



A DARK MAFIA OMEGAVERSE ROMANCE

RUTHLESS KING

ALISON AIMES

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RUTHLESS KING BLURB

He's the most brutal Alpha crime boss in the galaxy—and she belongs to him now. Payment for a debt owed. Pawn for an act of vengeance. Property to be used, knotted, and bred.

Irresistibly gorgeous mafia king Nikolai Skolov is dominant, hard, possessive—and determined to bend innocent omega Dahlia Lundin to his will. But she is equally determined to resist. The lives of those she loves depend upon it.

Except Dahlia isn't prepared for the insatiable hunger the Alpha's discipline awakens. Or her soul's recognition that her new master is also her fated mate.

As dangers mount and betrayals loom, all Dahlia knows is turned on its head. Allegiances are tested. Secrets exposed. Until Dahlia is not sure if her ruthless enemy is the monster who will destroy her or the only one left who can save her . . .

Ruthless King: A Dark Mafia Omegaverse Fated-Mates Romance is a scorching HOT standalone novel that includes:

- A ruthless alien mafia boss
- An innocent heroine growing into her power
- Warring families
- A forced marriage

A fated Alpha-omega bond
A long-suffering hero waiting years to claim his female
Plenty of hot and filthy Omegaverse action
Betrayal, murder, and revenge
Serious plot twists
And an epic romance that proves love will always triumph over hate.

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THE ALPHAVERSE

This story takes place in Anarchheim, a parallel Alphaverse galaxy in a dark future seeded with varied forms of alien life. There are, however, two immutable constants. The first is that all inhabitants are Alpha, beta, or omega. Alphas lead, betas serve, and omegas submit. That is the way. The second is that violence is a way of life, power is essential to survival, and crime is king.

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“P-please, Alpha Lord. Why am I here?”
“Quiet!” His meaty hand tight around her forearm, Dahlia hurried to keep up with her father, Olan Lundin, her bare feet slapping against the cool tiles.

She was still in her silk dressing gown, one that covered very little. Less than an hour ago, she’d been preparing for her prime omega bridal contract to the eldest son of the Verish crime syndicate. The pretense of dutiful acceptance the only alternative since her father, head of the Lundin Syndicate, had wanted the merger, and crossing one of the most brutal crime lords in the galaxy came at a price.

She’d learned that lesson many times.

Except now she was here, on this sleek, rumbling space shuttle, breathing air outside the compound where she’d been under lock and key since her first estrus began. Twenty-four years old and finally seeing beyond the restricted walls of her quarters as she’d always dreamed of doing.

Only this was a nightmare, and she was far from free.

“Keep up.” Olan jerked her arm, sending her stumbling into his side as they hurried down the hallway. The walls of the space shuttle were so black and glossy she could see more than she wanted reflecting back at her. Her white robe and unbound white-gold hair were stained blood red from the crimson track lights, while her small omega frame was dwarfed by her father and his handful of bodyguards.

Like all male Lundins, Olan's soldiers were eerily beautiful with long flowing white-blond hair, pointed ears, and snow-colored horns that twisted upward to a proud point. But their gazes were predatory rather than protective as they honed in on her father's bruising grip, his show of aggression triggering their own.

The stink of testosterone thickened the air—sending slick pearling on her own folds; the omega in her responding to the dominance even as her soul cried out in horror.

"Fuck." One of them sniffed the air. "She smells good."

"Keep it together," Olan barked at his men. "Or I'll rip your throats out."

Normally, she would have hidden from her father and his bodyguards as fast as she could. Except there was nowhere to run.

Olan had brought her to the secret gathering place of the Brotherhood, the elite organization of the most powerful crime families in the galaxy. Her father was one of its twelve members and attended its secret, closely guarded meetings often. Lowly omega daughters usually did not.

So why was she here?

The sight of the Brotherhood creed carved into the dark corridor in blood-red ink only added to her fear.

Death comes to all. Sooner to those who betray us.

Did they somehow know about her plan to escape? The money and jewels she'd stolen over the years when her father grew careless and left his contraband lying around?

Tearing her gaze away from the ominous words, she tried once more. "Alpha Lord, please. If you could tell me what has happened. What—"

"Enough!"

The back of her head slammed into metal, pain streaking down her spine as the massive Alpha pinned her to the shuttle wall, his bulk crushing her.

He shoved his face into hers and bared his fangs, his wild, unkempt beard scraping her chin, his breath hot against her cheek. "There is only one good use for an omega's mouth and if you don't shut yours, I will forget you are my first daughter and allow these guards to shove it full of Alpha cock here and now."

As always, her body shook and went pliant, her gaze sliding downward as her omega instinct kicked in and the compulsion to submit overrode

everything else.

She hated it. Herself most of all.

She'd wished all her life to rip the biological imperative to obey from her cells and get rid of the omega taint, but it could not be done.

The alpha, beta, omega dynamic was as inescapable as her fate.

Alphas dominated while betas served, and omegas submitted.

Each role was an innate compulsion programmed into the genes of every inhabitant in their galaxy. The interplay did not require affection, caring, respect, or consent. Like breathing, it simply was. Its essence primal. Irresistible. Immutable.

No matter how hard she tried to resist.

"You have caused me enough fucking problems, omega." Her father slammed her head into the wall once more.

She fought to stay silent. Noise only triggered further aggression in Alphas. Already, his men snapped and snarled at his back, their frenzy for violence growing.

"The contract with the Verish family is null and void. You will no longer be given the honor of prime omega to their family."

Shock slammed through her. Panic, too. Her family had been working toward that alliance since her birth.

The Verish crime family might be insect-like in appearance, with pinchers protruding from their lower gums, but they were well connected within the Brotherhood. As the official vessel of the Verish Alpha offspring, she would have been given the protection of the Alpha's family name and the promise of food and shelter for the duration of her life, even after her childbearing years ended. The two other main positions available to an omega—indentured omega and unclaimed omega whore—offered no such guarantees.

But even more importantly for her own plans, she'd intended her new position to get her out from under Olan's thumb and make it easier to escape Anarchheim with her sister and mother, resettling in a non-Alphaverse galaxy where they'd never be found.

She had no desire to trade one form of servitude for another and while the eldest Verish son might not be as horrific as her father, he was still an Alpha—and that meant he saw her as nothing more than an omega plaything to be bent to his will.

She wanted to give her little sister, Kaiya, as well as her mother and herself a different life than the powerless, voiceless ones they'd endured thus far.

But her goal appeared more out of reach than ever.

"What happened to void the contract?" A terrifying thought occurred. "Did they discover you were lying about my gift?"

Olan's eyes went wide. His hand closed around her throat and squeezed. "Say that again and I'll kill you myself and risk the Brotherhood's wrath."

She nodded as much as his grip would allow.

His hold slackened and air flooded back into her lungs.

"As far as you're concerned, your gift works. Always has. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Alpha." She repeated the words he'd beat into her. "I am a lucky, rare omega who still has her visions."

In truth, she'd only experienced the power of her gift once fifteen years ago, but like a phantom limb, the pain of the loss still ached every rotation of the suns' twenty-nine-hour cycle.

She pushed it from her mind. Her gift was gone, its loss one more thing she had to accept.

"Good." Olan's hold loosened further, an owner pleased with his pet. "What else?"

"Unlike most omegas who lose their gifts around the time of adolescence, I continue to be able to access mine and see past events."

"Exactly right." It was a bold untruth maintained through manufactured testimonies from terrified witnesses who'd saved their own skin by claiming she could recount events she'd never witnessed.

As a result of those lies, she'd become a sought-after prime omega and Olan's reputation and influence had grown, his wealth expanding, his criminal businesses prospering.

He didn't care that she'd be the one to suffer when her new Alpha commanded her to use her gift, and she was unable to deliver.

Her father had instructed her to take responsibility for the failure and suggest that her new surroundings and her new Alpha were at fault. It hadn't concerned Olan that she'd be beaten, or worse. He expected her to bear the consequences of his lies, and she'd been prepared to do so.

Because she knew the cost otherwise.

“Remember your sister and your mother are counting on you for their continued safety.” It was as if Olan read her thoughts. “I know you won’t want to disappoint them, or me.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“When your gift fails while in the bastard’s care, that’s on him—and you. Correct?”

Bastard’s care? She tried to make sense of Olan’s words. Was he saying she was going to be given to someone else instead? When the eldest Verish son had come to assess her potential as his prime omega, she’d been unnerved by the way he’d looked at her, as if he intended to devour her. Literally. Maybe—just maybe—whatever was happening now would be a better fate. Maybe escape would be easier?

But she knew better than to probe given Olan’s current mood, so she told him what he wanted to hear instead, “Yes, Alpha.”

“Right answer.” Spinning her away from the wall, her father hustled her down the hall again, his soldiers falling in line right behind. “You will obey as always.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Another lie, but direct confrontation would get her no closer to escape.

He moved faster. “I have some gambling debts I can’t currently pay.”

Her throat went dry.

“You will be given as payment instead.”

Payment. As if she were an omega whore. It was a far fall from prime omega status. Not that she wanted that anyway, she reminded herself.

He gave her no time to respond. “I have also been accused of crimes against the Brotherhood.”

She stumbled on her feet. This was an even bigger blow.

There was no greater sin than to betray the Brotherhood. Worse, punishment for such a misdeed did not end with the guilty party but extended to his closest family.

“Is it true?”

“No.” His grip grew so tight she feared he’d break her bone. It would not be the first time. “And if you are asked, you will, of course, affirm your Alpha’s innocence.”

Dahlia swayed, bile rising in the back of her throat. “Who is your accuser?” But in her heart, she already knew.

Olan snarled, ignoring her questions in favor of a rant she'd heard before. "This damn feud. He's like a wolverbear with a bone. First, he attacks my businesses. Then my personal assets. Then, he moves on to threats on my life. It's enough." Her father's roar echoed through the hall. "He will regret taking me on when his name is blacked out of the Brotherhood as if it never was. This must come to an end. There will be a trial. Evidence will be presented. I will be allowed to counter. Then, the Brotherhood will decide in my favor. It will all work out."

But Dahlia wasn't so confident.

She knew her father had done terrible things. She also knew he was a liar.

Her stomach seized. This could not be happening.

All she had done her whole life was to try and protect her sister and mother. She'd endured the beatings, the punishment, and the humiliations to keep the two people she cared for as safe as possible from Olan Lundin.

Now, he was going to be the death of them anyway.

Because if Olan was the one found guilty by the Brotherhood, it would not be only him who was executed, but all of his household, including her mother and sister.

Not if Dahlia could help it.

She'd simply speed up her plans for escape. She'd run away from whomever she was to be given to in payment while her new owner's guard was down and hadn't yet realized she was less biddable than she pretended. With Olan distracted by the trial, his attention would be elsewhere, too. His careful surveillance of her mother and sister weaker than usual. There was still hope.

"In you go." Her father's impatient words cut into her schemes.

She hadn't realized they'd reached the end of the ship's corridor.

He gestured toward an opaque glass door as high as her knees.

Her heart slammed into her ribs.

"No." She hated small, dark places. She'd spent far too much time floating in the deprivation punishment chambers her father used for those who displeased him, including omega daughters who did not obey fast enough.

"In!" He shoved her to her knees.

Panting, she looked inside. Oh, gods, it was so small, and it would shrink once she entered, the sensors in the walls conforming to her body

and forcing her to remain bent over, her body in submission.

She forced herself to breathe. She had never allowed her father to break her, and she would not do so now.

She crawled forward—only to be stalled as thick fingers tangled in her hair and jerked her back out, her scalp stinging as she hung in her Alpha's grip.

"One more thing." He pressed his lips to her ear so his soldiers wouldn't hear. "Do not tell that bastard anything."

What bastard? She wanted to scream. He'd told her nothing more about her fate.

Olan shook her like a rag doll. "That damn gift of yours is broken. Make sure it stays that way. You cannot help being a useless omega whore who will spread her legs for an Alpha growl, but betray this family, and you will regret it. As will your sister. Not a fucking word of your family's secrets to anyone. You already know what happens to snitches in our world."

Before she could respond, he tossed her headfirst inside the darkened glass cell.

Her forehead hit the glass. Her palms slammed against the floor. The door slid shut, and the lights flickered off as the darkness closed in.

Her breath rasped in her ears, her mind screaming as the walls and ceiling contracted. The pressure on her back increased like a boot on her spine, shoving her to the floor. The sensation of being crushed was as terrifying as always. Thankfully, the ceiling stalled as her belly hit her knees and her body folded in on itself, pinning her in place. The omega submissive first position, achieved with or without her consent.

Her bowed position made it impossible to do anything but stare out at the spectacle beyond her cell. Floating overhead were twelve two-story windows arranged in a circle, each lit from within by a blood-red light that illuminated a massive throne—and the more imposing figure sitting within.

These males were the twelve most ruthless crime lords in the galaxy.

These were the Alphas who controlled the fate of every single inhabitant unlucky enough to be born into the rot and sin of the Anarcheim Alphaverse.

She'd never felt more insignificant than when bowed at their feet.

Drawn by an invisible force, her gaze rose to the window directly across the way.

Piercing amber eyes bore into hers.

Him.

The Ruthless King.

The title the Brotherhood had given him was carved into his throne and was reflected in every merciless line of his body.

Even now, after so many years, she recognized him. The boy was gone but not the mesmerizing power or the breathtaking handsomeness that had been his birthright. The scars on his neck, chest, and hands only added to his air of danger.

Gorgeous. Brutal. Huge. Red-Skinned. Horned. Nikolai Skolov was still the most beautiful Alpha she'd ever seen. With thick sloping brows, wavy jet-black hair, powerful onyx horns that curled behind his ears, a square jaw, and full sensual lips, his face was a masculine masterpiece. The five o'clock shadow that covered his stunning face blended perfectly with the rugged black skin designs on his cheeks and neck, a common trait of all Skolovs.

He was far bigger than he'd once been—larger than Olan—and his bulging arms, bare, sculpted chest, and carved abdomen were equally mouthwatering, framed by the dark fur pelt that hung off his wide shoulders and stayed strapped to his body by wide leather bands that crisscrossed down his taut stomach. The swirling skin designs that dipped beneath the waistband of his dark animal hide pants only added to his dangerous, barbaric look, as did the heavy, black boots that laced to his calves.

He was striking. Wild. Fierce. And for one brief, incredible moment years ago, she'd thought he might be her savior.

Until he became her family's greatest enemy.

His lips pulled back into a snarl, his fangs flashing.

And she knew whatever was happening to her now was in no way better than the horrible fate she might have suffered as the prime omega of the eldest Verish son.

She understood, too, exactly why she was here and how futile it had been to believe escape might be possible.

She and her whole family were going to pay.

Nikolai's claws dug into the arm of his throne, five thick grooves denting the metal, his balls heavy, his cock hard as stone.
Finally.

He only wished he could see her clearly as she bowed at his feet. Scent her. Touch her.

But the thick, dark shatterproof glass that separated all the Alpha heads was designed not only to protect from assassination attempts but to muzzle their senses and dampen their aggressive instincts, thereby preventing them from tearing each other apart. Though it barely seemed to be working now.

The gouges in his throne's armrests grew as his claws tunneled deeper. The burn scars on his chest and arms pulled tight.

Soon.

His plans were so close to fruition he could almost taste victory.

Shoving his hand into his pocket, he fingered the chain tucked inside. His thumb traced the well-worn grooves of the necklace.

Soon.

"The meeting of the Brotherhood has begun. Alpha Nikolai Skolov and Alpha Olan Lundin, stand." The disembodied voice of Inner Council Head, Valf Prendel, echoed through Nikolai's sealed room, as it did for the eleven other crime heads staring out from their private chambers.

Nikolai stood, tearing his gaze away from the omega to stare at the smug, bearded face of his greatest enemy.

He could not wait to wipe that look from Olan's face.

Actually, he could not wait to wipe out Olan altogether.

“You all know why we are here.” As Inner Council head, the Prendel crime head ran all Brotherhood meetings, his slime-based races’ love of efficiency coupled with an inability to feel emotion, making him the perfect bureaucracy head. “The feud between the Skolovs and Lundins has gone on long enough. Vendettas and discord are a way of life, but this grudge has boiled over into a galaxy-wide territorial dispute that has begun to impact all our profits. That cannot be allowed.”

Nikolai hid a smirk. There was nothing the Brotherhood hated more than a threat to their bottom line.

Prendel droned on, his green, gelatinous body oozing and contracting as he spoke. “So, the Brotherhood has determined that action must be taken.”

Exactly as Nikolai had been pushing for far too long.

“Before this begins,” Prendel paused, “and to ensure that both parties come to the trial on equal footing, Olan Lundin’s outstanding debts to Nikolai Skolov must be paid.”

Nikolai didn’t hold back his smile this time. He wished his brothers Maxheim, Alexi, and Damien could have been here for this moment, but only heads of families and property were allowed in the inner sanctum.

Still, Olan’s flash of rage was as satisfying as it got. It had to be humiliating to have it revealed that the debts he’d been racking up through bad investments and gambling losses—all orchestrated by Nikolai—were held by the one person he wanted least to owe anything at all.

It had to hurt, too, that as a result of those outstanding charges, Olan had to back out of the official bridal contract he’d forged with the Verish family and use as debt reparation the one piece of valuable property he had that was not already leveraged to the gills: his first daughter omega.

But that’s what the bastard got for trying to give what was Nikolai’s to some other male.

Nikolai suspected most of the Brotherhood thought he was crazy to take the omega as remuneration for the massive tab Olan owed him.

But revenge was priceless—and Lundin’s first daughter omega was the key.

“Do you accept the ownership rights of Olan Lundin’s first daughter, a pure, gifted omega, as a fair and equitable exchange for the financial debt you are owed?” Prendel’s eight eyes blinked as one.

“I do.”

“Excellent. The first piece of business between the Skolovs and Lundins is resolved.” Prendel’s body formed an arm-like mass and pressed a panel on the glass in front of him. Streams of data—the official contract—rushed past. “Sign and you may take possession of your new property and all financial debts between the two parties will be considered erased.”

Nikolai slammed his hand to the glass, relishing the prick as his blood oath was absorbed into the barrier and added to the contract. *She was his.*

Prendel nodded. “We move now to the second piece of business, again related to the Skolov-Lundin feud.”

The other warlords sat straighter on their thrones. The Brotherhood was rife with disputes and double-crosses, but at the moment, none were more interesting than this one.

“The Skolov family,” continued Prendel, “has long contended that Olan Lundin is guilty of the most heinous of Brotherhood crimes: the deliberate killing and cover-up of one of our own.”

Low growls sounded from the other Alphas, their predatory instincts rousing.

There was no more grave offense in the Brotherhood. When associates and soldiers, as well as omegas, were killed in territorial disputes, it was dismissed as collateral damage, but to take down another crime boss was to break the blood oath made when they joined the Brotherhood.

The gravity of the accusation, and the outcome of the verdict—total annihilation of the bloodline of either the accused or the accuser—was why Nikolai suspected the Brotherhood had waited so long to address his complaint. No one liked the idea of upheaval in the current power balance.

But he’d made damn sure they had no choice.

“Nikolai Skolov has accused Olan Lundin of shooting the previous Kuril head of the family and setting him, and the murder site, on fire to cover up the crime.”

Olan had killed people far more significant than the Kuril crime boss in that fire, but the Brotherhood didn’t give a shit about them.

But Nikolai did, and he intended Olan to pay for *all* his crimes.

He looked across the way at the current head of the Kuril family.

Ever so subtly, the male nodded.

It was his predecessor who’d been killed in the fire, along with Nikolai’s own flesh and blood, and after finally hearing the Skolov side of

the story, the Kuril family wanted the truth to come out almost as badly as Nikolai did.

“The Skolov accusation against Olan Lundin will now be considered. Along with Olan Lundin’s claim of innocence and counterclaim of slander.” Prendel wrapped a glob-like arm around his gavel and slammed it against the glass. “Punishment for the party found guilty will be swift and merciless, the specific means determined by the innocent party. Do you accept these terms?”

“I do.” Nikolai’s voice held no hesitation.

“I do, too.” Olan’s declaration was equally as clear. Whatever his faults, and there were plenty, the bastard was as bold and brash as ever, despite his advancing years and the stink of guilt that clung to him even now.

Prendel nodded. “The Brotherhood has your witnesses. Interrogation will begin immediately.”

“Good.” The sooner the better. Tracking down the few living beta servants who’d been working in the compound the rotation of the fire had been a challenge. Olan Lundin had killed most of them already, along with any Lundin soldiers who’d showed an interest in turning against their own. They’d ended up with their throats slit and their tongues cut out before Nikolai could get them to testify.

But thanks to his brothers’ tracking and computer skills, he’d managed to unearth a few beta servants who’d been working the rotation of the fire—and *persuade* them that, despite their terror, it was to their benefit to testify. Because however scared they were of Olan Lundin, they needed to be twice as scared of Nikolai Skolov.

The witnesses’ recorded testimonies recalled the same details: Olan’s fury, his threats against the Kuril head, the raised voices in the family’s private quarters, the panic of the fire, the stampede and thick smoke, and the fact that the Kuril crime boss and several members of the Skolov family never made it out alive. The witnesses also mentioned the scent of Kuril blood and the burning odor of laser shots on Olan’s skin and clothes.

One witness remembered more. Right before his mad dash out of the flames, he’d seen the Kuril crime boss and Nikolai’s mother shot and sprawled on the floor of the omega’s private quarters, already dead.

His testimony proved it wasn’t the fire that killed the previous Kuril head, but a laser attack.

But to avoid accusations of tampering or undue influence, the Brotherhood insisted on interrogating all witnesses in person. They'd assured Nikolai security would be tight.

He disliked relinquishing his most persuasive evidence to someone else's control, but it could not be helped. Certain protocols had to be met. For an organization predicated on lawlessness, the Brotherhood was a stickler for established traditions.

"Both parties will return to their planets and cease all further retaliation strikes." Prendel's emotionless voice, ever intent on keeping the proceedings moving, cut through Nikolai's thoughts. "There will also be no attempt to influence the trial or the Brotherhood through outside means." He leveled first Nikolai and then Olan with a warning glare from eight narrowed eyes. "You will talk to no one reviewing evidence. You will undertake no personal retribution. Any attempt to do so will be dealt with swiftly and harshly."

Nikolai hated being sidelined, but he'd expected no less.

"You will have until the end of the interrogation and trial to present additional evidence," continued Prendel. "After that, we will make our decision and the case will be closed."

Nikolai didn't miss the way Prendel's usually expressionless face hardened. No one in the Brotherhood liked Olan Lundin, but they disliked the idea of one of their own being accused of such a betrayal even more. Especially when the accusation came from the Skolov clan: an upstart, unpredictable, recent addition to the Brotherhood.

Surveying the hard faces of the other Alphas, Nikolai tried to determine who else might give him a hard time. The Verish and Lunara crime bosses weren't happy with him since he'd moved into arms dealings, rising above them to become the top supplier in the galaxy. The Sartin family head also wasn't a fan. The growing preference among Anarchheim's elites to spend their money at Skolov gambling and pleasure clubs meant the other warlord's traveling shuttles of sin were no longer as sought-after or profitable.

Nikolai's relationship with the Stormhart family was fine, but one wrong move could send that fragile tolerance crumbling. The same went for his other allies: the Toor, Avitus, Kuril, and Gron families. Alliances were always changing within the Brotherhood, and a friend today could stab you in the back without hesitation tomorrow.

Of course, his family wasn't the only one with more enemies than friends. No one liked the Lundins. The Gron and Namiko families hated each other, as did the Grons and the Prendels, the Grons and the Sartins, and the Grons and the Kurils. The Stormharts had only recently formed a tenuous treaty with the Avitus family after years of underhanded fighting, though no one besides them knew the initial reason for the conflict. The Toors were squabbling with the Prendels and the Lunaras over territory. The Sartin and L'kashlg crime families had just joined their syndicates through a prime omega Alpha contract, but it was rumored it wasn't going well and ties between the two families were already fraying.

It was precisely to keep these tensions from bubbling over into all-out galactic, bloody war that the Brotherhood had formed in the first place. Survival at the top was hard enough. There were ambitious up-and-comers—like the Skolovs had recently been—looking to make a mark by striking at a Brotherhood business. The Federation, the law of the galaxy, was also always nosing its self-righteous way into syndicate business and disrupting shipping routes and confiscating valuable contraband.

Nikolai just had to hope that the proof he provided would be enough to outweigh all the exterior bullshit and petty internal disputes and bring the Brotherhood together for once.

It would definitely be an uphill battle. Especially because while the evidence he'd manage to acquire was good, none of it was the smoking gun that would convince a bunch of Alphas with a long line of sins of their own that Olan had been the one to fire the shots that led to the murder of a fellow crime boss.

That critical piece would be up to his new property to provide.

Nikolai couldn't wait to begin his own *interrogation*.

"I agree to the terms." Impatient to acquire her, he slammed his fist to his chest in the Brotherhood salute. "The Brotherhood is all."

"The Brotherhood is all." The other crime heads stood as well, echoing the salute.

"One moment." Olan interrupted the closing ritual.

The hairs on the back of Nikolai's nape rose.

Olan was never calm and cool and the fact that he was now, did not bode well.

Nikolai forced his expression to remain blank and reveal nothing of the fact that his claws had sprung out, violence surging through every pore.

She was fucking *his*. There was no way Olan could take her back now.

“What is it, Alpha Lundin?” Prendel sounded pleasantly annoyed. “The requirements of the trial have been laid out clearly and the debt proceedings have been taken care of. There seems little more to address. Our traditions are very clear.”

“Of course, you are right, Inner Council Alpha.” The obsequiousness in Olan’s tone was patently false. The male did not know how to be effacing or subtle. “But I would be remiss if I did not insist our traditions be adhered to in every way.”

“Explain yourself.” Even Predel sounded suspicious.

“I don’t want it said I don’t pay my debts in full.” Olan sounded far too smug. “To ensure the value of the property is as stipulated, I invoke the right to call for assessment.”

“No.” The low growl rumbled from Nikolai before he could stop it.

Then, he silently throat punched himself for the pleased smirk that spread across his enemy’s face as Nikolai’s protest echoed into each Alpha’s private chamber.

“I want no accusations later that the property was damaged,” continued Olan. “It’s as much a protection for the Brotherhood as me.”

The conniving bastard.

Olan wanted him riled. He fucking knew the assessment and its close-quarters exposure of the omega to the other Alphas would piss Nikolai off. No Alpha liked to share what was his alone to view.

“It is not always done.” Prendel was trying to keep the peace.

“But it is my right,” insisted Olan.

“Let it be done.” Nikolai wouldn’t give the bastard the satisfaction of thinking anything he did bothered him. This fucker would never glimpse any hint of weakness in Nikolai ever again. “If Olan doesn’t feel his word is enough for the Brotherhood, let him do what it takes to prove himself.”

Olan’s snarl was satisfying.

Until Prendel spoke. “Fine. Let the assessment take place. Bring the property forward.”

Horror wound through Dahlia.
This could not be happening. This was not happening.
But it was.

Two betas wearing long, gray robes and hoods that obscured their faces dragged her by her forearms down another dark corridor, her bare feet once more slapping the cold tiles. Even the release from her cell was not enough to calm her breathing.

Let the assessment take place. Bring the property forward.

Her father had asked for it, and her new Alpha had casually agreed. A pissing match between two adversaries out for blood. No thought was given to the wounds such humiliation would leave behind on her soul.

Gods, how she hated being an omega. Totally at the mercy of those who had none.

The booming voices of the two Alphas echoed down the corridor.

“You will not get away with this.” Olan’s voice shook with rage. “You have no damn proof of any treachery—and you tricked me into giving you the omega and making me look bad with the Verish family.”

“I’m just getting started.”

“Fuck you, Skolov. You can stick your cock in her as much as you like. Knot her until she tears, but it won’t change a thing. She’ll bleed Lundin blood. Which means she’ll always be loyal to me. She’ll never truly belong to you.”

“I’m confident she’ll register the change in ownership as soon as she’s properly fucked, bred, and used as I see fit.”

Shame pulsed beneath Dahlia's chest. Their crudity only enhanced her sense of powerlessness.

"Enjoy her while you can," snapped Olan. "Once I disprove your accusations, you'll be dead, and she'll be returned to me."

"I never took you for a doting man. You certainly never treated my mother with such care." Dahlia cringed at the reference, the reminder of what his mother had suffered at her father's hands making her sick all over again. "Makes me wonder," continued her new Alpha, "why you want your first daughter back so bad. Is it so you can keep all your ugly secrets locked up tight?"

"You think you can use my own property's gift to destroy me?" The depth of Olan's rage was so great it bounced down the hall and shook the tiles beneath Dahlia's feet.

She really did not want to go into that room. Each volley they lobbed at one another embedded like shards of glass beneath her skin.

"They cannot get to you." It was the beta to her left. Rather than pity, his voice was thick with impatience, and perhaps a little superiority, as he tugged her along faster. "They are speaking through a private comms system and separated by thick glass. Otherwise, they'd tear each other apart. Once you arrive, the signal will be given, and the other crime heads will enter their pods. The assessment will begin."

"I-I don't want to be assessed."

"It is only Alphas who get what they wish." With a nod to the other beta, he tightened his grip and pulled her along faster.

She tried digging in her heels, but no luck. She simply skidded along the floor and kept going, her heels stinging as they rubbed the tile. Even betas were twice as strong as omegas.

She twisted in their grasp, anyway.

She knew what her mother would say. *Do not fight what you cannot change. They may take your body, but they can't take your mind. Be smarter. Rise above.*

But no matter how much she wanted to be like her mother—to accept serenely and stride into that room of horrors, head held high—she could not find the detachment to make that happen.

She did not know how to serenely accept. All she wanted to do was rage and fight.

Bucking in her guards' hold, she struggled to break free—and only succeeded in being dragged more roughly down the corridor, the thunderous voices growing louder.

"Once I am found innocent of your accusations," roared Olan, "I will destroy you."

"You have to get there first."

"You think my daughter can help you?" Olan's tone turned mocking. "That's rich. Have fun with her, then. Especially that gift of hers."

A new worry emerged, fear threading with Dahlia's shame.

Thanks to her father's lies, Nikolai Skolov—like the Verish family and everyone else—expected her gift to work. What would he do when he found out she was worthless?

She had to escape before then. That part of her plan could not change.

"I will wipe you and your entire family from this universe, Skolov," shouted her father. "Once I'm exonerated, I'll personally enjoy killing each of your brothers. I'll save that sweet, ripe omega sister of yours for last—and I'll be sure to sample her, defile her, and knot her 'til she screams before I rip her throat and pussy wide."

Dahlia had always hated her father but never more than she did now. Both for his cruelty to the omega she'd never met and for baiting the very male who now controlled Dahlia's fate.

The betas pulled her to a stop in front of a thick, glossy door five times her size. Despite her determination to show strength, she was trembling enough to make standing difficult.

Panels were pressed, lights shimmered. The time waiting to be summoned passed in the blink of an eye and dragged on forever.

But too soon, the directive came.

"Enter." It was the same disembodied voice she'd heard earlier.

The doors slid open.

The betas bowed low, pulling her into the room.

Twelve thick glass pods stood in upright positions evenly spaced over ten feet apart in the circular room. Each was filled with a huge, intimidating Alpha. Some were more animal-like in appearance, some insect-shaped, some covered in slime, and some, like her, humanoid in shape and genetic makeup, but all the warlord crime bosses were massive and fierce.

The instant she entered, their gazes locked on her with unblinking stares, their bodies going unnaturally still.

Hands, paws, and hooves slapped against the glass. Someone roared.
She whimpered.

“They can’t scent you through the glass or break free.” The second beta’s voice was kinder than the first. “They are here to observe. They must remain within the containers during the assessment.”

She barely heard, her thoughts scattering as her gaze was captured by one male.

She could not look away. Could barely breathe.

Nikolai Skolov stared at her as if his hand was already wrapped around her throat, locking her in place. Even with her robe as a barrier, his burning stare was as visceral as the tips of claws against her flesh, toying with her, circling her nipples, skimming across her belly, and dragging down the length of her body before probing between her legs.

Gods help her, she trembled with the urge to bow before him. To beg him to do exactly as his ruthless gaze promised. To arch her back and spread her legs and earn his praise. To be a good omega. *His* good, dutiful omega.

Everything she had always promised herself she would never be.

The thought was enough to shake her from the worst of her trance.

Her pulse still fluttered, her skin tight and needy, but at least she now remembered the omega part of her was not what ruled her.

“The assessment will begin.” The disembodied voice jerked her from her thoughts.

Her fury returned.

This was exactly the kind of horror she was desperate to save her sister from.

“Come.” The two betas dragged her toward a simple metallic bench. Positioned in the center of the room, it rotated slowly on a circular platform, so it was visible to each pod from every angle.

“No.” Her struggles did nothing. Chest heaving, she was brought to stand at the back of the bench. The heat of too many hard, hungry, predatory eyes burned into her skin.

For a moment, before the bench turned, her father’s pod was directly in front of her. The smirk he gave her sickened her, but worse was how quickly he dismissed her, his stare locking on Skolov, his hate for the other man obvious.

That animosity was more emotion than her father had ever shown her. Olan Lundin neither loved nor hated her. He simply used her.

All her life she'd wanted one person to truly feel something for her. Not for what she could do for them or how she could best serve them, but because they cared.

"The property's robe will be removed." It was the same disembodied voice as before.

Her breathing hitched. Shifting slightly, her gaze instinctively returned to the only male she suspected had a chance of stopping this humiliation. Against all hope, she searched for the boy who'd once lived inside the brutal Alpha before her now.

"Please, don't."

The Ruthless King's expression hardened. "Skolovs do not beg." Even through the thick glass, his rumbled disapproval was clear. "You will remove your robe and you will present. You will allow the betas to confirm you are unused and in prime condition." Something in his voice shifted, so subtle she almost did not catch it. "This is a Brotherhood requirement. After this, no other male will touch my property again."

The declaration offered little comfort.

She stifled a sob and vowed to herself she would survive this, and she would get away. Nothing had changed. She refused to be broken.

"Do it now." Skolov's massive hand slammed up against the glass, his amber gaze shifting to lock on the betas still holding tight to her arms as his growl turned deadly. "Do it and then get the hell out as fast as you can, or I'll rip you apart."

For some reason, that little show of emotion soothed her as nothing else had. Was it possible there was a small part of him that remembered the connection she'd never been able to forget?

His expression gave nothing away, but she clung to the hope nonetheless.

Eyes sinking shut, she allowed the betas to remove her robe.

Cool air brushed her skin. Her nipples tightened, her legs shaking as she stood before them all, exposed.

The sound of cracking glass had her eyelids springing open.

Skolov's palms smashed against his pod, the tendons on his neck bulging. His lips curled upward while the once black bands around his wrists glowed bright red and then gold. His horn jutted straight out.

Small fissures snaked down the once smooth pod.

The beta had said the glass was shatterproof, but she wasn't so sure.

The powerful Alpha's stare fused with hers.

She shouldn't be able to hear him, but she did. Low growls that reverberated down her spine and through her skin interspersed with softer purrs. The sounds vibrated over the follicles of her hair like the softest of strokes. Soothing her. Calming her. Connecting her to him.

She was no longer alone. Her Alpha watched over her.

Even all these years later, the connection between them was as potent as ever.

"Bend, now. Legs spread." The meaner beta's impatient command, followed by an equally impatient press against her shoulder blades, ripped her from the soothing spell of her Alpha's hold. The wrongness of the beta's touch burned her skin.

"N-no." Panic tore through her once more. She fought the beta's grip. She couldn't do this.

Another slam against the glass. Another crack. Her Alpha, demanding her attention, exerted his will over her.

Gaze locked with his, she bent.

He wasn't going to make it through.

Looking at Olan Lundin's smirking face might have helped, but Nikolai couldn't look away from her. Couldn't stop the animalistic, possessive growls or urge to purr and comfort.

His control was shot when he needed it most.

Unlike most of the Alpha crime heads, he had no stable of omegas, indentured or otherwise, and no long line of official offspring or bastards, either. At age twenty-eight, that was almost unheard of. He fucked when he needed release, but until now he'd never had an omega of his own. He'd known, after meeting her, no one else would do.

But he wasn't prepared for the effect seeing her like this would have on him.

Shoving his hand into his pocket, he pressed his thumb into the deepest groove in the necklace and let it dig into his skin as he repeated his personal creed.

He did not show weakness. He was harder, tougher, more ruthless than anyone here, and he did not let anyone see him ruffled. Ever.

Except now he couldn't reel himself in, and the chain wrapped tight around his thumb wasn't tempering the worst of his fury as it usually did.

Instead, the skin designs at his wrists flashed from red to gold as the lines on the top and underside bled together to form a perfect circle, completing a cellular change that had begun the first time he'd seen the omega and waited until now to complete. At the same time, his cock grew harder than it had ever been in his life.

He hated her fear, but he was mesmerized too.

The thick pod barrier blocked her scent, but it did nothing to hide the beauty of her curves, the lushness of her hips, the high globes of an ass shaped for his hands, or the sweet shadowed hint of the tight pink slit he knew would welcome him home.

She was perfection. Perfection he wanted no one seeing but him.

His claws scoured the glass. He'd lost the ability to retract them.

He wanted to kill every one of these fuckers for looking at her.

He told himself to be reasonable. To play it cool. To picture his siblings and remember he was so close to his goal. That this tiny attempt by Olan to piss him off didn't need to affect him at all.

The omega was his and would soon be riding his cock, doing his bidding, presenting and spreading for him, showering him with her gift, telling him all he needed to know.

Then the beta male laid his hand on her back and pinned her to the bench, kicking her legs wide, and Nikolai's vision tunneled.

His female's eyes sunk closed once more.

His body went mad as the tie between them severed.

With a roar, he threw himself against the glass.

His frenzied stare locked on the glimpse of paradise between her thighs. Pink. Tight. *His*.

The other beta stepped forward, his hand slipping between her thighs before his fluttering robe blocked Nikolai's sight.

Everything went red. He would not allow this. He could not let this happen.

He had to stop them from touching what was his. Maim. Kill. Destroy. Whatever it took.

Lucidity slipped away as the rut took over and instinct took top billing. At the worst possible time.

He threw himself against the glass. Over and over.

Even as Olan's gloating voice, utterly indifferent to his first daughter's plight, crackled through the shared comms. "Proceed. I demand the ritual proceed. It is the way."

Even as the beta performing the assessment shoved his arm further between the omega's spread thighs.

Even as her shoulders tightened and her body stiffened.

Nikolai felt the invasion as if it were happening to him, the cold, hard digit stabbing into his flesh.

He roared in fury.

Blackness curled the edges of his vision.

Fractures snaked down the barrier like cracking ice or rolling tears.

“Sh-she is untouched.” The beta’s declaration barely reached him over the slam of his body against the glass. “The assessment is complete.”

The barricade shattered, shards tumbling to the floor as the Brotherhood’s automatic alarms sounded, triggered by the destruction of one of their own pods.

Terrified, the two betas sprinted toward the door, their robes swirling behind them.

Rightly so.

They were going to die for touching what belonged to Nikolai Skolov.

Glass crackled beneath his boots as he stepped out from the broken pod, his mind clouded by lust and violence, the blaring alarms mingling with the roars of the other crime heads as they too threw themselves against the confines of their pods. His aggression had triggered their own. But unlike his, their barricades held.

Which was good. It left him more time to kill them all one by one. And he would. He would kill every single male who’d looked at her. He would —

“Help.” The soft, lyrical voice of his omega penetrated his blood-rage. “The glass. I can’t move.”

His body turned toward the sound as if pulled by a magnet, the sight and smell of her hitting as one. Her beauty was more startling up close. The scent of her in his lungs better than the sweetest of *tavel* berries.

Fear. Sorrow. Shame. Pain. Fury. He tasted it all on his tongue, and beneath that, courage and goodness, light and life, and lush vitality.

Her.

So much more intoxicating than he remembered.

His lungs heaved under the onslaught, greedy for more. Determined to devour. To soak her into his bones, absorb her into his cells.

Until some still slightly lucid part of him registered her delicate features tight with fear, and the shards of glass scattered around her bare feet. Thankfully, none had reached her, but one wrong step and she’d be cut.

The thought made him want to throw back his head and roar with rage.

The faint sound of a door sliding shut echoed behind him. His beta targets had gotten away.

He could not seem to care.

Nothing mattered but getting to her.

He stalked forward.

Her breath hitched and he could see the panic in her eyes: she wanted to run.

He issued a warning growl—he would not have her feet torn up so he could enjoy the chase—and was gratified when a low moan slipped from her in response.

Her eyes sank to half-mast as his Alpha call triggered her instincts and a new scent joined the rest: slick for him.

She was readying herself, responding to him, just as a good omega should.

Her pupils dilated, her breath coming fast, her cheeks flushed.

Soon her lust would be as great as his own.

He stepped closer. Growled low once more. He wanted her wet and wild, frantic to be placed on all fours, begging for her neck to be pinned down while he shoved inside and fucked her hard.

“P-please.” Her tiny hand swung upward as if that could somehow ward him off. “Not the heat. Do not trigger the heat. Give me some control, at least.”

He did not like her attempt to resist the pull. He ran right through her hand until his chest was pressed tight to hers and her fist curled against his pec.

White-hot electricity crackled through every cell.

Even through the barrier of his clothes, he knew. Her skin was silk, her fit perfect. The scrape of her beaded nipples against his chest drove him mad, while the feel of her soft belly cradling his hard cock was better than anything the universe over.

He flattened his mouth against the sensitive tendon at her throat and breathed deep. His gums throbbed as his fangs screamed for release, craving to sink into her trembling, pliant body. To mark her as his for all time.

“Alpha, please. Not here. Not with the others—”

No? He roared in fury. Omegas did not refuse their Alphas.

He would not be denied. Not while the stink of the Lundin family and the betas still clung to her. Instinct demanded he rub against her. Mark her. Scent her. Claim her and erase all others. He had waited so fucking long.

He growled once more.

“Oh, gods.” Her voice was a defeated whisper. “That sound.”

Their bodies vibrated as one, like the perfect pitch of a tuning fork, hers trembling in need as her head fell back and she bared her neck, her hand fisting in his furs, pulling him closer. “Please.”

This time she begged him to continue.

His omega.

He’d known it from the start.

His enemy, his pawn, but his nonetheless.

“Alpha Lord Skolov, we did not realize the omega was your fated mate.” Prendel’s disembodied voice crackled through the space like a kick to the balls, piercing Nikolai’s rut state. “Had we known, we would have taken additional precautions since only a fated-mate connection can produce this level of strength and loss of control in an Alpha.”

Prendel’s disapproval was obvious.

“As a result of these developments,” continued the Inner Council head, “damages from this incident will be taken from your shared account and given to the Brotherhood to enact repairs.” He paused once more. “The assessment is complete. Alpha Olan Lundin’s debt is paid in full. The meeting will adjourn in five. In the meantime, Alpha Skolov, I suggest you remove the omega currently in heat from the room before the other Alphas lose control altogether.”

The sound of a slamming gavel came next.

Hells. Nikolai would have liked to use it on his own head.

He’d never intended the knowledge that the omega was his fated mate to be a secret, but he hadn’t meant to lose his shit quite so publicly.

Chin snapping up, he met Olan’s smug smirk through the male’s still intact glass pod.

You’ve dug your own grave now. It was easy to read the older male’s lips, even with them pulled back in a feral grin. *Good-bye to those balls, Skolov.* Olan’s lips moved once more, his stare dropping to Nikolai’s wrists. *Enjoy being an Alpha bitch.*

Among Alphas, the fated-mate bond was perceived as a trap to be avoided at all costs. Yes, it was recognized as the ultimate genetic marker of

breeding compatibility and known to produce greater strength in an Alpha, but it also eroded the Alpha's already tenuous control.

There were stories of insanity and mindless ruts that lasted forever. Stories too of a force stronger than the Alpha instinct to dominate and spread his seed that shifted the dynamic between Alpha and omega.

Plus, once the fated bond was cemented by time spent together, it grew permanent. Unlike a prime omega contract, which lasted only through an omega's childbearing years or a property interaction that could be severed by the Alpha at any time, the fated bond could not be undone. Once the bands around the wrist thickened and darkened to their full capacity, it became impossible for an Alpha to knot or impregnate another omega. Hence, the Alpha bitch moniker.

It was a lifetime sentence that went against the current Alpha philosophy. Why fuck one omega when you could rut with hundreds? Better to use their bodies and, if possible, their gifts and then move on to fresher meat when the older omegas were used up.

But there was so much about the fated bond the Brotherhood didn't know.

Fact was, neither did Nikolai.

But he was still going to take the risk.

Because, unlike so many of these old-timer Alphas, Nikolai didn't rest on his laurels. He couldn't afford to. Instead, he gathered information: details, facts, figures, whispers about who was blackmailing who and fucking someone else.

Information was the foundation of how he'd built his business from nothing to become the youngest and newest member of the Brotherhood. Richer and more powerful than most of the other crime bosses.

He was no one's Alpha bitch. He was the fucking Ruthless King.

And, like everything else in his path, he intended to bring the fated-mate bond to heel and make it work for him.

Like the omega herself.

"I accept the damages and debt payment." Nikolai responded to Prendel's terms. Then, giving her no warning, he bent his knees and tossed his omega over his shoulder.

Her gasp, coupled with the sweet smell of her cunt so close to his nose, almost sent him into another mindless rut.

He fought it with everything he had. From here on out, he'd have to do better.

Be harder. More on guard.

The fated-mate bond was something to be used to strengthen his standing, not weaken it.

He'd stained his palms red and scarred his soul ashy black to get to this point.

There was no turning back now. Revenge and redemption had to be paramount, superseding all else, even his urge to fuck and knot his newest property.

With a final glare in Olan's direction, Nikolai stalked from the room.

The reckoning with the past had begun.

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Fifteen years earlier

“Make this trim shine, worm, or you’ll be sorry.”

Thirteen-year-old Nikolai Skolov heaved his bucket and dirty rag to the hood of the gleaming hovercraft as the speaker emerged.

First out, a massive black boot topped with silver spikes that crunched the top step of the stairway leading to the icy ground, the metal almost bending under the wearer’s weight.

Next, the scent of expensive asteroid cologne, testosterone, and arrogance blew outward from the compartment, followed by a huge body swaddled in a fur coat and hat.

Olan Lundin. The boss of all bosses in their outer sector wasteland.

Nikolai despised him with the passion of a hundred glowing suns.

“When you’re done, make the seats inside shine bright, or you’ll be held down, ass-fucked, knotted, and given a whipping you won’t forget.”

“Careful.” Olan’s second, Selig, bobbed down the steps right behind, as blond and shiny as all the Lundins. “He might just like it. Like his omega whore of a mother.”

The two Alpha males chuckled.

Nikolai barely blinked. The thick bands that circled his skin and shifted color with his mood remained black. He was used to the insults. These rotations, while Nikolai and his siblings slept in a broken sewage drain near the outpost borders, their old stomping grounds had been infested with Lundin scum. Worse, the planet and main house weren’t the only things

Olan had claimed when he'd taken charge: Nikolai's mother was now Lundin's property as well.

The Alpha mafia boss had arrived six months ago at the frontier outpost on the ice planet Abzal, dripping in the kind of wealth and advanced weaponry the provincial inhabitants had never before seen. He'd ousted the small-time crime ring that had previously been terrorizing the planet—a crew run by Nikolai's father—and immediately made it clear he wasn't to be fucked with.

What Olan wanted, he got.

The inhabitants of the outpost fell in line and paid him protection money, or they died.

But Nikolai had other plans.

As several more of Olan's Alpha soldiers emerged from the shuttle and pulled travel bags full of money from the rear storage compartment, Nikolai tightened his grip on his rag and used the blade hidden within to scrape a small chunk of gold trim from the side of the shuttle. He dropped it into the dirty ice slush in his bucket.

Better to get even than mad.

Plus, feeding six other mouths wasn't easy.

"I hate this fucking cold." Olan stomped his feet as his men formed a chain leading to the main house, tossing the bags off to one another as the winds whipped at their beards and sent their long white hair flying. "Fucking Brotherhood. Giving me shit territory like this to control while other heads get to strut around in two sun sectors."

Too bad this is our summer, asshole. Unlike Lundins, Nikolai's people had red-tinged, thicker hides that meant they didn't need layers of fancy furs to stay warm. It also made them easier to rescue during the blizzard season and harder to burn in the constant light reflecting off the ice covering ninety percent of the planet.

"At least this shithole is off the radar of the Federation police," cajoled Selig. "And defenseless." He patted a valise full of cash before tossing it on. "These backwater outer planets are ripe for the plucking and always ready to pay for protection. The Brotherhood will be pleased."

Olan's frown lightened. "Tonight, we celebrate! Holes for all!"

Olan's men cheered. Lust, aggression, and the promise of violence choked the air.

“Prepare the property omegas. Especially Naytalia. I want my cock sucked now!”

Nikolai was suddenly very glad he’d sent his younger brothers and sister, minus the ten-month-old twins, to the ice slush sector to poke through the trash for anything useful.

Of course, he wished he’d insisted they all go, but Maxheim and Alexi had been whining that it was next to impossible to handle Zaya and Mikhail now that they were starting to crawl, and Nikolai had figured the twins needed to nap, anyway. He’d reasoned Naytalia’s room was a hell of a lot safer than the infested polar rat sewers where Zaya and Mikhail usually bedded down.

Now, he wondered if he’d guessed wrong.

Because when Olan and his men got riled up like they were now, they didn’t care who or what they shoved their fists or dicks into. Any weaker or younger non-Brotherhood Alpha was up for grabs, as were the usual fodder of betas and omegas.

That’s the way it always was.

The strong preyed on the weak.

Luckily, he’d been born an Alpha. He just had to survive to adulthood to reap the benefits.

“M-My Lord Alpha Lundin.” The nervous sound carried above the roar of laughter and chest-pounding as a brave beta hurried toward Olan. The beta’s gray robe dragged through the ice and slush as he bowed low. Unlike omegas who were dressed to entice and please their Alphas, betas were expected to be covered and hooded to lessen their distraction and improve their ability to serve. “I-I apologize, but your property Naytalia is not currently in the omega waiting room with the others.”

Utter silence.

It was never good to deny Olan what he wanted.

Nikolai’s old home was divided into two sections. The front section was for public, official gatherings and operated more like a town hall than a home. The back was connected to the front by a long corridor and held the private quarters. The servants crowded into several rooms to sleep. The same went for most of the omegas. However, since Naytalia was a favorite, Lundin had given her a private sleeping room. Still, he expected her to await him in the omega stable like the rest.

“Where the fuck is she?” Olan’s snarl broke the tense hush.

The beta paled and took a small step back. “I-I am not sure, my Alpha Lord.”

The air crackled with menace.

Nikolai stifled a curse.

He suspected everyone present had a damn good idea *who* Naytalia was with, even if they didn’t know *where* she was.

His mother was most likely being fucked by the Kuril crime boss, who’d been a guest of Olan’s these past few rotations and who appeared to like using her as much as his host did.

Which probably wouldn’t have been a problem—since omega property were expected to service all sanctioned guests—but Naytalia seemed to have developed a fondness for the Kuril warlord. She hadn’t been seeing to any other Alpha’s needs lately, especially Olan Lundin’s.

Worse, it was rumored that her gift, the ability to hear others’ thoughts, had resurfaced after years of dormancy, and it had happened not at Olan’s command, or even in his presence, but while the Kuril crime boss had been slamming away inside her.

Short-fused and territorial, Olan had no problem sharing his indentured omegas’ bodies with other Alphas, but the use of their gifts was meant for him alone.

“Where is she?” As if Nikolai had drawn the fucker’s attention with his thoughts, the Lundin top Alpha stalked in his direction. “Tell me where that worthless omega property whore of mine is, or you and the rest of her offspring will suffer unimaginable agony before I allow you to die.”

Rage coated everything red.

Nikolai’s gums throbbed as his Alpha instincts took hold, his fangs clawing for release.

One thing you didn’t fuck with was his family. He didn’t include his father in that circle because he’d been more sperm donor than paternal figure. He was also on the fence about including his mother in that category. Even before Olan’s arrival, she seemed to think she’d done her part simply by bringing each of them into the world.

Still, he’d always be grateful to her for that.

The six other Skolov souls she’d brought into the universe were the only things that were truly his. The only things that looked at him as if he mattered.

He was their Alpha, and he intended to guard them to his dying breath.

He sized up the ramped-up, bitter crime boss heading his way.

In truth, his chances were grim, his body one third the size of a full-grown Alpha. Olan would rip him to pieces the instant Nikolai challenged him for dominance.

Still, there was nothing he wouldn't risk for his family.

He should have known Olan wouldn't play fair.

"Seize the worm," he told his men. "Bring him inside and hold him down. It's too cold for my dick out here and I want to make him suffer for every heartbeat that bitch is not found."

Nikolai shot out with his fist. The first soldier to reach him staggered back. He wasn't so lucky after that. Fists pounded his stomach, ribs, and jaw. Bones cracked as his attackers slammed him to the ground.

His chin bounced along the steps as he was dragged up the outpost steps and tossed inside the entrance hall crowded with bags of money and little else.

He struggled to stand, digging his horn into the first fucker stupid enough to come at him again. But there were too many.

They were on him again before he knew it.

"Get those fucking rags off him. I want to hear him squeal."

"Alpha Lord, the omega property has been found." The beta's nervous announcement cut through the snarls and roars. "She is with the Kuril crime boss in the private residential quarters." There was a long pause as if he was bracing himself. "They are with your bride, the prime omega."

"With *my* prime omega?" The windows rattled with the force of Olan's roar. "What the hells is Kuril doing with them both? If he thinks to take what's mine, he'll regret it."

His rage redirected, Olan stormed down the corridor.

His crew scurried after him.

Shit. Naytalia was in for it now.

Free, Nikolai pushed to standing—or tried. His broken arm gave out, and he slumped back down, his chin knocking the floor. With a snarl, he forced himself up, grinning as blood dripped into his eye. *Take that, you fucking Lundin Alpha pussy. Nothing keeps a Skolov down.*

He needed to get to the twins, but he needed to be smart. The whole Lundin crew was currently mobbing the private quarters. It hadn't escaped Nikolai's attention that the beta had been deliberately vague about exactly where in the private quarters Naytalia had been located. Nikolai would just

have to hope that wherever Naytalia was entertaining the Kuril head and the Lundin prime omega, it wasn't in her own room where the twins were sleeping. She wouldn't be so reckless. Crying babies were a cockblocker and Naytalia wouldn't want to risk displeasing the Kuril head, right?

His nerves grew. He really never knew with Naytalia.

His gaze lit on an ugly gold scone on the wall that hadn't been there during his father's reign. Adding expensive shit to the place only made the ugliness of it stand out more and, constructed of the same cheap, brittle imported timber as the rest of the outpost, Nikolai's old home had never been much to look at in the first place.

Fighting a grimace, he rolled his shoulders and worked through the soreness in his arm, his bones already snapping back into place thanks to his Alpha regenerative abilities.

Time to sneak into Naytalia's room from the side window, get the twins, and get out. For good. After this incident, coming back wouldn't be smart.

He wished he could have done more for Naytalia, but she was the one who insisted on staying with Olan. She'd made her choice long ago.

On his way out, he grabbed the ugly gold piece and ripped it from the wall.

"Are you okay?"

The lyrical sound had him spinning around.

Standing in the entranceway was a vision straight out of the old-timers' tales about dazzling ice-fairies who bewitched a male and made him lose his way in a snowstorm.

Except this ice-fairy was real.

She had wide blue eyes, full pink lips, pointed ears, porcelain skin, and white-gold blond hair that shimmered like snow crystals as it fell in waves to her waist. Ethereal and elegant, she was swathed in fine metallic silk from her shoulders to the tips of her white, laced boots.

A perfect, delicate, untouched omega girl.

Though she had the look of a Lundin, he'd never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Shame slammed through him. He'd never been more aware of the dirt and blood on his face and the torn rags on his body.

Something else burned inside him too, though . . . something he had yet to feel until this very moment. The brutal surge of the rut, a flood of heat that slammed through his veins, ripping his fangs from his gums while his

cock went hard and the glands at the back of his mouth dripped. Hells, even he could scent the sudden burst of testosterone saturating the air.

“Come here.”

