



DESTROYED

Omega's Destruction Book Three

EVA DRESDEN

DESTROYED

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Destroyed - Omega's Destruction Book Three

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OMEGA'S DESTRUCTION BOOK 3

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EVA DRESDEN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eva Dresden writes dark romance that lives up to its name with every turn of the page. Her heroines are tragic and strong, her heroes are anything but, and tearing characters apart to see what makes them really tick is a favored past time. Her cat is her staunchest supporter, provided there are treats involved.

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ALSO BY EVA DRESDEN

Omega's Destruction Trilogy

Broken

Damaged

Destroyed

Standalones

Rite of the Omega

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ABOUT DESTROYED

Broken and damaged, Quinn refuses to be destroyed.

She rages against the bond Tobias Kahler forced her to complete between them, denying the pull of her claim set into his soul that fateful day. Struggling against the power of his will, she won't become the smiling, placid thing he attempts to mold her to be.

An unseen foe seeks to take matters into their own hands, threatening Quinn and everything she holds dear. Forced to cling to Tobias for support and strength with the constant threat, he's thrown into a whole new light. One where Quinn faces seeing him for more than the monster she's feared and hated.

Amidst their violent past and ever turbulent future, they must learn to accept one another as they are or in this final battle, much more than bodies will lay broken.

Destroyed is the third and final book in the Omega's Destruction Trilogy!

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*To Sarah, who helped a pantser figure out plotting.
Nancy, who kept it real and reads like a demon.
To everyone who stood by Quinn and me until the very end.*

Love you all!

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CHAPTER ONE

It was like dancing in sunlight.

A great lake of it, all golden and warm. Her movements always heavy as she fought against the weight of so much strength.

Until the screams started.

Then she shivered, flesh limned in ice as something evil clawed through her. Ripping her apart. Shredding her thoughts, her sanity, with gleeful disregard. Drowning in the freezing cold while she screamed. Suffocating on chocolate and chilies as she was bruised and beaten from the inside.

Plunged back into the glowing heat, sluggish and weak, she choked on the splendid brilliance. Repeating the agonizing cycle again and again.

The twilight evergreen of his eyes and the subterranean depth of his purr followed her no matter how she tried to escape.

It was easier when he was gone, leaving her shattered and curled up in the nest. Comforted by the soft sounds of sleeping children, their little hearts thumping against her cheeks the thin thread holding her sanity in check. They brought her back from whatever hellscape he had left her in. Their quiet snores and sleepy mumblings kept her whole.

Until he took them away and began his evil all over again.

Like now.

Lying under the oppressive weight of him, still twitching from the pleasure he'd forced from her body, Quinn smothered herself in the rumpled linens. Seeking oblivion in the gasping breaths that failed to fill her lungs, desperate to suffocate the writhing thing in her chest that hummed. It spoke with his measured tones, resonated in the way only he could provide.

It made sure she knew that, too.

She was incomplete now. Not just bound to the man, subject to his will, but he in return. Tobias Kahler had gotten what he wanted the moment he forced her to claim him. He'd invaded not just her body, but her mind and soul far beyond the constraints of social acceptance. No one else would have dared to create the vicious circle between them, throwing away generations of beliefs and plunging headfirst into the taboo. Her will pitted against his was a small and frightened thing.

She never stood a chance against something so devious, so underhanded.

Quinn was the perfect slave now, or she would be once she'd been battered into complete submission. Something that she'd once sworn would never happen to her was an all too real probability now. Each day it was harder to fight her way free of the heady warmth, more difficult to deny the comfort and serenity that basking in his presence gave her. Surrounded on all sides as her sense of self was stripped away one tangled thread at a time, it was him, always him in her thoughts. One touch, one whiff of his scent, and she was lost.

"Shh, little bird. It's all right," he murmured against her shoulder, lips moving against the thick scars of his mark. Three bites, all mangling her skin into an atrocity that said she was his and would never escape it. The wet heat of his tongue moved over the wrinkled flesh, tasting the salt of her sweat, swallowing her down.

Whining into the sheets, she tried to jostle away as the sensation of working muscle, heady pleasure, and satisfaction assaulted her. They weren't hers, but the lines separating Quinn from him were blurred, softening with every ragged breath. With him locked tight against her, she wasn't going anywhere. Not until he released her.

He had no intentions of doing that anytime soon.

"My beautiful mate," Tobias purred against her neck. He inched his way up her body, reclaiming the little space she had managed between them. "My sweet little Omega."

"I hate you," Quinn wailed as she thrashed beneath him. Kicking her legs and pummeling at the bed did little more than excite the male.

He liked the idea of forcing her to succumb and making her cry out his name once more as her body betrayed her yet again.

"You feel so good, little bird," he whispered as his arms snaked around her, imprisoning her within his embrace so she couldn't squirm away when

he began the slow rocking of his hips. Dragging the knot back and forth to grind against that spot that made her back arch and a low whine to pour from between her lips. “Gods, I can feel you inside of me. I know you want this. You cry for something that was lost long ago, sweetness, but you’ll see. You belong here with me. No one else makes you feel this way.”

“Y-you think that means a-anything? I came for all of them, too,” Quinn whimpered. Desperate now for some reprieve from his unending attention, unable to bear another moment of his dissection of her soul, she lashed out. She said whatever she could that would send him storming away, leaving her alone to lick her wounds. Maybe to save a little more of herself before he ruined it all.

“Hush now, little bird, don’t speak of those things. We both know it’s more than that. I am your Alpha.”

“You’re just a hard cock, asshole. You think you’re special for that?” Quinn stammered out a coarse laugh, wide eyes fixed on the dark shadows beneath the pillow before her. It was a dangerous game to play. A stupid one, too. She couldn’t stand another second of his touch and would do anything to stop it. He wouldn’t hurt her, not much. That much she could understand and use to her advantage.

“And did you hum and purr over them as well,” Tobias asked through a warning growl against her cheek. Snapping his hips, he drove the knot deeper. A punishment for her daring and a caution in one move.

“I did.”

The truth was a slap in the face. Quinn had done many things in the name of survival and pleasing Lee with her sounds of contentment was among the least of them. Refusing to cringe as she felt the tension ratcheting through his body, she held fast to the knowledge he wouldn’t hurt her too much. Not the mother of his children, the future incubator for another of his offspring.

“I see.”

He was quiet and still for so long that Quinn dared to touch that slimy thread that connected them. Uncertainty driving her to examine the filthy thing, she needed to know what his next move would be. How he would try to destroy her next.

It was a mistake.

The rush of heat warmed her skin, a crimson flush spreading through her chest to stain her neck and cheeks. A tempest of emotions and thoughts,

of things not wholly her own, ravaged their way through her. Stomping the clarity of herself into nothingness as it trampled everything that was Quinn into the ground.

Her stuttering gasp pleased him, as did the way her body softened. Welcoming, she squirmed to accommodate his bulk. Legs spreading wider, she urged him to move with the faint twitch of her hips despite the panicked screech that writhed through the air.

“Do you not see, Quinn,” he whispered while nuzzling her temple. “You are mine.”

“No,” she gasped, writhing as she grew wetter for him. Readyng to give him what he wanted, what her body demanded it needed. “You have something, but it’s not me. Never me.”

“It’ll do for now, little bird. Now show me how much you want this. Make me come.”

Quinn’s reply was lost in her groan, arms reaching back to clutch at the rolling hills and valleys of his muscled body to urge him on.

“Mama eat,” Adam shouted, slamming his cup down onto the table with rapid swings of his arm. Continuing to scream his demand as he beat plastic against wood, his cherubic face went red as tears welled in big hazel eyes.

“Adam, you need to stop. You’re upsetting—”

“Mama! Mama!” Elise joined the fray, high pitched shrieks and wails growing louder. Fists slapping against her tray, plastic rattling as it bounced across the slick surface. Chubby cheeks pink, her meltdown was imminent.

“Love of the Gods,” Quinn muttered as she snatched the cup from Adam’s small hand, lips tight in frustration. “You need to stop this.”

“Mama need to eat!”

“Fine,” Quinn half shouted, grabbing her fork and shoveling the cold, glossy eggs into her mouth. Lips twisting in disgust, her stomach began rebelling before she had even swallowed the gummy mess. Everything still tasted wrong, the well-known textures foreign whenever she tried to eat. It ended the same no matter what.

In an hour at most, she would be huddling on the floor, puking her guts out.

Meghan made a sympathetic face over Elise's head as she tried to quiet the shrieking. Quinn jerked one shoulder in a shrug, turning her baleful stare to Adam as she forced another lump of yellow mush between her lips.

"Good," Adam proclaimed, messy fingers gripping his fork as he stared back, attempting to mimic Quinn. Within a few moments, tantrum forgotten, he turned his full attention to the broken shreds of bacon littering the table in front of him. Smacking jaws and pleased grunts replaced his sniffles as he concentrated on the serious task of eating.

"Does he look bigger to you," Quinn asked as she rearranged the piles of food on her plate, hoping Adam wouldn't notice she had stopped eating.

"What did the doctor say?"

"That he was normal for his age, but I can't get over the feeling he's grown since then."

"All babies grow," Meghan said, her grin teasing as she tried to pry a smile from Quinn.

"He just seems too... big. Well spoken, too." Quinn twisted her lips to the side, staring at Adam as he dug into the pancake disintegrating under all the syrup he'd demanded. Brows sliding down, she cocked her head to the side. "It's been ages since health class, and I wasn't exactly paying attention at the time, but isn't that a sign of an Alpha? Please, Gods, tell me I'm wrong."

"He could be a smart Beta," Meghan said as she wiped Elise's face. "This one is hardly a slouch. You're no idiot, and neither is Mr. Kahler, so it would make sense you would have brilliant babies."

Quinn hummed a noncommittal response, sliding from her chair and going to Adam as he began playing with the remains of his breakfast more than eating any of it. It was hopeless to hold back her smile as she began wiping at the tacky film of syrup that appeared to cover most of his exposed skin. Much to his dismay, she also insisted on getting the bits of egg and other miscellaneous detritus from his hair.

"Don't be an Alpha, my love, okay?" Quinn groaned as she hauled Adam from his booster seat, hugging him to her chest where he nuzzled against her neck. He hummed his contentment, arms and legs wrapped tight around her.

"You should be honored if he is."

Quinn jumped as Curtis' voice swept through the room to rake across her back. Things had never been good between them, but since her return,

his demeanor worsened. She knew he didn't approve of Tobias spending so much time with her, but whether it was her own observation or Tobias', she couldn't say.

As if the thought summoned him, Quinn felt it. The heat pulsing through her chest swelled, seeping through her limbs. His scent, the rich decadence of chocolate and chilies, flooded her senses long before he came near enough she felt him behind her. A shiver cavorted down her spine, twisting through the vertebra as his hands slid down her shoulders to take hold of her hips. Pulling Quinn tight against his chest, he nuzzled her neck opposite his son.

"Tobias," Quinn whispered, head lolling back onto his shoulder. Something deep inside of her screamed, but it was buried under the heavy warmth that flowed thick as the syrup staining her shirt.

"Daddy!" Adam squirmed in Quinn's arms, struggling to reach Tobias over her back. He squealed in delight when Tobias plucked him from her straining grip with ease, cradled against his father's chest as Quinn was no longer able to.

"Good morning, my son," Tobias murmured against Adam's hair. Licking his lips, he made an admonishing face at Adam before shaking his head and settling the toddler on a hip. "Did you even get any of your breakfast into your mouth?"

"Yes, Daddy." Adam's bright grin faded around the edges, eyebrows puckering over the bridge of his nose. "Mama not eat."

"Is that so?"

"Mama sick?"

"Mama's medicine makes her feel sick is all," Tobias said as he scooped Elise from Meghan's arms and cuddled her on his opposite side. A sly look sent Quinn's way preceded the wicked smile that pulled at his lips. "It will be better soon."

"Don't lie to him." Quinn startled, uncertain where the venom of her response came from. Bewildered grays met the sudden narrowing of twilit evergreen, hands attempting to wring the life from each other as her shoulders rounded under Tobias' stare.

"Take them outside to play, Meghan." The order was delivered in clipped, cool tones as he handed off the children. A flick of his fingers sent Curtis away.

Quinn didn't miss the baleful glare Curtis sent her way before he shut the door with practiced ease behind him. The sounds of her children pouting and fussing, Meghan's soft promises of Quinn's arrival soon enough were all lost behind the thick walls within moments.

She was alone, stranded in the quiet with him.

"Is something wrong, little bird?"

Something dangerous lurked in the smooth velvet of his voice, but she couldn't grasp what it was he wanted of her. Under the weight of his stare the heat became violent. It burned through her veins, searing her thoughts into nothingness as he brushed the back of his hand against her cheek. Somewhere deep inside, a cold pit fought against it, valiant until the end, but it gave her no strength to resist.

Why should she want to deny him? Quinn mumbled a quiet plea, an apology that morphed into something desperate as his hands settled onto her shoulders. He didn't even have to push her down. Sinking to her knees, Quinn tipped her head back to stare up the long line of his body, eyes wet with some memory she couldn't grasp. It hammered around her skull, screaming its outrage and pain, but she couldn't place any of it.

She just knew it was wrong. As if she had done this before, hated it just as much, and had been just as helpless to stop it.

"Please, not here," she whispered, even as her hands reached for him. Delicate fingers plucked his belt free, the grating sound of the zipper loud in her ears as she kneeled up to nuzzle his stomach just as he liked.

"No one would dare interrupt us, little bird. Now, give me that pretty mouth, hm? I have business in the city to attend to, and I wouldn't leave you wanting."

Tears spilled over her lashes as she leaned in, careful of his fine clothes as she took him into her mouth. The awful feeling of *déjà vu* died with a sudden violence at her first taste.

It didn't take him long to spill down her throat, his groans and low murmurs of praise urging her on as she swallowed it all. Not until she was gasping, clinging to his thighs did he release the grip in her hair. Smoothing back the disheveled tangle he'd made of her long curls, Tobias crouched to take her into his arms, encircling her with the strength of his body as he doted on her.

"There now, that's better isn't it?" His smile was lazy and indulgent as he pressed it against her cheek.

“Don’t go,” Quinn whispered, burrowing into his chest. The chill still slithered through her, crackling through her spine and up into her teeth until she shivered. Something was wrong, but she couldn’t say what. All she knew was that some instinct understood only Tobias could make it right. Her thoughts were grinding forward, the easy feeling of just moments ago already dissipating as the taste of chilies and chocolate faded from her tongue.

“None of that, sweetness. I’ll be home for dinner, and you’ll have a full day with our little ones.”

“He needs other kids to play with.”

“In time, perhaps.”

The argument was becoming old even though she’d mentioned Adam’s need to socialize with children his own age just last week. There had been a multitude of excuses, from not wanting to take him from Quinn for any length of time to suggestions that it would be more a detriment than advantage. The one time she felt Tobias told her the truth was when he snapped at her insistence, telling her she had no idea what was out in the world for her little boy.

It wasn’t just bullies and scrapes he was talking about.

There were the quiet conversations between him and Curtis, words cut off as soon as he sensed Quinn was listening. Mentions of Mr. Rey and Mr. Beaumont, warehouses, and deliveries. Things she wasn’t supposed to know about, both before she’d ever known the name Tobias Kahler and now. There had always been housing available for the workers of Wicked, free of monetary obligations but with the implication of strings attached. The apartments were located close to the docks, deep in the warehouse district.

Quinn knew those warrens well. She grew up there while working for Alton more than she had within the city’s glittering lights. It was a rat’s nest of illegal goods, sex trafficking, and all manner of evils. A prime place for someone to control the import and export of so many things. Alton had attempted to rule over an empire of trash, but Tobias lorded over an entire city. If there was one thing she had learned under Lee’s thumb, it was that even the loftiest position didn’t mind if their money was dirty.

To be that worried over his son, there had to be more of a reason than the fact Tobias was the ruling Alpha of Alderbrook.

Which meant that Gerry could have stolen her away for any number of reasons. It was Tobias' fault the disgusting male had ever set eyes on her. It had been his dealings with the psychotic Alpha to find Grace that brought him into this house. He was the reason she'd been taken, such awful things happening...

Tobias growled low in his throat, capturing her mouth in a kiss that stole her breath and swept away all of her thoughts. Invading her senses with tongue and teeth, his hands became rough as they pawed at her. Digging their way under her shirt and loose skirt, he gripped her flesh hard enough Quinn whined.

It wasn't in pain.

He moved her body around with ease until Quinn clung to him with arms and legs. She squirmed against his front, seeking some kind of friction against the flushed wetness centered between her thighs as he gripped her ass. Pulling at her, he angled his first thrust with perfect accuracy.

Head rolling across her shoulders, Quinn moaned at the ceiling as he filled her. Forcing her to stretch around his thickness while he attacked her neck with lurid kisses. She was beyond wet, slick dripping from her as he eased inside.

The fertility drugs might make her feel so sick she couldn't eat, but they did their job well. Each day they pushed her a little closer to a heat, pumping hormones into her blood. Each simple act became something more, her body responding to the virile Alpha and his potent scent. Combined with the warm molasses sludge of her mind when he was near, she became pure instinct.

All other thought vanished under his onslaught. Only the feel of him, his taste ripe on her tongue, mattered now. The worries and hurts of moments ago were lost under his rich growl as his hands pulled her tight, jerking her hips that last inch to take all of him.

He didn't let gravity do his work for him. Gripping her ass, he moved Quinn up and down his length with the speed and roughness her body craved from him. The sounds of their sex were muffled by their clothes, but they made up for it with growls and whimpers. Near feral in her need for him, Quinn raked her nails across his back, pulling at his hair when she demanded his lips.

A stuttering cry tumbled past her lips as Tobias shifted his angle, grinding her clit against the fabric of his pants. Soaked through with her

slick, the fine weave became rough. The perfect amount of sensation to plunge her deep into her pleasure. Silken bands of it wove their way through her veins, a shimmering wave under her skin that pooled low in her stomach.

“Please,” Quinn panted against his neck, teeth scraping at his collar as she strained to press her lips to the hidden ring of scarred flesh. The primal need to see her mark upon his skin, to feel the salty span of it against her tongue, overwhelmed her.

Tobias groaned against her, tearing at his tie and buttons to free his shoulder for her. Letting Quinn work her hips in wild jerks, he managed to get loose enough of the constraining clothing to give her what she wanted.

The sound she made was a near scream of unadulterated joy. Mouth fixed to the small red ring that was still healing, Quinn licked and sucked at his salty flesh with animal like groans.

“Yes, my little one. Yours,” Tobias moaned against her ear, lowering them to the floor so he could gain the leverage he needed. Slamming his hips into the cradle of her thighs, offering the brutal tempo that would see her screaming his name.

Jolts of pleasure shuddered up her spine, pulling it into a painful arch as it wound through her limbs. The aching pulse dove low into her belly before zipping straight to her thundering heart. It was so much more than sex. Not an orgasm as she’d ever experienced it now. Ragged and fierce, it seared its way through the bond, doubling as they each fed from the other.

Her low whine and bared teeth announced the impending fall. Legs hooked over his flanks, Quinn arched and bucked, struggling for the final moment of perfect oblivion. Her very bones ached with the need to have him fill her again, this time where it was supposed to be. Deep inside, knot locked tight within her, filling her in every way.

“Oh, Gods,” Tobias stammered, the brilliant green of his eyes hidden behind scrunched lids as he shuddered. Fingers flexing over her shoulders, he pulled her into every thrust. Careless of the way the thick rug abraded their skin, he aimed to give Quinn exactly what she wanted.

Mouth falling open, a silent scream began deep within. It trailed its way up through her body, setting off a maelstrom of sensations under her skin. Explosions of pleasure, so exquisite it ached, crackled beneath her sternum.

“Sir, the car is waiting.”

Tobias shouted something incoherent, shoving her away. One moment utter bliss waited a feather's breadth away, the next she was panting on the rug, spread wide and shivering as Tobias jerked his clothing into place.

"I'll be there in a moment." Voice rough, a near snarl as he kept his back turned from the door leading to the foyer, Tobias continued to fuss with his shirt.

Making sure his shoulder was well covered and that none could see her claim.

Without warning, her lower lip began to quiver. Tears burned the back of her eyes, spilling out to rain down flushed cheeks before she could even think to try to hold them back.

He didn't want anyone to know. For all his talk about her place with him, how she was his mate, he wouldn't let anyone see what he'd made her do.

He was ashamed.

Evading his reaching hands was easy with him still distracted. Crawling around the table while she scrambled to her feet, Quinn careened past Curtis as she raced towards the stairs. She made it halfway up before the first sob tore free from her chest.

She didn't know why disappointment slithered dark and slimy through her thoughts as Curtis held Tobias back. There was no way she wanted him to come to her now. Not while the fresh hurt still simmered under her skin alongside the vicious tangle of her aborted need.

Wiping at her face with furious palms did nothing to stop the tide of tears as she slumped into the corner of the bedroom. Stupid to think of his room as a place of safety, but it was where her feet led her in the moment of blind emotion. There was nothing of her there, not even the nest made from her choice of fabrics or colors but from what he gave her.

As the simmering heat in her veins subsided and clarity resumed its cold watch, Quinn released a shaky sigh. It was easier when he wasn't near, and she would swear she could feel him moving further and further away. Like walking away from a roaring bonfire into the arctic chill, her thoughts became her own once more.

Fingers running in idle passes over the thick scars littering her abdomen, Quinn gave the floor a blank stare and went through the litany of reasons why she needed to remain strong. To fight harder when he came to

her like that, berating herself for succumbing each and every time like an idiot.

There was little warning before her stomach heaved, twisting in a slimy somersault.

Shoving away from the wall, Quinn dashed towards the bathroom with her hand clamped over straining lips. Crashing to the cold tiles, she leaned over the toilet just in time.

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CHAPTER TWO

Groaning as she lay curled up on the floor, one hand keeping the abused organ of her stomach in place, Quinn tried not to cry. At least not any more than she already had.

It felt as if that was all she did these days, between the confused torrent of emotions that erupted when Kahler was near and the quiet moments she spent with the kids. Tears of frustration, anger, sometimes of despair. They all came flooding out and leaving her miserable.

Pressing a sallow cheek to the cool tiles, she contemplated the nooks and crannies of the nearest grout lines. Every day was more of the same. She would try to eat, or Tobias would force her to, and she would end up here. Some days it was worse, not often better. If she complained, Kahler made all manner of excuses. How the doctors had said she was sensitive, and it would all be over as soon as she went into heat. Yet she hadn't felt sick when Lee had been doing this to her.

Not that she could tell Tobias that.

Forehead etched with deep lines as her brows slid down to scrunch together, Quinn began a slow recoil. Something that took an age before she was shoving up, bare feet skidding across the floor as instinct had her pressing back to the nearest wall. A protective gesture as she realized how his name changed in her head.

No longer his surname alone, she thought of him as Tobias more often than not.

“Fuck,” she whispered to the empty room, hands cradling her head as more salty misery tumbled down her wan face. He’d infected every part of her, twisting it up into something she didn’t even recognize anymore.

"Miss Quinn? Are you all right?" Meghan's disembodied voice floated into the bathroom, muffled and strained.

She probably hadn't even dared to enter the bedroom, hovering at the door. Not that Quinn could blame her. There were hazy memories of when the hormones first started effecting her, that she had lashed out at anyone other than the kids. And Kahler, of course, she thought with a silent snarl, making sure to consider him as nothing more than a name as she did.

It wouldn't help anything to fall apart thinking of everything that had happened during those weeks. The way he'd made her scream in anything but pain or anger.

"Yeah, fine," Quinn called back, voice ragged. Climbing to her feet, she stumbled towards the sink to splash her face and rinse out her mouth. Already she could feel her stomach twisting, threatening to revolt at the very idea of brushing her teeth again. "Where are the kids?"

"They're in the nursery."

"I thought you were outside with them?"

"The weather was turning, Miss Quinn. Children their age really shouldn't be out in the rain."

Quinn's shoulders rounded, guilt weighting her spine until she stared down at the swirling water without seeing it through the misty quality everything had taken through fresh tears. Damn him. Damn him for turning her into an emotional wreck, for making her take those fucking pills, for demanding everything from her and returning none of it.

Scrubbing the heel of her palm over her eyes hard enough to leave her blinking against lurid lime and crimson blotches, Quinn snatched up her toothbrush and began to brush her teeth. Motions jerky, furious, she didn't flinch as she abraded her gums raw. Welcomed the bitter taste of copper flooding her mouth as she forced her back to straighten.

"I'll go, but you should really come and spend some time with them before you get too tired."

Meghan was gone before Quinn could spit out the foamy pink bubbles to retort.

It wasn't her fault. She'd told him how sick it was making her, how exhausted she was, and he did not care. So set on his final goal, he was reckless with her. Apathetic to what he was doing to her body, let alone her mind.

Shaking her head, Quinn jerked the taps to shut the water off, wiping her mouth with rough strokes before storming out of the bedroom. She wanted to spend time with them, wanted to play with them. Quinn hated that she became so ground down by the time lunch rolled around that she could do nothing more than collapse into her nest and pray she wouldn't wake up vomiting if she'd dared to eat.

"Mama?" Adam's little face scrunched up, something too close to worry flashing in bright hazel eyes as she came bursting into the nursery.

Elise paused in her game of tumbling toys into their container, her gummy smile fading before she fell back onto her butt to watch Quinn come closer.

"Hey, baby boy," Quinn said as she fell into an awkward tangle of limbs beside Adam on the rug, weary bones refusing to allow her a graceful descent. Making a point to ignore Meghan's faint gasp, she offered up a crooked smile to Adam and tousled his hair. "What are we doing?"

"Blocks." Adam continued to stare up at Quinn with his face puckered. So similar to that one time he'd tried pears, all horror and disgust, right before he'd spit it all back out.

Elise babbled at her, forehead scrunching up as she became more animated. Gesturing with wild sweeps of her arms that almost toppled her over, she gave a final nod before picking up a bright green block to slap against the side of the plastic container.

"And that's all she has to say about that," Quinn muttered. She felt strange. A sense of inadequacy creeping over her skin as her infant daughter told her off and her toddler son watched with something too anxious for such a small boy. She was the parent, yet it seemed she was doing a horrible job of it.

Determined as always, Quinn scooted closer and picked up a couple of blocks to start building a tower. Adam loved making them and Elise had a blast making them crash to the ground.

She'd be fine.

Everything would be fine.

Adam joined in after several silent moments ticked by, helping her to erect a huge bastion of bright wooden bricks. By the time it was as tall as he was, Adam had lost the fretful scowl and lapsed into a commanding air. Pointing and ordering Quinn to pick him up so he could place the next block, she demanded he ask and be polite in return. The battle of wills was

won with his grudging thanks which earned him raspberries blown on his neck and cheeks, sending him into hysterical laughter.

The idea of him maybe being an Alpha worried her, but there was nothing she could do to change a dynamic. The hallmarks were all there, no matter what Meghan tried to say. The most she could do was teach him not to be like every Alpha she had ever known. To be polite and caring, understanding, protective of the weaker dynamics. There was time to instill in him a sense of right and wrong, and that doing *this* to an Omega would be so very wrong. That there needed to be love, not forced dependency.

Quinn started from her thoughts as Elise came screeching from the sidelines. Barreling into the tower with deep green eyes alight and arms outstretched, she slammed into the pillar with a gleeful squeal. Tumbling through the falling blocks to the floor, she screamed her delight at the chaos and destruction she'd produced.

The ecstatic girl didn't care about the light wooden bricks as they pummeled into her soft body. She laughed all the harder for it.

"Elise," Meghan said with a gasp, rushing forward with arms out as if she would snatch Elise up to protect her.

One brow rising, Quinn scoffed and waved Meghan away. Shaking her head, she pulled Elise from the wreckage, her wry smirk turning into an outright grin as Adam began laughing just as hard as his sister. Grabbing hold of his leg, Quinn yanked him closer, making him squeal and cackle before she folded both children into her embrace to blow raspberries wherever she could and mock bite their little limbs.

It wasn't long before Quinn began to pant, a cold sweat breaking out across her forehead. Arms heavy, she let the squirming children go to topple to her back. Heart hammering in her eardrums, she struggled to get a full breath. The ghost of pain coiled around her middle, tightening in ever smaller circles as her chest heaved. Bile seared its way up the back of her throat, burning through her sinuses as she forced down the urge to throw up.

She didn't want them to see her that way again. It had been hard enough the first time.

With a shaky breath, Quinn hauled herself upright by sheer force of will, muscles a tangle of overcooked noodles. Slapping a cheery smile on her lips, she looked at her children and prayed they wouldn't see the pain and fear that were her constant companions.

This was her life now. There would be no running with two children in tow, not after what Tobias had done to her. He had ruined her, along with any chance of getting away.

“I think it’s time for a nap,” Quinn said, keeping her voice as light and airy as she could.

“No! No nap time!” Adam’s face twisted, an indignant blush staining his cheeks. His little hands snatched at the blocks, cradling the toys close to his chest as if Quinn would take them away.

“Not for you, silly bean.” Smile faltering, Quinn brushed a lock of hair from Adam’s forehead. “I need to rest.”

Adam’s lower lip trembled where it jutted out before he threw himself into Quinn. The weight of him sent her tumbling back, his little body half sprawled across hers as he whined and wrapped his arms tight around Quinn’s neck. Burrowing into the warmth of her shoulder, nose pressed tight to her neck where her scent was strongest, Quinn could feel the first fat tear sliding down her skin.

“Oh, baby boy, it’s okay,” Quinn murmured, hands drifting over his back as she soothed with a quiet hum.

“Nuh-uh.” Voice thick, Adam snuggled closer, wrapping himself around Quinn. He didn’t even budge when Elise bounced her way to them, flopping into Quinn’s other side with a gurgling babble of syllables.

Quinn didn’t argue. Couldn’t while her stomach did a slow twist and the room spun before she clenched her eyes shut. Instead she palmed the back of Elise’s head and urged her daughter to snuggle in, uncaring how her chest constricted with more than the tears burning the back of her eyes.

This particular hell was untenable. She had to find a way to convince him, to make him stop forcing her to swallow those damned pills.

They lay like that for as long as Quinn could convince two babies to remain still. Until their restless shifting, little bodies full of too much energy, began to poke and prod her with knobby knees and elbows. Grunting as she struggled upright with the weight of both kids, Quinn looked out at the dreary gray skies. There’d be no letting them run outside today.

“How about a story,” Quinn asked, smoothing their hair back so she could see both their faces.

Adam sniffled and nodded, clambering down from Quinn’s lap to trot over to the small bookcase. Concentration intense, he squinted at the titles

as if the letters made perfect sense to him. Elise stuck her tongue out, spraying Quinn with saliva as she blew a raspberry. Her mad giggles joined Quinn wiping away the spittle with a palm.

As Adam began to pull several books from the case, Quinn made a game of crawling to the large overstuffed chair that stood sentry in the corner. Elise followed along, knees and hands a near blur as she hurried to keep up.

By the time they were all situated in the seat, both children sprawled across Quinn's lap, she was exhausted. Not daring to close her eyes for even a moment lest she drop right off, she focused her concentration on the vivid pictures and bright pages, making sure she spoke slow enough that Adam could keep up.

Through the first book, Meghan fussed and fidgeted, distracting them all as she moved around the room to pick up the array of blocks and the soft toys Elise had dumped out of her toy container. During the second she looked on with mild reproach, as if Quinn was doing something wrong.

Perhaps she was. It wasn't as if she knew what she was doing. Following instinct, what seemed to be common sense, Quinn did her best.

Three books later, Quinn thanked whatever God was in charge of such things that they were so short. As she closed the hard cover on the last story about eggs and ham, she breathed a sigh of relief. Head pounding with the dull throb of a magnificent headache, the glaring colors were killing her one crisp page at a time. Eyes drifting shut more often than they remained open, there was no way she could get through one more.

“Another!”

“Not now, Adam. You need—”

“It’s time for lunch, Adam,” Meghan said, breezing closer to the chair to urge him down. Smile soft, she pulled Elise from Quinn’s side to prop on a hip. Warm brown eyes turning to Quinn, her eyebrows lifted into something hopeful. “You’ll join us?”

“I, um... I don’t think...”

“Mama eat!”

“Adam, stop yelling,” Quinn hissed, fingertips finding her temple as his shrill scream ran a jagged course straight into her eardrum.

Seeing his little shoulders rounding, head hanging low, twisted Quinn’s heart. Tears springing to her eyes, she pushed off the chair to swoop down on Adam with a hug, pulling him tight against her chest as she began to

purr. The broken sound was strained, brimming with sorrow as much as comfort, but it had him curling into her, wrapping his small body around hers as he sought more of her touch.

“I’ll try, okay?” Quinn cupped the back of Adam’s head, holding him close as he pushed his nose against her neck.

“Okay.”

“But no more yelling,” Quinn added as she pulled him back enough to see rounded hazels swimming in tears.

“No yelling.” Adam sniffled, tugging on Quinn’s hair to pull her closer as he threw his body forward, wrapping himself in her.

“All right.”

Quinn grabbed on to the crib side for balance as she pushed up to her feet, groaning as Adam’s added weight almost sent her to her knees. He was too heavy, too solid for her to be carrying like this anymore, but she would rather the discomfort of it than to make him let her go.

Meghan preceded them down the stairs, Elise babbling over her shoulder at them. Quinn went much slower, taking each step with care as she held the banister with a white knuckled grip. For his part, Adam seemed to know not to squirm. He held on tight and remained still, letting Quinn concentrate on each step down.

Arriving in the dining room, Meghan brushed away Quinn’s insistence on helping. Leaving her alone at the table with the kids, Meghan disappeared into the depths of the house to prepare something. Whoever cooked their meals took lunch off during the week, only breakfast and dinner supplied in abundance. It seemed the rest of the household didn’t deserve a meal if Kahler wasn’t attending.

Snorting at her thoughts, Quinn tried to keep the two restless children occupied while they waited. The headache that had begun as a minor annoyance in the nursery had swelled. Now something angry and vicious attacked her skull, battering away with a dull chisel and hammer. Her stomach twisted and rolled in sympathetic unity. Very bones aching, joints tight and pinching, she wanted nothing more than to crawl into the nest and sleep for days.

Instead she listened to her children, strained smile fixed as she nodded and made the correct responses to their rambling dialogue, of which Elise seemed most intent on. The two had some bond, Adam seeming to know what it was Elise was saying, or at least guessing better than Quinn ever

would. Fingertips tracing the thick whorls of the polished wood, she wondered if that was some trick of siblings, if perhaps she would have had the same if Marina hadn't aborted every pregnancy after Quinn.

The sudden surge of tears shocked her, enough that a few slipped free before she could get some control of herself and blink them away. Why that would upset her was beyond understanding. Emotions all over the place, the hormones wreaking havoc on her body, it was no wonder something so trivial and stupid as her mother and the thought of lost children would bother her.

Meghan reappeared with a tray, smile sympathetic as she placed a plate with the other half of Elise's sandwich in front of Quinn. A glass of juice and one of Adam's pudding cups joined it, rounding out the wretched excuse of a meal. Quinn shuddered as she picked up the pudding, peeling back the foil top. Keeping the plastic grin in place, she spooned a bare taste between her lips and tried not to gag.

Too sweet, the thick texture clung to the roof of her mouth before she could swallow it. It coated her tongue with a veneer of sludge, one that tried to choke before it slipped down her throat. Closing her eyes, she spooned another bit into her mouth, listening to the bright chattering around her, hoping she could make it through at least most of the meal.

Some weird effect of the bond, everything tasted wrong. Tobias continued to tell her that it would get better, but it hadn't. One bite of the grilled cheese, it felt sandpaper rough and oil spill slick all at the same time. She couldn't chew it fast enough, the tiny bite taking forever to grind into a pulpy mass that tasted and felt like sawdust. The sip of apple juice was rancid, thick and cloying as it slithered down her throat.

If he felt anything of this, either before or after her claim on him, he showed no hint of his revulsion. The bastard ate with gusto, consuming huge amounts. Fuel for an Alpha's higher metabolism and solid mass, he consumed food as if every meal would be the last.

The fucker.

Quinn couldn't remember the last meal she'd enjoyed. Something Ilya had cooked her, something delicious and extravagant. Memories of crispy skinned chicken and lofty clouds of mashed potatoes made her mouth water.

Eyes snapping open, Quinn slapped a hand over her mouth and hurtled to her feet. Chair crashing to the floor, she tripped over the upended piece in

her race towards the bathroom. The hall lengthened as bare soles slapped against the hardwood floors, colors melding and swirling as everything began to spin.

She wasn't going to make it.

Behind her she heard Adam and Elise screaming. It took every ounce of effort to keep on her course, to move away from those awful sounds towards the door that was just out of reach.

A dark shadow glided in from another room, hooded eyes dark as pitch as they watched on with indifference. Quinn's feet stuttered over the floor, grinding to a halt as she choked on the bile flooding her mouth and the shriek of fear that followed it.

There was nothing she could do though cold logic tried to assure it was only one of the males he set to guard the house. The panic running rampant through her veins had her crashing to her knees, palms braced against the thick rug ahead as she lowered her body in submission. The dull gleam of heavy black boots shifting closer was her undoing.

Tears searing pallid cheeks, she retched all over them.

It had taken hours to calm Adam and Elise down. An age spent soothing their tears and wails while trying to keep from falling apart. The man she'd thrown up on had been angered and disgusted, which Quinn couldn't blame him for. She did however blame him for the violent roar that had set the kids off into an epic meltdown.

It hadn't helped her shattered nerves, either. Especially with what came after.

Others had flooded in, flowing from hidden niches to fill the room to bursting with male posturing and anger. Smoky darkness and hot ash coated her sinuses alongside the acrid burn as she continued to heave all over the expensive rug.

They were quick to disperse when she began to growl at them, crawling her way back towards the dining room though the battered ache of her midsection kept her bent double.

At least they had known not to press a threatened Omega.

Now Adam and Elise slept, though it was a fitful and delicate slumber. Long after when they should have been down for their naps, it hadn't helped matters as she'd quieted them.

Quinn wrapped an arm around her middle as she slid along the wall away from the nursery, eyes heavy and each step leaden. She just had to make it to the nest and not collapse before that. Meghan had made weepy promises, the liquid quality of her tremulous voice assuring Quinn that all would be taken care of.

A huff of air that tried to be a sigh of relief escaped her as she made it to the bedroom. Fingers plucking at the strings of her clothing, she shed the loose, silky items and stumbled free of them without altering her course. Stopping now would send her to the floor, and she knew from experience it would be that much harder if she did.

Crawling into the massive bed, Quinn whined as her muscles protested. A bone deep ache settled in, take up residence through every limb until she creaked and groaned with every shuffling move. Collapsing into the nest, she shoved her face into his pillow and breathed deep. There was no energy left in the quivering arm that strained to tug a blanket up.

Breathing in his heady musk where it lingered in the soft fabric, Quinn closed her eyes and prayed for sleep.

It didn't come soon enough.

Feeling as though the whole ordeal was mere minutes ago, she heard the door click shut. The mattress shifted, the solid weight of Tobias coming up the bed as his heat engulfed her. She knew what would come, the demands he'd make of her. Knew just as well that she couldn't withstand it.

It wasn't even a sob. Misery fled over her tongue in a hard exhalation, chest squeezed in a vise as tears strangled her. Face hidden in the thick drifts of downy softness, she knew he wouldn't see, and even if he did, he'd do it anyway. As if she lost control of every atom of her being, Quinn felt the weight of her heart sinking her body deeper into the bed.

"What is it, little bird?"

There was no strength left to her. Too exhausted, too wrung out, she couldn't control anything anymore. Not even the weak promises to herself to remain strong against his presence could hold up against the utter depletion. Submerged in fine linens and his scent, she gave up and released her tenuous grasp on even that to drag in a rattling breath for a response.

Not that she knew what to say. Too often her words were ignored, her complaints and denials silenced under his lips as he forced her to his will.

This would be no different.

She was so very tired.

“Quinn!” It sounded as if he’d been punched, the rumble of her name dragged out of him with force. Hands too gentle to make sense, he rolled Quinn to her back. Feather light the glancing touches to her face traced the sunken contours of cheek and eye as he bent close. “Quinn, sweetness? What is it?”

Quinn’s breath hitched, glassy eyes staring up at him while her lips and tongue struggled to form the motions. To tell him how much it hurt, that she needed sleep, that he was killing her by fractions all the while he professed his care and need.

It was then she realized that the deep green of his gaze held more than the usual determination and hint of irritation. There was worry there, an edge of fear tightening the fullness of his lips as he huddled over her. As if he would protect her sprawled body with his own, heat leeching into her frigid skin. A slow blink allowed her gaze to drift, and it was then she saw the reason why his caresses felt so strange.

His hand trembled where it hovered beside her face. Afraid to touch, and somehow she knew he was worried he would hurt her more than she already was.

“Quinn?”

Again came that sound. Using the last of her will, she shifted her gaze back to his. She hadn’t recognized it, because she had never heard it from him. A sob of breath as he was overwhelmed by something not within his power to control.

Her chest twisted, tightening in ever increasing bands. The hammering behind her sternum wasn’t the sluggish thump of her heart. She knew that. Understood somehow that the tangled web that threaded its way through her was him, his thoughts and feelings, the emotions now running rampant in a dizzying blur. Faster than she could make sense of anything.

“Quinn,” Tobias shouted in a whisper, heavy hands cradling her skull as he bent closer. “Answer me, dammit!”

“Tired.”

It was just a breath, the last of her energy expended to soothe the tumult that raced around her brain before darkness pulled her eyes shut and sleep

found her.

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CHAPTER THREE

Quinn whimpered as her eyes fluttered open, not rested enough by half for the shaft of gentle morning light that pierced through her retinas. The whole room was bathed in golden radiance, warming her skin where it peeked out from under the heavy drifts of blankets.

A shadow fell over her, cool and soothing before a solid object took up sentry in the field of her blurred vision. Blocking the stinging rays, protecting her from that particular agony until she could shove her face into the dark crevice between two pillows.

“Hold on, sweetness.” His voice was a quiet purr, calming and gentle as his fingers swept the tangled length of her hair over her shoulder.

Darkness descended over the room, shutting away the strengthening sun. She didn’t bother to move, remaining listless as his hand traversed the hollow valleys of her ribs. Whatever reprieve she’d received the night before, he’d do what he wanted now.

“Is that better?”

The sludge between her ears masquerading as her brain couldn’t make sense of what her senses perceived. His purr continued, quieting the dull ache that infected the marrow of her bones, but there was no insistence in the gentle reverberation. Though he touched her, it wasn’t his usual pawing. He made no demands as he brushed his knuckles over her shoulder and skimmed down her arm.

Neck creaking, Quinn angled to see him. The lowered high-tech blinds afforded a far more comfortable dimness, allowing her to open her eyes and look around. To see him sitting on the bed beside her with brows pinched tight, deep furrows marring his forehead.

Concern. Worry. Tobias looked as if he hadn't slept at all, the haggard set of his jaw and the liberal stubble attesting that he hadn't even showered yet. Groaning at the effort to move her arms alone, Quinn couldn't even complain when he took hold and rolled her to her back. Shifting closer, his hands were damned near hesitant when he traced the shell of her ear, tucking stray tresses back from her face.

"I called the doctor," Tobias said, the faintest hint of a stammer wringing his words. "He'll be here in an hour."

"Why?"

"You... Quinn, you passed out. You vomited in your sleep."

"And?"

"And...? And I called the damned doctor!"

Disbelief battled with anger for a single heartbeat before she sunk deeper into the pillows, wishing she could pull the blankets up, to be covered chin to toe in the lingering warmth. If she were being honest with herself, with his scent, too.

Despair registered for a second as he gripped the whole mess of blankets, far more than had been there when she'd crawled into the nest. Thinking he'd do it now, she was shocked when he tucked the lot of them tight to her chin, covering every inch of her. Even more surprising was when he climbed onto the monstrous bed, stretching out alongside her to press hard against her side. Wrapping her up in his arms, enfolding her in his body, his heat, and scent.

"I'm sorry I puked on the sheets." The foul taste in her mouth assured her it had happened more than once, and no doubt was the reason why so many new items had been added. She had never been so out of it not to wake up first, but she wasn't surprised. This exhaustion ran deeper than it ever had before. Not just tired, not something that a few hours of sleep could fix.

Something was wrong.

The damned pills were the problem. They did this to her, and he made her take them, day after day.

"You're killing me," she whispered to the dark recess of his shoulder, breathing him in with each rattling inhale. "Just leave me alone."

"Why didn't you tell me, Quinn?" His nose came to her neck, pushing hard against her skin to breathe her in deep. The tightness of his voice belied some emotion she couldn't quite believe.

“I told you!” A breathless wail, her nails dug into his arm, holding on as much as she wanted to punish him with the sting.

“You didn’t... You said, but... not this bad.”

Confusion swamped what was left of her thoughts as she swore she felt moisture slip down her shoulder to stain the bedding beneath her though her eyes remained dry.

“This is why you don’t eat, why you sleep so much. Why didn’t you... Damn you for being so fucking stubborn, woman. Even now you’re doing it again.”

“I’m not... Get off of me! You did this, not me,” Quinn whispered on a weary groan that held little strength. Though she wanted to scream at him, to shout that she had told him over and over again what he was doing to her, Quinn could do little more than lie there and take it as her body refused to find some untapped well of strength. Arms quivering when she tried to push at him, she was forced to accept his careful attention. She didn’t understand him, couldn’t make any sense of what he was going on about. It was always her fault, whatever trials and defeats she suffered through.

“Stop fighting me.”

It took too much effort to frown, but her brows still drifted downwards at his demand. Unable to form a cohesive thought much less move against him, she wasn’t fighting anything.

“Let me in.” The quiet, frustrated growl he made reverberated through the room, a distant thunder as he pulled away. The flat of his palm came to her chest, his touch not near as hesitant as it had been. “Here, Quinn. Here you always fight me.”

Before she could muddle through the sticky morass, he was there. Pressing close, aligned so that his heart hammered against hers. Nose buried in her hair, he cupped her nape and brought her head up. Forcing her lips to his shoulder where her mark was bared to the light of day.

The mark he was ashamed of.

She couldn’t mistake the shuddering quality of his breath against her temple. The jittery thread of tension that wove through it all, that thing writhing in her, twisted up in the slimy web he’d imprisoned her in.

“Is that how you see it,” Tobias asked, breath leaving him in a rush as he cuddled her closer. As if he would protect her from some danger, he curled his body around hers until she was wrapped in every inch of him.

Too bad he was the one she needed protection from.

“I don’t—”

“Gods’ sake, Quinn, for once in your life stop.” He vibrated above her, cold sweat peppering his neck and forehead as he strained against something. “Stop fighting and let me in.”

Incredulous as she was bewildered by his words and his actions, she grew more concerned. Fear and rising panic dared her to touch it. The slimy, knotted thing that bound them together jerked and shuddered through her chest as she risked the briefest graze of the bond tethering them together.

A flood of sensation pounded under her ribs, banging around with a brutal vengeance as his irritation faded to something too close to gentleness. Growl easing into a purr that was glorious in its depth and richness, he moved closer still. Plastering his chest to hers, careful not to crush her, he forced her to feel it all.

She would have screamed had she anything left in her when it ripped free from her sternum, ricocheting through her body in heavy pulses of electrified fire.

It was her, but not. It surged and drifted, sudden violent swells that gentled to a summer breeze between one quavering breath and the next. So similar to the misery she’d felt while with Lee, she became afraid. Terrified that somehow it would be like it was before and she’d lose the strenuous hold she had upon her sanity.

Tobias’ reaction was immediate. The purr growing louder, vibrating with a horrible sensation too close to sorrow as he cradled her ever closer until Quinn was smothered in his heat and scent. An attempt to comfort what could not be soothed away.

The exhaustion that had plagued her for so long now dug its ragged claws into her, making her weak, breathless as she fought for a single inch of reprieve. Mind struggling to sift through what was her and what was not, her panic flared and shrieked. A wailing explosion in a night dark sky.

