



*Hidden
Intuition*

VIOLA GRACE

♥ Betas In Waiting

Reebee's intuition lets her know how to survive, and suddenly, that formula includes two alphas who give her what she needs and a bit more. She restarts her own life for the second time with room for change.

Reebee has been unwell for the last five weeks. Since she got back to the city and returned the strength and protection she had borrowed from two alphas, she has been sick as hell and not keeping anything down. Her ex has turned up his stalking, and her mother is trying to kill her... again. It's been stressful.

She's been hiding successfully at an empty property when her illness takes a nasty turn. Kern was one of the alphas she had borrowed from, and he was the one who found her, getting her to the hospital and under the care of the second alpha from that arrangement, Theo. Kern's scent eases her pain, and she suspects at that point what her problem is. The problem is that she spent the first four weeks of her pregnancy running overland and through volcanoes, along with free diving in a tropical ocean. She hoped she didn't mess it up.

Appreciating how ill alpha withdrawal had made her, she agrees to spend time recovering and getting ready to return to work at her previous level, and they agree to assist her with her goals and projects as long as she takes care of herself. She's going to be a mom, Kern's going to be a dad, and people out there are still trying to kill her. What an easy start to a partnership.

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.

Hidden Intuition

Copyright © 2023 by Viola Grace

ISBN: 978-1-990635-35-9

©Cover art by Angela Waters

All rights reserved. With the exception of review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the express permission of the publisher.

Published by Viola Grace

Smashwords Edition

Look for me online at violagrace.com.

Hidden Intuition
Betas in Waiting Book 17

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Reebee smiled and chatted with her team while she finished doing the checks on the team, crossing out one member who tended to inflate their expense reports and then handed the file to Renner. “Thanks, Renner. I am going to head out. I am not feeling great right now.”

“Good. You look like shit, boss, and why are you putting the wig on again?”

“You have the trailers playing on your computer, Renner. I am getting recognized. I thought they were going to wait another week, but here we are.”

She fluffed the brunette wig and looked at herself in the glass wall next to her desk. She looked remarkably like a normal woman going through chemo. What the hell was making her sick? All she wanted was some rest.

She grabbed her keys and purse. “I am out for the day. I have to shake this, and I am not going to do it here.”

“You have months of sick leave accrued. Take a few days.” Renner grinned. “Get better, or I am going to bring you more of my mother’s soup.”

“Yup. No problem. I am going to get better.” She said it with a confidence she didn’t feel.

She locked her computer and headed out, waving to a few people on her team as she went. She got her tiny, nondescript car and drove out of the lot to the spot she had staked out to hide. Her family had broken into her apartment weeks ago, and going home wasn’t safe, so she had an empty property with a lot of trees. No one could find her there.

* * * *

Elsbetha looked at the destroyed property in shock. “Oh, god.”

Arkos rubbed her back. “She wasn’t here. She hasn’t been here in weeks.”

A dark, sleek sedan pulled up, and a man in a black suit, black tie, and narrow sunglasses stepped out. His hair was black and pulled back in a ponytail, and his skin was gold. Elspetha could feel the power radiating from him.

Arkos murmured, “That is my acquaintance. Kern. He can find things, people. That sort of thing.”

“Great.” She was holding Arkos’s hand as Kern was giving off a lot of power. It seemed to snake around him. Where was a T-rex when you needed one? Oh, wait. He was shopping for groceries.

Arkos nodded to him. “My mate’s friend is missing, extremely ill, and a few weeks ago, her home was destroyed. Pictures, linens, furniture, all slashed to pieces.”

Kern nodded. “Stay out here while I take a look.”

Elspetha watched the man glide into Reebee’s apartment, and he was in there for five minutes. When he came out, there was a green glow behind his glasses. “Do you have a picture?”

Elspetha brought one of the promo images that Wander had sent her. She showed it to Kern, and he stiffened.

“I will find her and bring her to Meksoren Hospital. I will text Arkos when I am on my way.” He was bristling with energy and turned to Elspetha. “What’s her name?”

“Reebee. Rhymbia Turner. Everyone calls her Reebee.”

“Thank you. She never gave me her name.” He turned and sprinted to his car.

Arkos stared, and then a stunned expression crossed his features.

The car roared away, and Elspetha felt the shock in Arkos’s link. “What is it? What’s wrong? Will he find her?”

“Oh, he will find her. I think he may have made her sick. He’s highly toxic and can stun at a glance.”

“Wait. You think she... he... Oh dear.” Elspetha swallowed. “Did you say he can find anything?”

“Yes. That is his primary talent. He’s a hunter down to the bone. I just haven’t heard of him having a lover. Ever.”

“I think it was Reebee that sought him out. She has a side talent that we don’t chat about.”

“What is that?”

“She can borrow skills from alphas. When she was on that show, she needed a bunch of skills that would take a while to acquire, so she borrowed them.” Elspetha frowned. “I wish she had told me that. I wouldn’t have been as worried.”

Arkos hugged her. “Let’s head to the hospital. Kern isn’t going to waste time.”

* * * *

Light flashed across her face. Reebee felt her breath rattle in her lungs as her hatch was opened. She heard soft cursing and gentle hands gathered her up and held her against a chest with a familiar scent.

There was an acid-green glow over her, and that was familiar, too. She was settled and buckled in. An engine roared to life, and her body was pushed into the seat as the car accelerated.

Pheromones filled the car, and her breathing eased up as they wove their way through traffic as if it wasn’t there. She could sense the other cars around them as they drove, but she couldn’t wake up. Her eyes just would not open.

He didn’t say a word. Her memory replayed low grunts and soft praises. Her cheeks got hot, but her body was on strike. She couldn’t make herself move.

They stopped, and he unbuckled her seatbelt, walked around the car, lifted her, and then closed the door with a thunk.

Light flared on the other side of her lids, and she heard people talking, some crying, screaming in the distance, and the medicinal tang blocked out the warm alpha smells that had been helping her to breathe. The rattling breathing commenced immediately.

“You found her.” Elspetha’s voice was worried. “Oh, god. She’s barely breathing.”

A female voice she didn’t recognize said, “The room is ready. Bring her in here.”

The man carrying her followed the woman, who had to be a nurse, to what Reebee guessed was a triage room.

She heard Elspetha fussing and someone that Reebee didn’t know soothing her. Bloodwork and monitors, oxygen that helped her breathe a little. Warm blankets were pulled over her, and she felt a soothing hand on her forehead. His low whisper to the nurse made her try to fight her way back into control of her body. “Pregnancy test.”

Is that what was consuming her from the inside out? Shit. She had wanted to offer sex over blood, so it was likely. Her body got what it wanted. Reebee was going to have words with it later.

She woke up in a quiet room and had a jacket covering her. The scent coming from the jacket was working on her senses.

Her hand was warm, and she turned her head to see that he threaded his fingers with hers. She remembered. “Kern.”

His head whipped toward hers, and he sighed. “Reebee? Or Rhymbia? Which do you prefer?”

“Reebee is easier for most people. So, what happened? Some weird jungle fever or ocean bacteria?”

Kern tilted his head. “Well, you did pick up a parasite. The specialist is on the way in.”

She blinked. “Is it serious?”

“Wait to talk to the specialist. The nurse just announced that he was on his way. So, now, I have a few questions.”

“So do I. Why is your jacket on me?”

“It helps you breathe. Now, what are those scars on your wrists? The nurse thought they were self-inflicted until I showed they were from restraints.”

“Scars.”

“From zip ties?”

“Yeah. I was supposed to be assassinated, but the guy thought I was worth more than just the first bonus. He was going to use me and sell me, but first, he had to get me out of town while he killed another family’s daughter. I got behind him and used the ties to cut through his neck. He still knocked the other car off the road but not on a high pass. They survive to this day. My wrists got cut.”

He turned her wrist. “Yeah, that would do it. So, you killed him?”

“Yup. Went through the courts and the investigations, and it was declared self-defense and wiped from my record. Yay, me.”

He smiled. “Your friend took away the brunette wig and contacts.”

“Ah. Right. Didn’t have a chance to take them off.”

“How long were you out there?”

“A few weeks. I shower at the gym in the building.”

He nodded and kept hold of her hand.

There was a polite knock on the door, and it slowly swung open. The figure in the lab coat was embarrassingly familiar.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” She slapped her free hand over her eyes as the man she and Kern had enjoyed a ménage with walked into the room.

He gave her a calm smile. “Miss Turner, you are in rough shape. When did your symptoms start?”

“Five weeks ago. When I got back from the competition.” She blinked. “Three days after I returned what I had borrowed.”

Kern squeezed her hand. “Just like you promised.”

“I didn’t need it forever. Using contacts that were my own eye colour was weird.” She looked at the doctor’s badge, which said Galanis–Obstetrics Gynecology.

She met the doctor’s pretty grey eye and looked at the new patch. “Is that really one you wear for work?”

He smiled. “Yes. You remember me?”

“Um. Yes. Vividly.” She blushed scarlet. Her mind scrambled and came up with, “Theo?”

He beamed. “Yes. You were very hot that night, and I was not sure what stuck.”

She tried to scramble back, but she was too low. “What stuck... exactly?”

He got a chair and sat on the other side of her bed. “Kern, how was she when you found her?”

“Unresponsive. Her breathing eased in the car, but it got worse in triage. Her friend suggested putting the jacket on her, and her breathing calmed. Now, why would that be?”

Dr. Theo looked at her. “I am assuming that you know you are pregnant.”

“I was putting things together. How far along?”

The doctor smiled. “Nine weeks.”

“Well, fuck.”

“That is how it normally happens. So, congratulations, Kern. You are going to be a dad.”

She stared at him. “How do you know it is his?”

He gave her a long look with his single eye. “I can see his power signature all over your belly. I would not normally say that to a patient, but you are a special circumstance. And aside

from the power signature, I wasn't in a position to get you pregnant. Literally."

She closed her eyes. "Mortifying. Can one of you let a hand go so I can move the bed to sitting?"

Theo leaned over, and the bed hummed as it elevated. She went from being loomed over to making eye contact. The hand that Theo held had an IV in it. She looked up and saw the bag. She sighed. "Fluids and nutrients."

"Yes. Your stats are not great. As soon as Kern takes that jacket off, your blood pressure is going to drop."

"Yeah. I know. Elspetha's mother died from an alpha pregnancy without a link."

Theo sighed. "Yeah, every time one of those comes through, it is always a guess as to whether the mother will survive. If the alpha is with her without linking to her, I want to break their fucking hands."

Kern murmured, "Since he is a doctor, that is a mean and scary thing."

She blinked. "Well, doc, what is the game plan?"

Theo blinked. "I just said. Kern needs to mark you."

She looked to Kern. "It was just a one-night thing. I wasn't out to trap you into anything. Is there a temporary bite or something?"

Kern shook his head. "I am afraid not. My venom is a one-way street. You are strangely adaptable to my toxin, and I would be a fool to let that escape me."

She wrinkled her nose. "I am hating my intuition right now."

Theo chuckled. "I am appreciating it. I am the one who got you out of your car that first night."

She groaned. "Right."

Kern chuckled. "But I sent him out to find out why you were parked across the street."

She winced. “How are you two friends anyway?”

Kern smiled. “I dated his sister while he was in college. We are still friends to this day, but she is settled down with kids and a partner.”

“Oh. Right.” She looked over at Theo. “Why are you single? You are a freaking doctor, for Pete’s sake.”

He smiled. “Most of the women I have tried to date get a little weirded out when they realize I have to analyze women’s privates for a living.”

She grinned. “Why would that bother them? You literally aren’t looking at anything else.”

Theo laughed. “I do try and tell them that, but it doesn’t matter. They fixate on my job and not on me. Well, the single eye doesn’t help.”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why. It is refreshing to know if someone is looking at you.”

He laughed. “You happen to have a unique perspective.”

“Your perspective was pretty precise, and you didn’t seem disinterested in the subject matter at all. I would have noticed yawning.”

He grinned, and there was a bit of a blush. “It is one of my favourite memories. I vividly remember that I had your attention.”

Kern asked. “You don’t regret that night?”

She turned to look at him. “Well, I wish it wasn’t killing me. But no. Not the fooling around.”

His fingers closed tightly around hers. “That’s unusual. My touch tends to make women ill.”

She snorted and then stared at him. “Oh, you mean literally. Well, I was fine. I think I pulled enough of your energy to give my body time to adapt. I snagged some stuff from Theo as well since he agreed to the same terms. I do have to thank you. It came in very handy while filming the show.”

Kern smiled. “How did you do?”

“I have a non-disclosure agreement. The promo has started to appear online. I think they are going to stream it over the next few weeks. They didn’t actually warn me of when that was coming.”

“Ah, the picture of you with two large, sweaty alphas.”

“They are very nice people. Kind and helpful. They saved my life, and I saved theirs during the show.”

Kern growled. “I would like a little explanation.”

“Uh. Some of the stuff I did during the show was dangerous. A lot of the events were extremely dangerous. If I am still pregnant after that, this is one tough little bean.”

One of the nurses knocked and came in to see Reebee flanked by the alphas. “Oh, Dr. Galanis, I thought you had gone home for the day.”

“Just helping a friend.”

The nurse focused on Reebee, and her eyes went wide. “Ohmygod, you are the woman from *Alphas versus Betas*.”

“Is that what they ended up calling it? Huh. There were three women on the show, by the way.”

“Are you ill?”

“Well, Dr. Galanis is visiting in his professional capacity.”

The nurse paused, so Reebee smiled slightly. “Now, I am not saying he hasn’t already seen my junk in a recreational capacity, but that isn’t today. And when you watch the show, I had no idea I was pregnant. None.”

The nurse blushed and nodded. “Uh, right.”

“Also, can I get some juice or something? The IV isn’t cutting it.”

The nurse smiled. “Yes, miss.”

She scampered away.

Kern looked at her and smiled as he shook his head. Theo’s face was beet red.

Reebee leaned back. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

He stroked her hair back from her forehead. “It was startling. I have never had a woman claim me at work.”

She winced. “I guess it did sound like that.”

“Don’t worry. I thought it was very sweet.”

It was her turn to blush.

He stood and kissed her forehead. “I am going to go change into something that isn’t a lab coat, and I will be right back. Do you have any particular symptoms we need to address?”

“Hyperemesis.”

He winced. “That explains the weight loss. Kern, you know what to do.”

Kern nodded. “I will take care of it.”

Chapter Two

Theo left the room, and Reebee looked at Kern. “What are you taking care of?”

“You. Reebee, will you be my bonded beta?” He took his dark glasses off and looked into her eyes.

“Um, yes. I guess. Are you sure?”

He smiled. “I’m sure.” He opened his mouth, and his long fangs folded down, dripping with venom. She watched him open the snaps on the shoulder of her gown, and he sank his fangs and lower teeth into her.

She panted as he held her and gasped while the burn of his venom sent fire through her veins. He held her there for what felt like two minutes, but when he pulled his fangs out, she was already feeling stronger.

He leaned back and smiled then came in and licked her cheeks with his tongue. The forks of his tongue moved and slithered as he lapped at her tears. She dragged in a shattered breath and looked at him. “Well, that’s that then.”

“No, it’s only starting.”

He carefully snapped the gown back into normal lines.

He sat next to her and stared at her. “Now, tell me what happened to your apartment.”

“It was my ex-boyfriend, who is now my brother-in-law.”

Kern nodded. “That explains the alpha musk all over your shattered furniture.”

“Yeah. My mom first tried to kill me, then she sent one of my omega sisters to my boyfriend’s place, and now, they are together with a pack. But he still wanted to keep me as his beta on the side. He took the *no* for a few years, but now, my sister has shifted her prime to another pack member, and it’s just him and his hand most nights. Before I left for the show, I was stronger, thanks to you two, and that got him hot from a

distance. He made a pitch for me, and I declined, but he continued. Then, I headed to the island, and when I got home, he called again. I returned the strength I had borrowed, and he showed up, telling me he still wanted me.”

Kern nodded. “And?”

“He started stalking me, and instead of returning home one night, I followed my intuition and took myself out for dinner. When I got home, everything was trashed, but I had agreed to remain in the city until the program aired. I have a chunk of property that is wild... well... you know that part. So, I ate out at work, promptly threw it up, and survived on sips of coffee and sports drinks.”

He smiled slightly. “Don’t tell Theo that. He will have you on a meal plan in seconds. Is Turner your family name?”

“No. It’s my mother’s family name. I’m a bastard. My mother remarried a great guy when I was six months old and refused to let him legally adopt me. Had two girls who are very successful omegas. They are great, and I enjoy spending money to get them the newest purses every year.”

“Refused to let him adopt you?”

“Yeah, stepparents can adopt the children of their spouse if there is no objection from the other parent. In my case, my mom didn’t know who my father was and didn’t care to find out. She was a lucky beta who didn’t have any side effects from the pregnancy. But to my stepdad, I am always his little jade monkey.” She smiled then straightened her expression. “It’s my mom who wants me dead and my ex-boyfriend who wants me as a pet.”

Kern nodded. “I will meet with him and let him know that it isn’t happening. Can we run DNA and find out if there are any local families that match?”

“Uh, sure. I have my mom’s colouring but have no idea where my features came from.”

He patted her arm. “We will figure it out. Now, how do you feel about taking Theo on as a second?”

“Uh, my body is enthusiastic about it, embarrassingly so. I am guessing that he works weird hours, and I am not sure what you do for a living, so I can just keep my day job and meet you at home. Well, your home.”

He chuckled. “My entertainment system wouldn’t fit in the trash heap that was your apartment. I hope you didn’t have anything in there that you wanted to keep. They were thorough.”

The nurse came in with the apple juice. Reebee smiled. “Thank you, miss. Kern, would you believe I have all my precious items at work?”

The nurse swung the table across the bed and put the juice cup on it. She hesitated. “Miss, would you sign something for me? We printed out that poster that has been everywhere today. Would you mind?”

Reebee nodded. “Bring me a pen and the paper.”

The nurse flew out of the room.

Kern sighed. “Am I going to hate the poster?”

“Well, you just suggested we shack up with Theo, so I don’t think exclusivity is an issue. That said, the two guys in the poster are really nice, and while we were all there to compete, it wasn’t at the expense of our awareness of others. We even worked as a team during one challenge.”

She noticed that Kern had put his sunglasses on again. When the nurse returned with the legal-sized poster in brilliant colour, Kern asked, “May I see that?”

The nurse smiled and handed it over. “I just got the file today. It looks so cool. Every purchase goes to the charity or foundation you guys chose, right?”

Reebee nodded. “That’s correct. That was the entire point of it. We all represented a different charity or foundation, so no matter who won, we were all working toward something better. The rest was just a very dangerous game.”

The nurse was excited. “Dangerous?”

“You will see.”

Kern tapped the page. “Who are they?”

“That’s Magnus. I think he’s a lawyer. The other is Vasuki. He’s a firefighter.”

He looked at her body in the image and her body now. “You had nothing left to lose.”

“Not really. Getting sick right after hit me so fast that I was caught off guard. I went from summer body to haunting.”

The nurse handed her the pen and pointed to her name. Reebee wrote a few words and signed her nickname with a flourish. The nurse grinned and did a little dance before retrieving her pen and continuing her shift.

Kern sighed. “They looked like they wanted to consume you.”

“That’s just the pose.”

“No, they definitely looked like they were just waiting for permission to pounce. So, did you take power from them as well?”

She blushed. “Only Magnus, and it was an accident. An emergency tank was sabotaged, and I ran out of air. He saw me thrashing and gave me air. I borrowed some additional lung capacity, got to the next emergency tank, and completed my task.”

He chuckled. “It figures. You didn’t kiss Vasuki?”

“No. It wasn’t necessary. I did keep him and Magnus from falling down a cliff.”

“Hm. How did the firefighter save you?”

“Ah. The game designers plotted a path through a dormant volcano for the betas.”

“And?”

“It wasn’t the dormant one. I ended up in an expanding lava field, and they picked me up with the emergency helicopter. Vasuki hung from the landing things, grabbed me, and tossed me into the helicopter, where Magnus got my melted shoes from me. They both fussed over me like mother hens until we

landed.” She didn’t mention that she made them hold her legs so she could grab her token for the day. The idea of her hanging upside down from the landing gear while being held by two strange alphas might irritate him.

Kern sighed and kissed her palm. “They asked about your relationship status?”

“Yup.”

“You said?”

“I wasn’t mated, but I was seeing someone just before the competition. They asked if it was serious, and I said he was very serious.”

Kern grimaced. “And what did they say to that?”

“They would talk to you after the show aired.”

He chuckled. “Well, they are smart and have good taste.”

“Only one tasted me.”

“Were you sweating around them?”

“Yeah, most of the time.”

He laughed. “They tasted you.”

“Aw, fuck. Alphas are treacherous bastards.”

“Yes, we are.” He rubbed his thumb along the inside of her wrist. “How are you feeling?”

She thought about how to answer that. “Uh, warm and tingly?” She punched a thumb into her apple juice and sipped it.

“No aches, pains, numbness?”

“No. Pulse is steadyish.”

“Theo will love that.”

Theo walked in with his black leather patch on, white button-down shirt, and black slacks. His thick dark gold hair was tousled, and her fingers twitched remembering the touch of that cool silk.

Kern chuckled, and she looked at him, realizing at that point that he had picked up the increase in her pulse. “Oops.”

He grinned.

Theo blinked. “Wow. He never does that in public. What did you do?”

Kern chuckled. “She watched you walk in. Check the monitor.”

Theo snorted, went to the pulse monitor, and smiled slowly. “I think you are pretty, too, Reebee.”

She tried to pull her hand loose from Kern, but he held it. “I am not in a great state for self-control. I will just ignore him when he walks past me again. Maybe.”

Theo looked ridiculously pleased with himself. “Your heartbeat is strong. I know I shouldn’t, but can we examine the baby’s stats?”

“Is there a nurse due to check on me?”

He blinked. “Right. I will get them to check you out, and then I will do the exam.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kern frowned. “Why can’t she walk in? It is just gel and your belly.”

Theo grinned. “You explain it.”

“For a few more weeks, the baby can’t be seen by the exterior wand. He was hesitant because he has to lube up a wand to find the bubble of the baby. Same way it got in.” She was blushing again, but it was true.

“You are making his night.” Kern chuckled. “Despite his occupation, he doesn’t date much. Everyone wants a doctor until they find out they spend their days staring at other naked women.”

“Most of it is strategic nudity. No doctor has their patients butt naked unless the woman prefers that in active labour.”

Kern stroked her wrist. “How do you know so much about it?”

“Two omega sisters. They each have two kids, and I was the birthing partner for three of them. Pissed my mother off to no end.”

He blinked. “Oh, right. So, you have done this before.”

“Not from this vantage point.” She grimaced.

Theo came back with a nurse, and she had a sheet of paper in her hand with a familiar image. Reebee smiled. “Do you have a pen?”

“Of course. Did you have a great time?”

Reebee laughed. “You will have to watch. I have no idea what it looks like edited together.”

The nurse looked at Theo and then Kern. “Miss, did you know Doc Theo and this gentleman before you left?”

“Oh. Definitely. We had... uh... met. Hence my current visit.”

The nurse took her vitals and charted them while Reebee signed her own legs below the shorts.

The nurse grinned. “Thanks. We are going to be coming in with one of these all night.”

“Oh. Yay. I am glad I am just puking constantly and not sleep-deprived.”

“Well, you have a few hours to get some rest, and food will be brought to you. You are too late for dinner, but we can manage a snack.”

Theo smiled and smoothed Reebee’s hair again. “I’ve got this.”

The nurse laughed. “He’s a master of navigating the commissary. He also shares snacks.”

“Good to know. A good provider is extremely handy.” She glanced at Theo, and he was staring at her and looked hungry. “What did I say?”

Theo leaned in and kissed her in front of the nurse and Kern. His mouth was warm and firm. He licked her lips and delved into her mouth. She tried to raise her hand to hold him, but it was pinned by the weight of him against the tubes.

She tasted coffee, a hint of sweet, and Theo. She was hungry. They kissed, and the nurse made a small squeak. Theo held her head as he kissed her, and she felt her body using some of the fluids they had jacked into her system.

Kern made an amused sound, and she suspected it was because he could sense her getting hot.

She hadn't felt anything near arousal since that night, so this was interesting.

Theo raised his head. "You had apple juice."

"I want... coffee." She looked at his eye and sighed slowly.

His slow smile warmed her heart and other places.

"I will get you a selection of things to try as long as Kern keeps the jacket over you."

Kern chuckled. "I don't think she needs it anymore."

The nurse was blinking, "Oh, miss, so you already had alphas."

Reebee looked at her and smiled. "I did, but nothing was formal. When I got back, things got busy, and we hadn't reconnected until today."

The nurse started vibrating in place, and Reebee could see her thoughts whirling. "Right. I will be back in a few hours to check on you."

Reebee nodded and looked at the bags she was hooked up to. They were still half full.

She frowned at her hand and the tubes. "Does anyone like this thing?"

Theo chuckled. "Absolutely not."

The nurse was gone, so Theo kissed her again. When he lifted his head, he stroked her face. "Your colour is coming

back.”

“Yeah, well, Kern um...”

“We did a cold mark.”

Theo blinked. “Where?”

Kern unsnapped the neck of the gown, and Theo examined the wounds and touched them. “You have a clean mark, and it looks like an acid burn.”

Reebee nodded. “That’s sort of what it felt like.”

Kern looked at Theo. “You wanted to do that scan?”

Theo snorted and then wheeled the ultrasound unit over. The end of the bed dropped, and the stirrups came up. He put the plastic condom on it and squirted the lube on it. She wiggled down to set her feet in place. “Before you say it, I am scooting.”

She waited until her butt was hanging off the edge, and he chuckled. “This will be a little cool.”

The machine beeped on, and the probe went in. It was uncomfortable, but he managed to capture images of the little black blob with the silver centre. He printed out six of the little images and smiled.

She wiggled in reverse to get back to the head of the bed, and Kern lifted her and settled her while Theo cleaned the machine.

Reebee looked at the mark on the display and remembered the rush of hearing the rapid, tiny heartbeat. “Wow. First picture.”

Kern grinned. “This is unexpected but very much welcome.”

Theo laughed. “Kern had a whole plan for being a bachelor billionaire. He was going to live alone in that big house and build his empire.”

Kern snorted.

“Lofty goals, but now, he is going to fit in playgroups and endless birthday parties.”

Kern blinked. “I am guessing that I can ease into it.”

Reebee nodded. “You think that if it gives you comfort. I can ask my stepsisters to bring babies by for practice.”

“Wait. You can just borrow babies?”

“Well, three pack members will come along.” She chuckled.

Kern sighed. “I will think about it.”

Theo offered, “I can ask a patient for a class. I don’t usually deal with them after they are born, so I might need a refresher.”

Her stomach growled, and she sighed, sipping some more apple juice out of the teeny cup.

Theo frowned. “Does that happen a lot?”

“Whenever a nice lady brings me apple juice.”

“No, your stomach growling.”

“I have violent alpha withdrawal-induced vomiting. So, yes, I get to keep ten percent of my food if I pick my battles and live on berry smoothies.”

“So, you have been able to eat?”

“Yup. Just not keep it.”

Theo grinned. “Excellent. Kern, do you mind staying a bit longer?”

Kern snorted. “Go and charm the commissary staff.”

“Ob-gyn with one eye? They call me the baby pirate. I will be right back.”

Reebee stared at him. “Wow.”

He paused with the door open. “What?”

“I just realized that when you wink, you are in the dark.”

He chortled his way out of the room.

Reebee turned to her primary alpha at the moment. “So, sorry to derail your plans for the day.”

Kern got up again and loomed over her. “I got a mate and a baby in one day. Scoot over.”

“I am not scooting far. I am still dealing with that lube.”

“You are witty. I remember that from when Theo hauled you inside.”

He lay next to her and wrapped his arms around her, her face against his chest. He was careful with her lines, and she inhaled deep. Her body relaxed, and he tossed his jacket to one side.

“Why did Theo haul me inside? You could have come out any time in the hours I was sitting there and debating?”

He kissed her temple. “Why were you waiting for hours?”

“The timing wasn’t right. I had to wait there until something happened.”

He tilted her chin up. “I was dealing with feeling that everything I needed was just outside my door, but I thought I was going crazy, so I sent Theo out to verify that I wasn’t losing my mind.”

She stared into his sunglasses and saw her own face. She looked surprised. She gathered her thoughts. “So, Elspetha’s friend asked you to find me?”

“Not friend. Mate. She was worried, so he was worried. When he called me, I knew that his request would lead to something I wanted. Your scent was faint, but your friend had that poster image on her phone. The moment I saw your face, I had the path to you in my mind. Is that your property?”

“Yeah. I bought it with my big-girl money. JN Foundation pays pretty well when you put the time in.”

His hand held her against him, and he made a soft hissing sound. She heard the sound, it rippled through her mark, and she relaxed to a light doze.

She stayed against him until Theo returned. He used light strokes on her cheek and neck to wake her. “Time to try eating, Rhymbia.”

She slowly sat up, and Kern helped her move around the IVs. Having her arm trapped wasn't her favourite thing.

Kern helped her settle and sit up while Theo arranged a shocking variety of food for a hospital food service.

She looked at Theo and asked, “You want me to start somewhere specific?”

“Just grab what you like.”

“I am going to skip the obvious joke there.” She reached for the gelatin with whipped cream and started slowly eating.

Once that settled, she went for some veggie sticks. There was a burger that appeared plain and cut into segments, some mac and cheese, and two more desserts.

She slowly made her way through about half of the tray, and the water and coffee washed it all down. Now, it was a waiting game.

Kern stroked her hair while her body got to work. He kissed her cheek and said, “Rest. I can hold your hair if you need it.”

She chuckled.

A nurse knocked and stuck her head in. “Miss Turner, there are visitors for you. Are you up to seeing them?”

“Friends or family?”

“Friends.”

“Let them in, please. No family allowed until I get my phone and can authorize visits.” She looked at Theo. “How long am I supposed to stay here?”

“Until you finish those fluids and your stomach and intestines are active.” Theo added, “And if you can keep the meal down for an hour.”

“Oh. Cool. Well, I am feeling better.”

Elspetha and Altar came in and smiled in relief. Elspetha stood at her feet and squeezed them. “Reebee, you should have told me what was going on. I could have helped.”

Altar sighed. “I thought you were just quiet because of the show and all the after-interviews.”

“Ah. No. My ex strikes again.” She smiled. “He trashed my place, so I get to go apartment hunting and redecorate all over again.”

Kern cleared his throat and shook his head.

“Oh. Right. I am going to be staying with Kern. This is Theo or Dr. Galanis. Theo, Kern, these are my friends, Elspetha and Altar, but Elspetha used to be Libby.”

Altar stared at Kern. Reebee looked between them and said, “You have met.”

Altar nodded. “At a variety of fundraisers. Kern sits in the corner, and the shadows wrap around him.”

Kern smiled. “That is because light had not yet found me.”

Elspetha laughed. “Oh, that’s slick.”

Altar looked at Theo. “How did you meet?”

He inclined his head. “There was a car parked in front of Kern’s place. I went inside, and he asked me to invite the driver in. I knocked on her window, we spoke, and she followed me inside. Then, she asked us a question.”

Reebee blushed. “I asked if I could borrow some of their power for the show. They agreed with the conditions, and now, I was nine weeks pregnant with no alpha mark. So, that has been fixed.”

Elspetha smiled. “Me too. I ended up with three.”

One of the nurses knocked and said, “Can I get another autograph?”

Reebee looked up. “Sure.”

Elspetha looked at the poster and laughed. “I can’t believe my cousin did that.”

Reebee blinked. “Cousin?”

“Vasuki.” Elspetha tapped the black-haired, bronze-skinned firefighter on the page. “Not by blood but by marriage. Through Lexa’s Delun.”

Altar smiled. “I am not related to the other one. Don’t worry. But... who is he?”

Elspetha smirked. “Elias’s lawyer. He drew up all of the pack-style paperwork, we signed it, and now, I fight for sleep and wonder if I am pregnant.”

Theo and the nurse perked up. The nurse asked, “How far along are you?”

“Less than a week.”

“Have you peed on a stick yet?”

Elspetha grumbled. “Every morning. There is a line so faint it is hard to see.”

Theo chuckled. “Wait one more week, and if you want the name of an obstetrician, I can recommend one.”

Reebee blinked. “You don’t have room on your books? I guess I should find one as well.”

Theo took her hand and kissed it. “You are fine, Rhymbia. I am just sure that you wouldn’t want me staring at your friend’s body during her exams.”

Reebee laughed. “That isn’t actually a worry. I don’t care. I will be a mate, not a girlfriend.”

Theo blinked. “Right. I had forgotten about that.”

Kern stroked her hand and arm. “I didn’t. It is very much in my mind right now.”

Reebee handed the fascinated nurse the newly signed page, and the woman reluctantly left. She didn’t blame her; this was probably a very interesting room.

Chapter Three

When the duty physician checked her bloodwork for what felt like the ninth time, she was free to leave. There was only one problem: Reebee had been so rigid when she was brought in that her clothing had met with scissors. Kern had called someone at seven and spoken quietly. When she was cleared to leave, a man, who looked serious and sinister, walked into the room, handing Kern a bag.

“Jeffrey, this is my mate, Rhymbia Turner.”

The brown-haired and brown-eyed man looked at her with the same serious expression he had walked in with. “Ah, the lady from two months ago. Good day, Miss Turner.”

“Hi, Jeffrey. Sorry to put you out this morning, but only myself and Kern know where my car is with all my stuff.”

He smiled slightly. “It was an interesting start to the day.”

Kern went through the bag. “You are taking today off?”

“Yeah, now that you have solved that issue, I need to start stuffing my face to regain some of my mass.”

Another nurse came in after a brief knock, and he had the paper that Reebee had already signed nine times. The man paused, and Reebee smiled and beckoned him in.

He had a Sharpie and the poster. She signed it to the name on his badge and handed it back. He paused.

“What did you want to know?”

“What were your clothes made from?”

“Ah. Goretex. We needed them to wash easy and wick fast.”

“How many sets of shoes did you go through?”

She grinned. “Are they starting trivia?”

He blushed. “Yeah.”

“Eight. Everybody else used four.”

“Nice. Why?”

“Ask the volcano.” She smiled.

“Oh, cool. We are arranging a watch party at the pub down the road. I don’t suppose you can be there?” His expression was genuine.

“Sorry. I have to be at the studio doing commentary for the streaming. I am hoping I don’t still look like I was just dug up by them.”

Kern cleared his throat softly. “She needs to rest and recover.”

The nurse looked at him and jolted. “Oh. Of course, sir. Miss, thanks for the autograph.”

“You are welcome. Have a serene shift.”

He nodded and headed out with his prize in his hand.

Reebee looked to Kern. “So, I get dressed, and we go?”

He nodded. “Do you need help?”

“Honestly? A little. I don’t want to creep Jeffrey out though, so Jeffrey, if you could wait outside?”

He inclined his head. “Of course, miss.”

She pulled the clothing out and laid it on the bed. The tags were all off and at the bottom of the bag. “Huh. I never realized that black and clear could be underwear at the same time.”

“Jeffrey has surprised me.”

She chuckled, kicked off her hospital slippers, and slid the panties on. Kern adjusted his narrow sunglasses, and there was an eerie glow behind them.

Reebee got the bra on, but it was a lot of effort. She stepped into the dress that was soft and floaty to her knees. It wasn’t what she wore to work, but she wasn’t working today.

She got to her feet, and while she felt weak, she did feel better. She looked at the black heels and muttered, “I am going to need to hang onto you.”

He nodded. "They are rather ambitious."

"I can manage them, but my balance is off." She grabbed the right shoe, put it on, and then bent the left leg to do the same. She nodded. "Here we go."

Kern moved in front of her to hold her hands, and she eased to her feet. He caught her against him and held her. They stood together, just breathing each other in.

"Do you want a proper breakfast?"

She sighed. "Yes? Shockingly, I am hungry again."

He hugged her. "Good. That is a good sign."

"Congratulate your teeth; they did the job."

"It is more than teeth; it is a will to bond. An urge to connect that opens during the marking."

She nodded. "Uh-huh. Can we go now? I haven't signed so many things with my face on it in my life."

He chuckled and grabbed her discharge paperwork. Kern offered her his arm, and they walked out of the room at a leisurely pace.

"Theo's working today?"

"No. He's been moving since he finished his shift." He stopped by the charge nurse and got the printout they had been promised the night before.

"Do we have to stop by billing?"

