has no idea how unnecessary that command really is.

His eyes narrow, nostrils flaring before he marches off. I lift my arm and smell myself, feeling suddenly uncertain. It’s a hundred degrees out here. Could I have sweat through the blockers? No, there’s not a hint of my natural scent. Not even a little. He’s just being a jackass.

One who’s already at the HQ tent.

I run a few meters, but my stomach cramps, causing me to curl over in pain. Fuck. I wish my body would cooperate right now. Deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out.

Most omegas only get cramps like this when they’re going into heat. But not me. I have to be the one lucky omega to experience pre-heat symptoms—aches, chills, hot flashes, cramps, headaches—at random times with no relief. They don’t go away with an orgasm or knots like with most omegas, and they never turn into a full heat. They just flare up randomly, make me feel awkward and itchy and miserable for a few hours, then vanish. Meds don’t help. Alphas don’t help. Nothing helps.

Well, there’s one thing that might help... but I have to find it first.

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She's stunning. All fired up and flushed. Spittin' mad. Yelling at some alpha I'd be happy to punish for her. Wonder if he'd enjoy that. Would she want to watch?

She's too far away to scent her, but I know she's an omega. I've got a sense for these things. Never been wrong before, either. And she's the hottest omega I've ever seen. By far. That itchy feeling starts in my fingers, and I know this woman is someone I have to have.

I duck behind the closest tent and take a few calming breaths to get my dick under control. My instincts are riding me hard. The alpha in me wants me to forget about the score, forget everything but her. I want to charge forward and bite her right here and now.

Bet that wouldn't go over very well.

I peek around the corner, needing another view of her, even though I know it's not a good idea .

The alpha is gone, and my girl is curled over, holding her stomach. Fuck, is she okay?

Just when I'm about to throw all sense to the fucking wind, she straightens and stomps toward the big tent. Works out well, since that's where I'm headed, too. I like the idea of being closer to my little spitfire.

Not that she can know I'm here.

Maybe I'll be able to catch a whiff of her. Bet she smells delicious. I lick my lips. Yeah, definitely need to know what my spitfire smells like.

Slipping through the shadows, I follow quietly behind her. There've been noises coming from the big tent for the last few minutes—not good for my purposes—but I can be patient.

Now that I'm inside the perimeter, I just need to wait for an opportunity, take what I need, then slip out before sunrise. Piece of cake.

Hmm, and with that pretty omega nearby, maybe I can have my cake and eat it, too. I run my tongue along the sharp tips of my teeth. This is shapin' up to be a pretty good night.

Rushing into the tent with a hand on my holster, I breathe a sigh of relief that the noise wasn't something more nefarious than the scientist standing over a pile of medical supplies. You can never be too careful, though, so I quickly scan the room for any possible threats. When my sight lands back on Archer, he's staring at me, his eyes bright with embarrassment. He's taken off the black shirt he was wearing earlier, leaving him in just a white undershirt that's smudged with dirt and looks a little sticky with sweat, like he's been working hard at something. Nothing like the put-together man he was a few hours ago.

He doesn't hold eye contact long, quickly turning away and crouching down to start picking up the mess.

Before I can offer to help, heavy footsteps sound behind me, and I whirl around, ready to take the threat head-on. There's a big man coming into the tent, and a scantily dressed woman not far behind him. I can't be certain on their designations, but I'd guess alpha and omega by the looks of them. Holding up my hand, I gesture for them to stop. "Whoa! Who are you?"

The man looks at me in annoyance, then over my shoulder to Archer. "Can you call off your guard dog? We heard a crash and wanted to be sure everything was okay."

The pretty omega steps into the tent as well, and I get a better look at her. Jesus fucking Christ, I can see her hard nipples through her thin tank top. Why is she even dressed like that?

Disgust tinged with jealousy hits me when I realize this alphahole already has a piece of ass in his bed on night fucking one. I mean, I'm no saint, but come on. How did he even get her on the site anyway?

Determining they aren't an immediate threat, I glance back to Archer for confirmation that he knows them. He's chewing on his thumbnail, clearly embarrassed to be the center of attention and the cause of this spectacle. My cock twitches when his tongue peeks out from between his lips.

He nods and rises to his full height, speaking as he walks forward. "Bear, it's ok. This is Dr. Roman Slate and Dr. Cora Whitlock, lead archeologists for this dig."

Doctor? Well damn, I should know better than to judge a woman, especially an omega, on her looks. My sister would smack me upside the head if she knew where my thoughts went first, and rightly so.

"Cora, Roman, this is Bear, he's head of the security team," Archer continues before focusing on them. "Thanks for coming to check on me. Nothing's wrong. Well, minus the fact that I can be a klutz sometimes. I just underestimated the width of the box I was carrying and upended the medical supply totes."

My shoulders relax, and my hand finally leaves my hip. My cock is still semi-hard though. Kinda impossible not to be with the adrenaline, the need to protect Archer, and the vast amount of skin the omega is showing. I really should have gotten laid before taking this assignment. I've been working back-to-back jobs in remote places, and the lack of physical contact has my alpha side edgy—and apparently judgey, too.

"You guys can, uh, you can go back to bed. It's gonna be an early morning," Archer waves us off and goes back to picking up the medical supplies. "Sorry I disturbed you."

“Do you need help?” The omega’s offer is sweet, but there are too many people in this tent already, and I can tell Archer would like to avoid any more interaction.

“I’ve got this. You two go, we’ll see you in the morning.” I don’t give them a chance to argue, immediately turning away and dropping into a crouch before Archer, who looks up at me gratefully. The tent flap rustles as Dr. Slate and Dr. Whitlock leave, and then everything is quiet.

“Thanks, uh, thanks, Bear. You don’t need to stay either, though. I made this mess, I can clean it up.”

I chuckle, but don’t leave my position. “I’m a medic, remember? I should know what we have on hand and where it all goes anyway. Plus, if I help you, I can make sure you don’t put it away wrong.” I throw him a wink to let him know I’m teasing.

He smiles and starts chewing on the pad of his thumb. Seeing the single digit between his lips has me picturing my cock there instead.

Fuck! I was just judging Roman—wrongly—for indulging in sex while on a job, and now here I am fantasizing about the same damn thing. I don’t fuck around while I’m working. I’ve got a reputation for professionalism, and I’m not going to ruin that by making a pass at some beta I barely know—no matter how hot he is.

Willing my dick back under control, we work in tandem, making short work of reorganizing the supplies. When I stand, I subtly adjust myself before gesturing to the tent door.

“Ahem. I—” My voice is strained so I grunt and try again. “I’m gonna go do a last perimeter check before heading to bed. You all good here?” As soon as the beta nods, I sweep out into the night to put some distance between us.

This is going to be a long assignment.

When the fuck is this beta gonna sleep? He's been at this for hours. Moving boxes from one tent to the other. Bobbing his head along to whatever is playing through his headphones. He's gotta stop sometime, right?

I'm hunched behind a wood crate, on the edge of the main portion of the site, with a clear line of sight to the big tent as well as the smaller one the beta keeps taking things to. The first fucking thing he took to the smaller tent was the radar I need. I almost got caught sneaking in once already, but had to bail when he came back almost immediately. That's when I figured out he's moving things. He's clearly not an alpha, but the guy has impressive stamina for a beta. And a pretty nice ass, too.

He shuffles another box into the smaller tent, but this time he doesn't come out. I wait. My nose itches. Fuck, I want to get out of here. The sun will start coming up soon, and then this place will be crawling with people again.

I sneak around to the back of the tent and listen. Nothing. Is he sleeping in there? This is a work tent. He's got all the equipment—including the fucking radar—in there. There's no room for a cot.

As carefully as possible, I slip around the front and peek inside. He's hunched over, unwrapping a microscope from one of the many boxes scattered around him. Is he planning to unpack tonight, too?

Yeah, no. I'm out. I'll have to try again tomorrow night.

Slinking back into the shadows, I creep to the edges of camp, back the way I came. But there's a tug in my gut. That sixth sense I have, telling me there's something good nearby.

Hmm, yeah there is.

Her tent is one of the last before the perimeter, a little farther away from the others. Probably a precaution because she's an omega. It's clear this is a scent-free dig. So whoever is paranoid about basic biology probably put the omega there so no one would catch a whiff between her blocker doses.

The need to catch her scent drives me straight to her tent. It's dark. Closed up. Silent. There are no footsteps from the patrol, and I can't see the beams of light from their flashlights. Now's as good a time as any.

My hand shakes as I pull back the tent flap. There's a sense in my gut that I'm about to do something irreversible. I step inside.

I shouldn't be here .

The thought shoots a thrill of adrenaline into my blood.

Starting with the creamy skin of her thighs, I take my time soaking in every detail. She's curled on her side on the narrow cot. Those skimpy sleep shorts have ridden up, giving me a glimpse of the curve of her ass. Fuck, what a biteable ass. Maybe that's where I'll put my bond mark. Then I can admire it when I'm fucking her from behind. There's no question in my mind that I'm gonna bond this woman eventually. Even without scenting her, I just know .

A sliver of soft belly peeks out from the hem of her tank top, but the creamy skin is overshadowed by her tempting tits. Damn, maybe my bite should sit right on top of

one of them so I can paint it with my cum after she sucks me off. Decisions, decisions.

There's no scent lingering in the tent. I pick up a shirt discarded over the back of the lone chair and bring it to my nose. Nope.

Like a dart to a bullseye, I step closer, bend down, and sniff. Scent blockers only last about twenty-four hours, less in the heat, and I've got a good nose, better than most.

She smells like... something. It's too subtle. I can't make it out. Moving closer, I hover my nose above her neck where her scent gland lies.

The world tilts on its axis, and I'm suddenly drunk. Elderflower and rose hips with a touch of something citrus. Light and fresh, slightly botanical. Delicious. I want to drink her down and never stop. I've been thirsty my whole life and didn't even realize it. "Fuuuuck. "

She stirs.

I don't want to leave. This is my mate. My scent match. I suspected when I first saw her, and now it's more than confirmed. She's mine.

I could stay. She'll know the second she scents me, and she'll want me, too. Right?

That niggles of doubt drives me to take a step back.

It's not time yet. I've got work to do before I'm ready for her. Right now, I need to get out of here. But every step away feels like torture.

I'll come back soon. I have to.

“It’s a mass grave,” Dr. Slate says. “Or a battle site.”

We’ve been having this discussion for a week. At first, I was willing to consider his hypothesis, but the more we uncover, the more certain I am that it’s wrong.

Now, standing at the edge of the dig, surveying the bones, I take in the little flags marking each discovery. There’s some pottery and other artifacts, but mostly it’s just bones. The bones of sixteen people so far.

“It’s not a grave,” I argue, more sure than ever. “They aren’t laid out like a graveyard, and they aren’t thrown together like someone dumped them here. They’re clustered in groupings and in positions...” My cheeks heat.

Dr. Slate narrows his gaze on me. “What about their positions?”

“They’re... extremely... intimate . These people died during...” Goddess, is he really going to make me say it? I’m no virgin, but talking about sex with colleagues has my ears burning with embarrassment.

“Are you implying they died during sex, Dr. Whitlock?” His brow scrunches down as his gaze returns to the site.

After a fortifying breath, I reply. “Yes.”

I can almost see the wheels turning in his mind. Of course, an alpha would assume

violence first and struggle to rethink his hypothesis. But I'm not an alpha, and I know what this is. It's not a mass grave, it's a mass orgy.

How it killed them is just as much a mystery to me as to Roman, but what they were doing when they died is clear.

And it's confirming all of my suspicions and buoying my hopes.

There are myths and stories about the goddess Lunara's festivals that would fit very well with the scene in front of us. The few artifacts we've recovered that aren't bones have all been dishes painted with the omega symbol. I'm growing more and more certain that her temple is here. I just need to find it.

Hopefully, alone first.

I've never been religious or superstitious even though the stories of Lunara have always held a pull for me. But what I'm most concerned with isn't the goddess herself, but her most legendary relic. No one knows exactly what it was, but it's said to have mystical abilities that could throw an omega into heat. Any omega.

Magic? Probably not. But could the relic have scientific properties that might do those things? That I might believe .

Or at least believe enough to want to try it before the Ekdoti government gets their hands on it.

Archer strolls over, joining us on the slope. He's holding a bagel and a coffee from the mess tent. I'm surprised Bear's not with him. The two of them have shared nearly every meal together lately and seem to have really hit it off.

"Did you tell Dr. Slate your theory?" Archer asks.

“He doesn’t believe me.”

“I didn’t say that. It’s actually a... good hypothesis,” Roman says, surprising me. “We need to find more before I’ll fully subscribe to it, but it’s... good.” He repeats the word like it pains him.

I can’t help the little thrum of satisfaction that fills my chest.

Bear joins us, immediately reaching for Archer’s coffee like sharing is the most natural thing in the world. By Archer’s surprised expression, it’s clear sharing a coffee is a new development in their quickly growing friendship. But it doesn’t surprise me all that much. Bear seems like the kind of guy who’s overly affectionate and likes sharing. He picked some grapes off my plate when we were chatting yesterday. Though, admittedly, sharing someone’s drink is a bit more personal.

The second Bear takes a sip, he makes a disgusted face and spits in the sand. “What the hell is that?”

Archer kicks the wet sand with his toe. “Cold milk and a blended raw egg.”

“Shit.” Bear makes a face, dragging his tongue along his top teeth. “If I get sick ‘cause of that egg, I’m takin’ it out on you. ”

“There’s only a 0.005% chance of getting salmonella from a raw egg. You’re more likely to get hit by lightning,” Archer says.

“It could still happen. And I’d still punish you if it did.”

“How exactly would you punish me?” Archer says, a shy, but playful lilt to his voice.

The thought of what Bear could do to punish Archer has a hot flash much stronger

than the desert heat warming my whole body. I fan my face. A perfectly normal gesture in this weather.

“Any luck on the radar?” Roman asks, cutting through the sexual tension.

Bear shakes his head. The ground-penetrating radar machine disappeared two days after we arrived, before we could get any images.

“There is something I want to talk to you all about, though.” Bear glances around like maybe he doesn’t want to be overheard, then jerks his head in the direction of the forensics tent. “Let’s go in there.”

Curious what he could have to say, I don’t hesitate before trailing behind him. Neither does Archer, who walks just a few steps in front of me. He must not realize I’m so close, because when I duck through the flap on the tent, I run into him, stumbling back a step before regaining my balance. The shy scientist is hiding some serious muscle under his clothing—he didn’t even budge.

I step around him to see what made him stop in his tracks. Bear is standing in the middle of the tent, holding a knife.

“What the hell?” Roman says, pushing forward and placing himself between me and the alpha who’s supposed to be here to protect us.

“Oh, sorry. No, I found this. Last night, while doing patrol, I spotted this knife near Dr. Whitlock’s tent.”

A chill slithers down my spine. “It’s not mine.”

“I figured,” Bear says. “You don’t seem like the type to break rules.”

There are no weapons allowed on the dig site, apart from the ones the security detail carries, but I would never own a knife like that even if there wasn't a no-weapons rule. It's not a little pocket knife or steak knife or the kind of thing you'd use for camping—not that I've ever been. This is a knife that could do some real damage. The sun glints off the sharp metal like it agrees.

“I already spoke with all my guys, and it's not any of theirs.” Bear flips the knife around with ease and tucks it into the belt at his waist. “Is it yours?” His piercing gaze lands on Roman.

“Of course not!” Roman scowls.

Bear takes in the archeologist for a long beat before he seems satisfied and turns a softer, questioning look on Archer, who holds his hands up, palms out, and shakes his head. “Not mine.”

“Hm, yeah, didn't think so.” Bear runs a hand over his neatly trimmed beard. “One of my guys said he saw someone sneaking around a few nights back. Thought it was someone on the crew, but when he approached to try to find out, they were gone.”

“You think someone's after the artifacts?” Archer asks.

“Not sure, but I spoke to my boss and they're gonna let me hire a few more guys and buy some lock boxes. Anything you find that's particularly precious, keep it under lock and key.” He flicks a glance at Roman and me before resting his gaze on Archer. “And no one should be wandering around after sundown. Especially not alone.”

“I like working at night,” Archer says, frowning.

“Tell me when you're gonna be up late.” Bear's smile is almost cocky, and I think he might actually wink, though with his face partially turned away from me, it's hard to

be sure.

I suddenly feel like an interloper, one more invested in the look they're giving each other than I should be. A startlingly hot image of the two of them kissing pops into my mind. They would be so pretty together. My skin tingles with that familiar ache. The one I know there's no release from. If only my stupid body would have a heat and get it out of my system.

Frustrated, I take a step back.

Roman clears his throat. "Where exactly did you find the knife?"

"On the east side of Dr. Whitlock's tent."

"Have your guys move her tent closer to mine and Archer's," he says through gritted teeth, shoulders riding up with tension.

"What? That's entirely unnecessary." Deep down, I actually appreciate the concern, but acts of kindness don't come without a cost from people like Roman Slate. And I'm not sure I want to pay that bill when it's due.

"You're an unbonded omega," he snarls. "The only one on this dig. You're defenseless and a knife was found by your tent."

"How do you know I'm defenseless?" Okay. Now I'm mad.

He raises his eyebrows. Before I can overthink it, I sweep his legs out from under him, just like I learned to in the self-defense class I took last year. Or rather, I try to. I make him stumble, but he catches himself right away, and the force rebounds on me. I lose my footing and fall on my ass.

He glares down at me with his arms crossed like he proved his point. Bear growls, and Archer takes my elbow and helps me up.

“Are you alright?” Archer asks.

Bear steps up to Roman so they're nearly chest-to-chest. “Hurt an omega—hell, hurt anyone—on my watch again and?—”

“She attacked me,” Roman says, voice level and calm.

The two men are of equal height, but that's where the similarities end. Where Roman is all lean muscle and sharp lines, Bear is wider with a barrel chest I'm not sure I could wrap my arms fully around. Though, even without the thick cords of muscle Roman is sporting, you can tell that Bear is incredibly strong. Farm-boy strong my roommate used to call it. A man who could lift you up with one hand and carry a bale of hay in the other without breaking a sweat.

“I'm fine,” I say, eager to get them both to back down. For a moment, Roman's gaze flicks to mine and something like regret pinches his features, but it's gone in a flash.

“Have her things moved,” he says, throwing back the tent flap and stomping out.

Sweat beads on my neck, rolling down my spine to further wet my already drenched shirt. We've been here over a week now, but I don't think I'll ever get used to this heat. The heat, or the dull sense of dread that's stayed with me ever since Bear found that weapon outside Cora's tent.

I may not want an omega of my own, but I don't want anyone to get hurt. Bear's team did as I asked and moved her tent so it butts up to mine, which was some small relief. But not enough. There's no way Cora Whitlock could defend herself if something were to really happen to her.

I smirk at the memory of that little sweep move she did. It may have taken down an average beta, but she's no match for an alpha of my size. Seeing some of that fire from her had my cock perking up. Feisty women turn me on, and Dr. Whitlock is fierce, beautiful, and smart—if a little awkward at times, which I find irritatingly adorable. The whole package really. If I were looking for an omega... but I'm not.

In my youth, I, of course, dreamed of finding my pack and an omega to center it, but those dreams evaporated when I learned how risky it can be to fall for an omega. The loss of an omega isn't like a normal break up for an alpha. It's much, much worse. I've seen firsthand the damage it can do, and I have no intention to put myself in that position like my brother did.

Looking at Cora now, though, some of those feelings of longing try to bust out of the cage I shoved them into years ago. I'm not old, but I'm certainly not young anymore. And, let's face it, it's in my biology to want an omega and a pack, even if it isn't in the

cards for me. I won't settle for anything less than a scent match, and I have no desire for that either. People lose all sense when they're scent-matched. They drop all their priorities, change their values, act like unhinged animals. No, that's not for me.

"Ho! Over here!" I'm whipped back to the present by the excited shout coming from the far edge of the excavation area. Curious, I make my way toward the gathering crowd to see what they've found.

Dr. Whitlock is already there by the time I arrive. She's on her hands and knees, bent over a section of sand with an excavation brush, carefully but urgently uncovering something.

An audible groan nearly escapes me. I may not want a bonded omega, but I'm still an alpha. Hell, I'm still a man. And seeing her on all fours with that plump ass in the air is nearly more than I can handle. Some of her long hair has escaped its ponytail and is blowing in the wind. I could hold it for her. Wrap it around my hand nice and taut. Preferably while I'm slamming into her from behind, making that luscious ass jiggle on each stroke.

Fuck. What is wrong with me?

Surreptitiously adjusting my semi-hard cock, I move next to Cora and crouch down beside her. She doesn't acknowledge me, simply continues to reveal whatever this artifact is. She's good at this. Meticulous and careful. I can't really see what she's uncovering from here, but soon enough she has it free, sitting back on her heels, marveling at the prize clutched in her small hands.

"Oh my goddess." She breathes. "Oh my goddess!"

"What? What is it?" My eagerness shows in my voice. This is the first time we've found anything new in days.

Cora carefully holds up a metal item. It's clearly a box, albeit an oddly shaped one. It has six sides, and there don't seem to be any hinges that would indicate that it opens. There are circles engraved on the top, filling the entire surface and laid out in a fish scale pattern. Each circle is made up of a mosaic of different metals, seemingly in no discernable order. I've seen similar items before. In fact, I think it's?—

“A puzzle box.” Both Cora and I say at the same time. She looks up at me with excitement glinting in her eyes. The whole world narrows to her smile, and it's like it's just the two of us, sharing a secret, a connection that no one else shares.

No. No . Cora and I don't share anything other than professional interest. The same as with the rest of the team. That's it .

Scrambling up, Cora nearly skips like a schoolgirl in her enthusiasm to take the artifact to Archer to examine. I break into a sweat watching her ass jiggle in those short shorts.

The puzzle box. That's what we're focusing on. Not the omega's ass.

Unfortunately, both of us are rule followers, and protocol says the item must be documented extremely well before we do anything with it.

Excitement is buzzing through my veins, my muscles clenching in anticipation, even though I won't be able to examine the little box until tomorrow. It'll take Archer a while to catalog the artifact, and it's already late. Not that I'll be sleeping much. Between Cora's tent next to mine and the adrenaline that comes with a new find, it'll be a miracle if I don't spend the whole night tossing and turning.

13

Laying the pottery piece down on the table, I type my last notes into the documentation file before turning to grab supplies to safely store the artifact. This job looks glamorous in the movies, but the truth is it's mostly examining, cataloging, and organizing unless something of note is discovered. So far it's been bones, pottery, and more bones.

I don't mind though. Organizing things has always had a calming effect on me. On bad days when I was younger, I would sometimes dump out a puzzle and just spend an hour sorting all the edge pieces, then all the similar colors into piles. Most of the time I didn't even do the puzzle, but putting order to something made me feel like my life wasn't spiraling out of control. It helped me disassociate from the constant chaos and conflict in my family.

The routine of cataloging a dig is second nature to me at this point. Receive item. Photograph item. Describe item. Wrap and store item. Next.

I've just placed another piece of pottery onto bubble wrap so I can pad it, when Dr. Whitlock and Dr. Slate come in unexpectedly. Instantly, I'm on alert. They never come here unless they need something, much less together.

"Archer, are you busy?" Cora asks kindly.

I make a show of glancing toward the lonely piece of pottery on the table before turning back to her with a raised brow.

“Yeah. Super busy. The busiest, actually.” I deadpan, expecting her to giggle at my joke. Instead she holds out something in my line of sight. All sarcasm is lost when I see it isn’t another goddamn piece of earthenware.

Before I can ask what it is, Roman cuts in. “We need you to prioritize cataloguing this item. We need it back as soon as possible.”

Annoyance filters through me at his demanding tone. He isn’t my boss, we’re colleagues. If I wasn’t just as excited to see a new item as they are, I would be tempted to tell him to kick rocks. It’s Cora who softens the request.

“What Dr. Slate is trying to say is, we found what we think is a puzzle box, and we would really appreciate it if you could catalog this as soon as you can, so we can attempt to open it.” She bats those long lashes at me, and I know I can’t refuse her.

There’s just something about Cora. Even before we met, her research and her mind captivated me. Getting to know her has only made my school-boy infatuation worse. Not that an omega like her will ever want a beta like me romantically. But, I like spending time with her. Like making her happy. I’d be thrilled just to be her friend.

“Come on, let's take a look at it now.”

She beams as I wave them both over to the exam table. Carefully moving the pottery aside to make room, I take the item from Cora and set it down in its place. It’s definitely a box, and upon closer examination I see that what originally looked like a decorative geometric pattern is actually several circular pieces.

A throat clears behind me. “I’ve seen boxes like this before. I think,” Roman pauses to look at the omega before continuing. “Uh, we think it’ll open if we can align the patterns on the top.”

“Have you tried yet?” I ask without taking my eyes off the box.

“No, of course not. You know we have to bring it to you first to document it,” Roman snaps.

“Sure, but most people would bend that rule for something like this. ”

“I don’t break rules.” Roman lifts his chin, and I roll my eyes.

“You have no idea how hard it was not to jump in and try to solve this thing.” Cora completely ignores the grumpy alpha and grins excitedly as she throws her hair up into a messy bun.

I’m pretty sure I know exactly how hard it was. You don’t find something like this on most digs. This could be a once-in-a-life-time discovery.

Instead of dragging out the conversation, I get to work photographing the box from every angle possible, notating where the patterns lie and any dings or blemishes. When I turn it over and look at the bottom, I notice some weird patterns etched into it. “Any idea what these are?”

“No. They don’t look like symbols per se—at least none that I’ve ever seen,” Roman responds. “It could be as simple as damage done when whatever killed these people transpired.”

I don’t think it’s that simple, but with a shrug, I continue my process. When I’m finally done, I gently place my fingertips on the mosaic top and add a little pressure. Nothing. No movement at all. Next I try spinning one of the circles but again, no movement. Cora and Roman move closer, standing on the other side of the table to get a better view. After several more minutes, it’s clear that either these things are stuck, or they aren’t supposed to move at all.

Rolling to stand up straight, I stretch my aching back out with a groan. “It’s getting late. I’ve documented this as much as I can for now. Why don’t you grab something to eat and hit the hay. We can try again tomorrow with fresh eyes.”

Cora bites her plump lower lip, her brows furrowed, until she seems to come to a decision. Setting her shoulders back, she asks, “Can I take this to my tent? I really want to keep looking at it, and I do my best thinking at night.” Before Roman can protest she adds, “Plus, you know the artifact will be safe! They’ve already got me on lock-and-key with my tent right next to Dr. Slate’s and yours, and I’m only two tents down from Bear’s. I’ll even sleep with it under my pillow so no one will be able to get it without waking me up. Please?”

Damn her for batting those eyelashes again. She’s so cute when she’s rambling.

Lips in a tight line, I acquiesce. “Okay, yeah. That’s fine. But if you find anything, come to me immediately.”

What can only be described as a squeal erupts in the tent and suddenly Cora is nearly pressed against me as she lands a quick kiss to my cheek. “Thank you, thank you, thank youuuu.” She sing-songs while she grabs the box and skips out.

I’m left standing stock still, staring after her as she goes, the place where her lips landed tingling with awareness.

“Don’t let that thing out of your sight,” Roman yells after her. But he doesn’t argue that I shouldn’t let her take it, which surprises me. Maybe he’s not as immune to the sweet little omega as he tries to pretend.

“Do you think she can figure it out?” I ask.

“If anyone can, it’s her,” he says so softly I’m not sure he meant for me to hear.

14

As I make my last lap around the camp before nightfall, Archer comes up to me wearing an anxious expression. He's chewing his thumb again. For a man with four degrees, he's sure nervous more than necessary. In the time that I've known him, he's proven himself to be competent and smart—not to mention the fact that he's smokin' hot. I'm not sure who shot down his confidence, but it needs a serious boost.

"Everything alright?" I ask.

"Um... yeah." He doesn't meet my eye. "It's just I'm planning to work late tonight, and you said we shouldn't be walking through camp alone at night, so I thought..."

"You want some company?"

"I mean, you don't have to hang out with me or anything if you don't want to, but maybe just check in, so when I'm ready to go back to my tent..."

"I'd be happy to walk you to your tent, Archer." I smile and take his wrist, pulling his thumb from between his teeth. I can't stand to watch him hurt himself, even if it's unintentional.

The idea of walking the little beta to his tent has my chest swelling with alpha pride. If this wasn't a job, I'd probably kiss him after walking him home, maybe even ask if I could come tuck him in. Would he let me?

He looks down at where I'm still holding his wrist, then looks back at me.

Keeping firm eye contact, I don't let go. "I'd like to hang out with you. If it won't disrupt your work too much. I've got other guys who can handle the night shift."

His eyes grow even darker, like staring into the night sky.

"I'd like that," he whispers.

Reluctantly I release his wrist. There's a pep in my step as I follow him back to the tent he works in.

"So, tell me about yourself." Just because I won't make a move while on a job doesn't mean I can't get to know the man. Who knows, maybe after it's all over, we can share a steamy night in Ekdoti before we go our separate ways.

"Not much to tell." Archer takes a broken piece of pottery off a shelf and places it carefully on the table in the middle of the tent. "I'm sure you're the interesting one between us. How'd you get into security?"

It doesn't skip my notice that he turned the question back around on me, but I won't push him if he doesn't want to open up to me. I lean my hip against the table and watch what he's doing.

"Well, as you know, I was a medic in the military. But even field medics have intense training in order to stay alive. We used to prank each other during the slow times at the base, though, and I quickly realized I was unusually good at sensing an attack from one of my brothers." I chuckle at the memories. "Fuck, it used to piss them off so badly that they could never get the jump on me. Meanwhile, I could sneak up on them like a predator in the woods—totally undetected. My buddy Romero joked once that I should've gone into the secret service instead, and it sparked an idea. I didn't know what I wanted to do after my stint, but I knew I wasn't signing up for another tour. Security seemed to fit my skillset and is always needed, job security and all that,

ya know?“

He laughs. “Yeah, I picked forensics partly for the job security. Never thought I’d be using my degrees this way, though.” He holds up the pottery piece and shakes it a little.

“You like it?”

“Yeah, I guess. Most of the time.” He picks up the camera and takes a few pictures of the broken relic. “How about you? You like security?”

“Yeah. Like I said, it suits me. I’ve always been big and burly and intimidating.” With a playful smirk, I flex my arms like I’m a bodybuilder posing on stage.

Archer laughs, but his gaze zeros in on my biceps in a way that makes me want to preen.

“Is that...um...are those, ” he jerks his head toward my still taut muscles, “how you got the nickname Bear?”

“Nope.”

“When did you get it?”

“Around the time I designated.”

“Oh, that’s interesting.” He stops taking pictures of the artifact and leans his hip against the table. “Does your nickname have something to do with your scent?”

I smile, not giving anything away.

The look he's giving me is so similar to how he studied that artifact that I almost want to laugh. It's damn hot to see that focused, intense concentration directed at me.

"Are you gonna tell me your real name?" He inches closer, all casual like, but still the heat in his eyes is unmistakable.

I shake my head in answer to his question. At this point, I've gone by Bear for so long it feels like it is my real name. Besides, I like being something he's interested in, and I really hate my given name. "You can try to guess, though."

He'll never figure it out, but the thought of him thinking about me that much makes my gut all fluttery and shit.

He's gazing up at me with a look that's so full of attraction, it's almost like I can read his thoughts. He'd make a horrible poker player. But something about that makes me smile. It's refreshing. Most the guys I work with in security are so stoic, so good at keeping their emotions under wraps. It's nice to be with someone who can't hide how he's feeling or what he wants.

I don't think Archer could deceive someone if his life depended on it. He's open in a way that makes me want to move closer, and also makes me worry about protecting him.

"Is your name Barrett?" he asks, making his first guess as he edges closer.

"Nope, not Barrett. "

"Damn." He scrunches his nose in thought. "Barrett means bear so I thought I was onto something there."

He tilts his chin up so that he can study my face. He's about half a foot shorter than

me, and something about that slight size difference makes my heart beat a little faster. Not that Archer is small by any means. I've noticed the muscular build he's sporting under those tight t-shirts more than a few times. But he would fit perfectly tucked into my side, right under my arm. Something about the beta makes me want to protect him and ravish him in equal measure.

"Arthur?"

I shake my head.

"Will you at least tell me why you don't like it?"

I chuckle at his attempt to get a clue. "It's just not a good name."

"What makes a name not good, in your opinion?"

Damn, he's cute trying to puzzle this out. Impulsively, I grab his hips and position him so he's standing right in front of me while I lean against the table. "A bad name is one that doesn't fit."

"And Bear fits?"

"What do you think?" I squeeze his hips with my large hands.

His throat bobs as he swallows. "It fits." He wets his lips. "Does... my name fit?"

"Can't tell." I lean close to his ear. "I haven't seen your arrow yet."

The corny line makes him giggle—flat out giggle like a school kid! It's a delicious sound that makes me laugh, too, but when it dies away, all that's left is the heaviness of our breaths, the heat of his body close to mine.

With my hands still on his waist, I skim my thumbs under his t-shirt. His gaze drops to my lips. So easy to read.

“I don’t kiss people when I’m on the job,” I say. “It’s unprofessional. Can’t have everyone here thinking I’m easy, now can I?”

“Okay.” His brows drop, and he tries to take a step back. I keep my grip on him, not wanting him to move away, wanting him closer, wanting to throw my own stupid fucking rule out the window.

“But damn, I want to kiss you right now.” My palms move up his sides, making his shirt bunch up enough to show a hint of skin. “Can I kiss you?”

“Please,” he says, all breathy. His dark eyes drop to my lips.

I trail my fingers over his abs. They’re so defined, not at all what I’d expect from a scientist like him. But I’ve got a feeling there’s a lot about Archer that might surprise me, and I want to know all of it.

He leans in, and I can smell the subtle hint of mint on his breath, like he just brushed his teeth. Did he do that for me? I can picture the nervous beta brushing his teeth before he came to ask me to keep him company, quietly hoping I might give him what he wants.

“I can’t hook up with people while I’m working,” I whisper, barely holding myself back. I really shouldn’t be doing this. But I already know I’m going to kiss him. I don’t know where my initial resolve went, but it’s nowhere in sight right now .

“Oh, yeah, okay.... so...you’re not going to kiss me?” He tries to pull away again, but this time, I slide my hands around his back and lock him in place.

“Oh, no. I’m going to kiss you.” I rub my palm up between his shoulder blades, plastering his chest against mine, so close he has to arch back to look at me. “But I’m only going to kiss you. That’s it. Understand? Nothing more while we’re working together. And it stays our little secret.”

I know I need to keep that semblance of control or I’m a goner. It’s probably already too late, but I’ve got to try. I don’t want to get a reputation for fucking around on the job. But now that my hands are on him, I know this isn’t just fucking around. This is right where I’m meant to be, but I can be patient.

As long as I get a little taste to tide me over until the job is done.

With an eager nod, Archer’s lips part, giving me his full consent.

15

I 'm kissing Bear! I can't believe this is actually happening. The alpha I've been dreaming about for days is sucking the life out of me. He said only a kiss, but the way he's devouring me is so dirty I almost come in my pants the moment his tongue sweeps inside my mouth.

My cock is painfully hard, pushing against the zipper of my jeans, and I have to reach between us to adjust myself. Maybe I'm trying to tempt him, because I don't bother being discreet as I slip one hand into my pants and lift my cock, tucking it into the waistband of my boxers.

He groans as my knuckles brush against him, his hips subtly pushing closer, seeking contact. Once situated, I turn my full attention back to kissing him, weaving my arms around him to eliminate the miniscule space between our bodies. Needing to feel his massive form pressed against mine.

He's not the only one who doesn't fool around with coworkers, even temporary ones. It isn't that it's not allowed—the powers that be aren't dumb enough to think they can force people to shack up in the middle of nowhere for weeks and not expect something to happen. It's just never happened to me .

Bear's been super flirty with me lately, and I'd hoped maybe he might be interested, but I never really thought he would be. He's so far out of my league.

I'm not an alpha or an omega like my siblings. I'm smart, but not particularly noteworthy. Nerdy and awkward, and I know it. Most people overlook me, and I've

learned to avoid them right back. It's easier that way. Less potential for conflict, less hurt.

But something about this alpha draws me in like the electronegativity of an atom seeking more electrons. My curiosity is relentless, pushing me to break out of my comfort zone, even if there's a chance I may get burned.

"Mine," he growls against my lips before cupping my face with his palms and devouring me again.

Silently, I echo the sentiment. It's illogical. He's not mine. He's little more than a stranger. That kind of possessiveness is for alphas and omegas, not a beta like me. But fuuuuck!

He nips my bottom lip, then soothes the ache by sucking it. My knees go weak. All coherent thought goes out the window. I grind against him, needing friction, and he gives it to me. This is escalating quickly, but I can't find it in me to care about propriety at this moment.

Strong hands trail down my back to my ass. He squeezes and kneads, driving my hips in waves so my cock rubs against his body. It almost hurts with the coarse fabric of my jeans in the way, but pleasure quickly overtakes pain. I groan deep in my throat.

"That's it, baby. You gonna come just from grinding your cock against your alpha?" he whispers before sucking on my earlobe.

With how he's leaning back against the table, his legs stretched out on either side of me, his cock is right against mine, and I can feel the heat of him even through our clothes. His kiss grows hungrier as he rubs against me.

There's a rumbling in his chest that's almost... maybe... a purr. I've never had an

alpha purr for me before. My fathers didn't even purr for me as a child.

The sound is soothing and invigorating at the same time. It vibrates through his whole body, setting me on edge in the most exquisite way. Tingles race across my skin, my muscles tense and spasm, the telltale zing starting at the base of my spine.

"I have half a mind to drag this out, make you wait to finish until you're begging for release." Bear growls low into my ear.

He wants me to beg? I have no problem with begging. "Please please please, Bear." The words are a low whine, and he chuckles against my neck.

"It sounds so pretty when you beg, baby." Suddenly, his hand spears into my hair, gripping it tight to yank my head back, exposing my neck. Sharp teeth rake down my throat to the juncture where my neck meets my shoulder, and Bear lightly takes a pinch of flesh and sucks. Hard. His bite isn't enough to break skin, but it's enough to send me over the edge.

"Fuck! I...I'm..." That's all I get out before I'm coming, coming harder than I've ever come before. In my pants. From dry humping the hot security alpha.

It feels like it takes forever for my cock to finish spending my cum. Panting, I gasp for breath, and he pulls back, his gaze heavy on me.

"Damn, you're so fucking hot when you come," he says, voice all gruff.

I hide my face in his shirt, very aware that I lost control just because of a kiss. Well, no, not just a kiss. That was definitely not just a kiss. That was unlike anything I've ever experienced. How the hell did he make something that should have been so normal, juvenile even, feel so good?

All I know is that we're definitely doing it again. For the sake of science, of course.

16

They've moved my little mate's tent. It's smashed right up against the other professor's, the big alpha who always looks like he just ate a lemon. It's been days since I've been able to get at her, because the stupid fucking alpha never sleeps.

Last night, I waited so long for the bastard to turn his light off that I fell asleep behind a bush. My neck is sore, and I've got sand in places it has no business being in. I've been irritable all day because of it.

Tonight is shapin' up to be more of the same. There's still light glowing inside his tent. Fuck, does no one on this dig sleep?

I should be out scouring the sands with the ground penetrating radar I stole. It's not like it scans the whole fucking area at once. I gotta walk with it, getting pictures a few feet wide at a time. Can't exactly do that in broad daylight when everyone is scurrying about like worker ants .

I bet she'd be happy if I found the temple.

But I can't seem to leave her. Each night, when I should be searching, I find myself right back here. Staring at the shadow her figure makes on the tent wall. Waiting for her to go to sleep so I can visit.

There have been a few times I've thought about waking her up or strolling right up to her in the middle of the day and introducing myself. We're scent matches after all, and she'd know it the second she got a whiff. But what do I have to offer her? I'm not

some posh professor. My hands aren't clean. I've scraped and stolen and even killed once or twice.

My mate needs better than that.

So, I've got a plan.

Find the temple, steal a few things that will set me up for life, then reveal the temple to her like a fucking courting gift. The temple of Lunara for my goddess mate.

In the meantime, I settle for brief glimpses of her and the faintest puffs of her scent.

Or I would, if the fucking professor would turn his light out and go the fuck to sleep. After waiting another hour, I notice there're no shifting shadows in his tent. It's quiet, even though it's not dark. I bet the fucker is leaving his light on just to mess with me! He's probably been sound asleep this whole time.

Huh, not such a chump after all, even if he is keeping me from my mate.

They found my knife, and I can appreciate the fact that he's trying to protect her. I'd do a hell of a lot more if I thought there was anything out here that could hurt her. So I'll give him a little credit. But, fuck, I hate that he's getting in my way, and I really wish I'd figured this out sooner.

Stealthy as a scorpion, I slink closer, holding my breath as I step to the front of her tent and unzip the flap. There's no stirring from next door, so I quickly duck inside.

Something in my shoulders unwinds the moment I see her. But other parts below my belt tense right up.

How long can I keep waiting? It's torture to be away from her, but seeing her and not

touching her makes my chest cave in.

Like the other nights I managed to sneak into her tent, I sink to my knees by her bed like a worshiper in prayer. I'm no saint, but she could be my salvation.

She's huddled on the cot tonight, tucked into herself with a soft blanket clutched against her. It weaves from her tiny hands, down through her luscious thighs, and suddenly I'm jealous of a piece of fabric.

A lock of her chocolate brown hair has fallen in her face, so I carefully brush it back, lifting the strands to my nose in the process. I can't scent her at all tonight.

A growl threatens my throat, but I hold it back.

She shouldn't be hiding her scent from me. I want to drown in it, and her in mine.

Without a thought, I lightly scent mark her hair. But it's not enough. Slowly, I pick up her wrist and drag it along my neck. Better.

I should leave her something. A gift. To let her know I'm coming. Something she can wear that smells like me. Yeah, I like that thought .

Ripping the bandana from my neck, I scent mark it, then tuck it in her hand. I hope she likes it.

17

My eyes are still closed when the scent hits me. What is that? Licorice? Anise? A memory comes to me of a time back in grad school when a friend handed me a dark green drink with a little tiny pitcher of ice cold water, instructing me to pour a small amount into the glass. When I followed the instructions, the liquid clouded like mist rolling in from the sea.

Absinthe.

I haven't thought of that night in a long time. It was the first time I felt the familiar ache in my bones, the crushing need in my core. The heat that never came, that's lingered on the periphery ever since.

I must have had one vivid dream if I can smell the scent in my nostrils even now after all these years.