The girl swayed in place, her eyes going wide, and then, as if he’d yanked an invisible string, she scurried forward until she was standing in front of him, so tiny the top of her head only reached his chest.

Slender neck bowed, her pulse fluttered wildly as her gaze fused to the ground. Like any good omega, his dominance had triggered her biological responses.

She didn’t speak again.

Her clean, pure scent filled his lungs. Potency rushed through his veins. His first taste of true power, of the Alpha birthright that would be his if he survived adolescence to wield it. The rush of it made him dizzy.

He was invulnerable. Powerful. Hard as hells.

His cock, which until that moment had been pretty useless to him, was suddenly the beginning and end of his existence.

But more powerful was the surge of an altogether different instinct, a possessive, protective compulsion to protect the girl in the same way he did his siblings. As if she too were bound to him by blood.

He wanted to master her. Dominate her. Guard her. Mark her. Keep her.

“Tell me your name.” His voice was a lower growl than he’d ever used before.

“Your eyes were amber. Now, they’re red.”

“Your name,” he demanded. His eyes had never changed before, but he’d never experienced the stages of a rut before, either.

“D-Dahlia Lundin.”

First daughter omega of the male who’d killed his father and fucked his mother.

He could forgive her even that.

“Look at me.”

Her gaze lifted at his command.

Up close, she was prettier. Long thick lashes framed eyes that sparkled with flecks of silver. And her scent . . . it was flawless, pristine, unique, like a snowflake melting on his tongue. He wanted to taste her everywhere.

“Did you see what I was doing?”

She swallowed hard. He could tell she wanted to lie.

He growled once, a low, primal rumble born of instinct.

“Yes.”

“You tell anyone what you saw and,” he repeated the threat he’d had hurled at him more times than he could remember, “I’ll find you, hold you down, ass-fuck you, knot you, and give you a whipping you won’t forget.”

She paled. “I won’t. I swear.” Her gaze flickered to his before dropping once more. “There are some inner-planetary coins in the top drawer of the bureau. You could take those too, and no one would realize until too late.”

His gaze narrowed. “Why would you tell me that?”

This time, her stare rose to meet his. “Why not?”

She might look delicate, but she had spirit. He liked that.

He shoved the scone into the waistband at the back of his pants. “I won’t always be getting my ass kicked, stealing small crap, and wearing rags.”

She shivered. “I know. I can sense your power. You’re destined for greatness.”

He nodded, doing his best not to show how her words soothed something inside of him. It wasn’t good to look weak, or as if you cared what others thought, but he’d been overlooked so long, it was satisfying to hear the certainty in her tone.

Nice. Like her.

It reminded him that her first words to him had been ones of compassion . . . because she thought him weak enough to need it.

“Why are you here?” Olan brought his prime omega with him often enough, but he’d never brought his daughter to Abzal before.

A tiny scowl formed between her delicate eyebrows. “I arrived this morning. Normally, I’m kept at the compound, but my mother and I stopped over because my Alpha says it is time for me to go to omega finishing school.” Her nose wrinkled, her words coming easier as her emotions overrode her awareness of him. “I don’t want to go. I hate the idea.” She swallowed hard. “That is why I helped you. Because I wish I could do what you are doing, stealing enough to be able to run. I don’t want to be an omega. I-I want to escape with my mother and my baby sister and leave Anarcheim for good.”

The growl erupted without warning, the burgeoning Alpha in him offended by her rejection of what was his to claim.

“I’m sorry.” Cheeks red, she bowed her head. “I forget myself.”

Two different instincts warred within him. Remembering her earlier kindness, he let his more understanding side take the lead. “If I was a Lundin, I’d be miserable too.”

Irritation flashed in her eyes. “My baby sister is a Lundin and I like her. That is why I will find a way to flee. Because she is a Lundin worth saving.”

“No, that is why I will rise to the top and come for you both.”

“Really?” Her big blue eyes grew wider. “Would you? We can go to the Federation for help. I heard a beta servant once say that they are the only organization in the galaxy that can take on the Brotherhood.”

“Those uptight do-gooders?” he snarled. The Federation was the law of the galaxy, a collection of puritanical self-righteous politicians out to take down the Brotherhood. Their rules for their citizens were so strict, Nikolai would rather have been dead than live a life sentence under their thumb. They required all Alphas, except those in their military, to take suppression drugs. The same was demanded of all Federation omegas. “They’re the worst, and worthless, too.” His chest puffed wide. “I have no intention of running or crawling to the Federation for help. I will become the most ruthless Alpha warlord this galaxy has ever seen. No one will fuck with me. They’ll be too terrified. Only my family will be spared my wrath.”

“You will kill me?” Her voice was a squeak.

“No. You will become mine.”

Her eyes flared, then darkened with sadness. “You will not want me.” She moved closer to whisper her confession. “My parents do not want me to talk about it for fear of lessening my value, but my gift hasn’t shown itself yet. That’s why they’re sending me to the school. They’re worried I might be one of those omegas that never reaches her potential. But I don’t think it would be so bad. If my gift never shows, maybe they will let me run away without a fuss.”

He should have rejoiced at his enemy’s troubles. Instead, he worried for her. An omega who never showed any evidence of enhanced gifts was reduced in value since it was assumed she might pass on the same failing to any omega offspring.

Such a female had no chance of becoming a prime omega and was rarely desired as indentured property, either. Most were relegated soon after estrus to the position of omega whore, untethered to any family and shared

by all. It was an even lower position than his mother currently occupied, and that seemed difficult enough.

“You will find your gift.” It wasn’t a comfort; it was a command. He needed time to secure his place.

“I-I don’t know.”

“You will.”

She bowed her head once more. “Yes, Alpha. I will.”

“Good.”

“Thank you for your faith.” She was a talker, his omega. “You are a good Alpha.” There was hero-worship in her gaze. It made his cock harder. “If I had my own shuttle, I’d take you away with me right now.”

He studied her, resentment mixing with something softer. He didn’t like that she thought he needed her help, but her pledge warmed him all the same. “I think you would.” So many people had made him promises. None had proven true. He’d learned long ago to depend only upon himself. But this girl . . . he almost believed. “But that is not your job. I shall come for you.”

She smiled shyly, echoing his words. “I think you would.”

“I do not say what I do not mean.”

“Dahlia Lundin!” The snap of admonishment crackled in the air. It came from the same beta servant who’d squealed on poor Naytalia. “Come out of that room this instant. You do not associate with filth. If your Alpha hears of this, you will be punished worse than usual.”

Worse than usual.

Nikolai’s rage surged. He’d tear them all to pieces before he let her be hurt. He started forward.

With a gasp, the beta scrambled out of sight.

“No, please.” A tiny delicate hand wrapped around his arm, the omega’s fingers curling around the leather band at his bicep while her palm seared his skin. “Don’t risk yourself.”

At her touch, several things happened at once.

First, a rush of violent white heat slammed through every cell. His skin pulsed as if the muscles beneath were suddenly too large for their casing—the force of it almost enough to send him to his knees.

He was aware of everything in a way he hadn’t been before: the scents of those not just inside the house, but at the farthest ends of the outpost, the sharp tang in the air that signaled a storm, the sound of ice cracking in the

fields several lengths off, and most significantly, the throbbing knot at the base of his cock and an intense, all-encompassing lust.

Second, he saw that he was not the only one affected. The girl vibrated as if electrified by his touch, and her crystal-blue eyes bled to black.

Before he could process what was happening, the images crashed into him, projected simultaneously like a vid into his mind, and at the same time, in the space above his head.

Murky and blurred, but accurate, nonetheless. He knew. Because it was a memory he'd lived through. The rotation his father, Burian Skolov, pressed the leather band with the Skolov crest into Nikolai's hand and told him to "hold it for a sec while I take care of this outsider Olan Lundin."

Worse, anyone who walked by could see the past exchange and live it too. Her vision forecasted in technicolor above his head as Nikolai's younger self stood tall, absolutely certain that the bully who'd always controlled his life would prevail. He'd still been thinking that as the warm splash of his father's blood hit his cheek and the flimsy bit of stability he'd had was torn apart.

Through the omega's touch, he heard the screams of his brothers and sisters as the full weight of what his father's death meant fell on his shoulders. It was up to him now to keep his siblings alive.

The fear nearly choked him. Would he be enough to protect them? He'd have to be.

"What was that?" The omega wrenched her hand from his, black eyes dilated with shock.

The image vanished from his mind and the air in front of him.

He found his voice. "I guess your gift exists after all."

Enhanced sight of the past and the ability to project it so others could see it, too. The omega girl had a powerful gift.

They stared at one another.

Raw, blistering shock vibrated between them.

His fury came next. He didn't like feeling exposed. He hated anyone knowing his doubts and fears, her most of all.

"I have never done anything like that before." Her body swayed as if she might fall. "I have no idea why it happened now."

He did.

He glanced down at his wrist. Faint golden lines that hadn't been there before were beginning to circle his wrist like a band. If he turned the

omega's hand over, he'd find the same thing.

He'd only heard of this happening once in his entire planet's history, but there it was. Proof.

No wonder he felt such a connection to the girl.

If they remained together, the bands forming on her wrists would darken and become full cuffs. A band would appear around her throat like a collar as well. If she did not remain in his presence, the marks would disappear. The same went for the bands at his wrist.

"I-I am sorry for what my father did to yours, Nikolai Skolov."

Thanks to her gift, she knew his name and so many secrets he hadn't wanted anyone to learn. The brush of her sympathy was like sandpaper against his skin. "You'll make it up to me."

Her winged eyebrows shot upward. "How?"

"That gift of yours is going to be useful in all sorts of ways."

She seemed shocked, then offended, and then scared. "You're like them . . . Oh gods, once they know . . ." She looked terrified. "There will be no chance of escape."

He couldn't give her false hope. Nor did he want to. "You cannot run from what you are."

Defiance flared once more. "I can try. I am more than a vessel to be used. I don't want to become like my mother, or yours."

He growled low. "Accept. Submit. That is the omega way."

"Not this omega."

"Dahlia Lundin. Your behavior has been reported." The beta was back, her stare glittering with smug pleasure. "You will both pay now."

His omega's anger turned to fear for him. "You should run."

"I do not run."

Her gaze shifted from the door to him and back again. "You will not survive another beating."

"You'd be surprised what I can endure."

But her worry for him only grew. She really was too nice for her own good.

"Here." She pulled something from over her neck and pressed it into his palm. "Take this. Hide it somewhere safe."

A rope of gems glittered in his palm.

"No." He pushed it back toward her. He had no interest in more of her pity.

“Please.” She backed up a step, her body trembling, and he knew she was using all her strength to fight the compulsion to obey without question. “Please, Alpha.” The title soothed him, as he suspected she knew it would. “The necklace will be of no use to me where I am going, but for you You can use it to help with the care of your siblings.” She blushed, knowing full well she only knew that information because of her gift. “And, maybe, if I haven’t escaped on my own by then, you could use it to keep your promise and find me.”

Count on it, omega.

“Fire!”

Olan stumbled into the front hall, his panicked prime omega clinging to him. Both were coughing and covered in ash. The prime omega’s usually perfect hair was tilted to the side while Olan’s shirt was torn, his skin smeared with soot and strange blackish-red streaks across his chest and arm. “The back of the building is in flames.”

Nikolai’s gaze snapped down the hall.

It couldn’t be. Fires were rare on the ice planet, but when they happened, it was bad.

The non-native timber used for building was not meant for this climate. Its brittle, dry state was akin to kindling, and the brutal winds only made matters worse.

The stench of smoke singed Nikolai’s nostrils.

“It’s moving fast,” roared the Lundin head. “Everyone out!”

Why the fuck did Olan have blood on his skin? Even through the smoke and soot, Nikolai could scent it.

And identify it as familiar.

His chest went tight.

“It’s going to blow.” Olan stumbled toward the front door, shoving past them, a coward revealed.

Right behind him was a panicked crowd of Alpha soldiers and beta servants. A stampede.

Nikolai grabbed his omega and flattened them against the wall.

More servants and soldiers followed.

But not his mother.

Not the twins, either.

“We have to get out of here.” The terror in the girl’s voice decided him.

“Go!” He pushed her toward the exit, but instead of following, he darted in the opposite direction, down the hallway toward the family’s private wing and the omega quarters. He ran past a few beta servants who were coughing as they hurried by.

Thick smoke made it hard to see.

He slammed into something and then heard the shriek as a body hit the wall and then toppled downward. Even at his young age, Nikolai was still already more solid than any beta.

With a curse, he reached out a hand, but the male beta servant was already bounding up, his face covered in soot, his eyes full of panic. “They’re dead! It’s too late for them. Save yourself!”

The servant darted by.

No! There was still time.

From outside, so faint he could barely hear it over the roar of the flames, he caught the sound of the omega girl screaming his name. The panic in her voice pulled at him, but he fought it. He had another priority now.

Determination growing, Nikolai sprinted deeper into the smoke and ash, rushing down the hall toward the sleeping quarters, choking and gagging until he saw it . . . the wall of flames at Naytalia’s door.

His stomach heaved.

Holding up his forearms to his face, he peered past the flickering orange, purple, and red, searching for movement, listening for cries of help.

Nothing.

All too soon it was clear why.

Through the thick smoke and flames, he could see Naytalia’s sightless eyes, her burning body less than three arms’ lengths from a door she never reached. Flames devoured her hair, clothes, and skin, erasing who she’d once been, but not yet enough to hide the gaping blaster hole in the middle of her belly. Just behind her was the crime boss Ghal Kuril. Two blasts in his chest and stomach burned just as fast as he lay half on his belly, half on his side, as if he’d been trying to turn over when he died.

It wasn’t fire that had killed them, but a laser.

No wonder that servant had said they were beyond help.

Angry flames at the far end of the room licked their way up the sides of the cradle where Naytalia had put the twins to sleep, the bedding and the wood ablaze.

Nothing could survive that.

Pain crippled Nikolai, slamming him to his knees, making it impossible to breathe.

The twins were dead.

Killed by the same bastard who'd murdered Naytalia and Kuril and attempted to cover up the evidence with fire.

But Nikolai refused to let him get away with it.

No one would give a shit about what happened to an omega property whore or her brats, but they would care about a murdered Brotherhood head.

He'd drag Kuril's body out of the room as evidence if it was the last fucking thing he did.

For the twins, Zaya and Mikhail. For Naytalia, too.

Sucking down a breath, he prepared to launch himself through the flames.

Except a burning piece of ceiling crashed down and slammed into the side of his head.

His ears rung. His legs folded.

Then, nothing.

Fifteen years later

Dahlia bounced on the Alpha's shoulder, naked while he was clothed. The dark, twisting corridors of the Brotherhood ship a blur as Nikolai Skolov moved at speeds she'd never be able to travel on her own, the blare of the shrieking alarms as loud as the shocked, panicked voice inside her head.

He'd come for her. Just as he'd promised.

But not to save her.

No, his intent was far worse.

He'd come to exploit the connection between them for revenge. He'd crashed back into her life to use her weakness for him against her and her family.

Alpha Lord Skolov, we did not realize the omega was your fated mate.

The memory of the disembodied voice sliced through her once more, panicking her all over again.

When she'd been younger, she'd had no idea why she'd responded to the Skolov Alpha as she had. Now she was not so innocent.

They were fated mates. Her craven susceptibility to him was yet another prison she could not escape. Even more intense than the usual Alpha-omega dynamic, the pull between them occurred not only during a rut but all the time. It was all-encompassing and all-consuming, stealing away the small bit of autonomy an omega had.

Even worse, if the bond was completed, she'd be tied to the Alpha for his entire life, not even freed from servitude after her childbearing years

ended.

She *had* to escape before the fated-mate connection was absorbed so deep into her cells, saliva, and skin there'd be no way to break free.

"Ready for the honeymoon, fated-mate omega property?" Tone mocking, Skolov carried her to a hanger where a sleek matte black hovercraft—nicer than anything Olan Lundin owed—was parked.

She refused to dignify the Alpha's question with an answer.

He laughed.

A walkway descended.

They glided upward, passing a cockpit and several doors before one opened and he ducked inside.

Without warning, the room spun, and the balls of her feet hit cool tile.

"Stay." The growled command froze her in place.

He'd brought her to a massive room with floor-to-ceiling windows, a huge desk, multiple screens, and a giant bed covered in black silk sheets.

A faint vibration between her toes signaled they were about to lift off. Automatic piloting. She wasn't surprised. Flesh and blood creatures made mistakes or could be bribed. High-security computers were a safer bet for males like Skolov or her father.

She'd have to be fast. She tensed to run.

As if he read her mind, his arm closed around her shoulder. "Not happening." He spun her around. Pushing her up against the wall panel, the weight of his body pinned her as the disorienting mix of soft fur, supple leather, and hot skin pressed into her bare flesh. "Move again and I'll fuck you here and now."

The worst part? Her need was so great, she barely struggled. The scent and feel of him enough to leave her panting. She'd always been weak where he was concerned.

Still, she fought it. "I am unused."

"Not for long."

"My gift may not work as well once I am no longer pure." She scrambled for any excuse. "Who knows how the fated-mate bond will affect it?"

"We both know your gift hasn't been operating for a long time."

Shock crashed through her.

He knew her gift didn't work. How? Such information was a well-guarded family secret, or so she'd thought.

Plus, if he knew about her broken gift, why had he agreed to take her in return for the resolution of her father's debt? And why hadn't he told the other Brotherhood members about Olan's deception? His actions made no sense, and that frightened her more.

"I don't understand. If you know . . ." She swallowed.

His hand wrapped around her throat, his mouth pressing to her ear. "You think I don't know what liars Lundins are?"

She wanted to protest that she'd never wanted to keep the truth from anyone, but the words stuck in her throat, stolen by the sensation of something thick and hard rocking against her bottom. Slow, deliberate movements, as if he knew that every press only made the heat between her legs burn hotter.

"Don't worry, omega. You'll earn me what I'm owed. I'll wring every ounce of your true value from you before we're done."

The threat should have horrified her. Instead, she moaned, her omega instinct shrieking in pleasure at the thought of him working her over, fucking, knotting, breeding her until she'd satisfied her debt. She had a terrible suspicion the fated-mate bond only increased the depth of her need to submit.

"Such an eager little omega." His voice was smug, her traitorous body telling him all he needed to know. "Remember what I told you long ago? You cannot run from what you are."

Enraged, she slammed her head back, aiming for his nose, but he was too fast. And powerful.

"That will cost you." His hand landed on her ass. A sharp sting radiated through her.

She hissed and bucked once more.

He pushed her harder into the wall.

"Fight and my instinct will take over." The hand around her throat tightened.

As prey, she recognized the danger.

Freezing, her breath coming fast, she tried to wade through the onslaught of sensations. She was furious. But that wasn't all.

His pleased purr rumbled through her as his hand slid between her thighs, exposing her shameful secret.

She was soaked.

"Such a good, dutiful omega."

She moaned, spreading her legs wider.

“Such well-behaved property.” His other hand swept her hair to the side, baring the back of her neck to his gaze. She shivered as his breath skittered across her skin like a caress.

Another low growl erupted as he skimmed his lips along the curve of her shoulder. “I’ve wanted you like this since I first saw you.”

Another shiver. More slick pearled on her folds. “I was a child.”

“I never was.” His every dominant gesture only triggered her heat higher. “And thank fuck, you’re not any longer.”

The rustle of movement behind her and then the fur he’d been wearing around his shoulders landed at her feet. The leather bands that had crisscrossed his torso was sliced in half as if he’d used his claws to cut through them in one powerful slash.

His chest was now as bare as hers.

She whimpered as he flattened himself fully against her once more, the rock-hard heat of him searing her skin.

“Don’t fight me, and it won’t hurt.” The hand at her throat held her in place while he ground his erection against the cleft of her bottom, the friction of the supple leather and the hard ridge of his cock heightening her need. “Put your palms on the wall.”

Lost in a daze, barely aware of what she was doing, she obeyed, the cool solidity of the walls welcome.

“Good girl.”

“Mmmm.” She pushed back into him.

Gods, it felt good. To obey. To feel him against her.

Some far-off part of her tried to raise an alarm and remind herself that her mother had warned her the actual rutting was agony. That even with the slick and the instinct, the Alpha rut was too much for an unused omega cunt.

But the cautionary voice was muffled, drowned out by an intense lust that dragged her toward her own doom, compelling her to spread her legs wider and rub herself against him.

“That’s right, baby girl.” His arrogant praise should have shamed her, but it only made her wetter. “Soon I’ll give you exactly what you’re begging for. But first, stay still and submit.”

There was no more warning than that.

Something sharp punctured her. Her skin tore. But not where she expected.

This violation occurred at her neck.

She jerked. Cried out. The worst of the mindless heat clearing as she returned to herself. Her hand swung up toward the slight pain, hitting some kind of metal instrument. “Stop!”

Crack. A firm hand landed against her ass. “Hands back on the wall. We’re going to start off as we mean to go, and that means you follow my commands. Without hesitation. I’ve been waiting a long time for this little reunion.”

The pain was already receding, but not his hold on her throat. Or the strange, foreign pressure at the back of her neck. But fighting would only add to her current problems.

She put her hands back on the wall.

“Good to see you have more sense than the rest of your family.”

She wanted to scream at his insult. Instead, she asked the only thing that really mattered. “What did you do?”

A sharp beep and then the pressure against her neck lessened.

“I removed your family tracker.” Metal pinged as he dropped something to the floor. His boot crashed down on top, grinding hard.

Shock made her dizzy. She’d always longed to do that herself, but without the resources to purchase such expensive removal equipment and no chance anyone in her limited circle would help her, she’d been unable to do so.

It had been one of her greatest impediments to running away.

Now, it was out of her.

She was free.

“Of course, I’ll be replacing it with my own.” His hard words brought her crashing back to reality.

Olan might not be able to track her anymore, but *he* would. He would be able to trace her anywhere, at any time.

“No!” The protest erupted from sheer instinct.

Another crack to her bare bottom. This one harder. Enough to make her gasp. The sting radiated, creating a heat that burned high between her thighs. “I will not tolerate disobedience, omega.”

Rough, thick fingers prodded at her neck while he held her in place as if she were a child.

There was another flash of pain, but duller this time. As if he'd numbed the area somehow. And then pressure. Not agonizing, but not pleasant. The instrument vibrated against her skin. More pressure.

She whimpered.

"It will be over soon."

She hadn't expected that show of comfort. And did she imagine the way his thumb ghosted against her fluttering pulse as if he could somehow soothe it?

A loud ping, and the pressure vanished.

As did her freedom.

"Good girl. It's done."

Her nails dug into the wall. "I hate you."

He didn't release her. He snarled instead. A heady, dominant sound that arched straight to her clit.

"Stop."

He growled again. "You so sure you want me to stop?" He sounded so arrogant, so knowing. "That's another Lundin lie, and we both know it. Poor little omega. It must be hard to hate something and want it so bad."

His mouth landed on the sore spot at the back of her neck. He sucked hard. A different claim. One that had her twitching beneath his tongue, her hips jerking as her clit throbbed.

"Kept so long from your Alpha's cock." His teeth raked up her tendon, and he nipped her ear. The rustle of leather whispered at her back as he undid the laces of his pants. "Your instincts denied. And now that tight cunt is aching to be filled. To be fucked by its Alpha, like it should."

Every filthy, arrogant pronouncement only made her wetter.

She fought it as best she could.

"This isn't me. You're triggering my heat. You're using my weakness against me."

"Weakness? It's not some flaw inside you. It's *all* you are, omega. This is what you were made for. Your body knows exactly what it was designed to do. Give." He growled in her ear. "Give me every fucking part of you. Your slick, your cunt, your submission, your gift."

"No." She struggled against his hold.

Somehow, though she'd heard it all her life, it was worse hearing it from him. She'd always stored him away in her mind as different, placed him and their interaction in a little bubble.

But now, that illusion was pierced. There was no such thing as a good Alpha. No male who might see her as something more than a pretty toy to be used for his needs.

“You can take what you like,” she hissed at him. “I can’t stop that. We both know that. But I will never give you anything willingly.”

“Good.” He shoved his thigh between her legs, keeping her spread wide. Blunt, thick fingers slid between her soaked folds, the pad of his thumb circling her swollen bud as his mouth returned to her ear. “I like a little fight. It makes the victory all the sweeter in the end.”

His growl shifted to a purr. “My property. My prize. Your bastard of a father sold you to me to pay for his sins—and I intend to collect.”

“I’m not just some rut toy.”

“You’re whatever I want you to be.” He leaned in close, pressing more of his weight against her. “I should tame that smart tongue right now, but I like it. Especially when I know it’s soon going to be sucking hard at my cock. Those cheeks hollowing as if I were your favorite dessert. Swallowing your words along with my cum.” His finger thrummed over her clit. “But you are right, little omega. I do have plans for you. Bigger plans than breeding and fucking—though we’ll get to those too.”

“What?” The menace in his tone frightened her.

He stroked her clit again, his big hand forcing her thighs wide. “You and I,” he lowered his voice as if sharing an intimate secret, “are destined for fire, death, and destruction. For revenge and the dark. For everything twisted, ugly, and vicious, just like my soul.”

He wheeled her around, clamping her hand to his forearm.

The very same spot where, fifteen years ago, she’d touched him for the first time out of worry and concern and the beginnings of affection.

But unlike then, there was no answering warmth in his gaze, only calculation as he stared at their joined flesh. As if he were waiting for something.

Then she knew.

He remembered what it had taken to rouse her gift and produce her one and only vision: her touch on his skin.

He was seeking to recreate it.

Like all those years ago, a shock of fire blazed through her, radiating from their point of contact outward. A welcome old friend. One she’d missed so much.

The throbbing at her wrists and throat were so strong it was almost pain. Need mixed with agonizing longing—and lust.

She'd touched other Alphas before, especially early on when her parents and the teachers at her omega finishing school thought any touch might awaken her gift, but it had never felt like this.

This was thirst and craving and hunger. This was power.

This was everything.

Pressure built from within. Her fingertips tingled; her cunt wept.

She remembered what came next.

The vision itself, so vivid and real it was as if she'd lived through the murder of Nikolai's father herself.

She braced herself for the onslaught of new images.

Except . . . nothing happened.

"What the fuck?" The Alpha's frustrated shout was almost worth her own grief. "Why aren't your eyes turning black? Where's the vision? I can feel you blocking it somehow."

She could feel that, too. A black hole swirling in the middle of her chest, sucking in all the energy and light as quickly as it sparked to life.

"Stop that at once," he snarled

She hid a smile. She had no idea where the block had come from, but she was thrilled.

Fire, death, and destruction? Let him burn in it himself.

Nothing. What in the ever-loving fuck?
Where was the vision?
Nikolai fumed.

Things went the way he planned. He made damn sure of it. He did not like surprises. Especially when it came to her.

Years ago, Dahlia Lundin's vision had slammed into him and the bands at his wrists had glowed to life. He hadn't wanted it. Hadn't expected it. Fact was, he'd been damned pissed about it, but it had come anyway.

Now, when he needed another glimpse into the past, her vision refused to come.

She was blocking it somehow. The energy and power beneath his fingertips sucked away before he could wield it as he wanted.

That was unacceptable. Omegas bent to the will of their Alphas, not the other way around.

"What are you doing to stop it?" He pressed her palm deeper into his skin, hoping more contact might do the trick.

"Nothing."

But she was doing something. He could see the pleasure in her gaze, her defiance fueling his fury and his lust.

The damn fated-mate bond was messing with his head, making it harder than usual to control his rut and think logically.

"You knew my gift didn't work." She sounded calm. And smug. He'd need to punish her for that, too. "It hasn't since that rotation."

He knew that. He knew everything about her thanks to his spies.

But he'd been confident he could spark her gift back to life. And he had. Only he hadn't expected she'd somehow have the ability to block him.

"You will regret defying me." Swiveling, he stalked to his desk and activated the security unlock.

It was either that or flip the omega around and stuff her full of cock.

It had been so damn long, and now she was finally in front of him. Not some grainy image taken by his spies, but his omega in the flesh, with her silky skin, defiant spirit, and sweet, ripe cunt.

He wanted to devour her whole.

Except he needed her vision of the rotation of the murder to clinch his case with the Brotherhood. Because to discredit Olan without a doubt, Nikolai needed a visual of Olan wielding the gun used to kill the Kuril crime boss.

A visual the omega could access through her gift, share with him, and then with the Brotherhood.

If she stopped blocking it.

He grabbed the sheet off the bed and threw it toward her. "Cover yourself."

Breathing as shallow as he could to lessen the allure of her scent, he slammed his hand on the comms screen in the center of his desk.

"Alpha Lord Skolov, good rotation to you." The gray-haired, lined face of his top beta scientist and healer, Dr. Toth Randalff, appeared on the screen. Stacks of books, reports, and vids were piled high on every inch of his workstation. With his grandfather-like round cheeks, bushy eyebrows, and furry, white neck and arms tucked into a respectable lab coat, you'd never know the brilliant bastard had once spent his youth working for another Alpha making mood enhancers so addictive and deadly, one tab beneath the tongue had you hooked. Or that he'd been forced by the other Alpha to peddle that shit without approval in Nikolai's territory.

Nikolai had retired the other Alpha permanently and then *gently* and *politely* convinced the beta to consider a career change and relocation to Abzal. He'd been putting his energies into Nikolai's projects ever since.

From the way the doctor's gray and pink-streaked eyes were blinking fast, Nikolai was pretty sure the beta scientist was currently regretting that decision.

"It's not working." Nikolai got right to it. His words were so close to a growl he wondered if the guy would understand him.

“What exactly isn’t working?”

“The vision. Didn’t happen. Something is blocking it.”

“I see.”

He couldn’t see his omega with his back turned, but he could feel her gaze burning into his back, scent her curiosity.

He would have tossed her outside, but there was no way in hell his instinct would allow that. The Alpha in him roared in fury at the idea of being as separated from her as he was currently.

Hunching his shoulders over the screen as much as possible, he leaned in and spoke as low as he could. “Her eyes are still blue. The visions aren’t coming, but the damn fated-mate bond is working too well.”

“I see.”

“Say *I see* again, and you won’t anymore. Ever.”

The doc cleared his throat. “We knew it might take time.”

Nikolai didn’t wait. “No. Something is wrong.”

More slow blinking from the healer. “What exactly, Alpha Lord?”
Randallff’s gaze flickered over his shoulder. “She looks—”

“Don’t fucking look at her.”

The beta paled. “Of course, sir. I meant no disrespect. I’m simply trying to understand. What is your concern?”

Another snarl. “I don’t . . .” He pressed his nose closer to the screen and spoke through gritted teeth. “There’s some kind of block. And the throbbing in my wrist, gums, and dick won’t stop. I . . .” He shoved the words out, the admission like acid against his throat. “I can barely think. All I want to do is breed her.”

A brief silence. “Yes, my lord. That . . . that is to be expected.”

“I do not want to be affected.”

A longer silence.

“It is the bond, Alpha Lord,” the beta said at last. “It works both ways.”

Another low, angry growl.

His fingers itched to close around his favorite laser and start shooting. Which was unusual because while most crime family members carried pieces, Nikolai had always viewed them as more of a last resort. An Alpha’s body was itself a weapon, so reliance on an outside defense like a laser seemed like a lazy male’s strategy. He preferred a more hands-on approach when dealing with a problem.

But his desire to use a hands-on approach *was* the problem in this case.

“The deepening of the fated bond is necessary for what you want.” The doc’s measured voice pierced Nikolai’s thoughts.

He slammed his hand down. The screen cracked. Now, two slow blinking betas stared up at him. “What I want is for her to stop blocking her gift. What I want is for her to corroborate my witnesses’ stories. What I want is for her to provide the missing pieces about the fire and send that bastard Olan Lundin to his doom.” And he wanted so much fucking more too, but he kept the rest to himself.

“My lord, have you fucked your omega yet?”

“What do you think?” He roared—and then, at the low gasp behind him, modulated his voice to a lower decibel for some unknown reason. “I am trying to stay focused on using her gift, not her cunt.”

“I understand, Alpha Lord.” Randalff dragged a dusty tome forward and flipped to a well-worn page. “But according to one passage in the fated-mate research I discovered, the firing up of one might bring forth the other. Perhaps that will be enough to overcome the block.”

“What is he talking about?” The question came from behind, the pleasing sound of her voice rippling over his skin. Precum leaked from his dick.

They both moaned.

He willed himself to ignore her and her question.

He was usually in more control than this, but it had been fifteen fucking years.

“So, you’re saying fucking her might bring on the vision?” He had to be sure because that was exactly what he wanted to hear. Now. Immediately. “I thought the whole reason for keeping omegas untouched was to try and keep their gift around longer.”

“It is. But a fated-mate bond is said to be different. It shifts the dynamic between Alpha and omega.” There was another slight pause. “It might also alleviate your mood swings and help you to think more clearly. There is the chance too—”

Nikolai cut the line, his Alpha instincts a drumbeat in his brain, drowning out anything else.

He could let his instinct reign.

Years of waiting were finally over.

He whirled around—and barely dodged the heavy object headed straight for his temple.

“Resourceful, little omega.” She was still in mid swing—black sheets tucked around her like a sleeveless dress, hair a tangled halo around her spectacular face—when he seized her wrist and spun her around, twisting her hand so it pressed against her spine.

He’d always liked her spirit. Fifteen years ago, it had pleased him as much as her beauty and kindness. He was relieved to see time spent with her Lundin family hadn’t destroyed her backbone altogether. But that didn’t mean he intended to let her walk all over him.

He intended it to be very clear from the start who was in charge.

“Foolish, little omega.” He plucked the small marble globe of Abzal from her hand and tossed it over his shoulder onto the bed.

Then, he claimed the hand and, despite her puny attempt at resistance, easily added it to his hold, crossing it over her other wrist and securing them in one of his. “Do you know what I do whenever something blocks my way?”

He used his free hand to jerk the sheet from her body. “I ram through it. Hard.”

With a curse, she threw her head back, attempting to hit his nose. “I am not going to lay down and let you fuck me so you can use my gift to hurt my family.”

Her aggression triggered his own. His fangs dropped as the need to dominate surged through his blood like a raging river. He shoved his pants to his thighs, too far gone to take the time to remove them.

“Who said anything about laying down?” He licked her throat, savoring the wild flutter of her pulse against his tongue. “You’ll be bent over on all fours when I punish you for your disobedience, and you’ll be in the same position when I stick my cock inside you.”

“You think your threats scare me? Fuck you. You have no idea what I’ve endured.”

Her words didn’t sit well with him. Rage blazed hot and fast. But not at her defiance. No, that made him hard as hells. What bothered him was the idea of anyone hurting her. That same unfamiliar protectiveness that he’d only ever felt with his family surged to the fore.

A weakness to be sure, but one he couldn’t shake.

He’d wanted to tear Olan Lundin limb from limb for a very long time, but never more than he did at that moment picturing her having to endure pain at the hands of a brute three times her size.

Still, he could not afford to weaken. “You will speak to me with respect, omega.”

“My father demanded the same, and all it did was make me despise him more.”

He snarled. He didn’t like being compared to Olan in any way.

“Like him, you want something from me too much to actually kill me outright.” Anger sharpened her tone. “But unlike him, you don’t have something hanging over me to keep me in line.”

She was smarter than he’d realized. Or so she thought. “Your little sister,” he volunteered.

She stiffened, and he took pleasure in saying, “I know everything there is to know about you, little omega.” He didn’t wait for her answer but went for the jugular. “Do you really think your father is the only one who can get to Kaiya?”

His omega sucked down a shuddered breath.

“That’s right. I know how to pull each string so you dance just for *me* now.”

“You claim to know so much. Did you know I think you’re a bastard?”

He dropped to his knees, taking her with him.

She fell forward, her palms slapping the ground. Ass high in the air.

“You. Will. Learn. Respect.” Growling low, he covered her body with his, fisting her hair and tugging her neck upward so that her back arched. Presentation pose. Offering herself up like a good omega should.

“Don’t.” But she was already panting hard. Her hips pushed back into his cock despite her words of protest.

“That’s Alpha Lord bastard to you, omega.” He growled low once more. “I’m going to tear through every barricade in my way, little virgin. Soon enough you’ll learn that trying to block me out is a bad plan.”

She cursed and rocked back harder, her spine arching deeper as she lifted her ass higher. Presenting now all on her own. The instinct taking over.

The sight sent more precum leaking out. He liked her spirit. He liked her desperation to be fucked by him more.

He rubbed the swollen head of his cock against her tight, wet cunt.

The rut stole a little more of his control.

He was going to fuck that tight little hole. But first, he’d spank her ass pink and work her clit until she was crying, begging, and showing him the

respect he deserved. Until she apologized for whatever block she'd placed on her visions and dropped it immediately. Then, he'd ram inside and claim all that was his due.

He raised his hand—

“Alert! Alert!” The computerized voice echoed through the room. “Two unidentified class B ships closing in fast, cloaked and armed. Initiating tactical evasive maneuvers and combat response. Fasten restraints immediately.”

The ship lurched to the side.

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The blare of an alarm ripped Dahlia from her lust-induced haze. She tipped forward and to the side. The ground was coming up fast.

Except she never hit.

Powerful arms pulled her backward, slamming her into the hard rock of Skolov's body as he twisted into a roll and took her with him

He landed face side up, her on top. His huge cock dug into her ass.

Stunned, it took her a moment to find her voice. "What's happening?" She had to shout to be heard over the alarms.

"Your father, I suspect. He doesn't like to lose." Skolov sounded pissed, but not at all surprised.

They slid together across the floor, the other wall coming up fast.

Gods help her, the ache for his hands to be between her legs throbbed so bad that even fear and shock were not enough to staunch it. He truly was pulling her strings to make her dance for him.

But she had another worry to contend with first.

"Olan is trying to shoot us out of the sky?" She flailed outward, searching for purchase.

"No." Skolov caught the leg of the bolted-down desk with his palm, anchoring them in place. It was just in time as the shuttle tilted back in the other direction, and everything not pinned down slid back across the floor, slamming into the opposite wall. "Not us, only me. He wants me to know he's taking you back before his goons deliver him a picture of my severed head."

“How could you know that?”

“It’s what I’d do.” The ship rolled once more. “But he’s got to know it’s a suicide mission. No one is taking what belongs to me.”

“But the Brotherhood said not to retaliate against one another.”

“You think Olan cares about that? He’s spent years trying to kill me and mine.” He batted away a lamp headed straight for them. “Keep your head down.” He tucked her head beneath his free arm, shoving her nose into the crook of his elbow.

The potent scent of Alpha male and power filled her lungs, arrowing straight to her core. But what flared in her chest was more tantalizing. Warmth. Longing. Awe.

No one had ever protected her before.

This morning, she’d been stuck in the same four rooms for over 5,475 rotations. Outside of her clashes with her father, her schemes for escape, and the few times Olan had taken her out of her room, like a doll off the shelf, to be presented to his allies, nothing exciting ever occurred.

She hadn’t realized until this very moment that she’d been dying a slow death.

She hadn’t realized she’d been waiting for Nikolai Skolov to come back and wake her up.

Every nerve tingled. Every inch of her skin desperate for his touch.

A small faint voice in the back of her head whispered that this was the heat clouding her thinking.

But she felt too alive to care. Too treasured to mind.

Out of nowhere, a soft purr erupted from her. A sound she’d never made before in her life. The sensation and the emotion behind it were so wonderful it took her a moment to remember Nikolai Skolov wasn’t her savior at all.

“Two intruders,” announced the computer. “Entering through the airlock. Requesting permission to initiate vaporization.”

He could do that?

“Request denied.” The growl that issued from Skolov’s chest was so deadly it vibrated down to her toes and sent more slick pearling on her cunt. “Let. Them. Come.”

She pressed her thighs together and prayed he didn’t notice. “What? Why?”

Powerful arms flipped her over, bringing her face to face with full lips, elongated fangs, and fierce eyes the color of blood.

Panic and need slammed through her in equal measure.

Something had tripped him into full rut.

His nostrils flared wide. "I will rip them limb from limb. Then you will purr for me again and give me your gift and your body."

Every possessive word, coupled with a blast of testosterone and aggression, muddled her mind worse than before. "I-I didn't purr for you."

Or had she?

He inhaled deep. "You like my aggression."

"What? No."

His palms skimmed down her body, gripping her ass and jerking her upward so that she rubbed over his cock.

They moaned in unison.

"You. Like. It." Even in his rut, he was arrogant. "That pull is still there, even years later."

"N-no."

Crack. A slight sting radiated across her bottom. *Crack.* Another, this time on the other cheek.

She cried out. "Stop!"

"Punishment. For disobedience." *Crack.* "And your lies."

With each forceful spank, her ass throbbed with pain—and terrible heat. It traveled from her sore bottom to her pussy, her thighs so wet now she could feel them sliding open as she tried to keep them pressed tight.

"Tell me." *Crack.*

"Yes," she moaned. "You're right, Skolov. The omega in me likes your aggression."

"Mmmm." He licked the side of her neck, his big palm molding her ass cheek like clay, spreading the heat, working her arousal higher. "Good omega. Obedient omega." He breathed against her temple. "Mine." Another low growl rumbled from his chest. "You will call me Nikolai or Alpha when I am fucking you, omega."

Panting, she fought to stay lucid. Despite every effort, her body was responding to him, but she had no idea if whatever had been blocking her vision was weakening, too.

"The intruders have entered and are in hallway three," announced the computer.

In the next moment, she was lifted bridal style and set down on her feet. He jerked his pants to his hips.

“Stay.” He marched toward the door, knuckles cracking.

“Wait.” Her heart slammed in her throat. “I . . . I need a weapon.” It was worth a try.

His fangs flashed. “You have one.” He slammed his chest with his fist. It was such an Alpha declaration. Primitive. Primal. Entitled.

Her traitorous clit throbbed harder.

Then he was gone.

Now was her chance.

She had no idea how long whatever had blocked the last vision would remain, or if it would be there the next time.

She grabbed the sheet from the mess on the floor and, folding it high enough to clear her ankles, wrapped it around her and tucked the end between her cleavage.

It seemed to take forever.

Then, she was weeding through the wreckage, tossing disks and papers and pillows aside until she froze.

Yes!

She’d found it. The tool Skolov had used to pull Olan’s tracker from her. She’d need it to remove the one inside her as well as similar trackers from her mother and sister—and the tool was solid enough to slam at someone’s head if she got lucky enough to get a swing in.

Perfect. She yanked it from the heap and made her next plan. She’d head in the other direction than the one the Alpha had taken. She’d locate the emergency escape pod. All shuttles this high tech had one, maybe two.

If she left now and returned to the Lundin compound, she might be able to get to her sister, remove her tracker, and run before her father realized she was no longer in Skolov’s custody. She would figure out how to get to her mother later.

For the first time in forever, she actually had a real chance at getting her sister away from all this.

Energized, Dahlia started forward and then stifled a moan. Her body was so primed, so swollen and wet from Nikolai’s Alpha growl, even that bit of friction was torment.

She’d have to push through.

A roar sounded.

Skolov's call. Vicious and aggressive. Powerful. The call of the most powerful of Alphas.

The one most suited to breed her. Dominate her. Protect her.

Her knees shook, the instinct to drop and wait for him so strong it hurt to deny it.

She ached to be filled. Fucked.

Listing sideways, she clutched the edge of the desk. She shook her head as if she could shake off the effect.

Still, a voice inside whispered, *he's out there*. Fighting. Protecting. Muscles rippling. Fangs on display. Her Alpha. The fiercest of them all.

No. She could not succumb. She could not allow the heat to consume her. She had to escape.

She forced her feet forward.

Another roar. Louder. More commanding. The roar of the victor.

The need between her legs flared to an agonizing ache, and she was helpless to stop it. Lust colored everything red, stealing her vision and her thoughts.

The tool slipped from her grasp.

She dropped to her knees, palms pressing to the floor, as her back arched and she moaned out loud.

The heat had taken over.

Bathed in the blood of his enemies, Nikolai stomped back down the corridor. His nostrils flared, the sweet scent of his omega's cunt, primed and ready, a beacon he'd follow to the ends of the fucking universe.

He would rip apart anyone who tried to take her from him.

Those fools had died sooner than they should have, but the scent of her—more honeyed and richer than before—had pulled at him to return to her quickly.

Low growls rumbled from his chest. His fangs throbbed in time with his cock. His balls hung heavy and full, swinging with the clomp of each heavy boot-fall. His dick was so erect it dug into the laces of his pants, leaving a mark.

No more waiting. He would fuck her now. She would submit and stop blocking the visions. And she would purr for him.

That sound—one he hadn't known existed and had never heard before—was the most pleasant, erotic sound he'd ever heard. More soothing than the dulcet *plink* of coins sliding into his bank account as his wealth grew and grew. More gratifying than the cacophony of glittering elite voices who now fell over themselves to do him favors. More thrilling than the chant repeated over and over during the Brotherhood ritual of acceptance when he'd been finally admitted into their ranks.

That purring sound was addictive. He wanted to hear it again. Immediately.

Unease trickled at the edges of his consciousness, a voice that whispered he was supposed to care a lot more about drawing the visions from her than that sweet, sexy purring sound, but it disappeared like smoke the instant he stepped back into his room.

He threw back his head and roared.

A mound of black sheets and pillows was now in the middle of his floor like a nest—and in the center, positioned on her hands and knees, back arched, was his omega.

Presenting. For him.

Waiting. For him.

Nothing had ever felt so right.

He roared once more.

Heavy-lidded eyes rose to his. “Alpha.”

The single word was drenched in desperation.

He knew exactly what she needed. Because he needed it, too.

Ripping his laces wide, he took out his dick, gripping the stem as he ran his thumb over the red, swollen head, the vein running along the side thick and pulsing. Like the rest of him, his cock was huge—and hungry. It wanted in her now.

She whimpered with each one of his strokes; her gaze locked on the hand fisting his shaft, never wavering.

“Turn.” The word was a near guttural growl.

She mewled in protest, but immediately scrambled to obey. The pillows and sheets scattered as she hurried into position, legs spread wide and trembling.

He dropped to his knees behind her, still half-clothed, still stroking himself. Her bare ass and pretty pink slit made him throw back his head and roar once more.

She was fucking drenched.

He’d never seen anything more beautiful in his life. She was perfect. Made for him.

The urge to ram inside was a drumbeat in his brain, the Alpha instinct primal and all-encompassing.

But there was a new instinct that overrode even that. One forged by the fated-mate bond and driven home by the throbbing golden bands at his wrists. The fundamental primal urge to please his omega. To ensure she was as wet and wanting as he. To give her so much pleasure that she was always

desperate and ready to give herself to him, not out of a compulsion to obey, but because it was what she wanted. Craved. Needed.

As much as he needed to hear that intoxicating purr of hers that was just for him.

“On your elbows. Forehead to the ground.”

She complied immediately, gorgeous tits swinging as they brushed the silk black sheet beneath her, and her nipples hardened further.

“Good girl.” He let go of his cock, leaving it to bob between her inviting ass cheeks and palmed a lush globe still slightly red from where he’d punished her earlier.

She cried out. Spread her legs wider. “Fuck me, Alpha. I need it now.”

Crack.

“I make the demands.” He kneaded her sweet flesh, reactivating the heat, reminding her who was always in charge.

“Yes, Alpha.” The force of his handling rocked her forward, but she hurried back into position.

“Good omega.”

She sighed at the praise, but she did not purr.

He wanted that fucking purr.

He slid his hands up her body, reveling in the curve of hips and the narrow tuck of her waist before he slid his hands to her ribs and then, slipping between the floor and her breasts, he toyed with her nipples, thumbing the sensitive areolas until she was pressing harder into his palms, her back arching as her hips rocked.

Slick drenched her and he could see her sweet little pussy hole opening and closing as small contractions pushed the slick from her, hungry to be filled.

But still no purr.

He buried his nose in her cunt and licked.

Fuck yes, her taste was sweeter than the purest crystal ice pools at the top of Abzal’s highest peaks.

“Yes, Alpha!” She pressed back hard.

He tapped the side of her breast with the flat of his palm and growled low.

She stilled.

With an approving growl, he devoured her once more, using the flat of his tongue to work her clit. Lick after lick. Wiping away any other scent

while he filled her with his own taste and saliva. Working her higher until . . . she came all over his tongue, her body shuddering as she screamed his name.

One fist gripped her hair to hold her in place while he used a single thick finger on his other to penetrate her tight hole.

The discovery of the thin membrane filled him with both pleasure and fury. A faint voice whispered that he was being irrational, that he'd already known she was untouched, but he was too far gone into instinct to care. It pleased him to know he would be the first and only to have her cunt. But he was also maddened by the notion that something as thin and insignificant as a membrane tried to keep him from what was his.

He wanted it gone. He wanted no more blocks between them. He wanted in her now.

Finger still working her clit, he rose over her once more. "Spread your legs wider, omega."

Panting, she did as commanded.

He lined up his cock with her pink slit. "Say it," he growled.

"P-please."

He snarled. "Say it all, omega."

"I need to be fucked and marked," she wailed. "Please, Alpha, I need you."

I need you.

It wasn't the purr, but it was the second best sound he'd heard.

He rammed inside.

She cried out.

He stilled, using his grip on her hair to keep her in place.

He'd felt the tear as if it was in his own chest.

"Shhh," he nuzzled the back of her sweat-drenched neck with his nose, licked at her delicious skin. "Good, little omega," he growled. "So tight. So wet." He dragged the tips of his fangs across the curve where her shoulder met her neck while his free hand toyed with her clit, strumming the swollen nub between his thick fingers. One obstacle between them torn down. "Pleasing her Alpha so well."

She cried out again, but this time there was no pain, only need.

Exactly the signal he'd been waiting for.

He worked himself in deeper. Her slick coated his dick, easing his way.

She sighed, moaned. Arching her back and raising her ass higher to take more of him. "Yes, Alpha, yes."

The sound of her submission, her pleasure, sparked his higher.

He pushed all the way inside, bottoming out as the hair at his groin pressed to her ass.

She was his.

He roared once more and drew nearly all the way out. Thrust back in hard. Fell into a rhythm.

She wriggled beneath him, clawing at the bedding nest, not to get away, but to work him deeper inside her. Like a good omega should.

He rammed himself harder. Deeper.

She matched him every step of the way. Her hips lifting in time with his, each smack of his balls against her ass making her moan while he snarled and roared.

This was better than he could have ever imagined. And he had imagined plenty.

Every time he'd taken another omega, he'd imagined it was her.

Every time he'd used his own hand, he'd imagined it was her pussy he was invading, pounding, claiming.

And yet, no imagining was as good as the real thing.

His balls drew up tight while her sheath gripped him tighter and tighter.

"Alpha, please. Mark me. I need it now. P-please."

That was all it took.

Pulling her to her knees, he sunk his fangs into the crook of her neck while his cock hammered deeper inside her and his thumb worked her clit hard and fast.

She screamed, twitching in his hold, pinned in place by his cock and fangs. Owned. Marked. Claimed.

She came again, her body convulsing while her pussy squeezed him tighter than a fist, and wave after wave of contractions slammed through them both, their hips thrusting in tandem as he laved at the bite wound with his tongue and filled her with his seed. Her pleasure his, his need her own. Blood, saliva, cum, and sweat mixed and fused them as one.

The pleasure went on and on. More intense than anything he'd experienced before.

He was still gripping her hard when the last of his orgasm ended and the knot at the base of his dick swelled, stuffing her tight sheath full of cock

and locking them together as the final stage of the claiming occurred.

She whimpered.

“Take it, omega. We’ve got years to make up for.” He sucked harder at the bite mark, pleased it was already beginning to close. Even more pleased at the new wave of slick that wet his dick as she responded to his command and the pleasure of his mouth on her skin.

“Yes, Alpha. So good.”

His chest expanded, the praise in her tone pleasing him greatly. Her obvious trust as she went limp against him equally agreeable.

The urge to take care of his omega was stronger now.

He nuzzled her neck, playing with her pussy while he threaded his other hand with hers and lifted their intertwined palms for a better look. Golden bands, thick and easily visible, encircled her wrists and her throat. It was proof of the claiming and that it was one driven by the rare fated-mate bond.

“Dahlia.” Her name rolled easily off his tongue. “Mine. Now and forever.”

“Nikolai.” A soft sigh and then, there it was . . . the purr.

Light and delicate, ephemeral as a snowflake on his palm, and yet as beautiful and searing as ice against his skin.

The sweetness of it burned the inside of his chest. He’d spent his whole life striving for power and watching his successes add up like steps on a ladder—one that would lead him to her—but he’d never felt as if he’d achieved anything as important as he had at this moment.

His knot expanded.

She purred once more. A sound of sweet contentment.

He held her closer.

Energy crackled against his skin, a live current that rushed between her flesh and his, raising the hairs on his body as a familiar rush of violent white heat slammed through not just his fangs and cock, but his every cell.

Though he couldn’t see from his position, he was one hundred percent certain his omega’s gorgeous blue eyes were bleeding to black.

Her gift had returned. The block torn through as easily as the membrane that had kept him from her cunt.

The images crashed into him, invading his mind as they solidified in the air above his head.

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“I don’t like it here.”

“I told you to stay in the hideout with Maxheim and the others, but you insisted on coming along. Now you’re stuck with me until I say it’s time to go.” Tugging at his little brother Damien’s hand, Nikolai dragged him through the ash and wreckage.

Truth be told, he didn’t like it here, either. Every step deeper into the burnt, hollowed-out outpost reminded him of the horror of that rotation. Of the sightless eyes and twisted, melting flesh that had once been Naytalia. Of the flames devouring the cradle that had housed little Zaya and Mikhail. Of how he’d woken himself, his eyes blurred, his head throbbing, the blaze eating at his skin. Somehow, barely alive, he’d managed to stagger from the corridor and throw himself through a window—right before the whole place exploded into a giant fireball.

He saw it all enough in his nightmares.

But there was no space for weakness in his life.

The others were counting on him, even Zaya and Mikhail.

He did not intend to let them down.

“I don’t want to be with them. I-I want to be with you.” Damien’s voice was tiny and scared. “No matter what.”

The heaviness in Nikolai’s chest increased. Damien had once been fearless—harder to corral than the twins—but now he clung as if terrified his older brother would disappear too.

Nikolai slung his arm—still pink in patches from the healing burns—around his brother’s smaller shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here with me.

There's no one braver than you, Damien."

He kept his voice low as he led his brother forward and scanned the ground. Coming back was a big risk. At the moment, Olan thought he was dead. A lucky break since it gave Nikolai some breathing room.

But he wouldn't stay dead forever. News of the Skolov boy who'd made it out of the fire was spreading among Abzalian inhabitants. Some snitch would pass it along to Olan, and the Alpha crime boss would come after him to ensure all loose ends connected to the Skolovs were tied up tight.

But by then, Nikolai and his family would be long gone.

This was his final stop before he took them into the polar mountains where only the hardest survived, and Olan and his goons would be too afraid to follow.

They should already be on their way, but he'd had to come.

He'd promised Zaya and Mikhail justice and intended to deliver.

"Give me a few more minutes to look around," he told his brother, kicking at a large pile of ash. "I want to see if we can find anything useful before we go."

Something solid thudded beneath his boot.

"What's that?" Already quicker than the rest of them, Damien squatted and, rooting around, held up a small, bluish-black lump.

Nikolai's chest squeezed. "That's Naytalia's ring. I remember the sapphire. The Kuril head gave it to her recently. It made her happy."

Damien's eyes lit up. "We can sell it. Get some more food for the trip."

Nikolai snatched it from him. "We'll see." Thanks to the Lundin omega girl, he already had a nice nest egg to fall back on. Except it felt wrong to sell any of it.

And that felt even more wrong. Her father had killed his family. He should want nothing more to do with her.

"I don't see anything else." Damien paused. "Wait. What's that?" He bounded across the space, his usual fearlessness returning. Plunging his fingers into another pile of ash, he scooped up a glob of dark, twisted metal that looked like it had once been a perfectly formed circle.

The sight of it stole Nikolai's breath. "Bring it here."

Damien's gaze was wary as he slapped it into Nikolai's hand. His brother had heard the grief he couldn't quite hide.

Fucking weakness. He'd have to cut it out of himself if was going to be the leader his family needed.

*Nikolai willed his voice to steady. “It looks like Zaya’s teething ring.”
His little sister had loved to slobber all over that thing.*

Damien’s face twisted as if he might cry.