"No. It's been handled. You have been added to my account." He nodded slightly.

"Uh-huh. While I was napping?"

"When we arrived, yes."

"So, you knew you were going to..."

"Oh, yes. Without a doubt. When I saw that image of you and your friend said that you needed to be found, I knew that when I found you, I was going to keep you."

“Well, I did kind of volunteer for that.” She leaned on him in the elevator.

He let out a soft hiss again.

She looked at his reflection. “Good noise or bad noise?”

“Good noise. Happy noise.”

“Was there any particular reason that the staff cleared the halls when you walked by?”

He chuckled. “No particular reason.”

“What’s your last name? I never bothered looking it up; I just followed my instincts to your door.”

“Meksoren.”

“Yeah, I thought that might be it.” She sighed as they got out, and they walked past security. She laughed when Jeffrey pulled up in a low and expensive car. He nodded to Kern, and Kern nodded in return.

Kern held the door open for her, and she slid into the passenger seat. When he got in, she muttered, “Next time, just use the parkade. Wait. You just left the car and took me inside, didn’t you?”

He shrugged and buckled up. “You were unresponsive. You needed immediate care.”

She flexed her left hand. “Yeah. I hope that heals soon.”

“We will work on it. Now, you are going to have breakfast and then rest. Jeffrey will hold my calls, and I will stay with you.”

“I need my phone and stuff.”

“Your friend and her mates will get your car and bring it to the grange.”

“Oh, your house has an occupation. Fancy.”

He laughed softly. “Theo says that you dropped about ten pounds. Not much in the grand scheme of things, but that was coming off you being very fit with minimal resources.”

“Yeah. I know. I am normally more squishy, but when I took you and Theo in, my body altered.”

He smiled. “I do remember curves.”

She sighed. “I remember a lot more.”

He reached out and took her hand. He held it on the drive through the city. She recognized the route, and as he finally slowed, she saw where she had waited for hours for someone to bring her to her mate.

She knew that’s what it was. That was why flirting with Vasuki and Magnus never went beyond casual pleasantries. They weren’t hers.

When she got back home after the show, her apartment was trashed by Miller, and she went to the one safe place she had.

The drive through the security gate and down the lane was longer than she remembered. When he pulled up next to the front door, she unbuckled and reached for the door latch. There was a thud, and Kern got out and walked around the car, opening the door for her. “If you are not driving alone, someone will open your door. With those heels, I would prefer you waiting for assistance.”

“I don’t normally wear heels like this.” She put her hand in his, and he helped her to her feet.

“You walk in them very well.” He held her around the waist and closed the car door.

“My siblings are omegas. We all had to learn how to walk prettily.” She smiled.

“Interesting side effect of having omega siblings.”

“Yeah. I taught Altar and Elspetha about it. We did deportment classes and then went to watch action movies and plan our futures and the future of the foundation.”

“Have you worked for them long?”

“Of course. I am one of the founders.” She chuckled.

He paused. “What?”

“Altar and Elspetha put up the money, and I worked on infrastructure. I used my intuition to find the place, the people, and the teams.” She smiled as they walked up the wide steps. “We grew fast, but we grew strong, and we reached out into the community for betas who were similar to us. Alpha powers, beta bodies.”

“I have been hearing about women with similar skills. Well, not specific but generally.”

“Nice save. No woman likes to hear that there are others like them. You should have met Elspetha before me. She’s a real angel.”

“Interesting. What is your friend Altar?”

She chuckled. “Pure magic.”

“Any definition of that?”

“Nope.” She chuckled. “She defies description.”

They got to the top of the stairs. He murmured, “Do you remember which way to go?”

“I don’t remember, but instinct says this way.” She pointed to the left.

“Why don’t you remember?”

“You were wearing me, had fingers inside me, and kissing me at the same time.”

He let out that soft hissing sound that seemed to be a happy noise. “That is how I remember it. I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t have any resentment to the deal.”

She chuckled. “I was the one who offered compensation for the loan. You didn’t demand it.”

The carpet under their feet made every step silent. He removed his sunglasses and tucked them in his pocket. The glow of his eyes was unmistakable in the home made of dark wood.

“So, your stepfather and sisters are fine?”

“Yeah. The only ones to avoid are my mother and ex-boyfriend. Anchor Killien.”

“I know him. And now that you have said his name, that was the scent.”

“Yup. He’s obsessed, but I have been able to avoid him for the eight years he has been my brother-in-law via mate contract. Navena’s pack is great aside from him.”

“Good. Who is your other sister?”

“Zyrella. She is part of a pack of eight, bonded to three.”

“So, the idea doesn’t freak you out.”

“They are omegas. I am a beta. For them, it is expected because there aren’t many omegas. Betas are a dime a dozen.”

“And you are priceless.”

They entered the bedroom he led them to, and he chuckled. “I know you just got dressed, but you need restful sleep without nurses asking for autographs. There will be a feast when you wake up.”

She sighed. “Fine. From what I remember, your bed is really comfortable.”

Kern stroked her back and hip. “I have been told that my scent will be helpful.”

Reebee looked at him. “Fine, give me your shirt.”

She unzipped the dress and shimmied out of it. Next, her bra followed, and then she stepped out of the four-inch heels. She looked at him and cocked her head, her hands on her hips. “Well?”

He looked her over from head to toe and then took his jacket off and unbuttoned his shirt. He undid his cuffs and slid the black fabric from his shoulders. His tie slid to the ground. Reebee’s breathing sped up. She hadn’t forgotten the golden skin and the heat that his body radiated.

He stepped to the side, put his shirt around her shoulders, and then grazed his thumb across the mark. She shivered, and her lips parted. “Don’t tease.”

Kern whispered, "I am definitely not teasing."

She reached out and caressed the lean muscles of his chest and the balls of his shoulders. She then touched his neck. He smiled, looking down at her with his eyes glowing brightly.

"I didn't think you would come back to me, but I didn't know you had returned."

She smiled. "I managed to dodge all seekers, but when you knew I was there, you found me."

He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her slowly. "If you need anything, just call."

She whispered, "I don't have my phone."

"You know what I mean." He lifted her, and she returned his kiss frantically. He slowed her, and she whimpered, breaking the urgent kiss. "You need rest. You have to recover." She was wrapped around him again with her legs locked around his waist.

She took a shuddering breath. "Right. Right. Sorry. The hormone button got hit a while ago, and I forgot you are not on the same page."

He braced her with one hand and slid the other between them, hissing as the slick, wet fabric was edged aside by his fingers.

Reebee knew that her eyes had changed as she looked at him and begged. "Just a little screwing around? I won't keep you long."

"I would prefer that it was after you had rested and were stronger."

She pulled his head down to hers and pressed her forehead to his. "And I would prefer if you were inside me right now, and as I count it, my body gets two votes, and you get one measly vote."

He laughed. "I never get outvoted."

"Get used to it. I have seven more months to go, and I plan to be demanding as hell."

Kern stroked her hair. “Can I see it down?”

She snorted and looked at him. “Now?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen it down before.”

She found the edge of her braid and unravelled the column of hair until the cool curtain smelled like the shampoo she had used at the gym the morning before.

His eyes widened. “You are attractive with your hair up but stunning with it down.”

She groaned. “It is a lot of maintenance to keep it down, and guys get all weird about it.”

He was staring at her and blinked slowly. “What?”

She chuckled. “Like that. So, can you be inside me now? I’m lonely.”

He groaned and set her on the bed, fanning her hair out to the side.

His belt opened, and his trousers dropped while he toed off his shoes. The panties came off, and she kept her shirt on as he pressed against her.

Reebee gasped as his skin pressed against hers. She closed her eyes to focus on the heat, the comfort, and then her rising lust.

“Open your eyes.”

She did, and he was looking at her in concern.

“Are you all right?”

“I am. I have just been remembering the feeling of you for the last two months. This is way better than memory.” She sighed. “Sorry, my ribs are showing.”

“You will recover. I am hoping this helps.” He kissed her and then began working his way down her body.

“Medicinal sex? Thought that would be Theo’s thing. How do you do that with your tongue?” The words tripped over one another as the serpentine appendage slithered around her breasts and flicked each nipple.

Reebee threaded her fingers through his hair and arched into his mouth as he continued to work himself lower. He licked slowly over her belly, and she caught on that he was greeting his child. “So, are you hoping for a boy or a girl?”

He raised his head, and it was a hiss. “You and them healthy. And both of you in my arms.”

She shivered. “Oh, Kern. That’s so sweet.”

He smiled, and his facial features were serpentine. She smiled. “You just want to wrap me in your coils again.”

His tongue flicked out. “Yessss.”

“Fine, but get me off first, and then no squeezing.”

He grinned and dipped his head down between her thighs; his tongue went deep and thickened and started to undulate. She was already hot, and she went over the edge in seconds. That was the point that he didn’t stop, and she kept thrashing on his tongue until he drained her. She wasn’t strong. It didn’t take long.

She was limp against him as the basilisk she was mated to fully transformed and circled her, making a nest of his coils and draping himself over her. He wasn’t a snake. Snakes didn’t have a thick crest of hair and feathers.

She snuggled down against him and got some sleep.

Chapter Four

She heard a soft knock at the door and looked around. The scales around her shifted to warm skin, and arms wrapped around her.

“Theo’s impatient, but he will have to wait until you have something to eat.”

Reebee looked at him. “What if he has food?”

Kern chuckled. “Come in, Theo.”

Theo opened the door with one hand and had a tray in the other. Kern kept his arms and one leg around her.

Theo paused. “She’s supposed to be resting.”

She blinked and smiled. “I just woke up. We came here straight from hospital and... napped.”

Kern chuckled.

Theo snorted and set the tray on a bedside table. “She needs to eat, not cuddle.”

She pushed up on one elbow. “Beg to differ. I need both.”

Her hair tumbled around her, and his eyes got warm.

“I like your hair.” He leaned over the bed and wrapped a lock of hair around his wrist before sliding his hand free.

“Kern mentioned the same.”

Kern rubbed his face on the back of her neck. “It smells good, too.”

“That’s the shampoo from the gym.”

Theo caressed her cheek. “He means your scent; under all perfumes, shampoo, and creams is you. Your scent is stronger today than it was yesterday.”

She frowned and muttered, “I showered at the hospital.”

“That isn’t the scent we are talking about. You said you had omegas in your family. You know.”

She held her hand to her neck. “But they have a gland that makes the alpha attractant. I don’t have one of those.”

Theo nuzzled her cheek. “It’s faint, but it’s there.”

Kern laughed softly. “Between her legs, it isn’t faint.”

Theo turned his head, and Kern moved the thigh and calf that had held her tight.

“Hey, I didn’t invite you.”

Theo laughed. “I am a cyclops, not a vampire. I don’t require an invitation.” His hands eased her thighs apart, and then his head was there, nose first. He lifted her leg higher and dragged his tongue across her.

She yelped, and he did it again.

Reebee finally pulled out a trick her sisters had used. She gave a soft whine, and Theo backed up, staring at her with his singular orb while licking his lips. She pouted. “I want breakfast.”

Theo narrowed his eye. “Did you do that on purpose?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what it does, but it always works with my sisters and their mates.”

Theo helped her sit up despite Kern keeping an arm around her. “Let’s just say that it caused a sudden redistribution of my thought processes.”

“Cool. Can I eat?”

Theo nodded. “Of course. After, I plan on marking you and then another nap.”

She nodded. “Okay. Should I get a contract lawyer?”

Kern paused. “Oh, right. The technicalities so you don’t feel we are taking advantage of you.”

“More so that this little bit has a future. Alphas that dip out are less common than betas who do the same, but it still happens, as my little bastard self is proof.” She chuckled. “I

have enough money to raise it right, but I am not doing it again if the burden rests solely on me.”

Theo blinked. “Right. Of course.”

Kern kissed her shoulder. “Do you have a contract lawyer?”

“No.”

He chuckled. “Elias has a good one. You may want to contact your friend and get him to represent you against my lawyer. He’s always looking to keep my money with me.”

She nodded. “I will do that as soon as I have my phone.”

Theo smiled. “It’s downstairs. Jeffrey and Kagan retrieved your things and your car. Jeffrey put your phone on a charger.”

“Kagan?”

Kern sighed and sat behind her, kneeling with his erection pressing against her back and his arms around her. “Chef and gardener. Jeffrey does everything else.”

“Oh, yeah. Great. House of men.”

Theo laughed. “And I just moved in.”

She tried to lean over to grab the tray, but Theo brought it to the bed and set it next to her. Fruit salad, a scone with jam, tea sandwiches, and a flask of water. “That’s pretty and weirdly healthy. What I am jonesing for is a bag of chips.”

Theo chuckled. “Tough. Doctor’s orders.”

“Theo, you are not going to use that as a constant excuse to get things into my body.”

He grinned. “Let’s see if it works.”

She took the fruit salad and started to eat. She mumbled, “Thanks, Theo.”

He grinned and sat on the edge of the bed. “You are welcome.”

“Someone talk while I eat because I don’t feel like being watched while I eat.”

Theo passed Kern his phone, and he stated that he was sending a message to Elias.

It took her less than six minutes to finish all the food on the tray and drink the water. Theo stroked her arm and kissed the back of her hand. “Good girl.”

She snorted. “Rarely.”

Kern said softly, “You are sweet to me.”

Reebee leaned against him. “Because you are sweet to me. You get what you give with me.”

Theo murmured, “Do you need the restroom? I am going to be taking my time.”

“That is the weirdest seduction line ever.”

“I am a fan of full disclosure. Besides, you used the restroom the first time.”

She blinked, mortified. “Yeah, but that is not normally something I would have thought of on my own.”

“Your intuition?”

“Yeah. It sent me to the pharmacy and made me pick up all those, uh, supplies.” She mused, “I did appreciate the lube, though.”

Theo kissed her shoulder. “As did I. You just drank a litre of water. Are you sure you don’t...”

“Kern, leggo, and point out the bathroom. I don’t remember.”

Kern was snickering. “To the left, second door. And go!” He released her, and she bolted out of his embrace, found the bathroom, and did what was necessary. No vomiting, no dizziness, no nausea. So far, it was a pretty good day.

She washed everything that she thought might have been of interest and then got a glance of herself in the mirror. Her hair tumbled in the thick waves that her braids left behind. Her eyes were their normal icy jade. She also knew that if Kern held her, they would be the same acid green as his.

She moved her hair away from the mark, and her eyes widened. His teeth had punched into her like a staple. The scarring was hot pink, but the skin was sealed. She had a mate. Her wonder must have communicated itself to him because warmth and reassurance coursed into her from their link.

She opened the door and saw Theo looking all gloriously barbaric, naked, and very interested in watching her walk toward him.

She glanced at Kern. "I forgot you could do that."

He hissed, and she saw his gaze was focused on her shoulder. The mark was his, and seeing it made him happy. She could also tell he wanted to boot Theo out of the room again.

She walked up to Kern and slid her arms around him. He bent and kissed the mark. "Ready to get your second?"

She grimaced. "I wasn't ready for the first. I needed it but wasn't ready for it."

Theo chuckled from behind her. "I will be careful, and you will be able to borrow Kern and me without negotiating."

She turned her head. "You mean borrow your power."

He chuckled. "That, too."

She blushed. "As interesting as the fantasies have been having you both again, it is going to be something I save for national holidays."

Theo threaded his fingers in her hair. "Why national holidays?"

"Because I need some time to get my legs back together."

Kern chuckled, and Theo snorted. Theo wrapped a hand around her neck and bent her back for a kiss. It started slow and rapidly built in intensity. His tongue slid against hers. Theo was where she had gotten raw strength, and even his tongue had it.

Theo took her from Kern and settled on the bed. He settled her across his lap, facing him with his arm supporting her hips.

“Now, sweetheart, focus on me. I am not a forty-foot hairy snake, but I have my own charms.”

She wrapped her hand around his erection. It was large but not unmanageable.

Theo gasped and guided her fingers away. “Oh, nonono. Not this time, Rhymbia.”

“I really feel stupid having stuff done to me all the time.”

Theo grinned. “Since we outnumber you, get used to it.”

“Do you have an office at the hospital?”

He nodded. “I do.”

“Good. If you have a break and I pop by, how big is the space behind your desk?”

She heard a groan behind her, and Theo chuckled. “I can shove my desk aside. Just make sure I am not attending a delivery.”

“Good. I would hate to interrupt a woman in the midst of a very technical job. You don’t need distractions for that.”

“You know when I also don’t need distractions?”

She blinked. “No.”

“Now.”

“Oh. So, shut up?”

“I don’t want to chat. I just want to see if I can change your vocalizations.”

She stared into his eye, and he touched her slowly and sweetly. He stroked her back, and she leaned into his touch, arching her back. He bent forward and licked her nipples, nibbling gently and then sucking softly. Arousal built slowly, and she found out that he really had a thing for her breasts.

She dug her fingers into his arms and realized that he had tipped her back deliberately. She couldn’t fight her way upright. She gasped, and that whine emerged genuinely this time. Her hips squirmed against him, grinding against him as she got embarrassingly wet.

Theo grinned and slowly elevated her, lifting her high and then lowering her down slowly. His cock nudged at her, and when her folds opened, he lodged inside. She met his gaze, slowly circled her hips, and began to sink onto him. A quick fluttering orgasm struck, and she paused and waited while her body clasped his. She panted, and he stroked her hips. She slid further and further until her thighs pressed to his, and she was heavy and full. Her legs were on either side of his hips, and again, she had no way of getting any control of the situation.

Theo tilted his head back, and the thick column of his neck flexed. She pressed herself against him, pressed her head to his chest, and tried to move her legs. He lowered his head, and his grey eye was terrifying as he smiled. She whimpered, and he grinned. He whispered what he wanted in her ear, and she nodded, pressing the soles of her feet together. When she pressed her feet together, she lifted, and his hands carried her half the way up his shaft. He slid her down again, and when she was on him again, they lifted off.

It was controlled and slow at first and then increased to a thudding slap. She whimpered and started to bite his chest as she got closer to something big. He growled encouragement, and she felt him pulling her hair away from the side of her neck. He moved her faster, and when she started to shake, he marked her. She shrieked and thrashed against him. He held her hips tight and grunted. She felt heat spill into her in small bursts, and then he pulled her down, and his knot locked into her. *Fucking ow.* It stung.

She panted as the bite made another link inside her. When their connection was heavy and strong, he lifted his head and started licking. He hummed happily, running his hands over her shoulders and then down to her waist.

Her voice was throaty when she muttered, “So, why obstetrics?”

He murmured against her skin, “I like the idea of helping babies into the world and helping the mothers with everything else. That, and my family took all other popular areas of practice.”

Her link throbbed, and Theo continued to lick at his mark slowly. She was pretty sure he was just in it for enjoyment because that was what was blazing through her.

After five minutes of light caresses and the enjoyed licking, his knot shrank enough to allow his cum to slither out and around.

She muttered, "I think my legs are locked up."

Theo chuckled. "You will get used to it. I certainly enjoyed it. Every time you flexed, it was heaven. It's a bit of a workout, but you didn't want to let me do all the work." He stroked a thumb over her lower lip. "This was a compromise."

"I am going to be sore in the morning."

He rubbed his nose against hers. "I think we should book you in for regular therapeutic massages. My sister owns a spa."

"The sister that Kern dated?"

"That was just for formal events. She has a mate and little ones made from donor sperm."

She was content to keep sitting on his cock. The cum was actually helping with the overheating of her skin. "What does her mate do?"

"Liliette is an excellent photographer. She focuses on maternity shoots and newborns."

"Aw, that's sweet."

"It is. She has a ton of tiny costumes and dresses the babies up."

Reebee chuckled. "Sounds adorable."

"The images are cute. Some of my patients send them in when their final checks are over." He smiled. His eye gleamed. "I think you and Kern are going to have a very cute baby. She's going to take the photos, or she's never going to speak with me again."

"Right. There's a person in there."

He rubbed below her navel. “Right about here.”

She blushed. “Right. So, should I get a different doctor?”

“No. As your alpha, I have the right to maintain your body, but during delivery, I am going to be a very nervous coach.”

She giggled. “Right. Oh, geez. What will Kern be like during delivery?”

She felt the heavy throb of happiness through Kern’s link. “I will be fine as long as you need me to be. As soon as you are fine, I am going to be a basket case.”

His low growl was right behind her, and he kissed his mark. She tingled all over and clenched around Theo. She muttered, “Don’t do that.”

Theo groaned softly. “Don’t listen to her. Do that again.”

Kern chuckled. “The wishes of the mate are important the first time. She’s getting used to us, Theo. Don’t push it. In fact, pull out.”

Theo sighed and kissed her again before slowly lifting her off him, and Kern moved around him to cuddle her on the bed.

“I am so happy we are together again, Rhymbia. You have no idea.”

“I have a pretty good guess. I missed you two as well.”

Theo shifted to her back and lifted her leg. A super soft and warm cloth was pressed between her thighs.

She buried her head into Kern’s chest but remembered the same gentle care after their first night. When tidied to his satisfaction, Theo left, and then he returned to her. They curled up together, and only a thin strip of her body wasn’t blazing warm.

Theo hummed happily, and Kern hissed softly. Reebee pressed one hand to Kern and put her other hand on top of Theo’s. She had mates and a baby, and now, she deserved a nap. Elspetha was delighted that they were going to have babies together.

Chapter Five

Reebee took a shower and got dressed again. The guys were already up and downstairs. They had left a note. Her thighs ached, but they were in their normal configuration after using the pounding shower heads, and she felt better.

She dressed and stepped into her heels, carefully walking down stairs and listening for voices. She saw her luggage and her purse. She checked it and then went looking for her phone.

Reebee found the guys drinking coffee. Jeffrey was at a desk in the corner of the huge kitchen and the person who must be Kagan. “Uh, hello. Where did my phone end up?”

Jeffrey stood and brought her phone over. “Here you go, miss.”

“Thanks.”

Kern got up and wrapped his arm around her. “Have a seat, have some coffee. Kagan is about to make dinner.”

Reebee nodded to the bemused Kagan. “Hello, Kagan. I think I will be living here?”

Kern nodded. “You are. Anywhere you try and go, I will find you, so you may as well stay here.”

Jeffrey and Kagan tensed and then nodded slightly at that declaration.

Reebee smiled. “Don’t worry. It isn’t like we are getting married. I will try to be minimally invasive in the household. Just a surface parasite.”

Kern turned her to face him. “Rhymbia, you are now as much a member of this household as I am. More because you get two votes.”

She smiled. “Fine. In that case, where is the coffee?”

Theo asked casually, “How much coffee do you drink?”

“Two cups a day. One morning. One night. One in the afternoon if I need it. It helps with the ADHD.” She beamed.

Theo blinked. “Any meds?”

“Nope. Perfectly healthy aside from dropping that much weight in four weeks and having a bit of heartburn from the vomiting.”

She saw Jeffrey’s surprised expression. “Don’t worry. You won’t have to buy a maternity wardrobe. I will start shopping for office wear because this little beastly is going to cause stress to my pantsuits.” She smiled at him. “I didn’t know it was there until yesterday either. This is a whole new bunch of shopping. I hate shopping.”

He widened his eyes. “It was no trouble, miss. It was unusual, but he had all your sizes, so it was easy.”

“Ah, all the clothes they cut off at the hospital.” She nodded. “Kagan, is there any fruit hanging around? My blood sugar is tanking.”

Theo bolted and reached into the fridge, grabbing a bottle of juice and skidding back around the corner just as Reebee started to slump against Kern while the world spun.

The world got a bit splotchy, and she was tasting the juice being slowly trickled into her mouth. She swallowed and muttered, “Sorry.”

Theo sighed from her left. “I was expecting it, but it hit rather fast.”

The apple juice was back at her lips as Kern held it for her to sip.

Jeffrey cleared his throat. “What’s wrong with her?”

Theo smiled. “To put it directly, alpha withdrawal. Kern was with her nine weeks ago and left something behind. That something will be here in seven months or less.”

Jeffrey stared. “So, that is why I was sent to obstetrics this morning.”

Kern smiled and lowered the bottle. “Correct. I will also be sending you out to get paint samples when we know the gender. And baby furniture, but I will pick out clothing and stuffed animals.”

Reebee laughed. “Cool. Then, I can get back to work right away. One less thing to think about.”

Kagan asked, “Miss, do you have any dietary requirements?”

Theo answered for her. “Fresh and full of nutrients but with a high caloric index. She needs to put some weight back on.”

Reebee looked at him with her brows arched. “I don’t fuck my doctor.”

He blinked and blushed. “Right. I will find a colleague to take you on. I will just be a concerned and vocal bystander.”

She smirked at him. “See, you are smart. I knew you didn’t go to medical school for nothing. You did go to medical school, right?”

He grinned. “I did. I promise. I even have the degrees framed up in my office.”

“Oh, good.”

Kagan was snorting. Kern offered her more juice, and she drank it. When that was done, Kagan brought her a bowl of soup.

She turned her head to see Kern’s concerned expression. “If you try to spoon-feed me, I will start biting.”

He sighed. “Eat slow.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Their link flared in outrage. She chortled and set about eating her soup. It was gone far too soon, and her stomach rumbled demandingly. Kagan took the empty bowl and spoon away. “Dinner is in half an hour.”

She sighed. “Thanks. I can wait. My body seems to be making up for lost time.”

Kagan chuckled. "I can respect a healthy appetite."

Reebee closed her eyes and then turned on her phone. Alerts exploded across her phone, and she narrowed her eyes. "What does he want?"

Kern asked, "Who?"

"Oh, Ford. Can I return his call?" She looked at Kern. "It has to do with the show."

"Sure. Did you want to use my study?"

"Is it on this floor?"

"Yes. Come on, Rhymbia."

Jeffrey asked, "Rhymbia Turner?"

"Yup."

"Thank you. There are going to be documents involving the child."

"Of course." She eased off Kern's lap. "Now, which way to the study?"

He stood up and took her hand to show her the main floor. His study was the same dark wood as the rest of the house, with dark green and blue cushions. The couch was dark leather. Kern asked, "Do you need me here for this?"

"No. I will be right back, but I am holding to the NDA."

"Good." He bent and kissed her quickly before muttering, "What do you think about having sex in every room in the house?"

"Not on the same day."

He chuckled at the door. "Probably sensible. There are thirty-six rooms."

Reebee grinned and called Ford. She began to get nervous and ran her hand through her hair. "Thursday?"

"Yup. The studio should have called you."

"I will look. I have been out of it for a few days, so I didn't have my phone. I'll call them back right away."

“Do it. They are going apeshit trying to organize a live-streaming event and asking me for a ton of edited content as well as behind-the-scenes stuff.”

“Okay. I will talk to them. Be well, and hug the family for me.”

Ford chuckled and said his farewells.

Reebee hung up and went looking through her voicemails. She listened and got a notepad out of Kern’s desk. She scribbled the information and continued through the messages. She got the basics. A streaming service was prepared to pay heavily for the show and still allow broadcast rights in two weeks. They were opening up, and this was the show they wanted to use as a flagship.

She sighed and called the studio back. She was put on hold and then doodled a one-eyed snake on the notepad before she saw what she had done and giggled.

The conversation with the studio was rapid. They needed her on Thursday morning and wanted her to do commentary on the show. She made a counteroffer and then had to wait while things were discussed. She grinned when they came back to her. Ford had agreed, and she could do the commentary from his sound studio as long as she was not yet ready to face a lot of people. Friday night, she was to present herself to the studio for the live react.

Since Ford had used drone photography to capture all of her scenes, he was going to be doing the companion commentary. They were going to interview each other with prompts from the studio.

She laughed and said, “Sounds like fun. When can he do it?”

“His schedule is open tomorrow morning. You are only commenting on your footage, so it is three hours.”

“Oh. Okay. I will call him again. Thank you.”

“Oh, the dress code for the live react party is cocktail formal. We would prefer that you wear black.”

“Uh, sure. I can manage something.”

“We will send a car for you. Is the address on file still correct?”

“No. I will give you the address before Friday.”

“Great. Thank you, Reebee! This is going to be fantastic. The feedback on the spots so far is amazing. You are very popular.”

“Yeah, I got that idea from the publicity stills.”

“You were amazing, and I don’t even know who won.”

“Neither do I. It’s a mystery.” She chuckled and looked at her notes. She sighed and called Ford again. “Hey, sugar, so are you up to talk dirty to me?”

“Tomorrow at nine, okay?”

“I should be good by then. See you then.”

She hung up and set a timer for seven-thirty the following morning.

She sighed, folded the paper she had scribbled on, and went back to the kitchen. Four faces turned toward her, and she sighed. “I have to do some stuff tomorrow morning.”

Kern frowned. “I had hoped to spend another day curled around you.”

“Wednesday is open. Do your homework and then spend the day with me?” She batted her lashes.

She walked up next to him and rubbed his shoulder with one hand. He caught her hand in his and kissed her palm. “I think that sounds like an excellent idea.”

Reebee glanced over at Theo. “You are at work tomorrow?”

“No, I am off for the rest of the week. Did you need a ride?”

“I can drive. It is only supposed to take a few hours, but knowing this scenario, it is going to go overtime.”

Theo asked, “What are you doing?”

“Oh, commenting on my portion of the events. Ford is giving his two cents, and we have been given questions to ask the other. Friday, I have to dress up and be there for the streaming event.”

Kern frowned. “That is a lot. I thought it was next week.”

“Some stupid streaming platform wants this as their first event. I don’t know what kind of an asshat would want to purchase an untested show for an untested platform one week before broadcast release.”

Kern blinked and then grinned. “You know.”

“Intuition. Plus, I like calling you an asshat. Fuck, you are fast.”

His arms snapped out, and he pulled her onto his lap. “How appalling would it be if I told you I just wanted to watch you in action?”

“Fairly appalling. Of course, this might be a moneymaking proposition for you.” She looked up at him, and his mouth covered hers. She sighed, and heat built rapidly.

Their lips were an inch apart when he whispered, “If this makes any money, it is all going to the little bean you are growing. It did all the heavy work. You just had to look pretty.”

She snorted, and he grinned. “Right, you haven’t seen much of the footage yet. Apparently, the promo spots are getting good reactions.”

He chuckled. “Show me.”

She clicked on one of the links Ford had sent her and held the screen next to her face.

His face grew pale. “You jumped off a cliff?”

“A few times. Three, I think.” She leaned away and looked at the links. “You should see the one where I almost drowned.”

Kagan brought food to the already-set table. “Uh, dinner is ready.”

Kern murmured, “I think I will wait to see more until we can watch them with you on my lap and holding my hand.”

Theo asked, “May I see?”

She smiled and slid her phone over. “All of the links have a clip with me in it. I was allowed to share it with family.”

Theo paused, and then a bright smile crossed his features. “Family?”

Reebee was hesitant. “I thought that was the point of all this. A family. I mean, it’s too late for Kern to boot me out though I guess he could if he wanted to.”

Kern hugged her. “That isn’t what he meant, Rhymbia.”

“I have snips of your emotions, his, and mine in me right now. It is a lot to focus through.” She looked back at him. “I am rather unsettled at the moment.”

She felt Kern and Theo touch her emotions instead of sharing theirs. They were shocked.

Kern cuddled her against him and pressed a kiss to her temple. “I am sorry. We are a little much.”

“Acceptance isn’t adapting. This was necessary but not what I had planned for myself. I am hostage to my own instinct.”

Kern pressed his head to hers. “As are we.”

She leaned aside and looked at him. “If you reject the link for whatever reason before the baby is born, I am going to die, and it is going to die. That’s... rough. I am not used to depending on anyone for anything. My instincts have scrambled around, and I don’t know if I am coming or going... and I am just hungry all the time.” She knew her lip wobbled, but it wouldn’t stop. She hadn’t gotten solid sleep for weeks. She sent both of them her disorientation, fatigue, and the heavy ache in her body.

Kern crooned and cuddled her, kissing her forehead, cheeks, and lips. Theo came around and knelt next to her, pressing his head to her neck. To her surprise, he unzipped the back of her dress and started to lick at the mark. It hurt at first, so he gentled, but in a few seconds, she was whining and rocking

back toward him. Arousal built from the long scrapes of his tongue, and she grabbed for his arm. He held her hand as Kern kissed her and tended the mark. When she felt the warm splash of pleasure, they didn't stop.

Reebee was limp against Kern and smelled hot. Theo kissed his mark and zipped her dress.

She mumbled, "Infection madness?"

Theo nodded. "I should have been watching your temperature. I'm sorry. How did you know about the madness?"

She mumbled, "Sisters are omegas."

"Right. Did you sit in on their orientations?" Theo stroked over his mark.

"No, I had to help them with their homework." She smiled weakly. "Oh, damn, did the food get cold?"

Theo shook his head. "Kagan just put the salads on the table and is on standby to serve up seconds when you are ready."

She squeezed his hand and kissed Kern's cheek. "Let's do this then."

Kern chuckled. "Let's go wash your hands and mine."

She nodded, and then her eyes widened as he pulled his hand from under her skirt. His fingers were dripping. She swallowed. "Oh, yeah, you are going to want to wash that."

His serpentine tongue flicked out, and he licked at the gloss on his digits. She yelped, pushed past Theo, staggered, and headed for the kitchen sink.

She scrubbed her hands, and Theo nudged her aside. "You scrub your hands thoroughly. Food service as a teen?"

She snorted. "Free clinic at nineteen."

Theo was shocked. "You worked at a clinic?"

"Sure. I took a lab assistant course when I was in high school. I did admin assist and scheduled homecare when there

were available nurses.” She smiled. “They are still one of the charities supported by the JN Foundation, but now, they are known as the Hylandian Clinic.”

Kagan held out a clean tea towel, and she thanked him. “Sorry for the fuss. First days are always awkward. I am trying not to be disruptive.”

“Miss, Mr. Meksoren is grinning, and he is normally a fairly grim fellow.”

Kern looked over. “Kagan, when a lovely beta tells you that you will soon be a father, you will have reason to grin as well.”

Kagan nodded. “Right. Miss, what kind of food do you need for the pregnancy?”

“I have no clue. This is the first actual normal meal that I have had in five weeks. It could be a baked shoe, and I would find it delightful.” She smiled.

“It is better than that, but let me know your preferences.”

“Junk food. Lots of junk food. If Kern doesn’t want it in the house, hide it on the premises, and I will find it.”

Kagan grinned. “Sweet or savoury?”

“Savoury. A bit of sweet.”

“You will have it tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I am going to need it. I have to put some weight on.”

“How much?”

“I think by the end of the pregnancy about thirty pounds.” She glanced at Theo as he took the towel from her.

“That’s about right for your frame.”

She smiled and headed back to the table, looking at the meal options on the table. She looked at Kern in his shirt with sleeves rolled up. His tongue was still flicking out. She hissed, “Go wash your hands.”

He licked again and chuckled. “Say please.”

“Really? What did I hook up with? Savage.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Please.”

He turned his head, and she tasted herself. “Okay.”

He got to his feet and went to wash his hands. She took his seat and started loading her plate.

Theo lifted her and set her on his lap. “I am your food monitor. I know you’re hungry, but you have to pace yourself.”

He cut up her food and used the fork to swirl some spaghetti and get some chicken parm on the fork. It was a decent mouthful.

“Open.”

He held it for her, and she snapped at it, hearing the clang of her teeth on the fork. She mumbled around the fork, “Ow.”

“Yeah, that is what I was thinking. Smaller bites and let loose on the fork.”

He pulled the fork out and tapped the back on her nose as she started chewing. “Lucky you didn’t go for that actual blowjob, huh?”

She snorted and mumbled, “Good thing you two don’t smell like food.”

“What do we smell like?”

She chuckled. “Sex. Now, next fork please.”

He smiled and nodded, “Yes, mate.”

“Less flirting, more feeding.” She parted her lips. Dinner commenced.

Kern sat next to them and dressed her salad. It took a while to get her serving in, but when she finished, Theo kept her on his lap while he ate. She felt full but nauseated. That was new. She was warm, she was full, she was safe, and she was out.

Reebee opened her eyes and heard music playing. The music was energetic, and there was a female singer. She could

hear male voices discussing what they were seeing. She looked around and smelled popcorn. Kagan was staring with a bucket of popcorn between him and Jeffrey. Kern was holding her, and Theo had her feet. He was rubbing them slowly.

“How long was I out?” Seven eyes looked toward her.”

Kern stroked her cheek. “Two hours. We have been watching footage from the show.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, you have.”

“You did some very dangerous stuff.” His voice was a growl.

“Huh. I thought you just hissed.”

Theo’s eye blazed. “You ran off a cliff.”

“Yup.”