She didn’t want to feel this.

Tobias gave her no mercy, invading her with single minded determination. Chocolate and chilies simmered under her skin, torrents of heat blasting through her veins. He grunted above her. Hands tightening, he tried to push closer as if he could take her inside of him, making them one.

A sound reminiscent of a groan filtered through the chaos clamoring around her skull. Uncertain which of them had made the noise, she could do

little more than cling to him as sensations bombarded her. Too much to take in, not enough to make any sense of. Pain, regret, sorrow, betrayal. It blasted through her thoughts, obliterating everything.

Destroying her one thudding heartbeat at a time.

Something splintered and cracked, shattering from the constant abuse. Soundless as it ripped her apart, slicing her open and laying her bare and vulnerable to the beast lurking inside and out. Thick tears dripped from her lashes, trickling down her temples to stain her hair dark and glossy.

A breath filled her lungs. Long and deep, it was clean and crisp. As if she breathed fresh air for the first time in her life. It shuddered through her, filling her up with a warmth she had never known under her own control. Something only he could incite, the thing he did to her when he broke her to his will.

Yet her thoughts were her own. She felt him there, deep inside, touching a part of her he had no right to, but she wasn't struggling against the sunlit agony.

The bond was not quiet, but for once it did not hurt.

"Yes," Tobias murmured against her wet cheek. Sliding his chest against hers, petting her with his whole body as he rubbed his scent on her skin.

To comfort, to soothe. Giving her something physical to hold on to as something close to panic began to prick the back of her neck again. Letting her know her Alpha was near and would keep her safe.

It wasn't her that thought it, wasn't her deduction bringing her to the conclusion. It was him. A pattern of emotions, thoughts, and things she couldn't begin to describe that told her what it was. Speaking without uttering a word.

Quinn could feel the wild staccato of his heart, the sweat trickling down his back. The heat of him against her chilled skin. As if she somehow inhabited his body while still locked within hers, she could perceive every little thing.

"I don't understand." Still her lungs worked to pull in the unsullied air that was redolent with both their scents, a crushing weight lifted. Quinn felt free in a way she couldn't comprehend and hated that it scared her as much as anything before it.

"You always fight me. Tooth and nail." He looked exhausted as he settled back against the pillows that had come loose of her construct while she thrashed under him.

She didn't remember moving, but she must have. Long red marks scored his arms and sides, deep crimson crescents oozing at his shoulders.

"Literally."

His surprised huff of laughter startled them both, but Quinn's lips twitched in a smile. She didn't remember ever seeing him laugh, not a real one at least. Well, not at her, anyhow. He smiled and laughed with the kids while she was too weary and sick to participate.

"I didn't know it was this bad, sweetness," Tobias whispered, touching her hair again. Worried even that would send her skittering away. He was waiting for her to reject him, all of it, for things to return to the way they had been.

Unsure if she wanted to continue this or not, she couldn't blame him.

"I told you what was happening."

"And what reason did I have to believe you? It wouldn't be the first time you lied to me."

Flinching from the chill that crept through his tone and the bitter well of anger that simmered just under the surface of it all, Quinn could see his point. Not that he was right, but she could understand it. Thinking he would know the truth of her words, that he had every last detail accounted for, she'd said a great many things aimed to hurt him. Cruel, vicious things. Things about her time with Lee and his men that were so far from the truth as to be laughable, but he didn't know how much, it would seem. He only knew it wasn't the truth.

"Yes. Now you understand." Rising from the bed, he held out a hand to her. He was tired and expecting another argument, something to bring this all crashing to the ground in a flaming pile of shit.

Quinn eyed his hand, wary of the invitation.

"I'd like to shower before the doctor comes. I thought you might, too."

"No." Quinn pulled in another breath, struggling up the bed so that she didn't face him from the flat of her back. Clutching at the sheets, she peered up at him with solemn eyes. "No more doctors, no more pills."

"What?" Face darkened, brows slamming down into a thick line, he was already shaking his head.

"It's been happening since you put me on the fertility drugs. It's gotten worse the longer I take them. I feel a little better, and you didn't make me take them last night."

It was the truth. Her stomach wasn't a twisted mass, and though she was still so very tired, she didn't want to crawl into a hole and die. How much was this thing that was happening between them and how much was the drugs, she couldn't say. If he would just give her this one thing...

Tobias watched her, the deep green of his eyes shadowed with worry. For once, she felt his indecision. Warring with the need to see her fixed, as much as he thought he could fix her, and his desire to give her something, anything, to keep this alive and whole between them. Quinn saw the moment he made his decision, felt it like an electric charge down her spine.

"We'll just have him look you over, little bird. Make sure you're all right."

Nothing had changed. The moment was gone, ash on the wind as he wiped his hands clean of her complaints.

He was there, drawing closer. The warmth of his command slithered through her in thick, honeyed rivers, draining the fight from her.

She'd been stupid. Again. A whole life spent priding herself on being smarter than others, of not dwelling too long on her weaknesses and instead reveling in her strengths. Now she was just the bastard's toy, something he played with when it suited him.

Feeling him *right* there, pounding away next to her heart, had been... overwhelming. Despite the way her thoughts had remained clear, the easiness she'd felt with the simple act of breathing, she began to wonder if it hadn't all been some trick. Some way to get her to agree to a new horror, to make her a more malleable slave since what he was doing didn't appear to be working fast enough for his tastes.

Ice crackled through her abdomen and chest, making her shiver with the intensity of the cold that pervaded her. She couldn't deny the effectiveness of his ploy. For that all too long span of minutes, she'd been pliant and quiet. She hadn't railed against him, he hadn't had to force her. She'd gone belly up with nothing more than a shock to the system.

Ilya had explained a great many things to her, had told her much about the bond and mates, but he'd never even whispered what it would be like if the Omega completed the circle. It wasn't done, and Quinn could understand why. It wasn't natural to feel a person like this, to be tangled up in them until you couldn't define yourself any longer. Nothing he or Tobias had ever mentioned even hinted at it being like this for the Alpha.

If he could sense even half of what she did... She'd had no sense of him before, a one way channel between them, but now she could feel him in a way that overwhelmed her with a thought. It stood to reason that what he did to her, she could do to him.

So she hoped, because if she was wrong, she was sure he'd make her pay. There would be no more ground given. No more moments where she was a person and not a thing, a piece of property.

Shoving away the ache of exhaustion that still dragged at her limbs, she straightened her spine and raised her eyes to his. The heat of him slipping through her veins, so hot her heart tried to seize, tried to bow her head. Wetting dry lips, Quinn dug her nails deep into her palms to center herself. She wouldn't just let this happen. Couldn't just lie there and let him do this to her again.

Taking in a long breath, Quinn closed her eyes and sought out that thing writhing in her chest, the brilliance of it blinding in her mind's eye. All the many things he could do to her, the horrific ways he could break her, flashed through her thoughts. If she didn't at least try, she'd never forgive herself.

Moving before her nerve could run out, she grabbed hold of it.

Crashing back into the bed, her head bounced off of the headboard. Mouth open in a silent scream, jagged agony tearing her open, bursting from her heart. Vision blurred and ears ringing with the impact of the devastating explosion within her skull, she saw him coming towards her.

Envisioning ripping at the bond, making him hurt, making him bleed, she poured every ounce of pain and fear she had ever felt into it. From the terror of her first heat to this very moment and all that lay between, she wanted him to feel every second of it. How Marina abandoned her, Alton used her, how Lee made her beg, the betrayal of Ilya, and all the faceless males who had ever caused her pain.

Quinn watched him falter and stumble, falling to one knee with a vicious roar.

Drunk on the agonized lines of his face, the whites of his eyes showing as a hand slammed into his chest to grip the space over the bond, she fought.

Wrenching, tearing, pulling, she tried to destroy it. She wanted to cut it loose, rip it out and throw away this thing that connected them. If her purpose to him was gone, obliterated, then she could be free of him.

Quinn wanted nothing more than to end it all.

Tobias lunged forward, grabbing hold of her quivering arm and dragging Quinn's body to him. Wrapping her up in his body, he growled meaningless words against her crown as a snarling purr reverberated through his chest, pushing into her. Forcing her to calm and melt into his arms.

The heady sunlight seeped into her, surrounding her on all sides as it drowned her in its honey gold depths.

She couldn't help but think if she'd had one more second, she might have succeeded. Unable to hold out any longer, she raked her nails down the side of his face in a last bid to be free.

Tobias hugged her tighter, gathering her into his arms as he crawled onto the bed. Muffled words lost in the vibrating warmth that dragged Quinn down into senseless oblivion.

Quinn's eyes fluttered open, a bone deep agony stealing the breath from her lungs on a ragged groan. Pale grays swam in heavy pools, swirling the multihued landscape into indistinguishable blobs of color.

"Lie still," Tobias murmured, feathering the lightest caress over her hair. A touch that was gone before Quinn could recognize it for what it was.

Feeling bruised and flayed, she took the advice. Even let her lids drift down to block out the muted light. Not much time had passed, or so she thought. The room still had the golden glow of early afternoon. Perhaps she had missed lunch with the kids, but the entire day wasn't lost.

Not that she felt much like breathing, let alone moving.

The steady hum of the bond was loud in her ears, a turbulent rumble of sound that tried to block out all else. Hand slapping over her chest, she tried to hold shut the jagged pain that seeped her soul out into the air. She was shocked to find her skin was whole and sound as ever, expecting some deep hole instead.

Prying her eyes open, she toppled her head to the side to look at him. Collapsed on the bed beside her, every limb slack with something close to defeat, he looked haggard and exhausted. A snide voice in her head thought he looked very much how she felt these past months, and it served him right.

“No doctors. No pills,” she rasped when he turned to look at her. Her hands shook, her body hurt in ways she didn’t know it could, but she’d be damned if she let this go.

Understanding darkened his gaze, the knowledge that she’d do this again and again, every chance she got, hardening the twilight evergreen. He would either have to keep her in a sunlit stupor for the rest of their days or destroy her.

Neither was an option.

“All right.”

“Thank you.” It was so much harder to say than it should have been. Words pried out of her mouth, having to force her tongue and lips to form the simple words.

It was a start.

“I hope we both don’t regret it.” His smile was stiff, but it wasn’t his usual arrogant smirk that drove her insane and for that she would overlook the tension bunching his shoulders.

They lay there in silent contemplation of one another, each gauging this new turn of events and taking stock of their adversary. She wasn’t helpless anymore, not after what he’d done. Knowing she could hurt him, that she could push back and defy him even when he was trying to sap her strength, was dizzying. He could win, eventually, but at a great cost to them both. One neither could keep up for long.

In a strange twist, she found that his pain didn’t cause the elation she had thought it would. Deserved, yes, but there was no sick joy seeing the rough lines around his eyes or the way his cheeks looked sunken.

Nodding towards the bathroom, he reached for his cell phone. “Go start, I’ll call off the cavalry.”

As much as she wanted to remain and listen to the conversation, Quinn dragged herself to the edge of the bed to begin the trek to the bathroom. Legs feeling loose and weak, she tried not to snarl when Tobias took her elbow and helped her down from the high bed. Even kept her grumbling to a bare minimum as he tucked the bit of glass and plastic between shoulder and cheek to support her the rest of the way.

Tobias chose to ignore it, or at least to let it slide. The uneasy stalemate would hold for now, and he basked in the fact that at least they were not fighting. For however long it would last, he would take it.

He didn’t have it in him to do that again.

It felt wrong on so many levels to know that, to feel it deep in her bones.

Straining to hear the murmuring rise and fall of his voice as she went through the motions of washing her face and brushing her teeth, Quinn could feel his agitation. The frustrated pacing as he spoke to the doctor resonated through her. Shivering at the strange sensation, she tried to ignore the fleeting flash of hunger that bloomed through her chest.

Glancing through the opened door, she saw him standing there. Silent and preternaturally still, he stared. The way her body moved, the sway of her hips, he drank it in with wide eyes as he listened to whatever the doctor was saying to him.

Grunting in response to something the doctor said, he eased forward a predatory step, gaze sweeping over her as the bond hummed and writhed. Whole and present in the moment, Quinn gnawed at her lip as she watched him moving ever closer.

Phone tossed aside as he made a distracted goodbye, Tobias came up beside her. A careful distance kept between them, the space felt charged, ready to implode or disintegrate with a thought.

They stood side by side, finishing their morning rituals without a single word spoken. Catching one another looking, quick to look away, neither of them knew what to do next.

“It’s almost lunch,” Tobias said as Quinn walked towards the closet to gather clothes. He hesitated at the door, weight shifting on the balls of his feet. A long moment passed before he followed, easing in behind her until he could move to stand opposite the long line of drawers down the middle.
“Will you try to eat?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“All I ask is that you try.”

“What did the doctor say?” Quinn trailed her fingers over a row of shirts, fixing her gaze on the muted colors that wanted to blur for no reason other than he was speaking to her. As if she was a real human being, he was conversing, requesting.

“He said that yes, it’s a known side effect, but that if it continues he wants you to go in for bloodwork. He suggested you increase your iron intake, try to get some sun if we wait to see your usual doctor. It might help with the fatigue in the meantime.”

Rolling her lips out, she made a quiet popping noise as she tugged a pale blue shirt free. Tucking it into the crook of her arm along with a simple skirt, Quinn turned to go back to the bedroom. She'd dress first and fix the nest, then see if the kids were ready to eat. If nothing else, she could help Meghan with them. The poor woman had been stuck with them by herself all morning, she probably could use a break.

"You'll need these." Standing before her, the oddity of casual slacks and a soft knit shirt draped over his arm, Tobias crouched to set the soft-soled shoes beside her bare feet.

Pale brows knitting, she eyed the footwear with mistrust. If he expected her to eat, there was no way she would be able to go outside and play with the kids after. She might feel better, but she knew that could change with a single bite.

"Just... Please."

Daring to look up at him, eyes narrowed as she watched the wry smile pull his lips up, she gave a faint shrug. Already the thing between them was quieting, becoming soft and hazy. Quinn could no longer feel him in such sharp relief, but a vague impression of him centered under her sternum.

Finishing getting dressed, she went around to set the bed to rights. Plumping pillows, reordering the sheets and blankets, she ignored him as he left the bedroom.

He didn't even say goodbye.

CHAPTER FOUR

Slumping her way downstairs, Quinn felt the momentary lightness of victory fading away. It left her bitter, a chill that would not cease as she shuffled her way through the halls and rooms towards the sound of voices.

Not his though, and now she was sure that he had departed for the day. Gone and left her dealing with this new thing that continued to burst apart in her chest, the bond discordant and jangling now.

Nothing had changed.

Her success felt empty and shallow now. Kept locked away inside his prison of a house, no different than it had been before. Yes, she could fight back when he tried to control her, but what use was that when nothing else about the situation had altered?

Anger fueled her steps, pushing her feet out of their customary shuffle to something grim. The raised voices grew louder.

She wasn't strong.

She was pathetic.

He thought he could shatter everything and walk away as if nothing had happened. She would show him.

Jaw tense, resolve hardening, Quinn stomped her way into the kitchen and the source of the argument. Lips a hard line, eyes pinched, she watched a Beta male straighten to a considerable height as he growled at a red faced Meghan.

"I don't give a damn who you think you are, woman. If he wants to cook in his own damned kitchen, I am not going to argue with him."

"Mr. Kahler does not need to be making food for—"

“I’ll say it again since you apparently didn’t hear me,” the man said in a rumbling snarl, stepping forward to invade Meghan’s space, putting his face closer to hers. “It’s his kitchen and he can do whatever the hell he wants in it.”

“What’s going on?”

Meghan jumped, whirling around with such speed that she knocked the man back a step. Staring at Quinn with her mouth working though no words came forth, she made a fluttering motion towards the French doors leading off of the kitchen to the backyard.

“Mr. Kahler, he, uh, he made lunch for the children and...”

“And she has a problem with it,” the Beta muttered as he gave a stiff nod of greeting to Quinn before bustling to a counter loaded with sandwich fixings.

Clothed in a crisp white apron, Quinn gathered he was the cook she’d yet to meet. Glancing at Meghan, seeing the flustered irritation, she was tempted to insult the man’s cooking, to tell him it was that which made her so sick. Something else caught her attention, stringing it along to flail in wild fits, a fish on a hook.

“My issue is that it’s your job to—”

“He’s still here?” Quinn wrapped her arms around her middle, eyebrows bunched tight.

“I’m out here with the children,” Tobias said from the door, smile as arrogant as ever. The deep green of his gaze swept over Quinn, taking her in as a muscle jumped along his jaw.

“You can’t just leave them out there alone!” Quinn shoved past his imposing bulk, ignoring the way her skin came alive as it touched him. Hurrying down the steps to the brick patio, Quinn swooped in to grab Elise where she attempted to stand by herself.

“I was right here, nothing was—”

“She could have busted her damn head open!”

“I think maybe you need to—”

“Adam! Get out of that right now, young man.” Propping Elise on her hip, Quinn hurried over to where Adam crouched over a muddy puddle.

“Look, Mama!” Arms grubby up to his elbows, knees and shins caked with dark sludge, he grinned at Quinn. Stretching out his hand, he held a deep red worm up in his fist where it jerked and wriggled to be free.

"Put him back, baby, he wants to go home now," Quinn said as she struggled down into an awkward squat, keeping a firm arm around Elise who tried to join her brother. "Look at you, you're filthy."

"Just dirt." Adam dropped the worm into the puddle, giggling as it splashed and disappeared into the thick muck. Turning his attention to the mud squelching under his soggy shoes, he began to scrape it up in great palmfuls.

"Adam, stop that. Let's go inside and get you cleaned up." Laboring to her feet, she held out a hand to the mud caked toddler.

"No! Play." Adam huffed and turned back to his mess, slapping his hands together to make brown tinged water spray in every direction.

"Adam, get up right now and come inside."

"Quinn."

The sharp bark of her name had her whirling around, clutching Elise closer and hiding Adam behind the fall of her skirt as Tobias stalked towards them. Strides too purposeful and steady, she was surprised when he stopped well out of arm's reach.

"It's only dirt. Meghan's getting a washcloth for him now," Tobias said, his measured tone at odds with the midnight hue of his gaze. The sweep of his hand was too sharp, making Quinn flinch as he gestured at the plates and bowls scattered over the green grass and a woven blanket. "They need to eat and it's already here and ready."

"A picnic..." Voice shrill, her scoffing laugh a caw of disbelief, Quinn adjusted Elise's weight as she sent a blind hand back for Adam's. "I don't think so."

"You need sun, they need to play. I made sandwiches."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm trying, the least you can do is make an attempt," he muttered on a faint growl.

Sucking in a breath to snarl an obscenity at him, Quinn became distracted as Adam's hands snuck up the back of her skirt to paint her calves in slimy cold. With a squeal she jumped away, crashing into Tobias' chest when his arm came out to steady her.

"Mama dirty," Adam shouted, followed by a cackling laugh as he held up his muddy hands.

"Adam, we don't do that," Tobias said, any admonishment lost in the twitch of his lips as he tried not to laugh.

"It isn't funny," Quinn hissed at Tobias, turning back to Adam with a severity that had him ducking his head between his shoulders. "Say you're sorry."

"Sorry, Mama."

"Like you mean it."

"I sorry, Mama."

"Now get out of the mud. It's time to eat." Quinn shoved Tobias' arm away, huffing a sigh as she stomped her way up the lawn towards the patio where Meghan waited with wet towels.

Once everyone was clean and most of the way dry, Quinn helped the kids get to the serious business of eating the sandwiches Tobias had made. She still couldn't believe he'd done all of this. For a man she'd never seen step foot into the extravagant kitchen he owned, it was odd seeing the simple meal laid out with such precision. Even after the kids got hold of the plates and tipped everything over. Elise found the mustard fascinating while Adam had a very angry discussion with Tobias about the horror of the pears he'd provided.

Quinn nibbled at a piece of bread and an apple slice, and even Adam didn't say a word about how little she was eating. Tobias kept sneaking little glances at her, the ghost of a smile on his lips whenever he turned his attention from his children to her.

There was no denying his love for them. She'd never known an Alpha to be so involved with his offspring, spending time talking and playing with them. He even snatched a fresh towel from Meghan's hands, wiping away the bright golden smears Elise painted all over her cheeks and neck.

Now, while Quinn stretched in the sunshine and basked in the warmth of the day, he held Elise in his lap as he taught them a game of patty-cake. She would have laughed outright if he hadn't been so serious about it, approaching the simple game as if it was a business transaction.

Quinn might have snickered a little when Elise drooled all over his fingers though.

"You look better," Tobias said, quiet as a whisper as Adam led Elise around the yard, onto a new game now that they were bored with his.

Quinn made a noncommittal sound, shading her eyes as she kept an eye on the toddling pair. The little food she'd eaten was remaining right where she put it, but she still felt sick. A bitter burn in the back of her throat that threatened but didn't appear to want to send her running for the bathroom.

At least not yet.

"Why don't we go inside, get you back in bed. You should try to get some more rest."

While not quite a demand, his tone brooked no argument as Tobias climbed to his feet, reaching a hand down to help Quinn. A dismissive wave pushed him away, Quinn leaning forward with a wry twist of her lips as Adam started leading Elise straight for the mud puddle he'd found earlier.

"Quinn—"

"I'm fine," Quinn said, waving away Tobias' buzzing irritation, an annoying fly of insistence. "Adam, don't let her get in the mud!"

"Let Meghan handle them."

"Adam! What did I just say?" Quinn huffed out a heavy sigh as she clambered to her feet, trotting down to where Adam crouched at the puddle. Not to be left out, Elise followed right alongside him, her chubby hands squishing through the muck as she squealed with laughter.

Grabbing Elise around the middle, Quinn lifted her up to a hip, an annoyed growl slipping over her lips as cold, black mud smeared over her chest and stomach. Sending a glance heavenward as the shirt became ruined, she reached down and took Adam by the arm to haul him to his feet.

"No," Adam whined, letting his legs drop out from under him. "Want to play!"

"Come here, little bird."

Quinn caught herself turning, one foot moving forward. Taking her towards him before she realized what she was doing. The hard pull of the bond was there, tugging at her limbs, demanding that she go to him. To obey his order and tuck herself close in his shadow.

Pale grays widened, fixing on the man who didn't even have the grace to look contrite. His chin canted, the smallest recognition of what he'd done. Not an ounce of remorse, not even the hint of an apology in the darkness of his gaze. Hand outstretched, Tobias flicked his fingers to beckon her to him.

Mouth falling open at his audacity, Quinn stared for a long moment, gaze drifting between Tobias' hand and face. She turned back to Adam and grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet. Dragging his squirming body against her side, she lifted him. There was no saving her shirt now, the skirt plastered to her hip and thigh where grimy water dripped from his pants. She didn't give a damn.

Baring her teeth at Tobias, she stormed up the lawn. Dodging his reaching hand as she scurried past him, she would have bowled Meghan over had the other woman not hurried out of her way. Mouth set in a grim line, Quinn hushed Adam's shrieking denials and calls for his daddy.

"Quinn! Come back here right now."

Steps trying to falter, to turn her right around and heed the demand that wrenched at her entire body, Quinn growled over her shoulder at Tobias. Hitching the kids higher, feet landing hard on every step, she raced upstairs.

Trying to outrun the call. To distance herself from the crushing weight of his demand.

Adam stopped his protests, taking notice of the tension crackling through Quinn as she shouldered her way into the nursery and the attached bath. Adrenaline pulsing in her veins, she set them down and turned the water on with shaky hands.

"Mama?" Adam peered up at her with his hazel eyes huge and worried in the roundness of his chubby face. Lower lip a bleak shelf, he collided with Quinn's legs, wrapping tight around her thighs as he pressed his face hard into the wet fabric. "Sorry, Mama. No cry!"

"I'm okay. It's not your fault, baby," Quinn said, though she was anything but. Salty tracks running rampant down her cheeks, breaths hiccupping in strangled sobs, she tugged at Adam's shirt. Helping him undress, she tried to keep focused on the individual acts, on the tiny moments that would see her back to somewhere solid though her emotions and thoughts shrieked in wild disarray.

Collapsing to the hard tile on her knees, she dragged both kids into her arms. Hugging them tight as she buried her nose in their soft hair and breathed them in. Powdery and soft and not a little stinky, she pressed a trembling kiss to their cheeks before she cut the water off and helped Adam into the tub.

The water became cloudy and gray within seconds, but Elise needed to go in, too. Tugging at little pink leggings and the long-sleeved shirt, she babbled at Quinn until she was stripped and plunked down into the water to play with her rubber ducky.

Adrenaline fading, she was crashing hard. What little energy she might have stored up depleted with her recklessness. Running around the house, hauling both kids, it took too much out of her. Soaping up Adam's chubby leg, her arms shook with the effort just to hold his heel aloft. Sagging over

the edge of the tub, her panting breaths feathered the crackling bubbles across the water.

“Miss Quinn?”

“What do you want?” Voice far sharper than she had intended, Quinn grimaced. Being caught unawares grated her raw nerves, but it wasn’t Meghan’s fault that she’d been too wrapped up in not dunking Adam to pay attention.

“I came to help,” Meghan murmured as she shuffled further into the room.

Quinn dragged a breath in through her nose to calm the ragged strain as much as anything else. Then she felt it. The steady hum of him, growing warmer and more brilliant the longer she concentrated on it. She could sense Tobias hovering nearby, waiting for his moment. The second she gave the kids over to Meghan, he would come in and snatch her up.

Pretending to consider, she scrubbed Adam’s other leg. Quinn sucked her teeth and sat back on her heels, working Adam’s hair up into rough spikes as he and Elise talked to each other, heedless of the fury writhing inside her. She’d never been so carefree, so guileless and unhindered.

She envied them that. Was so happy that they didn’t know to lie and cheat and steal that it hurt.

Quinn flashed a brief smile at Elise when sparkling green eyes turned towards her. Holding the soapy washcloth out to Meghan, Quinn gripped the side of the tub preparing to stand.

He was there. Drawing closer.

Shoving off of the tub, Quinn was on her feet and out the door into the nursery before he could come any nearer. Hoping that she wouldn’t scare the kids, that he wouldn’t make her scream and cry, she stalked right up to the source of all her outrage. Standing toe to toe with the so much larger Alpha, she craned her neck back to glare at Tobias.

“Don’t you dare do that to me again. Not in front of them,” Quinn hissed. There was something in those words, a wealth of emotion and a power she’d never felt. She shoved it at him, an unwieldy weapon that whirled until it struck home.

Tobias stumbled back a step, surprise flitting across his face in slack wonder before he firmed his stance. Taking hold of her elbow and leaning close, he kept his voice a near silent growl. “Then listen to me when I tell you to do something.”

“You don’t know me, don’t know what I’m capable of, so don’t you dare pretend you know what’s best for me!”

“You’re exhausted and—”

“I’ve been exhausted and miserable for fucking weeks, and you will *not* take time with them away from me anymore, do you hear me? A mother needs to be there for her children, and I’ll be damned if you take me away from them for one second more.”

“And what will you do when you push yourself too far because you—”

“Then it’s my own stupid mistake and I’ll learn.”

They stared at one another from inches away, Quinn’s teeth bared as his cold gaze held hers captive. Neither willing to give way, each firm in their decision, it was just another stalemate that simmered and boiled, waiting to explode and drown them all.

“Let Meghan get them down for their nap and you rest after their bath is done then.”

Voice so bland Quinn didn’t recognize it at first, she blinked up at him in a confused muddle before she realized what he’d said.

“You’re weak as water, Quinn. You need to sleep, and if you’re not going to allow a doctor to see you now, you’re going to give me that much.”

The bond jittered away in her chest, a live wire dancing across wet asphalt as they continued to stare at each other. Wanting to argue, to use this newfound power over him was tempting, but she knew it’d hurt her more than him. She was shaking she was so wrung out, head throbbing, every muscle rigid. Taking in a steadyng breath, she gave a small nod.

Before he could take advantage of his small victory, Quinn turned on her heel and went back to the small bathroom. Smiling at her children as she nudged Meghan out of the way and went to her knees beside the tub, she ignored his lingering presence altogether.

Let him hover and watch. She was going to scrub the dirt from under her little girl’s nails and give Adam a soapy mohawk just to see them grin. As she did just that, their giggles and squeals of delight loosened something inside of her. A peace suffused her, stealing her breath and making her eyes burn with peculiar tears while she rinsed Elise’s hair with care.

She had no memory of a moment resembling this sort of serenity. No matter that her reserves were depleted still or that each scrub of the washcloth over Adam’s grimy skin made her shoulder creak and arm tremble. She was near tranquil.

It ended too soon as she wiped the last of the water from Elise's chubby cheeks and helped Adam into a fresh shirt. Having to give way to Meghan's fussing, Quinn stood back as she lifted the heavy kids into their cribs before Quinn could swoop in to tuck them under blankets and kisses. Her quiet purrs and murmured lullabies sent them drifting into wide yawns and sleepy mumbles.

No matter how much she didn't want to admit that Tobias was right, she couldn't deny that she needed to sleep. Forcing herself to stay awake while even the kids napped would just make her weaker. Quinn knew that, but still the urge to fight against the leaden weight of her eyes was a simmering heat that clawed up her spine and shimmered under her skin.

Knowing what would be best and doing it were two different things.

Forcing her back straight, each step proud and unwilling to show even the hint of weakness, she left the nursery. The vague idea of a plan drifting closer to fruition, she attempted a silent stalk past the rows of doors to the staircase. There was no need to alert anyone to move through what was, by the thinnest technicality, her own home.

Quinn screamed as an iron tight grip encircled her upper arm, pulling her back towards the shadowy recess of the door. Another hand slipped over her mouth, silencing the shrill sound before it was much more than a loud squeak.

"We had a deal, little bird," Tobias said through a low growl at her ear. Pulling her against his body, enfolding her in a cage of muscle and intent, he dragged her backwards into the bedroom they shared.

Though his handling of her was rough, his touch was gentle in a paradoxical technique that had her disrobed with minimal fuss and not a single moment for Quinn to struggle and hurt herself in the twisted fabric.

Mouth working, she dredged up a scant morsel of indignation and readied to hurl it at him, but even that was snuffed out as Tobias lifted her. Legs wrapped around his waist, heavy hand pushing her face to his neck, he stalked through the room with a furious purpose that lit her skin on fire.

Smoky aggression coated her throat as she was forced to breathe in his scent where it was thick and strong. Tobias' hands were hard, but not what she could call cruel as he shifted her weight to his hip as if she were a child.

It was then Quinn saw that he'd brought her to the bathroom, his heavy bulk balancing them as he reached in to crank the taps on. Water slamming

against the tiles was too loud in the tense silence, making her twitch away from the sound.

In another move that was nothing but disturbing in its oddness, Tobias began to purr, drowning out the thunder of the shower. The deep sound worked its way through her as he maneuvered Quinn that much tighter against him, soothing the sudden tension away while his hand worked to massage at the tightness of her neck. Not until even the shadow of her gasp was banished from the echoing room did he let her slide down the length of his body, keeping her close until her knees stopped wanting to fold under her weight.

Withdrawing, he kept a hand at her arm, ready to grab her if she even hinted at stumbling as Quinn stepped over the low threshold into the shower. Heading straight for the near scalding spray, she was drenched in moments. Head down, letting the water pelt at her neck and shoulders, Quinn squeezed her eyes shut. Ignoring him as best she could while he hovered at the still open door.

When he didn't come in behind her, she allowed herself a breath and then another.

Perhaps this tenuous ceasefire would go on and whatever had crackled through the air mere moments ago would fizzle out into nothingness.

Glancing through the steaming glass towards the open bathroom door, she found him standing there with her robe and fresh towels over one arm. Watching the rivulets of water tracing the contours of her body, the way it plastered her hair to her skull, he stared.

Luscious and wicked, images flooded her mind, snippets of thoughts dancing through her consciousness.

It was so much like before and yet so very different. She swore she could feel his hands on her as what he wanted to do, what he wished he could do, came on a charged torrent of images and sensations. Whole and present in the moment, Quinn gnawed at her lip as he moved ever closer. Heat rising in her cheeks, seeing it stain her chest from the corner of her eye, she knew she was blushing.

Burden tossed aside with a careless sweep of his arm, he came. The backs of his fingers skimmed down her arm as he took up position behind her to press against her back.

He was gone the second she stiffened, hand snatched back with a sound of confusion and anger.

“It’s not... I mean, I...” The problem was clear to her. Not drowning in his control, able to breathe past his warming scent and excitement, she wasn’t being forced to forget it all. Gone was the brilliant heat that demolished all memory of what came before it. It was better than it was before, she didn’t jump at every shadow, but he had never given her time. The wounds ran deep and festered long after the physical scars healed.

Shoulders hunching the longer he remained still and silent behind her, she waited. He’d expect it, demand it even, and she had to find some way. He’d given her something, this is what she would pay him back with. It was a coin she knew and understood. Taking a shuddering breath that fouled in the fear tight confines of her throat, she turned towards Tobias. Letting her shaky fingers settle along his hip, she fixed her gaze on the rise and fall of his chest.

“Stop.” Entwining their fingers, he pulled her hand to his chest and pressed it against the space where the bond clattered with her anxiety. Spreading her fingers wide, he held it over the expanse of skin so she could feel the slow, steady thump of his heart.

Waiting until her breathing evened out and the skittery tension dwindled, he reached for the soap. Touch careful, he began to wash her. Gentle as he smoothed the fluffy lavender scented bubbles over her skin, he purred when her movements became restless, nervous. He washed her long after she was scrubbed clean, using it as an excuse to touch, to caress, but not to demand. Quinn peered at him through lowered lashes, knowing the game he was playing and wondering how far he would take it. Whether waiting until she relaxed enough for him to take advantage or if he would give her this as well, she was surprised that she was enjoying the careful attention.

More than she was intrigued. Feeling his marvel in his gentle caresses, the heat of desire as he traced the contours of her. Not seeking out to get what he wanted, but just... enjoying her. The little trips and stumbles as he traced a deep scar or the thick ridges of a bite, the possessive need to wipe all of it away tight on the heels of a burst of anger and sorrow.

It was fascinating. Now the scowls and frowns were explained, the way his gaze would slide over her, seeing but not seeing.

Scrubbing at her scalp, working the lather through the tangled tresses, he smiled at her contented hum. This she liked best, no matter what else he did. The way he ran his fingers through the long length of her hair,

scratching just the right amount, massaging away even the thought of strain from her neck and shoulders. Slick fingers working against her.

“You are so very beautiful.”

Eyes snapping open, she gave a perturbed grunt at her moment of peace being trampled. Rolling her eyes at his slow smile, refusing to acknowledge the compliment, she turned her attention to the water pelting her back as she stepped under it.

“Not yet,” Tobias said, pulling her into his chest, and if there was the lilt of a question there, his firm expression didn’t allow it to be answered. He wasn’t a man to ask. He told and demanded, and people did as he wished.

Not today though, or so it would seem. Quinn huffed a sigh but nodded her head once. Let him wrap his arms around her without complaint and even dared to relax just a bit more into his heat. Pushing his rough hands up her spine, digging deep into the muscle until he cradled her head, Tobias began that incredible scrubbing against her scalp once more.

When she felt like warm putty that would ooze down the drain, that was when he stopped his ministrations. Guiding her under the still hot water, he rinsed the thick conditioner from her hair. His purr was utter satisfaction and had nothing to do with sex.

It continued when he helped her from the shower, leading her to stand in the middle of the room so he could buff her skin dry with a warm, thick towel. It grew louder still, the resonance deeper somehow, as he stood behind her with a brush to restore some order to the riot of curls drying into a fluffy mass.

He was trying so damned hard, being so fucking careful. Quinn understood it as he kept his movements slow, easy, making sure not to startle her out of the dreamy calm. A true peace, at least for the moment. All without him crushing her under his will and forcing her hand. Without breaking her to his demands.

Whatever this truce was, it was only a breath away from being destroyed. One misinterpreted move, one careless word, and it would be a return to the grinding battle.

As Tobias stood before her, naked and in an obvious state of arousal that Quinn knew she couldn’t answer, she decided. Filling her lungs to the point of bursting, she held it as she reached for his hand. She couldn’t help averting her gaze or the way her head tried to turn away in a blatant sign of submission, but she still managed to slide her fingers over his. Curling her

far smaller hand around the broadness of his palm, she dared to give him her back and a faint tug. Leading him into the bedroom and to her nest.

Swallowing hard, Quinn forced her hand to unclench from around his. Grimacing at the slick feel of clammy sweat coating her palm but determined nonetheless as she pressed her fingers to his chest. Uncertainty and a spark of hope raged between them, a silent storm that threatened to rip the entire moment into oblivion as Tobias sank back onto the bed.

Another calming breath saw her climbing up onto the huge mattress, crawling past him to the heavy drifts that surrounded her side of the bed. Though she was beginning to tremble, she turned back to him and met the charged green of his gaze for just a moment. Quinn knew what he wanted, could feel it winding through her veins in lazy pulses of searing heat. While some part of her, whether through the bond or routine alone, wanted to answer the green fire of his desire, she leaned over to arrange the blankets and sheets around them instead.

A low sound of strangled panic met his questioning fingers as they moved down the sensitive skin over her ribs. Quinn recoiled to curl up around herself, protecting the prickling patch of flesh. Counting the staccato of her heartbeat, the moment she could breathe she forced herself to unfurl. Stretching out alongside of him, she poked and prodded at the trunk like limbs of the Alpha whose confusion grew thicker and more agitated by the second.

Once positioned more or less in a way that suited her, Quinn heaved a sigh and collapsed into the bed. Tucked into his shadow, nose tight against his skin, she hauled the mass of blankets up over them both and yawned.

“Good night,” she mumbled, eyes drifting shut before the words had even finished slipping past her lips.

CHAPTER FIVE

Quinn burrowed deeper under a slab that was overbearing in its warmth yet somehow comforting. Drifting in that hazy space between dreams and reality, she made a gravel rough hum as she pulled more of that unbearable heat around her.

For the first time in recent memory, she didn't hurt. The nausea lingered, twisting her insides into complicated knots, but she could breathe for once. Something soft and mellow drifted through her senses, a shy breeze carrying the promise of fresh and beautiful things. At peace, she swallowed in the sensations and pushed away the tickling urge to open her eyes.

She needed just a few moments more before she saw what this day would bring and what awaited her.

"I've never seen that smile."

Breath leaving her in a rush, the sound was an irritated growl as Quinn flopped to her other side. The moment was ruined, the arms she'd wrapped herself in now shackles in the cage of his presence. Tobias didn't let her go far, but he did allow her to turn her back to him and put a bank of frigid cold between them. Suppressing the shiver that followed the loss of his heat, Quinn grabbed her abandoned pillow and gripped it tight to her chest. A downy shield to protect her from whatever would happen next.

"How do you feel," Tobias asked, quiet and calm in the face of her defensive posturing. Leaving that small yet impossible gap between them, his fingers ran a slow path down the length of her arm to her knuckles. Thumb brushing over the bony ridges, nothing more than the overwhelming aura of him invaded.

“Fine.” Response flat and lifeless, she felt anything but. Instead she readied herself for yet another battle, gritting her teeth until her jaw ached as she waited for his next move.

“All right.” He slid free of the tangle of their limbs and the bed sheets, ignoring the way Quinn’s head snapped to the side to stare in slack mouthed surprise. Scrubbing a rough hand through his hair as he went, Tobias padded into the bathroom. A nudge of his heel swung the door most of the way shut.

Quinn sat up, clutching the blankets to her throat as the sounds of him starting his day drifted through the cracked door. As the shower cranked on, she expected him to return and drag her from the warm cocoon that no longer felt comforting, but he didn’t appear.

Minutes passed with Quinn refusing to leave the imagined safety. Her hands worried at the rumpled bedding, fussing with a soft fold here, a fluffy valley made crisp and sharp as pale grays watched the cracked door.

As the distinct hum of his electric razor pierced through her resolve, Quinn slipped from the bed. A cautious thief on stolen time, she scurried on tiptoe to the closet with breath held. Half an ear listening for the man, Quinn rooted through drawers and hangers, grabbing the necessities to be gone long before he finished.

The bathroom door swung open, bright light cutting through the dimness to reveal Quinn bent over, wriggling her way into a pair of underwear. Deer in the headlights slow, her head turned to see his backlit form. Errant rivulets of water trailed down his chest and abdomen, soaking into the towel slung low on his hips that was a bare breath away from tumbling to the floor.

Heart lurching with something that Quinn refused to believe was anything but panic, she tipped her chin up to stare back at his bland gaze, each letting a single brow slide up to translate a wealth of emotions neither spoke of.

“It’s chilly out. You should wear something warmer,” Tobias said as he came out of the dense cloud of steam. Following the chilling tendrils of foggy air, he gestured at the room he’d vacated, spoiling Quinn’s plan to escape unnoticed. “All yours.”

Taking a breath to argue, Quinn realized she couldn’t. Not as if she could say that no, she didn’t want to brush her teeth or even pee without looking like a complete idiot. Tugging the light shirt over her head, body at

least somewhat hidden, she edged past him. Wary of some trick, it wasn't until the door was shut firm behind her that Quinn tried to relax a little.

An entire twenty minutes, give or take, where he hadn't pawed at her, hadn't grabbed her and made her go where he wanted.

She was confused, to say the least, but a glimmer of hope dared to rear its ugly head. That somehow this could change, be something different, grew from a faint spark to a steady flame, warming her through as she sidled up to the sink.

The unease dissipated like the condensation on the mirror while Quinn brushed her teeth. By the time she finished, there was a lightness to her step. Something she hadn't known in so long that it felt alien and wondrous. Breezing her way back into the bedroom, she tripped over turbulent air as she came face to face with Tobias perched on the end of the bed. Head tipped to the side, he watched her. The hard lines of his features were neutral, and his gaze remained unfathomable. Everything about his body was unreadable.

Yet under the rapid time of her own thumping heartbeat was his.

It was not quiet or steady. It tripped and fumbled, racing along as his nose flared on a long inhale. Taking her scent in from feet away, it was somehow as intimate as if he spread her to sniff where she grew hot and slick.

Clearing her throat hard as heat seared the tips of her ears, Quinn fumbled with the clothing she'd left laid out on the bed. The skirt and socks twisted and tangled as she dragged them on, all the while a predator's deep green gaze focused only on her.

"You need something warmer." Disappearing into the closet, Tobias returned with a fluffy, delicate sweater dangling from two fingers.

"How do you know? Manage to sneak outside and take some weather readings, Mr. Meteorologist?"

Instead of taking the bait, Tobias wagged his cellphone at her with something close to a smirk tugging at his lips. He knew the reason for her ruffled feathers, why she lashed out with bared claws hidden behind the jagged snark. The deep green of his eyes was warming, becoming a conflagration that did little to settle Quinn's frayed nerves.

There was no use trying to pick apart the threads of whose thoughts belonged where. A steady breath filled her lungs with air saturated in his scent as Quinn eased the sweater from his fingers. Refusing to show

anymore discomfort, she slid the decadent softness over her head and tugged the hem into place.

Marching past him, she waited for some show of force and dominance to restore order to his little world. The delicate touch of his fingers over the back of her hand were not expected. At all. It surprised her enough to stop as the rough calluses of his fingertips mapped the small bones of her wrist, tickling the sensitive skin where her pulse raced in a maddening response.

“Will you try to eat breakfast with us?”

“Yes.”

“No argument for that one?”

“I don’t have a choice,” Quinn said with a snort, eyes rolling towards the ceiling as his chest rose in an unmistakable show of alpha satisfaction. That wouldn’t do at all. Smile saccharine as her chin cut to the side, batting her lashes at him with the syrupy sweet voice once employed on Wicked’s floors, she brought him down a peg. “Adam throws a fit if I don’t at least pretend I’m eating. Elise is still following his lead.”

“He’s most interested in his mother’s wellbeing.”

Smooth as silk, his voice didn’t hint at the turbulent rumble of emotion that shot through her senses. A flash of jealousy that anyone would supersede his request, with guilt darkening its heels that he would be threatened by his own son. Yet he was jealous of the love and attention she showered Adam in and never showed even a hint of to him. Not unless he forced it, made her his little willing doll.

Now it was his turn to clear his throat, aware that far more than he intended passed between them. This thing joining them was strangled down to a trickle, but it remained as wide open as any raging river to two people rather uncomfortable with the idea of sharing anything. Two poker players sitting in a mirrored room, it seemed they had no choice.

Turning away, Quinn made it all the way to the stairs before she realized he was beside her. Not just that, but her hand was curled within Tobias’ bulky mitt of a palm, fingers threaded through his. A hint of the sensations that had followed her into wakefulness seemed to coalesce between them, and the longer she held on to him, the warmer her skin became until Quinn felt flush and giddy.

It wasn’t just her either.

His smile was small, but it didn’t smack of male satisfaction or an Alpha’s ego. It was sheer enjoyment, the set of his shoulders as loose and

easy as she had ever seen them as he turned sideways to squeeze through the first doorway alongside her. Refusing to let her go, to stop whatever this was.

By the time they reached the dining room, Quinn was bewildered with this turn of events. Distracted, she brushed kisses against the sleep rumpled mops of tawny brown and pale blonde, nuzzling her children to breathe in their perfect scents. Powder soft and clean, still warm from their beds, she wanted to scoop them both up and cuddle them.

Tobias watching her with a serenity and unabashed joy made her rethink it. It was all wrong, this sudden peace, but... she was enjoying it.

As his focus became more distracted once Curtis crouched beside him, their murmuring voices unable to be deciphered under the excited talk of the kids, Quinn became aware of a chill slipping between them. It grew in measured pulses, dampening the warmth that had oozed through her veins until, riddled with ice and limned in frosty indignation, she thought she had an idea of what happened.

Up to his old tricks, the bastard must have tempered his control. He had to have known she'd fight tooth and nail if he tried to drown her in it and had instead let it trickle over her until it became a flood she would not resist against.

"Mama, eat!"

"Adam, I have had enough of this," Quinn snapped, jerking the plastic cup from his hand before it could slap against the polished wood of the table. Instant regret twined with misplaced anger as tears welled in his deep hazel eyes. Ignoring the stares from the others, she took a faltering breath. "I'm helping Elise right now. Please don't do that."

"He's just worried about—"

"I know what he is, Meghan, but he doesn't need to shout and slam things around," Quinn said, straining for calm as she felt Tobias' gaze slide over her. Leaving a slimy trail in its wake, she was hard pressed not to wipe at her skin to be rid of the sensation.

"You shouldn't take things out on him is all," Meghan whispered to her plate, fork and knife trembling over the food piled high.

Quinn sucked in air, but she was too late. Tobias was already leaning over the table, hands clasped in a terrifying display of casual restraint. Quinn felt the rush of an enraged Alpha's presence like a blast furnace, while he remained impassive to all but her. Even Curtis, close enough he

should be able to scent the underlying aggression, to see a telltale twitch of muscle, gave no indication he sensed anything was amiss.

“I think that will be all for now, Meghan. Perhaps you would like to take the morning.” Tone severe and giving no room for argument, he dismissed Meghan with ease. He didn’t even wait for a response, leaning back in his chair and turning to Curtis with a raised brow of inquiry. Their near silent conversation resumed as if it had never been interrupted.

“I think that would... be good, yes.” Meghan rose, head bowed as she straightened her shirt in a nervous fit of fumbling. “I’m sorry, Miss Quinn.”

Gone before Quinn could even think to reply, she found herself face to face with two children that she now had to feed, clean, and keep entertained all on her own. Something she hadn’t had to do since this all began. A hand on each head, Quinn’s mouth hung slack for a moment as she stared at Meghan’s retreating back before turning to Tobias who remained engrossed in his conversation.

The comment had hurt, yes, but there was truth to it. It wasn’t enough to send the woman away, abandoning Quinn to a level of responsibility she wasn’t sure she was capable of without someone melting down. There was nothing for it now as Meghan turned the corner and disappeared.