Shifting to my back, I go to rub my eyes, but fabric falls onto my face. I yell, startled as I rip the material off me. In my hand is a black bandana I've never seen before. The scent of it soaks into every cell in my body .

Mate .

I whimper, dropping the fabric like it burns. Who...? How...?

An alpha growl stuns me as Roman throws back the flap on my tent and charges in. "What happened?"

His presence dominates the small space, the omega in me cowering and scooting so far back on the cot that I tumble to the floor. Right next to the bandana.

Like a feral beast, I snatch it and bring it to my nose, eyes rolling back in my head before I regain a semblance of control and toss the fabric away. No. No no no no. This can't be happening, not yet! I can't be what a scent match needs me to be. I'm a broken omega. Unable to have a heat. And no heat, means no bonds, and no children.

"What the hell is going on?" Roman picks up the fabric that fell between us. I lunge for him, needing it in my grasp, but stop halfway there, terrified to touch it again.

"It's n-n-not mine," I manage to say.

He snarls, nostrils flaring. "Clearly."

I move toward him again. Then back, muscles tense.

"S-someone was in my tent."

The growl he lets loose is saturated with alpha power. It shakes me to my knees. He curses and takes my elbow, hauling me up. "Come on."

"Wait!" I jerk away, a new fear making my heart pound. Ripping the pillow from my bed, I sigh when I see the puzzle box still there. Roman grabs it with the same hand holding the bandana and uses his other hand to pull me out of the tent.

Dazed, I stumble as he marches me two tents down to where Bear is staying. "Wake up," he nearly barks before we're even there.

The burly alpha rubs his eyes as he steps out into the early morning light.

“Someone snuck into Dr. Whitlock’s tent,” Roman growls.

Bear snaps to attention, completely alert. His large, warm hands take my shoulders as he peers into my face. “Are you alright?”

His presence is more calming than Roman’s protective anger, and my heart slows. I didn’t realize how fast it was racing. My gaze flicks to the fabric still clenched in Roman’s hand.

“I think so,” I murmur.

“This was in her tent.” Roman holds out the bandana. I can’t take my eyes off it.

“In... in my bed,” I whisper.

Both alphas growl at that.

“She’s not staying in that fucking tent.” Roman crosses his arms over his chest. “She’ll stay with me.”

“What?” I squeak. “You hate me.”

He flinches, but doesn’t correct me. “This isn’t up for negotiation.”

I swing my gaze to Bear, hoping he’ll back me up on this. Since when does Bossy-pants McGee over here think he has any say over where I sleep?

Bear lets go of my shoulders, stepping back, leaving me suddenly cold and shaking. He’s retreated, but his posture is powerful, firm. “I agree with Dr. Slate. You shouldn’t be on your own.”

“Fine, then I’ll—” I’m about to say I’ll bunk up with one of the female betas, when Bear holds up his hand.

“You need to be with someone who can protect you if this person,” he holds out the bandana, “comes back.” Once more, I reach for the fabric before jerking away. Bear’s forehead creases. “You need an alpha with you.”

“Then I’m staying with you.” My certainty falters as I look up at the security lead. His eyes burn with an intensity I haven’t seen from him before. “Um... if that’s okay.”

Posture softening, his lips quirk in a half smile. “Not a problem with me.” He tilts his head and looks at Roman, who scowls and walks off without another word.

To say I was thrilled when Dr. Whitlock asked to bunk with me is an understatement. Shocked, but thrilled nonetheless. Of course, it was only because she and Roman hate each other and she doesn't know any of the other alphas working security with me. I'm sure she would have chosen nearly any alpha over him, and I was just the best choice of the options at hand.

That logic doesn't stop the excitement that's been running through me all day. Apart from my little slip up with Archer, I've been keeping things professional on the clock—I'm not an idiot willing to risk my job—but the draw I feel toward the two of them is like a live wire in my chest. Cora's a knockout. If the scale is one to ten, she's at least a one hundred.

Not just her looks either, her attitude is refreshing. Most omegas want to stay at home and be pampered. Nothing wrong with that. But this little hurricane is out here every day, under the beating hot sun, because of her passion for archeology. Smart as a whip, too. She's always going a mile a minute, though, I wonder what it would be like to make her slow down and enjoy the moment. Would she listen? Or would she fight me? Thinking about either outcome has my cock waking up.

Before my little soldier can stand at full attention, I shift my focus away from the sweet omega and back to my tent. After working all day, Cora went off to shower, claiming she was sweaty and gross. Sweaty I can attest to. I couldn't help but notice the liquid beading on her skin, rolling down between her cleavage. All I can imagine is chasing the droplet with my tongue after making the gorgeous omega sweaty for a much more fun reason. Even better if I do it while Archer's between her thighs.

Fuck. No, Bear. Bad. I already slipped up once. I don't need it happening again. And I definitely don't want to make an unbonded omega uncomfortable. Think of something else. Baseball. Great Grandma Beatrix. That bunion she was always showing off. The bandana in Cora's tent. That last one does it, my lust receding as anger surges forward, reminding me what I'm doing here in the first place.

I spent all day interrogating the twenty-two people at the dig site, and they all said they'd never seen the bandana before. Course they could be lying, especially since I can't scent them due to their blockers, but hell, I'm pretty good at reading people, and I'd bet good money they were telling the truth. I don't think anyone here is trying to scare or hurt her. But that has me even more concerned. If it's not anyone on the dig, who is it ?

Until I figure that out, I'm more than happy to have the little omega bunk up with me.

Opting to forgo a shower, I tidy up my tent and set up an extra cot for her. Not that my tent is messy by any means, the military trained that bad habit right out of me. My corners may not be as tight as when I was in the service, but the bed is made and nothing is strewn across the floor.

Just as I'm fluffing a pillow on Cora's cot, a voice calls out from outside my tent. "Hey, Bear?"

Striding over to open the flap, I find Roman standing awkwardly outside. The guy is kind of a dick, so I'm tempted to let him stew in silence until he tells me why he's here, but I'm tired, and expecting Cora any minute now, so I throw him a bone.

"Hey Dr. Slate, come on in. Did you need something?" I move aside and gesture for him to walk past me. He does, and takes a seat at the small card table set up in the corner.

“No. I mean, yes, but no,” he hedges. “I wanted to thank you for offering to let Cora sleep here tonight.”

Thank me? Buddy, this is the best thing that’s happened to me since I rolled into this sandy town. A pretty omega relying on me to protect her? Yeah, that strokes my alpha’s ego pretty nicely.

Raising a brow, I reply. “It’s no hardship. I’m sure you’d have done the same.”

He groans. “Yeah, I would have, if she didn’t hate me.”

I chuckle at that. “Seems to me like you’re doing most of the antagonizing.” Strolling over, I sit in the other chair across from him .

“Listen,” he says, his tone a little defensive. “I know I’m not the nicest guy?”

My scoff interrupts him, I can’t help it. Not the nicest guy? That’s an understatement. Though, something in my gut tells me the prof is using his alphahole demeanor like a crutch. He’s a scared animal, lashing out. Regardless, I nod at him to continue.

“I know I’m not the nicest guy, especially to Dr. Whitlock. It’s nothing against her personally. I have no problem with her. In fact, I think she’s as smart as they come. I just... avoid omegas as a whole.” He rubs the back of his neck. “But I want her to be safe, so I’m glad she agreed to stay here with you.”

Ah, so he's a self-aware jerk. “Why do you avoid omegas?” I’m genuinely curious.

He studies me with a look that reminds me of this dog I used to have back on the farm. Mean as shit. Always biting and snapping, but every now and then the little guy would ease his way slowly over to me and let me pet him.

I get the impression the stoic professor doesn't let people in often.

Leaning back, I kick my feet up on the table, happy to wait him out. He might not open up much, but people tend to tell me things. Guess I just have one of those faces.

He sighs and drops his gaze. "My brother's omega ran out on him. He... didn't take it well."

I drop my feet and lean forward. "He went feral?"

Dr. Slate nods.

"Well, shit." I run my fingers through my beard.

"I don't get it." Roman shakes his head, frowning. "They treated her like something precious, sacred. Their bonding ceremony spared no expense. But then, three years later, she claimed she found her scent matches and up and left, just abandoned everything they had because of fucking biology."

A scent match bond is the only thing that can break an already formed pack bond, but I hear it's excruciating for the ones left behind.

"I had a buddy in my unit who had that happen—well, I guess not as intense as your brother. He didn't go feral, but he bonded this girl on his own and not even nine months later she ran off with another pack. He was never the same." I shake my head.

Roman nods slowly, like he understands. "I just can't wrap my head around making one person your entire world and giving them that sort of power," he whispers. "Omegas are... liabilities."

"Well, I would certainly be willing to risk it. Life's too short to let fear control you." I

stand up and clap Roman on the back. “You want a beer? They’re warm as piss, but they get the job done.”

“You think I’m being an ass for pushing her away, don’t you?” Dr. Slate groans.

“Nah, I didn’t say that.” I don’t need to say it. I think the guy beats himself up enough already. And I can understand why Cora makes him nervous. She’d be all too easy to fall for. If it weren’t for being on the job, I’d have asked her out the first night I met her.

“But what if...” he takes the beer from me and twirls it in his hands. “What if I...” He clears his throat. “What if I meet my scent match? All of a sudden I’m supposed to drop everything because fate decides I’m destined to be with this person? What about my plans? The other people in my life?”

“You got other people in your life, prof?”

His growl is low, but it’s not menacing.

“Thought not.” I take a swig of my beer. It’s a bit too heavy with a sharp aftertaste. I’d prefer something lighter with this heat, but beggars can’t be choosers. “Look, fate’s a handsy bitch, but ultimately, you get to decide how to respond to her come ons. You get what I’m?—

An agonized scream pierces the air. We both freeze. Roman recovers first.

“What the fuck was that?!”

I can't say I'm particularly excited about sleeping in tight quarters with a man I barely know. My cramps are acting up today, and I don't want to seem weak in front of the team. Just another prissy omega who couldn't hack it in the field.

But something about the massive security alpha sets me at ease. He's formidable, to be sure, but he's also got this boyish charm and an easy smile. I wonder what he smells like. Does he smell as delicious as that banda?—

“Nope. Not going there,” I mutter under my breath as I walk toward the shower area.

When they delivered the equipment, they also dropped off three small portable shower trailers. Each one is like its own little room with a short open area in the front and a curtain sectioning off a shower area in the back. It seems a little excessive to me, but then again no one wants to flash the camp or have sand blow in when they're trying to get clean. Even though it's nothing fancy, and we're limited to five-minute showers, it feels luxurious after a day spent covered in dirt and sweat.

I spent longer than I thought fiddling with the puzzle box after dinner, trying to get it to open with no success, so it's late now, and there are no lines for the showers. A nice change from the norm.

I close the curtain, quickly strip out of my grimy clothes, leaving them on the short bench that's just out of reach of the shower's spray, and turn on the tap. The small water reservoir built into the back of the trailer sits in the sun all day, and is insulated to keep the water warm. I sigh and rub my tight muscles.

The puzzle box and everything else we've found swims in my mind. If we could figure out how it works and get it open, we might find a clue to what happened here or how close we are to Lunara's temple. Although, I'm starting to wonder if this site could be the temple itself. It doesn't meet the historical descriptions, but maybe there's something we're missing. We've found the foundations of a few walls and a few pots, but nothing that suggests the vast place of worship that historical texts allude to. Maybe this is the remains of a nearby town or outpost of some sort. Though, the positioning of the bones really does look like one big—for lack of a better term—orgy.

Could this have been a ceremonial site somewhere near the temple? Maybe where the festivals were held. The tales of those ceremonies are legendary. I kind of wish I could have been there and experienced it for myself.

The scent-neutralizing soap stings my nose, and I'm struck with a sense of longing for my natural perfume. I've spent a lot of my life on scent blockers, but this is the longest I've gone without a break from them. Usually I only take them on days when I'm at the university and not on weekends. We've been here almost two weeks with nothing but the scent of sand. I didn't think sand had a scent until coming here. It's dry and neutral, nothing like the refreshing botanical quality of my perfume or the heady intoxication of the bandana I smelled this morning.

A cramp twists my belly as I think of that piece of fabric stashed away in Bear's tent. Like an addict, I crave the rich, masculine smell of it. Mine .

"No," I snap at myself.

A snarl answers.

"What the—?" I'm cut off by a bark that sounds way too close. Entirely inhuman.

Shutting off the water, I slowly peek around the curtain. A massive jackal is standing at the entrance to the vestibule. My breath freezes in my lungs. I've never seen a wild animal outside of the zoo before.

Okay, okay, this is fine. They're not aggressive unless cornered, right? I just need to stay quiet and wait for it to leave. How the fuck did it even get in here in the first place?

Its head snaps in my direction and it yips. I jump back, scrambling to pull on my pants, but tripping over the legs. With the curtain still half open, I can see the jackal stalking toward me. He sniffs the air and licks his lips like he's spotted his next meal. They don't eat humans, do they?

I'm not sticking around to find out.

Giving up on getting dressed, I grab my towel and wrap it around me, tucking in the edge. The beast howls, and I have a sick feeling it's calling in reinforcements.

My heart thuds as I stare into the creature's eyes, unable to move.

Jackals were said to be the watchdogs of Lunara, protectors of omegas. So why the hell is this one looking at me like I'm its favorite meal? They're also supposed to be small, something this one is not.

With shaking hands, I swing my pants at it. "Go away!" I yell, trying to make myself bigger and scare it off. That's something you're supposed to do with wild animals, isn't it?

The jackal snaps its teeth, its imposing body blocking the door.

I know you aren't supposed to run from a predator, but if I'm fast enough, maybe I

can get past it. For a second, I envision how that would go. I'd dash forward, try to duck around it, trip, and end up the jackal's chew toy. I'm a scholar, not an athlete, and I've always been clumsy. Outrunning a jackal is out of the question.

Smarter, not harder, my dad used to say. Gaze flying around, I get an idea.

Inching toward the showerhead, I never take my eyes off the animal. With each of my movements, its body tenses as if it's getting poised to jump. Not willing to wait and find out, I dive for the shower nozzle and turn it on, spraying water directly at the wild dog. He howls and shakes his head, stumbling back, disoriented. But it won't last long—neither will the water supply. Sacrificing the little bench, I throw it at him and sprint toward the exit. I see now that I left it unlocked and partially open. Goddess, I'm an idiot.

Just as I reach the door to escape, teeth sink into my heel, and I scream. Kicking out, I hit the jackal in the nose, freeing my foot.

Without looking back, I scramble to my feet and run.

20

The scream has half the camp racing toward the showers, but I'm the first to get there, entirely unprepared for what I see.

The pretty little omega is stumbling around the back of the shower building, slipping on the sand wearing nothing but a fucking towel. There's a terrified expression on her face as she runs straight for me. Or tries to run, she's hobbling, and before she reaches me, she trips, falling into my chest, clawing for purchase. I lose my footing and fall backward with Dr. Cora Whitlock on top of me. Rather than scrambling off like I expect, she throws her arms around my neck and hugs me, burrowing into my body as deep as she can.

"What the hell is going on?"

"J-jackal," she says at the same time as I hear a thump from within the shower building. Bear is standing above us with his gun drawn .

"You saw a jackal in camp?" he asks, a stoney expression on his face.

"Y-yes, in the shower." She points back at the building about a hundred feet away. Fuck, she's shaking worse than the flags whipping in the wind above us. My arms wrap around her wet, trembling body and pull her closer.

Bear takes a step toward the showers, then hesitates. "Is she okay?"

I can feel her heart pounding as I tilt her chin up to study her face. "Hey, are you

okay, Cora? Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head. I'm not sure she's telling the truth, but it's enough for Bear to leave and head to the showers.

"Are you really alright?" I ask again.

"J-just a little shaken." She suddenly seems to realize that she's laying on top of me, because she scrambles off. The quick movement drags down her towel, popping one plump breast free.

Fuck me! She has a small tattoo of a hummingbird, done in vivid watercolor, right there on the lower curve of her breast. As much as I want to get a closer look at it, I don't want anyone else seeing her like this.

I yank her back down to my chest, using my body to shield her from the prying eyes of the people who came running when she screamed.

"Get lost!" I snarl at them all.

They flee just as Bear comes back out of the shower trailer. With everyone else now gone, I loosen my hold on Cora and look away. "Cover up."

She looks down and squeaks when she sees the problem. A red blush flames across her chest and cheeks as she quickly yanks the towel up to cover herself. Or at least as covered up as she can be. Why the hell are the towels around here so tiny?

"Well?" I ask Bear as I unbutton my shirt and throw it at Cora. For once, she doesn't argue with me and immediately puts it on.

"It's dead," Bear says, looking over the omega, who's still trembling.

“You killed it?” The pretty professor looks horrified when she should look relieved.

“It was already dead when I got there.”

“What? How?” I ask, studying Bear’s turned down brows.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he says to Cora, gaze falling to her feet.

One heel is covered in blood and teeth marks. A growl bursts from my chest at the sight of the sweet little omega’s marred skin. I want to rip out the throat of the beast who dared hurt her, but her whimpering response to my roar stops me in my tracks. Scooping her up, I haul her against my chest as I stand.

“I’m fine. It’s really just a scratch,” she says, but she curls closer to me in a way that makes me want to purr. I cough to hide the rumble.

“Really, I can walk. Let me?—”

“You’re not walking.” My muscles clench, drawing her closer. The skin of her bare thighs is hot against my forearm, and every time she moves to try to get down, my shirt slides higher. “And stop wiggling!”

She finally stills, her cheeks a bright pink and her eyes watery. Fuck, did I make her cry ?

Bear comes up beside us as we head to the main tent. He carefully takes her foot and looks it over. “You’re right. It doesn’t seem deep. Which is odd ‘cause they can rip through a small deer if they want.”

I shoot a glare at him. Why the hell did he say that? As if poor Cora isn’t frightened enough already.

He reaches for her, signaling for me to give her to him. I know he just wants to patch up her wound, but the thought of a wild animal like that anywhere near Cora has me feeling possessive as fuck. “Is it really dead?”

“As a doornail.”

“How? Who did it, if it wasn’t you?”

Bear gives me a concerned look, like he’s debating whether he should tell me in front of Cora and is looking for guidance. Without knowing what he’s about to say, I can’t really offer any.

He takes a deep breath. “Someone shot it point-blank through the head.”

“Wouldn’t we have heard that?” Cora asks.

That’s not the question on my mind, and I know it’s not the one that has Bear hesitating either. I’m sure there are lots of ways to quiet a gun. My blood runs cold, and I pull Cora closer before reluctantly setting her in Bear’s arms.

“Who did it?” I ask, voice low. A chill skates up my neck because somehow I already know what he’s going to say.

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t one of my men.”

21

Holding Cora close to my chest, I carry her back to my tent where my med bag is. She complains that she can walk just fine, but I'm not having it. It's more than the jackal. Someone broke into our camp. They didn't just break in, they did it with a weapon. And they're probably still here. My men are scouring the perimeter along with Roman and half the crew, but there's no way I'm letting go of the little omega right now.

Besides, she feels nice in my arms. Her hair is still wet from the shower, and she's only wearing the professor's button-up. It's swimming on her and comes down to her mid thigh, but the slit near the bottom teases me with what's hiding a little higher. God damn, she has nice legs.

Forcing myself to behave, I set her down on the front edge of the new cot I set up earlier, her feet dangling off the side so I can clean and bandage her wounds.

A genuine smile lights up her face as she looks around. "Bear, did you set this up for me?"

Gripping the back of my neck with one hand, I reply. "Uh, yeah. I did. I hope that's ok?"

"It looks so comfy! Where did all these blankets and pillows come from? The cot in my tent only had one sad pillow and some scratchy sheets."

I frown. Omegas should have more comfort items than that, even if we're out in the

desert. Maybe especially because we're out in the desert. And after her ordeal tonight, I wish I'd found more. She deserves a proper nest where she can curl up and decompress. "I took them from the supply tent. There were extras in a trunk."

"And you just took them?"

I smirk at her. "Who was gonna stop me?"

She flinches a little as I take her foot in my hand and examine it. The teeth marks are surprisingly shallow. It's the type of bite an animal might use to haul something somewhere, or carry its young. Strange.

I pour some rubbing alcohol on a cotton swab and dab it at the cuts. In an effort to distract her from the burn, I ask the first thing that pops into my head. "So, what's your favorite comfort item in your nest at home?"

Shit that was way too personal. But to my surprise, she laughs.

"Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"Cross my heart."

"A rubber duck."

I try to cover my laugh by blowing on her foot, waiting for the skin to dry. "Aren't omegas supposed to like soft cuddly things?"

"Yeah, well, my dad's a computer programmer and he used to have a rubber duckie on his desk. I thought it was funny, but then he told me about the concept of rubber ducking. Apparently, a lot of computer programmers will keep a ducky on their desk and talk to it when they get stuck. Hearing about the problem out loud gives them a

new perspective and helps them solve it. I thought it was cool, and I was kind of a lonely kid, so I took his rubber ducky. You know omega hoarding instinct and all. He didn't mind. But now, I just wish I could break the habit of talking to myself." She laughs. "So, not exactly the most omega-like comfort item, huh?"

"Eh, it's not that weird. You could have said something really strange like a rake."

"A rake?"

"It was the first thing I thought of."

"Who would sleep with a rake?"

I shrug. "I once heard of an omega keeping burlap coffee bags in her nest with her."

She shakes her head with a smile. "At least that would smell good."

I blow on the cuts again, even though they already seem dry. Goosebumps pop to life around her ankle, traveling up her calf to her thigh before I lose sight of them. Are they pebbling her skin under Roman's shirt, too?

"You ever seen a jackal before?" I blurt out, in an effort to think of something other than her smooth skin and what she keeps in her nest.

"Never. In fact, I've never really seen a wild animal before. "

"What?" I pull back. "Not even a squirrel while out hiking or something?"

"Okay, yeah, I mean, I've seen squirrels. But..." She shifts her weight. "I've never been hiking, unless you count walks in city parks. This is my first time camping. Nothing like jumping right into hard mode, right?" She laughs like that's a joke, but it

cuts off when she looks at me.

I probably look horrified. Having grown up on a farm, I spent a good bit of time out in nature and around animals, some wild, some domesticated. I knew the little omega was academic, but I can't imagine never having gone for a hike.

“My parents are more red-wine-and-reading people than out-in-nature people, you know? I didn't really mind. I've never been athletic anyway.” This time, her laugh has a self-deprecating ring. “I'm sure you noticed how clumsy I am. Not exactly the graceful omega I'm supposed to?—”

I squeeze her calf, and it cuts her off. “You're perfect.”

She blinks, like she doesn't know what to do with those words. Has no one ever told her how great she is?

New mission: compliment Dr. Cora Whitlock at least once every day.

She grabs a pillow and holds it to her stomach as she whispers, “Thanks.”

My palm drags down her soft calf to her ankle. “No need to thank me. I'm just saying it like it is. You're pretty special, and I like how clumsy you are. It's cute. Besides, we can't all be good at everything, right?”

She doesn't say anything, so I focus on covering the cuts with a clean bandage. But once it's done, I don't want to stop touching her. My hand trails down to the sole of her foot, thumbs digging in a little, massaging. She deserves to be pampered after all the hard work she's been doing and what she went through tonight.

She moans in pleasure, but her eyes immediately widen like she's shocked she let the little sound out. She pulls away. “Oh, you don't?—”

I tighten my grip on her foot and keep rubbing. “How are you liking your first camping trip?”

Her giggle is infectious. “Well, it’s been exciting.”

My thumbs must hit a spot she likes because she sighs and her eyes roll back. That’s it.

After gently massaging her injured foot for a few minutes, I switch to the other, working over the tender muscles and up her tight calves. I don’t think she realizes all the sweet little noises she’s making. It would be so easy to work my way higher, make her feel really good, take away all the stress and fear of the night with my touch.

No. Nope. I need to get myself under control and not grope the pretty professor. We’re not exactly colleagues, but we are working together, and I’m basically forcing her to sleep here with me. I don’t want to make her feel uncomfortable.

I already slipped up and broke my rules with Archer. Fuck, that was a good kiss. The memory of how he felt against me makes my cock give a little jump, which is really not what I need right now. Not while I’m holding Cora Whitlock’s dainty little foot in my hands, the soft skin of her legs tempting me.

Not once, in years of working in this career, have I ever broken my rules and gotten together with someone on a job, but now, I’m tempted to throw it all out the window for not one, but two people I can’t seem to stop fantasizing about.

Carefully, I set her foot down on the floor. Yeah. Distance is good. Touching is bad. Keep it together, Bear .

“Oh, um... thank you.” She moves a strand of hair behind her ear and tucks her feet

up under her as if she's embarrassed I was just rubbing them.

"Figured you could use a little relaxation after all that." I shrug indifferently, even though I'm feeling anything but indifferent toward Cora Whitlock. No, I'm feeling down right distracted and hard as a fucking rock. Not indifferent at all.

"I'll let you get ready for bed," I turn away from her as I stand, so she won't glimpse the hard-on pushing against my pants. No need to freak her out.

"Um, I don't think I'm going to... well, I'm pretty tired." She pulls back the covers. "I'm just going to sleep in this."

Huh, wonder what Dr. Slate would think of her sleeping in his shirt. I nod with a smile. Maybe the omega doesn't dislike the professor as much as she tries to pretend. Her creamy legs slip under the blankets, damp hair fanning over the pillow as she lays down.

I take a seat at the card table set up near the door.

"You're not going to sleep?" she asks.

"Nah, not tired yet." Truthfully, I'm exhausted. But there's no way I'm going to sleep when someone out there has taken an interest in our little omega. Sure, they might have saved her tonight, but the way they silently and efficiently killed that jackal just means they're dangerous. Not someone I want anywhere near Cora.

"Is the light going to bother you?" I ask.

"No, I'm fine. I had a roommate in college who always slept with the light on. I got used to it."

Since she's alright with the light, I take out my gun and start cleaning it. There's silence for a while, and I think she's asleep, until she whispers, "Bear?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"What... what do you think about scent matches? Do you think they're real?"

What's with everyone asking me about scent matches all of a sudden? Do I look like an expert or something? I've never met anyone who's scent matched. Not once. I chuckle softly. "Truthfully? I think it's kind of beautiful. The idea that there's someone out there who's perfectly suited for you, body and soul? Yeah, I like that thought." I snap the last piece back on my gun and tuck it into the holster. "But that kind of thing's rare. You can be happy with lots of people other than your scent match. Just comes down to what you choose."

"But..." There's a hesitancy in her voice that has me leaning forward, peering toward the dark corner of the tent where she's tucked under a mound of blankets. "What would you do if you found your scent match, and they weren't someone you... knew, or trusted? Would you pursue it? Or walk away?"

I scratch my beard. "Well, I can't say for sure. But I think I'd want to see what fate had up her sleeve, you know? I'd want to get to know them a bit first. Though, from what I hear, the bond is pretty intense and makes it hard, at the beginning, to do much other than... well, you know." I waggle my eyebrows at her to take the awkwardness out of that statement.

Even in the low light, I'm sure she's blushing.

"And what if... they aren't... um... good?"

This time I bark out a laugh. "In bed? Damn, Cora, hell if I know. I ain't never had

bad sex.”

“No!” She squeaks. “I didn’t mean it like that! I meant...well, what if they, like, murder people or steal or break the law in some way?”

That sobers me a little. “Huh, guess I never thought of that.” I lean back in my chair, staring up at the ceiling. “I’ll tell you, I think good and bad, right and wrong, are a lot more subjective than people think. I did some things during my time in the military that I’m still not sure were right or wrong, and I had to find a way to live with that. Does it make it any more right than the actions someone without orders may take?” I shake my head.

She sucks in a breath, and suddenly I’m seeing memories I don’t want to see.

I pinch my eyes shut. “Guess what I’m saying is, I’d give fate a chance. At least, I think I would.” It’s not lost on me that I’m giving this little omega the same advice I gave Dr. Slate...while she’s wearing his shirt to bed.

We’re both quiet for a long while after that. Finally, I lay down on the stiff cot, still awake, but resting. When she thinks I’m asleep, she creeps over to the table and picks up the bandana. The one she found this morning. It’s only after she tucks it under her face that her breathing finally becomes steady and she drifts off.

When I wake up, Bear is snoring softly. He's on his back with his mouth hanging open, the slightest bit of drool dampening his pillow. He's kind of adorable.

It's good that he's still asleep because I need a moment with my thoughts. I hate that I've still got that stupid bandana clutched in my hand. And I'm still wearing Roman's shirt. There's no scent coming off it—he's as careful as I am—but I still have the inexplicable urge to curl up with it and never give it back. Silly of me.

After slipping on a pair of shorts, I consider going to the bathrooms to finish changing, but I don't want Roman to catch me still wearing his shirt. And, if someone else sees, I don't want them getting the wrong impression. It's bad enough that Roman saw my boob last night. That was mortifying, but I'm even more embarrassed about how I clung to him like a needy little girl, a desperate omega. Goddess, it's like I played right into his stereotype of omegas.

So, I guess I'm changing in front of the security alpha. It's not like he's awake to see. I'll just be quick.

My heart races as I turn my back to Bear and unbutton Roman's shirt. I fumble with my bra and drop it on the floor. Bear rolls over as I'm picking it up, and I throw a look over my shoulder. He's still asleep. His breathing is even, and his eyes are closed.

What would he do if he woke up and caught me changing? He seems like a good guy, and he'd probably look away, but the thought of him watching makes my skin feel all

tight and pebbly. My nipples are hard points as I put on my bra.

Shit, I need to get my libido under control or I'll be playing into Roman's ideas about omegas even more. That's the last thing I want.

Once I'm dressed, I make my bed, tuck away my things, then grab the puzzle box and go in search of coffee. Caffeine is exactly what I need to shake off last night's ordeal and the inappropriate thoughts I keep having about my colleagues.

The mess tent's quiet, but it'll be a hive of activity soon, everyone trying to snag a bite to eat and get to work before the sun becomes unbearable. I'm just grateful Roman isn't here yet. I don't think I can handle seeing him right now without combusting from embarrassment.

After grabbing my coffee, I take a seat at a table near the door. I'll get food later. Right now, I want to enjoy my coffee and distract myself with the puzzle box. I'm certain the thing opens. I just can't figure out how, and I don't like not being able to figure something out.

"Mornin', sunshine."

I look up to see Bear with a plate full of pastries in his hand. He sets the plate in the middle of the table, then sits down across from me. "Help yourself. I know how you forget to eat when you're focused."

His attention to my eating habits surprises me, even as my heart flutters. "Um, thanks. Eating sometimes feels like an inconvenience when there's a problem to solve."

"Well, then, I'll have to make it more convenient for you." He taps the plate. "Eat up."

I take a blueberry muffin and break off a bite.

“Whatcha got there?” He tilts his head toward the puzzle box in front of me.

“I’ve been trying to figure this thing out,” I say, lifting it to show him. “It has to open somehow. My gut is telling me whatever’s inside is the clue we need to make a breakthrough.”

“A breakthrough with what?” He takes the box, examining the intricate circles that divide the top like a mosaic.

“I don’t know. Maybe finding Lunara’s temple.” I shrug, shoving another bite of food into my mouth. He looks up from the box as I swallow. “I’ve turned it and poked it and tried prying it apart, but I don’t want to break it.” Tapping my finger on the little circles, I add, “I think you might need to turn these in a certain order, but they seem to be stuck.”

“What’s this groove here?” Bear points at the oddly shaped rut in the metal on the opposite side from the circles .

“I don’t know.” I frown. “That’s been bugging me, too. It’s too deep to be an engraving, but the precise lines indicate it isn’t just damage sustained over time. If it’s a symbol, none of us recognize it, and I’ve tried sliding a pick along the edge to see if I could release a trigger mechanism, but no luck.”

We stare at the pattern a little longer until Bear huffs out a laugh. “It kinda looks like a twist lock. Not that they had those back then.”

I stare at him, smiling in excitement, nearly bouncing in place with new energy.

His chuckle dies, and he shifts in his seat, brows furrowed. “What?”

“Bear.” My mouth tips up into an excited grin. “I think this box has a missing part.”

“Archer! Archer!” Dr. Whitlock bursts into my tent like a desert storm. “Archer.” She says once more, her breathing labored like she ran here. Panic lifts the hairs on the back of my neck.

“What? What is it? Are you ok?” I rush out as several horrible scenarios play through my mind. We all heard about what happened with the bandana, and then the jackal last night. The woman seems to attract trouble, through no fault of her own, and the thought of anything happening to her makes my chest ache.

My panic cools when I see Cora holding up the artifact we uncovered a few days ago with a bright smile. A noise behind her draws my attention just in time to see Bear entering the tent. We haven’t spoken much since our kiss the other night. Not that we’re avoiding each other—okay, maybe I’m avoiding him a little. That kiss was mind blowing, and I know if I hang out with him alone again, I’ll probably beg for more, and he made it pretty clear it was a one time thing. I do still have some dignity.

But when our eyes meet, the look he gives me is so heated, I’m about ready to throw out what little pride I have and beg him right here in front of Cora. My skin feels tight, cock waking up, as I imagine her watching me with Bear. I’m not usually into exhibitionism, but with the way I want Cora, I don’t think I’d mind. Maybe she’d even join in. Thinking of the omega makes me realize she’s been talking to me this whole time. Shit, what is she saying?

“Bear, tell Archer what you told me. About the box.” She’s nearly bouncing on her toes in her excitement. I think a blush has risen on his cheeks at the attention, but it’s

too dim in the tent for me to truly tell. He sucks his teeth like he's embarrassed, but lifts a meaty finger to point at one side of the box.

"Uhhh, this groove right here. It uh—" He looks at Cora who nods at him encouragingly. "It looks like a twist lock union. You know, like what you'd use to connect a fire hose."

Bending down slightly to get a look at the artifact in the omega's palms, I see what he's talking about.

"Arch, I think we're missing part of this artifact," Cora says. "I'd bet three years of my salary that there's another piece somewhere, and that it has the interlocking counterpart to this one."

My eyes widen as her meaning sinks in. Immediately I stride past the two of them, heading for the main tent, yelling as I walk. "We need the maps!"

Moments later, all three of us are in the main structure, pouring over the large survey maps on the table, when a grumpy Dr. Slate arrives. "What the hell is going on? I heard shouting."

Pausing my perusal, I reply. "Cora thinks there's another piece to the puzzle box."

His eyes widen as he turns to the omega. "What makes you think that?"

She glances at Roman before quickly holding out the puzzle box. Their fingers graze each other, and she pulls her hand back like she touched a live wire. Her eyes widen briefly as she tucks her palms under her armpits, like she doesn't want to risk touching him again.

Once he starts examining it, she shows him the groove and recounts what she and

Bear just told me without meeting his eyes. When she's finished, both archeologists return to the table to scrutinize the maps.

"But where would it be..." Dr. Slate's rhetorical question trails off as his eyes bounce around the diagrams. The silence in the tent is heavy, the air thickened by the anticipation of discovery.

We all know that the other piece might not be at this site at all. The two parts could have been kept somewhere entirely separate from each other, hell, it could be lost to history for all we know, but if it's here... My heart races, blood rushing like a waterfall.

This is the part of archeology that makes all the hours in the hot sun worth it. Uncovering treasure, discovering secrets long hidden, solving puzzles.

After a few minutes, Cora straightens and addresses the group. "What do these markers look like to you?" She points along the edge of the dig site and we follow her finger.

"It's an omega," I gasp. "Well, not like the designation, like the actual symbol. Except it's missing a foot."

"A foot?" Bear questions.

"Yeah, see here? If you start where we found this artifact," I trail my finger along the map, "and follow the markers indicating where we found the bones and pottery, it loops up like the arch of the omega symbol." My finger stops at where the baseline should be, tapping the spot. "If this were the omega symbol, though, then there would be a foot on this side as well to complete it."

"Holy shit." Roman curses. "But why would the remains be shaped this way? It

doesn't make sense."

"If this was a ceremony site dedicated to the goddess Lunara, her devotees would do everything possible to feel closer to her and to manifest her power," Cora pipes up. "It stands to reason they would build it shaped like the symbol that is the embodiment of her essence."

Roman nods slowly as he processes her reasoning. "I guess we know where we need to dig next."

24

“ You shouldn’t be out here digging on your own,” I call down to Dr. Whitlock. She’s been a force to be reckoned with for the past two days since we figured out the puzzle box might have a missing piece. Right now, she’s in a pit ten feet deep, chiseling at the walls. Her cheeks are flushed from the heat and her hair has partially fallen loose from the neat bun she had it in at the start of the day.

She doesn’t respond to me.

Things have been awkward between us since the jackal incident. The whole camp has been on edge since then, but it’s been more intense with Cora and me. I don’t know if it’s just because I saw her breast or if it’s something else, but she’s been extra snappy with me—when she’s not avoiding me all together.

Not that I’ve been much better, but I’ve been trying.

My head has been a mess ever since that moment she clung to me for support. That, coupled with my conversation with Bear about omegas, has me questioning all my actions. It’s not right for me to punish Cora for her designation, something she has no control over. But working with her, getting to know her, it feels... terrifying.

But also... essential.

I’ve tried to be more accommodating, helpful. Apart from when she figured out the puzzle box was missing a piece and her excitement spilled over to all of us, she’s responded to each of my attempts with a coldness I would think was disdain if a deep

blush didn't also accompany it. I think she's embarrassed about what happened—that's got to be it—which doesn't sit well with me.

So I climb down into the pit with her and pick up a shovel.

Most of the team is gone for the weekend. They needed a break since they've been working non-stop, and we needed to replenish our supplies. I opted to stay the moment I heard Cora was staying. After everything that's happened, I didn't like the idea of her being here alone.

Bear stayed so his men could hit the town, too, and Archer stayed because he said he wanted to get caught up on cataloguing what we've found since digging in this new location, which isn't much. From the looks he's been throwing Bear lately, I wonder if his reason for staying has more to do with his obvious attraction to the security alpha than anything else. I also get the impression he doesn't like crowds and cities, which I understand. I'd rather be out here, too. But I wouldn't mind a day resting in my tent with a book.

Instead, I slot in beside Cora, and start digging, dumping the sand onto a tarp we'll later pull up and out of the hole. My elbow bumps hers.

"Do you mind?" she says with a prissy tone that makes me want to laugh. Despite my early assumptions, Dr. Cora Whitlock is anything but prissy. She's as fierce as this desert, but her mood shifts as easily as the sands.

"Should we talk about the elephant in the room?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"The fact that I saw your breast."

When she gasps, I smirk. Her hands fly to cover her chest as if I can see through the white t-shirt she's wearing. To be fair, it is thin, but sadly not thin enough to give me another peek at that vibrant hummingbird tattoo or her luscious nipples. Some women have tiny little areolas, pert and pale. But Cora's are deliciously big and dark. Bigger than a quarter, more the size of a small cookie. I lick my lips.

"It was an exceptionally beautiful breast, Dr. Whitlock. A perfect specimen real?—"

She slaps me. Palm landing hard enough to whip my head back and snap some sense into me. What the hell was I thinking?

Good thing I didn't confess I've been dreaming of that left breast every night. That one brief glimpse undid me, and I've wanted nothing more than to get a better look at that tattoo, trace it with the tip of my tongue, kiss my way up to suck her taut nipple into my mouth and?—

Shutting down that train of thought immediately. The last thing I need is to end up with a hard-on she'll most definitely notice .

"I deserved that." I rub at the sore spot and chuckle, trying to hide my own embarrassment. "Forgive me, Dr. Whitlock."

Nothing of what I told her was a lie—her breast was, by far, the most beautiful I've ever seen—but I shouldn't have said it aloud. This is exactly why I avoid working with omegas. Biology gets in the way, and suddenly all my brain power rushes to the wrong head.

"What the hell is your problem?!" She shoves at my chest, pushing me back against the dirt wall. "First, you complain about working with me. Then, you snap at me for every little thing, as if I'm responsible for all that's wrong in the world. Then , you pretend to be nice for a few days, but when I don't give you the attention you want,

you make a pass at me?” Her voice is near screeching by the end of her tirade.

“I wasn’t making a pass at you.”

“Oh, really? What was that then?”

“The truth.”

Her breath hitches as our eyes catch.

“What’s going on down there?” Archer says from the edge of the pit.

Bear stands next to him with a concerned expression. “Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine,” Cora snaps, turning back to her work.

I let out a nearly inaudible sigh and hit the back of my head against the dirt wall.

“You’re right. I’m being an ass.” She glares at me like that’s the understatement of the year. “Fine, yes, I’m being a huge ass.”

“He finally admits it,” Bear chuckles .

“Did you find anything?” Archer asks, trying to change the topic. Maybe the beta isn’t so bad after all. God knows I could use a little help right now so I don’t keep putting my foot in my mouth.

Turning away from all of them, I slam the shovel hard into the ground, harder than I should. Instead of the resistance I was expecting, the blade breaks straight through. I lose my grip on it, and the tool drops into a hole that seems to be getting bigger by the second as the sand attempts to escape through it. The grains beneath our feet shift, sucking downward and pulling us with it. Cora screams, and I grab hold of her with

one hand while clawing at the wall with the other, trying to keep us from being swallowed by the spontaneous vortex. I have no idea what's on the other side, if anything, and I don't really want to find out.

Bear is yelling above us, but all too quickly, everything is drowned out by sand.

25

From my vantage on the dune, I watch through binoculars as my little mate slaps the angry professor. My chuckle is a deep, satisfied rumble. She's got fire. I wish I was close enough to see the spark in her eyes. I have to admit, I may be a little jealous of the guy, I wouldn't mind her sexy ass slapping me around a little bit. Just thinking about it has my dick getting hard. Not that it takes much to fire up my arousal since I found my mate.

The security alpha and the nerdy beta are standing at the edge of the pit talking to my mate, but they're all too far away for me to hear. Is she giving them as much heat as she's giving the professor?

Before I can get lost in thoughts of my fiery mate, the earth seems to open, and she's slipping down, falling. No. No no no! I run.

Charging full speed down the dune, sand kicking up behind me, her friends' yelling reaches me but the words don't register. There's a ringing in my ears. The pound of my heart, faster than my feet. I need to get to her.

Fuck, why am I so far away? I'm never leaving her side again.

Now on level ground, I can't see her anymore, which only increases my panic. The big guy they call Bear is grabbing for the beta who's sliding down, twisting like a sand serpent, trying to claw his way to more solid footing. They clasp forearms and Bear pulls the smaller man up, falling backward as he lands on his chest, but the reprieve is short-lived. The unsteady ground gives out, sucking them toward the hole

like sand in an hourglass. Down, down, down.