Theo growled. “You full-tilt ran off a cliff.”

She ignored the outrage that was roiling in their links. “That was the only way to clear the rocks.” Reebee smiled. “If it makes it better at all, I used your strength and Kern’s speed to launch.”

Kern sounded astonished when he asked, “You could actually use it?”

“Sure. I wouldn’t have propositioned you two otherwise.”

Jeffrey asked, “Then, how did you get so good at swimming suddenly?”

She looked at Kern, “Did you get to the dive challenge?”

Jeffrey nodded. “On it.”

Reebee explained, “I can copy any alpha’s extra abilities after contact. The longer the contact, the stronger my ability to pull specifics. I did that with Magnus.”

Jeffrey said, “Found it.”

He played it, and they watched as the show host told them that they each had three icons to retrieve around a shipwreck. There were six of them for this challenge. All four alphas and two betas. They were all in swimming gear. The large iron ball

on a chain slid across the wood in front of them, and when the water touched the chain, they were free to dive. Reebee watched herself lunge for the cord on the chain as it passed, and she took a deep breath as the chain pulled her to the bottom. She exhaled slowly and remembered looking for the first two of her icons. She went to the breathing station they had rigged for folks like her and saw the other beta swimming away. Bobby was going to get his ass kicked for clamping the unit open and draining the tank.

She paused, calmed herself, and looked around for her last icon. She lined herself up with the icon and pushed off the wreck toward the icon. She clutched it and slid it onto her wrist, fighting to exhale slowly and as calmly as possible.

A large golden alpha curved around her, pulled her against him, and kissed her while breathing air into her lungs. He got quite the seal, and she lifted her hand to touch his cheek. He swam them to the surface and then parted from her.

She gasped. *"Thanks, Magnus."*

He grinned. *"Thank you."* They swam back to the dock and put their icons on the table.

The host grinned, and they stood with two other alphas and the beta who had messed up the oxygen tank.

A buddy diver brought up the final alpha. He was out.

Theo cleared his throat. "You almost drowned?"

"Yup. Kern, lighten up. I obviously didn't."

He shuddered. "I want to take you over my knee for that."

"Now, now. Don't hurt the baby."

He froze and then hissed with laughter. "Are you going to use that a lot?"

"Next seven months. It will get worse when the bump shows up. I am pretty confident about that." She looked at him and smirked.

"So, how many other death-defying moments did you have, sweetness?"

“Nine or so.”

There was a groan, and she looked at Theo. He leaned back and put a hand over his eye. “Oh, fuck.”

Kern sighed. “What did you do?”

She listed them. “There was a jump during the audition, the leap off the cliff, a second leap off the cliff, a run across a wakening volcano, the dive, another dive, a fall off a cliff, and a horse ride across country at a full gallop, trapped in a tropical storm, and a run across a suspension bridge. Those were the dangerous ones.”

Kern sighed. “You have no interest in repeating the performance?”

“No. I haven’t borrowed anything from you and Theo this time. We are good.”

Theo cleared his throat. “Did you borrow from anyone else?”

“Vasuki. I borrowed his scales. He’s fire-resistant. I didn’t know how to activate yours, Kern.” She didn’t know why she apologized, but he relaxed a little.

“What is he?”

“I don’t know, but fire snake is all that springs to mind.” She cleared her throat. “Oh, yeah, dangling from a helicopter over a lava field.”

He shuddered. “I don’t think I like this program after all.”

“Tough. If it hadn’t been for this show, I would never have come looking for you then and would not be here now.”

“Fine. Show us something triumphant.”

She chuckled. “Jeffrey, can you give me the remote?”

Jeffrey handed it to her, and she flicked through the videos until she found the file she was looking for. Her theme song with a matching video.

They all watched in silence as the music soared and drumbeats sounded. It was energizing music. When it was

over, the room was silent. She cleared her throat. “So, anyone want to see Magnus or Vasuki?” The video had made her look like a total badass.

Kern murmured, “They kept you safe?”

“It was a mutual exchange, but yeah.”

“Then, yes. We need to know them better.”

It was a weird comment, but she nodded and showed Magnus’s video and then Vasuki’s.

When the videos were over, she asked for the popcorn. Time to show them the fun stuff.

Kern asked, “Who won?”

She looked at him innocently. “What?”

“Who won?”

“The person with the most points.”

“You won’t tell me?”

She shook her head. “Ask the baby. It was here the whole time. It’s been talking smack about you.”

He sighed. “Time for bed. You have an early day.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Kern grumbled as he got to his feet. “Stop calling us Mom.”

“Well, it’s going to be a while before you elevate to Daddy, so Mom has to do for now.” She felt his hands clench on her waist and thighs.

Kern muttered, “That’s quite the tease.”

“Naw. You will know when I am teasing.” She trailed her finger along his jaw.

He turned his head and nipped her finger.

She snickered, and he continued to walk upstairs with her. He stood her at the edge of the bed and asked, “Did you want your luggage up here?”

“I am going to need something for tomorrow.”

“Do you mind if I upgrade your clothes?”

“Uh. Go nuts. As long as nothing gets weird for work, I don’t care what I wear.”

“You have to go on camera for hours?”

“Yup. I have to sit there and watch the last few minutes of the episodes and answer questions.”

“Hm.” He eased the dress from her shoulders, unbuttoned her bra, and his fingers hooked into her panties.

“I sleep in those.”

“Nope. Mom’s orders.” He growled playfully.

When they were down around her ankles, he lifted her, set her in bed, and tucked her in. “Get some rest. Your phone is on the bedside charger. We will be up in a while.”

He kissed her softly and left the room. She snuggled into the bedding, made sure her alarm was set, and went to bed. God, she was tired.

Chapter Six

Reebee woke slowly, warm and a little sweaty. It happened when two alphas were cuddling you, or so she was guessing. Kern slid a hand between her and Theo and cupped her breast. He kissed his mark, and his tongue flickered over it. She sighed and arched against him, putting her hand over his. He moved his head and whispered in her ear, "Morning, Rhymbia."

His erection was pressing against the back of her thighs, and she rocked her hips against him.

His breath hissed. "Invitation?"

She nodded and stroked her hand along his. He kissed her neck, and her toes curled. She looked at Theo, and he was sleeping deeply. Even breathing and no hint of awareness.

Kern kept one hand on her breast and wrapped the other around her hip, sliding down between her thighs. Her body had gotten started without him, and he found that out quickly as the slick welcome pulled his fingers in.

He hissed softly at her neck and moved his wet fingers to her clit, circling slowly. She dug her nails into his hand on her breast and whimpered softly as steady throbbing moved through her body.

He rolled her to her back and pressed his erection into her. He gently guided her hands over her head and eased into her. She registered that he felt normal. No duality.

She sent a question through their link, and he grinned, kissing her as he began to thrust and retreat. She looked up into the hot green glow of his eyes when he raised his head. She stroked the back of his thighs with the soles of her feet and smiled. He held her wrists in one hand and slid the other between them, finding her clit again.

She moaned and yelped as tension ripped into her as his cock curved upward as he withdrew, and she let out a gasp as

he slid in and then did it again. He kissed her to catch the sounds. Three more strokes and she shrieked and twisted under him. He held her and lowered all of his weight onto her to keep her close. She sent the pleasure through to him, his hips jerked into her, and he groaned against her mouth. Heat spilled inside her, and her body continued slow clasps around him. He was firmly wedged in her, and he raised his head. "And now we wait."

She looked toward Theo, and he was grinning, his head on one fist. The eye that was missing was just missing. No scar, no nothing. It had never been.

Theo smiled. "Morning, Rhymbia."

"Um, morning, Theo. Sorry if we woke you."

He grinned. "I don't think you are. You look satisfied." He reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of his index finger.

She chuckled. "That is a rarity these days. I am running in neutral most of the time. I have just been waiting for willing participants, and they had to taste right."

Theo stroked her cheek and asked, "Do we?"

"Of course. You have since that first night."

Kern nuzzled her cheek. "You are perfect. Smell right, feel right, fearless and sensible all at once."

"What the hairy snake said." Theo grinned.

"The fearless came from you guys. I had to get the kind of calm arrogance that came from genuine power, so I came here." She sighed and looked at Kern. "Where is the second one?"

"Oh, it's there. I just thought it was a little much to wake you when you have a meeting with a very astute omega."

"Oh, right. Well, Ford will mock me a bit. If Olivia is there, she will keep him in check, and I might get to play with the babies."

Kern cocked his head. "You have been to his home?"

“Sure. There was some post-filming stuff to do. I had to do the after-action interview and some other stuff.” She smiled. Her phone started to play snazzy dance music. She looked at Kern. “So, how long are you going to be?”

He smirked. “Stop clenching on me, and it will go faster.”

She opened and then closed her mouth with a snap. “Fine. Apologies. I didn’t know I was doing that.”

“It started when you looked at Theo.”

She wiggled her fingers. “Are you going to let me go?”

Kern paused. “You mean your hands?”

“Yes.” She wiggled her hands again.

Theo sighed. “Well, as your alarm isn’t going to stop and Kern won’t let you go, I am guessing we need to embrace the music. I will find a way of speaking to Ford.”

“Find a way?”

Theo chuckled. “I delivered his baby. Met the whole pride. There was little choice in that. They filled the room after delivery. It was the second time seeing an omega with an omega before.”

She snickered. “You were also Olivia’s doctor.”

He nodded. “That’s about all I can say, and I am only telling you because Ford will smell us on you and get all sly.”

“Well, I can have his brother come in and kick his ass. Elspetha took Wander in her pack or flight or whatever.” She chuckled. “She told me when we talked at the hospital. She has three now.”

She felt Kern’s knot easing up and sighed. “Great. Theo, if you want to join me in the shower, we can keep things even.”

Kern began to thicken inside her. He smirked. “Shower?”

She gave him a stern look. “If I go to Ford’s place reeking of sex, I am not going to hear the end of it. Off, alpha.”

He sighed. “The weekend will come again.” He withdrew, and she closed her legs.

“Yeah, and because of the show, I am probably going to be roped into a bunch of weird events. It’s in the contract. I am pretty much in demand for the next few weeks. After that, it should calm down. I look forward to the return to sitting in my office and determining which applicants are detrimentally lying on their résumés.”

Theo helped her up, and a creamy trickle ran down her inner thigh. “You think you can resume your old routine?”

“Yup. This time with less barfing.”

They both smiled, and she headed for the bathroom. Theo followed her, and Kern trailed in after. When she was clean, she grabbed Theo’s erection and started to work it. He snorted, lifted her, and pinned her against the wall while he rammed into her. It was a good thing that the shower walls were slick stone.

She whimpered and bit Theo’s left shoulder when she came. He grunted but pulled out before his knot could block her. There was a splattering of cum, and he slid his fingers in to clear her out a little.

She whispered, “Set me on my feet.”

“Not until you say please.”

“Fine. Please, alpha. Put me on my feet.”

“Of course, dearest beta.”

He set her down, and she looked at him and blinked. “When did I do that?” He was covered in claw and bite marks. So was Kern. “Oh, shit.”

They laughed. They actually laughed.

She twisted her hair, wrung it out, and left the walk-in shower.

There was still an hour and a half to get to Ford’s, which was enough time for breakfast.

Reebee found her luggage at the foot of the bed, and she grabbed clothes and shoes, dressing in her office-worker uniform of skirt and blouse.

Kern looked at her and frowned.

She snorted. “What? It isn’t designer, but it is from a nice boutique.”

“Yes, but it makes you invisible. I am not a fan of that. I want you seen and admired.”

She crossed her arms. “For the shape of my body? Really? That should be my first impression? At JN Foundation, folks learn about my keen intellect and my wit before they ever meet me. Appearance is secondary.”

Theo walked by with a towel around his hips. “The Meksorens are really slick.”

“Good for them. I am a Turner. I don’t need to dress like an adjacent family.”

Kern snorted. “What will you do at family events?”

“Hide.”

Theo grinned. “That might work with his family, but mine will seek you out.”

“Why? They don’t even know me.”

“They will.”

Reebee shrugged. “They will get used to me. Besides, I have to start with the maternity wardrobe soon. Why spend money on fancy stuff when my body is about to change shape?”

Kern sighed. “To make my mother happy?”

“I don’t know her, and that is enough of my wardrobe as a topic. I am going to try and find some breakfast and then get on the road.” She grabbed her purse and phone then headed downstairs.

Kagan had a full spread ready, and Reebee hit it hard. While eating and drinking a cup of coffee, she texted Elspetha a question. If she got the answer, a ten-year crime would be solved, and two other women would face disaster. This was going to be a big week for family.

She checked her phone, and there was the sentence she had been waiting for. *Go for it. I am ready.*

Reebee grinned and called a courier company to send documents and recordings to five different offices. Either it would close the case opened during the accident, or it wouldn't. Regardless, she was going to need to talk to her stepfather. She would ask him to meet her after the session with Ford.

Kagan chuckled. "The way those two are sniffing after you, I would think you were an omega."

"No, my mother chemically restricted me when I was a teen. She didn't want me overshadowing my stepsisters. They were not to blame, nor was their father."

Kagan looked ill. "I have heard of that, but it is rare. It is also punishable by twenty-years incarceration."

"Yeah. I know. It is part of what has been set in motion this morning." She sighed. "I hate to ask this, but who is your family?"

"I am Kagan Igorovich, descended from Lady Olyna."

"Grandson?"

"Yes, Miss Reebee."

"You have a vast family."

He laughed. "I really do."

Theo and Kern came downstairs. Kern wore his standard all-black with the sunglasses in his pocket, and Theo had on a white button-down shirt and black slacks. He looked very doctor-ish.

Reebee checked her watch and had just enough time to drive around the city to Ford's place. It would take her close to an hour; she drove like an old lady when she was worried, and she was very worried.

She finished her meal, got up to kiss them each on the cheek, and then smiled. "I will call or text you when I am done."

Theo nodded. “You are still recovering, so take things easy. Keep the coffee to a minimum, and don’t forget to have lunch.”

She smiled. “You aren’t my doctor. I still have to find one, remember?”

He sighed. “I promise to be less of a fusspot when you are better if you let me remain your doctor.”

Reebee glared at him. “So, when I am sobbing in pain or moaning like a cow in agony, you are going to be calm and implacable?”

He blushed. “Right. I will make some calls.”

“That being said, do you know what the baby’s sex is?”

He muttered, “Yeah.”

“Kern, do you want to know?”

Kern nodded. “I would like to. I didn’t realize you had run that test.”

Theo smiled. “It’s a boy.”

Reebee smoothed a hand over the waistband of her skirt under her navel. “A boy. Well, black hair and green eyes are going to be a given.”

Kern got up and hugged her. “I am talking to my mother today.”

“Excellent. I am having mine arrested.”

Kern blinked. “What?”

“Never mind. A scheme long in the making. Right. Well, I am driving slow and steady today, so it is going to take me forty-five minutes to make the drive.”

Kagan paused. “It is a twenty-minute drive.”

“Not when you stop at three drive-thrus.” She grinned.

Theo frowned. “Which three?”

“Bakery, coffee, and a sandwich place.” She smiled. “Never meet an omega without bringing treats.”

Kagan muttered, “If Mr. Meksoren will allow me, I will take one of his cars and drive you. Even with the stops, I can beat forty-five minutes.”

“You know where I am going?”

“Of course. My uncle lives next door.”

She snorted.

“Have a seat. I will be done in a few moments, and we can go.”

Kern laughed. “Yes, you can be her driver. Take the Bentley.”

Kagan finished tidying up the dishes then took the empty plates from the table and filed them away. “Miss, go wait by the front door. I will be right there.”

Reebee grinned and muttered about every guy in the place bossing her around.

* * * *

“Dr. Galanis, is there a way to reverse developmental restrictors that inhibit an omega from developing?”

Theo stared at Kagan. “That’s sick. Why would you ask that?”

“Because Miss says it happened to her when she was thirteen, and I was just wondering if there was a treatment for it.”

“No. No treatment as far as I know. If the glands didn’t develop, they just don’t. Are you sure of this?”

“That’s what she said.”

Kern muttered, “Are there tests you can run?”

“Yeah, but they won’t do anything more than every scan I already ran. She needs an MRI to show the buds where the glands would have been.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “That will be tricky as she’s fired me as her doctor.”

“Then find her another, and brief the new physician for what we want to learn. I own a frigging hospital. It should be easy.”

Theo grinned. “There is that. Right, I will get on this. It wouldn’t surprise me. She feels like the softest silk, and her scent is dizzying.”

Kagan nodded. “I will drive her and give her my number for pickups and squiring around town.”

Kern nodded. “Please do. Your wage will increase in response.”

Kagan went to the wall and got the keys. “I expected nothing less.” He headed out to the garage.

Kern looked to Theo. “This would explain why she so easily manipulates alphas.”

“Right. Are you really going to have her keeping her last name?”

Kern snorted. “Of course not, but I can’t meet with my mother until Wednesday. She’s planning a fundraiser for the hospital.”

“Again?”

“It’s what she lives for.” Kern shrugged. “Right. I need to get going.”

Theo nodded and headed for the front of the house. He walked out onto the step and saw Rhymbia fidgeting. He sighed and walked to her, rubbing his hand slowly over her back. “How are you this morning?”

“A little achy. I am soon gonna have thighs of steel.”

He smiled and did something he had been wanting to do since he first saw her. He lifted her and shared a slow kiss until Kagan came around. He rubbed his cheeks against hers before he set her down.

She blinked up at him. “What was that?”

“Alpha thing. I wanted to make sure you were marked for the rest of the day.”

“Right. Weirdo.”

“You helped omegas with their homework. You know how obsessed we are.”

“Oh, right. I flunked that part.”

He tapped her nose. “Have a good day, and I will contact you with information on your new doctor.”

“Good. Today is going to be rough. I have to be vocally pleasant.”

He smiled and tugged at her braid. “You will manage it.”

She waved at him. “Shoo.”

“I have a morning meeting with my sister, but I have contacted one of my friends to see if she has room for you.”

“Ok. I will wait for your text.”

He beamed, and Kagan pulled around. She squeezed Theo’s hand and then walked toward the navy blue car. Kagan walked around the car to open the door, and the roar of an engine made her look up. Kern got out of his vehicle and walked over to her with long strides.

Theo laughed when he lifted her high, draped her across the hood, and kissed her until she was gasping for air with her thighs rubbing together. When Kern finally let her loose and set her on her feet, she looked stunned. He rubbed against her the same way Theo had, and Theo started laughing.

He gently eased Rhymbia into the car and closed the door. Kagan grinned and drove off with her.

Kern blinked. “I completely forgot I had to do that.”

“I didn’t.” Theo grinned. “If your mother ever calls her a gold digger, she’s never meeting her grandson.”

“Yeah. I know.” He smiled. “I am sure that she will be delighted to meet her. She’s been begging me to find a partner.”

“Kern, she’s been begging you to find a wife, not a partner and not a mate. You are going to have to deal with that.”

Kern grimaced. “Why do you think I delayed her until Wednesday? I have to think of some way to say it.”

Theo frowned. “I talked to Arkos. Elias is marrying their mate.”

“Rhymbia’s friend?”

“Correct. She’s not an omega. She has legal standing under the law.”

“I will talk to my lawyer. A mate agreement should be sufficient.” Kern nodded.

“If you say so. You got her pregnant. She might actually want some security for her and her baby. She might want a family and not just lovers.”

Kern rubbed his forehead. “I will think about it.”

“You do that. She deserves the best life we can give her, and it goes beyond keeping her feeling secure and protected.” Theo checked his phone and responded to his sister’s query. “I have to go, but think about it.”

“I will. Say hi to Terreen.”

“Yup. But if I don’t go, I am going to be ducking fists.” He grinned. “See you later.”

He left his friend and headed for his car. He drove around Kern’s vehicle and headed for the spa, where his sister and sister-in-law were waiting. Fortunately, it was only ten minutes away. Boy, was Terry going to be surprised.

Chapter Seven

Kagan wasn't talking much, but then he knew how to find Ford's place. One of his uncles was a next-door neighbour. Reebee spoke to him while she caught up on her work emails and appreciated the benefit of a driver.

When they got to Ford's place, Kagan walked around to the passenger door and opened it for her. He helped her out and smiled. "Have a good day, and I am one door over when you are ready to go."

"Thanks, Kagan. See you later."

Kagan nodded and waited until Ford answered the door with a grin. His grin faded, and he blinked. "Holy hell, Reebee, who have you been doing?"

"Long story. Can I come in, or should I walk around the house?"

"Come in, come in. The nannies are in firm control this morning, so we can have a quiet walk through the house."

Reebee doubted it but took Ford's hand and waved the other at Kagan as Ford pulled her into the house.

Reebee smiled at the cheerful chaos of blankets and prams when they got to the kitchen. "It looks cozier than the last time."

"The housekeeper finishes in the afternoon. She starts on the upper floor and works her way down."

Ford picked up his baby and cuddled the infant. "I never thought that I wanted a baby, and then Olivia and Argus entered my life. Now, I can't imagine a day without them."

"Where is the pride today?"

"The big-cat rescue."

"I need to see that one day."

Ford kissed the baby's head and put it back in the bassinet. "Come on. I have tea with honey waiting, the big screen prepped, and the questions are lined up. You end up looking fantastic. I have never worked on something like this before, but the studio considered us an ideal blend of subject matter that I don't deny. We worked well together."

"I ran, and you used all the drone footage."

"Not all of it. There is so much that I wasn't able to fit in the time allotment. That is why the streaming system is better for this as a start." They walked through to his sound studio and settled on the chairs that had been set up for them. The microphones were set up, and the tea was poured.

When the tech had everything in motion, the screen started playing the entry notes of a familiar song. "Ford, I am going to paddle your butt. You said that was just for giggles."

"I did giggle, then I laughed and decided to use it as the show theme. Your charity is already racking up the funds from the views of the trailers."

"Yay! There are so many projects in the city that need funding." She smiled.

They watched the intro, and she brought up the questions she had been sent.

Ford looked at his tablet and grinned. "So, I am here with Reebee, a beta contestant on the show."

"And I am here with Ford. The producer who drew the short straw when it came to working with contestants."

Ford looked at her and snorted. "It was really easy. You did so much stupid shit that it made for great viewing."

"Well, I survived, you survived, and now we get to watch the show."

They chuckled, and the show started with the clip sequences. Reebee muttered, "I need popcorn and am wondering what pervert ended up with my sports bra."

Ford cackled, and they were off.

They went through episode after episode, got refills of tea, a pee break, and then continued.

By the time they finished, it was nearly five. Reebee got to her feet and swayed alarmingly. “Fucking hell.”

She sat down with a thud. “Sorry. I will just get Kagan to the door and have him swing through a drive-thru or six.”

Ford frowned. “We are about to have dinner. An extra chair is nothing.”

“No. I need to get home. Mind you, Kagan is the cook, so dinner is gonna be late.”

“Why are you exhausted? It’s only been a few hours.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Residual alpha withdrawal. I am pregnant.”

Ford stared at her. “No way. Congratulations. Just got pregnant?”

She slowly stood up and steadied. “Nope. Six months and three weeks to go.”

“Holy... you did all that while pregnant?”

“I didn’t know it until last Friday, so yeah. Impressive and terrifying.”

“I caught the scent of two alphas on you, but I thought you were just letting off steam.”

“Well, it wasn’t sweet or romantic the first or second time. The third was just what you do when you are mated, right?” She smiled. “They came to me when I needed them, so that is something. Now, I just don’t want to make a fuss.”

“So, who are they?”

“Uh, I don’t think that it’s something to make a fuss about. They are fairly well respected, and I don’t want to make anyone gossip about them.”

“We ran late. Do you need to call them?”

“No. He knows where I am.” She nodded. “Right. I can make it to the front door, and Kagan has said the car will be

there. I have spent the last five weeks throwing up, and it reached a critical point on Friday.”

Ford hugged her. There was no warning. She was wearing heels, and he buried his nose against her neck. She waited him out.

He leaned back. “Did you get anything from that?”

“You are neither my alpha nor food, so no. Those are the only things working for me this week.”

Ford chuckled. “Right. Do you need to lean on me?”

“Sure. I know when to accept help.”

He grinned. “Come on. Let’s go.”

They walked out. She greeted members of his pride who were smeared in dust and dirt. Reebee excused herself, left Ford with his family, and headed for the door.

She looked around and staggered to the support over the covered drive. She looked left and right, not seeing the Bentley.

A familiar dark car glided up, and she groaned. When Kern got out of the car, she sighed. “I can get a rideshare or a cab.”

Kern didn’t say anything. He pulled her to him and kissed her. When he raised his head, she heard a crackling sound, and a granola bar was pressed into her palm.

Kern carefully tucked her into the passenger seat as she nibbled at the granola bar. They hadn’t said a word.

“You were supposed to eat,” Kern said after ten minutes of driving.

“I had tea. We had to do voice recordings. No time to eat.”

He sighed. “Do you have to do that again?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“But sometimes my work runs late. I will bring snacks in my purse.”

He huffed.

“I’ll drive myself. I don’t feel great about messing with others’ schedules.” She kept eating and gathering up the crumbs as she went.

He sighed. “Keep small, stay out of view, and be useful. That is how you grew up.”

“Pretty much. A few other issues that my therapist has tried to deprogram with varying degrees of success.”

“You went to therapy?”

“Court-ordered for assault survivors. I stuck with it.”

His fingers tightened on the wheel. “Can you tell me about it?”

“Sure. Do you want to hear it while you are driving?”

Kern paused. “Perhaps not.”

“What I will tell you about what came after is that I was a little free with myself after that event. I chose who I took to my bed, and I frequently chose until I was twenty-three. After that, I had a grip on who and what I was.”

He quirked his lips. “What’s your body count?”

“Eleven, including you two.”

“Not terrifying. How many were alphas?”

“All of them.”

He glanced at her. “That is surprising. Why?”

“My stepdad is a good man, and he has always told me that the alphas who are dangerous are the ones who don’t or haven’t had softness in their lives. So, for all of my partners, I was softness. They taught me; I taught them. It was fine. Well except for my high school ex. He went nuts. He joined my sister’s pack, tried to keep me at his disposal, and generally was a pain in the ass. I declined. From the moment he signed that contract, he was dead to me.” She folded up the bar

wrapper and put it in her purse. “Unfortunately, he grew aggressive and crazy.”

“He will be dealt with.”

“Yeah. One way or another.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“You remember how I asked very sweetly to borrow your power?”

He hissed softly. “Yes. My favourite memory.”

She smiled and shrugged. “I don’t have to wait anymore. If I need it, it’s there.”

“You can call it?”

“I can wear your scales if I have to. Lose vision in one eye to use Theo’s strength. Whenever I need it.”

“I am strong as well.”

She smiled. “I can only pull one aspect from each male at a time. Your speed is more useful in a fight. When I put you two together, I pack quite the punch.”

Kern chuckled. “I would like to see that.”

“I don’t know what that would do to the baby, so I am trying not to use it, but I think because this would be coming from my own body, it should be okay.”

“Your own body?”

“Uh, I have genetic markers from both of you. They are part of me now. If we scrub the marks after the baby’s born, the genetic material left through your bites will fade out and flush away. Theo would know better how it works.”

“You want the marks off?”

“My instincts led me to you the first time, but I haven’t gotten a twinge or twitch about the big stuff since then. I know I am calmer if I have a plan for what happens after.”

“You have plans already?” His fingers tightened on the wheel.

“I have to, or I would be running until instinct guided me again. I wouldn’t go far, but sometimes life needs a framework. I haven’t had one of those, but I know it is something I need. I’ll figure it out.”

He glanced at her as they slowed, and the large gates swung open. “What is your stepfather’s name?”

“Liam Amory. Sisters are Navena and Zyrella. My mom’s name is Alice. I have to check my emails to see if she’s been arrested yet.” She blinked and focused on her phone.

He drove down the half mile of the driveway and pulled up in front of the mansion. “Why is she being arrested?”

“Well, while I can hide behind you, I released the recordings of my mother getting confirmation of my death and agreeing to send through the second half of the payment. I also have the recording of my would-be assassin agreeing to take on the accident that should have killed Elspetha. The next thing that happened was I strangled him with the zip ties, and we went over a cliff. When we landed, I was in rough shape, and his head was nearly off. That’s where I met Elspetha and Altar. We stood around and spoke while emergency services arrived. Blood everywhere.” She groaned. “I should keep my mouth shut when I am tired and hungry.”

He was silent and parked then walked around and opened her door. He reached around and unbuckled her belt then eased her out of the car.

“I can walk.”

“You are dizzy. Now that I know what I am looking for in the link, it is amazing that you are speaking.”

“I can do one thing. Just one.” She leaned her head against him as Jeffrey opened the door for them. “Security cameras?”

Kern nodded. “Loads of them. House and grounds.”

“No naked sprinting through the backyard. Got it.”

“Oh, please.” He chuckled. “How about on my birthday?”

“When is that?”

“Sunday.”

“How old will you be?”

“Thirty-seven.”

She asked, “What do you want for your birthday?”

“Let me think about it.” He smiled as he carried her to the kitchen.

Reebee frowned. “Think fast. Things are about to get bizarrely busy for me.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. Give me an IOU, and we will call it even.”

“Huh. I will have my assistant make one up. He’s a part-time graphic designer.”

“I hadn’t considered that you have an assistant.”

“His name is Renner. He’s very helpful. Quite talented.”

Kagan muttered, “I knew I should have packed her a lunch.”

“Ford decided that we would go through all eight episodes. Surprise.”

Kern sat down with her on his lap, and Kagan brought the slices of roast beef over. After silently conferring with Kern, Kagan sliced the beef into bite-sized pieces. “I do this for my nieces and nephews all the time.”

“This is embarrassing. I will set an alarm for every two hours at work tomorrow to make sure I eat something.”

Kern got some mashed potatoes, beef, and mixed veg on one fork. He fed her, and while she chewed, he said, “Perhaps you should just take a day to rest and relax. No work. No running around.”

“Uh, I don’t do that.”

Kern fed her again. “Take a day off work?”

“That. I also don’t rest or relax. I am not sure what I would do.”

“You don’t?”

“No. The only pictures of me in swimwear were taken during a contest. I even work on girls’ nights out.” She chuckled and took another bite.

“I had lunch with Elias today. Don’t tell them I told you, but you are going to be a bridesmaid.”

“Yay. Good for Elspetha, but then he has been courting her for months.” She swallowed. Another bite appeared.

“How did he do that?”

She snickered. “He donated money to the foundation and then made sure that Elspetha was locked to the project. He kept final authorization on the projects, and that meant she had to meet with him each morning. He brought her a cup of coffee every morning.”

She continued to eat, and when she was at the end of the meal, he asked, “How would someone court you?”

“No clue.”

“No hint for me?”

She looked at him and frowned. “You are planning on courting another beta? Find out what she likes, I guess.”

He looked at her in surprise. “No. You. I want to court you. We missed out on it.” He gave her the last bite. “Elias called me a dumbass.”

“Well, we are already mates, so don’t trouble yourself.”

He grasped her chin. “Please?”

“Are you asking to court me?”

“Yes.”

She stared at him in amazement. “Fine. I like picnics.”

“What?”

“Picnics. Romantic movies. Action movies. No horror. Even wildlife documentaries are good.”

He smiled. “Those are all doable.”

“Food. Lots of food.”

“No clothes, jewellery, shoes, handbags?”

“No. I can buy that stuff for myself. My chosen designs are boxier than what you would like to see, but they currently fit.”

Kagan offered, “My aunts are seamstresses and tailors. They love dressing omegas.”

“Well, I am a pretentious beta. No match.” She smiled.

Kern kissed her. “Sweetheart, please, let me do things for you. Please. I really need to.”

She tangled her fingers together and then said, “I am still hungry. Can I feed myself seconds?”

“Nope. Still me. I like taking care of you, and since I know that you didn’t eat lunch, you are weak. You did too much last night and this morning. Most packs spend a few days together.”

“Yeah, well, everyone had things to do. Including you.”

“Only because you had to go to Ford’s. Otherwise, we both would have called in.”

She smiled. “I hate wasted time.”

“Yes, I am picking up on that. Do you know why?”

“My therapist said it was because I always had to prove myself worthy of inclusion in my own home. I constantly had to earn my place.”

Kern looked at her. “You have a place. Your attorney is arriving in the next thirty minutes so he can fight for you against the sharks I employ.”

She blinked. “Not really shark alphas, right? I have met one, and he was definitely dedicated to his beta.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There were a few interesting alphas there.”

“Did you borrow from any of them?”

She looked away from Kagan serving up the seconds. “No. I didn’t need to. I panic-borrowed from Vasuki and Magnus.”

“Right. You said Magnus.”

“Yup. Why are you smiling?”

“No reason. Open up.” He squeezed her and fed her the second round of dinner.

When she was pleasantly full, she smiled. “I am good. Thank you.”

He kissed her forehead. “Jeffrey picked some things up for you. Get changed, and you can rest until your lawyer shows up.”

She smiled and turned to hug him, got off his lap, and walked carefully up to the second floor. When she opened the door to the master bedroom, she saw a rainbow of gowns on the bed with matching robes next to them.

She grinned. Poor Jeffrey. He had been demoted to her personal shopper. She took the set in stormy grey and went to change in the bathroom. When she came out, her hair was loose to her waist. She was thirsty, so she loosely tied the robe and headed downstairs.

She padded into the kitchen in bare feet and opened the fridge. Kagan loomed behind her. “What do you need, miss?”

“Water. Sports drink. Cold tea. Plenty of it. All I had today was tea.”

“Oh. Shit. Right. Do you like lemonade?”

Reebee smiled. “I do.”

“Here is a sports drink. I will get you the lemonade in a few minutes.”

“How fast does Kern eat?”

“Pretty fast. He’s in the study with his guest.”

She nodded. “I will chug this down and then go meet him.” She opened the bottle, chugged it down, and then burped delicately.

A bright-eyed Kagan took the empty and directed her to the study. Before she left, he paused and sniffed the bottle. He

scowled. “Your scent is familiar?”

“Of course, it is. I have been hanging out here for a few days.”

“No. This is a scent I run into in certain circumstances. Who is your father?”

“No clue. Theo is running a DNA match to try and find someone in one of the open databases.” She smiled. “I might find out who knocked up the psycho after all.”

“Your mother?”

“My mother.” She grinned and headed to the study.

Through the door, she could hear masculine voices talking softly. She sent a pulse through her link to Kern and heard, “Come in, Rhymbia.” There was anticipation thrumming through their link.

Chapter Eight

Reebee turned the knob and pushed the door open. She walked inside, and a familiar scent hit her. “Magnus?”

The blonde head turned toward her, and the shock in his expression probably mirrored the shock in hers. His grey business suit was precisely tailored. Damn, it was annoying how good alphas could look.

Kern got up and stood behind her. “Magnus, this is my mate, Rhymbia. Rhymbia, this is your lawyer, Magnus.”

She turned her head to look over her shoulder. “Very clever, butthead.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her sweetly. “I thought so.”

Magnus said, “Reebee? You said you didn’t have a mate.”

“The link occurred this weekend. So, I didn’t, but now I do. I also mentioned that I had a recent short relationship with a pair of alphas. This is the first, and I am guessing the second is at work.”

Kern nodded. “He is.”

Magnus nodded. “Mr. Meksoren mentioned it. Right, I suppose we should get down to business.”

She nodded. “Do you want to talk in the kitchen? Kagan is making some lemonade. I am super thirsty.”

He looked to Kern. “Do you have a preference to where I consult with her?”

Kern shook his head. “Wherever she is comfortable. The living room is also an available location.”

She shook her head. “Where are my manners? Hi, Magnus.” She extended her hand to him.

Magnus shifted his tablets to his left hand and shook her hand with his right, stroking his thumb across the back of her

knuckles. He frowned and looked down. “You didn’t feel like this on the island.”

“I had pulled some energy from alphas I am in contact with, and I can use it for survival purposes. I will explain when we are seated. I am still a little lightheaded.”

Kern said, “Do you need help?”

“No, just need to walk slowly. Magnus, where would you prefer?”

“The living room. You can relax a little.”

She nodded and patted Kern’s hand on her shoulder. “Okay, Kern. Let me do a slow turn and get settled.”

Kern turned her and bent to kiss her. “Call if you need me, Rhymbia.”

“Like you aren’t going to be listening.”

He smiled, and his shielded gaze was glowing bright. “Go and take me for everything I am worth.”

“I thought I already did that.” She looked to a slightly amused Magnus. “Come this way.”