“Okay,” Quinn said in a hard exhale, the rush of breath feathering Adam’s fine hair. Handing his cup back, she grabbed her fork and dissected his food into bite-sized pieces. Once she had him eating again, she turned to Elise and gaped.

Tobias sat close to Elise’s highchair, helping her chubby hand hold the bright green spoon to bring oatmeal to her wide open mouth. Giggling and smacking her lips after each bite, she wielded a stick of French toast in the other hand. Offering it to Tobias, Elise cackled as he opened his mouth as wide as she had and pretended that he would take her fist and all.

“Daddy’s silly,” Adam said before spooning eggs into his mouth with far more care than his sister showed.

“Yes, he is,” Quinn murmured while the massive Alpha mouthed Elise’s chubby cheek much as Quinn often did. Snuffling at the little girl’s neck, he made her squeal with laughter before he got her engrossed in eating all of her oatmeal, a feat that was not often accomplished.

There. It was happening again, that delicate softness infusing her as she watched him and their daughter. Riffling through her thoughts, the sensations, all of these emotions, she couldn’t pick out the thread. Gone was

the icy venom, but at what point had he begun his game again? She'd been watching for it, waiting, and no Alpha had such control to get past a wary Omega.

“Sir, we really—”

“I think you should take care of it,” Tobias said over Curtis, not turning away from where his daughter tried to dunk something less than her fist into the smear of syrup decorating her plate. “I have other business to attend.”

“Mama,” Adam said, dragging Quinn's attention away from the spectacle before her.

“Yeah, sweetie?”

“You eat, too.” A sniffle added the knife to his sorrowful pout, stabbing straight into her heart.

“Okay, Adam. I'll try.”

Quinn tried. It wasn't as bad as it often was, but it was by no means wonderful. The fact her stomach didn't reject the cautious bites as soon as she swallowed them was a God's send, but only just. At least the coffee she sipped at didn't taste putrid, a hint of the dark roast bursting across her tongue before it became oily and bitter.

Not until everyone had eaten and she fetched wet wipes to clean the messy kids up did things go so very wrong again.

Hauling Adam from his booster, she felt the twisted churning that signaled the end of her reprieve. Trying to get a squirming toddler to the floor without dropping him while quelling the urge to vomit was a feat, but somehow she managed. A gentle nudge to Adam's head, guiding him towards Tobias was all she could afford before she sprinted down the hall.

There were no dark guards this time, no strange floors slipping sideways out from under her slapping feet. Hunched over the toilet, she was able to hide this particular humiliation and pain this time, or so she thought.

Tobias slipped in behind her, crouching so that his body cradled her while he smoothed her hair back into a loose tail. Quinn's plea for him to go, to leave her alone in that moment was lost under another strangled retch that had her rising to her knees with its force. Doubled over with the wrenching pain exploding through her midsection, Quinn had a fleeting moment of gratefulness that he held her steady. He remained the entire time her body purged itself, purring to soothe the pained sobs that slipped out between her desperate sounds.

When it was finished, Tobias picked her up. Cradling her with ease, he held her steady as she rinsed her mouth and splashed the cold water over her face. He murmured something wordless at her ear, solicitous hands pushing Quinn to bend over the sink so that he could rinse the strands of her hair that had not been caught in time.

“Fuck,” Quinn groaned, cheek pressed against the cool stone of the sink as his fingers worked the tacky mess free.

“I’m going to call the doctor.”

“You said—”

“This can’t continue, and I doubt that you want it to.”

“You said no more doctors.”

“All I’m asking for is to let him help you,” Tobias said through a growl that rumbled with the first hints of his rage. Not simple irritation at her defiance, but something more. Something that felt helpless and protective, that buffeted her senses with things she’d never known from anyone, let alone a man like him. “There has to be something he can do to stop this until the drugs leave your system.”

“You didn’t ask.”

Lush lips parted before his mouth snapped shut with a loud click of his teeth. Staring hard at her in the mirror, Tobias eased her upright until Quinn met his glower head on with narrowed grays challenging.

“Will you please let the doctor come and give you something?” It ground out of his throat, a menacing request that sounded more like a threat.

Quinn was shocked that it had worked at all.

“For that. Nothing else.” Quinn’s fingers flicked toward the toilet, unwilling to do anything more to acknowledge that particular agony. She startled, shoving at his bulk to get past and out the door as panic swept through on a bitter wind. “Gods, what did you do with the kids?”

Tobias caught her, spinning her in a lazy circle until Quinn came flush with his chest. Arms heavy as they banded around shoulders and hips, he kept her tucked against his heat so that he could set his chin atop her crown.

“Curtis—”

“You did not leave my children alone with him!”

“Fetched Meghan to watch over *our* children before I came to you,” Tobias said, arms tightening by degrees until Quinn’s weight left the floor, the strangled gasps of her breaths loud in the small bathroom. “Now you’re going to go rest while I call the doctor.”

There was nothing she could do or say as Tobias dragged her to the sitting room adjoining his office. He ignored her complaints and snarling, handling her attempts to squirm free as if they were nothing more than a minor nuisance. Tumbled into the couch, a heavy plaid blanket tucked tight over her lap, he growled a warning for her to remain right where he put her.

If Quinn thought he would leave her to escape, she was wrong.

Pacing to the bookshelf lining the opposite wall, he slipped the cellphone free of his pocket. A flash of index and thumb and the device was to his ear. Before Quinn could grasp that the damned doctor was on speed dial, Tobias was speaking in low tones to whoever was on the other end.

“You’ll need to do better than that,” he said with a curl of his lip, a sure sign of irritation.

Quinn shouldn’t have tried to stand then, but the crackling energy racing down her spine demanded movement. To work out the frenetic energy that seemed to be passing from his emotions through her every cell. Rising, she let the blanket tumble from her lap, three swift steps taking her to the windows that overlooked the garden.

Perhaps he thought she would try for the elegant French doors leading outside or that she had some other plan in mind. Whatever it was, Quinn found herself hauled back into his body with a trunk of an arm at her waist. Squirming for space to breathe brought his other hand to her throat. Fingers able to crush without a thought covered the delicate column, holding Quinn still as if he’d shoved a pin through her breastbone.

“Just get here,” Tobias bit out into the phone before tossing it away.

The momentary freedom brought frigid air tainted with aggression and a hint of fear into Quinn’s lungs. Stiff in his unforgiving embrace, the mental war to bank the tirade of thoughts and emotions pouring from him was a losing battle.

“You agreed to let him help you feel better.”

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” Quinn said in a hiss, dripping with venom at the way the protective gruffness of his voice made something inside her melt and run in gooey strands. “Maybe if you could control yourself...”

“Maybe if you weren’t still fighting me at every damn turn,” he said, the trembling menace a blustering front to the worry that twisted through him and into her heart. Jagged and cruel, it tore at her as he pressed a snarl against her throat.

They stood like that long after the flare of tempers subsided. Quinn pretended to stare out at the lawn, sightless in her aloof disdain of his attention. All the while something hot and messy twisted away inside of her that had nothing to do with the nausea that etched the back of her throat each time her attention spun away to somewhere soft and dreamy. Hands that had gripped and pinched now cradled and caressed, tiny movements that sought some reaction that Quinn couldn't understand. He didn't want her kneeling at his feet, didn't want her spread open and riding his cock.

She was adrift, uncertain as to what the hell he wanted of her as his eyes closed and he nuzzled her throat like a child seeking comfort.

“Sir, the doctor is here,” Curtis said around the cracked door, giving Tobias time to disentangle himself from Quinn and seat her back on the couch.

An endless gulf of space put between them doing nothing to stop the disturbing litany of sensations, Tobias gestured for Curtis to show the man in.

Except it wasn't a man.

A lithe young woman clothed in a tasteful navy pantsuit and an air of efficient competence strode into the room as if she was the final word before the Gods themselves. A flick of her elvish chin sent a stray lock of thick auburn hair off of an eye the stormy shade of dove feathers. The aloofness of that gaze took in the room's occupants, showing not a hint of care to Tobias' far larger body and the beginning of aggressive posturing before the doctor marched towards Quinn.

“Doctor Darrah Annan,” she said with an outthrust hand in Quinn's face. The low, husky voice was a surprise from a woman not much larger than Quinn, but less so than the way she approached a mated Omega as if there were no threat from the Alpha now looming behind her.

On reflex alone, Quinn grasped Dr. Annan's hand, a swift up and down all the motion that was spared for propriety before the doctor took a seat near Quinn.

“I understand you've had quite a bit of nausea, Mrs. Kahler,” Dr. Annan said as she popped open a large black case, a stethoscope drawn out of the shadowy depths. “Is there a chance of pregnancy yet?”

Quinn sat dumbstruck. Not only was Dr. Annan ignoring Tobias, but she was addressing Quinn. Not just as some wealthy patient, but as if she was a human being.

Not to mention it was the first time someone had addressed her as Tobias' mate. It was strange to hear. Even stranger that the honorific was given instead of some version of a pronoun to voice his ownership of her, if she'd been named at all. Breath leaving her in a silent rush, she stared back at Dr. Annan.

"No, there is not," Tobias answered, his presence crowding along Quinn's side as a heavy hand dropped to her shoulder.

Whether it was to comfort her or to give a show of strength against the accusation, it grounded her.

"What other symptoms are there, Mrs. Kahler?"

"I've told you what her—"

"And I am saying that she knows her body and can tell me what else might be wrong, Mr. Kahler," Dr. Annan said as she popped the stethoscope around her neck. "I do not doubt your knowledge, sir, but if you wanted a concierge doctor who would write a prescription and leave, I'm afraid I'm not that person. I was given to understand you wanted me due to my reputation of being thorough."

"I'm always tired," Quinn blurted into the thundering silence before it could explode around her. "Not just tired, but exhausted. I sleep for hours and I lose my strength with the smallest amount of effort. A few minutes with the kids, and I have to go back to bed."

A tight line formed between russet brows as Dr. Annan scribbled on a pad. A jerk of her chin prompted Quinn to continue though she didn't look up from the tight packed scrawl.

"I can't keep anything down for more than an hour at best," Quinn murmured, a tumble of her shoulder pulling away from the burrowing tips of Tobias' fingers. Had he not known? "I throw up. A lot."

"And this is only when you eat?"

"No, all the time. It's just worse when I do."

"Have you noticed any dizziness, inability to control your movements?"

"What do you mean?"

Dr. Annan glanced up from her notepad, eyebrows rising a fraction before settling back into a hard line. "Such as stumbling, falling. Unexplained twitching. Dizzy is self-explanatory."

"Yeah, I'm aware of what dizzy means." Quinn sniffed, an act of derision she followed with a plastered on sneer. Her usual desire to deride the person with the patronizing tone was missing, the caustic attitude

plummeting to the earth amid a fiery spray of concern while Quinn tried to think. “I’ve fallen before, but nothing like twitching. It’s hard to get up or move, but when I’m that tired… Well, it seems logical. Dizzy, absolutely.”

“And this happens all day, every day?” Now Dr. Annan’s eyes couldn’t be described as anything as soft as a feather. Steely and cold, she inspected Quinn’s face as if it told her a wealth of information Quinn didn’t even know was present.

“Yes. It’s gotten a little better since…”

“Since…?”

“Since I...” Quinn exhaled hard, pale grays swirling up to meet Tobias’ for the briefest moment. Unsure of what made her do it, or why her hand settled atop his gentled touch that now cradled her shoulder, Quinn leaned into his heat as she turned to Annan. “Since I stopped the fertility drugs.”

“I want to run blood tests. At the very least, a general panel to check a few things out. I can give you something for the nausea for now until we sort out what is going on. I understand your primary doctors believe you’re sensitive to the fertility cocktail, but this is aggressive even for that.”

Despite the bland, perfunctory tone, Dr. Annan’s voice was downright serrated as she turned back to her pad to finish scribbling more notes.

A prescription pad slapped against stylish slacks, the medication’s name a hopeless blur of loops and jagged lines that culminated in the doctor’s signature. Once the piece of paper was ensconced in Tobias’ hand, Dr. Annan began an actual examination. The stethoscope was freezing, but Quinn breathed in and out as directed. Blood pressure, eyes, ears, everything was checked as Quinn had become accustomed to in the sterile, frozen fields of the hospital wastelands.

The real problem didn’t start until Dr. Annan pushed Quinn’s sweater up to draw the precious blood from her veins.

Dusky purple and indigo patterned Quinn’s arm, the thick bands and mottled circular shapes leaving no question as to whose hand had inflicted the wounds. Quinn thought nothing of it, the passive abuse of Alphas not knowing their strength so ingrained that she was surprised when Dr. Annan stiffened and ran a finger over the multitude of hues.

“Do you always bruise this badly?”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“This is… extensive,” Dr. Annan murmured, voice tense as she pulled the strap tight over Quinn’s bicep and prodded at the veins that jumped into

stark relief.

“What are you implying doctor?” Tobias spoke for the first time in an age, dark shadow slipping over the bent woman as he neared.

“I’m *stating* that this bruising is considerable, Mr. Kahler.” The needle slid into Quinn’s vein with practiced ease, the strap unwound as rich red began to spurt in slow pulses into the vial she’d connected.

“You’re saying far more than that, Beta.”

“No, Mr. Kahler, I am not.” Dr. Annan replaced the vial with another, this one filling faster as Quinn’s heart began to pound out a warning rhythm.

“How I treat my mate is no one’s business but mine.”

“So it is.” Dr. Annan removed a third and final vial, pressure applied to the small puncture with a thick cotton ball before she placed a band-aid over the wound.

“I believe your business is concluded here,” Tobias said, the reverberating thunder of his growl sending Dr. Annan back from Quinn when she might have pressed further.

“As you wish, Mr. Kahler.” Annan was not pleased with this turn, but her movements were just as smooth and swift as they had been when she unpacked her gadgets. When her bag was packed away, the vials safe in a hard sided kit, she turned to Tobias with a defiant chin. “Might I suggest you take some care with her person until I’m able to get the results back. This amount of bruising is not normal under the usual circumstances, and if you feel you haven’t—”

“Out!” He didn’t wait for Dr. Annan to move, grabbing her by the arm to haul her towards the door where Curtis appeared from thin air. Shoving the doctor out of the door, he slammed the heavy slab of wood in her face when she turned to say something more.

“How dare she suggest I beat you!”

Quinn ran her fingers over the bruises, contemplating them as she prodded at the tender spots. For an outsider, it must have been a surprise. More shocking for a Beta who maybe didn’t see such things day to day. Nodding her head side, to side, she presented the offending limb to Tobias. Let him see the dark, mottled bands and rounds, until he came to a stop and cradled her wrist to smooth a hot palm over them.

“Can you blame her?”

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CHAPTER SIX

“I would never hurt you, little bird.”

“I hate that, you know. And you do hurt me.”

“Not on purpose. I’ve never beat you for the sake of it,” he murmured as he went to a crouch, still holding her arm. Bowing over her hand, he placed a long kiss against a dark smear of purple.

“You’ve hit me before.” Quinn didn’t tug her arm back or protest his gentle mauling as he laid more slow presses of his lips against her skin. She studied him instead, watching his profile as he did it.

“I have not.” There was a warning there, his agitation still too close to be poked at. Fingers tightening around her wrist, he pulled her arm as he leaned in, forcing their faces close.

“You threw me when you came to my apartment. You slapped me when you came down to the warehouses to get me. You’ve hurt me in other ways.” They were old hurts, long scabbed over and left to leave a scar amid so many others. It had happened though, and for him to denounce it hurt far worse.

The deep pink of his tongue slid over his lips, tangling with her concentration so that pale grays zeroed in on the firm line of taut flesh. A momentary flash of heat, her pussy clenched over empty air with a lurid train of thoughts before she frowned and dragged her eyes back to his.

“I never thought you would fight me so hard,” he murmured, the richness of it flowing over her in sticky waves that clung to not just her sex, but places it had no right to touch. Her heart shouldn’t flutter at the hint of self-deprecating humor or the darkness of regret that teased at her senses.

“Is that supposed to be an apology?”

Before he could answer, Curtis returned. Stiff backed and ever derisive when it came to Quinn, he directed his attention to Tobias. Didn't even deign to glance at Quinn as he spoke of her as if she wasn't right there.

"The doctor advised filling the prescription as soon as possible. It should become effective within half an hour of her taking them, and that you should get her eating immediately. Dr. Annan said that should help with the fatigue. She also says to call her if any other symptoms appear or worsen in the next two to three days before she gets the results back."

Tobias stood, drawing up to his full height to look down at Quinn. It was an intimidating move, one she had seen a thousand times. Meant to make her feel small and too insignificant to matter. Sighing, she felt as if nothing at all had been accomplished despite their brief reprieve.

It would be the grind of an endless battle after all. At least she wouldn't be puking her guts out while it happened.

Leaning over her, Tobias slid his hands to her shoulders to pull her up from the couch. Pushing her before him, he crowded Curtis out of the doorway as he marched Quinn along the hall.

"Get the car, Curtis. I want Micah, Nicholas, and Stan with us."

Curtis opened his mouth to speak, one brow rising as his head tipped to the side. Lips drawing shut, he didn't voice the questions that no doubt plagued him. Ever the good soldier, he veered off from the main hall to collect the men and car at a brisk pace.

Quinn had no such compunctions about asking questions.

"How long do you think it'll take you? If I could eat lunch with the kids, maybe I could play with them a little afterward, too." More than half the morning was gone, but there would be a little time before they were put down for their naps. Adam was becoming less and less inclined to nod off with his sister and often tried to remain awake or woke far earlier. It would give Quinn so much more time with him.

"You're coming with me."

"What," Quinn squawked as his arm came to her lower back, pulling her up the stairs when she tried to balk.

"I'm going to need you to change."

Gruff tone edged in roiling fury, she flinched from the sound as much as the baleful glare that he leveled on her. Uncertain what was going on, where it had all gone wrong, she tried to pull free. Found herself hauled back against him, breath leaving her in a whoosh as she collided with the solid

mass of him. The press of his teeth to her shoulder offered no explanation or mercy, threatening to rip through cloth to get at the mangled scar of his mark.

“You put on something decent. Something warm.”

Gone in the next moment, Quinn whirled around to scowl at empty air that still reverberated with the sound of the door slamming shut behind him. By fractions her forehead smoothed, the line of her lips rising to a bewildered grimace. The thought was tempting enough. To go out in the world, to see other people and maybe even to speak with them. It tantalized as much as it terrified, her heartbeat beginning to race as the idea took hold and ran off in every direction it could.

Quinn found herself in the closet, riffling through the thick sweaters and slacks that would make even Dr. Annan proud. She should thank the Gods Tobias gave her more than skirts, despite his insistence she wear them daily around the house. The ease of access was beneficial here, but out there in the city, she doubted he would be so accommodating of the lines of her legs being revealed.

Wriggling into the pale linen pants, she dashed to the bathroom to brush her teeth. In a frenzy as her imagination went wild with thoughts of speaking with people she didn’t even know, she restored some order to her hair in a loose bun. Teeth brushed, water splashed on her face, she wrinkled her nose at the pasty quality of her skin. Tobias didn’t allow her cosmetics, saying he didn’t like the way she looked layered under all the powders and creams.

Jerking her shoulders in a shrug as she perched on the edge of the bed to pull on a pair of soft gray boots, she decided to hope that sun and food would bring some color back to her cheeks. Pale was fine enough during the winter months, but deathly pallid was not a shade she was fond of.

Grinning ear to ear in her excitement, she turned to the door as it swung open while tugging her sweater into place.

Tobias stood silent in the doorway, the evergreen of his gaze sweeping over her. Taking in every minute detail, judging and assessing every inch of her until Quinn began to shift her weight from side to side. Hands strangling one another at her waist, she looked down at herself in objective perusal.

The deep azure of the sweater brought out a blue tone in her eyes and complimented the paleness without making her look deathly. Delicate

cables did little to accentuate her chest but added a casual refinement that she rather liked. The linen slacks skimmed over her curves but didn't snug around her ass as she would have had them do. She could see nothing wrong with the whole of it, no matter what she tried to pick apart.

"I'll wear something else."

"It's... fine."

Too caught up in her worry he would change his mind, she didn't see him coming closer. Not until she was against his chest, feet dangling high above the ground as he stole her lips in a sudden assault. Invading her with ease, swamping her in the heat and depth of his arousal, Quinn whined low in her throat.

He released her before she could lose the thread of it all. Feet firm on the ground once more, Tobias slung his arm around her hips and guided her out. Escorting her down the stairs and through the foyer, he led her past armed men that fell into step behind them. Their shadowy figures followed to where the dark sedan waited in the chilly gray haze of late morning. She shivered, glad that he'd made her put on something warmer as the thick fog seeped under her collar to send a chill down her spine. Once Quinn and Tobias were ensconced in the warm leather and wood of the backseat, one guard piled his bulk into the driver's seat beside Curtis. The others moved on to cars at front and back.

"Bit much for a run to the drugstore, isn't it," Quinn murmured as Tobias pulled her in closer to his side.

"No." Curt and cool, he gave nothing away as he directed the Alpha guard on. The tension riddling his body transferred to hers, but it was everything else that Quinn drowned in.

The same excitement that paraded through her veins was in his, an eagerness so much at odds with his aloof demeanor she had a difficult time aligning the two. Intertwined with it all was a protectiveness that raged and howled, loathing even the very idea of someone else being near his mate.

It was enough to make her head spin and ache, fingers finding her temple to dig at the heavy pounding that scored the inside of her skull.

Noticing her puckered brows and the tight line of her lips, a low growl rumbled from Tobias' chest. "Are you feeling sick again? We'll turn around."

"No, please! I..." Gaze skittering towards the front of the vehicle, Quinn swallowed the words that wanted to pour forth. It was one thing to

speak her thoughts in front of Curtis, the Beta was no threat to an Alpha of Tobias' power and a trusted ally besides. The other guard was an unknown quantity, and she wouldn't risk belittling Tobias in front of him just for the sake of an argument that would see her locked back in the house anyhow. Instead she squirmed closer, petting at his chest.

Purr little more than a sigh, it was loud enough at least to have Tobias settle back into the charcoal leather. The tumultuous wave of his aggression tempered, letting her breathe and find some path back to her own thoughts. Arm snuggling her so tight she couldn't have moved away if she'd wanted to, she nuzzled his shoulder in gratitude.

To an outsider, she was just an Omega lavishing her Alpha with attention. For once, she didn't care what it looked like to them. He was giving her precious ground, letting her assert some degree of independence, no matter if it was on a level no one but they knew of. As he calmed even more, allowing her to peer out of the window at the thick banks of trees as they flew past, she smiled.

It took less time than she would have liked to arrive in the city.

It was strange how grimy and dark it all seemed. Streets littered with people and trash, the cement and steel buildings stared down from their lofty heights with sightless eyes full of indifference to the scurrying masses. Weary people clothed in years of toil and hardship trudged along the dingy concrete sidewalks, the same as they ever had.

Nothing had changed here. Alderbrook was the same beast it had always been. It was Quinn that had changed. Those streets, barren of kindness and mercy, had once meant freedom at the cost of everything else. Now they did little more than instill a knotted thread of fear that turned her stomach to leaden ice when the car hissed to a stop in front of a pharmacy whose brilliant red signage tried to light up the misty gloom of the day.

"We can stay here," Tobias murmured against her ear, fingers clenching over the shelf of her hip as he sought to warm that icy pit deep within her.

A brief shake of her head, a sudden denial of her hesitance made him sigh. More of a grumble, Tobias still rapped his knuckles against the seat which prompted Curtis to climb from the car. The men in the car ahead did the same, and Quinn caught the dark suits of more from the one behind them.

Amid so much fuss, it was difficult not to feel a little ridiculous as Tobias helped her from the backseat. Caging her in against his body, he

used the massive breadth of it to shield her from sight and imagined danger as he hustled her into the store. Down the aisles towards the sign indicating the pharmacy counter, two of the guards followed along with Curtis. The others remained at the front of the store to watch out for any dangers coming from that direction.

The pharmacist was wrinkled, the crepe paper quality of his balding pate transparent under the glare of the fluorescent lights as he sidled up to the counter. The rheumy blue of his gaze flicked from Quinn to Tobias, taking in the men behind them with a subtle sigh of long suffering.

“New prescription, sir?”

It wasn’t the first time Tobias had been here then. The scrap of paper came out of Tobias’ pocket, slapped down onto the counter and slid across where the pharmacist plucked it up into his knotted fingers. Squinting and mumbling, he angled the paper to read the illegible scrawl.

“Ah, yes. I can have that ready in about ten minutes.”

“You can have it ready now.”

“Yes, of course. Which will be about ten minutes, sir.” The sides of his face folded, wrinkles collapsing in on one another as the thin line of his lips pulled up into a smile. The perfect evenness of dentures presented themselves, a liver-spotted hand sweeping towards the racks of bottles behind him. “I have to count them out, sir. That will take a moment.”

“Just hurry it up, Wilcox.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Kahler.” Given a name, Wilcox went into his stacks, fingers trailing over labels and plastic to search for her new medication.

Quinn stood stiff against Tobias, pale grays skittering around in excitement. She inspected every end cap she could around the breadth of his shoulders, eyes rounding at the display of candies that taunted her from a few feet that might have been miles.

“Would you like one?”

His voice was so close and quiet, Quinn wondered if he had even spoken aloud or if she heard it inside of her in some freakish turn of the bond. Gnawing at her lower lip, a furious nod responded. Surprise flickered through her, a sudden jolt when Tobias led her away from the counter to the bank of bright wrappers and exorbitant claims.

Weight bouncing on her toes, she touched every bar and box she could reach. The delighted crinkle of the wrappers tempted her to take them all. Sliding one bar free of the shelf, Quinn turned her head aside and reached

for another. Movements slow, she snuck in plain sight. Fully aware he was indulging her, she pretended as the stack of chocolate bars and bags of candies were beginning to overflow her arms. Treats for the kids, one for Meghan, and several more for herself, she gasped as the large bag of gumdrops began to slip from her fingers.

A faded red basket appeared under her bounty, allowing her to dump the whole lot in. Curtis' brows knit as he inspected the contents, lips pressing into a pale line. No doubt thinking her stupid, the entire affair ridiculous, the rich brown of his gaze sought and found Quinn's.

Turning away from his disdain, shielding herself with Tobias' presence, something else caught her eye.

With a squeal she rushed forward, slipping out of the relaxed circle of Tobias' arms towards the aisle packed full of bright colors and cheap plastics.

“Stop!”

Shoulders lurching to her ears, she froze with hand outstretched towards the toy that demanded her attention. The command was a roar, violence spilling over to echo through the small store. Despite not having moved an inch more, Quinn saw she was boxed in. The guards from the front of the store now blocked the end of the aisle, Curtis taking up position on the other as Tobias stormed towards her. Fists encasing her upper arms, he put their faces close to breathe his rage into her shocked expression.

“What do you think you are doing?” Punctuating the question with a hard shake, he rattled her brains loose and strained her neck before shoving Quinn against his chest. Arm clamped at her back, he turned them towards the door, her moment of true freedom gone before she could even taste it.

“Get the bubble blower gun,” she squeaked, wriggling an arm free to point at the cheap toy. “Elise would like it and I think Adam can work it. The green one. They both like green.”

“The...?”

“The bubble blower. You put the stuff in, and it blows bubbles. Oh! And batteries. If it doesn't work as soon as I take it out of the package, Adam will freak out on me.”

“You...”

Quinn tipped her head back as far as she could, still not quite able to see all of Tobias' face. Single brow making a slow journey north, she curled the fingers of her free hand into his thick coat. “I... think the kids would like it,

and it's not some dumb educational toy you and Meghan keep insisting they need. They're babies, they want to pop soap bubbles not learn Mozart or whatever."

"There's nothing wrong with them learning Mozart." Tobias sighed, hiding the sound in the length of her hair as he turned them around and hauled her back to the pharmacy counter. "You make it exceptionally difficult to take you places. Don't do that again, little bird."

"Where was I going to go?"

"That's not the point."

"Here you are, Mr. Kahler," Wilcox said as he came up to the counter with a white paper bag emblazoned with the shop's name. The strain in his smile didn't let on the anxiety tainting the air at Tobias' display.

"How much?"

"Oh, sir, I couldn't—"

"How much?" One arm reaching back, Tobias took the basket from Curtis to set it on the counter before them.

Quinn's lips split in a sunny smile as she saw the waxy green plastic, extra bubbles, and a pack of batteries amid her collection of candy. As Wilcox rang up the purchases, Quinn snuck a hand into the crackling bag in order to retrieve a chocolate and peanut butter confection.

"Wait until later." Tobias tugged the packet free of her grip, tumbling it back into the bag. Arm crossing over her chest, he held her hip to keep Quinn confined. Attention on the pharmacist once more, Tobias dared a smile.

"Well, then," Wilcox said, weight shifting back and forth before he splayed his hands atop the counter. Gaze fixed square upon the Alpha before him, the corners of his lips fled south. "I don't mean to cause trouble, Mr. Kahler, but that kid and his hoodlum friends have been coming around again. They busted out the plate glass on the front windows there."

"When did that happen?"

Quinn shrank from the icy wave of his tone. Arm tightening, Tobias locked her against his body as he drew up to his full height. Shoulders broadening as his chest expanded, danger loomed on a too close horizon.

"Going on a couple weeks, sir."

"You didn't tell Jones about this when he came through."

"Happened after, sir. That night, matter of fact."

“Stan and Ross will stay behind and help. They’ll get this sorted out for you once and for all.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kahler, sir.”

Wilcox didn’t look relieved so much as resigned. He knew what would happen to this kid and his friends just as much as Quinn did. Anything Tobias intended to settle once and for all would be final in the most literal sense.

Uncomfortable with the knowledge of how much power the man at her back had, Quinn shrank into herself to make a smaller target as she had done all of her life. She’d known he was powerful when everything had started, came to understand he was the ruling Alpha of Alderbrook, but she’d never seen a display of that authority like this. As Stan trotted outside to gather the other man from the car, Quinn’s breath froze in her lungs.

They were going to kill some kid over a window.

“Don’t,” Tobias murmured as he led her outside.

Wilcox’s words of gratitude and acknowledgement became lost while Quinn buried herself under layers of protective walls.

As if she could stop.

Trundled into the backseat that was already warmed and cozy, he didn’t follow on her heels. Door shut tight, he stood beside it as he spoke with Curtis and the others for a long minute before he slid in beside Quinn. Taking the time to arrange her stiff limbs, forcing her to cuddle against his bulk, the others didn’t return to their seats.

“You know who and what I am, Quinn.”

“That gives you the right to kill people?”

“It does.” Tobias leveled an evergreen gaze carved from granite upon her, the full weight of it crushing the rigid length of her spine as a tender hand came to caress her cheek. “It’s what keeps you and our children safe.”

“You don’t have to—”

“When I finally located you, my hold on this city was hanging by a thread. I had placated and made deals with so many other Alphas, they thought I was weak. Not that I blame them.” A single brow bounced, the withered ghost of something self-deprecating and bemused creeping across his lips. “I promised them anything they wanted for passage through their territories with my men and guns, just to get to you. One little Omega, so much fuss.

“Now we’re home, where we both belong. Those ideas cannot be allowed to fester and grow. They can’t see me as easy pickings, Quinn, or what’s happened before will be nothing compared to what they’ll do now. Now there is Adam *and* Elise, not just you. What would you do if they came to take our daughter? Raised her as their own, made her into something else? Killed her outright?” Hand cupping her cheek, he forced Quinn to meet his hard gaze. His other hand swept over her hair, pushing back the pale strands that had slipped free. “I would do anything to keep you all safe. If I have to rip apart the entire fucking city, I will. If I must wring the life out of a thousand little shits who want to cause trouble to see Adam and Elise grow up happy and safe, I will. I don’t expect you to like it or even understand it, but this is how it will be. Do you understand me?”

“I don’t have much of a choice.”

“In this, you do not.”

Quinn knew he let her pull away. Allowed her to maneuver around until she could face the other window. She did not try to slide across the seat, didn’t attempt to put space between them. Remaining close to his side with his arm looped around her, nothing would appear amiss on the surface.

The bond rattled and screamed, angry and tormented in her chest, but under it all was the steady thump of his heartbeat. She believed what he said. Knew that he would rip this city apart if anything should happen to them. There was something to that, an emotion she didn’t want to give close inspection. It was hot, volatile... comforting.

Tobias tapped his knuckles against the cold glass, ordering Curtis and the other man to return. Within moments they set off.

Except they weren’t returning home, at least not by any path Quinn could map out. She knew most of the city streets by heart, all the back roads and side alleys. It had served her well more than once to keep safe.

The rattle of paper distracted her further, Tobias opening the bottle of pills. Shaking one free, he pressed it between her lips with a smile that showed true warmth.

“Don’t swallow it or chew it. Just let it dissolve.”

“What—”

“Let it dissolve.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

No further conversation was encouraged as the dark car wound through the city streets. Many areas she wasn't as familiar with as she would have preferred. Posh offices and extravagant bistros abounded, a pay grade far above any Quinn could lay claim to.

Oh, she had delivered Alton's drugs to plenty of these people, but they didn't want her type seen around their own. No, they wanted their vices in dark alleys and damp basements, thinking that's how one did these things.

Any proper junkie would tell you that such places were just asking for trouble and some people watched too much television.

Tobias muttered under his breath, pushing Quinn's head to his shoulder. Petting at her hair, he cradled her skull with one massive palm. Seeking to instill peace as if her thoughts troubled him.

Tires hissing over wet asphalt as the car glided into a parking lot, Quinn tried to peek through the misty rain at the building looming before them. There was an impression of soft golden light, deep greens and bright white muted in the gloom. Several other cars were arranged around the lot, none as understated in their refinery as Tobias'. Odd how she'd become accustomed to the subtle inflection of his wealth, seeing the exotic sports cars and flashy emblems as tacky.

Whatever Quinn might have expected, it wasn't for Tobias to climb out of the car. Less still for him to pull her along behind him and under the protection of an umbrella before he led their little band of shadows and menace towards the glossy green doors where strings of lights battled the gray with their orange filaments.

"What's going—"

“Quiet.”

Silenced with a word and the oppressive weight of his command, Quinn bristled. For him to drag her out into the world to parade his prize in front of others was bad enough, but to be kept quiet and docile infuriated her. For every step forward she seemed to make with this confusing bastard of a male, it seemed he wanted to shove her back a thousand more.

“Mr. Kahler,” a woman squealed as they all piled into the little entry. Rippling locks of the richest inky black caught and held the warm glow of the lights as she glided from behind the low counter.

The distraction of a liquid burst of rage at the airy tones of the female momentary, Quinn lost herself in the rich scents wafting about the building. Fear that even the smell of so many different foods would make her feel ill slipped away as saliva pooled in her mouth when a tray piled high with golden slices of garlic bread drifted past on the other side of a half wall.

“We weren’t expecting you so soon, sir.” Delivered in a sultry tone, the woman sidled closer, sable eyes sparkling in a mockery of coy abashment. Large breasts straining against the crisp white of her shirt, she presented them to Tobias to feast on.

“His usual booth,” Curtis said with a curl of his lip, tone dead as the slab of meat still crackling on its warm plate that waltzed past on the arm of a waiter. Moving to help Tobias from the heavy coat, he revealed Quinn from Tobias’ presence.

Curiosity piqued, Quinn slid a sly glance at the pair behind her. If Curtis’ disdain for her was bitter, it was downright venomous for the woman standing before them.

Then she realized what Curtis had said.

“We’re staying?” It tripped over her lips before she could think of repercussions, quick stepping towards the glower settling on her shoulders despite a sense of self-preservation telling her to turn the other way. Fingers hurrying over Tobias’ chest in a mindless placation, she gripped the edge of his suit coat. “Are we?”

It was clear as day to her in the evergreen depths of his gaze, even without the glorious swell of warmth centered under her sternum. Breaking free of any icy shield she might have attempted to armor herself with during the drive there, the bond hummed and whispered of sweet, beautiful things. He was beyond pleased.

Lips tipping into a stifled display of pleasure, Tobias kept his brow creased and gave a stiff shake of his head. He acted the part of the disgruntled Alpha, uncaring of his Omega's delight in the simple adventure of going out to eat.

Excitement fading fast, Quinn pushed a hand against her stomach. Gnawing at her lip as she looked up at him, uncertainty welled in pale grays that he was quick to banish. Hand at her nape, Tobias pulled Quinn against his side, caught in the cage of his arm as he strode past the simpering female towards the booth that seemed to be his alone whenever he wished it.

It would of course be the huge corner booth, upholstered in velvety emerald fabric set off by wood worn to a luscious golden hue under thick layers of glossy lacquer and crisp white linens. Manhandling her into the very center of the long seat, Tobias took up the remaining bench to her right. Curtis took a seat on the opposite edge, angled to watch the open floor and the door beyond where the others took up positions of watchful defense.

"This is unnerving," Quinn whispered as she made wide eyes at the fine white tablecloth, fingertips drumming out a stilted melody. "What if I get sick?"

"It will be fine." Decree given no matter her concerns, Tobias gathered up her hands and pressed them against his thigh to still her fidgeting.

A violent altercation made of curt gestures and the hiss of whispered shouts caught Quinn's attention from the front. The female that had greeted them stood with head bowed as a man not much older and at least half again as large hurled a litany of angry words at her. The scene disappeared as the man led the woman with restrained violence through a swinging door.

Before Quinn could question it out loud, a force of nature hustled towards the table waving thick arms and stumbling over apologies.

"Mr. Kahler, please, forgive me for making you wait," the man said in a voice so heavy with an Italian accent that Quinn had difficulty understanding the furious pace of his words. Hands cutting through the air, fingers pinched, he might have continued on had Tobias not raised a hand to cut him off.

"It's fine, Tony."

"I'll have John bring your usual red, sir," Tony said, still a flustered mess of nerves as he smoothed the thick waves of his salt and pepper hair.

“Marco is already preparing your meal.”

“Water as well,” Tobias ordered for Quinn, gaze never wandering from Tony.

Tony, of course, did not acknowledge her either.

“Of course, sir. Perhaps some bread? It shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Yes, that would be fine.”

As Tony moved aside to let the burly man who had chastised the hostess in with a deep green bottle and a fancy label that made no difference to Quinn, she caught the logo on their shirts. In fanciful script across the left breast, the word *Carmela’s* was stitched out in bright green thread.

Attention snagged on the vague familiarity of the man pouring the rich red wine and sending the scent of musty grapes into the air, something begged to click into place. The restaurant name she recognized, the same place Tobias had first begun his torment of her with. However the man wasn’t one of the handful that delivered that particular double edged sword.

Tobias did not appreciate her staring and struggling memory. Fingers working their way through the loose knot of her hair, his clenched fist turned her head with a precision that vibrated with hostile intolerance. Pushing her into the folds of his open jacket and burying her gaze in the shadowy confines of heavy musk tainted with aggression, Tobias warned without words.

He was her Alpha, and he was to be the one she gave her attention to.

Kept in the awkward position, he refused to release her no matter how she toyed with his shirt or pet at his waist. Quinn knew better than to struggle under that grip, at least in public. No matter what this was between them, Tobias was still an Alpha. She remained docile under the physical control, because he at least did not follow through with the demands that would leave her senseless and struggling to hold on to even a thread of herself.

He’d brought her out into the world, and that was something so rare among mated pairs. She wasn’t quite ready to ruin it all.

The clink of ceramic and the gentle chiming of silverware heralded the promised food. Even then Tobias was slow to let her go, waiting until the waiters had moved far away. Tearing a small piece from the slab of crusty bread bathed in rich golds and delicate browns, he fed her the tiny bite.

Lashes drifting down, she couldn’t help the pinch of her brows or the slow way she chewed. A moment of panic as the bread met her tongue

washed away under the heady flavor of roasted garlic melded with the creamy lusciousness of butter. Eyes popping open, she looked at Tobias with unabashed glee. It tasted as it should and went down without a moment of hesitation.

No outward appearance of the bone deep reverberation of his contentment showed on the hard lines of his face. Even his eyes remained chilled and aloof, the deep green of a winter's forest as he fed her another small bite from his fingers. The bond was a mass of sensations, thoughts spinning by in a whirlwind, emotions speeding past before Quinn could catch them all.

So entranced with it all, she didn't realize more plates had arrived. Didn't even acknowledge that others came near as Tobias held another piece to her lips. Not until he turned her to face the table and saw the multitude of plates piled high did she understand what he'd done for her here.

Sniffing back the burn of tears that threatened to spill as her lower lip trembled, her fingers dared to touch the warm plate. It was everything she had asked for and more.

Saffron bright cheese slid in heavy drifts over the hefty rounds of beef. Crispy and curled, thick pieces of bacon peeked from under a shiny bun dusted with sesame seeds. Wide wedges of fries cooked to crispy, golden perfection in a mountainous stack ranged along the other side of the plate. A small bowl of creamy coleslaw stood in opposition, the jumble of cabbage and carrots a welcomed contrast.

"What's that supposed to be for," Quinn mumbled, stomping down on the range of emotions threatening to strangle her as she poked at a loose hill of green leaves.

"Arugula. For that monstrosity."

"So... Fancy lettuce?" Quinn glanced up at him, lips twitching against a smirk while she reached for a fry.

"Very fancy," he murmured, eyes caught on the smile that still tugged at her mouth. Dragging his gaze back to hers, he nodded at her plate. "Eat, little bird. Then tell me how good it was and how much you wish to thank me for it."

Cheeks warming at the overt implication, Quinn shuffled upright and tugged the large knife free of the bun. Holding it aloft for a moment, unsure what to do with it, Tobias eased it from her grip and moved to bring it down

upon her precious meal. Small as it was, her squeak was sheer admonishment and brought Curtis' head swinging around. Eyebrows slamming down, his dark gaze flicked between Tobias and Quinn, uneasy before he turned to face the front.

Tobias' snort of amusement joined his butchering of her cheeseburger, the knife cutting through juicy meat and delicate bread without mercy. Halved and then quartered, he glanced at Quinn's hands and acted as if he would cut it yet again before Quinn gripped his thigh.

"I'm not a toddler." A breath of impatience that would go no further than their ears, even Curtis didn't notice the way Tobias stilled. Angling to stare down at her, a twitch of his eyebrows noted the hard set of Quinn's jaw and the thread of anger slipping through the bond. As if confused, he remained motionless for a second longer before settling back with a nod to acknowledge what had transpired.

Given leave to eat when he leaned back and held an open palm towards her plate in invitation, Quinn hefted the still large piece and dug in. It took two bites for her to become so engrossed in the perfect melding of flavors that she forgot all about everyone else.

There was still the odd moment where things tasted wrong, the slide of cheese disturbing before it settled into something customary or the bite of onion bitter, but all told she enjoyed every last crumb. Even her fancy arugula was consumed, the peppery bite of the pungent greens welcomed alongside the smoky taste of charred beef.

Too full and still somehow hungry after she'd cleared her plate, Quinn looked around the table in surprise. More so at the fork laden with linguine hovering before her face than at the empty plates from Tobias' portion of it all. Without question, she opened her mouth, accepting the wine sauced pasta and small shrimp. Chewing with consideration, Quinn nodded as she swallowed.

"You should have your fancy chef guy make that."

"He has, several times. You never enjoy it." Concern etched its way across Tobias' gaze as he brought his napkin up to swipe a stray spot from the corner of Quinn's lips. "Perhaps I need a new chef."

A perturbed grunt was all she was willing to impart to that statement. Lips askew, she slid her spoon back and forth across the smooth linen. There was no explaining why the food tasted normal here but not at home. She wasn't nauseous, but that could be the new medication more than

anything. Perhaps whatever it was that had happened between them when she'd challenged Tobias changed something and whatever forces that made this all an issue were now resolved.

"Dessert," Tobias asked, trying to and failing at hiding the hopeful rise in his tone.

"I'll explode," Quinn said, hiding her grin behind her hand though her shoulders trembled with a breathless laugh. She hadn't eaten so well in so long, and without the threat of being ill, she was ready for nothing so much as a nap.

"Don't forget you need to thank me still," Tobias whispered against her temple as he pulled Quinn into his side. If he didn't have to force her to snuggle up to his solid heat, neither were ready to acknowledge that just yet.

The check tended to at Tobias' amiable insistence, he held out a hand to her as he stood from the booth. Pulling her in, he caught Quinn's hip and held her close. Leading her through the scattered tables and their few patrons in such an obvious display of possession, she felt their eyes on her. They knew who Tobias was, and by default what she was. Perhaps not that she was his mate, but an Omega under his thrall at the least. It made her uncomfortable, but there was nothing she could do about it as the door opened onto the blustering wind and the mist that had become a downpour as they ate.

Their guards slipped outside, uncaring of the weather as Tobias paused under the awning to tug his heavy coat open for Quinn to huddle in while Curtis held an umbrella to keep her dry on the short walk to the car.

"They couldn't have pulled it around?" Grumbling against Tobias' chest, Quinn looped her arm around his waist to edge just a little closer as they started out into the torrential rain.

"Wouldn't want to spoil you too much, little bird."

Hearing the laughter in his tone as much as the grinding chuckle through his chest, Quinn tipped her head back to shoot off some snarky comment.

Except the world exploded.

Glittering shards of agony flew through the air, flinging bright red into the gray as they soared. Thunder cracked and boomed. A blow forced her double before sending her plummeting to the puddle strewn ground. More

thunder shattered the eerie quiet and now she saw the flash of lightning surrounding the figures standing over her.

It wasn't the storm.

Outstretched arm ending in a heavy gun that propelled another bullet into the gloom as the squeal of tires broke through the ringing in her ears, Tobias crouched with his feet straddling her legs. A human shield, the shot would have to be beyond lucky to veer around him to punch into her.

One of the guards was on the ground near her, propped on an elbow as blood pumped from his leg to swirl with the oil slick puddle beneath him. Still he fired shot after shot at the cars no doubt speeding by. If any were successful, Quinn wouldn't know it from the grayed tone of his grim face or the way his arm drooped.

"Quinn!" Tobias was hunched over her, hands patting her down in rough strokes only to jerk her sweater up to reveal skin to the frigid cold. Soaked through, he swiped an angry palm over his face and smeared a vivid wash of red over his chin as he continued his inspection. "Just lay still, sweetness."

"I'm okay." The quaver of her voice wasn't reassuring to anyone, least of all the man whose hands shook as he took careful stock of the stinging ache lining her cheek.

"Fuck," he growled, pulling her up and tight to his chest, his back to the street beyond in what couldn't have been a smart move considering what just happened. Calling out to the others, he began rushing her towards the car. "Curtis, with me. Micah, get Nick to the doctor and call someone in to deal with this mess."

Cursing up a storm, Tobias dragged Quinn the last few feet to the sedan. Shock settling over her, she began to shiver, steps fumbling as he tried to hurry her.

Perhaps that's why she looked back at the restaurant as the waiter who had plagued her memory appeared. He had all the time in the world to raise his arm, taking careful aim as Quinn struggled to open her mouth on a shout of warning.

"Down!"

Impacting her with enough force to send her skidding across the pavement, peeling away layers of precious flesh, she was knocked down yet again. It took eons before the ground met her back, falling in pinwheeling slow motion until her head rebounded from the mud smeared asphalt. The

scream broke loose as needling shards and thick sludge spattered across her face and chest, blinding her in scarlet hues.

Curtis' face came into focus.

On a slow blink, his full lips parted and spilled a torrent of ruby red blood across her neck. Eyebrows plummeting to cast his dark gaze into deeper shadows, he didn't seem to understand her shrieks or what had happened.

Least of all the gaping hole that leaked horrible things down his cheek to spatter against Quinn's skin.

Somehow the paling lavender of his lips slid upwards, a show of humor when there should be nothing of the sort. Disbelief warred with satisfaction in the depths of his clouding gaze.

It took seconds for the light to disappear from the umber eyes that had forever judged and ridiculed her, but each thundering heartbeat in her chest counted it off as a passing of decades until the oppressive weight of him was rolled from her body.