Faster. I need to be faster . Someone has to save her! How long has it been since she fell? The sand is still sliding and tilting.

Don't let me be too late. Please, goddess above and whatever powers exist, don't let me be too late.

Without hesitation, I charge straight for the pit, and dive.

26

We're going to die.

Humans have an innate reaction when faced with danger, which must be why my body operates on autopilot as I gulp in a huge breath of air, sealing my eyes and mouth as the sand covers us completely.

Before I can parse what's truly happening, the suction feeling turns into a freefall, then an abrupt halt. A strained grunt comes from below me, and I realize I'm laying on top of Bear, who is in turn laying on top of a large sand mound. We weren't in this position as we were falling, so the only thing I can think is that he must have spun us so he would take the brunt of the fall.

My weight can't be helping after he got the wind knocked out of him, so I try to scramble up, only to have his large hand grip the back of my neck, stopping me. His eyes scan my body before searching my face. He must be satisfied that I'm fine enough, because he lets me go .

"Nice of you to join the party." We both whip toward Roman, who apparently has lost his ever-loving mind if he thinks now is a good time to joke.

"Did you hit your head in the fall?" Cora's retort tells me she also thinks his behavior is out of character. That, or she still isn't over their little spat that caused this whole thing.

Bear and I sit up, then carefully slide down to the stone floor where Roman and Cora

are. We're in some kind of room, or hallway, it's hard to tell with only the dim light from the hole above us.

"Are you guys ok?" Bear asks.

Before any of us can answer, someone else comes flying through the hole we just fell through. He tucks and rolls down the mound of sand like he's some kind of athlete, then pops back up to his feet. His fall dislodged even more sand. It's pouring down, the whole ceiling collapsing.

"Run!" He yells, charging toward Cora and grabbing her hand while pulling a flashlight off his belt.

During a psychology class in undergrad, we learned about the four Fs: fight, flight, fawn, and freeze. I always thought I fell into the flight or fawn categories, but apparently I have never faced real danger. Turns out, I freeze.

I stand there gaping as stones start to fall from the ceiling, blocking out the light. The stranger runs past, dragging Cora with him. Roman's right behind them, but I can't move.

A meaty hand grips the neck of my shirt and spins me away from the avalanche, nearly throwing me forward.

"Here!" the strange man shouts, turning out of sight and taking the small light with him. Bear keeps his hand on my neck as we run, and it's the only thing that keeps me grounded to the moment.

Once we turn, everyone stops, seemingly safe under a heavy archway. We're all bent over, coughing from the plum of dust, catching our breath. The small light from the stranger's flashlight is cast downward, illuminating nothing more than the stone floor,

all the sunlight gone.

My breath comes in stuttered gasps.

“Everyone... okay?” Bear asks for the second time.

“Yes?” Cora answers like she isn’t sure. “But...” She pulls a penlight from the little bag strapped across her body and points it back the way we came. Wherever we are, there’s no chance of getting back out that way.

We’re trapped.

Bear asks the question that’s on everyone’s mind. “Where the fuck are we?”

“I...I think we’re in Lunara’s temple.” Cora looks around and grimaces. “I guess we found it. Yay?”

We all stare at her in shock, and she must feel the need to fill the silence because she keeps going. “And hey! We didn’t die! Yay for not dying!”

Roman snorts out a laugh, hanging his head and shaking it back and forth. “Thanks, girl scout. Hooray for not dying. Now what the fuck do we do?”

“Well, we really only have one choice.” The stranger speaks for the first time since he told us to run, and we all turn to look at him. He’s got his back to us, shining the flashlight away from the cave in, pointing toward what looks to be a long hallway. Torches line the walls at periodic intervals, interspersed with carvings I would love to study, but right now, I’m too busy taking in the new man before us.

The four of us from the dig site share looks between ourselves. None of us have ever seen this man before, and he smells... my sense of smell isn’t as strong as an alphas,

but is that... black licorice?

Suddenly, Roman lunges, grabbing the new guy by the neck, and slamming him against the stone wall with a growl. “Who the fuck are you?!”

The stalker's pulse throbs beneath my palm, but I don't dare let up my hold on him. It was weird enough that he appeared from out of nowhere, diving into the cave-in like he was fucking Indiana Jones or some shit. But then I got a whiff of him and saw red.

This is who was in Cora's tent, the owner of the bandana that was left in her damn bed. His black licorice smell is so unique and potent, it's unmistakable. A growl leaves my throat when he doesn't answer.

“ Answer me! ” Even though I barked the command, the alpha just raises one eyebrow and flashes his eyes down to where my hand grips his neck.

Cora's small, delicate fingers land on my forearm. “Roman. I don't think he can talk while you're cutting off his air supply.”

Bear steps forward, gently pulling her behind him as I reluctantly loosen my grip. Not completely, but enough that he can speak if he wants to. And he better want to .

He clears his throat and hits Cora with an adoring smile. “Goddess, you're so beautiful.”

She sucks in a breath and pushes in tighter to Bear. I slam the stranger back into the wall again. “Don't speak to her! Don't even look at her, asshole. Answer. Me.”

The interloper sighs as if I've laid the heaviest burden on him. “Fine. My name is Jax

Whitlock, treasure hunter extraordinaire, at your service.” He says that last part to Cora despite my orders.

“Whitlock? Are you related to Cora?” Archer asks.

“Not yet. But I always planned on takin’ my mate’s name, so I figured why not start now?”

Mate? This psycho thinks he’s Cora’s mate? If that were true, Cora would have said something when she scented that bandana. Instead, she seemed fearful of it.

When I turn to see how she’s responding to all of this, she’s staring at this Jax guy with wide eyes.

“Cora, what does he mean, ‘mate’ ?” I ask, barely avoiding a growl.

Her guilty eyes lock with mine, and it’s suddenly clear Jax is telling the truth. A heavy weight settles in my stomach, a chill working up my spine. My hand flexes on his throat.

“I...I think he’s my mate.” Cora stammers. “That’s why I was so freaked out over the bandana. Well, that and the whole stalking and trespassing thing.”

“What’s a little light stalking between mates? It’s only because I’m obsessed with you.” The way Jax says that so nonchalantly has my mouth gaping. Is he for real? Did he just fess up to stalking her like it was a good thing ?

“What do you want us to do with him, Cora?” Bear asks her gently.

“I think it’s safe to let him go? I mean, we’re all trapped here together, and he was in my tent already and didn’t hurt me, so...” She trails off with a shrug.

Reluctantly, I comply, removing my hand from the newcomer and stepping back to join Bear. Jax rubs his throat and smiles, swaying almost giddily even after I nearly choked him to death.

Cora studies him like he's a puzzle she can't figure out, then her eyes widen. "Wait, were you the one who killed the jackal?"

Jax takes off his cowboy hat in a swooping motion and gives her a bow. What. A. Jackass.

To my utter surprise, Cora steps forward and kisses his cheek. "Thank you."

What the fuck? "You're thanking him? He's stalking you!"

This just proves how illogical people become around a scent match.

"He saved my life." Her eyes glint with fire in the low light. "Which is more than you can say. You know better than to pound a shovel down deep like that, and?—"

"Hey, let's not pass blame." Bear steps between me and the little hellcat. "We're here now. Nothing we can do about the past."

Archer suddenly speaks up. "When you say treasure hunter... what exactly does that mean?"

"It means I hunt treasure." Jax chirps in response. This fuckin' guy. I can't tell if he's trying to mess with us, or if he really is this out of touch. My fists clench. We don't have time for games. We're currently stuck underground with no supplies and no way out. The whole fucking team is gone for another two days. No one's coming for us anytime soon.

“So, if you’re used to exploring, does that mean you have something useful in that backpack?” Archer asks Jax. “Like maybe a shovel or a phone?”

Jax pulls a satellite phone out of the side pocket on his backpack. “Doubt it’ll work down here.” We all hold our breaths while he looks at it. “Nah, no service.”

“Anyone else?” Archer asks.

My phone is back in my tent, since I don’t like keeping it out in the heat and the dirt. Bear shakes his head. Cora pulls her phone out of the little bag she always keeps on her. But I know it’s a futile hope. She immediately shakes her head, looks a little deflated. “I forgot to charge it.”

I have the sudden urge to comfort her, but I manage to get it under control before I do something reckless like hug her. Archer gives her a soft smile.

“We can’t just wait here,” Bear says.

Cora wanders a few steps away, her little pen light trailing the dirty stone wall. Fuck, this is no place for an omega.

“Does anyone have a lighter?” She asks.

“I do.” Jax jumps into action faster than I’ve ever seen a man move.

He pulls a lighter out of his pack and runs for her, but I stop him with a hand on his chest. “Don’t go anywhere near her.”

The smirk he gives me is cocky as hell. “She’s my mate.” He leans forward. “I’m gonna get a lot closer to her than this.”

“Would you two stop it?” Cora snips from somewhere behind me. “I need that lighter.”

I rip it from Jax’s hand and take it to her. She struggles the first couple tries, the flint sparking but not igniting. I’m about to step in and help her when she gets it, and the flame flickers to life. Determined, she reaches up toward a torch on the wall. She’s about two feet too short, but it doesn’t stop her from trying. Of course Cora Whitlock won’t ask for help.

When I take the lighter from her, I have to work to ignore the way my skin prickles as my fingers brush against hers. The moment the torch lights, a chain reaction occurs that doesn’t make any sense. One after another, torches blaze to life until the long corridor is lit by flickering flames.

“H-how—?” Cora’s gasp draws my attention to her enamored face. Childlike wonder radiates from her eyes, her cheeks soft under the bright torchlight. There’s something more there, though. Something wild. She may be in awe of what she’s seeing, but she doesn’t realize she’s just as commanding as the newly lit landscape before us.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers.

“Not as beautiful as you, little mate,” Jax swoops in beside her, breaking the moment. Or rather, tries to. I step between them, shouldering him out of the way.

Archer studies the torch on the wall, shaking his head before stepping back. It’s clear he can’t figure out the mechanism that make all the torches light. Currently, I’m more concerned about getting out of here than solving that mystery.

“What do we do now?” I ask.

“If this is the temple, like we suspect, there’s got to be a way out, stairs that lead up to

the surface or something, right?” Archer speculates.

If there weren’t so many bones above us, I might argue that this could have been the top floor of the temple before sand covered everything. All the historical texts hypothesize that Lunara’s temple was several levels, though none could confirm how many. But the lack of windows, the bones—the hypothesised orgy—and the structure of the temple surrounding us, indicate it was always underground. Which makes sense, omegas often seek closed in areas for comfort or safety, and Lunara’s sacred animal was the jackal, an animal that’s been known to burrow.

Archer’s probably right, there has to be an entrance. We just have to find it.

“Okay, so we find the original way in, and we’ll find our way out.” Bear rubs his hands together.

“Unless it’s buried in sand.” I tip my head back toward the cave-in we narrowly escaped.

“Do you have a shovel in there?” Archer asks Jax again.

“Nah, but I got enough food to get us through a few days. If no one minds protein bars.”

“A few days?” Cora gasps. “We can’t stay down here for a few days.”

“Place looks big.” Jax stares at the endless corridor that curves slightly to the left. “Might take a while to find our way out.” He almost looks excited by the prospect.

“And what if the original entrance was back there?” I point to the caved-in passageway we just escaped.

“Let’s hope it’s not,” Cora says quietly.

“Well, we best get walking, then.” Bear marches forward, taking the lead.

If it’s a choice between standing here next to Jax or following Bear, I’m choosing Bear. Even if I’m not thrilled by what may lie ahead.

This is the discovery of a lifetime. The walls are stone, and tapestries hang in-between each torch—or the remains of them. Though this temple has been hidden away, nothing is untouched by time. Colors fade, threads fall apart, but what's left is still breathtaking. And more well preserved than it should be.

The panels tell us stories of what life was like thousands of years ago, what this place really means. I wish I had time to study each and every one, but that will have to wait, I guess.

The hallway is wide enough that we can all walk side-by-side, but we don't. Bear and Archer take the lead, with Roman and I a few paces behind them. Jax keeps attempting to pull up beside me, but every time he does, Roman growls at him, and he begrudgingly falls back.

"Is that really necessary?" I hiss under my breath.

"Necessary? The man should be in handcuffs, not taking a stroll by your side." Roman barely makes an effort to stay quiet.

"Do you have a scent match, Roman?"

He scoffs as if it's the most ridiculous idea he's ever heard, and I realize it's a sound he hasn't made toward me in a few days. Maybe we really were getting somewhere as colleagues, and maybe even friends. Today has certainly undone any of that progress.

“If you don’t have a scent match, then you can’t understand what it’s like. I honestly...” How do I explain it? I mean, I have that bandana tucked in the small bag slung over my shoulder right now, right beside the puzzle box. I haven’t been able to let either of those two things out of my possession. It’s not hard to imagine why Jax would have “stalked” me. I might have done the same if I was the one who knew about him.

There’s only one thing I don’t understand, and it makes my heart twist. Why didn’t he introduce himself? He could have come up to the camp during the day and just... I try to imagine it and fail. No, I guess he couldn’t have done that. If Roman’s hostility is any indicator, an entire camp of people at a closed dig site certainly wouldn’t have let him get past the first tent, much less to me. I sigh, casting a glance over my shoulder at the man in question.

He gives me a crooked smile that’s oddly both playful and seductive. He’s handsome, in a rugged, unkempt kind of way. Wild. That’s the word to describe him.

Something in my core tightens, skin tingling. Would he unleash some of that wildness with me? Something tells me I may like it if he did .

The thought is immediately followed by another, much less pleasant one. Will he still want me once he knows I’m not like other omegas? What alpha would want an omega they can’t bond, even if they’re a scent match?

Turning my attention back to the path ahead, I quicken my steps. All the more reason to discover what secrets this temple holds. If there’s any chance the accounts of Lunara’s relic are true?—

“What’s it like?” Roman whispers, cutting off my thoughts.

“What’s what like?”

He hesitates, his Adam's apple bobbing down his throat. "What's it like having a scent match?" His voice shakes, all of his normal bravado gone.

"Um... I'm not sure I can say. It's pretty new. But... It's not just that I find the scent appealing. There's a pull, an impulse, deep in my gut. My instincts say he's safe."

He snorts, and I glare at him.

I think for a moment, trying to put it into words. "It's like coming home after years away. The town may have stores you've never seen, you may have new neighbors where your best friend used to live, but there's already a level of comfort and recognition when you arrive. You can relax knowing that this is your town, but you're still excited to learn its nuances all over again."

He stares at me in a way that makes it clear he doesn't understand. I'm not sure I understand myself.

When I just shrug, he strides off to join Bear and Archer.

The second Roman is two steps ahead of me, Jax is at my side and taking my hand. Roman doesn't stop him, so maybe I got through to him a little after all.

I give Jax a soft smile before removing my hand from his. No matter how natural it feels to be around him, he's still a stranger.

He looks a little hurt as he takes off his cowboy hat and spins it on the tip of his finger like a rodeo performer. "Sorry. It's just..."

"Yeah, I get it." The urge to touch him is like the draw of lightning seeking a rod. But what do I know about him, really? It's uncommon for scent matches to reject each other, but it happens. They aren't always a perfect fit. And this man is, by his own

admission, a thief and a stalker. I can overlook the stalker part, but can I overlook the fact that he makes a living breaking the law?

“So, you...” How do I even ask this? “Um, steal for a living?”

“I research artifacts, hunt treasure, and rob graves, little mate. It’s not so different from what you do. I just do it for someone who can pay more.” He grins and winks.

“And you’re... successful at it?” Right, ‘cause that’s the question I should be asking him right now. But, I’m curious. I mean, he may look a bit unpolished, with his cowboy hat and his unbuttoned shirt revealing his bare, chiseled chest, but his jeans are designer, and his boots and backpack are high-quality.

“Not successful enough to give you what you deserve.” He looks away and wanders over to one of the tattered tapestries on the wall, or what’s left of it. His fingers graze the worn threads. “You don’t like it, do you?”

“Don’t like what?”

“What I do. It’s not exactly an upstanding profession.”

“It’s an ancient one, though. I mean, grave robbers have been around as long as there have been graves.” Why am I defending him? “So have stories about the dangers and spiritual consequences of robbing graves. Most civilizations consider it disrespectful to the dead at best, and sometimes far more taboo than that. There are stories of hauntings and?—”

He stops my rambling with a finger to my lips. Beneath the sweat and dirt of his calloused finger, the smell of absinthe peeks through, making my head spin.

“Shhh, little mate. Don’t worry. I won’t be doing this anymore. This was always

going to be my last job.” His forefinger drags down my lips, tugging the bottom one a little. “But I never expected to find a treasure as priceless as you.”

I stare at him, breathless and shivering. A cramp twists my stomach, but it eases the moment his hands come to my shoulders.

“You’re cold.” He rubs my arms.

I shake my head. Definitely not cold, despite how my body is shivering. This is ridiculous. I am more than my biology, and this man isn’t my type. Nothing like my type. Roman is more the type of alpha I always pictured myself with, in the few moments when I allowed myself to picture being with an alpha at all, when I tried to pretend an alpha might want me.

Except Roman definitely doesn’t want me.

And Jax does.

He pulls me into his warm body, and like an addict, I let him, huffing in deep drags of his intoxicating scent.

“Fuck.” Roman’s voice booms in the long hallway.

I jump away from Jax.

“We might have a problem,” Archer calls.

As I hurry to put distance between myself and Jax, and to see what the problem is, Jax takes off his button up and drapes it over my shoulders. I should give it back, but the closer we get to the others, the more of a draft there is, making me wish I’d worn pants instead of shorts. It feels like the temperature has dropped a few degrees, and

goosebumps rise on my skin. That's the only reason I keep Jax's shirt. Not because it smells so good. Or because his bare chest looks so delicious. Nope. Definitely has nothing to do with that.

The crevasse blocking our path stretches across the entire hallway. There's a thin rim of floor still intact against the right wall, but that's it. It's pitch black, so I can't see the bottom, but there's at least ten feet between this side and the other. Reminds me of the canyons near where I did my basic training. My buddies and I used to climb those all the time, but that was with full gear and supplies.

Cora gasps when she sees it, and Roman curses again.

"What do we do now?" Archer asks, looking at me. It warms something inside me to have him defer to me, like I'm already his alpha. We've been more cautious with each other since our kiss, but there's no way I'm letting this beta get away from me. Once this job is over, I'm making him mine.

But first things first. We gotta get out of here.

While I'm still figuring out how to answer, Jax pulls a torch from the wall and tosses it into the pit. It makes a thump as it lands sooner than I expected. We all peer over the edge.

Cora's beside me, and the thought of her leaning over a drop like that has me instantly grabbing her waist and holding her steady. Fuck, I'd love for her to be mine, too. She feels so right tucked against me.

"There's a level below this." Her voice is an awed whisper.

I've never been much into history or all that shit, but seeing the way she lights up at each new discovery makes me wish I knew more about it. My gaze lands on Archer behind her, and that feeling only solidifies. He looks like a kid in a candy store.

"Well, this is definitely Lunara's temple," Jax says, as if any of us still had any doubt.

The crevasse only allows for so much visibility, but it seems as if the level below may be a twin to this one. Underneath a pile of rubble, the same stone floor runs in a slightly curved shape that matches what should theoretically have been right in front of us. There's a symbol on the floor near the edge of the lit area. If the torch had landed anywhere different, I wouldn't have seen it.

"What's that mean?" I point to it.

"That's Lunara's rune," Cora says, still staring in amazement.

"I've never heard of any rune specific to Lunara, and I've been studying antiquities for a decade," Roman says.

"Just because you've never heard of it doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Archer says. "History is vast, and you can't be an expert in all of it." Archer turns from Roman to address Cora in a much warmer tone. "Can you explain it to us? The rune?"

Her whole face lights up, the way it always does when she's excited. "There, in the middle, is the omega symbol. Which you all should recognize, of course. But those," Cora gestures in a circle around the symbol to four evenly-spaced hieroglyphs, "represent Lunara's four alphas. Omegas were always meant to be the center of the pack, to balance out their alphas' natures. Unlike today, where omegas are seen as fragile and weak, at one time in history alphas were seen as the weaker sex. They needed their pack and omega or they would go feral." She shudders at the thought. "Omegas may have been physically smaller, but they held all the power. In fact,

many packs didn't have a pack alpha at all, opting instead for the omega to lead. I've only seen this mark a few times in all my research."

"Well, guess we're going down." Jax takes off his backpack and starts rooting around inside it.

"We can't go down," Roman says. "That's the opposite direction from where we want to go. We need to get back to the surface."

"Can't cross that." Jax jerks his head at the hole in the floor without looking up from his pack.

"We could shimmy across that ledge." I point to the one side that has the scantest few inches of floor still attached.

Jax looks up, studies it, looks around the rest of the room, then goes back to his bag. "Nope. Not a good idea." He pulls out a neatly wrapped bundle of rope .

"Can't we use the rope to get across the crevice?" Cora asks.

Jax smiles at her. "You wanna play Jane to my Tarzan, little mate?" He waggles his brows at her playfully. "Even if we could get it attached to something on both sides of the crevice, it'd be risky. You ever try to climb the rope in gym class?"

She looks at him, her head cocked to the side. "I mean, yeah?"

"You ever make it to the top?" He finishes. Cora sighs when his point hits home. It may look cool and easy in the movies, but swinging on a thin rope over a huge gap really isn't the smartest idea.

"Maybe we should stay here," Roman says. "Start digging, or wait for the team to get

back and realize something happened. Going down isn't going to help us."

"I dunno, professor. Going down always helps me." Jax wiggles his eyebrows at Roman. "C'mon, aren't you curious? I would think an archeologist would be more excited about this?" Jax walks over to the wall and tugs on a tapestry hook. Surprisingly, it doesn't budge.

"I'm a little busy worrying about us dying down here. I'll save my excitement for when we're safely back on the surface." Roman replies.

Jax tugs harder on the hook, even going so far as to relax his knees to test its ability to hold his weight. The metal ring doesn't budge. Well, that's something in our favor. He ties the rope to the ring in a clove hitch, a knot I recognize will hold. Whoever this guy is, I'm pretty sure he's gonna save our asses multiple times before this is all over

"Give it to me." I hold out my hand. Jax hesitates, but hands me the other end of the rope. "If one of us can get across the ledge and attach the rope on the other side, then the others can use the rope as a sort of railing to get across."

Jax raises his eyebrows. "And you're gonna be the one to go across?"

"No way," Archer speaks up, ripping the rope from my grip. "Think this through, Bear. You're the biggest one here. There's no way that ledge will hold you up." He looks genuinely concerned, and it makes something in my chest swell.

"I should do it." Cora steps a little closer to the edge, testing the rim with one toe.

"Oh, no you don't." Roman wraps both arms around her and pulls her a good five feet away from the hole.

“Fuck, no,” Jax says, agreeing with Roman for the first time. The two share a brief nod.

“Yeah, sorry, honey.” I join them. “There’s not a soul here who’s going to be okay with you walking across there on your own, especially with no safety harness in place.”

“Don’t patronize me just because I’m a woman. Or is it because I’m an omega? Either way, I can do this. It’s the most logical course of action. I weigh the least, so I can get across with the rope, tie it to something, and then the rest of you can use it to get?—”

At the clatter of falling rock, my head swings around to take in a sight that makes my heart stop. Archer is halfway across the crevasse, sidestepping with his back pressed against the wall.

I want to yell at him, to rage at his stupidity, but I can’t breathe. It’s like someone sucked all the oxygen out of my lungs and then punched me in the gut. We all must feel the magnitude of the risk he’s taking, because the space is suddenly dead quiet.

His foot edges out, then slowly his weight shifts. His footing holds. So he does it again.

Cora is clinging to Roman now, Jax crowding in close on her other side. I take a step toward the edge, closer to Archer. But what can I do? He’s too far to reach, already committed.

“Don’t you dare fucking die,” I whisper, voice scratching across my throat.

He chuckles nervously and more rocks fall. He sucks in a breath. Cora’s gasp is half sob.

“No laughing. Stay focused,” I command in the same voice I used to use when training cadets.

Archer nods solemnly and sets his gaze on the other side. He should have gone with his belly to the wall. That would have kept him from looking down, and he could find handholds in the stone to help support his weight. But it’s too late now. Turning around would be even more dangerous. At least, he had the foresight to tie the rope around his chest, right under his underarms.

“You’ve got this.” My attempt at a reassuring tone wobbles. “You’re almost there.”

Just a few more steps.

His foot shuffles out to the side, toes brushing sand that falls down into the depths below. He eases a little further.

Then the rest of the floor gives out.

The big alpha they call Bear lunges for the pit like he's gonna throw himself after the little beta, but I toss myself in his path and knock him to the ground. Cora wouldn't like it if the big guy went over. I can tell he's hers, even if he doesn't know it yet. The grump, too, but I'd rather keep her in denial about that one a bit longer. Man needs to get his head out of his ass.

The beta's scream stops abruptly.

"Get off me!" Bear roars and throws me to the side. I barely stop myself from rolling over the edge.

"Some thanks," I mutter, standing and dusting off my jeans. "I just saved your life."

"Archer!" Bear's kneeling at the edge of the pit, peering over the side, completely ignoring me. Cora, Roman, and I crouch around him.

The torch I threw in earlier is still burning, but not as bright. The rope dangles a few inches off the ground. Archer isn't there. Shit. The knot he tied around his chest must not have held. That rope is top-of-the-line, it wouldn't have snapped, and the little beta may not know what knots to use. The question is, did it happen before he hit the ground or earlier? Hopefully it slowed his fall a little before it gave out.

"There!" Cora points to a shoe near the edge of the ring of light cast by the torch. "He must have rolled over there."

“Is... he alive?” Roman asks.

None of us answer. No use giving the good professor false hope. Bear rips off his shirt, wraps the fabric around his hands, grabs the rope, tugs, then throws himself over the edge. Roman and Cora gape at him like cute little fish.

It’s a pretty badass move, and I respect him for it, but the massive man is sliding faster than advisable. Really hope he doesn’t break anything. That would make things a lot harder. At least we know the rope will hold the rest of us if it can suspend his weight. I’ll send Cora down next, before the rope takes any more wear.

Bear lands with a loud thud and groans. Too much momentum. Knew it. He’s up a second later, though, and running toward the prone beta.

Cora reaches for me. My mate’s soft hands are sweaty with worry. I bring her fingers to my lips and kiss the inside of her palm. I hold my breath. Pretty sure the beta might be ours, too. If he lives.

Cora looks over at me, fat tears in her eyes. “Is he gonna be okay?”

“He’s gonna be fine,” Roman says, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

I’m grateful he lies for us both. I’ve never been good at that. Comforting people. Telling them what they want to hear when I don’t know if it’s true.

“Bear’s a medic,” Roman whispers, his lips brushing her hair. “He’s the best person to be down there right now.”

“B-but what if—” Her voice breaks into a sob.

“Shhh, hummingbird.” Roman holds her tighter, and smooths a hand down her back.

I take the opportunity to scoot closer, and he doesn't stop me for once. Admittedly, I'm not the biggest fan of the professor, but I can appreciate this softer side of him.

Cora's nostrils flare, and then she's curling into me, burying her face in my chest. My eyes meet Roman's over her head, curious if he's going to act the possessive ape and keep her from me again.

He sighs, gives me a curt nod, and lets me wrap my arms around her, but he doesn't move away, leaving our arms to rest directly beside each other.

The silence is deafening as we strain to hear an update from Bear. Silent tears roll down my mate's cheeks, dampening my skin. As much as I want to fix this for her immediately, I can't. In a past life, before her, I may have cowboyed myself into the crevasse like Bear did, adrenaline and excitement running through my veins. Now, though, I'll be damned if I'm gonna leave my girl alone up here with just the grumpy professor to protect her. Even if he is acting like less of a dick right now.

No. All we can do now is wait.

31

Strong arms engulf me and, even though my body aches in more places than I can count, everything feels right. The faint smell of black pepper with a hint of honey wraps me in its embrace, and somehow I know my alpha is the source. My alpha. Bear .

“Archer.” Bear groans against my neck, his nose running along my jaw. “Archer.” Mmm yes, alpha, I’m right here.

“Archer!”

Warmth is ripped away and replaced with something cold and hard as I open my eyes to take in my surroundings. Everything comes rushing back, and I remember sneaking off while the group was arguing over who would attempt to cross the chasm. Then the heartstopping moment when what was left of the floor gave out. Everything after that is a blur, but with the tightness in my chest and the ache in my skull, I can guess what happened. I fell. Hit my head and got the wind knocked out of me.

A strangled gasp leaves my chest as I struggle to take a full breath. Suddenly, Bear is in my line of sight, slightly blurry.

When I push to sit up, he stops me with a hand on my sternum. “Archer, thank fuck, baby. I thought I’d lost you. Don’t you dare move until I can make sure your neck is ok.”

Baby . That's a new one, but I'm not complaining. Hearing the burly alpha freely call me baby warms something in my chest. Though that could also be the oxygen returning to my lungs.

“My... glasses?” I pat the ground around me, but before I can worry too much about the missing lenses, Bear slides the frames onto my face. Thank Lunara, they didn't break in the fall.

When I look up through the smudged glass, Bear's beautiful face is etched with concern. He runs his hands along my body, gently but efficiently feeling for any injuries, his medic training kicking in on autopilot. His confidence in his skills and ability to perform under extreme pressure is a huge turn on. I've always had a competence kink.

Rough fingertips press along either side of my neck before gently tilting it right, then left. I groan but it doesn't feel too bad. Satisfied I'm not immediately dying, Bear stands, and I immediately miss his warmth. He begins to turn but then points at me. “Don't. Fucking. Move.”

“Yes, alpha. ”

Heat flares in his eyes at the term, but instead of doing anything about it, he yells up through the hole. “Throw me Cora's penlight!”

The omega in question yells back. “Oh my god, Bear. Is Archer alive? Is he okay? Did he break anything? Are you okay? Is he?—”

Bear cuts off her rambling. “Yes! No. Wait, God damn it. Just throw me the damn penlight so I can see if he has a concussion!” Something falls from above. Bear catches it easily and returns to my side. “Ok, baby, I'm gonna help you sit up, then I want you to look at me.” Once I'm upright, he methodically goes through the

concussion check, shining the penlight into my eyes and checking my pupils. When he's satisfied, he clicks off the light, and suddenly his lips are on mine.

He grips the back of my neck, pulling me into him as he devours me. This is completely different from our last kiss, but no less intense.

"Don't you ever do that to me again, Archer," he gasps between kisses. "That was stupid," another kiss, "and brave," he kisses me again, "and so fucking stupid."

His movements turn deep, and passionate, his tongue forcing entry past my lips to swipe along mine. I moan and push into him, wanting more, the adrenaline in my body heightening my arousal. It ends far too soon when Bear pulls back and rests his forehead against mine.

"If you weren't hurt, I'd spank the hell out of you for risking your life like that." He's kidding. I think. Before I can dwell on that thought, Bear pulls away and stands, walking back to the entrance in the ceiling. "He's ok! "

Relieved murmurs follow his proclamation, though I can't make out exactly what they're saying.

While Bear is occupied with the others, I take a moment to observe my new surroundings. There are no torches on the walls down here, but there's a dim light coming from the right. A bluish glow that's blocked by thick lines of something. Vines maybe? They're still too far away to tell. The hall to my left is too dark to see anything at all.

"I'm sending Cora next," Jax hollers. "I'll rig up a belay system so I can lower her down to you." Sounds of protest come from the omega, but before long, I hear Jax yell again. "Okay, ready, Bear? Here she comes."

Dainty feet appear first, followed by smooth legs and her shapely ass, now secured in a makeshift harness Jax must have whipped up. Slowly, she lowers until she's within Bear's reach and he grips her tight, setting her on the floor before quickly undoing the rope and tugging on it twice to signal to Jax.

Cora runs to me as soon as she's free of the rope, nearly slamming into me until she remembers I may be hurt. She pulls back, but only an inch or two, and straightens my glasses for me before bringing her hands to my shoulders and studying my face. She looks so pretty here in the low light of the one flickering torch.

"I'm alright, sweetheart." I brush her hair out of her face.

"Truly? Are you sure? I was so worried about you. I thought—" Her breath hitches and she hiccups a sob.

I'm so surprised by her reaction that I lean forward and kiss a tear from her cheek before I can think better of it. My lips linger, the salty taste of her is mixed with something lighter, fresher, almost botanical. But it's so faint, I might be imagining it. She tilts her head and our eyes meet, our breaths mingling. Her pretty pink tongue wets her lips. My heart beat picks up. I really want to kiss her, but I doubt she'd want that. Would she?

A thump behind us breaks the moment.

"You alright?" Roman calls as his feet hit the floor.

Cora backs away from me, and I clear my throat. "Yep."

Seconds later, Jax belays himself down like a pro, landing with a beaming grin as if being stuck down here is the best thing that's ever happened to him..

Yeah. He's a psycho. A useful psycho, but a psycho nonetheless.

32

“ E veryone alive?” Jax looks around at all of us like he’s taking stock of the situation.

“Yeah, I think so,” I reply, still feeling a little shaky after almost losing Archer and the intense way he was just looking at me. When he kissed my cheek, it woke up the sweetest butterflies in my belly.

Jax seems content with my answer, because he turns back to the rope, fiddling with it to get it down off the tapestry hook. When it finally gives way, it falls straight toward him, and he has to cover his head to avoid getting whipped in the face.

I snort, then quickly bite my lip to stop it. But I can’t hold it in when Jax begins to flail, trying to untangle himself from the rope. A laugh forces its way out of me, and it seems to be contagious. Bear raises his eyebrows as he chuckles, watching the entertainment. Roman covers his eyes and sighs. Archer, being the kind man he is, scrambles to his feet to help Jax .

He shouldn’t be the only one helping, not after what he just went through, so I join him, laughing the whole time, and the three of us quickly get Jax extracted from the rope monster, tossing it on the ground.

Jax looks up at me, shrugging his shoulders and smiling. “I’d suffer a hundred more rope fiascos to make you laugh like that, little mate.” He scowls at the two alphas behind me, pointing at each in turn. “You two, however. See if I come to your aid the next time you get yourselves into trouble. Archer here is the only one I’m coming to

save other than my omega.” He swings one arm around Archer’s shoulders and the other around mine, guiding us back toward the group. “Speaking of which,” Jax sets his pack on the ground, unzips it, then digs through it until he finds a steel bottle, “Here, sweet beta. Sit. You too, omega.”

Archer hesitantly obeys the command, sitting on a stone that clearly fell from the ceiling above. I shuffle over, plopping on the ground next to him.

Jax hands Archer the bottle. “Drink. It’s water. You probably need it.”

Archer unscrews the cap, gaze flitting to Jax before he takes a long swig. He tips his head back, and the way his throat moves as he swallows has me zeroing in on the action, squirming a little in place. When a few drops of water escape past his lips and run down the column of his neck, I squeeze my thighs tight, barely resisting the urge to rub them together.

New kink unlocked, I guess? I never paid much attention to that part of a man’s anatomy before. Hands? Yes. Veiny forearms? Hell yes. Those vee muscles a lot of men have that I can never remember the name of and seem to serve no purpose other than turning people on? Abso-fucking-lutely. Guess I’m adding nice throat to the list.

Archer finishes and removes the bottle from his lips, wiping the excess water with the back of—yep, one of the aforementioned veiny forearms. A small cramp twists my belly and slick pools between my legs. Good thing I’m wearing scent dampening panties.

Archer holds the bottle out to me. “You too, sweetheart. Please.”

I take the bottle and sip some. The cool liquid feels like heaven as it runs down my throat. I didn’t realize how thirsty I was. When the water hits my empty stomach, it causes it to growl, ensuring everyone notices I’m probably hungry. All four men’s

heads whip toward me. It's a little creepy, to be honest. It wasn't that loud.

Jax bursts into action, snagging his pack and appearing by my side in a flash. Before I know what's happening, I'm being lifted off the ground and set into a warm lap. I tense, because who does that without asking? But then the smell of anise and black licorice hit me and my shoulders instantly relax. Goddess, who knew just being close to your scent match could have that kind of effect on you? I mean, they talk about it in the books and stuff, but I always imagined they were embellishing. Now that I'm experiencing it, I can confirm it's everything they said and more.

Instead of pulling away, I let Jax tug me back to his bare chest, the heat of his skin like a comforting blanket. He rubs my arms a couple times, then places something in my hands. A granola bar. "Eat, little mate. Let's take a break and get you refuelled."

Bear grunts in agreement, taking a seat next to Archer, so close they may as well meld into one another.

"Shouldn't we be rationing our supplies or something?" I wave the granola bar toward the group in offering. "I can share."

Three growls and a firm, "no," answer me.

"No," Archer repeats. "You have this one. I'm sure Jax has more the rest of us can share later."

Jax nods, although I get the impression he's just agreeing to appease me. They all seem like the type to go without, rather than use up rations. Part of me is flattered that they'd sacrifice for me, the other part annoyed. Put on your own oxygen mask first and all that. "If you all end up passing out because you were too macho to take care of yourselves, I'm not carrying you out of here."

Jax laughs. “Fair enough, little mate.”

Roman sighs. “We should discuss our next steps. I’d rather find a way out of this hell hole than worry about supplies.”

“Don’t call Lunara’s temple a hell hole.” I chastise. He has the decency to look contrite. The wrapper of the granola bar crinkles as I tear it open. “Hmmm, chocolate chip,” I mumble, nearly moaning as my whole body vibrates in excitement. “I haven’t had chocolate in weeks.” The small supply I brought with me ran out after only three days in the desert. “Goddess, I love chocolate.”

Jax, of course, hears me and snuffs a laugh against my shoulder. “I’ll dip my dick in chocolate for you everyday, if you want,” he whispers with a smile in his voice .

My cheeks feel like they’re sunburned, and I drop my face to hide my smile. He’s so ridiculous, but the thought of licking my favorite food off him is rather tempting.

He kisses the side of my neck. “Seriously, though, I’ll get you all the chocolate you want once we get out of here. Anything you want, little mate.”

If he keeps making promises like that, I might fall in love with him.

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“S peaking of out,” I growl, trying to get us back on track, “I think we should head that way.” I point in the direction the cave-in would be if we were a level above still. “Maybe there are stairs or something that are still intact.”

“Maybe.” Jax says, then points his finger the opposite way. “But I want to see what that is.”

There’s a blue glow a ways down the hall that I didn’t notice. It must have been my worry for Cora that made me miss it, because I sure as fuck see it now. Is he fucking serious? Why the hell would we willingly approach some weird ass glow in an unexplored ancient temple? It’s clearly not daylight—the color tone is all wrong. I can’t think of many things that naturally glow that color. This is how horror movies start.

Jax may have been helpful in getting us down here after Archer fell, but I still don’t trust him, and every time he looks at Cora, it makes me want to growl .

Bear helps Archer to his feet while Cora picks up the torch on the floor.

“I kinda want to see what that is, too?” Cora admits with a slight shrug of her shoulders. Of course she does. She’s curious and inquisitive, something I find annoyingly attractive.

“It could be the way out.” Archer bends his neck side to side, like he’s stretching out a kink. I imagine he’ll be sore for a while after that fall. “That way seems as good as

any to me.”

“Guess we’re following Jax.” Bear keeps an arm around Archer as they head off.

Seriously? Come on .

“I’m following you .” I take the torch from Cora, my other hand coming to the small of her back.

My skin prickles with awareness from where I touch her, and my heart beats anxiously as we follow the rest of the group. I don’t like walking into things blind. I’m the kind of guy who wants to know what to expect. Uncertainty gets my hackles up and puts me on the defensive. But the group seems set on heading toward the creepy glow.

We barely make it a hundred feet before we’re all stopping again. A tangle of green foliage blocks the path, thick curls of plant life hanging from the ceiling like a natural curtain, albeit one too thick to just shove through.

“This is... wait, what is this?” Archer steps forward, bending to get a closer look at the vines. “I’ve never seen a plant like this.”

“Don’t you have a degree in biology?” Jax asks, holding the flashlight closer so that Archer can examine the green shoot.

“Yeah, biology, not horticult—” Archer is cut off by Bear’s protective growl.

“How do you know that?” Bear demands, turning on Jax.

Unphased, Jax shrugs and turns back to the indomitable flora. “Researched all of you.”

“What? Why?” Cora asks apprehensively at the same time as I say, “Fucking hell?!”

“Know your enemies,” Jax winks at her before tilting his head toward the three of us. “And your competition.”

“There’s nothing we’re competing for,” I say.

“You sure about that, professor?” Jax’s gaze slides from me to Cora and back to me, his implication clear. The bastard goes a step further, reaching out to gently tuck a piece of Cora’s hair behind her ear.

“Yes.” I clench my teeth and grab a fistful of vines intending to pull some out of the way. “Are we still going this way?”

Cora looks nervous.

“What?” I ask her, a little too harshly.

“Should you really be grabbing an unknown plant like that? What if it’s poisonous?” She’s got a point. Even Archer doesn’t know what this thing is, and if it’s been living down here for thousands of years, goddess knows what kind of prehistoric secretions it could be oozing out. I don’t say anything, but I do release the vine, wipe my hand on my pants, and step back to look at the group.

“Well, I think we’re gonna have to touch it unless Rambo over here has a secret machete hidden up his ass.” Bear hikes a thumb at Jax who shakes his head.

I bite my tongue to keep from reminding them that we could go the other way, away from the vines. It seems like their minds are made up, and not only am I not wandering off into the unknown alone, I’m sure as hell not leaving Cora with that Captain Jack Sparrow wanna be.

Turning back to the natural wall, Bear parts the vines gently with both hands, leading the way. I direct Cora to go next, following behind her with the torch. Archer and Jax fall into step behind me.

“Try not to damage the plant too much. I’m gonna want to come back and study it once we get out of here. It’s remarkable to find such a thriving vine without any access to sunlight,” Archer comments.

Instead of a curtain like we thought, the foliage is thick, a veritable forest hanging from above that stretches on much farther than I expected. The trek is eerie, the source of the blue glow still not visible. I’m reminded of the fairytales parents tell their children, the dark forest teeming with hidden dangers. The stories that kept kids from wandering off alone where they shouldn’t. Stories ingrained in the human collective consciousness.

A sense of foreboding blankets every step, and a nervous energy thrums through the group. We’re silent as we hold vines back for each other and walk forward in a tight line.

“Do you hear that?” Bear whispers after the last of the vines closes in behind us, making it even darker than it was before .