He nodded, and she left the office then walked the hall through the kitchen where Kagan was working on the lemonade. The whole kitchen smelled like citrus, and he was talking to someone on the phone with a frown between his brows.

He saw her and asked, “Miss, what is your mother’s name?”

“Alice Turner was her birth name.”

“Thank you. Lemonade in five minutes.”

“We’ll be in the living room.”

Kagan nodded.

She led Magnus to the living room and chose a corner of the couch while he sat on the other.

He sat down. “So, was returning to normal life as shockingly easy as it was for me?”

“Nope. There was a complication that caused issues when I got back. I got really sick.”

Magnus looked concerned, his deep blue eyes looking sad. “What happened?”

“Pregnancy and alpha withdrawal. Violent nausea. Weight loss. Just a fun time all around.”

“It’s strange for morning sickness to kick in so soon. It normally doesn’t hit until the second month from what my mother and sisters have told me.”

“Which was right on time. I was pregnant during the show. Didn’t know it, and I probably officially turned pregnant on the flight out, but I was.”

Magnus looked green. “Oh, geez.”

“Yeah. Makes everything look a little different on the show.”

He perked up. “Wait. You have seen them?”

“Sure. Kern bought the studio this week. I think it was just so he could see the show early. Do they have you doing any commentary?”

“Yeah. I commented on the final episode with my film crew.”

She smiled. “That is what I was doing today. So, in full disclosure, I can borrow an exotic alpha’s specific strength and use aspects of it.”

His eyes widened. “Which is why you got so good at swimming all of a sudden.”

“Extra lung capacity is all I was going for.” She licked her lips. “You are a whale?”

“Narwhal. Cold water, big horn.” He smiled.

She nodded. “My mates are... different as well.”

“Kern explained a little. Right. Business first, and then you can show me some of those videos.”

She laughed. “That had better be off the clock.”

He nodded. "It will be. Right. So, what do you need to settle down with your mates? Be honest."

She swallowed. "I would like to marry one of them legally. I grew up a bastard in a family, and I don't want my baby feeling like that for even one moment. He always needs to know he belongs and doesn't have to fight for a place."

Magnus had a serious expression on his face and nodded.

"What financial assets do you have?"

"Four million in savings, two downtown buildings, and several rentals, value of two million per year in income after expenses."

Magnus looked at her in surprise. "You could have this child on your own."

"Easily, if I wouldn't need Kern. But I do, and I am getting used to him. Okay. Something that I need is defense against my stalker. My ex-boyfriend and my sister's pack member."

She explained her family dynamic quickly.

"Wow. That's... not easy."

"Nope. But stepdad and half-sisters are sweet."

"So, what do you need to be happy?"

"A place I don't have to leave or constantly be earning my place. It is a very ephemeral idea, but it is what I want actually. I have enough funds to support any children that I have, send them to college, and set them up. What I don't have is a safe environment for me."

"I have to ask, why is your skin so soft? It wasn't during filming."

"Oh, I used Theo's physical attributes to make me more beta than I usually was."

"What does that mean?"

"I had tests as a child to show I was supposed to have become an omega, but my mother took me for therapy, and with painful treatments and medication, my maturation as an

omega came to a halt. Theo is getting his friend to send me for tests. Oh, shit. I didn't check my phone."

Kagan came in with the tray with two glasses and a huge pitcher of lemonade. She looked at him. "Kagan, do you know where I left my phone?"

"Charger in the kitchen. I will bring it to you." He poured two glasses and smiled.

He left and returned a moment later with her phone.

"Thanks, Kagan."

"No problem, miss."

He left, and she opened her phone, thumbing through emails until she found one.

"Aha. There it is." She replied to the obstetrics acceptance and groaned at the appointment that had been set, but she was going to take it.

Magnus raised his brows. "What is that about?"

"New obstetrician. Theo is a little too close to the situation. I want to be his mate, not his patient."

He smiled. "Thoughtful."

"Plus, he usually stares at my bits for free. It would be weird if he charged for it."

Magnus cackled.

They went through the boilerplate of the contract, and then Magnus paused. "Are you up to expand your pack in the future?"

"Sure, but everything has to go through Kern. It's his house."

"Of course." Magnus smiled.

They continued on, going through the needs she had versus the wants. Magnus paused, "Do you need a nest?"

"No. I like cuddling up in Kern if I need to. He's really warm."

Kern spoke from behind them. “And you are very cuddly, but I travel and won’t be there all nights.”

She bit her lip. “And Theo has to go in when he’s on call.” She turned toward Kern. “I guess I will just soothe myself. I have been doing it for a while and have the knack of it.”

Kern looked to Magnus. “Do you understand what she needs in the contract?”

“Yeah. I have it. She was pretty sure.”

Reebee asked, “Is there a subtext that I am missing?”

Kern sat on the edge of the chair and stroked her hair. “Did you close the pack?”

“No. Why would I?” She frowned. “It isn’t my house.” She looked up at him. “Am I missing subtleties?”

“Nothing that you need to worry about.” He leaned down to kiss her. His lips touched hers sweetly, and she leaned up to continue the contact. Kern hissed softly and stroked her jaw.

There was a rustling on the other side of the couch, and Reebee blinked and backed up, looking at Magnus with hot cheeks. “Sorry.”

Kern chuckled and asked, “Did you want to show Magnus some of the episodes?”

“Oh. Can I?”

“Sure. Kagan is going to bring some snacks.”

“Well, I do like snacks.”

He stroked her cheek, kissed her again, and said, “Take as much time as you like. Magnus, I am issuing a formal invitation to you.”

Reebee looked at Magnus, and he was suddenly on alert. Kern was stern, like a principal. “What’s going on?”

Kern leaned down and whispered in her ear, “I am inviting him to join your pack.”

She looked up at him with wide eyes. “What?”

“I have also offered the invitation to Vasuki. The way you interacted during the show was rather obvious to anyone who wasn’t a beta.”

She swallowed. “Oh. Right.”

He got the remote and tapped her nose. “So, find out if he is willing to round out our numbers. Vasuki won’t be here for hours.”

She gasped. “You have invited him here, too?”

Magnus chuckled. “So, you have mates that are aware of things.”

Kern nodded. “Oh, yes. Anyone who has experienced Rhymbia at close quarters would develop an interest.”

She scowled. “It is hardly that bad.”

He chuckled. “It is exactly that bad. It is your instinct that draws you to the alphas who would be most suitable.”

Magnus chuckled. “Well, it would explain why she saved our asses.”

“I saw that. She caught Vasuki when his rope broke?”

“The ground holding our ropes gave way. She chose the only stable selection.” Magnus shuddered. “She caught Vasuki, and I managed to cling to the cliff face. We both used her line to descend.”

She took the remote and tried to think of a segment that was Magnus only.

Reebee clicked and found the segment that focused on Magnus’s part of the dive challenge.

She watched the seriousness of his expression and saw the picture-in-picture as she waited until the chain hit the water, and then she dove over, grabbing the rope on the way. He grinned as she hit the water and dropped right behind her. They were the last two swimmers. The others were already on the way up.

Kern murmured, “I am going to catch up on work. Call me if you need me, Rhymbia.”

“Yes, my alpha.” She felt the jolt of Magnus next to her. Thick lust ripped through Kern’s link, and she smiled brightly at him.

He opened his mouth and then closed it with a snap. “Don’t forget to eat the snacks.”

She grinned. “I won’t. Will you tell me when I have to head to bed?”

“I will make sure that you are in bed by eleven.”

Reebee snorted and waved him off.

Kern sent an emotion she wasn’t able to identify as he left. It had a butt-paddling vibe. She snickered.

“What was that?”

“He wants to paddle my ass.” She grinned and glanced at Magnus. “He will soon remember that I am pregnant and just sit there growling and hissing for a while. I am enforcing the no spanking rule while pregnant.”

He chuckled. “Sensible.” His dark blue eyes gleamed with a slightly predatory gaze. “So, would you like to have me as another alpha?”

“Uh. Not if it makes you uncomfortable. I mean, if you think it’s weird, I wouldn’t want to pressure you into anything.”

He laughed. “I think we should discuss this a little more intimately.”

“What?”

He picked her up and settled her on his lap. “That’s better.”

She was startled. He had been so careful and slow-moving during the shoot.

“You smell really pretty, Rhymbia.”

“Is that your opinion as my legal representative?”

“No. That is the opinion of someone who wants to be one of your alphas.”

“So, what Kern did was a kind of formal invitation to throw your hat into the ring?”

“Yes. It means he’s gone over my stats, my health evaluations, my social status, and my family ties. Kern is a scary guy.”

“He’s... Kern. That’s it.”

“What kind of fun things has he given you?”

“Uh. The nighty and robe. The clothes I left the hospital with.” She smiled. “And he bought the studio because of me.”

“Right.”

“Oh, he gave me a baby, but that was a surprise for both of us.”

He chuckled. “May I kiss you?”

“Are we doing an oxygen transfer?”

He grinned. “No. I just really want to taste you without seawater.”

“Um. Yes?” She blushed and kept her head down. He cupped the side of her head in his hand and tilted his head toward hers.

He whispered, “The original contact was less to save you and more to taste you, just so you know.”

“The grip on my waist was a bit of a hint. The erection in your shorts was a larger one, so to speak.”

“And yet you held me tight,” he murmured against her mouth, tickling her.

“I was taking everything you would give me.”

“Oh, I love that attitude.” His lips came down firmly on hers.

The taste of him brought the memory back in a rush. He was holding her securely, carefully, and she grabbed his pristine suit, holding tight to his lapels.

He tasted cool and a bit salty. He kept his hand to her waist, and the other held her head, fingers woven through her hair.

He made a slow fist and tilted her head back, moving from her mouth to her neck.

She whined when his lips moved over the part of her neck where the scent gland should have been. He tensed, and his fingers gripped her waist tight. Her breathing was fast, and she cursed Theo and Kern for starting an addiction to touch. Her nipples scraped the silk of the nightgown, and she shuddered.

Magnus continued to move his lips over the mark, and when he started to suck, she yelped and pressed her thighs together as slick started to make its way out of her. She pushed against his chest. “Stop, stop, stop.”

He slowed and lifted his head. His blue eyes were nearly black, and he asked hoarsely, “Stop?”

“It’s sudden. I wasn’t expecting... you.” She stared into his eyes, and her intuition was giggling, just as it had been on the island.

“I wasn’t expecting you either, and I never expected that Kern would issue an invitation to me. So, that said, there is one thing in the contract that I am not clear on. You want to get married? Why?”

“Oh, personal issue. My mom threatened to toss me out on my ass. No family to take me in. She wouldn’t let my stepfather adopt me. She kept me alone, so I feel alone. It gets tiring. I just want to be able to relax and not worried about being yeeted into the cold. Going from having people around who want to screw me to having no one might snap my brain. I want one person who chooses me, first and foremost. Just one.”

He frowned. “That’s—”

“Hey, Magnus, who is the... Reebee?” Vasuki was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, Kagan behind him, peering around the alpha.

Reebee blushed and ducked her head. “Uh, hi, Vasuki.”

She tried to get out of Magnus’s grip, and he acted like she wasn’t yanking at his hands.

Vasuki's nostrils flared, and he paused. "So, Kern is really your alpha?"

"Wait, you can smell him?"

The alphas snorted. Magnus murmured, "This is his house. His scent is in it."

Vasuki smiled. "This room especially. Were you fooling around in here?"

"Uh, not today."

"So, I heard you tell Magnus to stop. Was he getting too handsy?"

Magnus softly said, "She got slick."

Vasuki walked in and took a seat near them. "You don't say." His tongue flicked out. "Yes, that definitely is what is in the air."

She started to panic, and a heavy wave of calm went through Kern's link. She exhaled and sat quivering.

Vasuki took her hands and pressed them to his mouth, flicking his tongue over her fingers and wrists. "You are with two alphas you aren't bonded to, so you are sending panicked signals. I am guessing Kern sent calm?"

She nodded. "My instincts say you are both good, but something else is freaking out."

Vasuki smiled. "It's fine. We will stop when you say stop."

She swallowed. "It's been quite a week for me. You know I am pregnant?"

He blinked and smiled. "And that is why you panicked. You can't afford to be near unlinked alphas. We would normally be dangerous to your pregnancy."

"What?"

"If you were no longer pregnant, it would make room for us to start a child with you." Vasuki kissed her palms. "But that is not the case. We aren't going to harm you. You are fine in our hands, and your alpha is nearby if you have the slightest

nervous moment. He'll defend both of you, and Kern can do it."

He looked at Magnus, and the blond handed her over to Vasuki with his black hair, black eyes, and sinuous movements. He smelled good, but Magnus also smelled good. Vasuki was sharper but still comforting. That nervousness was still fizzing, but Vasuki just cuddled her close.

She understood one thing. "You have met Kern."

He kissed her forehead. "I have. He's in charge of the local serpents, and visiting ones come to him for permission to access the area. He keeps us under control."

"He's good at that," she muttered.

"How did you meet him, Reebee?"

She mumbled, "I showed up at his house and propositioned him."

Vasuki froze. "What?"

"You heard me. I am a beta. The auditions for the show were in two days. I can take power aspects from alphas, so I followed my instincts and drove here. Theo came to my car and invited me into the house. I... uh... made a deal. That's why I made it to the finals."

Vasuki stroked her arm and just held her. "So, you took power from Kern?"

"And Theo. Theo gave me strength and durability; Kern gave me speed and hunting skills." She blushed. "I cheated."

Vasuki squeezed her gently. "You worked with what you were given. Not cheating. So, did you take anything from Magnus and myself?"

"Uh, lung capacity and resistance to cold. From you, I borrowed tougher skin and resistance to heat," she mumbled.

"Good. That day around the volcano was nerve-racking."

She remembered running across the surface that was rapidly heating under her feet and then jumping for Vasuki's hand as he hung out of the helicopter.

“Are you sure you are a beta?”

“Yes. My mom used restricting and blocking meds on me when I was a teen. My omega state never developed.”

His body got tense under her thighs. “So, you were supposed to be an omega?”

“Yeah, but I have two half-sisters who were also omegas, and my mother thought it was best I didn’t compete for attention with her new husband’s daughters.”

He pressed his lips to her temple. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. I have a doctor’s appointment in the morning for some scans. It will verify if I have undeveloped internal mechanisms or not. I am pretty sure that I do. I remember things starting, and then I felt so hollow.”

He crooned to her and held her. When she relaxed against him, he murmured, “I think you could benefit from meeting my grandmother. Lady Fen. She’s rough around the edges but a very knowledgeable omega.”

“Why?”

“She has a way of looking at things.”

“Of course. I don’t want to be declared a broken omega.”

“Why not?”

“Because then I lose so much. As a beta, I am a person. As an omega, I am an asset, a trophy.”

“Ah. I think I understand. But, won’t it be nicer for your alphas if you are an omega?”

“Oh, right. Hornyness and slick. I am sure that is all they have ever dreamed of.”

He paused. “There is more to it. There is honour, alphas who worship you.”

“Lack of financial freedom. Lack of voting rights. No more right to hold a job that isn’t entertainment-related. I would lose everything I have worked so hard to create. I just want to know that the glands are dead so I can wrap myself in being a

beta and get on with my life. As an omega, I can't call anyone my own, and I am up for grabs."

She felt the tears start, and then she was silent as they fell hot and fast. Vasuki wiped her tears, but they kept coming.

Reebee felt hands lifting her from Vasuki, and Kern held her while she cried. She didn't gasp that it was hormones. She had been living at the edge of stress for years, and now, the dam broke with a little cuddling. She deserved a meltdown.

She stood against him, and he explained to the others that this was a stress long withheld. He wasn't wrong. She waited until the wave of tears had run its course, and then she looked up at Kern. "Apologies, alpha."

He looked down at her. "For what?"

"Losing control. Emotional display. Blowing a snot bubble. Pick one."

He stroked her cheek. "All were justified. You are an amazing woman and have done amazing things. If we find out that you are an undeclared omega, we will keep it to ourselves."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Deal."

Chapter Nine

The next morning Kern was gone, Theo was still at the hospital, and Reebee had to get to her appointment.

Her doctor was a female alpha with a lovely bedside manner, ultrasounding Reebee's neck and pelvis, looking for the omega glands.

"Well, Reebee. They are there. If your pack wants to press charges against your mother, they are well within their rights."

"Even if it was decades ago?"

The doctor smiled and handed her a lollipop. "No crime against an omega is outside prosecution."

"Oh."

"I wish your alpha was here. They usually fuss or get excited at news like this."

"Well, we already know the baby is a boy. You can happily see it with an external ultrasound. I don't know what more there is to say."

"Who stopped your progress? The glands are partially developed, but they are definitely stunted."

"My mother. Long story."

"Well, she should be charged if there wasn't a medical reason for it."

"Right. Well, can you not notify the Omega Centre? I already have mates and don't need them poking around."

The doctor paused. "There was an automatic alert that went out the moment the test results flared up. Dormant omegas are extremely rare."

"But... I'm pregnant."

"Doesn't matter."

“Shit. Well, hopefully, they call Theo first.” She was just getting into a heavy bout of nervousness when she felt a tide of panic rising. There was a soft knock on the door, and she jumped.

The doc opened the door, and Kern walked in. Reebee bolted into his arms. “You should have told me.”

“I didn’t realize you didn’t know until I had breakfast and you were gone. Baby’s good. A bright and shining blob.”

The doctor chuckled and gave Kern the details. Kern nodded. “We will fix this before they can get to her for their own verifications. Now, Rhymbia, please, get dressed so that particular plan can get underway.”

She scowled. “What’s the plan?”

“First, you sign the contract that Magnus wrote and presented to my attorneys this morning, and then we have a stop at city hall.”

“Oh. That’s where you went.” She fidgeted.

“Yes. I didn’t know Theo had found you a doctor this soon.”

Her doctor smiled. “I had an opening, and Dr. Galanis was insistent.”

Reebee changed quickly and stepped into her normal heels. She had intended on going to work after this.

Her doctor looked at her. “She looks like a standard beta. The braid doesn’t help.”

Kern held his hand out, palm up. Reebee walked to him and took his hand. “We are working on convincing her to keep her hair down.”

The doctor nodded. “But, she’s a little thin, even though she has a lot of muscle. Also, she is going to need to learn how to cover a hickey better if she is going to wear her hair back.”

Reebee clapped a hand to her neck where Magnus had left a bright mark.

Kern smiled behind his sunglasses, his eyes glowing softly. “One of her prospective alphas was trying to be insistent.

Kagan has already taken your car home, Rhymbia. Jeffrey is waiting.”

“Oh. Okay.” She looked to the female alpha that had just become her new doctor. “Thanks, doc. Uh... do you have an orange one?”

The doctor grinned and handed her three orange lollipops and patted her head. “I will see you again in a month and monthly after that. Call the office if anything happens, and your tummy is starting to curve a little. You will have a bump before I see you again.”

Rhymbia blinked. “Shit. I need to go shopping.”

Kern twitched his lips. “That is what Jeffrey was up to yesterday. He had to go to several shops to find one that was willing to help him using your current wardrobe.”

“My clothes aren’t that bad.”

“They aren’t; they are just hard to match with designer equivalents.”

She mumbled, “I just think that clothes are a stupid thing to waste money on.”

“And yet, you look so pretty all dressed up, and I like you in soft things. You look more comfortable.”

She sighed. “It is more comfortable but still a waste of money.”

“But this is my money, not yours. We can fold your clothes carefully away, and then you can use the wardrobe we provide. Consider it a second job.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Sounds like a *dress for the job you want* situation.”

He stroked her cheek. “I am glad you want it, but we should let the doctor have her exam room back.”

The other woman grinned. “This is so sweet. You added yourself to her file?”

“I did.”

“Then I look forward to the checkup in a month, and I will forward ideas to activate what remains of her omega characteristics.” The doctor beamed.

Kern kept his arm around her as they left the office. They picked up a pack of prenatal vitamins from the front desk and confirmed the next appointment. The car was waiting for them, but it wasn't the normal one. It was longer and black, and Jeffrey opened the door for them. It felt like a limo when she was inside.

Kern settled next to her and took her hand. “You should have told me.”

“I got the message when I was on the way to talk to my lawyer, and the rest of the night got a little blurry.”

He sighed. “I suppose. Vasuki was good with you.”

The car pulled forward, and they began to make their way toward downtown.

“He has omegas in the family.”

“Yes, he does. Speaking of omegas, Kagan has a lead on your father's family.”

“What?” Reebee whipped her head toward his. “You are kidding?”

“No, well, you are apparently a dead ringer for the family matriarch, so now, he has given the assignment for Lady Olyna to look through her menfolk and find out who slept with Alice Turner nearly thirty-one years ago.”

“Do I have to do anything?”

“No. The lady has taken this on as her own assignment.”

“Right, so how do we know it is actually this family?”

Kern grinned and held out his phone, showing an image of an older woman who was beautiful, but she was blonde with blue eyes. He tapped the image, and it changed the hair to black and the eyes to pale green. Reebee blinked. “Holy shit. That's what I am going to look like when I am older.”

He chuckled. “It is a very disturbing similarity, and Kagan showed his grandmother this image and the transformation of you going the other way. He also mentioned that you smell like family. That piqued Olyna’s interest, and she ordered her alphas to investigate.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“They are looking to find any of their sons older than forty-five, so that has narrowed the queries.”

“Yikes. I don’t mean to cause any fuss. If my mom had wanted me to know, she would have told me.”

“She hasn’t told you many things. Now, this is the contract. Read it over while we drive, and sign it when you have gone over it. Magnus’s requests have already been filed and agreed to.” He handed her the tablet set to the pack agreement.

She took the tablet and looked at all of the involved names at the top of the contract. She swallowed. The words *Registry to be updated as more alphas enter the contract* made her a little nervous. Four was enough.

Reebee saw her name formally typed and smiled. She went through their responsibilities to her, to her children, and any plans for her future. There were separate offerings from each of the alphas and a listing of all their birthdays. She blushed when she read how young Vasuki and Magnus were. Theo and Kern were six and eight years older than she was.

Reebee read the next clause about her duty to the alphas. Her duty to herself was also covered. She had to put her health and safety first over that of the pack. That was clever.

There was also a paragraph outlining that Kern was to provide lodgings for all pack members. That was cute.

She got to the final clause, and her hands started shaking. She looked at Kern. “What is the last paragraph about?”

“We are attending to it. The ceremony will happen in a few months, but today, we are going to be legally married.”

“You didn’t ask.”

He turned to her, knelt on the floorboards, and took her left hand. “Rhymbia Turner, will you marry me so we can scrape your last name off and give you one that scares people?”

He was looking at her over the lenses and smiling.

“Okay, but just because of the scaring-people thing.”

He grinned and took a small box out of his pocket. He opened it, and a huge emerald the same colour as his eyes was sitting in a ring.

“Oh. Geez.”

He chuckled as they made their way through town. “There are wedding bands in my other pocket.”

She looked around. “This isn’t downtown.”

“No, I know a judge who is home today because his daughter has the sniffles, and his omega is pregnant again. He’s working half time, and today he is off.”

Reebee chuckled and commented, “The ring is heavy. I am not used to wearing jewellery.”

“Well, it will be balanced on the other side.” He kissed her knuckle and got back into his seat.

She looked around. “Hey, I know this place.”

“Of course. Your friend Ford is just at that place there.”

The car approached a fairly expansive home, and Jeffrey glided them to a halt. Reebee signed the tablet and handed it to Kern. “Almost forgot about that.”

“I wasn’t going to let you out of the car without it.” He smiled.

Jeffrey opened Kern’s door, and he slid out and then extended his hand to her. Reebee sighed and slid across the seat and took his hand. When she stepped out of the car, there was a welcoming committee.

She looked at Theo, Magnus, and Vasuki. “Uh-huh.” She turned around and tried to dive back into the car. Kern kept his grip on her hand and reeled her in toward him.

“We need witnesses. Delun will supply one, but we need another. I asked them, but they all wanted to come.”

Two familiar women came out of the house. Reebee beamed.

“Come on, ancient one. We need to get you dressed. Is that what you wear to leave the house?” Zyrella smiled. She was an ideal omega. Long, curly chestnut hair, huge dark eyes, and wearing a silk dress with the same attitude that Reebee wore sweats.

Navena smiled, her glossy hair complimented by her golden brown skin. They looked just like their father. He was a beautiful alpha and a kind man.

Kern turned her toward him and kissed her softly. “Now, go get ready. You are getting married.”

She smiled up at him. “Who would be dumb enough to take me on?”

He grinned. “It was just my luck.”

Her sisters hauled her inside, where a golden woman smiled and introduced herself as Lexa, Vasuki’s aunt.

Navena was unravelling Reebee’s braid as they walked to a room that was bright and sunny. Reebee took off her blouse, and her sisters snorted at her underwear. “Well, not everyone has someone as their personal shopper, Zyrella.” Then she paused as she realized that she did. That is what Jeffrey had been up to.

Lexa held up a garment bag, and Navena handed her a smaller one. She peered into it and snorted at underwear in rich gold. “Well, I guess they are the ones looking at it.”

She slipped on the bra, reached under her skirt to remove her panties, then dropped the skirt and reached for the emerald green dress that matched Kern’s eyes.

Her sisters pushed her into a chair. Zyrella did her hair while Navena did her makeup.

Lexa had a set of four-inch heels, and she chuckled. “So, how is your morning going?”

“After bloodwork and scans, I found out my new doctor is very clever. And your littles will have a cousin in seven months.”

Both of her siblings froze. Zyrella looked at her. “You are pregnant? Does the alpha know?”

She smiled. “I hope so; he was definitely there when I got pregnant.”

Navena finished fussing with her hair. “The others are his friends?”

Lexa filled in, “No, they are his pack. Well, Rhymbia’s pack. The contract was registered today.”

Reebee stared at her and then realized that if Vasuki was her nephew, she probably knew a lot more than Reebee was comfortable with.

When the formfitting dress was on, and her hair was settled over her shoulder, Zyrella grinned. “I covered up that hickey. Kern doesn’t seem the type.”

“Uh, he isn’t.”

Navena chuckled. “So, Kern is one of your marks. Who is the second?”

“Theo.”

Zyrella grinned. “With all those mates, they might double-team you. Do you want some pointers?”

“No. I am good. I figured that part out already.” Her sister was surprised and then laughed.

Lexa smiled. “Okay. You look stunning. Switch your engagement ring to your right hand.”

Reebee blinked and did as she was told. Lexa took her hand. “Come on, niece. They are waiting in Delun’s study.”

The sisters quickly hugged her, and then they all walked down the hall to the office. Lexa knocked softly, and a voice said, “Come.”

Lexa shivered, and Reebee giggled. She got a look from her soon-to-be auntie. “They do that to you, too?”

She chuckled. “Just Kern and just the first time.”

Her sisters gasped. But Reebee just smiled and went through the door with Lexa and her siblings.

The judge was sitting behind the desk with the certificate. He had broad shoulders, a thick neck, and broad everything. He smiled at her. “So, this is Rhymbia. You are lovely, and I have seen some of the clips with Vasuki. I am surprised you didn’t form a connection there and then.”

She turned her head and looked at Vasuki. He grinned. “My family is supportive, so they all got the promo links. We are having a complete party here on Friday after we do the show. Watching everything from start to finish.” He laughed. “Including auditions.”

She got pink. “Oh. That.”

Magnus chuckled. “I was shocked when I saw it, but it explained a lot about why you ended up on the show. You are a lot of fun to watch.”

Kern walked forward and lifted her hands to his lips, kissing each palm. “Yes, she is.” She leaned toward him and met his gaze through his lenses.

Reebee grinned and said, “You are fun to watch, too.”

They kissed sweetly, and he hissed long and low as she lowered to her heels. Vasuki’s eyes were shining. Whatever Kern had just said was profound or dirty. She didn’t care which.

Delun looked around the room. “Well, we have plenty of witnesses, so let’s proceed.”

Reebee focused on what was being asked of her and nodded. “I do, and I will.”

Kern waited and then said, “I do, and I will.”

Delun smiled. “Well, I now pronounce you husband and wife, mates, and partners. You may now... never mind, you

are way ahead of me.”

Kern lifted her, and she wrapped her arms around him. He slid a hand through her hair and tugged her head back for their kiss. The forks of his tongue slid between her lips and caressed every part of her mouth. Her body got hot very quickly, and she sent the heat through their link. His hands tightened, and he held her with nearly crushing force.

The kiss continued, and they got hotter and hotter.

Lexa and the omegas giggled.

When Kern lifted his head, he smiled down at her. “Unplanned but very much wanted. Hello, Mrs. Meksoren.”

“Huh. I will need to change my name.”

Delun chuckled. “I have the requisition here. You just have to sign it, and my assistant will bring this all in for filing. Today.”

She looked at the new ring that was on her finger and exhaled. She was about to say how ticked off her mother would be, but then she pushed the thought away. The Omega Centre had been notified that her mother had taken an omega from them, and her mother would pay for that even if the other crimes were too old.

They signed the documents, including the name-change request. The witnesses signed, and then Lexa smiled. “Great. Now we can have lunch with the family.”

Reebee frowned. “Whose family?”

Lexa chuckled. “Yours, of course. Lady Olyna’s clan have all been DNA tested at a private lab, so we know who your father is.”

Zyrella said, “Reebee, I thought you knew and just didn’t want contact. That’s what Mom said.”

“Mom said that it wasn’t any of my business. If he had wanted me, he would have kept in contact with her.”

Navena said softly, “She told us who it was when you disappeared. When you got in contact with us, we just thought

he hadn't accepted you."

Kern said, "That is enough about her. Your father brought Rhymbia to adulthood, and her mother tried to destroy everything that made her her. She became the dumping ground for all of your mother's bad choices. She doesn't need to live with that anymore."

It was embarrassing to be discussed, but Reebee straightened her shoulders. "She made choices for me, did things to me to influence my future, and then hired someone to kill me. She was not a good mother... to me. Please, keep all good thoughts of her for yourselves."

Zyrella looked at her. "She hired..."

"Yup. Oh, and the Omega Centre is going to be at her door soon. They don't take kindly to having omegas stopped before they can start. The twisted thing is that she could have been paid to have kids with your father as the omega-generating gene was obviously with her." She took a deep breath. "Right, so now, she doesn't matter. It's a happy day. I have personal strength now, and if it fails, I can borrow from my pack."

Navena said, "Those links are only between omegas and their alphas."

"And yet, I can feel the thick pulse of his emotions and strength, and Theo is right there as well. Kern is more excited today, for reasons."

Theo said, "Just like we can feel her desperate attempts not to hurt your feelings."

Zyrella blinked. "Right. Oh, honey. You were worried about us?"

Navena looked at her with concern. "We knew she treated us differently. I thought it was because you were a beta. Aw, geez, Reebee."

"Can we meet for lunch next week? I am still working downtown." She muttered it shyly.

Zyrella nodded. "I might have to bring one of my guys. Is that an issue?"

“Nope. Alphas have never scared me.”

Kern chuckled. “I can confirm that. I have never seen a beta so nervous and fearless at the same time.”

Theo nodded. “I can second that. When she looked me in the eye and didn’t freak out, I was smitten.”

“It’s such a pretty eye.” She smiled.

He smiled. “Your eyes are pretty, too, Rhymbia.”

Navena asked, “Why do you call her that? Everybody calls her Reebee.”

Vasuki smiled. “Not anymore. From here on out, she gets to wear everything that was given at birth. New day. More family. A lot more.”

Delun chuckled. “And with her colouring, Lady Fen will give her a much easier time than she has betas in the past.”

“What do you mean? I am pale as a ghost.”

Vasuki laughed. “It is the hair and eyes that will impress. You also look soft and lovely despite your height. You are also graceful and brave. I have been singing your praises for over a month.”

Delun got to his feet and slid the documents into an envelope. “He’s serious. We have been hearing about you for a month. I was beginning to think you were imaginary, and then the promos came out, and the world saw you in action. You are impressive.”

“Yeah, I didn’t really think this whole thing out, Judge Hall.”

Delun answered a soft knock on the door and handed the envelope to a younger male who looked a lot like Vasuki.

The runner looked around the room, and when he saw her, his eyes widened. “Holy shit. You weren’t lying.”

Vasuki snorted. “Pull your eyes in and get to the town hall to file them, or I will have to do it and tell the family you slipped in your own drool.”

Navena smiled. "I am guessing little brother."

"Correct. That's Varel. He's clerking for Uncle Delun."

"So, I guess when Vasuki marks me, that will make you my little brother."

Varel winced. "Eh, I can deal with that. Vas, you had better get her nice stuff to wear to parties. I may bring friends."

Reebee frowned. "Why would I need..."

Vasuki snorted. "Secondhand bragging. He wants to show you off."

"How the hell would that work?"

"Well, he would get to stand next to one of the most famous faces this week, possibly this season, and introduce you as his sister." Magnus grinned. "My siblings are looking forward to doing that."

She swallowed. "Ah. Big families."

Everyone except Rhymbia and her sisters laughed.

Chapter Ten

They eventually made their way outside, and she whispered to Kern, “How many siblings do you have?”

“None. Only child. Very selfish. We discussed your needs after you dozed off. That is why I married you.”

“So, this is a sacrifice play?”

“You had a need, we all wanted to fulfill it, and I won the honour.”

“How?”

“Arm wrestling.”

She looked up at him in astonishment, and he laughed loud and long. He chuckled. “The look on your face. No, we discussed it, and I was the most beneficial candidate for you, but they can offer you extended family.”

She smiled and sent him a signal. He leaned down, and she kissed him, ignoring the hundred people watching their slow approach.

There was a woman, who looked to be in her late forties, standing with her hair delicately arranged and a baby in her arms. There were a few men standing behind her.

Rhymbia looked at the older woman with surprise. “You have my face.”

The woman grinned. “And you have mine. I am Olyna, and I believe I am your great-grandmother. Well, we all have registered genetics, so I am sure I am your great-grandmother.”

“Oh, so you know who it is?”

The woman nodded. “I do. Konstantin!”

One of the men stepped forward. He was in his mid-forties and stood in front of her. She looked up at him and analyzed him. “Konstantin?”

He nodded. “She named you Rhymbia?”

She nodded. “It’s growing on me, but I haven’t used it much.”

He smiled.

She reached for her neck and rubbed it, and he did the same. She laughed. “So, you dated Alice Turner?”

“I did. She suddenly left the area, and I never heard from her again. Where were you born?”

“Stalathic City. That’s what’s on my birth certificate and passport.”

He sighed. “When did you get back here?”

“When she was getting married. I think I was eighteen months old.” She smiled. “After that, life changed.”

“For the worse?”

“For the better. Mom didn’t like me, but my stepdad was great. He wanted to adopt me, but Mom wouldn’t let him, so I was his stepkid.”

Kern said softly, “When she was a teen, her mother gave her blockers to stop her from developing her omega characteristics.”

Her father looked ill. “You are sure?”

“Yeah, I had a specialist check me today, and they alerted the Omega Centre. She’s about to get her ass handed to her.” She smiled brightly.

He blinked and then laughed. “My grandmother has that strange expression when she wants something unpleasant to happen.”

“I have a lot of rage.”

Konstantin extended his hand, and she put her hand in his. “Pleased to meet you, Father.”

“A pleasure to meet you, daughter.”

“Oh, this is Kern. We just made it legal.”

Konstantin looked at Kern and extended his hand. Kern shook it, and Konstantin's eyes widened. "Well, Rhymbia, I don't have any doubt about your ability to pick a strong alpha."

"Oh, good. I thought his pastel marshmallow collection was a bad sign." She smirked and suddenly felt a hand patting her backside.

She looked up at him. "And what do you think you are going to do about it? Your beast thinks I am cute and fluffy."

He pinched her chin and kissed her. "So do I, among all my other favourite attributes of yours. It's a long list."

She wrinkled her nose.

Olyna called out, "We have erected a tent for a luncheon for you. Even if you will have a reception later, this is to be celebrated with friends."

Ford walked past with his pride and wiggled his fingers as he headed to the tent.

"Uh-oh. Something is up."

Kern chuckled. "Why do you think that?"

"I know Ford, and that gleam in his eyes means he is up to something."

Kern grinned. "Let's find out what it is."

The rest of their pack was talking with her new family and Vasuki's. When they started moving, the folks gathered followed. Round tables were arranged. Hired waitstaff was standing by, and the food smelled great.

Olyna directed them to be seated, and their table was a long one so that everyone could look at them. There was a long white panel behind them, and it made Rhymbia nervous.

The moment they sat down, the servers brought them plates, and lunch started. They were all together. Theo was on her right, Kern on her left, and Vasuki was next to Kern, which left Magnus next to Theo.