“Quinn,” Tobias roared, as he hauled her up once more, flinging her slack body into the front seat of the sedan. Careless of the shattered glass littering the smooth leather, he shoved Quinn flat to the seat as he jerked the car into gear and peeled out of the lot.

Curled into a tight ball and shaking so hard her teeth chattered despite the sedatives Dr. Annan had brought her and the intense heat of Tobias at her back, Quinn stared into the empty air.

She could still feel the lurid warmth of his blood even after she'd scrubbed her skin raw to be rid of the thick strands of gore and the tacky film of blood. Could still see that ghastly smile on his dead lips. He'd leapt at her in the last possible second, taking the bullet through his skull to save Quinn.

Not Tobias. *Her*.

The woman he considered trash, hated that his employer and sometimes friend brought her here, and yet, he'd sacrificed his own life for her. There was no way for him to know her claim marked Tobias' shoulder, that her

death could mean the ruin of her mate. Not with how careful Tobias was with it. He couldn't have known. Yet he'd done it anyway.

A man was dead because of *her*.

Her cut cheek and the gashes marking her arm had taken eight stitches altogether. Dr. Annan patched her up, slapped a bottle full of sedatives onto the table, and then gotten out of there in a hurry.

The bullet grazed her shoulder as it exited Curtis' skull. The smallest mark. A pink welt that would be gone in a few days at most.

"I have you, sweetness," Tobias said through the purr that did nothing to dull the disarray of her thoughts or even calm the rapid stutter of her heart.

Kids long since put to bed, there was the urge to see them. To pet their hair, assure herself that they were whole and well. Somewhere in the thick tangle of dizzying horror was the very real need for Tobias to make it all go away. To fuck her into the sunlit oblivion where she felt nothing.

It was pushed away, stamped down until all that was left were rich golden brown eyes and a disbelieving smile.

What felt like hours passed. Quinn would begin to drift off, only to hear the crack of the gunshots reverberating through her skull once more.

Flailing as she came awake, clawing at her skin, it would take Tobias shackling her wrists to stop further injury.

Somewhere in the dark hours before dawn, Tobias pulled away. Abandoning her in the nest, he slipped on his robe and padded from the room. Leaving her to sob into the pillows as she tried to banish that damned smile from her memory.

"Quinn." The growl of a command buried under the depth of his purr, the kids didn't stir as he tucked them in beside her. Pulling the heavy blankets piled on top of Quinn tight to her chin, he pulled her cold arms around their little bodies until they were snuggled against her chest. Mouths slack in sleep, they made quiet murmurs and wrapped their arms around one another as well as Quinn.

"I have to take care of this, little bird. You need to keep them safe until I come back. Do you hear me?"

Quinn's nod was jerky, but she managed to choke down another ragged sob before it could tear free and wake her babies. Burying her face in their downy hair, she breathed in their warmth and the sweetness of innocence. It didn't make Curtis' smile go away, didn't bring her any peace, but Quinn refused to terrify her children with her hysterics.

Listening to Tobias move around the room, there was the rustle of his clothing and the usual soft sounds of him getting ready. So much like any other day it seemed inconceivable that Curtis was dead and another with grave injuries. Had that one survived?

Taking a shaky breath to ask, concern twisting through her, she was silenced with Tobias' kiss. Lips crushed against hers, he took without question in a violent assault using little more than tongue and teeth. Pinning her to the bed with the intensity of his presence, he continued on until Quinn gasped and trembled beneath him.

"Keep them safe." He didn't wait for an answer, gone before Quinn could muster up the ability to form coherent thoughts let alone words.

Backs of her eyes scalded with unshed tears, she curled around her sleeping children and settled in for a long night of watchful unrest.

Unable to do more than drift through a hazy world devoid of true sleep for the haunting smile, Quinn watched the minutes tick past on the small clock beside the bed. Feeling each second drag out into hours, the world twisted and slipped into something horrifying and unclear.

A place to be afraid.

In time the sun rose, bathing the room in golden light and waking the children. Meghan appeared not long after, looking as haggard and unwell as Quinn felt. Dark smudges under her eyes, pinched and dull as if she'd had little sleep. The normal rosy cheeks sallow, she looked sickly green in the morning light with an unkempt air that didn't suit her at all.

Foolish to want nothing to ever harm anyone ever again, but Meghan was Quinn's only friend now.

"Everything okay, Meghan?"

"Yes, of course, Miss Quinn."

"You sure? You're not looking so hot. If you need a day off—"

"I wouldn't dream of it, Miss Quinn! Unless... Unless you're dismissing me for the day?"

"No, not at all," Quinn stammered out, hands held palm out to stop them from veering off to a path Quinn never intended. "I just thought maybe... I don't know what I thought."

Concerns and questions waved aside, and Meghan refusing to acknowledge that anything was wrong as she fussed over the children, Quinn could offer nothing to solve whatever plagued her. Meghan's smile

was stiff, a stilted lilt in her tone as she whisked Adam and Elise off to be dressed and readied for breakfast, promising to see Quinn downstairs.

Hating the silence that echoed around her, she rushed through getting dressed. Armored herself in a silken dress shaded in soft blues and pinks to hold the gray misery at bay. The day was bright and warm, no hint of the storm lingering in lofty clouds in a vivid blue sky beyond her windows.

Popping one of the pills into her mouth to let it dissolve, Quinn made her way downstairs. Following Elise's burbling laughter and Adam's squeals of joy, she found them seated at the large dining table. Neat pile of cereal scattering as Elise grabbed the pieces up in strangling fistfuls, Adam scooped oatmeal into his mouth with intense concentration.

"Sit, Miss Quinn. I'll get you something." Meghan patted Quinn's shoulder as she breezed past, humming a quiet tune under her breath. Steps light, she hurried to the kitchen.

"Guess she's okay," Quinn murmured to the kids as she collapsed into her chair, ignored in favor of their food.

Meghan reappeared, a tray piled high with eggs, fried potato cakes, and sausage accompanied by a bowl of oatmeal doctored with a liberal amount of maple syrup and brown sugar. Setting one of the plates and bowl in front of Quinn, Meghan's lips spread wide in delighted exuberance.

"I'd almost forgotten that Mr. Kahler said the new medication helped. You've taken it, yes?"

"Yeah, I did," Quinn said, distracted by the sight of so much food. She'd puked after the whole ordeal the day before, and despite the grayed edges of the world and the way her limbs felt leaden, she wanted to try again.

Brandishing her fork, Quinn took the first bite and would have spit it back out had Meghan not watched on with avid interest, which caught the attention of both Adam and Elise. With all three staring, she couldn't get the thick glob of putrid muck from her tongue other than to swallow it. Slimy and hard, it quivered at the back of her throat before plummeting down into her stomach where she swore she heard it plunk.

Aghast at the differences between her cheeseburger just the day before and simple eggs, Quinn didn't know what was wrong with her. If it was that Tobias wasn't near, what had happened, if there was something new and awful wrong with her. Brimming with her frustration, she picked at the meal with all the gusto of the condemned as Meghan smiled and nodded in

satisfaction. All of them seeming unaware of what turmoil festered within her.

It would of course end the way it had all along.

Huddled over the toilet, Quinn gagged. The steady rush of bile burned her sinuses, eyes watering as she choked. It seemed to take forever before her stomach grew as quiet as it ever did these days. Blind fingers fumbling, she grabbed hold of the handle and flushed her misery away, squeezing her eyes shut so as not to see it swirling down the drain.

Hauling her body up by handholds on nearby fixtures, she gained her feet. Weak as a newborn foal, she shuffled to the sink. Even the thought of her berry flavored toothpaste made her shudder and cringe, but if she had to taste those awful mashed potatoes a third time, she would vomit again on principle alone.

Quinn faced off with her reflection in the mirror, swearing she could see herself turning green as she reached for her toothbrush.

Frowning, she leaned closer and swiped at her chin. Bringing her fingers up, she stared at the dark brown flecks. What on earth had she eaten? Pulling a face of disgust, she turned the water on and washed her hands and face. Reaching for her toothbrush, she steeled herself for the pungent flavor.

She felt him. A surge of violence and resolve pounded through her. Knocked her knees loose, making her cling to the cold stone to stay upright. Before the front door could even slam shut, she felt him storming through the house. Intent, purposeful.

Stalking his prey.

Stomach twisting, another violent cramp seized her middle. Turning towards the toilet again, Quinn's strangled shriek echoed back at her as she crashed to her knees. A rush of slick wet her thighs, soaking through her skirt, filling the room with its candied sweetness.

"There's my little bird."

Head swinging around, she stared wide eyed at him as he stalked closer. Tie gone, his vest flapped open as he tugged at his shirt. Buttons popped free to clatter against the tile as he jerked it open.

"Something's not right," Quinn said in a rush, words slamming together in a single breath as she crawled away.

The call was too loud, too harsh. It clawed down her back, twisting her spine as she stammered out a panicked cry. There was no stopping the river

of slick that poured out for him, enticing him.

“Wait! It’s not right, something’s wrong,” Quinn screamed, but he was already tearing at her clothes. Ripping the silky cloth away to leave her sprawled naked on the tiles.

Pawing at her, pushing and pulling as his nails scraped over delicate skin, he got Quinn to her knees. Covered her back, shoving the reverberation of his growl against her neck.

Thick, heavy, he split her open as he buried his cock to the hilt in one painful thrust. His gratified moan snared on her shriek of pain.

She wasn’t ready. There was no dulling of her senses, no lack of pain as he rutted her with violent slaps of his hips against her upturned ass. Her screams were nothing but agony.

“Mine,” he roared, dragging her up against him as he sat back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trembling under his weight, Quinn tried not to flinch from the growl that prickled her skin. Blood still oozed from where her stitches pulled free the last time she shifted in an attempt to find a more comfortable position while his knot felt as if it tore her apart.

He was far beyond reason, not listening to any of her pleas and cries to stop. When words failed, she tried to do whatever it was she'd done to bring him to his knees through the bond, but even that only enraged him further.

An Alpha in rut was a volatile beast. Inhuman. Animal.

Her body was telling him to be nothing else.

Slick eased his every entry, mixing with the coppery tang of blood that confused and angered him. A vicious cycle that caused him to become more brutal with every successive mounting. Still her pussy fluttered around him, strangling his knot to force his come deep inside of her as he ground against her cervix.

It was twisted, abhorrent, but a heat, nonetheless.

The damned fertility drugs had gotten the last laugh. Enough of the caustic cocktail flowed through her veins to induce an estrous, but her body failed to respond the way it should. No dulling of her pain receptors, no blind need to have him inside of her, Quinn could do little more than lie passive as it ran its course.

Except the flat iron taste of blood grew stronger with each passing moment. It stained the pristine tiles of the bathroom to a muddy hue. Blankets smeared in wide swaths of rusty brown when he'd dragged her to the nest, overshadowed by strings of brilliant crimson.

Everything was so very wrong and seemed to be getting worse.

Weaker as each hour passed and the sun set to allow true night sneaking through the room, Quinn was no longer certain how much of the wet slide between her thighs was slick and come or other more horrible things. Her lower body throbbed and ached, a burning tingle centered between her thighs. The bite at her nape he gave with his last reprimand trickled a steady runnel of scarlet that mottled the sheet beneath her.

Cracked lips a trembling line and gritty eyes scrunched, she set her cheek to the bed, unable to keep it out of the tacky spill any longer. Sky now showing brilliant golds and ruddy orange beyond the banks of wide windows, it had been near a full day of this torture.

“Please, Tobias,” she rasped as he growled at her shoulder, tongue lapping over his mark. “Please stop.”

Vision graying around the edges, she whined when he began to move over her. Pumping his cock into the tight clench of a body that refused to remain limp, her back arched into the hard slap of his hips as the world began to go dark.

“Please.”

“You fucking wake up! Do you hear me? Wake. Up. Now.”

Roar near silent, it thundered through her aching chest. Cracked open her sternum, splitting her wide to let everything spill out into the darkness that clung to her in ever tightening coils.

“You wake up, little bird, or so help me, I will make you fucking regret it.”

Threat laughable, Quinn didn’t feel like smirking at his menacing tone. Too tired, too cold, she shivered as the blackness dragged her deeper. The intangible threads of the bond frayed and unraveled, losing their vicious hold upon a disintegrating soul.

“You answer your Alpha, Quinn.”

Words following her down into the swirling emptiness, she could do nothing to respond. Throat closing over the reply that lingered, the vastness choked off the words and took her where nothing could reach her.

Eons, heartbeats later, she rose. Not out of the shadows, but close. Hovering in the dim corridors of the murky landscape near enough that she felt his large hands crushing her arms.

“I need you. Is that what you want to hear? I need *you*, my proud, stubborn, ridiculous mate.” Snarling against her temple, the warmth of his breath a brand on frigid skin. Moments dragged on, his breathing growing more serrated. “You come back to me *now*.”

It rushed up to meet her, grabbing hold and dragging Quinn down into the inky depths of nothingness. Shackling her in the desolate darkness, abandoning her in the empty.

There she remained.

Until the sweep of her lashes fluttered only to drift shut once more against the radiant glare of blinding light. Everything hurt, a deep agony that even the sigh of her rattling breath caused to increase by tenfold. Shrill tones scored the inside of her skull, building to a furious pace that coalesced into one long keen as the broken flesh of her lips parted on a silent cry.

“Make it stop.” Little more than a trembling breath, she didn’t think she would be heard over the furious wailing of the machine stabbing through her eardrums.

Then it cut off, the sudden silence loud in the now quiet room. The blinding light blinked out of existence, leaving a shimmering afterimage of reds and greens on the backs of her eyelids.

“You still with me, sweetness?” Rough hands cradling her cheeks, Tobias pressed his forehead against hers and breathed her in on a slow inhale.

Quinn’s grunt, worn and frayed, trembled on a breath that stung the cracked planes of her lips. The grating rasp of a thick layer of stubble scored her temple as Tobias pressed closer. Trying to be careful, failing in such a miserable fashion as to make it all worse. Hearing her low whine, he settled her back into the rustle of pristine sheets and hovered. As if he could protect her from everything with his body alone. Including himself.

Lashes fluttering open, she was able to make out the dark smear of his gaze through a murky cloud that crusted the corners of her eyes. “What...?”

“How much do you remember?”

Lashes slipping down, she tried to pinpoint the moment, searching through the tumbled drifts of thought to find the last clear memory. Darkness sucked at her, trying to pull her back into the gloom.

“Don’t you dare leave me again, Quinn! Open your fucking eyes, Gods damn it.”

Quinn muttered an incoherent curse as he rattled her back into the too bright sterility of a hospital room. Jostling her with gentle violence, it was too much for her battered insides. She opened her eyes and glared at him with all the impotent anger she could muster.

“Begging... you... to stop.” Chest heaving with the exertion of just a few words, her head lolled on the pillow. Weakened by the simple effort of speech.

“Yes, you were going into heat when I arrived.” There was no true apology there, but a darkness clouded his gaze as he shifted closer. Settling his weight on the large bed, he surrounded Quinn with elbows propped on either side, keeping their faces close. “When I came out of my rut the next evening, you were bleeding. They said much longer, and you would have bled out.”

Now the sweep of his brows slammed together, lining his forehead with craggy furrows. Fingers that dared to tremble smoothed back a tattered curl from her face. The darkness in his eyes burst inside her chest, a wealth of haggard desperation and raging fury. It stole her breath as the bitter slick slide of fear wound through it all, permeating her every cell in roiling black.

“They said you’d been poisoned. An anticoagulant, such as those commonly found in rat poison. Among other things.”

“Carmela’s?”

“No,” Tobias said, more of a snarl than speech. As if to stop himself from hurting her further, he twisted the sheets in fists that ached with the need to cause pain and wreak chaos. “It takes repeated doses.”

“The kids!” Quinn wanted to scream, but it came as a whine from her aching lungs when she set her hands to his chest. Pushing with all of her strength didn’t even muss his disheveled clothing. When he refused to budge, she turned her slapping hands to the needle shoved deep into her arm. Tugging at the translucent tubes winding their way out of her body, she managed to loosen the tape before Tobias caught her hands and held them to his chest.

“They’re fine. They’ve both been checked out and are perfectly healthy.” The rasping thunder of his purr tried to soothe while he kept her still. “Adam and Elise are with people that can be trusted.”

“Who?”

“Rey and his... Omega.”

“Mr. Rey...?” Quinn’s eyes rounded, mouth slack before she began to shake her head. It started as a slow glide, rushing towards a jerky denial as she tangled her hand in the slack lines flowing from her arm to be free. Voice a grating rasp, she condemned. “He runs guns and drugs, whores out women, and you think my babies are safe? Fucking idiot!”

“Keep your voice down.” Each word bit out through a sound that strained to be a calming purr. A losing battle as she defied him further, managing to get the IV free. Patience gone in the snap of some monitor falling free from her, his grabbed a fistful of her hair. Pulled her back to the bed by that grip until Quinn arched and whined. “Who do you think he does all those things for? He and Beaumont won’t let anything happen to them, and more of my men are there besides.”

“But you don’t know who—”

“Yet. Once you are stable, I’ll start looking. I will find them.”

Promises of things Quinn could not comprehend danced in jagged bursts through his dark gaze. Pain was a pale word to describe the evil intent that damn near frolicked there, an eagerness that terrified her more than the smoky taste of violence now coating her throat.

He shuddered it all away, cool and aloof as any dominant male when he saw her fear. Scrubbing at her scalp, detached in his soothing, his mind was in dark places Quinn didn’t want to know about.

“Rest, little bird,” Tobias murmured, leaning down to brush his lips against her clammy forehead. He even ignored the way she flinched. “I’ll fetch the nurse to put these back in you.”

Leaving the room, the opened door showed dark figures, some towering over Tobias. They all bowed their head in respect to their Alpha as he murmured something to them and turned, her view of the scene cut off as the door swung shut.

Nerves began attacking her senses when his presence swept from the room. No longer coddled inside the protective bubble of an Alpha’s rage, she felt too small and alone in the starkness. Though the sounds of traffic and the city at large were muffled, proving she was far away from the bustle, the would be quiet was unnerving. All that came to her ears was the murmuring of doctors and nurses as they passed her door, fading out as they veered an abrupt path around her guards.

What if one of them was the culprit? There was no way for Tobias to know.

Quinn's mouth opened on a scream as the door swung inward, hand clapping over tender lips to silence the sound that her throat strangled until nothing more than a ragged wheeze left her. Too wide eyes and trembling limbs met the unbelievable sight before her.

Marina's eyes narrowed to slits as she hustled into the room wearing faded green scrubs and sensible sneakers, taking in Quinn's reaction with a curl of her lips. Trying to close the door behind her, she found it snagged in a beefy palm. Turning to the males hovering in the doorway, she batted her long lashes and smiled.

"Door stays open," one of the burly men muttered, seeming unaffected by Marina's coy flirtation. His gaze was careful to remain centered on her mother, refusing to even glance at Quinn where she sat frozen.

"Gentlemen, I'm going to have to check some things that I'm sure her mate doesn't want you to see."

The act of simple subtlety was so unlike anything Quinn had ever seen from her mother. Tongue and lips refusing to form words, she could neither agree nor deny this awful charade. A no doubt stolen name tag dangling from her neck, Marina presented a façade that was difficult to question. Even her usual gaudy makeup had been tempered to subtle hues and clean lines, giving her the appearance of a ragged woman at the end of her shift.

"Then you can wait for him to return."

"I just have to check the bruising under her gown, guys, see if it's gotten worse. It'll be five minutes tops. Come on, I have other patients and the doctors here are jerks." Marina added a delicate pout, hip jutting to the side. "They're not going to cut me any slack because of who she is. The damage was pretty bad. Really need to make sure it hasn't gotten worse."

A glimmer of uncertainty slipped behind the guard's eyes. While not looking at Quinn head on, there was the impression of being studied. No doubt seeing the deep purple and indigo blotches decorating her arms and neck, the sickly lavender around her jaw. In the narrow mirror opposite the bed, Quinn saw the terrifying truth of her appearance. The guard must know what had happened as well as the ramifications. It was whether or not he feared the consequences of what Tobias would do to him if things worsened and he denied this nurse the ability to find out that would see this insane plan of Marina's to fruition.

"Two minutes," the guard finally rumbled. Large hand folding over the edge of the door, he dared to glance at the small hills of Quinn's feet before

closing the door to within an inch to give as much privacy as he could.

Marina didn't take the time to thank the guard. Rushing to Quinn's bedside, usual sensual grace cast aside, she sneered. Grabbing Quinn's wrist, she pulled the arm taut to inspect the mottled hues of twilight decorating her daughter's skin.

"Damn fine mess you got yourself into, girly. Fucking mated, no less. What did you do, eh? Stop taking your pills to snag him?" The caustic flow of her words kept to a quiet murmur, Marina shook her head with a glimpse of teeth as she smirked. "Nah, you've always been too goody two shoes for that shit. Poor little baby finally got what she had coming."

Quinn's voice ran back down her throat, leaving a trail of choking tears and betrayal. The hatred spouting from her mother's lips knocked the air from her lungs. A cold band of unease squeezed her chest, refusing to allow her another breath.

"Frankly, I don't give a shit how you got into this, but you hit the jackpot and it's high time you quit your shit and help out someone else for a change."

"What," Quinn sputtered, pale brows drifting down to shadow her eyes. Trembling fingers caught and held the thin blanket, twisting it up into her fists.

"You think I want to spend the rest of my good years dancing? You need to set your mother up, you little shit." Marine glanced at the door, a muscle in her jaw jumping as the sound of grinding teeth seeped into the near silence of Quinn's disbelief. "Got the Gods damned Alpha of the city fucking claiming you and you can't even slip me some cash so I can quit the club? Ungrateful little bitch!"

Quinn couldn't do anything but stare. Lips parted over each ragged breath, it was as if her mind refused to make sense of the vitriol spilling over her. Marina had never once left it unclear that Quinn was a burden for her to bear, but this was far more than Quinn had ever dreamed.

Marina *hated* her.

"You make this right, Quinn. You get me the hell out of that District, or so help me." She paused, a sinister gleam in the icy perfection of her gaze, the pink of her tongue sliding over waxy peach. "You get me set up somewhere nice, or maybe you take another little trip. Maybe this time you don't come back, since your buddy Alton won't be there to save you. Be a shame if something happened to those kids this time."

Chill creeping down her spine to infect the blood pounding through her veins in a rush, Quinn found the ability to move. Drawing up from her wounded slouch, she met Marina's gaze head on.

Her mother knew about the kidnapping. All that happened.

No one should have known about that. Tobias and perhaps Curtis were the only ones who knew all the details. There would be no way he would share it all, even with his men as they searched for her. The slow understanding that Marina might have had a hand in it wound its way through her, devastating everything in its path as her mother continued to threaten her. Not just Quinn, but her children, too.

"Especially that little girl of yours. Lot can happen to a bitch in this world, right? Gods put that hole between your legs for a reason. Lots of Alphas these days like them younger. Easier to mold when you get started early. Should have done that with you. Wouldn't have had to waste my hard earned cash on your pathetic ass."

Dragging a breath into starving lungs, Quinn started to respond, but the door began to swing open. Marina's vicious sneer disappeared, replaced by a smile made all the more unhinged by the malice shining in her blue eyes. Patting Quinn on the leg in a mockery of affection, Marina turned on her heel and slipped out past the guards.

Quinn's throat locked tight over a cry to stop Marina. The guards wouldn't ask questions. If Quinn voiced any pleas for help, Marina would be killed on sight. Tobias was in a vengeful enough mood to see to that.

Was she?

The thought of Marina dead failed to incite anything stronger than murky unease. Alive wasn't much better. Quinn didn't think she could be the cause of her mother's death, but if Marina had some means of hurting Elise and Adam, Quinn would stand over her mother's broken body herself.

The moment slipped through her fingers, the dry wheeze of her hard breaths echoing in the room.

She was still ripping the idea open, inspecting all of its ghastly parts, when Tobias returned. Agitated, his dark eyes scanned the room before settling on Quinn with a furrowed brow. Knowing something was wrong, but not having anything to act upon, he rocked on the balls of his feet.

Refusing to acknowledge that she did it as much for him as her own peace of mind, Quinn reached out a hand. Adrift in the open space, it shook with the hard exertion of holding her arm out. A sigh eased past her lips

when he enfolded her hand in his, following close behind with the rest of him. Seated on the edge of the bed once more, he wrapped Quinn in an embrace that hurt more than her battered body.

A faint knock sounded at the door, the rumble of the guard's voice muted beneath Tobias' pounding heartbeat and measured breaths. Quinn didn't even hear Tobias' response, so wound up in the comfort of him, needing it so much. Letting herself fall in graceless abandon into the heady sunlight he offered just by being close.

Tangled up in the bond and all that it represented, she ignored the nurse that tiptoed into the room. Didn't even feel the punch of the needle sliding back into her vein as the IV was replaced. Words were spoken that made little sense in the liquid golden hues of peace.

Time slid past, relentless and yet without measure. He held her, not once complaining or demanding.

"My mother was here," Quinn whispered, clinging to that heady tranquility as she spilled out the story of a betrayal from a quarter she'd never expected it from. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, threatening to overflow.

"They let someone in here?" The evil hiss jeopardized everything, his hands fisting the thin gown at her back.

"She pretended to be a nurse. Something has to be done. I can't... I don't think I can live with myself if I know I'm the reason she's dead."

"You wouldn't be the—"

"I'm not stupid. Whether I ask you to do it or not, it'll be because of me. But I can't just ignore what she said. If she hurt the kids... No. I will not stand by and let that threat hang over their heads."

"You need to rest and not worry about this. I will deal with it," Tobias murmured, sifting her hair through his fingers to tip Quinn into his chest.

"What are you going to do?" Gnawing at parched lips, her hands slid over his waist until they came to rest at his back. Allowing herself the moment to be weak, she clung to him and let Tobias soothe away all the tension riddling her spine.

"That's not for you to concern yourself with."

"Don't kill her. Please. I know she probably deserves it, but... Please."

"Rest, Quinn."

"Tell me you're not going to kill her."

Tobias sighed, the rumble of a growl hinted in the hard exhale. Pushing Quinn to her back, he tugged the sheet and blankets up to her chin. Tucking her in tight, he forced her to remain where he put her with hands braced on either side of her body, pulling the blankets taut.

“Tell me.” Touch soft as butterfly wings, she felt the bond. Brows knitting in furious concentration, she tried not to let it overwhelm. Delicate as spider’s silk, she attempted to show him.

The massive male hovering over her shuddered, muscles bunching and flexing under an unseen force as he lowered his chest to hers. The purr drowned everything out, a rockslide of sound limned in sheer outrage as he comforted her.

Quinn would know if he lied. That much she understood as the bond twisted and jostled under the tentative caress.

“I will not kill her.”

A jagged pulse of dismay and shock crackled along her nerves from him. He couldn’t believe his answer, agreeing to something less than mayhem and violence. In a move she didn’t understand, instincts guiding her hand, Quinn tugged at his nape and nuzzled along his neck. Soothing the man whose purr did not falter despite the turmoil rioting within him.

Her confusion at her actions grew as she gave another faint tug. Bringing Tobias climbing over her small body to lie against her side where the medical paraphernalia didn’t hold so much sway. The bed was more than large enough to hold them both, even if he did refuse to allow more than an inch of space between them as he settled alongside her. Wrapping her in his arms once more, he scrubbed at her scalp just the way she liked. Cocooned in the man, she strived for some sort of peace. He’d agreed with her. She should be happy.

She also knew there was a lot you could do to a body before it died.

The crimson splashed scene from Lee’s basement flashed through her memory. The man ripped apart and still begging for mercy that would never come. Her hand slicing through the air, the knife at the end of it cutting him open. Letting thick, wet things spatter to the floor and all over her body as she attacked with a single minded determination.

“Shh, little bird.” Purr somehow louder, Tobias made any space between them disappear. Holding her so tight she half sprawled over him, he tried to banish the images stampeding through her thoughts.

“I killed—”

“Stop.”

Quinn dragged in a shuddering breath only to let it out in a rush. Plunged deep into heady warmth, the golden brilliance of Tobias through the bond drowned out everything. Leaving her limp and placid in his arms as he curled around her, the purr infecting every particle of her being as she began to drift off into an easy slumber.

She could have fought it. The thought was there, lingering just out of reach. That she could twist the slippery strands of the bond in her hands, rip it open so that delicious honeyed warmth spilled out into nothingness. Knew she could do it if she had to.

The problem was, she didn’t.

Maybe it was weak and pathetic, but she didn’t care as she slipped under the balmy waves of Tobias’ enforced calm. It was quiet and so peaceful, and somehow the knowledge that she could be free whenever she wished it made it that much better. The rough rasp of her purr joined his as she twined her limbs with his, snuggling into the deep shadows of his arms.

CHAPTER NINE

Quinn groaned as she woke, burrowing deeper into the cocoon of warmth surrounding her. Body still aching, it was better than the first time she'd woken. Still tender and sore in a myriad of places, but the agony had abated. Maybe they'd given her pain killers.

Reaching for a source of true heat, one that would purr for her and send her back into sleep, her eyes flew open when all she found was cold, empty air.

Shoving up to a sitting position, wild gaze darting around the room, she let out a ragged sigh of relief when she found Tobias sitting by the window. Gaze shadowed under a brow heavy with the weight of brooding thoughts, he came towards the bed. Instead of climbing back in with her as Quinn expected, he wrapped her up in the still toasty blankets, pulling the lot of them with her as Tobias picked her up and carried her back to his seat. A moment of surprise that the IV no longer dangled from her arm was replaced by concern as he sat. He settled her in his lap, cradling the back of her head to press Quinn's cheeks against his chest.

Frazzled strands of turmoil slipped through the bond, tightening around Quinn's spine and making her straighten to ease the uncomfortable sensation. Only to be pushed back, held in the submissive position as if he needed her to remain subordinate to some cue she missed. He wasn't angry, not that she could tell from sight or scent. Confusion wove a tangled web inside them, agitating them both until Quinn curled her fingers into his shirt and pulled hard. A physical touch tugging him away from his roiling thoughts.

"Be still, little bird."

“Let me up.”

“I said, be still.”

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

Her rising panic brought him out of the thunderous cloud where her words and actions didn’t. A sharp inhale preceded the deepest resonance, the stiff fingers curled against her scalp loosening to massage away the tension riddling her body.

“Is it the kids?” The thought alone was enough to ruin any efforts he made. Struggling against his hold to stand, to rush out of the room in a blind rage to hurt whatever dared to threaten her children, Quinn found herself tipped back over his arm. Hand against her throat and tight to her jaw, Tobias forced her to meet his hard gaze.

“They are fine. You need to calm down.”

“But—”

“Everything is fine. I need you to calm down and rest, little bird.”

“Don’t you lie to me,” Quinn hissed, the red hazed sheen of her anger shearing through the bond.

He stiffened under her, hand closing over her throat for a moment before he forced it down to Quinn’s shoulder. Dragging her upright, he put her back into the submissive position and kept her there while he took several long breaths.

“I had a meeting earlier. It did not go as planned. Everything is fine, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about, Quinn.”

“What and who you are very much affects me and my children—”

“Our children, Gods damn it. Do not forget who gave them to you, little bird.”

“As has been proven several times over, and for you to pretend anything else is stupid,” Quinn finished, acting as if he hadn’t interrupted.

“For the love of the Gods, woman, you are the most difficult, bullheaded female I have ever encountered.”

“Thank you. Now tell me.”

Tobias snorted, a bemused smirk playing across his lips. His bewildered humor was derisive and adoring all at the same time, as if he both loved and hated how difficult their exchanges were. His grip at her neck loosened, though he didn’t allow her to sit up from the cowering posture.

“I had a meeting, as I said. Things became heated. Then he backed down. That shouldn’t have happened.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Tobias muttered under his breath, pulling Quinn back so he could trace the lines of her face with his appraising gaze. “He wasn’t so much weaker than I am. He’s a man with his own territory, albeit a small one.”

“So, why did he?”

“I don’t know. One moment we were arguing, the next...” Tobias let out a hard sigh before nuzzling Quinn’s crown. Voice muffled in the thick curls of her hair, he continued, “The next I swore I could smell you, taste you in the very air of that dank warehouse. Everything changed in that moment. He stopped talking, looked at me, and then lowered his head in submission. Politely requested if I would consider a trade arrangement for his exports as if he hadn’t been threatening me seconds before.”

“So...?”

“So, perhaps there are even more surprises in store,” he murmured, fingers dipping below the neck of her gown to trace the lines of his mark on her shoulder.

Quinn’s eyes widened, a single brow reaching skyward as her gaze slipped down to where she knew her mark upon him lay hidden. Her defiant act, using her end of the bond to bring Tobias to his knees, shouldn’t have been possible, and yet...

“Maybe,” she whispered back, and there was no one else there to see how she batted his hands away so that she could curl up deep in his arms as a smile gave a tentative pull at her lips. Burrowing under his jacket where his heat and musk were stronger, Quinn hummed, realizing that this was why they did not allow Omegas to claim their mates in return.

She held power over Tobias now.

Whatever other benefits there might be, that alone was enough to implode her world of what was and wasn’t safe. If her hold over him made an already formidable Alpha stronger, what else might she get in return?

“I can hear the wheels of your mind turning, little bird.”

Quinn lifted her lip in a snarl, hating that he insisted on using the pet name even in moments like these.

“Before you start planning your world domination, get some rest. Annan will be by later to talk about discharge.”

A true grin painted her lips wide as she let him fold her up into his embrace.

Dr. Annan's lips moved without a sound as she flipped through the pages of Quinn's chart, the dark lines of her brows becoming sterner with every snap of paper. The soft, deep gray of her eyes became colder with every line she read until she stood off with Tobias, gaze made of steel and bitter ice.

"This hospital's people are inept, but even with that, Mrs. Kahler is on her way to a full recovery. In addition to the anticoagulants, there were a number of other toxins present in her blood. The amounts in her system suggests a long term dosage." Lips pursed, Dr. Annan snapped the file shut and turned her darkened gaze to Quinn. "This has been going on for quite some time and it is a wonder something like this didn't happen sooner. The amount of hemorrhaging you presented with was extraordinary, and frankly I'm amazed you were able to survive the trip to the hospital, let alone make a full recovery."

Quinn didn't complain when Tobias stepped in front of her, a physical wall of muscle and rage that sought to keep her safe. Even if it was far too late for that. Curling her fingers around his hand when it reached back to grip her shoulder, she quieted the vicious tempest writhing in the bond as she kept her attention on Dr. Annan.

"All of it does explain your previous symptoms. The lethargy, vomiting, lack of fine motor control, and the excessive bruising are all explained by the different toxins." Dr. Annan took a deep breath, letting it out in a hard sigh that sounded far more troubled than relieved. "With your treatment here and some oral medications you'll be prescribed, you should notice a marked improvement."

"Which means nothing if we don't know who is poisoning me," Quinn murmured, brows knitting as she stared hard at the cold, speckled tiles.

"Precisely."

Tobias stiffened, the muscles of his back bunching as he rose to his full height. Quinn could feel the heat of his anger coming off of him in waves, and even Dr. Annan shifted a small step back from the Alpha too close to losing control. Confusion and a not too small amount of betrayal coursed

the bond, rattling around in Quinn's thoughts. He didn't like that the doctor knew he had no culprits in hand yet, hated that he didn't have someone strung up for it by now.

"Might I make a suggestion," Dr. Annan asked, her only concession to Tobias' oppressive presence the way she kept her cool eyes centered on his chin instead of meeting his gaze head on. Without waiting for his leave to speak further, Dr. Annan continued, "Allow the fewest people possible to come into contact with your food for the time being. I would even go so far as to suggest the same for your children. While the person or persons involved might stop at Mrs. Kahler's recovery, there is no guarantee they won't go after the children."

"It will be handled." The promise of bloodshed and violence in Tobias' growl made even the austere Dr. Annan flinch, her eyes widening a fraction as Tobias stepped towards her. "She's discharged?"

"Yes, sir. I just have to write out a few prescriptions, which can be filled before you leave. An hour at most, I should think, and then you can take her home."

"Thank you, Dr. Annan," Quinn called out around Tobias as the doctor headed for the door.

"You thank her for doing her job," Tobias asked as he turned to her once the door shut behind the doctor. Hands cradling Quinn's jaw, he held her face up to meet the brush of his lips against hers.

"People like being appreciated," Quinn murmured, cupping her hands over his as she let slip a sardonic brow.

"I do so like it when you praise my prowess, tell me how very well I fuck you."

"You would go straight to that." Snorting a laugh, Quinn squirmed backwards on the bed, grumbling at the paper thin gown bunching and twisting around her hips. "Where are my clothes? I'm done with these things."

"I'll send... I'll have someone get something for you to wear."

Quinn's chin snapped up, tears rising and tumbling over her lashes before she'd even realized what the heavy punch to her middle was. Something deeper than the word sorrow could ever encapsulate barreled towards her on a swell of anger. Reaching for him, Quinn sobbed and wrenched at his clothes until Tobias relented. Climbing into the bed with

her, cuddling her close, he allowed Quinn to try to soothe the heartache that slammed around her skull.

“Oh, Gods, I’m so sorry,” Quinn choked out, shoving her face into his neck while her shattered purr refused to offer solace.

Since the day it’d happened, she’d been wrapped up in herself. The eerie smile, puddle of deep crimson, being forced to watch the light fade away in the golden warmth of Curtis’ gaze. She’d never once thought of how Tobias might take the loss of his second, a man she now realized was more friend than employee.

“Shh, little bird. It’s all right,” Tobias whispered against her hair.

“No it’s not! You haven’t even been able to have a proper funeral for him and—”

“He was cremated, as he wanted. We both knew the risks of our positions, and I am honored that he chose to save my mate. I will not belittle that sacrifice.”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t act like this isn’t you,” Quinn whimpered.
“Fuck you if you won’t admit it, but I know, Gods damn it.”

“Then you cry for me, Quinn. You let it out where I can’t.” Holding her all the tighter, Tobias tucked the blankets closer and smoothed his palm over her hair. Cradling her as she sobbed his sorrow out for him.

The promised hour wound up being two, most of that time taken for Quinn to calm down enough to stop bawling. If she wept for all of Tobias’ sorrows, it would never end. Taking shaky breaths as she answered all of Dr. Annan’s final questions, she stamped down on the need to soothe the Alpha who showed no outward sign of discontent. Cool and aloof as ever, he looked on with a baleful glare as doctors and nurses came and went in a parting flurry before her clothing arrived.

She was discharged. They could go home.

Except Quinn didn’t want to return to the house. Whatever, or whoever, it was that wanted her dead remained on the loose. There was no way for her to know who to trust, if someone might hurt the kids, if they might go to further extremes now that this plan had failed.

Stomach turning an uneasy somersault, she huddled against Tobias in the back of the car as it sped through the city streets. Aimed towards the home he had rebuilt just for her, she wished they were going anywhere else. There was nothing for it. Not with more dark cars trailing along behind them, armed to the teeth and one containing the most precious cargo.

Mr. Rey's convoy joined theirs not long after they'd left the hospital. Adam and Elise, along with Mr. Rey's Omega, were packed away behind the dark tinted windows of one of them. The large black SUV's and sleek sedans presented an ominous force as they hurried down the streets, gliding through the desperate filth before breaking out onto the highway. There they put on real speed, cars flying along in a tight packed group that seemed far too dangerous to Quinn. No matter Tobias' reassurances of the drivers' abilities, seeing nothing more than the reflection of her glossy window in the paint job of the vehicle beside her was nauseating.

"When we arrive, go straight inside," Tobias said, pitching his voice low for her ears alone. "Rey and his woman will follow you in with the children."

"I still don't think that will end well," Quinn whispered against his collar, unsure if watching the world stream past the windshield was better than feeling it.

"It will be fine."

"Why couldn't they have stayed with Meghan? At least her smell doesn't bother me."

"Meghan is weak. If someone had attacked the house, she wouldn't have lasted long."

"But—"

"And if she'd known their location, someone could have used that as well. It wasn't a risk I was willing to take."

"Is that why I was in the hospital under a fake name?"

" Noticed that, did you?" There was a smile in his tone, though it failed to appear on his lips when he canted his head to see her face.

"Well, when I had to sign as Agnes Blanchett, yes, I did notice." Quinn huffed a sigh and squirmed around in his arms until she could face the front of the car again, certain now that hurtling through space sideways wasn't agreeing with her.

"You could have signed it as anything you wanted to. The files were destroyed the moment we left."

The crunch of gravel under the tires interrupted Quinn's train of thought. The long drive disappeared behind them in what felt like a blink of an eye, leaving Quinn staring up at the foreboding manse sprawling across the sky. Pulled from the car by Tobias' firm hands, she hurried up the steps and inside before it registered that he wasn't at her side.

Turning to rush back out, feeling too alone and small in the echoing coolness of the foyer, Quinn came face to face with her former employer and a small dark haired woman standing in his shadow. Mr. Rey was the same as usual, with a tailored suit of charcoal and his dark hair slicked back from the richness of tawny features. The woman was a complete unknown. She hadn't worked at Wicked when Quinn was there, nothing about her familiar from the cascade of rich brown waves to the small feet encased in short black boots. Eyes so blue they were purple peered out through a fall of her hair, a trembling smile on taut red lips.

"Mama!" Adam barreled forward, releasing the woman's hand to fling himself at Quinn's knees. A raucous litany of garbled syllables and true words intermingled while he recounted every second of their time apart, small hands gesturing in wild arcs back at the woman and Mr. Rey.

"I gave them a bath earlier, and I haven't touched them much since," the woman said when Adam paused to take a panting breath, faint and refusing to make any real eye contact. Her diminutive hand trailed over Mr. Rey's arm as he held out a sleeping Elise in her car seat.

Smart girl, whoever she was. Quinn took in a deep breath to calm her nerves, regretting it as soon as she did. Her lip lifted, hand snatching Adam closer as she tugged the heavy car seat free of Mr. Rey's grip. It was a stupid maneuver, but even with the suppressant the woman took, Quinn could scent the candied sweetness of another Omega. One far too close to Quinn's kids and in her home.

The car seat was heavy enough on its own but combined with the dead weight of a sleeping child, there was no way Quinn could hold it aloft. The swift descent had it thumping against the warm wooden floor, waking Elise with a jolt. She did not appreciate the interruption to her nap, letting everyone know just how angry she was with a piercing wail.

"Devin's not gonna hurt them, Quinn," Mr. Rey said, voice a low rumble that didn't dare to command, though he pushed this Devin behind his bulk all the same.

Quinn muttered and growled under her breath, dropping to her knees to struggle with the buckles to free Elise. A squirming infant is a trial at the best of times, but an angry one stuck in straps became a demon. The entire time she shrieked, building to an ear splitting crescendo that had Adam joining in to castigate his mother and support his sister.

“What’s going on?” It was less a question than a horrified squawk as Meghan flew down the stairs. Crowding Quinn out of her way, Meghan managed to get Elise loose of the twisted coat that held her prisoner in the seat and clear of the nylon bands. Hugging Elise to her chest, the warmth in her eyes vanished when she glanced at Quinn before turning back to the whimpering child. Muttered under her breath, she kept her scolding between them, “You could have hurt her, Miss Quinn.”

The lurid wash of anger wilted into dismay. Shriveling up into a bone deep distress that left Quinn crumbling in on herself as Adam went to cuddle his sniffling sister in Meghan’s arms. Daring to glance at the near strangers crowding the foyer, Quinn saw the foreboding scowl lining Mr. Rey’s face and the flicker of distaste in the vivid blue of Devin’s eyes.

Even they thought she was a terrible mother.

Arms winding around her middle, chin tipping down until it met with her chest, she blinked back the scalding tears. No matter the circumstances, regardless of the situation, the thoughts turned and twisted in her mind, feeding on every glimpse of insecurity. It was a veritable feast.

What had been joyous relief at being normal again, or at least the promise of it soon, became a gnarled claw that crushed the hint of lightness from her heart as she watched her children soothed by another. The way they trusted Meghan to ease their hurts.

“What the hell is going on here,” Tobias snapped, charging through the door as if he expected something far different from the quiet depression oozing from his mate’s pores. Green gaze alight with rage, he took in the scene. Settling on Meghan, his forehead creased with deep lines. Without looking away from the trio, he addressed the others. “There a reason you’re still here, Rey?”

“You’re the one who said you wanted to talk.” The grinding of teeth came in the thick wave of quiet tension that followed. “How you run your house is none of my business, and I’d be just as happy to not have to stand here and see it.”

Devin’s gasp became a squeak when Mr. Rey grabbed her arm. Hauling her slight body after him, he had her on tiptoes as he marched for the doors.

“I’m not done with you, Rey.”

Pulling up short in the still open doorway, Rey muttered a curse under his breath. Tugging Devin against his side, he muffled her whine of pain

when he wrenched her arm behind her back. Large hand catching the edge of the door, he closed it with care, the snick of the latch loud.

Meghan shifted Elise to her hip, reaching out to Adam as she turned.
“I’ll take the children to—”

“Adam, go to your mother. Quinn, take Elise.” Command bit out, Tobias showed a glimpse of even white teeth. Snapped his fingers hard at his son when Adam didn’t move at a pace Tobias deemed swift enough.

Quinn dragged herself upright, gaining her feet to take Elise from Meghan’s reluctant hands. Cradling her baby girl, a warbling smile met Elise’s contented coos and fumbling grip twining in her hair. They loved her. She didn’t doubt that. Her ability to be the mother they needed was another matter altogether.

“I have lunch coming,” Tobias said against her cheek, having come up behind her while she was caught up in Elise’s dark green eyes. “You and the children go to the dining room with Rey’s woman. They’ll be joining us.”

“She’s not mine,” Mr. Rey grumbled, giving Devin a push toward Quinn.

“I’ll be there as soon as we finish business,” Tobias whispered against Quinn’s temple, the brush of his lips a kiss with every word as the bond hummed with his promises of everything left unsaid.

Quinn nodded, ignoring all of it as Elise’s weight became too much. Not even five minutes in and she struggled. She was supposed to be better now, but it was nothing of the sort. Dragging in a hard breath, Quinn headed into the dining room in something just shy of a trot, uncertain why Tobias had demanded she handle the kids. Meghan was capable, wasn’t weak, wasn’t tired. One would think after two days of lying around and sleeping, Quinn would be a little restored, but all she could say with any certainty was that she didn’t feel sick. Yet.

Devin proved she was as smart as she first appeared. Keeping the large table between them, she sat down and remained quiet and still while the kids were strapped into their seats and given crayons and paper to keep them occupied until the food arrived. Meghan hovered, tense and uncertain after Tobias’ show, forcing Quinn to ask for help at every step.

Seated between the kids, Meghan restless on the other side of the table, Quinn turned a narrowed gaze to Devin. She was gorgeous with soft, rounded features and thick hair that tumbled down to her waist in lush waves. Outfit sexy and subtle, something Quinn would love to indulge in if

Tobias didn't insist on piecing her wardrobe together himself. The wide slash of cleavage hinted at full breasts, the pinch of the jacket at her waist flaring out to soft ruffles that accentuated her hips.

"Did you buy that or him?" Quinn pulled her lips in, not sure if she should have asked the question, or even addressed the woman. There was no mark Quinn could see, but who knew how Mr. Rey felt about her.

"Bit of both. He took me shopping, but I picked it out," Devin said, fingers working over the high gloss of the table to trace a whorl of darkened wood. "Beau picks out everything he wants me to wear, though."

"What?"

"What?" Devin glanced up, eyes wide and something close to fear shining in the deep blue depths before she sent her gaze bouncing around the room to avoid Quinn's.

"They both...?" Quinn's splayed fingers covered her mouth, pale brows traveling down in a rush as she thought through what that meant and all it would entail. "You poor thing. Mr. Rey is nice when he wants to be, but Mr. Beaumont..."