I listen intently, but all I hear are five chests breathing and the soft padding of our feet as we walk. As I focus back on Cora in front of me, she reaches to pull a vine out of the way like we’ve been doing the whole time. Except this time, it falls to the ground, wiggling and writhing.

“Snakes!” Cora screams, and all hell breaks loose.

My scream is deafening after we've been quiet so long, but I can't help it. A slithery green snake is thrashing on the floor near my feet. Instinctively, I dash sideways to get out of range in case it tries to bite me, not looking while I step further into the verdure.

The men are all yelling, asking me questions I can't hear through the roaring in my ears. Looking up, I see more of the vines undulating, glossy scaled bodies mixed in with the leaves. Now that we've disturbed them, more snakes fall as the guys spin and flail, trying to fling the reptiles from their bodies.

A smooth, sliding sensation caresses the back of my neck, and I freeze. My muscles tighten as something brushes softly past my ear, entering my peripheral vision. Not daring to turn my head, I slide my eyes as far left as I can as a hissing noise sends shivers down my spine.

That kicks my body into overdrive as I screech again, slapping at the vermin that's perched across my shoulders. It falls, but my panic is taking over. I flail, feeling as if they're everywhere. Strong arms wrap around me, pinning my limbs to my chest while I struggle even harder. The sweet scent of absinthe breaks through the haze, and I whimper as I go limp. My mate has me. Jax is dragging me forward, no longer treading lightly, as our group dashes toward the blue light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

Not wanting to think about that analogy, I focus on breathing until we break through the foliage, finally stumbling into the open air of the temple. Jax pulls me several

more feet before setting me down. He lifts my hair and studies my neck and shoulder, searching for bites that aren't there.

"I'm alright," I whisper as a muted sound of pain comes from one of the men.

Roman has a green snake latched onto his forearm, its teeth sunk deep into the flesh.

"Roman!" I cry, rushing to his side. His jaw is tense as he backs away, looking at his arm like he has no idea what to do now. What the hell do we do now?

"Hey, hey. Hold still, let me look. It's okay." Bear speaks calmly, like he's approaching a wild animal. And he is, I guess, but it's Roman he's addressing, not the snake.

Roman does as Bear requests and stops moving, the latter reaching out toward the snake.

"Be careful." Archer says.

Bear never looks away from the serpent but replies, "I've got this. Trust me."

We're all holding our breath as Bear inches his hand closer and closer to the snake's head. When he's about three inches away, he shoots his hand forward, gripping the snake right behind its head and squeezing tight. Its body begins to thrash at the new perceived threat, but it unlocks its jaw and releases Roman from its grasp.

The animal stops thrashing, falling to hang limp from Bear's grip. Did he kill it? How?

Jax steps up to examine the creature. "Damn. Looks like the thing struggled so hard it broke its own neck." He looks to Roman, who is holding his arm protectively to his

chest, then snaps his gaze back to Bear. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

“Grew up on a farm.” Bear drops the snake. “Learned a thing or two about snakes.”

“Still doesn’t mean you should grab it like that!” Archer flings his arms out in exasperation, voicing my own sentiment. I can’t believe he just snatched it like that. My relief that Roman’s okay barely overshadows my frustration that Bear took that risk.

Archer huffs out a breath. “What if?—”

Bear holds up his hand in a staying motion. “It isn’t venomous.”

“And how exactly do you know that?” Archer nearly growls. I’ve never heard a beta make a noise like that.

Bear turns the snake so we can see its head, then points to its nose. “You see the shape of its nose here? It’s a soft curve, which indicates it’s a non-venomous species. Venomous snakes have pointed noses, it’s a quick way to tell them apart.”

“Damn, does that mean the professor over here will live? Shame.”

At Jax’s comment, I gape at him. “Why would you say that!?” My eyes narrow into a glare as I chastise him.

He lifts his hands in a placating gesture. “Sorry, love. Sometimes I say the inside thoughts out loud, you’ll have to get used to that.” I open my mouth to yell again, but he hurries on. “But! I’ll try not to wish death on any other pack members. Okay, little mate?”

Pack...members? I couldn't have heard him correctly. Or he just used the term

because we're all stuck here together. Yeah, that has to be it.

Pushing the odd statement from my mind, I close in on Roman. Once I'm standing in front of him, I gently take his arm and pull it out to look at the injury. Two even holes pierce his skin, a trickle of blood leaking from each one. Not enough to be concerned he'll bleed out, but I don't want to leave it unattended.

As if reading my mind, Jax takes out a bottle of water followed by a rolled up bandage. He hands it to me like a peace offering, then backs away.

Bear should be the one taking care of Roman, as our medic, but my heart is still beating a mile a minute, and I need to do this. I can't even explain why. Omegas instinctively have the need to care for their alphas, but Roman isn't mine. Meeting Roman's gaze, he must see the question in my eyes because he nods, holding his arm out further to give me better access.

"I'm sorry," I say softly. "This will probably hurt." Roman lets out a hiss when the first drops of cold water hit his skin, but bites his lip and takes a deep breath to hide his pain. I don't linger, simply rinsing the wound as best I can, then gently wrapping the bandage around his arm to keep it protected. It isn't great, but it'll have to do until we can get out of here.

Satisfied with my work, I lean back, but don't leave him. Instead, I give Roman a quick peck on the cheek, muttering a soft, "I'm glad you're okay," before quickly stepping away.

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The poor professor looks like he's about ready to fall over in shock. His fingers brush the cheek Cora kissed, and I have to admit, I'm a little jealous. I pull Archer to my side and kiss his temple.

Jax picks the snake up off the ground.

"What are you doing with that?" Cora asks. Roman is still staring at her, mouth half hanging open, but she's got all her attention fixed on the limp reptile.

Jax lifts it over his head like a trophy. "Dinner."

Roman covers his mouth like he might gag, daze broken.

I chuckle. "It's actually pretty good."

"You've eaten snake before?" Cora asks.

I shrug. "Only once."

Her expression makes it clear she's waiting for an explanation.

"It isn't some epic survival story or anything. You know how young alphas can be, always trying to one-up each other on the manliness scale." I shrug. "What was that show with Gear Brylls? Alpha Versus Wild ! Anyway, in one episode he cooked up some snake, and the next day my buddy Sean caught one in the woods behind his

house and dared us to try it.”

Roman rolls his eyes when I finish my story. Like he didn’t do a little posturing with his friends growing up.

“It’s not an uncommon food in some parts of the world,” Archer adds. “In fact, I read an article recently that argued it’s more sustainable and better for the planet than the meats we typically eat. High in protein. Low in saturated fat. And it doesn’t require a lot of resources to raise snakes.”

I kiss Archer’s temple again. He’s so cute when he’s being all knowledgeable about shit. Cora watches us with the slightest blush on her cheeks.

“See, dinner.” Winking at Archer, Jax slings the snake over his shoulder, then takes Cora’s hand.

“It can’t be dinner time already.” Roman looks at the fancy analog watch on his wrist, his brows drawing together as he shakes his head. “Shit, it’s after eight.”

My empty stomach rumbles, glad we’ll have something to eat. That, combined with all the exertion and adrenaline, and I’m sure we’re all feeling hungry and tired. Jax said he has some granola bars, but those will only last so long between five people. We need to use any natural resources we can in case we end up stuck down here for a while.

Snake is far from the worst thing I’ve ever eaten. It’s bland, but not bad. And that one is big enough to give us a semi decent meal .

Jax leads the way around the slight bend in the hall, toward the blue glow.

Our steps slow to take in the sight before us. It can only be described as ethereal, like

something out of a fairy tale. The hall opens into a spacious area, with a pathway along the outside and alcoves along the wall. But what's giving everyone pause is what's in the middle of the space.

An underground oasis.

Sunk into the floor are several pools of varying size and shape, each one surrounded by lush tropical plants and vibrantly colored flowers. Steam sits low on the surface of the water. They have to be fed by a hot spring, but I sure as hell have never seen a hot spring glow before.

"Goddess above, it's gorgeous."

"Hmm," I hum my agreement, but I'm not looking at the pools. Cora and Archer are standing side by side wearing equal expressions of awe. If this place is a fairytale, the two of them fit right in, their beauty only enhanced by the soft blue light reflecting on their faces. I'd certainly love to see them frolic through paradise. Preferably naked.

Cora catches me looking and offers me a shy smile before glancing away. "Do you think the water's safe?"

"How 'bout we test it?" Earnest as ever, Jax digs around in his bag and pulls out a little device that tests water, the kind people take camping.

"Is there anything you don't have in there?" Roman asks.

"Condoms," Jax says with that signature wink of his.

Archer's gasps at the same time as Cora. Their matching expressions of shock draw a laugh out of me. Somehow, it doesn't surprise me that Jax would say that as freely as he would talk about the weather.

“Actually, I do have a few condoms. I just wanted to see your reaction.” He brings Cora’s hand to his lips. “I’ll never pressure you to do something you’re not ready for, but I can’t wait to fuck you raw and knock you up.”

Cora’s mouth drops open. Roman sucks in a breath, but I blow one out, unable to block the image of Cora big and round with my child. I’d never make a comment like the one Jax just made, but thinking it is another matter altogether. My cock presses painfully against my jeans as I imagine Cora’s wet heat surrounding it with nothing in between.

I take a step toward her before forcing myself to stop, clearing my throat. Archer raises his brows at me. I shrug and mouth, “What?”

Jax tests the water in two of the pools with his little tool and gets the same results for each. “Not drinkable. Too much salt. But perfect for bathing. It’ll probably help ease those muscles and get us all nice and relaxed.” He winks at Cora again, this time licking his lips as if he’s imagining how relaxed he wants to make her.

“Alright,” Roman says with a touch of an alpha edge. “We’ll camp here for tonight. Eat. Bathe. Get some rest. Then tomorrow we can look for a way out.” He points to a pool near the back, partially covered by pillars. “Cora, you take that pool. It’ll give you some privacy. The rest of us can spread out in these front pools.”

Any other time, I would give him a hard time about his bossy attitude, but I can tell his alpha is riding him hard right now, so I let it go.

“Someone needs to find something we can burn so we can roast this.” Jax holds up the snake.

No one volunteers, everyone too eager to get cleaned up and rest in the hot springs. Archer’s already sitting down and untying his shoes.

“I’ll do it,” I sigh, holding my hand out for the torch. Roman passes it over. They’ll have plenty of light here by the glowing pools.

To my surprise, Archer stands back up. “I’ll come, too.”

“None of those green vines,” Jax says. “Need stuff that’s dry.”

I cross my arms and stare at him. “If I can kill a snake, I sure as hell know what makes for good firewood.”

“Fair enough.” Jax claps me on the back with a chuckle. “You’re a handy man to have around.”

We’re only a few steps away when Cora calls after us. “Nothing priceless!”

“I think we can handle it.” Archer yells back as he joins me.

There’re probably dried vines we could use as kindling back where we came from. But neither of us have any desire to go toward the snakes, so we explore beyond the pools.

“Thanks for coming with me,” I say as we pass out of sight from the rest of the group.

“Thanks for jumping down a crevice for me.”

My eyes roll up to the ceiling, remembering the horror I felt. “Fuck, you scared me.”

He takes my hand, and I stop walking.

“I really like you, Bear,” he whispers.

I tug him into my body and kiss his forehead. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes, Noah , I do.”

I bust out laughing. “Nice guess. But my name is definitely not Noah.”

He cracks a smile. “Wyatt?”

I shake my head. Using my grip on his hand, I spin him until his back hits the wall, intent on kissing him until he’s too breathless to guess my name. But his back doesn’t collide with the stone like I expect. The surface gives out, and we both stumble through a splintered doorway.

“Guess we found wood,” Archer says, looking at the pile of ancient planks. “It’s a miracle these haven’t completely rotted, especially with the humidity from the springs.”

As much as I like hearing Archer get all nerdy on me, I don’t want to talk about the preservation of old things, and the only wood I care about, right now, is his. What is it about life threatening situations that makes you want to fuck?

Trapping him against the doorframe, my hands come to rest on his hips. After all the excitement and exertion, his scent blockers are wearing off, and I finally catch the slightest hint of him. Green tea and raspberries.

For a brief moment, I'm brought back in time to my first kiss. She was my next-door neighbor and we snuck out after dark to meet by the raspberry bushes between our parent's farms. She tasted like the tart fruit we fed each other before we kissed.

Archer smells like secret, stolen treats.

Mine .

“Alpha?” He breathlessly asks when I pause for too long. His hands thread through my beard and give the tiniest tug. Fuck, that feels good.

“Yeah, I’m your alpha, baby, and I’m gonna make you feel so damn good. But first,” a low growl shakes through me, “I’m gonna punish you for putting yourself at risk and scaring the living daylights out of me.”

“Yes, alpha.” His pupils dilate. He likes that idea.

“Turn around,” I command, though there’s no bark to it. I want him to act of his own volition, not be coerced by any alpha power. “Hands on the doorframe.”

He spins and lifts his arms, gripping the sturdy wood with his back to me. He’s not as tall as I am, so he can barely reach, stretching his body long, putting himself on display.

After taking a moment to admire him, I run my hands over his sides and back, watching for any flinching or indication of bruising. I don’t want to push him if he’s too hurt from his fall. His only response is a shiver and a needy sigh.

He’s damn lucky he didn’t get injured. So am I.

Without warning, I slap my palm against his backside, then lean in close and whisper, “Red, if you want to stop. Yellow, if you need a breather. Green if you want more. Good?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” He tries to look over his shoulder at me, but his arm is in the way. “All green lights here. ”

“That’s my man.” I nip his ear, sliding my hands down his chest from behind until I reach the clasp of his belt, holding there for a beat. “Still good?”

“Green,” he moans. “Take them off.”

Undoing his belt, I push his jeans down, taking his boxers with them. Then I step back to admire the view. I knew he had a nice ass, but seeing it stripped bare has my knot aching at the base of my already stiff cock.

Unable to resist, I crack my hand down on the round globe of his flesh. It jiggles from the contact before I rub the sting away. I do it again. Archer whimpers, swaying forward.

“I’ve never been spanked before,” he says.

I pause. “Still good?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Give me a color, baby.” I growl in his ear. He needs to know I’m serious about our play.

“Green. So, so green.” His reply is breathy.

His enthusiastic consent drives me to slap harder. He lets out a beautiful moan.

“You’ve always been a good boy, haven’t you, Archer Hale? Smart, careful, always doing what you’re told. But I bet you’ve secretly wanted to throw off all that restriction, free yourself from all those expectations and rules, and do something bad.” I press so hard against him he almost loses his grip on the doorframe, but he doesn’t let go. “You want to be naughty for me, baby? Be my dirty fucking boy?”

“Y-yes,” he moans.

“Look at you with your pants around your ankles, ass out, begging for it right here in the middle of Lunara’s temple.” I drop one hand to tightly squeeze the ass cheek I just reddened. “How bad do you want my thick cock inside you?”

“So bad.” His groan is low and barely audible.

I spank him. “I can’t hear you.”

“So bad,” he repeats. “I want your cock so bad, I feel like I’m going to die if I don’t get it. Please, alpha, give it to me.”

“That’s better.” Ducking under his arm, I come around in front of him. Like the good boy he is, he doesn’t move a muscle, staying stretched in the doorway exactly like I told him to. I suspected from our few interactions that Archer would submit beautifully, I just didn’t anticipate how much I would enjoy it. This type of play isn’t new to me, but none of my previous partners have affected me like this.

Licking my lips, I take in the erotic sight of him. Then I lower to my knees.

“W-what are you doing?”

“Torturing you.” I lick a slow line up the underside of his cock with the very tip of my tongue.

“This doesn’t feel like torture.” He juts his hips forward.

I chuckle. “It will.”

He sucks in a breath as I wrap my lips all the way around his cock. Fuck, he tastes

good. Like late summer nights, sipping tea and sucking raspberries off sticky fingers.

“Mine,” I growl, taking him deep, working him until his muscles tense and he’s right on the edge.

Then I stop. Popping off his cock to stall his pleasure .

“Noooo,” he moans.

“I’m supposed to be punishing you for being so reckless, remember?” I softly stroke the inside of his thigh.

He squirms, jerking toward my closed lips. Precum drips from the tip of his cock, weeping for me so beautifully. I turn my head away to drag my teeth along the skin I was just caressing.

“Please, alpha. I’ll never do it again. I’ll be careful. So, so careful.” Fuck, it’s so hot to hear him beg.

“Oh, I know.” I grip his base and swirl my tongue around the head. “Because I’m going to show you how much you have to live for. Color, Archer?”

“G-green. Gre—mmph,” he groans as I take him so deep my nose hits his abs. One hand drops to grab my hair, and I let him get away with it for one deep suck before I remove my mouth and growl up at him. “Hands. On the doorframe.” He swiftly obeys. “Such a good boy.”

I tease and enjoy him until he’s a whimpering, begging mess. Taking him right to the edge over and over again without letting him tip into ecstasy. I may have been doing this to torture him, but now I’m the one being tortured. My cock throbbing, my skin tight and tingling, I pull off and kiss my way up his body.

He's fucking wrecked. Teeth marks mar his arm where he bit the flesh to keep from screaming out. His glasses are smudged and lopsided. His jeans around his ankles, his dirty shirt rucked up his hips. He looks vulnerable and delicious.

I kiss him hard, sucking his bottom lip the way I did his cock as I undo my cargo pants enough to free myself, taking both our lengths in hand. His spit-slicked cock in harsh juxtaposition to my untouched shaft as I shuttle my hand up and down our lengths, squeezing them together.

"Please . I want you to fuck me," he begs.

"I don't have what we need for that, baby." Even as I say it, I think of the sweet little omega back at the pools. Would she make enough slick for me to get Archer good and lubed for my cock? Would seeing us like this make her drip?

"Fuuuck." I jerk harder, working us both into a frenzy of lips and limbs and grunts.

Only a few more strokes and Archer comes. My balls tighten, and I follow him over the edge. The sensation nearly knocks me over, limbs spasming, then turning to jelly. I knew it'd be good, but that was... wow .

Hot cum soaks our shirts, evidence of our pleasure combining to plaster the cotton to our abs. The aroma of green tea melds with black pepper, raspberries complement sweet honey. A perfect blend.

"You okay?" I kiss his neck, then his cheek as my body comes down from the high he just gave me.

He mumbles something incoherent, shaky arms dropping to rest across my shoulders. I've never been with a partner who followed my instructions so completely, who was so eager to please, who begged so beautifully. I kiss him again, softer this time, and

whisper, “Such a good boy.”

36

The pool beckons me with curls of steam. It's been way too long since I've had a bath. But I hesitate, looking back over my shoulder to gauge where the men are.

Bear and Archer have left to find firewood, nowhere in sight. Roman has his back to me as he stands near one of the pools off to the left. He pulls his shirt over his head, revealing a surprisingly muscular back. I nearly choke when I get to see the tattoos that have always intrigued me. With such a tiny portion visible under his shirt collars, I imagined it was something small.

No, Roman doesn't just have one tattoo, he has several .

Grouped together on his left shoulder and bicep are detailed images of mountains, rocks, something geometric with animal skulls in it. There's also dinosaur bones. What kind, I can't tell, because it wraps around his bicep to the front. On the right of the geometric pattern, black thinly-lined renderings of tropical plants and flowers flow partially down his back. I desperately want to get closer and look at them, take in the exquisite detail inked into his amber skin.

"Checking out the good professor?" Jax is standing only a few feet away, hooded eyes locked on me.

Heat crawls up my cheeks as I turn away. Having my scent match catch me checking out another man doesn't seem like a good way to start a potential relationship. Not that I'm looking to start a relationship with Jax. At least, I don't think I am. I don't know. He has been really sweet today and very resourceful. I like that in a man. And

he smells delicious. But what do I really know about him?

As I glance back over my shoulder at Jax, I catch Roman lowering his pants a few feet behind him. Shit.

Whipping forward again, I step behind a pillar so I can't see either of them anymore. It's strange to undress in a place that feels so public, even though I know we're the only ones here. As an only child who spent most of my life alone among academics, bathing here with so many men nearby is more adventurous than is typical for me. Not that I'm inexperienced, but I'm generally a fairly private person.

I try to imagine what it was like back when this was an active temple. Despite the few pillars dotting the space and the foliage that drapes itself around the pools, there's very little privacy. Those who came to the temple would have likely bathed together. Were these pools only for those who dedicated their life to Lunara? Or did others come here as well? Did devotees come to bathe, hoping to be healed? Like I secretly am.

For the first time, I realize that my cramps have been better today. Normally, there's a dull ache that's so constant I can almost ignore it, with occasional spikes in discomfort that hit unexpectedly. But right now... I actually feel pretty good. Maybe being around my mate is helping?

Channeling the energy of a priestess of Lunara, I draw my shirt over my head.

A low growl has me spinning on my heels, clutching my shirt to my chest. Propped against a pillar by his shoulder, Jax watches me. His ankles are comfortably crossed, hands in his pockets. His posture is relaxed, but his gaze is intense.

"Go on, little mate."

No one's ever watched me undress before. My encounters with men have been awkward fumbles in the dark, hurried hunger driving my attempts to ease the ache that never goes away from the heat that never comes. The few relationships I've had didn't last past my confession. No one's ever looked at me the way Jax is looking at me now. Like I'm the goddess herself.

I should probably tell him to get lost, that this is moving too fast, but... I don't want to. His potent scent mixes with the soft florals from the foliage around us, making me wonder how it would mix with my scent.

Jax doesn't move a muscle as he waits for me to decide, but his cheek twitches in a grin when my shirt falls from my hands.

With deliberate slowness, I unhook my bra, letting the straps drag down my arms in both a tease and a little self consciousness, before dropping it to the ground. His eyes follow the movement of the fabric before lifting, lingering on my bare breasts. I feel that gaze like a touch.

Despite the steam from the pools, the air is cold, pebbling my nipples into hard points. He traces a finger along the outside of my breast. "What's this, little mate? You've been hiding a sweet little hummingbird inked on your flawless skin."

I look down. Sometimes I forget it's even there. "Oh, uh, yeah. I got this while I was in grad school."

"What's it mean?"

"Does it have to mean anything? Can't it just be pretty?" I try deflecting the question.

"It could, and it is, love, but you wouldn't etch something permanently on your body that didn't mean something. And it's hidden away. Something private just for you.

So?”

Jax is like a dog with a bone, and I know he’s not going to let this go. He’s my mate, so why shouldn’t I tell him? But I’m standing here with my tits out, only halfway undressed, and the mood is quickly shifting from sexy to awkward. “I’ll tell you...after we get in the pool.” I wink.

With my heart racing, I bend over, unlacing my shoes and stepping out of them before easing out of my shorts. Part of me is dragging this out to push him, but it’s also possible I’m stalling, still trying to make up my mind if this is a good idea. What happens once I’m naked?

In thin cotton panties, I meet his gaze again. He doesn’t urge me to take off my last article of clothing, just crooks a finger at me.

One step forward. Another.

From where Jax is standing, Roman could see us if he looked back this way. He seems like the type who would be outraged if anyone even suggested he sneak a glance at me while I’m bathing. But I find I don’t hate the idea of him watching.

Jax holds out his hand. I take it, and he pulls me into a kiss gentler than I thought him capable of. This isn’t how I imagined my first kiss with my scent match. In an ancient temple. Nearly naked while he’s fully clothed—well, at least, wearing pants. Out in the open, where any of the others could see us.

Breaking for air, he spins me around and gives me a light slap on the ass. “In the pool, love.”

Again he surprises me. I thought he would try to take off my panties, progress things further than just looking, but he stays by the pillar, watching me as I walk away to dip

my foot into the hot spring. My toes tingle from the change in temperature. Looking back over my shoulder at Jax, I lower my panties, kicking it off once it gets to my ankles. He groans and palms his cock over his jeans, but still doesn't move closer. I'm a little disappointed. He doesn't strike me as the type to take it slow, but I guess it's probably a good idea.

There are steps that ease into the water, and I walk down them confidently, aware of Jax checking me out as I go.

The water feels amazing. I didn't realize how sore and exhausted I was until now. It's not just the adventures of today. It's everything. My first dig has been a far cry from my typical pursuits, very different from the solely scientific experience I was expecting.

Bones and jackals and scent matches. Oh my .

Easing down onto the bench, I lean my head back against the edge of the pool, closing my eyes. For a moment, I forget about Jax and his career of choice, about Roman's attitude toward me, about all of it, and just breathe.

Tension seeps out of my body like the steam rising from the pool.

Gentle ripples lap at my chest, and I open my eyes to see Jax entering the water. He's completely naked now and... woah . His shirtless torso had me salivating before, but now my mouth is dry as he walks down the steps toward me with his proud cock standing at attention.

I've never taken the time to really look at a man's genitals before, but he wraps a fist around himself and pumps once, almost daring me to look. I can't help admiring his thick, veiny shaft. Can penises be beautiful? If so, Jax's is stunning.

His waist dips below the surface as he takes the last step down into the pool, regretfully hiding his glorious cock. The water parts around his muscular frame as he draws closer, intense purpose in every step.

“Um... hi,” I say, awkwardly, once again feeling uncertain. After seeing him in all his naked glory, I feel more shy than when he was watching me undress.

His scent blooms, strengthened by the heat of the pool and the power of his arousal. It makes my head swim, my body responding to his.

“You promised, little mate.” Jax runs the back of his hand gently over the small tattoo on my breast. My breath hitches at even that slight touch.

I slide further under the water, looking away. “Um, I’m not sure if you know this, but hummingbirds symbolize healing. And hope. I read that somewhere anyway.” He tilts my chin up, encouraging me to face him while I confess this.

“I’ve always had...health issues. Bad ones that messed with my self esteem, my confidence. In grad school I hit a low unlike any I’ve ever experienced. I learned about the symbolism of hummingbirds around that time, and decided I wasn’t going to let my health issues beat me. I was going to try my best to conquer them. I drove to a local tattoo shop that same night, before I could overthink it. I wanted this little guy close to my heart, but a little secret just for me, to remind me to keep moving forward. To have hope. I’ve never done anything even remotely crazy in my life—well, up until then—so I decided to go big and add lots of color, too, hoping it would help brighten my world.”

Holy crap, did I really just spill all that to him? I’ve never told anyone I even have the art, much less why.

I don’t want Jax to dig further, to ask what exactly my health problems are, so I

quickly change the subject. “I’m... um... not really sure how this scent match thing is supposed to work. I mean, you barely know me. Although, I guess you probably know me better than I know you, since you’ve been watching me for a while. How long have you been watching me, anyway?”

“Shhh, little mate.” He brings a finger to my lips to stop my rambling. “Don’t overthink it. We’ll have all the time in the world to get to know each other, but right now, I want to taste you.” His finger drags down, pulling on my bottom lip so it curls and then bounces back in place.

“Taste me?”

“Hmm, yes, taste you.”

Before I realize what’s happening, he’s lifting me out of the pool to sit on the edge of the hot water. He spreads my legs, gaze intently locked on my dripping center. Being so exposed to someone who is basically a stranger should make me embarrassed, but the way Jax looks at me has me spreading my thighs wider, voluntarily giving him access.

Instead of diving right in, Jax brings his lips to the inside of my knee. Featherlite kisses move along my thigh toward where I’m already dripping, but he continues up to my right hip bone, then licks a line across my mound to the other side.

“Jax,” I moan, breathlessly.

He pauses briefly to reply. “Yes, love?”

He wants me to say it out loud doesn’t he? This is cruel and unusual punishment. When I don’t respond, he continues his trek, licking and sucking down my other thigh until he’s made a full circuit.

Reaching for him, my fingers tangle in his hair and tug, wanting him to kiss me, lick me, fuck me. Something . Anything. All the things. “Please, alpha.”

I’ve never used an omega whine before, but the desperation makes me rely on my baser instincts. The noise I make is indecent and desperate.

“That’s it, love. What do you need?”

“You, alpha. I need you.”

“Mmmm, that’s my girl,” he praises before burying his face between my thighs, making me cry out softly. After a few licks, he lifts his head enough to look me in the eyes. “If ever there was an elixir of the goddess, it would taste exactly like your slick. I could survive off your nectar alone if you’d let me.”

This alpha is an enigma. He’s wild and bold and kinda crazy, but then he turns around to literally worship me with his words and touches.

Suction on my clit has my hips lifting of their own accord, muscles tense with pleasure. Jax’s arms grip my thighs, holding me down, pulling me closer to his lips so he can devour me. Each lap of his tongue causes my insides to clench and tremble. My stomach hollows, chest heaving.

A calloused finger slides through my folds, circling my entrance like his tongue is circling my needy clit. When he finally slips the digit inside, I can’t help the gasp that escapes me. I try to stay quiet, knowing we aren’t alone, but it’s no use.

Goddess, I hope no one hears me. But the moment I have that thought, I know it’s not true. The idea that one of the other men might be listening, has me instantly climbing higher.

37

I try not to look back at the pool where Cora is bathing. I really do try. Dipping under the water, while keeping my bandaged hand raised, I scrub at the dirt in my hair until I can't hold my breath anymore. But when I break the surface, there's a sloshing sound followed by a soft gasp, and I turn. Just to make sure she's alright. That's all.

What I see arrests me. I can't look away.

Cora has her profile to me, sitting on the edge of the pool. Two pillars frame the view of her beautiful body, lush curves on full display, every peak and valley. Those breasts I've been dreaming about, now completely exposed. She's leaning back on her hands with her head thrown back, and from the rise and fall of her breasts, I can tell she's breathing fast.

Movement between her legs draws my attention, and I realize Jax is... fuck . I can't see exactly what he's doing, but the implication is clear. His moans are a perfect chorus to the gasps she's making. He throws her legs over his shoulders, and she shifts her weight to one hand so she can clasp his hair.

My scalp tingles, imagining it's my hair she's tugging, my tongue between her legs, cock like a pillar, aching as my knot swells and pulses. Her head rolls side-to-side, and like the draw of a magnet, her eyes lock with mine. She doesn't look repulsed by my voyeurism, doesn't yell at me to look away, doesn't tell Jax to stop. She licks her lips.

I'm so fucked.

Cora has always been beautiful, a temptation I've tried to avoid, but over the past few weeks on this dig, I've learned she's also kind, considerate, incredibly intelligent, and, well, fun. I'm mesmerized by the way she hyper focuses on a task she's excited about, how her eyes light up when she discovers something new, and the way she talks to herself without even realizing it.

She's not talking now. She's biting her lip like she's trying to keep herself quiet. I wonder what she's trying to keep from saying. If she didn't hold herself back, would she be talking to him or to me? Would she babble about the sensations she's feeling or beg for what she wants?

Her pleasure is enthralling, making it impossible to tear my gaze away. So I don't. Eyes roving her body, I fist my cock under the hot water. Her hand moves from Jax's hair to her breast, tweaking her nipple before filling her palm with the flesh and squeezing tightly. Her gaze is heated, steam circling her body like it's coming from her rather than the pools.

She shakes, and suddenly cries out as she comes, breaking eye-contact with me as she throws her head back, her chest pushing forward, her spine arching.

Fuck, she's gorgeous.

As soon as she comes down from the high, she looks at me, and I can't hold back anymore, spilling myself in the pool with a low groan. Shit! That can't be sanitary. Do I have to tell everyone to stay out of this pool? How the fuck am I going to have that conversation?

The spell she cast on me breaks like shattered glass, and I'm left feeling disgusted with myself and embarrassed by my actions. I'm a grown man, not a horny teen who can't control himself. Sure, she didn't seem to mind me watching, but it still doesn't mean it was okay. She was caught up in the moment, like I was. She'll probably

regret it now.

A woman like Cora Whitlock doesn't go for an old grump like me. She could have anyone. There's a fucking scent match between her legs right now! She doesn't need or want me. Just a few hours ago, she slapped me!

Shit, is she going to slap me again for watching her like a perv? I wouldn't blame her. I deserve it.

But, fuck, I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

That was the sexiest experience of my life, and I'll never forget it.

Climbing out of the pool, I avoid looking at her, focusing all my attention on putting my clothes back on. Or at least my khaki shorts. I forgo my sweaty shirt since it's plenty warm in here, and take a few minutes to wash it, along with my socks and boxers. Cora's soft footsteps sound nearby, and I hold my breath waiting for her to call me out. She doesn't. She walks by without saying a word .

Unsure if I'm grateful or disappointed, I glance up after she's past and see she's wearing nothing but a clean, oversized shirt I can only assume came from Jax. It makes me think of her in my shirt that night with the jackal. And, fuck ! Seeing her prance around with those long legs on full display, the fabric barely hiding anything, my cock is instantly stiff again.

How am I going to survive being trapped down here with her?

38

My eyes are unfocused as my mind replays the experience in the pool on repeat like an erotic film—especially the moment when I caught Roman watching and I met his gaze head on. I don't know what came over me. That's not something I've ever done before. Keeping eye contact with him while Jax was between my legs was terrifying, but also empowering. Roman didn't look away either, the arousal in his eyes brighter than the bioluminescent pools we bathed in.

Now that we're no longer in the heat of the moment, I can't help but wonder what the hell this means now. Roman hates me. Well, hated me at least. Over the course of this dig he's been warming up to me, even seeming to care about me when we fell into this underground temple and things began going awry.

After quickly washing my clothes in the pool, I lay them out to dry on a rock, still lost in thought about Roman. But then, Bear and Archer come back, and every thought leaves my mind. The world falls out from under me for the second time.

Green tea and raspberries. Black pepper and honey. Sex and comfort. They reek of sex and comfort.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm throwing myself at Bear, climbing him like a tree. I feel nearly feral with need, rubbing my bare pussy against his abs and burying my nose behind his ear. He responds by gripping my ass, but when I go to kiss him, he leans back.

“Woah there, little omega. What's going on?”

The sting of rejection makes my omega recoil. I blink at him, suddenly realizing what I just did, what I'm still doing. Emitting a noise that's half-squeak, half-moan, I scramble out of his arms. But Archer is right there. I stumble into him and lose all sense again, throwing myself at him, sniffing his neck. His scent is like a warm hug on a summer's day. I sigh, tension leaking out of my body as he rubs my back.

"You okay?" Archer asks.

Jax laughs from somewhere behind me. "She's more than okay. She just recognized her mates. Greedy little thing couldn't settle for one."

"W-what?" I step back from Archer, immediately missing his warmth and wrapping my arms around myself while looking over at Jax—my scent match, my mate, the man who just ate me out like I was the best meal of his life. Thankfully, he looks more amused than upset.

"Come here, Cora," Bear says, voice deep and commanding, almost bordering on a bark .

He pulls me close, dropping his nose to the place right below my ear. His hand tugs at my hair, tilting my head.

"Why is your scent so faint?" he asks.

"I took extra scent blockers this morning. And I was just in the pools."

He holds my gaze for a moment, then slowly lowers to his knees. His large hands grip my hips, bunching Jax's shirt as he brings his nose just above my mound and inhales.

"Fuuuuck," he groans.

“Told you,” Jax says with a smirk.

“What’s going on?” Roman asks.

I nearly jump at the surprise of seeing him again. He disappeared somewhere after our little... moment. And now, he returns to this. I want nothing more than to curl into a ball and disappear. My omega wants us to curl into the big burly alpha so he can comfort us, which makes me even more mortified.

Bear ignores Roman, throws my leg over his shoulder, and slides his nose along my wet center, humming a resonant note that makes my whole body shake. My eyes close as my knees go weak. I almost fall, but Archer slides in behind me, supporting my weight and kissing my neck. Bear’s tongue?—

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Roman yells. “Have you all lost your minds?”

Immediately, I drop my leg from Bear’s shoulder and push as far away as I can get with Archer right behind me. Bear sits back on his heels, but the look he gives me is nothing short of reverent. I tug down Jax’s shirt and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, avoiding looking at Roman. I don’t want him to think I’m normally like this. He already seems to have a distorted view of omegas, and I’m sure this isn’t helping.

“You need to understand...” I start. “We, um... I guess... I have three scent matches.” My nervous laugh is halted and abrupt.

Roman snarls—actually snarls like a beast! “I don’t fucking care if they’re your scent matches. This is an excavation, not a cheap motel! We’re civilized adults—colleagues! As far as I’m concerned, we’re on the clock down here and you’re all... you’re all... fucking around like rutting animals!”

“Aw, look, the professor is even grumpier when he’s jealous.” Jax can’t keep the

smile from his voice.

“I’m not jealous!” Roman closes his eyes and takes a slow breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth, before he looks at me again, expression completely blank. “Congratulations on finding your scent matches.”

“Um, thanks?” My head is still spinning with this new development, and I have no idea how to take Roman’s monotone congratulations. It’s clear he’s not really happy for me. But am I? I mean, I like Bear and Archer. I know them a lot better than I know Jax, and they’re both incredible men in their own unique ways. It would be a lie to say I haven’t daydreamed about them at one point or another over the last few weeks. How could I not? They’re handsome, intelligent, kind men. Green flags all around.

But I never really thought anything would happen with them. They seemed so interested in each other. Plus I could never expect them to make me their omega, defective as I am. It wouldn’t be fair. I can’t offer them a true pack bond, much less offspring—if that’s even something they want.

I look at Roman, and something inside me twists at his distant expression. He’s upset about this, even if he’s trying not to be, but I can’t tell why. Is it really just because he thinks it’s unprofessional? It’s not like I always go around throwing myself at people I work with. These are my scent matches! That’s different.

But he’s not my scent match, and I definitely looked right at him when I came earlier. I didn’t cover up or stop or anything. I practically begged him to join us. Entirely inappropriate. Although, he didn’t seem to mind. Did he think it meant something? Does he want it to mean something? Shit, there are so many reasons he could be upset with me right now.

Jax claps his hands together, breaking the silence, and the tension. “Well, I think we

should eat. Bet our girl is hungry after her bath.” He winks at me. “Who’s gonna help me with dinner? How about you, big guy?” He points to Bear, who’s still kneeling a step away from me, staring at me with a different type of hunger. Jax walks over and pats Bear’s shoulder. “Gotta get to know each other if we’re gonna be sharing our girl. You’re on fire duty while I clean the snake.”

“Yeah, okay, yeah.” Bear stands up, looking a little dazed as he picks up the wood that fell from his arms when I jumped him.

“You gonna help, professor ?” Jax says the last word like a needling jab. “Saw a fountain back there when we were bathing . I’d bet my life it’s drinkable. Place like this, in the middle of the desert, has to have a well somewhere.” He tosses Roman the tool he used to test the water earlier.

Roman nods, giving me a long look before stomping off.

39

Cora follows Jax and Bear, but I hang back. Twice today, I've lost my footing. Once physically, now emotionally. I'm free-falling as Cora crouches next to Bear. He bends over the pile of wood we collected and blows a flame to life, lips perfectly puckered as his gaze meets Cora's.

I assumed Bear'd move on once the dig was over, but I didn't expect it to happen so soon. Secretly, I hoped it wouldn't happen at all.

No one has ever felt as right to me as Bear.

But he's an alpha. What can I offer him? I can't take a knot. I don't have heats. He needs an omega for that, and now he's found one.

Cora pulls the puzzle box from the little bag around her waist and sits down next to the fire, studying it. Bear sits next to her, observing. They're talking too quietly for me to hear, and a bitter feeling curdles my stomach .

I used to dream about designating as an omega and scent matching with someone. I even had a secret mood board I stashed under my bed with images of what I wanted my nest to look like.

Five of my siblings are alphas and two are omegas. My parents were shocked when I didn't designate as either. The only beta in the family. The only one who'll never know what it feels like to find a scent match.

Turning away from the campfire, I walk back to the fountain where Roman is testing the water. “Need a hand?”

“Already done, actually.” Roman sets aside the little test kit and scoops some of the flowing water into his cupped hands, bringing it to his mouth. Guess it’s safe to drink.

I should be wondering how they got fresh water pumped in here, and how whatever system they used lasted this long, but it doesn’t really matter. There’s a lot about the temple I can’t explain already, and right now, I’m just relieved we have fresh water. There’ll be time to study everything later.

Roman coughs and spits half of it out. I laugh. “That good, huh?”

“Like a glass of the finest wine,” Roman deadpans. “But it’s drinkable. Just a little more sulphuric than I’d prefer.”

In other words, safe enough as long as we don’t drink it for long. And it’ll taste disgusting.

“But hey, at least we won’t die from dehydration.”

We chuckle together. Roman’s gaze drifts back to the rest of the group, and my attention follows .

Bear looks over his shoulder and our eyes lock, but he looks away when Cora says something. I bring my thumb to my mouth and chew on my cuticle.

“You really like him, huh?” Roman asks.

My eyes close, and the passion on Bear’s face when he made us come floods my mind. “Yeah... yeah, I do.”

I shouldn't. Not now that he's scent matched. Most omegas don't want a beta around taking away the attention of their alphas. I don't think Cora's like that, but we barely know each other.

Betas usually mate with other betas. To most alphas and omegas, we're dispensable in the grand scheme of things. Useful as heat minders when alphas and omegas lose their minds, because we're generally less affected by our hormones and emotions. Otherwise, we're overlooked.

Not that I'm unfamiliar with the feeling of being left out. My omega mother had three alpha packmates and let's just say each one of them wanted to have their own biological child. Bullshit if you ask me, a family should love each other regardless of DNA, but that's how I ended up the middle child in a group of seven children.

My youngest brothers are twins, and they were what finally convinced my parents to stop trying to populate their own football team. A handful is an understatement. My parents were stuck trying to get their oldest children through high school while simultaneously watching the twins like a hawk, lest they burn down the house or something.

That left the median child—me—to tag along in the background hoping to be noticed. I'm not very confrontational by nature, and vying for attention between my alpha and omega siblings was a struggle. I gave up on any hope that someone would take notice of me long before I hit puberty. It was so much easier to stay out of the way, devouring books and tinkering with old electronics than it was to shove myself into the spotlight.

Maybe it's part of why I've been so surprised and delighted by Bear's attention so far.

"You thirsty?" Roman changes the subject and I'm grateful to snap out of my

memories. I step up to the fountain, cup my hands, and scoop some water to bring to my lips. As the liquid hits my tongue, sulfur floods my tastebuds. My face scrunches up at the taste and Roman laughs. Forcing myself to swallow, I cough a little and press my tongue to the roof of my mouth a few times, trying to clear the taste.

“Wow. Blegh . That really is horrible, isn’t it?”

“Here, I think I’ve got...” He pulls a shiny rectangular piece of gum out of his pocket. “Last one. Want half? It’ll wash away the taste, although it won’t help next time.” He breaks the stick in half and hands one to me, but I notice he doesn’t put the other in his mouth, but slips it instead into his pocket.