She was eating something she didn't recognize, and there seemed to be a lot of different dumplings involved. A sound she didn't expect started. The music and chanting began, and a single glance behind her showed that a biography of her greatest public hits was being shown. All when she was a teenager. She had also volunteered at a kids' camp and had a position as a cheerleader.

She looked at Ford, and he smirked and called out, "Your sisters provided the video."

Zyrella and Navena grinned, and the alphas they had brought along laughed. They were good guys, and what their omegas wanted, they got. Including last-minute escorts to events full of alphas.

Kern looked behind him, nodded, and leaned in to whisper in her ear, "Do you still have the uniform?"

"No."

"We will have to arrange something. So, you have always been athletic."

"Yup."

"And are comfortable scantily dressed?"

She grinned and finished her meal. "Yes, or I wouldn't have been able to do the show. I spent weeks in a sports bra and short shorts." She daintily wiped her lips with a napkin.

"Are you still hungry?"

"Even in front of an audience. Yes."

He forked up a dumpling and held it to her lips. Rhymbia leaned forward and took it, munching happily. A hand stroked her right cheek as she was swallowing, and Theo had a meatball on a fork. She bit and took it. There were a few indulgent chuckles from the alphas, and the guys on the outside of their arrangement made it to her to offer her some food.

In five minutes, she was stuffed and had to wave off offers from the men around her. She was full.

There was murmuring and laughter, and Rhymbia looked over to see that Olyna was beaming proudly, and the alphas and a few omegas were smiling. Her sisters looked confused.

“Okay, Kern. Spill. What’s going on?”

He leaned down and said, “You satisfied yourself first, and then it took all your mates to finish the job.”

She tapped her forehead with her middle finger, and there was a shout of laughter from Olyna’s family. Rhymbia looked at the table, and they all bent forward and tapped their heads with their middle fingers.

The bride looked at her hand and burst into laughter. Nothing at the party was being done with malice.

She saw a flash of colour and looked to see images of herself jumping out of a plane with a child strapped to her chest who was giggling madly.

Vasuki gasped. “What the hell?”

“I have done over a hundred jumps. They are a popular wish for the kids that the foundation works with. When I am not working on internal security, I am jumping out of planes or racing dogsleds across frozen landscapes with kids recovering from devastating illnesses.”

“Why recovering?”

“They wanted to restart their lives, and this was something that they wanted to brag about to their peers when they resumed classes. They wanted adventure, so we gave it to them.” She smiled as the ziplining clip rolled.

Kern asked, “You had to be the one to do it?”

“Yup. My instincts pushed me to it. Someone had to go with them on the project so the kids had a temporary guardian who could make decisions on the fly and back it up with the company card.” She nodded. “That happened a few times.”

Theo entered the conversation. “Did you ever injure yourself?”

“No, there was always a guide or pro there to help if I was unsure.”

Theo chuckled. “Did you sleep with them?”

“Only two. The others were betas and not interested in me.”

He laughed. “No one tried to keep you?”

“I did it when I was leaving the next morning.”

Music pulsed, and she danced with one of the kids at a hip-hop performance then strutted behind one of the little boys at a fashion show. She wrinkled her nose. “Not my best work.”

Kern nudged her arm. “Look at Ford’s mate Yemeen.”

His mouth was wide open, and Olivia closed it.

“So, are you paid for all of this effort?” Theo asked.

“Just my salary. That’s why I have an apartment and no pets.” She smiled. “I always thought I would get a cat.”

Kern snorted. “We can do that. I just have to ask if you are done with your adventuring?”

“Uh, yeah. I will exercise as I have been doing, but my next adventure is as a mom. If I like it, I may do it again.”

Vasuki leaned over. “Want to go bungee jumping with me and Magnus?”

She smiled. “Give me ten months. If I am breastfeeding, I am not sure that these are going to be bungee-friendly.” She grabbed her breasts for a moment, and Vasuki laughed.

There were a few laughs from their audience, and it reminded her that she was being watched. She shrugged and sipped at the pineapple juice she had been served.

A huge cake was brought out, and it had two large rings as the cake topper, with three other rings in icing on the top tier of the cake.

Kern grinned. “We are on.” He held out his hand as he stood and led her to the cake. He murmured instructions to her, and she nodded. He asked, “Got it?”

“I always do my own stunts.” She glanced behind them at the collection of men coming along with them.

Kern squeezed her fingers, and then she was handed the knife. That was the point that she noticed the photographer. She blushed as she always did when someone was taking her picture.

Later, she looked at the images that Alexi had captured. There was the cake cutting with Kern, the first slice being carefully fed to her, and then she had to give him some, and then the line stepped forward. They all got a share, and each one of them put some cake between her lips. There was giggling as cake slipped. Vasuki kissed her and ate some cake from her mouth. She grabbed him by the front of his jacket and pulled him down. “No takebacks.”

Their kiss was wild, and a laughing Kern pulled them apart. Vasuki was breathing heavily, his eyes green and ringed with fire. His fangs had flipped down. She laughed. “You might want to tuck them, Vasuki.”

He smiled, and there was promise in his eyes.

Magnus was staring. “No idea that this is what was behind those eyes.”

She leaned against Kern and looked at Magnus. “It freaks people out when I let it loose, so I save it for special occasions. This qualifies.”

The caterers took over the cake, and everyone lined up and milled around. There were a lot of hugs and large blonde people greeting her as niece or cousin. She always sought out one of her mates until Vasuki spoke with an older Chinese woman with two mates nearby. Vasuki smiled. “There you are. Lady Fen, this is my mate, Rhymbia Meksoren. Rhymbia, this is my grandmother, Lady Fen.”

The older woman looked at Rhymbia and reached up to cup her cheek. She felt a tremendous pressure on her mind, and she let it just slide away, looking at her. “You could just ask, Lady Fen.”

The omega looked at her. “You... you are a lot.”

“Yes, me and two friends of mine.” She smiled brightly. She leaned in and whispered, “These new betas? We started it all. Back and forth in time, it began with us.”

Lady Fen’s eyes went wide, and she gasped, looking at Rhymbia, and their minds touched, and then it was over.

Rhymbia smiled. No one could ever remember, but the uneasiness didn’t leave them. Lady Fen wouldn’t mess with her.

She was surprised when Fen said, “Well, I suppose you will do.”

Rhymbia growled at the smaller omega, and the alphas pulled them apart. She looked at Vasuki and was about to speak when a spate of angry Russian was fired, combined with a blast of Chinese back. The two omegas were face to face and yelling in a ladylike manner.

Rhymbia was going to step forward, but Kern arrived and said, “Let’s just see who wins. I believe your height is the biggest issue. Oh, and your breasts.”

Vasuki sighed. “Yup. You are too curvy to be ladylike.”

“What’s your opinion?” She looked up at him with a challenge in her eyes.

“I think that my grandmother doesn’t know what she is missing.” He leaned in and kissed her as they ignored the bickering women arguing about which one had the better grandchild.

Kern looked to Lexa and Delun. They carefully came over and smiled wryly. Lexa smiled. “She didn’t like me when she met me either. For a woman with so many sons and grandsons, she’s really fussy about the ladies in the family. She also had a problem with another tough beta. She will come around in time. She did with her.” Lexa chuckled. “That being said, I have never seen Olyna so passionate about defending one of her family.”

“Well, I am not quite sold on that.”

Kern nodded. “Konstantin has agreed to be tested directly tomorrow.”

“Fudge. I was hoping to get to work.”

“I am sure your workplace can deal without you for a few more days.”

“Fine, but I have to investigate a new business partner. He looks shifty on paper.”

Kern grinned. “You don’t say.”

“Yeah, it’s going to take me a while to interview all his close acquaintances.” She slid her fingers around his tie and pulled him down to her. He obligingly bent close, and their kiss continued until they heard a comment.

“I am excited to keep celebrating, but I think it is time to get you two where you can celebrate in privacy. You won’t get much of it.” Theo chuckled. “Magnus and Vasuki are eager to make their mark.”

Kern smiled and held her against him. “They are welcome at one minute after twelve.”

She snorted. “Only if they bring lube.”

There was a hissing laugh in her ear. “Done.”

Vasuki’s tongue flicked her ear, and she shivered. She looked at him. “Do you have two as well?”

He grinned. “Only sometimes.”

She blushed and looked at him from behind Kern’s arm.

Her husband grinned. “Right. We will say goodbye to your sisters and then be on our way.”

Rhymbia nodded to Delun, and he smiled and waved her on. Lexa did the same.

They moved toward the clutch of tall bodies surrounding her siblings, and she called out, “Zyrella, Navena, thanks for coming. We are heading out now.”

Her sisters pressed past the alphas, and that was when Rhymbia realized their alphas had just been socializing with

men from the party. The local alphas turned and grinned. “Congratulations, cousin. We look forward to the proper wedding.”

She nodded, and Kern kept his arm around her until they reached the car. Once they were in, he pulled her against his side, and they were on their way.

She whispered, “So, a few impressive things have happened today. I got married. I have a husband. And I might have a father. Which do you think I should concentrate on?”

He chuckled. “Husband. Definitely. I plan on concentrating on you all day and night.”

He leaned toward her, she leaned toward him, and their mouths met and mated slowly during the ride home.

She didn’t notice when they pulled up at the house, but when he carried her over the threshold, she leaned her head against his chest. Kagan was there, and he was grinning. “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Meksoren.”

Kern grinned. “Thank you.”

Rhymbia high-fived him as Kern passed. Kern walked quickly up the steps.

“Why are you in a hurry?”

He snorted. “Why do you think?”

“We just had sex this morning.”

“Yes, but then I had to leave you, and you had the stress of that appointment. You should have told me.”

“I was distracted last night, and you were gone this morning. Are you going to be like that every time Theo has an overnight delivery?”

He chuckled. “I hope so, though I will be competing for time with you. Fortunately, I am very competitive, and I usually win.”

“Is it because you freeze them in their tracks?”

He paused in the hall. “You know about that?”

“Know about it? I used it twice.” She smiled and stroked his cheek. “You never mentioned it, so I guessed you were sensitive.”

He froze. “You used it?”

“Yup. Shark and big cat. My view was obscured both times. They just went past me like they didn’t see me.”

He exhaled softly. “Oh. Good. You weren’t injured?”

“No. Well, I was bleeding from a cut hand underwater and a cut leg in the jungle. Either way, everything glowed green, and they just moved on.”

“You have lived a very dangerous life.”

“I prefer to think of it as educational. Each thing I did taught me something about myself. I was more than I had been taught, but I had to prove it to myself, so I did.” She smiled.

He opened the bedroom door, and she giggled. Flowers, candles, roses. It was very pretty.

“Kern, someone trashed your room and left flowers.”

Kern laughed. “Hush. Kagan had to supervise, and flower arranging is not his strong suit. He and Jeffrey were excited to take part in this.”

“You mean the prep, right? I am quite happy that for just this time, it is you and me.”

“It is just us. For now. Until Theo gets overwhelmed.”

She smiled slyly. “You are planning to overwhelm him?”

He tossed her to the bed, flicked off her shoes, and slid his hands up her legs.

She muttered, “Be nice to those panties. I have only had them for a few hours.”

He slid down the lenses and grinned at her. “I will be very careful with them.”

She breathed fast, and he tickled her outer thighs while he slowly dragged the panties down her legs.

She watched as he tucked the gold lace into his coat pocket. “What are you doing with that?”

“Saving them for later.” He laughed as he took off his coat, throwing it over a chairback with precision. He rolled up his sleeves and loosened his tie. The glasses came off, and his eyes glowed bright.

She leaned up and muttered, “Should I help?”

He snorted and dropped between her thighs. “No, I have never been able to spend as much time as I would like with a woman, and here you are, immune to my gaze. It’s intoxicating.”

“Here, I thought guys were into eye contact.”

He looked over the folds of her skirt and up her body. “Let me know if you need me to stop.”

She laughed. “That’ll be a first.”

He snorted, and she felt his breath against her sex. “Challenge accepted.”

Chapter Eleven

Rhymbia finally sobbed, “Fine. Stop. Please.” She was gasping and sweaty, and her skin was throbbing. She groaned. “You win.”

He chuckled and flicked his tongue as he lifted his head. As she stared at him with bleary eyes, his tongue reformed into a more standard configuration. He grinned. “I usually do, but I am hoping you won as well.”

She croaked. “I will do an analysis later, but right now, quick, get inside me before my husband shows up.”

Kern’s expression lit with excitement, and he stripped out of his clothes with efficiency and then launched them into a pile beside the bed. He sat her up and unzipped her green dress, peeling it off her shoulders and pushing it down. He lifted her to free her from the dress and set her carefully on the bed.

When he moved over her, she wrapped her limbs around him and gasped when he lined up and slowly entered her.

She mewled, she begged, and finally, he was in her to the base and started a slow stroke that sounded ridiculously wet as he moved inside her. She leaned up and kissed him, and their tongues met and mingled as he continued the focused strokes that drove her insane.

She rocked her hips against his, and he pulled her hands over her head, moving for a few more thrusts before withdrawing and turning her on her side. Kern spooned her and moved into her again. At this change of position, she came and sobbed softly. He wrapped his arms around her, and she turned her head to face him. He kissed her gently, and she smiled. “My husband just showed up.”

Kern had an expression of wonder on his face. “If he ever steps out of line, I will kick his ass. Now, can the beast hold you?”

She sighed sleepily. “Yeah. He can, as long as you are nearby.”

Huge, black, heavy coils of the basilisk flowed around her, lifted her, and tucked her into the thick waves and scaly skin. Rhymbia was lifted and held carefully in a hollow of his coils, and he put a loop of his body over her, and his head covered the rest. She was warm and safe and married. It was easy to relax.

Theo was waiting downstairs for them with dinner, and Kern kept her on his lap, nuzzling her ear at random intervals while Kagan set the meal down, which was pretty. Pastry wrapped around tenderloin with mushroom duxelles. It looked delightful.

Theo grinned. “Well, it seems being married for six hours suits you.”

Rhymbia took the knife and fork and set to work on her dinner. She sighed and gave Kagan a thumbs-up as she kept eating. Kern reached around her, took his entire serving, and opened his jaw astonishingly wide. It disappeared in seconds.

She mumbled around her own food, “Show off.”

He finished swallowing and got back into normal configuration. “That’s really good. Kagan, is there a spare?”

“Yes, sir. Just a moment.” The plate was whisked away, and a few moments later, the replacement arrived. This time, he used utensils.

Theo grinned. “You don’t normally do that in public.”

“She’s seen all of me, and I all of her. No sense keeping occasional habits from her.”

She swallowed the last of a roasted potato. “I could have done without the surprise tail.”

He kissed her temple. “I just wanted to see how far he could get it in.”

Theo groaned. “You didn’t.”

“Oh. He did.”

Theo smirked. “So, how far did it go in?”

She looked at Kagan. “Is there dessert because I fucking deserve dessert today.”

Kern covered his glasses. “Further than I intended.”

“He went hand to tail with our son, even if he doesn’t have hands yet.” She muttered then sipped her water.

Theo winced. “Do you want me to check you?”

Rhymia sighed. “No. It feels fine, just a little achy.”

“If you change your mind, I will be right next door.” He was serious.

“Dude, if you keep a speculum next to your bed, your sex life is messed up.”

Theo opened his mouth and then closed it with a snap.

Kern murmured, “He has frequent one-night stands. Everyone thinks he has a great story about losing the eye. They are all disappointed when they learn it was by nature’s design.”

“Aw, I think it’s cute. I don’t know if he is winking or blinking, so I just assume the flirt is on all the time.”

Theo grinned. “Around you, always a wink. There is just something about you...”

“I have heard that a lot over the years.”

Kern asked, “Why didn’t you stay with any of the other alphas over the years?”

“Uh, they weren’t the right ones? They were perfectly charming and very attentive for the one night, but my body had to learn what was good and what was mine. So, then, I knew you when I had you in my clutches.”

Kern laughed and kissed her neck. “I am very happy that I made the cut.”

She sighed and leaned against him. “Me, too.”

Theo grinned. “Can I make a joke about stiff competition?”

“Not if you don’t want to turn this into a locked-in honeymoon.”

Theo perked up.

Kern snorted. “You are welcome in. She won’t be up to much, but she was able to help me remake the bed.”

Kagan set a chocolate dome with little caramel disks on it in front of her. Rhymbia beamed and grabbed the dessert fork. She cracked into it. It was a chocolate dome, chocolate mousse, layers of white sponge, and more mousse.

She got to eating and took it down in a few seconds.

Kagan grinned. “That was to share.”

She shrugged, pulled Kern down, and kissed him. After twenty seconds, he lifted his head. “That was very nice.”

Kagan said, “I can make it again for Sunday.”

Kern grinned. “The dessert was good, too.”

Kagan snorted, and Rhymbia snuggled against his shoulder and relaxed. She was wearing another gown and robe combo, but her skin was so sensitive she just wanted to be exposed to air and nothing else.

She didn’t realize that she nodded off until she woke up between them, her face toward Theo. She rubbed her forehead against his chest and went back to sleep. Not a conventional wedding night, but then their group was far from conventional.

Rhymbia shifted at the all-female lunch, and Olyna smiled. “Sore, Rhymbia?”

She shook her head. “No. Skirt is too tight.”

Elspetha and Altar grinned. Zyrella and Navena smiled, and Lady Fen and Lady Olyna nodded. Olyna smiled. “So, the great-grandson is making himself known. Excellent.”

Rhymbia laughed. “If you like. I am still not sure that we are related.”

Elsbetha smiled. “We are. I knew it the moment that I met you. You smelled like family and blood. So much blood.”

Olyna stared. “What? Explain.”

Rhymbia and Altar explained, and Zyrella looked at the marks on Rhymbia’s wrists, and she and Navena started crying. Two alphas burst in, her sisters got up, and the alphas patted them until they left the private room.

Rhymbia split a steamed dumpling with her chopsticks, and Lady Fen looked grudgingly happy.

Olyna narrowed her eyes. “I wish to have a talk with your mother. Did you tell Konstantin?”

“No, no. I am still not positive that he’s my bio dad. Liam Amory raised me, and I give him the respect due to a father, even if my mother would never let him make it legal.”

Altar nodded. “Well, she’s being held under charges laid by the Omega Centre.”

Zyrella blinked and wiped her tears. “Wait. The Omega Centre is laying charges?”

Elsbetha nodded. “Yeah, they get really fussy when folks take away stunning omegas. She could have made them millions in introduction fees through her. She’s gorgeous.”

Altar nodded. “Or advertising. Aside from her current height, she’s a picture-perfect omega. If she hadn’t gotten the intervention, she would have been about six inches shorter.”

Rhymbia smiled. “I am not upset about the height. It keeps Kern from getting a crick in his neck.”

Elsbetha nodded. “Right?”

They high-fived.

Lady Fen cracked a laugh. “I don’t have an issue with the height. It makes it more fun when my alphas are around me.”

Elspetha grinned. “Oh, mine have no problem with my height. Elias is very pleased that he doesn’t have to fold himself in half.”

Rhymbia grinned. “Neither Kern nor the others have any problem with my height. It helps alignment. Mind you, Theo is very conscious of movement and alignment and will probably have some ergonomic props at one point. Then, we have the two I haven’t tackled yet, but I have seen how they move at close quarters. We will get along just fine.”

Navena spluttered, “Props? You mean toys?”

“No, I mean straps and stuff so I can pull myself up on him and hold to him. Like a sex swing, but he’s the swing.”

Zyrella picked up her phone and tapped for a bit. “Okay, three out of four are going shopping.”

Navena blinked. “Damn, you are fast.” She was two-thumbed typing, and when she sent her message, her phone set off right away. “Mine are talking to yours right now.”

Rhymbia tapped into her phone and warned Theo.

He sent her a laughing emoji. They had whispered while Kern slept heavily. He had always planned on a beta for a mate and how to make things easier for her, so he shared some of those plans with her before she dozed off again.

Elspetha grinned. “So, different subject. Are you excited about the show launch on Friday?”

“Yeah. Glad to stop hiding the details. I have been lucky that I could work out of my office for the last month, though I have to heavily tip maintenance and the janitorial staff for what I did to the garbage cans.”

Altar chuckled. “So, who won? Alphas or betas?”

“I am contractually bound to tell you to fuck off.” She started on her mango pudding.

Lady Fen smiled. “I think I am finally understanding the benefit of the betas who can take on alphas. They don’t play favourites.”

Elspetha snorted. “Sure we do, but we are up front about it to start with.”

Rhymbia smiled. “I sought out Kern, and Theo was the bonus. Finding Vasuki and Magnus was Kern’s idea. The way Kern has watched some of the foundation footage, he is looking to collect a few more.” She shrugged. “Betas and omegas reproduce the same way. Only one baby at a time. Well, unless they have multiples in the family.”

Fen smiled. “Lexa was generous that way.”

Olyna nodded. “I agree there.”

“Sorry. No chance of doubling up on this round. There is one blob with a heartbeat, and that is it.”

Olyna smiled. “Well, Madame Meksoren must be over the moon. What did she say when you told her?”

Rhymbia blinked. “I haven’t met her yet.”

Fen paused. “Oh, shit. Well, I suppose Kern is waiting to introduce you after the show.”

“Possibly. I honestly guess that it isn’t any of her business.”

Olyna nodded. “Could be, but if you aren’t invited to his birthday gala, you will know.”

Rhymbia nodded. “And if she doesn’t know I exist, she can’t invite me. Got it. I guess I will have to crash the party.”

Elspetha grinned. “You have matured. You just used to make folks scramble.”

“That got boring a few years ago. After I met with Minara at the foundation.”

Altar nodded. “Right. The vomit comet. That took a lot of nerve, and you have done some scary stuff.”

Rhymbia sipped at her tea and smiled.

When Zyrella asked, “What did she do?”

Elspetha and Altar took turns listing the dangerous escort missions that Rhymbia had undertaken with young men and

women who were restarting their lives. Many of those adventures had created skills that she used on the show.

Navena stared. “Ree—Rhymbia, you went into space?”

“Just to the point where we went weightless. Then we had some time to float and twirl, and then we were down, and then we were up again. It was fun.” She sipped more tea, poured for her friends within reach, and then got up to pour for Lady Fen and Olyna. Zyrella and Navena were drinking soda.

Rhymbia sat back down and looked over the leftovers. She picked up her chopsticks and started eating.

Elsbetha asked, “So, what do you think of Theo as an OB-GYN?”

“He was good, but I have a new one. Now, that will be more useful during labour. I am not sure that he will keep his cool when I bleed pain through the links.”

“Oh. Smart.”

Rhymbia grinned. “I thought so. I don’t like the idea of him being paid to look at my lady parts.”

Altar laughed. “Sensible.”

Rhymbia looked over the dishes, and they were empty. She had eaten it all. “Oh, sorry about that. Five weeks with only a handful of food per day takes a toll. I guess I am making up for lost time.”

Olyna frowned. “You were ill?”

Elsbetha nodded. “She didn’t show up to a meeting, so I asked Arkos to help me find her, and he called Kern. We met at her address, and he left and found her. I got the call that she was in hospital shortly after that.”

Rhymbia patted her friend’s shoulder.

Elsbetha continued. “She was grey, her lips were blue, and her eyes were sunken. As you know, Oma, I lost my mother to alpha withdrawal. I was terrified to see her like that.”

“I got better.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to see someone like that. Certainly not someone I care about.”

“I just need a few more pounds of food at regular intervals, and I will get my curves back and a bit more.”

Navena chuckled. “Just wait until your breasts expand. If your mates are like mine, it will be tough keeping your clothes on.”

“Fortunately, we all have day jobs, though I have no idea what Kern does, and Vasuki and Theo do shifts. Magnus is the only one with predictable hours.” She smiled. “They decided to set the move-in date to Friday after the recording since they have the day off anyway.”

Olyna smiled. “The whole family is coming together for the event. There is a giant screen and caterers planned for Saturday night.”

Zyrella looked over. “I don’t suppose that our families could come?”

Olyna and Fen nodded.

“Sure. The more, the merrier. You guys know where to go already.”

Olyna grinned. “There are always children running around and playing. More and more with every passing year.”

Fen looked between them. “The resemblance in bone structure is startling. Skin tone as well.”

“It’s a shame that my mother went after Konstantin. She should be charged with stat rape as well.”

Novena gasped. “Why?”

“She was eighteen and nineteen when I was born. Konstantin was fifteen. That’s illegal nearly everywhere. No wonder her family took her and took off.”

Her sisters stared, and Rhymbia smiled. “I can do the math.”

Her siblings started to count, and then they stared. “Oh, my god.”

“Yup. No matter which way you look at it, she was an adult, and he wasn’t, whether he knew it or not.” She sipped at her tea. “I wouldn’t blame Konstantin for not wanting to know me.”

Olyna frowned. “We don’t believe in sin. We believe in deliberate action. Your mother acted, and you are the result. Why have you never sought him out before? We have enough samples in DNA banks in the city and around the country.”

“Well, there is also a picture in her senior yearbook with her arm around a young man who wasn’t in her graduating class, so I have always known the technicalities were a little off.”

Olyna blinked. “You didn’t look him up?”

“Oh, god, no. I was having enough of an issue dealing with what she had done to me. She tried to have me killed, Lady Olyna. She paid a man to murder me, and he raped me as he was going to sell me instead. It took me years to work my brain around that. So, I threw myself at people who did want me, and several of them were happy for the company.”

Everyone was staring but Elspetha and Altar.

Zyrella swallowed. “Dad wants to talk to you. Can we tell him what we have learned today?”

“Sure. Just make sure he knows that she didn’t bring the lawsuit against him. That was done automatically after the phone text logs were sent to the police.” Altar smiled.

Navena was cautious. “Why would that matter?”

Elspetha sighed. “Rhymbia has never wanted to do anything to hurt your father. She has always said he was the best person in her life, and you two were bright spots. She needs you to know and understand that.”

Everyone was silent. Rhymbia said, “I came into the world in a messed-up situation, and it didn’t get better until the worst night of my life. After that, I restarted myself and slowly built myself into someone I could be proud of. I am impressive as hell.”

Elsbetha laughed and put her arm around Rhymbia. “Yes, you are, you little maniac.”

Rhymbia was treated to a noogie from her friend, and she turned and smacked a kiss on her cheek.

The omegas were both busy on their phones, and the ladies had more tea while a round of dessert was brought, so Rhymbia got three more mango puddings, and then the elder omegas shooed the others away and cuddled in next to her. They really did feel cuddly and like nothing else.

Olyna stroked her cheek. “My family is a riot of good nature and barely legal activities. You will fit in wonderfully. We also have connections all over the world. So, if you want to continue your travels with the foundation after your baby, we can offer babysitting services with the finest alphas. Just in case you want to increase your pack.”

Lady Fen growled. “Not until she has decided on the order of offspring.”

Rhymbia blinked. “Decide? I don’t particularly care. I want a big family. Plenty of kids. I will let them work it out, but they are going to have to be clever. I have silent heats. That’s what shocked me about this pregnancy. No clue it was happening.” She shrugged. “We have some time to figure out the next one.”

Elsbetha murmured from the other side of the table, “Condoms work until they start shredding. Elias went through a dozen the night I got pregnant, but he knew how I felt about them, so he kept trying.”

Altar chuckled. “Congratulations on his persistence.”

“Thanks. I am super early days. Just over a week into it.”

Rhymbia smiled. “Sorry, I am going to go through it before you.”

“If you come out of it okay, I don’t think there is any way I will be upset.”

Rhymbia looked at her friend. “If you want to, you can be there during labour and watch Kern and Theo lose their shit.

They feel like panic scramblers to me.”

Altar said, “I don’t think they will panic.”

Olyna hugged Rhymbia. “That is a generous offer, but you know that Elspetha will have Elias with her.”

“So, we will have to find a spot that allows four bystanders.”

Zyrella smiled. “Most of the hospitals have pack delivery rooms. I had my first with five of mine in the room.”

Navena nodded. “Three of mine wanted to help me through, so they sat around and took turns cheering me on, and I cursed their junk the whole time.”

The ladies all laughed, and the lunch turned into labour stories and tales of how the men handled it. Elspetha and Rhymbia took notes.

When they separated, Rhymbia went back to her office. She smiled at Renner and finished some of the research she had started online.

When she turned her ringer on again, there were five messages. Three from Theo, one from Kern, and one from a salon and spa that she recognized the name of. She listened to the information and then texted Kern and Theo. She called the salon and spoke to her sister-by-bond. “Hey, Alicia, this is Rhymbia. I got your message.”

The bright and happy voice said, “*Oh, I am so happy you got back to me. Right, Theo wants you gone over from head to toe on Friday, and I have moved things around to make it work.*”

“Oh, now I feel guilty.”

“*Don’t. I am super proud of myself for managing it. Massages, facials, mani-pedi, sauna, and everything else we offer.*”

“I can’t do sauna or hot stuff.”

“*Why, are you pregnant?*”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my god. Is it Theo’s?”

“No. Kern’s.”

“Close enough.”

“Are you sure you want to do this? I have to be dressed and out of there by four.”

“Makeup and all. If you get in at nine, we will have you out by four.”

“Right. Can I order food? I am astonishingly hungry right now.”

“Sure. We also have a full range of snacks available.”

“I am above the snack range.”

“How far along are you?”

“Nine weeks. I had alpha withdrawal for the last five, so I dropped a lot of weight.”

Alicia was understanding. Rhymbia was told that a car would come for her on Friday morning, so that was that. She had to be ready at eight-thirty, but she could get one more day of work before everything got wild.

When she was getting ready to leave, she had a tingle of intuition. Kern called her immediately.

“Rhymbia, what was that?”

“I think my ex is in the parkade... again.”

“I am downtown. I can be there in five minutes.”

“I am in my office.”

“Have another glass of juice. Relax.”

She snorted. “Juice won’t solve everything.”

“Then have some of the snacks I had Renner put in your bottom drawer. Relax and keep working. I will be there soon.”

He hung up, and she shrugged and kept working, doing a security sweep of the staff, starting with Altar and working her way down. She did the sweeps every six months to find diversions of finances. It was the largest threat to the

foundation, and she was the wall between the good they did and those who tried to divert funds. That was her job.

When Renner rapped at her door, she looked up, and he smiled. “Your husband is here to get you home.”

“Oh, goody.” She exited her programs and turned off her computer. She could feel Kern through the door.

She grabbed her purse and put her phone in it.

She left and winced when she checked the time. It was nearly six. She put her shoes back on and headed for the door.

Kern was sitting in the entryway and reading one of the foundation magazines. He took up a lot of space. It was amazing because when he was with her, she felt he was just right.

“Hey, hubby. Thanks for waiting.” She walked to stand next to him.

He folded the magazine and stood up. “Do you want me to take care of your ex?”

“He was my ex over twelve years ago. Now he is just my stalker.” She sighed. “I just want to head home.”

He smiled. “I am glad you said so. He’s frozen and in a cabinet on the fifth level.”

She held the curve of his elbow. “Oh, that will be fun. How long will he be immobile?”

“I can let him loose in two days, but if I don’t release him, he’s going to remain in a coma.”

He walked out with her, and several staff members on her floor stared at them and then gasped when they saw the ring on the hand curled around his arm. She asked softly, “Did you put a lock on the cabinet?”

“Just wired the door shut. If you like, I can have Elias pass along the message to Elspetha, as you are going to be busy on Friday.”

“Right. Theo’s sister-in-law sounds excited.”

He chuckled. “Theo is excited. One of Ford’s alphas sent a rack of dresses to you.”

“Yemeen. He offered me a job a few years ago, but I have this gig, and it pays well.”

He made a slightly amused sound. The elevator lowered them to the main floor, and they walked out to see Jeffrey waiting for them next to a long sedan.

“Let’s go home, Rhymbia.”

When Jeffrey opened the door, she slid onto the leather, and Kern was right behind her. Jeffrey got into the driver’s seat, and they headed home.

Somewhere in the JN Foundation parkade, an alpha statue in a cupboard was silently screaming.

Chapter Twelve

She was dozing against Theo on the couch when there was a knock at the door. Kern nodded, set his laptop aside, and went to answer the door.

Theo kept his arm around her, caressing her hip. Kern returned with two men, and he smiled. “The fathers are here.”

Rhymia lifted her head and blinked as Konstantin smiled at her position, and her stepfather looked surprised. “Hey, Dad. Konstantin.”

Her bio dad held up an envelope. “We have the results.”

She sat up. “So soon?”

“I paid extra for the rush, and one of your cousins works there. If both donors are willing, it gets processed the same day.” He smiled. “I was eager to find out.”

Konstantin knelt on the floor and handed her the envelope. “You open it, please.”

She sat up, and her stepdad, Rikoth, took a seat on a nearby chair while Kern watched from the doorway.

Her hands shook a little as she opened the envelope. Theo sent comfort through their link. She opened the paper and slid the documents out of it. She exhaled and read through everything. She swallowed. “Well, Konstantin, I am sorry to tell you... you are the father with a point zero one percent chance of inaccuracy.”

He grinned and hugged her, pulling her into his arms. “I always wanted a little girl. I only have boys. They have wanted a sister, too. Boy, will they be surprised.”

“How many boys?”

“Four. The eldest is graduating with a bachelor’s in business management.” He grinned. “When I told him who you were, he lost his shit. He’s bragging about his older sister all over

campus already. As are the others. The youngest is sixteen. He's waiting to watch the series on streaming."

Kern chuckled. "I have provided your family with access codes."

"Ah. Well, you can skip the bio segment. It's boring."

Kern said softly, "But you will want to watch the audition segment. It is illuminating."

She glanced at him. "That was embarrassing."

"But amazing to watch. Would you like to see?" He turned to Rikoth and Konstantin.

Rikoth smiled and nodded. "I would love to see what Bug has been up to."

She covered her eyes and groaned. "I forgot about that."

She got to her feet, and Theo made a sigh of regret. She looked back at him and blew him a kiss. She turned to her stepdad and hugged him. "It's good to see you again. How have you been keeping?"

"I was divorcing your mother when she was arrested."

"What?"

"Despite your lack of contact, she continued to insist that all disasters in her life were your fault. Even slight inconveniences were laid at your door. It spurred me into looking into her past as now it was apparent that your father wasn't the brutal monster."

Konstantin sighed.

Rikoth nodded. "I didn't know who you were, but I knew you were in high school, and she was in college."

He sighed. "Yes. I was. I had my next child eight years later. It was still too early for my grandmother."

She eased out of Rikoth's hug. "Yeah. That must have been... odd. And, of course, you had no idea I was there, so it wasn't a long romance."

“It was not a long event. It was two dates, and then she disappeared.”

“Oh. Geez. That’s worse than I thought.”

Konstantin shrugged. “It was great for teen me, but in hindsight, I would have decked anyone doing that to my boys.”

She looked at him. “I would have torn her head off.”

He looked at her and saw the look on her face. “I believe you would. It is awkward, but may I have a hug?”

She patted Rikoth and then hugged her bio dad. He wrapped his arms around her and exhaled slowly. “You smell like your great-grandmother.”

“Wow. Glad you are married because that would suck as a pickup line.”

He leaned back and grinned. “You are scrappy.”

Kern smiled. “Take a seat, and you will see how scrappy.”

There was a bit of shuffling, and she ended up on Theo’s lap again while the audition reel began. It was her sitting in her work blouse and skirt. She talks about the foundation and its various branches, including the career jump project.

She was asked if she was ready to run the course, and she mentioned she needed to get clothes from the car. Rhymbia watched her face when they told her there was no time. They had to get to other candidates.

She agreed, and they went out to the water course with inflatable obstacles and a clear path. She hiked her narrow skirt up, rolled up her sleeves, and in bare feet, she darted forward the moment the alarm sounded.

Rhymbia watched her family watch her fight her way through the course, go hand over hand, and then there was the move that won her the spot on the show. She was moving on the rings, but the expanse was huge. She climbed the chain, got herself on the support beam, and ran along it to the final ring before lowering herself into place and swinging onto the final platform to hit the buzzer.

She was standing, soaked and sweating, her blouse stuck to her, and her thighs completely on display.

Theo kissed her neck. “Our little barbarian queen. Wait. Who left this?”

“Magnus. I guess the makeup wore off.”

Kern frowned then nodded. “Oh, you found the hickey.”

“How did you see it?”

“Oh, I know every inch of her, and her neck had a spot that was glowing hot. The hickey.”

Konstantin asked, “When are they joining you?”

Rhymia knew the answer. “Friday after the recording.” She yawned as Theo’s body heat warmed her up.