Nikolai understood.

*This was exactly the kind of object he’d been looking for, and yet . . . it
drove home the truth. Neither Zaya nor Mikhail would ever use it again.
They were gone.*

*The blackened edges of the teething ring dug into his palm. “Time to
go.”*

It was time to plot and plan and grow strong.

*Then, he was coming back and burning to ash every single dream Olan
Lundin and his family ever had. Like they’d done to his flesh and blood.*



NIKOLAI SUCKED DOWN A HARSH BREATH. The omega’s block slammed into him, extinguishing the vision from his mind and the air above.

He tumbled back into the present as if he’d fallen through time and hit the ground hard. Except he hadn’t moved at all.

He was still on the floor of his private shuttle, in a nest of sheets and pillows, his arms wrapped tight around the omega, her back to his front, his dick knotted deep inside her.

Rage filled him—and not just because she’d somehow gotten her block to return and end the visions. Once again, she’d seen his pain and doubts.

“Nikolai, I am sorry.” Her voice was soft and kind.

It stung worse than any cruelty.

“When I’m not fucking you, my title is Alpha, omega—and I don’t need your pity.” That was the *last* thing he wanted from her. “I need your gift to show me what happened the rotation of the fire. I don’t need to revisit any of this other shit.”

She stiffened. “I don’t know how the vision came on in the first place, much less what stopped it.”

She tugged at his arms, trying to squirm away—only to grind against him, her cunt gripping his cock harder.

The knot swelled tight.

He growled.

She moaned.

Hells, the lust between them was explosive, stronger even than their animosity and the taint of that last vision.

The heat would pull them under soon enough.

Another vision would surely follow. This time he needed to be better prepared.

Fighting the descent into rut, he lifted her with him as he sat up. He scooted backward, dragging her toward the desk. Each movement sent his cock channeling deeper inside her.

“What are you doing? Let me go.” She was fighting the lust, but she was panting hard.

And barely lucid. If she had been more clear-headed, she’d remember there was no letting her go. Not while the knot locked them together.

“You will have another vision.” Reaching his destination, he slammed his palm against the drawer and unlocked it, pulling Zaya’s melted teething ring from inside. He had no idea if holding an item connected to the fire would help focus her gift, but it was worth a try.

He forced it into the omega’s hand and wrapped her fingers around it.

“Hold this and make it happen.” After what she’d seen—his doubts, his fears, his weaknesses—he felt driven to prove he wasn’t that scared, pathetic boy anymore. He was a Brotherhood head. He’d risen from the fucking ashes to become his own deadly fire. He was worthy of her respect, and so much more.

She struggled against his hold. “I can’t just make it happen.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both!”

Even now, she defied him. Kept herself from him.

He leaned forward, sank his fangs back into the place he’d already marked.

She whimpered, but her struggles lessened.

He growled low and deep, the Alpha call.

“N-no.” She moaned, but the husky, needy tone was already returning to her voice, her body going soft and pliant as the bond deepened and the heat pulled her under once more, her omega instincts rising to the fore.

But she was not the only one affected.

His need rose too, and with it, other urges as well. Urges that whispered that she was unhappy, and he needed to fix it. That fucking her, tasting her,

pleasuring her, and hearing that purr were more important than anything else.

He fought it. His family was counting on him. Their fates, and that of his omega, depended upon him seeing his plans to fruition. He could not afford to be weak. He had to control the bond and his omega. He could not allow it to be the other way around.

Weakness now would only get them all killed.

Still, his tongue laved over the puncture marks, healing them as fast as he could. "You are a Skolov now, omega. You will be loyal to me."

She sighed, rocking on his cock.

His control slipped another notch. His lucidity too.

He could feel the rut taking him.

"Give me the vision," he commanded. "Drop the block. Submit, as you were always meant to do."

Nothing.

"Purr."

Silence.

She was more disobedient than he'd realized. Even lost in the heat, she refused to submit.

Guiding her back to her knees, he then forced her flat to the ground, following her down with his big body, his knot still lodged deep inside her cunt.

Slap. Slap. He spanked both cheeks. "No defiance."

She hissed and tried to scramble away, but the knot held her fast.

He rolled to the side and took her with him, ensuring that her bottom was pressed tight to his hips, slinging her leg over his thick thigh so she was open to his touch.

Slap. This time he spanked her wet cunt.

She cried out.

He held fast. Her body was his to command.

But hells, disciplining her was fucking with him as well. Stealing the last of his control. His thoughts drifted away as pure, primal need subsumed everything else.

"Vision." He stroked her folds, feather-light touches, gratified when she whined, her hips lifting toward his hands. "Or be punished."

She whimpered and tried to close her legs.

He held them open. “Obey!” He worked her clit once more. “Purr. Then vision. Now!”

Nothing.

He stopped playing with her cunt. Gave it a light slap. “Bad omega.”

She arched into his touch, her body shuddering as she came hard, but she did not comply. The block remained.

She was holding out on him, keeping him at bay. When all he wanted, all he craved, was for her to let him in.

With a roar, he raised his hand again.

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“Alpha Lord!”

The pounding woke Dahlia. She stretched and then gasped, absorbing the one-two punch as she registered two things at once. First, a thick, veined forearm was around her waist, pinning her to a hard wall of flesh at her back. Second, every muscle in her body screamed at her, aching as if she'd been battered in a rock storm, or fought and lost to a predator five times her size.

Which she had.

“Nikolai, your family is growing concerned,” came a second muffled voice.

“Fuck off!”

The deep, thunderous growl at her back drove home her reality with humiliating clarity.

She hadn't gotten away at all.

Instead, she was still here, in Skolov's bedroom aboard his sleek, expensive shuttle, lying on the ground, cocooned in a nest of torn sheets and pillows that reeked of cum and sweat.

Rather than escaping, she'd succumbed to the heat.

Unable to fight it, she'd ended up embracing it, begging her enemy to fuck her. Spreading her legs, presenting, coming all over his hands, cock, and tongue. Docilely accepting his knot. All while, he punished her, spanking her ass and cunt until she came like that, too. So. Many. Times.

The whole cycle was a terrible blur of indescribable pleasure and unbearable shame, of hunger and desperation like she'd never known.

In the midst of all that—and even more indefensible—she’d given him a vision.

A vivid glimpse of the past that had almost torn her apart. The image of the brave, cocky boy Skolov had once been was so familiar and bittersweet.

What’s more, he’d been right.

She did still have the ability to recall past events and project them into the present.

She’d assumed the loss of her gift was the natural but inevitable cost of aging into omega adulthood. She’d never dreamed the Alpha himself might be the key to its reactivation.

Her parents had taken her to a thousand omega medical experts and not one had suggested such a thing, but somehow Skolov had barreled right through her block with his cock and his fangs and drawn the gift back out of her.

As far as she could recall, the vision had come while she’d been lost to the omega heat, reveling in the exquisite pleasure of him stroking her while the bonds at her wrists and throat pulsed with contentment. Then he’d whispered her name.

Her name. Not omega. Or girl.

The unfamiliar experience had sparked such a sense of joy, she’d purred—and, like that, the barrier she hadn’t known was inside her thinned and weakened. The black hole that swirled inside her chest shifted direction so that it shot light outward instead of pulling it in. That was all it had taken. The energy of the Alpha’s touch had rushed through her. The vision had come.

For those brief few heartbeats, the power crackling against her skin had been addictive and sweet.

She was no longer broken. She was stronger than she’d ever believed. She had worth.

The sensation was astonishing. It was wonderful.

For the sake of her mother and sister, she could never allow it to happen again.

“I see we will have to add lack of attention to your transgressions, omega.” The Alpha’s commanding voice brought her back to the present. “It’s almost as if you like being punished.”

“You are nothing like the boy you once were.”

“You’re right.” The tips of his fangs pressed against the curve of her neck, not puncturing, just holding her in place. A warning. “He wasn’t strong enough to keep those under his protection alive and do what needed to be done. But I am. So, you will make that sweet purring sound again. You will stop being disobedient and give me another vision.” His thick fingers prodded her bottom, his thumb sliding over her rosebud. “Otherwise, we will see if you become more compliant after I fuck and knot a different hole.”

She stiffened, not sure which terrified her more: his suggestion that he intended to take her ass or the reminder that he’d marked her.

Had this helped bring about her vision as well? Either way, it spelled her doom since his bite was another critical form of Alpha claiming, and one step closer to solidifying the bond between them.

Already the markings on her wrists were thicker, the circle almost closed, making them look more like manacles. Ones she’d never be able to cast off if she didn’t escape soon.

“It’s been four fucking rotations, Nikolai,” shouted a different Alpha male. “The casino registered its first dip in overall profits in ten years.”

“What in the hells? Four rotations!” The haze of his rut clearing, Skolov jackknifed off the bed, and she got her first look at him without clothes.

Apparently, at some point, they’d stopped fucking long enough for him to take his pants and boots off.

At the sight before her, her womb clenched despite herself.

He was too beautiful a male specimen for any female’s sanity.

Messy, wavy dark hair fell into his gorgeous amber eyes—still tinged with the last bits of the red that signaled the rut—while a heavy five o’clock shadow clung to his square jaw and framed his full lips. And his body . . . heavens help her. He’d swung toward the door, hands on hips, legs spread wide, giving her a perfect profile view.

He’d been beautiful as a boy. He was sheer mouthwatering perfection as a man. There was not an ounce of fat on him, every part chiseled red rock. The skin designs that swirled across his skin and the scattering of scars and burn marks, as well as the long thin white lines on his back, only added to his menacing power. It was impossible not to notice the dips and valleys of his massive chest or the defined abs that led to a carved V and pointed the way to sculpted thighs, a tight, round ass, and a huge, swollen, ridged cock.

She could not believe he’d fit that monster inside her.

No wonder she was so sore.

“Down in profits!” Uncaring about his nudity, he was still glaring at the door. An exit was barricaded by a platform bed and desk she was fairly certain had both been bolted to the floor four rotations ago. “What the fuck, Maxheim?”

The memory of Skolov’s face buried between her thighs, lapping at her like a starving male, flashed through her mind, answering the question of why her inner thighs felt like she’d rubbed sandpaper against them. It was followed quickly by a slideshow of other images, all cascading down like an avalanche. Her on top, bouncing on his cock while he lifted her up and down and she bared her throat and screamed at him to bite her again. Her on her knees, cheeks hollowing while she sucked on his cock and licked him clean as if he were her favorite dessert. Her on her back, legs spread wide apart, ankles held in his grip while he pounded into her and she cried for more. Him hurling the desk at the door before bending her over it and taking her as she howled in pleasure.

She’d given him her body as easily as she had her gift.

Had she had more visions without remembering? She would die if she discovered that she’d betrayed her family while lost in the haze.

She cut off any more remembering before she grew sick—or the moisture between her thighs increased.

Even now, knowing the stakes, the omega in her wanted to do it all again. She could feel her body warming to the idea. *No, no, no.*

“I left you in charge.” Skolov was still yelling through the door as he grabbed his pants and shoved one foot, then the other, through. “If I—”

He cut short his own tirade, the laces of his pants still undone, as his nostrils flared wide and his gaze shifted from the door to her.

Oh, no. She shoved to her knees.

He growled low, his eyes bleeding from amber to red. He stalked toward her. “Omega.”

He’d scented her arousal, and it had kicked him back into rut.

Her skin heated in response, her body going soft and ready. “Alpha.” It was pure invitation. His rut sparking her own.

“Do not think it. Either of you.” The controlled Alpha voice rumbled through the door once more. “Profits, Nikolai. Down, remember? And we’ve got Lundin’s people on our ass, the Brotherhood demanding the

proof you told them you'd get, and a meeting about an arms shipment with a buyer who only deals with you."

Nikolai's lips curled into a dangerous snarl, but the red disappeared from his eyes. "Fuck." He shook his head as if trying to shake off the effects of the rut and backed away slowly, taking short shallow breaths that she might have found amusing if she wasn't caught in the same trap herself.

He stalked to one of the windows and, with the press of a few buttons on the panel, the window slid open a crack. Not enough for her to slide through, but enough to let some cool, fresh air into the room, counteracting the pheromones inside.

Instantly, her head cleared, her thoughts less sex-focused.

She sucked down one deep breath after another.

"Did you get what you needed from the omega?" It was the same composed voice. The one Nikolai had called Maxheim.

Her father had raged about Maxheim and the other Skolov brothers, so she knew a fair amount about each. Honestly, she wasn't sure who terrified and angered Olan more.

All four males were rumored to be ruthless bastards, but whereas the eldest Alpha's reputation was based on simmering rage, bold, reckless ideas that somehow worked, and the blunt in-your-face dealings of a warrior, the other Skolov brothers had very different reputations.

Maxheim was the crime family's second-in-command, the underboss, the savage prince next in line to the Skolov family throne. Everyone called him the fixer because, according to her father's rants, he was the one who cleaned up the other Skolovs' messes. Duty and family were said to be everything to him. To get to Nikolai, you had to get by him first—and little did. He was said to be meticulous, merciless, and deceptive in his dealings, and as emotionless and icy cold as the Skolov birthplace.

Next in line was Alexi Skolov, the notorious playboy of the family, a beautiful brute who liked money, speed, and danger. His title was capo, but he focused more on the glitz and glamor side of the syndicate business. It was his job to charm the patrons, bring in revenue, set up the marks, and keep profits rolling in. His prowess with beta and omega females was legendary.

The fourth brother, Damien Skolov, was known as the enforcer. People usually preferred to whisper his name. Like Alexi, he held the title of capo, but he handled the darker side of the family business. He was in charge of

security, collections, and he also ran the army of soldiers who served as the lethal arm of the Skolov family. If, as an outsider, you had to deal with him or his men, you were already in big trouble.

There was a sister too, but little was known about her.

Of course, all the Skolov brothers were rumored to be beautiful as well as brutal, but right now they all sounded to her like a bunch of over-grown, growly, irritated Alphas.

“No.” Nikolai’s low, angry growl snapped her from her thoughts. At first, she thought he was somehow objecting to her opinions about his brothers until she played the conversation back in her mind and realized Maxheim had asked the Alpha boss if he’d gotten what he’d needed from her.

No. Relief slammed through her.

The sensation was so strong it knocked her back on her heels. She hadn’t hurt the only people in this universe she loved.

“Shit.” A chorus of furious growls issued from the other side of the door.

“But it wasn’t a total loss. She did have a vision.” Skolov spoke to the other Alphas as if she wasn’t there while he shoved his big feet into his boots and laced them up. “After I fucked and claimed her. Dr. Randalff was right.”

Her face heated as the others grunted their approval.

She hated them all.

“It just wasn’t the one I wanted,” Nikolai admitted. “No matter how much I fucked her after, I could not draw another vision from her. Somehow, she’s blocking it from happening again.” His jaw clenched as his gaze fell to the lump of melted gold that had once been one of the twin’s teething rings. It was tucked within the folds of the sheet, likely forgotten during the madness of the rutting. “But I will. She is *my* omega, after all. No one refuses me for long.”

There was a brief silence as if no one on the other side was quite sure what to say.

But the respite was soon broken.

“You lucky bastard. Trying sure as hells can’t be a hardship. She smells fucking delicious,” said one of his brothers. “Is she as gorgeous as her pictures?”

“Quiet, Alexi, you fool. Don’t you recognize an Alpha slipping in and out of rut?” Maxheim’s warning was nearly drowned out by the menacing growls issuing from the Alpha on her side of the door.

Suddenly, she had a good idea why no one had tried hard to remove the desk barricade.

“No need to go all growly, brother,” shouted Alexi. “I’m just looking forward to welcoming your new omega to the family properly. Maybe we can all help her with those visions.”

Unrepentant, Alexi seemed to enjoy baiting his older brother, at least through a thick steel door.

“Might as well feel something,” Alexi finished, “before our sins catch up with us and we get to burn right alongside all the rest of the Skolovs.”

Nikolai’s head snapped back as if he’d been punched, his gaze narrowing as he snarled—and for once, it wasn’t directed at her.

The response on the other side of the door was more immediate. “Alexi, you fucked-up bastard!” The fourth voice was far deeper than it had once been, but she still recognized it from the vision: Damien, the scared little boy who’d grown into one of the most dangerous males in the galaxy, and right now he was clearly furious with his brother. “You don’t deserve to mention them.”

There was a crash. The door shook as if a body had been hurled against it. Then snarls and snaps. Another harder crash shook the door and the walls of the room.

“Get the fuck off me, Damien,” roared Alexi. All seductive teasing had been stripped from his tone, leaving only deadly aggression behind. “Try those bullshit assassin moves on me and I’ll rip you to pieces.”

“Bring it, you worthless fuck.”

She clutched the sheet and scurried back on her knees, her gaze flickering to the Alpha in the room with her.

She expected him to be tearing at the wall, frothing at the idea of joining the aggression.

Instead, he looked tired, his hand plowing through his hair as his frown deepened and he breathed slow and deep.

For a stupid, insane heartbeat, she almost wanted to comfort him.

“Maxheim!” His furious roar slapped that idea from her mind.

“Yes, brother.” It was hard to hear over all the snarling, but the second eldest Skolov had obviously come close to the door. His voice was cool as

ever, despite the battle raging on his side.

“Get Alexi and Damien under control and then get them the fuck out of here.”

“The omega’s scent is making them even more . . . *aggressive* than usual.”

“Great.” This time Nikolai’s glare was all for her.

She glared right back.

More crashes. A shout cut off. Several loud grunts. The smack of flesh against flesh.

Then, silence.

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

“Done.” Maxheim sounded as if he’d finished writing up a contract rather than wrestling two grown Alphas under control and hauling them away. That someone like him was subordinate to Nikolai Skolov made her even less optimistic about her chances for resistance and escape against such an adversary.

But that didn’t mean she was giving up.

As subtly as possible, she shoved her hand beneath all the wreckage littered on the floor and searched for the tracker remover.

“Get Randalff and tell him to meet me in my office in ten.” Nikolai was again barking orders. “Tell him to have some answers for me. I want to know how to ram through this block of hers once and for all.”

While he spoke, her hand closed around the tool’s metal handle. She dragged it beneath the sheet and wrapped it tight to her body, winding the fabric beneath her arms and over one shoulder like a toga, effectively camouflaging her contraband.

“Will do. What do you plan to do with the omega?” Maxheim’s question caught her off guard and made her heart beat fast. “Should I prepare the planned welcome?”

The narrowed gaze of the Skolov crime boss swung back to her.

She swallowed hard. “I’m not going out there.” She could only imagine what she looked like wrapped in a black sheet stained with cum and sweat, her hair a wild tangled mess, five o’clock shadow burn on her chest, while her mouth was swollen and her body was covered with faint fingermark bruises and bite marks.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion.” He stalked toward her, stopping only long enough to grab the melted teething ring.

She scrambled back, her spine hitting the wall. “I didn’t ask to become your property. I-I won’t give you any more visions, and I won’t be shared.” She knew exactly how her father had treated his mother, and she had no interest in being “welcomed” to the family in such a fashion. Surviving being fucked and knotted by one Skolov male was enough.

He loomed above her in the next heartbeat, his big arms closed around her shoulders, his eyes still amber but no less fierce. “No one ever touches you but me.”

Despite herself, she softened, relief mixing with arousal as his possessive aggression had its usual effect. “Then what does your brother mean by welcome?”

Nikolai’s scowl deepened. “My brothers thought it would be nice to give you a traditional omega dinner for joining the family. But that honor is only for obedient omegas.” He shoved his hand down her sheet dress and plucked the tracker remover out. With a growl, he threw it against the wall. It shattered into several pieces.

She sucked down a shocked breath.

He shoved his face into hers. “And you are definitely not that.”

“Nikolai?” His brother’s voice echoed once more from outside. “Everything all right? I didn’t catch your response about the omega.”

Her Alpha’s predatory gaze locked with hers. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle her myself.”

He hauled her over his shoulder.

Nikolai stormed through the hangar, still bare-chested with the laces of his pants undone, and slammed his palm against the scanner of his private elevator, the beauty of his home lost on him for once as the omega over his shoulder, wearing nothing more than a thin sheet as a dress, hissed insults and did her best to squirm from his grasp.

Normally, he took pleasure in what he'd accomplished. Abzal was far from the backwater post it had once been. Through blood, sweat, and tears—his sweat, others' blood and tears—he'd turned the former ice land into one of the most glamorous travel destinations in the galaxy, filled with luxury resorts and casinos built of composite ice, glass, and crystal that glittered finer than any *vralish* gem. No fucking wood in the whole damn place. He'd made sure of that. Plus, the composite ice meant the structure was sturdy but not as frigid as ice alone would have been, making it habitable for tourists as well as Abzalians.

The insides were equally grand, with huge crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, composite ice sculptures and sparkling gems carved into the walls, and opulent furs draped over elaborately decorated tables and chairs. It was beauty and decadence combined, and a far cry from the broken sewage pipe where he and his family had taken refuge in order to survive.

Even better, atop the entire glittering city, looking down on it all, was the family's private compound. Built into the largest of all the majestic ice-covered mountains in the vicinity, the composite ice palace had its own

security, private elevators, medical center, three hangars, food sources, and a staff as big as the entirety of those employed in the resorts below.

The compound was so big it housed many of the soldiers and servants that made up the core of the Skolov crime family.

Nikolai had a long memory, and he took care of every single one of the planet inhabitants that had helped him and his family rise to the top.

As for those who'd gotten in the way, most were buried deep under the icy ground—after a stay in the less luxurious cells beneath his home.

The dungeons were where he and his men took care of the less glamorous side of their business.

It was also where he was determined to break one tiny, defiant omega who refused to follow his commands, denied him her visions, and stole tracker removers when she thought no one was looking.

This was not exactly how he'd imagined this reunion going, but he was nothing if not flexible. He'd had to be to get where he was.

This was one battle he could not afford to let the omega win, for all their sakes.

The elevator door pinged, and the doors slid open at the lowest underground level.

Even he, who was used to Abzal's temperature, shivered. Down here there was no temperature regulation. Or composite material. Just ice. And the dark.

"Where are you taking me?"

The fear in the omega's voice had him slowing his pace.

Fuck. He didn't like her fear.

The urge to comfort her rode him almost as hard as the urge to fuck her.

He didn't recall much about the rut, but his cock remembered all too well. Permanently erect and throbbing, it was ravenous to be inside her again. To hear those sweet sounds she made. Feel the silk of her skin against his.

Fuck. Control was everything to him. Control was how he'd survived.

He could not afford to lose it now. He could not afford for her to make him weak.

Breathing deep, he fought off the rut.

Damn Dr. Randalff. He'd suggested fucking the omega might help him think better. Instead, it was harder for him to think at all. All he wanted was

to throw her to the ground, spread her legs wide, and do whatever it took to hear that damn purr of hers again.

He didn't know why the sound affected him, but when that soft contented hum vibrated from her to him, it sounded like nothing else in his whole life. He felt better, stronger, cleaner than the male he knew himself to be.

It also made him rabid to protect her. Comfort her. It had him wanting to spend every moment of every rotation fucking her as she screamed his name, clawed his back, and melted against him while her body shook with pleasure.

But those idiotic urges would not get him any closer to his goal.

He needed to activate her damn visions.

He needed her to tell him and everyone else, especially the Brotherhood, what had happened the rotation of the fire.

"What is this place?"

This time, bolstered by the remembrance of his ultimate goal, neither the fear in her voice or the chattering of her teeth bothered him.

Sort of.

Pushing the cell door open, he strode inside and set her down.

The fact that her toes curled, and she hissed, hopping from foot to foot as the ice seared her soles, didn't bother him either.

With a growl, he spun around and grabbed a fur blanket from the now vacant guard's station. No way was he having any other males anywhere in her vicinity when he wasn't around, even if they were his own men. He was back before she'd made it to the thick bars of composite ice and crystal that lined the cell, a hundred times stronger than solid steel.

Barring the door, he tossed the fur at her. She caught it with icy fingers and immediately wrapped it around herself, overtop the sheet.

"You will remain here until you decide to be more obedient."

Cocooned in the snowy fur, she glared up at him. "Then I will be here a very long time."

"We will see." Stalking forward, he rubbed his thumb over her trembling lips. "Lundin skin is fragile compared to my people. You don't do well with this kind of cold." She shivered as if to prove his point. "You won't be able to bear it long. Few do." He took a step back. "By the time my meeting is done, I predict my newest dungeon guest will have seen the

error of her ways and decided to rid herself of whatever that block is and behave as a proper omega should toward her Alpha.”

He grabbed her hand and slid the teething ring into her hold.

She tried to shake him off, but it was undercut by the huge shudder that wracked through her.

He stifled a growl. “When I return, I will take you to a warm cozy room in your new home and you will bow at my feet, present, and be ready and willing to try for another vision.”

“I won’t.”

She’d only grown more defiant over the years.

But she would soon be hungry and thirsty, too.

The madness of the heat slowed down other bodily functions, but once the haze dissipated, all other urges would return with a vengeance.

He was already ravenous enough to eat an entire wolverbear himself, and those beasts were huge. Her growing hunger should help her become more malleable too.

There was the issue of her soreness as well.

She’d been a virgin, and he’d used her tight little hole hard.

But that’s what omegas were made for. And hadn’t he already told Lundin he was no one’s Alpha bitch?

He could not afford to weaken. Especially before the spawn of his enemy.

Her discomfort was exactly what he was after.

The more miserable she was, the faster she would break. Once broken, she’d be willing to do whatever it took to be as helpful as possible.

He wasn’t asking for much. Just one specific vision. Then he didn’t care if she never had another view of the past again. It would be better, in fact. He had no interest in her rooting around in his memories.

The reminder of what she’d already seen inside his head helped him hustle the rest of the way out of the cell and slam the door shut.

Still, the sight of her small shivering form framed through the crystal bars had his chest going tight.

“Tell me now that you’ll submit, and I’ll take you from here. You don’t have to spend another moment of your punishment in this cold.”

Her chin only tipped higher. “I’d rather spend a thousand rotations in this cold than one more riding your cock and betraying my family.”

Fury coated everything red. See what came of softening?

He fought to retain control. "I'll tame that mouth soon enough. While I'm gone, you'll have time to think hard about whether it would be smarter to have me as an ally or an enemy."

"It doesn't matter either way." A surge of frustration reached him through the fated-mate bond. "I can't control my gift or remove whatever is blocking it."

Defiant as ever, she proved her resourcefulness by letting a piece of the fur slip to the ground and then stepping on top, curling her toes into the pelt and buffering her feet from the worst of the ice. Trouble was, the blanket wasn't big enough to serve as boots and a hood, leaving her arms and head exposed.

He curled his hands into fists to resist throwing her another blanket. "You can. You will. Like you, your gift is strong. I can sense it inside you, clawing to break free. You just have to let it."

"S-Strong? Like me?"

His confidence knocked her off guard, he could tell.

He remembered how surprised she'd been all those years before when he'd said something nice to her. He wondered if anyone had ever told her anything kind since.

He doubted it.

Her father was a bully. He suspected Dahlia's mother had been beaten down long ago.

The urge to counteract her parent's failings and whisper more nice things in his omega's ear hit hard.

He clamped his jaw shut instead.

In the resulting silence, her doubts returned to the fore. "You want to believe my gift is still strong, but that won't make it so. The vision I recently had could have been a one-time freakish occurrence. I might have been filled with power once, but that was a long time past."

His scowl deepened. He didn't like the resignation in her voice. That didn't sound like the omega who'd swung at his head with a globe and tried to steal his tracker remover from under his nose.

But he didn't need her to believe in her abilities, only follow his commands.

"I haven't gotten where I am by taking no for an answer. You have the power to rid yourself of the block." He took a step back, doing what had to be done. "I'm betting it's a matter of incentive."

“What do you mean?” Worry sharpened her features.

“If the cold doesn’t convince you, perhaps the image of your little sister suffering the same misery will.”

Her grip on the teething ring grew knuckle white. “Congratulations. I didn’t think I could hate you more than I already do.”

Fast as lightning, he leapt forward and snaked his arms through the ice, grabbing the edges of her blanket and yanking her to the bars. “I don’t care how you feel about me as long as you obey me.” She struggled in his hold, but he kept her pinned where she was, doing his best to ignore the sweet scent filling his lungs. “I have spies everywhere. It would be easy enough to give them the signal and take your sister from the omega compound.”

Her bottom lip trembled, but her eyes held nothing but suspicion. “If that’s true, why didn’t you do that before with me?”

“We both know your father kept you under a far more careful watch because of your rebellions. Plus,” his lips curled upward in the facsimile of a smile, “I thought it would be a hell of a lot more satisfying to take you from him through his own arrogance and stupidity and with the Brotherhood’s blessing. And it was. All his schemes to secure an alliance and gain you a prime omega placement destroyed. It’s one of the few hundred slices of pain and humiliation the male is owed.”

He let her go.

She stumbled back out of reach, the faint pink line at her cheek where it had touched the ice-cold bar searing itself onto his chest even as he told himself it meant nothing.

“*He* is owed your revenge.” She took another step back until she was out of arm’s reach. “Not my sister.”

“The twins Zaya and Mikhail were innocent, too. That didn’t prevent them from being burned alive. They never got to have the fifteen years your sister has.”

“That doesn’t make what you’re threatening right.”

“I’ve never been a huge fan of right and wrong. It’s a complication I don’t need. I prefer results.” He forced his boots back another step. “Your father is finally going to get what he deserves—and you are going to be the one who makes that happen. How much suffering happens along the way for you and yours is up to you.”

“You are a monster.”

“True enough, but I’m *your* monster now.” Their gazes locked. “I told you I’d come for you and I did. I told you you’d be mine and you are. Now I’m telling you, you will drop the block and you will give me the vision I require. That is as real and true as it gets.”

“You know what’s sad? I was so devastated when they said you’d died in that fire. I mourned for you. Cried my eyes out for you. And when my father started cursing your name, and I learned you hadn’t died after all, I was so . . . happy. I cheered every one of your successes. I . . . I thought: maybe he will come for me, after all. Maybe we can still escape together.”

He refused to let her words affect him. “There’s no escape now for either of us. You will break. It’s only a matter of time.”

Before she could utter another word—or shiver again and make him change his damn mind—he hustled into the elevator and slammed his palm on the top floor designation.

If he took a few moments to type out a request on his comms regarding food and water for a certain cellmate, he decided to forget it the instant it was done.

Dr. Randalff better have some answers, especially about how Nikolai could regain his damn control and spark more of her visions.

Because the embarrassing truth was, it turned out he did give a damn how she felt about him.

Because leaving her in that ice cell was a hell of a lot harder than expected.

And if this gamble didn’t work, he wasn’t so sure whether it would be the omega, or him, who would break first.

“S he has to like you.” Dr. Randalff closed the dusty book he’d been scanning with a loud smack and nervously placed it on top of Nikolai’s massive, shiny black desk.

“Come again, Doc?” Steepling his hands on the other side of the table, Nikolai leaned forward in his seat, a replica of the throne at the Brotherhood's headquarters. Carved of black onyx with a back nearly as high as the ceiling and decorated with the sculpted heads of snarling polar beasts at the arms and top, the chair was not only an homage to his homeland, but expensive, and, best of all, intimidating as hells. Sitting in it usually made him feel like a king.

Not so much now.

He’d managed to grab a shower and change clothes, ditching the more formal warlord clothes he’d worn for off-planet travel for a light-weight, gray, long-sleeved shirt and lounge pants that molded to his body for comfort and warmth. But the damn itch between his shoulders was making him crazy. Yes, he’d only recently left the omega in the cell. Yes, she needed to learn. Only . . .

The doc cleared his throat. “The omega’s visions are more likely to emerge if she is happy.”

“Uh-oh.” Alexi, who seemed to think life was one big joke, laced his fingers behind his head. His big ass feet were already propped on the edge of Nikolai’s desk. The black eye he’d gotten in his fight with Damien made him look more like a troublemaker than ever. As always, his shirt was not

even laced and his pants were scuffed as if he'd just finished fucking some female in some dark, dirty corner of the compound.

Nikolai would have liked to have this meeting with the doc alone, but his brothers' lives were as much at risk, so he'd figured they deserved to be here too. Now he was rethinking his choice.

"Alphas don't need to be liked. Just obeyed." He ran his thumb by rote along the bumps of the chain the omega had given him so long ago.

Nodding in silent agreement, Maxheim scribbled down more notes from his seat, his white shirt starched and his top-of-the-line navy suit perfectly creased. Few Abzalians donned the formal-wear popular among inner planetary types, but Maxheim had adopted the look when they'd first gone into business, saying he wanted to give their family an air of respectability. He'd yet to revert back. Or let loose. Like always, he was taking notes during the meeting, recording the exchange word for word so he could review it later. He didn't miss a damn syllable. He was better than a machine.

He often seemed as dead inside as one, too. But that was a different issue.

Meanwhile, Damien, dressed in all black as if he was off for a space battle at any moment, stood as silent as a sentinel by the door. Unlike Alexi, he didn't have a scratch on him from the fight. As always, his hard gaze never stopped scanning everything, always on the lookout for danger.

Seems this time, though, as if Nikolai might have fucked things up all by himself. No outside threat required.

She has to like you.

The omega hated him, and every heartbeat spent in the icy cell only deepened the feeling. While he . . . He shoved the thought away.

It was far better to be feared than liked—and she needed to learn to obey.

So why was everything inside him screaming that he'd already left her too long in that cell?

"Start from the top, Doc." Restless, Nikolai knocked Alexi's boots off his desk.

They landed on the floor with a crash.

The doc jumped, his already wild hair standing on end. "Yes, well, as I mentioned before," the doc's gaze darted from one brother to the next before fixing once more on Nikolai, "our Alphaverse once looked different,

with more bonded fated-mate pairs in existence and a different take on the Alpha-omega dynamic. Of course, this was so long ago that few records remain of that time, and those that do are in the hands of the Federation.”

Alexi yawned.

Damien shot his brother a disgusted look.

Nikolai concurred.

Of course, Alexi was tired. The scent of pussy and smoke from the sex clubs still clung to him, *despite* Nikolai’s command that the fool rein in his extracurricular activities and stay close to the compound.

But Nikolai had bigger problems at the moment. “I’m not in the mood for a history lesson, Randalff. I need results and I need them fast.”

“Right.” The doc cleared his throat. “That could be part of the problem.”

Nikolai growled low.

“But not insurmountable.” The doc forced a smile. “The omega journals you *borrowed* from the Federation files are fascinating.” Buoyed by enthusiasm, he lost some of his nervousness. “I conjecture that the omega from the journal had such success keeping her gift going because she was . . . happy. Happy with her Alpha. Happy with her life. She believed in their bond and, more importantly, his willingness to care for her no matter what.” He cleared his throat again and pulled at the collar of his shirt. “Perhaps a lack of happiness—rather than a deliberate block—is what is keeping you from being able to access the omega’s visions in a reliable manner.”

Absolute silence.

Nikolai forced himself to keep his hands by his thighs instead of curling them around the doc’s puny, narrow neck. Because if he killed the male now, he’d be more fucked than he already was.

I didn’t think I could hate you more than I already do.

You are a monster.

The omega’s words echoed through his head.

She was right. He was. What’s more, he embraced his fate willingly to keep those under his protection alive.

In this universe, only monsters survived to become the top Alpha. Only monsters had the ability to safeguard those in their care.

He’d never once regretted his choice . . . until the arrival of a glittering wisp of an omega who made him crave things he shouldn’t.

Maxheim flipped back through old notes. “Why didn’t you mention this before?”

Randall swallowed hard. “The concept was so strange and outside the norm, I discounted it. But when the bond, the Alpha bite, and the sex was not enough to produce consistent visions in the Alpha Lord’s recently acquired omega, it made me think about what else might be missing. I believe it may be happiness.”

Happiness? Who in this fucking galaxy was happy? Life was about power and violence. It was about survival and clawing your way to the top.

He had no clue what happiness looked like or how to make someone else feel it.

Though the omega hadn’t sounded too displeased when he’d had his cock deep inside her.

And there was that sweet, soft purr of hers . . . which had made him feel jumbled up inside.

“So, more sex then?” His balls tightened at the thought. He’d keep her in heat without triggering his own rut, or he’d never get anything done. If he left right now—

“Ah, no.” The doc’s response halted Nikolai’s plan-making. “Sex alone is not the answer. She needs . . . care.”

His cock wept silently.

“Is there any chance commanding her to be happy will work?” Maxheim was still flipping through his notes. “Omegas are inclined to obey their Alpha’s demands.”

Except his. But Nikolai kept his thoughts to himself.

“You could try.” The doc sound skeptical. “But I suspect this particular emotion cannot be forced. It must be . . . earned.”

“So, we’re fucked.” Alexi echoed Nikolai’s sentiment.

“Doc has to be wrong.” Damien, always a loyal soldier, had his back. “If happiness was the key, she’d already be giving Nikolai all the visions he wanted. We all heard her screaming his name and begging him to fuck her harder. It was pretty clear she was not just happy, but ecstatic.”

The others chuckled.

Nikolai smothered a snarl and wondered, for the thousandth time, what was wrong with him. Shouldn’t *he* be smirking, too?

He didn’t usually give a shit who heard him fucking or where he did it. But he didn’t like anyone else knowing how this particular omega sounded

right before her breath hitched and her eyes fluttered shut and she came on his cock. Or the way she sometimes whispered his name and made it sound like a song when his knot was stuffed inside her pussy and he held her as close as possible.

That shit felt oddly private.

“Listen up.” His tone cut off the laughter immediately. “Mention anything about my omega and fucking in the same sentence again, and I will pin you down and remind you of exactly why I am the bastard sitting on this throne.”

The others exchanged a what-the-fuck look, but they weren’t stupid enough to ask about his sudden touchiness. Even Alexi, ever the smart-ass, remained silent.

“Got it,” Damien said at last.

Nikolai’s comms beeped.

Andor Stormhart’s bearded, craggy face appeared on Nikolai’s screen without permission. He wasn’t surprised. The Skolov family’s security was top-notch, but the Stormhart crime family found their way around everything, preferably by battering their way through it.

It was fortunate, therefore, that while the two families weren’t exactly friends—who was in this cutthroat galaxy?—they did share enough mutual business interests to make them loose allies. A helpful situation since the Stormharts were crazy, brutal bastards who loved raiding and embraced the outlaw culture, not even trying to adopt a veneer of respectability. For that reason alone, Nikolai couldn’t help but like the Stormhart crime head. Andor unapologetically made his own rules and was as fierce about protecting his family as Nikolai.

“We’ve got a problem.” Andor’s blunt assessment raised the hairs on Nikolai’s balls.

“Tell me.” The Brotherhood had said not to talk to anyone about the trial, but everyone knew that was unenforcible.

“The Inner Council is locked up tight, but rumors are spreading that your witnesses have been taken out. Some kind of wide-spread food poisoning hit. It’s hard to tell if any are still alive.”

“Fuck.” Alexi exploded from his seat. “Fucking Lundin. He got to them somehow. This whole thing’s gone dirty. We can’t trust the Brotherhood. I knew it. I fucking knew it.”

Unlike his brother, Nikolai went icy calm.

“Quiet.” The single sharp word was enough to silence his brother. They didn’t need their personal business spread to outsiders, or to show anything but a confident, calm front.

Nikolai focused on the face on the screen. “We all know who’s behind it.” The Skolov family had plenty of enemies inside and out of the Brotherhood, but one only who cared about silencing those witnesses. “I have faith the Brotherhood will get to the bottom of it. In the meantime, we made copies of the witness testimonies and can supply them any time.”

“Good.” Andor paused. “But, just so you know, Olan denies responsibility for the hit as well as for the earlier one on your ship while you were transporting your omega home.”

“Of course, he does.”

The other warlord nodded. “He’s telling the Brotherhood you financed both to smear his reputation. He’s saying you took out the witnesses because a legitimate interrogation would have proven they were fakes coerced by you to frame him.”

“He’s a liar.” Alexi again.

“That was never in doubt.” Andor’s scowl deepened. “But his role in these hits is harder to prove. The Brotherhood asked us to look for a payment trail that would link Olan to the attacks and we found none. Doesn’t mean it’s not there, but we can find no withdrawals from his usual accounts or any of the hidden ones he doesn’t think we know about. We all know jobs like these take a fair amount of money to carry off, so there has to be some kind of trail leading to the guilty party.” The raider paused once more. “The same goes for your accounts. The Brotherhood asked us to look there too, and we found no evidence, but you should know we looked.”

“I never expected anything less.” Nikolai told the truth. Maxheim had alerted him the instant the Stormharts started digging through the Skolov accounts. He could have shut them out. However, since in this particular instance, he had nothing to hide, he’d allowed them to see what they wanted—and nothing more.

Andor tugged at his beard. “If Olan is hiding the money trail, we’ll find it eventually.”

“So will we,” Nikolai assured the other crime boss.

Maxheim was the best at what he did. If anyone could find the connection, it would be him.

“In the meantime,” Nikolai told the Stormhart head, “any additional information you can discover on which witnesses are dead and how it happened would be appreciated.”

“Done.”

“I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. It brings with it a debt I won’t forget.”

“Of course.” Andor looked pleased. “You Skolovs are a fucking nightmare to deal with, far too good at making money and stealing away potential clients and cargo, but it keeps us on our toes. Plus, you understand loyalty and family. Olan Lundin is a meteor worm that should have been incinerated long ago.”

The other crime head signed off.

Tense silence dominated the room.

“We cannot afford to piss off the Brotherhood.” Nikolai zeroed in on Alexi. “Work around them, yes. But in the end, none of us can exist without it.”

“You’re right.” Alexi blew out a breath. “It’s the stress of this trial. It’s getting to me.”

They both knew that wasn’t all that was going on, but his brother’s increasingly reckless behaviors, and the pain behind it, were a complication for another rotation.

“Your instincts are right though, Alexi.” Nikolai threw him a bone. “Something isn’t adding up. I want us to find out everything we can about what happened to those witnesses and how Olan was able to get to them. We need a deeper dive into his finances as well. Olan and his people have never been good at hiding their secrets before. How did they suddenly get smart enough to bury a money trail like this? It reeks of outside help for Lundin and, if that’s the case, we need to know who else we’re dealing with as soon as possible.”

“Done.” His brothers spoke as one.

“Good. In the meantime, we stay the course. We have our plan, and Lundin can do fuck-all to alter it.” Nikolai returned his attention to the doc. “Now, as for you, your out-of-the-box thinking is why I let you live in the first place.”

The doc looked paler than he had a moment ago. “Thank you, Alpha Lord. I-I am happy to be of use and hope to be of service for many years to come.”

“Hmmm.” He shot the male a warning glare. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it? But happiness, fluff, and rainbows are not fucking options. My witnesses are dead, and Olan is not playing fair. I can’t either. I need something tangible to eradicate my omega’s block, and I need it now.” His voice had risen to a near roar, his frustration reaching the surface. “Her power is there. Her gift so close I can taste it. Go back to the books, Doc. Find me something more concrete. Find me a fucking battering ram.”

Find me something other than happiness because that possibility ended long ago.

“Yes, Alpha Lord.” Head bobbing up and down, the doc seized his books and clutched them to his chest like a shield. “I’ll get on it.”

“We don’t have an indefinite amount of time.” Damien paced by the door, lip curled back, fangs out. Nikolai’s aggression had triggered his own.

“If we don’t deliver, it’s not Lundin and his rotten bloodline that dies, it’s ours,” added Alexi.

“Enough.” Nikolai silenced his brothers. “The doc doesn’t need to be bothered with our issues.” His voice dropped to a menacing growl. “He has his own fate to worry over.”

Ignoring the doc’s loud gulp, Nikolai seized his glass and tossed back the last of his imported inner-planetary ale. Even that offered none of its usual pleasure.

He slammed the glass down, the itch behind his shoulders a full-on prickling now. “In the meantime, I am confident my approach will yield useful results.” Bravado had never failed him yet. “The omega is stubborn, but after some time spent in the cell, she will have learned a valuable lesson. That may prove all it takes to bring her to heel.”

The pleased nods from his brothers made him feel all the more confident.

Until he glanced at the doc and saw the mix of worry and skepticism in his gaze.

Nikolai’s chest went tight all over again.

“Gentlemen.” He pushed back from his seat, the legs of the throne skidding against the ice beneath. “You have five minutes to finish up any remaining business—most urgent only.”

He refused to admit it aloud, but he was past ready to check on what he hoped would be a very contrite, willing omega.

Pretending to listen, he started counting down the seconds.

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O*ne, two, three. Go!*

Dahlia shivered beneath the fur and struck. She might not be using the melted teething ring as Skolov intended, but she was making use of it all the same.

The edge of the melted metal slammed into the prison bar. A tiny chip flew from the glimmering crystal. Not nearly enough to weaken the barrier.

Damn things looked and felt like ice, but they were clearly something stronger.

At this rate, it would take her twenty years to damage the bar enough to throw herself against it and break it.

She needed a new plan. The problem was that the only course that presented itself was the last one she wanted.

The elevator doors slid open.

She stumbled back, her spine smacking into the wall. She gripped the metal ring like a weapon.

“Don’t be afraid.” The voice was female, and a pretty mix of throaty and lyrical. “I’ve come with drink and food.”

A cloaked form glided into view, tray in hand.

From across the cell, unfamiliar savory scents filled Dahlia’s lungs.

Her stomach contracted and grumbled.

The new arrival moved to the side, pressed a button, and a small two-inch space dissolved on four of the bars, leaving enough room to slide the tray through. “These are some of the finest dishes Abzal is known for. Most

guests at the resort have to book reservations for such a meal at least a year in advance, but I managed to cut the line.”

The other female’s forced joviality was almost painful, but it was clear the female was trying to be kind.

Plus, Dahlia wasn’t a fool. She’d never turn away a potential ally.

After tucking her makeshift chipper into the sheet dress, she grasped the tray from her side and pulled it through. “Thank you.” The open space immediately solidified, the bars returning to their intact state.

Forcing herself not to pounce on the food, she set it on the ground before pulling her fur blanket tighter around her body.

The female darted away, and Dahlia thought she might be leaving, but she reappeared a few heartbeats later with two more thick fur blankets. “Here. Take these too. These are all the guard station has, but I can get more if you need.” She reopened the slot and passed them through one at a time.

Grateful, Dahlia piled them high on top of her shivering frame.

“I’m Anya.” Done waiting for Dahlia to make the first move, the female pushed back her hood and moved closer to the bars. “You should eat.”

“I will.” Dahlia tried to keep the shock from her face.

Dahlia had already guessed at the female’s omega status from the pleasing quality of her voice. What surprised Dahlia was the obvious fact that Anya was not an indentured omega imported to the territory, but a Skolov, her bloodline clear in the reddish tone of her skin, carved cheekbones, and midnight hair that cascaded around her face. She didn’t have the same bold skin designs on her face as her brothers. Nor did she have horns. Like all omega females in Anarchheim, the latter was only passed down the Alpha bloodline. But the female did possess the same stunning looks and, more shocking, the same arrogant bearing of the Skolov Alpha head.

“You’re the sister.” Olan had insisted Dahlia always have four guards by her side. Not for her protection, but to ensure her compliance and prevent her from escaping. Clearly, Anya did not have the same restrictions.

As if reading her mind, Anya shrugged, her lips tilting upward. She couldn’t have been more than nineteen years old. “Nikolai doesn’t know I’m here. It was supposed to be a beta servant who delivered your food. I blackmailed her into letting me come instead. No way was I missing the chance to meet the Lundin who holds the key to my family’s safety.”

The younger omega leaned in closer, acknowledging the question in Dahlia's eyes. "I sit in the air ducts and eavesdrop. That's how I know. It's the only way for an omega with four very bossy, very controlling older Alpha brothers to learn anything. Otherwise, I'd know nothing and go nowhere because it's *too dangerous for someone like me.*" She ended her tirade with a low growl, a very un-omega thing to do, but an impressive mimicry of her brother's growl.

Dahlia blinked. Apparently, guards weren't needed to keep someone in a cage. Caring too much could forge its own prison. Having experienced so little of that particular display of emotion, she had never realized.

Undeterred, Anya filled the silence. "They're up there in Nikolai's study right now chatting away, but I decided in this case, I'd learn more coming here."

"Aren't you afraid you'll be punished?" She shouldn't be drawn into a discussion at all, but she was genuinely curious. There was a fire inside the female that Dahlia couldn't help but like.

Anya shrugged again. "I don't like it, but I can take it. Plus, all I have to do is start to cry and talk about family and they get this nervous, panicked look on their faces and stomp off. It's not my fault if they think I'm more fragile than I am." She rolled her eyes. "I'm certainly not going to tell them."

Dahlia was starting to rethink her notion of who might actually run the show around here.

She wondered what the omega's gift was and if, unlike most, she'd managed to keep it flourishing past her youth, or if it too was blocked.

"I'm not saying it's nice to play on their complexes." The other female's words pulled Dahlia back to the moment. "But an omega's gotta do what's an omega's gotta do."

Dahlia almost smiled.

How different her life might have been if she'd had a friend like Anya to grow up with. Her own sister Kaiya was younger than Dahlia by nine years. By the time Kaiya had grown old enough to be someone Dahlia might have spoken with in a truthful way, they'd been separated and allowed only brief, superficial interactions.

But that didn't mean Dahlia had forgotten her. Far from it. Her sister's innocence and sweetness had been her inspiration. All of Dahlia's energy

had gone into finding a way for them to be together again. All her schemes had centered around finding a way to give Kaiya a different life.

Now, Skolov was threatening to drag her sister here to this freezing hell and make her a pawn so Dahlia would do his bidding.

She could never let that happen.

“If you help me escape from here, we could run away together.” Dahlia gave it a shot. “You’d never have to deal with bossy Alpha brothers again.”

The omega’s expression hardened, and Dahlia saw the truth beneath the other woman’s complaints about her brothers. Whatever frustrations she had with them, she loved them.

“That’s not happening,” confirmed the other omega. “Whatever their faults, they’ve kept me safe when . . .” She swallowed hard, and Dahlia saw the flash of pain in the other female’s eyes. Something bad had happened to her. Something ugly and dark that even four vicious Alpha brothers had not been able to protect her from fully. “When I needed them most of all.” Shaking off the memory, she added, “Plus, unlike many of our kind, I have a job and a purpose beyond fucking and gifting—and I’m not giving that up for anything.”

Dahlia was too floored by the other female’s revelation to be insulted by the accurate but harsh description of her own life. “An actual job?”

“It’s not well known, but Nikolai allows me to serve as the family’s behind-the-scenes publicist.” The dark-haired omega stood taller. “My job is to give the family a more legitimate face and keep us off the Federation’s radar.”

It was almost more than Dahlia could process.

“If you play your cards right, he may do the same for you, allowing you to be more than some fuck toy or sex-charged power source.”

Dahlia blinked. The notion was more intriguing than it should have been given what it would cost her to achieve it. “I could never do that at the expense of my family.”

“Well, in that we agree. I could never run away. I might mess with my brothers, but I’d never screw them over. Or disappear on them. They’ve already lost too much.”

“You mean the twins and your mother.” Dahlia realized they’d finally gotten to the reason Anya had come and the motivation behind all the forced friendliness. The Skolov omega wasn’t as pushy or growly as her

brother, but her intent was the same: to get Dahlia to use her gift to bring Olan Lundin to justice and reveal his crimes.

“Among other sorrows, yes. I was honestly too young to remember them, but my two older brothers, in particular, can never forget.” The other omega’s gaze never wavered from hers. “Nikolai blames himself for Zaya and Mikhail’s deaths.”

Dahlia knew it. She’d experienced his pain through her vision. She’d felt the tendrils of his rage and shame as they climbed up the vessels of his heart and constricted, choking him from the inside out.

Even now the memory of how lost that little boy had felt, how terrified he’d been of failing the others, threatened to soften her toward the man he’d become.

She looked around her icy prison and fought it.

“From the start,” continued Anya, “Nikolai took responsibility for us as if he were the parent. Life was hard, but the twins’ deaths made him harder. It was as if it wasn’t just their lives stolen, but the organ that beat inside his chest.” She sighed. “It’s not only vengeance that drives him, you know?”

For some reason, Dahlia found herself fascinated. She shouldn’t care about Skolov’s motivations, but she did. Perhaps it was because, outside of the visions, she knew so few personal details about him besides the thickness of his cock and how amazing it felt to be fucked by him when she was in heat.

Face burning, she cut off that line of thinking before it got her into trouble.

But it didn’t end her hunger to learn more.

He was a ruthless bastard and her enemy, but from the moment she’d met him years ago, something in him had called to her.

“Your father has had a price on our heads since the rotation of the fire.” Anya’s voice was strangely matter-of-fact. “It wasn’t so bad for a little while since Olan thought none of us would survive hiding out in the polar mountains. But those years only made Nikolai and the rest of us stronger.”

Dahlia shivered. She could not imagine what the Alpha crime boss must have had to do to keep them all alive.

Anya nodded as if she’d read her mind. “It wasn’t pretty, but he got us through. Once we returned to civilization, the abduction and assassination attempts started immediately. By then, Nikolai was too much of a threat to your father’s ego and his power. He wanted him not only dead but to suffer

beforehand. Orders were altered. We were to be captured, tortured, and then killed.”

“Olan is a monster.”

Anya looked surprised, as if she hadn’t expected such an easy agreement. “He will not stop until all our family is dead, so neither will Nikolai. He knows it’s either us or him.”

The tear in Dahlia’s chest ripped wider. It was a horrible situation, and in the end, no side could ever really win.

Anya ran her hands down the skirt of her fur cloak. “So much wealth, and I don’t think Nikolai really enjoys it. It’s simply another way for him to project strength and keep us safe. I’ve never seen him take a vacation. He’ll work five full rotations without sleep to close a single deal if it will benefit his rise in the Brotherhood. To raise the money to build Abzal into a tourist paradise, he fought in the unsanctioned fighting pits and took every beating and got back up. He does not quit.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Dahlia didn’t like the way Anya’s stories made her feel, chipping away at her hate for the man and leaving admiration in its wake. Unlike the Skolov head, her father had never cared for anyone else his entire life. “Are you trying to convince me I should thank him for sticking me in this cell and trying to force me to become a traitor to my own family?”

“No. I am telling you this as a warning.” The Skolov omega’s strength flashed in her gaze once more. “Nikolai will do whatever it takes to keep us safe and make this plan succeed. If you don’t get on board, he’ll crush you beneath his boots. I’ve seen it happen many times.”

“I’ve been knocked down plenty. You’d be surprised what I can endure.”

For the first time, Anya looked impressed. “You look so delicate and ethereal with that ivory skin and white-blond, golden hair. Like the glittering ice dolls Nikolai used to carve for me so I’d have something to play with.” Her gaze traveled from the top of Dahlia’s head to the toes tucked beneath the fur pelt. “Those crystal playthings easily snapped in two, but I’m beginning to think you won’t.”

“You think right.”

Anya’s smile widened. “I think I might actually like a Lundin.”

“Imagine that.”

Anya's smile grew and then dropped. "It really is too bad. You might actually have been good for him, but there's no way forward for us now but through you."

"I am sorry for what happened to your family." Dahlia met the other female's stare head-on. "But like your brother, I will do whatever it takes to protect those I care for."

Anya looked sad. "I wish it could have been different between us."

"Me, too."

The other woman was gone in the next heartbeat, her boots cracking on the ice. Then, there was only silence as the elevator door slid shut and Dahlia was alone once more.

Once he puts his mind to something, he always succeeds.

Dahlia shivered, but the cold against her skin was nothing compared to the ice sliding through her veins.

She didn't doubt Anya's description of Skolov's ruthlessness. She'd been the target of his determination already and felt its power. Already her mind was crowded with memories of how easily she'd given him her body. How much she had reveled in his touch and the way he made her feel. It wasn't hard to imagine that if he found a way to spark her gift, she would willingly and slavishly give him that as well.

But it was her feelings toward the boy who cared so much for his family that might be her real downfall.

Which left only one route of escape.

It was extreme. Terrifying. Almost unfathomable. But to save Kaiya, Dahlia had to remove herself from the equation permanently before she gave in and supplied Skolov with the vision he needed to bring her family down.

Panic slammed through her. Grief, too. She'd wanted so much more for herself.

She shoved such cowardice aside.

Once he puts his mind to something, he always succeeds.

The same went for her.

For Kaiya, she would do anything.