Little things like this make me wonder if Roman isn’t as much of an alphahole as he likes to pretend. No doubt he’s grumpy. And sarcastic, apparently. But, I think he’s got more layers to him than that.

“Thanks.” I turn the half-stick of gum over in my hands. Bear’s deep laugh carries through the space. He has such a nice laugh, deep and full. My heart twists with longing .

Even though there’s a metallic aftertaste on my tongue, I slip the gum into my pocket to give to Bear later, and Roman gives me a knowing smile.

40

Cora seems as unsure about our impromptu dinner as Roman, but once they both see Jax take a bite, they dive in. Can't be picky eaters when you're trapped underground in a hidden temple with no way out.

Shit, my omega shouldn't be trapped down here. She should be safe, protected, cared for. My beta, too. How the hell am I gonna get them out of this? My muscles clench thinking about all that tomorrow could bring, and I push my food away after only a few bites.

"You alright?" Archer asks, noticing my soured attitude.

"Yeah, just not so hungry anymore." I give him a smile and hand him the rest of my snake. "You eat it." Leaning close enough that the others can't hear, I add, "You need to keep up your strength. As soon as we're out of this, I have plans for you and our girl."

His pupils dilate, breath hitching at the innuendo, but he starts chewing on his thumb in that nervous way of his again. I don't think he'd appreciate me asking what's wrong in front of everyone, so I just take his hand and gently tug it away from his mouth.

Cora yawns, her food already devoured. "I'm just gonna..." She yawns again.

"Here, love," Jax pulls a toothbrush and toothpaste from his pack and holds it out to her.

“Are you trying to imply something?” she asks with a smirk that says she’s only teasing. I’m sure my own breath is about as bad as a real bear’s right now.

“Only if you want it,” Jax says. “Anyone else is welcome to my toothbrush, too.” He wiggles his eyebrows at Archer, who shyly looks down at his feet.

Cora takes the toothbrush. “Thanks.”

While she gets herself ready for bed, Jax unrolls a sleeping bag and places it on the opposite side of the fire from where the rest of us are sitting, then comes back to finish the last of his meal.

The rest of us are quiet as we finish eating. Cora goes to the fountain to brush her teeth, then crawls into the sleeping bag. I can’t take my eyes off her as she settles on her side. Her breathing slows, and her features relax into sleep. The only sound is the soft crackling of the fire.

Once Jax finishes, he stands, stretching his arms overhead as he takes a step toward the sleeping bag. “Guess I should turn in, too.”

“You’re not sleeping in there with her,” Roman says.

The professor kept his distance from Cora throughout dinner, but he watched her as closely as the rest of us. Only, his attention felt more like someone keeping an eye on a wild hound they think might pounce at any moment. Fuck, I guess she did. When she jumped on me like that... Yeah, I can still feel the imprint of her body against mine, the way her ass felt cupped in my hands as the heat of her bare pussy pressed against my stomach. The way she smelled when I pressed my nose above her core. That all too brief taste of her. I shake my head.

Scent match. Who woulda thought?

“Sleeping bag’s plenty big enough for two. Maybe more.” Jax smirks and winks at me. “And I’d rather not sleep on the ground.”

Roman steps between Jax and Cora. “She needs to sleep, not have you trying to fuck her all night. In fact, all three of you should sleep over there.” He points to a different pool that’s at least fifty feet away. “Far enough that maybe your cocks won’t be in control of your actions.”

“That so?” I step up. There’s no way I’m letting this alphahole tell me what I can and can’t do with my mate. Not that I plan to do anything tonight. She’s clearly exhausted, but I need her close. “And where will you be while we’re all sleeping over there?”

“I’ll be doing the honorable thing and keeping my dick in my pants while I protect her.”

Jax gives Roman a pointed laugh, jabbing him in the chest with his forefinger. “‘Cause you were such a gentleman earlier and kept your back turned while she bathed.” His tone drips sarcasm.

“You looked at my mate?” I growl.

“You try looking away when a beautiful woman is coming just a few feet away from you. ”

“She was... what ?” I shift my attention to Jax.

He licks his lips, a dazed look in his eyes. “She came on my tongue. It was fucking heaven.” He’s sporting a soft smile like a lovesick fool. It’s kinda creepy, but I’m not sure I would be much better if I’d gotten to feast between her thighs. The brief brush of my lips against her core wasn’t nearly enough.

“Look, everyone needs to take a step back so we can have a normal conversation.” Archer pauses as if in thought. “Actually, you each should take a literal step away from each other, too. All this alpha posturing isn’t helping anyone.”

There’s that good boy side of Arch again, trying to appease everyone and stop conflict. I take the first step back. “He’s right, and we don’t want to wake Cora. Let’s move by that pool if we’re gonna see who’s dick’s the biggest.”

A choked sound comes from Archer at my statement. Mmhmm, you know it’s mine, don’t you, baby.

Shuffling over, Jax and I each take a rock, but when Archer tries to find his own seat, I snag him around the waist and pull him between my legs.

“Um, I can—”

“You’re staying right here.” Did he think I wouldn’t claim him in front of everyone? Fuck that. He’s as much mine as Cora is, and I need to make sure he damn well knows it.

Tension leaves his shoulders as he relaxes against my chest. My body responds similarly, my alpha riding me a little less hard now that I have my beta in my arms.

Roman is the last to join us, closing his eyes and rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. It’s time we face this issue head on. I’ve got my suspicions about what’s got him acting like a giant alphahole, but I want to hear him say it. And I’m not afraid to push hard to get him to confess.

“Are you gonna tell us what the hell your problem is, Dr. Slate?” My tone is quiet, but demanding. “Because I think I speak for all of us when I say that no one—especially not a stuck up alphahole like you—is going to keep us from our

mate.”

Roman crosses his arms and looks back over his shoulder at Cora.

I’m shocked he’s not arguing with me or telling me it’s unprofessional. That I should keep it in my pants until the dig is over. But he just stands there, staring at Cora.

“You gonna answer the man?” Jax asks. “‘Cause he’s right. You gotta lose the stick up your ass. I got plans to do a lot more with my mate than I did this afternoon. And unless we get out of here tonight, you’ll be getting another show. No way my dick’s gonna last another twenty-four hours.”

Roman swings his head to glare at Jax like he wants to kill him, but he keeps his lips pinched shut.

Ever the mediator, Archer tries to prod Roman more gently. “Seriously, I know this is a weird situation so emotions are running high, but are you okay, Roman?”

“Not really.” The professor surprises me with his soft, direct reply, his shoulders dropping along with his gaze. “I’m sorry. You all are mates and—” his voice breaks, surprising me even more.

Shit, I knew scent matches were a sensitive subject for him, but never expected the prof to get this emotional over it.

Roman clears his throat. “We’ve been in close quarters for weeks, and now we’re trapped in a dangerous situation. And... um...”

It’s exactly what I thought. “You like Cora.”

He doesn’t respond.

Shit, this has got to feel like all his worst fears coming true. He told me about his brother and how much he wanted to avoid being in that same position, but now someone he cares about has found her scent matches before he even had a chance with her.

“Of course he fucking likes Cora,” Jax scoffs. “Is that really news to you all?”

“It’s kinda news to me .” Roman sinks down onto a rock like he can’t hold himself up anymore.

“We’ve already established you’re an emotionally stunted alphahole.” There’s amusement in Jax’s voice as he taps Roman’s foot with his. “It’s pretty fucking obvious you’ve got a massive crush on our pretty little omega.”

Roman rubs the back of his neck. “I’ll get it under control. I know...” He pauses and swallows. “I know she’s yours, and I’m gonna have to...”

Jax laughs and rolls his eyes. “And you all are supposed to be the smart ones.” He stands up and brushes the dust from his jeans, a fruitless effort considering where we are and where we’re about to sleep. “News flash, professor, she wants you, too.”

With that he walks off, laying down next to Cora.

“She doesn’t,” Roman says softly, shaking his head .

“I don’t know.” Archer studies Roman. “Jax is...” He pauses like he’s searching for a diplomatic word.

“Eccentric.” I help him out.

“Yeah, lets go with that. But he’s also oddly intuitive, and I kind of think he might be

right.”

“She doesn’t want me,” Roman’s protest is stronger now. “How could she? I’ve been a total ass.”

“Yeah, you have. And she deserves better.” I stand up, pulling Archer with me. “So step up. Or back off.”

Roman’s gaze follows Archer and me back to the fire where we lay down next to Cora. I can understand his hang ups, but I really hope he can get over them, at least while we’re down here. I have a feeling we’re gonna need to work together if we want to get out of this place alive.

41

The night is endless. A dozen feet from the rest of the group, I toss and turn, unable to sleep. The hard stone floor tortures my back, but it's not discomfort keeping me awake. It's the little omega, framed by her scent matches on either side. Jax is facing her, his features relaxed in sleep. Bear's body is curled around Archer, but the mammoth alpha pushes the beta as close to Cora as he can without being in the sleeping bag with her. His meaty arm is draped over them both.

In sleep, they look like they're already a pack. Even without formal courting, or intentions being stated, it's clear where this is going. She'll be mated by the next semester, maybe before this dig is over. Although, that's not saying much, since the excavation of a temple like this could end up taking years.

Unable to stare at the ceiling for another second, I creep closer to the rest of the group. The strength of Jax's scent pummels me first. I'll never confess it to him, but I've always loved absinthe. Not the cheap bright green stuff, but the good stuff, the top shelf stuff. The kind that has more complex notes than just licorice, that has other botanicals and herbs mixed with the anise seed. That smells as complex as Jax's personality. It's fitting.

Bear's spicy honey, and, to a lesser degree, Archer's herbal berries, mix surprisingly well with Jax's potent liquor. But all of it covers the scent I'm looking for, the scent I need to satisfy my curiosity.

To avoid making noise, I sink to my knees and crawl forward, creeping closer and closer to Cora's head. Her hair fans out on the thin pillow she made out of Jax's

button up, and I know if I can get near enough, I'll be able to smell her.

Almost there.

Jax throws his arm over Cora, startling me. I look at him, and he's staring back, that infuriating smirk lifting one side of his face.

"Go ahead, professor," he whispers.

Cora stirs, rolling closer to Jax.

Staring the man down, I ease forward. There's an undercurrent to the scents now. Something... my heart squeezes. Breath knocked from my lungs. I scramble backward so quickly, that I miscalculate how close I am to one of the pools. My knee hits nothing but air, and it's too late for me to recalibrate.

Splash!

Water floods into my nostrils, but it does nothing to cleanse the scent.

Mate.

42

I startle awake to the sound of a splash, droplets of water hitting my face, and Jax cackling like he's just seen something ridiculously funny. Roman gasps for breath, breaking the surface of the pool, dripping wet. He glares at Jax like whatever happened was his fault, but Jax just holds up his hands, palms out.

"Don't look at me, man," Jax says, still laughing. "You're the one who freaked out when you realized—"

"Shut it, Indiana," Roman growls.

"Oh, you think I'm like Indiana Jones, huh?" Jax grins and pretends to be slashing the air with a whip.

Roman narrows his eyes and climbs out of the pool. He's still wearing his khaki shorts.

"Did you push him in?" I ask Jax, even though I know Jax was right beside me when I woke up.

"I fell," Roman says curtly, before Jax can answer.

"Yeah, you did." There's something teasing in Jax's words, almost like an innuendo I don't quite get.

"Okaayyy." Deciding to drop it, I stretch, then stand up and make my way around the

corner to the little room Bear and Archer found last night. We all agreed to set it up as a place to do our business—a little gross, but necessary.

After taking care of that, I check to see if my clothes are dry. We all washed at least a few garments last night, then hung them over the rocks near the fire. Roman is laying his wet pants out on a rock when I return. I slow my steps. He's only wearing boxer briefs, the fabric damp and clinging to his body, emphasising the outline of his thick cock. The material is covered in little shovels. They're so unexpected, I laugh.

Roman jumps and nearly falls into the pool again. Rather than glare at me like he normally would, he looks almost sheepish, maybe even apologetic. He grabs his dry shirt and edges as far away from me as possible.

"It's fine," I mutter to myself. "He can act like I have the plague if he wants to. I don't care. We don't have to be friends."

"You okay, honey?" Bear asks.

"Oh, um, yeah." I hadn't realized he'd come up behind me. "Why?"

"You're talking to yourself again." His smile is indulgent.

"You noticed that, huh?" Usually I'd be embarrassed that someone noticed one of my quirks, but I'm too tired and too confused by Roman to care. "I just don't know what to make of Dr. Roman Slate. I mean, we're stuck down here. We should be working together, but he just jumped away from me like I'm a venomous snake."

"Give him time." Bear looks over at Roman, who's currently cleaning up our makeshift campsite. A good idea, since we don't know how long we'll be stuck down here.

I'm hopeful the rest of the team will recognize the signs of a cave-in once they get back from town and start digging, but that's still another two days away. In the meantime, we may have to camp out here. A thought that should upset me more than it does. Except, more time in the temple means more opportunity to find Lunara's relic. Though, I'm not sure how I'm supposed to do that without telling my mates how broken I am. Can I do that? Am I ready to?

Maybe I could tell Roman. He's not my mate so he won't have any personal investment. He could help me search the temple for what I need while the other guys look for a way out. Then again, I doubt he would help me, and I doubt my mates would let the two of us go off on our own.

Roman turns like he can sense us watching.

"I'm going to see if I can find a way out," he calls from across the space.

My heart lurches. "We shouldn't be wandering off alone."

His brows pull down as his lips pinch together. "I won't go far."

I look around and realize Archer and Jax are nowhere to be seen either. "Where are the others?"

"Archer's looking for more firewood, and Jax went to see if he can catch another snake for breakfast," Bear says .

It makes me uneasy having all my men scattered about.

Roman isn't yours.

My chest constricts when I remember that Roman won't ever be mine, even if I want

him to be. I thought we were at least making progress on the friend front, but if the way he's acting this morning is any indication, I was dead wrong.

"Hey! Guys! I found something." Archer's excited shout reaches us right before he does. Roman halts his step.

"What is it?" Jax's voice booms.

I startle at the sudden close proximity of him. Where the hell did he come from? When I look over my shoulder, he smiles and steps even closer, holding a very different kind of snake than last night, dripping wet. His hair is also drenched, wet droplets sliding down his bare chest to his?—

"You can't walk around naked!" I gasp, covering my face with my hands, though I'm not sure why. It's not like it's the first time I've seen his cock. And he's my mate . But it's just so unexpected, and so public .

"But I was swimming and I like being naked." Jax peels my hands away from my face, then uses his grip on my wrists to pull me into his body. He's hard against my stomach, and his scent is intoxicating. A whimper bubbles out of me, perfume scents the air. Jax moans. "Especially when it gets this kind of reaction out of you."

"Cut it out," Roman says, but there's not the same bite in his reprimand that there was last night.

Bear tosses Jax the jeans he'd left on the rocks, which land half on my shoulder as I step back. As Jax takes them, he leans in and whispers, "Later."

He steps his feet in the pants and pulls them up while I'm left wondering what he's suggesting with that one heated word.

“What’d you find, Arch?” Bear’s question reminds me why we’re all gathered around, and I’m shocked I’d forgotten.

“A book!” Archer exclaims. Holding up a worn tome.

“Not sure I’ve ever been that excited over a book before.” Bear’s gruff voice holds fondness in his tone.

“It’s not just a book,” Archer chastises. “I think it’s a journal, or a manual? There are symbols I’ve never seen before, and some, um, some?—”

“Some what?” I ask.

“Just look.” Archer brings the tome over to a clean, flat rock, and places it on the surface before stepping back so the rest of us can see it.

The worn leather cover spans nearly half the surface of the rock. When I hold my hands up to it, it’s wider than both of them side by side, shaped more like a square than a modern book would be. But what catches my eye immediately is the symbol gracing the front of it. A golden shine twinkles from a debossed groove, telling me this book was precious.

“Lunara’s rune.” I whisper in awe.

“The same one we saw on the floor?” Roman asks. He’s standing a good ten feet away. Odd. He’s usually the first to crowd close to an artifact.

“Yeah, but this is more well preserved than any I’ve ever seen. ”

Reaching forward, I run my fingertips reverently over the rune before gently opening the book. Only a few hieroglyphs sit before me, none that I recognize, so I turn the

page. A smile forms on my lips when I see a drawing of an ethereal woman, her beauty and power translated to the paper. Below her is the rune of Lunara.

“I think this is a depiction of the goddess.” I say to the group.

Archer takes his glasses off and wipes them on his shirt before leaning around Bear to get a closer look.

Turning the fragile page, I stifle a gasp as I take in the image of the same woman being ravished by four men. Worshiping her. Bringing her pleasure.

“Looks like fun,” Jax says, leaning over my shoulder.

“What is it?” Roman asks, still standing too far away. His posture is even stiffer than normal.

“Come over and find out.” Jax slings his arm around my shoulder.

“There’s a place for you here.” Bear takes a half step to the side. There’s something soft in his tone that has me looking up at him before looking back at Roman.

“I’m...” Roman shakes his head. Something passes between the two men that I don’t understand. Bear gives a brief nod, then steps close to me again. He turns the page, and I see something else I recognize.

“There! I’ve seen that symbol before. It means ‘fertility.’” I say, then point at another. “And this one means ‘health.’” I study the other two symbols for a moment, trying to place them, but it’s no use. “I can’t decipher these others, but maybe the rest of the book will give us something to work with.”

Eagerly turning to the next page, I suck in a breath at what I see. People of all genders

writhe on the floor, connecting bodies in any way they can. Some with one partner, some with four or five, in every combination you can think of. An orgy. It's a frickin' orgy. I was right!

"You were right." Archer echoes my thoughts with a touch of wonder in his tone.

The same hieroglyphs surround the edges of the drawing. Fertility, health, and the ones I can't read.

"Is that the goddess there?" Bear points to a woman in the center who looks a lot like the image of Lunara from the page before. But it's difficult to make her out in the crowd of bodies.

"I think so?" My fingers gently trace the picture. We shouldn't be touching this without gloves. Pages this old should be falling apart, but the book is in remarkable shape, mysteriously preserved beyond what should be natural. And I can't hold back. Something about being stuck down here in these circumstances makes this feel more like an adventure than an archeological dig. Like stepping back into the past and living it, rather than just excavating it.

Archer reaches around me to turn the page again, revealing a closer look at the goddess—almost a zoomed in version of the page before. A glint catches my eye.

"What's that?" Jax points at Lunara's neck, where a gold necklace sits. Well, more of a choker than a necklace.

"Pfft. You would see the gold thing first, treasure hunter," Bear teases.

"I've never seen this before." I lean closer to get a better look. "None of the renderings of Lunara in my studies showed her wearing this."

“What is it?” Roman asks again.

“If you want to see, you can stop being a mopey child and come join us.” I glare at him. But he doesn’t budge. With furrowed brows, he rubs his stubbled chin, refusing to meet my eyes. I wish I knew what was going on in his head.

“If they took the time and effort to gild this on the page, it must be important, right?” Archer asks, possibly trying to break up the tension and tempt Roman over with honey rather than ire.

Chills rush up my spine as I take in the stunning craftsmanship of the one and only gilded thing on the page—in the whole book so far, other than the cover. Could this be Lunara’s relic? Proof that the legends are true and it actually exists? Could this be what I’m looking for? A way to fix me?

43

My little mate is so smart. But seeing all these sexy images is making me think of Cora's sweet, sweet pussy again. I only got a taste of her exquisite nectar, and I'm desperate for more.

My focus bounces between the erotic images and my mate's excited face as she flips through the rest of the book. One page makes me pause to take it in. The goddess Lunara touching the forehead of a heavily pregnant omega. My cock hardens as I replace the omega on the page with my mate. I can't wait to see her swollen with my child. Fuck, she'll be so sexy.

The smell of Cora's arousal blooms, but before I can try to convince her to let me take care of it for her, she turns back to the group. "We need to find this necklace."

"What necklace?" The professor growls. I throw a rock at him. Our mate needs him to get his act together. It's not a big rock. Just a pebble really .

"Ow." Roman rubs the spot I hit on his chest, and I grin. I've always had good aim.

Thankfully, our little mate doesn't notice the exchange. I don't think she'd like me hurting the professor, even if it wasn't by much.

"You don't think..." The nerdy beta's eyes go wide when our mate nods.

"I feel like I'm missing something here." I swing my head between Archer and my mate.

“It could be.” Our beta says, ignoring me. “Do you think it really does what they say?” His attention is completely locked on our girl.

“I, uh, think it will... I hope...” She lowers her voice, continuing to talk to herself as if we can’t hear her. “How the hell do I explain this to them without sounding delusional?”

She’s chewing that plush lower lip of hers, so I reach forward and pull it out gently with my thumb. “Explain.”

“I think this might be Lunara’s Relic. And... I need to find it.”

“Why do you need the necklace, love?” I ask quietly.

“What we need is to find a way out of this hell hole,” Roman growls from the edge of the circle.

Cora turns her head toward him, but I grip her chin and force her face back to me. “Ignore him. Why is this so important to you, little mate? You know I’d do anything for you.”

“You might feel differently after?—”

“Nope. Not possible.”

“Okay, um, yeah, I guess it’s good we talk about this, since it affects all of you.” Her gaze flings toward Roman before looking away. “Well, three of you.”

Interesting. My little mate has secrets. I like that.

“Maybe we should sit down.” She closes the book and picks it up, holding it against

her chest like a shield, then walks back toward the fire, leaving the rest of us guessing. And drooling over her ass. Fuck, she looks good. She's still wearing the shirt I gave her after her bath, and seeing her in my clothes has kept me hard all morning. Pretty sure Lunara should dub me a saint for the control I've shown.

She sits cross-legged by the fire. I flop down next to her, grab her waist, and drag her into my lap. She only fights me on it for a second. But even in arms, she curls in on herself. I smooth a hand over her hair. "What is it, love?"

She waits until the other men sit down. Bear and Archer just to the left of us, and Roman on the other side of the fire and a good five feet back. Seems the good professor isn't ready for her to get a whiff of his juniper and cranberry scent yet. It's not overpowering—he was probably taking as much scent blocker as she was—but it's noticeable if you're close to him.

He crosses his arms, refusing to sit down.

Cora looks at him for a long beat before she blurts out, "I don't have heats."

I blink, shaking my head. I must have heard wrong. "Huh?"

"I don't have heats," she repeats, as if my hearing is the problem.

"But you're an omega," Bear says .

She's still looking at Roman, and he's looking back with an entirely neutral expression. For once, I'm grateful for the man's control. And grateful she's sitting in my lap and can't see my face. I don't know what my face is doing, because I have no fucking clue how to process what she just told us.

"What does that mean, sweetheart?" Archer asks.

Cora takes a deep breath before answering. “I have pre-heat symptoms—like, all the time—but it never turns into a real heat.”

“But you’re an omega,” Bear repeats. Big guy’s in shock. I am, too.

“The doctors think I probably won’t be able to have children. Since... well, you know. And bonding...”

The air sucks out of my lungs like I’ve been punched. The image of my omega with my bite on her neck, round with my child, is ripped from my mind in one instant.

But then I think of her.

I can hear the pain in her voice. Feel the tightness of her muscles as she leans away from me, curling over her knees even while sitting in my lap. How long has she known? How long has she carried this on her own?

“Oh, love.” I pull her against my chest, wrapping her in my arms.

“What does this have to do with the necklace?” Bear asks, coming out of his stupor.

Cora snuffles and keeps her damp face against my chest. “There are stories of...” She snuffles again, and her shoulders shake.

“Lunara’s Relic,” Archer says, like he’s putting together a puzzle and just found a missing piece. “They say it could heal people, and there’s one obscure text that says it can induce heats. You wrote about it in your paper in the National Academies of Omega Sciences Journal.”

Cora nods. Her whimpered cries are quietly breaking my heart.

“We don’t care that you don’t have heats, honey,” Bear says, shifting close enough to touch her knee.

“But I care,” she whispers. “I want a pack. I want kids. I want to stop being on the edge of a heat all the time, stop feeling constantly uncomfortable, and instead feel all the pleasure an omega is meant to. Without it, I’m... I may as well be...”

“A beta,” Archer’s voice is hard.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Cora says, reaching for his hand, but he’s too far for her to touch. “There’s nothing wrong with being a beta. All the designations have their place and purpose. I just feel like... I don’t.” Her last word dissolves into a sob as she buries her head against my chest.

“You do, love. Your place is with us. No matter what. With or without bonds and heats and all that shit.” I brush her hair off her shoulder and pull her closer. “But that being said, I’ll try every magic relic, doctor, temple, witch, and whatever the fuck else you want to try to get my bite on your neck and my seed to take root in your womb. If that’s what you want.” I give her a squeeze, then look around at the group. “So, we find this relic, yeah?”

“I’m in,” Bear says without hesitation. Good man.

“It’s worth looking.” Archer kicks a rock and it skitters across the floor. Seems our beta might need a little lift. Wonder if he’d let me fuck him out of his mood. Orgasms make everything better.

“B-but Roman’s r-right,” Cora says, tears wetting my bare chest. “We should be focusing on a way out.”

“Don’t back out of your own plan now, love.”

Cora looks at each of us in turn and wipes her eyes. There's that brave hope I know. But when her attention shifts to her professor, her face falls again. Fuck, I want to hurt him for hurting her. If only that wouldn't hurt her more.

"You don't have to come with us," she whispers, looking down, away from Roman's stare.

A myriad of emotions flash across the professor's face, his jaw tight with tension. His eyes never leave my little mate as he tries to sort through them. If he doesn't say something soon, I really might punch him in the face despite knowing Cora wouldn't approve. Finally, he stands up straighter, a look of determination taking over his features. "I'll help."

Roman's firm tone surprises me. Maybe I won't have to beat him up after all.

Cora gives him a look of shock tinged with hope.

"We give it three days," Roman continues, ever the pragmatist. "We have potable water and a food source that seems plentiful, even if snake isn't the most exciting meal. It won't hurt to do a little exploring before we try to find a way out in earnest. Who knows, maybe the team will find us and it won't be an issue. But after three days, we start digging our way out. With or without the necklace."

There's no debating his firm tone. He expects us all to follow. Since it seems like a good enough plan, I'll let him take charge. For now.

His face softens on Cora. "I don't want you down here too long. It can't be healthy, and I want—" He stops himself, shifting his weight.

When he doesn't say anything more, I stand up, pulling Cora with me.

“Okay, then.” I offer a hand to Archer to help him up, but Bear beats me to it. My effort is still rewarded by a shy little smile from Archer. Once we all figure our shit out, I think we’re gonna get along real well.

I rub my hands together, eager to do what I do best. “Let’s get searching.”

Seeing the look on Cora's face, the tears streaking down her cheeks as she sobbed against Jax's chest, cracked something in me. This new revelation about her makes me feel even worse about so many of my arrogant, preconceived beliefs. I fucking yelled at her to take her heat suppressants when we first got here. How did that reminder of her pain feel to her?

Guilt and shame rest on my shoulders like a heavy weight. I spent so many of our first days here treating her like she was nothing more than her biology, and all that time she was hurting and facing this pain alone.

Fuck, I've been such an asshole. Making assumptions without even getting to know her. My biases stemmed from seeing my brother's downward spiral, not something that happened to me directly. This woman is actually living her trauma on a daily basis.

With a sigh, I determine to help her any way I can moving forward. I'm still not sure how to tell her I'm her mate, or if I'm brave enough to face her rejection when I do, but I'll do anything to make sure she doesn't feel broken. Even helping her search for a solution that may not exist. I don't want her to feel like she doesn't have options, and if this is the option she wants to pursue, I'll support her in that.

Whether or not this relic will do what she hopes is yet to be determined, but a couple days down here won't kill us. And she's right about this being a rare opportunity. When will we ever have the chance to explore Lunara's temple like this again? Once we find our way to the surface and reveal this discovery, the powers that be will take

over, securing the site from any outsiders and demanding we follow protocol that could dredge on for years. If we're careful not to destroy anything, this is a once in a lifetime chance to see history raw.

A sharp clang echos off the temple walls, ripping me from my musing and spiking my adrenaline. The sound is emanating from the darkened hallway to the left, behind the pools. Archer and Cora are hunched over the book, searching for any clue as to where the relic might be—if it's even in the temple at all. Bear is roasting the snake. But Jax... where the hell is Jax?

My brows furrow as I lock eyes with Bear across the campfire. Another clang rings out, and we both jump up.

Without saying a word, we run from the fire, aiming for the tunnel. Sounds of rustling indicate Cora and Archer have scrambled up to follow, but I don't look back to confirm.

When we round the bend in the hall, my mouth drops open in horror. Jax is slamming what looks to be a pick-axe into a solid wall.

"What the hell are you doing?!" I yell once my initial shock has worn off.

Jax pauses, looks at me over his shoulder, and casually admits, "I'm tearing a hole in this wall," then he goes right back to it.

"No shit, but why?" Bear asks. He's a little less irate than I am.

Jax strikes the wall again, never taking his eyes off his project. "Noticed a hole between the bricks here. You can feel cool air being sucked in by the humidity from the hot springs, which means it isn't just dirt on the other side. Could be a room, or another path we can access, maybe one that leads to our girl's necklace. I know I

wouldn't keep something like that out in the open. Besides, I got a sixth sense about these kinds of things. So I figured I'd take a look."

"By destroying the temple?!" I yell even louder. My blood pressure is rising by the moment as I watch him tear apart history so crassly.

"Not destroying. Renovating." Jax throws back with a cocky grin.

Bear rolls his eyes at him, but doesn't say anything else. Just as I'm about to step in, something loosens and half of the wall gives way. The treasure hunter goes flying forward, dropping out of sight, and Cora lets out a soft scream. Scrambling forward, I breathe a sigh of relief when Jax stands up, brushing off his jeans and running his fingers through his hair to shake the dust out. I may not love the guy, but I don't want him to die .

"Jax! Are you okay!" Cora cries as she stumbles over the rubble to get to him. Right when she makes it to him, she loses her footing and falls, but Jax catches her.

"Whoa, slow down, love. We don't want you to hurt yourself," he croons at the omega as he sets her right.

"Holy Hell." Archer draws out the words in an awed voice as he takes in what Jax quite literally stumbled into. What looked like a solid wall turns out to be hiding a set of stairs that lead further underground. It was likely a hidden door that required someone to know how to open it, but of course Jax bulldozed his way through like a hippo on a rampage. He's lucky the whole damn temple didn't collapse on us.

"Bear, can you get us a torch?" Cora asks.

With a nod, the big man jogs off, returning moments later with a lit torch he swiped from our little campsite. Knowing Cora is too short to reach, he lifts the torch,

touching it to another one on the wall. The flames catch and spread lighting the passageway with a soft glow.

“Do we...go down?” Archer asks when none of us move. Jax shrugs his shoulders, turns on his heel, and begins descending the stairs. Cora follows him, and the rest of us trail after her like lost puppies.

It’s colder here than the room we just left, and the juxtaposition between the stairwell and the warm oasis of the pools is eerie. Cora wraps her arms around herself, rubbing her hands up and down her biceps as if warming them up. Bear notices and pulls her against his huge body. I’m sure the man radiates heat like a furnace.

“Are you cold, honey?” he asks her softly. She shakes her head, biting her lip before answering .

“No, I’m fine. Just a little nervous, maybe?”

When he reaches a plateau, Jax spins around, aiming a wide smile in her direction while continuing to walk backward. “Are you scared, little mate? You know I’ll protect you from any ghosts or creepy crawlies down here.”

“Watch where you’re going, asshole.” I growl. The last thing we need is someone falling into another hole because they weren’t paying attention.

Cora glares at me, and I sigh. I’m about to attempt an apology for snapping at Jax, when I hear a scraping sound. Jax freezes, looking down at the floor with wide eyes. The stone he’s standing on is slowly sinking under his weight. Before he can jump off, it settles with a click .

My chest is tight as we all wait, poised for something to happen. When nothing comes flying out of the wall or crashing from the ceiling, Jax lets out an awkward

chuckle. “Ha, uh, oops?”

“Guys.” Cora’s voice is strained. She’s staring at the floor. A trickle of softly glowing water is snaking between her feet, small at first, but growing thicker every second.

“Bear!” Archer calls out. He’s pointing at the wall, where more is flowing through small holes we didn’t notice. “I think it’s coming from the pools!”

More and more holes seem to open in the walls and ceiling. Bioluminescent water pours out, gathering in the stairwell.

It isn’t draining.

“Did you just trip a fucking booby trap?” I growl at Jax.

“Those really exist?” Bear questions .

“Not often.” Archer answers. “But there’s evidence that suggests ancient civilizations protected extremely valuable items with deterrents.”

Waving an arm around us, I grit out, “Deterrent is an understatement, don’t you think?”

The water is now above our ankles. We need to get out of here. Dashing up the stairs, I don’t get more than a couple steps before another scraping sound echoes around us. The little firelight that had reached us from our makeshift campsite is being snuffed out as a large stone wall slides across the middle of the stairwell. I pick up my pace, and hear the others splashing behind me. If I can just get there, maybe I can hold it open for them. But water is gushing down the stairs now, up to my knees as I try to wade upstream. The wall closes in, blocking us from the exit.

“Oh my goddess!” Cora cries as Bear yells out, “Fuck!”

When I spin around, Jax is staring between the new wall and the quickly rising water, likely trying to figure out what to do, but not fast enough. I grip his bare shoulder hard, squeezing so he looks at me.

“Find us a way out. Now .” I don’t care that the command comes out as a bark. He got us into this mess by bumbling in here without caution. There has to be something he can do to break through that wall. Now that I think about it, there must be something holding all this water in. Another door, maybe.

Pushing past the useless treasure hunter, and the rest of the group, I run into another stone wall. Shit!

There must be a hidden trigger mechanism to get it to open. At least I hope there is, I’m not ready to drown in Lunara’s temple. My gaze lands on Cora, my mate. She’s shivering against Bear, eyes wide with worry.

I can’t let her die. I won’t.

I drag my hands along the wall from one side to the other, scraping and pulling at any crevice I find, the blue glow from the water highlighting the grooves and divots in the stone. There has to be a way out. There has to be something .

Noticing what I’m doing, Bear pushes a trembling Cora into Archer’s arms, then wades toward me. With the torch in one hand, he places his other high on the wall. “What am I looking for?”

I don’t stop my search. “A button, or a handle, or maybe even a loose rock. Anything that could trigger whatever mechanism opens this door.”

“How do you know there is one?” he asks, even as he begins dragging his hands along the wall.

It’s Cora who answers this time. “Th-they wouldn’t have set this up with no way to get out. People lived here, there has to be a failsafe.” Archer nods in agreement, and they both start looking. I can hear Jax hammering at the wall that closed us in halfway up the stairs.

Water is pouring in faster than before. It’s up to my thighs. Panic sets in, my lungs growing tighter with every new inch of water, as if my body thinks it’s already drowning. Bear suddenly abandons his search, wadding to Cora who is now submerged to her waist. He picks her up, holding her on his shoulder. She has to scrunch over to avoid the ceiling, but at least she’s as high as she can be. Jax gives up on the stairs and takes Bear’s place next to me, frantically looking for our salvation .

“Fuck!” I yell when I can’t find anything. The water’s quickly rising above my shoulders.

“Roman! Get over here!” Cora pleads. She and Bear are on the stairs near the back wall in an attempt to get to the highest ground they can. Locking my gaze with hers, I study her gorgeous features for a moment before shaking my head. She gasps as I take a deep breath of air, diving under the surface.

A hand grabs my ankle and yanks me back up. I sputter as I glare at Jax. There isn’t much room left for air, our heads touching the ceiling. The torches sputter out one at a time as the water reaches higher and higher up the stairwell, leaving no light but that from the phosphorescent liquid that could be our doom.

“Let. Me. Go.” I growl, and the treasure hunter releases my leg.

Wasting no time, I take another deep breath and dive below.

There's no way I'm going to stand idly by and watch anyone—much less my goddamn mate—drown. Gripping the wall, I pull myself lower and survey my options with blurry vision. Suddenly a spot of white light appears on the wall in front of me. A quick glance shows Jax behind me, shining a small flashlight through the water.

He sweeps the light across the wall and the ground nearby, and something glints. I grab his arm, pointing toward the spot I thought I saw the anomaly. He aims the light again. There! Tucked in the shadows, whatever it is glints again. Our best shot.

Burning the last of my oxygen, I propel my body through the water and reach for the item. It's behind a rock that blends in so well, we never would have noticed it without the light from the flashlight bouncing off it.

Sliding my hand behind the rock, my fingers meet cool metal. I wrap my hand around it and depress it toward the wall in a hail mary, even though I have no idea what it will do. Something shifts in my peripheral.

The wall blocking us from continuing is sliding down into the floor, vortexes forming as the water drains.

When there's enough room between the wall and ceiling, I squeeze my body tight, dragging myself through the opening, crashing to the stone floor on the other side and heaving fresh air into my burning lungs.

Water is still spilling into this room as the wall lowers, but it isn't filling it. Jax tumbles after me, his flashlight swinging wide in the near-darkness. My heart buzzes as I wait for what feels like too long, straining my eyes and ears for any sign of Cora. Where is she? I'm about to climb the wall to get back to her, when someone rides the wave through the now large opening, landing on top of me. Cora .

She coughs, gasping in ragged gulps of air as I clutch her to my chest. Fuck, I've never felt so relieved. "Shhh, hummingbird, I've got you."

She's shaking, her head buried in my neck. I stroke her wet hair, and a purr stutters out of me for the first time in my life. My mate is in my arms. She's okay, and she's in my arms. Right where she should be. I can't remember why I've been fighting this any more.

She almost drowned. I almost lost her before I even had a chance with her.

Two more thumps, followed by low groans, cause me to reluctantly turn my head away from my omega. Jax's flashlight barely lights a few feet, but it's enough to see Archer and Bear. The security alpha is gripping the beta much like I'm clutching my trembling mate.

Cora suddenly whips her head up to stare into my eyes. Her breathing is labored, her skin flushed, and she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Her mouth parts slowly, her pupils dilating as she makes a soft sniffing sound.

Her voice is nothing but a whisper when she says, "Mate?"

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Mate. Roman Slate is my mate .

I sit up, still on top of Roman's lap, and he straightens with me, keeping his arms around me. My head feels fuzzy, and I'm not sure if it's from the recent lack of oxygen or his juniper and cranberry scent.

He smells like the punch my dad's best friend used to make every year for my parent's Winter Solstice party. Gin and sugared cranberries. As a teenager, I used to sneak sips of it when no one was looking. It made me feel grown up, sophisticated, a little naughty.

It's perfect for Roman.

"How long have you known?" I whisper, unable to take my eyes off him.

"Since this morning."

"But you didn't..."

"I know. I needed some time." His voice is a low rasp. "Breathe, hummingbird. "

I didn't realize I'd stopped. "You... you hate me."

"I tried to." He chuckles softly. "You terrified me, hummingbird. But no matter what I did, I could never hate you." His arms tighten around me, and he brings his nose to

the soft skin behind my ear. “You’re intelligent and feisty and curious. And I knew it would be so easy to love you if I let myself get too close.” He says it like it’s a revelation to him, as well as to me.

Pulling back slightly, we stare at each other in the low glow of the remaining bioluminescent water cascading around us in every direction. His scent hits stronger. Like lightning, zipping through me and electrocuting every cell.

“I know you have no reason to forgive me for how I’ve treated you. But please, please Cora...” His voice breaks as he touches his forehead to mine. “I’m so sorry. Give me a chance to make it up to you. I’ll do anything.” He brushes the wet hair back from my face, eyes pleading. “Do you need me to grovel? I’ll grovel.”

“I’d like to see that,” Jax says from behind me, a smirk in his voice. “I’ve got a few ideas for how he can make it up to you, if you need help.”

“I think you owe all of us an apology,” Bear adds.

But I honestly don’t feel like I need that from Roman. Sure he’s infuriating sometimes, but I kind of like the way he challenges me, spurs me to action, even his sarcastic quips. All I want is him . For him to be here with me, like he is right now, rather than pushing me away.

“I truly am sorry.” Roman’s sincere gaze swings from me to Archer, Bear, and Jax.

“Uh, hate to break up this beautiful moment, but I think we got a problem.” Jax swings his flashlight to take in a narrow corridor. There’s a door at the other end that glints like metal. Before I can process that, glowing dots draw my attention to the walls. Glowing dots that are moving .

Jax’s body is tense when he grabs my arm and yanks me to my feet. When he shines

his flashlight on some of the moving dots near the wall, it becomes clear what they are. Scorpions. A glowing scorpion skitters out of the drain. And then another. And another.

“Shit,” Bear curses.

“The water must be disturbing them.” Archer jumps up, then leans forward to investigate the grate closest to him. “Probably intentional. Pretty smart, actually. One booby trap setting off another.”

Bear yanks him back with a low growl.

“What the fuck do we do? We can’t exactly find a lever to stop scorpions!” Roman yells. “We gotta go back.” He’s already dashing back the way we came.

“No,” Jax yells after him. “The necklace is this way. I can feel it. We gotta get to that door.”

“Fuck!” Roman’s curse rings down the stairs. “The other wall’s still up.”

“See? This way!” Jax tugs my arm, swinging the flashlight from one grate to the next as we all rush toward the door. More and more scorpions scramble into the hall.

“Guys,” Bear’s voice wavers. I look back to see a swarm of glowing scorpions flooding from the grates behind us like water.

“They’re huge!” I pick up my pace .

“That’s good, actually,” Archer says, panting. “The big ones are less venomous.”

“That isn’t reassuring,” Roman huffs.

We make a mad dash toward the door. It's metal, with symbols I don't have time to study, but I notice Lunara's rune right in the center. On either side of the door are large, ornate braziers, the base of each supported by a golden jackal.

"At least we're on the right track," Jax says when we're right in front of it. He immediately reaches for a brazier, trying to find anything that might light it. Panic tightens my chest as the scorpions get closer. There's so many of them that they're crawling over each other and climbing the walls, a mass of writhing creatures.

Shit! The door has no handle, no lever, nothing to indicate it opens at all.

Everyone searches for a trigger mechanism, except Jax, who's still looking for a way to light the brazier. Our hands glide quickly over the cold surface. With the dim light from the water draining away, it's hard to see anything.

My fingers snag on a strange bump about the place a doorknob would be. Raised lines create uneven trails across the smooth surface, a different color than the metal of the door. Pulling my hand back, the shape of the odd area strikes me. A hexagon. It's roughly the size of... no... maybe? I pull the puzzle box from my bag, grateful that I kept it on me. If I hadn't been studying it so regularly, constantly playing with it in my hands, I might not have felt the similarity. Please let this work.