Konstantin sighed. “I had hoped you would have been more excited to learn of our connection.”

She smiled. “When I was young, I wished I had anyone to love me. When I was older, I wanted Rikoth to be my dad, and he wanted it, too, but that couldn’t happen. My urge to belong faded and got small. My craving for family died. I made a life with friends who didn’t hesitate to be affectionate with me in public. I found lovers who wanted me for the moment, and I returned the inclination. And finally, I found myself in this family where I am learning a new aspect of interaction all over again. They are here in the morning, every morning. Well, Kern is, and Magnus has a schedule, too.” She stroked Theo’s cheek. “And when the others get home, I go to them if I am home. If not, when I get home.”

“Appreciated, Rhymia.” He hugged her.

She knew that not every pregnancy delivered a healthy baby. Elspetha was the product of a very sad event. She made it out, and her mother hadn’t. It was horrible for the patient and rough for the doctors because they might have to face the same situation over and over in a week. Same thing with Vasuki. Some nights a hero, and some nights a mourner.

She looked at the two men who were looking undecided. “The past is the past. If you want to make a future with me in

it, I go for lunch downtown when I am working, and Kern isn't averse to visitors here. So, maybe a big family barbeque instead of a short lunch? I haven't been to the backyard yet, but I am imagining it can hold a few people."

Kern nodded. "It can. I have a good caterer. Weekend after next? A babysitter can be hired for the little ones."

Konstantin smiled. "We pack our own babysitters. They can manage quite a few, and parents who want a break from socializing can wander over to pitch in."

Rhymbia nodded. "Who will coordinate?"

Konstantin smiled. "My wife is excited to meet you. I think she would love to provide numbers."

Kern nodded. "I will give you Jeffrey's contact information with Kagan as a backup."

"Kagan?"

Rhymbia smiled at her bio father's surprise.

The man in question popped in. "Heard my name. Hey, cousin. I knew she was yours."

Konstantin blinked. "You told Oma."

"Absolutely. She moves quickly for an old lady that just had a baby." He smiled and looked at Rhymbia. "Oh, never let Nora kiss you if you have irritated her. She's an omega maker. She can set off a heat with a kiss."

"Oh. Noted."

Kern paused. "Sabin's wife?"

"Yes."

"I will keep an eye on Rhymbia when it is time. I don't put it past one of the others to try to press an advantage."

Theo sighed. "Anyone doing that before she has the all-clear from her physician will be torn in half vertically and then horizontally."

She patted his chest. "Thanks, Theo. Oh, officially, Konstantin, you are about to become a grandfather, possibly

again. Rikoth, for you, it's again."

Konstantin smiled. "Really?"

"Yeah. A boy according to the bloodwork." Kern smiled.

"You are sure it's yours and not Theo's?"

Rhymbia started laughing. Theo snorted. "She's laughing because I don't think any female has gotten pregnant that way. Male omegas, yes, but I would have noticed the gender swap."

Konstantin snorted and rubbed his eyes. "Right. Got it."

Rikoth was chortling silently, and then he sobered. He looked to Kern. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

Kern paused and then nodded. "Please. Come this way."

Rhymbia looked at Kern, and he sent reassurance through their link.

She continued to chat with Konstantin and Kagan while curling against Theo. She felt the flicker of fury through the link, and it made her jump. Theo stroked her black.

When Rikoth came back, he looked to Konstantin. "I look forward to seeing you at family events."

Kern walked toward her, and she got out of Theo's arms and went to hug Kern. He needed it.

"She was planning to sell you. That is why omegas are so scarce. There is an international market for omegas who have been neutralized. Her original plan was to sell you when she could make you disappear, but something happened, and she hired the killer instead."

He was running his hands down her back, but it was to soothe him more than her. "How much was I going for?"

"Four million was the original price."

"She must have hated my guts to pass that up."

"Your boyfriend wanted you as his beta with your sister as his omega. She couldn't have that. He was persistent, so she had to kill you."

“Yeah, she always had issues with the follow-through,” she mumbled against his chest. “Rikoth told you?”

“Yes, apparently, once she was arrested, she wouldn’t stop confessing.” Kern hissed angrily. “He didn’t want to tell you of her plan, but I thought you would want to know.”

Konstantin looked at them. “She tried to sell her?”

Kern jerked his head in the affirmative. She stroked his back and sighed. “Since you have had such a rough time today, I will let you be on top tonight.”

He blurted out a laugh and lifted her to face him. “If I had known what you would become to me, you never would have made it to the show.”

“I had a pretty good feeling you would let me go that night. No idea that you had left something traceable behind.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Your behind was Theo’s.”

Konstantin snorted. “Just what every male wishes for their daughters.”

Rhymbia looked at him. “I was pressed for time, and they were insistent.”

Her bio dad blinked, “But, there was consent?”

She groaned and pressed her forehead to Kern’s. “I parked outside the gates and waited until Theo came to get me.”

Kern chuckled. “I got my birthday present two months early.”

She kicked him in the knee. “Quiet you.”

Theo stood behind her. “Has she soothed you?”

Kern grunted. “I suppose.”

“Good. Hand her over. Just seeing the back of her is giving me ideas.”

Rhymbia laughed, and then Kern kissed her. She lost herself for a moment and then was blinking as she was very obviously being held by Theo, and Kern and Konstantin were heading to his office.

She sighed. “Where are they going?”

Theo settled with her again. She curled up against him, and her mind went through lists of people to check the following day.

“You are preoccupied.”

“Working through the present is a better focus than dwelling on the past. It’s done and locked in.”

Theo rubbed her back. “So, how have you chosen your lovers in the past?”

She looked up at him. “That is a weird question.”

“I am just curious if you were sent to them as you were to us?”

“Sort of. They were handsome and charming and very careful, so the aftermath was like rising out of a hot tub. An interesting memory and nothing else.”

“What would you do if they appeared in your life again?”

“Uh... hide behind you guys?”

Theo smiled. “Excellent plan. You have four mates now. We can protect you from everything but an aerial attack.”

“Oh, I don’t know why that reminded me, but your sister-in-law called and said you had booked me for a going over.”

He grinned. “Oh, that. I thought it would take your mind off the event just to be deposited there dressed and primped. She is really good at primping.”

She snorted, and when Kern and Konstantin returned, her bio father had been crying.

Konstantin knelt next to her and took her hand then ran his thumb across her wrist. “You’re a fighter.”

She smiled. “You’re learning.”

He laughed. “Well, I am going to have to go and report to the rest of our family. And share details if you don’t mind.”

She squeezed his hand. “Everything that happened to me was public record. No issue there.” She gave him the date and

the details to search, and he nodded.

He squeezed her hand in return. “I will see you soon, Rhymbia.”

“Yup.”

Kern saw her bio dad out, and Rhymbia sighed when Kern returned and sat next to them, pivoting her before pulling her legs onto his lap. Kern stated softly, “There is going to be a riot at the beginning, and it should smooth out by the end of your second trimester.”

She smiled. “You knew I was going to apologize for the fuss?”

“Yes. In my mind, I am imagining us giving you backrubs after a long day and you slapping our hands away and muttering at us.” Kern smiled.

“Can you see the future?”

He smiled and rubbed her feet. “I have an appreciation for you and the way you think. Also, what you have been through to get here.”

She sighed and went limp on Theo’s lap as Kern’s thumbs rubbed her arches. She wiggled and twisted as the thumbs went deep.

Rhymbia relaxed against Theo completely.

Theo laughed. “Whatever you are doing, keep it up.” He unravelled her hair and tugged his fingers through before he started to massage her scalp.

She groaned. “No fair. Wait. How do you both know how to do this?”

“We took a class when my sister-in-law’s spa opened. They were trying to fill the classes, and each took the last spot in different classes. Alicia’s students lined up to get Kern’s number, and he turned them all down.”

She looked at her mate as he pressed under her big toe, and she moaned. “Dude, why didn’t you take anyone up on it.”

He grinned. “I hate keeping the lenses on in bed.”

“But you don’t... oh. Right.” She wiggled her toes.

“I do believe that it’s time for bed, and you did say that I could get on top tonight.” He stroked his fingers up the sole of her foot.

She shrieked and kicked at him.

He laughed and gripped her ankles, hauling her completely onto his lap and leaving Theo with empty hands. Kern pulled her to face him and kissed the tip of her nose. “So. Ticklish.”

“Don’t tell anyone.” She slid her palms up his chest.

He stood up and glanced at Theo. “Your shift in an hour.”

Her other mate laughed. “I’ll set a timer.”

She lay flat on the bed and groaned as she struggled to wake. Kern kissed her between her shoulder blades. “Morning, sweetness. Theo had an early shift but left grinning.”

She groaned again and looked at him over her shoulder. “This baby is gonna have a big ol’ dent in its head.”

“I asked Theo, and he assures me it is an old wives’ tale.”

She thudded back to the bed. “I hope so, or this kid’s gonna look weird.”

He chuckled and nuzzled his mark. “What are you doing today?”

“Working from here. Just getting things in line because I have already arranged to take a leave for a few weeks until the surge after the release dies down.”

“Do you want to hang around with me?”

“As long as I get a few hours this morning to finish things up. My afternoon is yours, but don’t you have things to do?”

“I am also capable of doing things from a laptop, but I also have very competent staff. I check on them, but they can do what I pay them for.” He kissed down her back and up again.

“I have to pick out a black dress off that rack Jeffrey mentioned for tomorrow.”

“Fashion show?”

“Yup.”

“I knew playing hooky from work could be fun.” He rolled her over and kissed her quickly. “So, shower?”

“No, you showered last night. I think I was there. My body got wet, and someone was fucking me. I am guessing it was you because the room was green.”

He snorted. “I am glad you can discern the difference.”

“It is early days. I will get the hang of it.”

He lightly smacked her butt. “Funny woman.”

“Thank you for noticing.”

“Another shower would be good. I am pretty sure I missed a spot.” He lifted her, walked on his knees to the edge of the bed, and then they headed into the shower.

They had to shower twice. He kept getting her messy.

Chapter Thirteen

“So, why did you pick four dresses?” Theo was looking the selections over.

“Not all dresses look good with all hairstyles and makeup. Until Alicia and her team are done with me, I have no idea what I will look like.”

Theo grinned. “She’s getting you picked up?”

“And dropped off at the studio. Tonight is the last night I just get to be the old Reebee.”

Theo smiled. “Rhymbia is just the you that was inside the whole time. Reebee was the surface. Both of you kick ass.”

She grinned. “So, the one with lace or the one with the leather strapping?”

“Leather.”

Kern looked up from his computer. “Lace.”

She snorted. “So, you see why I am bringing a bunch of them to the spa. I am going to let the ladies decide.”

Theo grinned. “Then, why ask us?”

“If I don’t wear it to the finale, there are still a bunch of events coming up for the others.”

Kern smiled. “Yes, there are.”

She slowly exhaled. “I confess I am nervous about tomorrow. Shit! I need shoes!”

She dropped the dresses and sprinted toward the rack. There was a bag with shoes, and each was marked with the dress number. They were all in her size. She exhaled and checked out the shoes, standing in them and tying up the strappy ones that obviously went with the strappy dress.

She sighed. “Right. More choices.”

They chuckled, had dinner, and had an early evening. She had to confirm that she would be ready for both the spa and the studio via text. Rhymbia was too nervous to sleep, so they gave her a hand and a tongue and other appendages.

The woman in the spa uniform greeted her with a smile. She had red ringlets pulled back in a loose ponytail, bright blue eyes, and a badge that said *Alicia—Manager*.

“Wow. Theo really lucked out. Hello, Rhymbia. I am Alicia, your sister-in-law.” Alicia opened her arms and hugged her.

“Hey, Alicia. You look amazingly alert for this time of the day.” She chuckled. “I think Theo has started slipping me decaf.”

“He’s sneaky for a guy so hard to miss. So, let’s get you a cup of coffee and get this day of relaxation started without any alphas pestering you.”

“That sounds like fun. What’s on the agenda?”

Alicia grinned. “Warm bath, not hot. Facial. Two-hour pregnancy massage. Lunch with me for an hour. Mani-pedi, makeup, and hair. That takes us to the time limit when you will get dressed and be picked up for the shoot. I must admit, it is very exciting to have a celebrity in the family.”

“I don’t know about that. Right now, I am more notorious than anything.”

Alicia grinned. “If you say so. Let’s get you into a spa robe and relaxed. I won’t let you be late. I have nine different alarms on my phone with your name on them.”

Rhymbia smiled. “Can we save the *getting to know you* for lunch?”

“Absolutely. Theo has expressed how whirlwind things are, and you are a few months along, so congratulations, and you are in our luxury maternity package. Remember this place when your feet seem far away.”

“Fine, but make sure everyone gets hefty tips for the rush placement.”

Alicia snickered. “No problem. Theo is insisting on footing the bill.”

They got to the changing room, and as Rhymbia removed her clothing, she said, “I hope to meet your wife soon. She’s a doctor?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Theo once said that all of his family were doctors, and he picked OB because his siblings were in the other fields.”

Alicia laughed. “My wife is a dermatologist. We met at a conference, and she started to pursue me immediately after.”

Rhymbia put her clothing in the locker and slipped the robe on. The lock was activated by a charm on a wristband.

Her sister-in-law escorted her to the warm room, where she curled up with some lemon water and waited. She had to admit, it was relaxing.

A smiling attendant came to take her to her facial, and her odyssey began.

Her body felt like warm honey, and she felt beautiful when she put on the lacy dress with the heels that had their own lace imprint, which made her look like an omega. The whole show, she had been running around covered with spandex, mud, and occasionally blood. This would make for quite the contrast. The dress was off the shoulder so her marks would be on display, and the fluttering skirt was just above the knee. The remaining bruising of the hickey had been skillfully concealed.

Her rings were bright and the only jewellery she wore.

Alicia took a photo and grinned. “I am not sending that to Theo until you are safely in the car. Are they going to be at the live react?”

“Uh, I didn’t invite them, but Kern pulled some strings, so I am sure he will be lurking somewhere.”

Alicia nodded. “Have a great night. I look forward to seeing you.”

“Thanks. Talk soon?”

The hired car pulled up, and Alicia carefully hugged her. “Have fun.”

The driver came around and held the door open. One of the staff members came out with the spare dresses and handed them to the driver.

She checked her messages in the car and smiled at the well wishes. When they pulled up at the studio, they passed a line of folk waiting to be let in to watch the show.

The car glided around the corner to an entrance where two burly alphas guarded things. The driver got out, spoke to them, then opened the door for her. “This way, miss.”

“It’s Mrs., but I am still getting used to it.” She smiled and followed him to the door that was being held open for her.

An assistant with a clipboard saw her and exhaled in relief. “Reebee, we were getting worried. Damn. You look amazing.”

“Thanks. I am staging for an entrance?”

“Yup. We have different walks from every angle. Each of you comes in a different path.”

“Cool. How late am I?”

“Just in time actually. Everyone else has been here for an hour.”

“My sister-in-law kept me busy.”

The assistant blinked. “I thought you weren’t married.”

“I wasn’t. Now I am.” She was walked to a hallway marked eight. Looked like everyone was back together.

There was a screen on the wall, and the host got the signal that she was in place. She was quickly wired with a microphone, and a sound check was done. The earpiece let her know what was going on. And when she heard her name, she started the walk down the hall.

The stage and lights were bright, and the banks of chairs separated alphas and betas. She looked at the crowd and the

host. "Well, isn't this nice?"

The other contestants chuckled, and she took her seat.

Introductions were gone through, and they started to watch highlight reels of the first episode. When it was over, one of the contestants left. Rhymbia went through her commentary when she was asked but, otherwise, kept to herself.

When the three betas and a single alpha had left, they had everyone sitting together, and Rhymbia felt really small. The alpha she wasn't interested in was named Teddy, the female alpha on the program.

The host asked, "So, what do you do for a living, Teddy?"

Teddy smiled. "I'm a dermatologist from a family of physicians."

Rhymbia felt her skin go hot pink under her makeup.

The host laughed. "That is quite a reaction to the news, Reebee. Any particular reason for that?"

"Uh. Yeah. I think I dated her brother once."

The audience gasped and tittered.

Teddy chuckled. "Once?"

"Well, yeah. After that, he and Kern were my mates. We signed the contract about a week ago."

More gasping and a smattering of applause.

Teddy chuckled. "You are just as surprised as I had hoped. Alicia is going to be so pleased she was able to keep the secret. She doesn't have a deceptive bone in her body."

Rhymbia sat back in her chair. "Well, that's interesting. We are holding a barbeque next weekend. Bring the kids?"

Teddy patted her hand. "Already on the calendar, sis."

The audience laughed and gave more applause.

The host asked. "Is there any other news, Reebee? You seem to have had an eventful time after we returned. You were single during filming."

Reebee rubbed the spot on her neck where the hickey was, and Magnus smiled.

“Oh, yes. I... things got out of control when I got back, but the problem was that I wasn’t alone during filming. A special someone was with me.”

There were gasps.

“Um, it’s not with you think. I haven’t met this someone yet. It’s gonna take another seven months or so. So, yeah, I did the whole show pregnant.” She smiled. “Oh, and I am married to an alpha I met before the show. Teddy’s brother is also on the contract as a partner, and there have been a few more signatures involved. And... I found my birth father. A very eventful time.”

The host laughed. “Well, as exciting and curious as we are, time to get to the highlights of the fifth program.”

Teddy squeezed her hand, and she sighed. They watched the highlights and answered the questions.

Teddy left after that episode synopsis, and then there were the three from the poster.

They watched, they chatted, and when it came to the moment where first Vasuki dropped with Reebee catching him, she was asked, “What was going through your mind, Reebee?”

“Uh, fuck he’s heavy, I can’t hold him, and he has really pretty eyelashes.” She smiled. “Probably in that order.”

Vasuki grinned and answered, “I was wondering if she could hold me, then how she could keep cursing while holding me, and last, how did she get her rope to stay in?”

Magnus’s rope gave way in the next part of the clip, but he managed to cling to the rock face. Vasuki descended on her cord, and she offered it to Magnus when she was down. He linked to it and waited until she was clear.

They went through the next few episodes and, finally, the last challenge. They all got a map with the locations of their icons, and then the race was on.

Reebee watched and remembered as she knew she couldn't outrace the alphas, so she headed for a herd of horses and asked them to cooperate. Animal cooperation was the skill of an alpha she had met at the free clinic. She got herself onto the horse, and then he and the herd were thundering toward her first icon site. There were four. The last was in a dormant volcano.

The crowd gasped as the alphas climbed, swam, ran, and stood looking over amazing vistas. Reebee did the whole thing on horseback.

When the playback paused with all of them having at least three icons, she knew what was coming next. She groaned.

"So, Reebee, can you enlighten us as to what happened next?"

She looked at the crowd and saw Kern and Theo smiling. "Uh, it appears that there was an issue with my map. The dormant volcano was a bit more alert than anticipated. I left the horse and ran across the silt, and the ground got hotter. By the time the surface started splitting, I knew that getting the hell out of there was my only chance, and then... I heard the helicopter."

Magnus nodded. "Vasuki and I had already finished when a PA ran toward us babbling about mixing up the volcanoes. We were done, so we didn't see the issue, and then the real-time footage of Reebee in the volcano was shown, and we both got in the helicopter."

Vasuki explained, "Magnus held onto me while I reached down, but she wouldn't take my hand until she got the damned icon, so she jumped up after that, and I hung onto her until Magnus pulled us both in. We each had our four, and now, it was up to the voting to decide who won."

Reebee grinned. "We actually have no clue."

The crowd murmured, and she finished, "I am just happy to have survived, which is not what can be said of most gameshows."

A ripple of laughter sounded.

Vasuki lifted her hand to his lips. “I don’t care who won. I am simply pleased with the outcome.”

Magnus kissed her temple. “Me, too.”

The host’s jaw dropped. “You three are...”

Magnus smiled. “Not yet. We waited until after the contractual obligation of the program, which ends tonight. The contract has been filed with the courts, however.”

Reebee felt the heat rising in her face. “Oh, boy.” She was deeply uneasy with the exposure and felt folks staring at her.

There was a gasp as someone left the audience, and a familiar silhouette came toward her. Kern had his standard black suit on, and she went to stand up, but Magnus touched her arm. Magnus and Vasuki stood and stepped aside. Two chairs were put next to hers, and Kern took her hand after he sat down. Theo did the same.

The host chuckled. “So, it is obvious that you have no fear of alphas, Reebee.”

She held the hands holding hers tightly. “Uh, no. That has never been an issue. I mean, with one exception, I have never chased one, and the one I chased, I caught. And he had a friend.”

Theo laughed. “Technically, I caught her. I brought her inside, she and Kern talked, and the next morning, she was gone and then on her way to the island, though we had no idea at the time.”

The host asked, “When did you find out?”

“When my twin came home, talking about one of the betas she had met on the shoot, we had a fairly good idea of who it was based on the description. That was confirmed a week ago.”

She held Kern’s hand and said, “Yeah, I had pregnancy-related alpha withdrawal. So, while I appreciate Kern coming to the rescue—”

Kern answered, “Aside from the physical issue, she could take care of our child on her own.”

Rhymbia sat back until they were asked who they were representing in the finals. After Vasuki said the firehouse and community centre and Magnus had the legal resource centre, she mentioned, “I work for the JN Foundation, and we build playgrounds in developing areas, and my area is that we help children recovering from consistent illness to restart their lives. We apply to different industries to see if they will do a few days of instruction to the recovering children. Some of those kids want to throw themselves into life, and we are there to help them. It takes special kids and special assistants to travel the world to do tasks that can’t be done anywhere else.” She grinned. “We have an eighty percent placement rate with the teens who apply to our program. The kids have been sick for years, and when they decided life was where they wanted to be, they chose the JN Foundation as one of the places they wanted to introduce them to life again. Those kids hit it hard. But there are kids in the space program, bio engineering, ecological study, biology, oceanography, aerospace, and a dozen other occupations just from the kids I have shepherded alone.” She smiled. “Restarting a life has always been a passion of mine. Sometimes it’s embarrassing, sometimes it hurts, and sometimes you are sure it is the last thing you want to do, but you have to do it anyway. So, for all those kids, I am glad the foundation can be there.”

Kern kissed her hand and smiled. “I am glad you are here.”

She looked at the host. “Now, as much as I appreciate it, why were my mates wired with microphones before they got up here? That’s a little sus.”

Theo chuckled, and the host grinned. “We were warned that you might have a panic attack, and they were asked to assist.”

She glanced at the control booth. “Thanks, Ford.”

The light on her flickered in reply.

The host announced, “The participants don’t know this, but there was a three-way tie for points. The rest is going to be determined by online voting.”

Kern leaned down and whispered in her ear, “How much is at stake?”

She turned her head and whispered back, “Five million.”

He nodded, kissed her temple, and squeezed her hand. By that, she guessed she wasn't to worry.

Kern smiled. “The foundation has informed me that they have already received donations exceeding the value of the prize.”

“They did?” Rhymbia was surprised.

The host spoke quietly to a PA, with a tablet in her hand, that whispered in his ear.

He spoke up. “Well, the head of the JN Foundation has confirmed it. They are withdrawing Reebee from consideration for the prize. They have already received the funding to keep the program running for a decade. Congratulations, Reebee, you have achieved your goal and proved that a motivated beta can be equal to an alpha.”

Reebee sighed. “I wouldn't say that. I did everything full out without putting self-preservation into action. I have a hard time with that, but I am very good at survival. Weirdly, they are two different instincts. The first one stops you from starting, and the second keeps you going when your body is asking what you just did.” She smiled. “I have always been very good at survival.”

Theo added, “And before any speculation runs around, Reebee has her own money and has not donated it all to the foundation because she already donates her body to helping the clients find what they are looking for in a new start.”

She smiled.

The host said, “Participants were blocked from being financially compensated for their participation in this program.”

Rhymbia smiled. “Well, as I am out of the running, I think I would like to thank the organizers for putting the show on and head out.” She leaned forward.

The host's eyes got wide. “No, Reebee, we actually have a surprise for you.”

She settled back. "I really hate surprises."

Music started up, and lights slowly came on a group of masked musicians playing a song that was weirdly familiar.

Reebee looked at them, and when one of the show staff came up behind them, she started cutting off their masks.

"Oh my god!" Rhymbia covered her mouth as Jillienne grinned at her while she played the drums with accuracy and energy. Kern asked, "Who is she?"

In answer to his question, clips of her and Jill meeting, flying across the country, learning how to be stuntwomen, and then hugging afterward. After that was footage Rhymbia hadn't seen. Her mouth opened as clips from Jill flying, landing, taking a punch, and throwing one. At the bottom of the screen, it said, *It began with one week. 116 movies later.*

There were biologists and eco researchers and the aeronautics engineer and a member of the space program, and when they were all unmasked, the song ended. They left their dais and walked to Rhymbia. She was crying and hugged them all. Once children, now adults who had grabbed life with both hands.

Jillienne grinned. "Surprise. Happy early birthday, Reebee."

Reebee winced as she felt two pulses of shock through her. "Thanks, Jill. Things are good?"

"Very good." Jillienne reached up and peeled off her wig, letting snow-white locks tumble to her waist. She calmly removed her lenses, and the hot purple colour stared Rhymbia in the face.

"Are you sure you want to?"

"Yup. Tired of hiding, and now, I have something I didn't have as a kid."

She looked at the woman and remembered the picture of the girl bald from cancer treatments. "What do you have now?"

Jillienne smiled. "Me. Thanks to you standing with me, I learned what I could do, and it turns out I am pretty impressive."

Rhymbia hugged her and then went through the other five members, smiling and hugging and finding out how they were feeling and how life was treating them. They were all good, and aside from normal career issues, they were loving life.

The marine biologist grinned at her, and his features were familiar. She turned and looked at Magnus, and Max laughed. “Yeah, he’s my cousin. I was terrified I couldn’t swim with one leg, and it was you learning and floundering next to me that helped me remember how to learn.”

Magnus stood, stunned. “Max, I had no idea. I could have...”

“No. You and the rest of the family were so busy telling me I would be fine that no one could see I wasn’t. I wasn’t fine, but Reebee and the foundation saw it, and they helped me get back in the water.”

She looked around and saw Vasuki talking to Wen, the engineer who had jumped out of the plane. He glanced at Reebee. “Her mother works at my aunt’s salon. I have known her since she was two.”

Wen smiled. “You stopped going to gawk at women at the salon ten years ago, and that was about when my lungs gave way. There was an organ transplant, but my family was so protective that I contacted the foundation, and they promised to keep me safe while I learned what life had to offer. Reebee took good care of me, jump after jump.”

The camera drones swirled around them, and the host asked them to sit again. One round of hugs and Reebee was smiling and sitting there muttering, “Wow.”

Magnus’s pro bono clients sent in video accolades, and Vasuki’s firehouse arrived to congratulate him on the finals. Rhymbia leaned close to Kern when the firemen demanded an introduction, but a word from Vasuki, and they remembered their manners.

They shook her hand, and all asked her to stop by the firehouse. She paused and then said, “Only if Vasuki needs something brought to him.”

Six faces turned to Vasuki, and he sighed. “I will see what I can forget.”

His crew beamed.

The host called folks to order, and Kern wrapped her in his arms and settled her on his lap. She laid her head on his shoulder and dozed under the lights and in front of the crowd. She didn’t care anymore. Her social battery just died.

Theo moved next to them and held her hand, pressing a kiss to her cheek. The PA came forward and asked what happened, and Theo simply said, “The last few weeks of her pregnancy have been traumatic, and she’s recovering. She ran out of energy.”

“Guys, you know I can hear you, right? I just don’t want the lights and cameras anymore tonight.”

The audience laughed, but it was soft.

Kern kissed her temple, and she let her exhaustion show. The laughter stopped, and concerned voices filled the audience. She muttered, “Keeping up with alphas is not for tired people.”

“This is why they asked us to come on stage, Reebee.”

She nodded. “Good call.”

The host got them back under control, and he grinned. “Right, we are getting votes in from around the world, and it is a tight race. Reebee, despite your request to opt out, you are contractually included in the voting. JN Foundation is rising quickly.”

She looked at the host with sleepy eyes. “It’s a good thing that they support other foundations and organizations, then.”

The host grinned. “And now we are going to show some exclusive footage for the subscribers.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh... no. I was told that the footage would never see the light of day.”

Ford’s voice came through her earpiece. “I lied.”

Everyone on the stage laughed and turned to watch the screen where Reebee was pole dancing on a tree, including climbing up it and slowly sliding down using her hiking boots as grips while she slowly descended, and then she twirled, twisted, and rocked her hips to music that was blasting from Ford's speakers.

She crawled into Kern's jacket and hid.

The next music was familiar as well, and she knew it was her and her underwater make-out session with Magnus.

The clips got into every close call, and she had Kern's arms wrapped protectively around her. "You did a lot of very dangerous shit, Reebee."

"Yup, and lived to tell the tale."

"Do you still want to do that kind of thing?"

"Never really wanted to in the first place. They needed it, so I did it. It was fun, but I like to go for quiet walks, and I plan to get a cat."

"I think Grigory's Misha has a litter. Since you are family and all, you might have a chance at a kitten."

"What do they look like?"

"Super white and fluffy."

"I am looking for a cat with a mismatched bunch of limbs. Maybe one eye." She smiled against his chest, and Theo chuckled. She suddenly realized something. "Aw, geez, I have trashed your shirt, Kern."

He chuckled. "Makeup?"

"Yeah."

"I have other shirts."

She sleepily squirmed against him. "Yeah, but this one smells good."

"And I think you are done for the evening. Do you have any final remarks?"

“It was fun. I met new people. I did some very odd stuff and hopefully got some extra funding for the foundation. Now, I just want some rest and to start planning baby stuff.”

Kern chuckled. “Then, let’s get you home.”

She yawned and pushed away from her little cocoon. She sat up and smiled at Kern then shared the smile with Theo, Vasuki, and Magnus.

The host was startled when she looked at him. “As the clips are concluded, the commentaries have been given, and the voting is underway, I really want to go home now.” She sighed softly. “Thanks to everyone for coming out.”

He tried to convince her. “Please. We have so many more clips to go through.”

“Just over a week ago, my pregnancy put me in the hospital. I am not endangering me or the baby. Getting pregnant is dangerous enough. Have a nice night.” She got up, curtsied to the audience, and walked off the stage. The sound tech was there to get the mic off and collect the earpiece.

She turned off the unit and grinned. “That was badass. Congratulations on your pregnancy.”

“Thank you. For someone so small, he’s exhausting.”

“I have two, so I get it. First trimester, right?”

“Yup.”

“Your body is changing gears. Give yourself enough rest and watch your diet.” The woman squeezed her hand. “You are so soft.”

“So I hear. Thank you.”

Kern had removed the unit, and he handed it to the tech. Theo did the same. Together, their little pack made their way to the alley where Jeffrey was waiting with the car. They departed and made their way past the crowd with Rhymbia wedged between them. It had been quite a night.

Chapter Fourteen

Rhymbia woke up around five in the morning when she heard voices. Theo held her and stroked her back. “Vasuki and Magnus didn’t want to waste any time.”

She yawned. “Oh. What should I do?”

“Nothing. Kern is telling them that it is slow and gentle or nothing at all, and if you say stop, they stop.”

She yawned. “What if I fall asleep?”

Theo stroked her back. “They will deal with it.”

“Really?”

“They will have to. Kern and I aren’t leaving.”

That brought her eyes open wide. “What?”

Theo chuckled. “He’s the pack leader. He doesn’t leave when new members arrive. Your safety is his primary concern.”

“Oh.” When they had gotten home, they had just cuddled. It had been a relief because she was exhausted. She sat up. “I’m gonna go brush my teeth.”

Theo helped her out of bed, and she wandered off to brush her teeth and use the bathroom. Her body was producing slick at an alarming rate, and she put some effort into cleaning up. When she thought she had it under control, she walked back to bed but stopped when she saw Theo and Kern sitting at the small table in the corner, and Vasuki and Magnus were next to the bed, removing their slacks.

She turned and went back to the bathroom, muttering as she tried to clean up again. Kern came in and snorted. “Theo says that for some women, that is normal in pregnancy. Don’t worry about it. It is going to help things along.”

“Not if I slip and bust my butt,” she muttered as she tossed the small towel into the hamper.

He stepped forward and hugged her. "I'll carry you. Any idea what triggered it?"

"Relaxing cuddle time."

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her. She went up on her toes, and the slick showed up again while the sweet, slow kiss warmed her from the inside out.

He slid his hand into her hair and rubbed his thumb over her lower lip. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's meet fire and flood."

She grimaced. "I am flood at this point."

He grinned, and they walked out to face the rest of their pack. She cocked her head. "Is pack right?"

"We will figure it out. What would you suggest?"

"Nest or den."

He grinned. "Both are good. We will put it to the vote."

She looked at Vasuki and Magnus; their erections were gleaming and flushed. She tensed and was going to turn around, but Kern sent reassurance.

Magnus stepped toward her and took her hands. He smiled. "Breathe out."

Her eyes widened, and he leaned down as she exhaled softly, and then his mouth was over hers, and she breathed him in.

Things got blurry, and she was wrapped in a sense of relaxed and buoyant warmth. He lifted her against him, and she locked her legs around his hips. She felt the teasing at her opening, and then he lowered her oh-so-slowly. She arched and gasped then focused on the kiss while he sank into her, or she sank over him; she didn't care. She just wanted him inside her.

He didn't last long when she shivered and her body clutched at him. He groaned, bit her shoulder, and held her. She heard a

spattering sound, and she hoped it wasn't her. Their link started slowly, but he supported her butt with his hand and wedged fingers between them and stroked her clit. She couldn't move because he was pinning her between teeth and cock. She felt lips on her other shoulder, and Theo's mark flared bright inside her, sending arousal through her in a soft grey wave. Magnus's mark took shape faster and stronger as Theo's touch relaxed her. When Magnus's circling fingers set her off, she clenched and squirmed, then shuddered and settled, her sex slowly pulsing around him.

She gasped and muttered, "Thanks, Theo."

Magnus released her and licked his lips. "Thanks, Theo."

Vasuki asked, "What happened?"

Theo rubbed her back. "Things went too fast, and she wasn't able to react, so I just used my link to start her again. We had been cuddling when you arrived, so my scent relaxed her."

She slowly listed to one side and blinked, looking up at Magnus. "That was *you*?"

He grinned. "Yes. It has been building since I saw you in that black lace dress."

"You have seen me in a sports bikini. It covered less."

"But you didn't look like this. Now you look soft and feel softer."

She sighed. "You don't have a knot, so why are we still together?"

Magnus laughed. "You feel warm."

"This isn't the last time we are going to do this, but I think I need to tidy up."

Vasuki put his hand on her shoulder. "I can help with that. May I?"

She looked at him and nodded.

Magnus kissed her and then held her hips while he lifted her off him. There was another surge of cum, and then Vasuki took

her to the bathroom. He set her on the bench in the shower, warmed the water, and then gently sprayed water with the handheld unit over her shoulders and back.

“You are taking this remarkably well, Rhymbia.”

“You two?”

“Four mates in a week. Even Aunt Lexa only has the three. She tried for a fourth, but he wasn’t right.” He rubbed a smooth cloth over her back. “So, are we right?”

“Yes. The exhaustion is recovery from the rapid weight loss following the show. I gave back what I had borrowed, and given what happened next, that was an issue. Keeping a bit of Kern’s energy had kept the withdrawal at bay. My body thought he was still with me until I did what I promised to do. Then it all went to shit, and I lost a lot of weight in a very short amount of time.”

“How did they find you again?”

“Weird coincidence. My friend Elspetha got worried when I wasn’t where I was supposed to be, so she told Arkos who called Kern because Kern could find anyone with just a hint of scent. He recognized me. I know I have told you all this before.”

“Yes, but you sugar-coated it. Where were you?”

“Uh, approaching a coma in my car in the woods at my lot.” She shuddered. “He got me out of there and drove me to Meksoren Hospital. Well, the one his family owns. Tests were run, and I popped pregnant. Theo was called because that is his department. I was cleaned up and hooked up and kept there overnight with Kern’s jacket on me.”

“So, you were that near death?”

“Ask Theo. He can tell you. He’s not my doctor anymore. I have a different obstetrician, and she gives lollipops and tells me I’m a good girl.” She sighed and started to lean on him.

“Tired?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I am guessing that since you mated, they have been at you every moment they can manage.”

“Tonight we cuddled.” She smiled.