She didn't allow herself any more time for doubt or waffling.

With a whispered plea for courage, she dropped the furs and the sheet to the cell floor.

Then, shivering as the cold air raked her skin like claws, she took the water Anya had left for her and, steeling her spine, poured it over her head.

Like a slap, the frigid water stole her breath. Within moments, the moisture coating her hair crackled to ice.

Now she was not so different from the glittering ice playthings Skolov had carved for his sister.

But Dahlia's end would be slower than a quick snap in two.

The tingles in her fingertips and toes faded away as numbness set in and the last droplets in her wet hair rolled down her body. She forced her feet across the ice to the coldest side of the room, where the draft from beyond was most pronounced. It seemed to take forever, her body refusing to cooperate.

She'd always imagined a different escape for herself.

But she'd also known that however her end came about, it would be done in the interest of protecting those she loved.

She might not have the power and strength of so many others in her world, but she was not powerless. Her mother's lessons rang in her ear. She could still have an impact.

Teeth chattering, she lay down and spread herself out on the ice.

It was almost a relief. She was already so exhausted.

A stupid tear spilled from her eye and rolled onto her cheek, freezing before it hit the ground.

Closing her eyes, she resisted the urge to curl into a ball. It would only make the process slower and more painful.

In five to ten minutes, her sister would be safe, and Dahlia would finally be free.

“**B**ring another set of blankets.” The growling, angry voice penetrated the edge of Dahlia’s consciousness.

“She’s already buried under four. Are you trying to keep her alive or suffocate her?”

“Shut it, Alexi.” It was the same gruff voice, at triple the volume of the others, and yet it soothed her like none of the others. “And where the hells is Randalff? Get him here now!”

“Nikolai, he’s been up the last twenty-six hours nursing her back to health.” The third voice was calmer than either of the others. “He needs a break. You need one, too.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Calloused fingers lifted her hand from the bed and turned it over.

She was too weak to resist.

A warm thumb traced the throbbing band along the underside of her wrist, chasing away the cold.

“Randalff said she was past the worst of it. He said she’d wake up soon. So why isn’t she?”

“He said *soon*. Not now.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed so hard.”

“You did what you needed to do.”

“I underestimated her resolve.”

“We all did. She looks like she would break in a strong wind.”

“But she won’t.” The growly, gravelly voice sounded almost proud. “She’s always had spirit. I won’t make the mistake of forgetting that again.”

The grip on her hand tightened. “I’ve spent so much time growing hard and untouchable, I don’t know how to be anything else.”

“We’re fighting for our lives here, Nikolai.”

“You don’t think I know that, Maxheim? But what good is mine if she’s not in it? Fifteen years I waited to reclaim her, and in less than a rotation, I almost lost her again.”

“But you didn’t.” The calmer voiced tried again. “Her body temperature is back up. The med unit did what it was supposed to do. Her vital signs are strong. She just needs rest.”

“No one is fucking resting until she opens her eyes. Get the doc back here!”

The protectiveness in the ticked off voice calmed her. Made her feel safe and treasured.

She sank deeper into sleep.



FEELING EXTREMELY WELL-RESTED, Dahlia opened her eyes—and locked gazes with fierce amber ones.

“Thank fuck.” The warm, firm grip on her hand tightened. “You’re awake.”

Nikolai Skolov was holding her hand?

Why?

She frowned—and everything came flooding back.

Her last few moments. The fact that she’d failed to end her existence. Her sister’s precarious position.

She gasped, bolting upright. Something clinked against her other wrist, keeping it from rising with the rest of her.

She looked down. A gleaming silver manacle locked her wrist to the side rail of the cot.

Strong hands grasped her shoulders and pushed her upper body back into the mattress, and the thin fabric of her medical gown crinkled as her back once more connected with the bed. “Settle down. You’re not going anywhere.”

He would punish her for what she’d almost done. Her family would suffer.

A monitor beeped in time with the fast pace of her heart, the hologram of neon colors dancing on the wall.

Skolov pressed a panel on the side of the bed and the back of her cot slid upward into a seated position.

She was no longer in the cell or freezing. Instead, she was chained by one wrist to a metal frame and buried under at least five soft fur pelts in a sterile hospital-like room of ice and metal that looked extremely state-of-the-art, sleek, and expensive.

Like the male standing over her. His body was encased in a tight-fitting shirt and drawstring pants that showed off every inch of his sculpted body and thick thighs.

“You saved me.” Her voice was deliberately accusatory. She had never shown Olan her fear, she refused to start now with her new bully.

The Alpha’s gaze narrowed. “Yes.”

There were lines at his eyes and lips that hadn’t been there before. He looked as powerful and beautiful as ever, but tired.

It must have terrified him to think of losing his best shot at vengeance.

“You shouldn’t have. I’ll only try again.”

He snarled, leaping toward her only to rear back.

He sucked down a deep breath. Then another. Fists at his side.

She was too surprised to speak.

It was almost as if he was reining himself in.

Grabbing something from behind him on a table near the door, grip a little too tight, he wheeled back around and shoved it in her face.

“Here.”

She blinked.

Swirling white and gold petals of a delicate flower swayed in an equally beautiful crystal pot, their sweet fragrance wafting up to her. A small part of her oohed in awe. Abzalian lilies were extremely rare and expensive, especially one in such good condition.

“What is this?”

“A plant. One of your favorites.”

Her brow wrinkled. “Why would you give it to me?”

She’d expected fury, threats, punishment for almost succeeding in ruining his plans. She hadn’t expected potted flora.

He put it down a little too hard by the table next to the cot. “Does it make you happy?”

She sat up straighter. “Why would you ask that?”

His scowl deepened. “I want to know. Do you like it?”

Her internal warning signal blared loudly. “If you’re in a gift-giving mood, I’d like mine to be speaking with my sister and mother.”

“Not possible. You’re a Skolov now. The sooner you accept it, the better for us all.”

Silence descended.

She wanted to ask who’d found her. What he’d felt when he heard. If any small part of him regretted his treatment. She wanted to know how he planned to punish her and when. But revealing any of her anxieties to her father had only allowed him to use them against her, so she kept her silence.

Skolov didn’t need any more ammunition to break her. The scent and sight of him so near were already dangerous enough.

Her nerves stretched tighter, the beeping monitor kicking up another beat in speed.

He eyed the monitor and then her.

The space felt too small with him in it, his wide shoulders dwarfing all the equipment and her cot. The power of his aggression and strength crackled against her skin—and yet for some reason, he was keeping it leashed.

She didn’t understand why. Or how he was staying in such control.

She wanted to scream.

“You like to garden,” he said at last, his stare back on the lily. “Though your parents disapprove of such a dirty pastime.”

“You know this from your spies, not because I told you freely.”

“True enough.”

Something had shifted between them. His attempts at being solicitous almost made her believe he could be remorseful—an emotional state she suspected Skolov could never be.

What disturbed her most, however, was the festering wish inside her that this kindness was real.

“You should take the plant back.” She nudged the pot toward him. What was the worst he could do? With luck, kill her himself.

“Hells no.” A muscle twitched in his jaw. “I had to express deliver it from the other side of the planet and promise some greedy fucker ten free nights at one of my resorts if he could climb to the highest peak, pick it, and get it here before you woke up. This is staying right here.”

“I admire your persistence and reach, but this plant needs air and sunlight to thrive.” Her gaze deliberately scanned the windowless room. “Like people.”

He snarled, more like his usual short-fuse self. “Fucking doc and his idiotic happiness theories. There’s no way this is right. Or workable. I don’t know how to do nice.”

She had no idea what the Alpha was talking about. “Not a million of my favorite plants would ever be enough to convince me to betray my sister. You should have let me die.”

A massive hand swept out and seized the pot.

He hurled it against the far wall, littering the floor with shattered crystal and dirt.

“That is not happening. Ever.” He loomed over her bedside, shoving his furious, beautiful face close to hers. “When I thought you were dead—” He cut himself off, his jaw clamping tight as he growled low. “You are never to do something like that again, omega.”

His mouth slammed down on hers.

Their first real kiss. There’d been so much fucking and clawing, but never his mouth slanting over hers in such a personal, intimate claim.

Shock blasted through her. Wonder came next.

Passion too, as the taste of him seeped onto her tongue and the vibrations of his growl rippled straight to her pussy. Power and sin. Decadence and strength. And, most surprising of all, fear and regret.

As if he cared.

Each sensation slammed into her through a fated-mate bond she’d been so busy ignoring, she hadn’t realized how strong it had become.

Somehow her near-death experience had only solidified the tie between them.

The knowledge shook her to her core, the heat of his full lips driving her equally wild—so soft when the rest of him was so hard.

The fingers of her free hand tangled in his hair, yanking him closer. Her body sprang to life, the rush of being alive mixing with white-hot need and rage.

How could she be so happy and furious to have failed at her objective all at the same time? How could her body simultaneously hate and need so intensely?

All she knew in that moment: she was desperate to be dominated and filled by him. Hungry for more of the warm glow of concern seeping through her along a fated-mate bond that anchored her in a way nothing else ever had.

As if he sensed her wishes, he growled deeply, his hand sliding behind her back, hauling her against his chest while his knee landed on the cot and it groaned under his weight. "I'm going to fuck you so hard I leave an imprint on your soul. One that will make it impossible for you to simply throw yourself away without thinking of me." His fangs scraped her throat. "Spread your legs, omega. Now."

"Yes, Alpha." The bond between them glowed brightly with lust and need.

"Dahlia." Her name on his lips was a pleased groan. "I'm not losing you again."

She shoved at the blankets and fought to get closer. Her free hand slipped beneath his shirt to slide along the ridges of his stomach.

She needed to please her Alpha. Like he was pleasing her. His devotion a ray of sunlight after so much ice and darkness.

"What in the hells? Why is her monitor going off like that?"

The stampede of boots and worried voices cut off as quickly as they'd come.

She flinched, reality returning with a vengeance as the scent of the new arrivals filled the room. Her chained wrist clanked against the cot, and her stare locked with the red-eyed Alpha whose face was inches from her own.

"The doc said to make the omega happy, brother, but I'm pretty sure a rough hard fucking so soon after you almost killed her is not what he meant."

With a growl, Nikolai whipped around, his dark hair curling over his eye. "Get out."

Make her happy? What was that about?

The golden glow pulsing between them dulled, the sense of connection and intimacy vanishing as if it had never been.

Disgust welled from within. She was a pathetic fool. He wasn't upset that he'd almost lost her because he cared. He was upset because she'd almost foiled his plan.

She caught a glimpse of several dark-haired, massive forms crowded in the doorway—and one slender, harried-looking beta male with furry white

skin and gray hair in a lab coat.

“Alpha Lord.” The beta’s gaze was downcast, his words wrapped in respect and caution. “She needs rest still. Her body cannot yet take an Alpha’s pounding. As her doctor . . .”

A low growl.

Despite all she knew, Dahlia wanted to mimic the Alpha’s protest. Her flesh craved his touch, her body ready to obey. To lose herself in the oblivion of dark pleasure, if for only a moment. The alternative, contemplating her failure, was not something she was ready to do.

“Her body is still recovering from being near death.” The beta doctor was braver than many. “Push too fast and she could get worse again.”

To her surprise, her Alpha reeled, as if the doctor’s words had been an actual punch. “Of course.” He rubbed two hands down his jaw. “Of course.” He pushed back from the cot and turned so he faced the others. “We’re fine. She’s fine. You can go.”

“But—”

“Go!”

They scattered.

Skolov swung back around, his hair still tousled from her fingers, their gazes fusing once more.

She could not bear the knowing there—or the memory of how easily she’d hurried to obey. Desperate, she seized on a different topic.

“Why would you want to make me happy?” One eyebrow raised, she echoed the brother’s words.

The Alpha’s scowl deepened. “According to Randalff’s latest theory, the most likely way for a fated-mate omega to sustain her gift is to be happy.”

Happy? Could it be both that simple and that doomed? No wonder so many omegas never kept their gift past childhood.

“So, fucking me is your grand plan?” It comforted her to know what the doctor believed. Because if sustaining her gift truly only happened under those conditions, her sister was safe.

She could never be happy as Nikolai Skolov’s property.

“If I thought fucking you would . . .” He blew out a deep breath. “But no, taking you on the cot was . . . spur-of-the-moment.” He gestured with his chin toward the dirt, broken crystal, and the wilted plant in the middle of it all. “There’s the doc’s plan right there.” His expression hardened. “I have a different grand idea in mind.”

She shivered. “Nothing will work.”

His nostrils flared wide, tendons at his neck bulging. “So, we’re at an impasse then. Or that’s, at least, what you believe.”

The menace in his voice had her sitting up straighter.

She doubted he ran up against repeated resistance often. But what did she have to lose?

“Yes.” She braced herself for the blow. Olan would have struck her long before.

That Skolov hadn’t suggested he had an even more terrible fate planned for her.

As if he’d read her thoughts, he rose and retrieved a small circular tablet from the same table where he’d gotten the plant and placed it in her free hand. “Let me change your mind.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

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“S he looks like you.” Skolov’s tone was matter-of-fact. “A tiny glittering ice wisp.”

It was her sister, Kaiya, in her rooms at the Lundin compound. Her wild white-gold hair streaming behind her, her nose buried in a book like always. Though this time, her lips were moving. Almost as if she was also talking to someone. And right at the corner, just out of the frame, was a large, dark shadow.

Dahlia clutched the tablet edge harder. “When in this from?”

“It’s live. Happening now.”

“What are you going to do?” Ice slid through her veins. Was this her punishment? To watch her sister be raped and murdered in front of her? The chain at her wrist jangled against the rail as she strained to reach him. “Please don’t hurt her. Please.”

He cut her off with a sharp wave of his hand. “I’m not going to hurt her. What I am going to do is get past the impasse and make you a deal.”

She nodded and tried to keep her panic at bay.

Her shock, too. A deal? As if she had agency? As if her word and cooperation mattered? Force and bullying was the usual Alpha way when dealing with omegas. Negotiations were only conducted with fellow Alphas.

Despite herself, she sat taller. Felt less insubstantial.

“The man she is talking to is a friend of mine—and hers,” continued the Alpha. “I sent him there as a spy, but he’s become somewhat of a personal bodyguard. Seems you’re not the only Lundin female who has a way of

muddling up a male's plans. My man rescued Kaiya from near-rape by one of your father's cronies a while back."

"What? When?" She'd had no idea.

"It was over a year ago.

"She never told me."

"Apparently, you're not the only one trying to protect her sister no matter the cost."

Her breathing hitched. "Please. I really don't know how to bring down the block and give you more visions, but I'll do whatever else you want. I —"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Listen to the deal before you decide."

She nodded.

He didn't remove his hand. Instead, his finger slid back and forth over the curve of her bottom lip, a claiming and a warning all its own.

Her nipples tightened despite herself, his spell over her body undeniable.

"Right this minute, my man is offering Kaiya the chance to escape. To leave with him within the hour and disappear forever."

Dahlia reeled.

"If she says yes, then you will have a choice to make." He removed his hand.

She took it as permission to speak. "What is my choice?"

"You can agree to my terms and my man will do exactly as he's promising Kaiya. He'll sneak her out and she'll be free."

"If I don't agree?"

"She'll stay where she is, though my man will have to leave since his cover will be compromised."

Leaving Kaiya vulnerable once more to Olan's cronies and whoever else. As an omega whose gift had never revealed itself, there was no chance for Kaiya to become a prime omega and make a high match. She would never be anything but property—and prey. Dahlia's cooperation with Olan was the only reason Kaiya hadn't already been whored out or sold off.

"What exactly are your terms?"

"Her freedom for yours."

Confusion slammed through her. "I don't understand. I am already yours by the contract."

He growled, his stare dropping to the golden bands at her throat and wrist. “You are mine by far more than that.”

She blinked hard.

“In return for her freedom and safety, you promise to never do something so stupid and idiotic—” Hands curling into fists as his side, he cut himself off, sucked down a deep breath, and started over. “You promise to willingly accept punishment for attempting to damage my property, and you vow to never deliberately harm yourself again.”

She waited for the rest.

It never came.

“That’s it? That’s all you want?”

His scowl deepened. “You hold your life so cheaply? I do not. And your punishment will be no small thing. By the time I’m done with your discipline, I feel confident you will never make such a rash move again.”

A small glow flickered to life inside her chest. She reminded herself he was protecting his interests and wouldn’t care about her life otherwise, but it didn’t matter. The small ember sparked by his ferocity over her near-death would not go out.

So, she simply ignored it. “But if I give in to you now, you’ll only use my sister again for something else.” As Olan had done. “She’ll always be leverage to get me to behave or supply you with visions or keep me in line when you don’t like something else I do. She’ll never truly be safe or free.”

“Wrong,” Skolov growled. “The terms of this deal are very specific. No more self-harm and your sister goes free.” His voice deepened. “We’ll handle the matter of tearing that block aside in another manner altogether.”

Heat flared between her thighs. The memory of him dealing with the block by spanking her while he fucked and knotted her made her burn.

His nostrils flared in return. He knew.

But one problem at a time. “You can’t possibly be telling me the truth.”

His jaw went tight as if she’d insulted him. “I always say what I mean.”

The same words he had used fifteen years ago, and every single one of them truthful.

“You’re right. You do.” After so many lies and duplicitous dealings within the Lundin family, it hadn’t dawned on her until that moment how much she’d clung to Skolov’s honesty. Whatever else she thought of him, she did trust him to keep his word. “I believe you.”

He looked almost surprised. Definitely pleased. “Good.”

She opened her mouth to accept the deal.

He cut her off. "There's more you need to know before you agree."

His tone had her bracing.

"Escape from your father does not mean Kaiya can be reunited with you. That is being explained to her as well. There's a good chance you'll never be able to see her again."

"What? Why?" It came out like a wail. Her sister was all she had. Taking care of her sister was what she did. Who she was.

His expression only hardened. "She has to disappear. To move on to a new galaxy and assume a new name and identity. I have expert forgers who can make that happen, and my man and his wife will take her and see to her safety as if she were their own child. They will have enough money to live a good life. All three of them. But they can never return. Olan will suspect I have had a hand in Kaiya's disappearance, but as long as the Brotherhood has no proof, there is nothing he can do. But if that were to change, and the Brotherhood discovered concrete proof, it would be considered a betrayal of the Brotherhood code and the Skolov family would pay."

It dawned on her then how much the Skolov head was risking to make this deal with her.

"Plus," he continued, "it is for her safety as well. If my plan succeeds and Olan is found guilty, the Brotherhood will seek to hunt down the entire Lundin bloodline, including her. We need to be sure they never find her."

Dahlia's mind spun. Both at the brilliance of his plan and its cost for her.

To never see her sister again. It felt like a death.

She'd been willing to accept her own but never imagined she might be the one alive to mourn her sister.

Plus, if she agreed, if she promised never to risk herself again so that her sister could be free, she would be shutting the door on any chance of escape for herself. Death would no longer be a way out.

It truly would be her life for her sister's.

"Your chance for freedom ended fifteen years ago. Your fate set the moment we met." It was as if he knew her thoughts, and while his expression was as uncompromising as ever, his tone was gentler than expected. "At least this way, your sister will be free."

Vision once more blurred, she raised her gaze to his. "Y-you will make sure she is safe?"

“I will.”

She turned away, the cuff digging into her skin as she stared at the blinking monitor lights, her heart tearing in two. Was he right? Were her dreams of freedom doomed from the start?

“In return, you will keep your word to me.” He hovered nearby. So close he could almost touch her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his hand extend.

She held her breath, the urge to be sheltered in his arms almost more than she could bear. She felt so lost and afraid—and for some insane reason, her body clamored to be held and soothed by the same male who had caused the sensations in the first place.

But he was not her savior or her anchor.

He was her Alpha. She was his property. She was alone and going to be more so once she agreed to a deal that would be the end of her dreams.

Clutching the fur pelt to her chest, she nodded. She couldn’t bring herself to speak.

His hand dropped to his side. “Sometimes giving up old dreams means new ones can flourish.”

Her tears came faster.

Kaiya, her beautiful sister. She’d held her as a baby. Rocked her to sleep and sung to her when she was awake. Their mother was not especially maternal, and so much of Tasha’s time had been spent dealing with Olan, pacifying Olan, obeying Olan, traveling with Olan, and keeping up appearances so the Lundin line would remain strong. She hadn’t been around much for either of her daughters, so it had been Dahlia who’d been there for Kaiya’s first steps and her first tears. Who’d whispered into her little sister’s tiny ear about escape with their mother to another galaxy, where they could become a real family. Who’d vowed she’d find a way for them to be free.

At least one of them would.

Thanks to a male who would now be her jailer forever. How ironic was that?

“I want a spoken answer, omega.” The command in the Alpha’s voice sent a shiver down her spine.

Her reaction sparked her anger and kept her from shattering. She faced him head-on once more. “I will keep my word.”

He nodded. "Then the deal is done. Your sister will be safe. From Olan and from me."

She blew out a breath, sinking back into her cot.

She should be thrilled. She *was* thrilled. But the grief was also a heavy weight on her chest, so dense she could barely breathe through it.

Skolov eyed her as if she'd sprouted horns like his. "You are confusing as hells. I thought you would be pleased."

Her laughter caught her by surprise.

Him, too, if the way he froze was an indicator.

"I am pleased for my sister, but sad, too." Her chin tilted up. "And if there's anything to your doctor's theory, I cannot afford to be happy anyway—because while my sister is safe, my mother is still in danger from your plans for me. Do not think I have forgotten that for a heartbeat."

For an instant, he seemed almost surprised by her words, then his lips tilted upward. "Such defiance. Nothing keeps you down for long." He leaned in, his mouth brushing over her ear, sending fevered pleasure rippling to her core. "I will deal with that soon enough."

She stifled a whimper.

He pushed away from the cot. "You need to rest, and I will fuck you if I stay." He eyed the broken crystal and dirt. "I'll send someone to clean that up right away."

He was back to brusque.

She didn't like it. "I'm not weak, you know."

Heat flared in his eyes. "You're the fucking strongest, most stubborn female I've met."

She fell back against the mattress. He'd said similar words before about her.

Out of nowhere, a soft purr erupted.

Her gaze went wide.

His narrowed. "You like . . . insults?"

Warmth flared across her cheeks. "Of course not." She pulled the blanket that had fallen halfway off the cot back onto her and wrapped it tighter around her like a shield. "No one has said something like that about me before but you. It took me by surprise."

He scowled.

She tipped her chin and returned his stare.

Red flashed in his stare. The rut. But he shook his head and took a step back. “Rest.” The word was a low rumble, thick with lust and dominance. “You will need it.”

Her heart beat fast.

He pointed toward another package wrapped in shiny tissue paper. “Those are clothes for you.” He held up his hand as if he expected her to comment. “Yes, I know your size. From the same spies and the same files.” He shrugged. “I’m shit at picking out a female’s clothes, but Anya assured me these would be good.”

Another warm glow, larger than before. Actual clothes. She stifled any chance of a betraying purr before it could emerge.

“Servants will be in to help you into them.”

“And my wrist? Can the manacle be removed? I have given you my word.”

“It will be removed once your punishment is complete.” His tone was absolute. “Be very happy that is the only restraint on you at the moment.”

Despite herself, her pussy clenched, slick wetting her folds. She already knew how much her body liked his attempts to discipline her. Moreover, she was feeling so lost and tired, the idea of his heavy weight pressing her into the mattress and taking away her choice was almost appealing. She wanted to float in a sea of oblivion. To go numb and remain there forever.

With a growl, he seized her chin and tilted her face to his. “If I thought for one heartbeat this resignation and subdued acceptance would last, I’d almost be smug. But I know you better than you know yourself, little omega warrior.”

She startled, shocked at his description of her.

“You will be ready to fight again soon—and so will I.” He rubbed his thumb against her lower lip. “Tangling with you is almost as satisfying as proving the victor.”

He turned and left before she could say another word.

The worst part? There was a horrifyingly big part of her suddenly primed for a fight and already desperate for his return.

Four fucking rotations.

Four fucking rotations of listening to the doctor report on his omega's progress while the scent of her clung to the bastard's lab coat and Nikolai had to fight the urge not to kill the beta because he got to be in her presence and Nikolai didn't.

Four rotations of waiting while he and his brothers failed to find the money trail linking Olan to the recent hits or identify who Olan had hired to help him since they damn well knew he wasn't clever enough to hide the transactions himself.

Four rotations of pretending to listen to Maxheim, Alexi, and Damien discuss business while the links of the omega's necklace dug into his thumb, and his cock pressed against the seam of his pants so hard he was sure there would be permanent lace marks.

Four rotations of waking up roaring his omega's name, covered in sweat, plagued by nightmares where this time he didn't reach her before her heart stopped for good and her body stayed lifeless and cold as ice in his arms, her eyes empty and unblinking.

Finally, though, the doc had given him the all clear.

Nikolai reached the eight hand-picked guards at her door, their faces covered in masks that blocked out the scent of his female. Overkill, maybe. But he wasn't taking any chances. "Leave."

They disappeared down the hall without a word.

He shoved open the door—and forgot how his lungs worked.

His omega stiffened in the bed, the hairbrush she'd been using freezing in mid stroke.

Her hair shimmered while red silk clung to every curve, showcased to perfection in a soft fabric of crisscrossed strips and a plunging neckline, the bands at her wrist and throat shimmering like a golden collar and cuffs. And then there was the bright silver manacle restraining her to the bed.

He wanted to stare at her forever. He wanted to rip the dress right off her.

"Who the fuck gave you that to wear?" He'd tear the doctor's eyes out for seeing her like that.

Her eyes went wider. "You did." She pointed to the package wrappings he'd left by her beside four rotations past. "They all look like this. I-I thought that was your choice."

Damn Anya. That omega was far too wild for her own good, and almost as determined to push his limits as Alexi. He should have put a stop to it years ago but, truth be told, every time he remembered how she'd clung to him when he'd told her the twins and Naytalia were dead, he gave her one more chance.

This time she'd gone too far.

But he'd deal with her later. He had another omega in need of a reckoning right now.

For four fucking rotations he'd imagined little else.

His dick lengthened, pressing hard against the laces of his drawstring pants.

He stalked toward the bed. "You're looking well. In fact, the doctor gave me the all clear. He said you were once again the picture of health."

Her chest rose and fell, her back pressing into the mattress. But restrained to the cot, there was nowhere for her to go—and by the time he reached her side, he was pleased to see she'd wrestled her flight instinct under control and was staring up at him, chin jutting out, defiance flaring in her gorgeous crystal-blue eyes. "You said to be ready to fight—and I am."

He didn't think his cock could get harder, but it did. Seeing her four rotations past looking so defeated and lost had made his chest go tight, the urge to pull her close and comfort her almost as strong as the urge to fuck her. The only reason he'd managed to stave it off: the knowledge that she wouldn't welcome his sympathy.

What the hells did he know about comforting, anyway? No one had ever done anything like that to him.

Still, the urge to obliterate her sadness had been a primal beat in his veins. It, therefore, pleased him more than it should that the lost, pinched look had been wiped clean from his omega's face, her eyes flashing fire instead, her cheeks pink and flushed, her expression full of life and spirit. He liked her courage and her resistance. Almost as much as he liked the idea of turning that insolence into desperate need.

But first things first.

Retrieving the tablet he'd asked the doc to leave for him, Nikolai held it up for her viewing. "Kaiya. Safe and happy and on her way to a new galaxy, a new home, and a new life. My side of the deal upheld."

His omega studied the screen as if it held the secrets to the universe.

Her breathing hitched, and for an instant, her eyes went glassy.

That strange panicked need to pull her close slammed through him once more.

But then her gaze cleared, and she nodded. "Thank you."

He breathed an easier breath. "The communications will soon stop. It can't be any other way. Otherwise, we'll make it too easy for others to track them."

She placed the hairbrush by her thigh, her movements stiff. "I understand. Whatever it takes to make her safe is the best plan."

Again, he admired her loyalty. He'd yet to see any other Lundin behave with such honor.

But then again, she wasn't a Lundin anymore. She was a Skolov, and the sooner he got her to accept that, the better for them all.

"It's time, omega." He picked up the hairbrush. Her wide eyes locked on his hand as he ran his thumb along the bristles. "Time to uphold your side of the deal."

He'd fuck her over the cot first, silk dress flipped over her perfect ass. Then, he'd take her on all fours in the nest she'd make. After that, he'd command her to strip and use the silk to bind her wrists and ankles and keep her spread wide to his satisfaction.

But first came punishment.

That was going to take a toll on them both.

She blew out a breath. "I'm ready."

"You don't intend to fight me?" He knew better.

Her tipped chin proved him right. “Oh, I intend to fight. But not like you. I can’t batter through you like a raging river, but I can endure. Over time, a single droplet of water can change the shape of the hardest, densest rock.”

He almost smiled at the insult, and her spirit—until he remembered what that stubbornness of hers had almost cost them both.

“Do you know the usual penalty for an omega that dares to damage what belongs to her Alpha?” He turned the hairbrush over and tested its heft by smacking it lightly against his palm.

Thwack.

Despite her tough words, she was startled at the slight sound, her chained wrist clanking nicely against the bed rail. “I do.”

“Tell me.”

“Maiming.”

“That’s right. An eye for an eye. An evening of the score. Not any part of her body that’s useful to the Alpha, of course, but that leaves a lot of tissue, muscle, and organs to work with. It’s an important lesson. A reminder of exactly who is in charge of his property and who decides what happens to it. No one else. Not even the omega herself.”

She swallowed hard, but he could see her fighting to stay strong. “Y-yes.”

“But that is not the kind of punishment I have in mind for you.”

She wilted into the cot. “It’s not?”

“I would never harm anything so beautiful. But a lesson is in order. One that makes you think long and hard before you endanger yourself again. One that reminds you of exactly what is between us and what your rash action almost stole from us forever.”

“Us?” Questioning eyes found his. Eyes that had him wondering if he’d given too much away. Especially to someone who’d been so willing to throw it *all* away.

“Open your legs.”

She froze.

He growled low. “I will not tell you again. If I have to repeat myself, it will only earn you further discipline. It will also make me question whether you mean to keep to the terms of our deal.”

Her breath left her in a rush, her face turning away from him to stare at the opposite wall, but her legs slid open, the red silk rippling over her thighs

as she moved, the intoxicating scent of her filling his lungs.

“Pull your dress to your waist. Bare that tight little cunt to me.” He pressed the bristles into his palm to keep control.

She whimpered, and for an instant, he wondered if she’d refuse, but then her free hand fisted in the silk of her dress and the hem rose, revealing her creamy skin an inch at a time. Delicate calves. Long, lean thighs. Until the red silk slithered above her hip bones and that perfect pink slit, prettier than any he’d ever seen, was his for the taking.

His mouth watered. His control slipped a notch. He fought to stave off the rut. “Bend your knees. Heels to your ass. Hips lifted.”

Her breath came faster.

Her heels slid up toward her bottom next, and he was treated to paradise.

“Good girl.” She was already soaked for him, and he’d only growled once.

Whatever was between them, however much she despised him, her body knew he was her fated mate. It lit up at the slightest hint of his aggression and attention.

The bond between them shimmered with lust while her nipples hardened to tight little points, poking insolently against the front of her dress, begging for his mouth.

But lust alone wasn’t what he wanted from her. Neither was access to her gift.

After finding her so still and cold on that dungeon floor, he understood in a way he hadn’t before that vanquishing her body would never give him what he craved most. He was determined to conquer her mind as well.

He wanted her to see him as her master and protector, ruler and champion, defender and disciplinarian. He wanted her to understand, deep in her bones, that he would do whatever it took to keep her alive, even if meant protecting her from herself.

Curling his arms beneath her knees, he jerked her to the edge of the cot, her white-gold hair fanning out behind her, her restrained arm stretching upward as her wrist stayed locked tight to the upper side rail.

“Look at me, omega. Look at me and face the consequences of what you’ve done.”

Her gaze rose to his. No longer blue, no longer defiant, her stunning eyes had streaks of black flaring within. He hadn’t touched her, and his

omega was already heavy into her heat. Enthralled by his Alpha command.

His, if only for the moment.

He fought to keep his rut at bay.

It helped to remind himself of what she'd done. How he'd found her so icy and still and cold.

He let out another low growl.

She whimpered again, this time in fear and submission.

"For the first part of your punishment, you will receive five corrections with the hairbrush. One for each minute it took the doc to revive you, and I thought you were lost to me for good."

She moaned. He had no idea if it was in protest, apology, or need.

"You will count every one or we will start again. Do you understand?"

"Yes." The word was so faint he almost didn't hear it.

Thwack. His first strike landed at the juncture of her thigh and seat.

She cried out. But he knew it was more out of surprise and anticipation than actual pain. He hadn't hit with any real force. An Alpha's strength was far greater than an omega's and needed to be tempered or he could really hurt her. That was the opposite of what he wanted. He wasn't after her tears. His intent was a lesson of a different kind.

"One." It was easy to hear the thickening lust in her voice.

He knew exactly what his omega liked—his show of dominance, his display of care—and, damn him, he liked giving it to her.

Olan had never given a shit about her. Her mother had never had the time for her, either. Her actions, her life, had been secondary to their goals.

Before they finished here this rotation, Nikolai intended to show his omega that was no longer the case. She was his now, and everything she did mattered to him.

"Yes. One strike. For the first tortuous moment when I thought I'd never hear that soft purr again."

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. He landed the next three paddles in quick succession, each time in a slightly new spot, spreading the heat.

She called out with each one, counting as she'd been told to do. But her voice trembled more with each one, and her thighs shook. "Please."

"Did you hesitate when you poured water on yourself? When you threw away your own life like it was nothing?"

She shook her head, her pupils dilated with arousal and what almost looked like remorse. "No."

“But you won’t forget again, will you? Not the consequences, or the depth of what’s between us.” Pressing the back of the hairbrush against her clit, he worked it slowly over the swollen nub. Slow, light circles. “Hate and need and so much more. You may not like it, but you can’t deny it. Our bond is rare and vibrant and as alive as you, and it’s going to keep growing like those vines you like so much, binding us tighter and tighter.”

Her breathing hitched. “Yes. Oh, gods, yes. I feel it.”

“Good girl.” Slick left her pretty little hole glistening.

“Please, Alpha.” Her head tossed against the cot. Her legs shook. She was close to the edge.

The four rotations had been a long wait for her as well.

“If you come, you will be corrected further.”

Her eyes went wide. Surprise and then defiance flared within. “But—”

“Stay in position.”

Panting, her chest heaved as her nails curled into her palms and she struggled to bring herself under control.

He understood. He hung onto his own mastery by a thread.

But he would see it through.

Because this was not only about her, this was about them both. And the lesson was too important to shirk.

“You will not be coming for hours.” His voice was a rasp of lust and command. “Five to be exact.”

Golden eyes fused with his. “I can’t.”

“You will.” *Thwack*. The last light tap with the back of the hairbrush landed on her swollen cunt. “Because I say so. Because you are mine. Because from here on out, you understand exactly to whom you belong.”

She moaned, her back arching as her head fell back and her hips jerked. “Yes!”

Watching her fight to obey, legs spread wide, chest flushed, was the hottest sight he’d witnessed to date.

The hairbrush snapped in his hold.

His body shook with need, precum leaking from his cock and saturating the room with the scent of aggression and desire.

“Please.” Her voice was frantic and oh-so-sweet. “I can’t hold out.”

“You will.” He tossed the broken hairbrush aside. Then, he reached for the same tablet he’d used to show his omega her sister’s pictures. With a press of a button, he brought up the timer. Set it to countdown from five

hours and pressed start. “Before we’re done, you will endure far more than you ever thought you could.”

She sobbed.

“We both will.”

Her gaze rose to his, surprise flaring within, cutting through the ribbon of desperate need.

“We’re in this together, Dahlia.” He answered her unasked question, his own lust so great his words emerged as little more than a gravelly rumble. “That’s what you don’t yet understand.”

But she would.

Before this punishment was over, he would ensure that the memory of this ordeal would deter her from ever endangering herself again. He would also guarantee it served as a reminder to him, too. His arrogance and lack of control had almost cost him everything.

He wouldn’t make that same mistake again.

He dropped to his knees, nostrils flaring at the feast before him.

“Prepare yourself, omega.”

He buried his face between her thighs.

Dahlia couldn't take any more.
She'd tried to hold on to some semblance of distance, to keep some part of herself back, but the line between pleasure and pain had blurred so long ago.

She'd bragged that she was a water droplet that would alter him over time, but his onslaught was remolding her, his mix of ruthless discipline, deliberate control, and masterful pleasure making it impossible for her to deny the depth of her need, or the all-consuming power of the bond between them.

Every nerve was wound tight. Every muscle tense and shaking. His passion was her own. Her misery was his.

It was heaven. It was hell.

She'd lost count of the times he'd brought her to the edge of bliss, only to snatch it away and leave her shaking with need while he got up, moved around, got a drink of water, and then came back and did it all again.

At first, she hadn't understood why.

But now she did. Now, she felt it in every tormented nerve and throb of her clit. He was demonstrating that his determination to keep her alive came before his pleasure, and hers, every time.

For an omega who'd been told her entire life that all an Alpha cared for in the end was what he could gain through his cock and his fists, his lesson was a shocking one.

It shattered her—and gave her hope.

“Good omega. Obedient omega.” His growled words vibrated against her cunt as he licked and licked.

He’d been lost to the madness of the rut for a while, but somehow still maintained enough control not to fuck her, no matter how she begged and whined and pleaded.

She didn’t know how he did it.

“Please, Alpha.” Her hand, slick with sweat, gripped the rail above her head and tried to stave off the pleasure clawing for release. “I will never harm myself again. I have learned. Please.”

He was her Alpha and her protector. Her end and her beginning. Her torment and her greatest pleasure.

She’d thought herself only his possession and pawn. But in this moment, she was so much more.

He lapped faster. “You will keep yourself safe.”

“Yes!”

“You belong to me.”

“Yes!”

He growled low, but like every time before, he never gave her permission.

“Please.” She moaned low, her hips rocking with every rough thrust of his tongue, her body shaking in misery and euphoria as her toes curled and white-hot pleasure fused into a tighter ball concentrated between her thighs.

Lost to the overwhelming sensations, the faint beeping from far off barely registered.

But the roar that followed was impossible to miss.

Surging upward, her Alpha loomed over her. “You will come for me now, omega.” He tossed his shirt over his head. Shoved his pants to his thighs. His arms slid beneath her thighs. He yanked her to the edge of the bed. “The punishment is at an end.”

He slammed inside, working his way in deep.

She threw back her head and screamed, her channel convulsing around his cock as climax after climax slammed through her, her legs jerking in his hold, the pleasure more intense than anything she’d ever experienced.

“You will never leave me again.” He thrust deeper. “Tell me, omega.”

“I won’t. I swear it.”

“You feel so good around my cock. Like . . . home.”

The growled words, so much sweeter than she'd ever expected him to say, set her off again.

The bonds at her wrists and throat throbbed as the fate-mate bond between her and her Alpha strengthened.

Her climax grew as he thrust harder and faster, working her up and down his shaft until he was roaring her name and the warm stickiness of his seed filled her.

Her body went lax as his knot filled her, stretching her wide and locking them together. Something that almost felt like contentment wound through her.

Her life mattered to him. It might only be because of what she could give him, but it was still more value than anyone had attributed to her existence before.

She was his responsibility, and he was deadly serious about protecting her, even from herself.

It was more caretaking than anyone had shown her before.

Her eyes sank shut.

"Oh no, little omega." Her Alpha ground against her, the slight friction reawakening her sensitive tissue. "It's not rest time yet. We have four rotations to make up for, and a lesson in consequences that needs to be rammed home." He rocked faster, his thumb finding her clit. "Over and over again."



DAHLIA WOKE WITH A MOAN.

She was on the floor once more, naked, cocooned in a nest of pillows and furs, and if she wasn't mistaken, the mattress that had once been on the cot. She was also pressed tight to a rock-hard body, a thick cock poking against her back.

She'd survived her Alpha's discipline. There were moments when she hadn't been so sure she would, the pleasure so intense it was agony.

A vague memory of him unlocking her wrist from the cot before he flipped her over the bed and took her from behind flitted through her mind. He'd taken her on her hands and knees on the floor as well. In the end,

she'd come so many times she was sure they'd more than made up for the four-rotation delay.

But memories of the initial torment would not be easy to erase.

Nor would it be so easy to forget how fiercely he'd held her. Or the way he'd said she felt like home.

No one had ever said anything like that to her before.

As if he really cared.

"You're awake." His breath fluttered against her ear.

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

Again, his solicitousness surprised her. Her father had never once asked her mother how she felt.

Dahlia took stock. She was sore, especially between her thighs, and she could see faint red marks around her wrist from where she'd strained against the manacle trying to get closer to him, but she was shocked to realize there was no other bruising.

The strongest sensation she had, in fact, was a strange, euphoric sense of contentment along the fated-mate bond between them.

That confused her more.

Before her punishment, she'd been so sure Nikolai was a monster. One bent on the destruction of her family and bloodline. One who had torn her from her life and crushed her dreams of escape.

None of that had changed, and yet, somehow, she'd been altered.

She shouldn't feel anything for him besides hate and lust. Except the flutter in her chest when he asked about her wellbeing told another story altogether.

She could not afford to confuse his determination to keep her alive with caring for her, yet keeping them separate when he held her was harder than she'd expected.

She settled on, "I feel fine."

"Good." His arm banded tighter around her waist. "I am very pleased with my omega right now."

Her heart gave another traitorous little leap. Without warning, a soft purred sigh whispered from her.

He stilled. Growled low himself. "I like that sound."

He nuzzled her ear, his shaft nudging against her bottom.

Apparently, administering punishment followed by several hours of rutting put her Alpha in a good mood. Once again, she couldn't quite recall when he'd taken off his pants or his boots. It was all a blur. But the very good kind.

Her body responded instantly to the thought, wetness pooling between her thighs despite her soreness.

Her mother had always said rutting was hell. She'd declared it one of the worst aspects of being an omega.

Dahlia had to admit she had been terrified of sex as a result.

But surrendering to the rut and her Alpha was far from awful. It was extraordinary.

Perhaps it was Olan who'd made it so terrible for her mother.

Or perhaps it was Nikolai who was the exception.

Either way, she could not pretend the pleasure she found when her Alpha took her was anything but intense. Exquisite. Addictive.

It might be wrong. It was definitely a betrayal of herself and her family. But gods help her, her body already craved the way he touched her. Used her. Fucked her.

"We fit together well, omega." It was as if he read her mind.

"You are too big."

He chuckled, and to her shock, she liked the sound. "While you are just the right tiny size—so tight you grip my cock like a vise."

Her face heated more, but there was no denying the growing wetness between her thighs. Or how her breathing sped up at the mix of heat and teasing in his tone. He was always so fierce. So hard and ruthless. To see him like this felt almost like a privilege.

"We will take it slow and easy this next time, little warrior." He scraped his fangs along the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. "No matter how much you sink your claws into my back and tell me to fuck you harder, I will not."

Oh, gods, she had done that, hadn't she?

His hands slid upward and cupped her breasts, toying with her already hard nipples. "Tasting these on my tongue is sweeter than *taza* berries."

Another sigh escaped. She tried to remind herself it was only seductive words. That he wanted something from her, and that he was only pleased with her now because she was pliant and wet and needy in his arms.

But she couldn't quite hold it against him, because she liked it too.

Her eyes fluttered to half-mast as she arched her back and thrust her aching nipples into his hands.

He growled in approval.

She purred once more.

The shaft at her back lengthened. "So sweet and soft. For now." He sounded almost proud. "But my omega is like a ferocious little wolverbear cub when she's riding my cock, and that pleases me greatly, too."

Embarrassment mixed with pride. "It is the heat . . . the omega inside me takes hold."

He pinched her nipple, the slight sting drawing her attention—and sparking heat between her thighs.

"You are omega." His voice had turned stern once more. "It is not a separate part of you, but the whole of who you are. Fighting it only makes it harder for you to control it. I told you long ago, you can't escape what you are." His hand dipped downward, slipping between her thighs. He stroked her soaked folds. "Or your Alpha's plans for this tight little hole."

She moaned low, spreading her thighs.

There would be time for fighting. Time to recoup. Time to defy and remember her fear and hate, but right now, all she wanted was to lose herself in the pleasure and the warm glow wrapping around her through the fated-mate bond.

She was so hungry for his touch and his attention.

She moaned low as he prodded her entrance, her sore tissue giving way as he worked the head of his cock inside her, his hips rocking against her ass, awakening the heat from her earlier spanking and making her body burn hotter.

"You see, little omega. A perfect fit." He thrust another inch inside, filling her in tiny increments as his fingers played with her clit. Gently at first, then harder as he bottomed out inside her.

They both purred.

He pulled out, leaving only the tip of him buried inside of her.

She whimpered.

"Work yourself on my cock, omega." He growled. "Grind those perfect hips against me."

Her heart slammed against her ribs, what he was asking of her suddenly clear.

This time was different. Sweeter. Sharper. More vivid. Her need as great as ever, but there was no haze to cloud her vision, no violent submission on his part to erase her will.

This time he was making her a willing and eager participant.

She hesitated.

His thumb worked her clit harder.

She moaned, her hips jerking as she gave in—to his command, and her own desires. Her hands clutched at the furs for leverage as she slid herself along his cock, her channel opening for him of its own accord.

Letting him in. Accepting him. Surrendering to him.

It was terrifying. It was bliss.

“Dahlia.”

That single purred sound was enough.

The climax hit from out of nowhere, pulling her under, drowning her in wave after wave of pleasure.

He took over, rolling her onto her stomach as he pounded into her and roared her name.

It was enough to set her off again.

The bond between them snapped deeper into place as his power flowed into her.

Without warning, energy crackled beneath her skin, and the vision slammed into her.

“Olan’s goons broke into the bar again.” Maxheim burst into Nikolai’s office. “I just got word. They’re long gone now, but they gutted the employees who refused to give up the location of our hideout, broke every liquor bottle, and stole what was in the safe.”

Nikolai cursed under his breath but didn’t get up from his desk. What was the point? He knew where to find the culprits hunting him and his family. He just didn’t have the firepower or influence to retaliate. Yet.

“We can make up for it.” Maxheim ran a hand through his hair, his face gaunt. His expression was worried as he stared down at the accounting book Nikolai had been perusing. Always good with numbers, Maxheim was their official bookkeeper—though there wasn’t much to tally up when the bottom line was always zero. “I looked beforehand. We’ll take from the family food budget.”

“No.”

None of them were eating enough as it was.

Eighteen years old and full of fight and bravado, Nikolai had put almost everything he had into this operation, the first of many glitzy, glamorous tourist destinations he envisioned on Abzal. Staying up in the mountains would have been safer, but hiding had never been his ultimate goal.

Even knowing Olan would find him eventually, he’d poured every coin he’d earned breaking his back, stealing, conning, fighting, flirting, and doing things he’d rather not remember because he believed this place could be more than the backwater wasteland it was now.

And because he knew without a doubt that this place was the key to winning against Olan and securing his family's safety.

But the gamble wasn't without risk.

Maxheim prowled the length of the room. "Damien is insisting we retaliate now. Alexi, too."

His brothers were such hotheads. Even at ages fourteen and twelve, their Alpha aggression was difficult to corral.

Nikolai blew out a breath. Frankly, his impulses weren't much better, but he didn't have the luxury of idiocy. "That's exactly what Olan wants. He's trying to draw us out. Tell them to stand down and focus on their damn studies."

"So what?" Even Maxheim was wearing thin at the edges. "We're supposed to stay huddled in this hideout like polar rats in an ice burrow and let Olan get away with attacking us?"

"Hells no. That bastard is going to pay a thousand times over for what he's done to us. Just not yet."

Nikolai needed the backing of the Brotherhood to become powerful enough to take on a crime boss like Olan Lundin, but an invitation to join the syndicate didn't just happen.

It took vast amounts of money and influence to become the kind of player the Brotherhood couldn't ignore.

Nikolai was determined to get it.

Olan was equally committed to preventing it.

Luckily, Nikolai had a secret weapon.

Hand burrowing into his pants' pocket, he removed the chain he always kept close—and laid it on the desk.

"Here." He used the tip of his knife to pop out one of the remaining gems. "Take the vralish crystal. With that, we can replenish what the bar needs and have a little left over for a celebratory meal."

Maxheim didn't reach for it. "I know that necklace means something to you. Soon there'll be nothing of it left."

The same could be said of the Skolov clan—and Nikolai's soul.

But every sacrifice would be worth it in the end. He had to believe that.

The edges of the gem dug into his palm. "Do you need a reminder of who's in charge, brother?"

"No." Maxheim was a strong Alpha, but no one outranked Nikolai.

“Good. That necklace means our ticket to security and revenge. Nothing is more important than that. What gets lost in the process is just collateral damage. We can’t afford to give it a second thought.”

“Got it.” But it was clear Maxheim didn’t quite believe it. Still, he took the gem and left.

Nikolai waited for his brother’s footsteps to echo down the hall before he swiped the necklace off the desk and held it tight in his hand.

Almost all the jewels had been dug out and sold. Casualties of a war with Olan that was going to claim many more victims before it ended.

Only one of the three gems in the center still remained: a stunning blue aquellish crystal that didn’t hold a candle to the beauty of the eyes of the female who had given it to him.

His cock went hard at the thought of her.

His wrists burned as he wrapped the chain around his cock and imagined it was her hands gripping him close. Her mouth and teeth scraping against his shaft.

His hips rocked as he worked his hand up and down.

His omega.

His fated mate

His revenge.

No matter what it took, he would rise from this like a firewing from the ashes—and he would keep his vow.

She would be his.

The deprivations, the humiliations, the hardships would end and his enemies would be the ones to burn. Whatever the sacrifices required.



DAHLIA GASPED, past and present blurring as another climax grabbed her and she soared, her body shuddering as she came with the dreamlike Nikolai from the past and the real flesh and blood, grunting Alpha pumping deep inside her, his seed coating her channel, the force of his power spreading through her.

For the first time, she almost didn’t want her vision to end. It was the first one she’d had that didn’t fill her exclusively with horror or guilt.

Even at eighteen years old, he'd been so strong and determined, the responsibilities on his shoulders enough to have broken a lesser male. But not him.

It made her happy to know her necklace had helped him.

It pleased her to learn he'd thought of her through the years. That even through all the darkness and difficulties, some part of him had remained as consumed with her as she'd been with him.

But his references to sacrifice made her nervous. She refused to allow her mother, or herself, to be nothing more than collateral damage.

"Your visions are coming more often now. That block is definitely weakening." His voice pulled her from the last of the haze and remembrances of the past, planting her squarely in the present.

A present where his knot was lodged deep inside her and he sounded all too triumphant. As if his plans were coming together, just as expected.

"Hard to know, though," he continued, "if it's because of the doc's fluffy theories or because I'm pummeling you into submission, just like that sweet cunt."

She growled and bucked in his hold.

He held her tighter. "I see I will have to keep my fingers hard at work on that pretty clit if I want to summon the sweet little omega who worked herself so well on my cock."

She stiffened. "You can't do that."

"You're right." His voice sobered, and she realized he'd been teasing before. "I've taken more time away from work in these past few rotations than I have all the years before."

Surprise slammed through her. "Really?"

"Really." His tone had gone gruff as if he didn't like admitting it.

Still, some part of her thrilled at the thought that he was taking time from his schedule for her. Neither of her parents had.

Olan didn't work nearly as hard as Nikolai, but he and his men spent most of their time fucking, drinking, and gambling. Her mother's activities were more of a mystery, though Dahlia suspected the poor female spent most of her time cleaning up after Olan and seeing to his needs. Still, restricted to her own quarters, Dahlia didn't have a great handle on what had been going on.

As proven by the fact that she'd missed the attempted assault on her sister.

At that thought, longing for Kaiya swept through her.

“What’s wrong?”

His question surprised her. But she offered up her usual answer by rote.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Sliding his hand beneath her hips, he pulled her up and onto his lap, his knot seating itself deeper inside her, while her legs draped over his thighs and her back pressed tight to his front. His arms encircled her. “I can feel the change.”

Her eyes went round. “You can?”

“Yes. The fated-mate bond is strengthening every time we fuck. I can feel your lust and your sadness. You will tell me why you are suddenly feeling the latter. You will not pretend that everything is fine when it isn’t. I don’t like liars.”

“I wasn’t lying. I . . . I didn’t think you would want to be bothered.” She was beyond grateful her back was to him as she confessed. “I am sad about missing my sister. That’s all.”

Silence.

“You see?” Her anger rose. “I said you wouldn’t want to be bothered, and I was—”

“I want to be bothered about everything related to my omega.”

She pressed her lips tight. She knew they were thinking along different lines. He meant he cared because it gave him insight, because he saw her as property to be maintained and used, and because details about how she worked and thought helped him to achieve his goal.

But that was far from the kind of caring she craved.

“I will have more pictures sent to you.” He nuzzled her neck again. “It’s not the same, but it is something.”

“Thank you.” Her voice emerged as little more than a whisper, the sudden tightening of her throat catching her off guard. She’d never expected him to do something like that. Or how the band of his arms around her would make her feel safe, almost treasured.

It wasn’t real, but it was wonderful.

“That vision . . . did you really think of me when you were younger?” She couldn’t resist asking.

“I did. But imagination does not do the real you justice.” He cupped her breast while his lips ran along the length of her throat. “If the younger me only knew how good it would feel to have you bouncing on my cock, he

wouldn't have wasted time jerking off to your image. He would have just kept working around the clock to make you his."

She should have been outraged by his arrogance and handling, but she wasn't. Somehow his pride and pleasure in her became her own. The glowing bonds at her throat and neck soothed her in a way they never had before. The damn punishment had changed everything.

A rush of slick gushed from her and coated his cock.

They both moaned.

She fought to stay lucid. "I'm glad the necklace was of use."

"As am I, omega." His thumb circled her areola with sensual precision. "Even then, you were too nice for your good. But you are lucky. From here on out, I will protect you from all the other bastards out there . . . except myself."

"That is so wrong."

"But the truth. I've told you many times, I only say what I mean." His mouth pressed close to her ear. "And I mean it when I say you are mine. Forever."

She held perfectly still, fearful of breaking the spell. He was such a disorienting mix of possessive, arrogant, and outrageous, and yet something about the way he whispered *mine* made her blood pump wild and hot. Made her feel connected to him in a way she never had before with anyone else.

As if it wasn't just about fucking her so he could fuck over her father, or using her as a pawn and an instrument for revenge. As he if might truly want her for herself.

But how could that be? No one in the universe wanted that from her.

The first person to do so certainly wouldn't be the Alpha at her back. A man like Nikolai, who could have whatever he wanted from anything and anyone, would never want that from her, the daughter of the male who'd killed his mother, sister, and brother.

Whatever might have been between them had twisted and died in that fire.

She had to find a way to remember that, or her mother was doomed. Except with every heartbeat spent in his arms, that was harder to recall.

"So quiet. So thoughtful." Her Alpha traced the whorl of her ear with his tongue. "But I prefer your thoughts focused on me."

She could feel his knot retreating—and his cock lengthening. Soon he'd be able to move hard and fast inside her once more. To fuck and claim her

again.

Despite knowing she shouldn't, despite knowing she risked another vision and that was exactly what he intended, she wanted exactly that.

She wanted to lose herself in the delusion that the claim she heard in his voice was real and driven by something other than hate and revenge. That the caring she felt crackling along the fated-mate bond was genuine affection and not simply the kind of pleased possession an owner felt for its pet.

It was foolish and no more than an illusion, but in this moment, it was all she had, and she was desperate to be more than collateral damage in his game of revenge.

Of course, that was the moment her stomach took the opportunity to growl. Loud.

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Cock hard and throbbing, Nikolai forced the hand cupping the silkiest, softest skin in the universe to stop moving. “Was that your stomach?”

“Yes. Ignore it.” He could scent her embarrassment, along with her need. Even more, he could *feel* it. *Feel* her. Her emotions increasingly accessible to him along the fated-mate bond forming between them like tiny golden filaments, burrowing beneath his chest and sinking into his cells.

Strangely, far from annoying, the sweet, light touch of her emotions made him crave more.

He wanted fucking everything she had to give.

Except he could sense her resistance. Feel her holding back.

Still, some things took precedence. “When was the last time you ate?”