Lifting the box to the wall, I spin it first one way, then the other, until I feel the raised trails align with the grooves on the bottom. I twist it, and it locks into place with a loud click.

"What was that?" Bear asks.

"The puzzle box wasn't missing another part, it was the missing piece to this door! I think it's a key." Maybe there are even more of them somewhere.

“More opening, less talking,” Jax grits out.

I try to twist the box, expecting the door to open, but it doesn't turn. “Shit, I think we still have to solve the puzzle.” My thumb glides over the disks at the top of the box, and this time, they spin. “I need light.”

“I'm trying, love,” Jax says. “But I'm a little busy at the moment.” He's no longer looking for a way to light the braziers. He's stomping scorpions one after the other, kicking them away as fast as he can. “Unless you want scorpions all over you.”

“We might have that either way.” Bear points up. A few of the braver creatures are slowly crawling along the ceiling.

“Fuck!” Jax swings the flashlight overhead and two of them fall a few feet away. Bear grunts as he heaves the brazier Jax isn't trying to light until it tips over. The metal crashing onto stone is deafening in this confined space. The unlit coals scatter like seeds from the momentum of the fall, startling the scorpions enough that they scatter briefly. Our reprieve is short lived, though, as the glowing bodies regroup and crawl toward us once more.

Shit, I need to focus. Roman unzips my bag and pulls out my little pen light. I'd completely forgotten about it. He holds it steady while I spin the little dials .

“No, turn that one to the right. I think these bright gold sections line up,” Archer says from over my shoulder.

A shape starts to take form as I align the parts Archer points out. An omega symbol.

When the last piece clicks into place, the sides of the box open, revealing a metal piece the shape of the same omega symbol. I fit my hand around it and try to turn, but it doesn't budge. Cursing, I try the other direction.

“Push it!” Archer suggests frantically.

I put pressure on the extrusion, and it sinks cleanly into the wall, the door creaking open in the process. Thank the goddess!

Bear whoops loudly and ushers Archer and me through first, the rest of them rushing in behind us. Jax moves to slam the door, but I yell out, “Wait! The puzzle box.”

He unhooks it, then shoves the door closed. Only one scorpion makes it through, but it meets its end quickly under Jax’s boot, the crunch of an exoskeleton ringing through the space.

For a second, we all stand there, staring at the door, catching our breath, dripping wet. That’s when I realize I can see. It’s not bright in here, but there’s a low, red-tinted glow. In the center of the room there’s another bioluminescent pool, but this one is different from the ones a level above us. I’ve never heard of a red bioluminescence, maybe it’s something else making the pool glow a crimson red, blood red, almost like it’s warning us away with its eerie light.

The room is large, with six even sides. What I see along the edges makes me catch my breath.

Treasure.

Even as an accomplished, very serious archeologist, there’s no other way I can describe it. Golden urns, fine fabrics, and jewelry line the walls, their shine dulled by dust and time. On my left, a dress form holds what must be ceremonial clothing. If it is clothing, it certainly wouldn’t leave much to the imagination. Nothing but delicate chains made from rare ore drape the form’s chest, they pinch in the middle before hanging over what would be someone’s hips.

The air is still as we take the space in, until Jax interrupts the silence. “Hot damn! It’s even better than I imagined.”

Roman grabs Jax’s wrist. “Don’t touch anything. We don’t know if there are more traps in here.”

Jax shakes him off and crosses his heart with his forefinger. “I’ll be careful. Promise. All I care about finding is our girl’s necklace.”

“Our girl?” There’s the softest uncertainty in Roman’s tone as he looks at me.

A warm glow fills my chest, and I smile. “We’ll see. ”

He folds his arms, looking down at his feet. “Right. I understand. You already have your alphas, you don’t need?—”

“Shut up.” I grab his face and kiss him before he can run his mouth anymore. Roman’s lips are still against mine until I press my body against his. He responds by driving his hands into my hair, gripping the strands to tip my head back so he can devour me. When I tease his lips, he opens, meeting the sweeps of my tongue with his own. The kiss slows slightly, and Roman pulls back, taking my bottom lip between his teeth and pulling it with him before releasing it with a pop and a small smile.

“‘Bout time,” Jax says, then claps Roman on the back hard enough to nearly send me stumbling. “Now, let’s find our omega the best mating gift ever.”

A discovery of this magnitude should have me on cloud nine, but as Roman and Cora embrace, I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy. Cora deserves a pack of her own, and it's about time Roman pulled his head out of his ass. It's clear that with or without the ability to bond, they're forming a pack, even if they aren't aware it's already happening. But where does that leave me?

Bear and I have had some hot moments—some very sweet moments, too—but now that he knows Cora is his scent match, will he still fight for me if the rest of the pack doesn't want me?

Jax pulls Cora away from Roman, keeping a hold of her hand as they walk deeper into the chamber. He throws a wink at me over his shoulder, and my body heats from the attention. Jax is unlike anyone else I've ever known, so self-assured and confident, and... hot. Fuck, he's so hot. And totally out of my league. He might flirt, but I doubt he's interested in more than that.

The scent of black pepper and honey envelops me as Bear wraps his arms around me from behind, then places a kiss on my temple, his beard softly scratching my cheek.

"You okay, baby?" Bear turns me to face him.

"Yeah, fine. Just... um, it's a lot."

"I know. I was so worried back there." Bear pulls me against his chest and sighs heavily, like he's trying to release tension he's still holding.

But it's not the scorpions, or even almost drowning that has me feeling shaky. It's the uncertainty of not knowing where I stand. Bear cares about me, that much is clear, but is it enough for the rest of them? For Cora? That's what I'm really concerned about. That she won't want me.

I mean, she did nearly jump into my arms when she first scented Bear as her mate, but I was covered in his scent, so it made sense then. And we did have that moment after I fell, but life and death situations make everyone a little extra emotional and vulnerable.

"You sure you're okay? I'd think you'd be a bit more excited about this." Bear waves a hand in the air, indicating the room of treasure. "This is the chance of a lifetime."

"Yeah, but think of all the paperwork," I try to joke, but it comes out flat. Steeling myself, I reach for his big hand and follow the rest of our group.

All of us are moving slowly, checking the ground before we step to make sure we aren't triggering any more booby traps. My eyes are trained on the stone floor when Cora suddenly screams.

My heart clenches in fear, and I squeeze Bear's hand like I'm trying to break it. Cora's face is buried in Roman's chest while he strokes her back, soothing her from whatever scared her.

"What is it?" Bear asks gruffly as we approach. Jax is staring at something on the ground, an uncharacteristic frown marring his face. He's silent. Also unusual. When we get close enough, I see why.

Bones.

Not a group of them like we found buried in the sand, but a single body, the bones

still aligned as if they were sleeping on the ground. Mostly intact robes drape over them.

“Ah, fuck.” Bear curses.

Cora’s breathing evens out, and she approaches the group with Roman nearly plastered to her side. “I-I’m sorry. It—they—startled me. I wasn’t expecting to find a b-body in a room filled with sacred valuables.”

“I think she was guarding that.” I say, pointing beyond the skeleton to a pedestal on the back wall.

“How do you know it’s a she?” Bear asks, still staring at the bones.

I gesture to the pelvis that’s visible where the ancient fabric had shifted. “Females generally have lower-set, wider hips. You know, for...um, birthing children.” Not wanting to upset Cora even more than she already is, I drop the subject like a live wire and lead Bear to the pedestal.

For as opulent as everything else in this chamber is, the pedestal is made of plain white stone. The surface is free of any blemishes or symbols, except for the bottom. The base of the plinth is inlaid with golden jackals, similar to the ones that stood stalwart by the doors.

“Lunara’s relic.” Cora breathes out reverently. Her gaze is focused on the item atop the pedestal. A half-bust holds a necklace of sorts. That’s the best way to describe it even though it’s far more than that.

Intricately woven chains form a bright gold choker, the strands so fine it looks as if the metal is malleable. The braid meets in a swirl in the middle with a centerpiece in the shape of the omega symbol. The pendant is adorned with four blood red stones,

set around a larger stone in the center.

“Cora, don’t!” Roman’s yell pulls me from the trance the relic had me in. Holy goddess, I was so focused on the choker I didn’t notice we had all gotten so close to it. Roman has his hand on Cora’s outstretched arm, stopping her from reaching for the jewelry. He spins her toward him, and she shakes her head, eyes clearing from the haze they just had.

“Oh my goddess.” Cora’s voice is muffled as she buries her face in her hands. “I can’t believe I nearly grabbed a 4000 year old relic. What the hell was I thinking?”

“I-I don’t think you were.” I stutter. “It felt as if the choker hypnotized me, beckoning me like a siren would a clueless sailor on the sea.”

Bear is looking between me and Cora, a confused expression on his handsome face.

“What?” I ask.

“You felt it that strongly? I mean, I felt something but it was more...uh...” Bear tightens his lips and waves toward his crotch, his cock already half-hard under his pants.

“Horny?” Jax so helpfully supplies, as per usual.

Roman addresses the group. “Okay, clearly something’s going on here, and I think we all need to take a step back. I’d say it’s pretty obvious this is Lunara’s relic, does everyone agree?” He gets murmurs of agreement and nodding heads in response. “Great. Now what do we do?”

While Roman’s facing us, Cora turns back to the necklace, that hazy look in her eyes again.

“Okay, little mate. Let’s get you away from the shiny relic before you accidentally unleash a plague of man-eating spiders or something.” Jax gently takes Cora by the shoulders and steers her away from the choker to a pile of rich textiles on the floor, urging her to sit. She complies, taking a deep breath before looking up at us.

“This has to be it,” Cora says as we all take a seat in a semicircle facing her. “Lunara’s relic. It looks exactly like the one we saw in the book. And I can feel it. This could be the answer to all my problems. My lack of heats, the horrible cramps, the mood swings. If it works, we could bond.” She looks around. “All of us. ”

“You want to bond with us?” Bear asks at the same time as I whisper, “All of us?”

“Well, I mean, only if you...” She shakes her head, waving a hand like she’s dismissing a thought. “That’s something we can talk about later. The point is, it could fix me.”

“You aren’t broken.” Roman interrupts her with a growl.

She waves him off. “You know what I mean.”

“No, honey,” Bear says. “You need to stop looking at yourself as damaged. We don’t see you that way.”

“He’s right.” Jax scoots closer to Cora. “All we see when we look at you is our mate. Our gorgeous, kind, brilliant, compassionate mate. We don’t care if you ever have a heat, as long as we have you.”

My breath catches. The alphas all nod in earnest agreement with Jax’s proclamation. If they truly don’t care if Cora ever has a heat, does that mean they may not care that I won’t either? Could they possibly bring me into their pack despite me being a simple beta?

Tears threaten to spill from Cora's eyes. "I-I just...gah! That's so sweet. You all are good men, I know you'll accept me as I am if you have to. But...I have to do this for me. Besides the actual heat, I want bonds and babies, lots of them. I want a pack I know I'm enough for. But most of all, I need the cramps and insatiable cravings to go away. You can't imagine the pain I've lived through. I don't think I can survive a lifetime like this." Her tears win, trailing down her cheeks like rain down a windshield. Slow. Quiet. But full of so much hurt .

Jax pulls her into him, gently asking, "What do you want to do, love?"

She looks at all of us. "I need to try it on. I have to know if it wor?—"

" Absolutely not! " Roman barks, and she flinches. Bear turns a menacing glare on the professor, his fists clenching like he wants to punch him for barking at their omega. Roman holds his hands up in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I just can't let you put yourself in danger."

"Let me?" Cora challenges him. It's so good to see some of her spark back. I want to see that fire every damn day for the rest of my life. If she'll have me.

Roman backtracks. "No, I didn't mean... Fuck, Cora! I thought I watched you die back there in the water. I can't— we can't—lose you. Not when I've only just accepted that this could be something. I want time to prove to you that I can deserve you. Don't put that at risk." His voice breaks, and her face softens.

"You won't lose me, Roman. You saw the book, this is my answer!"

"I know you need this, well, you think you do." Roman pulls at his hair. "But we can't do this down here, hummingbird. What if it does work? Or what if it hurts you?"

“Do you... do you not want to bond me?” Cora’s voice wavers.

“Fuck, of course I want to bond you. You’re my scent match. But we’re just getting to know each other. And we’re several stories underground in an unpopulated desert with no supplies and no way out. We can take the necklace with us, maybe you can try it when we get up?—”

“No!” Cora cries. “No. You know as well as I do that if we show up with the relic they’ll immediately take it for research. It’ll go under lock and key, maybe even end up in a museum or a laboratory, if it actually has healing properties. This is my only chance!”

Roman looks like he may counter again, but Bear beats him to it.

“Okay, everyone, let’s take a step back. We’re all tired, hungry, just escaped multiple instances of death, and aren’t thinking straight. Let’s find a way back up to the pools and our supplies first, then we can figure out what to do with the necklace. Deal?”

Cora snuffles, but agrees. We all decide it’s best to check the room for another exit before attempting to brave the scorpions again, so we spread out, carefully searching for any signs of hidden doors or other passageways.

I’d bet good money there won’t be any. It’s clear to me that this is a vault. The fewer entry points the better, but it seems to make everyone feel better to have something to do.

Even as I search, I find myself looking at the necklace every few seconds, captivated by it. I picture it around Cora’s slender throat, bouncing against her breasts as I fuck her while Bear takes me from behind. The image is so vivid I gasp.

“It’s mesmerizing, isn’t it?” Cora says from beside me. I’m not sure when she got so

close, or when the two of us moved within arms-length of the choker. Bear, Archer, and Jax are on the other side of the room.

It's the first time we've been marginally alone since she discovered Bear's her scent match, and my mind spins with all the things I want to know. All the things that are causing my gut to churn with anxiety. Heart thumping loudly, I take a deep breath to fortify my resolve. "So... scent matches, huh?"

"Yeah." She drags her attention away from the relic to look at me, her eyes still a little glassy, but her lips tipped up into a soft smile.

"What's it like?"

"What's what like?" She turns back toward the relic.

"I mean, what's it feel like to have a scent match? How did you know? Was it as instant as all the stories say?" Goddess, is that a stupid question? It probably is. Fuck .

Cora gives me a confused look. "Don't you know?" Her hand moves back and forth in the space between us, then toward the three men still searching the other side of the chamber.

I bring my thumb to my mouth and chew on my cuticle, shaking my head. What is she implying?

"I thought... I mean... you smell..." Her nostrils flare, and she sucks her pretty pink lips into her mouth, then looks at her feet and shakes her head. "Nevermind."

"No, please. I want to know. I... I need to know what you mean."

“Archer, did you forget when I pretty much climbed you like a tree by the pools? Your scent, mmm, green tea and raspberries. I couldn’t resist. First Bear’s scent hit me like a punch to the gut, then yours wrapped around me like the sweetest comfort.” She worries her bottom lip with her teeth. “Did you...did you not feel it, too?”

She’s so vulnerable at this moment I want to tell her yes! I felt it—not right then when her scent was still too subtle to catch, but later. And now. Shit, she smells like a dream. But...

“Betas don’t have scent matches,” I hedge, staring at the choker, wondering what it would be like to feel its weight around my neck.

“Who says?” She takes my hand and brings my wrist to her nose, inhaling deeply. The touch warms my skin, heat radiating up my arm and down to my toes. “Standard convention is proven wrong all the time, you of all people should know that.”

Her eyes lift to meet mine.

Her scent thickens, like late summer hikes through the forest. Elderberry, fresh from the bush, rosehips as red as her lips. Something wild in my chest ignites.

Somewhere behind us, Jax and Bear laugh, but the sound seems far away. Everything is muffled by Cora’s sweet breath, the intensity in her gaze. I turn our hands over and bring her wrist to my lips, kissing the smooth skin. My tongue, darting out to taste her. We lean toward each other, and I feel as if my body is expanding, reaching for something. For her.

“Cora!” Bear’s voice slaps the air. He grabs her and tugs her a step back. Disoriented, she blinks multiple times in a row.

“Do you even realize what you almost did?” Bear spins her to face him .

“W-what?” She looks around like she’s trying to remember where she is.

“You were about to touch the necklace.” Bear’s thundering voice is loud enough to draw the attention of Jax and Roman.

“No... I...” Cora glances nervously between me and the relic. “Was I?”

Of course our moment wasn’t real. It was a result of the relic, nothing more.

“What’s going on?” Jax asks.

Bear ignores the question, pulling Cora into his chest. “We don’t know what that thing can do or if it’s booby trapped like the rest of this place. What if... you could have been hurt.”

“We need to get out of here.” I cast a quick glance back at the relic, then turn away from it lest it pull me back under its spell.

“With the relic,” Cora says.

“Maybe we should just figure out how to get back to the pools and then come back for the necklace,” Roman says. “Now that we know where the traps are set, we can bring torches to scare off the scorpions and come back when we’re more prepared.”

“I’m not leaving without it.” Cora squares off with Roman.

“Did you find another way out?” I ask.

“Nah, probably have to brave the scorpions again.” Jax shrugs. “Hopefully they’ve gone back to their nests by now.” He sounds cavalier, but then his gaze lands on Cora, and his scowl makes it clear he doesn’t really like the idea of her facing the

death-trap hallway again .

“There is one place we haven’t checked for another exit.” Bear points to the red glow in the middle of the room.

Roman walks over to the edge of the pool, staring intently at the water as if he can see into its depths. “You think there’s a passage underneath it? I guess it’s possible that they could have built a waterway to serve as an emergency exit of some sort, but only if it opens into a passage with an airway.

“I doubt they’d want this place to have more than one way in,” I muse.

“Worth a look.” Jax throws off his shirt and strips out of his pants so fast I barely have time to realize what’s happening before he’s jumping into the ominous pool.

Seconds tick by without Jax coming up for air. My eyes scan the surface of the water for any sign of movement, but not even a bubble breaks through the glass-like appearance. I feel like I’m holding my breath right along with him. It’s been too long. What if he’s stuck down there? Hurt? The treasure hunter has grown on me over the past twenty-four hours. He’s part of this group, and if anything happened to him... “Should one of us...?”

Bear starts to strip out of his shirt to go in after him, but just then, Jax breaks the surface with a gasp. He takes a few deep breaths as he swims over to the edge and lifts himself out, chest heaving, muscles rippling as the water sluices down his body. For all his faults, the man is a beautiful specimen of masculine power.

“There’s a pipeline, letting water in, but it’s not big enough to get through,” he says, breathing heavily. “Searched as far as I could hold my breath, but nothing. ”

I stomp up to him and smack him in the chest with the back of my hand. Jax’s eyes

open wide in surprise.

“Don’t you ever scare us like that again! Do you know how distraught Cora would have been if something happened to you?”

“Cora, or you?” Jax smirks, pulling his pants back on over his wet thighs.

I roll my eyes. “Keep dreaming.”

Jax leans so close, his lips brush my ear. “Oh, I will.”

Goosebumps rise on my skin from his proximity and implication. My gaze flicks to Bear, worried that he might not like Jax flirting with me, but he doesn’t look upset. His head is tilted to the side thoughtfully, desire in his eyes. It’s probably just that damn necklace making us all horny. It’s highly unlikely that I could have more than one person in this soon-to-be pack—if I can even be a part of it.

Roman clears his throat. “Well, looks like we’re gonna have to go back through scorpion city. Maybe there’s something else here we can use to keep them at bay. Some way we can light a fire maybe.”

“A blow torch would be nice.” Jax rubs his hands together.

“Right, yeah.” The sarcasm is thick in Roman’s voice. “I think I saw one of those over—” he points behind us, but cuts off abruptly.

We all turn to look and find Cora holding the choker against her neck. “Just to be clear, if this makes me go into heat, I want all of you.” Her gaze turns to Jax with a shy smile. “No condoms. Uh... if you want.”

Then she snaps the choker onto her neck.

I don't know how long Jax has been under the water, but for once, I'm not worried. This is all meant to be. The five of us, down here, together. With Lunara's relic.

The necklace seems to grow brighter, like it's agreeing with me. The gold should be dull from years of disuse, but it's as bright as the sun in the dimly lit room. It's clearly not a standard piece of jewelry from this era, from any era really. Maybe it's made of something other than gold? Some alchemistic metal, lost to antiquity. Or maybe it really is magic, imbued with the power of the goddess who wore it. It's easy to believe in the occult here, in the secret temple of Lunara, surrounded by scent matches I never thought I'd find, men so uniquely suited for me I could have never imagined them.

Jax with his intense adoration, breaking through every doubt I have that I could ever be loved as I am, even if this relic doesn't fix me. Bear with his steady strength, alleviating my fear. Roman, with his irritating fire, pushing and challenging me, but also always protecting when it's needed most. And Archer, my beta. The calm beneath it all. The linchpin holding us all together.

I want this pack. I want to bond them and keep them and create a home with them.

Far away, I hear my men, but their words seem distant. All that matters is this moment.

My fingertips brush over the centerpiece, tracing the blood red gemstones. It's warm to my touch. A warmth that spreads across my skin. My breathing picks up as I

slowly reach around the bust and unclasp the hook at the back. When I pull it away, the bust lifts an inch, like a weight has been lifted from the molded shoulders.

The solid heft of the metal settles the shaking in my hands. A whimper climbs my throat as my skin tightens, nipples pebbling into firm peaks. Without thought or hesitation, I wrap the choker around my neck. It fits perfectly.

Roman turns, and our eyes lock, his widening as he takes in what I'm about to do. But I feel none of his panic. All I feel is calm. And warm. Tingly and happy.

“Just so we're clear, if this makes me go into heat, I want all of you.” I know they're not ready to bond me, but I want to experience a heat with them, and this might be my chance. I don't want one of them holding back because they aren't sure if I'd want it. Thinking of Jax's off-hand remark about condoms yesterday, and all the nights I cried about not being able to have kids, I add, “No condoms. Uh... if you want. ”

Maybe it's reckless. But right now, I don't care. It feels right.

When I bring the ends of the necklace together to clasp them, they pull from my grasp and snap shut with power I don't possess. A wave of heat unlike anything I've ever experienced washes over my body. My insides twist and cramp. It's a feeling I'm familiar with, but this time, it's ten times worse. A whine pitches through the air, my whine, needy and desperate.

My skin is sensitive and even the scant clothing I'm wearing feels oppressive. I want them off. I need them gone so nothing is separating me from my mates' touches. Except, I'm so lost to this haze that I can't bring myself to remove them on my own. My whine grows louder, a sound befitting the absolute desperation ricocheting through my body and soul.

So this is what a heat feels like.

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“Fuck, yes.” Jax throws his head back, scenting the air.

Elderberry and rose hips flood the space with a fresh note that’s unlike anything I’ve ever smelled before. My dick immediately stiffens in response to the glowing omega before me. She’s resplendent, like the goddess incarnate. The power radiating off of her is only softened by the whimper from her lips and the way her hands grip her stomach. She curls over, and the next sound that escapes her is one of pain.

Instinctively, I know she’s in heat. And I know exactly what she needs.

“Come here, omega.” My voice shakes with the effort to avoid barking the command. My alpha wants to take over, to dominate.

Since I’ve avoided omegas, I’ve never been so close to one in heat, and the pheromones pouring off her affect me in ways I couldn’t have imagined. My knot swells in response to her needy whine, aching to give her what she needs.

Cora obeys my demand, taking a step toward her alphas, but before she can get any closer, Archer jumps between us all.

“Wait.” He holds up his hands. They’re shaking, and a light sweat has broken out on his brow, too. “We need to talk before this goes any further.”

“No,” Cora moans, shaking her head as she sinks to the floor like her legs have given out on her. “Knots. I need knots.”

“What’s there to talk about?” Jax walks around Archer. “We fuck her. Knot her. Bond her. Seems pretty simple to me.”

The second he’s close to Cora, she grabs for him, nails scratching over his naked skin. He hisses in pleasure, then praises her when he sees the red welts rising on his arm. “That’s right, my perfect little mate. Mark your alpha. Claim me.”

“We can’t do this here!” Archer urgently waves a hand in the air.

In a blink, Jax has Cora’s shorts off and his head between her legs. She’s on her back, writhing on the stone floor, as he hoists up her ass to devour her. Fuck, it’s like the pools all over again, but this time I’m not going to just sit back and watch.

Shoving Jax out of the way, I pull her into my lap, brushing the sweaty hair from her face. She protests the loss of Jax’s tongue only for a moment before snuggling into my lap and wrapping her legs around my waist, dragging her core against me. Fuckkkk .

“Hey, hummingbird, look at me.” Her eyes are already unfocused, but she follows my direction. Archer’s probably right. We shouldn’t do it this way—but with her wet pussy grinding against my cock and the potency of her heat pheromones, I’m not sure I’m strong enough to resist.

Reaching around her, I fiddle with the clasp on the choker, hoping once it’s off, this crazy heat spike will end, and we can talk more reasonably about a plan.

But it won’t unhook.

“Let me try.” Archer squats down behind Cora. She clutches the necklace like she knows he’s trying to take it, whips her head around, and growls. But no sooner has she snarled at him, than she’s grabbing him and kissing him like she’ll never get

enough.

He continues to fumble with the clasp on the choker, to no avail.

Bear steps in, giving it a try with the same results. All the while Cora rubs herself against my shaft, only my thin shorts between me and her dripping cunt.

“It won’t come off,” Bear says.

She curls in on herself, nearly falling off my lap in the process, clearly in pain from another cramp. Heats and heat spikes demand knots. It’s the only way to satiate them. If they aren’t satisfied, it can be dangerous. I’ve even heard of rare cases where omegas have died from unfulfilled heats.

My alpha growls in displeasure. My mate is hurting . My mate is hurting, and I have what it takes to relieve her of that pain. It’s my responsibility as her alpha. And whether or not she takes me as her bonded mate when this is all over, at this moment, I am her alpha.

“What about getting out of the temple? Doing this here isn’t safe. We need supplies.” Not even Archer’s logical statements can rip my focus away from my omega.

“Can’t you see she’s in excruciating pain? You want me to leave her like this? Desperate and begging for a knot?” I snap back at the beta.

Cora starts squirming, trying to pull away. I almost let her go—I won’t hold her against her will—until I see the sad look in her eyes. Fuck, is she hurting so bad she’s crying? I tighten my hold. “Omega. Settle. Look at me.”

When she does, my heart nearly cracks all over again. Her lip wobbles as she stops struggling and stares into my eyes. “Y-you don’t w-want me? I kn-knew you hated

me!” Cora whines.

She thinks I don’t want her? Fuck that. I wrap my hand gently but firmly around her throat, making sure she can’t look away. “You think I don’t want you? You have no idea how bad I want you. How badly I’ve wanted you. Can’t you feel it?” I lift my hips, pressing my hard cock against her core. She lets out a noise that’s a mix of a whine and a moan. She needs a distraction. Needs to know what she does to me.

“Take it out,” I command, releasing her neck.

She smiles eagerly before quickly undoing the button on my pants and lowering the zipper. I watch mesmerized as her long fingers wrap around the waistband of my boxers, pull them down, and free my hard length, precum soaking the tip.

Gripping her hips, I lift her body high enough to notch my cock at her entrance. “I want you to look at me when I show you how much I fucking need you.” She obeys my request, never taking her eyes off mine as I drop her onto my cock with a low groan. “God damn, omega. You feel so fucking good. Gonna make sure you know you’re mine.”

When she sinks all the way to my knot, she pauses her frantic rocking and we share a silent moment. It doesn’t last long. A whine ekes out of her and she throws her head back, her hands coming to her tits and gripping them tightly. “Please! Fuck me, alpha!”

That’s all it takes to make me snap. I lift her, sliding her along my shaft until just my cockhead is engulfed in her warmth before slamming her back down. I do it again. And again. And again, until I’m jackhammering into her, lifting my hips to meet her on every thrust.

Cora’s pussy suddenly gushes slick and her scent blooms. When I open my eyes, I

see Jax behind her, his hands on her breasts as he tweaks her nipples hard. She's leaning against him, her head lolling on his shoulder. When he opens his mouth, scraping his teeth along her flesh, I barely manage to get my hand between his incisors and her skin before he does anything rash. "No bonds."

Jax growls and snaps his teeth at me even as he slides his hand between our bodies so he can play with her clit. "She said she wants us."

"Yes, bond me. Fuck, bite me." Cora squeezes her breasts hard enough to bruise the pink skin. All thought flies from my mind as she clamps down around me. Her botanical scent bursts into the air, so heavy and rich, I can taste it.

Every man in the room groans, my thrusts faltering.

"Bite, please, bite, bite, bite," Cora chants.

"Hey, honey, do you want more of your alphas inside you?" Bear says, and I'm thankful for the big bastard because it distracts our omega enough that she stops whining about bites. Instead, her eyes widen and she nods frantically.

"Yes yes yes! Please! More!"

Bear prowls closer, threading a hand through her wet hair. He grips a fistful and yanks her head back until she's looking at him. "Your other alpha looks a little needy. Why don't you suck his cock while you ride Roman's big fat knot."

"Fuck." Archer's eyes are wide as he stares at Cora.

Her breathing picks up and she tips her head, nodding as best she can with Bear's meaty grip on her. Bear releases her, turning to me. "Lay down, Roman."

I arch a brow at him both in confusion and because he's telling me what to do. He sighs. "Just do it. For her."

That's a low blow. He knows I'll comply if it's for her. I slowly lean back until I'm flush with the stone floor. A moment later, a shadow falls across me and a tight ass comes into view. Jax has his legs spread, standing over me as he inches forward, pumping his cock, precum already dripping from his shaft.

Our omega surges forward, taking Jax's dick deep into her throat.

"Oh! Fuck, omega," Jax curses.

Despite Jax's balls hanging above me, I'm mesmerized by the sight of Cora bobbing back and forth on his cock. Her pussy clamps down on me, spurring me into action .

I grip her thighs, holding her in place as I buck up into her. Her glorious tits bounce wildly and she moans around the shaft filling her mouth. Her rhythm falters, the strength of my thrusts making it hard for her to stay steady. She pops her mouth off Jax and stares up at him, whining.

"I got you, love." Jax threads his hands through her hair, holding her head steady as he fucks her mouth with thrusts as unhinged and erratic as he is.

"Oh shit, she likes that. She's choking the life out of me." I groan. "I'm not gonna last."

Jax looks down at her, keeping up his rhythm. "That's it, love. Show the good professor what he's been missing out on, what an obedient little slut you can be for your alphas when they're good boys, and give you what you need. Make him lose his fucking mind."

Cora tips over the edge, screaming her pleasure around Jax's shaft. He roars as he thrusts deep and spills his seed into her hungry mouth. My omega takes every drop, and the sight nearly makes me come. Jax pulls out of her mouth, praising her while he extracts himself from over me.

With renewed vigor, I pump into Cora a few more times before shoving my knot inside her, coming harder than I ever have before. The stretch has Cora climaxing again, milking my cock for every drop of cum.

When we're both spent, Cora collapses on my chest. I brush her wet hair out of her face and cup her cheek, scent marking the top of her head as a rusty purr rattles out of me. Having my mate in my arms, trusting me, makes me feel at peace for the first time in a long time.

Seeing Cora fall apart in pleasure is like watching the sunrise. Fucking stunning. I don't want to take my eyes off her. I'm not usually one for voyeurism, but watching her with Jax and Roman feels natural. Maybe it's because we're all scent matches and meant to be a pack, or maybe it's just the necklace making me too horny to care. Not sure, but it doesn't matter. This is a memory I'm taking to my grave, and no one can steal it from me.

While Cora nuzzles Roman, Archer tests the clasp on the choker. It releases easily this time. Fuck if I know why. Some kind of magic shit, I guess. Or religious shit? I don't know. My parents were the religious ones, not me, but something mystical is going on here. That's for damn sure.

"What do I do with it?" Archer asks.

"Does this mean she's?—"

"Mmmm, more," Cora's moan cuts me off. She's grabbing for Archer where he kneels next to her after removing the necklace. Roman pets her hair gently, running his hands down her back and over her lush ass as she wiggles on his knot.

A bloom of pheromones fills the air. Her perfume, as thick as elderflower syrup.

"Definitely not out of heat," Archer says. "Guess the necklace is only the initiator." He stands as he holds the relic in the light, caressing the stones with his thumb. When he lifts it higher, I think he's just getting a better look, but then his hands move

toward his throat.

“Oh, no you don’t.” I snatch the choker out of his grasp. “Who knows what this thing could do to you.”

“I didn’t even?—”

“Yeah, I think we’ve established it seems to have a stronger effect on omegas and betas.”

There’s a soft squelching sound as Roman’s knot releases Cora. He gazes at our omega with a contented look unlike any I’ve ever seen from him. I bet he’d like to stay locked in her longer, but it’s not uncommon for knots to deflate quicker during an omega’s heat. An evolutionary trait to make sure omegas get what they need.

Our girl, on the other hand, not so content. I almost want to laugh at how quickly she grabs Jax and tugs him down to the floor, climbing over him. He chuckles, tucking his hands behind his head like he’s relaxing on the couch.

“That’s it, love,” Jax purrs. “Take what you need.”

“Never took you for a bottom.” I smirk.

“I like being used,” Jax replies .

Hmm. My pulse picks up, cock jerking painfully against my pants. I’ll have to explore that later.

Cora rides Jax slow and steady, cupping her breasts so they spill over her fingers, perfect handfuls. She grabbed them a lot while she was fucking Roman, too. I’ll have to remember our mate loves having her tits played with. Roman lays on his side,

casually stroking her thigh as she rocks her body back and forth.

“Shit, that’s hot,” Archer whispers, but I hear him crystal clear. Even as a beta, his scent is nearly as heavy as Cora’s, making my dick pulse and throb.

“You like watching them together, baby?” From behind him, I drag my hands up under his shirt, pulling it over his head while he moans in response. The sound is echoed by Cora, a beautiful symphony that I could listen to for hours. The moans and grunts and groans. The wet slap of skin. Jax’s curses. Archer heaving in deep breaths.

“More!” Cora demands.

“Fuck, she’s a hungry little thing.” Jax grins.

“Wrap those pretty lips around my cock and taste yourself,” Roman coos. Cora twists her body as Roman sits up and moves closer to Jax’s side. She licks him clean, but whines again, “More!”

“How about I fuck our sexy beta while you’re choking on your alpha’s cock, omega?” I flatten my palm across Archer’s chest and use it to pull him flush against me. “Do you want to watch me take his ass for the first time?”

Her eyes roll back in pleasure. “Yes! Please.” Then she’s leaning forward, stroking Roman’s cock a few times before devouring it again. The poor professor looks like he’s at the edge of his control, pulling his hair in fistfuls, like he’s trying to keep from tugging hers.

A moment later, he mutters a soft, “Fuck it,” before grabbing our omega’s face to hold her still so he can fuck her mouth the way he wants.

“Pants off, beta.” I buck my hips against Archer’s ass. “Your omega wants to watch

you come.”

Archer quickly complies, hands fumbling with his button. He’s so shaky, he can’t get a good grip. I knock his hands away and yank them down forcefully, his cock already dripping as it springs free.

I roughly jerk him back against me, one arm resting gently along his throat, my hand reaching around his hip to grab his cock, making him whimper and buck into my grip. My tongue laps up a bead of sweat on his neck, following its trail until my mouth is at his ear.

“You like to be used, too, don’t you, baby? You want me to take control of your pleasure.” I pump him hard, my rhythm matching the salaciously wet sounds of Roman fucking Cora’s throat and Jax pounding up into her soaked pussy. “Do you want me to fill your ass while you watch our omega? Can I fuck you, beta?” Archer nods, but I need the words. “I need to hear you. Can I fuck this tight ass?”

“Yes! Oh god, please, Bear. Please fuck me.” His tone is frantic, and he whimpers when I release his cock.

“Be a good boy and get me some of our omega’s slick,” I growl in his ear.

Jax’s doesn’t slow his rhythm, too lost to his pleasure to hear me, but there’s plenty of slick all over Cora’s thighs for what we need .

When Archer bends over to reach the sweet nectar, his asscheeks part, spreading beautifully. Heat zips through me at that quick peek of what I crave. Fuck, he looks so good bent over like that.

His touch distracts Cora, and she releases Roman’s cock to look back with a whimper. That’s right, omega, look at me. I pull my shirt off and drop my pants.

Roman grips Cora's hair and tugs her back to face him, his other hand on his shaft. He taps the swollen head of his cock on her lips. "Open, omega."

Her jaw eagerly drops, her tongue sticking out as if she's waiting for him to feed her her favorite dessert. Well, in a way he is, I guess.

Even as Roman steadily fucks her face, she keeps her head slightly tilted and her glassy eyes on me. Archer stands back up, fingers shining with slick. Desperate for a taste of our omega, I grab his wrist and suck his fingers into my mouth. The taste of her mixes with his fainter flavor in a way that's completely intoxicating.

"Share," Archer whispers.

"Oh, we're gonna do lots of sharing," Jax says with a chuckle.

Bending down, I collect more slick from Cora's thigh, taking my time to caress the smooth skin before I bring my hand to Archer's mouth, dragging it across his lips. He darts his tongue out, fervently chasing more of the flavor.

"Mmm, maybe next time you can eat our girl out while I fuck you. But right now, I want you to touch yourself while I get you ready."

Jax slips out of Cora just long enough to reposition them so she's on all fours, with him behind her, as she continues to take Roman down her throat.

Jax lines his hard cock at her entrance, but I swoop my hand in before he can thrust into her. His low growl fades to a chuckle as he realizes I'm not stopping him, I'm just grabbing up the mix of slick and cum that's leaking out of her. Fuck, that's hot.

Once my hand is free, he slams deep, fucking her onto Roman's cock with a force that has the normally put together alpha cursing like a fucking sailor.

Using Cora's slick, I get Archer good and wet before pushing in one finger. There's some resistance, but with Archer stroking himself and the mess of Cora's slick, my digit finally sinks deep.

No one speaks. It's a cacophony of moans, grunts, and slick skin as I thrust my finger in and out of Archer. Scooping up more slick before adding a second finger, I scissor them, stretching his ass to prepare him to take me. I've waited longer than I thought possible, and my control is about to snap, so I'm glad it feels like Archer is relaxed and ready.

I lube up my shaft, notching the head at Archer's tight entrance. He's completely zoned out, staring at the place where Jax's cock disappears into Cora, and he's shaking, bent slightly with his hands on his knees. I nip his shoulder to get his attention. "Do you need something to hold on to, baby?"

"Y-yes." He whimpers.

Dripping precum and jittery with the need to be inside him, I guide him to the stand where the necklace was a minute ago. It's just to the side of Cora and the other men, close enough that she can still see us if she looks up. "Hold on." He puts his hands on the solid marble plinth. "Are you ready for me now, baby? I need you. Fuck, I need you so bad."

He nods, and I know I should get the verbal confirmation, but I can't wait any longer. I push forward, his eager body welcoming my cock like he was made for me.

"Oh, oh, fuck. Fuck!" Archer garbles out, his hand pauses working his shaft.

"Did I say you could stop touching yourself?" I growl near his ear as I slide out, then back in. He works his shaft once more, and I pick up my pace until I'm nearly slamming into him like a jackhammer. He takes every ounce of my dominance with

pleasure.

I've never been a possessive meathead of an alpha, growling 'mine' all over town and demanding submission. But when my beta gives himself over to me, it's as if something ancient and instinctual comes to life in my chest. A visceral need to completely own his body, to control his pleasure and bring him to heights he never imagined.

My hand slides firmly around his throat. I test the waters a little, sliding it up until my fingertips hit right below his jaw, then pressing upward to safely reduce his airflow. My strokes have slowed, but Archer still frantically pumps his cock, deliciously pathetic noises scraping from his throat around my fingers.

Fuck, I'm nearly in a rut and it isn't even my omega causing it. He's so goddamn tight, squeezing the life out of my cock as I slam into him once more. Cora screams out another orgasm, the sound demanding my attention. Thrusts never faltering, I whisper in Archer's ear. "Watch our omega come, baby. Do you think she's clamping down on Jax's cock as hard as you're gripping mine?"

Archer moans, but his eyes stay locked on the trio. Jax pulls our omega up so her back is plastered against his chest, much the same position I have Archer in. Roman pumps his cock over them both, roaring out his release as thick jets of cum cover Cora's breasts. Jax reaches around, grabbing her tits and smearing the cum everywhere as he slams home. Cora goes over the edge as Jax loses his battle and knots her, groaning as he fills her pussy.

"Ahh!" Archer screams out as he comes into his palm.

I couldn't stop my orgasm if I tried. I guess my beta is about to discover why they call me Bear. Two more thrusts, and I shove deep into Archer's ass, stopping just shy of my knot. I explode with a roar that shakes the temple walls.

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Cora's moans wake me. She's got her ass in the air and her mouth around Jax's cock. Bear curls around me, still asleep like Roman, who's a few feet away snoozing. My muscles ache from the cold stone floor. I should have grabbed some of the fabric scraps before we got started.

Some beta I am. How will I prove I deserve a place in this pack if I fail in taking care of them during their omega's heat?

Well, maybe I can make up for it now.

When I stand up, Bear opens his eyes. He must see Cora, 'cause he sucks in a breath and groans, "Omega."

She reaches for him, and soon they're a tangle of bodies. I squint and adjust my glasses. The room is darker. Why is it darker? The lenses are thoroughly smudged, but that's not what's making it hard to see. Behind Cora and her alphas, the red pool is gone. No, not gone. There's still a soft glow from where it was, but it's muted .

Stepping around everyone carefully, I walk to the edge of what was a full basin. The water is no longer right at the lip, giving the illusion that it's part of the floor. It's draining, fast, taking with it our one natural light source and only water supply—if it's even drinkable. Jax swam through it and didn't die, but without Jax's supplies we can't test it for potability.

"We've gotta get out of here," I say, for what seems like the hundredth time. But no

one's listening. Their moans and grunts fill the air, as thick as their scents.

I find the flashlight next to our discarded clothes and shine it into the pool. There's only a small puddle of water left. The only thing I can think of is that Cora must have triggered something when she picked up the necklace. Nothing happened immediately after she took it from the pedestal, but it was naive of us not to assume there wasn't a booby trap there, as well.

"Fuck, guys!" No one answers me. I flash the light at the rest of the group. Bear is lying on his side behind Cora, holding one leg open wide so he can thrust deeply into her from behind. I'm glad I had the foresight to clean us up before I dozed off, because I have a strong feeling hygiene isn't a priority for any of them at the moment.

Roman is awake now, on his knees near Cora's head, feeding his cock into her waiting mouth. Jax is watching, touching himself, when suddenly he dives down to suck Cora's clit even as Bear slams into her. All three alphas are entirely absorbed in their omega. And I don't blame them. Cora looks like the goddess from those illustrations. She's pleasure personified.