"Beau got me a job when I really needed it," Devin murmured at the fingers she clenched tight on top of the table.

"What job?"

"Office manager."

"Chrissy left? But she was saving up for... Well, that was a while ago, wasn't it?" Quinn's lips thinned, a slash of bitterness that so much time was lost to her. Everyone at the club moved on, got on with their lives. Her sometime friends might not even have cared what happened to her. Resentment carved a neat slice, letting the darkness of her mood spill free.
"Not a dancer then?"

"They don't let Omegas on the floor anymore since... Since what happened."

"You mean me?"

"In a way... I think it has more to do with him coming to the club." Devin's shoulders rolled in a shrug, lush lips sliding sideways. "Apparently he did some real damage, cost them a lot of money."

"What do you mean?" Quinn leaned forward on her elbows, animosity flowing away like so much dirty water as curiosity reared its head.

"Mr. Kahler. I'm not certain, no one's very clear on the details, but he came into the club and tore the place up. Something about you being gone.

Some of the girls say he thought Rey and Beau were in on it or knew who was. They say he almost killed them.”

“They say when that was?”

“I’m sure that’s just reckless gossip, Miss Quinn,” Meghan said, tone as unobtrusive as she could make it and still be heard.

Devin turned her head, though she didn’t grace Meghan with her gaze. Instead she met Quinn’s for a moment, the corner of her lips perking up in a real smile. “It’d be a bit over a year now.”

“That’s enough,” Mr. Rey said, the thunder of warning directed at Devin as he stalked into the room. Hand landing hard on a shoulder far too small to take such abuse, he gave Devin a quick shake of reprimand.

Quinn sucked a breath between her teeth, ready to tell him to leave Devin alone before Tobias’ hands settled over her shoulders. The bond kicked and vibrated, a calming resonance at odds with the warning tendrils that slipped through her veins. It was enough to make Quinn pause, long enough for her to look at the pair across the table. Devin set her cheek to Rey’s hand, leaning into him while those rough fingers softened to work away the bite of his scolding. Subtle as a shadow in the darkness, she would have missed the moment with a single blink.

Then Tobias was moving, making orders and commanding those around him with the easy air of a man used to getting his way. Lunch came on the arms of strangers, trays laden with food that smelled incredible and looked just as amazing.

Quinn didn’t trust any of it.

“What’s this?” Genuine surprised flitted over Meghan’s soft features, settling in the rich brown of her gaze as the two men carrying the food set the trays down on the table. “Has something happened to Henry?”

Everyone ignored the question as Tobias leaned forward. Hand darting out, Quinn covered Elise’s tray, wide eyes taking in everything as she stopped Tobias from putting the large spoonful of pasta where their daughter could reach it.

“That’s enough, little bird.” A grinding force hidden under the quiet words, he demanded Quinn move. Buried under the cool exterior, the promise that it would all be fine shone in the evergreen of his eyes.

Either she moved or started an argument, and in front of a man like Mr. Rey, a disobedient mate couldn’t go unanswered. Still her hand remained,

lips tight over her teeth and the spill of words that wanted to plead for some real assurances, an explanation of why he thought everything was safe now.

He surprised everyone, Quinn most of all.

“It’s all right, sweetness. Now move.”

“Miss Quinn?” With less than a scuff of soft-soled shoes against the thick rug, Meghan scurried to stand behind Elise, gaze darting between Tobias and Quinn. Restless hands refusing to settle over the back of Elise’s chair, she hovered as if she would protect Elise from some unseen foe.

Ignoring Meghan yet again, Quinn exhaled hard and forced her hand away from Elise’s tray. Pausing to untangle little fingers from her sleeve, knitting brows and turbulent gray gaze kept watch over the slick pile of noodles.

“Mr. Kahler, what’s going on?”

“Sit down, Meghan.” Tobias held Quinn’s gaze as he slid the heavy dish laden with red sauced spaghetti towards her, a dip of his chin indicating Adam.

Harder by far to bolster up the courage to serve Adam than it was to watch Tobias, Quinn managed it. Dragging up a smile as the meatballs rolled around his plate and he giggled at them, she smoothed back Adam’s too long bangs before she turned to the table. Everyone else had their food, plates piled high with so much it seemed obscene. Quinn’s stomach clenched, starved and angry, bitter unease mixing with the whole lot.

“Mama, why aren’t you eating?” Roundness of his face puckered, the hazel of his eyes so green in that moment he looked too much like Tobias by half, Adam thrust his hand out to the many options and pointed at the generous spread. “You eat, Mama.”

Quinn caught the widening of Devin’s eyes, the tilt of Mr. Rey’s chin, and for a moment sheer, unadulterated pride threatened to choke her. That was her son surprising these strangers as he spoke and attempted to swirl his spaghetti onto his fork.

She had no choice when Tobias began piling food onto her plate. A little of everything, she recognized some of the foods from what he’d ordered during their single outing. Delicate shrimp nestled in whorls of thin pasta caught her eye first. Any hesitation fell away as the first hints of the warm sauce burst across her palate. Ravenous, she devoured everything Tobias put upon her plate and reached for yet more. Mushrooms packed full of some concoction that tasted of rosemary and scallions, herb crusted

chicken, fish laden with lemon slices and a savory crust. All of it disappeared, one bite at a time, as she bustled between her two children to help them cut up their food and get it into hungry mouths.

Sated at last, Quinn leaned back. Unerring, her heavy lidded gaze met Tobias', and met the smug amusement head on with a shy smile. Feeling more than a little ridiculous, she dragged her attention away from the heat growing ever more impatient in his eyes to fuss over the saffron bright smears coating Elise's face and hands.

Brimming with an energy she hadn't felt in ages, Quinn could have laughed out loud at the giddiness that infected her. No queasiness disrupted her unabashed joy, no lethargy to drag her into an abyss of darkness. It was her, simple and clearheaded for once.

"We should go," Mr. Rey said, standing and pulling Devin along with him. Tucked against his side, he forced the small woman's nose against his coat. "Leaving Beau alone with the club for too long leads to things."

They all heard Devin's snort of amusement, and Quinn was hard pressed not to join in the muffled snicker that Devin hid behind a quick palm. Things, indeed.

Despite the rocky beginning of their meeting, Quinn entertained the idea of having a friend. Someone who understood the trials of all this, the special pain and resentment that came with being an Omega. Thoughts crumbling before they formed to true hope, Quinn glanced at Tobias to see the granite cast of his lips and the coolness of his eyes.

There would be no idle visits, and never with someone like Devin.

"Take the children upstairs. There's an Alpha waiting there, Rebecca. She'll watch the children while they nap, and I want you to come to the study," Tobias whispered against the shell of her ear as he helped Quinn to her feet.

"But Meg—"

"Do as I say, little bird."

Quinn's feet moved, hands pulling Elise from her chair as Meghan dealt with Adam's squirming and whining. Dangerous and brittle, Tobias' tone left no room for her usual arguing, the undercurrent of the command snapping through her synapses in a live wire that frazzled her nerves until she did as she was told. Halfway up the stairs she dared to glance back, betrayed and indignant with his coarse treatment, to find him in heated conversation with Mr. Rey. Movement swift, his hand curled into the crisp

blackness of Mr. Rey's shirt, hauling Rey's body up until it dangled from a fist.

Tobias was just a bit taller than Mr. Rey, not as large and muscled, yet he lifted the other man with ease.

Swallowing a gasp as Mr. Rey's body met with the dark paneled wall, Quinn hurried up the rest of the stairs.

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CHAPTER TEN

After settling the kids down for a nap, which was far easier than she anticipated with a strange Alpha female lingering nearby, Quinn went to the study as Tobias demanded. Still rattled by the easy way he flipped the switch of his kindness on and off, she fell into the armchair off to the side so he would not be able to force her against his body when he joined her. Contact ruined everything. The warmth of him dragged out her resentment by the murky fistfuls until she became dripping honey in his hands.

Angry and restless with the nervous energy crackling along her spine, she tucked her body tight into the large chair. Glaring at the door, she waited for him to come to her.

She didn't understand why he invited Mr. Rey and Devin to eat with them or why Meghan wasn't being allowed to do her job. Even his personal chef, Henry, hadn't cooked their meal. Instead, strangers swarmed their home, people she didn't know or trust. Tobias' sudden change from the hospital confused her even more, the quiet peace she'd known in that sterile space dashed to bloody pieces across the floor.

Lower lip trying to tremble, Quinn lifted her chin as the door opened to allow Tobias to enter. Pausing just inside the doorway, his darkened gaze took in Quinn's position. Tablet smacking against his thigh just the once, he went to the couch and settled his heavy frame into the soft cushions. Generous space to one side, the usual place that held Quinn prisoner between him and the armrest remained a gaping maw of disquiet.

He didn't like her not being where she should have been, liked it even less she'd curled into a defensive ball. Eyes cutting sideways, he looked at

the empty spot then fixed Quinn in his sights. Single dark brow rising, he directed without words what he expected.

He could go on expecting until the end of days, as far as she was concerned. Crossing her arms over her shins, she barricaded against the crawling itch to go to him. Chin to upturned knees, she glared back.

“Suit yourself. Sit there and pout.” Tobias flipped the tablet around and flicked the cover back. Screen coming to life, it cast the hard lines of his jaw in stark contrast with its eerie blue glow. Rapid taps of his fingers did something, swipes and what might have been a thumbprint getting him to where he wanted to be.

Colors flashed across the scowl painting his features, blurred lights reflected in his eyes as Quinn tried to watch without being noticed. Minutes slid by, the gripping need to pace and snarl growing louder by the second.

“What are you doing,” Quinn snapped, even the frayed thread of patience dissolving under her temper.

“Watching security footage from one of the warehouses.”

“Do you care to explain what the ever loving hell—”

“Calm down, little bird.”

“I will not calm down,” Quinn hissed as she launched from the chair, sending the heavy piece scuttling backwards a meager inch in her rage before she began to pace the seating arrangement.

“Be quiet.” Tobias lowered the tablet by a fraction, the dark sweep of his brows coming together. The glow from the screen froze in his eyes, turning the deep green a brilliant chartreuse as he narrowed his gaze at her in a glare.

Quinn’s gasp rattled through a chest too tight to drag it down into frozen lungs. Palm flat against the cold bands cinching ever tighter, wild grays swung towards the man sitting so still it was eerie. Panic ran rampant through her, coiling through delicate vertebrae and forcing her shoulders high against an expected blow. Not until she whined and crashed to the floor, cowering before the bright gleam of his stitched loafers, did Tobias move.

“I told you to be quiet,” he growled against Quinn’s throat as crippling heat melted away the brutal cold. With rough hands he shoved Quinn into the scant space beside him, dragging her head to his chest with a fistful of her curls.

Quinn sucked down one sultry breath after another, panting in desperate time to the staccato of her racing heart. The room swirled and slipped, murky gray threatening the edges of her vision until the overwhelming thunder of his heart caught hold. Grabbing hers, hauling it into a rhythm not its own, he forced Quinn into a languid calm that her body fought. Left shivering and sick while turbulent swells of heat and cold bashed her against the splintered rocks of Tobias' will, she snarled and clawed at the exposed bit of flesh on his neck.

The roar of his heart dimmed, scalding heat lessening. He let Quinn breathe through the last violent tremors with her teeth set deep into his skin, the faint taste of copper coating the back of her throat. Not enough to mark, at least not for long, but enough to ground her as she unfurled from the tight huddle. Sliding down his body until she lay sprawled over his lap, she choked back the sob that tore at her throat.

“Don’t. Do. That.”

“You need to listen—”

“Don’t you fucking do that to me again, or I swear to the Gods, you will regret it, Tobias Kahler.”

“Are you threatening me, little bird?”

“It’s a promise,” Quinn said, fading into a murmur as she became distracted. The tablet lay in front of her, the recording frozen on a grainy image. Pulling back, she blinked hard to focus on the small figure enlarged on the screen. “What is that?”

“A street in the warehouses, between the club and housing.”

“I... don’t understand.” Quinn sniffled, running the back of one hand across her nose as the other used his clothing for handholds to pull herself up to kneel beside him.

“Do you know what this is?” Voice too soft to be passed off as casual, his fingers tripping down her spine became another warning. Touch possessive, he angled the tablet so Quinn could see it all the clearer.

“No,” Quinn whispered, fingers hovering over the image of Marina paused in mid step, looking tired and all the worse for being portrayed in shifting grays.

“A gift for my little bird.”

Tobias tapped at the image and the footage began to play. Marina walking down the alley, coming ever closer to the camera. The exhausted woman pausing, the tension drawing her shoulders back felt even through

the miles of optic interference. Straight to Quinn's heart where it wrenched the aching muscle. Quinn understood that fear, even recognized the smile her mother slapped on when she identified whoever it was that had their backs to the camera. Face cold and hot in turns, Quinn's fingers clenched over her stomach to stop the sickening tide of foreboding.

"What are they going to do to her?" Fingertips glancing against the screen sped the recording up, her question answered as the men rushed forward. Crowding Marina against the filthy brick and stone, the gaudy layers of her clothing torn away. There was no doubting what would happen then.

"What she promised to do to my mate." Deadpan delivery, Tobias gave no hint of how he might feel about his order. Not even the stony green of his gaze as Quinn caught and held it gave away his emotions. The bond lie still and quiet, waiting with bated breath.

"They're... just going to take her somewhere else, right," Quinn asked, refusing to acknowledge any of it. Pretending that the words never slipped over his tongue as the world shook and crumbled around her. The choking dust of so many emotions left to wither into ashy confusion. "She's my mother, Tobias."

Tobias' lip lifted, the beginnings of an impatient snarl settling before it could claw its way free. "She is an employee who betrayed my trust."

"Don't you even care that—"

"Don't doubt how deeply I care for something because I don't go to pieces over it, little bird," Tobias said, the brittle shards of his words burrowing deep under her skin. "There is something far more important going on here. She is getting exactly what she deserves."

"But you're hurting her. No one deserves that." Quinn looked at the tablet again, features pinched as her thoughts turned to the inky darkness of disquiet. She wanted her mother gone, made him promise not to kill Marina, but this was too much. Quinn flinched as if the backhanded blow catching Marina's cheek was aimed at her.

"If she's had a hand in what's happened to you, I will end her."

Quinn knew the whimper came from her throat, watching as Marina's slack body was tossed into the back of a van. Battered, the dark smudges seemed too stark against the eerie pale gray of her skin.

Tobias growled at the man who charged into the study, interrupting Quinn's personal horror. Dark clothing, the dull gleam of a weapon at his

hip, one of the guards lacking all of Curtis' quiet consideration and sense of timing. The knife twisted within Quinn's heart as the large male refused to transform into the Beta come back to life to taunt her with his derision. Shoved into the back of the couch, Quinn grunted as Tobias' arm connected with her middle, holding her behind his bulk as he faced off with the perceived threat.

"Sorry, sir." Having the good sense to look chagrined, the lesser Alpha bowed his head. A glance tipped in Quinn's direction, his gaze skimming over the hint of her behind Tobias as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Out with it, Simon."

"Sir, Ross would like to know if you want the other files."

"Not just now," Tobias said, catching Quinn's troubled gray eyes for a moment before swinging back to face the guard. "You can bring Meghan here."

"Meghan?" That caught Simon's attention, wide brown eyes swinging up to meet Tobias' for a breath of a heartbeat before hammering into the floor at his feet.

"Yes. The nanny. Tell her I need to speak with her."

Tobias' fingers clamped over Quinn's hip, keeping her still and quiet while Simon left the room. As the door swung shut, he began manhandling her into position beside him. Forcing her body into the relaxed repose he would expect of her, the twilit darkness of his gaze dared her to resist.

Of course she did.

Shoving at his arm, teeth bared in a feral snarl, she tried to get away from him. Each attempt Quinn made to rise, to kick, met a swift end. Grip painful in its cautious gentleness, he kept her by his side. Even when Meghan came into the room, stilted and more than a little afraid, he kept his attention on Quinn. Working her body back into place, ignoring the Beta standing worried on the sidelines until Quinn shrieked and fell back into the couch. Finally still with his face close and his mountainous weight crushing her into the cushions, she gave up the physical fight.

"Mind the children," Tobias said, the reverberation of his growl slamming into both women though he spoke to Meghan. "Rebecca remains with you until Quinn or I come to fetch them."

"Of course, sir." Unable to get out of the study fast enough, Meghan turned and bolted. Stumbling as her shoulder caught the doorjamb, her quiet

hiss was cut off by the door shutting just shy of being slammed.

“You can’t do this, little bird,” Tobias said through a sound somehow even darker than his usual growling demands. Fingers driving into her hair, tight against her scalp, he brought their faces closer. Lips near touching as he continued to warn, the confusing jumble of signals did nothing to calm. “You cannot defy me in front of others.”

“I’m not your powerless bitch anymore,” Quinn whined as her neck was stretched taut, his fist angling her head back ever further.

“You never were, sweetness.”

The press of his lips stung as Quinn remained closed to the kiss so that he ground tender flesh against teeth. His quiet roar a relentless weight against her chest drove the air from her lungs in a fluttering rush. Thumb at her jaw, prying her mouth open to his invasion, he assaulted one sense after the other. The screeching rattle of the bond at war with the dulcet hum of his gratified sounds, Tobias gave no mercy as he systematically destroyed her.

Stubble a rough rasp against her skin, it tingled and burned. Distracting her as the slick slide of his tongue probed deep between her lips. Fist clenched tight in her curls, he held her still for the violent caresses, all the while groaning needy epithets he forced Quinn to breathe in with every gasp.

Resistance fading with each tormented clash, Quinn could only groan when he hooked his free hand in the waist of her pants. Tearing the soft fabric with a single twist to wrench it over her hips. Frayed cloth pulled taut at her knees, the hand shoved between her thighs to cup her. Pausing to stroke his fingers over the glistening seam of her sex, his bone shattering rumble made her shiver.

“You’ve always been mine, but never powerless, little bird,” Tobias husked between flicks of his tongue against Quinn’s flushed lips. “Never that.”

“Get off of me,” Quinn panted out, struggling against the rising heat and the divine slide of his hand moving against her. Fingers curling into the lapels of his jacket, she shoved while refusing to let go. Bond discordant as ever, the piercing shrillness of its song rattled through her thoughts and bones. Shattered under the devastating force of it, she whined. Twisted the splintering mass in her hands, thrusting it away, wanting nothing to do with the sweet words and promises coating it in sticky foulness.

“Don’t, Quinn,” he said against her neck, low growl calling to her, urging more slick to coat his hand as thick fingers slipped inside. “Don’t fight me. Let me give you this.”

“You had my mother raped and beaten and you want to fuck me,” Quinn screamed, dredging up the frozen tendrils of her will. Using it against all those honeyed declarations and the languid warmth they held.

“She is *nothing* to you,” Tobias roared against her breasts, forehead crushing her chest. Hands that once sought to draw out her responses now grabbed and clutched, possessive as he moved to catch her gaze, forcing her to look at him. “She has hurt you in ways I can never fix, things you cling to even now. You’re so ready to distrust when I’ve given you everything. Easy to call me the villain just because I’m the only one willing to do something about it.”

Tobias stood, grabbing Quinn’s arm as he did. Hauled into his embrace, she screamed when he lifted her, arms and legs pinned in the iron bands of his clutches as he stormed out of the study. The hall flew by with his long strides, stairs appearing and gone before she could do more than register the shocked faces of the many black clothed guards milling around.

Back slamming into the mattress, Quinn snarled as she bounced across the bed. The stale landscape of her nest cast into ruins, she grabbed fistfuls of the blankets to pull her body away as Tobias followed.

“And yes,” he continued as if there had never been any interruption, “I expect you to appreciate my efforts to make you happy. You, who thanks a Gods damned doctor for doing her job and not the man who has risked everything for you.”

“You only—”

“Quiet,” Tobias shouted, grabbing hold of Quinn’s kicking leg to pull her under his weight. Burying her in his scent and body as he bared his teeth, one hand went to his throat. Ripping away the fine linen of his shirt, dragging it down his shoulder to expose the red ring of her claim. “The Alpha who did this to prove to you, once and for all, that he is yours as much as you are his.”

“You didn’t know,” Quinn said, stumbling over the words in near silence. Flinching away from the sight that filled her with as much ominous dread as furious gratification. The elated sense of power in the hospital long since fled since her first steps through those doors, she cowered beneath him.

"I knew it would bind me to you, and that was all that mattered," he hissed, slapping her outer thigh when she resisted the pressure of his knee. "Do not make me tell you to spread one more time."

"No! Please don't do this," Quinn shouted, squirming her way through the crumbling mountains blankets. "If you hurt me—"

"I have never hurt you. I am sick of these accusations."

"All you have ever done is hurt me! From the very beginning, and have you forgotten what put me in the hospital? You. Raping me for hours, not listening to me, refusing to stop while I bled out under you—"

"Enough," Tobias yelled, the sound rattling the windows in their casements. Thin veneer of restraint vanishing, so much acrid smoke between them, he set to work. Ignoring her shrieks and yells, Tobias tore her clothes away. The tattered remains of her pants fell under his strength, the delicate sweater becoming tangled threads in his hands. Maneuvering her far smaller body across the bed, he splayed her in the middle of the too large space. "It is long past time that you showed your appreciation to your mate. Shall I remind you of all that I've done?"

Wrists pinned to her thighs, spread wide around him, Quinn sobbed. Screamed at the ceiling as he moved down her body with torrid kisses. Tongue licking at the fine sheen of sweat coating her while she continued to struggle. All of it in vain as he called to her, pushing the sound into her skin, the deep rumble vibrating along her spine as she arched and writhed.

"I could have kept you as a breeder, but I didn't. I gave you the power of being my mate, the mother of my children," he murmured against her.

Waiting for the rush of heady sunshine that she could fight against where her physical strength would never be enough, Quinn balked when all he did was press that lying mouth against her. Shuddering as his tongue dipped between the slick lips of her pussy, mapping the delicate folds, nothing but the intense warmth of her body's betrayal came to her. None of his usual tricks, no drowning her in the golden heat. Tobias destroyed her one piece at a time with her basest chemistry.

"I feed you the finest foods, keep you in luxurious clothes."

Body so used to his touch, she didn't realize her knees had long since fallen open. That her hips bucked against the slick slide of his lips when he pressed them against the thundering pulse hammering in her clit. The bundle of nerves begging for attention, wanton and desperate while Quinn gasped.

“I gave you safety. A real home where you can raise our children.”

“S-Stop. Just stop, please...”

Thick fingers careful as they slid into her wet heat, he crooked them to rub against that delicious spot. Grinding against it while easing her into the slow rhythm, his mouth caught her clit. Soft suction built to something far stronger, almost painful in its pleasure, while he flicked his tongue over the imprisoned bit of flesh.

“I’ve protected you as best I can, and I will never forgive myself for what happened to you while you were mine.”

Unwanted pleasure fueled by anger tangled up her spine. Ratcheting through the vertebrae, Quinn couldn’t fight against the rising tide of sensations. She bucked against the devastation only he could bring, fingers reaching for his hair, left to scratch at her skin as he kept her locked in his grip.

Quinn’s moans echoed through the room as sweet, hot bliss twined through her veins. Jostled higher with every coarse flick of his tongue, his name flew from her lips on an airy cry announcing her approaching downfall.

Tobias redoubled his efforts.

Brought to the brink, Quinn keened as the impending crash rose up before her scrunched eyelids. Promising a release she didn’t want, he growled words of encouragement between hard sucks to the abused flesh of her clit. Abandoning his hold on her wrists, he palmed Quinn’s ass with one hand, bringing her up to his mouth as a delicious feast. Fingers of his other hand plunging into her in a furious tempo, he gave her no choice.

Teetering on the edge, Quinn cried out. Cursing and praising him in the same panting breath. A sudden flare of honeyed sunshine exploded within her chest. Ripped open, rays of golden warmth bursting forth through her senses brought the doubled sensation of his working lips and teeth. She could feel every movement he made, deep inside her soul and on every inch of her tingling skin.

There was no defense for such a sweet violation.

Screams of ecstasy pouring from between slack lips, she came. Wet sounds grew louder as her pussy rippled and clutched at his pumping fingers, trying to hold on to something that would not come. White hot torrents speared through her, leaving syrupy lies in their wake. Sensation unending as he created a vicious loop. Feeding every touch back to her,

compounding it all. Tobias prolonged her pleasure until Quinn could only croak out a hoarse cry. Left her broken and shivering as her lungs filled with ragged gasps of air too thick with the scents of sex and mayhem.

“You are mine, little bird,” he whispered against reddened flesh, nuzzling the soft skin where thigh met hip. “Resist all you want, cry if you must, but I can see inside of you and I know everything that you refuse to admit.”

“You see what you want to see,” Quinn sobbed, heels digging into his ribs to twitch away from his sucking mouth. “You don’t see me.”

Snarling a curse under his breath, Tobias grasped her hips and pulled Quinn flush to his waiting lips. Forced her to endure the ache of too much sensation as he lapped through her wetness, tongue burrowing deep before he began to lick and suck at her thighs and the softness of her mound again.

“I see plenty, little bird,” he said through a sultry growl, lips opening to suck hard on her clit until she jostled and whined before he eased back. “No one has ever offered you even half of what I’ve freely given you.”

“You take too much.” Quinn panted, palms shoving at his forehead when he dipped down to taste her. Whined and jostled when he wouldn’t be moved from lapping at the river of slick.

“I give more.” Breathing in her scent, he exhaled in a low groan of pure male satisfaction.

“Not enough.”

“She abandoned you. Betrayed you. I gave you what you needed, even if you don’t want it, little bird,” Tobias whispered as he made his way up her body. Feathering kisses over her skin until he covered her, shielding her from everything but his harsh words. “You are gentle and good, but I’m not. I’ll be evil for you whenever I need to be.”

“Shut up!” Quinn hissed as his mouth covered his claim on her shoulder, bucking when the flat of his tongue slid over the puckered flesh. Engulfed in lingering pleasure, she fought to make sense of what he was saying. Grinding through one thought to the next, she couldn’t concentrate through the blissful haze to argue.

“I see you. When you forget you hate me so much and give me your purrs and hums. Crying for my loss.” He paused to press bared teeth to her throat, grinding down into her. Rubbing his cock against her pussy to make her squirm. “I see the scared little girl who is just afraid of loving as being loved.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Quinn shrieked the words, louder with every syllable. Still her legs wrapped around him, ankles hooked to drive her heels into the small of his back. Pulling him closer as her hips began to rock. Hands at his shoulders no longer tried to push and shove, nails digging bright pink half moons into his skin.

“Most importantly, little bird, you ran from all of them.” His subterranean growl trailed off into a groan as he moved, sliding through her slick heat. “I’m the only one who brought you back. I’m never letting you go.”

The pressure of his thick length too perfect, too Gods damned right as he worked his hips, Quinn whimpered. Refusing to listen to another word while he kept her dazed, she grabbed his hair in her fists and wrenched him down into a kiss. Swallowed his shuddering moan as he lowered more of his weight to give her the delicious friction she needed.

It wasn’t enough.

Control slipping, the bond became a deafening roar. Feeling every nuance of sensation and thought as it rebounded between them was too much. Shivering as he slid against her, feeling it inside and out as he nudged her clit with each careful thrust. She needed more. A shift of her hips, the angle just right, he slid inside of her. Stretching her wide around his length as his cock drove in before he could stop it.

Snapping her teeth as he pulled back, she ignored his slow smile. Dug her nails deep into the long muscles of his back, pummeling her heels against him when he swayed to a stop.

“I can’t be gentle, sweetness,” Tobias said against her lips, giving her the edge of his teeth to prove his point. “I need to fuck you. I want to knot you so good you feel it for days and have my come dripping out of you for hours.”

Quinn tried to groan the curse that lingered on her tongue, but he trapped it with his sucking mouth. Teasing over her, drawing her between his lips where he could play and nip at the slick muscle.

“Too soon. Later,” he grunted over her shrill whine as he pulled out. Hand between them, he slapped the back of his fingers against her spread lips, mouth twitching at her squeal. “And too tempting.”

“Please,” Quinn stammered, but it was no use. No matter how she tugged and offered herself to him, Tobias wrangled her limbs back down, holding her there as he situated his shoulders between her spread thighs.

“Now be a good girl and come hard for me.”

Quinn followed that command with ease, too many times to count until even his calls and growling orders couldn’t make her respond beyond a twitching groan and pleas for mercy. Even then he knelt over her, guiding her hands to stroke him. Teasing her with the heady fluid streaming from his crown until he released in shuddering spasms over her body. Coating her in thick white strands that he rubbed into her skin while she hummed.

Only then did he sprawl out beside her, tucking her halfway under his body and crushing her as they both drifted off, exhausted.

She wouldn’t have it any other way just then.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Waking to find the bed empty left Quinn far colder than the cool shadows of early morning stretching through the room allowed for.

He'd covered her at some point, tucking Quinn under a blanket and bunching a messy clump of fabric around the edges of the bed. Building a shoddy nest to hold her while she slept after he left. It disgusted her to even look at such a shamble, nothing pleasing to the eye about the hard twists and turns the sheets took on with his careless hands. It wrenched at something deep in the confines of her heart, too. Snarled its fingers within that writhing thing centered in her chest and *pulled* until Quinn pushed trembling fingers hard against the quiver of her lips.

Smothering that uncomfortable emotion under a veritable sea of resentment, Quinn wasted no more time before fleeing the bed and the ruined nest. She didn't want to think about everything he said as he tormented her body through the long hours of the night. Refused to examine the way her body betrayed her each and every time. It wasn't fair that he could do that to her. Even now the bond danced within her, jittery with anticipation as she felt his presence nearby. Realizing he hadn't left the house shouldn't fill her with giddy warmth.

Cranking the shower on, she didn't wait for the water to heat. Too eager by half to get their mingling scents off of her body. Scrubbing at her skin until it was a rosy pink, she crashed to a halt.

How many times had she done this? How many more times would she clean away the evidence of her downfall?

Crumbling to the tiles, wedged into the back corner, Quinn brought her knees to her chest. Shoving her face into the shadowy recess it made, she

tried to think past the prickling sensation of awareness. Attempting to strangle the bond was no use, whatever he'd done the night before too fresh in her dazed memories. She remembered crying out for him, answering his peculiar mix of curses and endearments with her own. Unable to believe half of the things she couldn't quite remember if she'd said or only thought. One thing remained clear above all of it, free of the languid haze.

Tobias Kahler was the only man—the only *person*—who ever came for her. He'd made sure that at least shone like a beacon among all the moans and sighs.

Somehow he forced her even now, deep within her own mind. Made her pick apart all these emotions, these thoughts that left her so tangled up in him she didn't know what she was anymore. She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment it became not easier, but more desirable for her to accept it all.

Remaining there for too long even for her own tastes, she climbed to her feet to finish. Lobster red and aching, Quinn scoured her skin dry with the towel. Hating its plushness and warmth, she growled and threw it away. Uncomfortable in her own skin, she stormed out of the foggy heat.

Coming into the bedroom, she stopped again. Shivering in the cool shadows, she stared at the opulence as if seeing it for the first time. The snarl erupted from her lips long before she heard it, hands tearing at the bed. Flinging sheets and blankets wherever they would land, she destroyed any hints of the nest he'd built around her. Wanted nothing to do with any of it, hating that her scent was ingrained in the plush mattress. Everywhere she looked, there was some sign of her. The room that she had refused to acknowledge as anything but his held traces of her in every corner. From the fuzzy, soft blanket draped over the small couch by the windows to the array of glittering jewelry she'd never worn but secretly adored.

Feeling crazed, she stormed into the closet, pulling on whatever came to hand first. It didn't matter what she looked like. He still treated her like his plaything, and nothing had changed at all. The man that proclaimed his need for her in the hospital was a lie, just like all of his other lies. All of this was no different and she'd be stupid to think otherwise.

Not sparing herself a glance in the large mirror, she went for the door.

Quinn's gasp died in her throat, its lifeless body tangled with her lungs and refusing to draw in another breath. A solid line of bodies barred the exit, their dark backs as good as any fence.

“Mr. Kahler asks that you remain in your room, ma’am.”

Quinn’s gaze swept over the line again, amazed that she recognized the one who dared speak to her. Stan, the one who would solve the problem of the punk kid. Worn down to the gritty nub of her reserves, Quinn’s lips parted to show her teeth.

“Get out of my way.”

“Ma’am—”

“I’m just going to my kids, okay? Now move.”

“We can’t do that.”

“I said move!” Quinn’s growl was pathetic even to her ears, weak and small against the towering Alphas. Yet Stan rocked back on his heels, eyes going wide and lips parting.

She was just as shocked, but not paralyzed by it. With trembling fingers she shoved past, refusing to let the moment pass without some action. They parted before her, heavy bodies stumbling over each other to get out of her way while Quinn breezed past. Chin high, shaking with the riot of anxiety and elation crashing through her veins, she stalked down the hall to where her babies still slept.

Ensconced with Adam and Elise in the nursery, Quinn found a broken sort of peace. Perhaps knowing it would be fleeting made it all the sweeter as she built soaring towers and made the right noises for the bright plastic cars to bring it all tumbling down.

The initial difficulties she’d had in prying the kids away from Rebecca and Meghan failed to cast a shadow over these handfuls of moments.

Riding the powerful high of having the men guarding her room give way, she’d expected the female Alpha to fold just as fast. Rebecca held out a bit longer, but a single glare from Quinn sent her to the doorway, hurrying to get out of the Omega’s space. Meghan gave in with little more than a wave of Quinn’s hand.

It made Quinn all the more aware that Tobias was right in that respect. Short of Alphas guarding their every move, there was no way to keep her babies safe. Even then, all it would take was a single, more powerful Alpha to sway them. It was how Alphas ruled entire cities. Tobias reigned over Alderbrook in the same way.

Smiling as Elise babbled and slapped a wet fist against the far smaller tower Quinn helped her build, she gave Elise a little nudge to make the blocks clatter to the floor.

“Proud of yourself?”

All three of them startled, none of them having heard Tobias come into the room or noticing him leaning stiff backed against the closed door. Where Adam and Elise burst into happy smiles, Quinn set her emotions into something approaching neutral, strangling the swell of the bond down to the thinnest trickle as she faced him. Adam clambered to his feet to go to his father while Elise reached out and mixed her few words with gurgling coos.

Ignoring Quinn, he smiled at his son and daughter, coming further into the room to scoop them up into his arms. One on either side, they both nuzzled his neck and hummed their contentment.

Any warmth in his gaze wilted and fell to dust as he looked at Quinn. Lowering to a crouch, he deposited both kids back onto the rug, nudging them towards their abandoned toys. Surprising Quinn, he sat down, one knee up with an arm braced over it as he contemplated her with narrowed eyes.

“I asked you a question. You’ve yet to answer me.”

“Does my answer actually matter?”

“Don’t.”

Quinn’s heart slammed around the confines of her chest at his tone. An edge of danger, serrated and waiting in the lightless depths, skimmed the undercurrents of his deep voice. Far more disturbing was where else it touched. A shivering tingle coursing down her spine and through her hips, the threat of him shouldn’t have made her feel warm. Posture remaining casual, he slid a cherry red block across the rug to Elise’s grabbing hands. The kids continued on, clueless and absorbed in their serious tasks of play.

“I just wanted to see them,” Quinn whispered while her fingers plucked and twisted the pleated edge of her skirt. Far shorter than the ones she was used to finding hanging on the racks, she didn’t remember when it might have been added to the collection of things he gave her. The fact it bared her legs at all was a statement in and of itself. One she didn’t want to contemplate. “You don’t know how hard it’s been not being able to do even this with them.”

“What I do is to keep all of you safe.” Chest rising, expanding as he took a breath that looked as if it would burst his lungs, Tobias let it out with a measured control that made it less of a sigh. “Don’t act so reckless again.”

“How was it—”

"If they guess, there will be no end to the challenges on my rule over Alderbrook. You're not stupid, little bird. You know this."

"Daddy," Adam huffed, face pinched as he plowed through his tower to come stand before Quinn. Didn't even pause to revel in his destruction. Arms wide, he protected his mother and glared with squinted eyes at his father. "That's a bad word! Don't call Mama stupid."

"That's right, baby boy. Stupid is a bad word." Quinn buried her smile in Adam's neck as she hugged him to her chest, arms wrapped so tight around him he squirmed.

"Is a bad word," Adam said again, wriggling free of Quinn's embrace to stomp back to his blocks. "Don't say it again, Daddy."

"Your influence, I take it," Tobias drawled, fingers rolling towards their son as he forgot his demonstration and settled back in to play.

"It's not nice." Quinn's fingers raked through the nap of the rug. Gaze bouncing from one primary bright object to the next, she refused to meet the one she felt searing along her skin.

Lips clamped over the refusal that skittered over her tongue when he grabbed her arm, she stood with his careful show of assistance. Brought against his towering form, kept still in his warm shadow, she shivered though she smiled at her little ones when they looked her way. She shouldn't feel so flush, so out of sorts when he was this close, yet it took a ridiculous amount of willpower not to breathe in the rich spice of chocolate and chilies that hung around her. Tobias turned her to face him, fingers under her chin forcing pale grays to meet twilight evergreen.

"Go and get dressed."

"Why?"

"Do as I say." There was no command hidden beneath his words, but the hard gleam in his eyes promised much if she didn't follow. Touch gone in an instant, he went to the kids and crouched among their strewn toys. Speaking in quiet tones to them, he teased out their pleased giggles before he rose and left the room.

Abandoning Quinn to do his bidding, trusting she wouldn't defy him again.

Sucking her teeth, Quinn hurried after him, hating that she had to scurry to match his strides. Despising that her gaze became drawn to the length of his long legs, took in the breadth of his shoulders and tightness of his ass

hidden beneath expensive slacks. None of it was fair. Not the way he made her feel or how much he doted on the kids. “I’m already wearing clothes.”

“You look like a lunatic.” Each curt word slung in her direction ended in a whip crack of distaste. He didn’t slow or pause, never deviating from his course.

Fingers going to the collar of the dark purple blouse, she couldn’t argue that it clashed with the soft pink of her skirt. Quinn also couldn’t deny that the words stung more than she counted on, leaving her fumbling through feelings she didn’t understand. What did she care what he thought? The most important part was playing with the kids and getting the hell out of that room.

The same one he led her back to.

“What does it matter how I look? You’re just going to rip them anyway.”

Tobias stopped and dragged in a breath, eyes drifting shut as if he counted to calm his temper. It did nothing to help when he met Quinn’s gaze again. Chin tipping to the side, he took in the many people surrounding them, from Meghan and the woman Rebecca at one end of the hall, to the black garbed males still crowded in front of their bedroom door.

Too fast to follow, the shock didn’t register for a breathless second. Slammed against the wall of his chest, head exploding in a shower of incandescent tendrils, Quinn struggled to regain the breath that he knocked out of her. More than a little queasy as she drifted, time and space churning around her, Tobias tangled her up in his arms.

The hard snick of the lock turning signaled he’d moved them inside the bedroom. Each inhalation laden with the hot ash of anger, they became more ragged. Clawed fingers scraped over his neck and chest, ready for the brawl she expected.

“Hush, little bird. I don’t want to fight,” Tobias said, pinning her wrists to his chest with one hand. Palming her ass under the short skirt with the other, he jostled her higher so he could meet her gaze. “If you wanted my attention, all you had to do was ask.”

“That’s not—”

Quinn shrieked when he cut her off with his lips crashing into hers. Struggling against his kiss, she kicked and writhed to break his hold. All she managed was to grind against the growing bulge held at bay by the placket of his zipper. No matter how she moved, he countered it. Turning what

should have been the beginning of an all-out war into a sensuous struggle. Even when he pressed her back to the wall, one of her legs slung over an elbow to keep her open while he moved his hips in agonizing circles, he met her growls and snarls with more attention.

She hated it.

Hated it even more that she reveled in it.

Already she was wet, soaking through both their clothes until the slick fabric became smooth as silk and twice as divine where it rubbed against her. Rough palm cradling her breast, the pinch of his fingers made her squeal and buck, but not to get away no matter how she might try to convince herself otherwise. Not even when he began pulling at her clothes, tearing the skirt and blouse just as she predicted in his eagerness to get rid of them.

“Stop. Please, stop. This is...” Quinn trailed off on a low groan when his head dipped down, capturing the neglected flesh of her other breast, lavaging at the nipple though he had to pull her up to his mouth. Away from the delicious grinding of his cock. That made her keen more than the hard nip he gave the swollen nub.

“Do you really want me to stop?”

When she didn’t answer, he paused all his torments. Holding her aloft, keeping them both still, he brought his head up to look her in the eyes. Deep evergreen and pale grays clashed, her brows and kiss reddened lips tumbling down as he continued to stare. Not moving, not demanding. Their hard breaths mingled in the space between them as he waited.

Words refused to form on her lips, dying to ash on her tongue when they coalesced into nothing more than wanton pleas. She didn’t want him to stop, wanted to shriek and scream, and cry out his name as he shattered her into a million pieces over and over again. Wanted to taste his skin and feel his rumbling sounds, the ones he gave to her and no one else.

When had she come to want it?

“I didn’t think so.”

“No! You’re in my head, this is you.”

“Oh, is that it,” Tobias asked, one dark brow drifting upwards. Lips crooking into something hard, the brittle edge of his smile held as he dropped Quinn to her feet. Left her to stumble when he stood back, arms spread wide to give her space. “All right then.”

Slack jawed, she watched him with wide eyes as he walked backwards from her. Eyes narrowing in an instant when he began to undress with the swift, efficient movements he reserved for when he was angry. The closer he came to the barren bed, the more skin he bared, until he fell backwards onto the mattress naked.

Naked and glorious. Blinking hard, Quinn diverted her gaze away from the thick shaft that throbbed under her attention. Refused to acknowledge the way her entire body clenched, pussy fair dripping and grasping at empty air for what he offered. Letting her gaze skitter around the room when he groaned and stretched, displaying the long lines of his muscles and the rigid hardness of his stomach, she pretended not to see any of it.

“Tell me, little bird. If I’m in your head, what am I thinking?”

“You just want to fuck me.”

“Oh, please, we both know I’m more explicit than that. What exactly?”

“You...”

“What? Can’t think of anything I’d want to do to you?”

His chuckle unnerved her, narrow shoulders slumped under the weight of his jab. So caught up in the flustered train of her thoughts that this might not be him at all, she gave an inelegant squawk when he grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the bed. Thighs gripped, spreading her around him as he maneuvered her into the dominant position. Cock teasing over the flushed folds of her pussy before he eased inside of her. An inch at a time, he made her feel all of it.

Both of them groaned as he pulled her down by the hips. Spreading her open around his thick length, forcing her to take all of him until he could go no further. His quiet curses and muffled praise tripped across her prickling skin alongside the rasp of his stubbled jaw. Tense and still, he sat under her until even Quinn questioned what was wrong.

“It seems you didn’t hear me last night. I do hate repeating myself, little bird, but for you, I’ll teach you your lesson once more.” Strain visible in the pinch around his eyes and lips, he laid back with care. Fingers caressing her hips and thighs, he urged her to move. “Slow. Slow and gentle.”

“No.” Unwilling to admit how good it felt, how much she wanted it just then, Quinn remained frozen. Shrugged his hand away when he tried to caress her cheek, baring the edge of her teeth when the movement caused his cock to shift inside of her. She was no more in control than ever, no matter that he put her astride him.

“Sweetness, I can fuck this sweet pussy just as hard from down here.” Lids drifting half mast, the pink of his tongue slid in a slow arc over his lips as if he envisioned doing just that. Chin tipping hard one side then the other, he eased the tension from his shoulders before smiling up at her. A pretty lie of calm couched in the darkness of his demands. “Now, I want you to go nice and slow.”

“What about what I want,” Quinn ground out, daring to growl as she leaned forward over him with hands braced on the wide expanse of his chest. Dug her nails into the firm flesh and sneered at the raw display of his lust.

“Take what you want, little—”

“Fine.” Quinn snorted with a jerk of her head, denying it all as she started to clamber off of him. Yelled her dissatisfaction when he brought her crashing back down, his hips driving up to grind against the very end of her until Quinn fell forward to curl around the blissful ache and shuddered against his chest.

“I didn’t say you could go anywhere.” Dark as a starless sky, his voice wound around her the same as his hands. Fingers grasping her throat, not enough pressure to hurt, but plenty to warn.

“Why do you always ruin it?”

They blinked at one another, both confused and more than a little startled at the words that swept slipshod over her lips. Where Quinn swallowed hard against the increased grip and fumbled for some explanation or reasoning, his green gaze became arctic.

“I mean you always force it just when I think I might want you.” Trying to back out of the corner she’d painted herself into, Quinn made it so much worse. Lashes fluttering, one hand cut through the air in a furious arc as she snatched at the words still hanging in the charged space between them. Opened her lips to spill yet more. “It’s like you don’t want me to enjoy it on my own!”

Hands reaching for the mouth that wouldn’t stop, Quinn stalled halfway. Stared down at him and moved her hands back, set them onto his chest and pushed. Shoved him no matter that it jostled their positions and he bucked beneath her.

“You can’t ever let it alone. Don’t you care how hard it is for me? After everything that happened...” Quinn sniffed hard, slapped her hands to his chest with even more force. This time when his cock moved, she added a

sway of her hips. Worked back the hardness that began to flag as she spoke with a shuddering sigh before she went on. “After everything that happened and then you give me a fucking short skirt. I hate pink, by the way, not that you ever bothered to ask me. When did you even put it in there?”

“Last week,” Tobias said, eyes flaring with the scent of hot ash and simmering chilies when she slapped a palm across his mouth.

“No, you shut up,” Quinn said through a snarl, circling her hips to drive her point home. “It’s my turn, and you said to take what I want. This is what’s happening.”

He went still. Gazing at her with furrowed brows, he twitched his lips beneath her hand. The hard rush of his sigh coursed over her knuckles as he settled back into the bed, hand sliding down from her throat in a rough caress to take her hip. A gentle request as the fingertips of his other hand stroked a long line down her opposite thigh.

“Thank you.” Rising up to her knees in one smooth stroke, she descended in slow increments. Shaky inhale rattling her thoughts as much as her voice, she gripped his chest tighter still. “You don’t listen to me. Just make your decisions and expect me to go along with them. Even... even when I want it, you have to control everything, and you make me feel like all I am is a wet hole for you.”

The growl Tobias made wouldn’t be held back by her fingers, and neither would the torrent of rage sparking to life in his gaze. Touches that could never be accused of being soft turned rougher still, his hands clenching over the shelf of her hips. Jerking his head aside, he freed his lips, showing Quinn his teeth.

“I know! I know, I’m not your whore,” Quinn said, words rushing out on an airy tide as all that motion caused her to bounce, grinding against him. An ache that was just painful built and faded. “I didn’t mean that, it’s just... It’s how you make me feel.”

“You’re being ridiculous—”

“See? If I argue this, are you going to do it again? You drown me in it until I don’t know which way is up and I *have* to fight just to remember who I even am anymore.”

“You’re my mate.” As if to prove his point, one hand came down on the roundness of her ass, slapping hard enough to make her jolt. “You stopped moving.”

Closing her eyes, Quinn moved with gentle sways of her hips and wondered where it went wrong. Tried in vain not to remember another man she'd done this with. Rising and falling in a steady, slow rhythm she fought not to let the memory of hot ash and smoke invade her senses. Instead taking Tobias deep with every plunge, splayed fingers braced low on his abdomen where she struggled not to dig her nails in when it began to sting.

Opening her eyes, seeing his near closed in pleasure with a smile on his lips undid all her efforts. The gentle sways became harder, rougher. Aimed with calculated precision for his gain and not hers, she moved her body above his. Ignored the ache that swelled low in the cradle of her hips, the pinching sting of stretched flesh nearing the breaking point. She concentrated on the razor sharp edges of his features, watched them soften with wanton bliss. Waiting until his first low groan spilled out and he kneaded her hips.

"Is this what you want," she whispered into the empty silence that existed for her alone.

