

A woman with leopard print tattoos on her face, arms, and legs is standing on a tropical beach at night. She is wearing a purple bikini. The background features a large full moon, a starry sky, and a lush tropical coastline with palm trees and rocks. The text "Emotional Support Beta" is written in a green cursive font in the upper right corner.

Emotional Support
Beta

VIOLA GRACE

♡ Betas In Waiting

The request sent to Ven is shocking, but the money is good and will help a lot of people. An omega and his feline alpha need her as an emotional support beta. Interesting job.

Emotionally damaged to her core, Ven gets the request to become a calming influence for a traumatized omega. He has an alpha who has some of the feline characteristics that Ven had developed several years ago.

After going over the contract, she agrees to their terms, and that is when things slip from her control.

The island is warm, the omega is cuddly, and she sees so much of her own past trauma in his eyes. She comforts him, he comforts her, and the alpha spends time with both of them.

She deals with hostile locals, attempts on her life, and a kidnapping that brings up the past. Her new partners have a job in front of them if they want to keep their cute little beta.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Emotional Support Beta

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Emotional Support Beta
Betas in Waiting Book 13

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Ven hauled her carryon with her as she checked the airline information. She stopped at a map and bit her lip as she tried to figure out where the counter was. She ended up going to the information desk and showed the airline information.

The older man smiled. “Come with me, miss.”

She followed him to a small alcove that had the airline’s name. She thanked him. The woman behind the counter looked at her skeptically and then took her passport for identification. She tapped it in and blinked. “Oh, Miss Venetia. Excellent. Please, come with me.”

The woman left her alcove, and there was no one to take her place.

Ven followed her with her carryon bumping along behind her on worn wheels. *Where the hell are we going?* There was a security scan ahead of her, and her bag was scanned while she walked through the scanner; she was the only person in line.

“Where are we going?” Ven asked the woman.

“To the plane, miss.”

They were in a hangar. There was a sleek plane settled in the shade.

“The rest of your party is on board.”

Ven paused in her tracks. “Oh. Them. Right.”

She took her carry-on with her and climbed the unfolded steps. There was a flight attendant who took her bag and gestured for her to enter the cabin. She walked in, wearing her leggings, baggy shirt, and jacket.

She moved cautiously into the cabin and saw one sandy and one dark head in close conversation. The alpha kissed the sandy-haired omega and met her gaze. Her features were far more feline than his were. He softly said, “She’s here.”

Syar jumped out of his seat and turned toward her. “Venetia. You came.”

She nodded warily. “I did. Are you sure about this?”

He grinned and rushed toward her. He thudded into her, buried his nose against her neck, and breathed heavily. He leaned back. “You have been around other alphas.”

“Sure. My brother and my two new brothers-in-law, and my sister-in-law.”

He frowned and leaned forward to snuffle against her again. “And a really strong beta.”

“That’s my sister. She owns the two alphas.”

“They smell like the ocean.”

“Yes, all three of them.”

“Come and sit next to me.”

“I think Reynaldo wants to be next to you.”

Syar’s eyes grew shadowed. “Sit, please.”

“Fine. Come on.” She walked with him, and he was normal height for a beta and tall for an omega. He was still a few inches taller than Ven was.

The seats were wide and very comfortable. Reynaldo walked to the attendant and spoke to her. Ven was wary around Reynaldo. He didn’t like this idea of Syar’s.

There was a table with a stack of paperwork. Ven hated paperwork, but it was necessary when dealing with people who owned most—if not all—of a country. Fortunately, it was an island, but it had some very specific mines that provided a lot of very colourful gemstones.

She asked Syar, “Do you have a pen?”

Reynaldo came back and handed her a pen that weighed a quarter of a pound.

She hauled the paperwork to her lap and started reading. “You know, if I knew this involved homework, I would have turned you down.”

He leaned against her left shoulder and breathed her in. Her scent soothed him. It was a weird reason for this whole event, but there it was. He had been kidnapped and had flashbacks, night terrors, and things that made his life hell. He had his linked alpha but needed someone to help him when he wasn't in public. Someone to help him be stronger. He had caught her scent and decided that she could fulfill that purpose. Emotional support beta. She was there to cuddle with him when he needed it. Frankly, curiosity had driven her to accept because she understood trauma and was willing to help if she could.

She flipped through the one-year contract. "Are you sure you need me for a full year?"

"If I don't, you can just hang out on the beach until the contract concludes."

"And you can dissolve the contract fully if I fuck up?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Will you mail me home?"

He blinked. "Yes."

She scribbled in a provision to return her to her home city.

"What are you doing?"

She looked at Reynaldo. "I am adding addenda to the contract, and if he signs it and you sign it and I sign it, then it is part of the contract."

"Returning her home is the least we could do." Syar shrugged.

"She has to return any payment if we send her home."

She looked at him. "Keep the funds until the end of the contract. I'll put that in the payment section."

Reynaldo nodded. "Good."

Her leave to visit family for birthdays was in there.

She kept reading, hummed, and frowned. "I didn't bring formal wear."

“I will provide it if the situation requires it.”

“Okay. Appropriate clothing. Is there somewhere nearby I can buy it?”

“I will provide it.”

She looked at him. “Not necessary. I can manage.”

“Clothing is expensive on the island.” Syar was starting to pout.

“I can still manage it as long as they take debit or credit cards.”

Syar smiled. “They don’t.”

She felt a cold finger tumble down her spine. “You are joking.”

“I will make sure that they don’t.” He smirked. “It’s good to be the king.”

She sighed. “Fine, take it off my payment. I will note that.”

She flipped through the rest about sleeping where Syar could cuddle with her. She froze when she got to the mark from his alpha. She shook her head. “No. Absolutely not.”

Syar frowned. “Why not? You can get it scrubbed afterward.”

She blinked. “I know about mark scrubbing. I just don’t want to make the link.”

Reynaldo frowned. “Then how will I find you if someone kidnaps you?”

“You won’t. You will find Syar and get him to safety. I can get myself out of most situations. I don’t depend on anyone to fight my battles for me.”

Reynaldo frowned. “What about a holding mark?”

“Ah, the promise ring of marks.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Why is this a sticking point?”

Syar was matter of fact. “It is common in royal households. All linked to the omega or alpha in charge are marked.”

Reynaldo was staring at her hand, and she jerked it down. “You have been marked before.”

She debated lying but answered, “Yes.”

“You were rejected?”

“Oh, yes. In the worst way.” She crossed through the marking portion and filled in the payment information.

She flipped through the pages to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. She skipped over the pregnancy contingency and then signed the whole thing. She capped the pen and handed it back to Reynaldo.

Syar extended his hand, and Reynaldo gave him the pen. The omega looked over the changes she made and initialled them. But he wrote in a graze mark for her.

She sighed and looked at Reynaldo. “Can you manage a graze mark?”

He nodded. “It has to be refreshed though.”

“I can tell you when it burns out.”

“You will do weekly assessments?”

“Yup.”

“I will manage a graze mark.”

She nodded and took the pen to initial and sign the addition.

Syar smiled and signed the contract. He passed the pen and contract to Reynaldo.

Reynaldo grunted as he flipped through the contract, initialling and signing.

He capped his pen and put it in his jacket. He nodded to the flight attendant and buckled up.

Ven buckled up, and Syar took her hand. “I really hate takeoff.”

She held his hand and ran her free hand over his wrist, the thudding pulse slowed, and he smiled. He tilted his head to hers and inhaled, closing his eyes as they pushed back and began to taxi to the runway. The smaller planes were on a

different flight path and took off with a rush and roar. Ven stroked Syar's head and rubbed her head against his. When they began to level off, she released him and pulled her hands into her lap.

Syar murmured, "You pulled away too soon."

"Sorry. I thought that was a guy thing."

He chuckled. "We will get used to each other."

"I am sure."

"You will even get used to Reynaldo."

Ven smiled tightly. "That isn't likely."

Reynaldo unbuckled the seat and beckoned to Ven. "Please, come here, and we will get the graze over. How much tending did you need when you were first marked?"

"Uh, once an hour." She swallowed. "For twelve hours. A graze should be easier."

Reynaldo beckoned to her. She got up and walked over to him. "How do you want me?"

Syar laughed.

He growled. "Just sit across my thighs and remove your jacket."

She tensed and then took her jacket off. He made a surprised sound, and she settled lightly in his lap. She bent her head and felt him inhale. He licked twice against the base of her neck, and then she felt the slow drag that cut through her surface skin in four straight lines. The light tease of Reynaldo's emotions flickered when he did a second slow drag. His rough tongue scraped over the graze, and when he lifted his head, she got up and went back to her seat, putting her jacket on.

"How far do your markings extend?" Reynaldo asked it softly.

"Hands, feet, forehead, shoulders, and spine."

Syar smiled. "Can I see?"

“Uh, not in the freaking plane. No. If I wear shorts and a crop top, you will see more than you like.”

“That isn’t really standard clothing around the place. It is an island, you know.” Syar smiled.

“So, what do you wear?”

Reynaldo growled. “As little as possible.”

Syar nodded eagerly. “Yup. It’s hot as balls most of the time.”

“Unless there is a storm.” Reynaldo had a slight quirk on his lips. “Then it is hot and wet as balls.”

“Well, now I am worried about hygiene.” She smiled.

Syar flipped up the seat arms between them and patted his lap. She moved slowly but settled against him, and he pulled her in close and just breathed her in. “You know, I could make this more convenient and just sweat in a gym and give you the clothes.”

Syar chuckled. “If you can’t be with me, we will look into that. You feel so soft.”

He stroked her arms and slid his hand along her collarbone. “You feel like a kitten.”

“So my sister says.”

“Do you feel like this all over?” He moved his hand to tug at her shirt.

“Hey!” She slapped at his hand.

Reynaldo sat up and growled.

Ven looked at him. “Are you going to growl at me the whole time he treats me as a giant dolly? Asshole.”

Reynaldo pulled back in surprise.

Syar was chuckling.

She whirled and looked at Syar. “And you... you have cuddle rights, but if you want to do something like that... ask.”

He blinked. “Can I feel your stomach?”

“Fine, but there is a lot of scar tissue. It wrecks the fuzzy softness.” She untucked her shirt, grabbed his hand, and slapped it against her skin.

Syar blinked. “What the hell made that?”

“Most of it was an electrical cable when I was six.”

Syar was appalled. “Who did that?”

Reynaldo murmured. “Her caregiver.”

“My mother, yeah, I had one. She might still be alive. I have no idea.” She shrugged.

Syar looked at her with concern. “Can you get them fixed?”

“Sure. With the extent of the damage, it would have been over a hundred thousand dollars twenty years ago. I keep hearing that it doesn’t matter. It does. For some reason, I welcomed the pigment change. It covers a lot of the mess.”

“What is the treatment for it?”

“Dermabrasion and time in that order. Even that won’t get them all.”

“Why haven’t you done it?”

“When I had the time, I didn’t have the money, and now that I have the money, I don’t have the time.” She shrugged.

Syar lifted the shirt and looked at her skin. “It looks smooth, but I can feel the marks.” His fingers glided toward her hip. “Wait. These are different. What are these?”

“Stretch marks.” She tensed. This question she had been dreading but braced for.

“You have a child?” Reynaldo leaned forward. It was a weird response.

“No. I lost her at five months.” She looked at Syar. “Are you sure you want to know this stuff?”

“Yeah. I am pretty sure I do.”

Reynaldo grunted.

“Short version is I met a boy in high school. He was a feline alpha. We went out for years and were twenty-two when he was offered what every alpha wants. An omega. His family offered him an omega, and he jumped at the chance. He rejected our bond and left without telling me. I was pregnant. The pregnancy was rough, but I did all I could. My family kept me going, but when we got to five months, she died, and I was badly torn up. I buried her when I got out of hospital three weeks later.” She looked at Reynaldo. “They scrubbed my mark while I was in hospital.”

He exhaled. “That would explain your dislike of alphas.”

“Oh, that just explains my dislike of *that* alpha. It isn’t that I don’t like them; I don’t trust them. Too many folks just trust blindly. That particular situation isn’t one that I let myself get into anymore.”

Syar looked at her. “But you’re here.”

“Yes, and I looked into you. I didn’t look into where, but I looked into who. You are both trustworthy.”

Reynaldo scowled. “But you don’t want another alpha.”

“Dude, your distaste for me has been blazing like a flag since I met you both. I will stay out of your way.”

He frowned. “I...”

Syar nodded. “He thinks you’re a gold digger and that you will break my heart.”

“Oh. Well, I am here with the goal of making you stronger, not weaker. If you start to feel anything for me, just fire me.”

Syar looked at her. “What if you start to feel something?”

“I have learned in my life that a broken heart heals.” She smiled. “And no one can feel the breaks.”

He slid both hands under her shirt and hugged her. “So, you saw me.”

“Yeah. I saw you.”

He held her tight, and she ran her fingers through his hair and kissed his forehead.

He looked up at her. “There is more I should know.”

“When you tell me about the shadows in your eyes, I will share the shadows in mine.”

He blinked, nodded, and held her close. Reynaldo’s graze started to itch at the back of her neck, and she pushed the feeling away.

It was an hour later when he lifted his head with a smile. “Thanks. I feel better.”

“I am glad.” She shifted to her chair and stretched her neck. It was starting to burn. “Um, Reynaldo?”

He opened his eyes slowly. “What?”

“The mark is burning.”

He held out his hand, and she went to him, took off her jacket, and watched him examine it. He ran his thumb over it and muttered, “It has healed.”

“It still burns.”

“Was it like this on your first marking?”

“No, but he didn’t leave it alone, so this kind of thing didn’t happen.”

“That would take your skin off.”

“No, it wouldn’t. I heal fast.”

“Ah, that’s it.” He leaned in, scraped his tongue over her skin, and relief shot through her.

She shuddered as the licking had an arousing effect. “I think that’s fine.”

He muttered, “No.”

He continued, and then she felt something close to a click and a rush of heat through her veins. She gasped and said through gritted teeth, “Stop. Please.”

He licked once more and raised his head. She tried to dart back to her chair but noted that he had wrapped his hand around her waist and under her shirt.

Syar sighed. “You two are so cute together. Like Makso and his kittens.”

Reynaldo stiffened, and Ven slipped back to her seat. She was shaken. She hadn't felt aroused in seven years.

She looked out the window and saw the ocean beneath them as far as the eye could see. She finally calmed enough to say, “Who is Makso?”

“He's my cat. He's very attentive to his offspring.”

The emotion coming through the link had not been paternal. Well, not unless Reynaldo liked to play daddy. That was definitely not a kink Ven had acquired. If she thought about it, her kink was cuddling and feeling safe. Nothing got her hotter, and she was worried. They had the cuddling down.

Chapter Two

She sipped at her coffee, then took her phone out and looked at pictures from the party. She smiled softly.

“Who is that?”

“My newest cousin, Liella. That’s her new mom, Penny, my cousin.”

“Your file says you don’t have any blood relations.”

“We were foster children in the same home, along with her brother Edgar. We grew up together.”

She showed her family, and their heads were almost touching as the selfie with her and the little cousins were on the screen. She listed all their names, and Syar said, “None are related to you by blood?”

“Nope. By choice.”

She flicked through her phone, and he said, “May I?”

She handed him the phone, and he flicked through a bunch of pictures of the roller derby. When he started tapping around, he paused and moved slowly. She glanced over at the picture of her in hospital, her face blue and eyes red.

He flicked, and the next image was the small bundle that was her daughter wrapped in her hands. “She was five months? She’s big.”

“Yeah, that was the problem. There was a rupture that took most of my blood with it when it killed her.”

“Where was the father?”

“Off getting designer suits.” She rubbed her forehead. “His family kept me from informing him about her, and not having my bonded alpha with me made the gestation very unpleasant.”

Syar flipped back. “You were so thin.”

“Five months of nausea and vomiting will do that. I have talked to other betas since, and apparently, if you have an adaptation like this, the father is important to a successful pregnancy.”

He nodded. “Do you mind me poking around in here?”

“No. I don’t put anything on my phone that I don’t want folks to see.” She shrugged.

He kept flipping and paused. “What’s this?”

“Oh. That’s something else. My cousin had a stalker who decided to get at her through me.”

Syar looked at the images of her body naked and bruised, and then her with the tubes up her nose and her cousin sitting next to her with bruises on her arms, visible around her medical gown.

“What happened to him?”

“Oh, he recently died while attacking my cousin and her new mates.” She smirked. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

“When was this?” He gestured to her picture.

“Five years ago. He got time for the sexual assault and kidnapping.”

Syar looked at her, and she shrugged. “I know the shadows when I see them.”

He frowned. “Where did these photos come from?”

“A friend from a women’s shelter took them. She wanted to remind me how far I have come. So, anytime I doubt that I am better, I look at those images.”

He pulled her toward him and hugged her while she waited for him to finish cuddling her. Her past upset him, but if he got attached to her, the pain would be worse for him.

She stroked his cheek and whispered, “It’s okay.”

He looked up at her. “It is the furthest thing from okay.”

“It happened. It’s done.”

“Can I get Reynaldo to kill him again?” Syar was hopeful.

“It isn’t necessary. He’s done.” She kissed his temple. “She’s safe.”

He frowned. “Who?”

“His target. My cousin Penny. He hurt me to get at her. He was obsessed.”

He breathed her in. “I can hardly wait until it is just you, but you have some of Reynaldo on you, so that is making you smell amazing.”

She sighed, and the back of her neck prickled.

Reynaldo frowned. “Do you need it tended?”

“No, it is just prickly, not hot.”

He nodded and sat back.

Syar nuzzled at her neck and started to kiss her. She kept her tone calm. “How much longer are we in the air?”

Reynaldo chuckled. “About two hours. If he latches onto you, he comes off when you pinch his ear.”

“Latches?” She gasped a moment later when Syar moved her shirt and bra strap from her shoulder and started to suck. Hard. “Holy shit.”

She was going to have a hickey for a few minutes.

“Syar, let go.”

His eyes rolled as he sucked. She slid her finger along his lips, popped it between her skin and his teeth, and broke the suction.

She pressed soft kisses along his forehead and cheeks. “Okay. Pick the parts of me you do that to very carefully, or I will do more than pinch your ears. I will pierce the fuckers.”

He smiled slowly. “How did you do that?”

“I have grown up around kids, and a lot of them don’t know that my breasts don’t give milk. Undoing a latch is one of the first things you learn. Staying away from weaning toddlers is another.”

“Are you calling me a toddler?”

She ran her finger over his lips. “If the suction fits.”

He smiled and bit her fingertip. He flicked her finger with his tongue before letting her go. She worked hard to keep from showing any reactions.

Reynaldo asked, “Did he injure you?”

“No. It will probably heal in fifteen minutes.”

He came over and looked at the hickey going through its life cycle. “Wait, you heal rapidly?”

“Yeah. I talked to Olivia, and she said she does as well. It probably has something to do with the keratin spikes on the tongue and other areas of feline alphas.” She looked at him. “No worries.” She chuckled. “They are also good guys and have offered their help if I ever get knocked up and the dad takes off or is simply uninterested.”

Syar chuckled. “Ford’s pride agreed to take you in if anything happens?”

“Sure. They are neighbours with another member of the book club, so they are well aware of what it is and what it’s doing for the waves of betas who are turning up. Some are like me, in pretty rough shape. They are housed, rehabilitated, and helped through any alterations or transformations. Older couples volunteer and act as foster parents and rehab for the battered betas.”

Syar cocked his head. “That would be fun. You having a little kitten.”

“Uh, as sweet as the thought is, my uterus is scarred to hell and stitched up. It won’t be hosting anyone.”

His face fell. “That’s sad.”

She stroked his neck. “It is, and I have already cried over it. It’s done.”

Careful fingers peeled back her shirt. The scraping of Reynaldo’s tongue made air escape her lungs. She let her eyes flutter closed.

She kept her breathing calm as he gave one last lick and raised his head.

Syar looked at her and smiled. “This is going to be fun.”

She looked at Reynaldo, and his eyes were glowing. “Yeah, I am not up for that kind of fun. It never ends well for me.”

His gaze banked, and he returned to his seat. She felt the stirrings of interest in their link.

She looked at Syar and said, “Can I get a spray bottle? I think I will need one.”

Syar pulled her close until she cuddled next to him. He stroked her cheek and smiled. “Yeah, this is going to be fun.”

She let the hum of the engines ease her into a doze. Reynaldo tended to the graze twice, and she murmured softly. She knew they were cat sounds. She couldn’t help that they were cat sounds, and she couldn’t help arching her back into Syar while that was happening. *Shit. I should not have taken a nap.*

“Venetia, do you want something to eat?”

She jolted and pulled away from him and slammed against the wall of the plane. Her heart was pounding, and she curled her hands in as she got her body under control.

Syar looked at her warily. He tried to be casual. “There’s a fruit platter or a meat and cheese platter.”

She swallowed. “Can I have both and a lot more coffee?”

“Of course.”

The astonished flight attendant nodded and left.

Ven scrubbed her hands over her face. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.”

Syar asked, “Do you always wake up like that?”

“Uh, no. I normally don’t do that. I was up late last night wrangling the cousins after the birthday party. It was a large sleepover.”

Reynaldo asked, “Your instinct is to push away?”

“Uh, sort of.” She opened her hands, and the blood was visible. “When I am startled, my claws come out.”

Syar gasped. “You have claws?”

She nodded. “Sure. Under my fingernails.”

He smiled. “Can I see?”

“Uh, they are sharp.”

“I won’t play with them.”

She turned her hand, palm up, and Reynaldo dropped to his knees to watch as she let them examine her hands. Reynaldo took out his pen and pressed on her index finger near the first joint. The claw came out with a jab, thick but needle-pointed.

Reynaldo asked, “Can you control them?”

She gave him a droll look. “Yes. I was going to be sarcastic, but I live a normal life, but these are an adaptation I got after the pregnancy.”

“It didn’t help you when you were assaulted?”

“He drugged my soda. The bartender was charged with poisoning, but that came later.”

Syar nodded. “A gun can’t be used if it’s out of reach.”

“Yup. When Penny came in, she got him down and got me released, and we worked him over, but police were already on the way. An ambulance followed. He was a big bastard.”

Reynaldo frowned. “How big?”

“Six foot ten, three fifty, all ‘roid-raging muscle.” She made a face. “Smelled bad.”

The flight attendant hesitated.

Ven looked at Reynaldo. “You are blocking my coffee.”

He slid his pen free, and her claw scratched it. “Sorry.”

He nodded. “No problem. I will bill Syar for it.”

Syar shivered a little.

“Ah, that kind of payment.”

Syar blushed, Reynaldo smiled, and Ven got her snacks and coffee. She downed her coffee, finished her food, then took the tray and walked the tray to the attendant.

“Oh, miss. I was coming for that.”

“They are making eyes at each other. Best we stay out of their way.” She smiled. “Can I get a bottle of water? Make that two, please.”

“You are the king’s lover?” The woman handed her the small water bottles.

Ven froze. She hadn’t discussed her job description with Syar.

Arms reached around her, and Reynaldo said, “She’s our companion. Isn’t it obvious?”

Ven blinked as she was carefully lifted and carried back to the seats.

She apologized. “I blanked on that. Apologies.”

“I haven’t felt embarrassed panic before.” Reynaldo smiled.

Syar smiled. “What did she ask you?”

“If I was your…” She went into vague hand gestures.

He cocked his head. “Puppet?”

Reynaldo growled, “Plumber?”

She groaned and covered her eyes as they continued guessing.

“Dancer?”

“Pillow?”

“Tour guide?”

“Very bad sign language interpreter?”

She muttered, “Lover.”

Syar smirked, “I would not have guessed that.”

“Shut up, Your Majesty.” She mumbled and drank some water.

Reynaldo blinked. “*That* is what caused you to panic?”

“Pick your triggers. Intimacy is mine.” She slugged the water down. She opened the second bottle.

Reynaldo was watching her.

“What?”

“You didn’t argue when I described you as *our* companion.”

She looked at him. “If that is the cover story for why I am here, I can get behind it. But we hadn’t discussed how to explain me, and I don’t want to embarrass Syar.”

Reynaldo smiled. “Buckle up, Venetia. We are about to land, and it is a short runway.”

She capped her water bottle, set it on the table, and buckled up.

The attendant took the empty and partially consumed bottle and nodded. “We are landing.”

Ven felt them dropping, and Syar buckled up, reaching for her hand. She held his hand carefully and felt his thumb rub the back of her hand. The plane shook and descended fast. The engines screamed, and she saw the island, which was surprisingly large, suddenly beneath her. Shit. She was facing backward.

The ground got close, and then the engines shrieked as they decelerated. Ven bent forward before she flopped back into the seat. “Ow.”

When they stopped, Syar unbuckled, and she did the same. He held her hand and said, “And now we drive to the hangar.”

“Oh. So, no sense in getting up.”

“Not yet.”

The plane moved across the tarmac like a wide and pointy bus.

When they were in shadow and the plane stopped, Syar smiled. “Now we can get up.”

She stood and went to ask the attendant for her carry-on.

She got the battered nylon and took it with her dark fingers.

She waited to be told where to go, and Reynaldo went first while Syar gestured for her to go next, and he was behind her. A man was standing next to a horse-drawn carriage, and Ven looked at Reynaldo. “You are kidding.”