Cheeks red, she pressed her palm to her belly. “The doctor has been giving me broth several times a rotation, on your order. He said you insisted I finish every meal. So, I did. I’ve been getting more than enough nutrients.”

He’d made sure of that. “But real food?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugged, her delicate shoulders lifting as her body moved, sending his cock deeper inside her.

He stifled a groan.

“I was nervous before the contract with the Verish family, so it’s hard to remember.” She wiggled against him as her channel squeezed him tight. “But it’s definitely not what I’m focused on now.”

He growled low but fought the rut.

His cock might be on board, but a deeper instinct prevailed. One more powerful than lust or his commitment to batter aside that block of hers for good.

The determination to provide for what was his.

No way was his omega going hungry on his watch.

“You need to eat.”

He’d been helpless to do anything but watch his family suffer from lack of food when they’d been growing up. He would never allow anyone under his care to experience that again.

“I’m getting you some clothes and a heavy cloak.” He pulled out of her—admittedly, with a fair amount of regret—and lifted her off his lap, setting her down next to him. Then, resolved, he jumped up and moved to the comms network, typing out his requests to the betas manning the system. “It’s colder in the dining room than here.”

He also didn’t want anyone else staring too closely at her perfection.

That sight was for him alone.

Because just as his eighteen-year-old self from her vision had predicted, every sacrifice, every humiliation—even the ones he wanted most to forget—was proving worth it. She was here with him. Her scent on his skin, her taste on his tongue. All the ugliness it had taken to get to this point was erased by the knowledge that she was his.

“So, we’re not going to . . .” She was still sitting in the nest of pelts, her beautiful white-gold hair tangled around her face, her hands gripped tight around the blanket now clutched to her chest. Confusion darkened her gaze. Something that almost looked like hurt, too.

He stifled a curse—and tapped down on his surge of arousal.

His control around her was shit.

He promised himself he’d satisfy every craving of hers.

But first things first.

“Not now. But definitely very soon. First, I am taking care of my omega properly.” Stalking forward, he stepped to the tantalizing nest of pillows and blankets. A quick search produced his shirt and pants. Pulling them on, he watched her watching him and couldn’t help the kick of pleasure at the lust in her gaze as his muscles flexed. Once dressed, he scooped her off the ground and into his arms.

“What are you doing?” Her hands looped around his neck by instinct, her small frame pressed tight to his skin, the mix of wary surprise and

pleasure on her face confirming he'd made the right call.

Torturing myself. "Getting you dressed so I can take you to dinner."

She blinked fast. "That's so . . . thoughtful."

He winked. "Let's keep that little secret to ourselves."

A burst of amusement reached him through their bond. "I can walk."

"Maybe. But I'd prefer you save your energy." He was already out of the room and heading down the corridor toward the dressing room he'd requested prepared for her when he pressed his mouth to her ear. "Because after you eat your fill of food, I'm going to fucking devour you."

Out of nowhere, the fated-mate bond crackled and white heat slammed through him.

The eyes of the omega in his arms went black.

Somehow, he knew, this wasn't going to be good.



"COME HERE, ALPHA BOY." The scrawny beta with a comb-over yanked at the chain.

Laughter mixed with the stink of sweat, male musk, and lust as the circle of six males closed in tighter.

Nikolai gritted his teeth and let himself be dragged forward, each movement sending the muscles in his back screaming, small droplets of blood rolling into the divots in his skin.

But a whipping was far from the worst part of this experience.

"On your knees, Alpha."

At fourteen, Nikolai was already taller than the forty-year-old beta bastard holding the lash and stroking his stubby, pink cock, but he wasn't nearly the size he would become when he reached Alpha adulthood. Which is why this fucker and his beta pervert friends were willing to take a chance with him.

Still, despite the leash around his throat, it would have been easy to break the chain, pounce forward, and take out the lead beta and the five other grinning freaks, tearing his fangs through their flesh and shutting them up for good.

Easy, but not lucrative.

So, he shoved his instinct down deep, fought for control, and pictured all the cash this would earn him. Nothing paid as well as the beta pleasure houses, where betas were able to act out their twisted desires, including dominating the very Alphas they were supposed to serve.

He'd considered all other moneymaking alternatives before coming here, including pawning some of the gems in the necklace, but the moment those jewels surfaced, Olan would know he was still alive. That couldn't happen until Nikolai had enough money to buy food, a safe house, and the loyalty of at least a few guards.

But other lucrative options were limited. Stealing from others who had little cash themselves was a waste of time and disheartening. Full-grown Alphas who would crush someone like him dominated the illegal fighting pits, and death meant no more ability to earn money. The gambling tables would have been nice, but he didn't have the capital yet to be invited to the games that would earn him the score he needed. Snitching paid okay, but that was one thing he'd never do.

In the meantime, he needed funds now. His brothers were way too skinny for their size and age, Anya had a fucking cold she couldn't seem to shake, and Alexi was eyeing the stash of the local mood enhancer peddlers as if they were the answer to his prayers.

Nikolai needed money to feed them and to put his bigger plans into motion. To reclaim what was his.

What was another piece of his soul lost if it gained him those other things?

His neck jerked as the chain was jostled. "You hear me, Alpha boy? I said, on your knees, that mouth of yours open wide."

"Stick that nasty pencil dick of yours anywhere near my mouth and I will bite it off." Nikolai smiled as the beta's erection wilted.

"Th-they said you'd do what we wanted."

"You want to whip me, fine. You want to watch me jerk off and get yourself off while I do, fine. But that's where I draw the line."

A moment of silence—and then the rush of air as the rawhide cracked against his back.

"Then get on your knees and take out the massive cock, Alpha boy." The beta had decided he'd rather have something than nothing at all. "Nice and slow."

Jaw clamped tight, Nikolai did as he was told, his knees slamming to the dirty floor. As he'd done for Olan Lundin.

Nikolai vowed then and there this would be the last time he'd ever fucking kneel.

He vowed too that he'd be back to kill this fucker some rotation soon.

He might be on his knees now, but soon he'd be standing above them all. Him and his entire family. Untouchable.

The dirt and pain, cum and sweat, shame and twisted ash that tainted his soul would be forgotten, washed clean. His power so great, no one would ever harm him or his again. All that was his by right and blood and bond would be returned into his keeping.

Nothing was more important than that.

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Dahlia sucked down a harsh breath, crashing back into the present, the horror of what she'd seen still clinging to her skin as the colors faded overhead.

Nikolai was braver than she'd ever comprehended. The sacrifices he'd made greater than she'd imagined.

Every lash had split her skin as if it were *her* back. Every drop of his rage and shame had burned into *her* flesh, joined alongside the fear he hadn't wanted to admit to himself.

No wonder he was so hard now. No wonder he was filled with such darkness. No wonder his pride was so important to him.

He'd been stripped of it far too often when he'd been young.

"What the fuck was that?"

Her feet hit the ground hard as he put her down and staggered back.

Out of reach.

As if he feared her touch.

"That is not the fucking vision I need you to have." His chest rose and fell with each harsh drag of air.

"I can't choose what I see. Apparently, neither can you." She sounded defensive, but the pain of his fourteen-year-old self still crawled through her. "You're the one pushing me to have the visions in the first place."

"Not that one." Something that looked almost like hate shimmered in his gaze.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of." She took a step toward him. "What you did was courageous. Your siblings—"

“Say a fucking word about this to them, or anyone else, and I’ll make your earlier punishment seem like a cakewalk.”

She reared back. “I thought . . .” *We were softening toward one another.*

“You thought what?” Cruelty coated his voice. “That tight little cunt of yours would turn me so easily into an Alpha bitch that I would welcome you rooting around in my past? Think again.” His expression hardened. “It’s past time to see your father’s sins, not mine, and I’m growing impatient. Your sister may be off the table as leverage, but she’s not the only person you care about.”

His threat stung more than his previous ones.

She knew he was lashing out in anger and shame, but it didn’t lessen the savagery of his words or her powerlessness in the face of them.

That was her fault for beginning to expect something better. For letting lust cloud her mind. For tricking herself into thinking his seductive words and false kindness were anything but ploys to get her to fall in line. For imagining that the warm glow pulsing through the strands of the fated-mate bond was anything more than her own wishful thinking.

There was no one more ruthless than Nikolai Skolov, after all.

He would never see her as anything but his property to be used as he required.

She was a fool to have ever forgotten that. “I wish to return to my hospital room.”

“Too bad.” He stared down at her. “I issue the commands. If you think what you saw makes me weak, think again.” He wrapped his hands around her arms and yanked her close. “We are going to dinner. You will forget what you saw. We will go on like this vision never happened. You understand me, omega?”

She nodded, but the truth was, she wouldn’t be able to forget.

Not his cruelty or the foolish sense of betrayal slicing through her chest.

Or her horror and awe at what he’d willingly endured.

If she’d ever doubted his determination to do whatever it took to protect those he loved, she didn’t anymore.

The Skolov crime boss might be a ruthless Alpha beast, but he hadn’t been born that way.

He’d been made, molded by shame and rage and each horrific brutal thing that had been done to him by her family.

Now that she knew his secrets, he only hated her more.

And that was the real tragedy.

Since knowing those same secrets only lessened her hate and left her bleeding with the desperate craving to comfort him.

But that wasn't the Alpha-omega exchange, and it certainly wasn't their dynamic.

She needed to stop imagining it could be any other way.

"Let's go." Swiveling her around, Skolov pointed down the corridor, his voice stripped of all the warmth and teasing of earlier. "Servants are waiting for you in that dressing room with the clothes you will wear. You have twenty minutes to bathe and dress. Otherwise, I'm coming in."

Her heart beat fast.

Was it silly to mourn something she'd never really had?

Squaring her shoulders, she marched in the direction he'd commanded. A few moments to pull herself together would be welcome. She had no idea what was coming next, but she was determined to be ready. His past and her future were linked, but it seemed increasingly clear that only one of them would survive the battle coming.



SHAME as thick and black as dirty sludge coated Nikolai's veins as the clink of silverware echoed through the luxurious dining room.

The emotion wasn't coming from his omega through the fated-mate bond. No, this remorse was all his own.

He'd prepared for every fucking thing when it came to his omega, except his idiotic reactions.

Shoveling another forkful of tasteless food into his mouth, he forced himself to swallow.

The silence was deafening, despite the presence of his three brothers, Anya, and his omega gathered around the long, rectangular crystal dining table. He hadn't expected anyone else to be here. He should have remembered Maxheim had instituted a family dinner hour. He was usually so busy he worked right through it.

Frankly, if it was always this quiet, he was glad he'd missed them.

He allowed himself a single glance across the expanse of the long table to where he'd designated his omega sit. Her hair was more golden now that

it was wet—the reason the heat in the room was cranked higher than usual—and her head was bowed as she toyed with her food. She looked gorgeous in a navy cloak accented with fur and a simple blue gown that matched her eyes. He hadn't specified that color or dress, though he had requested long sleeves and a high neckline—as much for his own sanity as for her comfort in the compound's colder temps.

Maxheim sat to her right, cutting his meat with surgical precision. Nikolai suspected his brother was not happy about getting kicked out of his spot at the head of that side of the table, especially by someone who was their family's greatest enemy.

Maxheim hadn't said a word about it though. Like always. He'd been that way ever since he lost the female he loved. He kept it all bottled up inside and focused on familial duty to the exclusion of all else, including himself.

Which was why Nikolai suspected it was the others who were more likely to present a problem. Alexi's mocking stares were really starting to irk while Damien simmered with barely controlled rage.

Tough shit.

Nikolai wasn't feeling too at ease himself right now.

When he'd stormed into the dining room and seen everyone already gathered around the table, he'd reasoned that distance from the omega was the smartest plan.

Now he wished she was pinned to his side so he could . . . what? Fix things?

He was a fucking fool. And an idiot.

He knew she couldn't control what she saw . . . but the exposure still burned in his gut like a hot poker.

He'd expected to take that particular set of sins to the grave.

Now the person he most wanted to see him as powerful knew exactly how low he'd sunk.

Equally bad was the memory of how, for a few heartbeats before he fucked it up, her gaze had been warm and welcoming, the golden glow flowing from her to him along the deepening fated-mate bond making him feel lighter than he had in ages—until the vision and his knee-jerk angry reaction messed everything up.

He'd struck out, wanting to prove he was strong, despite what she'd seen.

All he'd done was prove what an asshole he really was.

Her hurt and confusion whispered to him along the fated-mate bond.

"Nikolai, I'll need your okay to proceed with a new arms shipment. The buyer wants them immediately." As predicted, Maxheim's feathers might be ruffled, but he never let it stand in the way of business. "I'm thinking double our usual price since they want it so bad."

"I'll take a look at the particulars and get back to you tonight."

"I want to discuss retaliation for the witness killings by Lundin." Damien's voice was hard, his stare locked on Dahlia as he spoke. "My men and I are ready and willing to take the whole dirty Lundin crew down."

The omega's fork clattered to the table.

"Shut it, Damien." Nikolai's words were a savage growl. "That's not up for discussion here. Or anywhere, for that fucking matter. If you can't understand that, leave the room."

He watched his omega pick up her fork and felt a little better.

Damien growled but remained in his seat, shoveling a forkful of meat into his piehole.

Nikolai still wasn't sure how Olan had pulled off the hits, and something about it was definitely rubbing him the wrong way, but his sources were saying that the killings in the Brotherhood stronghold had pissed off a lot of the other members and made them more suspicious of Olan Lundin. The last thing Nikolai wanted to do was lose the advantage by blatantly upping the war between him and Lundin.

He had every intention of retaliating, but he planned to be far smarter about it than Olan.

"Moving on." Ever the fixer, Maxheim swiped at the small comms device he'd placed next to his plate. "I've identified a new planet with potential for a Skolov luxury resort and casino city. I want to show you the specs."

"Sounds good." He'd missed a lot in the hours he'd been busy fucking his omega. Fact was, he hadn't noticed the passing time. For once in his miserable life, his mind hadn't been solely focused on business or revenge.

It had been . . . nice. Better than nice, actually. It had been amazing.

He cast another glance at his omega.

Head down, she was still toying with her food, without a single bite actually sliding between her lips.

He stifled a growl and opened his mouth to tell her to eat.

“The Stormhart rep called about a discounted shipment deal.” Alexi spoke before he could, and Nikolai didn’t miss how Damien went still across the table. Or how the kid’s eyes bled to the red of rut at only the mention of the family name. Hells, his brother’s forbidden obsession with a contracted Stormhart omega hadn’t lessened in the least, despite the fact that Damien had his shot with her and come up short. Didn’t seem as if he was taking the rejection well. That was a situation definitely worth watching.

“I say fuck ‘em.” Alexi was still talking. “We shouldn’t have to give them shit for the little bit of intel they’re throwing our way.”

Nikolai mined for patience. Alexi was as bad as Damien. “They have to give the appearance of impartiality or it won’t look good for any of us. Tell them the cargo is already on the way. We’ll send someone to pick up the funds.”

“I’ll handle it.” Damien’s sudden show of cooperation was suspect. Nikolai would have preferred to keep the kid away from any Stormharts, but clearly, that wasn’t going to happen. Maybe Damien seeing the omega contracted and bred to someone else would drive home that it was over once and for all.

“Fine.” Nikolai refocused on the fact that no one had yet to speak a word to his omega. Not even Anya.

His irritation grew—until he recalled that he hadn’t either.

Shit. As head Alpha, it was his job to lead and everyone else to follow. They took their cues from him, and what they saw now was his fury and barely leashed aggression.

Except before this last miserable cluster fuck of a vision, he’d been feeling anything but hostile toward his omega, and he’d been getting the feeling she was warming to him, too.

A development that had been balls-tingling amazing. And way over-fucking-due.

Until he screwed it up.

“There’s an issue at one of the off-planet drop sites,” Maxheim spoke up once more. “Crates of product are missing.”

Fucking Lundin. Nikolai’s gaze flickered briefly to his brother before returning to his omega. “The usual troublemaker?”

“I’m not sure. I want your go-ahead before I investigate.”

“*Investigate.*” Nikolai emphasized the single word, his gaze on Damien. “No disappearing bodies until we know who’s behind it. The Brotherhood is watching us closely.”

Jaw tight, Damien nodded.

“I’ll need your approval too.” Anya spoke for the first time, her gaze shifting between the food at the end of her fork and her eldest brother. It wasn’t like her to be so timid, but then again, she was still in trouble for her visit to the dungeons and was probably pretending to toe the line for a little while longer. Nikolai was sure it wouldn’t last long. He’d always thought her bold nature was odd for an omega and would cause her problems later on, but now he was beginning to see he hadn’t a clue. Because there was likely some poor bastard out there right now who was going to like Anya’s defiance as much as Nikolai liked his omega’s feisty spirit.

One who would realize, if he were smarter than Nikolai, that he needed to do whatever it took not to crush it.

“I’d like to run a fundraising effort related to one of the nearby moons.” Anya was still speaking. “It’s still radioactive from the last idiotic Federation spill, and I think being a part of the cleanup could earn us some good PR points.”

“Give me the usual paperwork and I’ll look into it.”

Maxheim tapped his comms. “I’ll also need—”

“Enough!” Nikolai slammed his fist on the table.

Absolute silence descended in the dining room. Even the servants bustling about with the trays of food froze.

Nikolai cleared his throat. “Omega.”

Her head popped up, those gorgeous eyes—clearer and more vivid than an Abzalian arctic lake—bore into him with wariness and surprise. “Yes?”

Ah, hells. Now he actually needed to say something. “Do you like the main dish? It’s a local favorite.”

Her eyes widened. “It’s very good.” Though she hadn’t actually put more than a few tiny bites into her mouth.

“Excellent.” His stare remained locked with hers, but he could still sense the way his siblings’ gazes skipped from one end of the table to the other like they were watching a damn sport’s match.

“Alexi hired the chef who made it.” He turned toward his brother. “I wonder if he knows how to make any dishes native to the Lundin planet?” There was usually a strict nothing Lundin-related policy in their family, but his omega was from there and there was nothing that tasted sweeter than her.

“Who the fuck cares who made it?” Damien shot to his feet, dishes crashing to the ground as servants scurried out of the way. “You’ve never given two fucks about the food as long as it tasted good, and now you’re suggesting we import something from the Lundin homeworld?” He snarled across the table, his blood-red eyes boring into the omega as if she were prey. “I don’t know why she’s at the table. She’s not some fucking guest.

She's a prisoner. A pawn. Meant to be used and abused and then put out of her fucking misery. Like her bastard of a father did to our mother."

"Enough." Nikolai's voice cracked through the room ushering in tense, ugly silence, made all the thicker as Damien's comments hung heavy in the air.

Nikolai pushed back from the table, his chair making a loud crash as it skittered into the buffet table behind him. More dishes crashed to the ground. This time, no one moved.

He rose slowly, his fists curled on the table.

Maxheim looked concerned and Alexi watchful. Damien was defiant, Anya terrified, while his omega just appeared crushed.

His fury grew.

"I don't know where Damien got the idea that he had a say in how I choose to handle my affairs." Each word was low, deadly, and precise. "But let me make a few things perfectly clear to everyone here. First, I am the Alpha and head of this family. I make the rules. You don't like it. Challenge me." His voice devolved to a low, feral growl. "Or shut the fuck up and fall in line."

He waited.

Damien's shoulders tensed, but he looked away, and then down. No one else breathed.

"That's what I fucking thought." His fingertips pressed deeper into the cloth as he leaned forward to ensure he had their full attention. "Second, the omega is neither a guest nor my prisoner. She is my prime omega and my fated mate, and she is a fucking Skolov now. She's not going anywhere. Ever. You don't like it. Challenge me," he repeated. "Or shut the fuck up, fall in line, and treat her with respect."

He pinned each member of his family with his gaze, waiting until he received a nod of acceptance before he moved on.

Then, he shifted to look at his omega and finally gauge her reaction.

She was looking at him wide-eyed, shock writ large across her beautiful blue eyes.

It wasn't exactly the warmth from earlier, but it was better than the recent hurt and despair.

He'd take it.

"Good. Glad that's settled." Nodding to the closest servant, he waited until his chair was back behind him and then sat. "Let's eat."

For another moment, no one moved.

Then, one single low, warning growl from him, and his brothers and sister sprang into action.

“I, ah, I can definitely ask the chef about some Lundin dishes.” Alexi, always the easiest at rolling with things, was the first to recover.

A swell of affection swept through Nikolai. Skolovs were a passionate, pain-in-the-ass bunch. Keeping the lot of them in line was a lot of work, but it was worth it.

“Would you like me to ask?” Alexi spoke to Dahlia for the first time as the servants surreptitiously cleaned up the broken plates and spilled food.

“Thank you.” His omega gripped her fork tighter. “But there’s no need to trouble yourself on my account.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Alexi shot her his trademark smile.

She didn’t return the smile, but her hold on the fork loosened.

Then, Alexi went off on some tangent about some recent delicacies he’d ordered for the clubs that were all the rage, and the omega actually nodded and responded with a half-smile.

Nikolai’s gums throbbed, his fangs itching to release.

Did his omega think Alexi was handsome? A better match? Stronger? Out of all of them, Alexi and his piercing blue eyes had omegas and betas sighing the most. And Alexi’s charm was legendary.

Nikolai’s claws pushed against his fingertips, begging for release.

She was his.

Maxheim coughed and caught his gaze.

Nikolai reeled himself in.

For hells’ sake, the omega was his, Alexi was his brother, and they were just talking—as he’d engineered.

He really needed to speak with the doc and see if his moods were going to even out soon.

As an Alpha, he was always aggressive, but he didn’t usually contemplate ripping out his brother’s throat. He might say it, but he’d never do it. Alexi might be all grown up and a royal pain in the ass, but he’d always be the little brother who Nikolai had found broken and beaten, chained to a bathroom pipe after he’d been taken by a rival gang who didn’t like the Skolov’s growing power. His brother had survived five rotations while Nikolai searched for him. He’d never spoken about what had been

done to him, but he'd never been the same since. Because of that, Nikolai gave the male a lot of leeway. Maybe too much.

This life had taken a toll on them all.

Alexi laughed, his omega almost smiled—and Nikolai reminded himself that it could all still work out.

“There’s a good wine that pairs well with that dish.” Anya joined the conversation. “It’s nearly impossible to get, but if anyone can, it’s Alexi.”

Despite the gnawing guilt in his gut, a competing sense of satisfaction washed over Nikolai. His family and his omega. Together. Safe and secure in his compound, surrounded by his guards, well-fed, warm, safe from every bastard predator out there who wanted to bring them to their knees.

This was what he'd always wanted.

This is what he'd gotten down on his knees for and let himself be some beta pervert's whipping boy.

He'd do it again in a heartbeat.

And he was going to do whatever it took to ensure this domestic scene repeated itself over and over, forever.

Maxheim's comms buzzed. He looked down and sighed. “I know you don't want to talk business, but I got a request from the casino. A couple of high roller guests asked if you'd join them tonight for some play and fun.”

You didn't have to know Maxheim-speak to suspect that was code for gambling, drink, and sex.

Across the table, Nikolai's omega had gone still once more.

“Not now. Not ever.” Nikolai waved the invitation away. “I've got my hands full as it is.”

“Got it.” Maxheim started typing. “I'll offer up your excuses and—”

“No, don't make excuses for me.” Nikolai cut him off. “Truth is, sometimes I can be an ass.”

Her gaze flew to his.

Finally.

“I tend to prefer anger over anything else. Especially weakness.”

Her delicate eyebrows winged upward. A rush of warmth flooded his chest, traveling from her along the invisible fated-mate tie between them.

“Okay.” Maxheim, still staring at his screen, froze in mid type. “I'm not quite sure—”

“And sometimes,” Nikolai continued, encouraged by the tantalizing sensation reaching him through their bond that felt a lot like forgiveness, “I

think I'm better at keeping control than I am."

A small smile played at her lips—and miracle of miracles, she took a bite of food before saying, "I am sure your guests will understand."

"Will they?" He growled. "Because I had such big fucking plans for after this dinner."

"I don't know how she'd know." Maxheim finally looked up. "And I don't know what any of this has to do with dinner."

Nikolai growled low.

His omega's eyelids sunk to half-mast.

The fork in his hand bent. He barely resisted the urge to command her to get on the table and crawl the length to come to him.

"For fuck's sake, could you two make this any harder?" Alexi's voice had dropped, responding no doubt to the increased pheromones in the air. "Unless this is going to end in an orgy—"

"Get out."

Everyone froze.

"I'm not finished eating." Alexi sounded amused.

"All of you," Nikolai roared. "Except for my omega. You stay right where you are."

Legs scraped the floor as chairs were pushed back. Alexi grabbed his plate. Maxheim, his precious comms. Damien didn't bother with anything but ushering Anya out.

His omega's gaze never wavered from his, even as the last beta servant hurried out the door and closed it quietly behind him.

"Now," he pushed back his chair and stood. "I think it's time you and I make another deal."

Dahlia's lungs worked overtime, her body already on fire, the force of his need battering her along their fated-mate bond and sparking her own desire higher. "What kind of deal?"

Nikolai stalked toward her. "The kind you'll like, omega."

He looked mouthwatering in the flickering candlelight, all wide shoulders and bulging, sculpted arms, his huge muscles rippling beneath his long-sleeved shirt with every crunch of his boots on the crystal floor, his beautiful amber eyes bleeding to red.

He truly was the most magnetic, beautiful male she'd ever seen.

Everything she was learning about him only made her want him more.

The Alpha was hard to resist when he was fierce and dominant. When he added leniency and humility to his arsenal, it was nearly impossible.

But she was going to try. Otherwise, he'd steamroll right over her. "Dahlia. My name is Dahlia."

He growled low and kept coming.

She stood her ground.

He had proven himself beyond brave by acknowledging his own error. She needed to be strong as well.

I tend to prefer anger over anything else. Especially weakness.

Her father had never once apologized to her or her mother. Nor had any other Alpha she'd ever known.

Yet, the head of the Skolov crime family, more powerful than any of those others, had not only defended her to his family, he'd also been willing to admit his mistake. To her.

Her skin crackled with power. The fated-mate bond between them was deepening so fast she suspected she no longer needed his hand on her to spark her visions to life. His potency simply surged through her at all times, his strength hers to lean on whenever she needed, a sparking fuse waiting for the right fuel to explode.

All that was required was that last piece, something inside her to make her gift ignite and rip aside the block once and for all.

He had said she was the key to his vengeance and destruction. She was beginning to realize he might be the answer to her awakening.

“You think I don’t know your name?” He reached her at last, his energy rippling over her skin like a caress. Her fingertips tingled.

Except he made no move to actually touch her. Just loomed above.

Her anticipation grew.

“You think I didn’t whisper it to myself every time I was jerking off or letting those beta bastards whip my back. I know your name, *Dahlia Skolov*. But until you’re willing to accept it in full, I don’t like uttering it.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“You thought wrong.”

Her heart fluttered hard inside her chest. “I had no idea I was your prime omega. I thought the contract defined me as your property.”

“It originally did.” He held her gaze as if searching for something. “That was all that was officially required per the terms of the debt your father owed, but I wanted more.”

Her breathing hitched, her body swaying as the impact of his words hit. He’d given her the esteem of the title prime omega though it hadn’t been necessary.

He was so hard one moment. Kind the next.

How could she have been so wrong about so much?

Perhaps because, if she acknowledged to herself that Nikolai cared for her as much as she’d once cared for him, it changed everything.

And nothing.

Their families’ enemy status remained the same. His family’s dislike of her was still there. Most significantly, in the aftermath of the upcoming Brotherhood trial, someone she cared about would die—and she would be responsible for it.

But, somehow, none of that stopped her blood from pounding hot and wild as the thought that Nikolai might value her beyond her use as a pawn

and a warm, wet sheath.

“You’re thinking too hard and worrying too much, Dahlia.”

Oh, gods, her name in that rumbled voice sent shivers down her spine.

“Maybe you’re right, Alpha.”

“Call me Nikolai.”

Her chin lifted. “We’re not fucking.”

His eyes narrowed. “Say it anyway.”

“Nikolai.” It came out breathier than intended.

He growled low, nostrils flaring. “I like the sound of that.”

She did too. Too much.

“You’re worrying again,” he scolded. “All you need to consider right now is if you’d like to make another deal with me.”

It was a relief to think of something more concrete. “What kind of deal?”

“The kind where I give you something and, in return, you forgive me for my earlier asinine behavior, and I bend you over this table and fuck you so hard we send every plate shattering to the ground.”

The image left her trembling with lust. “I could have another vision.”

“Aren’t I supposed to be the one warning you of that?”

“True, but you were not happy last time.”

“I’ll take my chances.” He stepped closer. So close her chest nearly brushed his stomach with every rushed breath she took.

“I won’t be able to control what I see.”

“You’ve already witnessed the worst I have to offer.”

“You’re right.” She tipped her chin and met his gaze head-on. “But it wasn’t because of that vision.”

His lip curled upward, fangs flashing. “That damn smart mouth. I like it more than I should, omega.”

“Then we’re even,” she admitted. “Against my better judgment, I am beginning to like some aspects of you more than I should, Alpha. Especially for an enemy.”

Her admission had his nostrils flaring, the amber bleeding from his eyes as they changed to red. “But you are far more than that to me.” He grasped her wrist and turned it over, displaying the band. “Fated mate.” He rubbed his thumb across the band. “Prime omega.” Raising her hand, he pressed his mouth to the golden glow. “Treasure.”

Her heart soared at the words. “What are you offering?”

“New accommodations. A tour of the compound. A surprise I think you’ll like.”

“A surprise? What?”

His expression turned chiding. “It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told.”

The urge to smile rippled through her once more. Strange. Exciting. It was accompanied by another surge in power.

Because, for the first time in her entire existence, someone was treating her as if her omega status did not mean only sexual servitude, submission, and surrender.

The way he looked at her now, she truly did feel like the treasure he said she was.

But that did not mean she could simply surrender. Her mother’s life was still on the line, and Dahlia had more loyalty than that.

“Do we have a deal?” His rumbled voice held a hint of impatience. He would always be Alpha, and Alphas did not like to be kept waiting.

She tried to think past the need coursing through her body.

“I would like to speak to my mother. I want to make sure she’s okay.”

He scowled with displeasure. “You’re a Skolov now.”

“Please.”

He studied her, then gave a brusque nod.

Her mood lightened further.

“Accept my apology, omega.” His growl was deeper now. “I can scent how much you want to.”

“Did you make one?”

His fangs flashed, but he did not hesitate. “I’m sorry.”

“Then, I accept. I’m sorry, too, Alpha. I—”

She never got to finish. Big hands seized her hips and lifted her onto the table. Dishes clattered. His mouth slammed over hers.

The fated-mate tie sizzled with golden light and unbridled lust.

With a moan, she wrapped her hands around his horns and dragged him closer. Her heels locked against his ass. The power buzzing beneath her fingertips pulsed from him to her and back again as the bonds at her wrist and collar sparked with pleasure.

The force of it threatened to throw her headlong into a vision.

Acting on instinct, she channeled the wild rush of power into her lust instead, anchoring her and her Alpha in the present and the raw, heady heat of the here and now.

This was where they both wanted to be, anyway—his body moving against hers, his fingers digging into her hips while she rubbed against him.

This was beauty. This was joy. This was more precious than a tainted past or an uncertain future. This was everything.

She had always heard the fated bond was nothing more than a terrible trap, but in this moment, she knew those assessments were wrong.

The connection between her and this complicated male was all-encompassing and full of possibility.

It always had been.

For this moment, she was done fighting it.

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“Come on, little one.” Strong arms lifted her and cradled her close. Arrogant satisfaction pulsed through her from the fated-mate bond, along with something that might have been tenderness. “A dining room is no place for a nap.”

Latching her arms around his neck, she managed a tiny growl of protest.

His low chuckle rumbled through her. “So fierce.”

He jostled her higher in his arms as he moved out of the room. “I promised you a talk with your mother. If we wait too much longer, it will be too late to call and I don’t want that damn call hanging over my head all night.”

She forced one eye open. Then the other.

He’d carried her into a connecting room filled with plush couches, books, and a huge ice bar that ran the length of the room, a sleek after-dinner gathering spot made for cigars, drink, and sin.

Honestly, all she wanted to do was sleep.

He’d fucked and knotted her twice on the table, once from behind and once with her on top, breaking the dishes as promised, before he pulled her into his seat and fucked her there as well. He’d never removed his pants, and he’d never taken off her dress. Just yanked her panties to her ankles and pounded inside. It was becoming a habit. One she liked. A lot.

But her body was exhausted.

She was worn out from the incredible pleasure he gave her. As well as her effort to channel the force of Nikolai’s power into remaining in the present rather than spiraling into the past.

She could scarcely believe she'd done it, but she had. She'd deliberately kept herself from having a vision. At least for the moment.

Except controlling her abilities was a full-time job, and she needed rest.

She also needed to weed through her guilt and her increasingly complicated feelings for her Alpha.

More important, however, was making sure her mother was okay.

Her bottom settled onto the leather as Nikolai gently placed her on the couch. She forced her arms to unlatch—it was harder than expected.

A couple of fast presses on his keyboard and he was handing his wrist comms to her. “You’re good to go.”

She didn’t bother to ask how he knew how to reach her mother. If Nikolai wanted something done, it got done.

“I’m going to see to that surprise while you’re speaking, but I’ll be back in less than a minute.” He shot her a warning stare. “There are guards stationed outside. I expect you to behave.”

“I will. I promise.” The edges of his comms dug into her palms. “Thank you for this deal.”

His gaze narrowed. “Are you okay?”

For some reason, she was horribly, stomach-churningly nervous. “Yes, of course.”

“Should I stay?”

Another tiny foolish flutter in her chest. “I would prefer to speak to her alone.”

His scowl deepened, but he didn’t push. Instead, he leaned over, swiped at two more panels on his comms, and stalked toward the door.

A final growled, “be good,” and he was gone.

Her heart beat fast. In a frantic dash for presentability, she patted her hair and straightened the bodice of her dress.

Her mother’s top beta servant appeared on the screen. “Omega Dahlia?” She looked stunned. “I will see if the prime omega is available.”

Tasha Lundin often hadn’t been. Not for Dahlia, or Kaiya.

But Dahlia didn’t blame her. As her mother had explained, her time was not her own. As a lowly omega, she was subject to the whims of Olan Lundin.

But the prime omega would make an exception for something like this. She had to.

Dahlia gripped the comms screen tighter.

“Daughter?” Her mother’s face appeared on the screen.

Dahlia’s relief made her dizzy.

With perfect features and marble white skin, her mother had always appeared like a walking statue, too beautiful to be real.

“You’re not dead.” The coolness of her mother’s tone stabbed at her until she remembered that was simply her mother’s way. She’d told Dahlia long ago that, ground down by the weight of Olan Lundin’s boot, she’d had to detach and grow numb. Otherwise, she’d have gone mad.

“No. I’m very much alive.”

“What have you told him?”

The familiar abruptness of her mother’s conversation style was coming back to her. “Nothing.”

“I see.”

Did she? “Prime omega, please. I need—”

“Your sister is gone.”

“I know.”

Her mother’s gaze sharpened. “You know?”

“The news has reached here, too.” She hated to lie, but she would never endanger her sister’s chance for freedom. Or endanger Skolov and his family for making that happen.

“It is a blow. Your father has been worse than usual. I have been left to deal with it alone since your desertion.”

It hadn’t been desertion. Or her choice. But Dahlia could only imagine Olan’s fury and how quick he would be to take it out on her poor mother. “I’m so sorry you have to face this alone.”

Her mother spoke over her, her concern clearly elsewhere. “For your sister to be taken from inside the compound weakens your father’s reputation. It was a terrible humiliation at a time when he can least afford to appear soft. But he shall prevail. Kaiya will be found, rest assured.”

That was the last thing Dahlia wanted. She clutched the comms device tighter and tried again. “I don’t have much time.” Her gaze flickered toward the door, her ears straining for the slightest sound. “I need your help. I’m not sure what to do.”

She didn’t usually ask her mother for help. Caretaking usually flowed in the other direction, with Dahlia pitching in as she could. She’d always been more than happy with that arrangement since her mother’s duties as prime omega were difficult. But Dahlia had also never been so lost before.

“Mother, my gift has returned, but none of my visions have been related to the rotation of the fire.” She hurried to add the last part as her mother’s lips pinched tighter. “I am currently blocking them, but he is so powerful, and he has this . . . *effect* on me.” She whispered the last words, wrenched from her soul, a confession she’d been too afraid to admit aloud. “I don’t think I’m strong enough to resist.”

“You’re not.”

The sharp assessment arrowed straight to Dahlia’s chest.

“There is only one choice.” There was a softness to her mother’s voice that hadn’t been there moments before. “I am sorry, child, but it is the lot of the omega.”

“What is?”

“Sacrifice.”

A chill ran through Dahlia’s heart. “What are you saying, prime omega?”

“Kill yourself. Do it as fast as you can. Your gift cannot fall into the wrong hands.”

Dahlia reeled. “I already tried. I-I was punished.”

“Don’t try. Succeed. It is the only path left for you. For us.”

Dahlia’s breathing hitched. Her mother had always been practical, but it had never hurt so much. “I have already promised Nikolai I would never try something like that again.”

“Nikolai?” Her mother’s face twisted with disdain. “Are you already so familiar?”

Heat flamed across Dahlia’s cheeks. “He’s not what he seems. He’s . . . more.”

“So, you’ve forgotten your blood already.”

“No. Of course not.” Dahlia sat up and pressed her face closer to the comms as if she could somehow reach her mother that way. “There has to be some way to fix this with the Brotherhood. A deal that punishes the guilty but doesn’t drag down the innocent.”

“There isn’t.”

“It’s not our fight.”

“Of course not. We are merely omegas, but our fates are bound to our Alphas.”

“That’s not fair. Your destiny should not be tied to Olan’s.” Dahlia spoke fast. “What if you ran away? What if you left Olan and came here?”

The prime omega drew back as if struck. "I cannot. Olan Lundin is my Alpha."

"He doesn't deserve your loyalty." Dahlia's shout was so loud it rattled the nearby bottles on the bar. She took a breath and lowered her voice. "You could come here. I will convince Nikolai to help you. We can be together. Safe."

"Is that what you did for your sister? Did you give that bastard your gift in return for his help and some foolish pipedream that will never be?"

"No."

Her mother's disbelief was obvious. "You foolish girl! Do you think he cares for you? Do you think he intends to keep his promises? Do you think an omega can actually be truly safe or cared for? No Alpha is capable of such a thing. Your sister is likely dead already because of you."

Dahlia shot up from the couch. "That's not true!"

"You have always pushed when you should have simply accepted things as they were. You have always dreamed of things that could never be instead of making the best of what is in front of you." The prime omega delivered the assessment of Dahlia's character as if these traits were the greatest of failings.

It wasn't the first time.

"Prime omega, I am sorry I've disappointed you again, but please, there has to be some other way besides bloodshed for this to end." Unable to stand still, Dahlia paced the room.

"I have told you already what must be done. We omegas do not make the rules. We must live with what is allowed us, but we are not without power. *You* can still make an impact. Taking away Alpha Skolov's ability to use your gift is a form of power in itself." Patting her already perfect coiffure, she leveled Dahlia with the same martyred stare she'd used many times. "Choose selfishly and all Lundins, including myself, will perish. Choose wisely, make the most of the little power that has been given you, and you can at least die knowing you have struck back against a ruthless, arrogant Alpha who, like all the rest, would never suspect an omega could disrupt his plans."

Her mother's words, so close to what she herself had been thinking the rotation in the dungeon, twisted Dahlia up inside, making her question what was right, but she knew one thing for sure. "I cannot. I told you already. I made a vow."

“Break it.”

Without warning, her mother’s face disappeared as the background turned blurry and spun.

In the next heartbeat, her father’s face appeared. “Kill Skolov first. Stab that bastard through his black heart.”

“No.” Shock slammed through Dahlia, leaving her swaying on her feet. She hadn’t realized her father was there. How much had he heard? How much had his presence affected what her mother had been forced to say? “I can’t kill him. I won’t.”

“You ungrateful, faithless whore!” Olan roared into the screen.

This time it was Dahlia’s screen that was snatched from her hand.

With a gasp, she looked up to see Nikolai looming above, the veins at his neck popping while his horns snapped straight, and his fangs flashed.

She scrambled back, her spine hitting the edge of the bar. When that didn’t seem far enough, she detoured around it until her back hit the wall.

He gave her a hard look and then shoved his face into the screen. “She may not be the most obedient of omegas, but she is far more loyal than either of you and possessed of a hundred times more courage.”

Dahlia’s mouth opened in a shocked O.

“If you ever insult my omega again,” he continued, “I will make sure your tongue is cut from your mouth and shoved down your throat before you die.” He slammed his palm down, ending the communication.

Her breath rose fast.

He whirled and pinned her with an enraged stare. “You will not do as they asked.”

She shook her head. “I could never kill you.” It was the truth. All she wanted was to find a way for them all to live.

His hand slashed through the air, a dismissive gesture of impatience. “I don’t give a shit about that. I mean you. You will not try to take your life again.”

Mind whirling, she stared at him. Was that really the part making him so furious? “I gave you my vow.”

His shoulders relaxed, some of the fury seeping from his gaze. “Good.” He blew out a slow breath. “Come here.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. But the truth was, there was nowhere else to go. Even her mother felt lost to her now.

Her breathing hitched.

Steps slow, she reached the middle of the room where he stood, legs spread wide, muscles bunched beneath his shirt. The top of her head was level with his chest.

If he punished her now, she wasn't sure she could take it. She was so close to shattering.

His hand extended.

She braced herself, but the touch against her cheek was shockingly gentle. "Shh, little one. You are okay."

She hadn't realized until he spoke that she was crying. It was the first time she had in a long, long while.

Startled, she swiped at the tears and blinked hard. "Of course, I am fine." Her voice wobbled. "I'm tired."

"Hmmm." He purred low, his fingers slipping through her hair. Petting her. Soothing her.

It felt so good . . . she fought it. "Don't."

He didn't stop. Instead, his arms came around her and he scooped her up, carrying her to the couch and sitting her in his lap so that she straddled him, his arms still wrapped tight around her, her cheek pressed tight to his big, solid chest.

Her tears came harder.

His palm pressed to her back in slow circles, warm and steady, and somehow staunching the worst of the bleeding inside.

"She didn't even ask how you were faring in the hands of your enemy." Disgust coated his voice.

She'd expected him to rail about her father, not her mother. Until she realized he shouldn't know about any of it. Sniffling, she stared up at him. "How do you know what was said at all?"

He raised an eyebrow. "All conversations in and out of the compound are monitored. No exceptions."

She should have known. "She is worried about the family."

"But not her daughter."

His words stabbed deep. "Of course, she worries for me. She has always tried to make me strong. To accept what was in front of me and work within the system to make the most of the limited options afforded an omega. But she is the prime omega of the Lundin family. She must think of the survival of all."

“I know what it is to carry the burden of responsibility.” He didn’t sound any less angry. “You are giving both your parents far more leeway than they deserve.”

He would never ask anyone in his family to do what her blood relatives had. He would die himself before he risked them.

She knew that about her Alpha now, thanks to the visions. There was nothing more important to him than protecting those lucky enough to be counted in his inner circle, even his own survival.

Was it madness to wish that she was a part of that select group, not because of revenge or biology, but because of something deeper?

Wrapping her arms around him, she held tight.

She had hoped speaking to her mother would help. Instead, she was more lost than ever.

Her Alpha growled low, his cock twitching beneath her bottom. “I like when you hold me like that.”

She hid a shaky smile, suddenly feeling a wealth of other emotions, including need. Always need when he was near. “Like what?”

His hands slid down her back to slide beneath her dress and grip her ass. “Like I’m your anchor and your protector.” His lips skimmed across her temple. “Like you’re not just mine, but I’m yours.”

Her breath seized, his words beautiful and full of promise.

“Nikolai.” On a sigh, her body melted against his. Desire blazed into an inferno. She leaned forward to press her lips to his.

“Come.”

He was standing with her in his arms in the next instant.

“Why?” Disoriented, she tried to catch up with the conversation. “Where are we going?”

“We made a deal, and I am a male who keeps his promise. Especially to an obedient, tenderhearted omega who is keeping her pledge to me to stay safe.” He sounded so pleased with her, she was almost ready to forgive him for leaving her so achy and desperate.

“I will keep my vow,” she reiterated. “Kaiya’s life is too important to me to go back on our deal. But I’m not tenderhearted, I’m fine. Really.” Embarrassment was starting to creep up on her as she recalled how she’d clung to him and sobbed. She was stronger than that.

“No, you’re still sad.” He jostled her in his arms, shifting her until she was cradled in his arms. “You will not pretend with me.” His expression

hardened. “Nor is this a situation, like with everyone else in your life, where you’re going to be the one taking care of me. I don’t need handling or managing. You’ve done enough of that to last a lifetime.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he was already pressing his mouth to her ear, his voice once more back to teasing. “I’m the one who will do the handling. Plus, I’m a betting male, and I’m betting that as bad as my sweet, greedy omega wants my cock now, she’s going to want it even more after my surprise.”

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They were halfway down the corridor, Dahlia's body on fire thanks to Nikolai's dirty-talking, when she finally found her voice. "This is promising to be some surprise."

He smiled, his perfect lips tilting upward while an indent appeared on his left cheek.

She lost her breath. He was so beautiful.

He winked. "It is a good surprise, but if you keep looking at me like that, you'll never see it."

She couldn't help but grin back. "I can walk. Or run to it, then." She teased, strangely happy even after the mess with her parents. "No need to carry me."

He held her tighter. "No need. Just a want."

Her chest did that funny, fluttering sensation again.

"Well, in that case . . ." She tightened her latched hands around his neck and licked his collarbone.

Two could play at his game.

He growled low.

Her body heated further.

"Maybe the damn surprise can wait."

Her feet hit the ground as her back was pressed to the wall and his fist tangled in her hair, his cock rocking against the juncture of her thighs through her dress. "I'm going to fuck you in this hallway, omega. Prepare yourself."

Her leg curled around his hip, her hands already fumbling with the laces of his pants. “You prepare yourself, Alpha. I’m beyond ready.”

“So, it’s not safe to come out?” The sound of Maxheim’s voice had her freezing in place.

Nikolai didn’t hesitate. “No. It’s not. Go away.” Another low growl from her Alpha, but this one was far more menacing.

“We can’t go away forever.” Exasperation tinged his brother’s words. “This is a public hallway, and there are matters that need your attention.”

Matters? Her stomach clutched. The trial and her family, if she had to guess.

Reality intruded with a slap.

With a curse, Nikolai released his hold on her hair, but he didn’t let her go altogether. Instead, he pulled her tight against him and pressed his mouth to her ear. “Do not think about going stiff and cold on me again, omega. If you think I was ruthless before, imagine how I’ll be if you take away the sweetness I’m coming to crave. For fifteen years, I waited. That was hard enough. But to hold you warm and willing in my arms, to feel your light and goodness warming me from the inside out along the fated-mate bond, and then have you slip from my grasp . . .” He paused. “Don’t do it.”

The foolish organ inside her chest fluttered once more.

Whatever the future brought, she could never go back to thinking of Nikolai as only her enemy.

Nor did she want to.

He’d become so much more. Her Alpha. Her protector. Her obsession. And likely her doom.

She tangled her hands in his shirt and held tight. “I’ll be right here. Same as now.”

Relief flickered in his gaze. He covered it with a satisfied grunt. “Good.”

He released her enough that she could turn and see their full audience: Maxheim, Damien, Anya, and a host of guards with the lower half of their faces encased in masks to shield her scent.

The entire group was wide-eyed.

“Guards!” Nikolai’s bark jerked Dahlia from her embarrassment. “I will be gone for no more than three minutes. Watch my female as if your life depends on it—because it does.” He turned to her. “I’ll make this fast. You may sit in those seats over there.” He pointed a few feet away, and she

realized she'd been so lost in him she hadn't noticed the chairs, gorgeous art, or fancy rugs decorating the hall. "Rest up, omega. You'll need it for when I return."

He winked. Her thighs pressed tight. He groaned, gave her one more squeeze, and started back down the hallway, glaring at his brother Maxheim all the while. "This better be worth it."

"Wait." Anya's hands twisted in her skirt, her nerves obvious as the mob led by Nikolai halted at her request. "Alpha Lord, before you go, may I talk to your omega for a moment?"

Nikolai's scowl deepened. "I think not. Last time you chatted, it didn't go well for any of us."

The dark-haired omega paled, staggering back. "Yes, Alpha Lord."

Damien snarled, his muscles tightening as if he intended to defend his sister.

Dahlia got there first. "Please, Alpha. I would like to speak to your sister."

He still didn't look convinced.

"If I am to be a Skolov, I need get to know those in the family."

"Hmmm."

"It would make me *happy*."

"Would it?" He looked both intrigued and annoyed at her effort at manipulation.

"Yes." It wasn't a lie. There was much she wanted to say to the other omega.

"Fine," he agreed at last. "Have your talk." His amber eyes narrowed. "But this better end with you the same temperature as when I left you."

She hid a smile. Who knew the man had a sense of humor? "Understood."

Anya seemed too shocked to say anything at all.

None of the others were moving either, too busy shifting their gazes from her to Nikolai and back again. As if the planets had suddenly shifted on their axes.

When all that had actually happened was the head Alpha of the Skolov crime family had actually compromised and done something nice for someone else.

"Move it." Nikolai didn't seem to like the extra attention. He snarled at his brother. "This is taking too long already."

He stomped forward, the other brothers marching behind. The guards fanned out to give her and Anya some privacy.

Still, even with Nikolai soon out of view, his urgency to return thrummed along the invisible bond between them, the bands at her wrist and throat emitting a soothing warmth that anchored her and made her feel safe. His power continued to surge beneath her skin as well.

The other omega didn't waste time. "I feel as if I am to blame for what happened."

"You're not." She could feel the other female's pain and it shamed Dahlia. She'd been so desperate and frightened when she'd made the choice to take her life, only thinking of her family. She hadn't considered that it might negatively affect others, like Nikolai, or his sister. Now she knew differently. "I always had such a plan in the back of my mind as an option. Our talk did nothing to affect my thinking."

Relief washed over Anya's face. "Thank you for saying that. I felt . . ." Her voice broke. "I am glad you're okay." She paused. "Nikolai is very angry with me."

"He will get over it. He cares for you too much to stay angry for long."

Surprise widened the other omega's blue eyes, her youth and vulnerability suddenly very apparent. "Do you really think so? I'm such a burden. We all are. If not for us and the need to keep us safe, he'd never be in this situation."

Now it was Dahlia's turn to be surprised. "You're not a burden." She could speak with true conviction. She'd been inside his mind, thanks to the visions. She knew how deep his feelings ran for his family, including Anya. "Perhaps he doesn't show it as well as he should, but you are his purpose. The need to protect you is in his blood. It's what has made him the male he is today. You don't restrict him, you inspire him."

Anya looked stunned. "I-I never thought of it in those terms."

"The visions give me insight."

"Your gift is amazing."

"And problematic." Dahlia's own fears returned.

"Yes." Anya's expression turned contemplative. "But things between you and Nikolai have clearly changed since our last chat. I frankly don't recognize the almost-happy male who was smiling at you." Her expression tightened. "I hope you are not thinking to do something so foolish as to try and hurt him."

Speaking about her complicated relationship with Nikolai was the last thing she wanted to do right now. “No eavesdropping from the ducts to give you insights?”

“I am being punished.”

Unease coated Dahlia’s stomach. She looked the other omega over but saw no bruises. “What does that mean?” She already sensed a fragility beneath the other omega’s show of bravado. She wasn’t nearly as strong as she wanted her brothers and the rest of the world to believe.

“During non-meal hours, I’m confined to my room with guards stationed at all possible exits to make sure I obey. I’ve also had to agree to additional hours with the tutors Nikolai hired away from the omega finishing school.” The omega’s stunning features twisted in a comical parody of disgust. “It’s getting in the way of my job, but I’m making it work.”

Dahlia hid her relief at hearing the extent of what amounted to a light punishment and made a commiserating face of contempt. “I despise the omega educational curriculum.”

Whatever was causing the omega’s pain, it wasn’t her brothers.

“I knew we had more in common than a tendency to drive Nikolai to distraction.” Anya shook her head. “Their lessons can be summed up in one sentence: spread, submit, obey. I got it years ago, I just don’t choose to always follow it.”

“Agreed.”

Dahlia had once thought that under different circumstances, they might have been friends. With her sister lost to her, the idea held more appeal than ever.

It also made her more confused about her way forward. With every heart beat, she was sinking deeper into an either/or situation with no good choice.

“Well, that’s settled.” Nikolai’s low voice sounded from out of nowhere.

Dahlia’s feet left the ground, and she shrieked as strong arms scooped her up without warning.

“Chat time is over.” He hustled past an open-mouthed Anya.

“Alpha!” Unfortunately for Dahlia, the title came out sounding more like a pleased moan than a chiding.

“There will be plenty of time for omega bonding later. Alexi has gone missing again, despite orders to stay put. We’ve sent men to his usual

haunts to drag the rebellious bastard home, and I'll have to deal with that soon. In the meantime, I've got a promise to keep."

He really was a male who liked to keep his promises. She appreciated that.

It was several twists and turns later before he reached the end of a hall and opened a door.

Dahlia's breath caught in her throat.

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“**W**hat do you think?” Nikolai set her down on her feet at the threshold of the room.
Dahlia stared in awe.

The greenhouse was crystal and glass, teeming with a rainbow of lush colorful flowers that snaked along the walls and lined the pots crowding the tables that stretched the length of the massive room. Twinkling lights and twisting vines dotted the ceiling as well. Plus, unlike the rest of Nikolai’s fortress, the temperature in this room was almost balmy, far more comfortable against her skin than the chillier air everywhere else.

If that magical setting wasn’t enough, the whole dazzling, dizzying feast of color and sultry scents spilled out through two massive glass doors onto a large open patio filled with ice sculptures, more lights, and hundreds of different native flowers native to Abzal. All of it nestled safe and secure within massive high walls.

She finally found her voice. “It’s . . . the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Second most for me, but I’m glad you like it.”

She hesitated. “Can I go in and explore?”

“You better. It’s yours, after all.”

She spun toward him. “Mine?”

“You said you needed sunlight and air to thrive.” He raised an eyebrow, echoing her earlier less than grateful message when he’d given her the Abzalian lily.

She hid a cringe. “Yes. Sorry. I was . . . upset.”

His expression sobered. “The truth is, I’ve been waiting a long time to share this place with you. The expression on your face makes it worth it.”

Surprise wound through her. Along with so much joy.

No one had ever done anything like this for her before.

“Thank you.” Somehow, he kept slipping beneath her defenses. Somehow, he kept ramming past logic and cynicism. Even the echo of her prime omega’s disapproving voice was not enough to staunch what was blooming inside her.

Nikolai controlled her fate, her body, her gift, and her family’s future. The last thing she wanted to do was give him her heart as well.

But it might be too late.

“This is . . . incredible.” She trailed a finger down the first long table, marveling at each stunning bloom and noticing the inviting stacks of seed packets stored beneath. She could really leave her mark on this place. “You are a good Alpha.” Her voice broke. “I do not deserve this. I have not always been a good omega to you in return.”

He growled low. “I like you as you are.” He gripped her jaw and tilted her chin to meet his stare. “Why are you sad again? I can feel the mix of feelings along the fated bond. As usual, this is not the reaction I expected.”

Her smile wobbled. She could so easily imagine a life for herself here. With him. All her dreams of escape seemed so colorless and bland in comparison.

“What am I supposed to do? I can’t save your family and mine, but I can’t bear the thought of any of you dying either.”

Uncompromising eyes met hers. Nothing about his ultimate objective had changed. “You know what you must do.”

“I will be their destruction.”

“You did not make anyone murder innocents or set fire to an outpost. All your gift will do is reveal the culprit.”

“And as a result, I will become a murderer myself.” She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly chilled once more. “My father is a monster, but he is still my father. And my mother . . . she is an innocent victim, forced to stay by Olan’s side because she is an omega.” Her voice wavered. “You saw her at her worst, but it is because her time with him has twisted her. She never says it, but she despises him. One time I came upon her burning some of his stuff in her private quarters. She laughed it off as a childish outburst, but I know she hates him far more than she lets on. I’m

sure if she thought she could leave him, she would. But she thinks there is no escape. That her role is to endure.”