Eyes snapping open, he saw something he didn't expect to. Judging by the way the dark sweep of his brows crashed together, he didn't like it at all. Liked it even less he hadn't noticed sooner if the confusion dwelling deep in the abyss of his gaze was proof enough. Quinn choked on a gasp as he flipped them, arms coming up in a feeble attempt to protect herself when he closed the distance between them too fast.

"If you think for one minute I'm going to stay out of this sweet pussy, you have another thing coming, Quinn. It was made for me by the Gods, and I'll be damned if it goes without my cock for long," Tobias snarled in her face. Catching her wrists, he slammed them into the mattress above her head. "I stopped, didn't I? You demanded I let you breathe, and I did and you're all the more miserable for it. I only wanted to make you happy, keep you calm while you came to terms with it all."

"You tried to—"

"No, you had your turn, now it's mine. For fuck's sake, woman." Tobias groaned, mouth finding his claim with unerring accuracy despite all her struggles. The slap of his hips jarred them both, but he kept his lips and teeth to the mark without fail. "You know exactly what I want because you see it in the mirror every day."

Quinn panted under the crushing weight of him, held still in his grip. Unable to draw breath enough to shout at him and continue this latest battle

she never intended. It'd all fallen apart somewhere in the middle, fumbled through her fingers when she'd tried to say the words she wanted to. Trying to tell him she needed him to let her find her own way through the twisting paths of all of this and she'd fucked it all by blurting out nonsense that had no bearing.

Somehow her squinting gaze found her mark on his shoulder. A perfect red ring, small as she was. Just a little further, a tip of her head up from the mattress, and she could reach it.

Why couldn't he be hers as much as she was his?

Action as fast as thought, she found her mouth there. Teeth sinking in hard, his quiet roar deafening and glorious as she punched through the taut flesh. Blood flowed in thick rivulets. Hot and coppery, she swallowed the scant mouthful.

Would have screamed if she could when her world exploded into a fragmented shower of fire.

Blackness enveloped her, shot through with sizzling electricity pelting through her veins. Fireworks singing under her skin, a string of sparkling detonations, she couldn't make out what was up or down. Couldn't tell what anything was as the bond grew louder. Not a hum, but a fierce roar. One that swore oaths of possession, of love and desire. One that shrieked in her high tones that she *wanted*.

"Shh, sweetness. Quiet now," he whispered against her ear.

It was the only sound in the abyssal void. His hand sweeping over her hair the lone sensation before a rush of awareness swept in, strangling her in an overload of information. Crackling through her synapses, misfiring senses.

Whether by her own strength or his allowing it, she rolled them over again. Seated on his thighs, she whined as a shiver sent goosebumps racing down the backs of her arms, clawing at her spine and twisting it up. Her desperate, fitful motions stilled by his powerful hands. Grip unrelenting he held her back before giving in with a rough sigh. Pulling her where she wanted to go, his fist moved between her spread thighs. Working the crown against dripping lips, he stroked his cock. Slid it inside as soon as he became hard enough, grunting when Quinn sat down with enough force their skin clapped together.

"You have to go slow, little bird," he husked, grip dimpling the flesh at her hips where he controlled her first frenzied twitch.

"Please, please, I need it," Quinn whimpered, trailing off into a low cry. Breath catching in a sob, she licked at his chest. A shattered hum slipped free, the tormented sound carried on the knotted threads of the bond.

"I know, little bird. I know just what you need."

With the first hard thrust, pain attempted to register in the back of her mind, but by the time he lifted her high onto her knees, it was gone. Faded away into the blissful rush as he pulled her back down, surging up into her. Head falling back, her shrill cry tangled with his groan, twisting and writhing together as she strained upwards once more.

Scents mingling, it was beyond overwhelming. She could taste the rich chocolate of him, the burn of chilies scalding her throat alongside sugared lavender. Something that never should have been right and perfect was. Sensations that shouldn't be were. Quinn could feel the slick glide of flesh inside and out, a pleasure she didn't know or understand welling inside of her. Building with each measured thrust, every careful caress, it was more than she'd ever experienced.

Pleasure wrapped around her spine, bowing her over his thighs as his hand cradled her breast and hip. Pulling at the taut nub, he twisted it with a pinch. Utter perfection as he shoved her up once more.

Snapping tendrils shivering over her skin, she grabbed hold of his wrists. Not to push away, but to hold on as she bucked and writhed atop him. Muscles drawing tight, her thighs trembled when he pulled her down. Sweat slick skin slapping together. Adding to the maelstrom building under her sternum.

Rushing up to the final precipice, a sprint that left her gasping at the ceiling, her descent promised madness. The thunder of her heart shimmered through the room, matched by the low growls and gentle roars of the beast under her. Inside of her. All around her.

Scream airy and breathless, she fell.

Savage pleasure ripped through her. Twisting through muscle and sinew until her very bones shattered under the onslaught. The world slipped sideways, a shower of sparks that sizzled across her skin making every pulse a devastation. Euphoric, it worked through her in violent surges, splintering her further.

Her body jumped and bucked, frantic movements pleading for the final end to this downfall. No matter his grunts, the way he pushed at her hips, she would not allow it. Fluttering muscle, slick and hot, tightened around

the burgeoning knot. Held it fast as Tobias fell back and hurled obscenities and blessings at her.

Not until the first heady rush filled her, the knot keeping it all right where it belonged, did she collapse against his chest.

She keened at his rough caress down her back. Jostled as his heart hammered inside of her chest, her thoughts mangled by his. Each new sensation sent her soaring. An earthquake that shook the foundations of her soul.

She thought she might die.

With a thought, one she wasn't sure was hers, she passed out.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

“Eat.”

Tobias left her no choice, shoving the flaky bite of biscuit into her mouth. Sprawled over his lap on the small couch in their bedroom, he refused to let her up to feed herself. Not that Quinn was in any condition to sit upright, let alone eat by herself. Feeding her tidbits with his own fingers, he’d emptied one plate and now forced her to eat more. Grumbling the entire time, harsh words tempered with gentle touches and conspicuous care.

She’d been out for several hours after her little exploit, so she tried not to blame him for his fussing. The kids had come and gone, Quinn’s strength flagging too soon to go and play with them and Tobias far too protective to let her try. It had perhaps been a mistake, but one she didn’t want to take back. Not with him coiled up inside of her chest, the knotted threads tying them together more tangled than ever.

Still, it grated her nerves to be babied.

“I’m going to explode. I can’t eat as much as you, you know.”

“You’re nowhere near full. Do you know how I know that?”

“Are you angry that I did it or that I did it?”

“You’re not making sense. Drink.” He held the glass of water to her lips, tipping it up until Quinn had to gulp to keep it from overflowing her mouth.

“You know what I meant,” Quinn said between panting breaths, slapping his hand away when he tried to push more food at her.

“One fucking day out of the hospital and—”

“So you’re angry that I did it.” Quinn squirmed as upright as she could, using his body for leverage until she could swing her feet down to the floor. Feeling boneless and weary, she stretched out all akimbo with exhaustion.

“Do you even know how a claim works, Quinn?”

The solicitous tone made her wary, but still she turned to him though she had to hug his arm to keep from falling onto the other half of the couch. “Obviously I don’t. No one’s ever bothered to tell me, even though I’m supposed to be half of the equation. Except... and even he only told me a little of it. You know, they don’t teach us that stuff. You’re supposed to tell us how it all works and what happens and—”

“All right, I get it.” Tobias took a deep breath, fingers sweeping over his eyelids before pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re tying your soul to someone else’s.”

“No shit.”

“It’s the intent behind the bite, the claim itself,” he said, opting to ignore her. “You’re ripping yourself open and giving them a place inside you.”

“That’s not true. If that was the way it worked, then I’d have power over you when you bit me.”

“No, because I’m an Alpha. Say whatever you want, little bird, but my will is stronger than the average Omega.” Taking hold of her arm, he hauled her back into his lap, cradling Quinn against his chest before offering the sausage once more. “Not you, but there’s never been anything average about you.”

“Oh, now comes the sweet talk.” Lips curled into a smirk, they both knew she was pleased. Warm and damn near fuzzy with it, she snatched the sausage from him and ate it.

“The point is, you were already weak, and you put unneeded strain on your body.” The growl that emanated from his chest was quiet, a steady vibration felt more than heard as his hands tightened to the point of bruising. “What were you even thinking?”

“Wasn’t, really,” Quinn said with easy nonchalance, adding a flippant wave of her fingers before reaching towards the waiting plate. Grumbled when he tugged her back and offered the toast she aimed for.

“You were thinking something,” he murmured against her hair. Possessive touch becoming questing, he slipped warm fingers under her robe. Gliding along her skin, tracing the curves he could reach with ease. “Otherwise it wouldn’t have worked the way it did, hm?”

“Oh, Gods, there’s going to be no standing you now. Your ego is more than big enough,” Quinn snarled, flinging the toast in the general direction of the table to bat away his hands.

“You like how big it is, among other things.” Grasping her hip, he rocked Quinn’s ass against the growing bulge. Ground her down into it until his warm sigh scattered over her shoulder he bared with newfound urgency.

“What happened to me being too weak to do anything,” Quinn asked before her thoughts tripped and fell flat on their face. With a few careful caresses, he had her nipples hard and aching. His pinching twist stealing cognizant thought while lurid images and sensations bombarded her.

“You just have to lie there.”

A flash of something else, something cold and unexpected shot through her synapses. Another stumbling crash that she jerked away from to concentrate on the here and now. His hands already stopped, the moment crumbling around them. Sifting to dusty ash that clogged the back of her throat, he didn’t touch her at all for a few thundering heartbeats.

He began to purr, quiet and unassuming, so unlike him that it startled her more than when he fetched her abandoned toast and held it up to her. Collapsed back into the couch, he tried to make himself inconspicuous and unthreatening, failing with miserable flair.

“Eat, little bird.” When she didn’t take the offered food, he grunted and tossed it back to the plate. A second later he unfolded his bulky height, easing Quinn into the warm void. Settling her blankets and things around her body before standing back, stiff and seeming uncertain for a change. Twilit evergreens indecipherable, he took her in. “I’ll get fresh sheets. Check on the children.”

“Those are fine,” Quinn mumbled to her knees. It was her fault, that something that lingered chill and wretched in the air. It had no place there, she knew it, but the careless words had brought them back and there was no warm glow to hide them in. Disbelief warred with satisfaction that it never would again.

“You don’t like them.”

“I don’t like a lot of things, Tobias.”

His reply little more than a grunt, the tension riddling his body looked painful. As he turned to leave, Quinn caught his hand. Stared in fascination as she twined her fingers through his and gave a careful tug. Even more surprised when he gave in, coming closer though he loomed. Pride kept him

upright, wouldn't let him bend his knees to lower to her level. That was fine, though. She didn't need that just now.

"I like other things," she said, voice pitched low. She'd never be seductive, couldn't add the husky tones that dripped pure sex to her words. Leaning forward, she nuzzled his hip. Let her lips travel a path downwards one open mouthed kiss at a time until the unabated swell of his cock nestled against her cheek. "A lot, actually."

"Quinn..." Fingers tangling in thick curls, he tipped her head back to see her face. Furrowed brow darkening his gaze, thumb ghosting over her cheek, he held her still. Too much lay unspoken in his gaze.

"They're fine. For now. You're going to let me pick new ones though."

"Are you suggesting the trade of that sweet little mouth for sheets?" Putting on a disgruntled air, he shook his head with dark eyebrows crowding together.

"Among other things," Quinn said through a quiet hum, wriggling free of his hold to place a hard kiss against his fly. Blind fingers fumbling with his belt, she licked over the soft fabric of his trousers. Giggle breathless when his cock throbbed against her tongue, she moved faster.

"We'll discuss your methods—"

"Tobias, shut up." Quinn nipped at his thigh as she managed to get the belt free. Zipper down in a flash, fingers curling into the waist of his pants, she dragged it down to his knees. Satisfaction swelling somewhere under her heart, a delight she didn't quite understand invaded her senses as her hands closed over the proud length of him.

For once, he listened. Kept his mouth shut until her lips closed over the swollen crown to lap up the spoils of his excitement. He couldn't hold back his low moan then.

Tongue sliding over swollen flesh, Quinn hummed her pleasure. The rough strokes he enjoyed most brought more of that potent fluid to her, swallowed down where it coated the back of her throat. Chilies and chocolate invading her alongside the intense musk of an excited Alpha.

Her Alpha.

The thought startled Quinn, her moment's pause interrupted by rough fingers pushing her head down. Hands clenched tight against her scalp, Tobias forced her a few precious inches further. Bumped the back of her throat with a pump of his hips.

Instead of gasping and choking, she swallowed against the urge. Working her tongue against the thick veins running up his length, she pulled more of him in. She couldn't manage it all just then, no matter how he thrust and squirmed above her, but she twisted her fists around his cock. Pumped him to the same easy rhythm she bobbed her head when he let her up enough to gasp for air through her nose.

Lips overflowing with the taste of him, Quinn whined low in her throat. Each heavy mouthful she swallowed made her blood sing, simmering along in her veins until her whole body burned. Sucking harder, his groans and murmurs of praise became a heady undertone to it all.

Even when he bucked and snarled some curse, hand heavy on the back of her head, she didn't stop. Suppressed the reflex to gag when he slipped down her throat and squeezed his cock with a wringing twist. Urging him to continue. Hair twisted up into his fingers, he began to guide her. Moving her faster, easing further in with every short pump until he breached the tight ring of her throat with every forward lunge, stopping himself from hilting his cock. Fucking her mouth with solicitous care.

Quinn moaned as the knot began to swell at his base. Small fingers twisting, kneading at the thickening length, she coaxed him to come. Pleaded with a swirl of her tongue as he withdrew before plunging deep.

Tipping her head back with a moan, she lengthened the line of her throat and gazed up at him with blown pupils. High on his taste, his scent, she mimicked the fluttering ripple her orgasm would give him. The intense massage caused the knot to swell, growing in rapid pulses beneath her palms.

Roaring above her, he caught and held her eyes. Gritted his teeth as he withdrew to his tip. Flooding her mouth with thick spurts that she couldn't swallow fast enough. Creamy rivulets trickling over swollen lips and her chin, staining her chest.

Purring her contentment as the initial rush abated, Quinn licked and sucked at his cock. Gathered up every spilled drop and licked them both clean as he watched on in a wondrous fascination.

Falling heavy to his knees, he shoved Quinn back onto the couch. Her squawk of dismay ignored as he slung her leg over the arm, hands spreading her wide. Head lowered, he licked down the trembling length of her thigh.

"My turn."

Tobias wasted no time with teasing. Lips capturing the throbbing nub of her clit, he sucked hard on the bundle of nerves. Flicking his tongue in rapid time over it as he gave her the edge of his teeth. A kiss of pain amid all the pleasure.

Her squeal of surprise drowned in the ragged moan that tumbled free of her lips when his fingers thrust inside. Fingertips scraping against that special spot he knew all too well with that first rough glide. The slick flowing from her pussy made thick, wet noises as he rocked his hand back and forth.

Fingers tangling in his dark hair, Quinn whined and pulled him tighter. Leg hooking around his shoulder to dig her heel into the bunching muscles, she writhed under his delicious ministrations. Tried to buck when he gave her clit a series of hard nips. His free hand came down hard in the cradle of her hips, pinning her to the couch. Forcing her to take the pleasure winding up her spine. The molten strands weaving through trembling muscle as she jostled and cried out.

Abandoning her clit to make long licks around his fingers, his vicious growl vibrated through tender flesh. Making her gasp and twitch. As he swallowed her down, the restraint of his violence frayed. Fingers thrusting in swift, jerky movements, he shoved her up the steep cliff. Dragged her towards the precipice with a delirious assault of lips and tongue and teeth.

Feeling his control crumble through the bond that beat against the cage of her ribs intensified everything. The warmth pooling low in her hips spread in crushing pulses. A heat that flushed her skin, coating her in a shimmering veneer of sweat. Head thrashing against the soft cushions, she battered her heels against his back. Forced his head tight between her thighs with fists twisting the inky strands of his hair.

“Come for me, little bird,” he snapped at her between furious licks.

Quinn felt his smile, entirely too delirious to pay it the attention it deserved as she grabbed the blistering edges of her orgasm closer. Moaned at the whitewashed ceiling and rocked his mouth when it held tight to her clit. Adding a pull that tumbled her closer still.

The gentle insertion might have stalled everything had he not distracted her with his teeth scraping over tender folds of reddened flesh. Coated in slick, his finger slipped into her ass with ease.

Grasping the cushions, Quinn tried to scramble away from the uncertainty that pervaded her lower half. Pleasure and dismay wove in thick

strands, one refusing to outdo the other. Still Tobias sucked and licked, concentrating on that pert nub to keep her ever more off kilter.

“S-Stop... it feels...”

Tobias shrugged her legs away. Giving himself more room to work. More space to torment her. The wide bulk of him strained to fit into such a small area, following every jerky twitch Quinn made.

The glide became smoother, friction evening out as assailed nerves became accustomed to his invasion. Tumbled over into sheer pleasure as he manipulated both her holes and continued to attack her clit.

“Tobias,” Quinn squealed, drawing it out into a bewildered whine as he added another thick finger. Clenched around the invading digits. Jolted when he moved his hands in concert, filling her. Sensations she couldn’t grasp detonated under her skin. Pleasure crashed into her and receded, building for another blow.

“Next time, my cock will be here,” he husked against her folds. Pushed his fingers deep into her ass and widened them, making her feel the stretch. Added a hard suck to her clit and plunged his fingers hard into her pussy. Easing back, he looked up at her along the line of her body, lips curving. “You’ll come even harder than you are now.”

“No,” Quinn whimpered. Knew she was lying as she spread wider, tipping her hips to ease his entry into her body. Her guttural groan spilling into the air as another crushing swell of bliss pounded into her.

“Yes. Now come.”

Lungs seizing in a silent cry as he managed to strike each point at once, Quinn froze. Overloading her synapses with an explosion of pleasure, he added to the violent bliss shivering through her. Crackling through her bones, melting her thoughts into nothing.

Air knocked loose on a shrill keen, his teeth scraped over her clit one last time. The crushing weight of her orgasm slammed into her. Knocked her from that high point to free fall into the ether. Airy sounds becoming a scream grinding from her throat, he plunged his fingers deep.

Vision sheeting to white stained brilliant chartreuse and vivid scarlet, she heard her shriek from a long way off. Ages between one ragged breath and the next, it scalded her throat and split her lips with a keening cry.

Twitching under a fresh flood of sensations, Quinn opened her eyes. The slick slide of flesh too much, she dug her nails into his shoulders as he

climbed his way up her body. Hauling her hips down the cushion, the rasp of the textured fabric overwhelmed.

“Hold on to me, sweetness,” Tobias whispered against her damp temple. “Just hold on.”

Quinn gasped as the head of his cock slipped through her wet folds. Seated against her entrance, one smooth push drove him into the hilt. Pussy fluttering around his length, eager and ready. Limbs slow, she wrapped them around his torso. Held on as tight as she could as he began to move.

“That’s it, little bird.”

Laptop balanced on precarious knees, Quinn squinted at Elise’s sprawled body. Tipping her head side to side, she muttered under her breath and turned back to the screen. Movements still uncertain and awkward, she moved the cursor to hover over the next larger size. She’d never had cause to use a laptop, let alone shop on one, but Tobias refused to let them go out. A lecture about the dangers of it left Quinn more than a little disgruntled. Then he’d dropped the device in her lap and told her to have at it.

“I can do it for you, Miss Quinn,” Meghan said for what had to be the hundredth time.

“I’m doing it, damn it.” Voice sharper than she intended, Quinn set the laptop aside with care to scrub at her eyes. “I’m sorry, just... I want to do this. It means a lot he’s letting me.”

“It’s only shopping. I do it for them every day.”

Quinn’s shoulders slumped, any remaining excitement slipping away in a slimy rush. Of course Meghan shopped for them all the time, and they didn’t need new clothes any more than she did. It was more that Quinn would choose, could pick to not put her little girl in pink ribbons and rainbows. To get Adam a decent set of jeans that he could play in, not items that looked more at home at some fancy dinner.

Meghan also wouldn’t understand the importance of it all.

“You should also be careful what you say. They’re both picking up words they shouldn’t.”

“Every kid picks up a few curse words.” Quinn snorted and pulled the laptop back onto her thighs, her decisive click sending the two piece romper

to her cart.

“Not every child.” Meghan sniffed, the act derisive and unexpected.

Pale brows fell, pursed lips sliding sideways as Quinn glanced where Meghan guided Elise to play with some new educational toy. Shoulder jerking to be rid of the unwelcome emotions, Quinn chose to focus on getting a few toys that promised nothing but entertainment.

An hour later and Quinn began to doubt the use of so many things. The kids grew at an astounding rate. Elise could outgrow several of them in a month, Adam in even less with the way he sprouted. Items picked for her own enjoyment were triple the cost and half the purpose. Peering at the amounts displayed on each of the tabs opened in the browser, teeth caught and held the tender flesh of her lip.

“Watch them for a second, I just... I’m going to run downstairs,” Quinn said as she climbed to her feet. Laptop clutched to her chest, she looked at the kids absorbed in their play and decided she would push for their items. She didn’t need things for herself.

“I’ve been watching them all this time.”

Quinn’s lips parted, a coarse remark lingering on her tongue before she snapped her mouth shut with an audible click. No denying Meghan’s words cut to the core, but when had that begun? Quinn was on her way to better, able to interact and take care of the kids more and more. Small lapses in judgment notwithstanding. Turning on her heel, she made her way out of the nursery and down the hall to the stairs. Ignored the black suited men that fell in behind her and the Alpha woman Rebecca sliding into the nursery.

More guards still milled around the foyer as she came down to the lower level, all of them tense and watchful until she passed them by. Acting meek as a lamb, giving them no cause to question what had allowed her to get past a whole bevy of them before. Scurrying through the dim shadows, she made her way to Tobias’ office. Came to a hard stop when his hand came up as soon as she entered.

“I don’t care. We promised them today, and it needs to get there today.” He paused, listening to the voice on the other end of his call. “Then you get her back. Find a new one. I don’t give a fuck, but there better be ten of them when they arrive.”

Wide eyes caught and held his. Dark brows snapping together, he held a single finger up to warn her against speaking. He turned away from where

Quinn stood static with disbelief to face the windows as he went on.

“Yes, yes, a Beta is fine. Just make sure it’s clean and quick. This better not happen again, Tom.” Dropping the cellphone from his ear, Tobias’ lip curled as the other man continued to chatter on. Thumb sliding across the screen, he listened to none of it. Grabbing hold of the heavy chair behind his desk, Tobias turned it with a hard jerk and sat down. Peered at Quinn with raised brows and frozen gaze that invited no argument or questions.

“I... I wasn’t...” Quinn coughed, trying to dislodge the words that tangled up and choked her. Gave up when the threat of tears began to burn her eyes and rushed his desk, slapping the laptop down in front of him.

“What’s this? I told you to get what you wanted.”

“It’s just that... I mean, I can go without, but their stuff is...”

“Ah, sweetness.” Tobias’ laugh was more a groan, his hand darting out to catch hold of her waist. Dragging her over to perch on his thigh as he flipped open the laptop to view what all she’d accumulated.

“Like I said, I don’t need all that stuff for me. Just the one set of sheets, maybe?” Quinn cleared her throat again, restless shifting turning to anxious fidgeting as he continued to scroll and move through the tabs. “The kids’ stuff—”

“There, done. All you had to do was click the button, sweetness. It knows my card number.”

“Wait... All of it?”

“Yes.”

“That was an obscene amount of money,” Quinn hissed in a whisper, leaning away from the laptop and all its unfounded terrors. As if it alone were responsible for having spent more money than she’d seen at any one time in her life.

“Is that what you were worried about?” Tobias gave a true laugh then, tucking her head beneath his chin so he could wrap her in his arms.

Nuzzling her hair, he chuckled again. “Quinn, unless you manage to spend millions, we’ll be fine.”

“Because you sell women.”

“Enough. You shouldn’t be in here while I’m working.” Though he didn’t shove her away, his nod towards the door and the tap to her shoulder were as good as one.

“What else do you do?” Refusing to be dismissed, she turned to sling her legs over both of his, arm sliding between his back and the chair.

“We’re not doing this, little bird.”

“I know you have something to do with guns.” Feeling his surprise like a static jolt zapping the base of her spine, she took a slow breath and tried not to let her voice tremble. “Mr. Rey and Mr. Beaumont. They own some of the warehouses down by the docks. You work with them. They sell guns, sometimes drugs. Is that what you do, too?”

“How do you know what Rey and Beau do?”

“The apartments by the docks. I thought about living there for a little while, when things got rough.”

His answer was proof enough that she’d been right to be wary of the housing. Possessive and painful, he pawed at her to drag her somehow closer. Shielding her, proving his claim.

“Did they ever...?”

“What? No! Be serious.”

“That still doesn’t answer how you think you know.”

“I know a run when I see one. Unbranded trucks, bunch of shifty guys lingering around.”

“And how do you know what a run looks like?” Tobias eased her back, fingers under her chin bringing her eyes to his. Letting him scrutinize her.

“I used to do runs for... I delivered, picked up. Got money from people.”

“What,” he snarled, no question to be found in the furious sound or in the reverberation that followed.

“I was independent once, you know.” Scoffing at his fury, she trilled her fingers through the air as if it never meant anything at all.

Whatever he might have said, Tobias cut himself off as a quiet knock sounded on the closed door. Jerking Quinn upright, vibrating with the tension riddling his body, he shouted for them to enter.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir, but, um...” The lanky Beta male spared a quick glance at Quinn, gaze darting away to stare hard at the floor. A slow shift of his weight and a quick inhale, he got on with it when Tobias’ hand clenched. “Ms. De Vries sent the files and we’ve transferred them to your laptop. She’s said she’ll need an answer by six if you want them ready to go in the morning. Ross also sent the files he was able to recover, but they’re still fragmented. He’s still working on the rest.”

“Yes, all right.” Dismissing the nameless man with a curt wave, Tobias jerked a second laptop around to face him. With a deft skill Quinn envied,

he opened programs and entered passcodes one handed. “We’ll finish this later. You need to go now, little bird.”

“Why? Who the hell is Ms. De Vries?”

“No one you need to worry about, and security footage.”

“Oh, Gods, you didn’t do that to someone—”

“It’s from the house.” Patience at an end, he set Quinn on her feet and gave her a hard nudge towards the door. “Now go.”

“What? You have... Cameras have been watching all this time?”

“I had security cameras installed when I rebuilt the house, and for good reason.”

“All this time, someone—No! Multiple people have been watching what you do to me. All over this damned house!” Arms swinging wild, she accused and judged with every swift movement. When he didn’t even have the decency to look chagrined, her anger became incandescent. “You fucking bastard. How dare you—”

“Stop this,” he said and there was no need for him to shout over her hysterical yelling.

The dangerous edge of his tone sucked all the air from the room. Ominous and edged in shards of ice, it cut through her rage and shredded it before her very eyes. Reduced her to a trembling mess that sniffled against a wave of distress that had little to do with whom might have seen what.

“Come.” Arm out, he invited her in to retake her perch on his lap. When she shuffled forward a mere inch, he let out a growling sigh and hauled her into place. Nuzzled her temple as he smoothed rough hands over her shoulder and thigh.

Wordless and lacking in all the ways she could want, it was as good of an apology as she would ever get. Fingertips pressing hard to her chest, she touched the bond in every way she could. Tried to find some calm in the chaos when he rumbled a purr and tangled his fingers in her hair.

“Why are you looking at this,” she asked into the quiet when she’d managed to strangle the hurt and betrayal down to tolerable levels. For all his raging at the mere thought of another touching her, she never expected him to allow everything to be recorded and seen by someone else. No matter the reasons.

“To see who poisoned you.”

“You think someone here did it?”

“You do not—” Choking off the harsh words before he could finish, Tobias clenched his jaw. Inhaling hard through his nose, head tilting back and eyes closing, he sought calm the same as she did. “Everything else checks out. Since someone tampered with the recordings, I’m left no other choice but to look at everyone close to you.”

“Well, start it.”

“Quinn, you don’t need to see—”

“I want to see it, now play it before I break something trying to do it myself.” Scrubbing at her eyes with the back of one hand, she shoved upright. Put an endless gulf of space between them with an inch when she leaned towards the laptop.

Hard as granite and twice as unmovable, Tobias slung his arm around her waist and pulled her back. Crushed her against him with an implacable grip while his free hand whisked over the laptop and brought it to life again. Rapid fire taps of his fingers over the track pad brought a program up, the still image of the foyer coming into blurred reality in shades of gray.

“Didn’t spring for the color stuff, huh?”

“If you’re going to insist on remaining here, you’re going to be quiet.”

“Fine.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tobias' hand moved, the image shuddering then blinking to a wide shot of the dining room. It rolled once, twice, the lines of the furniture becoming stylistic blobs before returning to their natural shapes. Another tap of his finger sent the recording into faster motion, bodies of guards and others on their tasks tripping across the program's window.

"What's going on with it?" Quinn shivered the same as the footage, lip curling in distaste as vague nightmares of late night horror movies plagued her subconscious.

"Someone tried to delete them," Tobias muttered, lips thinning as he pulled Quinn in closer. Curling his arm around her to give her his warmth and the sense of protection she needed from the boogeyman stuck in her skull.

"I saw a movie like this once."

"Be quiet." Distracted, the bite of his snarl was missing as he leaned into her to view the screen better. Tapped something to make the window even larger, his disgruntled sound faded into a muttering growl.

The image became clear then settled into a murky haze, dark shapes jerking through the point of view as the time track jumped and slowed. Fast enough to make Quinn jump, he smacked his finger against the keys, pausing the video on a grainy image that seemed to show nothing at all in the eerie dining room.

"What is...? She's holding something."

"Who is holding what?" Quinn squinted at the image, trying to make sense of the soft edges and blurred lines. Like staring at a mystery puzzle image, Meghan coalesced out of the pinpricks of light. Stooped and

crowded into the short hall joining kitchen to dining room, something showed in her hand.

A touch to the keys began to play the video once again, but it jumped ahead twenty minutes, showing the dining room empty save for ghosts of light and shadow.

“Fuck.” Tobias ground his teeth together, tugging the laptop closer even as he edged them both forward. The intensity of his gaze trained on the screen, he watched with a predator’s focus while people came and went.

Another clearer image presented itself, though it wasn’t much better. Meghan stood in the short hall once again, but this time Quinn and the kids sat at the table. Something bright clutched in her hand, her face turned to watch through the door.

“Do you know what that is in her hand?”

“No, I can’t... I remember falling asleep at the table. You can see my head right there. I felt awful when she came back with the kids’ breakfast. She gave me an earful about how Elise could have fallen, or Adam done something—”

“She said that to you?”

“Well, yes, but it could have—”

“She’s standing right there, Quinn. Those things wouldn’t have happened.” Fingertips caressing her cheek, he guided her to face him. An exasperated huff of warm air feathering her face when she refused to look at him. “Does she say things like that often?”

“She’s right.” Quinn slid her lips sideways, trying to muffle the hard sniff that staved off the burn of tears. She’d been such a horrible mother so far. “They’re just babies...”

“Quinn,” Tobias said through a low, rumbling growl as he pinched her chin and jerked her watery grays to meet him. “You are not to blame.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter,” she mumbled, twisting away to face the laptop again. “Can you make it—”

A series of movements made the window massive, taking up the screen and more. Tobias scrolled around the paused image until the hall stood center stage. The hint of something in Meghan’s hands became clearer. As did a hint of color beyond the sickly gray-greens.

“You did get color...”

“Just tell me if you recognize what she’s holding.”

Racking her memory for any ideas of what the container might be, she could think of nothing. Bright yellow, it looked like a cereal box, though small. A terse shake of her head was all she could offer, agitated fingers catching the touch pad on accident and sending the video back into stumbling motion.

Meghan didn't appear from the short hall with cereal for the kids. Plates with waffles and eggs adorned the tray she carried. The small box was nowhere to be found.

Quinn jerked her hand back, grimacing as she began to fast forward the footage. Speeding through the days, it showed so many things. Quinn on her knees before him, Tobias rucking up her skirts as he carried her to the table or a convenient wall. Strangling down the heavy swell of resentment as she watched the lost woman with her sun struck smile, Quinn tried to concentrate on the other moments instead.

The ones where Meghan seemed to scrutinize Quinn's every move as they ate. Urging Quinn to eat more with sharp looks and hard gestures, even directing Adam's attention to how Quinn listed at the table. The cheery smile once Quinn ran off to be sick, a flurry of activity as Meghan doted on the kids. Meghan soothing their cries, snuggling them to her chest. Her whole demeanor bizarre, at once mothering and overexcited. There were only the faint images of her in the hall twice. The stuttering movements of the warped recording made it all the more eerie.

Far more disturbing were the various feeds that Tobias swiped through with rapid flicks of his wrist. Meghan appearing ghostly in a long white gown as she hovered over the sleeping children. Easy to explain it away as just checking on them, except for the gleam of teeth in her wide smile and the white knuckled grip on the crib side. Standing there for what the time track proved was hours, her careful caresses of their soft hair intermittent at best. Drifting through the halls, pausing outside of Kahler's bedroom with head tilted as she listened. Hiding a giggle behind her hand as some unheard sound came through the door.

"You were screaming," Tobias murmured, zooming in by spreading his fingers across the pad.

"You don't know that. There's no sound."

"I remember that night."

"You can't—"

“I was wearing a green silk vest, the one you liked, when I went in there. You ripped it while fighting me that night. Curtis threw it out.” There was no nuance to his tones, no emotions to be salvaged from the evenness of his words. Even the bond remained quiet, refusing to let on how he might feel about what he said.

Meghan trailed downstairs, disappearing and reappearing on the lower steps in some sort of nightmarish lurch. The dark figure of Curtis came up not too long after, his steps pausing outside of the door. Whatever he heard, it made him shake his head, back unbent as he stalked off down the hall.

“He never liked me.”

“It wasn’t his duty to like you, little bird.”

“Meghan is my friend. She’s the only one here that’s ever treated me like a person.” Though she continued to stare at the laptop as Meghan drifted across the screen once again, Quinn wasn’t looking. Didn’t want to see that terrifying grin on her friend’s face.

The woman she trusted with her children.

Thought galvanizing, the anxious energy zapped through her spine and sent her into motion. Scrambling from Tobias’ lap, she bolted towards the door. Found herself crushed in Tobias’ embrace, arms immovable bands around her middle though she kicked and shrieked.

“Quiet, Quinn,” he ground out, huffing a grunt against her shoulder when her heel connected with his knee. “If she’s responsible for this, you can’t let her know what’s going on yet. She could hurt them if she thinks she’s in danger. Calm down.”

“Our babies are up there with her,” Quinn cried. Tearing at her clothes, straining to be free of the shirt that seemed to tangle her up further in his grasp.

“Calm. Down.” The rush of a command followed his quiet words.

Icy, metallic as it burned through her lungs, it brought her to a crumbling heap. Shivering with the overwhelming influx, synapses fried under the assault as he hauled her up to cradle Quinn’s weight against his chest.

Tobias moved to the door, tucking her head under his chin as he ordered some man inside. Swift, violent instruction to call Annan right the fuck now, to get the men ready but to remain out of sight. Tell the nanny he needed to see her and be calm about it.

As the man hurried away, only Quinn heard Tobias’ mutter.

“I could fucking use you right about now, Curtis.”

Strangled under Tobias’ will and his crushing arms, he manhandled her to the couch. Cradled her against a chest that vibrated with the rumbling rockslide of his growling purr. Equal parts anger and comfort, he tried to quiet Quinn. Promised a great many things as the bond screamed the tormented wails he wouldn’t allow her to voice.

By the time Meghan knocked on the study door, Quinn had calmed somewhat. Not enough by half to keep her from running upstairs if Tobias freed her for even a second. He kept her pinned against his side, a feint of their usual struggles. Crushing Quinn under the forced calm, drowning her in the honeyed sunshine he didn’t feel. Something she never discerned before, the nuances of his moods as they filtered through the bond. The turmoil and angst roiling through him, infecting it all, weighing heavier on her with every strained breath.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Meghan hovered at the door, the limpid brown of her eyes cast down in submission.

Somehow Quinn noticed only now how she tipped her chin aside even with this regular encounter. Baring her throat to the Alpha to prove she was no threat. Demure hands clasped in gentle repose at her waist. Nothing of the crazed smile or wild eyes shown in the videos. Everything about her remained small and timid, a veritable mouse to match the diffident, nervous shades.

“Yes. Come in, sit.”

Though his voice left no room for Meghan to argue, her weight shifted back. Head turning, she peered over her shoulder as if she could see whatever lay beyond the door someone closed behind her. Worried the whole thing was up, that she knew and had hurt the kids before even coming down sent a rush of panic through Quinn. Molten and flaring in wild bursts, Tobias strangled the racing emotions to a crawl. Smothered Quinn under the weight of his command without more than a tensing of his jaw showing.

“The children, sir, they’re up there with the Alpha woman. I’m afraid she’s not the best with them. Perhaps I could bring them down if this will take long?”

“It won’t take long. Rebecca can handle their little fits of temper for a moment.”

“As you say, Mr. Kahler,” Meghan murmured, though she looked anything but convinced. Steps slow and careful, she still managed an air of scurrying. Prim as you please, her smooth skirts spread around her legs as she sat in the stiff-backed chair opposite the couch. She followed it with hunched shoulders and lowered chin, the epitome of servitude.

Quinn wanted to scream.

Why wasn’t he throwing Meghan out of the house? Beating her senseless, yelling, something. He remained quiet and collected, no matter the rage banging around Quinn’s skull. The haze of red descending over her gaze, Quinn’s lip began to lift. A subtle shift of her limbs brought Tobias’ attention. Hands clamping over her arms, he held her back physically all while inundating her with the sunlit warmth of the forced calm. Dissonant and full of warning, the bond became painful. A roar of silence, a plea for caution.

His detached smile didn’t falter once. Stance casual as he clutched Quinn to him, he regarded Meghan as if nothing could ever be wrong in the world.

“I realized no one has sat you down and discussed what’s been going on.”

“No, sir. Curtis normally...” Meghan added a tempered sniffle as she trailed off, dabbing at the corner of her eye with a kerchief she produced from a pocket.

“Yes, his loss is felt all through this house.” Arm tightening around Quinn, he pushed her head against his chest. “His sacrifice was honorable, and one I will forever be grateful for.”

“Oh, yes, of course! He saved Miss Quinn. We mustn’t forget that,” Meghan said, with overbearing enthusiasm, turning a bright smile upon Quinn where she sat crumpled against Tobias. “He died for you, to keep you safe. A most noble act for a great man, truly.”

Spine lengthening as he sat taller, Tobias’ hand crushed Quinn’s shoulder. A thread of impatient rage twined through the bond, humming its dissatisfaction at such inaction. The words burbling over Meghan’s lips were fair and sweet, but the intensity of her eagerness, the glassy quality of her limpid brown eyes as she spoke of Quinn’s near death, were far too brazen after they’d seen the video footage.

“Indeed,” Tobias said, voice a low rumble. The edge of his impatience flared, the bond crackling with the unspent energy of it. Chest rising high as

he took a deep breath, expression fixed into the neutral aloofness of any Alpha, Tobias pinned Meghan under the intensity of his gaze. “Let’s talk about what’s been going on.”

“Yes, please, sir.” Despite her earnest tone, Meghan shifted her weight in cramped twitches under his attention. A fine trembling shiver racked her frame, eyes trained upon the glossy finish of Tobias’ shoes.

“I have reason to believe someone is out to undermine me. While this in itself isn’t unusual, given my position in Alderbrook, it is strange how they’ve gone about it. A challenger would face me directly, but whatever this is, they’ve decided to go after my mate and children. Attacking an Alpha’s family is low, underhanded. A device of the weak.”

“Oh, sir! You don’t think someone is really out to hurt them, do you?”

“Given everything that’s happened, I would say so.”

Meghan flinched from the growl underlining Tobias’ response. Even still, her soft features pinched, lips thinning into a hard line. While it could be passed off as further reaction to a dominant Alpha’s harshness, there was something perturbed about it to Quinn’s eye. When his arm came from around her, Quinn wrapped her fingers around the edge of Tobias’ jacket, holding on as his impatience lessened the stranglehold he kept over her.

“Someone had my pregnant mate kidnapped. Tried to take my son,” Tobias continued, leaning forward with clenched fists braced against his knees. “They’ve been poisoning my mate. I would very much say someone is trying to hurt them.”

“Forgive me, Mr. Kahler, I didn’t mean to imply anything,” Meghan whispered in a hoarse croak. Gaze skittering around the floor, she huddled further into the chair with pinched eyes and a downward turn of her lips that pulled her whole face into a dark cloud of misery.

“I’m sure you didn’t. Especially not with this.” Tobias shoved the laptop he’d placed on the table around, slapping a key to send the paused video into motion.

The sharp angle sent a glare across the screen, saving Quinn from having to see it yet again, but by the sudden smoothing of Meghan’s features, she could view it just fine.

Her reaction wasn’t immediate. It began in gradual steps, speeding up as the video continued to play. Eyes widening by degrees until the whites showed around the brown of her irises. Lips first tensed, then slack, ending

in a strange curve at something she saw on the screen. A terrifying avalanche coming to the surface.

Whatever veneer Meghan kept in place, it fell away in ragged pieces as the footage came to an end. The dry husk of soft sweetness peeling back to show the creature beneath. Dragging her gaze up to meet Tobias's, Meghan pricked her eyebrows high and canted her head aside. The soft brown of her eyes turned glassy, an opaque surface that let nothing but a crazed gleam free of its reflection.

"How could you," Quinn whispered as the eerie silence stretched on far longer than she could tolerate. "You were my friend."

"I would never be a friend to a whore like you."

Quinn blanched. Shied away from the modulated tone that dripped with venom flowing from Meghan's now pale lips. Clutching at Tobias' arm, she held on for support as much as protection from the rage that swept across Meghan's face. Festering and evil, it twisted her mouth and narrowed her eyes to slits. A true monster in human skin for a moment before she tucked it away behind the screen of sneering calm.

"How can you say that? You've always been there—"

"Someone had to save these children from the likes of you." Meghan's lips tipped at the corners, the tight slant of her smile serrated as she slid a cruel gaze over Quinn's cowering form. "It's a wonder I even managed to keep them alive this long with you always there."

"I would suggest you be quiet, before I change my mind on how to handle you, woman," Tobias said through a growl that caused the hair on the back of Quinn's arms to stand on end.

"It's the truth and it's about time she heard it. She's never been a good mother to them. Even that precious boy knew she wasn't fit for him when he was just a baby! Her own daughter seeks me out before her. What does that tell you about your bitch?" Meghan laughed, the shattered echo of humor flying through the room in a wild, jittering race.

"That's not true—"

"Like you would know. Always flat on your back, ignoring them. You went off and spread for utter strangers, abandoning that sweet boy in the freezing cold, and for what? To come back and ruin it all when they'd had their fill of you. I heard what happened. I saw the marks on you. Don't pretend you didn't enjoy it. Adam was doing just fine without you, happy as

could be without your whore face to look at every day!” Ending on a screech, Meghan launched from the chair.

Tobias followed before Meghan could even take that first step, though she fell back to pace the long wall behind her. Tearing at Tobias’ arm, Quinn pulled herself up behind him, both arms wrapped tight around his waist to keep him still as Meghan continued her tirade. What demon possessed them both that she wanted to hear the vitriol tumbling pell-mell from Meghan’s lips was unknown. The need remained, and she would see this thing that had once been her friend unravel before her. Needed to see the monster she’d trusted with everything come into the light to prove something she didn’t understand.

“That poor little girl. To have only you as such a tiny soul! Not even the decency to feed her at your breast, too busy doing Gods’ knows what with whom to even look after her properly.” Swinging around, arm outstretched, a trembling finger found Quinn unerring. A sneer painted across her lips, making the once kind softness brittle and hideous. “We can only pray she won’t be like you, marked as she is with your whore hair. She’s young enough. She won’t remember you for long after you’re done and gone for good where the worms will be the only things squirming inside of you. Thank the Gods they saw fit to make you sterile, useless for anything but a wet hole for whatever beast crawls between your legs. A true blessing for humankind!”

“Enough,” Tobias yelled, a single step forward sending Meghan scuttling back.

Splayed hands braced against the wall, Meghan’s chest heaved as she caught her breath. Hair a wild halo around her head, the light caught the crazed luster of her eyes before she shuttered it away. Hidden from sight as she stood to her full height and faced the Alpha before her. Staring at Tobias with a blankness that was somehow even worse than the torrent of terrible words.

“Who put you up to this,” Tobias asked, the vicious chill of his words no longer effecting Meghan, the total stranger across from him daring to curl her lips into a smile that showed too much teeth.

“For someone so accomplished, you truly are an idiot!” Meghan crowed, head thrown back in ecstatic humor while she clapped her hands together hard enough for it to turn her palms ruddy pink. Gasping for

breath, she added between her airy giggles, “No one put me up to this. You did this to yourself, you disgusting cretin.”

Tobias stilled. Not the sudden quiet of the predator ready to pounce, the bewildered chord strumming along the bond leaving Quinn breathless as she clung to his back. He had no more idea of what was going on than she did.

“What do you mean by that,” he asked, cautious as he swept an arm back to push Quinn further behind him. Protective as he angled his body to block her from Meghan’s view.

“He was so good,” Meghan cried, pounding against her sternum with heavy fists that threatened to break the sturdy bone as thick tears stained her cheeks. “So very good and you killed him. You! You, who were nothing more than worthless trash yourself! Just another gutter lord clawing his way up the ladder, but you killed him. He was so perfect. So good.”

“What are you talking about?”

Tobias eased forward, pushing Quinn towards the couch with a steady hand as he kept his focus on Meghan when she began to pace again. Three quick steps, turn, and back. Hands clawing through the strands of limp brown hair, Meghan fisted the locks and repeated her route. It took three passes before she stopped muttering to herself, the tension rising with every step. Choking the air from the room until Quinn thought she could wring it in her hands.

“Derek,” Meghan screamed, the name turning into a drawn out wail that pierced the heart and made it bleed with her pain. Devastated, haunted, they were paltry words to describe the emotion flooding from Meghan on the bitter scent of hurt and anger. “My brother, you soulless vermin! You killed him over nothing. Nothing at all. He was so good. So proud. Would have been so much more than you would ever be if you hadn’t... but you...”

“What did I do?” Tobias took another step, abandoning Quinn by the sofa when Meghan dropped into a crouch.

“You cut his head off,” Meghan screeched, fisting her hair and tugging at the locks until several ripped free and tangled in her fingers when she thrust an accusing finger at Tobias. Eyes feral and wide, showing too much white as she lurched to her feet to face him head on. “You cut his head off, couldn’t even give him a proper burial. Never going to heaven. My poor, sweet, wonderful brother never got to go to heaven!”

“I don’t know of any Derek.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Meghan wailed, books clattering the floor as she dragged her fists across the shelves. Glass shattered against the warm wood as the few frames fell amid torn pages and ruined leather. Tearing at her dress, her hair, clawing at her own skin, Meghan stood among the chaos looking as broken as Tobias' precious books.

“Derek Shearer, you swine. You disgusting pig! My beautiful brother,” she yelled at Tobias, kicking her way through the detritus to storm closer. Quivering with her suppressed rage, fists in tight balls at her side, she glared.

“He tried to take my territory. Challenged me and paid the price.” Recognition achieved, Tobias stood somehow taller. Wide shoulders squared, he looked down on the sobbing woman with disgust.

“No! No, Derek was strong, good. He was looking out for his family and you cut him down and now you’ll pay!”

“You failed. My mate is healthy and well now, and you won’t be hurting anyone anymore.”