Syar sighed. “My ancestors washed up and married into the local population. They brought their vehicles here later, and they still work and run on grass, so we kept them.”

The driver took her bag and handled it like it was dirty. He tucked it into the back of the carriage and bowed to Syar. “Welcome home, Your Majesty.”

Syar was handed up into the carriage, and Reynaldo reached for her hand. “Come on, Venetia. Time to head home.”

She took his hand, and the carriage driver looked at Reynaldo’s hand when she got into the vehicle. She looked at her hands, folded them up, and tucked them inside her jacket. They looked dirty. She knew it. She sighed.

Syar was excited, and when Reynaldo quirked a brow at her, she shook her head and stared out of the carriage. The island was beautiful, volcanic, and extremely warm. It was also larger than she had imagined.

“So, we have an emerald mine here.” Syar smiled and then sighed. “That is why there are fairly constant attempts on my life. Well, more like attempts on custody of me. As king, I control how many emeralds we release each year and of which quality.”

“Oh. Geez. Do I have to go through customs or something?” She bit her lip as they left the airport.

“No. We registered you with immigration.”

She swallowed. “Okay. As what?”

Syar smiled. “My emotional support beta.”

She watched the locals, and Syar was right. They didn't wear much. Natural-fibre skirts and trousers were worn by men and women equally. Women wore a simple band around their breasts and not much else. No matter the skin tone, everyone was dressed, or undressed, the same.

She took off her jacket and folded it over her hands. It really was hot as balls.

It was laughable how few clothes she had that would be appropriate for this place. She needed a new wardrobe before she melted.

Syar touched her cheek. "Venetia, are you melting?"

She looked at him seriously. "My clothes won't work here."

"That is why wardrobe is in your contract. We don't wear much, so it won't be pricey if that is what you are worried about."

"Partially. I am worried about a few things."

"Tell me what they are so that I can fix things."

"You can't fix this." She smiled and stroked his cheek. Some of the ladies watching them pass put a hand to their mouths. She stretched her fingers in front of his face. "They look dirty. What I just did is going to make the rounds. Touching the king with filthy hands."

He looked at her charcoal fingers with their jaguar spot patterns. "They are lovely."

"Close up, you can see the markings. From a distance, it looks like I have been shovelling ash with my hands."

"How do you deal with it at home?"

She looked at him blandly. "Leather gloves."

"Right. Not practical. They will get used to seeing you. I know that your hands are lovely and clean." He kissed her palms.

She shivered. "Right. I am fine with it. I just don't want it reflecting badly on you two."

He smiled. “They can’t kick me out, and Reynaldo doesn’t care. He was hired to abduct me way back, but he took one look into my eyes and decided that he would stay with me.”

Ven glanced at Reynaldo, and he shrugged with a smile. “I am a sucker for dimples.”

She looked at Syar’s baby-soft skin and said, “How old are you anyway?”

He grinned. “Thirty-six. Yes, I know I look younger. It’s the omega factor.”

“So, how long have you and Reynaldo been together?”

“Eight years. Why?”

She whispered, “How old is he?”

Reynaldo answered. “Forty. Why?”

She sat quietly. “No reason.”

She looked out and saw the families, the kids playing in a schoolyard, and there were two cell towers in the distance to the north and south. She could see them if she squinted. She checked her phone and blinked at the connection.

She sent an *okay* text to Penny and got a photo of Penny and her family in a selfie.

Ven smiled. Penny was her favourite. Edgar was great as an older brother, but Penny was made to care about people.

Fam is looking good. Don’t forget to start ballet classes before you get too big.

Asshole.

Ven laughed and then sobered as she looked at Syar, who was looking at her curiously.

“It was the check-in that Penny wanted. The next one can wait until I get a new SIM card.”

Syar asked, “They sent a picture?”

“Oh, yeah.” She showed him the picture of the family and explained who was who.

“They are enhanced alphas?”

“Oh. Yeah.” She smiled. “The guys would love it here. They are both aquatic.”

Syar smiled.

“Well, I will be seeing them in two months.”

The king frowned. “What? Why?”

She paused and looked at him. “Because you said you would send me home for birthdays.” Her words came out slowly. “That is when Penny’s birthday is.”

“How many people are in your family, in total?”

“Fifteen.”

“Perhaps we can bring them here.” Reynaldo smiled.

“Uh, six of the kids are still in foster care. This isn’t the kind of thing they get authorization to leave their state for.”

Syar smiled. “Over dinner, you need to tell me how foster care works.”

She shrugged. “It isn’t that complicated. They just remove kids from homes and attempt to keep them in safe places until they become adults.”

“I still want to know how it worked for you.”

“It did. I made it out alive.” She smiled.

They pulled up to a large house, and Reynaldo got out first and took her hand in his before Syar stepped down and walked casually up the stairs. Ven hesitated. “Uh, my stuff.”

Reynaldo said firmly, “It will be brought in and put in your room.”

She nodded and walked to keep step with him.

She would be better once she had her bearings. There was nothing familiar about this place except for the air. There was something in the air that was familiar.

Chapter Three

The house was large, it was cool, and there were people bustling around. Syar greeted them all by name, and a few of the women and men walking with what appeared to be bedding paused and stared at Ven as she continued to walk behind Syar.

Ven saw a huge room with a polished floor, and her fingers itched to put on headphones and stretch. Maybe dance. It had been such a relief to get her pointe shoes after years of practice that she now wanted to wear them every chance she got. They would only last four or five more sessions, but she wanted to have that time with free movement. It was hell on her feet, but she healed fast.

She looked back and had to hustle to catch up with Reynaldo. He looked at her curiously and smiled. “We are just going to his office.”

“Oh. Uh, why?”

He chuckled. “The contract has to be notarized. It will act as your temporary visa for the next year.”

“Oh, so we are going to the notary?”

“Syar can authorize it.”

She felt like an idiot. She was getting smaller with every step. She owned two businesses, lived on her own, and here, she felt like a teen on her first trip away from home.

Ven followed them into the office, and Reynaldo closed the door behind her. He removed the contract from his coat jacket pocket and handed Syar the paper.

Syar flipped through it and read the clause about her travelling for family birthdays. He huffed and nodded. “There it is.”

She watched as he took a red sticker and a notary seal and sealed the area next to the signatures, signing over top of it. He

opened a safe and put the contract in.

He smiled. “Now, let’s get out of the suffocating clothing and into something more comfy.”

Syar smiled. “Don’t worry, Venetia, the clothing here is pretty adaptable to different sizes. I got some stuff for you. Ford got your sizes.”

She blinked. “When?”

Reynaldo smiled. “During your nap.”

“Good signal.”

Syar made a face. “Come on; I want to get out of this suit.”

She followed them through the house, and they got to the room guarded by two men wearing pistols and daggers.

Syar pointed. “That is your room. There are clothes on the bed.”

The room was next to the king’s, and she walked to the door and opened it. It smelled heavily of flowers and something familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

She found a toilet behind one door and a sink and mirror behind another. No shower. *Ah.*

The bed was a low platform and had all the yield of her shoe’s insole. *Yay.* She looked at the folded fabric on the bed and sighed. She disrobed and wrapped the skirt around her hips. It covered her nicely, and she tied the strings to secure it. She jumped and twisted, but it stayed put. The breastband didn’t fit. She looked at it and then saw her luggage. She found a crop top in a soft peach that would hopefully be light enough. She put on a neutral sports bra and slipped the crop top in place. Checking her reflection in the mirror, she shrugged. It was as good as she could do. She finger-combed her hair and flopped back on the bed. While she lay there, she realized she must be really tired. The wall moved, and a door opened. Reynaldo saw her and smiled. “Hello.”

She sat up, and her skirt shifted alarmingly. “Uh-oh. I did it wrong.”

“The skirt? Yeah, there is a trick to it. Hold it and stand up.”

She held the skirt in place, and the tie unravelled. He chuckled and knelt, taking the ties and showing her, “There is a loop here and a loop here. Then you secure the inner layer and the outer.” His hands fastened it, and he secured the tie. “Now, why aren’t you wearing the top.”

She muttered. “Too small.”

He looked at her chest. “It should fit.”

“No, I am not too small. It is too small.” She hooked the edge of her top and lifted it. “I wear sports bras with major compression. I need about five more inches of fabric than this.”

He blinked. She dropped her top back into place.

“Five more inches?”

“Stop smirking. They are annoying, and if I could spend the time recovering, I would have them reduced.”

He looked horrified. “Why?”

“They get in the way.” She asked, “So, um, where can I get something that will fit?”

He smiled. “Just a minute.” He backed through the adjoining door.

She noticed that he was wearing an unbuttoned shirt and loose grey trousers. He was fun to look at.

She sat back down on the bed and waited.

Syar came in wearing a ton of jewellery. “What’s the problem?”

“My chest is too big.”

He looked at her dubiously. “Really?”

She narrowed her eyes, released her bra with her hands under her shirt, and slipped the straps off through the cami’s arm holes. She tossed the bra aside, and Syar stared. “Really.”

She wanted to massage them now, but he was watching.

She got up and went to the room with the sink and massaged her breasts. They always needed help after being released from the bra.

There was a knock at the door, and it opened with a band on the end of Reynaldo's fingers. She took it. "Thanks. Does this one have a trick, too?"

"No. It should go on easily, but it has a strap that attaches to the button over the right breast."

She got the band on and used the strap to add a bit of support. It was comfortable but felt a little naked.

She dragged in a deep breath and came out to find both men watching her intently. "Well, it fits. Thank you for getting it."

"My pleasure. You were right. Five more inches."

Syar stared at her. "You have lovely shoulders."

"Uh, thanks? They are a matched set."

He stood up from her bed and walked over to her, circling her slowly. "Aside from the short hair, you look like a local. I have to catch up on paperwork. Feel free to explore the residence. We will find you for dinner."

She got nervous. "When's dinner?"

"It's in two hours."

"Okay."

"If you see a large cat in the hall, it's just Makso. I don't know if his mate had kittens recently or not. He keeps them wild. The staff will make themselves scarce."

"Where is his mate?"

"In the jungle. She is extremely wild."

"Okay. Good to know." She smiled. "I will go exploring the residence."

They stretched in their breathable and comfortable clothing. She looked around and didn't find shoes, so she padded out of her room with her feet bare. She had her phone in her hand with the translator app on in case she needed it. She left her

room and waved at the guards at Syar's room. She began exploring a building where folks changed direction instead of talking to her.

She found the large open room and knelt on the floor to meditate. She sat there and kept herself calm when she felt a warm presence in front of her. She opened her eyes and met another set of feline eyes. She cocked her head, and he leaned forward, butting against her shoulder. "Oh, hi, big baby. You must be Makso."

He shouldn't purr, but he purred. It wasn't a proper purr, it sounded like he had learned it somewhere and was mimicking it, but it was definitely a purr.

She wrapped her arms around him and rubbed her cheek against his neck. His eyes were very pretty, and his scent was light.

She rubbed his back and rubbed at his ribs, where she found the distended nipples.

"Oh, you are the missus. Gorgeous girl."

There was a mew sound, and two fat black kittens marched up to her. "Oh, wow. We are all here. Hello, littles."

The kittens mewed, and their mother flopped on her side. The little ones ran up to get lunch, and the big lady put her paw on Ven's knee. She felt a little less out of place.

They sat there for half an hour before she heard, "Venetia, remain still. That isn't Makso."

She smiled and looked at Reynaldo. "I know. The babies eating kind of gave it away."

He had the larger male next to him, and she watched the female get up and get between Reynaldo and the kittens. Ven got up slowly and walked to the alpha. "Don't read anything into this."

She rubbed herself against him slowly, then walked back to the missus and knelt in front of her. The feline sniffed her and huffed, turning and summoning her babies to exit the

residence. Makso came by and bumped into Ven before he followed the family back into the jungle.

She got up and didn't look at Reynaldo. "Sorry."

"Come with me."

She stared at the middle of his back as they walked, and the loosely woven fabric let her see the deep groove of his back and the solid curve of his ass. She didn't look at men often, but she enjoyed the view. She smelled fish and the sweetness of fruit.

Syar was talking to an older woman who was giggling and smiling at him. When she glanced their way, her face sobered. "And who is this?"

"This is my companion. Venetia. She will be here this year."

"Oh, only a year?" Suddenly, the woman was all smiles again.

"I get the feeling it will feel like forever."

The woman walked up to Venetia and grabbed her arm, turning her around. "She is too muscular to wear a skirt. She should be in pants."

Venetia nodded. "I know, but thank you for pointing it out."

"And her hands need to be scrubbed. Doesn't she wash?"

Syar growled. "Actually, *look* at her, Myele."

The woman looked slightly down at her and met her gaze. She grabbed Venetia's hands and said, "She's a jaguar?"

"Partially. No, I have no idea why. Is there somewhere around here I can get opera gloves that won't kill me in this heat?" She looked down and said, "And boots or socks?"

Reynaldo was talking quickly to Syar, and the omega was smiling.

Ven said softly to the older woman, "I was asked to come here, I am here for a reason, and when it is fulfilled, I will go. No fuss."

Myele looked at her with narrowed eyes. “How much are you being paid?”

“Nothing until I finish the contract. At that point, all expenses for my upkeep should be deducted, and then I will use what is left for a planned project.”

“Well, your hair is a disgrace. You need extensions. You also need a manicure and facial.”

“Where I lived, we were still in spring and not yet summer.” She smiled slightly. “Any other expensive treatments you can think of that will shrink my end payment?”

“Pedicure and a waxing.” She nodded. “I will arrange it tomorrow.”

“The waxing isn’t necessary.”

“Of course, it is.”

“I mean, no, it isn’t. That ship has sailed. When the spots came, the hair went.”

Myele blushed. “I see. I will come and get you tomorrow and take your maintenance into my concern.”

“Great. Where can I bathe or shower?”

“The king will show you tonight.”

“Okay. Fine. Thank you for your consideration.” She could live with the contempt for a year. After that, she could go back to where she belonged and kick off her charity with a boost. She sighed mentally. The contempt might fade over time. Right now, she was the strange thing that had been dropped in their midst because the king had an impulse.

Syar walked toward her and wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling her neck.

Myele was surprised. “Your Majesty, don’t you have Reynaldo for that?”

“Not for this. Her scent is perfect. I want her to look like a princess. Can you do that?”

“All I can do is clean her up and dress her properly.”

“We will start there. Tomorrow after breakfast?”

“This is a long job. I will collect her at dawn.”

Syar smiled. “Good.”

The woman bowed and gave Ven a more considering look before she left the dining room.

Syar smiled. “Come on. Time for dinner.”

She was seated to his left, and Reynaldo was on his right. The platters all contained either fish or fruit. She identified one piece of fish that wasn't in a spiced sauce, but Syar took the whole thing and set it on his plate. Right. He picked first.

She went for some of the fruit she was familiar with and tried a bit of each of the fish dishes while Syar and Reynaldo discussed local events while they were gone.

When she had satisfied her hunger, she put her hands on her lap. She could eat more, but nothing appealed to her. It must have been the travel. It could have been the new environment. She filled her belly with water and waited. The first days in a new place were always rough. She pretended that this was a new foster home. It was temporary, people didn't like her, and the food was strange. She had done it before; she could manage it now. There was just one thing. It didn't seem that Syar needed her here. She felt tricked.

“So, Venetia, what do you think of the residence?”
Reynaldo looked at her.

“It's nice, pretty, lots of people. Surprisingly cool.”

Syar blinked. “That's all?”

“Um. I don't know what I am supposed to say. I can find my way back to my room. Should I go?”

Syar smiled. “What did you see on your tour?”

She paused. “Tour? Uh, I found the kitchen by smell, saw the entry hall, and then I sat in the big room and meditated.”

“That's it?”

“Yes.”

“I thought Grecca said she brought you to the gallery.”

She frowned. “Who is Grecca?”

“Your guide. She says she showed you the residence.”

“I don’t know who she showed around, but it wasn’t me. Myele is the first person to speak to me.”

Syar growled. “What?”

Reynaldo looked at her. “You expected this.”

“I have been the stranger in a populated place several times in my life. It is always the same.”

Syar frowned. “Like where?”

“Foster homes. This is the same. Everyone protects their own position and the position of those they feel deserve to be higher. So, I will be slapped down when I say or do anything regarding you two. They want me far away from you, but you have brought me here, so they are working on figuring out how to reduce the timeline. They will do the minimal to maintain me in order to get me gone as fast as possible.”

Syar frowned. “They aren’t.”

“They are a family dynamic. Everyone has a place. I am outside the normal dynamic. There is no place for me, and they want to keep it that way.” She smiled. “That is just a guess by being in this situation a few times.”

A server came in and filled Reynaldo’s and Syar’s glasses with fruit juice and then came to Ven, and she was out of juice.

The server blushed. “I will go get more.”

“No. It’s fine.”

“No, miss. I insist.”

Syar started getting irritated when she left. “It was probably just because they are used to how much we drink.”

“I am sure that’s it.” She stretched out her hand, and he took it as she calmed him down.

The server came back with a high blush on her cheeks. “Here you are, miss.”

The colour was the same as that of Syar's and Reynaldo's glasses. The scent of harsh citrus slammed into her nostrils.

The server swallowed nervously. "I have been ordered to make sure that you enjoy it, miss. It was made specially."

Reynaldo said, "No. I will try it. Let's switch glasses."

The woman gasped. "No, my lord. You can't."

"It is good enough for our honoured guest. Why isn't it good enough for me?" He stood up and took the glass, bringing it to his lips.

There was a shout of "No!" from the door to the kitchen hall. A woman wearing an apron came out and tried to fight Reynaldo for the glass.

Syar was prickling with fury, so Ven got up and got close. He calmed and growled at the cook. "Ledi, Venetia is here as my guest. She will be fed well, clothed well, and made comfortable. Are you understanding me? She isn't here to get between Reynaldo and me, so that is all you need to know, but you will understand one thing. If she weren't next to me right now, you would be swimming for the mainland right now."

The woman flinched. "Yes, Your Majesty. I am sorry. Rumours spurred when you had the queen's quarters prepared."

Reynaldo said, "It's common knowledge that I share the king's bed. This keeps Venetia where she needs to be so that she hears when she is needed."

Understanding of Venetia's purpose flared, and the cook said, "I am so sorry, miss. I thought you were something else. Is there anything I can do to apologize?"

Ven walked up to her and whispered in her ear.

"We don't have any left. There are plenty of dishes on the table."

Ven swallowed. "Everything smells different than I am used to. I just need some plain stuff. Is there any bread?"

"Bread, I have. Come with me."

Ven nodded, and they left without being dismissed. They walked the twenty-foot hallway and then saw the staff were all sitting around a huge table and having dinner.

Everyone went silent, and Ven went to the bread and snatched a chunk of butter that she balanced on the one-pound loaf.

She headed back to the dining room and ignored the other two as she ate the heavy bread. It wasn't meat, but it was pretty good.

Syar was surprised. "You are still hungry?"

Reynaldo told him, "Her senses are overloaded. The food smells good but tastes like she's eating perfume. I was like that when I moved in with you. Remember?"

Syar snorted. "Yeah, all you would eat was grilled fish." He frantically looked at the table and then went, "Fuck."

Reynaldo patted him on his shoulder. "She's a new addition. You have to learn what she needs."

Ven said, "I won't be here long enough for that to be necessary. I can just give the kitchen a list of the plain and boring food that I will be able to eat."

The alpha got up and came around the table, looking at the back of her neck. He hissed. "It's red."

"It isn't." She was outraged.

"It is. I am your alpha, temporary as it may be, and your mark needs tending."

He started licking, her nipples peaked in her wrap, and her belly pulled in. He shifted the strap that held her top in place, and she heard that purr that wasn't a purr.

She looked over, and the purr was coming from Syar.

Reynaldo finished licking and stroked his fingers through her hair. "Such soft fluff."

Ven smiled. "That changes tomorrow."

Syar blinked. "What?"

“Hair extensions tomorrow.”

There was a lot of growling as Myele was summoned, and her plans for Venetia were discussed, and she blurted out, “She doesn’t even know how to bathe properly!”

Reynoldo blinked and grinned. “Myele, there isn’t a shower or bath in the queen’s quarters. You know that.”

Myele blinked. “Oh. Right. I’d forgotten that. You haven’t been in there in so long.”

Ven said, “So I have to go to your room to have a shower?”

Syar nodded. “Yeah.”

“Not inconvenient at all.”

“Can I leave the residence if I promise to come back in an hour?”

Reynaldo shook his head. “No. Wild boars are dangerous and roam the jungle near the town at night.”

“Okay.” She finished her bread and butter and rubbed her eyes. She wished she had something to drink but didn’t trust the kitchen staff.

They got up and left the table.

She followed them, and they headed to their bedroom. She diverted and went to her bedroom. She went to the toilet, threw up dinner, and then went to wash her hands and face. She was brushing her teeth when the connecting door swung open.

Syar asked, “Where did you go?”

“Back to my room.” She frowned, washed her mouth, and put the toothbrush down. “That is what we did before. I thought that was how it went.”

His nostrils flared. “Did you get sick?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Unfamiliar food and stress.”

“Why do you apologize? You do it a lot.” Syar walked toward her.

“Learned behaviour. When you start screaming sorry, they tend to stop hitting you.” She looked at him tiredly.

“Oh Venetia.” He looked so sad.

“There are things I need to be myself, and I can’t do them yet, but I will just launch into the jungle soon.”

“It’s dangerous, Venetia.”

“I know, but being around people is worse.” She shrugged. “I am just better in the wild while getting my bearings.”

“Fine. You can go out tomorrow after you finish at the salon.”

He pulled her into his bedroom, where Reynaldo was nowhere to be seen. “Reynaldo is checking the residence. So, we can take a shower.”

“We?”

“Conserving water is recommended.” Syar smiled. “This is for me to get familiar with you and you to get familiar with me.”

“Uh-huh. You are bisexual, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. Both you and Reynaldo are my ideal lovers and companions.”

“I am not a lover.”

“Not yet, but I have time to seduce you.”

“Time?”

“There is time.”

With that cryptic comment, he put her in the bathroom and removed her clothing with three sharp tugs and a flick. He chuckled at her panties and eased them down her hips.

“Let me guess. You don’t wear anything under the clothes?”

“Nope. Too warm.”

The shower fell in a gentle rain, and she relaxed in his hands as he took care of her. She was tired, she was insecure, and she was homesick. It was the perfect storm for the slow tears down

her cheeks. Not a stellar first day, but only three hundred and sixty-four were left. She could do this.

Chapter Four

Ven towelled her hair dry and wrapped herself in the fabric while looking at Syar. His skin was light bronze, his body tight with muscles, his hair was sandy, and his eyes kept changing colour as his mood shifted. His erection was surprising, but she had chatted with a few omegas, and the slick and weeping were normal if aroused.

“Hand me a towel?” he asked with a smile.

She unfolded one from the stack and handed it to him.

He wrapped the towel around his hips and shook his head violently.

She blinked as droplets ran off her nose. “Did you really just do that?”

He grinned. “I like doing that. Reynaldo’s reaction is fun, but you will see that eventually.”

She took a corner of her towel and wiped her face. “Yeah, I think I will skip it. He only needs to update the graze weekly.”

“If you are ever willing to get a full mark, he will be glad to oblige.”

Ven looked at him with a slight smile. “I will never again be marked by someone who doesn’t want to keep me. That was a horror that I am not going to live again. This is a nice place to visit, but so far, I wouldn’t want to stay here.”

“We could have the mark scrubbed before you leave.” He walked with her into the enormous bedroom.

“Have you had a mark scrubbed?”

He blushed. “No. Isn’t it simple?”

She opened her mouth, but Reynaldo came back inside, and she closed her mouth. He smiled. “Don’t mind me.”

Syar was looking at her curiously. “What is it like?”

“When you are young and stupid and your alpha marks you, there is usually affection. The moment the bite happens, your futures are linked together. Your hope for a life with them twists together, and you feel what they do, and if you are lucky, there is love as well as affection.”

She rubbed her face. “When you scrub a mark, you are destroying all those years of hope, and the connection that you had is severed, so your emotions spin into a void where no one hears you. The place your alpha was is grey ice inside you. When your child is dying inside you, you scream for your mate, and he isn’t there. There is nothing. There is no one, and you are more alone than you can imagine.”

Syar was crying. Reynaldo took him and held him, murmuring to him softly.

Ven swallowed but turned to walk back to her room. Arms wrapped around her, and the soft sniffing confirmed that it was Syar. He lifted her up and dragged her back toward his bed.

Ven said quietly, “Syar, what are you doing?”

“I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Honey, I am always alone. It is easier than flickers of warmth and hope. They are devastating.”

“You are here to help me, and I am sad.”

When he set her down, she turned and saw that he was genuinely upset. She sighed. “I am sorry. I will be more careful in the future, but you are asking me hard questions that prod sore areas.” She stroked his jaw and neck.

He leaned in and kissed her. She tasted his tears and held him close, wrapping her arms around him and stroking his back.

Reynaldo called out from the bathroom, “Get into bed. It’s getting late.”

Syar crawled under the sheet, pulling her after him. His towel flicked out, tugged hers loose, and then pulled her in

with him. The kissing started and continued when Reynaldo climbed into the other side.