“And then Magnus and I have blundered in, insisting that you take us. I am sorry.”

“No problem, but will you go slow?”

He smiled. “I can do that. I can also wait.”

He turned off the water and got a huge towel to wrap around her.

Rhymbia smiled at him. “If you want to have sex and mark me, you could have me on my side.”

He nodded. “I am going to cold mark you. Is that all right?”

She nodded.

He walked back into the shower stall, sat on the bench he had used to bathe her, and patted his knees. Rhymbia walked over and sat down. “How often do I have to see Lady Fen?”

He laughed. “Only big family events, and you only need to speak if she catches you.”

She leaned forward and pulled her hair in front of her. She felt him licking Magnus’s mark and the other marks, which got her blood warming, and her breath came faster. She clutched at the towel while Vasuki sighed and said, “You taste amazing.”

She shivered. “So, what kind of snake are you?”

“Fire serpent. Venomous. Don’t worry. Kern’s venom is far deadlier than mine.”

She nodded. “I understand. Kern’s on standby.”

“You can feel him?”

“I can see him.” She looked toward the door to the spacious bathroom. Kern was silhouetted against the light of the bedroom.

He laughed and then resumed his slow warming of her body. She heard the soft hiss, and the next thing she felt was the bite. The slow slide of his fangs into her body was right below

Kern's mark, and she gasped. She dug her fingers into the towel.

His tongue slithered around, and she panted as the pain subsided and the link flared to life. Vasuki reached under the towel and slowly stroked the inside of her thighs. She shuddered when his fingers slipped and slid, and heat boiled through her blood until she gasped softly and whined as soft pulses rippled through her sex and their link.

She was whining softly as pleasure kept rippling through her as his fingers slowly teased her sex, and she tried to catch and keep him.

When he released the bite and lifted his head, she slumped into his arms. Kern was at her side and sighed. "I'm an idiot. This was too much."

He touched her face, and she sent him reassurance to blot out his guilt.

"I have been lectured on how to treat an omega since I was five. I offered her the chance to abstain from sex tonight, but she counteroffered." He smiled and shifted her in his arms.

Kern got up, and when Vasuki got up, she was carried back into the bedroom. The other two were nearby, but they stood back as Vasuki placed her gently into the bed before easing her towel off. He did everything carefully, and it was appreciated.

Rhymbia was interested in what he was doing when he settled her on her side with her knee propped up on two pillows. She was suddenly very open, and the air in the room hit her wet bits and made her shiver.

Vasuki sent a pulse through the link. He was asking permission. She returned the pulse, and he eased in behind her, finding her opening with his fingers and then his cock. He slid inside slowly and whispered in her ear. The hissing was soft, but her body recognized it. She placed her hand over his and looked into Kern's eyes. Vasuki kept up with the whispering, and the climax was a warm wave that ran through her from head to toe. Vasuki moved twice and groaned softly. She felt

the hot spurt and was glad it was a softer experience than Magnus, but Magnus's beast was a whale, so it made sense.

Vasuki whispered, "I am not going to be so restrained on other occasions."

"Just let me regain my strength. Another week."

"I am taking that as a promise."

"Hmm. When do you next have a shift?"

"I have the weekend off." He kissed her earlobe and neck.

She shivered. "Don't start. Oh, shit. Do you have to tend your marks?"

"No, they healed."

Kern drew his finger down her cheek. "A benefit of me watching over things."

She leaned into his hand. "This is a lot."

Kern sighed. "It isn't ideal, but you linked to them, and they linked to you."

She nodded and clutched at him, slowly breathing until she felt them all checking on her. She smiled and relaxed. It was a few hours until dawn, and that would be more sleep than she had gotten in weeks.

She woke up with Kern around her, and she smiled and whispered, "Is the fuckathon over?"

He moved his hand below her navel. "It is, unless you get super horny later in your pregnancy then we are all happy to serve. For now, it is who you want, when you want, if you want. Your move."

"Right now, I just want something to eat. I know, it's getting old."

He hugged her and murmured, "You have to fix what I caused, so it is only right that I be there during your recovery and for decades to come."

She smiled and just enjoyed the warmth of him. Her stomach growled, and she sighed. “Right. Stomach has cast its vote for me getting out of bed.”

“Kagan can bring a tray.”

“Kagan has enough to do with four of you guys and me.”

“Magnus and Vasuki are moving in, Theo is back at the hospital, and it is just you and little ol’ me.”

She looked at him, and his eyes glowed. “Pretty eyes.”

He smiled and kissed her before he raised his head. “Breakfast.”

“If that’s a pet name, I don’t hate it.”

He patted her thigh. “Come on, or we will be cuddling all day.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She pushed herself upright and smiled. “But breakfast sounds better.”

They got out of bed, and he helped her put a gown on before sliding the robe onto her shoulders. He was wearing pyjama bottoms and a robe, and she grinned. “Gift from mother or ex-girlfriend?”

He smiled. “Mother. She said if I had guests, I shouldn’t run around without anything. Also, now that I have Jeffrey and Kagan, it is simply respect.”

“Right.” She looked around for slippers and was surprised to find some in the closet. “Wow. Jeffrey is a thorough shopper.”

“And he is compensated accordingly.”

She laughed, and they headed downstairs. They were settled, and Kagan was bringing breakfast when Kern asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Slightly more rested and a bit like a chew toy.” She got excited when she saw what Kagan was bringing over. “Woohoo!”

He put down the extremely sugary cereal and a jug of milk. “This doesn’t look good for you, but it does have a huge calorie load, and Dr. Theo isn’t here. Go for it.”

She laughed. “You talked to Renner.”

“I did. He said you had three boxes of this stuff squirreled in your office, so it was a guess.”

She poured a bowlful and dumped milk on it before stabbing her spoon in and crunching her way through the kids’ cereal.

Rhymbia closed her eyes and remembered the first time she had the cereal. It was her stepdad’s parents’ place, and her half-sisters were getting their presents. Rikoth’s mother had bought Rhymbia special cereal so Alice couldn’t complain about her getting a gift. The cereal was there every time all of the girls were over. It meant calm, and it meant affection, even if love wasn’t possible.

She crunched along until the cereal got soggy, and then she ate faster. She reloaded the bowl and kept eating. Kern picked up the box, and she paused and hissed at him. “Give it back.”

Kern’s brows rose. “Wow. Is there an explanation for the hostility?”

“Yes.” She turned back to her treat. He had bought them, so she didn’t have a right to complain. She would just go out and get her own.

“What is going on there?” He frowned. “You are determined, but I don’t know why.”

“I have already dumped too much on you. I will just get my own stuff when I go out later today.”

Kagan asked quietly, “So, since it is a kids’ cereal, I am guessing that is when the injury happened?”

“Yeah, Rikoth’s parents felt bad about being forbidden to buy me anything for holidays, so they bought me this cereal so I would be distracted with the gift-giving in the other room. That lasted until I was eight when Alice came back in and saw me smiling and swinging my feet. The next morning, when the

next round of gifts was being given, I poured my cereal, took a few bites and had to run into their gathering with blood pouring from my mouth. She'd dumped in crushed glass. I don't eat from an open box that has left my sight anymore." She shuddered. "I still remember that smile. Rikoth's parents rushed me to hospital and had to wait for Alice to authorize treatment. That took ten hours."

Kern was grey. "So, is that the only food-related issue?"

"Yup. Childhood memories are the ones that surprise you." She sighed and put her spoon down. "And now they are mushy." She looked to Kagan. "Is there a possibility of some toast?"

He nodded. "Sure."

She looked at them. "I will just keep the cereal thing for when I am alone at home or in the car or waiting in traffic or in my office. And yes, I have gone through therapy, and this is as good as it gets. It took eight years for me to touch the cereal again, and now, I can only eat it alone. I wasn't thinking."

Kagan had the toast on the way, and he brought out strawberry jam and grape jelly.

Kern sighed. "So, she actually fed you glass?"

"No. Of course not. She put the glass into the cereal, and I fed *myself* the glass. I didn't swallow it, but my mouth was trashed. Rikoth's family let me stay in my room after that."

"What happened then?"

"The girls asked for gelatin for dessert, and they each took bites before bringing me their leftovers. Alice was livid." She wrinkled her nose. "I've got issues. I warned you."

Kagan brought over her toast, and she did half strawberry and half grape. Kern finished his breakfast, wiped his mouth, and grabbed his coffee as he walked toward her. He lifted her and settled her on his lap. She kept hold of her toast.

"I am going to try to make up for your past, Rhymbia." Kern pressed his head to hers.

She kept chewing and then swallowed. “You don’t have to make up for anything. My past is set in stone: chips, cracks, and all. It’s done. You are just responsible for what happens next.”

“So, I am responsible for everything in your life?” He squeezed her gently.

“No. Just your actions in my life. No one is responsible for my life but me. You guys are just along for the ride.”

“Fine. When is your birthday? I want to throw a party.”

She continued eating her toast. “You are going to have to wait a year.”

He looked to Kagan. “Was Renner forthcoming?”

“He didn’t know. He said he would ask HR on Monday to see if they would part with the information.”

Rhymia smirked. “He’s a good assistant.”

Kern said, “He isn’t going to part with the info, is he?”

“Nope.” She finished her toast and looked around for her coffee, but it wasn’t there. She shrugged and grabbed Kern’s.

Kern smiled, and she felt his triumphant thought. He opened his phone and checked his email, and then he scrolled with his thumb until he found something. She saw the email from the medical centre, and she yelped, taking a swing to grab the phone. He calmly moved his hand out of her reach and slowly lowered his arm.

She slumped. “Busted.”

“You and I have the same birthday.”

“You don’t say.”

He sighed. “This is going to be awkward.”

She slammed a hand to his chest. “No. It isn’t. Your mom is having a party for you, isn’t she? You go and have fun.”

He looked at her like she was insane.

Kagan said. “Wait. It’s tomorrow? Shit. Boss, what’s the plan?”

She let a wave of fury run through their link, and Kern paused. “What is it, Rhymbia?”

“Just let it go. Please.” She put a hand on his chest. “Please. I am so tired.”

He looked at her and frowned. “Okay. Rhymbia... is this a childhood thing?”

“Yup. My friends and I just got together for lunch at a nice restaurant. I like things casual.”

His eyes lit with understanding, and he nodded. “Will you go out for lunch with us?”

“If folks have time. I don’t know where everybody is going to be.” She looked at Kagan and said, “I know Theo wants me to restrict my coffee, but if I don’t have it when I get up, I am a confused, cranky toddler with a credit card. Either coffee is coming out of the kitchen, or there is going to be a delivery dude at the gate, and I will hike my ass down there to get it.”

Kagan paused. “Right. But can you deal with Dr. Theo?”

“Yeah. I will have a chat with him. My current obstetrician says that my use of it is not excessive, and due to the ADHD, it is more benign than a lot of pharmaceutical interventions.” She groaned. “And I fucking talk like crazy before I am all buttoned up.”

Kagan slid a coffee in front of her, and she picked it up and blew on it. Her mind stopped feeling like it was under pressure, and she slowly calmed down. She turned to Kern. “Sorry, I got so emotional. Don’t ask me about my childhood until I have had my coffee. It sucked.”

Kern hugged her. “I won’t. What do you want to do today?”

“Well, my stuff is here; I have told my landlord to trash everything. So, I just want to sleep.”

Kagan laughed. “How are you going to sleep after the coffee?”

She snickered. “Look up its effect on folks like me. I can usually bolt down a coffee and fall asleep.” She yawned. “In fact, an empty bed is calling me.”

Kagan said, "I really wanted to make your bed."

She shrugged. "I will just hijack a room and crawl under the bed."

Kern frowned. "You don't need to do that."

"It's more comfortable for me." She smiled at him. "So, go and do whatever you do on a Saturday. I am going to be enjoying my day off with just rest and relaxation."

"I feel strange leaving you here alone."

"I will be fine once I get some rest and maybe a bit of water."

A glass of water was set next to her, and she consumed it. "Great, now I just need a six-hour nap, and I will finally feel nearly human."

Kern held her close. "I want to stay with you."

"You won't fit under the bed."

"So, you are serious about that?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Yeah. I grab some bedding and a pillow and get some actual sleep."

Rhymia saw something in Kern's eyes and felt it in their link.

He kissed her and smiled. "Kagan can find you a warm, dark room and settle you under the bed with all the bedding you need."

"Okay. Now?" She stood up.

Kern got up and smiled. "I will help you pick a room. Come on."

She took his hand, and they headed upstairs again. He showed her which rooms had been taken by Theo, Vasuki, and Magnus. She knew the room the moment that she saw it. It was burgundy and dark blue with rich red wood. "This one, please."

He nodded. "Good choice. Let's get you some bedding and a comfy pillow."

She was situated in five minutes, kissed him goodbye, and then snuggled down in a quiet place where there were no voices, no tension, and she was safe.

Chapter Fifteen

Kern felt her slide into sleep before the door was closed. He started calling Rikoth before he reached the steps, and when he went to his office, he learned about the way that Rhymbia had grown up. He kept the white-hot rage to himself and spoke to Magnus about finding means to make sure that Alice never walked the streets again.

“Yeah, about that. She’s put another hit out on Rhymbia.”

“What?”

“It didn’t go anywhere. It seems the dispatcher she used was a fan of the show. The police were notified, and she no longer has communication privileges. It seems she didn’t realize that all calls were recorded.”

The fury roiled through Kern, and though he hadn’t seen this woman, he wanted her dead so that some of the pain she had caused would be put to rest.

“Right. I really want her out and taking a walk down a quiet road.”

“If she finds her way out, I will be notified immediately.”

Kern nodded, and he sighed. “Right. Thanks. I know this isn’t your normal area of expertise.”

“No problem. Is she asleep?”

“Yeah. I have to get a designer in to make a nest. She said she didn’t need one, but she is upstairs, under a bed, in bedding, and sleeping like a log.”

Magnus chuckled. *“That does seem like omega behaviour.”*

“It definitely seems that way. Now for the tense information. Rhymbia and I are sharing a birthday.”

“Wait. That’s tomorrow.”

“Correct. I have texted Theo and Vasuki but haven’t heard back yet. I have that stupid party downtown tomorrow. Do you

think my mother would forgive me if I skipped my own party?”

“I don’t know her, but if she is a normal socialite, no. Does she know you are married?”

“No. I wanted to meet up with her and let her know. I guess I will do that today, but I hate leaving her alone here.”

“She is asleep and under the bed. She’s secure.”

“I know. When will you be home?”

“In a few hours. I have some stuff to wrap up for Elias.”

Kern sighed. “Right. I will try and get that over with, but I had hoped to have Rhymbia with me.”

“She needs rest more than meeting the in-laws.”

“That’s probably right. Well, I will see if my mother has time for lunch. Get home when you can.”

Magnus said farewell and hung up.

Kern sent a text to his mother and went to speak with Kagan. Kagan contacted a family member who was an interior designer, and he was also notified where she was sleeping. Kern didn’t want her to wake up until she was ready.

He seethed on the way home from lunch with his mother. She hadn’t listened. She had fluttered around the party that had now been elevated to the level of a ball and had grudgingly given him three invitations for his pack. She had wittered on and did not let him introduce the idea of Rhymbia. His mother was sixty and stuck in her ways. He had been a surprise to her and his father. His father refused to deny his lady anything she wanted, including talking over their son.

Jeffrey was out getting more supplies for Rhymbia. Her clothing had been the most basic, and now that she was Mrs. Meksoren, she needed to upgrade.

Kern pulled up in front of the house and calmed himself. She didn’t need to think that his irritation was directed at her.

Jeffrey's car was parked nearby, and Kern walked inside and up the steps as quietly as he could manage. Jeffrey was in the largest bedroom, hanging up the clothing and humming to himself. It was a lovely array of clothes featuring a lot of black and emerald green.

He nodded to Jeffrey and gathered some underwear, a green dress, and black shoes.

Rhymbia's phone was sitting on the bedside table, and he was amazed it wasn't ringing off the hook. He checked it and sighed. It was dead.

Kern checked their link, and she was still blissfully asleep. He laid the dress and underwear on the bed, bent to look at her, and she was clutching a pillow with another at her back. A nest was needed. She needed a private place that was secure when her alphas were too much.

All of her other mates had time-consuming jobs. Kern could and did work from home frequently but still spent hours doing deals and assessing businesses. She would often be alone. He hated that. He would just have to adjust his schedule.

He headed down to his office and put the phone on a charger. It took less than three minutes before it lit up and vibrated. He was right. People wanted to know where she was. When he saw her friend Elspetha checking in, he called Elias and asked to speak to the other male's mate. Elias said, "*Oh, is it about Rhymbia?*"

"Yes. She's been texting, so I thought I would answer any questions for her."

"*Here she is.*" Elias handed the phone over.

"*Hello? Where is Rhymbia?*" Elspetha's voice was stern.

"She's asleep. She made a nest for herself under the bed in the spare room. I have been checking on the link, and she is in a deep and restful sleep."

Elspetha exhaled slowly. "*Okay. I was worried. She never shuts down like she did last night on camera.*"

“She’s exhausted from being so ill. Theo has said she isn’t in danger, and he has been monitoring the situation via the link.”

The woman again exhaled slowly. *“She’s usually invulnerable. She can dodge disaster and take care of herself, or she could until she met you.”*

“She sought me out. I am not easy, and this is only our first week together. I am doing what I can. Are you and Elias coming to the party tomorrow?”

Elsbetha snorted. *“Yes, but Rhymbia isn’t.”*

“What?”

“Your mother is militant that with strange women trying to crawl into her events to get close to all the eligible alphas, no one comes in without an invitation. Even with you.”

“How do you know that?”

She laughed. *“Lady Olyna is going to be there, and she briefed me. Elias had to get a plus one added to his invitation, or I couldn’t be there either. Please tell me your mother has been informed of Rhymbia’s marital status.”*

“I tried, but she kept talking.”

“Uh-huh. I will see what my oma can do. Well, our oma, I guess. Cool. We are cousins.” She chuckled. *“Right. Tell her to call me when she wakes up. How long has she been asleep?”*

“Four hours. She guessed earlier that she would need six.”

“Uh-huh. You know tomorrow is her birthday, right?”

“I do. It was a surprise that we matched up that way.”

“No surprise to me. That is just how she does things. Her intuition is never off.” She sighed. *“So, I am guessing you are all having lunch together tomorrow?”*

“We are.”

“The end of an era. Ah, well. We can have a fun lunch with the baby showers.”

Kern paused. "Right. The baby. I keep forgetting about him. He doesn't seem important yet."

"He is the reason that she was weak enough to need you... not rubbing it in. If he hadn't been pulling everything from her, she wouldn't have been too weak to take care of herself. But that being said, she went to you that night so that you and she could start him."

Kern wanted to rush in to hold Rhymbia but said, "I appreciate her instincts."

"You know about her rough road and obsession with keeping those around her safe?"

"I am learning."

"I saw the first responder who was at the crash site. Is he one of yours?"

"Who? Vasuki?"

"Yes. He was there with the paramedics and ambulance drivers. Funny that he would be there now. He was in his early twenties and in a junior position."

"I will have to ask him. Is there a detail?"

"Two-car accident and a decapitated alpha. An open trunk on that car with blood inside."

"Right. And two women covered in blood with remarkably few injuries while one stood next to them, wearing their blood."

She laughed. *"She told you? Did she tell you about the beta in the trunk?"*

"No. What the hell?"

"When she wakes up, ask her. And tell her to fucking call me. I am worried. When the strong ones fall, it shakes the rest of us. Get her back on her feet, or I will kick your ass."

He smiled. "I am doing my best. I think a nest would be good for her."

“I think so, too, but make sure you don’t leave her alone there all the time. She has had enough alone. And get her an invitation to your birthday party. And a dress. Her stalker destroyed her nonessential wardrobe.”

“I will. Now, may I call you if I have any questions about her? We have not spoken directly, and I didn’t want to appear pushy.”

“Sure. No problem. Some of us need more fussing than others.”

He heard the low rumble of Elias’s voice in the background. Elias’s voice came over the phone. *“Please, excuse us. My mate needs some fussing.”*

Kern chuckled. “Have a good day.”

“Every day with Elspetha is a good day.”

They finished pleasantries and hung up.

He sent a message to Vasuki and wasn’t surprised when there was a response. Vasuki had been on his first week as a medic. He became a firefighter later. The horror of that night had stuck with him. Now, they just had to determine whether Rhymbia remembered the same thing, and for that, she had to wake up.

He went to Kagan and asked for some sandwiches and other items to be ready when Rhymbia woke.

* * * *

Sounds were muffled, and she pulled the pillow off her head. She hadn’t slept like that in decades. Rhymbia rubbed a hand over her face and pushed the bedding down. She was thirsty, she was hungry, and the sense of relief Kern poured through the link showed he was worried. She scooted out from under the bed, dragging the bedding with her, and found clothes on top of the bed.

She smiled, got dressed, then drank the bottle of water that was next to the clothes. With her nightgown and robe over her arm, she walked back to Kern's room and hung her clothes on an available hanger.

She twisted her hair into a loose bun and went to the bathroom to pin it in place. She looked for her phone and figured that Kern had it.

She sent a query through their link and headed down to the kitchen.

She smiles at Kagan. "Hiya."

He grinned. "Nice nap?"

"Needed. I probably need three or four more of those in the next few days, but I feel a lot better than I did this morning."

"Kern asked me to have something ready to go, so sandwich platter?" He nodded for her to sit.

"Um, maybe. Are there chips? Corn or ripple."

He grinned and nodded. "Done. Renner has mentioned your fondness for junk food."

"He's an excellent assistant."

She sat, and he brought her a glass of water, the pitcher, a cup of coffee, and a platter of sandwiches with a bowl of potato chips. She felt Kern before he touched her shoulders. He massaged her neck and shoulders. "How was the nap?"

"Restorative. Thanks for not freaking out about the under-the-bed thing."

He ran his hands down her arms and massaged her biceps. "Can I let your hair down?"

"I just pinned it up, but if it gets in my food, I am going to start spitting stuff out."

He chuckled, unpinned her hair, gathered it, and loosely knotted it below her shoulders. "There."

She smiled and started in on her meal. She was halfway done before he asked something that made her freeze.

“Who was the beta in the trunk?”

Rhymbia blinked. “You called Elspetha?”

“Well, technically, I called Elias, he handed the phone over, and she told me to ask. So, who was the beta in the trunk?”

Her eating slowed. She nibbled. “The guy who took me was a multitasker. She was purchased by a collector who wanted someone with my characteristics. Subdued omega, I guess, is the right term. She was seventeen years old, sweet and timid. When the car crashed, I didn’t even know she was there until after I met the others, and then she started pounding on the inside of the trunk. We let her out, and she ran. I saw her again a few years later. She’s doing better.”

“Does she have a name? Will I meet her?”

“Probably. It’s Renner.”

“But... Renner is a male.”

“He is, but she can change her form for convenience and protection. The height is the same. It is just a matter of reducing the curves.”

He blinked.

She looked at Kagan, and Kagan was stunned. Rhymbia smiled. “Why are you so surprised? Kern turns into a forty-foot snake, Theo can lift tons if necessary, Magnus is a horny whale, and Vasuki is a giant snake on fire. A woman hiding behind the appearance of a man is shocking?”

Kagan flushed. “Renner looks and acts like a man.”

She smirked and continued eating. “And smells like one. Even her scent is an illusion, but she has to keep two wardrobes. It’s a good thing she’s tall. It makes things more convincing.” She glanced at Kern. “Where did my phone end up? I need to tell Renner that I outed her.”

“It’s in my office and lighting up every few seconds. Your battery was dead.”

Kagan nodded. “Got it.” He went to get her phone, she guessed.

She kept eating, and when she got the phone, she ignored the messages and texted Renner. *I have outed your duality.*

A moment later came, *Okay, cool. At least I don't have to worry about showing up and freaking them out.*

You have my new address?

I do. Your file is updated. Payroll is up to date. When do you think you are coming back?

One more week to recover, I think. I might come for half days, but I can do a lot from home.

I can bring you anything that requires your signature and bring donuts.

Thanks for taking this so well.

We agreed that when you found a mate, you would tell so that they didn't think we had a thing going on. Today is that day. Did you need reservations for you and your pack tomorrow?

No. I think Jeffrey is on that, but if I am desperate, I will contact you. It's Kern's birthday, and his mother has rented a ballroom for the party. That is what I am competing with.

It's not a competition. She's getting older and is holding tighter. When the family starts to expand, she will relax because she will have Kern and his boy, and you have them both.

Stand by tomorrow night in case I need an emergency extraction from the party I am not invited to.

Yes, ma'am. You will have girly me. I have a new dress to wear.

Remember to switch the shoes this time.

I am laughing. Yeah. I will remember. This dress deserves to be seen.

I look forward to panicking and calling you for help. Thanks. She smiled, and Renner signed off.

Kern was staring at the text. "She wasn't mad?"

“No. She always knew that if I found a mate, it would be found out in short order. So, this way, we get it out of the way.”

Kern smiled. “Communication is key.”

She smiled and finished the snack and the chips. She drank two glasses of water and downed the coffee.

She sighed. “That’s better. Now, I need to go for a walk because that was a big snack.”

Kern extended his hand, and she slid her fingers along his, stifling the heat that rippled through her. “We have a walk in the back.”

She got to her feet, and they walked out the back door. She stopped. “Oh. Wow. Walled garden.”

“It is also a maze. I promise to make sure you make it out.”

She wrapped her hands around his bicep and smiled. “Hooray.”

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah. I am guessing I need four more naps across the week, and I will probably be firing on all cylinders.”

“Good. So, you have known Renner since that night? Was she betrayed by her family as well?”

“No, she was in foster care after her parents passed. No one looked for her after the crash, so our best guess is that she was alone in the world. We haven’t been able to find family for her, but then, we never thought to start going through the genealogy sites. I will suggest it to her.” They started to walk through the stone archway, and their feet crunched lightly on the bark. “You know, as many of the things I did for the foundation that you would have considered dangerous, she did more. She was with me on every mission and did a lot of the things I couldn’t do just because they were gender inappropriate.”

“Like what?”

“Stints with the military; she’s amazing with automatic weapons. Her race car skills are amazing. She was the body in the heavy gear while a lot of folks thought it was me. Motorcycles, she was with me jumping out of planes. If we could hide her face, we did.”

He hummed. “Would she mind if you got some help to track things down?”

“We can ask Renner. If she says yes, let your hunting skills roam wild and free.”

He chuckled. “Excellent. I am sure that you could have done the same.”

“She didn’t want me to. She knew I was having enough issues with my own family.” She sighed. “I wonder when the police will need to interview me?”

“Soon. Magnus is locating a good attorney for you as this isn’t his specialty anymore.”

“Right. He does contract stuff.”

“Correct. I have a few lawyers on retainer and will ask whom they would recommend as counsel. You will be sorted out by tomorrow.”

“By Sunday? What fun.”

He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers.

“Why do you do that?”

“The texture of your skin is getting softer.”

“It must just be the regular meals and water.” She smiled.

“You know what the other option is.”

“I know, and I am denying that until I can’t anymore, and nothing will be definitive until after the baby is here.”

He chuckled. “Seven months. I can’t believe it.”

“So, how did lunch with your mother go?”

“She refused to let me get a word in edgewise. She wouldn’t let me tell her about you, but I managed to get invitations for

the others. I am just going to carry you in if I have to.” He grinned. “You can sit on my lap at the table.”

She laughed and sighed. “I am going to feel guilty crashing your party. What do you want for your birthday?”

They were firmly inside the walls of greenery, and he turned to face her. “I have you; that is more than I have ever wished for.”

“Yes, but I still want to get you something.”

“Fine. Since you are going to be huge during the holidays, buy something for the baby room.”

She chuckled. “I can do that. I have a few ideas.”

He smiled. “This has been a very exciting week.”

“I agree. I will have to answer those emails and texts sometime today.” She sighed and pressed her forehead to his chest.

“I got some calls today as well. It was a very popular segment. Apparently, I looked both nurturing and threatening. It was rather flattering.” He wrapped his arms around her. “And you looked delicate and beautiful, just like now.”

“And pale and exhausted.”

“Yes, but you made me and Theo look all dramatic and heroic, and Vasuki and Magnus compassionate and caring.”

She chuckled and just leaned against him, feeling the heat and protection he offered. “So, did you trap me in the maze?”

“I will let you out, but first, I just want to sit with you over here.” He picked her up and walked around the corner, showing her a gorgeous gazebo, fountain, and benches.

He walked to the gazebo and sat on a chair with her held against him. The splash of the water nearby and the sounds of nature were the only distractions.

“Your pack. How do you feel about everybody?”

“Theo is solid, Magnus is in a hurry, and Vasuki, he was raised right. I didn’t feel uncomfortable with him at all.”

Kern chuckled. “Good. So, we just need to slow Magnus down.”

“And take the edge off, though I think this morning took care of a bit of that.”

“Probably.”

“So, how weird is it for you to feel them through me?”

He grinned. “You know that?”

“Yes. I know that.”

“It is interesting, but I am happy with it. It aids tracking.”

“So, you now know where all of us are.”

He grinned. “I do. Vasuki is on his way here with assistance from his firehouse. Magnus is sending a moving van. They are a few minutes out.”

“Oh, is that why you put out a proper dress for me?”

“Yes. Otherwise, you could spend the entire day and night in that silk.”

She looked at him and cocked her head. “There is another part of that sentiment.”

He grinned. “And I would spend day and night inside you.”

“You know it isn’t a reliable way of bonding with the baby, right?”

“But it is an excellent way to bond with you, and you are my primary concern.”

Rhymbia wrinkled her nose and sighed. “I wish I wasn’t so complicated.”

“We are big boys. We can manage complicated.”

“Yeah, but I can wish. I get angry about people touching my cereal, for fuck’s sake.”

“I understand why. Rikoth’s divorce is being expedited. He wants to be able to testify against her without being dragged down in any lawsuits.”

“Smart. I know he wanted to help, but she was fixated on me being hers to punish. The others were hers to love. It was fucked up.” She smiled grimly. “But there is no way that any baby of mine is going to have a mom like that.”

“No. He’s going to have a ferocious mommy.”

“He already does.” She smiled. “Now, I just have to do the opposite of what Alice did to me, and we are going to be great.”

“If not, we can hire assistance.”

She nodded. “Probably a good idea, as I love doing my regular work with the foundation.”

He paused. “The dangerous stuff?”

“Yeah. It should be a good incentive to get back in shape after the little dude gets evicted.” She gently put a hand over the spot the little guy was developing. It had seemed so far away, and now, it felt like it was rushing toward her.

Kern tilted her chin and said, “No jumping out of planes?”

She nodded. “No jumping out of planes, though that is one of the better-controlled things I have done.”

“Thank you. I will be ready to accompany you if you do get selected to do anything dubious,” he murmured against her temple.

She chuckled. “Well, there are currently requests for some public performances, band participation, and someone who wants to learn to be a baker.” She smiled. “The applicants get to choose their representative. It makes it hard to say no.”

He nodded with understanding and held her close.

Chapter Sixteen

Kern murmured against her temple, “Vasuki and his guys are here.”

She looked at him in astonishment. “There are firefighters to ogle, and I am in the middle of a maze?”

He chuckled. “Why do you think you are in the maze?”

Rhymbia snorted and leaned her head against him. “So, when is dinner, and if it is pizza for moving day, I am camping in the kitchen until it shows up.”

He laughed and stood. “Fine, but can we come back here tonight?”

“It’s your maze, and I do like a walk after dinner or lunch or just eating.”

He carried her out of the maze, and he grinned at the expression on Kagan’s face as they walked into the kitchen. Kagan snorted. “They have been requesting her presence.”

Kern nodded and set her on her feet. She walked cautiously toward the front door, where there was laughter and the heavy thud of feet.

She sent a curious pulse through Vasuki’s link and heard a thud from outside, and then he was racing past his friends and picking her up, spinning her around. He settled her against him, face to face. “Hi, Rhymbia.”

She smiled, framed his face with her hands, and kissed him. “Hi, Vasuki. Is this place adding to your commute?”

“Absolutely not, and the company is much better when I am home.” He pressed his forehead to hers.

“You are very sweet.”

He nodded. “I try. You don’t need extra strain.”

“So, do you remember that accident from your first week?”

“The headless man, two bloody women, and the light concussion in the third? Yeah. I remember.” He shifted her to hold her with one arm and stroked her wrist with his thumb. “You healed well.”

“You applied very good first aid.” She smiled.

“And what about your other injuries?”

“They were taken care of in time. The beheading gave the healing a jumpstart.” She smiled. “After that, I took care of myself and learned to restart what had been derailed.”

He nodded. “My grandmother would like to visit you now that I am settled. I think she will give you a list of my virtues and why I should be the father of your next child.”

She blinked. “The first one isn’t here yet.”

“I know. But she just wants you to give me a chance. You could have an entire family of little Kern babies if you wanted. He could keep you to himself.”

The image of a nursery full of little babies with black hair and green eyes made her smile. She chuckled. “Ancestral ethnicity would be the only difference between the kids. All black hair and green eyes.”

He smiled. “So, you are not averse to the idea.”

“I am not, but I don’t know how well my body will tolerate this pregnancy.”

“Well, my family has dealings with several enhanced betas, and they have very little issues in labour and delivery.” He smiled. “My brother’s mate had a set of twins. She came out of it just fine, and her mates were watching her carefully. She’s a fighter, like you, but she is a professional fighter.”

She paused and ran possibilities through her mind. “The fighter. She is currently married to the owner of the sumo stables, and her other two mates are fighters as well.”

He blinked. “Really? How do you know that?”

“Renner took one of our foundation guys over to the sumo stable for some basics. They spent two days there, and then he

decided to pursue sumo as his chosen occupation, got an apprenticeship, and Renner went home.” She smiled. “When you meet Renner, you will understand.”

“Your assistant?”

“Yup. He’s been with me on a number of events. He does the stuff that is too dangerous for me.”

She could see a lineup of guys in jeans and t-shirts waiting off to the side.

“Too dangerous for you?” He raised the arched black brows that looked a lot like his grandmother’s.

“Yup. Racing, SWAT teams, sumo. You name it. Renner can take a hit.”

“As long as it isn’t you. The thought of you in those situations causes some tension.”

She smiled. “I can manage a pretty respectable back rub.”

The firefighters cleared their throats. Vasuki lowered her. “Oh, right.”

She smiled at them. “Sorry about last night. I was a little tired.”

They smiled and introduced themselves, each kissing the back of her hand and rubbing their thumbs across her skin.

She smiled. “Thanks for hauling his stuff over here. It isn’t like he doesn’t have a bajillion cousins. But they have seen a beta like me before.”

Vasuki chuckled. “Even the other enhanced betas are nothing like you.”

Rhymia smiled. “Just shows you women are all different with some basic similarities, just like men. All the same and different in our own ways.”

They looked at each other skeptically but took on expressions that they were humouring the pretty thing.

Vasuki smiled. “I was thinking of heading to the range with a few of the guys.”

“When?”

“Today? There is one just a few miles down the highway.”

She felt approval and looked to Kern. She nodded. “Fine, but it is going to be you guys versus me and Renner. Are you going from here?”

He chuckled. “Yes. I can drive you.”

“No. Renner will pick me up. I just need to make a call.”

She kissed Vasuki on the cheek and went to get her phone. A laughing emoji was the response, followed by *Girl or boy?*

Up against firefighters, so the girlier, the better.

On my way. There in ten.

Rhymbia chuckled wickedly and looked at Kern, who was raising his brows. “Uh... hi.”

He smiled. “You are up to something.”

“Yeah. Renner rarely gets a chance to strut her stuff in public. She is possibly the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Her figure is incredible, and her eyes sparkle.”

“It sounds like you have a crush.”

“You’ll see. Oh, are you going to come and play guns with us?”

“No. I will catch up on work now so I can spend more time with you later.” He kissed her softly. “Is she really going to be here in her female form?”

“Yup. She said she would be here in ten.”

“That’s quick. Where does she live?”

“Oh, she can get where she needs to really quick.” She smiled. “It’s what makes Renner such an excellent assistant.”

Kagan got her and Vasuki’s friends some iced tea and lemonade. He smiled. “I confess to a curiosity as to what she looks like when she isn’t at work.”

“Well, she’s got breasts, so that is different. Renner’s suit depicts a flatter physique.”

Kagan snorted and headed out to hydrate the firefighters.

Kern smiled. “Are you going to change?”

“Nope. I can shoot like this. I will need to shower and change later because I am gonna be smelly.”