“No! I haven’t failed. Nothing is over yet. You killed him and now you must pay.” Calm slamming through her, Meghan stood straight with hands clasped at her waist. A docile smile eased across stiff lips. If not for the wild clumps of her hair and the still terrifying light glowing in her eyes, nothing would seem amiss.

“Meghan, you need help,” Quinn whispered, some part of her still clinging to the idea that this woman had ever been there for her. She’d seen plenty of people affected by their pasts for the worse, and Meghan was no different. No amount of therapy would fix this, no medication would take away what she’d done, but she still needed help.

The bond screamed inside Quinn’s chest. Made her lose her balance as unadulterated rage swam through her and pounded her brain into a soggy pulp. Clutching at the arm of the couch to remain upright, she tried to strangle down the sensation, but it was no use. He was somewhere beyond rage, livid with the idea of letting Meghan live, let alone Quinn’s insistence on aiding her.

“Oh, you filthy whore,” Meghan said, and now there was no hiding the wicked glee in her smile as she held up her hands. “You’re the one that needs help. It’ll be all right. I’ll save those babies from you and then I’ll make him pay. They won’t even remember either of you. I’ll make sure of it.”

"I've heard enough," Tobias snarled.

"She already got your best friend killed, saved me the trouble of that. How did that feel, hm? I'll kill that cunt you claimed next, and then maybe, just maybe, you'll feel a portion of what I did. Then I'll take those sweet babies—"

Meghan didn't finish. Couldn't with Tobias' hand wrapped around her throat, squeezing it until her face turned an ugly shade of purple while he lifted her. Slammed against the wall, any air that might remain in Meghan's lungs came out in a grunt of pain.

Still she smiled.

Kept the grim curl of her lips while clawing at Tobias' hands and arms, writhing and kicking for all she was worth. Betas were smaller, leaner than Alphas, yet somehow the blows she landed made him grunt and flinch. Scoring the side of his neck with her nails, tearing at his shirt, Meghan managed to drive him back enough that Tobias lost his grip.

Collapsing to the floor in a heap, Meghan gasped and choked out a broken laugh. Head slanted upwards, her hoarse cackle grew louder still before she swung her feral gaze towards Quinn. It sent Quinn a step back, the meager distance and the weight of the sofa adding a measure of safety.

"You're a clever slut, aren't you," Meghan croaked, using handholds to haul herself up to her feet. "Claiming him like that. It will make this easier."

Tobias already reaching for her, Meghan somehow ducked his large hand. Darting past him, she managed two steps towards Quinn before he grabbed hold of the unkempt locks free of Meghan's usual neat bun. It didn't stop her. Continuing forward, she screamed as the hair pulled free of her scalp, launching herself at Quinn.

Smaller even than a Beta, Quinn couldn't hold against the full weight of Meghan flying into her. Not even with the bond coursing her veins, adding whatever strength her physical body lacked. They fell to the floor, Meghan's body colliding with hers all over again as it came down on her.

The other woman wasted no time. Hands at Quinn's throat, she squeezed hard. Tighter and tighter. Nails digging into the back of Quinn's neck until blood flowed and ran in sticky hot rivulets over their skin. Mouth working to pull in a breath that would not come, Quinn slapped and kicked at Meghan. Pulled at her hair and clawed at her face, straining for even a sip of air. Nothing would break the grip Meghan had. Even as Tobias grabbed Meghan around the waist, hauling her body all the way off of Quinn's, she

refused to let go. With ungodly strength and determination, she held on. Seeming intent on pulling Quinn's head off before letting go.

Darkness edged Quinn's vision. Tobias' roar matched the reverberation that shuddered under her sternum. A tempest that raged, bloody and monstrous. A flash of white, the darkness of his torn coat. The horrible tearing sensation of her skin ripping open, a flood of warmth from a deep gash opening on her neck before a scream splintered the dimness of Quinn's thoughts.

The crack was audible, working through Quinn's teeth and into her jaw. The first breath that swept into her lungs painful, a sheet of stinging needles, Quinn attempted to roll away. Something warm and soft slapped against her cheek, the flurry of movement above her blurring into a wash of shapes as her eyes watered. Another scream followed the next smack of flesh, and it had to be that from its warmth.

A second crack registered, crawling down Quinn's spine as she recognized the sound as splintering bone. Another horrible slash at her neck followed by more soft slaps and screams. Blinking in a furious attempt to clear away the watery mist, her vision cleared.

Meghan shrieked when Tobias pulled her free from Quinn, launching her body across the room. Arms pinwheeling, moving in awkward spirals, she crashed against the other wall. Not making any effort to catch herself, she fell into a hard ball upon the floor. The thud of her head rebounding off of the warm wood reverberated through the entire room.

Not until Meghan sat up with a slow shake of her head did Quinn understand.

He'd broken Meghan's arms. Multiple places, judging by the way the limbs hung askew at shoulder, forearm, and wrist. It had to have been agony to continue hitting Quinn with such mangled hands, yet she'd done it.

Meghan wasn't done, either. Shuffling up the wall with back braced and scuffing feet, Meghan panted through her sneer.

The bond came alive in Quinn's chest, drawing on something she'd never felt before. Sapping what little strength she had left, she collapsed to the floor and could only watch as Tobias stalked towards his prey.

The tangled threads roared, one thing clear in the twisted tide of crimson and scarlets that seared her thoughts into ash.

Death.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Quinn's hands slapped over her mouth to muffle a scream when Tobias reached Meghan.

Words were done. Eons of evolution gone in a blink of an eye, Tobias' higher thoughts scattered to ash. The Alpha grabbing his prey was feral, a base creature who knew one thing. Meghan would die at his hands, and he would glory in it.

The sound of ripping skin flowed through the air on a fine red mist. Wet and pulpy as he shredded connective tissues and bones with the ease of a male in his prime. Snaps and pops, the crackle of splintering bone, it all echoed deep into Quinn's soul. A twisted part of her enjoying it as Meghan's shrieks and wails grew louder with every inch he separated from the body he destroyed.

Piece by meticulous piece, he tore Meghan apart. Fingers, hands, arms. Each one coming free with a sickening wet squelch and hard pops. Limbs tossed aside with careless abandon. Like a child ripping paper free of a present, the tattered pieces of her blood soaked flesh drifted down around him. The sodden clap of her body against wood vibrated through the wood as he threw her flat. Foot pinning the shrieking woman's hips down, he twisted and wrenched. Face spattered in sticky red drops as he pulled Meghan's foot free with a sickening crunch that Quinn felt through her teeth and down into her spine. Meghan's screams began to fade as he repeated the motion on her other foot, the weak kicks abating into useless flopping.

Quinn cried out along with Meghan's sharp screech when Tobias kneeled on Meghan's thigh. Gripping the one opposite, he pushed. Hard.

The pop of the joint, the hip shattering beneath his palm sounding like dry kindling. Crimson oozed and gurgled from the ever widening gash as her skin split and tore.

Unable to believe this was the same man she thought she knew so well, Quinn huddled against the couch. Tried to make herself small and invisible as she watched him rip Meghan apart like some kind of animal. A beast in a man's skin, a monster she didn't recognize under the syrup thick stains of blood and gore sheeting from his skin. Tobias' wild green eyes swung up to meet Quinn's. Lip curled up, showing the vicious edge of his teeth, he took in Quinn's horrified face. Whatever else he saw snapped something inside of him. Something she felt torn asunder deep inside her heart. Pain, yes, but so much more. Possessive, protective. Swimming through it all the sharp edged sword of his love.

With a roar he turned back to Meghan.

Quinn retched as the wet sucking sounds filtered through the suffocating tension. No longer precise in his destruction, he tore at Meghan's body. Ripping away chunks of flesh, tossing them aside to grab hold of slick organs and whatever else the body hides away from sight. Ribs cracked open, he flung the meaty bones to smack against the dripping walls. The glimmering white of her spine twisted up through the gaping hole of her stomach, the delicate bone shattered to dust in his clenching fist.

This was her mate. The man who had claimed her, kept her and given her the children she loved more than anything. Thinking he protected her with such violence, that he proved his prowess with all that destruction. Hugging her middle tight, Quinn couldn't find an ounce of fear for the beast making sounds that should never come from a man's throat. He wouldn't hurt her. This rage he showed would never dare to touch her. Somehow warmed by the thought, Quinn found the strength to leverage herself up to her knees. Refused to look at the carnage but did not huddle and cringe. Looking out of the French doors leading outside, she stared in fascination at the day proceeding outdoors as if nothing of importance happened within these four walls.

It was a long time before he sat back on his heels, fists braced against the floor in thick drifts of gore and cooling red pools. Shirt and skin stained, his dark suit soaked through, he appeared a devil clothed in red and black. Strands of unspeakable things twined around his fingers, leaking more fresh scarlet onto his slippery hands.

Between one second and the next he came back. Startling himself and Quinn, he sat up fast and rocked back onto his heels. Pulling away from the evidence of all that violence with swift movements that belied none of the adrenaline coursing through his veins. Not even a tremble in his hands as he stalked towards Quinn with an intensity that worried her.

“Are you all right,” he asked, the words sounding as if they were dragged through rough stone and broken glass. He didn’t even pause before crouching, running his hands over her body to check for any injury. Uncaring of the dark smears he left on her clothes and skin.

“I-I’m fine. Please stop,” she whimpered, eyes squeezed shut as she turned her head away from the swaths of crimson coating her now.

“Your neck,” he muttered with a snarl when his burning gaze landed on the weeping lines marring her nape and throat. Grabbed her up to cradle against his chest then stormed from the room. The door slammed against the wall before bouncing back, the loud crack of splintering wood too much like bone.

Men in dark uniforms fanned out, making room for the Alpha walking through the tight clump that once defended the hall and office door. Quinn wondered if they’d been there the entire time, if they’d heard Meghan’s screams and ignored them.

If they’d heard all the awful things Meghan said about her.

For so long she’d listened to Meghan’s little digs at her abilities, the small comments of how Quinn could never be good enough. Realizing the madness hidden away, the ultimate goal Meghan had, didn’t make it any easier for Quinn to cast it all aside.

“Get Annan,” Tobias shouted, hand cupping Quinn’s ear to muffle the volume though he left cold, tacky trails on her cheek and hair. Pushed her head against his shoulder and kept it there as he took the stairs two at a time.

“No need to shout I’m right—” Annan crashed to a stop, face paling as shaking hands covered pallid lips. The deep blue-gray of her gaze troubled, she took in the state of Tobias before even noticing Quinn. Lacking all of her usual bluster in the face of the still growling Alpha soaked in blood, Annan gave a faint wave towards the bedroom door. “I’ll need you to put her down to check her out.”

Tobias’ first reaction was instinctual. He roared at the Beta, clutching Quinn tighter and turning his shoulder so that she would be hidden behind

his bulk. Protecting her from an imagined threat. The sudden appearance of Rebecca at the nursery door and the wails of both kids flowing out into the hall had him ready to charge. A repeat of what happened downstairs waiting to happen.

“Tobias, please, you’re scaring our babies,” Quinn whispered against his neck, shaking hand smoothing back the thick locks of his inky hair. Try as she might to ignore the slick feel of blood oozing between her fingers, she still shuddered. “Just take me to our room. Let Dr. Annan see how bad it is.”

The grinding of his teeth, the creak of his jaw as it tensed shuddered down her back. Arms crushing Quinn to the point she had to stifle her whine, Tobias gave a slow nod. One step became two, another bringing them to the bedroom. From there he became more decisive, consolation in the space permeated with their scents. Depositing Quinn on the couch, he hovered over her. Blood smeared face close, he ran his palms from cheeks to hair, tipping her head back to look at him.

Dr. Annan was wise to remain at the door. Clutching her little black bag high at her waist as a shield, she kept her gaze centered on the floor before her. Smart woman not to push the man, to hurry him along as he reassured himself Quinn was all right.

“You’re getting it all over me,” Quinn murmured, gasping through a wave of disgust that tried to make her stomach revolt. Made no move to bat his hands away or to shy away from his touch. Looking up into the twilit evergreen of his eyes, they were still far too focused.

The beast lurking within him was still too close.

Another slow nod, far less smooth, and Tobias began to extricate himself. Fingertips lingering against her cheek, he stepped back to take up position beside Quinn where she remained half sprawled across the now ruined couch. Sticky and clumping, it made the soft fabric cling to her.

“Come. Her neck.” Arm jerking, he waved Dr. Annan in.

Pausing for a deep breath, Dr. Annan entered the room. Slow and steady, careful not to make a single movement that might be misunderstood. Not until she stood in front of Quinn did she become uncertain. She’d have to touch Quinn, and Tobias was not making it appear that would ever be an option.

Filling her lungs, trying to ignore the mingling scents of smoky darkness and acrid fear, Quinn plucked at Tobias’ sleeve. Bringing his attention to her, she quelled the urge to bolt. Danger and violence swam in

those eyes, fair begging for an outlet to present itself with the smallest misstep. “Calm down, sweetheart. She can’t help me if she’s too terrified to look.”

He startled. Arm twitching under Quinn’s hand, his brows crashed together. The hard, rigid planes of his features plunged, lips slack as he looked at Quinn. A breathless moment where she thought he would deny Dr. Annan anyhow brushed away with the vague roll of his wrist that brought the Beta doctor forward.

Turning to let Dr. Annan see where the sensation of burning needles pierced her skin the most, cautious fingers tangled with his. Holding on as Dr. Annan poked and prodded, inspecting the ragged wounds that felt as if they bared Quinn’s spine. The first hiss of discomfort might have sent him after the woman, but Quinn’s grip remained strong. Holding him right where he was. Dragging that tight grasp to her chest with a low whine, pinning his hand there against the stammering rhythm of her heart when Dr. Annan pinched at the torn skin.

“She’s almost done, sweetness.” Sounding far more himself, Tobias offered comfort. Held her hand and smoothed back the brittle strands of her hair from her face.

“All right,” Dr. Annan pronounced when she stood back, digging through her medical kit. Some of the color returning to her cheeks as the suffocating miasma of Tobias’ anger lifted some. “I don’t think you need stitches. They need to be cleaned and bandaged, but, um...”

“I need to take a shower.”

“Yes, a bandage would be ruined if I applied it now. So, if you would care to—”

“Out.”

“Tobias,” Quinn whispered in a hiss, cautious in her movements while turning to face the doctor. “Are the kids okay? Did she do anything to them?”

“They’re fine. No symptoms. Checking their blood now.” Dr. Annan slid back a step, shying away from the subterranean darkness that vibrated through Tobias’ chest.

“All right. I can manage to bandage it after I get clean. Thank you, doctor.” Quinn gripped Tobias’ arm, forcing him to change the direction of some of that attention as she demanded he assist her.

With no hesitation on her part, Quinn dragged Tobias after her towards the bathroom. Which was to say, she wrapped his arm in hers, hugging it to her body as she made mincing steps away from the doctor. Murmuring quiet sounds of soothing, she urged Tobias to come with her, though he wouldn't turn away from Dr. Annan until she slipped out into the hall.

"Now can we please get all of this... I need to get it off." Desperate, Quinn began stripping as she begged. The plaintive whine grating her nerves though it couldn't be helped. Flinging the rusty brown and viscous crimson clothing away from her to land in a sodden heap by the door, she backed away towards the shower.

Not until she was shivering on the cold tiles, reaching for the taps, did she understand her mistake.

Tobias was naked and on her in moments. Clothes ripped away, left wherever they fell as he rushed Quinn. Swooping down, he had her thighs cupped in his palms, lifting her until her back smacked into the wall.

Sex and violence were two sides of the same coin for Alphas. She knew that and hadn't paid any attention to the situation before showing one still high on the violence and chaos he'd wreaked all that naked flesh. Cursing her stupidity, she kept her chin and gaze averted, offering no real resistance. Gave no indication she would be willing but didn't deny him either.

"I need you, sweetness," Tobias murmured against her skin, sucking mouth traveling over her neck and shoulder. The heavy weight of his cock slid against her, hips working as he sought entrance. Surprising them both when he added, "Please, Quinn, I need you."

"We have to get clean first," Quinn whispered into the cool air, gaze tripping over the taps that were so close and yet miles away. "Please, not with all of this on us. It... I can smell it and—"

Tobias cut her off, shushing her with wordless sounds of comfort. One hand palming her ass, he reached out and cranked the water on. Shielded her from the first icy blast, waiting until it warmed before he turned to let her catch some of the steaming water. Holding her there as he reached blind for the soap, the rough strokes of the bar against her skin turned into frothy pink bubbles while he scrubbed away the worst of it.

Quinn tried to remain passive. Attempted to breathe through the iron band cinching her lungs. Failed with a miserable shudder as she fumbled her soap from the shelf and flipped the top open. Upending the bottle she squeezed, sending the lavender and honey scented liquid dripping down his

chest. She didn't care it was hers, no more than she was bothered that he scrubbed at her with his warm, musky scent. She needed them both to be clean.

As the water ran more clear than red, swirling down the drain and making all those horrors disappear, his touches changed. More to arouse than to remove any trace of the sticky crimson he'd left on her skin. Thumbs brushing over her nipples as he cupped the weight of her breasts, he set his lips against the sensitive spot just behind her ear. Breathing in her scent, he let it out on a quiet, rumbling call that bowed her back and had Quinn's hands scrabbling over slick shoulders for purchase.

With the first slow rock of his hips, she braced for the rough mounting that would come. Under the perfume of their soap, the bitter scent of hot ash and smoke lingered far too close. Lips set in a hard line as her pussy grew wet with slick, she waited for the first painful thrust.

It never came.

Easing inside of her in cautious inches, his deep reverberation unlocked her joints. Made her warm putty in his firm grip while he kneaded the flesh of her ass, spreading her open to his slow invasion. His rumbling groan against his claiming marks on her shoulder sent a shiver cavorting down her spine. Twisting it up, tingling shocks of pleasure zapping her nerve endings as she twitched her hips in response.

Hilted inside of her, he paused. Rolled his hips to edge that much deeper, the delicious ache against her cervix prompting Quinn to let her head loll on a guttural moan. Waiting until she grew impatient with his lack of movement, he eased back. The slow glide of slick flesh divine, she clung to his hard shaft before he altered course and worked his way back inside. Making her feel all of him with each measured thrust.

Growing frustrated with the crawling pace, Quinn made quiet noises and tried to work her hips. Found them pinned against the hard tile by his large hands, keeping her angled just right for the slow pumps of his hips. Perturbed, her lips slanted down. While happy he wasn't hurting her, this level of gentleness would never see him releasing the pent up aggression that started it.

Raking her nails down his back made him grunt, the final push a delirious jolt to her senses. Except he resumed his slow pace. Cupping the back of his neck, she eased forward, rubbing the hard points of her nipples against his chest. Ran the flat of her tongue up his throat to lick away the

droplets of water clinging to his skin. He faltered with every attempt she made and yet returned to his slow thrusts each time.

“Stop that,” he said through an ominous growl, baring his teeth as he snapped at her when she fisted inky locks and clenched around him when he bottomed out.

Flinching from the darkness in his eyes, Quinn crumpled against the tiles. Made herself small and averted her gaze to the wide expanse of his chest.

“I don’t want to hurt you, little bird.” Groaning, Tobias set his forehead to her crown. Sucked in deep breaths through his mouth as if he strained against a force too great to be denied.

“It’s okay.”

“No.”

“You’re not going to hurt me,” Quinn said, raking her nails down his chest in a bid to give the timid quality of her voice more truth than lie.

When he remained still, Quinn dared to growl. Jostled in his grip until Tobias let her slip down the length of his body, standing aside when Quinn walked with cautious steps from the shower. Buffing her skin dry, she looked over her shoulder at the Alpha standing torn under the spray of water. Vibrating with a tension she could ease if he’d just let her control the exchange.

With a slow curve of her lips, she danced forward a handful of steps. Eyes rounding when he stalked from the shower, coming to such a quick halt before he gave true chase that he rocked forward. Nibbling at her lower lip, Quinn clutched the towel to her chest, hiding away most of the body he stared at with such avid need she felt it crackle across her skin in heated waves. With a breathless giggle to expend her nerves, she tossed the towel at him and hurried from the bathroom.

The sound he made was dangerous, but that was part of the game. Launching herself onto the bed, she was ready when he chased her down. Following a moment later, landing hard enough Quinn’s body bounced as the springs rebounded her smaller weight.

She didn’t give him time to dissect the situation, to come to his right mind and rethink what he was about to do. Legs spreading wide, she invited him in. Cupping his throbbing cock and guiding him inside of her, offering him her low sounds of need when he remained seated at her entrance.

That first thrust hurt. Punching deep inside, driving the air from her lungs in a hard grunt that ended on a whine. Squirming beneath his bulk as rough hands gripped and pulled, she tried to ease the strain. Bit her lips hard when he did it again to muffle her cry.

Able to draw a true breath when he came to a full stop, he stared down at her with wide eyes that were clearing of the lustful haze too soon for her tastes. Quinn bared her teeth and shoved at his chest. Amazed when he rolled off of her, falling to the side on his back.

Not to plan, but it would do.

Climbing on top of him with enough speed to surprise but not enough to startle, Quinn straddled his hips. Slid her pussy against his cock before angling to take him inside. Sitting hard to take him even deeper. They both groaned when she rolled her hips in a tight circle, clenching around his throbbing length to make it that much tighter.

“Quinn—”

“I know. I get it. Just lay back,” she whispered against the fluttering pulse under his jaw. Tucking her ankles over his thighs, she pushed up. “Just enjoy it, sweetheart.”

“Fuck,” he groaned, fingers clenching hard over the shelf of her hips. “Say it again.”

Quinn bit her lip, realizing what she’d called him. The term of endearment slipped over her tongue twice now, and she hadn’t given it a second thought. Tears tried to burn the back of her eyes as a ragged layer of vicious, murky darkness peeled away. Leaving her a little more scarred, a little less weighted as she braced her palms against his chest and felt the unsteady tremor of his heart hammering against her hands.

“Let me make you feel good, sweetheart,” Quinn said, rising and then lowering her weight in a slow glide. Lashes fluttering, she let her breath out in a lusty sigh. “Just relax and let me do this for you.”

Low moan edging into a vicious growl, fingertips bruised soft flesh as he held onto her. Quinn started moving with slow, steady rolls of her hips, a part of her waiting for his control to crack and splinter beneath her careful sways. Still he let her control it.

With hooded eyes she watched the turmoil slipping across the planes of his features. The grim line of his lips, ruining the fullness she wanted to lick and nip. Humming low in her throat she leaned forward and did just that. Earned herself a sound that made goosebumps prickle the backs of her arms

as the urge to run twisted up the length of her spine. Shoving the trembling need aside, she pushed against his chest. Leveraged her weight back as she sat down hard enough their skin clapped together and a cry spilled between her parted lips.

“Don’t you like this,” she asked, words tangling on a moan as her thighs worked. Lifting her weight to then plummet, the sound of their clapping flesh loud in the tense silence.

“Yes.” Single syllable curt, it still resonated with enough danger to belie the placid way he lay under her.

“Liar.” She moved faster, taking his thick length deep enough to steal her breath. Moving her hands to her breasts, she mounded soft flesh. Pinched their stiff points and added a twist that sent her head rolling back against her shoulders. Watching him through the narrow slits of her lashes, one hand traveled south. Sliding along soft skin, she moved slow enough to capture his attention. Waited until his focus became absolute before pushing her fingers against her pussy. Splitting her folds, a flash of rich pink meeting his hungry gaze.

“Careful...”

“Mm, feels so good.”

Tongue sliding over his lips, the predatory gleam in the deep green of his gaze caught her. Held her in its thrall as she plunged her fingers between slick lips to rub a fast circle over her clit. The sudden spark of sensation crackling along her nerves adding an involuntary twitch to her hips as she landed on his thighs.

“Don’t you like this pussy?” Shaky breaths heaved into starving lungs, Quinn shivered under her own pleasurable assault. Rocking her hips, she forced his girth to stretch her open again and again. Added on a moan, “Don’t you want to fuck it good and knot it hard?”

“Quinn, enough,” Tobias groaned, gripping her hips hard enough to make them ache. Pulling at her weight with the next swift descent. Giving a subtle rock of his hips to add a delirious taste of pain to the motion.

“Just going to lay there and take it?” Gasping as her teasing touch turned far more serious, she dimpled the skin of her breast. Rubbing her clit in quick, jerky circles that had pleasure scalding through her veins. Winding through her muscles, drawing them tight as heat suffused her body. The delicate flush of it staining her skin as she bounced ever faster.

“Little bird... careful...” Showing his teeth in a silent snarl, Tobias tipped his head back. Neck straining as he looked away from the show Quinn put on.

“Some Alpha,” Quinn murmured, body undulating in jerky waves as the precipice grew ever closer. Rushing headlong towards a swift end, she hung her head so that her hair trailed along his chest and arms. “Letting his mate just get off on a thick, hard cock. Not giving her what she needs.”

Quinn swallowed the scream that rose to clog her throat when he flipped them. Roaring in her face, the hot wash of his breath fanned across her cheeks before Quinn angled her head high. Baring her throat to him even as she worked her legs high on his waist. A gentle rock of her hips pleading as her eager depths fluttered around his throbbing length.

“Take what’s yours,” she whispered when he remained still above her.

There was no bracing for the impact. His hard thrust slapped into the cradle of her hips, jostling Quinn up the bed. Breath leaving her in a low cry, she gave no resistance when he hauled her down into the next.

The brutal snap of his hips as he plunged deep inside of her was too fast for her to control. Clinging to his wide shoulders as he snarled and growled, she took his violence and gave him her moans and cries. A fresh wave of slick bathed where their bodies joined, wet sounds joining the slap of flesh. Even as his knees pushed her wider, opening her for more of his furious assault, delirious pleasure saturated every inch of her body.

As violent as the male above her, it ran riot through her limbs. The jerky spasms of abused muscles adding another layer of sensation to the already overwhelming barrage. Her toes curled at his back, the long muscles of her legs straining as they trembled. His sounds of rage were anything but anger, large hands pushing and pulling her into his wild thrusts, pawing at soft flesh until she cried out in bliss.

In the middle of it all the bond was a firestorm. A live wire that sizzled and sparked, sending out exhilarating showers of decadent bliss. It twisted deeper and deeper, pulsing through her very soul as the impending fall shuddered up her spine.

She felt alive. On fire and alight in the night dark sky, another star among the heavens. Soaring through a tempest raging around her. The knowledge that she was safe, no matter the way he roared and tore at the bedding, only added fuel to the blaze searing through her. She cried out his

name as the twisting clench of muscle became painful, the looming plunge into oblivion coming ever closer.

He gave no mercy, shoving trembling legs higher. Slamming against the very end of her with every slap of his hips. The more noise she made, the more it seemed to incite the beast within him. A sudden change of angle, he slid against that special spot, prodding it hard before the slick planes of his stomach collided with the throbbing nub of her clit.

Synapses exploding inside her skull, Quinn screamed as the first vicious whiplash of pleasure tore through her. Wriggling under his continued onslaught as mangled senses and disoriented nerve endings misfired. Pain and pleasure mingled and danced. Tangling up her spine and destroying her under wave after wave.

Tobias showed no signs of stopping as slick muscle fluttered around his driving cock. Her body's attempts to force the knot to complete their joining failed to inspire anything but more violence.

Quinn's cry was all dismay and horror when he pulled free. Still deep in the throes of her pleasure, she snapped her teeth and growled at the male kneeling above her. Snarled alongside his violent yell before he flipped her to her stomach and shoved the breath from her with an arm hauling her up to hands and knees.

Even with her arms braced and elbows locked, he shoved Quinn forward with his entry. Back arching as she tried to rise, to ease the pain of this new angle, she gave a squealing shriek when Tobias shoved her shoulders back down to the bed. Arms caught when she tried to push up again, he held them at the small of her back. Used them as a handhold along with her shoulder as he slammed his cock home.

Scream muffled by the pillow tumbled over her head, she could do nothing but take it.

Back bent in a painful arch, Quinn jostled and twitched. Nerves scraped raw, she whined as the interrupted torrent of pleasure began to build again. Too much and far too soon, she lurched forward to pull away.

Wrenched back into the pistonning of his hips, she found no relief to the ecstatic thrill scrabbling up her spine. Didn't want it as a small shift made him grind against that spot, striking deep for that delicious ache. Her guttural moan scattered in a warm gust as she managed to push her weight back into his next thrust. Ragged jolts of pleasure raced through her veins.

Warmth low in her belly becoming an inferno as he drove her to unsteady heights before him.

So close she felt the serrated agony of it crushing through her spine, Quinn cried his name and tugged her arms free. Surprise fleeting when he let her, she braced against the headboard to push back against the heavy slap of his hips against her upturned ass. Sounds growing wild, loud as the spiraling ecstasy wound tighter around her.

Wrecked senses pleading for the release that lurked just out of reach, she kicked her legs. Bucked back against him to incite a final rage of movement that would send her careening over the edge.

Tobias growled, covering her back and wrapping his arms around her. The leverage he needed for the furious rhythm lost, he ground into Quinn in swift jerks. Pulled her weight back into the hard lunges.

“Say it,” he rasped against her temple, tightening his grip when Quinn jostled to push back against him.

“Fuck me, knot me,” Quinn sobbed, hands scrabbling over the rumpled bedding as she fought for a single inch of space to steal more glorious sensation.

“More!”

“Show me that I’m yours. Prove it,” Quinn shouted, angling her chin to glare at him over her shoulder with all the wanton fury she could muster as she whined and arched to take more of him. “Make me feel it.”

The heavy bulk of him drove her down into the mattress. Quinn didn’t care that he crushed her. Not as his hips slammed against her, driving his cock hard and fast into her depths while the last vestiges of her sanity crumpled under his assault.

Thin wails of delight pushed from her lungs, she gripped his arms. Held on tight as the base of his cock began to swell. The delicious stretch adding to the maelstrom as he pushed and pulled the thickness through the tight clench of slick muscle.

Whole body sliding against hers, he marked her with his scent. Rubbed it into her flesh and soul as his thighs tensed against hers. Quinn’s hoarse cry poured over cracked lips as he set his teeth against his claim. Panting breaths washing over sweat sheened skin as he licked at the marks.

“Make me yours, Tobias,” Quinn husked before falling into the bed. Unable to do more than hold as he braced above her. Pleasure reaching the tipping point, she sobbed, and though there were tears, they were not sad.

Her world shattered around her on the roar of the Alpha. Senses exploding, her vision sheeted to white as it all became too much. Knot driving home, the swollen perfection of it stretching her wide before fluttering muscle tightened around it. Locking it in deep as the thick surge of his release bathed her insides. Held there as they made sounds more animal than human. Clawing for that last grinding pleasure to destroy them both.

When his weight crashed into her again, she offered a broken hum. Contentment filling the spaces between panting gasps and the remnants of quieting growls. Closing her eyes, she thought she might have told Tobias she loved him.

It might have just been in her head though.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Quinn's gasp turned to a hiss before she managed to clear the gummy film from her lashes as Tobias shifted above her.

"Stop! Fuck," she whispered in a hoarse croak, slapping at his arm when he did it again.

"Too heavy."

"M'fine. Just stop."

"Are you all right," he asked, so quiet she almost didn't hear him despite the fact he was mere inches away.

"I'll be fine when you stop trying to move," Quinn grumbled while threading her fingers through his. Cradling his large palm and rubbing her thumb in slow sweeps over his knuckles.

"You're sure?" Tensed and too distracted to accept her touch, he tried to lift more of his weight from Quinn's back. Jostled the knot still lodged inside of her body's tight grip.

"Love of the Gods," she muttered. Clenched aching muscle around him with a shiver and a purr as a ragged pulse of lingering bliss scraped up her spine. "See? Fine."

"Fuck," he breathed, voice strained as if she caused him true pain.
"Don't do that."

Settling into the bed, Quinn dozed as she waited for the knot to abate. Staring at the blurry shapes of their entwined hands, she didn't pay attention to the fact she still touched him. It didn't matter that he was as calm as he ever was now. The soothing caress was as much for her as for him in these languid moments of quiet before the world intruded once more.

“Fuck, the kids,” Quinn squeaked, jostling under his bulk and earning herself a wrenching pain that twisted through her midsection.

“They’re fine. Rebecca has them.”

“An Alpha guard with my babies? No.”

“She has children of her own, little bird. Rebecca can handle them fine.”

Now he settled his weight on her, crushing her will to move along with the breath to argue.

“Ruined my nest again,” she huffed, free hand shoving at a fold of sheet tumbled close to her face.

“You’ll make a new one.”

His purr called her to rest, but too awake with the dull throb of pain centered low in her hips still, Quinn played with his fingers. Examining the texture of the roughened calluses, the weight and heft of each digit compared to her own.

Spine trying to lengthen when he took hold of her, Quinn’s gaze skittered away. Unhappy she’d been caught out fondling him, no matter he’d been paying attention the entire time. Ignoring the smooth glide of his thumb over her hand, she clicked her tongue when he dragged it to his lips. Pretended she didn’t feel the shiver that twitched her shoulders when he placed a kiss to her palm.

Though Quinn’s cheeks warmed at the rush of fluid wetting her thighs and the bedding beneath, neither moved when the knot diminished. He nuzzled the sensitive spot beneath her ear and abraded her skin with the delicious rasp of stubble. Fingers winding around one another in ever more complicated patterns as each tried to come out on top. Until Quinn couldn’t contain her humor and let it out a husky chuckle when he pinned her hand with deft ease.

“Things will have to change,” she murmured, reality edging further in with every measured breath. A chill snaked down her spine, its sobering effect sinuous as it spread through her limbs.

“We’ll get a new nanny—”

“No. Absolutely not. I’m raising my kids, no one else.” Angling her chin to peer at him over her shoulder through the tangled mass of damp hair, she sent both eyebrows high and set her lips in a tight purse. “A lot of other things have to change, too.”

“Not now.” He rolled off of her then, but before she could miss his heat and weight, Tobias dragged Quinn into his side. Wrapped her in his arms so

that she sprawled across his body. Scrubbing his fingertips against her scalp, he soothed. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Fine.” Said on a gusty sigh, Quinn tried to relax. Willed the tension working back into her shoulders away. It was no use.

Disentangling his fingers from her hair, she sat up and viewed the rumpled chaos of the bedding. Muttered and grumbled as she began to rearrange the stiff folds and limp drifts into something more pleasing. Giving up when none of it would do, she bounced off the bed and stalked towards the closet, intent on changing it all out. Returning with arms full, she gave Tobias wide eyes when he continued to lounge, his bulk sprawled across too much of the mattress for her to do anything.

“Are you all right,” he asked, the rich timbre offering a soothing resonance. Arm held out, he invited her back in against his body.

“I’m fine.” Pale brows slamming into a hard line, Quinn gave a terse shake of her head. Beginning to tug and pull at the bedding, she huffed and groaned when he still didn’t move.

“You’re sure?”

It was the uncertainty hidden deep in that question that made her pause. Bent over the bed so far she strained to remain an inch off of the offensive construct, her head snapped up. Pale grays widened, catching the turbulent green of his.

“Why on earth wouldn’t I be?”

He didn’t answer, not with words. Moving faster than Quinn could track, he sat up to catch her under the arms. Dragged her back in against him so she was plastered to his chest. Gripping her ass hard, he carried her towards the bathroom.

“What on earth are you doing now?”

“I still need to bandage your neck.” Any hint of the warm spice of his scent dissipated under the suffocating rush of hot ash and smoke.

Quinn remained pliant when he set her on the counter. Held her hair up out of the way while he inspected the cuts and scratches. Observed the intense male as he patched her up with antibiotic creams and sterile bandages that made her skin itch. All of her work became undone in a matter of minutes.

Tension ratcheting up by degrees with every swift movement, she didn’t have to touch the simmering fury within their bond to know he was working himself up to another fine rage.

“There was no way for anyone to know, Tobias,” Quinn said, modulating voice and words in a way she never did. Soothing and quiet, she tried to placate. “No one even guessed.”

“I shouldn’t have trusted Curtis to check her out.” Delivered in a tone so devoid of emotion it was miles below lifeless, Tobias finished applying the last bandage and pulled Quinn down from the vanity. Smoothing his palms over her hips as if to reassure himself, he turned and left her there.

Quinn shivered as much more than the cool mist lingering in the room worked down her back. Goosebumps prickling the backs of arms and thighs, she hurried after the agitated Alpha. Finding him in the closet sorting through fresh clothing, Quinn leaned against the doorframe to stare in outright confusion.

The beast that attacked Meghan might be long gone, but so was the man who cuddled her after their violent sex. Cool and precise, he acted as if nothing had happened. Watery grays narrowing, she stood to her full height and blocked the door. Lips slanting down when she was further ignored, Quinn grabbed hold of the bond. Gave it a swift pull, drawing on it as she had when ordering the guards out of her way.

Tobias fumbled a suit coat from its hanger, ripping the sleeve as he turned to Quinn. Nostrils flared as the green of his eyes darkened to near black. Simmering just beneath the surface of his aloof exterior was a rage that threatened to burn them both.

“This is one of the things that will be changing. You don’t get to ignore me when it suits you,” Quinn ground out between clenched teeth. She trembled under the strain of trying to control the powerful surge of sensations pounding through her chest but refused to back down.

Chest expanding, he grew larger. Taller as he came at Quinn at speeds that shouldn’t be possible for a man so massive. Large hands catching Quinn at the hips, he lifted her until they were of a height. Showing her the edge of even white teeth, his snarl was quiet.

Pushed into the smooth wood of the door, it stuttered under her trembling. It had nothing to do with fear. The certainty he wouldn’t hurt her still flowed through her veins and it sent her hand to his cheek to caress the hard lines.

“I am still your Alpha, little bird.”

“And I’m your Omega.”

A rush of heat swelled within her chest. Threatened to explode her heart as it stammered and tripped into a furious rhythm not her own. With a low growl he was against her, rubbing his body over hers. Marking his territory.

Hum breathless and off-key as he pushed the air from her lungs, Quinn sifted his hair through her fingers. Nuzzled his neck and shoulder, outright purring when she set her lips to the small red rings claiming him as her own. What began as simple touches and primal need soon escalated. Quinn grinding against the hardness of his stomach, low whines scattering over his shoulder as she licked and sucked at her claiming marks.

“Shall I go around with your slick scenting me then,” Tobias asked, teasing tone gruff and rocky. Palming her ass, he pulled her tighter still, sliding the hard length of his cock between spread cheeks. Leaving a thick trail of his desire no less potent against her skin.

“You are a tasteless ass.” Quinn growled, smacking at his shoulders until he put her down. Hid her smile by turning away to grab at the first outfit that came to hand. Slacks and a simple blouse, it’d do for the moment. Didn’t even consider going to the bathroom to wipe away the tacky film of his excitement from her skin as she wriggled into a pair of underwear and hurried through the rest.

“I’m going to see what’s being done about—”

“Okay, yeah. Going to the kids,” Quinn said in a rush, breezing past him while he tugged on a pristine shirt that hugged his arms in a way that made her knees weak. Uncertain why she would be so distracted by his state of undress or disgruntled as he covered it up, she scurried from the room.

An uneasy walk down the hall brought her face to face with Rebecca once again.

Frigid brown gaze taking Quinn in, her nostrils flared, lips twitching as she caught scent of Tobias on Quinn. Movements exaggerated, she moved aside from the doorway and gestured Quinn inside to find the kids playing. Adam building an unsteady tower while Elise blew raspberries at a bright plastic truck she pushed ahead of her.

“Thank you,” Quinn murmured to Rebecca, smiling as Adam told Elise she was doing it all wrong.

“Just doing my job.” Remaining by the door, Rebecca crossed her arms and looked into the blankness of space. Seeming alert and ready without even trying.

Not until Quinn was sitting cross-legged on the bright rug, watching her children giggle and laugh as they played, did she realize she'd given Meghan no further thought. After watching the woman be ripped open, her entire body nothing but meat and broken pieces, she thought she should feel something. Hatred, betrayal, something other than this hollow emptiness.

Meghan had been there from the very beginning. Taught Quinn to feed and clothe Adam, things she'd carried on to do with Elise. She'd listened to Quinn's sorrows, soothed her when Tobias abandoned her. How could she reconcile the evil she'd watched unravel with the woman who once rocked her while she sobbed?

"You shouldn't waste your time," Rebecca said into the babbling din, still not looking at Quinn.

"What?"

"Don't waste your time finding things to mourn. She sure as hells wouldn't have."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" Quinn sniffed, pulling her knees up to hug her legs. The defensive posture giving it all away as she struggled to maintain the derisive tone.

"Been there, done that. Evil is evil, Mrs. Kahler," Rebecca said, pitching her voice low enough not to disturb the kids from their play. "No matter what else they might have been, they were always evil."

"You don't understand—"

"I do. She was keen on telling all three of us how important she was, how little you mattered." A growl edged into Rebecca's tone, one she was quick to stifle. "Kids need their mother."

"I didn't have one."

"How'd that turn out for you?" One brow raised high, Rebecca's lips tipped up into a smirk.

"Mama, help me!" Adam rushed to Quinn, throwing his arms around her neck to nuzzle her cheek. "Becky makes it huge."

"Becky...?" Quinn unfurled, rising to her knees and shuffling over to Adam's tower to begin placing more blocks on top.

"He had a little trouble with it." Rebecca's shoulders twitched with an indifferent shrug, but her eyes warmed to rich umber, dancing with mirth as she slid a glance at Adam.

Rebecca didn't encourage any further conversation after that, remaining silent and still by the door. At some point Quinn even stopped glancing at

the Alpha, the gnawing worry of the stronger dynamic fading fast as she played with Adam and Elise. For the first time in too long, she was whole and well and nothing would ruin this for her.

Nothing would ever keep her from this again.

Somehow that thought led her to Tobias. The man who had ruined her life, broken her to his will had now become a piece of a puzzle she no longer wished to destroy. He wasn't gentle or kind, never once made her feel like an equal, but somewhere along the way her hatred and fear transformed. Mutated into things she'd never felt before.

She thought she'd loved before, even Alton with his rules and punishments. None of it even began to compare to the emotions bombarding her daily. A match in the deepest, darkest hole, they flared bright for a second before fading into nothingness.

Tobias was so very different. A beacon in the night, safe harbor that exacted a price, he refused to let her go. Refused to leave her no matter how she fought and cursed him. Came for her, saved her. Loved her in his own strange ways though he was as terrible at showing it as she was.

When Rebecca straightened, pulling away from the door to face it with a hand dipping under the loose folds of her jacket, Quinn's heart began to race.

Pulling Adam and Elise closer, she grit her teeth and turned her back to the door, protecting them with her body as she waited for what new surprise would come barreling through.

Relief sluiced down her spine, making her lightheaded and weak when Tobias came in, his dark scowl a welcomed sight. She even managed a shaky smile when his narrowed gaze slipped over her before centering on Rebecca. Bristling with challenge, he crowded the other Alpha out of the room. Closing the door with precision, the quiet click of the latch loud as a gun report.

"Are you all right?"

"You keep asking me that."

"When I believe your answer, I'll stop."

"We're fine. You startled me is all. Bit ominous when the Alpha guarding the door gets antsy, you know?" Quinn ruffled Elise's hair, letting her toddle off to attack Tobias' shins as Adam went back to his blocks.

Tobias grunted in reply, lifting Elise to nuzzle her cheek. Making her giggle and squirm as his rough stubble tickled her. Coming further into the

room, he set Elise down and sent her back to play with a light pat to her rump. Ambling over to Quinn, he looked at her with the dark sweep of his brows tight over the bridge of his nose.

“What’s wrong?” Not thinking, she reached for his hand. Wrapping her fingers around his and tugging him down, insistent until he settled on the rug beside her. He looked so out of place with a dark suit fashioned for board rooms and high society rather than a nursery, clashing with the primary colored plastics and vivid decorations.

“It will take some time. I’ll put you and the children somewhere safe until—”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Quinn hissed, angling a smile at Adam when his head swung around at her vehemence.

“You can’t stay here, little bird,” he murmured against her ear, taking far more care to keep their conversation between them. “It smells of blood and death downstairs and I’ll not have them anywhere near that.”

“Then you’re coming with us.” Quinn nodded once, decision made as she climbed to her feet and picked a stiff path through the scattered toys towards the closet. “We’ll all go.”

“I can’t be seen leaving my own home, Quinn.”

“No, just putting your mate and children somewhere else. That says nothing!” Hands flying in an exasperated arc, she opened the closet doors and began taking out clothes. “We stay or we all go, Tobias Kahler, and don’t you dare argue with me on this.”

“Mama?”

“Quinn, calm down. It’s only for a little while. A week at most.”

“You can’t keep doing this to me,” Quinn shouted, slapping the armful of bright colored clothes on top of the dresser. Ignoring the continued clatter of plastic hangers dropping to the floor, she jerked the nearest drawer open. “I’m trying here, Tobias, I really am, but you have to stop leaving me just when I need you.”

Elise’s soft sounds of concern grew louder, building up to a distressed wail that Tobias tried to calm. His hands became uncertain as she refused him, kicking and crying as she worked herself into a true tantrum.

“Everyone leaves,” Quinn cried, voice cracking as the words shattered in her throat. Leaving her to choke on them as tears streamed down her cheeks. “No one ever stays. You think I run? That’s why. I got sick of being the one left behind.”

Slamming the drawer shut, she dropped the collection of socks and onesies to the floor in favor of scooping her daughter up. Cuddled Elise to her chest and cried into the cottony fluffs of hair though she rubbed at Elise's back to soothe her.

"Don't leave me," she whispered, crumpling to the floor with her back wedged against the wall. Opened her protective huddle to bring Adam in when he came, pushing his face against her shoulder when he tried to glare at Tobias.

"All right, little bird." Unfolding from the floor, he came to them. Gave Adam a narrow eyed look of admonishment until he averted his watery hazel gaze. Crouching before Quinn, he pulled all three of them away from the wall, into his arms and the protective circle of his presence. "We'll all go somewhere."

Nod jerky, Quinn snuggled against his chest. She cuddled their children close, reassuring herself they were whole and well until they squirmed out of her too tight grip. Long after they returned to their play with the easy forgetfulness of childhood, Tobias sat with her. Curled around her back, arms looped around her hips, he held her close. He even remained when Quinn collected the last fragments of her dignity and started packing the kids' clothes, helping her fold and put away the multitude of items they wouldn't need.

Dinner was eaten on the floor of their room, a picnic over the thick rug made up of finger foods. Even the kids were sedate, watching Quinn with concerned wariness whenever her lower lip began to tremble.

Not until she tucked them into their cribs, kissing their soft crowns just once more before Tobias pulled her from the room, was she able to let go. Sprawled over the half made nest, she sobbed into the blankets, staining them with a deluge of tears and emotion.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Quinn stammered out when Tobias finally tired of her shrugging off his hands. Pulled on top of him, forced against the rich vibrations of his purr, she gave in. Clung to him as she wrapped her body around his and buried herself in the comfort only he could offer her.

"A lot has happened, little bird," he murmured against her hair, long strokes of his hands over her back firm and strong. "It was bound to catch up to you."

They lay like that until Quinn had no more tears left to cry. Exhausted and wrung out, she remained listless when he arranged the blankets on top of them. Mumbled incoherent complaints when he kept her draped over his body but made no move away from the purr that had yet to stop.

“Sleep, sweetness. We have a lot to do in the morning.”

There was indeed a lot to do. Packing for two adults and two children seemed an insurmountable task to Quinn as she dragged herself from the bed with Tobias’ help. He’d left in the dark hours before dawn, arranging everything they would need, but returned before Quinn could rouse herself enough to call it anything nearing awake.

He’d even taken the time to calm her again, holding her on his lap and purring while scrubbing at her scalp when she broke down over him doing far more of the packing than she did.

“I’m a horrible mate and terrible mother,” she sobbed against his chest, fists wringing the edges of his jacket, ruining the crisp lines of the shirt beneath.

“You are none of those things, sweetness,” he said through the deep resonance.

More meaningless sounds of comfort were given until Quinn slapped at his hands and pulled away. Shaken and refusing to show it, she scrubbed her eyes raw and tried to do more.