She curled against him and blanked her mind to enjoy the taste and smell of him. Ven wiggled closer, and she felt Syar smile. Omegas were something else. Designed by whatever twist of evolution had created alphas, an omega was a guaranteed way to distract one of the hyper-intelligent powerhouses. They weren't normally supposed to be fascinating to betas, but Ven was drawn to him. She wanted to protect him, but all that was happening was that he was comforting her. This wasn't working at all. She was heading for a firing. If she couldn't help him, she should get her ass out of there.

He kissed her softly, his lips clinging to hers before he lifted his head. He pressed kisses to her cheeks, and his hands roamed down her back. "You are so soft."

She shivered and moved her leg to tangle it with his. It let her get closer. His erection was slipping against her belly, and she squirmed against him.

He whispered a request for permission to touch her, and she nodded, needing the connection. He slid his fingers along her sex and explored carefully. She flinched and twitched as he stroked her with focus, and she rapidly breathed as he stroked two fingers into her and slid them around her clit before plunging inside. Her hips moved with his hand, and she softly sobbed as she came. He continued his stroking and dipping until she whined softly, "Stop."

Syar kissed her, and he slowly massaged her folds until her channel stopped pulsing.

He withdrew his hand, and she heard him licking softly, and a purr came from him. He murmured, "Here."

A slow licking sound rang in the room, and to Ven's mortification, she smelled Reynaldo's scent getting hot very fast. His rattling purr started up as he licked Syar's hand.

Ven went from lazy to rigid in a moment. She pulled away from Syar, and the omega growled and pulled her back. "Stay,

Venetia. Please.”

She muttered, “I don’t believe I…”

“Came? Enjoyed yourself?”

“Let you touch me like that.”

He chuckled. “I am very persuasive. No one expects an omega to make the first move.”

“I knew better.” She kept her forehead pressed to his chest, not looking at either of them.

“Yes. You know Ford. Why do you know Ford?”

“I volunteered at his mate’s big cat rescue. The cats liked me.”

“Not in one of his videos?”

“No. I get enough attention as it is.”

He stroked her hair. “You are incredible.”

“Yes, I defy credibility.” She chuckled weakly.

A larger hand stroked her hair, and the purring picked up.

“Don’t mind him. You let me touch you, and he feels left out.”

“It’s too much for me.”

Reynaldo stroked her cheek and then pulled his hand away. “You have an early start, Ven. Best get to sleep.”

She nodded and curled up against Syar. “Wait. Do you normally curl up against Reynaldo?”

“Yes, but this is far softer.”

“Curl up normally. I will be here if you need me.”

He huffed but turned his back to her. Reynaldo’s arms went around him, and she held the sheet to her chest and tried to sleep. It wasn’t easy, but she managed to doze off a little.

Ven woke with a jolt when she heard whimpering. Syar was lying next to her and making sounds of distress. She touched

him, and his hand struck her across the cheek, but she returned to him and stroked his jaw and neck. “Easy, Syar. Everything is fine. You are good. You are home. You are safe.”

She continued until he stilled and fell into a deeper sleep. She got up and headed to the bathroom, making a cold compress with a hand towel and pressing it to her cheek. It was the chance she took working with traumatized sleepers.

Ven refreshed the compress and put it on her cheek. It was a solid hit, but she would heal. She just wanted to minimize it in case he felt guilty.

Reynaldo loomed in the mirror. “What happened?”

“He was upset and lashed out. Now I know he has a contact trigger.”

“Let me see.”

“No. It will heal.”

“Let me see.” He ran the assertion through his mark. Damn, she was hoping he had forgotten about it.

She lowered the cloth, and he looked at the red mark that was going to grow up to be a bruise.

He sighed. “He didn’t mean for you to get hurt.”

“Right. That is why he prods at every sensitive topic in my life. I have cried more today than in the past year. Thinking about it hurts.”

“He just wants you to give yourself up to him.”

“Just? If I give everything, what is left for me?”

He leaned in, and she tensed as he licked her injury. “What do you want?”

A thousand bits of hope rushed through her link, and then she cut them off. “I want to act as his companion for three hundred and sixty-four days and then go back and resume my life.”

“What if he offers you a life here?”

“There isn’t a contingency for that in my contract.” She started shaking. She was tired, stressed, and hungry.

She tried to walk past him, but he was standard alpha width. Huge. Ven put a shaking hand on his arm and tried to get past him.

He said softly, “Pull strength through the link.”

“I don’t know how, and it’s too light.”

“I can give you a stronger link, but I don’t want to do that to you. Your experiences have not been good.”

“Understatement. I just need some sleep.”

He nodded and let her pass.

She curled up at the edge of the bed and shivered herself to sleep.

A hand shook her roughly to wake her. Myele looked furious. When Ven sat up, she was hauled over to her quarters, and the door was eased closed. “Get dressed, and we will get going.”

Ven got dressed with her hands shaking. A set of sandals was given to her, and she got up and followed the housekeeper out of the residence.

They walked through the dawn light and to the light inside the salon and spa. Myele spoke rapidly in the local language, and the woman eyed Ven and nodded. She was given a robe to put on over her clothes and led into the spa, where her mani-pedi was taken care of.

She remained quiet while her feet and hands were scrubbed raw. They would heal. Her nails and toenails were painted matte grey. It wasn’t a particularly good colour for her, but when that was done, she was given an abrasive facial, and then it was time for her hair. The shampoo was rough, the brushing was awkward, and when she was turned toward the mirror, she was unsurprised to see she had an inch of hair all over her head. She got up and removed the haircut bib, and when she passed the counter, the woman grabbed her by the arm.

“Payment.”

“Send the bill to Syar and Reynaldo. I am too tired to play this game.”

She dropped the robe and walked back toward the residence, but she didn't want to see anyone, so she headed for the jungle. It was time to get acquainted with her new home.

She shifted in the crook of the tree, where she had found enough space to catch a nap for a few hours. She felt a demand in the link, so she sighed and sent a response.

Reynaldo and Makso were at the base of her tree in under a minute. She climbed down and walked to him. He was shocked. “Your hair. Your skin...”

“Yeah. I just wanted a nap before I had to deal with it. The salon was given very specific orders.”

“Why didn't you stop them?” He touched her head and stroked the fluff.

“I didn't know that any of them spoke English until the receptionist grabbed my arm and demanded payment.”

“Syar is going to be pissed.”

“Good for him.” She felt pressure against her legs. “Oh, hey, Missus. Thank you.”

Reynaldo watched her take the pheasant, and he said, “She's hunting for you?”

“I'm hungry. The last food I kept down was on the airplane.”

“I thought you had breakfast before you left.”

“You are doing a lot of thinking. Where can I use a frying pan and get some butter?”

“You can use the kitchen.”

“I think I am going to be a bit of a bitch today.”

“Feel free. You are entitled.”

She smiled. “You might want to stand out of the way.”

They walked to the residence, and Reynaldo said she was to be given full rein to prepare her meat. The moment he was out of the room, Myele snorted. “It seems you got the wrong end of the scissors.”

Ven walked up and faced her, and she did what she never did. She roared.

* * * *

Syar looked at Reynaldo. “You found her?”

“Yes. She was sleeping in a tree after they sheared her at the salon.”

“They what?”

“That beautiful hair? Gone. Down to an inch. Myele gave the salon instructions to damage her. She didn’t have enough energy in her to deal with them.”

Syar stood up and was going to look for his little princess when he heard a roar that shook the structure. “What the fuck?”

Reynaldo ran with him to the kitchen, where the staff was huddling in a corner, and Venetia was humming and arranging some fowl in a cast iron pan. Once that was set, she washed her hands and her claws. She took a container of salt back to the stove and sprinkled some on the sizzling meat.

She turned to Syar. “Good morning, Your Majesty. I haven’t slept much or eaten anything, so please excuse me while I make myself some food.”

He stared at her as her shorn head moved while she worked on her meal. “Uh, Venetia, my precious. Where did you get the bird?”

“Makso’s missus brought it to me. She knew I was hungry.”

“What happened to your hair?” He looked at Myele, who cringed back.

“Haircut. It will grow out.”

“But, your lovely hair.”

“If you are that attached to it, it is on the floor of the salon. Oh, can you settle the bill for me? They wanted me to pay, but I don’t have any local currency.”

“Of course. I will make sure to settle this.”

Myele whimpered, “Your Majesty, she has threatened us.”

Ven turned her food, and she turned to Myele. “I thought I told you to remain quiet.” She opened her mouth, exposed fangs that an alpha would claim and roared in Myele’s face. The other kitchen staff whimpered and tried to pack themselves into the corner.

Ven remained in control, and she returned to the food. When she finished, she turned off the stove, got a plate, and loaded it with the cooked bird. She turned to the head cook. “Shall I clean the pan?”

“No, miss. We will take care of the pan and the entrails.”

“Oh. That’s nice. Have a nice day... oh, and Myele.”

The woman sobbed. “Yes?”

“Don’t fuck with me again.”

Syar blinked and grinned, stepping aside as she walked past him to the dining room. She sat at the table and started eating.

Reynaldo muttered, “Holy shit.”

Syar walked up to her. “I am going to find out what happened at the salon.”

“Good. If you find one drop of malice in what they did to me, I am going there next. Also, grey nails aren’t my colour. Is there anywhere I can get this done properly?” She shrugged. “After the bleeding stops.”

Syar blinked. “Bleeding?”

“Cuticle butchery. Easy to avoid as my natural nails were white, and these blend in.”

He grabbed her left hand and examined it. There, against the grey of her skin, were stripes of blood that had emerged after she had washed her hands.

“Why?”

She picked up another piece of meat and kept eating. The pieces were jagged. “My guess is that I am unworthy as I am not stunning, elegant, or royal. They need to punish me so I don’t forget where I belong. Women are nasty.”

“What did you use to cut that bird?”

“My claws.”

“Ah. I will be right back. Keep eating.” Syar kissed the top of her head, but it didn’t smell like her.

He ran to the salon and saw a group of four women standing around the desk. “Which one of you cut her hair?”

The stylist put her hand up. “Lady Myele said she needed to be shorn according to tradition for trying to get into your bed.”

The other two standing there nodded.

The receptionist stuttered, “She said she was a gold digger, and we needed to be efficient but make her regret coming here.”

Syar was stunned. “Not one of you thought to double-check before you butchered her beautiful soft hair?”

The stylist went grey. “She... isn’t someone trying to guilt you into accepting her?”

Venetia’s voice rang out from behind him. “No. I am not. And, now, I am going to return the services you gave me earlier. Down to every cuticle cut and bruise on my face. Oh, and your hair, of course. That has to go.”

The stylist said, “I was following orders from the residence.”

Venetia growled. “So was I when I put myself in your hands. Syar has been saying that he wants me treated like a princess.”

The women froze in shock at the implication.

Syar shook his head toward them as they were about to bow to Venetia.

His beloved beta looked at the manicurist. “Which hand to you want to keep?”

“What?”

“Which hand do you want to remain pristine?”

“Uh, my right?”

Syar didn't even see Venetia move. The manicurist gasped and then looked down to see four even lines that were slowly bleeding.

“A little tea tree oil should heal that in no time. Now, you... you turned my face into hamburger, so I want you to give yourself a facial with the same scrub and equipment you used on me. I will check on you in five minutes.”

The woman teared up and nodded, heading to her station.

The stylist was shaking. Venetia spoke softly. “Now, you more than anyone know that hair is a woman's crowning glory, so your actions were reprehensible. But since your hair is so glorious, I will give you a modified punishment.”

“What is it, miss?”

Venetia smiled. “You will only lose half your hair. I mean, it grows back, right? Isn't that what you said?”

“I didn't say that in English.”

“I know.” She nodded to the back of the salon, and the woman was sobbing. “Aw, honey. I would have cried if I had known what you were going to do, but I trusted you. I came to you, and I trusted you. Hold still. I will be quick.”

The buzzing of an electric razor was heard for a few minutes, and then Venetia said, “Scrub harder. You aren't bleeding. That's better. Now follow up with that salt scrub, and we are good. There you go.”

Venetia walked back up front and looked surprised when Syar reached for her. He hugged her and kissed her forehead and then her lips. “Are you all right, Venetia?”

She looked at him, and he could see she was close to breaking. He tucked her head against him and looked at the chalky receptionist. “What is her bill?”

“N-nothing, Your Majesty. I am so sorry.”

“Your aunt has been punished as well. I am debating whether or not to keep her at the residence.”

Reynaldo said, “I will take her, Syar.”

Syar smiled. It would send a signal to any who wanted to look that she is not an unwanted intruder. She is very much wanted. She is essential.

Reynaldo eased her away from Syar, and his skin felt cold when she left. Reynaldo cradled her against his chest, and the little kitten was shivering. They left the salon, and a crowd gathered.

Syar recognized a face in the crowd, and he stepped forward to speak to her. “Solai, we need your talents. Can you bring your kit to the residence?”

“Of course. How bad is it?”

Syar carefully took one of Venetia’s hands and showed it to the esthetician. “Holy shit. They went nearly through the nail. She needs dips for protection.”

Syar took her hand and tucked it back against her body.

Solai muttered, “Did Myele order this?”

Syar nodded.”

“She wanted Fefee as Reynaldo’s breeder. You know that, right?”

He nodded. “I never thought she would do something like this.”

“I will fix what I can. Expect me in half an hour.”

Solai left and picked up her daughter.

Syar smiled. “Bring your child.”

The woman nodded and said, “I will be there shortly.”

Syar and Reynaldo walked through the crowd, and the ferocious kitten was curled in a ball.

They walked back to the residence and went into Syar’s study, and Reynaldo sat at his own desk with her still in his arms. She was still shivering.

Reynaldo gave her his rough purr, and she chuckled.

He pressed his head to the fuzzy surface of her hair. “We need to wash your hair.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I will get on it.”

She squirmed to be let loose, but Reynaldo held her. Syar watched as she turned her head toward Reynaldo, and they kissed sweetly. He smiled, and Reynaldo guided her to her feet.

She said, “I am going to go take a shower.”

Reynaldo nodded to Syar. “You are shaking. I will help.”

Venetia looked at him for a long moment and then nodded. They left the office, and Syar composed a request for a new housekeeper and posted it on the community board.

He was amazed that his kitten could strike like that, but she had. The roar was impressive as well. Nearly as good as Reynaldo’s. He could still feel it in his bones.

He worked for ten minutes on administrative stuff when there was a soft knock. “Come in, Myele.”

The older woman that he had hired ten years ago was standing there. “Your Majesty?”

“Yes, Myele?”

“It has come to my attention that you have reposted my position.”

“Of course. Your duty is to see to the health and comfort of my guests, and you have not. In fact, you have ensured her humiliation and discomfort. That sounds like you have refused

your contracted obligations. So, I am taking your actions as your resignation.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. You know I always hoped Fefee would be enough for Reynaldo.”

Syar looked at her. “This morning, you didn’t pull her from Reynaldo’s arms; you pulled her from mine.”

“She wasn’t in anyone’s arms. She was curled in a ball at the edge of the bed.” Her words were not a defense.

He looked at her. “So, you punished her for sleeping? Her nailbeds are shredded, her hair smells disgusting, and the soft fluff that I buried my face in is gone. Her nails have been abraded to paper thinness. Her skin is raw. She has been tortured.”

“She could have said something.” Myele sniffled.

“She did. You told them not to speak English. They ignored her because you asked them to.”

She opened and closed her mouth. Syar looked at her. “You can gather your things and go. One week from now, you can ask Venetia how she is doing and ask her if you can have your position back.”

“Your Majesty?”

“You heard me. Out.”

She stared, and the door opened behind her. Venetia moved like lightning and wrapped her hand around Myele’s neck as she whispered, “The king said to leave.”

He could see the moment that Venetia’s claws started to press inward.

Myele’s eyes got huge, and she started to back toward the door with Venetia guiding her, crooning, “Come on, little chicken. You don’t need to be here right now.”

Syar covered his mouth as he realized Myele had watched her rip through the fowl with her claws.

Reynaldo came in looking slightly ruffled and dazed. “She just got her second wind, but she smells like her again.”

“She just took Myele out with claws to her neck.”

“Shit. She’s fun.” Reynaldo smiled.

“How was the shower?”

“She has a lot of scars. She’s also furious. The fury is battling with her, upset about the damage she sat for, but having seen the scars, she has endured a lot. The fury is going to manifest from time to time.”

Syar smiled. “I am hoping to channel that.”

Reynaldo blinked and stared. “You knew?”

“Ford and I had an in-depth conversation. It was illuminating.” Syar smiled brightly. The kitten’s claws were out. Now, the woman had to rise up. One thing at a time.

Chapter Five

Ven followed Myele to her quarters and waited while she packed. “So, why did you do it? Just curious.”

“My niece would make an excellent breeder for Reynaldo, but he doesn’t even look at her.”

“Wait? You are trying to entice an alpha with a beta? Seriously? What did you think would happen? He’s already linked to Syar. He doesn’t need a beta.”

“He needs a breeder. The king needs an heir, and he is infertile.”

Ven laughed. “Well, that is hilarious. First off, I am here for a year. Second, I am also infertile. Don’t worry about me.”

Myele stared at her. “You are... you can’t?”

“Nope. Not unless something drastic changes.”

“I want the best for my niece.”

“Sure. We want the best for those around us. It doesn’t give us the right to hurt others. How can joy be built on pain?”

Myele started hanging her head. “I am sorry.”

“I might forgive you when my hair and nails grow back.” She shrugged. “I might. I believe you can find your way out.”

Myele nodded, her eyes full of regret.

“I am sure I will see you around.”

Myele nodded.

Ven left her and just wanted to curl up in a corner. Instead of hiding in her room, she returned to Syar’s office and asked, “Your Majesty, can I go rest now? I haven’t been this mad for this long for a while.”

“No. Solai is coming, and she is going to fix your nails.”

She nodded. “Of course. Where should I be?”

Reynaldo got up from his desk and said, “Come with me to the morning room.”

She followed him, and to her surprise, a woman was sitting and pouring water into a foot spa, had a hand soak set up on the table, and a little girl was sitting in the corner, playing with a stuffed version of Makso.

The woman smiled. “Hello, miss.”

“Ven. Call me Ven, please.”

“Ven. I am Solai; this is my daughter Haril. That is her toy, Arfloof.”

Solai gestured for Ven to sit as she opened a case and pulled out small containers about an inch tall. “First, I am going to take off that botch job, and then we are going to put on the layers overtop. We will have to keep it up while your nail grows back out, but we should be able to manage this with maintenance every week.”

Ven sat. “What are those?”

“Those are the dips.” Solai explained the procedure and smiled. “Okay, first, we get that gnarly grey off, and then you pick your colours. Thank goodness they seem to have left you some length in your nails.”

The little girl got up and came over. “Lady, why are your hands dirty?”

Solai made a noise, but Ven said, “They aren’t dirty. My skin is just a different colour. See? I even have spots like Arfloof.”

“Oh.” The little girl poked the dots, looked at her finger, then stroked Ven’s inner arm and smiled. “You are really soft.”

She smiled. “Yeah. That just happened one day.”

Ven was astonished at how fast things went. One hand was stripped and dried while the other was worked on. Her feet went next, and Haril laughed. “Mom is fast. She says she has stuff to do, so if she goes fast, she does more stuff.”

Solai smiled, checked on the nails, frowned, and then said, “So, why did you come to the island?” Her tone went to the chatty tone of manicurists around the world.

“Oh, I was asked to come as a companion to Syar, but I am getting the feeling that there are hidden clauses I didn’t know about.”

Solai laughed. “They are smarter than they look.”

Ven blinked. “Huh.”

“Oh, Syar is my second cousin. We went to school together.”

“Oh. And you...”

“Everyone here does whatever they feel like. I always liked doing nails and hair. I wanted to get married and have kids and live a normal life with normal people around me.” She twisted her lips while she worked and sighed.

“What went wrong?”

“I met Dalnet. Fell in love. Got used to him being away from home, and now he’s moving back.” She smiled slightly. “I have no idea what I am going to do once he’s home.”

“By your expression, he’s an alpha?”

She snorted as she dipped Ven’s fingers. “Yeah. My bad luck that I was at the beach, and a wave knocked me into him. And then it happened again. By the fourth time, I realized he was catching me, and we were two hundred feet from the others. At that point, I looked up at him, and he punched a shark in the nose. Yeah. Doomed.”

“My cousin’s lawyer came to the hospital to get her and the detective that was collecting information about her stalker are now expecting a baby with her.” She chuckled. “Happily doomed. And she got a bonus daughter.”

“Do you want kids?”

Ven sighed. “I did. I had a daughter. She didn’t make it, and there was damage during delivery.”

“Oh, god. I am so sorry.”

“It happened before Haril was even a gleam in your husband’s eye.”

“How did your partner take it?”

“Oh, he was long gone by then. Off to play with the omega his family bought for him.” She grimaced.

“Oh. Ouch. Was someone there for you?”

“My foster family. The ones I call cousins. Our foster mom taught us to cook, and our foster dad taught us to fix cars. Penny’s brother was the best physiotherapist afterward, and his wife helped me get back on my feet. I lived with Edgar and Janie for a few years until I could pay them back. I opened a business as my change continued, and then I paid for it with another. They helped me through it all, and I have begun to pursue my life and my dreams and things that I enjoy. Penny, Edgar, Janie, and the kids are my chosen family.”

“Were your businesses successful?”

“Wildly.”

“So, why did you come here?”

“I had the thought I would be needed. That’s my kink.” She snorted. “I am having a difficult time blending in.”

Solai laughed. “I know it is early days, but do you want help standing out?”

“I think I could use the help.”

“Excellent. Not a lot of people like Myele that aren’t related to her. She has the personality of wet rope.”

Ven smiled. “I agree.”

Haril chuckled. “Mom says she’s a fucking idiot.”

Solai gasped and said, “Haril, get behind me.”

Ven turned her head and saw Missus with her kittens. One in her mouth and one waddling behind her. Missus lay down next to Ven and started giving her babies a bath.

Solai was staring. “What’s she doing?”

“Bathing her kittens. It’s almost time to feed them. Why?”

“She doesn’t come into the residence.”

“That was before. Too many boys.” Ven chuckled. “She hates being outnumbered.”

Solai slowly began to finish the nails. “How do you know that?”

“She told me... somehow. I guess it came with the spots.”

The lovely blue took on a metallics shine. Solai kept working on her nails, and then she bent down to do the final top coat on the toes.

Ven flexed her fingers and smiled. “They look lovely. Thank you so much. They feel hard again.”

“Dip nails are basically powder and super glue with a topcoat. They are definitely protective. And no worries about denting them. Go on about your day. They will be a little stiffer than a normal nail, but when your nails grow out, these will soak off in a few minutes, and then I will reapply until your full nail is there again. Then, you have a choice. This should last seven to ten days.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome. I was going to put something on your skin, but it has healed. How did you do that?”

“I don’t know. I just heal new damage quickly. Soft tissue only.” She smiled and touched her face with her strangely heavy fingertips.

“So, could any other damage be fixed?”

“I don’t have any other damage. Well, my cuticles, but they have healed.”

Solai smiled. “Never mind. All right, miss. You are ready to go and have lunch.”

“Will you join me?”

Solai packed up. “No, we are going to have lunch with my mother. I would like to meet up with you later in the week.”

“You know where to find me.” Ven looked down at Missus and smiled. The kittens were passed out. “I will remain here until you and Haril are gone, just in case she has a mood swing.”

“Got it.” She packed up quickly.

Haril held out her stuffy. “Arfloof says goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Arfloof. Goodbye, Haril.” She smiled at Solai. “Goodbye, Solai. Thank you again.”

She slipped her bags over her shoulder and held her case with her other hand steering her daughter clear of the large predator and its little clones.

The kittens started mewling and pushing against Ven’s legs, and she looked to Missus, who sat up and stretched. Ven picked them up, one under each arm, and walked through the halls. She headed for Syar’s office, and Missus padded behind her.

Ven juggled kittens and knocked on the door.

“Come.”

She opened the door and stepped in. “Anyone want a kitten break?”

Reynaldo got up and came toward her. “You took her kittens?”

“She’s right behind me, dude. She knows.”

Syar got up and smiled when she looked up at Reynaldo. “Kitten?”

She handed him the one on the right and stroked the left one under the chin.

Syar extended his hands. “May I hold one?”

“Of course.” She handed the kitten over and crouched to pet Missus. She sat, and Ven used her new nails on the pretty kitty.

Reynaldo stroked the little kitten, and Ven felt her chest tighten. Missus huffed, and Ven stood up. “That concludes the kitten break.”

They handed the kittens back to her, and she kissed each of the babies before setting them on the floor. Their mom cleaned them and then walked away with them.

“We have had six applicants for Myele’s position.”

“Oh. Excellent. Missus said she will get me dinner. She says I look weak.” She folded her hands together and nodded.

Syar paused. “You are talking to her?”

“She is talking to me. It would be rude not to pay attention.”

Reynaldo walked up to her and carefully wrapped her in a hug.

She froze. “Why am I getting a hug?”

“You looked like you needed one, and I definitely needed one. You were supposed to be safe here.”

“I have been exposed to mean girl antics because someone wanted to get in your pants. I survived it.”