Nikolai’s expression softened. “I understand. This seemed a hell of a lot more black and white to me too before you arrived. You would become a Skolov. You would accept your role as my omega and fated mate and embrace what is between us. Justice would be served, revenge doled out, and the Skolov family secured. But now . . .” He wrapped his hand around her wrist and drew her closer, his thumb skimming back and forth over the sensitive pulse point. “Now that I see how much it’s tearing you apart,” he pounded his chest with his other hand, “and I *feel* it here, it’s not so easy, after all.”

Her heart beat a little faster. She fell a little harder.

“I will speak with the Brotherhood and, if there is a way to help out your mother, I will do so.”

Her mother’s voice accusing him of lies shrieked in Dahlia’s head, but she tuned it out. “I would be so grateful.”

“I can make no promises. The Brotherhood is not known for mercy and their rules were in place long before I became a member, but I will try. For you.”

“Thank you.”

“You are my prime omega. I can do no less.”

He really was wonderful and such a different kind of Alpha than she’d ever imagined existed.

“But I will say again, you should not need to protect *anyone* from the truth. All you can be responsible for is whether you choose to reveal it or hide it away.” He was as relentless in this as everything else. “I wish I could take the burden myself, omega, but I can’t. Only you, it seems, can bring down the block. We both know all my efforts to ram through it only give you glimpses into my own actions.”

She had always said she wanted agency and to be allowed to make her own choices, but suddenly she was recognizing how much responsibility came with such a path.

Nikolai was right. Only she could overcome the block. Only she could determine whether she had a vision or not.

She, who had always thought she was so powerless and voiceless, had far more power than she’d ever understood. If she chose to access it.

Despite her fears, despite the costs, she could not regret learning that about herself.

“I may be learning how to control whether or not I have a vision,” she admitted, “but I still have no idea what I will see.” Every time she had a vision, it brought up the ugliness of the past and altered the landscape of the present, and yet it was growing increasingly clear that there was no future for any of them if she did not. “I might not see the rotation of the fire, but something else altogether.”

His hands wrapped around her upper arms. “It will come in time if we are patient. You are strong enough to make it happen. I know it.”

His faith was as exhilarating as it was terrifying.

“All my life I have never really felt as if I was anything but a disappointment. I could not give my father the gift he wanted. I could not submit with grace as my mother expected.” She forced herself to admit the rest. “I don’t want to fail you as well.”

“You won’t.”

“I have always wanted someone to believe in me.”

“I know.”

Heat tinged her cheeks. “Is it so easy to see?”

“Not to anyone else, but yes, to me, both the strength of your power and your doubts are as bright and vivid as the colors of the rainbow pulsing through the fated-mate bond.”

“What else can you see?”

“Your fear that this is somehow a manipulation. Your worry that our connection will end the moment I have what I need.”

“Will it?” She held her breath.

“What does the fated-mate bond tell you?”

That she was not as good at reading him as he was her. His strength was there, his power, too. But so much of what originated from his side of the bond was cloaked in shadows, so much of his emotions shrouded in darkness, it was impossible for her to see clearly.

“Stop letting your fears and doubts win.” His voice was a low command once more. “Stop fighting yourself. Submit.”

She sucked down a sharp breath. Could he be right? Could it be that simple and that hard all at once?

“You are not in this alone. I am right here.”

The truth of his support reached her through the fated-mate bond, even through the shadows. She had never felt so close to another soul.

Without warning, the vision slammed into her. This time she did not fight it but surrendered. Just as her Alpha commanded.



“THE KURIL CRIME boss will be arriving sometime this week.” Olan Lundin loomed above.

“Yes, Alpha.” Crumpled on the floor, Naytalia’s gaze was glued to the ground in servile obedience and fear, as Olan liked.

“There will be no repeat of last time.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“You will spread your legs. You will keep him happy enough that he accepts my proposal to do business together.” The Alpha seized her hair and yanked her upward by the roots, so her knees dangled off the ground. “What you won’t do is let him use your gift for his benefit.”

Her fingers clawed at his hold. “Please, Alpha. I am sorry. It just happened. He said I was pretty. He gave me the ring. The gift came on me. H-He sparked it somehow. I did not plan it.”

Olan threw her to the floor. “I decide what you do with this body and your gift.” He snarled down at her. “I have been trying to get that worthless gift of yours to work—and nothing. Then he comes along, spouts bullshit in your backwater ear about how you’re special, and you give it to him! Him! Why not me?”

“It was a mistake.” But there was a flicker in the omega’s eyes, a cunning light that hadn’t been there before. “You know you are the only one who makes me come alive.”

“Liar. You said you cared for me!” Olan slammed his fist into the wall. “You begged me to come here. You spread those thighs and writhed against me and whispered how much promise this shithole had. You pleaded with me to kill the Alpha in charge and take over. To take you as my property. You said you would do anything for me. You said your gift was mine for the taking.”

“I can’t help it if your prime omega’s interference is undercutting my efforts. She is always interrupting right when I feel as if my gift might

finally show itself.”

“Leave Tasha out of this. Do not speak her name. She at least knows how to see to my needs, and when to shut up.”

“But that’s not what you like in your omega, is it?” Naytalia slunk toward him, winding her body around his leg. “Her docility isn’t what you want or need. That’s not what you keep coming back to this outpost for. That’s not why you spend your time fucking my disobedient, dirty little cunt and not hers.”

Olan growled low and, for a heartbeat, it appeared as if he was entering the rut, but then he stiffened and kicked out, sending her tumbling back into the wall. “I can’t be so easily manipulated this time, omega. You give him anything that is mine again and you’ll both regret it, along with those brats you keep around to do your bidding. Don’t cross me.”

He stormed out.

Naytalia pushed herself to her feet, but instead of tears, or terror, a slow smirk spread across her face.

With a gasp, Dahlia was thrown back into the present. The light too bright. Sounds too sharp. Especially the harsh rasp of her own breath.

Head pounding, she shoved out of Nikolai's hold and stared up at him.

"Alpha . . ." Her apology, her sympathy, rattled in her throat. He'd struck out so cruelly last time.

"It's okay, Dahlia." He sounded angry, but not with her. "You did very well. Your abilities are astounding."

And awful.

Dahlia had always hated her father. She'd never for one moment doubted he was anything but a brute. But it was still strange to learn that, in his own twisted way, some part of him had craved Nikolai's mother's approval.

A circumstance the omega had exploited.

Dahlia didn't blame her for that. Fact was, she applauded Nikolai's mother. She'd done what she'd needed to do to survive.

What Dahlia couldn't forgive was what Naytalia had done to her children in the process.

To rid herself of one Alpha, she'd brought a bigger monster into their lives and never told them what she'd done.

So much deceit. So many lies.

"That wasn't the rotation of the fire." Nikolai's voice was too cool and controlled. If not for the pain beating at her through the fated-mate bond, she would have believed him entirely unaffected.

“I’m sorry. I know it wasn’t what you wanted.” Frustration hit hard. Again, she’d failed to give him the vision he needed. A wave of dizziness swept through her, too. Her head pounded harder. “I’m sorry too that you had to see that.”

Most of all, she hated that Nikolai now knew what no son ever should.

Olan was not the only one responsible for Nikolai’s father’s death; Naytalia had played a part as well.

“There must be a reason you saw what you did.” Nikolai was all business. “Olan didn’t kill Naytalia in your vision, but he threatened her, along with Kuril. That will help with the trial evidence. Can you project that anytime you want now that you’ve seen it?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

It was easy, like reaching for an image she’d already composed and framed. With barely any effort, and little need to draw on his power, she projected the scene into his mind and the air above his head.

He smiled, but it was forced. “Well done.” But he didn’t look at the images as they played out once more.

“Nikolai, I know seeing that must be hard. I—”

“Don’t. I told you before. You don’t need to protect anyone from the truth. I never idolized Naytalia. I’m not surprised to learn she was less of a victim than I’d realized.” He laughed, but there was no humor in it. “She was never the one any of us trusted to keep the family safe. That was up to me.”

“You can’t blame yourself for what happened to the twins.”

“I don’t. I blame Olan Lundin. That hasn’t changed.”

He was still standing in the same place he’d been when he’d declared she was no longer alone. So why did Nikolai feel farther away than ever?

“You’re angry.”

“Not with you.”

She didn’t quite believe it. Was he growing as frustrated with her as she was with herself? All her life she had wanted someone to see her as more than that a pretty doll, to recognize her as having power and agency, and now, finally, when someone was giving her the chance to prove it, she was falling short. Unable to conjure up the one important vision that was being asked of her.

He blew out a breath. "Let's leave it alone. We made progress here today."

She couldn't. "Even so, you don't like me seeing these things. You don't like me knowing these pieces of your life."

"Damn right." His roar burst from him like an explosion held in too long. A sharp surge of fury crackled through the fated-mate bond, so strong it hit like a fist.

She swayed on her feet. Tried to catch her breath as the pain reverberated through her.

"Omega," he reached for her. "Hells. Are you okay?"

"Alpha . . ." She raised her hand toward him—or tried, her limbs too heavy—and then, despite her will to fight, she was falling.

"Dahlia!"

She heard the far-off sound of her name, but it was too late to answer.



"SHE'S FINE. She just needs a break."

Nikolai scowled as the doctor waved his med wand and recorded more of the omega's vitals.

It would have been easier for the doc if Nikolai had put her in the medical cot, but he liked holding her close. Plus, he never wanted her back on that particular mattress looking ill and pale again.

Already, those images of her after he'd found her in the dungeon would haunt him until the end of rotations.

"She's not fine. I was angry." He blew out a breath and confessed all to the doc. "I didn't control myself as well as I should."

The beta reared back, surprised. "Did you hit her?"

"No!" His denial echoed in time with hers.

"Of course not. He didn't touch me." His omega sounded more upset on his behalf than she was about her ordeal.

"Right." The doc was back to looking close to amused. "It's a powerful connection and we still don't understand exactly how it works. Best to be careful." He waved his med wand once more over her head and chest.

"Still, I see no problems."

"See?" She pushed at his chest. "I'm fine."

“Fine people don’t faint.” Nikolai bounced her in his arms as a message to settle down and then caught the doc’s attention once more. “Explain yourself.”

“She’s been through a lot and she’s tired. The power of your feelings may have overwhelmed her. You both could use a rest.”

“So, bedrest then?” He could get behind that.

From his omega’s soft purr, he suspected she could too.

“Ah, no.” The doc hid a smile. “The opposite, in fact.”

For a guy who’d recently told him sex could be the key to amplifying his omega’s gift, the doc was turning into a real cockblocker.

“Explain.” Nikolai tried to keep the menace from his voice but wasn’t sure he succeeded.

Stepping out of reach and pretending to fiddle with a monitor halfway across the room, the doc responded, “Fresh air. Relaxation. Play. Anything besides death and revenge and gifts.”

For hells sake. Who the fuck had time for that?

He’d already heard through his comms that his brothers still hadn’t identified a money link between the hits and Olan Lundin. That news brought with it some troubling implications.

But soon enough such setbacks might not matter.

He’d made huge progress in a single afternoon, his omega finally submitting and giving him her gift on command. It was extraordinary, heady stuff to have that kind of power at his fingertips, the combined force of her energy and his as sweet and addictive as the feel of her cunt milking his cock.

Everything he’d wanted finally within his grasp.

“I see.” He didn’t try to hide his lackluster response to the doc’s suggestion.

But his omega had gone still in his arms, her eyes wide.

Hells, she liked the idea. Her eagerness shimmered through the fate-mate bond.

The doc was still pretending to fix his monitors. “It might actually help to enhance the omega’s gift abilities. We often perform better after we’ve had some rest and time away.”

“I would love to visit the mountains nearby.” There was no mistaking the wistful sound of his omega’s tone. “I’ve only seen them from the shuttle window, and they look so beautiful.”

Beautiful, but they could also be deadly.

She went on before he could refuse. “All the years restricted to my quarters and the small patio off my rooms, imagining these mountains was one of the only things that kept me sane. I told myself that one rotation, I’d be free and able to actually experience powdery snow, high towering drifts, and frozen glacier lakes for myself.”

Shit. He’d forgotten what she’d been through. How small her world had been.

“Done.” He couldn’t give her freedom, but after hearing that, he would clear the mountain himself beast by beast to ensure she got at least a part of her dreams. “I’ll need the rotation to shore up security and identify the best crew to accompany you.”

Her hands fell away from his neck. “Of course, thank you. That would be wonderful.”

Disappointment beat at him along a bond that had only moments ago been shimmering with excitement.

He scowled. “What’s wrong?”

She looked startled. “Nothing.”

A lie.

Swiveling the two of them so his back was to the doc, he spoke low. “Unless you’re after another punishment, you’ll tell me the truth right now.”

Irritation flashed in her gaze. “That’s not fair to use the bond against me.”

“I don’t play fair. You already know that. No more stalling.”

Her cheeks colored. “It’s nothing, really. I . . .” She spoke fast as his frown deepened. “I had hoped you might want to come. But I know that’s silly. You have a lot to do and I have already kept you from your work as it is. Believe me, I know how much attention it requires to run the many parts of a syndicate. My father didn’t have half of what you have, and he and my mother were still busy all the time as a result.”

Nikolai stifled a curse.

The reports of her stuck inside the Lundin compound, ignored and dismissed, catapulted through his mind with a vengeance.

“Actually, I’m coming too.” He had a shitload of work to catch up on and some disturbing growing suspicions related to the trial to consider, but he’d get to it when he returned. In the meantime, he was developing a new theory about the hit on the witnesses which he’d ask Maxheim to look into

while Alexi—dragged back home and entirely unrepentant—shook down his underground contacts and Damien and his men went door-to-door, demanding answers. The Skolov operation was a well-oiled machine.

It could survive a few hours without him.

Dahlia sat up in his arms. Her hands gripped his. “You are? Are you sure?” Hope beat along the fated-mated bond. Pure, unbridled energy and goodness, too.

How the hells could anyone say no to that?

He told himself this was all part of the plan. He told himself his priorities hadn’t shifted in the least. He told himself he was following up on the doc’s theories and ruthlessly doing whatever it took to get the omega to give him what he needed as he had all along, but a small voice in the back of his head whispered that his omega wasn’t the only one who lied on occasion.

He squelched the irritating narration before it became a distraction.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” He forced a smile and tried not to notice how somewhere along the way, pleasing her had begun to please him too.

“Nikolai, look out!” Dahlia pressed her spine into his chest so hard he thought maybe she was attempting to make it back up the mountainside in reverse. But it was too late for that.

They were careening down the icy cliff on a lightning-fast sled steered by a string while the planet’s two far-away suns shown high in the sky. After a night with her held tight in his arms, she had gotten her wish and her outside excursion.

It hadn’t been easy not to fuck her all night, but he’d made it through, and it turns out, having her in his bed and curled against him, warm and soft and sweet, went a long way toward making up for the misery of blue balls.

So did their current situation.

She was bundled in a white fur cloak and fur boots, with her slight body tucked between his legs while the hair not trapped beneath her matching fur hat slapped him in the face as they flew down the mountain. Even cuter, she was laughing and screaming in equal measure, sometimes at the same time.

He suppressed a chuckle and turned the sled. Unlike her, he was in a single long-sleeved layer—the better to feel her against him—and the wind whipped invigoratingly against his skin as the sled tipped slightly on its side and skidded past a massive, shimmering, silver block of ice. There were no trees in this harsh wonderland, but the twisted, sparkling ice and snow that littered the landscape possessed a beauty all of its own—and as much danger.

His omega screamed again. Unfiltered joy shimmered down the fated-mate bond. “Oh, gods. You’re an insane thrill seeker.”

“You’ve got that right.” It was the only way he’d gotten where he was.

But the truth was, he knew these paths well. When he and his siblings had fled to the highest peaks to escape Olan, he’d used these chutes to sneak into town for supplies. He’d also taken his family here when they’d needed a distraction from hunger or fear. They’d managed to have some good times.

But nothing quite compared to this.

“There’s another ice block!” His omega’s excitement was almost manic, but it was also pretty damn adorable. She hadn’t stopped oohing and ahing over everything. Even the rows of armed guards lining the paths hadn’t dampened her enthusiasm in the least. “It’s coming up fast.”

“Would you like to drive?” He was only teasing. Half the time her eyes were covered by her gloved hands.

“Yes.” She grabbed the string and yanked.

Their sled tipped to the side once more and headed straight toward another giant ice formation.

“Turn!” Hands on hers, he swung them back the other way and realized she was as much an adventurer as he as her laughter followed them all the way down.

They slowed as the ground evened out, coming to a gentle stop thanks to a bump with a snowdrift twice his size. A shower of snow landed on them.

Cheeks flushed, lashes dusted in white, she turned and stared up at him.

He might not have known what happiness looked like before, but he knew now. And damned if he couldn’t feel it pulsing in his chest as well.

“Thank you. That was incredible.” Her gratitude made him horny—and furious all over again at her family. Who the hells kept a young female locked in a tiny set of rooms for most of her life? He and his family hadn’t had much, but they had at least gotten to experience life, the good as well as the bad.

“Do you think we could do it again sometime?”

“Sometime? How about now?”

“Really? Yes. Thank you.” She swiveled fully around onto her knees and grabbed the neckline of his shirt, dragging him close as she crashed cold lips to his. Her hat toppled off.

He was still chuckling to himself and thinking he owed the doc a raise when the surge of energy slammed into him and his omega’s eyes turned

black.



“EVERYTHING HERE, every single one of you, belongs to me.” Olan threw back his head and roared. His fangs flashed crimson, still dripping from the recent fight. He stepped over the lifeless body of Nikolai’s father and slammed his hand to his chest. “You will serve me. Obey me. Submit to me.”

One by one, the nervous subjects of Abzal who’d gathered to watch the challenge dropped to their knees as Olan Lundin swaggered by.

Nikolai’s trembling mother was on hers before the bastard reached them, not a single tear shed for the male who’d been her Alpha.

Nikolai’s knees refused to bend. He stared at his father’s empty, sightless eyes. The blood from his ravaged throat trickled bright red into the white ice. He hadn’t liked his father, but he’d respected him.

Now he was gone.

The sound of Nikolai’s siblings’ sniffing echoed over the slam of his heart, the scent of their fear and uncertainty filling his lungs, choking him with the truth: he was their Alpha now. He was the one responsible for their survival from here on out.

“Nikolai, don’t be a fool.” Naytalia clutched at his wrist. “Kneel.”

Everything inside him rebelled at the idea.

From across the sea of other bowed heads, Lundin’s gaze locked with his, the victorious Alpha’s eyes narrowing as he recognized the challenge to his authority in the still-standing young figure.

“Think of your brothers and sisters.” Naytalia tugged harder as Olan Lundin made a beeline in their direction. “If you kneel, they will kneel. If you do not, they will follow you, to their deaths.”

The one thing he could never allow.

Nikolai’s knees folded, cracking the ice below and sending similar fractures spiking through his chest as his cells recoiled and everything inside him screamed in defiance. But behind him, he heard the tiny drop of several other knees falling to the ice and knew his siblings had heeded his example.

Zaya and Mikhail, held tight in Maxheim and Alexi's arms, cooed as if pleased with his choice.

They would all live to see another rotation. That would have to be enough.

Olan reached them.

"Very good. Know your place and we'll get along fine." His voice was thick with smug pleasure. "Keep a watch on this one, though." He pointed at Nikolai as he spoke to his men. "I sense trouble." Then, challenge still in his gaze, he pulled Naytalia up from the ground and hoisted her over his shoulder.

She didn't struggle.

"Come," he told his soldiers. "I need a drink and a good fuck." He smacked Naytalia's ass. She cried out, but Nikolai wasn't sure it was in protest. "Grab what you like and let's see if this backwater shithole has anything of value in it, after all."

Another round of cruel, crude laughter as the males pulled other kneeling forms from the crowd and strode inside the outpost that had moments before had been Nikolai's home.

Nikolai shot to his feet. His rage was so great he shook with it.

All he wanted right then was to follow Olan Lundin inside and rip him apart.

Except Maxheim, Alexi, Damien, Anya, and even the twins, were all looking up at him with expectation in their eyes.

He was all they had in the way of protection.

His first priority had to be keeping them safe.

The purr of another shuttle engine startled him from his thoughts.

A hover shuttle with the Lundin crest floated into place and parked behind the others.

A laced, refined boot emerged from the open door.

Murmurs went up from the mostly still kneeling crowd. The arriving Lundin family member appeared and floated down the stair ladder.

Nikolai felt a stirring of hope. Perhaps something good and pure had come to their planet.

This was no hulking Alpha like the others, but an older, beautiful, white-blond omega that glittered as bright and sharp as any of the icicles hanging from the hamlet roof. Truth be told, at a second glance, she looked

almost brittle, and Nikolai suddenly wanted to warn her to turn around and fly away from this place as fast as she could.

Small like all her kind, she wore her hair in an intricate braided style on top of her head. She also sported the typical tight corset and a glittering choker that proclaimed her not simply another propertied omega, but the prime omega. The top omega in Olan Lundin's collection.

Apparently, not high enough though to warrant Olan's consideration. He'd left her to travel separately and fend for herself while he rutted a lower omega.

Still, Lundin's bride held her head high. After her, an entourage of four betas covered in hooded robes spilled from the vehicle and hurried to fluff her dress and fidget with her hair.

She waved them off.

Nikolai's gaze locked with hers. Again, a surge of hope ran through him, as if maybe he'd found an ally, as if their shared difficulties with Olan might foster shared sympathy.

Until the omega spoke.

"Look at this place and these creatures." Olan's bride's nose wrinkled, her stare still locked on him. "Filth and disrespect as far as the eye can see, but I will rise above. I always do."

Somehow, her disgust cut worse than Olan Lundin's disrespect.

He snarled to cover the weakness, but the prime omega had already dismissed him, sailing forward, stepping over the downed body of Nikolai's father without hesitation or remorse.

Her entourage of beta servants and guards trailed behind.

Nikolai decided then and there he hated all Lundins, and that soon enough, none of them would ever be able to dismiss him again.

The vision ended as quickly as it had come, the image disintegrating as it was pierced by the shimmer of sunlight reflecting off the ice. Except nothing could wipe away the stain of cruelty left behind by her mother.

Or the fact that for the first time, Nikolai hadn't been the only one to see her vision.

Dahlia sucked down a harsh breath, her hold on the Alpha's shirt too tight as the murmurs of the guards reached her.

They'd all witnessed Nikolai forced to kneel, the ugliness of her mother's treatment.

She knew already how much her Alpha hated having his secrets exposed.

Nikolai hated all Lundins.

No wonder. First, both her parents and now she had publicly humiliated him.

"I'm so sorry." She shivered, aware of the cold as she hadn't been before. "I thought I was beginning to be able to control the visions, but sometimes when my emotions get so big, it's too much. I never meant for anyone to see. Spending the rotation with you has been so wonderful, and now I ruined it with the stupid vision and the reminder of my family's cruelty. I am—"

"Shhh." Her Alpha pulled her to him and pressed his mouth to hers. She was so startled she kissed him back.

She'd almost forgotten the incident, much less her name when he pulled back. "Turns out I don't hate all Lundins."

She stared up at him.

He sighed. "So, no humor after a vision, huh?"

He was . . . *teasing* her?

She tried to catch up. "You're not mad?"

His hands moved up and down her arms, warming her up. "It's okay, omega. What you saw is long in the past and frankly feels farther away with every moment spent in the present here with you."

Such unexpected, lovely words. Her heart expanded.

"Plus, I don't give a shit if my soldiers see what happened that rotation." Aggression rumbled through his voice, reminding her again that, despite his indulgence for her, he remained a dangerous predator. "I'm not the boy I was, and if any of them doubt it, they are welcome to challenge me and test my strength for themselves."

She hoped it didn't come to that. Not that she doubted the outcome for one moment. Nikolai was the strongest, most brutal Alpha she'd ever seen, but her family had already been the reason for too many of his wounds. She didn't want to be the cause of any more. "No one would be so foolish. What stands out most from that vision is your strength, loyalty, fortitude, and how much you're willing to do for your family. After seeing that, anyone considering tangling with you would know exactly how dangerous it would be."

His hold on her arms tightened, his gaze heating. "You've always been too nice for your own good, omega. But I like the way you see me. I like it a lot."

She smiled up at him, her body catching fire as the heat in his gaze sparked her own. "Thank you for being so understanding. I'm glad you're not mad."

But instead of leaning in for another kiss as she hoped, he gripped her chin and gently turned her face as he peered into her eyes. "What I am, is concerned that you are okay. You are not supposed to be having any visions right now, doctor's orders. How do you feel?"

His care warmed her. "All right. A little more tired than before, but no headache this time."

"Good."

She couldn't help herself. "I hope you didn't end up taking what my mother said to heart. Her life was . . . is . . . hard."

"She proved a motivating force."

It was a kind way of putting it. "Strange that I saw that particular vision now."

"True, though right before you had it, I was thinking about the last time I left work behind and felt this light. Maybe my thoughts about the past directed your vision toward this particular moment."

The rotation her father had come and torn Nikolai and his family's life apart.

"Don't look so sad, omega. The point is, I'm feeling that lightness again here with you and it's . . . nice." His lips tilted up, and she wished his mouth was back on hers. "The doc was right. This was a good idea for both of us. I didn't realize how much I needed to get away until now."

Her heart skipped again. It pleased her to know he was having a good time, too. She had never had better.

Truth was, it was getting harder to care that his motivation for his recent kind treatment most likely stemmed from his desire to bring her and her gift to heel. Because unlike Olan and his brutish fists, Nikolai's gilded cage was full of exquisite orgasms, fun outings, shivers in her core, and flutters deep in her chest. The battle he was waging wasn't in-her-face vicious as her father's had been, but it was far more effective.

Like any ruthless warrior, Nikolai was settling for no less than the full surrender of her heart.

Despite knowing this, she couldn't seem to help herself from falling, anyway.

But what would happen once she gave him the vision he needed?

Would he keep his promise regarding her mother and her sister? Would he still treat her with care? Take her sledding? Say kind things and worry over her health?

Or would he become more like Olan, treating her the way her father did her mother, as something to be used time and again without anything given in return?

Because the truth was, if Nikolai only cared for what he could get from her, and not for her as something more than a pawn or prize, this was all going to end and she needed to be prepared.

She'd never know the answer though unless she risked all, and it turned out she might be evolving into as big a risk-taker as the Alpha she was falling for because that was what she intended to do.

She just had to figure out how to give him the vision he needed.

"You ready for another ride?" Nikolai pulled her up. Then, scooping up her fallen hat, he shook off the snow and placed it carefully on her head, tucking her hair beneath, before he tossed the sled over his shoulder, muscles rippling beneath his tight long-sleeved shirt.

Presented with such exquisite care and only more questions, all she could do was nod and follow.



"HERE. DRINK THIS."

It was the third cup of warm spiced drink he'd thrust into her hands.

He'd brought her to another gorgeous room in his compound. This one was a cozy study, with a red, silken rug on the crystal floor, plush white fur couches, walls of books, and a roaring fire in a massive fireplace. Without a word, he'd stripped them both down to next to nothing before seating her next to the flames.

Now he was wearing dark blue drawstring pants that showed off his round ass and left his chiseled chest bare while she wore the matching top—though it went to her knees.

She took the cup and sipped. She was far past thirsty and beyond warm, but his care was so sweet. The entire rotation, besides the brief blip with the vision, had been magical.

It was insane to admit, especially during such a difficult, complicated time, but she'd never been happier.

That she felt this way because of the male she had been so sure would only bring her pain was more startling.

Grabbing his own glass—unlike hers, his was filled with his favorite inner-planetary ale—he joined her in front of the fire, scooping her up and putting her on his lap.

That was another wonderful thing. He seemed to like touching her, even when he wasn't fucking her.

She'd never seen her parents touch outside of the times her father grabbed her mother for sex or struck out in anger. Until Nikolai, Dahlia hadn't realized there was another way.

"Today was a good day."

She hid a smile. Of course, he declared it. No asking for her Alpha. "It was," she agreed readily. "One of the best I have ever had."

"Only one of the best? What was better?" He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

This time she did smile. "Not better, but there have been a couple as spectacular." She couldn't help the blush that spread across her cheeks. "Yesterday, the rotation you told me I was your prime omega and then fucked me on the table." Her body heated at the reminder. "That was the best, too. Along with the greenhouse surprise." Unable to help herself, she reached out and stroked her finger along the curve of his strong, square jaw. "Thanks to you, I've had several recent amazing, surprising good moments."

He growled low, turning his head and catching her finger in his mouth. The scrape of his fangs against her skin sent a shiver straight to her core.

She leaned closer.

His eyes flashed to red and then back to amber. He shook his head as if trying to shake off the rut. "One moment." His fingers flew over the comms.

The doc's harried face appeared on the screen.

Nikolai didn't bother with hello. "We've rested. We played. We had fun." He winked at her. "Now, can we fuck?"

Her mouth dropped open. The male was outrageous.

"Of course." The doc sounded amused. "I never said no."

"What?"

Dahlia was very glad there was no way to strangle someone through a comms device as Nikolai looked ready to kill.

In his defense though, she'd also thought the doctor had been discouraging sex. If she'd known differently, she would have already triggered her Alpha's rut several times. Last night in Nikolai's bed, with his arms around her and his scent in her lungs, had been extraordinary, but also sheer torture. She'd craved him inside her.

"I said to do something else, too." The doc was nervously explaining. "I apologize if you thought—"

Nikolai closed out the comms.

His eyes had returned to red. “We’ve got some time to make up for, omega.”

The growl in his voice had her nipples hardening, her thighs pressing tight. “Good.”

Suddenly, she was on her back, the soft fur of the couch tickling her shoulders, the hard muscles of her Alpha pressed to her chest, his thick cock between her thighs . . . and something lumpy digging into her hip.

“What’s that?” She wiggled beneath him.

“If you don’t know by now—”

She laughed. “Not that.” Her hand slid from his shoulders to his pants pocket and she poked at the distraction.

“Oh, yes.” He shook his head, some of the haze of rut clearing from his gaze. “I was going to give you this before the conversation with the doc.”

“It’s for me?” She shook her head. “You don’t need to give me anything else. The adventure this rotation was more than enough.”

He leaned over her, his thumb tracing the lines of her face. “It’s more of a return.”

She had no idea what he was talking about.

Stare solemn, he pulled something from his pocket and cupped it in his hand.

She rose on her elbows to see.

Surprise slammed through her.

It was the necklace she’d given him long ago. In her vision, he’d removed the gems one by one to sell to keep his family alive. Except the necklace in his palm sparkled with a complete set of jewels that looked bigger and of higher quality than what had been there before.

“You kept it.”

“Of course.” He stared down at the necklace and then at her. “It killed me to have to take any of the gems out, a little bit like cutting out my soul, but I promised myself I’d replace them. I promised myself that one rotation soon I’d be putting it back around your neck and you’d be wearing it for me—with nothing else.”

Her chest was too small for the sensations clamoring within.

“That can definitely be arranged.” She pulled his shirt over her head.

The heat of the fire was nothing compared to his gaze. “Beautiful.”

She bowed her head.

He placed the necklace around her throat and closed the clasp, the cold weight of the gems an erotic contrast to the fire licking beneath her skin.

“This necklace was the first time anyone ever sought to take care of me.” He traced the length of the chain with the tip of his finger, dipping between the valley of her breasts and making her breath come faster and faster. “It was the key to my survival. Any time I began to wonder if I could truly keep them alive, I would grip it in my palm and remember the faith you had in me. I would recall how you said you could sense greatness in me, and I would keep going.”

Those feelings inside her chest grew bigger.

“It’s time though to give it back to you.” He traced the fluttering pulse at the hollow of her throat. “Because now I have something better to anchor and guide me. A brighter treasure to give me hope and remind me there is light in the world. You.”

“Alpha . . .” Perhaps her hopes were not so foolish, after all. Perhaps an Alpha could truly care for an omega, even one who was his enemy. Her gaze locked with his. “Promise me something? Promise me you won’t shut me out. Promise me all this is real.”

He paused, his stare boring into her. “I promise.”

For now, it was enough.

On a sigh, she tangled her fingers in his hair. “Then I promise to believe in you—and us.” She dragged his mouth to hers.

“Nikolai!” The shout echoed from down the hall. “Come quick. There’s been an attack. It’s Alexi! He’s been shot.”

Nikolai leaned back in his throne and, over the length of his desk, studied the glittering lights and well-dressed people below.

He'd always loved the view from his private study at night.

Perched high above the deluxe main room of his most popular elite gambling establishment, his floor-to-ceiling half-circular windows showcased all he'd built. Seeing it laid out beneath him had always given him a voyeuristic thrill.

Until today.

Today, only rage and the urge to do violence burned in his gut.

Fucking Lundins. They'd almost taken another of his family from him.

"The doc said we'll know more in a few hours." Damien barreled through the door with yet another unnecessary update, his hair a wild mess, Alexi's dried blood still clinging to his dark shirt.

Damien had been the one to find their brother.

"The med unit will work." Maxheim looked equally as rough. The button on his shirt sleeve hung on by a thread, his usually perfectly creased pants a rumpled mess.

Unlike his brothers, Nikolai had sat by Alexi's beside until the doc kicked him out. Then, he'd gone back to his room and showered and changed. No more casual clothes, however. He'd donned his ritual Abzalian mafioso warrior gear: fur pelt, leather pants, and shit-kicker boots—because a fight was coming.

Anya had been crying so hard she'd had to be sedated.

His omega was with her now.

Dahlia. The daughter of the male who'd killed his mother and siblings, and now allegedly gunned down his brother.

Nikolai's grip on his glass tightened.

The distinctive white-golden coloring of the Lundin soldiers who'd conducted the hit against Alexi had been reported by several witnesses.

Overwhelming evidence indicated that, despite the Brotherhood's decree to stand down until the trial was over, Olan had struck out again, anyway.

But something about the whole situation didn't sit right with Nikolai.

And not only because of the look on his omega's face when they'd heard the news or the way the golden glow blazing along the fated-mate tie had sputtered and gone out like a flame extinguished, as if all her hope had faded, as if he'd lost her again.

Right when he'd finally gotten his omega to believe in him, to believe in *them*.

He refused to let that faith be destroyed.

He refused to let Olan Lundin take one more fucking precious thing from him.

The only problem: as the war heated up, sacrifices would be required, dangers multiplied, lines between enemies drawn deeper in the dirt. And Nikolai didn't know how to keep his family safe without hurting the omega that every cell in his body screamed to protect.

"We need to make that motherfucker suffer." Damien's fangs flashed. "No more waiting for the Brotherhood. We take Olan Lundin apart now and make him pay for coming after one of our own. Him and every fucking Lundin tainted by his blood. An eye for an eye."

Nikolai sat forward in his chair. The leather of his pants rustling ominously. "Be very careful right now, brother." He didn't try to hide the threat in his voice. "Not all Lundins are up for grabs."

Damien snarled.

Nikolai pushed back from his chair and stood.

Maxheim stepped between them. He shoved Damien's chest, sending the kid stumbling back. "Don't be an idiot."

Another snarl from Damien, but he didn't retaliate.

Instead, he stormed to the other side of the room and slammed his fist into the wall.

A hole emerged. Cracks snaked along the composite ice wall.

Maxheim straightened his sleeve, giving it a good tug. "I'm taking that out of your salary, Damien." He headed back to his seat and folded into his chair once more. "We knew this could happen. Alexi was under strict orders not to go out. He did so anyway."

"We already lost two siblings to that bastard." Damien was still seething. "I'm not losing another because some of us have gone soft."

The glass in Nikolai's hand shattered.

"Can we all calm down before we wreck our entire fucking casino without Olan Lundin lifting a finger?" Maxheim scooted back, dusting shards of glass from his suit jacket. "Look, tempers are high, but this is not the time for finger-pointing."

"You're right." Nikolai curled his fist, the sting from cuts in his palm no more than he deserved. "But so is Damien. This is on me."

"He never said that," protested Maxheim.

Damien looked mutinous.

"He didn't have to." Nikolai plucked a shard of glass from his palm. "This is my plan. My responsibility. I should have been asking different questions when it came to Olan Lundin. I should have known what Alexi would do and been ready. Our brother's been inching toward self-destruction for a while now, and I kept kicking it down the road as a problem to be dealt with later. I needed to be three steps ahead, and this time I wasn't."

Because despite the fact that he'd sensed something was off with this whole Olan Lundin situation, he'd lost focus. Gone soft.

Like he had with the twins the rotation of the fire.

It had cost them all.

Alexi had been gunned down leaving his favorite club, while Nikolai had been soaking up time with his omega, so dazzled by her scent and softness and the goodness that radiated from her like a golden light that he'd stopped thinking exclusively of revenge and business.

Again, like with the twins.

Nikolai's boots crunched over broken glass as he paced to the window and joined his younger brother. His skin itched, his claws pushed at his fingertips. He said what he needed to say, anyway. "I'm sorry, Damien. I let you down. It won't happen again."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for." A muscle jumped in Damien's jaw. "This is on all of us, not just you. Maxheim is right, Alexi knew the

risk he was taking. That's probably why he did it. I don't think he knows how to feel anything unless he's right on the edge." He paused. "But the idiot is tough. He'll recover. I'm more concerned about you."

"Me?" A low rumble emerged as Nikolai's Alpha ego bristled. "I'll be fine, believe me. I can more than handle myself."

"You didn't have an obvious weakness before." His brother blew out a breath. "She's going to get you killed."

Nikolai's comms beeped, cutting off any response he might have given.

Andor Stormhart's bearded face appeared on the screen. "I heard about Alexi. I'm sorry."

Nikolai's nodded. "Thank you. What have you heard?"

"Same as you. Not much." Stormhart sounded frustrated, an unusual state for the usually unruffled Alpha. "The hit looks like a retaliation. No clear traces back to Lundin, but it's hard not to connect the dots."

Nikolai and his men had made the same conclusions and come up against the same roadblocks. "Seems obvious enough, but my men have been watching the bastard around the clock. He's holed up in his compound, drinking and fucking, and trying to reach his cronies in the Brotherhood so he can complain to anyone who will listen that he's being railroaded. We've been monitoring his communications and not one can be traced to this hit."

"Like with the hit against the witnesses." Damien projected his voice loud enough to be heard into the comms.

"Plus," Maxheim's fingers tapped the armrest of his chair, his computer-like mind trying to find the answer to their puzzle, "my team and I have made sure all his assets are frozen, his accounts close to liquidated."

"Which means he has neither the funds nor the manpower to pull something like this off right now. So how the fuck did he do it?" Stormhart's voice crackled across the comms.

"Help. Just like with the hits against the witnesses." Nikolai voiced what they were all thinking. "It's no longer a theory, but a fact. Olan is getting assistance from another source."

That's what had been bothering Nikolai all along. The growing certainty that there was another enemy plotting against his family.

Nikolai only hoped he hadn't figured it out too late.

"Are you sure?" Stormhart sounded skeptical.

“I listen to my gut.” Initially, Nikolai had assumed Olan had brought someone in to help him, but now he realized he’d been myopic in his thinking. Now, he was beginning to suspect the other crime boss might be less the puppet master and more the puppet, linked with someone who wanted everyone pointing fingers at Olan while they operated from the wings. After all, Nikolai did have more enemies than just the Lundin family. The Skolov meteoric rise had pissed off more than a few.

“Shit.” Stormhart’s reaction sounded genuine enough, but Nikolai didn’t trust anyone outside of his family circle. “What if it’s someone in the Brotherhood? What then?” For the first time, the big, fierce male sounded nervous.

“We don’t even blink.”

“It will mean war,” warned Stormhart. “The dissolution of the organization that has maintained the status quo and kept things from getting ugly for generations.”

“Then everyone better hurry up and pick sides.”

Stormhart blew out a breath.

Nikolai waited. He could feel his brothers tense behind him.

“We’ll side with you, of course.” Stormhart didn’t sound happy about it, but Nikolai understood. The other male would prefer no feud at all.

“Smart choice,” Nikolai told the other crime boss. “Instability is bad for profits, but being on the losing side would be worse for business.”

The male laughed. “You’re such an arrogant, troublesome bastard. Must be why I like you.” He sobered fast. “But that won’t be enough if your theory is wrong. The Verish and Lunara family heads are already squawking that we should just take both you and Lundin out and save ourselves the headache—and increase our profits. The rest of us know that wouldn’t be as easy to do as it sounds and Prendel is a stickler for precedent. Still, you better be damn sure of who this other enemy is before you go accusing anyone and blowing up the Brotherhood.”

“I will be.” Nikolai stretched his neck left to right, loosening the tense muscles. “Damien tracked down a few of the hired guns involved in the hit against Alexi. They’ll be in our dungeons soon enough.”

“Impressive.” Stormhart’s bushy eyebrows were sky high. “I don’t know how you do it. My men are good, and we couldn’t find anyone who took part in the hit still alive. It looked like they’d all been wiped out by someone tying up loose ends. We assumed that was Lundin.”

“We’ll know the answer soon enough.” Nikolai’s hands fisted at his sides. “Nobody wants the bastards behind the hit against Alexi more than we do.”

“Understandable.” Stormhart tried for a smile. “We’ll wait to hear what you learn.”

His face disappeared from Nikolai’s comm and the signal blinked out.

“Can we trust him?” Maxheim didn’t mince words.

“Hells no.” Nikolai didn’t either. “But we can’t afford to isolate ourselves either. If war is coming, we will need allies. Only time will reveal our real friends from the polar rats.”

“A second enemy. It seems so obvious now.” Damien paced. “We should have known from the start Olan didn’t have the smarts or the balls to keep his syndicate afloat this long all by himself. We should have known there was another threat hiding behind Olan.”

“We know now.” He turned to Maxheim. “Expand your search. You know what to look for. Our culprit may be hiding behind others, but we’ll get to them.” Nikolai locked down the rage and fought for control.

He couldn’t afford any show of weakness. Unlike Damien, he wasn’t worried about his own survival, but he was damn sure not going to do anything to endanger those he’d vowed to protect. “Better yet, we’ll go through Olan to get there. We may have another enemy to contend with, but Olan Lundin is nowhere close to paying his debt to us.”

“Alpha, may I come in?”

The sound of his omega’s voice hardened his cock, sending his thoughts careening from killing to fucking.

He stifled a curse.

She was the last thing he needed right now, and everything he wanted.

He didn’t turn around.

Instead, his fists clenched by his side.

“I wanted to let you know Anya is resting.” Nerves thickened her voice as she hovered at the doorway. She had to sense the darkness seething through the fate-mate bond. Detect the barely leashed violence in the air. “And . . . see if I could be of any other help?”

“Now’s not the time, omega.” Maxheim rose from his seat and blocked her way. He sounded annoyed, but Nikolai knew he was only trying to protect the omega—and Nikolai from something he’d regret.

Good old Maxheim. Always trying to save everyone.

But Nikolai wasn't in the mood to be saved.

"She stays." Nikolai growled low. "Everyone else, out."

"Brother, think this through," urged Maxheim.

"Contact me when our *guests* arrive and are settled in. Until then, get the hells out." The last sentence was delivered with the unmistakable Alpha command, an order that could not be ignored or disputed.

There was a scramble of heavy footsteps, and then his brothers were gone, leaving behind the faint breath of a single brave inhabitant, and the sweet, addictive scent that had his fangs dropping.

Wrestling for control, he remained with his back to her, surveying the scene below in the casino, watching as another foolish high roller lost fifty thousand in one reckless bet.

It was crazy how quickly one's fortunes could change from one moment to the next.

But he's already learned that lesson himself.

"So, you want to help?"

"Yes." She crossed toward him, her footsteps tentative. She wasn't a fool, but she came, nonetheless. She had courage.

And how did he intend to reward it?

He was as much a bastard as Olan.

"I'm sorry about Alexi." She hovered at his back. "But Doctor Randalff says your brother is strong and there is every reason to hope—"

Nikolai cut her off. "How exactly do you think you can help me?"

A slight hesitation. "You comforted me when I was sad. I hoped I could do the same for you."

"Hold me? Pet me? Tell me everything will be all right?" There was no missing the hard edge to his voice.

She swallowed hard. "Yes. If that's what you'd like."

"If it's not?"

She paused. "This was a mistake. I'll go." She turned.

He scented her anger, and her hurt.

It frayed his control further.

He whirled around and caught her wrist, yanking her to him. She was wearing the red silk dress that drove him crazy, as if she'd come armed for battle herself. "What if what I want from you is something different?"

She stared up at him, defiant as ever. "I'm not sure you know what you want from me, Alpha. Maybe that's the problem."

Her words surprised him. Clawed at him. And then pissed him off.

He spun her around, the weight of his body pinning her to the window. “Wrong. I’m pretty sure what I want right now is to fuck my property up against this glass. To pull up that fuck-me dress, and let everyone watch while I spread those legs and split the tight, little hole of Olan Lundin’s first daughter in two.”

“You’re being cruel.”

“I know.”

“I thought I was a Skolov now.”

“You are, omega. You will always be mine.” His hand wrapped around her throat. “But you’ll always be a Lundin, too. And that’s the rub, isn’t it?”

Silence. She had no fucking answer to that. Neither did he.

Her pulse fluttered beneath his grip. “I’m not your enemy.”

“But you’re not my ally either, are you, omega?”

She answered his question with one of her own, her gaze locked on the guests below. “Can they really see us?”

“Not now.” He let her change the subject. At least, to this, he had an answer to give. “It’s special glass, designed to let the viewer on this side see out while those below can’t see in.” He used his hand to turn her head to the left. “But with a swipe of the panel, that can change. The one-way mirror shifting to two ways.”

She shuddered against his hold. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“I’m a ruthless monster, omega. Thanks to the fated-mate bond, you know exactly what I’m capable of. I may smile and sled and say nice things, but we both recognize the ruthless bastard that lives beneath. One that does whatever it takes to stay on top, knowingly binding an unwilling omega to him forever. One that dragged something good and sweet into the darkness with him—and put her right in the crosshairs of a coming brutal war.”

She stilled as if realizing something. “You feel guilty.”

“I don’t know what I feel. Before you, truth is, I didn’t feel much at all.”

She persisted. “You don’t like how I make you feel.”

“I can’t afford to be weak. Not now. Not with so many counting on me, including you.”

She shuddered against him and then melted into his hold. “I was always in those crosshairs, even before you took me. You said so yourself, our destinies were set the rotation we met.” She spun around, her finger

clutching his shirt. "I'm not sorry I'm here. I'm not scared of the coming war. I like who I am when I'm with you. I know it didn't start out this way, but I want to stand by your side. Guard you as you do me. You can trust me. I *am* your ally."

Hells. Every kindness she gave him only cut a little deeper. He didn't deserve it, especially when he wasn't so sure he could make the same pledge to keep her out of harm's way. Not if what he was coming to suspect was true.

With a curse, he stepped back. "You should go."

He was too volatile. Maxheim had been right.

"No." She followed, pressing against him. "I should stay. You say I know better than anyone who you are, and you're right. But I don't see you as a monster anymore. Far from it. I see a male who tempers his strength for me. I see an Alpha who is brave and selfless and fierce. A fated mate who has brought me joy and laughter, and shown me a power within myself I had no idea existed. Our younger selves knew years ago that what was between us was rare. It's only grown more intense over time. Despite the ugliness around us, it isn't hate or biology that binds us together. It's something deeper. I can't believe it's a bad thing. I can't believe it's something I'll regret when every fiber of my soul tells me being in your arms is right."

With a growl, he tangled his fingers in her hair. "How the fuck can you be the best and the worst thing that ever happened to me?"

He crushed his mouth to hers.

She fisted his hair and kissed him back.

He could not lose her.

He had to be smarter than this new enemy. He had to find a way.

His tongue claimed hers. She answered as fiercely with her own.

Together, mouths still clinging, they shoved at his pants' opening. Pushed his fur off so he was bare-chested. Untied the strips of fabric at her neck so he could palm her gorgeous tits. Fumbled with the silk at her hips.

"You promised not to push me away." She pressed kisses to his collarbone. "Let me make you feel good. Like you do me."

"My omega. For always." He jerked her dress to the side. Lifted her back to the glass, and slid home.

"Yes. Yours."

The bond between them flared brightly.

Ass flexing, he thrust into her tight cunt, claiming his omega all over again.

Pleasuring his fated mate.

Reveling in his weakness, and his greatest strength.

Everything else faded away. Along with the rage and the anger.

He knew it couldn't last. He knew all too soon he'd have to leave her, but, for the moment, buried deep inside her, her silky thighs wrapped around his hips, her nails at his back, he was cleansed, free of the ash that had clogged his lungs and sunk beneath his skin the rotation his sister and brother burned to death in that fire.

With Dahlia, he was reborn. Freed. Unburdened.

He was content.

That had to be enough.

It was more, in fact, than anyone had ever given him before.

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“**T**his really is an amazing view.” It was an hour later. Dahlia was curled in Nikolai’s lap, her cunt sore, her body happy, her dress mostly on.

“Mmmm.” He nuzzled her neck. “I’m glad you like it. I like mine too.”

He was staring down at her, while her legs were draped over the arm of his massive desk chair and her head rested on his shoulder, her fingers playing in his hair. The silkiness beneath her fingertips felt like a privilege, the same as if a sleek polar bear sidled up next to her and let her stroke it without biting her hand off. The sensation was dangerous but wonderful. As if she was special. As if she could do what others could not. What others would never be allowed.

Trouble was, she had no idea how long he would allow it to last.

Her Alpha’s pants were still undone, his knot deep inside her, but it was already shrinking, and she knew the end of this peaceful moment was coming soon. Already the tension within him was coiling anew, the buzz of his aggression vibrating against her skin.

“I wish I was as strong as you.” Then she could prove to him that he could rely on her.

“You are.” With a grunt, Nikolai stretched beneath her, his chiseled chest muscles rippling like a giant polar bear. His knot disappeared, leaving only his semi-hard cock inside, more than enough to keep her channel stretched wide.

She held her breath, expecting him to pick her up and set her aside.

Instead, he simply shifted her on his lap into a more comfortable position and settled back down.

“But I’m glad you’re not as physically strong. What in the hells use would you have for me otherwise?” He picked up her hand and she could tell he was only partly teasing. “All that power in these delicate, beautiful palms.” He traced the length of her fingers with his own. “It’s an extraordinary thing. And easily exploited.” His chest puffed out. “Luckily, I’m here to protect you.”

“Protect me? Aren’t you the one who made my life such a mess?” Now it was her who was only partly teasing.

He raised an eyebrow. “Would you have been happy contracted to the eldest Verish son?”

“No.” She didn’t hesitate. The thought of those mandibles sent a shiver down her spine. “But that wasn’t my intent. I was planning on getting away. I was close. I’d stolen some funds and convinced one of the beta servants to help me and Kaiya. I had planned to leave within the week.”

“I know.”

“What?” She went to pull her hand from his, but he was too fast. His palm trapped hers easily within his.

“Why do you think I moved when I did?” His expression turned disapproving. “Do you honestly think you would have made it without being caught and dragged back, punished, and made an example of?” He shook his head. “No way was I allowing that.”

“What about the contract with the Verish family?”

“No way was I allowing that either.” His fangs flashed. “You’re mine.”

Again, her world shifted. So many of her earlier perceptions had been wrong. She’d been so certain when he’d come for her at the Brotherhood meeting place that he was there to destroy her. Instead, he’d been intent on saving her. *His* version of saving, of course.

“What if I’d made it and escaped? Would you have still come for me then?”

“Yes.” His heated stare bore into her. “There is nothing in this universe that would keep me from you. Nowhere I wouldn’t go to find you.”

Before, his words would have scared her, confirming for her that he would go to any lengths to possess her gift, but she was listening with new ears now and she heard more than his ruthless determination. She heard

devotion, too. Felt his need for her churning restlessly along the fated-mate bond.

She might be his pawn, but she was his salvation too.

She just didn't know which impulse would prove stronger in the end.

She wasn't sure he did, either.

"You wouldn't have made it." His verdict on her inability to escape yanked her back to the present.

She pursed her lips in exasperation, but the fact was, he was likely right. She'd been so desperate, locked in her small rooms, she'd been willing to risk almost anything.

"You would never have rediscovered your gift, either. It took our bonding to do that."

She nodded. He was right about that too.

She hadn't realized until this moment how desperate and foolish her dream of escape had been. She'd found more of herself here than she ever would have if she'd run.

Nikolai placed his finger under her chin, tipping her face up. "None of that was meant to upset you. It's an ugly universe. I've seen it at its worst. The strong prey on the weak, the good get chewed up and spit out. Only the fiercest and most brutal survive, and those under their protection."

His anger and need to protect rumbled through the fated-mate bond.

"What's wrong, Alpha?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he ran his thumb along her lower lip. "I will *never* allow the ugliness to touch you. Hurt you. Tarnish you." He drew in a shuddered breath. "I will burn this fucking galaxy down before I let anything happen to you."

"Nikolai." Leaning forward, she feathered kisses along his neck and collarbone. "You saved me when I didn't know I needed saving." She took a deep breath. "Let me help you now. Let me try again for the vision you need. I should have done it before, and I'm sorry I didn't, but I can fix this. If I can see the rotation Olan killed your mother and Kuril and set fire to the outpost, we can share the vision with the Brotherhood. We can end this before anyone else gets hurt."

Piercing eyes bore into her. "No."

She reared back. It was the last thing she'd expected him to say.

"I don't understand. You said before my vision was the key to saving your family, to securing all you wanted."

His gaze searched hers. "I'm not so sure that's true anymore."

The hairs on the back of her nape rose. "You're not making sense." Was he rejecting her gift?

"I don't have enough information yet to make sense. When I know more, you will, too."

"But my vision may be able to give you the clarity you need. You said so yourself."

His expression hardened. "I have given you a command, omega. You will obey it."

Anger rippled through her. "I thought we'd gotten beyond that."

"We will never *get beyond* me doing what it takes to keep you safe."

Confusion replaced animosity. His words were hard, but the concern surging through the fated-mate bond was unmistakable. "I thought everything rested on me having that vision."

"I thought so too." Regret thickened his voice. "I was so sure I knew how this would all play out. Now, I might be the one getting played."

"I don't understand."

"It's simple. Your visions might not be the key to solving my current problems." He added nothing more.

"You promised you wouldn't shut me out, and yet that's exactly what it feels like is happening here." Was he giving up her ability to give him what he needed? Had he grown tired of waiting and moved on?

"Someone else is helping Lundin. I don't know who yet."

"Someone else?" She sat up straighter. "You mean someone else in the Brotherhood? Who?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." He watched her closely. Too closely. She got the sense he was looking for something. Wariness beat along the fated-mate bond.

"I wasn't privy to much of my father's doings." She did her best to be helpful. "But beyond attempts to gain the favors of the Verish and the Kuril families, I never noticed any particular alliances. I often heard my mother complaining to her servants that my father had somehow managed to irritate or alienate most of the Brotherhood members. He was more isolated than she thought he should be."

"Someone seems to see that as an advantage."

"Maybe, but I don't see what this has to do with me trying to have another vision."

His comms beeped.

His body went hard beneath hers. "I have to go. Some guests have arrived that I need to question."

He lifted her off him and set her on her feet. Unfolding, he rose until he loomed above.

Cold once more, it took a few tries to retie her dress. He'd already laced up his pants and donned his leather and fur pelt by the time her stare rose to his.

He was back to business-like and unreachable.

She gathered her courage. "I know you are the Alpha and that you hold tremendous responsibility. I know you need to take care of whatever threat is coming, but I don't understand why you are dismissing my help. Our bond only makes us both stronger."

"You, maybe. I'm not so sure about myself."

The dismissal sliced deep. Did he really see her as a hindrance?

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "It's on me that Alexi's lying in the med cot. It's on me that this second enemy was able to strike without me knowing."

"That's not true. You're not alone in this." The same words he said to her that had made such a difference. "I'm here. I can help."

"I don't want it."

The wound inside her chest bled.

She hadn't realized until this moment how badly she'd wanted to be needed by him.

"I see."

"I doubt you do. This is going to get uglier before it gets better. War is coming, the full extent of the player involved still to be determined, and you're at the center of it all. I can't afford to be weak. I can't afford to be anything but focused." His expression hardened. "My guards will take you to my private quarters. You can shower, rest, sleep. If I'm not back before you get restless, you have my permission to work in your greenhouse. That's it. No deviation from those two areas."