Somewhere safe turned out to be a townhouse he used for business affairs. Small and not intended for family living, it’d taken a lot of effort to make it inhabitable. The kids thought it was grand until the gates on the stairs went up, keeping them from breaking their fool necks when they decided to traverse the steep staircase unaided.

Quinn was edgy, the space unknown. Despite the liberal use of cleansers and a wealth of laundry being done, faint hints of aggression and darkness lingered in the dark corners. Only Tobias’ adamant refusal kept her from directing the men moving furniture to put the cribs in the far smaller master bedroom. Reassurances that Rebecca would be remaining were given, a folding bed disguised as a comfy chair for her use sitting right in the middle of the kids’ room. They would not be left alone as long as they remained here.

Neither would Quinn. Two black clothed men trailed her around the house as she tried to put everything into some semblance of normal while Tobias had to tend to business. She'd seen Mr. Rey and Mr. Beaumont go into the dining room with him, their murmured conversation cut off as the door shut hard behind them. A glimmer of disappointment that Devin wasn't with them vanished as she busied herself with making the kids' lunches.

More people came and went throughout the day as Quinn arranged the house to her liking. Guards moving furniture were quick to lead her away from the front rooms or block her view when the doors opened. Keeping her tucked away from the dark violence that permeated the air.

It was sheer dumb luck that she managed to come down the stairs where the guards couldn't hide her away fast enough when the woman came in. Dark and dangerous in ways that made the hair on the back of Quinn's neck stand on end, she was imposing and beautiful. Backlit by the thick rays of a setting sun, the dusky reds and golds turned the tawny beige of her skin a glorious bronze.

The steady click of fashionable heels brought her further into the entry, the perfect dark arches of her brows rising above meticulous lined eyes as she caught sight of Quinn. A momentary flash of surprise lit up the warm cognac of her gaze before she turned towards the sound of Tobias leaving the dining room with a cluster of Beta males. The thin veneer of polite society coating them in slimy muck, slicked back hair and wheedling whines of praise for Tobias filtered up the stairs. Shuddering in disgust, Quinn held the banister in a white-knuckled gripped and prayed no one but the woman would notice she was even there.

Misfortune always biting at her heels, they all looked up. Tobias' eyes widened by a fraction, the deep green of his gaze biting and cold as his jaw tensed. Lower lip caught between her teeth, Quinn's hand pressed against the center of her chest. Dug the heel of her palm hard into the fractured ice that lodged under her heart as she averted her eyes to stare at the expanse of mottled gray tiles laid out in a herringbone pattern.

"That would be my mate you're gawking at," Tobias ground out, his imposing presence sucking the air from the small room as he crowded the males back. Forcing them to stumble towards the door as they tried to turn their eyes away far too late, he snapped orders for the guards there to see them all to their cars.

“Good evening, Mr. Kahler,” the woman said into the thick tension as the raucous din of the Betas faded away, the husky tones of a sultry voice swirling through the air. She sounded more accustomed to murmured exhalations in bedrooms than boardrooms, despite the slutty chic suit baring the swell of firm breasts and snugged tight at her trim waist.

Rubbing her hands over the backs of her arms, Quinn turned and tried to run back upstairs. Gripping her thin shirt, wringing it to be rid of the hideous thing slithering around the jagged cold. Both warring from supremacy as her feet refused to budge.

“I wasn’t aware you were coming by, Ms. DeVries.”

With his voice coming closer to Quinn’s back, she trembled. Wrenched at the bond, trying to suffocate it so he wouldn’t feel the turmoil within her. Feeling the stairs shudder under his feet, she tried again to brush past the two men blocking her path.

“I thought I’d deliver the files in person, seeing as we haven’t officially met yet,” DeVries said, the lilting tone edging into a tease. “I find I get a better feel for those I work with when I’m able to sit down with them personally. You’re also very particular in your needs from me.”

Shoulder caught the instant Quinn thought the vicious paralysis broken, Tobias pulled her into his chest. Rumbled a quiet sound that didn’t dare to be a purr in front of another Alpha against her temple before fingers under her chin brought her eyes to his.

“Everything okay?”

“I didn’t know—”

“I know, little bird. I’m busy now though, so tell me what you need.”

“Nothing, I just came down to get Adam a snack.”

“All right then.”

Unexpected, his lips brushed hers. A feather-light kiss that promised to be much more when he had the time and less of an audience. Smoothing his thumb over her cheek as he pulled back, a slow smile crept over his lips as he bounced his brows once in a playful tease. Gone down the steps, arm held out to invite the attractive Alpha into the dining room he was conducting his meetings in.

Not until the doors shut tight and Quinn rummaged through the disordered kitchen for a pudding cup and spoon did she understand the filthy muck oozing around her insides. Examined the murky shadows of it as she traipsed back upstairs to relieve Rebecca of her babysitting duties.

She was jealous. There was no other word for it.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was late when he finished and came to her. Perched on the edge of the bed, Quinn stared at the nest she'd remade half a dozen times with a critical eye. Unable to decide if it was the lifeless sheets or the bed that reeked of warehouses, her fingers itched to start all over.

"What exactly do you think you are doing," Tobias asked as he closed the door behind him.

The snick of the lock sliding home echoed through the sudden quiet, Quinn frozen where she leaned over to push at a stiff fold. Raising her eyes to him, she gave a slow blink. He'd asked that often in the beginning, when she was doing something he felt was improper. Memory at odds with the rough, teasing tone he used now, Quinn's brows drifted down to pinch tight.

"My mate should be naked and spread for me at the end of a long day." The curve of his lips was indolent, hands tugging at the knot of his tie as he began to undress.

"Your mate is tired and sore."

"Excuses. Her Alpha will make it better."

"Perhaps her Alpha thinks too much of his abilities." Quinn bit the corners of her lips to keep the smile at bay, watching the man stalking towards her divest himself of shirt and jacket in one easy shrug.

"Now he has to prove his prowess!"

Tobias' mock growl sent tension skittering through the delicate vertebrae of her spine, pulling it tight as she shuffled away. Pupils narrowed to pinpoints, she stared up at the large male as he loomed closer.

"Quinn, it's only me." Pitched low, he tried to soothe. Easing down into a crouch at the end of the bed so that he wouldn't threaten the space she'd

put between them.

Covering her face with her hands, she groaned into her palms. Let loose a ragged snarl of frustration as she clenched fistfuls of her hair. “I’m sorry, I _____”

“You’re going to tell me you love me again.”

“What?” Quinn’s scoffing laugh was more a squawk of dismay, eyes snapping up to meet his as he edged closer.

“This time you’re not going to be high on sex, either,” he said as he went to his knees before her. Hands covering her thighs, he pried them apart, making room as he settled against her.

“I never said any such thing.”

“You did.”

“Didn’t.”

“Fine. Have it your way. I’ll fuck it out of you until you get more comfortable saying it.”

Pounding at the door stopped Tobias before he could fall on top of Quinn. Growl ominous, he stalked to the door, a hard jerk opening it just enough for him to see the guard beyond but to block their view of Quinn still sprawled across the mattress where he’d shoved her flat. Even in his anger he remembered to hide the shoulder bearing her mark, the edge of the door casting the red rings into deep shadow.

Their quiet conversation couldn’t reach her ears, but she saw the long muscles of his back tightening. Hand gripping frame and door, the white knuckled grip showed the building rage that resonated through the bond in unrestrained pulses shaded rich crimson and bloody red.

Quinn scuttled up the bed, pulling a blanket tight around her as Tobias closed the door with care. The click of the latch the only sound as he turned to her, the sharp edges of his features as dark and foreboding as the gleam of murderous intent shining in the depths of his gaze.

“I have something I have to attend to. Personally.” Jerky movements pulled a fresh shirt and jacket from the closet, hangers not daring to utter a single click. Dressing with swift efficiency, he kept a sea of distance between them. Dark eyes sliding over her unseeing, as if he watched something far different from his mate huddled against the headboard playing out in his thoughts.

“What’s going on, Tobias?” She hated the quaver of her voice, the strain of his anger trying to strangle her. Clutching at the edges of the blanket, she

forced herself away from the headboard to inch forward on her knees across the bed.

“Everything is fine.”

Nothing was fine. From the set of his shoulders to the snarling twist of his words, everything was wrong. Strangling the low whine of distress that raked its bloody claws through her throat, she edged closer still. Her hand trembled when it reached for his arm, a glancing touch to bring his attention out of the raging depths that were somehow more terrifying than what she’d witnessed while he tore Meghan apart. Tried not to flinch when he whirled on her with a snarl, bruising grip catching her fleeing arm and jerking her from the bed to dangle in listless confusion.

The dry click of her throat loud when he brought her higher still, Quinn remained soft in his hold. When his other arm came up to support her, she let her head fall forward to burrow into the warm shadows of his neck and shoulder. Her quiet purr scattering over the tight muscles standing in stark relief there.

“I’ve been issued a challenge. They’re giving me the courtesy of not bringing it to my door, where my mate and children are,” Tobias said against the loose curls of her hair. Hands fisting in her clothes, he gripped her tight enough to squeeze the breath from her before he set her back on the bed. Refusing to look at her again, he kept his focus on buttoning his shirt. “I have to go now.”

“A... a challenge? You can’t be serious!”

“You know who I am, little bird. This will not be the last time it happens.”

“But... you can’t... What if something happens and—”

“It will be fine.” He came to her then, gripping her jaw hard enough to make her wince. Angling her to meet the brutal crush of his lips, his subterranean growl resonated through her.

The sheer aggression of him calmed. Fingertips digging into the back of her skull, tearing out strands of her hair, he laid claim to her lips.

Her soul. Her heart.

A quiet sound built in the depths of the bond. Fierce, crazed, it clawed its way up Quinn’s throat. Met his vicious reverberations head on and matched them. Became so much more. Pouring herself into the kiss with lips and teeth, tongue attacking, they battled. Each seeking to dominate, to

subdue the other. Doing nothing but building the heat between them to a roiling tempest that threatened to devour them whole.

“I must go,” Tobias said on a menacing rumble, the scrape of his teeth bringing the bright coppery tang of blood to their exchange.

“I swear to the Gods, Tobias Kahler. If you don’t come back whole, I will kill you myself,” she snarled, raking fingers like claws down the back of his head. Deep red welts appearing under her nails as she scraped them over his neck.

“You better be naked this time,” he tossed over his shoulder, pushing Quinn away as if he couldn’t bear to touch her one more moment. Stalking towards the door, he gripped the handle so tight his knuckles popped, the brass fixture moaning. “Naked and ready to tell me you love me.”

Watching him leave, the hard thump of the door closing sounding far too final, Quinn collapsed into the bed. Hugging herself around the middle, she stared at the solid pane of wood in disbelief.

“I love you, you arrogant ass,” she whispered in the dead quiet of the room.

As it neared dawn, Quinn took her pacing to the hall where a bank of windows gave a view of the postage stamp sized backyard. Floor to ceiling, they offered little protection against attack, but the glorious sight of dusty purple and faded blue seeping into ruddy crimson and gold was framed to perfection.

Quinn saw none of it.

Mind too occupied with scenarios that tormented her to appreciate such a fine view, outcomes that saw her alone and adrift with two small children. The absolute terror that at any moment she would fall to the floor as life slipped through her fingers, all while he lay somewhere far away doing the same.

That much she knew about the bond. She’d die without him. If something were to happen to him, she’d have little time to find another male. Someone strong enough to wrench her back from the edge of the abyss. One who wouldn’t mind what she was, what she looked like. Along with the two children who looked more and more like their father every day.

Shudder twisting through her spine, hunching her shoulders against an invisible chill that stole her breath for a too long moment, Quinn pushed the tears aside. She'd spent hours sobbing into the scentless bedding. Even resorted to clinging to his worn shirt when things got worse.

Then the pacing began. Back and forth, wearing a track into the warm wood as she muttered prayers to Gods who had never deigned to listen to her. Cursing and pleading with them in turns as she asked that he come back. Whole or not, she just needed him alive. All of the finery, the money, the prestige of being the ruling Alpha's Omega. None of that mattered to her.

She only needed him.

Quinn didn't know when it happened. At what point she came to love the monster that ruined everything for her. It had happened though, and she'd be damned if she let it go. If someone thought it a joke to snatch him away just when she was realizing that, she would murder them, too. Deity or human, their blood would flow before she fell into death.

"I thought we agreed you would be naked."

Quinn's shrill scream pierced the crimson shaded darkness, shredding through the quiet of the sleeping house. Men flowed into the small space, black guns gleaming in the uncertain light. Aggression and danger swirling around them, jammed down Quinn's throat as she threw herself back against the windows. Hands splayed, clinging to the night cold glass, she stared in horrified relief at the spectacle of violence before her.

Covered in blotches of scarlet and crimson, hair in disarray, it was indeed Tobias. The green of his eyes swallowed by the darkness of his pupils as he tracked her small twitches and heaving chest. A predator viewing his prey.

"Get out." Words mangled by his growl, the men understood it all the same. They disappeared into the shadows once again as Tobias came to her. Hands grabbing hold, pinching, squeezing. Dragging her away from the windows, he pulled her along with him as his long strides took them back to the bedroom.

"Are you all right," Quinn stammered out, fists twisting in the ruined front of his shirt.

It was torn, stained with fresh blood. A ragged cut marked his chest where something had clawed through linen and flesh. Further inspection as

she pulled his shirt back reveal yet more cuts and the telltale threads of puncture wounds sewn up.

“Oh, Gods, you were *shot*?”

“Stop screaming, little bird. I’m fine.”

“Being shot is not fine,” Quinn hissed, ripping the shirt back to see what other damages were being concealed. A jagged moan of distress pouring over her lips as a sinuous curve following the line of his hip came into view.

“Bastard brought a knife to a gunfight, can you believe it?” Tone easy, cocky as hell, the smile he angled down at her with a bounce of his eyebrows was nothing if not easy arrogance. “I would have thought an Alpha running Grayfall to be smarter than that.”

Quinn balked at the display.

“Y-You could have... It c-could have...” Sniffling, she denied the tremble of her lips. Thought she for sure would have no more tears left within her, but as they scalded her wan cheeks, she understood that had been simple wishful thinking. Sobs ugly and wretched, she clung to the idiotic male. Slapped the sides of her fists against his bruised shoulders and cried all the harder when he flinched from a blow.

“Have a little faith in your mate, little bird. It was a glorious win and I’ve expanded my territory,” he husked against her hair, nuzzling the soft strands as he ripped away his shirt. Skin beneath sterilized, reeking of alcohol and other vague medicinal scents, he sought to prove he was well.

When Quinn continued to blubber about the danger he put himself in, Tobias led her to the bed. Seating her on the edge he went to his knees and wedged his bulk between trembling thighs to wrap trunk like limbs around her.

The rumble of his purr intense, it roared over Quinn. Threaded through the bond, invading her heart and soul in one fell swoop to leave her soft and devastated in his embrace. A comfort she never allowed herself, castigating herself when she did bask in it, now she clung to it. Wrapped herself up in the heady vibrations of his offered comfort. Let it ease away the hurts and aches, the things she couldn’t speak out loud for fear of ruining everything.

He was alive. Wounded, bruised, patched holes littering his skin, but alive. Another Alpha lay dead somewhere, defeated in glorious fashion with his head cut off. The ritual of it denying the challenger their last rites.

Images of a man resembling Meghan tried to surface in her mind’s eye, but

she shoved them aside and breathed in the rich decadence of chocolate and chilies. Took it deep inside of her where it would never fade again.

“You’re still not naked,” he said through the purr when she’d calmed, the sound twisting into a far darker rumble.

Shivering as it snaked down her back, leaving a delicious tingle in its wake, Quinn pressed her lips to his neck. Kissed the steady thumping of his pulse. A sudden frenzy of motion, she tugged and squirmed at the clothes she wore, sudden desperation making her hands shake.

“Too late. I think you need a lesson about keeping promises.”

Standing, he shoved her back onto the bed. The long skirt she’d worn rucked around her hips with a swift move of his palm up her thigh. Quinn’s squeal of surprise was muffled by his other hand, his smiling face coming close as he called to her. Deep and rich, it exploded through her, plunging into the cradle of her hips and sending a rush of slick dripping from her pussy in answer.

“You have to be quiet, little bird,” he husked against her shoulder while pulling at their clothes to free them both. “These walls are too thin for you to be screaming about my cock inside of you. There’s something else you owe me, too. I’m going to hear it before I give you what you want.”

Quinn’s pale eyes blazed, lighting the air with a string of vivid curses that trickled past his hand in grunts and mangled syllables. Punching his shoulder made no difference, tugging at his hair failing to alter his course as he mouthed the hard points of her nipples through the thin shirt.

“Say it, sweetness. Tell me how much you need me, how much you love me,” he murmured against the swell of her breast. Pressing a hot, wet kiss against the center of her chest where the bond resided.

Quinn bit his palm. Hard. Earned herself a shake of her head and a warning growl, his fingers tightening over her cheeks to pinch the soft skin. Pinned to the bed by his hips, he tore at her clothes with his free hand, ruining them as he flung the ragged pieces away.

The sound he made when she lay naked before him was savage, pure male need. Dark green gaze alight with his lust, he shoved an arm under the small of her back to move them further up the bed. Giving him room to sprawl atop her as he rubbed his body against hers.

Each slow glide had his scent permeating her skin, the throbbing length of his cock smearing the pungent evidence of his need across her twitching

thighs. Teasing at the swollen, wet folds of her pussy but never entering. Denying Quinn the glorious fullness of it.

Taking his hand from over her lips, he cradled her cheeks. Brushing a careful kiss against the edge of her snarling mouth, he prodded at her entrance. Edged back when Quinn twitched her hips in welcome and slid down her body when she tried to pull him back.

“Say it, little bird.”

“Fuck me,” Quinn whined.

Tobias shook his head, the dark reverberation of his call shuddering through her. Bowing her back, limbs seizing around his body as Quinn tried in vain to force him to plunge into her wet heat. A growling whine slipped over panting lips as she writhed when he refused her.

“Tell me, little bird.” Mouth going to his claim on her shoulder, the slick laps of his tongue worked over the scarred flesh. His low sounds of satisfaction edging into a dangerous rumble when she tried to do the same.

“I need you,” Quinn snapped, nails digging into the long muscles of his back. Forgot to be careful, clawing at the skin as she pulled. She hid her stuttering cry against his neck as he pushed inside of her, stretching her open around his thick cock in a single thrust.

“More,” he snarled against her throat, teeth grazing the flutter of her pulse beneath her jaw.

“I need you to fuck me,” Quinn hissed, hips rocking up into the delicious ache.

“Tsk, such a bad girl. Disobeying your Alpha.” Rising above her, Tobias shook his head with brow furrowed. Despite the admonishing set of his features, laughter danced in the twilight evergreen of his eyes. A sparkle meant just for her as he angled her hips high with his knees and slid his hands around her thighs.

Fingers trailing up his arms, she watched him through her lashes. She could give in, tell him what he wanted to hear. Instead her lips curved, a smile hidden in her snarl as she bared her teeth and pulled herself higher. Bucking against him as she clenched slick muscle around his length.

Growl edged in danger, dripping in aggression, he caught hold of her hips. Bruised the soft flesh when he jerked her into the swift thrust that ground his cock in deep. His low groan tangled in her airy cry, the wet sounds as he withdrew followed by the slap of skin when he did it again.

There was no slow, no careful in that moment. Eager, ready, they both grabbed. Clawed. Pulling one another into the swift rhythm that dragged animalistic sounds from their throats. Sex and need, love and lust scattered through the air. Made it too thick to breathe in anything but panting moans.

The rough rasp of his thumb over the vulnerable nub of her clit had ragged threads of heat suffusing her limbs. Pooling low in the cradle of her hips before exploding into every nerve ending with his next powerful thrust. The frayed edges of the overwhelming sensation tangled with the delicious ache of it all.

Strangled cries offered up into the crazed din, Quinn's hips rocked. Undulated to pull him deeper still as Tobias drove her higher up the rocky cliffs of her pleasure. Pinching the throbbing bundle of nerves, adding a twist to make her shriek and jostle to get away. To get more.

Hips moving in jerky snaps, he fell onto her. Crushed her beneath his massive frame as he curled around her. Embraced as much as restrained. An inferno engulfing her inside and out. Ecstasy exploding beneath her skin, she gripped him with her entire body. Terrified she'd float away on the swift currents of bliss that ran molten in her veins. Breaths shuddering into her lungs, Quinn trembled as the world around them began to dance with sparks of vivid greens and reds.

“Say it,” he snarled in her face, lips brushing hers with his vicious demand.

“You say it,” Quinn whined, fingers clenching through the thick locks of his hair to drag him into a true kiss. Attacked with tongue and teeth until he tore his mouth away.

“You are mine. My mate. My fucking Omega. Now say it,” he grunted, lines of strain edging his sharp features. Kept the brutal rhythm driving her higher as the base of his cock began to swell.

Starting as a ripple of heat wringing her spine, it bent her back. Thrust her breasts to his waiting mouth. Nipples caught between lips and teeth, Quinn's airy scream reverberated through the room before she caught it with a shaking palm. Cries growing ever shriller as he demanded she give him more. Hand grabbed in his fist, he pinned it to the mattress. Forced the air from her lungs with each heavy slap of his hips. The knot growing, stretching the tight ring of her entrance. Promising the fulfillment she craved and needed, threatening to take it all away as he held back.

“I love you,” she screamed with the first slick contraction. Violent pleasure crashing through her, exploding in rapid fire pulses through her joints and limbs. Made her twitch and groan. He shoved a rough hand between them to rub swift circles around her clit. Pushing her further, dragging her higher. Ground the knot in only to edge it out again to hear her scream it again.

A litany of endearments and promises tumbled free of the tight grip she held. Words of love, of care. Leaving her vulnerable as she jostled against the too much sensations he dragged out until her cries were ragged and coarse.

Pulsing around the thickness of him, she sobbed when the first heady wash of his release bathed her insides. Felt it like a molten tidal wave, filling her up. Making her whole as he ground in deeper.

World fading around the edges it simmered to a blinding white. Synapses misfiring as he gave her more. Each careful rock of his hips, every touching of his fingers sending her soaring into the starlit brightness.

Quinn’s eyes opened to the brilliant glow of early afternoon. Swathed in muscle and male satisfaction, she grumbled and tucked her head against his chest. Blocking the worst of the sunlight to close her eyes again as she shrugged his thick arm higher to give her more shadows to hide in.

“I love you, too, little bird.”

“Shut up,” Quinn mumbled, mouthing his skin all the same and smiling as the heady rush of his scent slipped over her tongue.

“Tsk, disrespecting your Alpha. Again. Will you never learn?”

“Mm, I distinctly recall someone calling me an impossible female.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to teach you again.”

Whatever lesson he might have decided to give her came to a halt as Adam burst into the bedroom, all giggling laughter and excited squeals at having escaped Rebecca’s eye. Beyond impatient for his parents to come and join in his play.

“To be continued,” Tobias muttered against Quinn’s ear, tucking the sheets tight around them both as the excited toddler clambered up onto the bed to start his complaints.

“No,” Quinn said, laughing as she tucked Adam between them and nuzzled his soft hair. Gray gaze finding the dark evergreen she’d come to

know so well, her smile widened as Elise's angry shouts came barreling down the hall. "I think this is the happily ever after."

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EPILOGUE

“What time is it?”

“Exactly three seconds since the last time you asked me that.”

“Don’t patronize me, Tobias,” Quinn snapped, fast strides carrying her back along the path she’d paced all day. Fingers shoving at the short locks of her hair, she tugged at the curling strands. She never should have cut it, the shoulder length feeling awkward and unruly.

“Might I remind you that you were the one that insisted they go?” Leaning over the desk, he rubbed at the short beard he’d begun to grow. Peering at the laptop screen, his brow began to furrow. Distracted, he added, “They’ll be fine.”

“They need human interaction! A fucking private tutor is not human interaction.” Nodding once, decisive again, Quinn made it a handful of heartbeats before she resumed her pacing.

She had insisted the kids go to school. Adam needed friends his own age, other seven-year-olds to run and play with. Not guards with guns. Elise needed it even more, before all of this insanity became something too normal. Knowing the private school was well-guarded, that Rebecca and Ross trailed the kids all day, didn’t help her worry any. Even knowing all the children that attended were the rich, the important, with their own guards and security didn’t change a thing.

Her babies weren’t home and the house felt miserable and empty without them.

Tobias’ expansion hadn’t helped her nerves any either. Alderbrook and Grayfall hadn’t been enough for long. No, he had decided that with the power afforded to him with their bond, he would take over the surrounding

cities and towns until he was such a force to be reckoned with that no one would dare try. Too many nights she had sat up waiting and worrying, falling apart when he ambled through the door with some man's blood still marking him.

He refused to listen to her pleas that he slow down, wait until he solidified his claims on all these places. Now there were rumors of Alphas questioning his sudden command. Wondering what it was that made a man once in control of a middling coastal city a veritable king. Controlling the southern half of the country along with its shipyards, trains, and airports. It was too much, too fast.

Quinn feared it was only a matter of time before they figured out it was their completed bond that gave him that power. That they would come after her or the kids. She couldn't go anywhere without a dozen men, all armed to the teeth. The SUV Tobias gave her for the rare trips into town when the kids needed more than Dr. Annan was bulletproof with all sorts of bells and gadgets to keep her safe.

None of it made her feel safe.

“What do you think about Brookmoor?”

“What about it?” Quinn whirled on the Alpha not paying half as much attention to her anxiety as she would have preferred. If he'd even shown an iota of nerves, she'd have been satisfied. Yet he remained a source of cooling calm that rankled her to no end. Hand spinning with curt gestures, she listed off what she knew. “Big, dirty, has that cute café with the chocolate covered almonds and dear Gods their coffee was divine. Adam fell and busted his head in the park while you were with that woman.”

“She's an Alpha, Quinn. I have no more interest in her than her goods.”

“Please do not refer to the helpless women she's stolen from their homes as ‘goods.’ I really don't think I can handle that right now. I know you're not interested, but the fact remains she dresses like a bitch in heat when you two have your little meetings.”

“My sweet little Omega is jealous,” Tobias said, gruff and arrogant. Catching Quinn around the hips as she stalked past, he pulled her into his lap and mouthed the side of her neck with a rumble that was sheer satisfaction.

“Why are you asking me about Brookmoor?”

“Moving.”

A swipe and a tap on the keyboard brought the screen back to life, a sprawling home with high walls and sturdy gates appearing. A slideshow began, showing vast rooms with Carrara marble and liberal gold leaf, intricate murals and sculpted ceilings.

“That is hideous.” Quinn snorted a laugh, waving the idea away as she shoved against the desk to return to her pacing.

“We could paint it. Any color you like.” Holding Quinn right where she was, he scrolled through the list of accommodations the property boasted. “Look, a pool. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Before or after our kids drowned each other?”

“You could teach them to swim.”

“Mmhmm, and will you be letting me parade around the grounds in a swimsuit?”

“A sensible one piece,” Tobias grumbled against her neck. “Something with sleeves and legs, maybe.”

“Oh, no, I want a bikini. Bright purple. Thong.”

“Dear Gods, woman, you’re trying to kill me.” Growling against her shoulder, he nipped at the patch of flesh forever marked by his claim. Lips certain where it sat no matter her clothing.

The front door opening sent Quinn bolting from his arms. Sprinting down the hall towards the foyer, Quinn crashed to a stumbling halt when she saw Adam stomping towards the stairs. Round cheeks rimed in dirt, streaked with tears he glared when Quinn made some sound that caught his attention.

“I’m never going back!” Little fists shaking at his sides, his lower lip trembled with the force of his conviction. Without another word, he raced upstairs, the far away slam of his bedroom door echoing down the stairs.

“What the ever loving fuck happened,” Quinn shouted, whirling on Rebecca and Ross as they came inside with Elise in tow. Swallowed a scream of equal parts anger and fear at the bloody tissue Elise clutched to her nose.

“Ronny Talbot shoved Adam in the dirt,” Elise announced, shrugging free of Rebecca’s sturdy grip that tried to warn the little girl to be careful of her mother’s wild emotions.

“Who the hell hurt you?” Tobias’ voice came from somewhere dark, a blood-soaked field of death and destruction.

“Ronny Talbot! I just said, Daddy.” Her nasal whine soggy and wet, Elise tugged a rumpled wad of tissues from her bright blue jacket to replace the one starting to drip. “It’s okay, though. I got him real good.”

“There was a scuffle on the playground while Ross went to get the car,” Rebecca said, the puckered lines of her brow and clenched jaw speaking to more than the perceived lapse of control of the situation. “By the time I turned around from helping Adam, Elise had the boy on the ground. Punched him hard enough to break his nose. He started kicking when we were separating them, got her in the face.”

“It. Was. Great, Mama,” Elise squealed, swinging her fist into the air to show the sickly blue-green of her knuckles. “I got him good for Adam, but then he was all mad at me in the car. Said Alphas don’t need protecting.”

“Please, by all that is sacred and holy, don’t be a stunted Alpha,” Quinn groaned, falling to her knees to collect Elise into her arms. “We’ll get you some ice, baby.”

“Why? It’s fine.”

“This Talbot boy,” Tobias asked, smoothing Elise’s wild mane of pale curls back from her forehead to scowl at the tissues already wet with blood.

“He’s a twelve-year-old Alpha. Half again the size of Adam,” Rebecca said, gaze sliding towards Elise. A single brow rose with a hint of admiration. Voice dropping to a low murmur, she continued, “If we hadn’t pulled her off of him, I don’t think the kid would have all his teeth right now.”

“How about instead of standing here, one of you go soothe Adam’s pride,” Quinn ground out. Clasping Elise around the thighs, she struggled to her feet with the added burden of her five-year-old. “Poor boy just had his little sister take out a bully.”

“Hey! We look out for each other, that’s what you and Daddy said.”

“Yes, I know. That does not include hitting people. I swear, Elise, you get all this violence from your father, and I don’t like it one bit.”

Leaving the two Alphas in the foyer and ignoring their snorts of amusement, Quinn carried Elise into the kitchen to get one of the many ice packs they’d acquired in the past few months. Where Adam was slow to anger, quick to think of alternate paths that would avoid a fight, Elise ran in screaming for blood.

“The Gods hate me,” she muttered at the freezer.

“I don’t think I’m an Alpha, Mama,” Elise said, spindly legs kicking in wide arcs as she admired her knuckles. “Robert Dawson said I smell pretty.”

“Elise, sweetheart, this is very important.” Quinn cupped her daughter’s chin, tilting it up until pale gray could meet the deep green so like her father’s. “Do not, under any circumstances, tell your father that.”

“Why?”

“Because he’ll kill us all.”

“Oh, okay. Can I have a pudding?”

“Sweetness, I have to—”

“If you leave this house for another Gods damned challenger, I will cut your balls off while you sleep,” Quinn snarled from the depths of the nest. Cradled by the thick pockets of heavy blankets and warm sheets, arms slapped against naked flesh as she crossed them over her chest.

“I have to take a call and then I’ll come to bed,” Tobias said, tugging the knot of his tie down as he came towards his grumpy mate. Sitting with a long sigh, he tipped his head hard side to side with a crackling pop to relieve the tension there. His hand slid up her leg, fingers exploring the warmth between her thighs. “Maybe another hour.”

“Just let it happen, sweetness,” Quinn hissed through clenched teeth, mocking him as she smacked his hands away. “It’ll be fine, little bird. Just have your heat and I’ll get you through it.”

“You’re not in heat yet.”

“No, if I was in heat, you would be fucking me like you’re supposed to be!”

“I know this is difficult for you.” Tugging Quinn forward, he brushed his lips against hers. A flick of his tongue teasing over the soft flesh before he eased her back into the softness of her construct. “You said you wanted to try.”

“That was before I felt like crawling out of my skin.” As if to prove the point, Quinn clawed at her legs, nails raking red welts over the pale skin as she scratched at the annoying tingle that simmered just below the surface.

Only his presence seemed to soothe the worming frustration that twisted through her spine. He'd remained home for the last several days just for that reason. It was always worse at night, when things were quiet and still, and she had nothing to distract her.

"Promise to be quiet." Standing back, he pulled the tie free, tossing it over the back of a chair. Ignored her quiet snarl and raised the dark arches of his eyebrows high as he waited.

"For what?"

"Promise me, Quinn, that you will be silent. This one is important."

"I promise, just... come hold me." Hating how pathetic she sounded, she still held out her arms in invitation. Made room for him after he shrugged out of his shirt and didn't even complain when he tossed it aside in a rumpled mess.

Hum so low as to be near silent, she nestled against his side. Eyes drifting shut in pure bliss when his arm curled around her and she could feel warm and calm, even if just for a moment. Until the nagging itch returned and she began to let her hands wander.

The damned call better not take an hour. She wasn't sure she could wait that long to mount him, to feel him sliding inside of her.

"Stop that."

"I'm doing nothing."

His cellphone rang, the blaring trill of it making Quinn wince and burrow under his arm to muffle it. She hated that phone, wanted to smash it to pieces, but bit her tongue as he answered.

Fingers smoothing over the taut lines of his stomach, listening to the rise and fall of his voice, she ignored his conversation. Quinn had become very good at that. Not hearing when he spoke of helpless women, destroyed families, men lying dead in gutters. Guns being handed out to tyrants, drugs to the hopeless. He never demanded she remain when he was working, even when she'd started a game to entice him to their bedroom. She only had the one chance to make up her mind and had to be quiet until he was finished speaking.

She'd made the mistake of speaking up once and only once. The rage in his green gaze had been nothing compared to the suffocating pull of the bond. Sending her to her knees, clawing at her throat for a breath that wouldn't come. Sheer dumb luck it'd been Mr. Rey on the line, someone not so important or greedy to try something against him.

Moving in careful inches, she slung her leg over his thighs. Working in eager little twitches to rub against him. Hoping to hurry him along as the conversation dragged on. Just thinking about it would be enough to get her wet, but she made her thoughts divert. Refused to consider all the filthy things she wanted to do tonight before exhaustion claimed her. It'd distract him, and part of the game was not to use base instincts to guide him where she wanted him.

“Highwater? You’re absolutely certain?”

Quinn shoved away from Tobias as the words pierced the warm haze, rounded eyes jerking up to see the scowl that cast his eyes into shadow. Lips parting, she gaped as he ignored her rising panic.

“The bastard survived?”

Scrambling across the bed, Quinn slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the scream as a torrent of images that had nothing to do with the man beside her flooded her mind. Invaded her thoughts with cruel precision, jagged shards of icy terror lacerating her from the inside out. Her blood didn’t run cold, it was syrup thick with dread.

Warmth rushed through her chest, exploded through her middle as his hand caught her and pulled her back. Sprawled Quinn’s weight over his chest, legs clamping tight around her lower half to pin her there.

“If I see that ugly fuck, I’m killing him.” Tobias snorted at something the other person said, gripping the back of Quinn’s head tight to muffle her ragged breaths against his chest. “You tell him to keep to his side of the river and everything will be just fine. He’ll know there’s a problem when I come for him.”

Not waiting for a response, Tobias ended the call and tossed the phone away. A vile thing, the sleeping serpent to be purged. Shuffling Quinn up his body, he was already purring. Strong hands soothing, working at the knotted wreck of her back.

“Y-you said you killed him. You said he’s dead,” Quinn sobbed, too distraught for tears. Crushed against him as she was, she couldn’t even hit him. Could only lie there as he kept her restrained.

“Lee is dead, sweetness. He will never hurt you again. I saw the life go out of his eyes. My men told me the other one was dead, too. The reports from there didn’t mention him, just an Alpha taking over. I didn’t know it was the other one.” Tobias gripped her tighter, buried his nose against her shoulder and let loose a violent thunder of curses. Remembering he was

supposed to be calming her, he dragged in a breath and began his purr again as he stroked her back. “I’ll kill him. I’ll do it with my own two hands and you’ll never have to think of him again.”

“You don’t understand, Tobias. He was the dangerous one.” Breath catching on a ragged cry, she tried to hide in his arms. Fear worked its way through her spine, shattering the delicate bone to ashy powder. “Ilya was always the dangerous one.”

“He’s not leaving Highwater, do you hear me,” Tobias snapped, rolling them to press her into the mattress. Settling his weight into her so he could cup her jaw in his hands and force Quinn to look at him. “He can’t leave. He doesn’t have the power to, he’d lose it all.”

“No, no, you don’t understand!”

“You think I can’t protect you?” Delivered on a snarl, baring his teeth as he got closer to her face. Infuriated breaths hot as they scattered over her cheeks, the bond sizzling with indignant rage.

“Ilya will find—”

“Don’t you dare utter his name again, little bird.” Sudden calm swallowed the inferno of his anger. The green of his gaze became crushing granite, frozen and still. Dangerous as an iceberg’s bulk lurking miles below in a frozen sea.

“Tobias, please, you don’t—”

“Enough,” he said, the single word sandpaper rough and grating over raw nerves. Fingers slipping into her hair, he fisted the length and tipped her face to meet him. Crushed her lips with a kiss that owned more than possessed, forcing her wide with tongue and teeth and disregarding her low whines of distress.

“You don’t get to think of them here, not in our nest.” Catching her wrists in one hand, the other shoved between them. Scraping over soft flesh as he tugged his belt free, the rasp of his zipper scoring her mound.

Call more assault than seduction, thick fingers swept through her folds. Enticed the first rush of slick to bathe the swollen crown of his cock as he freed it. Spreading her scent over his length with a tight fist, he nudged at the swelling nub of her clit.

“Never here,” he said through a growl. Shoved her chin aside with his to drag the edge of his teeth over her pulse before making his way down her throat. All sharp teeth and slick heat as he mouthed the delicate column.

“Tobias, please—”

“That’s right, you beg me to fuck you. Plead with me to breed you, little bird.” Breath hissing between clenched teeth, he notched the head at her entrance. Teased with the tensing of his ass, edging in and out in inching thrusts.

The strain fell from the razor sharp lines of his face when she failed to respond. Rising above her, hands enveloping the swell of her hips, Tobias jerked her into the hard thrust. Impaled her on his length. The burning stretch too much despite how wet she was as he forced more of his cock inside, hiltng himself in her slick heat. Quinn jostled and whined, clawing at his arms. Bucked to get away from the ache swelling through the cradle of her hips.

“You take what I give you,” Tobias ground out. Moving Quinn back and forth, pulling her into another painful snap of his hips. “You’ll take it and you’ll like it.”

Between one breath and the next, something splintered within her. The bond roared, crashing through her chest. The brilliant cascade of it coursing through her limbs, a shuddering violence twisting her spine until she bowed in a painful arch. Took him deeper still as a fresh wave of slick bathed his thighs. Scented the air with something far more primal than simple lust.

Shattered whines spilled over her lips as pale grays showing in the thinnest of rings around the blackness of blown pupils strained to meet vicious green. Lips moving in a strangled litany of syllables that made no sense, fingers clawing as she rocked into the slow grinding roll of his hips.

Pleading for everything he promised with the pulsing thickness inside of her.

Tobias’ nostrils flared, taking in the scent of her. Eyes widening as he pawed at her breasts, pushing her back into the bed to soothe the vicious creature beneath him as she demanded more. The curl of his lips slow, a predatory smile at Quinn’s desperate whine.

“That’s it, little bird,” he rumbled, working her up and down his length. Grinding into her with each measured thrust so that she felt every inch of him.

Pussy throbbing, the agonizing need to be filled pushed her to snarl and growl at the Alpha above her. Awareness of everything but that agonizing longing scattered to ash on the wind as she lapped at the taut skin of his chest. Swallowing the warmth of chilies and chocolate to bathe her insides while she made plaintive whines for him to do as he should.

The slap of his hips jostled her up the bed, both snarling as she slid away. Each pulling to force her back with a resounding clap of flesh. The pattern repeated until Tobias caught her shoulder and hip. Pinned her to the bed when he angled her hips high as he slammed into her again. His low sounds tangling in the breathy delight he shoved from her body with each slow thrust.

His creeping rhythm didn't last long. He heeded her demands, the snarling whines and vicious growls urging him on. The male building to a furious tempo, his low groans reverberating through her. Felt inside and out, his pleasure compounding hers. Slick muscle working, clenching. She felt it everywhere.

Head thrown back as pleasure arced up her spine with a crackling jolt, Quinn's moans raced through the room. Ecstasy a live wire that sought to explode through her senses, she clung to him. Held on as sensation sparked under her skin. Sizzling and hot, the burning ache centered low in her hips flaring in rapid pulses.

Jangled nerves and disoriented senses left her whole body quaking. Muscles drawing tight, scalded by the threads of pleasure weaving through them. Her cries growing louder, shattering with the almost painful pistonning of his hips. Wriggling under the too much sensation, she screamed at the rough rasp of his fingers over the aching nub of her clit. His rough treatment hurtling her through the darkness towards oblivion.

"Come for me, sweetness. Take my knot," Tobias husked, lowering his body. Crushing her beneath him as he caught her panting mouth in a brutal invasion.

With the first fluttering clench, he ground the pad of his thumb against that tender bundle of nerves. Launched her screaming over the edge, swallowing her sounds with a guttural groan.

Quinn writhed as her senses were assaulted. Screams lengthening into spiraling wails as slick muscle clenched around the sudden fullness of his cock. The wringing twist urging the knot to swell further, trying to catch him. Hold him deep inside. Her stuttering cry lost in his roar as he slammed in a final time. Stretching her open even more until the knot locked in behind her pelvic bone. The rippling contractions of her pussy holding him right where he belonged.

Blinding pleasure shattered through her. Sent her soaring through blissful oblivion as his heart hammered alongside hers. Pushing her ever

higher. Never letting her fall until the blackness of nothingness swallowed her up.

Four days later, amid the stained and sticky bedding, Quinn woke with a whimpering groan. Hand stealing between her thighs, she cupped the tender ache of her pussy as she burrowed deeper beneath the mountain of heat already crushing her.

It was the sudden rise and fall of his chest, the harsh exhale and twitch of his muscles that alerted her. Had her pulling a breath through her nose, slow and careful to examine the air around them, to find what had caused the tension skittering up her spine.

His fingers followed the path, the rumble of his purr swallowing her up as thick and syrupy pleasure swam through the bond.

“What do you think of Gareth for a boy?”

“Pretentious as hell.”

THE END

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EXCERPT

FROM RITE OF THE OMEGA

After years of constant battle, the final war seemed too easy.

Otaso stalked through the charred halls, crumbled bits of stone clattering across the ruined floors as he went in search of his final prey. The bloody waves of his robes fluttered behind him, snapping in an unseen wind as he gathered his power to him.

One final foe remained.

He would destroy the would-be king of the realm this day.

The cavernous room he arrived at showed a soot dark sky etched in bloody lightning, the clap of thunder cracked and rumbled to shake loose more debris from the gaping maw that became of the great domed ceiling. There Otaso found dozens of his warriors, well-armed and with the protection spells glowing with the eerie light of his magic where they etched the heavy armor. It had taken months to find the right combination of engraved symbols and the amount of power needed. Time well spent, if the numbers of black suited men ranging around the castle now to clean up whatever souls remained were anything to go by.

Otaso's target lay in a broken huddle at the foot of his throne, the cerulean robes stained rust and vermillion where they splayed across the dais. The imposter's woman sprawled behind him, rivulets of wine dark life pulsing between slick fingers as she clutched at the wound that would end her.

Standing over the other male, sneering at the waxy paleness of his skin, Otaso felt a surge of disgust. It had been easy, this victory. Years of battling

with this now weak adversary, to win because he was drunk on his new woman and the offspring she'd given, it felt hollow. Empty.

The once worthy opponent shielded a female that even now slipped into the Abyss. Not that Otaso wanted her. No, there was a prize far greater than some bitch.

"Where is it," Otaso asked, voice a grinding rumble that echoed after the crash of more thunder.

"Vrazys take your soul."

"Now, now, Kistsam. We both know your goddesses have abandoned you here. Tell me where it is, and I'll make your end swift."

"Do what you want to me," Kistsam said, blood spattering over his lips and chin. The fine white rays of crystalline eyes brightened as they met Otaso's gaze head on. "I will never tell you."

"My warriors are searching even now." Otaso lowered into a crouch, drawing the blade from its leather sheath to let it soak in the crimson lightning arcing through the midnight sky against its sinuous edge. "We will find it, and its end will come."

"Your search will be in vain." Another choking cough sent a wash of blood to stain his throat, trickling down to the red ruin of his chest.

"I bet you think yourself so clever," Otaso said through a crashing landslide of mirth, twirling the blade to catch the glint of fear buried in the roiling fury of Kistsam's eyes. "Let me guess. Servants swore an oath to see it gone from here before I even took the walls. A trusted maid to raise it as her own in the wilds of the countryside. Ah, you people are far too predictable."

"You will never—"

The squalling of a furious infant cut Kistsam's vow short. By the widening of Kistsam's eyes, Otaso knew. His smile was brimming with feral delight, the flash of crimson fire behind the midnight shot darkness of his eyes a glimpse of the horrors to come.

"Did you not know my men breached your walls long before I knocked upon your gate? She must have been something otherworldly," Otaso said, dark gaze sliding to the female behind Kistsam as the light flared and died behind pale eyes. "To make a man who kept me at bay for so long forget that no one is to be trusted. Least of all the stable boy with the lame leg willing to do much for a bit of coin and sport."

A swift roll of his wrist brought the dagger down in a vicious arc, splitting the would-be ruler open, spilling blood and dark, wet gore over once regal robes. Gathering Kistsam's entrails in his hands, Otaso pulled them up to his face. Let the full strength of his power show in his eyes as the other male looked on in horror.

Tipping his clenched fists, Otaso took in Kistsam's blood. Power straight from the source seared along his veins, crackling and flaring across the back of his eyes as he swallowed again and again. It slithered along his spine, tangling in the vertebrae in charged pulses. Crimson, black, the pure blue of a summer sky as the fallen king's power battled to be free. Freedom it would never find as Otaso swallowed it down into the endless abyss of his soul, burying it in the wildness of his dark thoughts.

Kistsam was the only Alpha within range who might have defeated him, and now his magic belonged to Otaso.

Releasing the slick clumps of flesh from his fists, Otaso roared to the sky and the Abyss beyond. Lightning sizzled through the air, the boom of thunder rattling the castle down to the foundations as that bloody fire pierced through the too thick air to grab hold of Otaso. Winding around his fists, entangling his limbs, it slashed through his heart with an ear shattering shriek.

Night gripped him, the shadows swallowing him until even the thought of light vanished. All that remained were the screams and cries of the fallen, all of them flowing through the brimming darkness into him. Shredding away that much more of his soul, the very things that made him human.

Otaso gloried in it, basking in the bloody haze as he relived each and every death. Taking power from their violent ends, soaking in their fear and anger as luscious ambrosia. Their wails building to a deafening crescendo that threatened to force Otaso into the blackness as he channeled it all into his reserves.

Panting, Otaso came back to the here and now. Knee to the ground, he braced with both hands to remain upright as the last of the power trickled through him before settling into an uneasy murmur that would take weeks if not months to calm.

Surprise registered somewhere in the eerie shadows that trailed through his mind. He had not expected the lofty morals Kistsam proclaimed to allow for a blood oath from his people. They were all of them bound to the dead ruler, and so now belonged to Otaso.

That was the least of the shocking details revealed to him as the corpse's thoughts unraveled within him.

"Bring her here," Otaso rasped, letting his other knee drop with a heavy clamor to sit back on his heels. Ignoring the narrowed gazes of his general and vizier, he pulled the still screaming child into his hands. Cradling the loose neck and rounded bottom, Otaso peered into the red rimmed eyes that would never change from their starlit blackness.

He could feel it coursing through her, tangled in every beat of her raging heart. Even in the slippery tears that soaked through his shirt cuff as the infant made known her indignation. It tingled against his skin and crackled along his senses. Power unlike anything he ever dreamed.

An Omega.

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