“*My pants?*”

“Yup.” She felt him reacting to the thought. “And that is enough hugging.”

He sighed but let her go.

Syar smiled. “I actually need a hug. It has been a stressful morning.”

She nodded and went into his arms. He inhaled her scent and buried his nose against her neck. She felt the tension melt out of him and remained until someone cleared their throat from the open door and announced, “There is something for the lady at the kitchen door.”

She murmured to Syar, “That is probably my dinner.”

“Stay.”

She combed her fingers through his hair and kissed him. His attention instantly shifted, and she continued the kiss until he pulled her hips to his. She broke the kiss. “And on that note, I am going to have to go to the kitchen door. Could be fowl. Could be a snake. If Myele left it, I am going with snake.”

He whined, “I want you with me.”

“I will be right back. I am testing out my new manicure.”

“Reynaldo, go with her, just in case it is a snake.”

He grunted and followed her back to the kitchen. Reynaldo said, “You kiss him very naturally.”

“Shouldn’t I? Is it not appropriate?” She wasn’t really worried, but she needed to know.

“I would rather you kissed me.”

“Why?”

“Because my body reacts to your scent. The feel of you in my arms makes me dizzy, and there isn’t another woman I have ever met that makes my soul sing the way your presence does.”

“That’s direct.”

“You seem to appreciate direct.”

She shrugged. “I normally do, but I can’t actually offer you anything.”

“I don’t need anything.”

She chuckled. “Then you aren’t for me.” She sent him gentle regret through the link.

She walked into the kitchen and opened the back door, where there was a pile of brightly coloured birds, each the size of a small chicken.

One of the women in the kitchen came forward. “I will take care of those, miss. You are wanting them for dinner?”

“Yes, please, but no spices aside from salt and pepper. My stomach is still adjusting. Are we clear?”

The woman nodded. “Yes, miss.”

“Thank you very much.”

Ven walked back to where Reynaldo was staring at her. He frowned and pulled her down the hall into a small room that

looked like a linen closet. “What do you mean, I am not for you? You are the only one for me.”

She shrugged. “You know how you don’t need anything from me?”

“Yes.”

“I need to be needed. If you don’t need me, what the fuck am I doing there?” She shrugged. “The only reason I am here is that Syar needs me. When that’s done, I have to go home. It’s in my contract.”

He was astonished. “You are honestly thinking about going home? We are in paradise.”

Her laughter started as silent, and then tears were running down her cheeks. She wheezed, “I am too tired for that.”

He pulled her for a hug again and stroked her back. “I guess what home for some is hell for others.”

She wheezed, “You are funny. Three hundred and sixty-three days to go.”

“You are counting down?”

She looked up at him, and his expression looked hurt. “Sure. It reminds me not to get comfortable. This is probably lack of sleep talking.”

He touched her cheek. “How is your face?”

“Healed. My nails would be, too, but they are nails and not skin. You didn’t tell Syar, did you?”

“No. Why can’t he know what he did?”

“Because he was in pain and panic. I beat the hell out of the people who were taking care of me after the first problem and again after the assault. Penny took a lot of damage, and she blamed me for none of it.”

He frowned but then said, “Will you kiss me?”

“Why?”

“I need it.”

She nodded and lifted her face. He bent down, and their kiss was intense, and it left her shivering. Parts of her were waking that hadn't been active in more than five years.

His hands stroked her back and rubbed her ass. He treated her tailbone to a slow massage, and his rough tongue carefully explored her mouth. The kiss continued for quite a while before he lifted his head and nuzzled her temple.

Her pulse was felt in all parts of her body, and he didn't seem to want to stop cuddling with her. She murmured, "You are very warm."

He smiled. "I am."

"When is your rut happening?"

"Within the week."

"So, that's why I am here?"

"No. Syar needs you." He continued to rub her back.

"Right." She nodded. "Of course, he does."

She glanced around. "I think you are musking up the linens."

He chuckled. "Probably. Do you mind?"

"How often are the sheets on my bed changed?"

"Every day."

"Damn it." She yawned and looked at his chest. The smell was making her relaxed and warm.

"You look tired."

"I have only gotten one nap in a tree for a few hours before you came looking for me." She started to droop. "Where can I sleep?"

"I've got you." He bent his knees and picked her up.

She curled against his chest, and he inhaled before leaving the linen closet and startling away the staff who had been huddled around the door. He walked to the office, and she heard the rumble of his talking, the concerned tones of Syar, and then she was out.

Her skin was warm, and the scent of food woke her.

Syar said, “Oh, there she is. Hello, Venetia.”

She opened her eyes and focused on Syar. “Oh. I should get off him.”

She moved to get off Reynaldo.

There was a low growl from the alpha who held her.

Syar smiled. “That move would not be recommended. He’s fixating on you right now.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not comfortable to be the sole focus with him.” Syar smiled. “So, do you want to try some of the local food or what the missus brought you?”

“The fowl she brought.”

He nodded and pulled the platter toward them.

Reynaldo washed his hand, dried it, and then picked up a thick shred of meat before he brought it to her. She opened her mouth and bit down. She felt a happy hum coming through her. He kept his fingers near her mouth, and she licked and sucked the juice off. He shuddered and reached for another piece when she finished.

She was halfway through the platter and noticed that Reynaldo cleaned his hand before he ate any of his own food. “Why don’t you want any of the birds the missus brought?”

“It is full of hormones that aren’t good for men.”

Syar snorted.

“That’s odd. Why is she giving me these birds?” She took another mouthful.

“They have a luteinizing hormone. They trigger ovulation.” Syar smiled.

She paused before she swallowed. “What?” she mumbled around a mouthful.

Syar nodded. “They are called *queen’s fowl*, and only the royal household is allowed to eat them.”

“Why?” Her appetite was suddenly gone. She had eaten most of the birds already.

“The original people did not want the birds hunted to extinction. So, it became punishable by loss of a hand.” Syar smiled.

“What am I going to lose for this?”

Reynaldo held another chunk in front of her. “Open.”

Syar shrugged. “A bit of dignity. It was actually Missus that brought down the birds. She can kill all she likes.”

Reynaldo was growling softly. “Open.”

She opened, and the warmth crept over her tongue as she ate. “Even if my ovaries go off, nothing will happen.”

He nuzzled her jaw. “You will smell right, and that is very powerful.”

She swallowed. “How long do I have?”

Syar smiled. “Two days, maybe more.”

She nodded. Thoughts of sprinting toward the volcano ran through her mind, but she met his gaze, and he picked up more. He murmured, “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

He put the bird on her tongue, and she chewed. Reynaldo ate some of the highly spiced meats and vegetables. “I was just thinking about it a little.”

Syar sighed. “You two are a lovely couple.”

The phrase sent a pang through her. “We are a match, not a couple. Please, don’t say that.” She rallied, “And I am not lovely. Not by any stretch of modern imagination unless you have a feline fetish.”

“I do.” Reynaldo looked at her. “You are stunning in my eyes.”

She looked at him and saw that there was hot fascination in his gaze.

“I have randomly pigmented skin, cat’s eyes and claws, not to mention my teeth. Attraction is individual, but lovely is a community standard. You don’t have to talk sweet.” She sighed. “I used to be lovely. Pretty and golden.”

Reynaldo nodded. “We know. But you are as you are, just as we are what we are.”

Syar said, “We have seen pictures.”

“Where?”

“Jax got them from Penny’s phone, with her permission. She has many images of you.” Syar smiled. “You’re a cheerleader.”

“I was. Right now, the only thing I could lead is a lynch mob.”

Reynaldo sighed. “Your appearance is startling, but it is very easy to get used to. Even easier to appreciate.”

Syar sighed. “How long were you in a coma?”

“A few weeks. It took them that long to stabilize me. My family held the funeral two days after I was released from hospital.”

Syar asked, “Where is your ex-alpha?”

She shrugged. “No idea. He dropped off the face of the earth in the arms of an omega with more money than brains.” She looked at Syar.

“Ouch. I felt that one.”

Reynaldo hugged her. “Be gentle with him; he means well.”

“He means to get what he wants, *and* he means well. The two can exist at the same time.” She sighed. “And I am always gentle with him.”

Ven was finally full, and the plate was empty. “Missus is scary. That was dead on.”

Syar chuckled. “You are always gentle with me. I am wondering how I can change that?”

Ven gave him a bland look. “Give it some time. I am sure I can rough you up with enough motivation.”

Reynaldo laughed. “And every nerve in his body just went to full attention.”

Syar’s cheeks reddened. “Shut up, Reynaldo.”

“So, what does one do here in the evenings?”

They both laughed, and she groaned. “Not that.”

Reynaldo smiled. “We go swimming.”

She paused. “I like swimming.”

They both smiled at her.

“Should I *not* like swimming?”

Syar laughed. “No, it’s good. It means you can join us for a swim this evening.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

Reynaldo smiled. “Private pool.”

“Oh. So, Syar doesn’t have any paperwork or conference call or anything?”

Syar shook his head. “No, I finished all my calls this afternoon.”

The guys finished the food, and Reynaldo carried her through the palace and out a doorway that Syar opened for them.

“I can walk, you know.”

Reynaldo smiled and showed a lot of teeth.

“He isn’t really going to set you down until you two have mated.”

“I don’t want a mate.”

“We know, and we are sorry, but you are the only match for Reynaldo that we have ever found.”

“So, this was a trap.”

“It was an invitation.” Syar smiled. “You accepted.”

“I... thought I would be useful.”

Reynaldo stopped on the green path. “I need you. I need you a lot.”

She had a few pithy comments, but she swallowed them. He walked after Syar, and she felt them climbing uphill. She stayed cuddled up to Reynaldo until they arrived next to a wide pool fed by a waterfall. Syar stirred the water with his hand; it began glowing. The wave of light spread across the water and turned it into a shimmering surface.

She looked around and found the light spreading into the trees. The jungle around her had been in her dreams for years. She had never imagined it was real.

Chapter Six

Syar and Reynaldo removed their clothing, setting it down on a rock. They waded into the water, and she was left watching them disappear into the glow. When they sank under the surface, Ven stripped and put her clothes in with theirs. She waded into the water, and it felt warm and slippery.

The guys had gone missing, but she didn't care. She was in the place she had dreamed of and happy to be there. After she lost her daughter, this was the place she had gone to in her mind. After the attack, this place kept her sane. Now she was rolling around in her dream pool, and she felt at peace. Ven rolled to her back and looked up at the sky and the stars that were not quite where she was used to seeing them.

The water pushed against her, and she heard Reynaldo, "Having a nap?"

"Relaxing. I have been here before but not in my body. This is amazing."

Syar swam next to her. "When were you here?"

"In my dreams when I needed to flee pain. I came here to the glowing pool and the glowing trees and the slow star cascade above me." She kept her voice low.

"What do you feel here?"

"At home and at peace." She let her legs drop and slowly treaded water. "Legs bumping against mine."

Syar was very close. Reynaldo was further away, but she was still within his arm's reach. "So, you guys went behind the waterfall?"

"Yeah. We needed to check on supplies for his rut. He comes up here and camps out."

Ven turned to look at Reynaldo to read his expression. "Camps out? Aren't you together?"

Syar said, "No. He helps me through my heat, but he wears protection. In his rut, he wouldn't remember, so he stays up

here.”

“Why?” Reynaldo was floating near them and Ven watched him.

“He is determined and aggressive. I want to help him but his beast doesn’t take *I’m freaking out* for an answer.”

She turned from Reynaldo to Syar. She moved toward him and kissed him. She kept her body away from him as she kept her lips in touch with his.

She was pulled away from him and turned to face Reynaldo. He kept them both floating as he pulled her against him and pressed her body to his as he took her kiss. His cock was hot between them against the cool of the water.

“Oh, hey, Reynaldo.”

“Hey.” He sniffed behind her ear. “I can still smell you.”

“Right.” She put her palms on his shoulders. “So, Syar rented me for you.”

“Forty percent for him, and sixty percent for me, Venetia.” Syar pressed against her from behind, making Reynaldo take their weight. He didn’t seem to mind.

Syar kissed her neck and said, “I feel so much better when you are with me; you let me be strong.”

She reached back for his waist with one hand. “You are strong; you are just damaged.”

“I am scared all the time.”

“Welcome to the club; we should have t-shirts.” She stared at Reynaldo’s neck. “You acknowledge the pain and work through it when it hurts, but you work around it every other time it rises. It is a memory, and all you can do is learn from it.”

Syar wrapped his arm fully around her waist from behind. “Like these scars?”

“The scars tell me that just because common knowledge says someone should love and take care of you doesn’t mean they will. When using you as stress relief becomes common

and the only reason you are around, you should walk away. That is also what my relationship with the yutz showed me. The teen love had long since burned out, and he was restless. He was so excited when he met his omega, and I felt everything.”

“I am sorry that he was an asshole. He should never have done that without uncoupling from you.” Reynaldo caressed his lips with hers. “I would happily break his neck if it would make you feel better.”

“Well, what I think is that if he was the one who started my transformation, he needed this, and he doesn’t and will never have it.” She smiled at Reynaldo. “But I might let someone else borrow it. Take it for a spin, as it were.”

He smiled. “Is that an invitation?”

“I suppose it is. It has struck me that, for once, it should be my choice as to who was inside me.”

Syar murmured, “You didn’t choose your boyfriend?”

“No. He chose me. Quarterback and head cheerleader. Everything was appearances with him. It’s a lifetime ago now.”

The alpha asked softly, “Are you ready to let it go?”

She answered honestly. “I am ready to try.”

“Good enough for me.” He floated them to the shallows, and their lips met and mingled, tongues sliding. The barbs on his tongue weren’t in evidence, but she knew they were there.

She felt Syar’s fingers on the hand she had on Reynaldo’s shoulder and his warm body at her back. She had support, not restriction. He wasn’t holding her there; he was letting her know she wasn’t alone.

Ven tried to remember the last time her libido had kicked in, but she couldn’t. She pushed previous experiences out of her mind and just enjoyed the moment. Water wasn’t practical, but it did let her press closer and wrap a leg around Reynaldo’s thigh to pull her closer.

Reynaldo lifted his head. “Do you want to continue here?”

She shook her head.

“In bed?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

He leaned in and nuzzled her temple. “This will be fine. It will be good. I promise.”

She nodded. She didn’t want to speak. That would ruin it.

Syar floated away from her and held her hand, tugging her toward the shore.

She unhooked from Reynaldo and floated after her omega. The alpha was right behind her.

They made their way out of the water, and the glowing water was slowly drying on her skin, leaving the luminescence.

She asked either of them, “How long will this last?”

Reynaldo murmured, “Until we sweat it off.”

She took her breast band and wrapped it in place. “Oh.”

The skirt wrapped around her and clung to her legs, but it wouldn’t be on long.

To her surprise, Syar picked her up and held her as he walked back to the residence.

Reynaldo laughed at her expression when she met his gaze over Syar’s shoulder. Her confusion was obvious.

“You are his favourite size, Venetia. All your parts line up without bending or pausing to figure things out.”

“I thought that omegas were small and weak. Well, until I met Ford. He works out a lot.”

Syar grimaced. “Reynaldo likes rock climbing, so I go with him.”

Reynaldo chuckled. “He likes the climb but hates coming down.”

“Don’t we all,” she murmured.

Syar grinned. “You can come with us.”

“I am pretty sure I can outclimb both of you.”

Reynaldo laughed. “Wanna bet?”

“Well, my money isn’t good here, so any loss will have to be taken out of Syar’s hide, right? You said you will pay for me.”

Syar stared at him, and Reynaldo laughed. “Well, you did say you would, Syar.”

They walked back to the residence with Syar muttering about revamping the contract.

She smiled and stroked his cheek as he walked the halls. Several members of the household looked at them in shock, and a few smiled brightly. The guards at his door snapped to attention. Syar shifted her and pressed his palm to the plate above the doorknob.

He opened it and pushed inside, walking her over to the bed and setting her down gently. She laughed when she saw his face. “Nice in the romances, hell if you aren’t an alpha. I am not as light as thistledown.”

Reynaldo looked around and chuckled. “That isn’t exertion face. That is horny face.”

“Oh. It looks like he tried to sprint on a full tummy.”

Syar huffed and tugged twice, sending the fabric she was wearing into a puddle under her. The smile that crossed his features was a lot more recognizable.

He shrugged out of his loose shirt and crawled over her. She blinked. “Oh, hello.”

He smiled and breathed her in. “After the pool, your scent is stronger.”

She blinked at the sandy head buried between her breasts. She stroked his hair, and he slowly relaxed down her body. He started to move his head against her breasts. He started licking, and she held very still.

Reynaldo dropped to the bed next to them. He propped himself up on an elbow and watched.

She sighed softly but felt the wet welcome that her body was starting. Syar licked and then sucked at her left nipple, causing her to squirm and bite her lip. Whatever evolutionary deviant made nipple play extremely enjoyable had reared its head in her family tree.

She shifted her legs against him, and a warm cloud of pleasure hummed around her. When he finally got her as far as he wanted, he kissed each breast in turn and then moved away from her.

The cool air rushed in, and Ven moved her arms to cover her breasts, but Reynaldo gripped her wrists and pulled them above her head. She stared at the large alpha as he moved to cover her. He kept her hands pinned and slid a hand behind her neck to lift her head to his.

The kiss wasn't the soothing tease from the pool. This kiss expressed that he was around and being inside her was the next move. She tasted him and moaned as she leaned up to increase the pressure and contact between them.

Her hips arched and wiggled against him. He moved the hand from under her neck to between her thighs. She whimpered when he slid his fingers against her, and one worked into her. He lifted his head and groaned. "This is going to take some work."

She felt tears and blinked as she buried her face in the bed.

Syar whispered, "What's wrong?"

"He's not going to fit."

"Aw, yes, he will. It will just take time. Want some help?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"Good, because Reynaldo almost cried when you did. I do have smaller fingers."

She chuckled, and so did Reynaldo.

Two slick fingers pressed into her. She yelped in surprise. He asked softly, "Did that hurt?"

She shook her head.

“It was the slick, huh? I use my own.”

She shuddered as the fingers inside her went exploring until they lined up with the raised area on her front wall. He started to rub his slick fingers rapidly, and her body raced to keep up.

Ven gasped and whined softly. She felt the rough tongue scraping her breasts, and when the alpha sucked on a nipple, she writhed and bucked as she came. It was a rush to her senses, and the hand between her thighs changed to something rougher.

Her channel gripped Reynaldo’s fingers, and he caressed the spot Syar had just been playing with. As his fingers grazed the spot, she jerked and whimpered.

He nuzzled her cheek until she turned toward him. His lips caught hers as his thumb circled her clit. His fingers slowly moved inside her, and a few moments later, a third finger was inside and stroking her. She mewled into his mouth and got her hands loose, putting her fingers on his shoulders before running her hands through his hair and holding on.

She lifted her knee and stroked the outside of his thigh. And then she rocked her hips against his hand as he slowly turned his fingers inside her, widening her. She gasped and closed her eyes as his fingers left her and the wide head of his cock pressed into her. He groaned as he slid into her. Her breath hitched as he sank in until he ran out of space.

He shuddered and pressed his forehead to hers. “You okay?”

Ven nodded. “I’m okay.”

She smiled. “You okay?”

He chuckled. “Fucking fantastic.”

He slid almost out of her body and then pushed in again. She arched into him when it felt so good her toes curled. He rolled her to her back and coaxed her legs around his hips. She exhaled and looked up at him. His expression was fierce.

He moved slowly, carefully, rocking in and drawing out. The moist sounds were distracting, but when they sped up, she

couldn't reciprocate. She just locked her legs around his thighs and held tight.

She felt him surge deep, and he groaned. She felt his cock moving inside her in slow pulses. Ven looked at him, and his eyes were closed. She whispered, "You okay?"

Syar murmured, "Wait for it."

Ven was confused, but she looked at Syar, and he was grinning. He jerked his jaw toward Reynaldo, so she turned, and his eyes focused on her. "Oh."

He withdrew from her and flipped her to her belly, pulling her up on her hands and knees. His cock slid into her again, and he used a single finger to massage her clit. She started to rock and impale herself against him. She was slowly being set on fire from the inside out.

Tension built, and then she arched her back and moaned, shaking on her arms. He gripped her hips and thrust into her steadily. She dropped to her elbows, and Syar laughed. He moved over and nuzzled her cheek, licking at the sweat at her temple. She looked at him as she was being pounded, and then her eyes went wide when he found the spot he had been teasing earlier.

Her breath left her lungs, and Syar lay on his back and wiggled under her breasts. He started to suck and knead, and she whined. The friction inside her twisted her tight, and she screamed softly as her sex gripped Reynaldo with heavy beats. He grunted and pulled her hips back against his, and a thick groan followed as he filled her.

Syar got away quickly as Reynaldo's weight pushed Ven flat on the bed. She grunted. "Big fucking alpha."

He kissed the back of her neck. "Sweet mate."

She froze, and he continued licking at her. "Not a mate."

"You will be. We are very convincing." He just chuckled. "We will explain all the benefits of being our mate. In detail."

Syar was lying close to her. "We are going to court you."

She was having this conversation while pinned under the muscled mass of Syar's alpha. Reynaldo started purring, and she felt it in every bone in her body.

He was still inside her, and the heavy purr was magnifying the feeling she was getting from the strong licks on the temporary mark. Ven whimpered and squirmed a bit. She focused, planted her hands on the mattress, and did a pushup. Syar stared while Ven straightened her arms. Reynaldo started laughing, wrapped his arm across her hips and chest, and rolled with her. Syar got out of the way.

Now, Ven was lying face-up with Reynaldo still inside her. "Well, this isn't what I had in mind." Her voice startled her. It was all thick and throaty.

Syar crawled over her and kissed her. "Was it fun?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Yes."

Syar grinned. "Did you want to do it again?"

She could feel Reynaldo's cock waking up inside her. "Now?"

Her mattress laughed. "Not necessary. My body can wait."

Syar laughed. "Not for long."

She squirmed and eased off Reynaldo. When he was out, she exhaled. "Oh, that was odd."

Reynaldo muttered, "Speak for yourself. I was warm and snuggly."

"I am speaking for myself. The last time someone was in there, I was getting an SAEK at a hospital." She blushed. "Sorry. This isn't the time for that reference."

Syar smiled and ran a hand down her body. "May I come in?"

She blinked. "You?"

"Yes, me. Handsome, charming, slippery dick." He smiled, his eyes crinkling.

She looked down his body, and his cock was shining. "Oh."

“Don’t worry. He made room for me.” He paused and waited.

She remembered the question. “Yes? Yes, you may.”

He grinned, and she felt the slick pressure against her, and her eyes widened in surprise.

He slid deep until his hips pressed against hers. “Oh, I have dreamed about this feeling. How can you be so perfect?”

She stroked his silky-soft skin over muscle. “Shut up, and do something.”

He kissed her as he started to thrust, and her hands slid up his back. The distinctly wet noises were his fault. Her back was slipping and sliding against Reynaldo’s chest and belly. He gripped her and held her in place, which enhanced the impact of Syar’s hips.

Reynaldo’s hands moved between them, and she twisted her head restlessly. He started to purr and croon under her, and to her shock, he set his teeth over his mark. She whined hard, Syar’s hips thudded into her, and he groaned. Her body twisted, and she came hard.

Reynaldo licked at the graze, and her body throbbed around Syar. The omega was staring at her. “Wow.”

She was sweaty, limp, and fighting the sound rising in her chest. She fought it for a moment, and then she started purring.

Syar pulled her off Reynaldo, and they all were on their sides with her in the middle.

Syar asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Can I be sticky and slippery at the same time?”

Reynaldo chuckled. “Absolutely.”

“Then those things. But no bad feelings if that is what you are asking.”

“No flashbacks?”

“No. There was a flicker, but Syar was here, and that hadn’t ever happened before.”

The omega in question rubbed his nose against hers. “I am glad I could be helpful.”

“You were. Very.” Ven checked the bite, and the connection was still the thin thread. “Reynaldo, thanks for not biting.”

“I won’t say my pleasure because there is nothing more that I wanted to do, but you are welcome.”

She squirmed around in place until she was facing him. “I really mean it. Thank you.”

He cupped the back of her head and smiled. “It’s okay.”

He kissed her forehead and said, “But during my rut, I might not be so understanding.”

She nodded. “Got it, so when you are in rut... run away.”

He tapped his forehead to hers. “Don’t run where I can see you. The result would be... energetic.”

“How often does this energetic event happen?”

Syar chuckled. “Every two years. After it’s over he comes back down, and he fucks me until I can barely walk and then passes out on me. Ah. Tradition.”

She smiled. “Well, sounds like you two have it all planned.”

Syar whispered in her ear, “Oh, no. You aren’t going to leave me with that horny beast.”

“But... it is a couple thing. If he’s mindless, I would be at risk of a nasty infection if he goes from one to the other.”

Reynaldo blinked and leaned back. “Huh. I hadn’t thought of that. You will just have to go first, I guess.”

“What?”

“I won’t be *that* mindless, and you are my mate. He’s my omega. There aren’t many differences when it comes to affection between the two.”

“You have the separate beast consciousness?”

He paused, “I do. You know about that?”