I want to go to them and slip between her and Bear. Maybe she'd suck me off while she rides Bear's massive knot. The need to give in makes my already hard cock weep, but we can't stay here. My mouth is dry, dehydration already setting in after all the fluids we lost.

I flick the flashlight on and off repeatedly, trying to get their attention. "We need to leave!"

Grunts of annoyance follow my proclamation, but nothing more. They barely notice me. They probably wouldn't even know if I left.

I guess that's exactly what I'm good for as a beta. Betas aren't ruled by their

hormones like alphas and omegas are, we don't go into rut. It's what makes us perfect heat assistants. Perhaps I can contribute now by going to get supplies. Clearing the path so that maybe I can convince them to leave once they satisfy the itch. If they ever do. I've never been with an omega in heat, but I can already tell this is different. Cora's never had a heat, so it would stand to reason this one would take her body by storm.

She moans as I slip on my pants and pull my shirt over my head. She's happy with her alphas. They're happy with her. I'm not needed for this.

A twinge of hurt stabs at my chest, my heart constricting as I realize I'm yet again unneeded and forgotten. But I remind myself this is different. They do need me, just in a different way than Cora needs them right now.

And I should hurry. The light is almost completely gone. Without it, one of them could easily roll over the edge of the empty pool and hurt themselves. I quickly gather a bunch of random trinkets from around the room and spread them out along the edge of the pool. Hopefully, it'll be enough that if they run into them or push one of them into the pool, the noise will keep them from rolling further, like rumble strips on a highway. I don't know how deep alphas get into their ruts, but they certainly haven't heard me yelling at them.

The door has no handle from this side either, but now that I know how to use the puzzle box, it shouldn't be hard to open. Everything works just as it did before, but the door remains closed. I pull harder, but it barely budes.

"Fuck!" I throw my gaze to the ceiling. Why the hell won't it open? That's when I see the bolt. Some kind of deadbolt like contraption has fallen over the top of the door.

Now the pool draining makes sense. Lock the thief in and rob them of light and

water. We're gonna die just like that guard.

There's a table to the right that's made of stone rather than wood. It looks sturdy enough to stand on, if I can get it over here. Huffing and panting, I push the table an inch, another inch. Thankfully, I've always found working out to be a stress relief, otherwise I wouldn't be able to move the table at all. Finally getting it close enough that I might be able to reach the deadbolt, I climb up on top.

The mechanism is simple, but difficult to reach. This would be a lot easier if Bear could help. I flash the light behind me. They don't even flinch. In fact, Jax seems to preen under the attention, like it's a spotlight instead of a flashlight. He flexes his abs and his ass as he continues to suck Cora's clit while Bear pounds into her. His cock drips precum, and my mouth waters.

No, focus.

I grab a chest full of loose gems and use it as a step stool on top of the table. I still can't reach. A rusted sword catches my eye in the corner. The light is almost completely gone now, so I run for it, then climb back up on the table. The metal holds as I wedge it along the bar that fell over the door. The weapon isn't sharp enough to cut or do any damage, but I manage to use it as a lever, working the bolt up by increments until it locks back into its original position while I hold the flashlight in my mouth.

"Yes!" I whoop, hopping down to try the door again.

I crack it open, shining the flashlight ahead of me. There are a few scorpions along the walls, but most of them have skittered back down the grates. I just hope my presence doesn't draw them out again.

Taking a deep breath, I slip into the hall. For a moment, I panic, unsure how to handle

the puzzle box. If I take it with me everyone else will be trapped in the vault. I want them to have a way out if something happens to me or if they somehow come out of the haze. But if I leave it on their side of the door, I won't be able to get back in. Despite wanting to keep the scorpions out, I decide the best option is to leave the door open the tiniest crack, and leave the puzzle box attached to the door on their side.

By now, most of the scorpions have gone back underground, but I run down the hall, not wanting to take any chances. I move quickly and keep my eyes open, only stopping when I come to the thick stone wall still blocking the path. I should have asked Roman where he found the release before. But it's too late now. Guess I'll just have to search.

There's a scraping behind me, and I jump. The flashlight doesn't reach far enough down the stairs to see what made the noise. My heart hammers against my ribs. I need to find that damn release. I stick the end of the flashlight in my mouth and run my hands over the wall, searching frantically and praying I don't set off yet another trap.

"Boo!" A voice says right behind me. I swing my fist.

"Fuck!" Jax jumps back as my knuckles graze his jaw. It's not a hard punch, but it's enough to smart.

"How'd you know I like it rough," he says, all gravelly.

"What are you doing? You scared the shit out of me." I rub my aching hand. "I didn't think you knew I left." The last part is softer, and to my horror, my voice shakes.

"I knew." He leans into me. "Bear, too. But he's knot deep in our omega, so he couldn't really come after you."

“I tried to get your attention,” I whisper.

“Admittedly, it’s a little hard to focus when an omega is squeezing the life out of your dick, but the second your scent started to dissipate, Bear panicked.” Jax drags his thumb along my jaw. “Why’d you leave on your own? It’s not safe.”

“I didn’t think... I was needed.” The confession surprises me. I don’t know why I’m suddenly spilling my guts to Jax, so I backpedal. “I mean, I wanted to help. The pool’s draining, and we all need water, and if I can get this wall open, maybe you all can sober up long enough to get Cora back upstairs.”

“Shhh.” Jax’s thumb covers my lips. “You might not think you’re needed. But you’re wanted, Archer. Fuck, it’s taking all my willpower not to fuck you right here.”

“Me? Here?”

“Mmhmmm.” His hand skims down my neck to rest at the base, fingers slipping under the collar of my shirt.

“Bear told me to punish you for him.” Jax’s thumb drops to the divot at the base of my throat and strokes slowly up. “Apparently, you promised him you wouldn’t be reckless anymore.”

“It’s not reckless. I just wanted?—”

“To earn your place. Not necessary.” Jax takes the flashlight from me, clicking it off and plunging us into near total darkness. There are still a few glowing scorpions way down the hall, but it’s nearly impossible to see anything.

“W-what are you doing?”

“Don’t want to attract the scorpions, do we?”

My heart races at the feel of his breath on my cheek, his absinthe scent rich in the air. His lips skim my jaw until they reach the corner of my mouth.

“You can try to run and hide all you want,” he whispers, kissing me so gently it makes me shiver. “Believe you’re not good enough, go ahead. But not a single one of us is gonna let you get away with it. Run, and Bear will catch you. Hide, and I’ll fucking find you. Try to pretend that you aren’t the brilliant genius you are, and I know Cora and Roman will set you straight. You’re ours, beta.” His hand cups my throat. “Ours. ”

He kisses me, tasting of licorice and lust. Every thought flies out of my mind. His tongue strokes into my mouth as he undoes the button on my jeans, letting them fall in a heap around my ankles. Cold air tickles my skin, sending goosebumps pebbling my thighs. He pulls back from the kiss, and I can’t see or feel him.

“Jax?” It’s so dark, it’s as if he vanished. The uncertainty of what he’ll do next makes my heart pound in my ears.

I don’t realize he’s on his knees until his breath fans my cock. He’s not touching me anywhere, but that hot breath may as well be a caress.

“You’re ours,” he repeats before licking up my shaft.

My head drops back against the cold stone wall. I want to believe him. Fuck, I want to believe him so bad, but years of going unrecognized no matter what I accomplished, of being pushed aside and ignored while my siblings were deemed more significant... that kind of damage isn’t easy to undo.

“Want me to prove it?” Jax blows a cool stream of air up my cock, following the wet

trail his tongue left. The whiplash in sensation is nearly enough to have me spilling already, before Jax has even really touched me yet.

“Y-yes,” I pant.

“Can you show me how fast you can come down my throat? Our mates are waiting, so you gotta be quick, sweet beta.”

A moan is the only answer I can give, and the only answer he needs before he swallows me all the way down, his nose hitting my abs. My gasp echoes through the dark corridor. I can't see him, no matter how hard I strain my eyes, but I can feel him. Oh, fuck, can I feel him. His grip on my hips is bruising. His mouth, warm and wet.

The pale green glow of a scorpion scampers along the wall a few feet away from me, the only thing visible in the cavernous darkness. Fear tightens my muscles, adrenaline spiking. Logically, I should make him stop, make sure the scorpion doesn't sting us. But the danger, and the dark, and his command to hurry swirl together until I hit a new level of arousal. I can't hold on much longer, and I don't want to. This is raw lust. A claiming. It's fast and dirty and?—

“Jax!” I explode, clawing at the wall with my nails to keep from falling over.

The scorpion scampers away, and Jax releases me. His weight suddenly presses against me as he stands. His lips meet mine, begging entry. The moment I open for him, he tilts my head back and spits my cum into my mouth.

“Such a good beta,” he coos, “Now, swallow, and next time I'll give you my cum.”

Stunned, I do as he says. It's filthy and shocking, and my skin heats with a mix of embarrassment and lust.

He kisses me again, then pats my cheek. “Now, let’s get this wall out of the way.” His tone is so casual it’s as if what just happened was a fever dream. If it weren’t for the taste of my cum on my tongue, I might question my sanity. But then he nips my ear. “Come on, hero. I know I’m good, but you can’t be rendered useless every time I suck you off.” He gives my ass a quick slap. “At least not right now. We got work to do.”

“Hero?” I ask, confused why he’s calling me that.

Jax scoffs. “Yeah, hero . Trying to sneak off to rescue everyone. It’s kinda hot when you get all save-the-day, though.”

Hero . No one’s ever considered me a hero before. A warm feeling settles in my belly. I kinda like it.

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“Archer,” Cora whines, tugging hard on my beard. “Where’s Archer?”

The same question fills my mind, too. Was it minutes or hours ago that I sent Jax to find him? It’s hard to keep track of time during a heat, when all you know is fucking and rutting. Add in the fact that we’re underground in an ancient temple with no fancy clocks? Yeah, I don’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell of knowing how long it’s been.

Cora’s not the first omega I’ve helped through a heat, but nothing I’ve experienced before has ever been like this. I don’t know if it’s the damn necklace, or because this is her first heat, or if it’s just because she’s my scent match, but I feel like I’m caught in some kind of fuck trap.

She wiggles on my knot, moaning Archer’s name again as she clutches her breasts. Roman’s passed out beside us, but he stirs when he hears her. His eyes open and meet mine with a question before looking around.

“He’s not here,” I say.

Tears flood Cora’s eyes. Her shoulders shake. “Need. Him.”

“I know, honey. I do, too.”

“Now!” she growls like a feral cat, then twists like she’s gonna stand up, only to realize she can’t because we’re still knotted. It doesn’t stop her for long before she

tries again, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Shit, she’s gonna rip herself open if she doesn’t stop,” I groan. Her movements are only making my cock harder and aren’t helping the situation. Normally knots deflate faster during a heat, but I’m still hard and swollen from the way she’s wiggling against me.

“Can you carry her?” Roman says, looking at the door. His eyes are clearer than they were before. Guess a few good orgasms shook a bit of the haze off. Pretty sure the man came down her throat three times in a row before he passed out.

“You mean, while knotted?” I ask, considering exactly how it might work to stand up with Cora still attached to me. “Yeah, I think I can do it.”

With her legs wrapped around my middle, I make my way to standing. The movement makes my knot tug at her entrance, and we both hiss. I nearly topple over again when she starts kissing me, but Roman is there to help, putting a palm on my back and shoving just enough for me to catch my balance.

“Thanks, man,” I say as Cora kisses down my neck. She’s rocking herself on my knot in a way that’s got to feel good, but she’s still whimpering about needing Archer. “Let’s go find your beta, honey.”

The door is already cracked open, and the second we step into the hall, I scent the rich sweetness of Archer’s arousal mixed with the deep notes of Jax’s licorice liquor. Cora’s elderberry florals thicken in response. Fuck, they smell good together. It’s too dark to see anything more than a few scorpions skittering around the grates. But the scent makes it clear exactly what happened in here.

Before Jax left to find Archer, I told him to punish our beta for running off on his own, the implication being clear. I’ve seen the covert looks Archer’s thrown Jax’s

way, and I know Jax will fuck anything he deems attractive. I wish I could've discussed this with Archer explicitly, but I'm hopeful he knows I'm the sharing type. Well, with my packmates anyway. Smells like he enjoyed whatever happened. Good boy.

My knot has no chance of deflating now. Cora grinds down on me, her core clenching with each step I take.

"You okay?" Roman asks.

I grit my teeth. "Yeah."

Fuck, it's hard to focus on anything other than the weight of the woman in my arms, the heat of her wrapped around my shaft.

All I want to do is slam her against one of these walls and rut into her until I fill her again, make sure she's so full she'll never get rid of me. I still can't believe she wanted us to fuck her raw. I've never been with anyone without a condom before, but this is my mate. Mine. Stuffing her full of my seed is playing to every fantasy I've ever had. Jax isn't the only one with a breeding kink .

She kisses me again, and fuck, I can't see, can't think. Need to unload my cum into her until she overflows, dripping around my knot.

No. Bad Bear. Focus. Just gotta get to the end of the hall, up the stairs, and out of the death trap. Then I can fuck our girl senseless again.

Roman keeps a hand on my upper back, steadying me as I carry Cora down the dark hall. When we get to the step that triggers the first trap, he stops me, reminding me to step over it. Fuck, I'm glad I'm not down here alone.

Cora whimpers and whines, biting my shoulder, begging to be fucked and bonded. It takes all of my control to keep putting one foot in front of the other. The intense focus is enough to make my knot deflate, but my cock stays hard inside her.

“Almost there,” Roman says, anchoring me in the present.

The stairway is brighter now, and I can see the steps in front of me. There’s a pale blue light coming from above. Archer and Jax got the wall released. When we make it to the top, muted voices have me sighing in relief. They're okay.

“Almost there,” Roman repeats like a fucking mantra as he guides me around the rubble from Jax’s demolition job.

Once we’ve cleared the rocks, I’m running with Cora bobbing on my cock. “Archer!”

“Archeeerrrr!” She yells a beat after I do, dragging out the end of his name with a whine.

We round the curve in the path, and I spot Jax first. He’s gathering up his sleeping bag and shoving it in his pack, but stops as soon as he sees us. “Oh, good, you made?—”

“Archer,” Cora groans, cutting him off.

“Where’s Archer?” I ask.

Jax juts his chin toward the back of the pools where the fountain is. “Filling up the canteens.”

The moment Cora sees our beta, she twists to the side and reaches for him, keeping her legs locked around me. He answers her call, hurrying to her and holding the

canteen up for her to drink. "I'm here, sweetheart."

"Missed. You." She ignores the water and nuzzles his neck, scent marking him.

He pulls back to look in her eyes. "Really?"

"We both did." With one arm still banded under Cora's ass, I use my other to pull him close, kissing his forehead.

His sigh is one of relief, but when Cora reaches down and grabs his cock, his gasp is all pleasure.

He's not hard, but that doesn't stop our girl. She strokes him, her lips frantically searching his while I hold them both in my arms. Archer wiggles enough to get the canteen between us and holds it to my lips. I take a long draw of water. Didn't realize how thirsty I was. It takes a bit of convincing, but he eventually manages to get Cora to drink, too.

"Need you. Both," she whines after finishing the water. She brings her arms to my shoulders, trying to use the leverage to bounce herself on my cock. "Please," she whimpers. "Please, fill me."

I raise an eyebrow at Archer. "You good to go again?"

His eyes widen, like he's been caught doing something naughty. And he's chewing on that damn thumbnail again. "Yeah, um, about that..."

I pull the digit away from his lips and replace it with my mouth. "How did he make you come, baby? Did he fuck your ass?"

Cora groans at my dirty words. "Yes, fuck, yes."

Archer shakes his head. "He sucked me off... then spit my cum in my mouth."

"Fuck!" I throw my head back as Cora clamps down around me. "Our girl likes that. Let her have a taste, baby."

"I need you," she begs, grabbing for him.

Archer keeps his eyes on me, even as he strokes Cora's hair. "You're not... upset?"

"Hell no," I say. "Though I'm not sure a blow job counts as punishment. Now, you heard her."

I guide his lips back to hers, and I nearly come on the spot, watching Cora moan as she licks into Archer's mouth, searching for more of his essence, her pussy pulsing around me. Archer's panting roughly by the time they pull apart.

"Please," Cora whines.

It's taking all my core muscles to keep her from falling off my cock as she twists and stretches for Archer.

Pulling her back to my chest, I stumble a little until I find a rock ledge to lean my ass against, making it easier to handle her weight. Not that she's heavy, but with her writhing like a sand snake, and after all the fucking we've done, my muscles are on their last legs. When Archer presses against Cora's back, I realize this also puts us on a more level playing field .

I hold my palm in front of Cora. "Spit, omega." She obeys, and I reach down to slick Archer's cock with the moisture. He grunts and thrusts into my palm. "Mmm-mmm beta, save that for our girl's ass. She wants us both, remember?"

Cora moans, then begs. “Yes! Yes, please! Now!” That feral little growl is back. I fucking love it.

With my hands on her ass, I spread her cheeks, now even more grateful for my slightly lowered position on the rock ledge. Archer’s cock grazes mine as he lines up at her back entrance. He works his way in slowly, making everything tighter and tighter, and it takes everything in me not to rut into our omega and come.

Once he’s fully seated, Cora tries to fuck herself on our cocks, but in her foggy state, her movements are sloppy and uncoordinated. I grip her thighs, lifting and lowering her onto both our shafts, slowly at first, building up to a rhythm that I know will send us all over the edge pretty quickly.

Feeling Archer’s cock against mine, with only a thin barrier between us, might be my new favorite experience. Each time I raise Cora, our cocks press together, skin to slick skin, only to be separated again when I lower her and we fill her. It’s tight, and hot, and so fucking wet. The panting sounds of pleasure my beta makes while he grips our omega’s waist, his hands right above mine as we work in tandem, nearly drive me to the brink.

This. This feels right. My scent matches. Bringing both of them pleasure. Feeling both of them deep in my soul, even if we aren’t bonded. They’re mine. And I’m not letting either of them go .

“I-I’m...” Archer pants out, then his legs stiffen as he empties his release into our omega. She isn’t far behind, and as her pussy flutters around my cock, I slam her home one last time, forcing my knot into her as I drag Archer’s mouth to mine.

By the time my balls are drained and I break from my kiss with Archer, a contented mewling comes from the woman burrowed into me. Cora’s already asleep.

My mouth is empty. Empty isn't good. I don't like empty. Without opening my eyes, I sleepily stick out my tongue, tasting... Roman. Deliciously bitter and sweet. My head is on his thigh making it easy to wrap my lips around his soft cock. My grumpy alpha becomes so placid when his cock is in my mouth. I should have dropped to my knees and wrapped my lips around him the first time I saw him, maybe he would have been less grumpy then. I giggle at the ridiculous thought, a noise that's muffled by the sweet length resting on my tongue.

He moans softly, but doesn't wake up. I suckle him contentedly, but as I become more alert, that contentment turns into an ache.

Everything has been fuzzy since... the necklace. Since I put on Lunara's necklace. Touching my neck, I feel it's bare. Does that mean...? Did I...?

I lift off Roman's cock to sit up on my knees, rubbing my eyes as I look around. We're no longer in the treasure room, but back at the pools. The warm, humid air makes my already cum-covered skin even stickier. A lewd moan slips out when I stretch my limbs for what feels like the first time in ages. I'm sore everywhere, most so between my legs. There's a buzzing over my skin, a bone deep ache of emptiness that I need filled.

"Cora?" Roman calls my name tentatively, as if he doesn't expect a response. Have I been that out of it?

"Cora, hummingbird. Look at me." I do as he asks. He grips my chin to hold me

steady while he looks into my eyes. “Lucid, but not out of heat yet,” he calls out, to whom I don’t know. Maybe the other men? Where are they? I need them.

As if he can sense my confusion and discomfort, Roman scoops me up and carries me toward one of the pools. He walks straight in with me in his arms, not stopping to put me down, rather carrying me to an underwater bench and sitting with me straddled across his lap.

“Mmm. That feels good.” I moan when the hot water drips over my body. A soft splash indicates someone else has entered the pool, and moments later a wet rag is being drug carefully over my skin. Green tea and raspberries. “Archer,” I whisper.

“I’m here, sweetheart.” He mutters over my skin as he gently cleanses the sweat, dirt, and cum from my body. His touch is meant to be soothing but just spreads fresh heat.

Wait. Before I lose myself again, I need to tell him.

“Don’t leave me.” I reach for Archer, slipping off Roman’s lap to float into my beta’s arms.

“What, sweetheart? I’m right here.” Archer replies as I wrap my legs around his hips.

“You weren’t!” My whine is a little pathetic, but my omega doesn’t care. “You left us!” I cling to him as if he might vanish again, tears mixing with the steamy air on my cheeks. “Do you not want me?” Somewhere deep down, I know I’m being irrational, but the heat hormones have pushed all common sense out the window.

“Oh, Cora, no.” He brushes the hair away from my face, his gaze meeting mine. “I want you. I want you so badly. I thought...” He looks away. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t want me. I’m just a beta.”

Is he crazy? I growl and grind my sex along his cock in the water. “You’re my beta. Ours .” Reaching between us, I grab his cock, line it up to my entrance, and sink down until I take him fully. My needy core clenches around him, my sweet beta. He stumbles, but doesn’t drop me, landing on one of the underwater benches. Perfect. I scent mark his cheek, his neck, then bite his shoulder. I’ve bitten all my men, but the bonds don’t take, a momentary peek into their souls that immediately fades. Why? Why haven’t they bitten me back? I want their bonds. I need them.

Archer’s scent mingles with mine as I claw at his back. “Ours,” I repeat over and over.

Jax chuckles from behind Archer. “Do you believe me now, sweet beta?”

Before Archer can reply, Roman is there again, reaching up to scrub my hair, working a sudsy soap into my scalp as I slowly grind in Archer’s lap. Soap? Where did he get soap? Oh, Jax. Where’s Jax? Whimpering, I reach for him while still clinging to Archer, but my hand only splashes in the water.

“Oh, hummingbird,” Roman whispers. Why does he sound sad? No, tired, he looks tired. So tired. “I’m worried about you,” he says, still working his fingers through my hair. “We can’t keep going like this.”

“More.” It’s all I can say, the heat haze nearly taking over again. “Jax. Bear. More.”

Soap gets in my eyes, stinging some sense into me for a moment. Roman guides my head back to rinse in the pool. The new angle has my beta’s cock hitting even deeper, making me keel with pleasure as I lift back up.

“You need to eat a little something, honey.” Bear. My teddy bear alpha.

Something hits my lips, and I open instinctively, wanting to be good for my alphas.

But food isn't what I crave. I grab the back of Bear's neck and pull him into a kiss as I lift on my knees, then slam back down on my beta's cock, working up a pace that has the water splashing out of the pool. Hmmm, feels so good.

Muffled voices sound behind me as I chase my release.

"How long do you think this will last? What can we do?"

I don't know who said it, but I know the answer. "Bite!" I moan. "Bite."

Then I'm engulfed by the haze yet again.

“Treasure hunter! You’re up!” Bear’s deep baritone startles me awake.

“Huh? I’m up. I’m up. Wait... I’m up for what?” I look around, still slightly disoriented until I feel small hands running up my thighs followed by a tongue on my balls.

“Woo-oh! Okay, little mate, hold on there.” But there’s no waiting for my insatiable omega. She immediately grips my cock and sinks down to my knot, making us both groan. What a way to wake up.

Even exhausted, I grin at my perfect little omega. Cora rolls her hips, mewling as she chases her next orgasm, using my body as her playground. Which, don’t get me wrong, I love, but shit my dick is sore. Didn’t even know that was possible.

“Nghh, fuck. Okay love, take what you need.” I tell her, though she isn’t truly listening. Yelling out behind me in hopes one of the men hears me, I admit, “I love fucking our girl, but I’m runnin’ outta steam over here fellas. How many days has it been? Three? Four?”

The longest I’ve ever heard of heats lasting is four days.

“Five.” Archer answers.

“Five?! How are we still alive?” I shriek, unsettling my little mate for a moment and making her whimper. I grip her hips and grind her against me to get her back into the

rhythm. “Shh, there you go, love. Use me.”

Roman comes around in my line of sight, kneels to kiss our omega soundly, then turns to me. “What did you just say?”

“Huh?”

“What did you just say after Archer told us how many days it’s been?” he asks.

“Jesus, I asked how we’re still even alive! We’ve been living on snake and cum for five fuckin’ days straight— oh fuck , omega. That’s right, come on my cock. Milk my knot with that tight little pussy.”

Cora’s insides spasm and clamp down around me. Fuck, I don’t care how wrecked I am, I’ll never get enough of her like this. I fill her with my cum, locking it all in with my knot. Fuck, that’s so hot, knowing she’s overflowing with my seed, not a drop spilling out, all of it shoved up in her.

Roman scrambles to his feet, drawing my attention. The man looks like he figured out the cure to cancer. “That’s how they died.”

Now it’s Bear’s turn to look confused. He’s washing in the pool nearby, his head tilted in question. “That’s how who died? ”

“The bones!” Roman continues. “Cora hypothesized they were mid-orgy when they died. What if...what if they literally?—”

“Fucked to death?” I supply, able to concentrate a little more now that Cora is nuzzled into my chest, waiting for my knot to deflate.

Bear barks out a deep laugh, slapping the water, until he looks around and realizes we

aren't kidding. "Can that happen?"

"If an omega goes into heat and it's never satisfied with knots, even synthetic ones, it can be very dangerous for them," Archer explains. "That's why there are so many free heat clinics. If this truly was a refuge for omegas—like Cora's research suggests—and someone put that thing on without alphas around... oh, goddess, those poor omegas."

Archer's distraught expression has my knot instantly deflating, though I keep my cock wrapped in my omega's warmth. It's a small comfort after the morbid thought.

"Holy fuck." Bear sounds as horrified as I feel. "They literally fucked to death. What the hell?"

"You've seen how hard it is to get Cora to eat or drink anything," Roman adds.

"Not that you all are much better when you sink into a rut," the beta mumbles under his breath.

The poor male has been taking care of all of us when he isn't balls deep in our omega. Or stuffed full of Bear's or my cock. Each alpha has fallen into some kind of rut over the duration of Cora's mega-heat, but now our bodies are too tired to keep up that level of horniness. Which explains why we're all havin' a casual conversation like we're out for brunch, and not buck naked, passing an omega from one cock to the next like a merry-go-round.

"But Cora's had knots this whole time, and the heat has barely slowed except for a few brief moments of semi-lucidity. Why is it still going strong?" Roman muses, staring vacantly at the pools in thought.

We're all silent for a few minutes, either resting or pondering the professor's

question.

“Bonds.” Archer says quietly from the rock he’s sitting on. He has the book we found in his lap, open to a page I can’t see. He looks up, gaze meeting ours. “Mating bonds. I think she needs an alpha to claim her. To...” Archer swallows nervously. “To bite her.”

“Mmm, Bite!” My little mate cries out, even in her sleep.

“That’s all she needs? Fuck, why didn’t you say so? I’ll bite her right now!” I open my mouth and lower it to the juncture of her neck and shoulder, but strong fingers weave through my hair and yank my head back. The tug on my scalp has my dick pulsing in my omega and my knot swelling again.

“No. Bites.” Roman growls as he looks down at me.

“Yes! Bite!” Cora’s stirring awake now, her arousal beginning to bloom yet again.

“Listen, professor. She’s my scent match. My mate. There is no one else for me out there, and I sure as hell am not givin’ her up for some other schmuck to pack up with her. Unless it’s you, of course.” Roman’s grimace just makes me smile. “If the scientist over there thinks my mating bite will help, I’m doing it. End the mega-heat and have my little mate for life? It’s a no-brainer. ”

Done with my speech, I sit up, rolling Cora onto her back so I can get a better angle. Her movements are sluggish. She’s running out of steam. She needs this heat to end as much as the rest of us do, and I’ll do whatever it takes to take care of her.

Hitching her left leg over my arm, I push it to her chest, canting my hips to make sure I’m hitting her g-spot on each thrust. I know when I find the right position because she screams in pleasure, her back arching off the sad, makeshift nest we managed to

compile out of textiles from the treasure room. My little mate deserves more than this. And I'm gonna give it to her. I'll make her mine, then I'll build her a nest fit for a queen.

I lower myself closer to her body, trailing my tongue up the valley of her breasts and along her neck. Once I'm face to face with her, I kiss her soundly.

"Cora." She's too lost to her heat to respond. I want her lucid for this—as lucid as she can be. I'll settle for her looking at me. But the only way to get that from her right now is something I really don't want to do. Fuck, okay, yeah, I can do this. I need her attention, need her to understand. I stop thrusting, and she mewls.

"Omega. Look at your alpha." My bark does its job, even if it makes me uncomfortable to use it. "Omega. Gonna bite you now. Make you mine. Okay?" I ask her, hoping she understands.

Instead of the usual begging she's been doing, she doesn't break my gaze for several seconds. My teeth ache, longing for what I've wanted since the first moment I saw her. But I wait .

"Yes, alpha." The most beautiful smile I've ever seen graces her swollen lips. "Bite me, please. Please, Jax."

Fuck, that's all I need. I start pounding into her with newfound determination. This is it. This will be the best moment of my life, I just know it. My intuition is tingling as my instincts take over. I bury my face into her neck and sink my teeth into her skin, tasting her copper-rich blood on my tongue. It feels as if a rope is pulling my heart and tethering it directly to hers. But it's not until her little teeth sink into my bicep that the full bond snaps into place.

Emotion slams into me like a tidal wave, nearly drowning me. Hers. Mine. Ours

together. I can feel that she's happy. And horny. But mostly just happy. Her contentment flows through the bond like sunshine, warming my cursed soul. She's too good for me, and I know it. But I'm a determined mother fucker, and I silently promise her I'll do everything I can to deserve her, to keep her this happy all our days. Grabbing for the tether, I push my promises down the bond. Strength, resilience, joy, and...love. Fuck, I love her.

Her gorgeous eyes open, locking on mine with a clarity I haven't seen from her in days. She reaches up to cup my cheek. "Jax. My alpha. Mine."

Tears burn behind my eyes because she's here with me, clear of the heat haze, even if only for a moment. I kiss her palm, then look at her again, my heart flayed bare for her to see, and nod. "Yours."

Her core spasms and slick gushes from her tight pussy as I slam my knot home with a guttural cry.

54

A world of emotion explodes inside me, mine and not mine. A rainbow of color and sound and sensation. Jax. My sweet, devoted Jax. I can feel him. All of his longing and obsession. He's a meteor burning bright and hot, the impact of him changing the landscape inside of me and making me new.

I gasp and come again as he fills me.

"Oh, fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck," Jax chants above me. He throws his head back in pleasure, looking like a god sent to earth to ruin me. Mine. All mine.

I'm not sure how long we stay knotted together, but when we both finally return to earth, our eyes connect, and he smiles, so bright and beautiful.

"There she is," he whispers, dropping his lips to meet mine. "My omega."

His kiss is tender as he slowly rocks his hips, grinding his knot inside me. I feel his pleasure as well as my own, softer now, less desperate. Another quivering orgasm trembles through me when he drops his mouth to his mark on my neck and tends to it with his tongue.

I feel more present than I've felt in... how long has it been? I have vague memories of eating and bathing, but mostly I just remember the need. The desperation for my men, orgasms, knots, it was unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Now, I'm suddenly cold, despite Jax's warmth pressed against me. My skin feels

clammy and sticky with sweat and cum. I shiver.

Jax brings the back of his wrist to my forehead. "Fever's gone."

"Thank fuck." Roman's rumbling voice sounds from my left.

Embarrassment tickles the back of my neck at all that's happened between us in the past few days. When we first arrived, Roman wanted nothing to do with me. Before I went into heat, he seemed interested in seeing where this goes, but does he still think that now, after seeing me like that? I was the epitome of a needy omega. Exactly what he seemed to want to avoid so badly.

I don't dare look at him, my gaze finding Bear standing behind Jax instead. My big alpha smiles before squatting beside me. "You okay, honey?"

"Yeah," my voice shakes a little. I yawn. "Just tired. And... do we have anything to eat?" My stomach rumbles, days of not eating enough suddenly catching up with me.

"On it," Archer says from somewhere out of sight. A minute later, he's bringing over a stick with steaming snake meat.

Jax sits up, with me straddling him, since we're still knotted together. He leans against a pillar, and Archer pulls off some of the meat to offer to me. I thank him with a quick peck on the cheek before shoving the whole bite into my mouth at once.

"We're still in the temple?" It's a mindless question, and I don't know why I ask it, but I'm a bit dazed and not entirely with it yet. "We need to get out of here."

"I'll take Shit That's Obvious for 400, Alex," Roman says with a hint of a laugh. When I look at him, his expression is sheepish. "Sorry."

Tentatively, I reach out for him. He comes closer and takes my hand.

“Thank you for helping me through my heat,” I say. “I know you thought putting on the necklace was reckless, and it wasn’t what you wanted.”

“It’s not—” He stops and sighs. “It was an honor, hummingbird.” His palm cups my cheek as he kisses my forehead. “And I hope it’s one I can have again some day.”

“You think the necklace fixed me?” I whisper. My heart fills with hope that Roman wants to do this again, to stay. That I didn’t drive him away with my desperation and clinginess during my heat. That he thinks I can have another heat.

“You didn’t need fixing, honey,” Bear says.

“But I?—”

“Shh, this is a conversation for later.” Bear holds a cup of water to my lips, and I drink, not even caring that it tastes horrible. I’m so thirsty.

Jax snores loudly, and I giggle. He’s fallen back asleep sitting up. It’s adorable, but also concerning. With clear eyes, I study him more closely. His hair is sticking up at strange angles. His swollen lips are chapped. There are dark circles under his eyes.

Taking in the rest of my men, I realize they look much the same. Bear’s right, we need to rest, and then find a way out of here. Conversations about the future can wait.

But as I ease back down onto the pile of textiles and clothes they’ve used to make a nest, with Jax under me, Bear and Archer on one side, and Roman on the other, I can’t stop a few tears from slipping down my face.

I love the new bond lighting up my chest, but there’s a dull, empty ache alongside it

where my other men should be. I wish they'd all bonded me while they had the chance.

Jax pulls me a little closer, probably sensing my sorrow, and I let his comfort wrap around me as I sink into a deep sleep.

55

It's been twenty-four hours since my heat broke, and we're still stuck. We spent the first fourteen hours passed out in the deepest sleep I've ever experienced. Once we woke, it was like there was a silent agreement between all of us not to talk about anything beyond getting out of the temple.

We've searched every inch of this level. Any stairs that previously existed have been well and truly destroyed. Either crumbling with age or swallowed by cave-ins. There's no way up that we can find.

"I think our only option is to figure out how to go back to the cave in, and dig our way out. We know there's a hole in the ceiling there at least." Roman says. We're all in the pool, letting the water ease the lingering soreness as we try to come up with a plan.

"That could take ages." Jax splashes Roman, who sputters before splashing Jax back. His face is set in his normal grumpy expression, but there's a playful light in his eyes that makes me smile. Whatever differences the two have, they've made some sort of tentative peace while I was in heat.

"How the hell are we going to get back up there? The stairs are just piles of rubble and we don't exactly have a ladder to climb through the crevasse." Bear pulls Archer onto his lap, massaging the betas scalp with his fingers.

"Maybe we could..." Archer's words die as he moans. "Hmm, that feels good."

Jax splashes Archer and Bear this time. “Don’t get me going again. My dick’s still dead.”

As my men banter and try to come up with a solution, I sink under the water, needing some quiet to think. I’m honestly surprised no one from the dig has found us yet. I wonder what they think happened? Did they check town first? Scour the desert to see if we wandered off? Didn’t the site look different after the cave-in? Couldn’t they tell?

When I come up for air, I’m a good bit away from the rest of the group. This is the biggest of the pools, shaped a bit more like a thin oval than the others. I swim a little farther, taking in the plants growing along the edge of the water. It’s still so fascinating to me that they can survive down here without sunlight. This place is truly beautiful. The intricate tile work of the pools set off by the glow of the water, all of it framed by moss and greenery. An oasis of life and fertility hidden under a dry desert. It’s easy to imagine why they built the temple here around these natural hot springs. They attract life.

A soft chuff sounds from one of the bushes nearby. The leaves rustle. I strain my ears and squint, freezing in place. Jax has found a few snakes close to the water, none of them poisonous, but I don’t particularly want to be bitten by a snake, even if they’re harmless.

I hold my breath. My men continue talking on the other side of the pool, but they seem far away as all my attention narrows on the one quivering bush.

A snout pushes past the leaves, and then a furry head. One I recognize. It’s a jackal. Every muscle in my body tenses, unsure what to do. How have I found myself in this situation again? It doesn’t lunge for me or anything. Maybe because I’m in the pool? Maybe they can’t swim?

I should scream. Splash water at it. Yell for my guys. But something tells me this creature doesn't want to hurt me, a knowing deep in my gut. It doesn't even snarl. It lowers its head with its eyes locked on me for a long moment. Then lays down, averting eye contact, and rolling to the side to expose its belly. Her belly. It's a classic submission pose anyone in the animal kingdom would recognize. With a soft whine, she rolls to lay upright. Then, with a flick of movement, she looks back behind her, returns her gaze to me, and does it again. She takes one step backward, and I get the sense I'm supposed to follow.

"Cora! Get back!" Roman's strong arm bands around my waist and yanks me backward, away from the wild dog. She spooks, running off several paces before turning to face me, performing her odd little bow again. This time, though, she follows it up with a sharp yip.

Wiping water from my face, I sputter, "Roman! Stop! She wasn't going to hurt me!"

"You don't know that," growls the alpha manhandling me. When he finally puts me down, the rest of the men have waded to our location.

"Hooo boy! Our omega's pissed at you, professor." Jax needles Roman. I guess he can feel my mood through the bond, I'll have to get used to that.

More yips followed by a whine. "I think she wants me to follow her," I tell the group as I climb out of the pool, all four of my men right behind me.

"What is this? A fucking episode of Lassie? The jackal—whatever gender it is—doesn't want you to follow it." Roman's sarcasm is starting to tick me off. My gut is telling me it's important to follow the jackal. Ever since putting on that necklace, my intuition feels stronger than ever before. Like I'm closer to the goddess, or just more in-tune with what's around me. Maybe it's all in my head, but Lunara has kept us safe so far. She's even given me a heat and a mating bond. Who am I to

question her now?

“Please. Let me just get a little closer. You guys can stay right behind me,” I bargain.

“How about the treasure hunter and I follow your jackal, honey. I can’t stand to see you get hurt again,” Bear offers.

My first instinct is to argue, but I need to remember that these are my mates. If I truly want a life with them, we have to work together, which means I have to compromise sometimes. As much as that sucks.

Barely resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I sigh. “Fine. But I’m coming with you.”

Bear looks as if he’s about to protest, but Jax places his hand on his arm, giving him a subtle headshake. Hmm. Having someone feel my emotions could be pretty helpful. Jax knows I won’t back down from this.

The two alphas turn to where the jackal is still standing, staring stoically at us. When they take a step toward her, however, she crouches low to the ground and lets out a warning growl. They both stop immediately, and the wild dog peers around them, finding my gaze and flicking her head behind her.

My hard-headed men don’t get the memo and try approaching again, only to meet the same result. They both look at me. I don’t say a word, crossing my arms and arching a brow at them as if asking, can we try it my way now?

Jax steps to the side, waving his hand toward the jackal, indicating I should go ahead. I can tell he isn’t fond of this plan, but I know they’ll be right behind me, making sure nothing happens to me.

Tentatively, I step forward. One step. Two. Four. I’m past Jax and Bear now, and she

hasn't snarled once. Bolstered that this is the right decision, I continue toward her. She jumps up, spinning away from me and heading toward the back corner of the room, looking over her shoulder occasionally to ensure I'm following her exact path through the flora.

As we near the wall, she takes a right, then a sharp left, and disappears.

"What the fuck?" Roman says incredulously.

"Where did she go?" Archer asks.

Trusting in Lunara once more, I follow the jackal's path. Only, once I make the left, it's as if a crack has opened in the wall. I stop, confused. Surely she went through there, but how did we miss this?

"Oh shit!" Archer exclaims. He's back a few steps, pacing left, then right, repeatedly. When he notices us staring, he beckons us to him.

"It's an illusion. This crevice is hidden behind an outcropping that you'd never see unless you hit exactly the right angle. Just like the hidden releases for the doors. We never had reason to explore this closely given it looked like a plain temple wall, albeit a little less lit than the others."

The thickness of the foliage back here didn't help either.

"Well, I'll be damned." Bear smirks. Sure enough, unless we followed the jackal's exact path, our eyes would have skipped right over this nondescript portion of the temple.

The she-dog pops her head back out, looking at me and barking.

“I’m coming!” I assure her. When I get closer, I hear whimpers—more than one. As I round the outcropping, I’m met with two wriggly puppies, headbutting the jackal’s legs and mewling.

“Awwwwww!” Jax breaks the silence. “Look how cute!” He reaches forward, as if he’s going to grab one of the babies, and the mama jackal immediately snaps her jaws at him, placing herself in front of them as a barrier.

“Okay! Sorry! I got you!” Jax apologizes as he backs away.

“If she’s in here, and she has babies with her, do you think this crevice leads to the outside?” our ever-analytical beta asks.

Mama jackal—I really should come up with a name for her—snags both pups by the scruff, then trots off, deeper into the mystery crack. This time, she doesn’t look back. She either assumes we’re going to follow her, or has decided we aren’t her problem if we’re too stupid to trust her.

I start to trail her, but am stopped yet again by Roman. “We don’t know where this leads. What if we get lost? Or stuck? We can’t go wandering off butt naked into a hole in the wall.”

“I like going butt naked into holes,” Jax teases.

Roman glares at him, but my body heats at the innuendo. We’ve spent so much time naked this past week, I’ve gotten used to going without.

“This could be a way out, prof.” Bear counters.

“We can get dressed first, but I think we need to see where this goes.” I look Roman in the eyes, silently pleading for him to trust me. I won’t beg, but I won’t let him

decide for me either. If we're going to be a pack, this is a pack decision. Right?

56

This is a test, and I know it, but every part of me still fights against letting Cora go into the dark crevice in the wall. My alpha wants to protect her, tuck her away somewhere safe, but my more rational mind knows I'll lose her if I keep trying to lead the way I always have before. I've always been stronger than the other alphas around me. Intelligent. At the top of my field. In charge.