His command was unmistakable.

"Yes, Alpha." He was closing her out, though he'd promised he wouldn't.

All her life she'd been sidelined. Devalued. Overlooked. He'd made her feel different. Like she could matter. Until she proved a disappointment,

failing to give him the vision he needed most. No wonder he didn't need her anymore. *An omega was only as valuable as her usefulness to her Alpha made her . . .* a direct quote from her mother.

"No deviating from the rules." Nikolai's hand gripped her chin. "Got it?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to be busy for the next little while. I expect you to behave."

"Yes, Alpha." She gathered her tattered pride around her. "Where will you be?"

"Entertaining the arriving guests." The menace in his tone was so great she shivered anew. "I hope for both of our sakes I don't find what I think I will."

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Dahlia paced the length of Nikolai's bedroom. No fast task. As decadent and sleek as the rest of his compound, his private quarters were huge and done in the same dark, sensual colors and textures that reminded her of him.

Except he wasn't here, and the space was too big and cold without him in it.

Shivering, she turned and headed toward the wall of windows that stretched across two-thirds of the space. The view of the glittering mountains above and the spectacular crystal city below was also stunning but wasted on her now.

His words kept echoing in her head.

I hope for both of our sakes that I don't find what I think I will.

What could he possibly mean by that?

The chill at the base of her spine told her it couldn't be good.

She'd had a shower, dinner, a nap, and changed into a white dress she'd hoped would remind her of snow, sledding, and a happier moment. It hadn't worked. She was still restless and weighed down with dread.

She wasn't sure she'd even want to see Nikolai if he showed up right now.

He'd hurt her with his casual dismissal of the bond between them as something that weakened rather than strengthen him. He'd seemed so content these last few rotations. Lighter, too, as if the darkness in him was receding. He'd said such sweet things to her about how pleased he was with her.

She'd honestly begun to believe they could build something extraordinary between them.

But it had all begun to fall apart when Alexi was shot. Like a switch flipped, Nikolai had drawn in on himself, pulling back from the very fated-mate bond he had forced on her in the first place.

She didn't know why he'd retreated, but she did know she missed him. She missed the soothing force of his power and strength. She missed his lust and need and adoration. She missed his faith and the steady rush of his formidable will.

Especially now, when she needed it more than ever.

She swiveled back in the other direction and her gaze fell on the sleek comms unit built into the panel by his bed.

Her fingers flexed, as they had every time she'd passed it.

He hadn't said anything about not using it, but he hadn't exactly said she could.

She'd asked the four guards stationed at her door, but they'd had no answer for her. The guards had offered to get her more food or drink, take her to the greenhouse, or fetch her a book, but that was the extent of the options they'd been allowed to offer.

They barely spoke to her beyond that. Masked from the nose down, it was hard to tell much about them, anyway. Since they'd never given her their names, she'd numbered them to keep track. Guard Two and Three were apologetic, shrugging when she tried to speak to them and mumbling something about orders. Guard One was the head guard and the least friendly. With spiky hair and a scar bisecting his eyebrow, he and Four, a bald male with a golden ring through his horn, reacted to each attempt at conversation as a transgression they intended to report to Nikolai later on.

Her suggestion that they contact their Alpha directly to ask about the comms had been met with hard expressions and the response that "the Alpha Lord Skolov was currently indisposed and could not be interrupted."

She'd asked to speak with Maxheim, Damien, and the doc and had gotten a similar answer.

Fortunately, Anya had reached out to her through her comms to say she was in the same position—under guard and restricted to her private quarters. Unlike Dahlia, though, she'd had word from the doctor that Alexi was doing better. He was still unconscious, but the doctor was far more confident today that the Skolov male would survive.

But Nikolai wasn't with Alexi. Neither were Maxheim nor Damien. Anya couldn't reach any of them.

So where were they?

Dahlia paced the length of the room once more.

Nikolai's restrictions didn't bother her too much. She was used to being by herself and having her movements curtailed, but the growing length of Nikolai's absence gnawed at her, as did the suspicion and fury that kept bursting along the fated-mate bond despite Nikolai's attempts to keep it from her.

Something was wrong.

She looked down at her wrists. Was it her imagination or did the bands there look fainter than they had before?

She needed guidance.

Decision made, she launched herself at the comms panel.

Her fingers flew over the keypad. Either out of arrogance, a lack of faith in her intelligence, or—and she really hoped this was the case—because he was fine with her using it, Nikolai had typed in the comms access code several times with her in the room.

She dialed the only other creature she cared about in this universe who might be able to advise her.

She held her breath.

Her mother's beautiful face appeared on the screen, but she looked different. Her usually elaborate coiffure was tilted slightly to the side, her makeup around the eyes smudged.

"Dahlia?" There was no mistaking the surprise in the prime omega's eyes. "You're not dead."

"What? No, of course not." Dahlia plopped down on the bed. This was not the greeting she'd expected.

"Thank the gods." Her mother appeared to recover quickly from her shock, relief playing across her features. "I thought he'd killed you, too."

"Prime omega, please slow down. I have no idea what you're saying." But the dread that had been growing in her all evening was now a boulder in her stomach.

"Kaiya is dead. My Alpha Lord Olan is missing." Her mother's voice was a low tremble. "I fear he is murdered as well. All at the hands of your Alpha."

"What? No."

“He hates us all.” The prime omega clutched at the cloth in her hand and Dahlia realized it was clothing and that she was haphazardly stuffing it into a travel bag. “I am terrified he’s coming for me next. Or you.”

“Prime omega, stop!” Dahlia clutched at the necklace Nikolai had returned to her as if that would somehow keep her afloat.

The female stilled, likely because Dahlia had never used such a sharp tone with her before.

“Kaiya is not dead, prime omega. She’s free.”

“Free?” Anger, then pity, flitted across her mother’s face and the hair at the back of Dahlia’s neck prickled. “She’s not free. She’s been murdered. As I predicted.”

“No.” Dahlia stood up so fast she grew dizzy.

“Yes. Her body was found by Olan’s men. She’d been beaten, shot. Her body set on fire. Like what happened fifteen years ago to Naytalia Skolov.”

“No!” Nikolai would have known. He would have told her. Unless . . . could that be what he was so upset about?

“I told you that you couldn’t trust Nikolai Skolov.” Her mother’s voice had risen to shrill. “I told you all he wanted was revenge. He hates us. He lied to you.”

“No. Stop saying such things. It can’t be true. I . . . I need to speak with Nikolai.”

“To hear what? More lies? Of course, he’s not going to tell you.”

“Stop. Nikolai wouldn’t hurt Kaiya. He wouldn’t.” Dahlia’s fingers pressed against the links of her necklace, searching for an anchor. Anything to numb the pain.

Kaiya could not be dead.

“Then who killed your sister? And where is Alpha Lundin?” The prime omega was back to pulling clothing off hangers and stuffing them into her bag. “No one else but Nikolai Skolov would dare to attack a family protected by the Brotherhood. His thirst for revenge has maddened him. He will bring the Brotherhood down on us all.”

“Alpha Lundin is missing?” Dahlia tried to think past the anguish threatening to pull her under.

“I told you before.” Her mother’s shout echoed down the comms. “Can’t you keep up? Your father never came home from his last outing. He never called. No one can reach him.” She clutched the fabric in her hand to her chest, her voice breaking. “He has never spent a night away from me.”

That was true. Olan's demands on Tasha Lundin had been relentless and all-consuming. No matter how he spent his rotations or who he fucked and knotted, he always expected her to be by his side by the end of the rotation to see to his comforts and demands. He was helpless without her.

"There must be some explanation. Same with Kaiya."

"There is. They've been murdered. Killed by the very Alpha you are so desperate to defend." Tasha Lundin's nostrils flared wide, her expression one of disappointment and disdain. "I should have known you would succumb so easily to Skolov's lies. He's too formidable for someone like you. He's cowed you into being his pawn and his puppet."

"That's not what's happening." Was it? It was hard to think, much less breathe. Everything inside her rebelled at the idea that her beautiful sister was dead.

Nikolai had promised her Kaiya would be safe.

The prime omega shook her head, sending her hair tilting farther to the side. "You are fooling yourself. Alexi Skolov was shot. In retaliation, your sister was murdered. Your precious Alpha has gone after my Alpha, too. There is every chance you or I are next."

"Stop. You've got it all wrong. If anyone is a danger to us, it's Olan Lundin. He's impulsive, quick to anger, and brutal. He has struck us our whole lives. He beat Naytalia Skolov and threatened to kill her, too."

"No." Her mother swayed on her feet. "That is only what Nikolai Skolov wants us to believe."

"I saw it."

Her mother's grip on the cloth tightened. "I thought you said you had no visions related to the fire."

"I had one, but it ended before I could get the full picture of what happened that rotation. Still, I saw Alpha Lundin threatening Naytalia. I felt his fury. He was definitely enraged enough to kill."

"No."

"Mother, I am sorry. I know you don't want to believe it."

"No."

Her mother was unraveling before her gaze. Dahlia knew the prime omega's life hadn't been a particularly good one, but her mother had still clung to it.

Dahlia wasn't doing the same, was she? Clinging to her Alpha because she was afraid to see the truth? The pain of Kaiya's death stabbed like a

knife with every breath she struggled to take.

“Dahlia, I’m afraid.” Her mother’s fear echoed her own. “None of this makes any sense.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Dahlia had lost everyone else. She refused to lose her mother, too. “I will get Nikolai’s help.” Her Alpha *had* said he would do what he could for her mother with the Brotherhood. That could not have changed just because he’d grown more distant and more disinterested in her visions. She’d told him she would continue to believe in them, and she would not stop now. “He will know how to fix this. We will hide you away.”

“Like Kaiya?” Her mother clutched the cloth in her hand. “No, there is nowhere I can run. I must throw myself on the mercy of the Brotherhood and ask for leniency.”

“Mother, no!”

Her mother cut her off. “You should do the same. I was not referring to myself when I said I was afraid. I was referring to you.”

“Me?”

“If your gift has returned and you are the key to discovering the truth related to the fire once and for all, you are the one in the most danger.”

A chill passed through Dahlia. “I am fine. Nikolai’s compound is a fortress.”

“But what if he’s the one you need to be guarded from?”

“He’s not.”

Her mother was not convinced. “Maybe we can run together? Hide?”

“No. I am safest here.”

“Fine, but stay on guard.” The prime omega zipped her travel bag closed. “Do not worry for me. I am not without resources. The Stormhart Alpha has always been kind to me. I-I shall throw myself on his mercy. He will help me with the Brotherhood. If my fate is to end with Alpha Lundin’s, so be it.”

“No, please. I don’t want to lose you, too.” Like Kaiya. Like her beautiful, sweet, gentle sister—who Nikolai had sworn would be safe.

What if her mother was right, and she was trusting when she shouldn’t? What if she was falling prey to a will more formidable than her own?

As if she knew her thoughts, her mother’s resolute expression crumpled. “I will contact you if I can. Please, do the same.” The prime omega’s eyes glistened, and for an instant Dahlia saw the connection they might have

forged if their mother-daughter bond had not been burdened by the weight of her father and his constant demands on his prime omega. “Let me have a chance for one more good-bye face to face.” Her gaze traveled over Dahlia’s face. “It is more than I got to have with Kaiya.”

Dahlia’s heart bled anew. “Stay safe.”

“There is no true safety for an omega.” Her mother’s screen went blank.

Dahlia stared at the darkness, the hollow sensation in her stomach growing.

Everything she knew, everything she’d begun to believe, was falling apart.

She needed to speak with Nikolai. She needed him to tell her Kaiya was still alive.

She rushed to the door, only to find her way barred by stone-faced Guard One with the spiky hair and scar through his eyebrow.

She didn’t think anything of it—until he seized her arm and shoved her back inside.

The crack of bones echoed through the dungeon cell.

The male tied by his wrists to the meat hook dangled in the air, his pale skin shivering in the icy cold. “No more. Please.”

Nikolai signaled Damien.

His brother slammed his fist into the bastard’s ribs once more. Another round of snap, crackle, and pop occurred. The male wheezed, his ability to breathe suddenly restricted. Damien knew exactly where to hit a male to make the pain excruciating.

Nikolai stepped up to the man. “Who hired you to take out Alexi Skolov?”

“O-Olan Lundin.”

Nikolai retreated and let Maxheim take a turn.

Thwack.

Blood spattered the ice of the cell. Maxheim might be slow to ignite, but his rage, once sparked, was savage. Nothing woke the beast inside him more than a threat to those he loved.

“Who hired you to take out Alexi Skolov?”

It was the same dance they’d done with the other two *guests* stupid enough to let themselves get caught. In the end, they’d cracked. This one would too. Because Nikolai wanted to be absolutely sure.

Plus, since this was one of the hitmen who’d tried to take their brother’s life, suffering was part of the plan.

“No more.” The male’s voice was a desperate rasp.

This time, Nikolai rolled up his own sleeves.

The male's eyes went white with panic. "I don't know. I swear it."

Now they were getting somewhere. "So, not Olan Lundin?"

"I'll be killed if I tell. I can't."

"You'll be killed if you don't."

The male snarled.

Nikolai grabbed his throat and squeezed. "You're already living on borrowed time. It's only a matter of how painful you want your last moments to be."

Fury, then finally, acceptance. The hitman nodded, his gaze pleading.

Nikolai loosened his hold.

The male gasped, sucking air into his lungs.

Nikolai reminded himself that control was essential. Compartmentalizing as best he could, he forced what he hoped was a soothing sensation through the fated-mate bond. The last thing he needed was to overwhelm Dahlia again with the force of his rage and violence.

"You'll make it fast?" The guy had finally recovered enough to speak.

Nikolai nodded. "You won't see it coming."

"Okay. Yes." Their prisoner sucked down another pained breath. "The truth is, I have no damn idea. I was told to say it was Lundin, but I didn't speak with the male. I have no fucking clue who hired me, but something about it . . ." He shook his head. "From the start, I knew something was off. We've worked with Lundin before. He always contacted us directly."

"Give my brother the account information used to pay you." Nikolai nodded in Maxheim's direction. "Trace the information. We need to know where the payment really came from."

Their *guest* rattled off the numbers.

Maxheim typed furiously. "Tracing." After a few minutes, his scowl deepened. "That's weird."

Nikolai braced himself. "Tell me."

"The payment path leads back to Lundin." Maxheim looked up, his confusion obvious. "It was done outside the usual Lundin off-galaxy accounts, which was why I didn't find it before, but it definitely leads back to Lundin in the end."

"So, Olan didn't have outside help, after all?" Damien was pacing as usual. "He just did a better job of hiding his money than we thought? None of this is making sense."

But Nikolai was fairly certain he understood all too well.

He seized the prisoner by the hair and made sure the other male could see the menace in his stare. "Tell me more about the hits and how you were contacted."

"We're mercenaries. We take random jobs all the time. We got contacted by an anonymous source and assumed it was business as usual. They sent us these fucking uniforms with the Lundin crest, told us to dye our hair blond and wear the clothes when we did the first hit. Strange, but we've dealt with weird requests before."

Everything inside Nikolai had gone on the alert. "You said first hit. So, you were contracted to do another as well?"

A slight pause. "Yes." Nikolai saw the uncertainty in the male's eyes, the question of whether he should try to bargain for his life with the information he realized might be important.

"Don't bother." He told the hitman. "There will be no negotiation. I'm only going to ask one last time: was there a second hit?"

The guy sagged in his bonds. "Yes, we were instructed to dye our hair back to black for it. Whoever hired us agreed to pay us an insane amount of money, half when we did the first job, half after the second. I should have known it was too good to be true."

"Was killing Alexi Skolov the second hit?"

"Yes." The guy was talking fast now, glad for any moment free of pain.

"And the first hit?"

The guy swallowed hard.

"Tell me who the first hit was."

"Olan Lundin."

Though Nikolai had expected to hear it, the words still slammed into him like a kick to the solar plexus. "And did you?"

The guy's eye darted wildly from side to side as if seeking a last-ditch escape from the hard truth, but there was none coming. Not for any of them.

He nodded. "Yes. Olan Lundin is dead. Our orders were to take it slow. Make it hurt. We did. The bastard suffered, as requested."

Olan Lundin is dead. After so long waiting to hear the words, the outcome was oddly hollow. No joy. No sorrow.

Mostly because . . . they'd been played.

"Fuck!" Damien slammed the heel of his boot into the wall. He understood the implications, too. As did Maxheim, who gripped the icy cell bars, his face a mask of rage.

Nikolai blew out a slow breath. They'd been outmaneuvered by a masterful opponent they hadn't even known was in the game.

His comms beeped. Stormhart's face appeared on his screen. "We have a problem."

Nikolai already knew what the other crime head was going to say. "Olan is dead."

"Yes." The other crime boss didn't appear surprised Nikolai knew. "Was it you?"

"No."

"The evidence left suggests it was a Skolov hit, retaliation for the strike against Alexi."

"Exactly how it was made to look."

"The Brotherhood is up in arms." The big male took a deep breath. "They're coming for you now. All of you." Stormhart scowled. "I know I said we'd stand by your side, but this isn't war. This is a reckoning. I shouldn't be calling."

"I appreciate the warning." Nikolai asked what mattered most. "How long?"

"You've got an hour at most. I'm sorry, I tried. They're out for blood and determined to make an example."

The pit in Nikolai's gut grew. He'd promised his omega he wouldn't shut her out. He'd also promised he'd keep her and those she cared for safe. He was beginning to realize he wouldn't be able to do both, and she was already upset with him. He could feel her pain beating at him through the fated-mate bond.

But he'd do whatever it took to protect her. Even if it killed him.

Nikolai's comms beeped again and clicked into override—and his stomach dropped.

With a roar, he sprinted from the cell.



"WHERE THE FUCK do you think you're going?" Guard One shoved Dahlia onto Nikolai's bed.

She landed on her ass. "Help!"

To her surprise, the guard added his voice to hers, their shouts blending—until she realized too late that she'd played right into his hands.

The three other guards barreled into the room, prepared to help.

She scrambled off the bed. "Careful! He's—"

Guard One shot them between the eyes without hesitation.

Her stomach pitched. "You killed them!"

"Such a smart omega." Whistling, he ripped off his mask and, stepping over the downed bodies, sauntered to the door. The lock closed with an ominous snick. "Now, it's just you and me."

She used the time his back was turned to put as much distance between them as possible and arm herself as best she could. Against his gun, however, her odds weren't good.

Swiveling back in her direction, he pointed his laser at her face. "This is going to be fun."

She backed up. "Whatever you're being paid to kill me, Nikolai Skolov will pay more to keep me alive."

"Your Alpha can't pay me if he's dead."

Her heart slammed against her throat. "He's not dead."

"Not yet. But he will be." Guard One cut off her avenues for escape with every step closer he came. "When they find you shot and burnt to a crisp and Olan dead, your Alpha won't be far behind. The Brotherhood doesn't take too kindly to blood feuds carried out when they've expressly come out against it."

"O-Olan is dead? How do you know that?"

Her mother had been right. She tried to push past the shock and the rush of grief for her father she hadn't expected. Did that mean her sister Kaiya was dead as well? She shoved aside the slam of pain. She had to stay focused, or she'd be next.

"Yes, Olan is dead. Thanks to me." Guard One looked smug. "Though it's your Alpha who will be blamed."

Understanding crashed through her. "You were hired to flame the feud and frame Nikolai, so he looks guilty."

Guard One's lips tilted upward, but his eyes remained cold and hard. "Smarter than you look." His stare dropped to her breasts. "But it's never been an omega's mind that interested me. I think it's about time I got to experience the benefits of a top Alpha."

She refused to panic. "Who sent you?"

“I’m done with your questions, omega. It’s time for action.”

She darted left.

He mirrored her. His movements too fast for her to dodge.

Her body slammed into the wall, her breath leaving her in a rush as he followed right behind, crushing her.

He dug his weapon into her forehead. “What did your visions reveal to Nikolai Skolov about the rotation of the fire?”

Another wave of understanding. This was why she was going to die. Someone feared her visions. Someone wanted her silenced.

But who? Everything she’d seen so far pointed to Olan.

“Tell me, omega bitch.” Guard One pulled a small torch from beneath his jacket. “Tell me now or it’s going to be a slow painful death. I’m supposed to kill you quick and then burn you. But it doesn’t have to be like that. I can take my time. Make it hurt.”

“Nothing. I saw nothing. I can’t have visions. My gift died out long ago.”

Crack. Her neck slapped sideways as his fist plowed into her jaw. Pain rocketed through her, her brain knocking against her skull, her thoughts suddenly sluggish as the lights blared and then dulled.

A rough hand grabbed her chin, shook her. “No fucking lies. Tell me what you saw!”

Her tongue worked slowly in her mouth, too big for the space. “G-Go to hells.”

He laughed. “I wish I had time to tear that tiny omega asshole to pieces but I am being paid more than I could ever dream to get this job done fast and make it look a particular way.”

He raised his gun.

With a scream, she launched herself forward and buried the jagged end of the biggest jewel from her necklace into her attacker’s throat.

Alpha’s never expected an omega to fight back. But she was done being underestimated.

Blood splattered. With a shocked gargle, Guard One grabbed his throat, rage turning his gaze blood red.

She raised her weapon again.

Crack. His fist slammed into her before she could stab him.

Her body pitched to the side. Blackness ate at the edges of her vision.

The fall to the floor barely registered as her head rung and his torch flared to life, the promise of horrific death in his stare.

No matter what happened next, she'd never regret what she'd found with Nikolai. It had been worth every moment of the wait.

The door behind her crashed open.

A roar. A blur of movement, and the weight above her disappeared.

"Dahlia!" Nikolai's anguished face appeared in front of hers. "Tell me you're okay."

But the darkness took her before she could assure him she was.

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Nikolai sat by Dahlia's med cot, her small hand tucked in his, the doc's monitors beeping away as she slept, sedated by the doc's concoctions.

The position was familiar. Too fucking familiar.

He'd vowed to protect her, and already she'd almost died twice under his watch.

"The shuttle's ready." Maxheim hovered at the door.

Nikolai didn't move. Instead, he held her hand tighter. Anya had come in and helped him clean up his omega and get her into a long-sleeved, snow-colored dress his sister had assured him Dahlia would like and would be good for travel. Seeing his omega in white reminded him of the first time he'd seen her. She'd been a shimmering vision then, too.

"Are you sure about this?" His brother wasn't happy with the plan.

"Yes. You heard Stormhart. The Brotherhood is coming. I need to give you time to get away."

"Come with us. We'll make it."

"We won't. You know as well as I that the Brotherhood has the arsenal, men, and power of all the other crime bosses at their fingertips."

"Then at least let me come with you. We can fight together. Hold them off so that the others get away."

"No." Nikolai rubbed his thumb along the bruises on his omega's knuckles. "You're the fixer. I need you there with Damien to help take care of the others."

“Where is that slacker, anyway? I don’t want to have to pack his go-bag for him too.”

Nikolai appreciated the attempt at humor, strained as it was. He and Maxheim had been through so many tough spots together and always managed to make it through. Not this time, though. “He’s getting Alexi and Anya ready, as well as the doc.”

Already too many lives had been lost: four loyal guards who’d been good males with families of their own.

Despite Nikolai’s best efforts, he’d failed to protect those he loved.

Someone had turned that fifth guard, one who’d worked for his family for years, into a traitor. Thankfully, Nikolai was a paranoid bastard and had installed a secret set of alarms even his guards didn’t know about in select rooms within the compound. One had tripped the moment the attacker crossed the threshold into Nikolai and Dahlia’s bedroom uninvited. That emergency report through his comms, coupled with the fear he could feel through the fated-mate bond, had been all the warning he’d needed.

Sprinting from the dungeons to his bedroom had been the worst three minutes of his life.

To date.

“This is going to get uglier, isn’t it?” Echoing his thoughts, Maxheim moved to stand behind him, his gaze locked on Dahlia’s sleeping form.

“Yes.” Nikolai traced the lines of her fingers with the tips of his own. “When you guys are safe and settled, tear this galaxy apart looking for proof. Any evidence, any snitches, any witnesses. Our real target has been hiding in the wings far too long.”

The guard-turned-traitor had already been dying thanks to his omega’s incredible courage, but Nikolai had confirmed the identity of their shadowy enemy before he ripped the bastard’s throat out.

Unfortunately, the final dying words of one of Nikolai’s own guards would not be enough to convince the Brotherhood. At this point, he wasn’t sure anything would.

The syndicate was prickly about members killing members.

“You’ll stall and meet up with us when you can?” Maxheim was far more hopeful than he should be.

“If I can, I will.” But the chances weren’t good. His unseen adversary had played Olan and him off each other well and made them both look guilty as hell.

“If the Brotherhood doesn’t believe the truth, I’ll come and get you.” In the end, Maxheim always had his back. They’d built an empire together. Held a family together.

Nikolai was going to miss the uptight bastard so damn much.

“No. You stay put.” There’d be nothing to get, anyway. By the time the Brotherhood was through with him, he’d be in pieces. “Make sure my omega gets to see proof her sister is alive and well the moment it’s safe. I don’t want her to suffer from that misconception a heartbeat longer than is necessary.”

“Will do.”

He squeezed his omega’s hand—and noticed a small crimson spot on the top of her knuckle. Blood.

Shit. He’d washed his hands five times before coming to her. He thought he’d washed it all away after his last *conversation* with the traitor guard, but someone like him never got fully clean, did they?

But his omega was different. She was goodness and light. Too fucking perfect for the likes of him.

Yet he loved her with every dark, twisted piece of his soul.

He rubbed at the spot, relieved when it disappeared without too much effort.

He turned toward his brother and clasped his shoulder. “I’m counting on you and the others to keep the family going. Keep us strong. Take care of my omega as if she were your own.”

Nikolai wasn’t a fool, and he wasn’t the kind of male to rely on one plan. He’d always known things might not go his way. He’d hidden money in secret accounts in a thousand different galaxies. Purchased untraceable IDs, transport, and homes. Maxheim, Alexi, and Damien had all the information. His family would be well taken care of.

It would hurt to lose Abzal and all they’d worked for, but they’d survive, and he had no doubt they’d thrive once more. Even his beautiful omega.

Though he was going to fucking miss her.

“I will. Without question.” Maxheim’s gaze was locked on the hand Nikolai still hadn’t been able to release. “She made you happy. I never knew that was possible. For any of us.”

Nikolai nodded. Happy was a paltry word for the way she’d made him feel. But maybe there’d been something to the doc’s quack fluff theories

after all.

All he knew for sure was that those other Alpha fools had no idea what they were missing when they dismissed the fated-mate bond as a trap.

It had set him free.

The rotations he'd had with his omega were by far the best moments of his life.

Leaning down, he scooped her into his arms. "It's time. I want her and Alexi loaded into the hovercrafts and you all on your way to the main shuttle before the Brotherhood gets any closer. Already there's a target on her back, our enemy out to silence her visions. I need her as far away as possible."

Maxheim followed him out into the hall and into their private elevator. "She won't understand." He pressed the floor for the hangar.

"She doesn't have to." Nikolai held her tight, memorizing the feel of her slight body molded to his. "She just needs to be safe."

"Anya will be upset too."

"After that, she'll be thrilled. She always wanted an adventure." His lips turned upward. "Same with my omega." He pressed his lips to her temple. "I guess she'll get her dream after all."

He was going to cling to that like a life preserver to keep himself from going after her. He'd been selfish enough. Even a ruthless bastard like him, it would appear, had his limits.

The elevator doors opened to reveal three sleek hovercrafts, a few select servants, a handful of his best guards, as well as the rest of the family.

A grim-looking Damien stood by the second vehicle, alongside a sedated Alexi. A red-eyed Anya was already inside.

With a nod in their direction, Nikolai passed them by—he'd already spoken with them at length and said all he needed to say. He headed toward the first craft where Dahlia would ride with Maxheim, the doc, and some guards.

The doc was already waiting inside.

Nikolai tucked her in and strapped her into her safety belts, the soft, steady rise and fall of her breath soothing him and keeping the worst of his Alpha instincts at bay.

"She's not going to go easily." Of course, the doc was too brave to say nothing. Nikolai had always liked that about the guy. Despite his fear—and

the air was sour with it—he was still speaking up. “Fated mates don’t do well without each other.”

“Won’t be an issue once I’m gone.”

The doc looked surprised. “Alpha Lord?”

Nikolai lowered his voice. “I’m telling you this, Doc, because you’re the only one I can. My family won’t accept it. Neither will my omega. But the Brotherhood is out for blood. They expressly said no retaliation, and now one of their own is dead. An example must be made.” A muscle twitched in his jaw. “I’m going to ensure it stops with me.”

“Your omega will feel your distress. Your pain.”

“Unless the bond is ruptured.” Nikolai had been doing his own research, reading the doc’s notes. “You theorized that in a recent report, correct? That the fated-mate bond will be neutralized once the Alpha dies.”

“In theory, yes. If you’re dead, she’ll be free.” The doc’s gaze bore into him, straight to the recesses of Nikolai’s miserable soul, a place that was ugly and dark, but for a brief, lucky period, pulsed with a presence that lit up every monstrous corner and made it beautiful.

He wasn’t sure how he’d live without having her in there. Then he remembered he wouldn’t have to.

“Then so be it. I’ll protect her to the end,” he vowed. “I’ll shield her from the pain as much as possible.”

“But you can’t shield her from losing you.”

The doc was too damn smart.

Nikolai raised his wrist comms and typed. “Do you see this?”

Doc moved to the screen, his eyes wide. “Yes, it’s ten million in universal dollars. In an account. In my name.”

“That’s right. It’s a thank you for all you’ve done. I know I wasn’t the easiest of employers, but I am grateful for your work. Without you, I would never have experienced the bond I did with my omega. There is not enough money in the worlds to thank you for that, but I hope this will be a start. I expect, too, that it will free you from the need to deal with any more asshole Alpha bosses in the future,”

The doc looked dazed. “Thank you, Alpha. This will buy me a lot of books.”

Nikolai actually smiled. He was going to miss the beta and his obsession with theories and research. “Good, but I am offering you another ten million to be delivered in a year’s time if you agree to travel with my

family and monitor my omega's health for the duration of that time. I want to ensure she makes it through the dissolution of the fated-mate bond okay." It was harder than he'd thought to get the words out. Everything inside him rebelled against the idea.

"I see." The doc blinked hard, the color in his eyes suddenly more gray than pink. "You don't need to give me money for that. I will do it for nothing. I have become fond of your omega and feel somewhat responsible for her current plight."

"The responsibility for my omega's situation is all on me." Nikolai closed the screen. "The money will be waiting for you."

"Thank you, Alpha."

He cleared his throat. "Take good care of her for me, Doc."

Because it killed him he wouldn't be there to do it himself.

Maxheim settled into the seat next to her. Several guards crowded into the other seats.

"Time to go." Maxheim gave him one more nod.

Then, because he didn't give a fuck who saw, Nikolai leaned down and pressed another kiss to his omega's forehead before tucking the clean and polished necklace into her hand. "You keep this safe for me, baby." He whispered the words against her ear. "Know I am always with you. Like you were for me. There is nothing, not even distance or death, that could end what I feel for you."

Maxheim, his jaw tight, pretended not to hear. Instead, his brother stared straight ahead. "You are the best Alpha brother a male could ask for. I will do you proud and guard every single Skolov, including her, with my life."

"I know you will." Straightening, Nikolai allowed himself one more look, and then he shut the door and stepped back.

He waited until the line of crafts disappeared into the sky before turning back to the soldiers who'd volunteered to remain behind. "Arm yourself with everything you've got. We head to the mountains to make our stand. We're not going down without a fight."

Dahlia stretched and opened her eyes. The rumble of the hovercraft was soothing.
Craft?

She jackknifed upward, or tried—the safety belts securing her to the seat restricted her movement.

“It’s alright, omega. Settle down. You’re safe.”

A rumbled Alpha’s voice, but not the one she wanted.

“Where’s Nikolai?” The necklace tucked into her palm frightened her. It should have been around her neck. It should have been put there by Nikolai himself.

Maxheim’s jaw went tight. His suit was wrinkled, and a five o’clock shadow darkened his usually clean-shaven face. “He couldn’t be here.”

“Where’s here?” She looked out the darkened window and saw sparkling silver blocks of ice rushing by. Her dress too differed from the one she’d been in before. “Where are we going?”

Maxheim didn’t reply. Neither did any of the well-armed, grim-faced guards packed into the other seats.

“We’re going on a trip.” The doctor, sandwiched between two guards, spoke at last.

“What kind of trip?”

“Enough questions, omega.” Maxheim cut in. “Nikolai is busy. We’re leaving the compound at his orders and will be taking this hovercraft to a larger shuttle. Anya, Alexi, and Damien are in the craft behind us.”

A lot of useful details, and yet he’d told her nothing at all.

She tried to reach Nikolai through their bond, but something was blocking it, just like her visions. The tie muted from Nikolai's side as if he'd gone purposely numb.

Her sense of urgency increased. "I need to speak with Nikolai."

More silence.

She refused to be cowed. "I know he's being framed. I know Olan Lundin is dead. Tell me where my Alpha is. I need to ask him about my sister. I need to know what's going on."

"He's not fucking coming." Maxheim's low growl echoed through the craft, the depth of aggression causing a few of the other guards to snarl and snap.

Her protective instincts surged to the fore. She curled her finger around her necklace, wondering if she'd need to wield it once more. Maxheim had always struck her as the most controlled and civilized of the Skolov Alphas, but it was clear now he'd simply done a better job of hiding the aggressor beneath his skin.

He looked at her. Blew out a breath. "I apologize." His expression turned rueful. "If Nikolai were here right now, I'd already be on the ground and bleeding for that display."

"It's all right." Maxheim's affection for her Alpha was undeniable. Same with his worry.

"No. It's not. I promised him, and I will do better. His are not easy boots to fill."

Panic crashed over her. "Fill?"

Maxheim scowled and she could hear him mumbling. "I am so much better with facts and details than omegas." Shoulders squaring, he turned back to her. "He's buying us time so we can get away. The Brotherhood believes he killed your father. They believe he broke the code. If we don't leave now, they'll kill us all."

"But Nikolai is innocent. He didn't kill my father. I know. The man who tried to attack me . . ."

"He's dead."

"It's my fault. I killed him and now he can't say who he worked for."

"Nikolai killed him, and no one is sorry. But that traitor's confession wouldn't have made a difference. He was once one of ours. The Brotherhood would see the traitor's confession as nothing more than a means by us to point the finger away from our Alpha."

Their enemy had thought of everything. Except . . . “I can still help through my visions. Those are impossible to alter. They will be believed.”

“No. It’s too late.”

“Is my sister alive?”

Maxheim didn’t hesitate. “Yes.” He took a breath. “I’m under orders to provide you with the proof the moment it’s safe for us and her to do so. Your mother’s information was incorrect.”

Relief rushed through her. The bleeding inside her slowed to a trickle, but it didn’t stop.

Not when she could still lose the person who mattered above all else.

“Alpha,” the pilot’s voice crackled through the comms from the front of the craft, “we will arrive at the shuttle station in five.”

“Excellent,” but the grim resignation in Maxheim’s voice was easy to hear. He didn’t want to go, either.

She turned as much as the restraints allowed. “We can’t leave Nikolai alone to face the Brotherhood and these false charges.”

Maxheim’s scowl deepened.

“You need to take me back. I can use my gift and share my visions with the heads of the Brotherhood. They’ll be able to see for themselves what happened. Irrefutable proof.”

“What if your visions fail? You have yet to see what Nikolai asked you to see. If you go back to the Brotherhood and can’t summon the vision we need, you’ll be in as much trouble as he is. We all will be.” Maxheim shook his head and turned away to stare out the window. “No. Nikolai made the right decision. We need to stand by it.”

Old doubts threatened to creep in. Was Maxheim right? Was she too weak to do what needed to be done? All her life, her family had told her that was the case.

“Plus, what if you see something you don’t want to see?” It was the doctor who spoke this time.

Maxheim shot the beta a warning look.

Her gut shrieked in greater alarm. “What are you not telling me?”

Maxheim gave the doctor another hard stare before responding. “Nothing.”

Her suspicion grew.

The brothers would do anything for each other. Their bond as deep and powerful as hers with her Alpha. Their faith in each other unbreakable. But

they were also all Alphas, which meant they were also inclined to believe they were the only ones strong enough to solve problems and protect those around them.

But she'd already decided she was done being underestimated.

"If I see something I don't want to see, I'll survive it."

This time it was Maxheim who studied her closely. "Even if it turns your world upside down, destroying everything you thought you knew?"

Dread slid down her spine, the knowing in his words as terrifying as the questions themselves.

"Is that why Nikolai didn't want me to have any more visions?" She looked to the doctor, certain she had a better chance of getting an answer from him. "Not because he doubted me, but because he believed I *would* see what happened and that whatever I saw would crush me?"

The doc nodded.

Maxheim sighed. "He said he'd hurt you enough. He didn't want to destroy your dreams or your life any more than he already had. You wanted freedom. He's giving you that."

That might have once been her goal, but it wasn't anymore.

Foolish, stubborn, arrogant, wonderful Alpha. He'd shut her out to protect her.

The golden light inside her flared brighter.

He'd considered her needs over his, and rather than using her for his own agenda, as was his initial plan, he'd done the exact opposite. He'd chosen her life over his.

Power surged beneath her skin. Not the usual crackle, but a wild storm fueled by awe and wonder, and so much love. The last of the block inside her disintegrated. Her doubts and fears, too.

He was a true Alpha, one she would gladly serve. One she would lay down her life for in an instant. He was her leader, her master, her mate, her treasure, and her love.

Happiness and tenderness mingled with trust and respect and made accessing her gift simple. There was nothing she wouldn't do for the male she loved. Nothing she couldn't achieve. Including showing him and the rest of the galaxy that she was far from the fragile omega they perceived her to be.

"Alpha Maxheim, I need you to turn this vehicle around. I'm not asking permission." She imbued as much of Nikolai's power into her voice as she

could. “I’m telling you what’s about to happen. I am going to access what happened the moments before the fire and project it into the minds of Nikolai and the heads of the Brotherhood. You should be ready.”

Her Alpha’s brother raised an eyebrow, but his look was more pitying than impressed. “You can’t. Not without your Alpha to spark your gift—and he has purposely done what he can to staunch it by closing himself off from you. I know it’s hard, but you need to accept it. We gave him our promise. We’re keeping you safe.”

Maxheim turned away once more.

Accept. Submit.

She wondered if there would ever be a time when Alphas stopped deprecating omegas.

“No.”

This time Maxheim growled low. A few guards as well.

She snarled back.

The doc smiled, but his gray and pink-streaked eyes were lined with worry. “You’ve come into your power. I knew you would. But with it, there are always costs and consequences.”

She appreciated the warning, but such possibilities no longer scared her. “I’m ready to face them. You’d be surprised what I can endure, especially for my Alpha.”

The doc nodded.

Maxheim looked between them, his stare flickering from uncertain to hopeful and back to doubtful.

But she didn’t need to convince anyone any longer.

She already knew what she was capable of.

Embracing the omega within, welcoming her love for her Alpha deep into her cells and sinew, she drew in a sharp breath and concentrated. As if it had been there all along waiting for her, Nikolai’s forceful power flowed through her, mixing with her own, building, expanding, honing.

Every ruthless king needed an equally ruthless queen, and she was ready to become his.

“Contact Nikolai.” Already she could feel the images gathering. “Tell him we are coming. Tell him I love him.”



“SKOLOV, you can’t hold out forever.” Prendel’s emotionless voice carried across the wreckage of laser-singed ice sheets that stood between where Nikolai and his men were holed up in the mountain pass and the army of armed Brotherhood soldiers on the other side determined to take him out.

They’d come out in full force to take down a presumed traitor.

Good thing Nikolai didn’t need to hold out forever. Just long enough to ensure his omega and family were too far away to be caught.

“I was set up.” Nikolai didn’t expect them to believe, but he wasn’t above stalling.

“You shame yourself with baseless excuses. Face your actions and your crimes like an Alpha.” The Verish crime boss sounded smug, his pinchers chomping together with something approaching glee. No wonder. He hadn’t been happy about the dissolution of the prime omega contract for his son. Maybe he hoped to take back the omega originally promised to his eldest child once Nikolai was dead.

But no way would Nikolai ever let that happen.

The thought of his omega, however, sent golden light snaking through the block he’d erected to lessen her pain. He did his best to rebuild his defense fast. Compartmentalize. Cut off his emotions. Not that he didn’t crave her light with every doomed part of his soul, but he knew if he allowed himself to feel a little of their bond, he’d want it all, and he had to protect her. He didn’t want her feeling any of what he’d be experiencing once the Brotherhood got a hold of him and he was torn apart.

“I have no problem facing up to my crimes.” His sins against his omega were too many to count. He never should have dragged her into this in the first place, but he’d been a selfish fucking bastard and wanted it all. Wanted her. He could only hope his actions now made up for some of what he’d done. “But you should know you’re being manipulated, played by an enemy using the Skolov-Lundin feud to bring both families down, and manipulate you in the process.”

“Lies. Deflections.” Verish gnashed his teeth. “Why should we listen to the desperate accusations of a male who knows his time is up? This has gone on long enough.”

“What does it hurt to listen? If we agree to a temporary truce,” another familiar voice boomed across the distance, “perhaps we will learn something.” Good old Stormhart. They both knew that wasn’t a possibility, but Nikolai appreciated the gesture.

“There will be no working things out.” Prendel made the final call. “This ends now. An example must be made.”

Laser bursts exploded near Nikolai’s shoulders.

With a roar, he shot back. His men followed.

A volley of green streaks and roars pierced the night.

Proof that all the Brotherhood had come out for this battle.

The repudiation of their rules and the murder of one of their own wasn't enough to provoke them to forego their usual hard and fast security measures and gather to mete out justice. That in itself was a rare occurrence since Brotherhood gatherings were usually held on the ship, the location constantly shifting, the coordinates a closely guarded secret that members themselves didn't know until the very last moment.

Nikolai stilled. Oh, hells. The realization hit like an ice boulder. *This* was what the enemy was after all along. Not simply the eradication of the Skolov or the Lundin family, but the destruction of the entire Brotherhood.

This was a hostile takeover of the entire syndicate.

“Cease fire!” Nikolai shouted to be heard over the roar of weapon fire. When that didn't work, he got on his comms. “You need to get out of here now.”

Prendel's emotionless face stared back at him. “This is the way. The Brotherhood will not falter. Nor will we run.”

“You'd better. Someone has deliberately brought the Brotherhood together to attempt a coup. An attack is imminent.” He ignored the skepticism in the Inner Council's head's gaze. “Pull back beyond the immediate perimeter. Spread the word.”

He was dialing Stormhart when a burst of golden light slammed into him, barreling through the block he'd erected and curling around his chest, burrowing into every part of him, ensuring he was no longer alone.

Dahlia.

The beauty of the bond between them, stronger than before, was no longer tinged with corrosive doubt. It was so beautiful that for a heartbeat all he could do was stare in wonder.

He'd known she was strong. Capable. Extraordinary. But he'd had no idea how powerful she truly was, or what was possible between them.

The whine of a laser burst overhead pulled him from his trance.

Hanging up on Stormhart, he contacted Maxheim instead.

“Nikolai.” His brother picked up instantly. “Hold on a little longer. We’re almost there.”

He shouted to be heard over the roar of battle. “What have you done?”

“Not me. Your omega. She is insisting on accessing the vision, and there doesn’t appear to be any way to stop her. The doc says she has come into her power.”

A mix of pride and panic slammed through Nikolai. “She can’t. It’s too late. Don’t come back.”

“We’re already almost there. She insists she can handle it.” Maxheim paused. “She says to tell you she loves you.”

Nikolai’s chest went tight. He’d always thought her purr would be his favorite sound, but the ring of those three words seared straight to his heart and altered him forever.

She loved him.

He could rule a thousand planets. Create a hundred more empires. Earn a trillion more universal dollars. Nothing would ever make him feel as powerful as those three words.

He wished he had time to hear her voice one more time, but instinct was telling him otherwise. “Tell her I love her too. Tell her she is my everything.” He swallowed hard. “Then get the hells out of here. There’s more going on here than we initially thought. Someone is attempting to take down the whole Brotherhood and you can’t be here.”

An explosion rocked the mountainside.

“**S**hit! Nikolai. What happened? Are you there? Are you okay?”
Dahlia heard Maxheim’s shout as another part of her registered an ear-shattering blast and saw the mountainside crumble and flames burst on the horizon, but all of that reached her as if through a wall of ice.

The chaos and noise were dulled by the far louder roar of power rushing through her, a force of beauty and light and love propelled by her and Nikolai together.

She wanted to tell Maxheim not to worry, that Nikolai was more than okay, his power surging through the bond and helping to support and strengthen hers, but it was too late.

The vision was already on her.

“Alphas, we have a situation.” The pilot’s voice crackled through the comms. Again, his voice registered, but only in a far off, distant way. She was too busy gathering power.

A shot streaked across the hood.

“We’re under fire.”

“Is it the Brotherhood or an outside threat?”

“Unsure.”

“Respond in kind,” roared Maxheim.

Another flare of a laser.

Their craft listed to the side and slammed into a snowy bank.

She flew forward, but the restraints held tight.

Groans sounded around her. Curses, too. Doors opened as weapons were drawn.

She refused to lose focus. All her life, she had been told she did not have the strength to do what must be done.

She did.

Even in the darkest of moments, she could prevail.

The frightened omega who had been dragged along by her father, forced to bend and submit before the Brotherhood was no more.

She made her own rules now.

Whoever was shooting at them would fail in their bid to stop her. Her time was at hand.

Wrapping herself in her Alpha's strength and her own, she surrendered to the images and sent them slamming into every single inhabitant on Abzal.

Now was not the time for subtlety.



“MY APOLOGIES, ALPHA LORD.” The prime omega sailed into Naytalia’s private quarters as if they were her own. Tasha Lundin didn’t blink to find the Kuril head bending her over the bed. Nothing fazed that one. “Alpha Lundin has returned and will expect his property to be waiting for him in the omega stable.”

Kuril snarled. “She is busy. You wait on him, prime omega.” He thrust harder, his hand pinning Naytalia to the mattress. “That is your role.”

Naytalia moaned and tried to think past the pleasure of the thick cock slamming into her. It pleased her to hear Kuril order the prime omega around. Olan Lundin never did.

“Of course, Alpha. I was only trying to think of my Alpha’s pleasure. I know how enamored he is with Naytalia’s mouth right now.”

Right now. But not forever. Naytalia understood the hidden message. Forever was a security only afforded the prime omega.

Which was why Naytalia thrust her hips back and moaned louder. It was also why she’d added a little alcohol to the twins’ drinks before she’d invited the Kuril warlord to her private room. She’d been thrilled when her plan worked and he’d stormed in, threw his gun on the dresser, and, not

bothering to unbutton his pants, bent her over and shoved inside her. In his haste to fuck, he never noticed the cradle on the far side of the room, but he would not be pleased if anything, especially crying, disturbed his pleasure.

And Naytalia's scheme required keeping the Kuril crime boss happy above all else.

Nikolai would be pissed if he knew what she'd done, but she didn't plan on him finding out. Either about drugging the twins or all the rest of her schemes. Her eldest offspring scared her already, and he wasn't even close to adolescence yet.

If she was lucky, she'd be long gone by the time he realized she was the one who'd reached out to Olan Lundin and suggested Abzal could be a useful and lucrative outpost.

The Kuril head had already given her several jewels. She was all but certain he was going to offer to buy her contract from Lundin, especially since her gift had sparked back to life.

Its reappearance after so many years of nothing had shocked her. It had only flickered for a second, but for that brief moment, the thoughts of those around her had been crystal clear. She'd heard the beta servant worrying over her laundry. She'd heard Kuril enjoying the sweet heat of her cunt. The power had blinked out almost as fast as it had come, but she could sense it wasn't entirely gone. Rich, fabulous power. After so much powerlessness, the sensation was glorious.

Not for the first time, she wondered if its resurgence had to do with Kuril himself. She'd hated her first Alpha, and Lundin had turned out to be worse. Kuril was also demanding and selfish, but he did praise her and give her gifts. There were times being with him almost made her . . . happy.

"I only seek to please and serve." The prime omega's ingratiating words pulled Naytalia from her thoughts. The other female was bowing low, her gaze on the ground as she backed toward the door.

"You are a good omega." Still inside Naytalia, Kuril worked his hips faster.

Naytalia rolled her eyes. Like all the rest of the Alphas, Kuril was blinded by the prime omega's beauty and pretense of docility. Naytalia didn't buy it. No one could be that selfless.

"You honor me, Alpha." The prime omega bowed low once more.

"I will finish up soon." His warm cum flooded Naytalia's channel, his knot swelling and locking him in place. "I want to speak with Olan,

anyway.”

Naytalia's heart beat fast. Was this it? Was he going to buy her from Olan? Excitement rippled through her—along with a spark of power beneath her skin. Still bent over, the Alpha's knot deep inside her, her gift roared to life.

Enjoy your power now, you arrogant Kuril worm. I will destroy you some rotation soon. You think to tell me my duties? You think you know my role? You cannot fathom what I am. What I am capable of. How I will rise above and destroy you all.

Naytalia blinked. The prime omega's voice was clear as a bell in her head.

I have no time to deal with you or my fool of an Alpha. No time to service your cocks or your arrogance. One rotation soon, you will know it. One rotation soon, the Brotherhood will be gone, and I will be the one in charge. If you only knew how easily I plot against you. You're so busy fucking, fighting, and counting your money, you fools have no idea what is happening around you. So, go on, do as my Alpha does. Fuck your pliant omegas and drown in your arrogance and lust. In the end, you will burn.

Naytalia gasped. She clawed to her elbows. “You.” She stared at the omega. “What have you done? What are you planning?”

Naytalia's fate was tied to the Alphas. Their destruction would bring her own.

“What do you mean?” The other omega stood frozen in the door, her wide eyes guileless, but Naytalia caught the flicker of fear.

Does the slut omega somehow know? Has her gift returned?

“Yes,” Naytalia answered her aloud, triumphant at the idea that she could finally put the snotty prime omega in her place. “Yes. It has returned. I heard every thought. You are plotting against the Brotherhood.”

The prime omega's eyes went wide.

Behind Naytalia, Kuril had gone still. “What are you two talking about?”

“Nothing, Alpha.” The prime omega glided toward Naytalia's dresser. “Nothing at all.”

“Nothing?” Naytalia mocked. “I read her mind, and she is up to something. None of it good for you or the Brotherhood.”

The prime omega seized Kuril's laser from the top of the chest of drawers. “Quiet.” She pointed it at Naytalia, her aim steady. “Shut up or I

will shoot you both.”

“What in the hells?” The Alpha’s roar was furious. To have a weapon pointed in his direction was instant cause for aggression. That it dared to be done by an omega was more rage-inducing.

Naytalia screamed as Kuril jerked his cock from her channel, tearing her in his haste, but the Alpha’s focus was on Tasha Lundin alone. “How dare you point that at me?”

He charged.

Naytalia collapsed back on the bed, the pain between her thighs agonizing.

Only to scream as Kuril faltered and crashed to the ground. The horrific scent of burning flesh permeated the air.

The Lundin omega had shot him.

He groaned. The prime omega fired again.

Crying erupted from the cradle at the far end of the room as at least one of the twins awoke.

But they were hardly Naytalia’s first concern. All her hopes, all her dreams, of escape from Abzal had just been dashed. She shoved up from the bed. “You won’t get away with this. You’ve killed a member of the Brotherhood. You’re going to die for this.”

She staggered toward the door.

There are no servants to hear you, bitch. I sent them all away. I wanted no one to witness my upcoming meeting. Seems that will serve me well on several fronts this rotation.

More of the prime omega’s thoughts. Naytalia didn’t want to hear anymore. Especially the last one.

Die.

She was almost to the door, panic flooding her body, when the searing pain sliced through her back and into her stomach.

She gasped. Went down hard.

Overwhelmed by pain, she almost thought she was imagining the sudden appearance of a wide-shouldered, robed figure in gray walking into her line of vision, his boots planted by her cheek—until he spoke. “What is going on here? This was not the plan. You were supposed to meet me in your room for a secret meeting, not cause a scene and execute an Alpha and his whore.”

“It could not be helped.” The prime omega was breathing fast, her excitement palpable. She liked what she’d done. “They weren’t supposed to be in this section of the compound. I tried to send them away, but Kuril was too busy fucking her to go. Then she read my mind. She knew I was plotting against the Brotherhood.”

“My employer does not like surprises.” The male’s voice sounded young, and arrogant.

“It won’t happen again.”

“You were told to learn account information, shipping routes, crime boss patterns, weaknesses, and most significantly, how and when the Brotherhood meetings are communicated and any means of infiltration.”

“All of which I will do. I swear it.” Tasha sounded more nervous than Naytalia had ever heard. “Olan is a fool. His security lax. And none of the Alpha crime bosses would ever suspect an omega. You have already seen how easily I was able to get you Olan’s account information, as well as that of the Kuril head.”

The robed figure growled low. “Do not make the mistake of thinking all Alphas are like those two. There are far smarter within the Brotherhood, and without.” His tone was heavy with warning. “There are also plenty of Alphas who know how to handle a disobedient omega.”

“Yes, of course, my Alpha Lord.” Eyes downcast, Tasha took solace behind false submissiveness.

“Hmmm.” The robed figure didn’t seem to buy her act. The air around him crackled with menace. “Do not pretend with me, omega. I don’t need your fake docility to force your surrender.”

“Yes, Alpha Lord.”

“See that you remember who is in charge.”

“Yes, of course. You are.” Tasha said the right words, but it was clear to Naytalia they’d scraped like jagged glass as they issued from the other omega’s throat. Poor Tasha. In this way, they were both alike. Both plotting and scheming for more. But Tasha craved power, whereas all Naytalia wanted was security. Thanks to the Alphas around them, it looked like neither would get their wish.

“A destabilized Brotherhood is distracted, sloppy, and prone to rash acts. Patience and deliberate chaos is the best way to ensure they never see us coming.”

“Yes, Alpha.” Tasha agreed in a rush. “If it pleases you, the fire will be ruled a tragic accident, the result of an omega whore’s carelessness with candles, but a cloud of suspicion will hang over Olan. One I can exploit at any time.”

“You are more devious than you appear.” The male sounded pleased.

Tasha preened. “I can turn this to my advantage. I promise.”

There was a scuffle of footsteps and before Naytalia could blink, the robed figure had Tasha in a chokehold, the laser in her hand immobilized.

“Not your advantage. Our employer’s advantage.” The male voice had gone hard as steel. “You serve him now, omega. Him and me. I do not expect to have to make this clear to you again.”

Naytalia took advantage of the distraction to inch closer to the door.

“Y-Yes. Of course, My Lord.” The prime omega gasped the words out. “I serve you and him. I promise.”

“We’ve spent several years getting into position to become a threat to the Brotherhood. They are notoriously secretive. It will take several more years before we know enough about their businesses as a whole to cripple them and capitalize on what we have begun. Your stupid rash act has threatened that.”

“I will do better.”

“Good.” The male sounded pleased. “The road may be hard, but such loyalty will be rewarded.”

He released Tasha.

The prime omega staggered out of reach.

“Start the fire.”

Hurrying to obey, Tasha grabbed one of the flaming candles from the top of Naytalia’s dresser and touched it to the drapes by the window. The flames leapt upward.

The Lundin omega’s excitement was palpable. “Soon, anything that might have led back to me or your employer will be ash.” A sharp crying from the cradle drew the omega’s attention. “The bitch’s brats. I will kill them now.”

She raised her laser once more.

Naytalia took advantage to drag herself closer to the door.

“Wait.” The male’s bark was heavy with command.

He strode to the cradle. Two silver-skinned arms poked out of the robe and reached into the cradle, a small circular skin design just visible on his

exposed right forearm. "I will take these two with me. Consider it a gift of goodwill in appeasement for the mess you have made here."

The prime omega nodded. "Good thinking. We—" she corrected herself, "—you and our employer has a business to run after all, and good cargo like these two are not easy to come by. They'll make a fine profit on the market. Soon enough, no one will be looking for them."

"You have no conscience, omega."

"You do?" Tasha's pretense of docility hadn't lasted long.