“Yeah. A friend of mine got knocked up by a dragon. Not the man. The beast. She nearly died bearing her son. She had an idea of what she needed afterward and did some seriously janky stuff to survive.” She smiled. “But her son is nineteen now.”

He smiled. “That is excellent. Dragon offspring rarely survive.”

“That’s because the mothers die.” She looked at him seriously.

His hand on her skull squeezed gently, and he nodded. “How bad was it for you?”

“Agony followed by heartbreak, followed by a coma. Lost a lot of blood.” She gave him the crippling loss she had felt, and he gave her a hug.

He sent quiet concern through their link. She pressed her head to his chest and inhaled deeply. He smelled like the deep loam of the jungle... and sex.

She felt heat creeping into her again, and she backed away from him before her body could start signalling for attention.

Syar stroked a hand down her hip and thigh. “So, do you always smell hot when you have sex?”

She muttered, “I don’t know.”

“You were warm, but now you are hot again.”

Reynaldo chuckled. “I think I know.”

She muttered. “Shut up.”

He hugged her.

She sighed. “Shower?”

Syar started stroking her sex. “Later?”

“You are going to wear it off.”

He chuckled. “You heal fast.” His fingers slipped into her, and she arched her neck and mewled as his hand started moving rapidly.

Syar started gnawing softly on her shoulder while his fingers teased her. She gasped and whined softly. Reynaldo kissed her neck and jaw and cupped her breasts in his warm, rough hands.

She made a curious sound when her thigh was lifted. Reynaldo kissed her, and she grunted when Syar slid in. He wasn't in a hurry this time. He pulled out slowly and eased in just as slowly. Ven kissed Reynaldo to the rhythm that Syar was setting.

Hands were everywhere. She gripped Reynaldo's erection and stroked it to the same beat.

Ven had no idea how long Syar was moving inside her, but when he finally came, she and Reynaldo sped things up, and his cock bucked in her hand, sending sticky cream onto her belly.

She chuckled and brought her hand to her tongue, licking curiously. She cocked her head as she analyzed the taste. His scent was super strong, salty, and a bleachy tang. It wasn't bad but very strong.

Syar chuckled. "It's like licking aftershave. You develop a taste for it."

Reynaldo shrugged. "It is what it is. We can't all taste like coffee."

Ven paused. "So that's that scent."

Syar wrapped around her. "And you smell and taste like Vernetha flowers."

"What flowers?" she asked.

"Vernetha flowers. They surrounded the pool. They glowed in the trees." Reynaldo smiled.

She sighed. "I have to get out of this huddle and go to the bathroom."

They chuckled and let her out. She used the restroom and realized one thing. The following day, she was going to need to make a call.

Chapter Seven

Sleeping with them was difficult. She couldn't rest smashed between them. She hadn't cum that last time, and her body was on edge. Syar was wrapped around her and his face buried in her neck all night. Reynaldo had her pulled tight against him and intermittently purred.

She was going to be tired. Maybe she could find that friendly tree again, or Missus could show her where to sleep. The guys were so cute when they slept.

The moment they started to move, she sat up and scooted out from between them. Syar looked at her sadly. "Come back."

She groaned and flumped to the bed. "So tired."

Reynaldo asked, "Didn't sleep well?"

She shook her head into the bedding. "Didn't sleep."

Ven lifted her head. "Can I go sleep in the other room now? I will come if Syar needs to cuddle or something."

Reynaldo sighed. "Right. You don't share a bed with people normally. Did you ever?"

"No. Even when I shared a room with Penny, we had different beds. I can sleep under a pile of children, but that is very different."

"Venetia, have breakfast with us, and when we are in the office, you can rest on me."

She raised her hand. "Shower first."

Syar laughed. "Fine. Come on, sleepyhead."

She looked at him, and he blinked and wrapped her in his arms. "You will get used to it. Did I have an episode last night?"

Ven shook her head. “Not even close. You were giggling and holding onto my boobs.”

Syar grinned. “Come on, let’s scrub the cum off you.”

Ven sighed. “You are such a jerk.”

“Yes, but I have had my first solid night’s sleep in years. I am giddy with excitement.”

Reynaldo mentioned, “And I have had an uninterrupted night as well. Wow. I have forgotten what it feels like.”

Syar warmed the water and then guided her into the shower. She stood and faced the rain, scrubbing her face before turning to be greeted by Syar’s hands. He worked the body wash across her skin and circled his palm on her belly before he moved lower.

Their alpha moved behind her and took care of her back while the omega washed her front. Reynaldo washed her hair. “How fast does your hair grow?”

“Pretty quick. How long is it?”

“Two inches.”

“Yay.” She yawned. “Am I clean?”

Syar nodded. “Yes, dear.”

She towelled off and wrapped it around her. She wandered into the adjoining room and looked for clothes. She found a clean skirt, but the breastbands were all small ones. She went and put on her sports bra. At least it was clean.

She returned to Syar’s bedroom, and they were both dressed in skirts similar to hers. They looked really good. Part of her sleepy mind wanted to run her tongue down their abdomens and over the muscles.

Syar blinked at her top. “Right. I have to get more of those.”

She shrugged. “This works to keep things comfortable.”

Syar grimaced. “You look all stiff. It doesn’t look comfortable.”

“I am trying to keep myself standing.”

He nodded. "Right. Breakfast and coffee."

He walked up to her and slid an arm around her waist. "How are you feeling?"

"Sleepy, achy, and a bit paranoid because Reynaldo is staring."

The alpha in question joined them, and he leaned in to give her a kiss that made her belly flutter. Syar smiled. "You two are so pretty."

Reynaldo continued to kiss her; his purring kicked on. She went up on her toes, and she kept the contact. Ven sank back on her heels, and he smiled with his eyes glowing. She blushed, and Syar sighed. "So pretty."

He turned her, and they entered the main hall, past the guards, and walked to the morning dining room. The light was bright, and she was seated at his left hand. A carafe of coffee was placed in the middle of the table, and a second server poured coffee into all cups.

Ven picked up the cup and sipped in relief. "Oh, I have missed this."

Syar chuckled. "What?"

"I like coffee with an unwholesome kind of love, and the last cup I had was on the plane."

She finished her cup and reached for the carafe, but the server got there before her. He filled her cup with a smile, and she smiled back before cradling the cup in her hands.

Ven asked, "So, what is on the agenda today?"

Syar smiled. "I thought we would go for a walk-through of the town and introduce you around."

She whined, "But I am so tired."

Reynaldo smiled. "It will only take a few hours. The town is not that large."

"Hours?"

“We will keep you up, but you do need more of a wardrobe, and it is in your contract that Syar pays for any clothing he wants you to wear.”

“Yeah, but...”

The servers brought the breakfast out, and the cooked bird was in some kind of gravy today. She sighed. “The missus is feeding her pet.”

The server chuckled. “It is an honour to be fed by them, miss.”

She washed her hands and wiped them on a cloth. “Right. Here we go.” She slowly started dissecting the fowl with her fingertips while the other two got more standard breakfast foods.

The bird was juicy and tasty, and the gravy was just some light starch to bind the drippings together. Ven made her way through the roast bird until it was gone.

The other two were waiting for her. She drank a third cup of coffee and a glass of juice and looked at them. They were grinning.

She sighed. “What?”

Syar said, “You make happy kitten sounds while you eat.” He paused and then said, “You also make those sounds when we kiss your neck and shoulders.”

“Oh. Balls.”

Reynaldo snorted. “It’s cute. Adorable even.”

She groaned. “Delightful. That’s embarrassing.”

Syar smiled. “It’s sweet.”

She blushed and pressed her hands to her cheeks.

Syar took her hand and squeezed. “C’mon. Let’s meet people.”

She got up and paused. “I need shoes.”

Reynaldo slowly reached down and lifted her shoes, dangling the straps from his fingertips. “Got ‘em.” He got to

his feet and put her sandals on, strapping them in place. “There you go, princess.”

She slowly got up. “I have shoes.”

Syar pulled her out of the morning room and yanked her outside into the bright light. There were birds cruising through the air and people setting up kiosks and stands.

Ven grinned when a horse walked up to her and snuffled her hair. She stroked the wide jaw. “Hello, sweetie. Having a good morning?”

The horse’s lashes fluttered, and it leaned toward her. Reynaldo slapped its side, and the horse’s skin shivered as he raised his head. Reynaldo smiled. “Told you, you smell good.”

They met the farmers and importers, popped into the dance studio, met the mayor, florists, and all the vendors that made daily life pleasant and enjoyable.

Most of the vendors smiled slowly and threw glances at Reynaldo immediately before returning their gazes back to her. *Ah. Cat face.*

She turned to Reynaldo. “Wait, do you turn like this?”

“Something... ah... similar.”

The florist snorted and then blushed. “There are commonalities.”

Reynaldo grabbed her around the waist and pulled her in. “I am not as soft as you.”

Syar was talking to someone and looked at them and grinned. “Do you want to go to the grinding facility?”

“Wow. That sounds... odd.”

He nodded. “Come on, princess.”

The florist stared at her and suddenly looked eager to get away from them.

Their trio headed down a path, and Syar kept hold of her hand while they marched. She asked, “Where are we going?”

“Not much further. This is the industry that the town supports.”

He was excited, and she smiled. When they reached the security gate, she had to stand and be wanded for anything metal. Her biometrics were recorded, and they urged her to do the ocular scan. With her slit pupils, it was unlikely that anyone on the island would have a similar eye pattern.

She got the scan, and then the guard smiled. “You will get your chip when you go inside. I am not authorized to use nonlethal rounds.”

“Chip?”

Syar cleared his throat. “We use RFID chips instead of money. It means you can go to the beach or dance in the rain. Still don’t need a wallet.”

Ven frowned. “But it comes out, right?”

“If you want it to.”

The other two scanned through the gate, and a woman in a lab coat smiled. “Miss, please come with me.”

Reynaldo rubbed her back in encouragement.

She walked off with the woman, and the woman smiled. “It isn’t anything weird. I am just a lab tech. I do this and some of the etching on the emeralds. My name is Kai.”

“Ven.”

“Is that your full name?”

“Um, Venetia Ember Alder.” She smiled. “I chose it when I was nineteen.”

Kai’s fingers moved over a tablet she pulled out of her coat. They were walking through a huge stone room that was polished and yet didn’t send sound echoing. They entered a room with a red cross on the door, and Kai gestured for her to sit in the chair.

Kai finished typing on her tablet. There was a hum from the corner, and she used forceps to take a small dark rice grain and put it into a solution. She rocked it around and then loaded the

small piece into something that looked like a combination of injector and shovel. The numbing injection was quick, and then the grain went into the base of her hand. There was a bit of blood, but Kai moved quickly and pressed down on the entry point. She held the skin shut and then added a drop of glue. “There you go.”

“Uh. Thank you. So, this is my ID?”

“Yes. It has been linked to you and your account here.” Kai smiled. “Huh. It’s invisible.”

Ven looked, and there was a slight bump on her darkened skin. She flexed her hand. It felt a little stiff but not too bad. “Thanks. Where do I go now?”

“I know where the king is.”

“Why do you guys have a king?”

She smiled as Ven stood and followed her. “Because the shipwreck survivors said a king was better than a chief. So, we got a king.” She smiled. “The sea kept invaders at bay, and when it was time for us to join the modern age, our king began travelling and came home with a mate. She advised him, and they were blessed with their son late in life. He’s helped us develop into a technological nation who can choose their way of life.” Kai chuckled. “We just had to pick up the green stones and learn to shape them.”

“Just that?”

“Jewel cutters were hired as tutors. We learned, and here we are. Free health care; free transport to and from the mainland. We get paid for duties outside of just existing. Farmers get bonuses as does anyone working in socially beneficial occupations.”

“Okay. Why are you telling me this?”

Kai chuckled. “Because I don’t think you knew. Also, we all speak English because of our families, but we have to do it to the exclusion of our traditional language because Reynaldo is having a helluva time learning.”

Ven smiled. “I have heard it a bit. It sounds tricky.”

“Where?”

“The salon.”

“Oh. Ohhh. That was you.” Kai cleared her throat. “I apologize for my cousin.”

“What?”

“Your manicurist. It is a relief that Myele is out of the residence. She’s a bully to everyone but the king.”

“Wow. Gossip travels fast around here.” Ven sighed.

“Yup. Small population and a lot of relatives.”

“Well, I am sorry I made her abrade her cuticles.”

“She’ll heal. She knows she was stupid.”

Ven sighed. “That was a stressful day.”

“I can imagine.”

They walked to another office, and Syar was sitting and looking over trays of emeralds and talking seriously to an older man. Reynaldo was standing in the doorway. Ven gripped his arm and went up on her toes. “What’s he doing?”

“He’s picking a present for you.” Reynaldo chuckled.

She hissed loudly, “Why?”

Syar didn’t look up from the tray as he picked a few and set them in a tray to his left. “Because I want to, and I am the king,” he muttered.

She sighed and dropped back to her heels.

Reynaldo murmured, “Not excited?”

“Naw. If I am careful, can I go watch what the cutters are doing?”

Reynaldo nodded.

Kai was waiting when Ven turned and said, “I will introduce you.”

Ven nodded. “Thank you.”

They walked over to an area with a lot of security, and she watched through thick windows as the first gem cutter came out and smiled at Kai. “Kai, who’s your friend?”

“Manu, this is Venetia. She’s Syar’s princess.”

Manu blinked, and then he nodded his head with a smile. “Finally.”

“Um, call me Ven.”

“Of course, Ven. Would you like to know what we do here?”

“Sure. That would be helpful.”

He smiled. “Please, come in, and I will walk you through the process.”

He showed her how they took raw emeralds, ultrasonic cleaned them, did assessments for the quality, and then showed her the computers that worked out the cut angles and the grinding wheels that did a lot of the work.

He had different gems in different stages of processing, and it was helpful for her to understand the process.

“What do you do with them once you are done?”

“We catalogue them and give them to Kai. She puts the identification on the stones and sends them to inventory where they are sorted, and orders are filled for shipping around the world.” Manu chuckled. “Only a few hundred per year, but our island is thriving, and the young that go to the mainland for school come home at a rate of over eighty percent.”

“And guys like Solai’s husband are couriers for delivery.”

Kai grinned. “Exactly. The alphas line up for that. They get a chance to get out and travel a little. Some bring mates home.”

Ven smiled. “Some punch sharks.”

Kai blinked. “Aw, she told you about that? It was so sweet. It is a legendary gesture around here.”

“It sounds adorable.”

They thanked Manu and wandered over to the custom design area. Kai asked, “What was the sweetest thing that Syar did for you?”

“Um, we went swimming in the pool with everything glowing around us.”

“He took you to the sacred pool, and the flowers and water glowed?” Kai spoke slowly.

“Yeah, it was pretty.”

“Wow. What else? Romantic moments? Sweet gestures?”

“Uh. We signed a contract for me to be here for a year?” She saw Kai’s disappointed face. “He arranged local clothing for me?” She looked down at her sports bra. “Yesterday?”

Kai sighed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make things awkward.”

“I am sorry. I don’t expect anything because... well... I just don’t.”

“Bad relationships in your past?”

“One could say so.”

They looked at the area with designs pinned to the walls. Some were delicate, some were sturdy, and some looked heavy as hell. Kai introduced her to Lagi, the designer.

They chatted for ten minutes before Syar walked up with a box in his hand. “Venetia, you might want to go with Kai for some coffee or a snack.”

“Right. I am to bugger off.” She turned on her heel, and Kai joined her, guiding her to the commissary.

There were a lot of snacks, but when she picked one and swiped her new chip, the vendor shook her head.

Kai blushed. “There isn’t an account linked to your chip yet.”

“Okay.”

“It’s fine. What do you want?”

“Nothing. I am tired of being half an adult. I am just going to take a seat and put my head down. You can leave me here if

you have somewhere else to go. I am going to have a quiet tantrum that will look like a nap. There may be snoring involved.”

She walked over to one of the chairs and put her head down to fall asleep. It didn't take long.

She smelled coffee, and it pulled her out of her dreams of rocks and grinding wheels. “How long was I out?”

“Ten minutes. Kai came to get us. She couldn't wake you.” Reynaldo stroked her hair. “She didn't know you are a coffee fiend.”

“You also pulled on the link.” She sat up, and her hands were shaking when she wrapped them around the coffee cup. He helped her steady the cup as she lifted it to her mouth. She slurped the coffee and lowered the cup back to the table.

“I did. Your output was... weird.”

She sipped the coffee again. “I was being chased on grinding wheels by big green rocks, and the only thing that would stop them was coffee, and my chip is useless.”

“We will set you up when we get home.”

“Thanks for the coffee.” She sipped again. “How long will His Majesty be?”

“About an hour. Did you want anything else?”

“Coffee is fine.”

He stroked her hair.

She finished her coffee.

He asked her, “Another?”

“Yes, please.”

He went back to the kiosk and spoke to the man quietly. They talked, and she closed her eyes as she swayed. The air was warm, the building was quiet, and she had nothing that she had to keep track of. She could rest.

Reynaldo came back with coffee and slid a pastry in front of her, and her nose twitched. She saw the pastry she had tried to buy. “Why did you get that?”

“He said you wanted it.”

“I wanted it when I could pay for it with the new toy. It was going to be fun. And then it didn’t work, so now I am pouting.” She pushed it away with her fingertips. She reached for the cup. “But I will take the coffee.”

He nodded and watched as she picked up the cup and took a sip. He picked up the pastry and took a bite. He nodded. “That’s really good.”

She nodded and sipped at her coffee. “It looked good.”

The jam-filled pastry was suddenly in front of her with the cherries and chocolate gleaming out of the puff pastry wrapping. Reynaldo just sat there and waited. She opened her mouth and leaned forward, taking a bite and pulling back, yanking it out of his grip. She caught the end of the pastry and chewed on her mouthful. “You are right; it is good.”

He grinned. “Greedy.”

“Yup.”

She washed the mouthful down with coffee and then bit the last of it. When the pastry and coffee were gone, she covered the yawn that emerged.

“Still sleepy?”

“Yup.”

He patted his thigh, and she got up and sat in his lap, letting him cuddle her as she made herself comfortable against his shoulder. “Don’t tell Syar I was mad about a pastry.”

“Why not?”

“He feels bad for forgetting things. Clothes and stuff. I have been taking care of myself for a while. Waiting for someone to remember what I need is irritating.”

Reynaldo murmured, “He is thinking long-term. He is looking past the moment, which is why the gaps are

happening.”

She nodded. “I get it. Three hundred and sixty-two days to go.” It might have been off a day or two, but she was tired. She couldn’t remember what day it was.

Reynaldo’s hand was warm on her head and neck.

Rumbles around her woke her with a jolt. Reynaldo kissed her forehead and then her lips. Her heart was pounding, and she looked at Syar. “Oh, hello.”

He smiled. “We can head home now.”

She struggled to sit up and stand. A thick arm was around her waist.

“I can walk.” She was so sleepy.

Syar wrapped an arm around her waist and supported her. “I will help.”

They left the facility, got patted down at the entrance, and then were back on the pathway to the town. She didn’t stumble, but her eyes weren’t focusing. They returned to the residence, and once they were past the guards, Reynaldo picked her up and carried her to Syar’s office.

She was drifting in and out, but soon there was a thud, and she was on a very warm mattress that was breathing slowly. A blanket was put over her shoulders, and she was out.

* * * *

Syar spoke after a few minutes. “Is she really out?”

“Yeah, she’s exhausted.” Reynaldo sighed. “She made a good point. You made promises in the contract to take care of her clothes, and here you spent hours arranging jewellery that she doesn’t plan on being here to wear.”

Shock ripped through him. “What?”

“She’s counting down the days. Until she’s home. I don’t blame her. This is not the idyllic start you had planned.”

Syar blushed. “There was more to catch up on than I anticipated.”

“Yes, but you promised that you would take care of her clothing and chastised her for trying to dress in her own wear. So, that is one problem. Fix it.”

Syar blinked and opened and closed his mouth. “Right. Are you good to stay here with her?”

“Yes. She’s breathing slowly, but I think she’s down for the count.”

Syar smiled. “I am doing the interviews for a housekeeper today. Do we want to see if she will sleep through it?”

“I think it’s a good test to see how attentive the housekeeper can be to her.”

“Did you want to move to your chair?”

“No. She’s asleep on me and getting used to my body and scent. That should make tonight easier.”

Syar looked over, and Reynaldo stroked her hair softly. She snuffled softly, and a tiny rumble started to emanate from her body. Reynaldo grinned and looked toward Syar. He whispered, “She’s purring.”

Syar smiled and sent messages to the candidates. “First one will be here in twenty minutes. They have been warned there is someone resting in the office.” Syar frowned. “You think she wants to leave us?”

His alpha said, “I think she has been betrayed enough for several lifetimes. If she trusts us, she exposes her heart. She has done it several times in her life, and those she trusted have always betrayed the trust.”

“How do you know?”

“Her alpha betrayed her; that is enough to know. Add to that, her status as a foster child removed as a toddler from her mother for beatings. She has had few people to trust in her

lifetime.” Reynaldo looked at him. “You have to hold to everything promised in the contract. Everything.”

“So, I have to send her home in seven weeks for her sister’s birthday?”

Reynaldo stroked her hair again. “Yes. She’ll come back.”

Syar whined, “I don’t want her to leave.”

“Syar, follow up on your inquiries from yesterday.”

“Oh. Right.” Syar went into several video calls, and when the twenty minutes were up, he paused his screen and called, “Come in!” He clapped his hand over his mouth, and Venetia just squirmed a little in place before she exhaled and dozed off again.

The first of the candidates came in, bowed, and glanced at the alpha and beta on the couch. “Is she all right, Your Majesty?”

Syar was frank. “She doesn’t sleep well with others in the bed. She’s exhausted.”

The candidate nodded with a blush on her cheeks. “Ah.”

Syar went through the duties and responsibilities of the housekeeper of the residence. She asked some questions; he asked some questions and made some notes.

He smiled and said, “I will be in touch.”

She smiled and left.

The next candidate arrived, and this time there was something different. When the man stepped in, he frowned. “Is she all right?”

Syar nodded. “Just tired.”

“She isn’t also dehydrated? Some of the mainlanders lose their thirst because of the humidity and then run into trouble in a few days.”

Syar blinked. “Right. I will get a pitcher of water for when she wakes up. She seems to drink well when it’s an option.”

The young man stood. “Pardon, Your Majesty.”

Syar nodded and started the questions and got interesting answers. He made notes and then promised to be in touch. He put a star next to Kane's name, and now he was curious as to which of the other three candidates was going to show concern for his mate.

He also called for a pitcher of water and glasses. They arrived before the next candidate and were put aside on a shelf behind Syar's desk. The rest of the interviews went along, but none of them asked about Venetia after they greeted Reynaldo.

When the last interview was over, he sat back and said, "Well, what do you think?"

"My vote is for Kane. He's the only one who acted with care for Venetia."

Syar nodded. "He has a good resume. He's worked in the retirement facility, the hotel, and as a carriage driver. His grandmother works in the kitchen, and his sister is a housekeeper. All of his references say he is earnest and industrious... and he cares."

"Three-month trial period?" Reynaldo murmured, "She's waking up."

"Sounds sensible." Syar got her a glass of water and crouched next to her as she rubbed her eyes and pushed herself upright on Reynaldo's chest.

She mumbled, "Sorry. Sleepy."

He grinned as she pushed herself upright, making Reynaldo grunt. When she was sitting upright, he held the glass out for her, and she grabbed it and slugged the water down. It was gone in seconds. "More?"

She nodded. "Thanks."

He smiled and brought the pitcher over. She drank the whole thing one cup at a time. Kane had been correct. That was another point in his favour.

She pushed the blanket down and blinked at them. "How long was I out?"

Syar took her hand. "Two hours."

“Well, that is better than nothing.” She looked at him and Reynaldo smiling. “What did I miss?”

“We interviewed the housekeepers. We think we picked one.” Syar set her glass aside.

She nodded and blinked sleepily at him. “Good.”

Syar picked her up and cuddled her against him. Reynaldo sat up, Syar sat down, and they were all on the couch together. She sighed. “Sorry, I am so sleepy.”

Syar smiled. “We are on the third day of you being here. We are adjusting, too.”

She sighed and yawned again. “Well, it helped.”

He kissed her temple. “I think we can have a nice afternoon at the beach.”

“Beach?” She looked at him. “Don’t you have stuff to do?”

“I can do most of it from there.”

“Okay.”

“But first, lunch.” He inhaled her scent, and his heartbeat set up a slow and steady thudding. Just having the kitten close was intoxicating. She had been a warrior of sorts for years, but now, she could relax and choose what she wanted to do. He was hoping that Reynaldo and himself were high on the list.

Chapter Eight

Ven looked at the open ocean. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she could only guess at the dangerous and deadly creatures below the surface next to the tasty ones. There were chairs that Reynaldo snagged, and she and Syar were soon curled up in the shade.

She was dopey from her high-protein lunch and looked around. There were families walking into the water and having fun. No one wore a swim suit, and no one cared.

Reynaldo sat next to her and smiled at her. “Want to take a dip?”

“I am still tired.”

“I will hold you. Come on. You aren’t officially on an island until you have stuck your foot in the ocean.”

She sighed and got up. “Fine.”