The urge to demand Cora stand back pulses through my veins, but I know I'll give in.

"Okay, we see where this leads. But! We get dressed, supplies, and a torch first," I say. We've all gotten way too comfortable walking around naked.

"Fair," Cora replies with a sweet smile.

"On it," Jax calls, already bounding back through the foliage toward our camp.

Within minutes we've packed up, and we're back at the secret opening in the wall the jackal showed us. I don't have a lot of hope that this will lead out of here, but wherever it leads, I won't be caught without supplies again.

Before stepping into the dark, Cora grabs my hand. My heart does a little flip. Her touch feels so right, so natural. I want to hold her hand every day, through every dark passage life might throw at us.

"I trust you, hummingbird, and will follow your lead. But, will you let me go ahead of you? Everything in me is fighting to protect you. Please." I let her see my alpha's

need in my pleading eyes. Her face softens, and she gives me a small smile before nodding.

“Let’s do this.” I lift the torch in my free hand while keeping a tight grip on Cora at my side, then I carefully lead the way.

We take our time, looking out for any signs of traps or danger. But apart from a few spiders, we don’t see anything alarming. The path is narrow, barely big enough for us to walk single file.

“I think this might have been like an emergency exit,” Archer muses, running his hand along some runes on the wall. “A way for the priestesses and acolytes to escape if the temple was ever attacked.”

“So you think it might lead to the surface?” Bear asks.

“If it hasn’t caved in,” Cora says.

The ground begins to slant upwards, and the space gets narrower and narrower until we’re crawling on our hands and knees.

“Do you hear that?” I ask.

There’s a soft patter, or tapping coming from somewhere .

“Is it getting lighter in here?” Cora’s head bumps my backside, and she sputters as I slow down unintentionally to observe the sound.

I’ve still got the torch stretched out in front of me as best I can while crawling, but I think she’s right. There’s a light somewhere up ahead, dim and grey.

As we get closer, the noise becomes louder and more recognizable.

“Rain,” Archer says, and we all move a little faster.

Relief floods through me at the realization. We’re gonna get out of here. “I can’t wait to take a shower.”

“I’m going to drink a gallon of cold milk,” Archer says, laughing.

“I just want a real bed,” Cora sighs. “And chocolate. Oh, I want chocolate.”

“Don’t worry, love, I didn’t forget my promise,” Jax says. “You’ll get all the chocolate you want. And you can stay in my bed. It’ll be a hell of a lot better than those cots they set up in your tents.”

“You have a bed out here?” I try to look over my shoulder, but can’t see Jax past Cora.

“Nah, I was living out of my pack even before we got stuck in that temple. But I’ll get you a hotel with a real bed, a shower, a bath, a tub full of chocolate, anything you want.”

“Oh, that sounds so good right now,” Cora moans.

It suddenly dawns on me that once we’re out of this, there’s nothing keeping us together. We could all go our separate ways. The university’s excavation contract will be up in less than a week, and with what we found, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Ekdoti government wants to take over themselves. Sure, we’re scent matches, but that doesn’t mean that Cora will still want all of us around—that she’ll want me around.

Before I can react to that thought, we hit an alcove. A dead end. Well, it looks like a

dead end until I look up. There's a small hole above us, light shining through, droplets of rain sneaking in to hit me in the face.

"That's a tight squeeze." Bear comments behind me. I can tell he's worried he'll fit.

"Why don't we boost you up first? If you can make it, the rest of us can. Plus who knows what's waiting up there." I suggest.

Bear nods, Archer grips his hand roughly before letting go.

"Here, take this." Jax digs in his pack and pulls out the rope. He helps Bear secure it diagonally around his shoulder and waist. Cora rushes up to the big alpha, planting a kiss on his cheek.

"For good luck." She states shyly.

We all maneuver so Jax and I can lift the biggest of our crew through the hole. Each of us position ourselves near a foot, forming our hands into a step like we're a rag tag cheer team. I look at Bear. "On three?"

"On three." He agrees.

"Wait, wait! Are we doing one, two, three, boost? Or are we boosting him on three?" Jax asks.

Cora stifles a giggle behind her dirt-covered palm. I sigh.

"One, two, three, boost." I pinch my lips, fighting my irritation. For a brief second I imagine using the rope to wrap up our treasure hunter, leaving his ass here. But Cora wouldn't like that. And much as I hate to admit it, I think I might miss the jackass.

“Okay, ready? One. Two. Three. Boost!” The last word comes out as a grunt as we lift Bear, pushing him as high as we can. My muscles burn, weak from days underground without proper nutrition or sleep. “Urrgghh!”

I give one last shove and Bear grips the stone near the lip of the hole. He grunts and huffs, scrabbling with the rocks and sand, but he manages to pull himself up and out of sight, sand and pebbles falling on our heads in the wake of his exit.

Jax and I turn our heads, coughing and blinking dust out of our eyes. When we look back up, a bearded face is peeking over the edge. “Y’all ready to bust outta there? Who’s next?” Bear hollers down.

“Cora.” Jax and I say simultaneously. We all agree when it comes to our omega’s safety.

We line up in the same position, boosting Cora up to Bear’s waiting arms. She’s much easier to lift, and Bear quickly pulls her through to the surface. Archer follows. Bear drops one end of the rope to me, and I look at Jax.

“Go ahead, professor. Our omega is waiting. I’ll be right behind you.” He crouches down, in position to give me a boost up next. After a nod of respect, I’m being hauled out of the hole, untying the rope from my waist and sending it back for Jax. Except, by the time I toss the rope down, the treasure hunter has scaled the cavern walls and is hurling himself out of the hole. Show off.

I can’t help but be relieved he’s out safe, though. These men drove me crazy at first—still do sometimes—but I can’t imagine doing life without them anymore. Somehow, in the course of our time stuck down there, we became a family. A pack. With or without official bonds.

The rainfall gets heavier, all of us taking a moment to soak in the moment, relish in

the fresh air. Cora turns her face to the sky, closing her eyes and letting the droplets cleanse her. A demure smile graces her pretty lips. Fuck, she's truly the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.

The rain picks up, pouring down in sheets of water, a monsoon, making rivulets form across the top of the sand. They turn red, the rusty color of blood—the reason the locals gave this place the moniker “the sands of blood.” I've heard of the phenomenon, but seeing it brings a sense of wonder to my chest. How many people can say they saw it happen this close?

Because of the red sands, I know where we are. An area roughly two miles from camp. I hate that we'll have to make the march in a thunderstorm, but after everything we've been through, it's manageable.

“Well, better get hiking,” Jax says. He pulls a compass from his pack, studying it to find which way to go. A straight march north should do it.

As we walk back in near silence, I'm forced to think about everything that's happened. I'm not the same man who fell into that cave several days ago. I was content being alone before. No, not content. Resigned. After spending time as part of this impromptu pack, however, I don't want to stay solitary. I want Cora and her kind spirit. I want Bear with his stoic wisdom, and Archer's brilliant mind. I even want Jax's insane ass. By the time we climb the final dune and the white tents of camp come into view, I know what I need to do.

“There's camp!” Cora cries.

“Wait,” I say, placing my hand on her arm. The rain is finally dying down. Storms like this are intense in the desert, but they never last long. “I need to say something.”

None of them look impatient with my statement, despite the rain still falling or the

exhaustion we all feel.

“Look, I know I’m not an easy man to live with. I’m cantankerous at best, but I...” Swallowing the thickness in my throat, I take Cora’s hands. “We’re a strange group.” I look over at the men who’ve saved my life this past week, men I’ve grown to respect and care for. “We shouldn’t work, but somehow we do. The five of us work together. And I’m grateful for you.” I look from one man to the next. “There’s no one I’d rather have been stuck down there with than the four of you. And there’s no one I’d rather share a scent match with either. I hope we can... explore this, now that we’re out of there.”

“Damn, look at the professor, getting all sappy.” Jax gives me a shit-eating grin before grabbing me in a fierce hug. “Maybe our omega’s right about you after all.”

I look over his shoulder at Cora. “Right about what?”

“That you’re ours.” Jax releases me, grabs Cora’s hand, and charges down the hill toward camp, leaving me to hope he’s right.

The last bit of the hike is the longest, and by the time we stumble into camp, my muscles burn and my mouth is dry, despite the rain. We're immediately surrounded by my security guys and the rest of the team, everyone wanting to know exactly what happened.

We give them the barest summary—omitting the choker and the heat—before I order two of my guys to drive us to the nearest hospital. I won't feel like all this is truly behind us until I know that Cora's okay. After a marathon heat and days of living off cave water and snakes, I'm sure we're all malnourished and probably in need of IV fluids and a good round of antibiotics.

The days that follow are a blur of medical care, reports, and rest. Even after all the debriefing, it was like an unspoken agreement that we didn't mention the necklace or Cora's heat. I think we all inherently knew Cora wouldn't want her personal life put under a microscope. Jax's fresh bond mark on Cora's lovely throat either goes unnoticed or ignored by the team of doctors.

They've kept us at the hospital for the past three days, which seemed excessive. Normally, I hate hospitals—reminds me too much of bullet wounds and stitching people up—but since Cora demanded a pack room, being here has kept us all together, which has made it tolerable.

Personally, I want this entire trip to be behind us. As grateful as I am that some greater power or twist of fate brought us all together, I'd like to move forward with my new pack—however that looks. Which, I guess is what we need to figure out

now.

“Are you sure she’s okay?” Roman asks the nurse for the hundredth time.

“Yep. Perfectly fine.” She smiles and shuffles through a stack of paperwork. Discharge papers. “Sign here.” She gives Cora the pen first before passing it off to the rest of us.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to finish gathering up your things, then someone will escort you out.” When the nurse leaves, we’re left with awkward silence.

We all know it’s time for the conversation we’ve been avoiding, but I sure as hell don’t know how to start it. In the throes of a heat haze, all inhibitions drop. But now, with our minds clear, it’s tough to talk freely.

Cora breaks the silence. “So, um. What...” She clears her throat to try again. “What happens now?”

Jax looks at her, confused. “What do you mean, love? We’re bonded. We start our life together.” He’s so matter- of-fact about it, like it’s an inevitability. I guess, in his mind, it always has been.

We should have been easing into this conversation for days, asking questions, working out logistics. Now, we’re being sent out of the hospital without a plan for how to handle things. The dig will still be ongoing, but Cora and Roman’s contracts were only for a month. They’re supposed to be back at the university in a few days to resume teaching. I’m not sure what happens now with the dig. Maybe the Ekdoti government will take over? Who knows. It’s not really our problem anymore.

Now that the temple’s been discovered and the excavation is gonna turn into something more long term, my security company was fired and replaced with Ekdoti

military officials. I guess the staffing requirements, and long term financial commitment of a dig that could last years, needs a more local approach. Not to mention things didn't exactly go smoothly under our command.

The locals have all been clambering for the site to be made a national, or even global protected landmark, and religious leaders are arguing for rights to the site, too. It's all above my pay grade. But I know Cora wishes she could stay and be a part of whatever comes next. Without anything holding us here, we're all feeling a little shaky.

Except Jax of course. Not sure anything could shake that man. And right now, I'm grateful for his certainty.

Cora glances around at each of us. "Is that what you all want? To start a life together? I know, um, everything was heightened in the temple. I don't want to..." She trails off, the next part so quiet it's hard to hear. "I don't want you to feel obligated to bond, or form a pack, or even just live with me, if I can't ever bond. I mean, we don't know if I'm fixed or if the heat was a one-time thing."

She's still unsure about how we feel about her? I won't let that stand. I might not know how we move forward from here, but I know damn well there's no path forward without Cora.

"Cora. Omega ." I lightly bark when she won't meet my eyes. "We want you. I want you. I want you, and Archer, and even the grumpy professor over there as part of my pack. I know there's a lot to figure out still, but we've been defying odds this whole time. Beta's aren't supposed to have scent matches, but I know damn well Archer is mine. I think you know he's yours, too. I can't speak for everyone, but I don't need some bite mark or babies to know you're mine."

"Me either, sweetheart." Archer says quietly. "I-I've never felt like I belonged

anywhere, not in my whole life. But... I feel like I belong with you. All of you.”

All eyes fall to Roman. He fought this connection for so long, and though he did seem to make his peace with this when we were down in the temple, and suggested he wanted to see where things go when we got out, who knows how he feels now that we aren't in imminent danger.

His brows furrow as he clenches his jaw, like he's trying to pick his words carefully. “I don't want to bond right now.”

Cora's breath hitches and a whine slips out before she can stop it. I glare at the professor, growling without meaning to .

Roman holds up a hand in supplication. “Wait! I don't want to bond right now . I want you, Cora. Please don't misunderstand me. I want you so desperately it hurts to think of losing you. But I need to prove to you I'm committed. That I'm a worthy alpha for you, and for this pack.” His voice wavers as he continues. “I also need to know, for myself, that this isn't an effect of our traumatic ordeal. That...that you all want me, too. I don't know if I'll be able to trust the truth of that until we're out of here, and I can earn it.”

Cora sobs and flings herself into Roman's arms. He catches her easily, stroking her head and purring to settle her. It doesn't take a genius to know Roman's already proven himself, that Cora wants him as he is. But I understand where he's coming from. And as long as he isn't bailing on our omega because of some self-sacrificial bullshit, I won't have to kill him.

“Give me a chance,” Roman says, looking at each of us before returning his attention to Cora. He cups her face in his hands. “Please.”

“You really think I'm letting you go now?” Cora's eyes are soft as she gazes at

Roman. "I love you, Roman." She kisses his cheek before turning to look at the rest of us. "I love all of you."

"Right back at you, love," Jax says with a shit-eating grin.

I wrap my arm around Archer's waist while keeping my eyes on Cora. "I get what the professor's saying, but I'd bond you tomorrow if you say yes." I squeeze Archer. "Both of you. "

Archer's smile is a little sad. "What if she never goes into heat again?"

"Don't you worry about that, hero," Jax says. "You'll get your chance to bond our girl."

"How can you know that?" Cora says with a slight hitch in her voice.

"Oh, I got my ways." Jax pats the pack on his back.

Roman narrows his eyes. "If you stole that neck?—"

"I said I got my ways, professor." Jax dismisses him, taking a step toward the door, but before he gets there, some guy in a fancy suit walks in.

"Oh, good, you're all still here." The man shrugs off his suit jacket, throwing it over the arm of the tiny couch, then pinches the fabric of his dress shirt, pulling it out and shaking it like there's something on it. "Holy Hades, it's hotter than a honeymoon hotel out there." He chuckles, finally looking up at us.

"Dean Anderson?" Cora rubs her eyes like she's afraid she's seeing a mirage. "What are you doing here?"

“Can’t I check in on my favorite professors?”

“Since when are we your favorites?” Roman retorts, but there’s a smile on his face as he moves in to hug the man. “Good to see you, Hunter.” He pulls back. “Now, seriously, what are you doing here? Pretty sure a phone call would have sufficed if you just wanted to check up on us.”

“I tried calling.” He glares at Roman. “Someone wasn’t answering.”

“We’ve been a little preoccupied.” Roman slings an arm over Cora’s shoulders. She looks shocked at the public display of affection from the typically closed off alpha, but her expression quickly melts into one of joy.

“I can see that.” Anderson grins broadly, but there’s something sad in his eyes. I recognize that look. He clears his throat, schooling his face to a more serious expression. “When I heard the two professors I sent into the desert for a dig went missing, and were buried in an underground temple for nearly a week, you can bet your ass I jumped on a plane over here. Besides, I wanted to see this big discovery for myself. It’s not often I get out in the field anymore, and I miss it.” His attention moves from Roman to the rest of us. “You gonna introduce me?”

Cora grimaces at Hunter’s mention of our escapade, but Roman smiles and quickly makes the introductions, surprising me yet again when he comes right out and says we’re looking to pack up. Nice to know the prof was serious about his intentions.

“Congratulations,” Anderson says. Yeah, I definitely know that look. He can’t hide the longing in his eyes. He clears his throat before continuing. “Well, despite the fact I came over to make sure you were still alive, I received an interesting piece of news right before I boarded the plane. You see, the Ekdoti government wants to offer Woodhurst University a long term contract to excavate Lunara’s temple in partnership with Ekdoti University. So, how would you like to stay?”

“What about our teaching contracts?” Cora wrinkles her brows.

“Well, I think as the dean I can get you out of those easily enough,” he chuckles.

“What do you say? Want to head up the team here for a while longer? ”

Roman turns to Cora. “Well, what do you say, hummingbird? What do you want?”

That one simple question solidifies something I’ve been turning over in my mind for the past few days. I think Roman’s finally ready to lead our pack.

Cora smiles brightly. “I want to stay.”

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SIX MONTHS LATER

“Y ou okay?” Roman sets his hand on my leg as the small plane hits a bit of turbulence.

“Just don’t like flying, remember?” I smile, thinking of that first flight Roman and I took together and how different things are between us now.

We’ve been nearly inseparable for the past six months. After we both officially became the leads on the excavation of Lunara’s temple, we immediately hired Archer, Bear, and even Jax as part of our crew. There’s no one else we’d want to work with day after day. The crude tents around the dig site were replaced with more permanent dwellings, and we were given a little makeshift cabin big enough for all five of us. It’s tight. We don’t get much space for ourselves, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I smile at the four men who’ve become my home. Roman is next to me, with Bear and Archer in the seats facing us, and Jax just across the small aisle from them .

“Are you gonna finally tell us where we’re going?” Bear kicks Jax’s foot.

My treasure hunter arranged this whole thing. The tiny private jet, the accommodations, everything. He’s been planning it for... well, I’m not sure how long, but I’m sure it’s been in the works longer than when he first pitched the idea of a vacation to us.

Not just any vacation, a private bonding ceremony. Two weeks away together.

After the temple, I stopped having constant pre-heat symptoms, but we still don't know if I'll ever go into heat naturally or not. Jax assures us that this is the week, and we've all learned to trust his intuition, strange as it seems sometimes. I have been feeling a little extra clingy and emotional, so maybe he's right.

But we agreed that whether I went into heat or not, this week we'd commit our lives to each other and become an official pack—with or without bonds.

"Nope," Jax answers. "You'll see when we land. But I will tell everyone your real name." Jax waves a ticket in the air. Because he wanted to keep the destination a secret, he hasn't let any of us see the tickets.

"Don't you dare," Bear growls. "I swore you to secrecy."

"And I won't tell anyone—outside of the pack." Jax yanks his arm up as Bear lunges for the ticket, keeping it out of reach. "But packs don't keep secrets."

"Come on, Bear, I've guessed every name under the sun and still haven't figured it out," Archer pleads. "Don't you think it's time. "

Bear takes Archer's hand. "I like our little game. Are you sure you want it to end?"

Archer leans over the armrest and kisses Bear. "I want to know you."

Bear pauses for a moment to kiss Archer again, then turns to Jax. "Alright. Do it."

"Lady and gentlemen, may I introduce you to Bartleby Archimedes Hudson...the third." Jax's smile could give the Grand Canyon a run for its money with how wide it is. "I kinda like it. Maybe we should name our first born son Bartleby."

“No way,” Bear groans.

“We can talk about it after we knock her up.” Jax takes my hand and kisses the middle of my palm.

I close my eyes, taking in the rich anise smell of my bonded mate, imagining for a moment what it’ll be like to add three more tethers next to Jax’s.

“Not this time, though,” Roman says. “Right, Jax? I need to hear you say it.”

We were all a little shocked I didn’t get pregnant in the temple, and as much as the old hurt and worry still hit me in the gut, looking back, I’m kinda glad. I don’t want any of my mates to feel obligated to stay because of a baby, and despite how strong our connection was, the relationship was still so new. When we got home and settled in together, we discussed it as a pack and decided we wanted a bit more time before having kids.

Which I’m okay with, truly. As much as I want a family, I’m enjoying my time with my men, and work on the temple is keeping me far too busy to think of much else. We didn’t want to suppress my heat—since we still want to bond and aren’t sure what suppressants would do to my body after the experience with Lunara’s relic—but the guys agreed to cover up this time around. Though Jax did so begrudgingly. That man is crazy, but he really would do anything to make me happy. He bought a box of condoms big enough to last a month at least, so we should be good. Hopefully.

“I know. I know,” Jax grumbles.

“Say it,” Roman demands, just shy of a bark.

“I’ll wrap my dick. Promise.” Jax crosses his heart. “But, oh, love, when you’re ready...” He makes a whooshing sound through pursed lips, brings his hand to my

belly, and leans across the aisle, bringing his lips to my ear. “I can’t wait to fill you so full of my cum your body bulges. Any that slips out, I’m pushing back into your cunt, right where it belongs until you’re carrying our little one,” he whispers so only I can hear.

My core clenches so strongly, I have to cross my legs to help ease it. Slick pools in my panties, and yeah, Jax may be right about my heat coming this week. To try to cool off, I stare out the window past Roman.

The view on our descent couldn’t be more different from Ekdoti. We circle a small tropical island and land in the middle of a vibrant jungle unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.

“Ta-da!” Jax proclaims as the flight attendant opens the door. There’s no big airport or terminal. Just a set of stairs that lead down to the tarmac, and a building off in the distance.

“Where are we?” Archer asks.

“Our very own private island!” Jax throws his arms out to the side. “Isn’t it great?!”

“You bought an island?!” My mouth falls open.

“Nah, sorry, love. Wish I could have, but we’re just renting it.”

“How can you afford this?” Roman asks.

Jax gives him a cheeky wink. “I got my ways.” That’s his answer every time.

“You stole something from the temple, didn’t you?” I put my hands on my hips and glare at him, but he doesn’t balk.

“Sure did.” In true Jax fashion, he pulls me into a kiss that has my knees going instantly weak. His arm bands around my back, and he grips my hair, tilting my head to kiss down my neck to his bite. “Hmmm, you smell so good, love.”

When he pulls away, I’m flushed and needy, immediately surrounded by my other men. Archer kisses my shoulder while Bear teases my neck with his lips. “Jax, is right, honey, you smell like heaven.”

“Come on,” Roman takes my hand, leading me toward the beautiful house, half hidden by foliage.

The structure looks like a low treehouse, built amongst the natural formations of the tree trunks so it nearly blends in. There’s one main house, with three rope bridges that span the gaps between trees and lead to smaller individual cabin-like structures. All of the buildings have large sloping roofs and wood siding, which helps with the illusion. You can’t miss the wrap-around porch, or the fairy lights dangling from the overhang, though. Plus, the entire front of the main house is made of windows. Thank the goddess this place is literally a private island. If we had neighbors they would be getting more of a show than they asked for. Jax loves being naked, and I doubt the rest of us will be much better during my heat—if it actually happens.

A stab of nerves makes my stomach swirl. I know these men will stay with me no matter what, but I want to bond them. Being bonded with Jax has been so much better than I ever dreamed. It’s like having a window into his soul, and I want that with my other men.

I’m lost in my thoughts when, without warning, Jax scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder, delivering a stinging slap to my ass that causes me to squeal. “Jax!”

I should have known he’d feel my anxiety and try to distract me from it. He’s always

been in-tune with me, even before the bond, but now, it's like he can read my mind just by knowing what I'm feeling. I'm not nearly as good at determining what's going on in his head, even though I can feel every shift in his emotions. Right now, he's pretty easy to read, though.

"I can't wait any longer, love," he proclaims. "You wouldn't let us join the mile high club, and I need to sink inside your sweet pussy before we do anything else."

"To be fair, the plane was super tiny." Archer says, pragmatic as always.

Lifting my head, I can barely see Bear lean into our beta, saying something that makes his brows raise and his steps quicken. Roman rolls his eyes at the entire scene, albeit with a smile on his face.

He's been so much happier these past few months. For someone who was worried he wasn't enough for me or this pack, he sure went all in when it came to trying. Sure, he's still a sarcastic alphahole sometimes, but that's part of his personality. I don't want to change him. I love him, attitude and all. But it has been nice to see his softer, more caring side.

Jax sweeps us up four stairs, pausing only to open the sliding front door. I guess if you're the only house on the island, you don't need locks? The logistical thoughts are wiped from my mind seconds later when I'm thrown into a sea of soft, white and forest green blankets. Flailing my arms, I manage to swim my way out of the fabric trap, swiveling my head to take in the room.

It's laid out like a large studio, the massive bed I'm on taking up most of the space. There's a small settee and several comfy looking, low slung chairs on the other side of the room, as well as some kind of loft. Before I can ask what's up there, I turn to see my men all nearly stripped bare.

“Oh. Straight to it, huh?” I breathe, fanning myself with my hand as desire floods my veins.

“You feeling a little warm, love? Maybe a little needy? Why don’t you let us help you out of those clothes,” Jax teases.

Sure enough, he’s right. I do feel hotter than normal, even by tropical weather standards. The clothes that felt comfy on the flight, now feel scratchy and unbearable on my skin. I let out a whine.

“Treasure hunter’s right again. Pay up professor.” Bear laughs, holding his hand out to Roman expectantly. Roman rolls his eyes, but grabs his wallet off the chair where he put his clothes and pulls out what looks like a twenty, slapping it in Bear’s meaty palm.

“Did you guys...really...ah!” I don’t get to finish that question because a cramp pummels me like it’s using me for target practice. When I try to curl into myself, Jax is there, pulling me into his lap and running his hands up the length of my body. I scramble around to straddle him, but it’s still not close enough.

“Shh, love. Let your alphas and beta take care of you. I can feel how much you need to be fucked and knotted.” When Jax’s hardness presses against the seam of my leggings, I moan. Suddenly, the bed dips, and there are hands everywhere, divesting me of my shirt and bra.

Large hands grasp my waist, lifting me off the bed so I’m standing between Jax’s legs while he sits on the edge. Black pepper and honey. Bear. My burly military man spins me to face him, kissing me as someone else’s hands slide into my leggings and ease them down my thighs and off my legs entirely. Bear’s lips leave mine as he lowers to his knees trailing kisses down my body as he goes. He removes my panties, my last stitch of clothing, leaving me completely naked as he pushes me back down onto

Jax's lap.

"Show us that pretty pussy, honey," Bear commands, and I know exactly what he wants.

Still facing Bear, I straddle Jax and he spreads his powerful thighs with my legs draped on either side. Cool air hits my fevered flesh as Jax opens me lewdly for the men in front of me. Archer is standing on one side of Bear with Roman on the other, and they're all looking at me like I'm the most beautiful thing they've ever seen .

Jax's cock twitches against my backside. "Give them a real show, love. Part those pretty curls. Let them see how you glisten with slick for them."

Another cramp twists my insides. Empty. So empty. "I need?—"

"Do it, and I'll give you what you need," Jax whispers.

Bear's tongue peeks out, gaze lighting a fire in my belly. With two fingers I part my slick curls and spread my pussy lips.

The groans that come from the three men watching me are completely obscene. The smells of my men thickening in the air. Absinthe, black pepper and honey, green tea and raspberry, juniper and cranberry. Bitter and sweet and floral and rich.

And mine .

Jax lifts me just enough to position his cock at my already slick entrance. He's already wearing a condom, fulfilling his promise, even though I know he'd rather not.

He doesn't waste time, pulling me down, impaling me in one long stroke. Even though we've barely started, his knot is already swelling. He holds me, rocking me up

and down his shaft.

“Hmmm,” I moan. “Feels so good.”

“Open your eyes, love.” I obey my alpha’s gentle command. “Look how hot you make them. They love watching your sexy little body get fucked. Bet they wish they were sitting under you right now, getting their cocks coated in your sweet slick.”

As I watch, Bear pulls Archer into a scorching kiss, lifting the beta up and laying him on his back on the bed next to us. Bear licks a trail down Archer’s body as he lowers to his knees. When he takes Archer’s dripping shaft into his mouth, he keens.

More slick gushes out of me as my pussy contracts around my alpha’s cock.

“Fuck yes, that’s my girl,” Jax whispers right against my ear. “You like watching them together, don’t you, love? I do, too, but I think the professor wants your attention right now. He’s got something to prove.”

Roman’s gaze travels over me like a caress, starting at the apex of my thighs and moving up until our eyes lock. He wets his lips as he lowers to his knees in front of me. My whole body shakes with anticipation. Jax eases the ache with each thrust, but it’s not enough. I need Roman, my grumpy alpha. Why is he taking so long?

I grab him by the hair and pull him forward. He chuckles. “Shh, hummingbird. Let me savor you.” He licks from my entrance, where Jax’s cock breaches me, to my clit, lapping up any slick trying to escape.

“Fucking delicious.” Roman growls, before diving back in with earnest, not caring that Jax’s cock is still shuttling in and out of my body. He sucks and licks and bites my clit, driving me to a quick climax that has me shouting. Jax follows me over the edge, but he doesn’t knot me. I feel his climax as if it’s my own, sending me into a

whole other realm of pleasure.

“Knot!” I cry out when Jax slips out of me, leaving me empty.

“I know, love, but your professor wants to knot and bond you. Don’t you want that?” Jax coos as he maneuvers us so I’m laying on my back on the bed with him on my left and Archer on my right.

Archer. My beautiful beta.

From the foot of the bed, Bear hooks his arms under Archer’s thighs and spreads them wide. Our beta’s expression twists in ecstasy as Bear pushes inside him, and I reach out, stroking my thumb across his lip. He sucks the digit into his mouth and sparks fly across my skin, all the way down to my clit.

“Omega.” My attention is pulled back to Roman, who is now situated at the end of the bed, between my thighs. “I want to knot you, bite you, make you mine. Do you want that?”

“Yes! Please, alpha!” I’m slipping further into the heat haze, but I need him to know I want him. I manage to look into his eyes. “Yes, Roman. Please bond me. Now.”

His smile is dazzling as he notches his head to my pussy, pushing in to the hilt.

The bed shakes from Bear pounding into Archer, but Roman manages to establish a rhythm all his own, pumping in and out of me so quickly, all I can do is take it, which I do gladly.

Jax lays on his side next to me, tracing my breasts with gentle touches. The stimulation builds in intensity until he’s kneading my flesh and tweaking my nipples with a fervor that has me bucking off the bed.

A guttural sound tears from Archer's throat, and I look over in time to see Bear sink his teeth into our beta's neck.

"Yes!" I cry out, loving that Bear is giving Archer exactly what he wants. Oh, how I want that, too. I place my wrist to Archer's lips. He locks eyes with me, understanding flowing between us. He gives me his wrist in return, and we bite down simultaneously.

An orgasm tears through me, Roman fucking me through it as my bond with Archer snaps into place. Oh, my sweet beta. His emotions are so tender, so fragile and hesitant. And under it all there's an echo of Bear's impatience.

"Bite me, baby." Bear insists.

Archer leans up, sinking his blunt teeth into Bear's pec, right over his heart. Bear literally roars as he comes, and there is something so special about bearing witness to their mate bond forming. I can feel it in my chest, the love they have for one another. The love they have for me.

"My turn, omega." Roman stands, lifting me while I'm still impaled on his cock, leaving my other men behind. I'm about to protest until I see Jax prowling toward Archer, a hungry look in his eyes. Roman nods to Bear, then walks to one of the plush, low chairs, sitting on it while I still ride his lap.

I'm squirming, urging him to move, when I smell black pepper and honey. Bear runs a hand down my spine, spreading my ass cheeks as he whispers in my ear. "Can the professor and I both have you, now, honey? Wanna bite you, make you mine."

I nod vigorously. Roman reclines back in the deep chair, and Bear leans over us, one hand gripping the back of the chair for balance as he situates himself so he can fill my ass.

“Hurry up,” Roman grits out. “I don’t know how long I can sit here without moving.”

After spreading slick around my tight hole, Bear sinks his cock fully inside me, and all three of us let out strained sounds. The two alphas are uncoordinated at first, but finally establish a rhythm. Roman bucks up as Bear retreats, then Bear presses both Roman and I down into the chair with hard thrusts.

This has been a favorite of ours these past few months. I love all my men and crave being connected to as many as possible. Feeling both alphas rutting into me, controlling my pleasure while chasing their own—it’s intoxicating. Addicting. The only thing that could make this better is if one of them would fill my mouth, too.

A hand strokes my hair. Absinthe. Jax.

Lips brush my shoulder. Raspberry. Archer.

I somehow manage to wrench my eyes open long enough to see Jax wrapped around my beta, pumping Archer’s cock right in front of my face. My tongue darts out to lick my lower lip, and Jax leans forward, pushing Archer closer to me. “That’s right, love. Suck your beta’s cock while I fuck and claim him,” Jax purrs.

My mouth drops open and Archer’s shaft thrusts in, working his way down my throat while my other two holes are owned by my unbonded alphas. When Jax enters Archer and begins fucking him in earnest, we end up a continuous tangle of pleasure. I don’t know where one of us ends and the next begins. I have fledgling bonds lighting up all over the place, and dark spots awaiting the rest of my connections to my mates.

Jax cries out as he comes, biting Archer’s shoulder. Warm, salty cum floods my mouth as Archer finds his release, turning to bite Jax on his bicep.

My pussy clenches as I feel everything. Archer and Jax's pleasure, the fullness inside me from Bear and Roman. I'm awash in it all, drowning in the glorious ecstasy of my mates. Bear and Roman become haphazard in their strokes, frantic and uncoordinated. Bear roars his climax, this time filling my ass while he gives me a bonding bite on my neck, the opposite side of Jax's.

Desperate, I strain to find any bit of Bear I can reach with my teeth. His hand is still on the back of the chair, putting his arm just above me. Straining my neck, I bite his forearm. Calm strength engulfs me like a blanket of warmth. A well of love so much deeper than I imagined.

Roman thrusts his knot into me, setting off another round of climaxes, and sharp teeth graze the top of my breast before settling in my skin, branding me as his. I return his bite with one near his throat, high enough it will peek out of the collar of those stuffy shirts he likes to wear, telling everyone he's taken.

My connection with Roman is a fire that burns through any doubt I may have had about his feelings for me. His love is all consuming. Hot and fierce and protective.

Mine. All of them. Mine .

We all collapse in an awkward heap on the chair in a sweaty, sated, happy heap. A pack.

"On her tit, professor? I didn't think you had it in you," Jax says out of nowhere.

Roman chuckles, which causes his knot to tug where it's locked inside me, and we both groan. "You aren't the only one with surprises, treasure hunter."

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I expected our omega to immediately beg for another knot, but she's content in the bond. She opens her eyes and gives us a relaxed smile, playing with Roman's chest hair and tracing over his tattoos.

"Heat spike?" I ask our resident medic in a whisper.

"Yeah, I think so," Bear replies, touching her forehead and giving a nod.

Jax gives me a tight squeeze before pulling out of me, then he hops over to his bag and digs around.

"Guess we won't be needing this after all," Jax says, holding up Lunara's necklace as he spins to face us.

The relic almost doesn't seem real, the gold and rubies just as flawless as I remember from the temple.

Cora gasps. "You stole it!"

We've been searching for the relic for months. Jax told us it was misplaced during Cora's heat, and even though we all suspected it wasn't as simple as that, none of us pushed it. I think Cora believed it was better if it was lost, like the goddess had taken it back for herself or something. She's gotten a little spiritual after our ordeal. Nothing too extreme, and she's never pushed anything on the rest of us, but I get it. We experienced things down there none of us can fully explain. Even just the fact

that the five of us were trapped together and all scent matches is pretty miraculous.

“I can’t believe you lied to me!” Cora backhands Jax’s chest.

“Didn’t lie,” Jax holds up his hands in a pose of surrender. “I just twisted the truth a little. It was misplaced by everyone else.”

She glares at him, entirely unamused.

He lowers to his knees and hobbles over to her. “I’m sorry, love. Truly. But I had to make sure you could go into heat again if your body didn’t do it on its own. Couldn’t leave these guys out. Plus, I told you I’d do anything that may help get you what you want.” He waves the relic in our direction.

“It belongs in a museum.” Cora puts her hands on her hips, attempting a stern, chastising look toward the thieving alpha.

“I’m not sure it does,” I whisper. It’s not like me to condone stealing a priceless artifact that belongs to all humanity and the common knowledge, but this relic is different. “It’s dangerous. We’ve seen what it can do. I don’t think it should be anywhere public. No one should have access to that kind of power. Can you imagine if someone put it on in an airport or in a government building?”

The pull of the relic is stronger than ever before, tugging at me with an insistence that nearly has my knees buckling.

“I never thought I’d say this,” Roman glances at the necklace and runs his fingers through his hair, “but I think we need to destroy a priceless piece of history.”

“Let’s toss it in the ocean,” Jax suggests, he’s already back on his feet and on his way out to the patio. We all have to run to keep up. None of us bother to get dressed.

Who's going to see us out here on our own private island?

The back deck extends over the water almost like a pier. At the far end is a rotunda with wooden benches. A perfect spot to rest out of the sun, while still enjoying the enchanting scenery surrounding us. I've never seen water so blue or a sky so clear.

"Want to do the honors, omega?" Jax holds the necklace out to Cora.

She shakes her head with a shiver. "I don't want to touch it."

"I'll do it." I hold out my hand, and Jax drops the choker into my waiting palm. A steady pound thrums in my head, getting louder the longer I hold it. Is that my heart? Or is it the relic? Again, I'm tempted by the beautiful pull of the choker, the otherworldly call of it. What would happen if I put it on? There are stories about Lunara creating omegas. Could this be how she did it? Could it make me into what I've always wanted to be? Somehow, I know it could.

But when I look up from the relic and see my pack, my family, looking back at me, all I feel is peace. I don't need anything more than what I already have right here. For the first time in my life, I'm content being a beta. There are people around me who love me just as I am. And I have so much to offer them. It might not be knots or heats or any of that, but they have my whole heart and soul. Always.

With a shuddering breath, I hurl the necklace as far out to sea as I can.

"Woah, beta's got an arm on him," Jax says. His hand is warm on my shoulder, and I tilt my head to nuzzle against it. Cora is standing in front of him, leaning back against his chest. She presses her shoulder against me, taking my hand in hers. Roman is on Cora's other side, but his gaze meets mine over her head, and he smiles. Bear comes up behind me and wraps both arms around my waist from behind, pulling me into him, exactly where I belong. I've never felt so content in my whole life.

Emotion hits me because I can feel their joy and satisfaction through our newly formed bonds. The links to my packmates are so new, they still feel like a tangle of cords I have to work to unwind. I'm sure once we settle into this new normal, each tether will feel like the mate it connects me to. I can already determine which one is Cora, the brightest golden thread sending unending warmth and love straight into my soul. Bear is next, the solid foundation we can all rely on, but with a softness he reserves for me, like it's our little secret. Jax's bond is chaotic at best, but even he is calm, assured in our mating.

Finally, Roman, our pack alpha. My bond with him is weaker, coming through Cora rather than a direct bite. But I can still feel his protective love for all of us. The man standing with us today is nothing like the grumpy archeologist I met months ago .

"Alright, that's enough of that," Jax says. A slap rings out, and Cora yelps loudly, then falls into a fit of giggles as Jax smacks her backside again. "My dick's cold."

She jumps away from him, her round ass jiggling as she dashes toward the bedroom. "You've got to catch me first."

Jax and Roman growl, chasing her into the house, but Bear and I stay outside. Bold swaths of pink and orange burn across the sky, reflected perfectly on the still water. Far out in the ocean, something breaks the surface, something that doesn't seem natural. "Do you see that?"

"Is that... a head?"

As we watch, a man's torso rises out of the ocean, the creature leaps, flicking a massive tail as he dives. Looking back over my shoulder, I see Bear blinking rapidly. "Did we just see...?"

Disbelieving, I shake my head. "No. We couldn't have. It's not possible, right?"

The ocean is completely still now, no sign of anything out of the ordinary.

“Must have been a trick of the light.” Bear squeezes me tight. Cora’s happy giggles spill through the open door of the house, inviting us to join their fun.

“Yeah,” I murmur. But after everything we’ve seen and experienced, it’s not hard to believe that there could be more mysteries out there, more than we’ll ever understand or uncover.

Those are puzzles for someone else to solve, though. Right now, all I want to focus on is my mates.

EPILOGUE

The water's lovely today, a complete juxtaposition to my ugly mood. I swim closer and closer to the surface, farther than I ever have before, determined to get away from my family and the responsibilities that hound me.

After my argument with the Queen, I need a good long swim to clear my head. Of course, I made the mistake of calling her mother today and was quickly reprimanded for it. Queen. Always, Queen. A reminder that I'm nothing but another pawn in her domain.

Once again, I protested the archaic tradition of arranged marriages purely for status. And once again, she ignored everything I said. I even tried to appeal to her as my mother, which only earned me a reprimand for not showing her the respect of her title. She didn't listen to a word. She just slammed her trident on the stone floor of the receiving chamber, declaring, "That's enough."

Not many can resist an alpha bark, and no one can resist the alpha bark of the literal Queen. The tide picks up, pulling me toward the only bit of land within our territory, and I let it draw me closer, relishing the familiar tug.

I'm headed toward one of my grottos, a hidden sea cave where I've set up a little hideaway for when I need to be alone. It's filled with soft beds of seaweed, lightly glowing anemones along the walls, and whatever trinkets I don't want my siblings to get their hands on. The entrance is just ahead, around that outcropping of coral.

Something breaks the surface of the water, its shiny veneer glinting as the sunlight

reflects off it. What the hell is that?

Sweeping my powerful tail, I glide toward the disturbance, my eyes never straying from my prize. Whatever it is, it lands on the seafloor, hooking itself around a branch of pink staghorn coral.

It's a necklace, or a choker, or something. Some kind of jewelry that's certainly out of place in the wild like this. Slipping my hand under it, I grab it firmly and lift, but it releases easily. Looking closer, I see there's a pendant in the middle, and I gasp. It's the ancient symbol of omegas, though this one has five ruby stones inlaid on its surface, four small ones and one larger one in the center. How did this get here?

Nothing lives above the surface, it's too dangerous. Except...

I turn the beautiful necklace over in my hand. It's clear to me it's powerful, something ancient. Still warm from the sun. I should take it to the Queen, but my gaze flicks to the surface of the water, sunlight dancing like an invitation.

It's against the law to go above, but right now, I'm not feeling particularly gracious toward the laws that want to bind and break me. Or the woman who made them.

Determined, I flick my tail urgently, powering upward through the water, the necklace in tow. As my head breaks the surface, I hear a short scream that causes my heart to clench. That was not an animal.

Turning toward the sound, I'm rendered speechless. There, on a platform above the water, are...beings. Similar to me on top, but instead of a tail, they have long split limbs on the bottom. They're talking to each other, though I can't hear them.

We've always been told there's nothing above the water except for plants and the occasional animal left over from prehistoric times, but as I look at these beings staring back at me with the same shock I feel, it's clear...

They lied.