But this time the hooded Alpha did not take offense. "I did once." A long pause. "Now, it seems I have none at all."

"Kuril!" Olan's enraged voice echoed down the hall. "You have gone too far this time. My omegas' gifts are mine! The prime omega is mine! I will tear you apart for taking what is mine."

For an instant, both Tasha and the robed figure froze.

"He's coming this way." The male was eerily calm. The twins cried louder.

Tasha's expression sharpened. "Perhaps I can kill him now too. Blame his death on the fire?"

"No. Now is not the time." The male barked out commands. "Head him off. Say the fire is already too strong, and it is too late to save anyone else. Scream and cling to him, play on his Alpha instinct to get you out. Be sure to rub up against him, let any blood from Kuril and the omega that might have splattered on you soak into his clothes and skin. Make him look guilty in case this situation becomes useful to use against him later."

"As you wish."

The twins in hand, the silver-skinned male swaggered toward the door. "I'll take the back way out. The servants are still out of the way?"

"Yes." The prime omega tossed the burning candle onto the bed. "I'll head Olan off now."

"Kuril, Naytalia, you are going to pay. You hear me?" Olan's boots pounded the ground as he stomped down the hall.

Hope fluttered in Naytalia's chest. Maybe he would come in time . . .

"Olan, help!" Tasha staggered out the door, the prime omega's voice heavy with tears and panic, the perfect actress. "There's a fire! Turn back or we'll all be burned alive. The back entrance is already blocked by flames. Hurry to the front or we'll die!"

Rage gave Naytalia an extra surge of strength. She inched closer to the door.

The robed figure glided past, juggling her children in his arms as he prodded her with his toe. “Still alive, huh? I’m sorry, but I can’t allow that to continue.”

Naytalia opened her mouth to scream.

She never got the chance. Searing pain slammed into her belly once more.

Then, nothing.

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Dahlia returned to the present with a gasp, collapsing back into the seat of the hovercraft.

Horror was a thick coat of ice on her skin.

All this time, her mother was the killer.

All this time, she thought Olan was the worst monster in her midst.

All this time, the Skolov family had thought the twins were dead when they could still be alive.

“You did it.” The doc’s whisper pulled her from the last of the vision haze. “You made them all see. Amazing. The Alpha-omega bond is more powerful than I ever imagined.”

She looked around, the scene coming into focus. The doc was seated next to her, a laser awkwardly held in his shaking hand and pointed toward the door. Outside, crater-sized black soot marks darkened the landscape while large figures tussled, and laser blasts streaked through the air.

The doc answered her unasked question with a shrug. “We came under attack while you were under. I’m apparently the last line of defense.”

“Cover the omega. Don’t let her mother get to her.” Maxheim’s voice boomed from outside the vehicle.

“There’s too many. We’re pinned down.” Damien’s shout echoed down the ridge.

Laser fire seared the side of the vehicle.

The doc’s frightened gaze met hers. “I think your mother may be upset with you.”

No wonder her prime omega had never wanted Dahlia to reach her full potential.

But Dahlia had only one main concern. “Nikolai?”

Troubled pink and gray eyes blinked fast. “We’re not sure. We lost comms when the explosion occurred. As far as we can tell, the blast was meant to take out the Brotherhood heads.”

Her mother was as ruthless as any Alpha.

“Give up my daughter and my men will let you live.” A familiar voice cut through the roar of battle.

“I don’t take orders from an omega,” snarled Maxheim.

“Then you and your family will die at the hands of one.” Dahlia’s mother had dropped all pretense of servility.

Dahlia had to admit she admired the strength in the other omega’s voice.

Unfortunately, their goals were at odds. She could not allow her mother to do any more damage to the Skolov family.

The doc’s attention was on the unfolding scene outside. Taking advantage, Dahlia eased her door open and slipped out.

“Wait. Don’t—”

She closed the door on the doc’s protest and entered the world of snow and ice, her boots sinking into the deep snow as the icy wind whipped at her. Dressed for hovercraft travel, she was ill-prepared for the frigid Abzal temperatures. It didn’t matter.

Her rotations of allowing others to wage her fight were at an end.

Trudging through the deep snow, she moved away from the vehicle and called out. “It’s too late, prime omega. Your misdeeds have been exposed.” It was both gratifying and terrifying to witness the barrels of over fifty lasers swing in her direction, but at least they were not on the Skolov family any longer.

She stared across the icy expanse at the mother she’d never really known.

Tasha Lundin’s white-blond hair flowed freely, the wind whipping the waist-length hair into a frenzy, while her eyes burned with an intensity that would have been beautiful if it wasn’t so twisted by bitterness.

“You stupid girl. Who knew you would end up being the greatest thorn in my side?” She gestured toward a few of the guards, indicating they should advance toward where Dahlia stood. They weren’t Lundin soldiers

but hired mercenaries. Her mother appeared to have created her own army. “Bring her to me unharmed.”

Too late for that. The staggering depth of her mother’s betrayal cut deep. “I thought you loved me.”

The prime omega scoffed. “There is no love in this world. There is just survival.”

The words struck like a fist around Dahlia’s heart, squeezing so hard it was difficult to breathe. She’d long ago stopped looking to her prime omega for emotional support or affection, but giving up the illusion of who her mother was and what was between them, ripped off a layer of her soul. Like grieving the loss of a person who was alive.

But she wasn’t the same female she’d once been either. “You’re wrong. There is love and it’s more powerful than you can imagine.”

Her mother’s disdain was obvious. “I prefer to rely on myself and my own machinations. They’ve gotten me impressively far.”

Dahlia marched backward up the slope of the mountain, forging a new path, the hem of her dress dragging in the thick powder.

Fortunately, the going was equally difficult for the guards coming for her.

It dawned on her what her mother meant. “*You* were the one who had the witnesses killed. *You* were the one who sent the man to kill me. Not Olan.”

“True.” Her mother tracked her progress like a predator did its prey, stepping easily in the boot marks left behind. “When you were first born, you seemed so helpless and useless. I almost killed you then, but that oaf Olan was so pleased to have proof of his breeding prowess, I reasoned it would be wiser to let you live so I could carry out my plans without him pawing at me all the time. For so long, you were so malleable, so desperate to please, it seemed like I’d calculated correctly.”

The cruelty of her mother’s words stung slightly less this time. No wonder Dahlia had always felt like a disappointment. To a mother concerned only with furthering her own power, she’d been one.

“When you showed your gift, I could scarcely believe it. Such power. What a waste.” The jealousy in her mother’s voice was clear. “That such a gift would be given to someone who had no interest in leveraging it for gain, but only wanted to pretend it didn’t exist?” She shook her head. “Pathetic.”

“I’ve no problem embracing it now.”

Her mother scowled, the reminder of Dahlia’s vision unwelcome. “If my gift had remained past my youth, I would never use it in the service of an arrogant Brotherhood Alpha. They deserve nothing we have to give.”

Clearly, her mother did not have someone like the doc in her entourage to let her know that the retention of the gift past adolescence was only possible if sparked by an Alpha-omega connection. Or that the strength of Dahlia’s gift relied on the tie between her and Nikolai.

And there was no question in Dahlia’s mind that her prime omega had never been happy enough to discover what truly powered an omega’s gift.

For all her mother had accomplished, she’d never known the joy that came from that bond.

It softened some of Dahlia’s anger. “I’m sorry Olan was such a monster to you, but not all Alphas are like that.”

Her mother laughed. “My father was worse.”

“Is that why you did all this? You wanted revenge against the Alphas who’d hurt you?”

“What I wanted was to be on top. To rise above all the fools and their small-minded plans and control my own empire and business.”

“An impressive goal.” But their Alphaverse did not allow ambitious omega’s like her mother to rise. In keeping her down, however, they’d twisted her into something even more dangerous. Dahlia could see the madness flickering in her mother’s gaze, no longer hidden by false docility.

It made Dahlia sad. It also left her angry. Such a waste. What might her mother have been if she’d been allowed to flourish? The same went for Naytalia.

Except neither omega had tried to change things for the better. Instead, they’d become as selfish and vicious as those they professed to want to escape.

“I’ve been running your father’s syndicate for years, but always behind the scenes and always hindered by his stupid, reckless choices. When I was contacted by my employer and asked to turn, I didn’t hesitate. I was so tired of being hobbled by the arrogance of the Alphas around me. I knew then exactly how I could rise above.” Her mother’s beautiful features sharpened with smug satisfaction. “Which is what I have done. Your gift comes too late. Neither the Brotherhood nor Nikolai Skolov can save you now. They’ve fallen at the hands of an omega they never saw coming.”

“Dahlia, keep coming this way, and keep talking.” Maxheim’s low command whispered like the wind from behind a nearby cluster of ice. Somehow, he’d circled around and positioned himself to defend her. “Damien and Alexi are getting into place. We’ll take your mother and her men by surprise. We promised Nikolai, and we are not letting her take you.”

It was sweet, and not unexpected, but Dahlia had her own plan.

Determined, she moved in the opposite direction, forging up the mountain, her shivers increasing as the cold and wet seeped into her body. Still, she forced her feet upward, her gaze locked on her mother and the encircling mercenary soldiers. “What will happen now?”

“The people I work for will take over the Brotherhood’s enterprises and consolidate it into a more efficient, ruthless organization.”

“Who is your employer? Who is the silver-skinned robed figure from my vision?”

Her mother’s expression turned sly. “You’ll have the chance to meet them soon enough.”

“They aren’t here?”

Irritation sharpened the prime omega’s face. “Of course not. I have an army I paid for using Lundin funds siphoned into my own account years ago. I have enough manpower, and my employer has other plans afoot. But he knows what is happening, and he trusts me to get the job done.”

Dahlia sensed an opening. “Or he doesn’t want to risk getting caught and has left you to twist alone in the wind if things go wrong.”

“You know nothing.” Her mother’s dismissal was quick, but Dahlia caught the flicker of doubt. “I am of great importance. As important as his silver-skinned lackey. My employer has told me often through our written communications.”

“He has to be someone with vast resources and connections, but he clearly doesn’t like to get his hands dirty. He leaves that part—and the greatest risk—to pawns like you and the silver-skinned male.”

“Pawn?” The repeated insult worked, pricking her mother’s ego and loosening her tongue. “I am no pawn. My efforts are critical to my employer’s plan to take over the Brotherhood’s operations and consolidate its enterprises into one business controlled by a single great ruler. I am to be an essential advisor—and I am not the only one.”

A chill ran through Dahlia, and it wasn’t simply from the icy cold. If she understood her mother correctly, there were other unknown enemies in the

Brotherhood's midst. Like a hydra with many heads, her mother's employer had planned his attack well. But something else about the way her mother spoke of her employer caught Dahlia's attention as well.

"Others? I see. But you must be his finest creation."

"I suspect so." Her mother preened.

"But you don't know for sure, do you?" Certainty came in a flash. "Just as you don't know who your employer is. I saw through my vision that at the time of the fire, you had no idea who either the silver-skinned male or your main employer was, only that they were offering you a way out. You were determined to discover their identities and use that as leverage to secure your position, but you never did. You still don't know."

Irritation narrowed her mother's eyes. "Well, I see there's some of me in you after all. Clever girl." The omega didn't sound as if she meant it. "You're right. I don't know. I've spent years trying to discover their identities but have been blocked at every turn."

"Yet you've convinced yourself this unknown employer will somehow let an omega who he hasn't allowed to know his identity be his advisor once he is ruler of all? I saw the way the silver-skinned Alpha treated you in my vision. You accuse me of being foolish, but even you must see that you will never be allowed to do anything more than serve."

"Agreed. An omega's lot is the same every Alphaverse over unless she has been funneling off money for her own use . . . and has access to a gift powerful enough to make the most vicious of Alpha's consider negotiation."

The mercenary glint in the prime omega's stare sent a shiver down Dahlia's spine. "You intend to use me as a bargaining chip to gain a greater position of power."

"Yes. At first, I thought it best to kill you and keep you from spilling my secrets about the fire, but now that it's too late for that, I've decided on a different plan. I think my employer will be quite excited by all your gift can offer. So many secrets up for grabs."

Dahlia backed up faster, but the wet hem of her dress dragged her down, slowing her steps.

"I'd think you'd be pleased." Her mother's guards were skirting around the twisted blocks of ice, closing in. "You always spoke about how you wanted us to be together forever. Now we will be."

“I said I wanted to be free. Not used and whored out to a madman to further the greed and ambition of a woman I once trusted.”

“That was your first mistake. Trusting anyone, caring for anyone, is a fool’s game.” Her mother dusted some snow from her sleeve. “Plus, an omega’s fate is to endure.”

“Except for you, apparently.” A short time ago, her mother’s betrayal would have devastated Dahlia. All she could think now was that she was beyond lucky to have crossed paths with Nikolai Skolov years ago. Otherwise, she might have ended up as twisted as her mother.

“Do not think for a moment that I have not suffered. I have.”

Despite everything, Dahlia’s heart bled. She’d felt her mother’s rage and jealousy through the vision. She could only imagine how painful it must be to have that kind of corrosive poison eating away at a person over the years. It would turn anyone into a husk of who they might have been.

Dahlia slid on the ice and almost went down. She caught herself, but it cost her. The encircling guards advanced closer. “My Alpha is good to me. He cares for me, and I for him.”

“A delusion.” The prime omega waved her hand in dismissal. “I am doing you a favor, saving you from disillusion down the line. An Alpha cannot love. At least this way your gifts will be in service of a better cause. Imagine, I will be the first omega of power. I will be a legend.”

“Is that why you told me Kaiya was dead? Was that to save me somehow, too?”

Her mother’s expression never altered. “No. That was merely a manipulation to draw you out of the Skolov compound, but you proved pathetically willing to cling to your Alpha. In the end, though, I have you right where I want you.”

“Actually, mother.” Dahlia stopped retreating and stood up straight. “I have you right where I want you.”

Amusement played across her mother’s face. Pity, too. Until . . .

“Dahlia!” Nikolai’s roar echoed across the ice.

Followed by the trampling of an army of pounding boots as the full force of the Brotherhood raced toward her down the mountain.

Her mother’s expression shifted to shock, then horror.

The same with her men. A few broke rank and turned, sprinting down the mountain.

“He lives. There’s a chance they all do.” Dahlia confirmed with a nod. “The bond between my Alpha and me is strong. Strong enough to let me know he is alive and well. Strong enough to tell me he is on his way.”

“You were stalling.” A few more of her mother’s men heard the roars and took off. That was the problem with hired hands. There was rarely enough money exchanged to convince them to give their life.

“Yes,” Dahlia admitted, “and leading you toward them. There is more of me in you than you suspected. I can be ruthless when it’s required. You have less than twenty seconds until my Alpha arrives. Your plan has failed.”

Her prime omega’s expression twisted with rage, especially as more of her men disappeared until it was only her left behind in the ice and snow. An army of one. “You have ruined everything.”

“For you, perhaps. For me, it feels like a new beginning.” Dahlia let herself take in her mother one last time. “I understand your rage and your pain. I have felt it too. But I prefer to let love guide me over hate.”

The prime omega scoffed. “You’ll be sorry. He’ll disappoint you. You’ll see. And my employer will still win in the end.”

“My Alpha has already come through for me more than you ever did. We found a way to bring you down. We will find a way to thwart your employer as well. Goodbye, mother. I hope you find some semblance of peace.”

Her mother looked torn. Dahlia understood. Stay, and she’d be seized or trampled by the hundreds of enraged Brotherhood Alphas coming for her. Go, and she’d admit defeat. A terrible outcome for a female who’d prided herself on outwitting them all.

“Dahlia!” The sound of her name so nearby and rumbled in that deep, familiar, commanding tone had her gaze lifting up the mountain, searching for the one person who had always kept his promises to her.

By the time she looked back toward where her mother had been standing, the space was empty. Her mother was gone.

Despite everything, Dahlia couldn’t regret the small part of her that hoped the omega got away. Her mother knew nothing helpful about her employer or how to find the twins. All her capture would have done was appease the fury of the Alphas who she’d wronged, but in their way, by allowing Tasha Lundin to be brutalized by Olan Lundin, they’d wronged the omega too.

Life in the Anarcheim Alphaverse was not fair and it never would be, but this felt like its own form of justice.

“Dahlia!” Nikolai’s shout was closer.

Then, before she could answer, strong arms closed around her and she was scooped up and held in his arms. Safe. Treasured. Loved.

“Alpha.” She held him as fiercely. Soot covered his face, blood splattered his furs and leather, but he’d never looked more beautiful to her.

“You’re safe.”

“I knew you’d come for me.”

“We make a good team.” He pressed kisses to her temple. “You’re soaking wet and ice cold.”

“I’m fine. What happened up there?” She clung to him; the bitter chill not as bad with his body molded to hers.

“Your mother set off some kind of explosion. Luckily, I’d been able to warn some of the Brotherhood, who warned others. A fair number were already away from the main blast site when it erupted, but some didn’t make it. Trouble was, no one knew who the real enemy was. Chaos erupted. The Alphas aggression triggered. Everyone started attacking everyone.”

She shuddered. She’d been so close to losing him.

“But then something miraculous happened.” He squeezed her tighter. “Your vision hit us all. There was no fighting it. It froze everyone in place, overwhelming with its power and truth. When it ended, the only sound was the howling wind. But everything had shifted. Thanks to you, the Brotherhood was no longer in chaos or divided. They had a common enemy. They stopped fighting among themselves and started fighting together. After that, taking out the mercenaries was easy, and we moved down the mountain, cutting through the fighters to find the omega behind it all. But no one was moving faster than me. I could feel your faith and your fear through the bond, calling me home.”

“I never doubted you’d find me.” She confessed the rest. “But my mother is gone, and neither her employer nor the silver-skinned robed male was ever here.”

Frustration surged through their bond, followed by determination. “A short-term respite. We’ll get them.”

“I’m so sorry about everything my mother did. I never suspected.”

“None of us did. That’s why she was so effective.”

“And the twins . . . did you see?” She hoped that would ease some of the fury she could feel pulsing through him. “They’re alive.”

He gripped her tighter. “I did. I saw, along with the small circular skin design on the silver-skinned bastard who took them. That’s another gift you’ve given me. I won’t stop looking until they’re back with us and our family is reunited. Whoever took them will pay.”

She didn’t doubt it for an instant. “I will be with you every step of the way.” Rising on tiptoes, she pressed her lips to his, not stopping even as a slew of soldiers crashed into view and an ominous shadow fell over them.

The rest of the Brotherhood had arrived.

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Nikolai shoved Dahlia behind him.

He'd managed to warn most of the Brotherhood in time, but a few families had suffered heavy losses and the Verish crime head was dead. Plus, it was his omega's mother that was behind the mess, and she and her employer appeared to have escaped for the moment.

He had no idea what kind of mood the cavalry was in.

"We're right behind you." Maxheim's comforting voice had never been more welcome. The same went for the sight of Damien and an injured, but determined, Alexi, both flanking Anya, and so many of his men, emerging from behind the snowbanks and ice to stand at his back. All of them armed, all looking ready for a fight.

He'd known his omega was alive and well through their bond, but he'd had no idea about his family. He should have known better than to doubt them.

The Skolovs were survivors.

Prendel stepped forward, his massive blob-like shape oozing over the ice and snow. "Where is the traitor?"

"Gone."

Even for an emotionless creature, Prendel looked displeased. "I see."

Nikolai tightened his hold on his laser.

"I think we can agree there has been enough fighting for today." His omega spoke from over his shoulder. "You have seen through my vision who killed the Kuril head and plotted against you. At the same time, my Alpha has saved the Brotherhood from devastation from an enemy it had no

idea existed, and brought a more dangerous one to light, giving you time to prepare and retaliate. Now is not the time for more division, but for the Brotherhood to come together against this unseen foe.”

Silence descended.

Pride rippled through Nikolai. His omega had found her power—and become a handful. He couldn’t have been happier. Skoloys were known within the Brotherhood for being unpredictable outsider upstarts. She was truly one of them now, and he’d defend and cultivate that growing confidence in his beautiful omega to his dying breath—though they’d definitely be having a little chat later about limits. She was still his to protect.

If they survived the next few moments.

He pushed her more fully behind him as more of the warlords drifted forward, until all the surviving Brotherhood heads, ten in all, were standing shoulder to shoulder in a semi-circle facing Nikolai and his family.

Stormhart nodded in his direction.

Prendel’s eight eyes blinked as one. “Your omega is not observing protocol. She is also not behaving as a proper omega should.”

Nikolai shrugged. “I like her as she is.”

A few raised eyebrows, some growled. Stormhart laughed.

Nikolai didn’t let it distract him. “What’s the move here, Prendel?”

“Move?” The Inner Council head looked genuinely confused. “Though she speaks out of turn, your omega’s words are correct. You have saved the Brotherhood from annihilation. Any and all perceived grievances have been wiped clean. You have our gratitude.”

Nikolai relaxed, but he didn’t bring his omega forward. “And my omega?”

Prendel’s body undulated in a giant nod. “The bylaws of the contract indicate that if the agreement you signed with the Lundin male is not met in full, the contract can be made null and void. The Lundin omega’s actions qualify under those terms. If you would like to return the property, you will be allowed to do so without a loss of honor. You will be free. The taint of any association with Lundin blood removed.”

The small, pained gasp behind him tore at his chest. By now she had to know what she was to him, but he suspected the pain of her own blood’s betrayal would leave her vulnerable for a long while.

He would do whatever it took to help her heal.

“She is mine, always and forever.” He leveled the other crime bosses with a hard stare. “But she deserves far more than that. It was not me who saved the Brotherhood, but her. If not for her power, our enemy would remain unknown. It cannot be overlooked that the Brotherhood is in her debt.”

Low growls among the other syndicate heads. No Alpha liked that idea.

“What are you suggesting?” Prendel alone seemed more intrigued than offended.

“I’m saying payment is due. I believe you can start by joining me in thanking my omega for saving all our asses.” With no more warning than that, he swiveled and swooped her into his arms. “You can give yours publicly now and, after agreeing to spare any and all innocent Lundins and their beta servants from further retribution, I suspect she’ll consider that a good start toward payment for the debt owed her. If she agrees, you can get the hells off my mountain. That explosion was big enough to show up on Federation surveillance. The law will be coming to ask nosy questions. We’ll tell them it was an accidental explosion of one of our sanctioned heating units, but it’s better if you’re not here to undercut the story. Plus, too many Alphas in one place make us all itchy, and I’ve got plans. Big ones.” He pressed his mouth to her ear. “I intend to offer my thanks to my omega privately—and very thoroughly.”



DAHLIA’S HEART slammed against her ribs. Need, too. “Nikolai.” Her desire for her Alpha was constant. It thrilled her to know he felt the same.

It awed her too that he would think of her family and do what he could to spare them because he knew it mattered to her.

“Do you agree to our terms, omega?” He winked at her, but his next words were meant for the entire group once more. “We might have almost been taken down by an omega, but we were also saved by one. What you have done will not be forgotten. The Brotherhood’s debt to you can never be repaid, but we will do our best to try.”

Joy thundered through her. Pride, too.

Especially as one by one, the other Alphas, motivated by Nikolai’s words, agreed to his terms. They came forward individually and offered

their thanks while pledging to vote to spare the rest of the Lundin clan. Stormhart ambled forward first, then Prendel, and then the rest; a ragtag, growling bunch of blood-spattered Alphas whose barely leashed power crawled over her skin as they offered her tribute.

She could scarcely believe it. She who had once been forced to bend and bow before them was now on the receiving end of their respect thanks to the Alpha who held her tight the entire time. It was a heady experience, and a little stressful. Especially with her Alpha snarling each time one of the crime bosses came close.

But Nikolai allowed it, for her.

Because he'd always be an Alpha, fierce, aggressive, brutal, but he cared more for her than he did his pride or his aggression, and he showed her so in a thousand ways.

She was the luckiest of omegas, and the biological imperative she'd once hated seemed like a privilege now.

"Thank you for this moment." By the time the last Brotherhood head offered his thanks and stepped back, the need inside her was a wild frenzy that could only be filled by one male. "I will always do whatever is required for my Alpha because I love him. My gift, my body, my heart are his for the taking—and," she lowered her voice and teased, "I hope he takes me soon."

Nikolai's eyes bled to red. "Maxheim!" He called his brother forward. "Are you up for dealing with any Federation questions?"

"Absolutely. You know I've always got your back."

"And I yours." A look passed between Nikolai and his brother. One of respect and affection. Her Alpha was clearly very happy to have his family back. "Make sure the Brotherhood members get where they need to go. Then, take the rest of the family and head back to the compound and get dry and warm. I'm taking my omega there now. She's chilled."

Alexi spoke before Maxheim could. "She seems pretty warm from here."

But Nikolai didn't bother to respond or acknowledge the laughter that followed; he was already hauling her back up the mountain at breakneck speed.

"Nikolai." She pressed kisses to his jaw, his ear, the curve of his horn. There was no more block between them. No more doubts or uncertainties to dampen the fated-mate bond. Only the shimmering gold of pure respect, trust, and love. Its searing force stronger and brighter than any fire.

She couldn't wait to burn with him deep inside her.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, clean, warm and dry, well-fucked and knotted, Nikolai lifted her into his arms and, cradling her, plopped them both in front of the fire in his room, the plush couch more than big enough to hold them both with ease.

He pulled a blanket over her.

Sleepy, she snuggled in close, soaking in the dancing flames, purring softly as he played with her damp hair, his thick fingers gentle as they combed out the last of the tangles.

Sex between them had always been amazing, but now it was even better. Revelatory. Her newfound confidence allowing her to see what she'd been too uncertain and afraid to recognize before: the depth of his love and devotion, the scope of his need.

He truly was hers as much as she was his.

"I meant what I said in front of the Brotherhood." His rumbled words cut into her thoughts. "I owe you a thank you."

She smiled against his chest. "I believe you thanked me plenty already. Five times in fact."

She thought he'd smile. He didn't. "I hated every second apart. I thought it was the best way to keep you safe."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Lifting her, he repositioned her so that her legs straddled his and their faces were aligned. "It isn't always easy for me to say what I feel, but I realized today that if I'd died without you knowing, it would have been my greatest failing yet."

"Alpha, I do know." She cradled his jaw in her palm. "I can feel it through our bond with every beat of my heart—and yours."

He turned and kissed her palm. "But some things need saying aloud. Omega, what I feel for you is timeless. Vast. Infinite. It is past, present, and future. It is need and rage and pain and lust. It is every dirty sin, every ruthless act, every brief flicker of goodness and light in me. It is all for you. It has always been for you."

“Nikolai.” She threaded her fingers through his hair. “It has always been you for me, too.”

“I survived a fire, years of hell and hunting, so I could come for you. I killed and lied and cheated so I could build an empire strong and sturdy enough to keep you safe. I rose to be the most ruthless, feared bastard of them all so I would be powerful enough to snatch you from my enemies and make you mine.”

She blinked hard to keep her foolish tears at bay.

“Every move I’ve made has been to bring you back to me. Love is too weak a word for what I feel for you, Dahlia Lundin Skolov. You are my beginning and my end, my wildest obsession, my greatest purpose. I would walk through fire for you. Burn down a universe if it kept you safe. So, you can be sure”—he pressed his lips to hers and whispered—“I will do whatever it takes to ensure you stay with me. You are not my property, you are my everything.”

“Thank you for those words. Like my necklace, I will cherish them always.” She kissed him back, tiny worshipful touches at each corner of his mouth. Their world wasn’t perfect, but with him by her side, it was beautiful and right, nonetheless. “You are my strength and my anchor.” Next, she worshiped his temple, his throat. “You are the dream I never knew I wanted. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, my treasure, my mate, my queen.”

His mouth found hers once more and soon the bands at her wrists and throat pulsed with golden light as she gripped his horns and rode him while he growled and thrust deep inside her. They were frenzied in their fucking, consumed by primal need, unquenchable hunger, and wild, raw trust and honesty as only an Alpha and his omega could be. Joined in every way.

As they were always meant to be.

There was no greater bond than between fated mates, and no greater force in the Anarcheim Alphaverse than the love of two lost souls willing to risk everything to find each other once more.

EPILOGUE

“I wasn’t expecting you, Alexi. You’re not my omega.” Pushing off the wall in the outside corridor to his study, Nikolai peered hard at his younger brother. He’d summoned her over ten minutes ago and she should have arrived by now.

They liked to take an hour at lunch to be together, and sometimes they even ate during that time, too.

He was especially looking forward to today. His omega liked surprises, and he liked giving her them, especially since she was so enthusiastic after, bouncing on his cock as she purred and whispered she loved him.

His family’s challenging times were far from over, but he was still one lucky fucking Alpha.

“No shit.” Alexi shot him his usual smart-ass smile. “Good to see that all that fucking and happiness bullshit hasn’t interfered with your deductive skills.”

Nikolai growled low. The too-handsome-for-his-own-good fucker was healing up, but he was still skirting the edge. Yes, his brother was no longer sucking down mood enhancers like candy and he’d returned to his rigorous work schedule, but after work ended, he was still in those clubs of his until all hours, fucking like a madman and doing gods knows what else. Even after a shower, Nikolai could scent the stench of pussy, sweat, and desperation on his brother’s skin. As if that would somehow take away the memory of what had happened to him.

Trouble was, nothing seemed to be working and attempts at talking about it had been met with smart-ass rebuffs. But since his omega had come

down strongly on the side of Nikolai not beating the shit out of his brother, Nikolai was doing his best to be patient. No easy task.

“Where is she?”

“She’s fine.” Maxheim appeared behind Alexi, hands out as if to block the way, and Nikolai’s gut went on the alert.

Maxheim barely emerged from his quarters these rotations, and it showed. After three months of hunting for their silver-skinned elusive enemy—and any signs of the twins—the neat, fastidious Alpha was gone, replaced by a bearded barbarian with wild golden eyes who divided his time between mumbling at a screen as lines of data streamed by him and honing his combat skills, fighting any soldier stupid enough to accept his challenge.

His brother was clearly taking the lack of progress hard.

Thanks to Dahlia’s last vision, they’d identified a distinctive skin design on the right forearm of the silver-skinned male who’d stolen the twins.

Nikolai and his brothers had instantly recognized the mark. They might not be in that line of business themselves, but it was easy to spot a tracking code. The kind used by slavers to tag their cargo. Which meant their prey might be a trafficker now, but he’d once been property himself. It was a useful clue, but it still left them searching for the equivalent of a single planetary piece of dust in a vast galactic storm. There were at least six different races in their galaxy with silver-skin and that meant over at least sixty billion creatures to weed through in search of a single scumbag slave turned slaver.

The knowledge that the twins were out there and he was proving helpless to find them was pushing Maxheim to the edge. He’d always been their fixer and yet he couldn’t fix this. With every rotation, he got worse. Less communicative. Harder. Colder.

For the first time, Nikolai was more worried about him than anyone else.

Almost anyone else, he amended.

“Where is she?” he repeated.

His brothers exchanged a look.

Maxheim was the one who finally spoke. “Dahlia’s with the doc.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” He pushed by his brother. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He hustled down the hall. All that stopped him from freaking out completely was the fact that the fated-mate bond glowed as bright and strong as ever.

His brothers sprinted to catch up.

“She’s fine,” Alexi repeated.

Nikolai moved faster.

“She was trying to have another vision and got a little dizzy.”

“What?” His roar shook the hallway. A few beta servants ducked back inside whatever room they’d been about to emerge from. “I distinctly remember commanding her not to attempt any more visions if I wasn’t around.”

Maxheim frowned. “She was trying to help. Hells knows, we need it. Plus, you know the news of her mother’s death hit hard. Give her a break.”

Nikolai pinned him up against the wall. He appreciated his family’s growing allegiance toward his female, but some lines were not meant to be crossed. “Do not run interference between me and my omega.”

He let Maxheim go and picked up speed once more.

He knew better than anyone how much it had hurt Dahlia when she’d heard the news that her mother’s body had been found floating in space. The prime omega’s throat had been torn out, the familiar trademark of an Alpha kill. Small slivers of silver were discovered imbedded in her skin. There was little doubt her death had been ordered by an employer determined to snip off a loose end and prove she’d been nothing more than a pawn, after all.

After breaking the news to Dahlia, Nikolai had held his mate close, skin to skin, cuddled in his arms, and let her cry her eyes out, despite the fact that he hated the dead female more than almost anyone in the universe.

Because he loved his omega more.

She’d been a handful ever since she’d heard the news, and that was already saying something.

Even the reports from her sister, full of happy details about new adventures and freedoms, hadn’t been enough to assuage his omega’s grief—and, he suspected, her guilt.

She blamed herself for her mother’s death. She also hated that she couldn’t offer more information about the silver-skinned male or the employer who’d tried to take down the Brotherhood.

But Nikolai wasn’t surprised. Whoever had been pulling Tasha Lundin’s strings was a clever bastard.

The only thing that had seemed to help his omega was learning more about her abilities, testing herself and her limitations. Besides their bond,

proximity to someone connected to the past event appeared to be critical to her ability to access it. Another reason she'd had the vision about the fire when her mother was near.

But because all the other witnesses who'd been at the fire were dead, there was no one left from whom Dahlia could try and pull a vision.

Which was why she'd been trying to push past those limits—despite Nikolai's expressed command that she not push too far too fast.

No wonder she hadn't wanted him to know about this latest attempt.

He pushed through the door into the doc's office, his brothers right behind. "How is she?"

Four startled faces looked up at him. Damien, the doc, and Anya were all crowded around his omega, who lay on the cot.

He should have known Anya would somehow be involved. The two of them had grown as thick as thieves. And Damien, as usual, was their shadow. His youngest brother had extended his self-appointed protective duties to include not just Anya, but Dahlia. Nikolai appreciated his show of allegiance. Usually.

"Nikolai." His omega smiled, joy pulsing along the bond between them. "I'm fine. Better than fine."

He growled low.

Her grin faltered.

"Now, Alpha," began his sister, "I think—"

He cut Anya off. "Everyone out."

"Alpha, I know you're upset—" This time it was the doc who was stupid enough to interfere.

"I will not repeat myself." He pinned each with a warning stare as he stalked to the foot of the bed. "The only one here who really has nothing to fear from me is my omega, so if you are wise, you'll get the hells out while you can."

Everyone scattered, taking a wide berth around him.

Disapproval rippled through the bond.

He didn't give a shit, especially when he noticed the faint bruise at her temple. "I told you not to have a vision when I wasn't around."

"You were busy, and I was doing fine." Gaze down, she picked at the blanket covering her. "There were extenuating circumstances."

He narrowed his eyes.

Red suffused her cheeks. "You're ruining my surprise."

He started. "You ruined mine first."

Her head snapped up and she looked at him. *Really* looked at him. "What surprise?"

His chest went tight. With her face tipped upward it was easy to see the tear tracks on her cheeks, scent them on her skin. Along with a new smell he hadn't noticed before.

Anger vanishing, surprise forgotten, he hurried to her side and scooped her into his arms, sitting half on, half off the small cot with her in his lap. "What is it, love? What's wrong?"

To his consternation, she smiled. "Nothing's wrong. Everything is just right." She snuggled closer.

He felt the truth of her words along their bond. The grief that had been there since she'd heard about her mother's death was still there, but it was lighter now. Layered with a new level of joy and excitement that vibrated through him and sent his heart pounding, even before his mind had fully caught up.

But his lungs figured it out next. That scent. Sweet, perfect, and unspoiled.

"You're pregnant."

"Yes." She squeezed him tight. "A new Skolov is on the way."

His heart, already so damn full, swelled inside his chest. He had no idea he could be happier, but he was. His family was growing, and soon the twins would be back with them as well.

His omega had already given him so much. But with every rotation, she gave him more.

His hand rested on her belly. "I will take good care of this little one. Count on it."

She laid her palm on his. "That was never in doubt."

"Doc—"

She covered his mouth before he could finish his summons, laughter in her gaze. "I already asked. The baby is fine. I am fine. Fucking and knotting is not only *not* a problem, but a very good idea."

Relief slammed through him. Still, he had to be sure. "Doc said that last part?"

She smiled wider. "In so many words."

A handful. Just as he'd said. But he was too damn happy to care.

“Then one good surprise deserves another.” Holding her tight in his arms, he stood and—cradling her in his arms because he liked it—carried her out of the doc’s office and back down the hall.

Thankfully, he’d scared everyone enough that they encountered no busybodies in the corridor. There’d be time enough to celebrate with the family.

For now, he wanted time with just his omega.

They reached the door to his study.

“My surprise is in here?” She looked curious.

He carried her inside.

There, next to his throne, was a matching seat, identical in every way except, instead of the fanged polar beasts that adorned his, hers was accented by two beautiful golden suns, as bright and pure and strong as his omega.

He set her down.

She hurried to it, running her hands over the sleek lines. “This is beautiful, and such a lovely gesture. I’m honored.”

He followed to stand behind. “It’s no gesture. A ruthless king needs an equally fierce queen by his side. I know you’ll do me proud.”

She turned to him, pleasure at his faith in her shimmering through their bond. His girl might be growing in confidence, but some wounds would take longer to heal. He intended to do whatever he could to help that along.

She seized his shirt and dragged him close. “Always.”

He pressed his mouth to her ear. “And when we’re not ruling together and no one else is around, I intend to be bending you over the seat and fucking you hard.”

She moaned.

He raked his fangs down her throat. “Or sitting in mine while you kneel at my feet and suck me off like a good omega should.”

She shuddered and melted against him. “Yes.”

He licked the fated-mate band at her throat. “And when you’re heavy with my child, I’ll seat you in my lap facing away from me and rock you up and down my cock until you come all over me.”

She shivered. “Oh gods, that all sounds so good.” Panting, she looked up at him, eyes dazed with the heat. “Let’s start now, Alpha. Please.”

He’d always heard a pregnant omega was even more needful. Had he already said he was a lucky Alpha?

“Yes.” He spun her around, pressing her back down until she was bent over the armchair of her new throne. He’d always been careful with her, and he would be more so now with his offspring growing inside her, but he still knew what his omega liked, and he intended to deliver.

He slipped his hand beneath her dress, sliding it up the smooth silk of her thighs. “But before I do, there’s the matter of punishment.”

She stilled. “Punishment?”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten the little matter of your disobedience. I waited ten minutes without a word of where you were, so neither of us is going to be coming for twice that long. I’m hoping that’s enough to remind you that it’s not just you who suffers when you risk yourself.” He wasn’t an idiot, and he wanted inside his omega. Especially when a celebration was in order. But he also knew his female, and the rush of need that slammed through their bond confirmed it.

She liked his care, in all forms.

“Yes, Alpha.” She squirmed beneath his touch.

He barely made it twenty minutes before he was fucking her on her new throne with her seated in his lap.

He’d once scoffed at the idea of happiness, certain he had no clue what it was or how to find it, especially in a place as dark and harsh as the Anarcheim Alphaverse.

But it turns out that holding his omega, feeling her grind against him, the scent of her need in the air, the knowledge that their baby rested safely in her belly while he held them both close and pleased her, was ecstasy and contentment and boundless joy all in one.

For this ruthless king, there was nothing better than to be the ruler, protector, and keeper of his omega’s heart and soul.

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STOLEN EXCERPT

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Earth 9079

“You’re not supposed to be here, DaKar. Go away.” DaKar Volkan, disgraced firstborn Executive to the Starlight estate, Warlord of nothing, didn’t move. Dirty feet planted on the cool balcony tiles that overlooked the ballroom, he let his half-brother’s voice roll right over him. His hands gripped the railing as his gaze locked on the gathering below— and one tiny, delicate figure in particular.

Despite his calm appearance, his heart slammed against his chest.

“This party is for full élithe only.” Unfortunately, ignoring his younger half-brother, Peller, did not make him disappear. Instead, he shuffled closer, his nose barely reaching the top of the railing, his narrow chest puffing out and making the rich fibers of his skintight jacket shimmer and pulse with different shades of purple. “It’s not for heathen half-Martian freaks like yourself. Mother said so, and Father agreed. You’re to stay out of sight.”

The festivity below was your typical excessive élithe event. A reminder, DaKar supposed, of how far they’d come. Earth had been a bleak, dying planet after the Great Wars, useless and used up, its air toxic. Until six wily survivors coaxed the United Federation into using Outer Worlder technology to slap a dome on a large swath of the place and turn it into a trading post. Over centuries, the dome had exploded in importance—thanks to the ruthlessness of those at its helm—transforming into a thriving, anachronistic mini-fiefdom, ruled with an iron fist by the shareholders of

the Earther Corporation and their grasping male offspring. His father's family had been one of the original six, but DaKar wasn't nearly as impressed with the legacy as the rest of his relatives.

"Mother said this is my chance to represent the family and make Father proud. To show him I can handle the title of High Executive when he is ready to pass it down." His half-brother rarely gave up. "You will ruin everything."

DaKar didn't bother responding. At moments like this, he almost felt sorry for Peller. There was no making their father proud. And the older male would never give up the esteemed *élite* title or the power that came with it unless they were pried from his cold, dead hands.

"This is *my* event." His half-brother prattled on. "Mother has done this for *me*."

DaKar had to admit his stepmother had outdone herself tonight. A thousand flickering candles cast shadows over the Outer World performers from beyond Orion's belt, their green scales glowing as they climbed the walls and astonished with acrobatics an Earther's body could never do. In another section of the giant room, musicians from Saturn's moons played haunting tunes through their trunks as *élite* guests pretended to sway to the music while looking to see who they could suck up to next. To top it all off, colorful neon lights flashed in random bursts from the ceiling, sparking to life the gems and *danashe* stones sewn into the clothes or worn as accessories around the neck, wrists, or hair of the guests. There was nothing the *élite* loved more than to show off their wealth, and *danashe* stones, prized for their beauty, rarity, and stunning color shifts in the light, were a staple of *élite* couture.

But none sparkled quite as bright as the tiny one's golden hair.

"I'll tell Mother." His half-brother was relentless—and unimaginative. His insults and threats always the same.

"Bleek off, Peller." DaKar's voice dipped to a growl and then cracked, ruining the effect. His grip on the railing tightened. Thanks to his Martian blood, he'd always been bigger than his full *élite* peers, but at ten, his voice and body were changing, and suddenly unreliable. His horns, usually tucked to the side of his head, popped out when he least expected. His skin, already golden and nothing like the creamy pink color of his *élite* peers, was deepening in hue, while his fangs lengthened and his shoulders, chest, and legs grew by the lunar rotation.

That last development was the only thing he liked. Because maybe soon he'd be able to do something besides taste dirt beneath the fists of the grown-ups who ruled his life. Maybe he'd even be able to stop following his sire's directives and finally accept his mother's uncles' repeated invitations to come visit them on Mars. He didn't know if things on the Outer World would be as rough as here, but he wanted to find out.

He leaned farther over the balcony railing, rising to his tiptoes, the strange heat rippling beneath his skin weird, but not unpleasant.

She'd been standing next to a nervous-looking female and smug Executive male who looked like a typical élithe asht-hole. The two adults had recently entered into a breeding contract by the looks of the bright, metallic sashes around their shoulders, and the girl had been crowded out by a steady stream of well-wishers. Until she hovered at the outskirts, her head cast downward, her tiny shoulders hunched. Alone. Like him.

He gripped the railing tighter, the bruises on his jaw and ribs throbbing a little less. He didn't know how he knew, but she was the cause of the strange sensations. He was certain of it.

He'd been tinkering with his junk of a transpo floater, no intention of coming here, when the burn had snaked down his spine and propelled his feet forward, tugging him along until he'd stood at the edge of the balcony and his gaze had unerringly locked on her, everything else dropping to silence.

He had no clue why. Her hair was pretty, but there was little else of mention. She was skinny with big eyes and a large mouth that took up her whole face. She was also no more than seven, right around the same age as his annoying half-brother. And she was full élithe, like his stepmother, dressed in the same shimmering ornate white gowns required of all unbred females.

Svette, the eighteen-year-old girl from Orion's belt who came with her father to deliver supplies and giggled and winked at him the whole time, was a far more attractive female. But his skin had never once hummed for her like it did for the golden-haired one.

His stepmother would probably say it was some disgusting Martian thing. She blamed everything she didn't like on his Outer World blood. And maybe she was right, maybe whatever this was—

His breath left in a rush as the blonde's head snapped up and bright green, defiant eyes zeroed in on him. Her fiery spirit, fury, and confusion

slamming into him as if he'd stepped inside her mind. As if they were one. As if he knew this strange girl as well as he knew himself. And, for an instant he wasn't alone, the heat inside him swirling and changing, snaking in golden tendrils that stretched towards her even as they wound tighter and tighter around his chest. Binding them together, two jagged pieces snapping into place. Inevitable. Right. Fated. Fused into one perfect whole. Filling the empty, bleak sky of his soul with a million sparkling stars more beautiful than any *danashe* stones.

Minel. The Martian word for "mine" ricocheted through his brain, a silent roar. Ancient. Primal. Out of context in the *Élithe* world and his ten-year-old boy mind. And yet so right. As if he was finally slipping into the skin he was meant to wear, his chest expanding as the golden shimmer of his skin glittered brighter. *Minel.* He who'd had nothing he could call his, not even the clothes on his back, suddenly had everything he'd ever wanted. *Minel.* Her anger, fear, and loneliness pulsed in his chest as if she'd whispered her feelings straight into his ear, and a protectiveness he'd never known roared through him. His horns jutted from his head, his fangs lengthening. Keeping her safe, making her happy, suddenly all that mattered.

The railing bent under the force of his grip.

"Oh, look what you've done," gasped Peller. "Mother will be furious."

The humming beneath DaKar's skin increased in tempo. The girl's eyes crinkled at the edges as if she was trying hard to make him out and he realized she couldn't see him nearly as well as he could her. *Élithe* sight wasn't as strong as Martian sight and he was positioned far across the other side of the room, high above. And yet she still looked his way...her brow wrinkled, her expression uncertain, but curious.

Then, her face scrunched up, her tongue came out, and she made a silly face totally out of place with her fancy dress and proper bearing.

He locked his knees to stay upright. She was perfect. *Minel.*

The wild, uncivilized urge built inside. He needed to plant himself in front of the girl who'd tried to make him laugh and rip apart anyone who attempted to hurt her or take her from him.

He moved along the balcony edge toward the stairs, his stare never wavering from her.

"You can't go down there. L-look at you. You know how Mother feels about keeping up appearances." Peller had lost his smug tone. Now, he just

sounded shocked—and a little scared. “Why are you growling like that? A—and why are your chest and fangs bigger than before? What’s that glowy thing around your body? You...you look even more like one of those savage Martians than usual. Father will be furious.”

Neither of them liked their father furious.

DaKar hesitated, but not because of his father. The pull to go to the girl, to find out why she was sad, built like a storm inside his gut, the pressure immense, almost painful. Except...Peller was right. He’d never been more aware of his ragged, worn clothes, castoffs from his half-brother that looked ridiculous on his too-big frame. Or his horns, fangs, wild hair, and dirty face and hands. Or the bruises that throbbed beneath his clothes. The élithe below were everything he was not, and she was one of them.

“You need to leave. Look what you did to the railing.” His half-brother’s constant whine buzzed like an irritating insect in the background. “I told you. You will embarrass us all.”

“Peller, shut up before I show you what a true savage can do.” The little shanus was a constant pain in his side, but he wasn’t the real cause of DaKar’s anger. That was reserved for himself.

He shouldn’t even hesitate. She needed him.

All his life he’d heard his blood was tainted, that his mother’s Martian Warlord heritage was barbaric and not befitting of their family—and neither was he. He’d pretended not to care, but up until tonight, he’d done his best to prove them wrong.

Tonight, he needed to put ego aside and gladly prove them right. She was what mattered.

He prowled forward once more, following the railing that led to the stairs, his gaze still locked on her.

“Stop right there.” Another voice, higher-pitched and far more dangerous. “You were told not to show your face tonight and you will do as you’re bid for once. Turn around and crawl back to your hole. You are not welcome here. I have a reputation to uphold.”

He didn’t have to turn around to know his stepmother loomed behind, her streaked gold and black hair piled high on her head like a coiled snake and laden with glittering danashe stones while her meticulously maintained body was draped in the finest of iridescent red fabrics that fastened tight to her body and billowed out behind her like the echoes of a scream. Nor did he have to look to know her face was pinched in a sour expression. Or that

she was surrounded by the same four burly, blank-faced guards with thick forearms and brutish knuckles that followed her every command.

Most of the servants were kind to him, sneaking him food or patching up his injuries on the sly, sharing what they had, despite having very little. But not these four. They served his stepmother with pleasure, and her pleasure was his pain.

She hated him for having Martian blood and golden skin. She hated him for his father's refusal to remove him from her home. Mostly, she hated him because he was his father's firstborn, and élithe rules were very clear on lines of inheritance. Her younger son Peller would never inherit the full title, lands, and shares of the Starlight estate. Half-breed or not, freak or not, that right belonged to DaKar.

"I may not be welcome, but I am still going." His stare still on the girl, he suddenly felt far older than his ten planetary rotations, his blood pumping with an ancient impulse that gave him the wisdom of a thousand Martian Warlord ancestors. "This does not concern you or your precious *reputation*."

"Everything you do concerns me." A slight pause, her voice sharp with excitement as she issued her next directive. "Teach this half-breed some respect."

It hurt to turn away from the girl, his soul ripping like shredded fabric as the connection severed, but he couldn't protect her if he was dead. His fangs lengthened. His chest expanded, the seams of Peller's old clothes giving way.

He ducked, air hissing against his cheek as he barely dodged the meaty fist slamming toward his jaw. He was not so lucky with the next kick to his stomach. His bigger body was unfamiliar and awkward, making it harder to avoid the blows, while the roar of possession and protectiveness in his blood made focusing difficult. He had the instincts, but not the skills or understanding— and despite the ancient drive throbbing through his veins, he was still only ten. Smaller and weaker than the handful of grown males closing in.

He went down hard, the railing and half wall hiding him from the ballroom below. His palms slammed into the tiles, along with his chin. His fangs punched into his lower lip. Blood splattered. Fists and boots battered him.

“Not here.” His stepmother’s hiss cut through the haze of pain. “Take him to his room. Make sure there’s no chance he can make another unwanted appearance tonight.”

Firm hands gripped his arms and jerked him upright and forward, his toes barely skimming the ground. Bucking and thrashing, he tried to escape the males flanking both sides. *Minel*. He needed to get to her.

“My Lady,” Tom, a hardworking servant in his mid-twenties who’d only recently been promoted from outside work to doorman and floater driver, appeared from behind the column, his expression a mix of nerves and determination, “the boy meant no harm. If you would show him some kindness, I—”

Before DaKar could even open his mouth to warn the man off, his stepmother flicked her fingers. “You’re dismissed.”

Her lackey’s brutal fist plowed into the brave male’s jaw. Eyes rolling back, he crumpled. “No.” DaKar fought harder.

“I do not want a scene.” His stepmother flicked her wrist once more.

A slight hiss of air and something hard punched the back of his head. His neck snapped.

Black dots danced in front of his eyes as his body sagged and his senses shut down one by one. Until all he knew was the grim beat of his heart and the knowledge that he’d failed those he should have protected, her worst of all.

The connection, the heat, the golden tendrils growing fainter with every step they dragged him away, until it was only a mocking echo, until he wasn’t sure it had even been real, and then, there was nothing at all.

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TRAPPED EXCERPT

Want more Condemned series heat and fierce warrior convicts? The first three books in the Condemned series are available as well... First up, TRAPPED.

“You can’t just leave them here.” A woman’s furious voice reached prisoner 673 through the rocky canyon. He froze. Cocked his head. Inhaled, but scented nothing except the usual arid scent of dirt and dust.

After so many years alone, the sound of such loud squawking was jarring. And that the voice was a woman’s? His cock twitched and rose, taking notice. Eight years was a long time to go without. The last time the droids had dropped a woman on Dragath25 was five years ago. 223’s pack had gotten hold of her first. She’d lasted five minutes.

It was a good reminder. Fragile things didn’t last here. And nothing, not even long overdue pussy, was worth risking his survival.

“You hear those shrieks? They’re coming.” An equally enraged male’s voice boomed through the canyon, thoughtfully telegraphing his precise location. “Our shuttle streaked through the sky like a clear come-and-get-me invitation for the entire penal population of murderers and psychopaths. We don’t have time to dick around. We don’t have time for those who’ll only slow us down. We’re moving out.”

“You coward. I saved your life. The least you can do is try and return the favor.”

673 cleared the canyon in time to see a bull of a red-haired soldier dressed in fatigues grab a far smaller woman in a torn gray uniform, her boots dragging along the ground as he shook her hard.

673's whole body went tight. He didn't like bullies. He dropped into a crouch, instinct taking over as he slunk forward, his gaze absorbing everything: the way the soldier bastard favored his right side, the large firearm strapped to his holster, the second weapon at the man's back... the way the woman's ripped uniform clung to her curvy body and the outraged rigidity of her spine even up against a man twice her size. Then, there were the nine other thick-necked, smug soldiers with similar military-issued buzz cuts standing close by, no clue of the danger he represented, their sole attention on the woman.

In the next instant, the woman dropped into the dirt. On a perfect, heart-shaped ass.

Freezing in place, 673 waited to see what happened next.

"Fine," the woman shouted, stumbling to her feet. "Go. But I'm not leaving. We'll find a way."

"Your funeral." Soldier bastard grabbed a pack off the ground. He slung it onto his shoulder next to a similar one.

"At least leave us one." She surged forward, grabbing for the pack, but soldier bastard darted out of reach.

"Not so high-and-mighty now, are you, Cadet West? In fact, seems like you and your Council friends might need us after all." Soldier bastard patted the pack. "These were issued to the military crew, and you know how strict Command Council is about ensuring resources are relegated to the proper department. You survive the night, I'll be ready to hear just what you're willing to do to get an unsanctioned taste." With a final leer in her direction, soldier bastard kicked it into a jog. "Let's go, men."

An odd frisson of uncertainty snaked through 673. He wanted those weapons, wanted what was in those packs. But he'd come for a different reason entirely, and with the seven soldiers out of the way, the few left would be easy pickings.

It was a curious thing: choice. For so long, there had been only the option to survive. He didn't like having alternatives. It almost made him feel human again.

"West, please," a dark-haired female in a similar gray uniform limped over to where the other woman stood, the quality of her boots marking her as Council even without his ability to see the CC designation on her skin, "go with them. You've done so much for us already. Why should you die, too?"

He'd already noted this second female and the wounded Council officer on the ground and dismissed them as any kind of threat. Fact was, like fighter girl, they were dead folks walking— because, in this case, soldier bastard was right. The strong barely survived out here. The injured didn't have a chance in hell.

His fighter girl didn't seem to care, though. *His?* No, she wasn't his. She wasn't anything but Dragath25 dirt in the making.

He'd learned long ago not to stick his neck out for anyone else. Keeping himself alive was hard enough.

Just beyond, the wind picked up, brushing against 673's skin, signaling the start of another dust storm. Within the half-hour, this place would be choked in dirt and debris, everything within suffocated under an indifferent cloak of dirt and rock.

"I'm not leaving you." Fighter girl stumbled forward, her wavy, soot-colored hair brushing her ass . . . so easy to grab and wrap around his wrist. "Let's find something I can drag Dr. Winthrop in."

She turned in his direction, giving him his first full view of wide green eyes, a lush pink mouth, and firm, high tits full enough to fill his hands.

His body rioted to attention, the man he'd once been waking with a silent roar as white-hot lust flooded his veins. He jerked to standing, all subterfuge, all caution, forgotten. The absence of touch for eight long years, a sudden agonizing stab of need across his skin.

"Look!" She pointed near to where he stood, and for a heart- stopping moment, he was sure he'd been sighted. But then she turned back to her friend. "There's something that looks like a cave only a little way up. If we can make it there, we can hide."

"But—"

"No but. We are making it there." She dropped to her knees beside the wounded officer's body. "No one else is dying. Head- quarters will send search and rescue to investigate the crash. We only have to stay alive until then."

The shrieking cry of 223's pack sounded again. Closing in fast.

The reminder cooled 673's lust enough to get him thinking again.

His gaze flickered between the woman, now frantically working with her friend to wrap the man in some kind of fabric, and the strewn, burning wreckage that littered the ground. His hands clenched and unclenched.

Choices.

His dick was telling him one thing. His mind another. *Shit*. He really hated choices.

He started forward.

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