“Take your clothes off. We aren’t fussy about clothing. You’ll get used to it.”

She undid the skirt and unzipped her sports bra, rubbing at the red marks on her shoulders. She steeled herself, stalked to the water, and kept going until she was waist-deep. The waves lifted and dropped her gently. She lifted her legs and sank beneath the waves as she was pushed toward shore. Reynaldo was thigh-deep as she surfaced and looked at him. His face was relieved, and he moved toward her, wrapping her in his arms as the next wave struck.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and held tight to his neck as the next wave hit her. He cupped her hips and murmured, “Having a problem getting wet, kitten?”

Ven gasped in shock. He was at her opening and had slipped in.

She shivered and bit his shoulder. The water lifted her and dropped her more firmly on him. She tried to feel what he was

feeling, but it was gone.

She looked up at him. “The mark faded.”

He nodded. “While you slept. You heal really fast.”

He was about three inches inside her. The urge to bend her neck to him was difficult to ignore. She looked up at him and stroked his jaw.

He smiled and nipped her thumb. “May I mark you again?”

She sighed. “I guess you have to.”

“I could just tether you to my wrist. Have you close at hand.”

She swallowed. “I thought I was Syar’s emotional support beta.”

“I am rapidly discovering a distinct need for one of my own.”

Ven felt him moving slightly inside her as the waves hit her back over and over. The slight slide inward with the unpredictable rhythm made her press her forehead to his shoulder, and she gritted her teeth as she came.

He stroked her back. “Did you...”

She nodded with a small motion. Her hands kneaded his shoulders.

He whispered in her ear, “Can you do it again?”

Ven looked up at him. “Like... now?” Her body rocked with the force of a wave.

She blinked. “I think I just tensed out of it. I can’t cum on demand or even request.”

She was rocked against him, and pleasure curled through her.

Two more waves and she shivered against him. He grunted, and she felt heat spilling into her. The cool water made it obvious that her body was hotter between her thighs. She gasped.

She looked up at him. “I think that’s enough playtime in the waves.”

His eyes were still warm. “Not enough.”

She was startled at his lack of a more eloquent sentence. “It is for now. The water is making me cold.”

She slipped off him, and he growled a little. She blinked and leaned back in his arms. “Are you okay?”

Syar was there suddenly, and he took Reynaldo’s hand before leading them both out of the water. Reynaldo sat on his lounge and clutched his head.

Ven was holding one elbow and looking at Reynaldo with concern. “Is he okay?”

Syar frowned. “Yeah, he’s... frustrated? Did you two have sex?” He was looking at his alpha like he wanted to do some kind of reboot.

“Sort of. The water did most of the heavy lifting.”

“That should have been fine. I don’t get it.” He squatted and stared at Reynaldo when the alpha reached around Syar’s neck and tapped his fingers on Syar’s mark. He then looked at Ven and hung his head.

Syar paused, “Is your mark gone?”

“Yeah. It healed.”

“Can he replace it?” Syar said, “If he makes a permanent mark, I will hold you while it is scrubbed.”

“If?”

“Do you think he can focus in this state? My guess is that his mind was reaching for you while you were having sex, and when he didn’t get feedback, he freaked out.”

She swallowed and nodded. “You had better hold me while it’s being scrubbed. I don’t think I could live through it alone again.”

She walked to Reynaldo, pushed his knees apart, turned around, and sat in the sand with her neck exposed. Nothing

happened for a moment before he licked at her neck and snuffled. He whispered, “Yes?”

She cleared her throat. “Yes.”

He growled and whined eagerly. He ran his hands down her arms, licked with the heavy scraping of his tongue, and then there was nothing before fire bloomed under his bite. Syar knelt in front of her and held her hands. The bite was deep, and she took a deep breath and held still through the pain. Syar kissed her, licking at her lips until she opened, and then he tilted his head so she could remain still.

When Reynaldo started purring, she knew it was almost over. Syar was an excellent distraction. The thick silver link was a tunnel of connection, and the waves of smug satisfaction and light apprehension were unmistakable. He eased his fangs out of her neck and started licking.

Syar got more aggressive with his kiss, and he paused and said, “Can you feel me?”

Ven reached through the link and went past Reynaldo’s satisfaction to a bright, shivering excitement. “Found you.”

He lunged toward her, and her thoughts were wrapped in the omega. She wasn’t sure what happened after that, but she woke up in Syar’s office on the couch. Her brain felt weird. It was her thought, wrapped in a calm strength, and around that was bright excitement and a lot of lust.

She put a hand to her head. “Syar, are you this horny all the time?”

The omega chuckled. “Yup. It has gone up a notch since meeting you.”

Reynaldo snorted from his desk. “It has coloured my desires as well.”

She checked herself, and she was dressed again. “I’m sorry. It was never my intention to cause any kind of distraction.” She tangled her fingers together. She felt horribly off-balance emotionally, and her neck burned.

Reynaldo sighed. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Right. I am going to my room to lie down.” She stood and then thudded back to the couch when the room spun violently.

Reynaldo was at her side and pressing his lips to his mark. He licked, and the spinning slowed and stopped. She nodded to him. “Cheers.” And got back to her feet. It worked better this time, and she walked out of the office. She needed time alone.

She walked to their rooms and was dizzy enough to try and enter Syar’s quarters. The guards stopped her. Not unkindly. She opened the queen’s quarters and staggered inside to drop on the bed. She found her phone and made a call.

When her friend picked up, she smiled. “Hey, Penny.”

Penny smiled, and then her smile faded. “*Ven, you don’t look so good.*”

“I got marked. Then I found out that it was just because the contract omega was pushing his alpha’s buttons.”

“*Oh. Damn. Want me to kick his ass?*”

“No. Three hundred sixty-two days. and then I am home, and I can start something new.” She smiled. “How’s the fam?”

She spent the next fifteen minutes chatting with Penelope and saying hello to Liella, asking her about the cookies they were making.

When the call was over, she felt better. She set her phone next to her and went to sleep.

* * * *

Syar answered his phone. “Hello?”

“*What the fuck are you doing to my cousin? She’s exhausted, depressed, and I haven’t seen her that defeated in nearly a decade.*”

“Who is your cousin?” Syar was grappling to understand.

“Ven, you twit. She looked like she was going to pass out while I was talking to her. What did you do?”

He scowled. “We mated with her. We showed her around a bit today.”

“What have you done to protect her? I mean not practically but in theory.”

“I am not sure what you mean?”

“Courting, asshole. Things that reassure her that you are interested in little ways. Clothes, food, flowers. That kind of thing. From what she has told me, the female jaguar is doing more for her well-being than you are.”

“I...”

“Never mind. Keep her in one piece until she comes home for my birthday.”

Syar had a thought. “About that...” He outlined his plan to her, and he heard a warming in her tone.

Reynaldo listened to the conversation in silence until Syar hung up, and then he sighed. “I am going to get some flowers.”

“Flowers?”

“I want to make sure that she knows she isn’t just a slick hole to fuck. She’s just let me mark her because *I* needed it. I don’t think she will believe that it is because I chose it.” He got up and said, “Can you check on her? I will be back shortly.”

Syar nodded. “Is something wrong?”

“She’s masking her emotions. She feels very still, and that isn’t good.”

Syar got up to check on their mate. He entered his room, and his guts felt like ice. She wasn’t there. He focused on the link and felt the concern from Reynaldo. He had an idea and went through the closed adjoining door. There she was, curled up in a small ball at the edge of the bed, her phone next to her hand.

Tears streaked her cheeks, and when he pressed his hand to her neck, it was hot as hell. He crawled into bed behind her and licked Reynaldo's mark. He didn't remember this kind of infection, but he was designed for this by whatever deity thought it would be cute to give alphas fuck pets in the form of omegas. They hadn't given the same adaptability to betas. The backbones of society, they weren't built for cavorting with alphas. That said, she had done very well. He remembered the snug and slick feeling of being inside her, and it had felt exceedingly comfortable. If she weren't out cold, he would have tried it again.

He looked at the mark and blinked. "Holy shit."

Reynaldo had gone in deep. Really deep. It wasn't a mark that could be scrubbed. Syar wasn't going to tell her. Not for a long time. Maybe their fifth anniversary. She didn't know it yet, but if she wanted to go home at the end of the contract, they would follow her until she agreed to return to the island.

"What the fuck?" Reynaldo's voice came from their bedroom.

Syar called out softly. "In here."

Reynaldo came in with an armload of flowers with soft pink petals. He lowered his tone to a soft rumble. "Why is she in here?"

Syar spoke softly, "At a guess, the guards wouldn't let her into my side. We are just lucky we didn't have this locked like we planned. She would be asleep in the great room right now."

"Damn."

Syar looked at Reynaldo's hands and said, "Give her one. Put the rest on our bed, and we will put the petals there later."

"Why just the one?"

"Trust me on this."

Reynaldo analyzed his burden and pulled out a single flower. He disappeared for a moment to toss the other flowers on the bed. He brought back the chosen bloom and crouched next to Venetia's face. "She's pale."

“You nearly bit out her spine,” Syar muttered.

“No. He was just locking her in.” He stroked her cheek with the flower. “He doesn’t like her countdown.”

“So, he bit her so deep, and her body’s shorting out.”

“Um. Can I have a look?”

Syar looked at their alpha. “You want me to move away from her?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I will move you.”

Syar met his gaze as he licked the mark.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Venetia said weakly. She straightened and rolled to her belly.

* * * *

Ven didn’t open her eyes. She felt Reynaldo’s body heat get closer, and then his tongue started scraping, which was a relief. She muttered, “What is wrong with the mark?”

Syar held her hand. “Tropical environment, they heal differently.”

Reynaldo had a pang of surprise go through the exceptionally sturdy link. He continued the slow scraping, and she felt relief from the fever that had been pressing on her. She was tired, and that always tanked her immune system. Not an ideal situation to get bitten in.

She dozed off while being tended to and woke up naked.

Ven sat up and looked around. She was in a bed covered with flower petals, and there was a single flower on her hand. She was stunned. She turned her hand and held the flower, lifting it to her nose and inhaling. The tears came quickly.

Syar came into the room with an armload of fabric and was instantly concerned. “Venetia, are you all right?”

She nodded and held the flower, unable to stop the tears.

Reynaldo slammed through the door behind Syar and rushed to her side. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

She held the flower stem, pointed at it, and made small squeaking sounds, trying to tell him how much she liked it. She held it to her chest and took a deep breath. She stated, “I. Like. The. Flower.”

He slumped down and pressed his forehead to hers. “You terrified me.”

She swallowed. “Sorry.”

He stroked her cheek. “Why the tears?”

She sniffled. “Shock. First flower.”

Syar walked into view. “What?”

She was calming down and sighed. “Right. This is embarrassing. First time anyone brought me a flower. Ever. I overreacted.” She wiped her face.

Reynaldo and Syar were stunned. Or at least that was what she read through the link.

Reynaldo took her hand and kissed the back of her knuckles. “I am sorry it took us so long.”

She blinked and looked at their concerned faces. “It was a very appreciated gesture. How long have I been out?”

“Four hours.”

“Well, that explains why I feel more energetic.” She ran her hand over her hair, and her right hand played the petals of the flower across her lips. The scent was sweet and bright. She smiled at the sensation of the soft brush against her lips, and the expression on Syar’s face went from concerned to aroused.

She pulled the flower away from her lips. And he pouted. “Keep going.”

She smiled. “I get one flower in my lifetime, and you want me to turn it into a sex toy? No. It won’t last long, but I am going to hang onto it while it lasts. I think I will name it Hector.”

Reynaldo had a surprised look on his face. “You are giving it a man’s name?”

“It will last two days. Maybe. I don’t intend to take care of it.” She smiled. “If I had a book, I would press it.” She looked at them. “Where did my clothing go?”

Syar snorted. “The sports bra looked painful. I got you some clothing. Sorry, it has taken so long. You guessed correctly. I was preoccupied with long-term plans. Travel, vacations, adventure. Mating.”

Reynaldo smiled. “Lots of mating.”

“You guys need a hobby.”

Syar grinned. “That *is* our hobby.”

She rolled her eyes. “Are those clothes for me?”

Syar nodded. “Yeah. Here. Put this on. Solai picked them out for you.”

Instead of the neutrals, deep gem tones were on the skirt and the handkerchief-style top. She took a set in deep sapphire and tied it on. The top wasn’t restraining in any way. This was not everyday wear. The cut and colour made her other colouration look more normal. Her appearance was more trendy and less traditional, in general, so this fit her mood.

She turned and looked at Syar and asked, “What do you think?”

“I think my cousin learned more about you in seconds than I have so far. Why did she choose those colours?”

She smirked. “I stand out already. I stand out more if I wear clothing to blend in, where folks are looking more closely at features to tell people apart. Wearing this kind of thing, folks focus on the clothing. If I wore a dinosaur costume, even fewer folks would recognize me out of it.”

Reynaldo smiled. “Syar wants you to be recognized on sight by the locals.”

Syar nodded. “I was taken in broad daylight on the mainland. No one noticed I was being carried by an alpha through the streets. He put his arm around me and walked me around like I was a puppet.” He sighed. “From there, it was to a vehicle and a storage location. That’s where I met Reynaldo.”

Reynaldo nodded. “I was working security at the facility where they brought him. It was close to my rut, so as his heat was drawing others to pace outside his cell, it pulled me in as well.”

Syar nodded. “Frankly, even in rut, he was easier to negotiate with. He got me out of there with mass casualties on the kidnappers’ side. Those that had touched me were missing a lot of pieces by the time he wrapped me up and carried me to safety. Then came some hard decisions, and then we came home. It was three years before I was willing to leave the island again. Even now, Reynaldo catches my fear and sticks to me like glue.”

“So, that is why you send couriers now.”

“A third of our alpha population is occupied in that capacity with their families remaining here.” He sighed. “It is just safer here.”

She walked over to him and kissed his forehead. “The world isn’t safe, Syar. If it were, we wouldn’t need alphas. I was taken in a bar, surrounded by hundreds of people. Drugged and carried away, and nobody noticed.” She shrugged. “Fortunately, I don’t remember much until Penny came in. At that point, she pulled him away, and we beat the shit out of him until the police arrived. Good thing that Penny had low-tolerance neighbours.”

Syar hugged her for a minute then ran his hands up her back. Aside from one string, nothing impeded him. “Oh, I can get used to this. You feel nearly naked.”

She kissed him again. “I am glad you came through your experience sane and able to work toward leaving the island again. I ran to family, then danger and adrenalin and getting control of my body again. The wilder my choices, the more alive I felt. Some of my hobbies were weird, but they helped. I am a huge fan of occupational therapy.”

Reynaldo asked, “What type of hobbies?”

“Roller derby, dance class. That was a ball buster.”

Syar buried his face between her breasts and asked, “What kind of dance?”

“Ballet. I suck at it, but I love it.” She smiled and stroked his hair.

Reynaldo mentioned, “They have local dances and competitions here.”

She chuckled. “Right. I can be in class with the four-year-olds.”

Syar sighed. “You will advance quickly, I am sure.”

“Why are you stating it that way?”

He pulled his face away from her cleavage. “I am enrolling you in the morning.”

She jerked her thumb toward Reynaldo. “Don’t you have to ask the alpha? Pretty sure it takes two guardian signatures for the waiver.”

“I am the king. They will accept my signature.”

She chuckled, and he found the centre part of her skirt and slid his hands in, cupping her butt. He stuck his face between her breasts and sighed, mumbling, “I think this is my third favourite place to be.”

Ven didn’t dare ask what his first two were.

Chapter Nine

Ven got some rest that night. They spent their time in or on her until she was exhausted and sleeping between them. She woke up hot and sweaty between two male bodies. Reynaldo murmured what he did every time, “Do you consent?”

She smiled at the sweet gesture. “Yes, I do.”

He smiled, and they started to move against each other until he was part of her, and she was part of him. Syar joined in at the rear, and she grunted as she was filled to capacity and a bit beyond.

Ven soared, came down, and soared again. The guys held off until her third climax, and she was filled with heat. When they all huddled together, sweaty and smiling, she knew that something good might be starting.

A group shower didn't get anyone very clean, but it did clear the sweat off and give them all a chance for caressing and tickling.

Ven had her breakfast of the fowl that had been delivered again, and Missus and her kittens sat in the breakfast room while Ven ate. The beast didn't want any part of her offering, but she nudged Ven if she slowed down.

She was wearing one of her new outfits in blue. She ate the bird provided and then had a fruit salad.

Ven glanced to Reynaldo. “So, when is your rut going to kick in?”

He grinned and flexed his hand. She saw the same type of claw that she sported. The deadly tips came out, and he analyzed them. “Probably tonight.”

“So, what happens, just so I know to get a puzzle or something while you and Syar are busy.”

Reynaldo chuckled. “Oh, pet. You are the primary target. Syar is excellent, but you are our mate. *He* knows the

difference between a lover and a mate.”

She blushed. “So, what happens?”

“Well, my transformation kicks in, I grab you, and possibly flip Syar over my shoulder. Then, I get us all to the pool, and we spend time going mad together until he feels he has done his utmost to rut you.”

Syar smiled. “Two days are exceptional. Three days are unusual. Four days are standard.” He snorted, “One day is unheard of.”

“Oh. Good. Glad I don’t have a day job.”

Syar grinned. “I am your day job. What are you going to do with the money?”

“Open a charity for foster kids to assure that they get therapy when they are first entered into the system. Giving them tools to deal with the adults who hand them around is essential. Even the ones who mean well are difficult to deal with at first. They need a fighting chance and a guide to the tools that they can call on if they need them.”

Syar blinked. “You can do that with what I am paying you?”

“Yes. It’s a start. It will let children who have gotten out of the system grade therapists for the children who are still inside. They know who does and doesn’t understand the nuance of the situation.” She started to tick off the ways and means to her goal, and by the time she finished the subject, it was ten and Syar and Reynaldo were walking her to the dance studio in town. The instructor was Madame Aroha. She demonstrated the local dances, coached Ven through the basics, and then graded her.

“Well, she isn’t proficient, but I think she could go into our third-tier class.”

Ven smiled. “This goes against what I have recently learned; it is loosening all the things I just tightened.”

Aroha laughed. “We will loosen up those hips in no time.”

Reynaldo chuckled. “That’s my job.”

“Um, yes. We have a class starting this Saturday.”

“I believe that we should go with private instruction for her. Beginning next week.” Syar smiled. “We can join in for her graduation.”

Aroha gasped. “In public? You haven’t performed publicly in years. You are such a wonderful dancer, Your Majesty.”

Reynaldo looked at him. “You danced?”

Syar nodded. “Until…”

Ven curled against him and said, “I will if you will.”

He smiled. “You are going to work hard to get up to show level.”

“I can manage.” Ven stroked his cheek.

Reynaldo cleared his throat. “I am going to get supplies. You two stay together until I get back.”

Syar nodded. “We will. We won’t leave each other’s side.”

Reynaldo had a dark wave of fur wash over his face. Ven blinked. “Oh. Right.”

They finished with the instructor, got a pineapple smoothie from a nearby vendor, and headed back to the residence. Reynaldo had been away from them for thirty minutes when he came into the office, his skin replaced by a jaguar’s spotted hide. His nose and mouth had stretched into a boxy muzzle, and his hands opened and closed at his sides.

Syar had warned folks over the phone that he would be out of communication for a few days.

Ven had talked to Penny and Edgar about the same thing.

Penny had smiled. “*Heats are fun.*”

“This is a rut. So, he is going off, not me.” Ven didn’t have heats. Never had.

“*Will you be all right?*”

“Yeah. We have been practising.” She tried not to blush but miserably failed as Syar grinned from his desk.

“Oh. Right. Let me know how that goes. Apparently, the guys won’t have a rut until after the baby arrives.”

Ven smiled. “Stay happy, Miss Penny.”

“Stay safe, Ven.”

They blew each other air kisses and hung up.

Syar asked, “Can you feel it?”

The column of sensation between her and Reynaldo was taking on a hot tinge. “Yeah.”

“I think we should meet him out on the lanai.”

“Or on the path?”

“I don’t know where he will emerge, but it will be fast, and he will probably take you first.”

“Why?”

“Because while the beast accepts me as mate, he knows not to breed me. He is going to try with you.”

“You don’t want kids?”

“I do. More than anything, but I can’t. Literally. During my abduction, there was an incident, and I was rendered unable to bear.”

She got up and walked over to him, holding him tightly. He pulled her onto his lap, and the kiss continued while the heat in their minds got closer.

A roar shook the house, and they pulled apart.

She blushed. “Oh. Right. Reynaldo.”

He grinned, and they separated and got to their feet. “He has a hard time in the house, so we had better get outside.”

She nodded, and they held hands and walked to the back where the enormous black beast-human hybrid was pacing back and forth restlessly. He chuffed low in his throat when he saw them. The sniffing was awkward.

She stroked his altered head, digging her fingers into his thickened rough. He went from Ven to Syar, and he whined.

She said, "Take him first. I will follow you."

He huffed and shook his head.

"Fine. I will go on my own. You will have to catch me."

He shook his head. He went back to Syar, and she ran. She ran while he roared behind her. His mate was getting away.

She ran. She heard him behind her, heard Syar calling out warnings, and she released her top and then her skirt as she sprinted until she was in the pool and swimming for the waterfall. She held her breath to go through it and was pushed down before she popped up inside the pool that led to the cave. It was lovely. There were thick furs, soft blankets, pillows, and some coolers. A pyramid of three-wicked candles was in the corner. The top one was lit, and the light was a lovely gold. She had just pulled herself out of the pool when the heads of Reynaldo and Syar emerged from the water.

Syar muttered, "He's pissed. You might want to present."

"Is it because I am faster than he is?" She remained kneeling.

Reynaldo nodded; the jutting lower teeth sold the sabretooth jaguar look his beast was going for. He crept toward her.

She remained still as he sniffed her from ear to navel. His clawed hands pried her thighs apart, and he pressed his nose against her mound and snuffled. It tickled. His feline eyes glowed green.

When his tongue started lapping, she held still until he tipped her back and got ferocious with his tongue. He started rutting her three minutes later, and time seemed to lose all meaning.

Everything ached, and she was quiet as Reynaldo carried her back to the residence. Syar was already home and under guard. He was also laughing at her. With a few exceptions, she had been her mate's favourite target.

"Are you okay?" He murmured it to her.

“I am fine. Just sore. Why did he lick me until I was raw?”

“Because you heal fast, so if he got enough skin off, your scars would be reduced.”

Her ribcage and belly were pink and smooth, still healing from the raw red they had been a few hours ago. It had been dermabrasion by tongue.

“Yeah, next time, I am going to outrun him.”

He sighed. “He’s inviting you to try. I think my workout is going to be hard on the cardio for a while. I have gotten soft living with Syar.”

“I beg to differ,” she grumbled.

He lifted her and kissed her temple. “It won’t happen again for a few years, but now, you understand why one of Syar’s motivations was this.”

“Yeah. I get that he was searching for another target for you.”

Reynaldo sighed. “Was it that bad?”

“I’m tired and cranky and tender,” she muttered as they entered the house. “I will need a day or two to stop fantasizing about clawing your dick off.”

“You did try at one point.”

She sighed happily. “I remember. Syar is really quick.”

“Minx.”

He carried her to the bedroom and set her into bed next to Syar. The omega cuddled her carefully before Reynaldo spoke to the guards at the door before joining them in bed, holding them both.

She was sleeping in under a minute. Ruts were rough. She was glad he wouldn’t have one for another two years.

The shower spray was reviving. Ven stood under the water and ran her hands down her ribs. The skin felt smooth. She had spent her entire adult life with those marks on her, and

they were just... gone. Her body was still tender, but her scars were... gone.

Ven turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. She looked in the mirror and saw her weird eyes, soft fluffy hair, and now her ears had points. She really hoped this was the end of her evolution because stuff was getting harder to hide. At least her hair was growing back. It was five inches long now and grazed her mark with feathery fluff.

She walked back into the bedroom and smiled at how carefully Reynaldo held Syar. She got dressed in a ruby red outfit and went to get her pointe shoes. It was time to get another piece of herself back.

She sat on the floor of the great room and put on her shoes. Ven set up music on her phone. She did some flexing and loosening exercises, and then she went up on pointe and began to dance. She went through six of her favourite songs before she paused and slowly bowed to an invisible audience before sitting and removing her shoes before she massaged her feet.

Syar sat down next to her. "That was amazing. How long have you been dancing?"

"Four years. Twice a week. Practised every day. It is great that my body heals itself, or my feet would be trashed." She stuck out her legs and wiggled her toes.

He scooted closer and nudged her hip with his. "So, you obviously survived Reynaldo's rut."

"Yeah. I see you managed it, too."

"Oh, I just needed popcorn half the time to watch you two."

She pinked. "Oh."

"I love watching you two. It's like a dance. So pretty."

Ven snorted. "He was the dancer. I was the blow-up doll."

"Yeah, he started by inflating you."

She covered her face. "Oh god."

He nudged her. "Too soon for jokes?"

“Too soon.”

“Seriously, how are you feeling?”

“Achy, delicate. Uncertain.”

“Uncertain?”

“I know he wanted me for his heat, and you wanted me for it, but that is over now. You can go about your daily life now.” She wrapped her arms around her knees and stared at him. “My reason for being here is now in the past.”

He stared at her in shock. “I want you just as much now as I did before Reynaldo’s fun few days.”

“How does he feel? It isn’t one or the other. It has to be both of you or neither.” She shrugged. “He can let the link go cold, and I can hope that my mark fades enough to heal it.”

“Why? Why are you pushing away so hard?”

“Because no one who has had me has ever wanted to keep me,” she exhaled and ran her hands through her hair. “I don’t believe in fairy tales, so not having prince charming and his big kitty at my side forever and ever.”

“Good, I haven’t been a prince for years, and I am only charming while drunk.” He grinned. “And call Reynaldo a big kitty to his face. I dare you.” He sighed. “Why do you really want to leave?”

She smiled slightly. “You will get tired of me, and I will have to leave on your schedule.”

“And that will degrade your self-worth further.”

“Yup. I have fought my way to liking how I have turned out. Walking into this situation and being rejected again would probably be too much. And now, I did, and here I am, a whiney, needy bitch because I haven’t done anything like this before.”

He wrapped his arm around her and then hugged her. “Can we go cuddle in one of the morning rooms?”

“Is it morning?”

“No idea.” He chuckled and got to his feet, taking her with him. They walked the halls, talking softly.

In the morning room, they cuddled on a chaise, and he offered her ideas for how to use her focus for the benefit of the people of the island. She was good at getting women involved and listening. But first, she had to learn to dance and work on learning the language.

She listened to it with the attention of someone being given a quest then fell asleep against him.

Ven felt someone stroking her hair, and it was not the same man that she had dozed off on. A soft kiss on her cheek and a flower let her know Reynaldo had woken up. “So, you want to run, kitten?”

“It seems appropriate. It’s only been a week. You two are solid, and I don’t want to hinder anything. Also, I don’t know how to be in a relationship.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“He just put me where he wanted me or dragged me into place. I tried very hard not to screw things up, but he left me anyway.”

She dragged the flower down her cheek and then rubbed her lips with the petals.

He hugged her. “We won’t do that.”

“But either you or Syar might want a family.”

“There are surrogates, or we can adopt.”

She knew that surrogates wouldn’t work for his kind of alpha, but it was sweet of him to mention adoption.

He said, “But first, let’s run you through a pre-pregnancy scan to see what your body is currently up to. It might be a different situation now that your healing has kicked in.”

“Where is the nearest centre that could do that particular round of tests?”

“Other side of the island in the city.”

“Wait. There is a city? Why the hell are we here?”

“Royal village. This is where Syar likes to live, so this is the most exclusive place on the island.”

“Oh, that explains the lack of tourists.”

“Yes, the city is much more frenzied. Here, we get to live quietly.” Reynaldo stroked her hair. “He has to approve stacks of documents every day, and I watch over him.”

“Right. So, what is my role here? I have had my vacation.”

He chuckled. “I am flattered that you considered it such. You handled me easily.”

She blushed. “Well, you were purring most of the time.”

Reynaldo wrapped his arms around her. “With such a pretty kitten in my arms, the purring came naturally.”

She hid her face against his chest. “Stop calling me a kitten.”

He squeezed her. “You are a precious and necessary part of me, just as Syar is.”

“I don’t know how to fit.”

“Just keep doing what you are doing. We want you as you are, and Syar and I are better now with you here.”

“What do you mean, better?”

“Syar sleeps through the night. He’s more confident and is working through some of his own issues because he sees them in you, and you are handling them using tools you have learned. He’s watching you and using those tools. Some of them are transferred through your link.”

She blinked and kept her head down. “I am glad I am upholding my contract obligations.”

“It goes beyond the contract and the comfort he gets from your presence. He is *better* with you around. He wants to be better. So do I.”

She snuffled. “You are going to make me cry.”

He ran his hand up and down her back. “How are you feeling?”

She lifted her head in surprise. “Huh?”

“Are you sore, chafed?”

“Um, my ribs and tummy are a little delicate. I think what you did qualifies as cannibalism.”

He sighed. “That wasn’t me. That was him. Can I check?”

She nodded, and he stroked his fingers across the newly smooth skin.

He nudged her chin up. “Are you pissed at him for this?”

“No. It’s fine. I was just surprised to be pinned down until he got to the base layers.” She sighed. “At least he saved it for last.”

She chuckled. “I got some of you in me, and you have some of me in you.”

He smiled. “I will keep up my end of things; just let me know.”

Ven frowned. “What?”

“Venetia, I will make sure that I top you up anytime you like.”

Her face caught fire as she caught his meaning and snapped her jaw shut. He started laughing, cuddling her again and told her how happy he was that she had come to the island. Kidnapping her would have made things awkward.

Chapter Ten

Dance class was rough. She rocked, stretched, and moved in time to drum and pipe music. When the teacher let her relax for the end of the first class, Ven gulped down water and promised to return at nine the next morning.

“Are you sure your mates will be done with you by nine?” Madame Aroha smiled.

“Yeah, the horny bastards wake up early.” She snorted as she put her sandals on.

“They are collecting you?”

Ven checked her watch. “In a few minutes.”

There was a knock at the side door. Ven blinked when she saw the familiar face of Myele.

Aroha smiled at her. “Myele. What are you doing here?”

“I wish to speak with the king’s companion.” Myele paused. “Please.”

Ven got to her feet. “Why?”

“There are things that I need to say to you, miss. Please.”

Ven checked her watch. “How long is this going to take?”

“Just a few minutes. Please. I have a lot to get off my chest.”

Ven smiled at Aroha. “Tell the guys where I went.”

“I will, Lady Venetia.”

Ven walked to the side door and followed Myele out. Myele spoke softly and offered a heartfelt apology as they crested a ridge, and that was when Ven felt the sharp impact on her thigh. She saw the dart and turned to run back to town, but Myele grabbed her, hissing, “This is for getting me fired, bitch!”

Ven collapsed, but she was still staring at Myele when her head exploded. Ven threw the dart down the path and into the brush when masked men rushed at her and carried her down the slope to a zodiac on the shore. The guys were silent, and her world went grey, then black.

* * * *

Reynaldo looked at the disturbance on the path and the bloody mess where Myele had been. He was keeping calm. Syar was his focus now. The locals had all come running to say a team of alphas in black had fired from the shore twice, and a few minutes later, Venetia had been hauled to the boat, and they were out to sea.

She was gone. Now they had to wait. This had all the hallmarks of a ransom scheme, and they would have to wait it out.

Syar had started the calls for help, and now they had to wait for the notice for the ransom. Whatever they wanted, Syar would pay it. If the price was Syar himself, that is where Reynaldo would have to draw the line and keep his mate from doing something stupid.

Reynaldo's beast shifted and roared his frustrated fury. He was trying to stay calm for his partner, but his mate was somewhere on the ocean, and he needed her back.

* * * *

Penny held Jax's hand as the second leg of their journey was nearing its completion. The amphibious helicopter had dropped low. Thor was looking around, and he spoke into his microphone. "I can see the trail."

The pilot nodded. The extra assistance in the form of a very curvy woman was sitting next to the pilot. Penny didn't know what Nova did, but Luna assured them she was good.

The pilot muttered, "I can see the ship."

Penny used the sat phone and called Syar. “Let Ven know that we are almost there. We can see them.”

Syar noted, “*Message sent, and she is furious.*”

“Good. She does her best work while pissed off. See you soon, cousin.”

Penny hung up, and the helicopter swung in close. The shapeshifters were stripping, which surprised the pilot. Nova spoke through the mic. “Sorry. Should have warned you.”

Penny could see her putting her clothes in a pack. She was wearing a sports bra, and not a lot else was visible from Penny’s angle.

The pilot muttered, “Ready to drop.”

Penny braced as Jax and Thor jumped. When she closed the door, she saw the first deep-sea mermaid the modern era had seen. The kraken and leviathan were next to her as they closed the distance to the enormous and glossy yacht. Someone was about to have a very bad evening.

Mort turned the helicopter and moved to a safe distance, settling into the waves.

Mort grumbled. “Now we wait. Damn. She’s amazing.”

They could see the trio approaching the ship, and Penny nodded. “They all are.”

* * * *

Ven woke up when they pushed another person into the room, where she was zip-tied to a chair. There was a lot of whimpering, but it was masculine, which narrowed down the possibilities.

When the omega turned to her, he was cringing and crawled onto the furthest corner of the bed. She looked at the obviously pregnant omega.

“Despite appearances, I am not going to chew on you.” She talked using the tone she would use for a child. “Did they hurt you?”

He shook his head, his dark curls flying. She knew that face.

“Oh, fuck. Lucas?”

He frowned, his pretty blue eyes confused. “You know me?”

“Uh, no, but I know who you are. Where is your alpha?”

He whimpered and grabbed a pillow over his belly. “They have him downstairs. They are hurting him.”

“Well, pain builds character.” She grimaced as she shifted in the chair. “Where did they get you?”

“This is my yacht. They needed it to get close to Emerald Island.”

“Oh, is that what it’s called? Huh. Didn’t know that.”

“You know it?”

She sent a calming tone to Reynaldo again. “Yeah. I have been there. I didn’t call it that.”

“What did you call it?”

She shrugged. “Home.”

“Do you have people there?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Will they pay your ransom?”

“It depends on what it is.” She could feel the equivalent of soothing fingers stroking the link.

Lucas nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“How far along are you?”

“Eight months.”

“So, boy or girl?”

He blinked. “Little boy. Do you have kids?”

“I nearly did, but my alpha dumped me, and my body went into shock. She died.”

He looked horrified. “How could he have done that?”

She gave him a calm gaze. “Because an omega claimed him, paid his family, and he left the area.”

“That’s horrible. What happened when you told him?”

“I couldn’t. I told his family, and I can only assume they didn’t pass it on.” She shrugged. “It ended the way it ended. I held her, and I buried her.” She sighed, “But that was what feels like a lifetime ago.”

Lucas said, “You can always have another when you are ready.”

“It would be nice to think so, but it is not likely.” She changed the subject. “How long have you been here?”

“Five days. They feed me and let me use the restroom, but I have to say that I was shocked when they took me from my room and brought me here.”

“Are they ransoming you as well?”

He blushed. “I don’t know. I get the feeling that they are going to sell me and use Andy as a hostage for my cooperation.”

She sighed and realized that she could bitch-slap Andrew later. “Well, I guess you will have to just settle in with me and hope.”

“Will your people be able to pay the ransom?”

“Oh, I think so. He’s got pretty deep pockets.” She paused. “When he wears pants.”

“Oh, he sounds fun. Can you introduce me?” Lucas got flirty.

She smiled. “Oh, he doesn’t need anything you are selling. Omegas aren’t his type. I asked.”

He frowned. “Omegas are everyone’s type. We are adorable.”

She was going to comment, but a surge from Reynaldo rocked her forward. “Oh. Right.”

She looked at Lucas. “Keep your mouth shut.”

Ven flexed her fingers and called out. “Hey, dude! I have to pee.”

She whistled sharply. “Dipshit! Things are going to get messy.”

The guy with the zip-ties tucked into his belt came in. She gestured to her hands, and he sighed. “Just go in the chair.”

“No! Not unless there is a bowl between me and the seat. You have been letting the omega go, and I have been here for seven hours all calm and polite in the chair.”

“The arrangements are being made. You can wait.”

“No, I really can’t.” She whimpered. “Please. This is already humiliating.”

He grinned and smirked.

She started sniffing and crying. He finally got tired of the show when she blew a snot bubble.

He unsnapped her left wrist, and she curled it to her chest. She was still sobbing, and when he freed her ankles, she let him haul her up and push her into the bathroom. She legit had to pee, so she attended to nature and then opened the door. He reached for her, and she climbed him, clawing across his throat until a heavy spray hit the walls. She rode him to the floor and held him there until his body had the limpness of death.

She was covered in blood and grinning when she stood up and took his guns. “Oh, that’s better.” She looked at the stunned Lucas. “Stay here. I have family coming. If a tentacle enters the room, introduce yourself. It’s my cousin’s husband.” She smiled. “Now, where is your alpha?”

Ven got the information, crept up to the command area, and shot the pilot. The dark camo made it so easy to decide who was a bad guy that it wasn’t even funny.

Some of the others came running, and she got to take them out one at a time. Picking her path over the bodies was awkward, but the three sharp pops from the bow got her attention. She fired, and he dropped back, but then she looked down and saw the blooms of red on her abdomen. “Shit. Time to stop playing.”

A mermaid came flying over the side of the ship, and Ven stared. She blinked as the woman got her legs under her.

“Nova?” Ven swayed.

“Yeah, Ven. Time to get out of here.”

Ven laughed. “Yeah, there are several baddies down in the hold. There are also an alpha and omega being held hostage.”

“On it.” Nova smiled and looked at her. “Ven?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you get shot in the guts?”

“Yeah.”

“Right. Jax should help.”

Nova rushed her, picked her up, whistled, and dropped her over the edge of the vessel. She called down to the darkness. “She’s been shot.”

Tentacles reached up and caught her, covering her with a clear slime. She sent a message via her link. She was in safe hands... sort of.

* * * *

Penny took possession of the sluggishly bleeding Ven, and the helicopter fired up and slowly lifted off the surface of the ocean and headed for the distant glow of the city of Emerald Island.

Mort called the hospital and warned them he was coming in with a wounded beta. “How bad are the wounds, Penny?”

Penny inhaled and said clearly, “Three gunshot wounds to the midsection. Heartbeat is slow but stable.”

She didn’t mention that the bullets were slowly oozing out of her body. She knew that Jax’s goo was good for a lot of stuff, but Ven was so still.

Her cousin muttered, “If you are freaking out, I am doing well, but I am trying to keep still, as bullets don’t like dancing.”

“I was scared when Syar called me and asked for help. Jax and Thor took time off right away, Gen took Liella, and Niko offered the flights. Nova offered her help as she loves the open ocean. Niko got us to an oil rig, and then Mort got us out on this helicopter.”

She chuckled. “Did he use an aircraft, or was there a dragon on the rig?”

Penny smoothed her hand over Ven’s silky hair. “I am not allowed to say, but a lot of monsters have worked to get you safe. Did they... hurt you?”

“A couple groped my boobs, but then I was just zip-tied to a chair for seven hours. You wouldn’t believe the other kidnap victims. Lucas and Andrew. If you see Andrew and he doesn’t have burns or bruises... they ran the kidnapping ring.”

“I will let Syar know.”

Ven nodded. “I am going to be quiet now. Don’t worry. I am still here.”

Penny spoke quickly to Syar, explaining the injuries and the healing measures that were working. She passed on the message about Lucas and Andrew.

Syar said softly, “*Can I talk to her?*”

Penny held the phone to Ven’s ear, and she didn’t hear what was said, but Ven murmured, “You can sob all over me once I get to hospital, sweetie, and tell Reynaldo to stop growling. He can yell at me in person. I need not to be tense now. I think we are almost at hospital. Why didn’t you tell me there was a

modern city, you ass?” Ven paused. “Fine, your majestic ass. Bye.”

Penny took the phone and shouted into it, “We are landing on the hospital roof.”

She cut the call, and Mort set the helicopter down without turning off the rotors. Mort said through the headset, “I am setting this thing down at the airfield. When you want to head home, use the home button on the sat phone.”

Penny watched the gurney pushed toward the helicopter. “Great. Where will you be?”

He chuckled. “I am going for a dip.”

Penny helped the medics get Ven onto the white sheets, and she followed them into hospital.

There was one face she recognized and one that she didn't. Ven was taken to the diagnostic centre to find out if the bullets were still in place and what kind of damage they had done. Penny looked at the stunning man about the same height as Ven and the giant jaguar on two feet. “Hello, Your Majesty. Reynaldo.”

Reynaldo made a soft whining sound as they watched through the glass.

“Well, suddenly, her description of your rut makes a certain sense.”

He snorted.

Syar leaned his head against his alpha. “He's stuck like this. Will be until Ven tells him that it is only evening wear. If the idiots had hidden on the island, we never would have had to call you. He would be picking them out of his teeth.”

Reynaldo grunted.

Penny watched the ultrasounds, the looks of surprise, and then they picked up a familiar wand. They spoke to Ven, and she nodded, and then the internal scan started. The doctors spoke, and Ven fainted.

Penny wanted to rush to her side, but Ven's mates raced in and got in the way, but then the doctors spoke to them, and they looked wobbly. When Reynaldo's clawed hand reached for Ven's belly, Penny's knees wobbled. Jax and Thor made the same move on her... constantly. There were some cells building a person in there.

Holy shit.

* * * *

Ven woke in a medical gown in a quiet room with familiar faces on either side. "Uh, I didn't think that this called for an audience."

She found the bed control and had it sit her up. She smiled. "Nova. Enjoying the deep blue sea?"

Nova smiled and glanced at the one stranger in the mix. "Definitely. Oh, Ven, this is Mort. He was the pilot that got us to the yacht."

"Thank you. They are good swimmers, but I am not sure how much time I had." She looked at Mort. "No one was wearing a mask."

He winced. "Glad I could be of service."

Penny was there and smiling. "I just wanted to say I am glad that Jax was there to slime you."

Jax grinned and stretched. "I haven't gotten to crush a vessel in ages."

Thor snorted as they headed outside. "Yeah, yeah. And I enjoyed getting everyone back to shore."

Penny pushed them out of the hospital room, and Nova and Mort caught in the wave. "I will leave you three to discuss... things."

Ven was left alone with Syar and Reynaldo's beast. She reached out and took his hand. "Hey, sweetie. Yeah, I know

that trusting Myele was stupid, but I was feeling ridiculously optimistic.” She swallowed. “She’s really dead?”

Syar nodded. “Oh, very.”

He was next to Reynaldo, who was reducing back to normal size.

“So, who called my cousin?”

“She refers to herself as your sister, but yeah, ‘twas me.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles.

“So, you got informed by the docs about the, uh, situation?”

Syar smiled. “That your injuries are nearly healed and should be invisible by tomorrow. You will be back to your normally tight abs for now.”

She swallowed. “So, I am not hallucinating what they said?”

Syar smiled. “No, you are not. We are going to have a kitten.”

She laughed. “I hope not. I would rather have a baby.”

He smiled. “I would rather have that, too.”

Reynaldo put his hand on her belly. “Me, too.”

His touch was delicate and warm. She looked up at him, and he kissed her carefully. She sighed happily at the contact.

Syar cleared his throat. “You know, I am the king.”

She reached out and squeezed his hand. He chuckled. Reynaldo lifted his head, and Syar pressed his forehead to hers before he nipped her lips and kissed her, stroking his tongue along her lips before he delved between them. When he lifted his head, he whispered, “You and Reynaldo will make adorable babies.”

She chuckled. “We don’t yet know which one of you hit the target.”

Syar stepped back. “What?”

“Well, you aren’t infertile. Reynaldo told me that. You just have a low count.”

“Wasn’t he just chatty?”

She nodded and swallowed. “I am going to be super paranoid about this pregnancy, insecure and nervous as hell.”

Reynaldo nodded. “Understandable.”

Syar smiled. “I can hardly wait until we get the all-clear to cuddle your brains out.”

She chuckled. “When do they do their final checks?”

“Oh, you are going to be here with us all night. Scoot over.”

To her amazement, he climbed into bed with her.

He cuddled her carefully, keeping her abdomen flat. She twisted her head toward him and pressed her cheek to his chest. She started shaking, and he soothed her. Every time during the night that she shook with remembered panic, he calmed her. He didn’t sleep at all.

Chapter Eleven

“Don’t you dare apologize.” Syar took sips from her coffee. He had finished his right off.

Ven smiled. They were waiting for the doctors to bring back the discharge paperwork. Everyone who had a flimsy reason to visit her room had come in to fluff pillows and check her IV. They all wanted to see their king and his alpha’s breeder.

Reynaldo had gone off to do something, and she spent her time nuzzling and kissing Syar as they waited to be told they could go home.

“We have a fully outfitted hospital in the village. You will get the best possible care. Nothing will happen to you or the baby.”

“That is a promise you can’t make.”

He smiled. “I am your king. You will follow my directive. You will be healthy, happy, and get nice and round with new life. It’s my royal decree.”

She laughed. “Well, if you say so.”

They were holding hands and softly kissing when Reynaldo came back. He spoke softly and said, “You have a visitor.”

She smiled, and her smile faded when she saw Andrew standing with his arm in a sling and a crutch helping him balance. His little omega was hovering worriedly.

“So, not the kidnapper.”

Reynaldo shook his head. “Not the kidnapper. Also, not a feline alpha.”

“But...”

Syar murmured, “He wasn’t the one to set you off.”

Andrew moved into the room. “Venetia. I... He told me what happened. About... I am so sorry.”

“It was a girl. The size of a seven-month-old at five months. I felt her move that day. Then, she was gone.” She looked at him. “Her name was Victoria, and she is buried next to your grandmother.”

Andrew swallowed. “She is?”

“She is.”

“My parents knew?”

“Oh, yeah.” She sighed and held Syar’s hand. “They knew. They told me you were ignoring my messages.”

Lucas was helping his alpha. “I saw him, and he was so glorious, so pretty, that I had to have him. I didn’t think that he already had a bound beta. No one said. Not even him.”

“The mark is long since scrubbed, so I would appreciate it if you get the fuck out of my room.”

Syar said calmly, “Get out and accept your banishment from Emerald Island.”

Lucas stared. “You are an omega.”

Syar smiled. “I am, and you are agitating my emotional support beta. Now get out and take the banishment with grace.”

Lucas snorted. “Who are you to order me around?”

Reynaldo went big and furry and spoke carefully around his fangs. “He is my king and her mate and my mate. He is the king of the ground you walk on. So, fuck off.”

Ven looked at Lucas. “I told you my mate and alpha would not be interested in an omega.”

He reeled back in shock. “But, my boat, how will I leave?”

Reynaldo smiled, fangs flashing. “There are charters and other boats available. You can get to the next island and make arrangements from there, just don’t come back here.”

Syar grinned. “We will literally deport you.”

Andrew looked at their trio and nodded. “I will get Lucas to the port right away. Thanks for getting us off the yacht. I know

you didn't have to send the mermaid for me, but she was helpful. She even jumped with Lucas into the tentacles of that... whatever it was."

"My brothers-in-law." She chuckled. "Both of the sea monsters. The mermaid is a friend."

Lucas blinked. "They came for you."

Ven blushed when Syar said, "Of course. We would have had a whale shark, but someone had to fly the helicopter."

Ven sighed. Of course, Mort was a whale shark. It fit. Nova was a multi-tailed mermaid. She had a tail for every occasion and could switch them out as needed. She suited a gliding giant.

Ven looked at Andrew. "Andrew, get the fuck off my island, and I wish your child a better father than you this time around. Lucas, find another alpha to support you. If another omega wags themselves at him, he's gone. If I see you again, I am going to start tearing parts off with my claws."

Lucas's eyes got wide, and he hauled Andrew out of the room. Guards flanked them and walked them down the stairs.

Ven sighed. "That felt nice. Apologies for claiming the island for dramatic effect, Your Majesty."

Syar pulled her in for a kiss and whispered, "I am sorry you had to see them."

"I hope they have a lively and healthy baby... far from here."

Syar smiled. "They are leaving the island today."

"Can Penny and the others come to the village?"

Reynaldo smiled. "They are already there. You need a bodyguard. Maybe another alpha?"

"No. I don't want anyone other than you two."

Syar nodded. "One of the special betas with a love of the island."

The doctor came in with a clipboard, engaged in a few observations, and said, “You will check in weekly at the local hospital?”

Reynaldo smiled. “We will.”

“It is still early days, so we want to keep an eye on it. Will you go for genetic testing?”

“Sure. And paternity, just to be sure.”

“We can do that at week seven. I am assuming it is one of these two?” He smiled.

“Unless someone got past Reynaldo.”

The doctor looked at the alpha and nodded. “Right. I am forwarding the file to Dr. Iona. He will be waiting for you to check in the day after tomorrow.”

A nurse came in and unhooked her IV then pressed it until the vein sealed. The nurse looked for the mark and blinked. “It’s closed.”

“Looks like my healing got kicked into high gear.”

She made a fist, and the monitoring tabs were peeled off her skin. The nurse paused. “You are really soft.”

“Yeah, I hear that a lot.”

The doctor nodded. “You are clear to leave. Astonishingly, you only have some light bruising over the points where you were shot, and even those are nearly healed.”

Syar was handed a copy of Ven’s discharge papers, and Reynaldo shooed everyone out so that they could help her in the shower and get her dressed. She was wearing the same shade of green as her eyes, and her skirt was barely hanging onto her hips.

Syar tied up her sandals. She caressed his cheek. “I thought your prince charming days were behind you.”

He kissed her thigh. “I am having a relapse.”

Reynaldo grinned. “We can both confirm your fit state at home.”

She nodded. “How many people are angry at me about Myele?”

“There were a few rumblings from her family until the twenty thousand dollars was found in her account, deposited an hour before she went to lure you.”

Reynaldo picked her up and carried her, ignoring the wheelchair.

They left the hospital, passed the reporters, and got into the carriage to take them to the other side of the island. The quiet side.

They were home in an hour, and when Reynaldo finally let her leave his lap, she smiled and lunged to hug Penny. Ven whispered, “Thank you for coming.”

“Always, and the nieces and nephews are going to love vacations here.”

Ven lifted her head. “What?”

“Syar has made certain offers. It is going to involve a lot of teleconferencing for Jax, but while I am on leave, this is going to be where the baby is born.”

Ven smiled. “Put a pin in that. I have a suspicion about how things are going to go down, and we might both be able to have our babies in our own homes.”

“What’s going on?”

“I think this time I am going to have a healthy baby at five months, and it will be fully developed.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because now my healing is fully developed.”

Jax spoke up. “Antonio’s mate Dell does it that way. Her pregnancies are fast, but the babies are perfectly healthy.”

Ven crossed her fingers. “Let’s hope, and you are welcome to come and visit whenever you like and when Syar is willing to let you. I think there will be exceptions made for heats and ruts. Nobody wants to watch that.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Thor raised his hand. “I do.”

Jax laughed and elbowed him. “Well, with you safely back, I am going to go patrol the island.”

Thor started peeling off his t-shirt and turned toward the beach. Jax kissed Penny’s cheek and said, “Liella will love it here.”

He snorted and scampered off after his friend.

Ven blinked. Penny said, “Give them open water, and they are giant teens again.”

Syar came up behind them and said, “Are they going to shift?”

Penny nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

Syar asked Ven, “Can we watch?”

Ven laughed and nodded. Reynaldo picked her up, and they all hiked to the beach a few hundred metres away.

“I can walk.”

“Less than a day ago, you had three bullets in your abdomen. You are going to rest until we say so.” He gave her a light squeeze.

She laughed.

Penny ran ahead to join her mates, and they folded their clothing and put it on a lounge chair.

Ven eyeballed Penny’s mates, and Reynaldo started growling.

Ven looked at him. “What? They are very well put together. Besides, by this point, you know I am not a huge fan of fish.”

He paused and started laughing. The trio waded into the ocean, and Penny waded with them. When the guys were past the coral, they changed, and Ven got to see the creature that had caught and healed her last night. That goo on his tentacles worked wonders.

Thor’s sea monster was huge and left wide ripples where it swam.

Syar stared. “That is... more than I thought it would be. I am amazed you didn’t freak out through the link.”

“When I saw him, I knew who he and the shining creature next to him was. Also, Nova told me.” She chuckled. “And then she carefully let Jax take me and get me to the helicopter.”

The mermaid sauntered over with a sarong around her hips and a wrap around her breasts.

Nova smiled. “You look better.”

Ven nodded. “Thank you so much for coming out.”

Nova grinned. “Of course. I don’t get to beat people to death that often. It is rather nice that here, all the evidence floats away.”

Reynaldo chuckled. “I like her.”

Ven hissed. “Put me down.”

“No. I was very worried, and now I am going to be protective for a while.”

She sighed and stroked his cheek. “Stop being a dumbass.”

He looked at her with his brows raised. “The blood and brain are still in the sand and shrubs on the hill. Four hundred metres from where we are right now. The kidnappers beat onlookers who tried to stop them. They fired from that point near the reef. It was chaos. The word *worried* doesn’t cover it. Syar knew what to do, and he started making calls.”

Syar took her hand. “Their masks were discarded as they got away. They were going to ransom then dump your body when they got the money.”

“You got that from masks?”

“If they weren’t worried about being seen, it was because they were sure you couldn’t identify them. You weren’t blindfolded?”

“No.” She winced. She had figured out the ramifications as well but didn’t leak her panic through the link.

Syar sighed. “You knew.”

“What?”

“You just had a flash of guilt. You knew.”

“The second that I got the go signal, I went.” She pressed her head with her open palm for a moment.

“But you knew.”

“I guessed. Same reasons you did. Lack of mask.” She shrugged. “When they threw Lucas in with me, that was too convenient. I was going to be the example for him to get his money together.”

“How did you get loose?”

“I could have shredded the zip-ties, but they make a specific sound, so I did what people have done for centuries.”

Syar pressed her hand to his cheek. “What was that?”

“I told him I had to pee then climbed his back and tore out his throat.” She smiled. “That move made Lucas nervous, so I left him with the body and took the guns.”

Reynaldo asked, “You can shoot?”

“Yeah. My last foster dad was a farmer, and he believed that if we were stable enough, we should learn what other kids in the area did. So, off to the gun range until I had a nice grouping and shot a minimum of three bullets per torso.”

Nova mentioned, “She got six of them before I took over.”

“Before you dropped me over the edge. How many were left?”

Nova grinned, “A few. None now.”

“Where is Mort?”

Nova shrugged. “He was called back to the rig platform. Oh, your guys have asked me to be your bodyguard while you run around the village and if we head to the mainland. What do you think about it?”

“Fine with me. I am taking a dance class, so you will have to participate.”

Nova snorted. “I will manage.”

“Yeah, right. It is like squat day.”

Reynaldo laughed, Syar grinned, and said, “I am telling Madame.”

“Great. Do it. It’s going to be a few days before I get back to her studio.”

The locals watched the monsters in the sea, passing their mate from one to the other until she was settled on Thor, and he swam her to shore by holding her with his tongue. He set her in the shallows and wiggle-walked his body out so he and Jax could play in the ocean.

Nova got Penny a towel. Nova laughed. “They didn’t even let your feet touch the water.”

Penny wrapped the towel around her. “I think they think the baby is made of sugar or something. So, that reminds me. Ven?”

Ven looked at her. “What?”

“Do you think boy or girl?”

“Yeah. One of those would be good.”

Penny smiled. “I will just be a phone call away. Closer if Jax can pass with authorization for the legal system, oh, and I get a place at the school in the village. There are a lot of boxes to tick for us to move Liella from her school. I am a little unsure of leaving my workplace and taking Liella from her friends, but... wow. This place is amazing.”

Ven said, “Why don’t you come here for some vacations before making a move? Jax can get his certification and work things out with Antonio. Thor can pull some overtime to make up some leave, but Liella would be leaving her aunty Gen and grandparents and little friends. I love you, but come here for vacations.” She grinned. “And I will come there to figure out what underwear feels like again.”

Penny blinked and paused. “That is supersensible. When Syar mentioned it, it seemed like such a great thing.”

Syar sniffed. "It still would be a great thing. I like the idea of a big family."

Ven smiled. "You can still spend time here, and if Liella develops an attachment for the kids here you can make the visits a semi-annual thing or even move here. And Edgar and Janie are working on paperwork to come for a visit. Once here, Syar can do the paperwork. He is very good at paperwork."

She squirmed, and Reynaldo sat on a lounge, draping her over him. "Enough plotting. You need to rest."

"Really? I was asleep most of the night."

"You were crying and whimpering," he whispered in her ear. "Syar had to curl up with you to stop it."

She sighed. "Oh."

Penny was dressed in a nice summer dress that looked like it weighed a ton next to Ven's outfit. She held up her phone. "Liella wants to talk to you."

Ven sat up a little and took the phone. "Hey, Liella."

The little dark-haired girl looked concerned. "*Auntie Ven? Are you okay? Mom told me someone took you away, and she had to go get you back.*"

"They got me. They were very helpful, and everyone is okay." She smiled.

"*Who are you sitting on?*"

Ven blinked. "What?"

"*You are sitting on someone.*"

She blushed. "Um, that is one of the people I am here with."

"*Can I see?*"

Ven looked at Reynaldo. "Do you mind?"

He shook his head, and she tilted the phone. "Liella Kekerek, this is Reynaldo. Reynaldo, this is Penny and Jax's daughter."

She looked at him, and her eyes went wide. She whispered, "*Hello.*"

He smiled. "Hello."

"Are you married to Auntie Ven?"

"No, but I am her mate, the same way your Uncle Thor is with your mom."

"Oh."

Ven saw Syar moving around and stuck his head into the camera view. "Hello, Liella."

The little girl exhaled. *"You are pretty."*

"Thank you. My name is King Syar."

She got excited. *"Do you have a crown?"*

"I do. It is made with woven reeds and flowers, but I do have one."

Ven was surprised, but Liella asked Syar how long he had been king and if he had a horse. They talked for a while, and then Penny grabbed her phone. "So, you know we are all good now?"

"When are you coming home, Mom?"

"We should be home tomorrow, Liella."

The little girl chattered to her mother about school, and Penny wandered down the beach to take a seat on a lounge. The love on her face as she talked to her daughter showed.

Syar smiled. "She and her daughter have a tight bond."

"Yeah. They first met when Liella went to her first day at kindergarten. Miss Penny is the school secretary, and all the kids know her on sight."

"Kindergarten... but Penny and she look identical." Syar was surprised.

"Yeah. Weird, huh? Jax and her mother were in an arranged situation, but when she got pregnant, she put everything on hold, including the wedding. She signed off her rights and gave Jax his baby and walked away." Ven spoke softly.

Syar winced. "I can't imagine parents walking away."

Ven sighed. "I dreamed about it."

Reynaldo hugged her close.

She relaxed and decided that maybe a nap was in order.

Two days of being coddled and cuddled and petted had driven her to the edge. She was waiting while the ultrasound tech scuttled outside to get the doctor.

Syar stood up. "Why was she freaked out?"

Ven looked at him. "You are seriously asking me? Did either of you leave some graffiti the last time you were in there?"

Reynaldo was concerned but shook his head. "I didn't leave anything you weren't expecting."

"It was days ago. Are you sure you remember?" she muttered. Their caring and fussing were nice, but it didn't blank her mind as sex did.

He gave her a surprised look.

Syar blinked. "Uh, so I am guessing that we are derelict in our duties."

She nodded. "The cuddling is nice, but now I feel like a bruised piece of fruit. A frustrated piece of fruit."

Reynaldo smirked. "We will work on that when we get home."

Syar nodded. "Right. I will push back some of my meetings."

"Dude, I don't want you telling anyone you were delayed because your beta needed to get laid."

He grinned and kissed her. "Oh, but I *want* to tell them."

The doctor came in and looked a little nervous. "Miss, I am going to have to check the scan again."

She winced. "The wand?"

"Uh, no. Actually, that isn't necessary anymore."

"What? Oh, no." Ven started to shake and got pale.

The doctor gripped her hands. “It’s fine. It’s just bigger than expected.”

She blinked. “Bigger?”

Her skirt got scooted down, and the conductive gel hit her belly. She gasped, and then the scanner slipped and slid until it found flickering. The doctor flicked a switch, and a rhythmic surging sound filled the room. He smiled. “The heartbeat is definitely strong.”

Syar whispered, “Whoa.”

Reynaldo grinned.

Ven cried.

They gathered around her and worked to calm her. Since the embryo was far enough along, they got the DNA tested and headed home. The results would be sent to them via email.

They were walking home while Ven giggled and cried in turns. Two weeks of pregnancy had turned into fourteen weeks. The baby might slow down when it got larger, but things were going fast.

She asked Syar, “So, where is the nursery going to go?”

“I thought the queen’s room would be a good place to start.”

“But... that’s where I keep my stuff.”

Reynaldo smiled. “Your desk was set up in the office today, and your luggage can go in our closet. You already have a dresser.”

She sighed. She put her hands on her belly. “It’s alive.”

“It’s alive.” He held her.

“Will you guys be upset if it is the other one’s?”

Syar grinned. “If it is Reynaldo’s, I will be excited. I told you that.”

“Reynaldo?”

“If it is Syar’s, it will be loved and spoiled, and then I will let him have it for a few minutes. I will just have to try harder next time.”

They all chuckled, but Reynaldo's beast appeared behind his eyes. Yeah, trying harder was on his agenda.

Ven gasped and panted. "Seriously. I am good. You can do business and computer stuff and meetings and things. Reynaldo, too. You can go walk the perimeter or something."

They chuckled and kept moving inside her. Syar murmured behind her, "Are you feeling better?"

She moaned and clutched at Reynaldo. "I am feeling everything."

They kept moving until all three shuddered together. They started up for the fourth time, and she figured out that they were taking the afternoon off.

Ven got the email and opened it, scrolling down to see the result, and she grinned. Sex and paternity.

She looked across at the other desks. "Guys. Check your email."

They both opened the files from hospital, and Reynaldo started laughing, and Syar cried. Ven got up and ran around Syar's desk, hugging him as he dealt with learning that he was going to have a little princess of his own.

Reynaldo came around and hugged them both. "Well, unless she slows down, she's going to be here in a month. We need to get her room ready."

Syar smiled slowly. "I just needed the colour scheme. The orders are ready."

Reynaldo smirked. "Artisans are already lined up?"

"Yeah."

He opened an email draft while they stood there, and he typed in, *It's a Girl!* He hit send, and the island kicked into gear.

Epilogue

Ven watched as the carriage approached. The high-pitched squeals of excited children could be heard, and Edgar and Janie calmed them down, so they didn't upset the horses.

Nova was standing next to her, and she said, "They are going into the bunkhouse?"

"The guesthouse. Yes. It's a requirement that the kids need separate space away from unvetted adults."

"Right. Forgot about that. Incoming!"

Ven was hugged by nine little people and then squeezed by Edgar and Janie.

Edgar looked at her abdomen. "You aren't..."

She rushed to assure him. "She's fine. Big and healthy and with her daddy."

Janie looked at her. "You don't look like you have given birth in the past month."

"The healing is really quick. Now, let's get everyone changed and hit the beach. Penny and her bunch are already down there."

"Then, let's go. Oh, and where are these mates of yours?"

"In the residence. We have clothing for you in the guesthouse, but I warn you that public nudity is common on the beach. We have cordoned off an area if you want to use it."

"We might. Thanks for thinking of it."

"No problem. We want them to have fun." She paused. "Oh. Shit. This is Nova. She's my bodyguard. We met at the book club."

"Oh, right."

Nova smiled. "I just bumped into someone at Sea World."

An older woman was following. Ven walked up to her. “Hello. You are the social worker?”

“Yes. Kelly Pritt. You are?” She was wearing a suit, and she was going to melt.

“Venetia.”

The woman checked her notes. “Oh. *Oh*. Your Highness.”

“Ah. Right. Keep forgetting about that. Well, we have you in accommodations in the residence, about twenty metres from the guesthouse. Breakfast usually has a lot of fruit, which is astonishingly fresh, but until you get used to it, stay within view of a restroom.”

Kelly laughed.

Ven stared at her.

“Oh, you weren’t joking.”

A demanding little wail came from the residence. “Come with me. I will show you your room.”

Kelly picked up her bag and walked behind Ven. Syar came out the door and said, “She’s hungry.”

Ven nodded. “I know. Can you finish showing Kelly to her room? She’s the social worker, so she needs to be within view of the guesthouse.”

“Got it. Take care of the little miss. She’s bossy today.”

“It’s called assertive, Syar. You are bossy. She’s assertive.” She took the wailing baby to the nursery and got into her favourite chair, rocking as she fed their daughter.

Reynaldo leaned in the doorway and said, “Everyone is settling in and hitting the beach. How long will you be?”

“At least half an hour. The little miss likes to take her time.”

“Want company?”

“Sure.”

He walked over to her and kissed her slowly. He stopped and whispered how his beast would have her all to himself the

next time so that it would be his cub in her arms. She made beautiful kittens.

“They are called babies.”

He chuckled. “Whatever you call them, your offspring are gorgeous.”

She smiled and murmured, “You guys do your part. Syar’s right. We would make pretty babies, and now I have proof. Penina is gorgeous.”

“So, how long until we can try again?”

She laughed. “At least a year. Now that she’s out, her growth is normal, so I am not even going to try to wean her until next year. Deal with it. If the next pregnancy is short, we will be covered in babies and diapers, and I will run out of milk.”

He kissed her again. “How many more do you want?”

“I have no idea. How many rooms are there in the residence?”

He chuckled.

There was a scream down the hall, and Reynaldo whirled to put himself between her and the intruders.

“It’s Missus and her babies. They arrive this time of day and sleep on the bed while Penina has her lunch.”

He stood aside as the jaguar came in with the two smaller versions of herself, and she tapped her nose to Ven’s hand before they hopped onto the bed. The room took on a very maternal air as everyone got calm and drowsy while Reynaldo purred beside her.

He held the baby to her while she relaxed and muttered, “Cheater.”

He smiled. “I am your bodyguard this afternoon. It is easier to track you when you are sleepy.”

“Where’s Nova?”

“When the kids hit the water, so did she. She’s acting as a lifeguard.”

“Nice. When is Mort coming back?”

“His company contract is up in three months. He will be transferring here to run a helicopter service between islands.” He grinned. “He said that when he saw a mermaid swimming with the monsters, he nearly tipped the helicopter into the sea to follow her.”

“Penny would have been pissed.”

“And Jax would have torn him into bits.”

She smiled and stroked the baby’s cheek to keep her eating. “Yup. She’s lucky in her partners.”

Reynaldo crouched near her. “And you aren’t?”

She laughed softly. “It is a different thing. My appearance was identifying as your mate, and Syar liked the way I smelled. We built from that.”

“There was more to it.”

She nodded. “Yeah. You brought me flowers.”

“I did, but it was Syar who told me to only give you one as opposed to twenty pounds of them.”

“Good call.”

Syar walked in and smiled at what he saw. “Edgar’s family is hitting the beach, and Nova is on watch. The social worker is a little stunned but seems to be willing to relax a little. Liella is at full speed with her cousins.”

As he walked forward, he ruffled Reynaldo’s hair, and their alpha moved aside. “How is she doing?”

“She could suck the chrome off a bumper. You should be very proud.”

Syar frowned. “Does it hurt?”

“It isn’t exactly comfortable.”

“It’s been a week. Can I have the leftovers?”

She rolled her eyes. “If you keep snitching leftovers, I will just make more.”

Reynaldo smiled. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Don’t you start.”

“Cats like milk.”

“Fine, but don’t blame me if you are lactose intolerant. There also isn’t much right now. I am keeping time with her.”

Penina finished her meal and fell asleep, so Ven lifted her to burp her with slow circles of her palm on her tiny back. Once she was good and sleeping again, Ven smiled. “And she’s out.”

Syar reached for his daughter, and Ven smiled. “I am keeping her to introduce her to Edgar and Janie.”

He sighed. “Fine.”

She got the baby wrap from him, tucked her in, then was ready to go and introduce the newest member to the family.

By the end of the week, the family was talking about the next time they could come back. Syar was delighted with the cousins taking careful care of Penina. The younger ones had all gotten swimming lessons from an actual mermaid, and to her shock, Ven had signed a roller derby poster for Kelly. She was a huge fan and had been shocked to find out who she was, but she had brought the poster just in case it was actually true.

Ven waved them off with Penina in her little sling. They would all be back for Edgar’s birthday in three months. Penny would still be safe to fly.

“Uh, Miss Venetia?” Kane was at her bedroom door as she got Penina ready for the day.

“Yes, Kane?”

“Something has been... delivered.”

Ven looked at him, and he held a beautifully plumaged dead bird. Her daughter was nine months old and growing at a

normal rate. She was also nearly weaned, but her father wasn't.

"Can you get Syar for me? Oh, and have the cook take care of the bird for me."

Syar came in a few minutes later as their daughter was perched on her hip. "Yes, princess?"

"When is your heat coming?"

He coloured. "About a week. Why?"

"The birds are showing up again. Missus wants to grow the family. How long are your heats?"

He shrugged. "Four days."

"Right. We need a new bodyguard and nanny for Penina. Nova is distracted right now."

He nodded. "Another woman from the book club?"

"Yeah. I have been chatting with Luna, and she has someone who needs peace and quiet. An elemental. She works at a coffee shop, so she can leave at will."

"Well, why haven't you brought her in?"

"I thought your heat was just going to be sex. If she is bringing the birds, it is going to be more involved after that. Now, are you going to let Reynaldo have his child?"

He blushed. "Not if I can help it."

She smiled. "I am having a special breakfast. You get to feed your little princess today."

Syar grinned. "Excellent."

"She's going to have to switch to formula. I don't want to give her a hormone bomb."

"Right. Of course."

"And you are going to have to lay off as well, or you will be able to nurse her."

He cocked his head. "Fair warning."

Reynaldo was discussing security with Mort, and they filled him in. He was excited, and over breakfast, they discussed the logistics. She had sent a message to Luna and was waiting for a response.

When the bird was gone and Syar was off explaining things in baby terms to their daughter, Ven caught Reynaldo's hand. "After three days of the birds, we will try to get you in before he goes off."

He grinned and wrapped his hands around her hips. "Oh, I can get in. Tight as you are, you still fit me perfectly."

She pressed her hands to his chest. "But after this, I am taking some time off."

He chuckled. "I think Makso is tired of me whining that I want more children."

"Yeah, that sounds right. You big softy."

"You have met my parents. They always wanted grandkids, just were resigned when Syar wasn't able."

"I am having these babies for us, not your family. That is a by-product. I want Pen to have brothers and sisters and parents she can trust who do what is best for her. As long as we can keep that up, there will be more babies." She grinned. "Well, until Missus kills all those birds."

"There are thousands of them in the valley."

"Oh. Great. It took about twelve of them last time."

"So, plenty. And if Pen wants to have kids when she's grown, there will be more for her."

"That is a stunning thought."

He kissed her. "It is. Now, when are you starting that circus school?"

She looked down at her flat belly. "The equipment is on a ship that should be here next week, so construction will start when the next one is born."

"I do love progress."

Two months after that conversation, Reynaldo had his own little girl in his hand and his son in the other.

Syar grinned. “You cheated.”

Ven nodded. “Of course. I knew you were going to do your utmost. You are far too good with Penina.”

Their daughter was sucking her fist, and she squealed and waved at the new babies.

Syar asked, “Can I get twins next time?”

“Well, I am pretty sure that one was during the cheat and the other during your heat. So, it’s your fault.” She chuckled. “Now, no more babies for two years. The house is filling fast.”

“We have nine rooms available.”

She laughed. “And three babies in under a year. Are you trying to populate the island on our own?”

He leaned toward her. “If they all have your blood in their veins, absolutely.”

Reynaldo was sitting and still staring with tears in his eyes and their little legs kicking. “Two?”

“Your parents will be out here in two weeks to meet their new grandbabies.”

He looked at her and smiled. “Two?”

She laughed. “Two. So, no leftovers.”

Syar sighed. “Dang.”

They chuckled, and hospital got the babies weighed and ready to go home. Ven was healing already.

The new nanny helped get things sorted out, and the family was all tucked in with the newborns in the room. Eliana was extremely efficient. Her focus was water, so the people were just a task she had to take care of. Luna had said she had a bad breakup and had lost interest in romance. Her loss was Ven’s gain. She was amazing with kids while not encroaching on parent attachment.

Ven fell asleep cuddled between her mates with the warm air blowing through the slats of the windows. No tension, no fear, no trepidation for the future and a whole lot of rage had simply faded away with intense exposure to light and gentle affection. She smiled against Syar's cheek. Sometimes not so gentle affection. She had a new home while keeping her family. She, Penny, and Edgar had upgraded from calling each other cousins to brother and sisters for the ease of the kids.

Penina and her siblings had actual cousins. Ven had mates and a family of her own. The only violence in her house happened when someone tried to hurt her family. Syar was wealthy and loaded, so they would always be targets. Now that their family was expanding, so was their protection detail. It was just something else to get used to.

Ven heard the snuffling of the newborns, and she heard the sounds that warned her of an incoming yowl. Reynaldo got up and said, "I'll bring them."

She grinned. Syar had done the same, but she didn't take it for granted. Reynaldo picked them up and brought them to the bed, where a sleepy Syar sat up and helped her line them up and feed them. Three sleepy adults fed the two infants, and then Ven silently celebrated the best part. Reynaldo took care of the diapers. It might turn her into a lazy mom, but in the middle of the night, she wasn't too coordinated.

When the babies were clean, full, and soothed, everyone went back to sleep. When Penina wailed, Syar got up and took care of her, soothing her and bringing her to bed to cuddle her. When she was asleep, she was put back in her crib, and Syar thudded to the bed. "Right. We wanted them; we take care of them."

Ven stroked his hair. "You are very wise, my king."

He smiled sleepily and passed out.

Reynaldo wrapped his arms around her and whispered, "Sleep while you can, princess. They will be twice awake before dawn."

"Do you have names?"

“I am still thinking. Even though I knew they were coming, I was shocked when I was holding them.”

“Give me a few more years before more show up. These nightly feedings are rough.”

He chuckled. “I think that I will eventually agree with you, but my beast wants what he wants.”

She snorted and curled up against him. “We will have a chat before your next rut.”

He chuckled and purred her into sleep.

After a few hours and some pre-dawn wailing, she got up to another day in paradise.

Author's Note

Well, that was that. There are at least two stories planned on the island. Probably. I thought exporting the betas would be helpful.

Thanks for reading,

Viola Grace

About the Author

Viola Grace (aka Zenina Masters) is a Canadian sci-fi/paranormal romance writer with ambitions to keep writing for the rest of her life. She specializes in short stories because the thrill of discovery, of all those firsts, is what keeps her writing.

An artist who enjoys a story that catches you up, whirls you around, and sets you down with a smile on your face is all she endeavours to be. She prefers to leave the drama to those who are better suited to it, she always goes for the cheap laugh.

In real life, she is now engaged in beekeeping, and her adventures can be found on the YouTube channel, Mystery Bees Apiary. Just look for the cartoon kittens.