She got her purse and wallet, made sure she had her phone with her, and then checked the timing. At precisely ten minutes, Renner drove through the open gateway and up the drive. The muscle car that she favoured roared up the road, and when she parked in front of the house, she had the full attention of Vasuki’s team as she swung the door open and walked toward them wearing a pink chiffon dress with fluttery sleeves and a snug corset that drew her waist into a tiny span. The strappy black heels matched the corset. Thick waves of rich brown hair cascaded down her back, and her deep blue eyes and delicate features made her look like a fairy come to life.

Kagan whispered, “Holy shit.”

Renner grinned with mischief in her expression. “Hey, Kagan.”

“Uh, the video chat didn’t do you justice.”

She laughed. “Hey, boss, did you want to get going?”

“Oh, let me introduce you to Vasuki, and the one in the back is Kern. Magnus and Theo are at work.”

Renner was laughing at the shocked expressions. “Sorry about the outfit. I have plans this evening, and I always get dressed early. So, she caught me just before I started planning dinner. Well, come on, boss. Kiss your mates goodbye, and we will meet the challengers when they drag their sad pickup trucks there.” Her taunting was unmistakable, shaking Vasuki’s friends out of their fascination.

Rhymbia quickly moved to kiss Kern, and then she did the same to Vasuki while Renner opened the door of her muscle car. Rhymbia watched her assistant actually skip around the vehicle before sliding into the doorway, closing it with a heavy thunk, and then buckling up. “So, this is going to be fun.”

“You are looking more cute and girly. What’s up?”

She put her car into gear while the men scrambled behind them. “The alphas could probably tell you. I am at the tail end of my heat. That is where the staring and drooling kicked in.”

“So, your plans this evening...”

“Get laid. I am on birth control, so it’s fine. It’s easier to draw in guys who won’t remember me in the morning if they aren’t looking at my face.”

“Do you have any friends with benefits?”

“Nope. They always get clingy or bossy. That’s when I send my attitude to deal with them.”

“You haven’t done that since coming to work for me.”

“Nope.” She accelerated onto the highway and headed for the range. “The switching back and forth usually keeps the heat at bay, but the last two months in Renner in the office meant that when I did a switch a few days ago, I hit hard.”

“Aw, I am sorry.”

“It’s fine. Juggling requests for appearances. Ford’s omega wants to write your biography.”

“Olivia? Cool. I would like that. I think it would be nice to show stepparents and siblings in a favourable light.”

“Nice. I will book the first meeting.”

“You seem bigger, but how tall are you?”

“Five two. Six-two in the dude body.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Oh, the changing?” She passed a few cars carefully and then got into the lane to exit the stream of traffic. “I don’t actually change. It is more like a solid illusion. That’s how I can switch so fast.”

“Wait, so you are wearing five-inch heels?” Her mind had finished doing math.

Renner grinned. “I love that that is your takeaway.” She signalled, and they took the exit to the range.

“You just have such a presence. I always think you are taller.”

“That happens. I have to cultivate that, or I will never get laid.” Renner smiled. “A lot of alphas freak out that I am so tiny, and some like it as a kink, so I split the difference with the heels. And generally, just get guys who want sex.”

“No accidents?”

Renner pulled into the range and parked. “Not one. No one knots me. Never get pregnant. The heats are only once a year, and usually, I can take on the masculine aspect through most of it, but this one wasn’t just the once. This is my third one this year.”

“Oh, I had no idea.”

“It isn’t something I advertise. Anyway, I am going to start trolling for a suitable alpha while not alerting the Omega Centre.”

“Why not?”

“I like my job. Declared omegas aren’t allowed any job outside of entertainment. I am not very entertaining.” She got her purse and opened her door after she turned the car off. “I also don’t like public displays. I have really been enjoying the anonymity of the dude.”

Rhymia got out and nodded. “Right. You only do the stuff that involves a helmet or mask.”

She closed the door and asked, “Is this the one Reginald gave you?”

“It was the one I bought from him. Yeah.”

“Oh, he told the foundation that he gave it to you.”

“Nope, and I have financial records to prove it. I sure as hell paid the taxes on the purchase price.” She chuckled. “But he sold it to other me. He didn’t keep to the bet.”

“Right. He lost it in a race.”

“Yup, but he’s been commenting every time the car is posted on social media. He misses her something fierce.” She

smirked and balanced perfectly on her astonishing heels.

Rhymbia smiled as Renner pranced into the range; men stopped and stared. Betas and alphas alike were gawking at Renner. She looked to Rhymbia. “What did you want to shoot?”

She sauntered closer, and they picked their guns and the amount of ammunition that they wanted to use. They had sorted things out and gotten their targets when the guys showed up.

Rhymbia smiled. “Most accurate target per session?” She looked at Vasuki.

He nodded. “Sounds good. I can go to your team if you are doubting the outcome.”

Renner smiled. “I believe we have a fair chance. Now, are you and your mate engaging in stakes?”

Rhymbia blinked. “I think bragging rights are fine.”

Vasuki leaned in and whispered in her ear. He described a night alone with him inside her, including the tip of his tail. She shivered. “Not for a week. I still want to settle myself.”

“Well, if you and your friend win, it won’t be an issue.” He smiled.

“Fine, and if we win, you have to talk your grandmother into being nice to me.”

He winced. “I think my task is trickier.”

“You are up to it. She actually likes you.”

Renner smirked. “What do I get if I win?”

Rhymbia went up on her toes and whispered the explanation of what would be good.

He blinked. “Five pounds of chocolate?”

Renner grinned. “Good chocolate. Rhymbia is aware of my preferences.”

“Done.”

Renner inclined her head. “Then, choose your weapons and wait for your number to be called.”

Vasuki grinned and walked off with the other guys.

Renner muttered, “Do you think he will realize I have no forfeit?”

“No, but his buddies might. Are you edible? They are looking at you as if you were edible.” She asked her assistant, “Are you edible?”

“Technically, I am made of meat, so that isn’t wrong.”

“How badly are you going to win?”

“Aw, boss. You know I never make anyone look too bad.” Renner grinned. “I will be fucking smug.”

They confirmed with the staff that they were going on range with the guys and then waited. A few of the guys tried to cozy up to Renner, but she just smiled at them and gave them vapid looks.

Rhymbia watched them try to get her assistant to interact with them, and she just blinked slowly and giggled.

It took half an hour, and two of the guys were showing Renner around the different firearms and telling her which ones they favoured.

Rhymbia covered her eyes with one hand.

Vasuki slid his arm around her waist. “What’s so bad? It’s cute that they are trying to help her out.”

She looked at him and said, “Remember that when we are judging our targets and comparing the video footage we got for proof.”

He paused. “You think you are going to need proof?”

“Considering that Renner was the one who helped one of our program clients get SWAT training, I think they might want proof. They made him an offer for sharpshooter training.”

Vasuki sighed. “Oh, shit.”

“So, start practicing what you are going to say to Lady Fen.”

They got the call that the range was ready for their party. Staff members went down with them, carrying the firearms and then bringing the ammunition.

Renner was all cute and bouncy, hopping from foot to foot with eagerness. Rhymbia looked at the guys who were watching attentively and shook her head. They were going to find out that cute and deadly could walk hand in hand.

Renner put on her headgear. The range monitor, or whatever he was called, hooked up her first target, and he looked stunned when she beamed at him. When she picked up the handgun, loaded it, and fired a super tight grouping, the employee’s expression turned to awe.

She smiled when she emptied the clip and set the gun down with the barrel cleared and clip out. She reeled in the target and giggled. “Could you put up another one, please? I am a little short.”

The man attached another target, and when he was clear, she loaded a semi-automatic weapon, took a comfortable stance, and let the bullets tear the heart and head out of the target.

Vasuki looked at her and sighed. “Where do I get the chocolate?”

“I will send you the link.” She grinned and stepped up to her booth, put on her headgear, and set up a target, sending it to the end of the range. Vasuki set up next to her, and his guys were on the far side. They spent half an hour shooting, and Renner bounced out with a roll of targets.

They headed out to the parking lot, and the targets were laid out on the back of one of the trucks. Renner had put a red kiss on the corner of each of her targets.

The two guys who had shown her their favourite weapons were quiet until one said, “You knew about the guns.”

“Yes, but anytime someone gives you information, there is always a chance to learn something new, or women would stop dating after their first bad lay.” She smiled brightly. “But

seriously, I have had some training. I just can't stop guys from explaining things to me. I think it's the shoes."

Rhymbia smiled at the gracious aura that Renner was radiating. Vasuki's friends were smiling as if they couldn't have an angry thought about Renner.

Renner beamed. "Well, this has been fun. I have to get Rhymbia home before I turn into a pumpkin."

The guys complained. She crossed her arms. "Well, you may not be crack shots, but you do know how to handle a hose, and that's intriguing. I will keep ya'll in mind. I am sure that Rhymbia's mate can get a hold of you if I need lessons on how to put out a fire by getting wet."

The guys groaned and pressed their hands to their chests as if struck by an arrow.

Rhymbia looked at her assistant and grinned as the stunted omega turned on her heel to make her skirt flip as Renner returned to her car.

Rhymbia lifted her head to Vasuki and whispered, "Chocolate company is on your phone. She prefers a mix of milk and dark. See you at home."

She slipped away before he could kiss her and giggled as she got into Renner's car. When she was buckled up, the over-muscled car purred to life and crept past the bemused crew taking photos with their phone.

"Oh, he's gonna be pissed again." Renner chortled evilly.

"Why?"

"Because those guys have a heavy online presence." Renner chuckled. "I did my research on your mates. Want to know anything?"

"Uh, I already know their occupations and what their junk looks like."

"Well, I know their hobbies, childhood pets, and favourite foods." Renner laughed. "I am very good at what I do, as you know."

“Yeah, I keep forgetting that for some reason.” Rhymbia chuckled. “Thanks for coming to play guns.”

“No problem. The extra few minutes were for getting into the corset, or I would have been with you earlier.”

“You were there in ten minutes.”

“Yeah, but I am always trying to beat my last time.” She chuckled. “If your husband has any alpha friends with a lot of tattoos, let me know. I haven’t checked that particular bingo card yet.”

“You are looking to settle down?”

“Oh, hell no. But the heats have diminished my discernment. It makes it hard to concentrate in this appearance, so I am just gonna be a guy for a few weeks. I am hoping that calms it down.”

“Does having a penis help?”

“Oh, I don’t have a penis. I am more like a plastic doll.” She smirked. “That’s why my suits always look so tidy.”

“But, what do you do if you have to pee?”

“The men’s restrooms have stalls, boss.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Do you need anything for the Meksoren gala tomorrow?”

“Uh. Gala?”

“Yeah. You have a bunch of dresses from Ford’s mate Yemeen. Do you need anything else?”

“Uh, sure. Send over whatever you think will be appropriate.”

“Great. I will collect with my guy senses and not these ones. You would end up missing a lot of fabric.”

Rhymbia grinned as Renner moved the car effortlessly. “Kern likes black, Vasuki likes dark green; storm blue and dark blue are also options.”

“Got it. Angry peacock.”

“That’s it. Thank you for getting me.”

The car pulled into the driveway smoothly and rumbled to a halt near the door. “Did you want to come in for a cup of tea? I think Kagan is in shock.”

“Well, hydration is important.” She grinned, and they got out of the car and walked into the house, where Kern greeted them.

Rhymbia walked into his arms and breathed him in for just a moment. He asked, “So, how was the range?”

She looked up at him and grinned. “We won.”

Renner said, “I am just going to beg for a cup of tea.”

Rhymbia watched her friend enter the house, and she smirked when she heard the strangled shout of surprise from Kagan.

Kern smirked. “Your assistant has quite the effect on men.”

“That is why she works as one. Less fuss.”

He kept his arm around her as they walked into the house. “So, she was the girl in the trunk?”

“She was. She was an older omega that was stopped before she could activate with the same chemistry that stunted me, but she didn’t get to grow to beta height. Oh, do you know any alphas with a lot of tattoos?”

“A few, why? Want to add more to your collection?”

“Lord no. Renner said something about bingo and that she was missing tattoos.”

Kern chuckled. “Oh, she is one of those.”

“What?”

“She’s trying alphas on for size.” He smirked. “So to speak.”

“Oh. She says they don’t knot her.” She had a hopeful tone, and hearing it made her wince.

“If they think she is a beta, they wouldn’t. If they weren’t sure they would be able to keep her, they wouldn’t take a

chance on hurting her.”

Rhymbia was relieved.

Kern chuckled. “So, shall we have a dinner party and invite some tattooed alphas?”

Vasuki arrived behind her. “Tattoos?”

She smiled. “Renner has a craving.”

“Oh. I know of one that would probably suit her. He’s in town as well.” Vasuki smiled. “How old is she?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Thank goodness. He’s late thirties, so the age gap isn’t extremely bizarre.” Vasuki chuckled. “Not that it ever matters when the right two come together.” He smiled. “Should I call him?”

“Just who is he?” she muttered. “Renner looked up you guys, and I should return the favour.”

Vasuki chuckled. “My second cousin Thanatos. He was born to my great-uncle’s beta. His mother wasn’t Chinese, so Fen pretends he doesn’t exist, and yet, he is still invited to family stuff.”

“Isn’t Thanatos the god of death?” Kern chuckled.

“His mom almost died in childbirth, so his father named him for her gods.” Vasuki chuckled. “He’s a serious guy, but I think he would get a kick out of Renner.”

“Serious how?”

“He is a business manager for fighters, among other talents. He wants to retire, but some of his clients have just had their careers resurfacing.” Vasuki got a strange expression.

Rhymbia looked at him seriously. “What else?”

“He has the ability to make people simply disappear.”

“Oh. Well, that’s handy.” She smiled.

“He is now your second cousin, so he will be willing to speak with you.”

She laughed. “So, I get to proposition death on behalf of my assistant?”

Vasuki shrugged. “Unless you want to ask him if he wants to join our collection. I don’t know if anyone has deliberately tried to get his mind on mating before.”

Chapter Seventeen

Rhymbia nearly snorted when she walked into the kitchen to see Renner perched on the counter with her legs crossed and a cup and saucer held daintily in her hands. “Who has their mind on mating?”

Kern smiled. “I hear that you do.”

Renner sighed and looked at Rhymbia. “Really, boss?”

Rhymbia blushed. “It’s a bit on my mind as well.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want mating. I am up for fucking though. Any likely candidates?”

Kagan made a strangled sound.

Renner just sipped daintily at her tea with her brows raised.

Vasuki smiled. “I can introduce you to my second cousin. He’s an alpha covered in tattoos, but it will have to wait until next weekend, or it will be weird.”

Rhymbia knew what was going to come out of Renner’s lips, and she laughed when she heard, “But I’m horny *now*.”

The two alphas jolted.

“Renner, you are making the boys riot.”

Renner sighed and set her teacup down, hopping to the floor and turning into a man. He ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry about that. Hormones are pretty bad right now.”

Rhymbia watched as Kern shook his head. “Geez, Renner. You pack a punch.”

“Ah, it’s the whining about wanting to get laid. Does it every time. Congratulations on your links though. They didn’t even take a step toward me. That’s impressive.” He straightened his jacket.

Vasuki’s eyes were wide. “So, you really switch sexes?”

“Yes and no. This is an illusion, but to maintain the illusion, the hormones cut off while I look like this, or it would be useless.” Renner shrugged. “Great for control, but hell when I switch back. Turns out that they just build up.”

Renner pulled out his phone, and Jeffrey came in while he was pulling up data. Jeffrey looked at Renner. “What is he doing here?”

“Getting Rhymbia her birthday present. I will be back in an hour, boss.” Renner nodded with one hand and headed for his car.

Jeffrey looked around. “Why was he here?”

Rhymbia smiled slowly. “It’s complicated, but I needed an assist.”

Vasuki blinked. “Ah. Right. Well, Rhymbia was challenged, and she needed backup, so Renner came to her rescue.”

Jeffrey frowned. “I could have assisted.”

Kern chuckled. “I didn’t know you were a semi-pro target shooter.”

Jeffrey paused. “Oh. You are right. He can shoot?”

Vasuki sighed and turned his phone toward Jeffrey.

“Who is that?”

Vasuki, Kern, and Rhymbia said, “Renner.”

“How...”

Rhymbia smiled. “She’s different and an excellent assistant.”

Jeffrey stared at the image. “Is that an assault rifle?”

“Yup.”

Vasuki smiled. “I left her targets in the entryway. They are the ones with the kiss on the corner.”

Jeffrey walked to the entryway and brought back the precisely punctured sheets of paper. “So, right. I will just stick to trying to keep Kern content.”

“Angling for a position at the foundation?” She smiled.

“Part-time. Yes. You do a lot of very fun and gratifying stuff.”

“Ask Renner. He can set you up with a skills match and then the kids choosing companions, escorts, and mentors. It is up to them, after all.”

Jeffrey frowned. “Can I ask you questions about it?”

“Sure, but I have to start working on all the emails I have been getting after hiding on Kern for a large part of the show last night.”

“Isn’t Renner dealing with them?”

“I am sure he is, but he has other stuff to do today.” She smiled. “All I need is my laptop, and I can catch up on a lot of the more annoying stuff.”

Kagan walked over to a cupboard and brought her laptop out. She smiled her thanks and asked Vasuki, “Didn’t you have something to do at your family’s place?”

“Not for a few hours. Are you up to it?”

“Do I have to reenact anything?”

“No. Just relax and have family bring you snacks.” He smiled.

“Cool. I think I can handle that.”

Kern rubbed her back. “You are rested?”

“Yeah. I need a shower. I smell like gunpowder.” As she watched her email, the messages were disappearing. She clicked on her sent folder and watched all the replies from Renner flicking by. She was quick and probably using her dictation software. “Well, Renner has it under control, so I am going to take a shower until he gets back.”

Jeffrey asked, “Why do you call her him?”

“If Renner looks like a woman, she’s a woman. If Renner looks like a man, he’s a man. It saves confusion for bystanders. Respect the appearance.”

“Right.”

“Fortunately, the changes are dramatic enough that you should remember which is which.” She chuckled. “I am going to have to take that shower. Are the others coming home?”

Jeffrey nodded. “Magnus is on the way, and Theo’s shift ended half an hour ago, so he should be on the way home.”

She smiled and got up to go shower.

Male Renner was thumbing through their phone when Rhymbia came downstairs. He held up a garment bag with his free hand. “Your dress for the party tomorrow.”

Jeffrey sat up at his desk in the corner. “I brought a selection of dresses.”

Renner shrugged. “Not like this one. It’s special.”

Rhymbia took the garment bag, opened it, and light struck the fabric that melted and swirled with colour. “Oh, gorgeous.”

“Thanks. You are cute, too.” Renner was smiling and answering the emails and texts. “I put all the good emails into a folder called *Worthy*.”

“Thanks. I noticed the weird ones disappearing and stayed out of it. I am interested in talking to Ford’s mate. I read Olivia’s book and really enjoyed it. She went through a lot.”

Jeffrey sighed. “You know they both have an alpha.”

Rhymbia smirked. “I know, but they get enough publicity. Omegas doing things that folks have been saying they don’t have the brains to do. Olivia is bright and charming, and Ford has more talent in his little finger than I do in my whole body.”

Renner smiled. “Oh, you have about half his talent and far better instinct.”

Rhymbia nodded. “I am going to answer these and then go to the party at Delun’s place.”

“Have an enjoyable evening. I think I am going to head to the cat café and enjoy some friendly fluff.” Renner smiled.

“Are you sorted?”

“All ready to spend time with family today and Kern’s family tomorrow. After that, I am just taking a few days off to sort myself.” She smiled. “And sleep. Sleep is the sexiest thing in that bed right now.”

Renner chuckled, and Rhymbia got up. They hugged, and Renner departed. The roar of his car a few minutes later indicated that he was gone.

Vasuki came into the kitchen. “Was Renner here?”

Rhymbia nodded, “Yes, he was.”

“Will Renner come to the party tonight?”

“No. No reason for it. Renner owns a cat café and has plans to hang out and enjoy the population tonight.”

Vasuki groaned. “Damn. I talked to Than, and he is... intrigued by my description of Renner.”

She snorted. “You sent him the photo of her with the gun.”

“Maybe.” His golden skin darkened. “He has a type and hasn’t found a match yet. So, can you get Renner to the party in girl form around seven?”

Rhymbia looked at him, and he dropped to his knees with his hands together. “Please?”

She reached for her phone and sent the address and appearance request to her assistant. She glanced at Vasuki. “Does he have tattoos?”

“Absolutely. Neck to ankles, and his eyes glow in the dark.” He smiled.

Rhymbia added, *He has tattoos. Lots of tattoos.*

The reply came five minutes later. *Slutty or cute?*

She looked at Vasuki. “Slutty or cute?”

He slumped with relief. “Dressed like a member of the clergy would be fine.”

However you like is fine, but there are a lot of alphas and several are my siblings and relatives.

Right. Cute it is. See you at seven.

Rhymbia snorted. “She will be there at seven.”

He grinned, jumped to his feet, and hugged her. “Thank you. He doesn’t blend well with the rest of the family, so having someone think of him will soothe his ego.”

Rhymbia sighed. “She isn’t a sacrificial offering or a peace offering or an offering of any kind.”

“Yes, but she has this air of perky menace that I think will appeal to him.”

“What will she get out of it?”

Vasuki smirked. “A devoted servant, possibly boyfriend, maybe lover.”

“I know Renner. The lover thing is going to go first, but she is also militant about birth control, so the servant thing would freak her out.”

He chuckled. “So, do you know when we will find out who actually won the show?”

“Not a clue. Hang on. It might be in the folder Renner set up.” She thumbed through the information and found the file. “They are waiting for two weeks so the voters can pick their favourite contestant. They want us back on for a viewers’ favourite moments and the big reveal.”

“How badly are you winning?”

“Not a clue. The numbers are online, and I am not interested in it. JN Foundation is going to split the funds between your charity and Magnus’s.”

“As long as they get something, I am good.”

“Altar wanted to show off the JN Foundation, which is why I participated to begin with. I am pretty sure that was accomplished.”

He laughed and leaned down to kiss her. “I would definitely agree.”

“And don’t forget that you have to get Lady Fen to like me.”

He groaned. “Oh, shit.”

She hadn't felt this happy in weeks.

Sitting with Lexa, Rhymbia and her guys were watching the far side of the house where folks were arriving. Kern and Vasuki were talking with Grigory, Walter, and Delun off to one side, leaving a clear view of the area where most people were wandering in to watch Vasuki in action on the big screen.

“Who are we watching for?” Renner spoke in a hushed whisper.

Rhymbia whipped her head around and stared at her assistant. “Geez! Where did you come from?”

“Well, from what I remember, there was a bird, and a bee was trying to have sex with it...” She trailed off and looked thoughtful.

Rhymbia took in the dark purple sundress cut high at the front and long in the back. Renner looked like the perfect little omega, except for her aggressive streak. Even her hair was pulled over one shoulder, exposing her delicate neck.

Lexa gasped. “Oh, you are adorable.”

Renner curtsied. “I like to think so.”

Rhymbia looked around and saw Than coming their way. Renner lifted her head and turned toward the dark-haired man striding toward them with purpose.

Renner muttered, “Oh, he looks fun. What did you promise him?”

Vasuki said, “An introduction. Nothing more.”

Renner cocked her head, and the cousin picked up speed, his long legs consuming the space between them.

When he came to a halt in front of Renner, she looked way up at him and smiled. “Hello. My name is Renner.”

He extended his hand to hers, and when she took it, he bent to kiss the back of her hand. “Thanatos Chronos.”

She blinked. “Time to die?”

He smiled slowly, his extended canines visible. “Yes. My mother thought it was funny.”

“Sucky reason to name a kid something scary.”

“She had her reasons. There was a prophecy, and then I showed up.” His dark eyes were looking at her, but instead of staring at her figure, his gaze was locked to hers. “And now you have shown up. How is it that you are an omega alone?”

She smiled. “Once upon a time, I was subjected to arrested development via chemical intervention so that I could be a sex toy for a nasty man. Fortunately, he died before he could take possession.” She smiled brightly.

“So, you look like an omega...”

“Think like a slightly horny beta.” Her lips twitched in a smile. “Occasionally, more than slightly. I have a normal job with an extraordinary boss and own a small business at the edge of the city.”

Rhymbia blinked. She had never heard Renner advertise herself like this before. She was being blunt, and Than wasn't flinching.

Vasuki murmured, “So, do you think he's suitable for her?”

“Uh...” She watched Renner stepping toward Than, and he nodded to an unoccupied portion of the expansive backyard. When the little miss walked off with him, Rhymbia blinked. “Yeah. She seems to think so.”

He smiled. “Good.”

She nodded and yawned. Kern chuckled, came over to her, and picked her up. She groaned. “This makes me look like an idiot.”

Kern kissed her temple. “You were ill, and now, you are recovering. Allow me to fuss over you.”

She absorbed the heat from his body and nodded off in seconds.

Rhymbia woke up in Magnus's arms while he was explaining the event they had just seen on screen to those around them. She looked at the screen, and it was him free climbing a cliff. "I didn't see that."

"You were on the zipline at the time." He stroked her arm.

"How long was I out?"

"Two hours."

"Sweet. Ten solid hours to go."

"Ten hours?"

"Yeah, my body is owed restful sleep. With you guys around, I can just nod off at any time, but I have to catch up on missing sleep and calories before I get back to work."

"Sensible. How are you feeling?"

"Thirsty and like I just woke up." She chuckled. "Where did Kern go? I can still smell him."

"He had to take a call. I think it was his mother. My guess is that an acquaintance of hers has mentioned that you were declared his wife and seen with a wedding ring on your hand."

She chuckled. "Yeah, that was a little blatant."

"I am just grateful that Kern is reasonable."

"Yup. Very. He asked me if Theo could join right off the bat. I know what I feel when I am around him and guess what he feels around me. We felt settled from the moment that we met. With the rest of you, it is the tingling excitement you feel when things are starting."

Magnus smiled. "Understandable. Your instinct led you to him."

"And he led me to you."

"Really?"

"Sure. Without him, I would have been the first one off the show, or you would have been. Or Bernard would have succeeded in killing me by tampering with the air supply."

He growled. "I wish they had let me at him. When we saw that footage, even Reggie wanted to break his nose."

"Uh, I was another competitor. He was competing. Cheating but competing."

Magnus murmured, "I am wondering where he is now?"

She glared at him. "Just let him be a chicken shit in peace."

"Fine." He hugged her. "I promise not to let Kern watch that particular clip more than once."

"How many times has he seen it?"

"Uh, seven times by my count, but I only showed him once."

"Hm. I get the feeling that Kern knows some unsavoury people."

Magnus turned with her so that he could see Kern speaking to Than, and Than was making notes on a notepad.

Rhymbia frowned. "Where is Renner?"

"She left half an hour ago. She got a call and said she had to leave."

"How did Than take it?"

"He offered to give her a lift, but she said she had her car."

She chuckled, checked her dress's pockets, and looked for her phone. Magnus sighed and handed over her phone. "Kern said you tended to lose it."

She muttered, "He's not wrong. There it is. There was an emergency, and she had to take one of her employees for medical care."

Magnus frowned. "That's odd. Why would she have to drive an employee anywhere? Couldn't they call an ambulance?"

Rhymbia smiled. "It isn't that kind of employee. She owns a cat café. One of the cats is sick."

"So, she left a party because a cat is sick?"

“Not just a cat. Achilles. He’s the one I want to adopt. He’s chill and an excellent defender at the same time.” She thumbed through her phone and pulled up an image of a golden cat with one eye and a lot of battle scars. “Renner found him dumped by the side of the road. She got him help, and now, he’s the café mascot.”

Magnus chuckled. “Nearly indestructible.”

“Yeah.” She texted Renner for an update and exhaled and chuckled when she got the answer. “Good news. He’s fine. He just wanted to visit with one of the cats who was at his checkup the other day. What a brat.” Then she read the next line. “She now has another cat. The one he wanted to visit was a rescue waiting for a foster home.”

He chuckled. “So, she’s a crazy cat lady?”

“Now and then. Mostly, she is the best assistant that I have ever hired. When she showed up in my office, well, when he showed up in my office, his credentials got him the job. When I had coffee with him a few weeks later, I saw the tattoo, and I knew who he was. It was like getting hit with an emotional bomb. I cried and asked him where his other half had been, and he winked and said he would show me later. Later, we went out for dinner—two girls—and she was the cutest little thing I had ever seen. I know why alphas are obsessed with omegas. I just want to put her in my pocket and carry her around all day. Thankfully, she works for me, so I get to keep her close.”

Magnus blinked. “Do you have affection for her?”

“Of course, I do. She is a great friend. If she leaves my life, I am going to pitch a fit.”

He hugged her. “I am sure no one is planning that.”

“Good. Because I am keeping her; she’s mine.”

Kern walked up to them and said, “You feel awfully militant, sweetheart. What’s up?”

Magnus smiled slightly. “She was just describing her affection for Renner.”

“She’s my friend, and I am not going to budge on that.” She blushed and rubbed the back of her neck. “Though it is one of the side effects of the skills she developed. She can know if she is in danger, act to keep herself safe, and associate with people and scenarios that won’t harm her. Basically, her biggest wish was to be safe at any time, and that’s what she got... so she can do sketchier stuff than I can.”

Kern looked sad. “Which is the fondest thought of a child in her situation, and now, she has worn it into adulthood.”

Rhymbia shrugged. “I wanted to know how to choose and make decisions in my best interest. That’s how I came to be at your door, sweetie.”

“And I am happy for it.” Kern smiled. “I never knew what joy could feel like until I had you in my arms.”

She looked at Magnus, and he deposited her in her primary mate’s arms with a snort. “I am going to win you over, Rhymbia.”

“You already have, but Kern is just Kern. My safest place.” She was bathed in the glow of his eyes behind the lenses of his sunglasses. His arms held her close. “Renner wasn’t the only one who wanted to be safe.”

Kern held her and lifted her high to kiss her. “Always safe with me.”

When the heat between them reached a comfortable simmer, she said, “Now, protect me from your mom when I crash her party tomorrow, and you are going to have quite the afterparty.”

He chuckled. “You now have a formal invitation. Her friends saw the video clips on the news, including your wedding ring. They called to congratulate her, and that is when she realized what I was trying to tell her.” He pressed his head to hers. “The only time I will not be at your side is when you are in the ladies’ room, and then I will be outside.”

“A comforting image. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”

She sighed and started to sleep again. A few more hours and she would be in bed, and after that, she would be counting the minutes until the party was over. She hated that her birthday was tainted by memories of the crash.

Chapter Eighteen

Rhymbia was cuddled between Theo and Magnus when she woke up. There was no heavy scent of sex, just heat and bodies.

“Happy birthday, Rhymbia.” Theo rubbed his cheek against hers.

She smiled. “Thank you.”

Magnus murmured against her shoulder, “Happy birthday, Rhymbia.”

She chuckled. “Thank you.”

She squirmed. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

They released her, and Magnus sat up, helping her to her feet. She was still wearing the nightgown she had gone to bed in and felt rested.

She laughed and went to brush out her hair. She checked the time on her watch and blinked. “It’s two o’clock? What the hell?”

Laughter burst from the bedroom. Theo opened the door and leaned in the doorway. “We thought helping you recover some of your lost sleep would be an excellent present.”

She sighed. “You aren’t wrong. I feel... better.”

“Can I run some vitals?”

She brushed her teeth and muttered, “Is that what you are calling it now?”

“Today, you are off limits for rutting against the wall, so the vitals are just to update your stats.” Theo smiled. “We want to make sure you are getting stronger.”

She sighed, walking over to him, pressing against him, and drawing a finger across his eyepatch. “I can tell you I am, but if you need confirmation, you are welcome to get it.”

Theo smiled. “My sister wants to meet you for lunch.”

“Oops. I missed it.”

“She forgives you but really wants to meet up with you. It stifled her not to be able to mention her involvement in the show. Now that things are open, she has questions and would like to be friends.”

“Well, we got along on the show. Nothing creepy, which was nice.”

He laughed. “All the alphas got along with you. That was evident.”

She shrugged. “It was a fun few weeks.”

“Yes. She said filming the show took two weeks.”

“Yes, but we had a client from the foundation, and we had to go diving. It was a nice winddown. I did have to apologize to a shark alpha, but that was done away from our client.”

“Why?”

“I punched him in the nose during the show. They thankfully clipped that bit out of the show. It was not my finest hour, but his mate thought it was hilarious.”

Theo slid his hands down her back to her hips. “So, let’s take your vitals, and then you can put on your birthday outfit, courtesy of your friend Altar.”

She chuckled. “Fine. Let’s do this.”

He took her hand and led her to the room he had claimed as his own. She sat on the edge of his bed while he laid out the instruments he would use.

“So, this is what you mean by letting me have a different OB?” She looked at him putting the stethoscope on.

“This is about your health, not the baby’s. You were in rough shape.” He listened to her heart, took her pulse, and leaned down and kissed her neck. Her heart pounded, and she held her breath as he lifted his head and looked at her. “Your colour is good and pulse is steady. Your skin is hydrated, and the circles under your eyes are gone. I just need to check your blood sugar, and then we are done.”

He took a monitor and strip, wiped her fingertip with an alcohol swab, and then used a small needle before getting a drop of blood and put it in the small unit that projected a number that made him grunt in satisfaction. “Well, your fasting bloodwork is good.”

She smiled. “Happy with my progress?”

“Yes, just one more thing.”

“What?”

His lips quirked. “I need to check your temperature.”

She looked down at the towel he had put his gear on. “No thermometer?”

He nudged her chin up with his fingers. “I can check for heat.” He pressed his mouth to hers in a scorching kiss that curled her toes.

She clutched at his shoulders and pushed against him. When he lifted his head, she muttered, “That is never going to catch on at the hospital. But in the house, it’s fine, as long as I don’t have a cold. Then it’s just gross.”

He grinned. “You are in amazing condition, considering how close to a coma you were just a few days ago.”

“I bounce back.”

Theo smiled. “And we love to see it. This isn’t how I imagined finding a mate, but I am not surprised it’s you. From the moment I saw you sitting in your car and chewing your nail, I knew that we were entwined.”

“That happened a few minutes later.”

“And for hours after.” He smiled and stroked her hair. “If I didn’t know better, I would guess you were an omega.”

She snorted. “You saw the scans.”

“Yes, and the most obvious glands are still in place and functioning, if weakly. So, I am guessing that after the baby is here and your body decides it’s time, you are going to have a heat that will exhaust all of us.”

“Boy, are you optimistic.”

He laughed and helped her to her feet. “You have no idea. When your heat gives us the signal, it is going to be a race to your womb if Kern doesn’t want to hijack you.”

“How will my heat signal? It never did before.”

He paused. “I suppose I will just have to take your temperature frequently.”

She snorted, and he grinned.

Magnus came to them and brought her robe. They made sure it was tied, and then she headed downstairs for breakfast. A flustered Kagan presented coffee and waffles with fruit. “It is very unusual for an alpha and their omega to share a birthday.”

“I am not moving my birthday. It always sucks, but it has meaning to me and other friends around me. Where are Kern and Vasuki?”

Magnus smiled and shrugged. “Errands.”

Kagan sighed. “Oma is going out of her tree. She visits every one of her descendants on their birthdays, and by her estimation, she has missed thirty of them. She feels like a bad oma, and it takes a lot to get her to feel anything, so this is impressive. Be prepared for her to gush over you tonight.”

“Wait. Lady Olyna is going to be at the party?”

“And your father and his wife. They are part of the social group that the Meksorens associate with. They were on the guest list before you were.”

“Oh. Right.” She waved a strawberry around and then started to look left and right. Magnus grinned and handed her phone over.

She wrinkled her nose. “Sorry. I do get distracted around here. Wonder why?”

Kagan smiled. “Renner said that you always misplace your phone. It was literally in his job description to keep track of it and make sure that your phone was constantly backed up.”

She smiled. “I pay more attention to the people interacting as opposed to the annoyances of people trying to get my attention, but I make an exception for friends and family.” She checked her phone, and a cascade of birthday wishes presented themselves. She smiled and thanked the well-wishers with frantic taps of her thumbs.

She paused when she saw an unwelcome sender. “Next time, Kern should leave him in the locker.”

Theo asked, “Who?”

She kept thanking those who had wished her happy birthday. “Stalker. He was encouraged to become one of my sister’s alphas, and when he did, he had the idea that he could keep me on the side. Nope.”

Magnus nodded. “You are not a side beta.”

“I know. I don’t know what he was thinking, but he hasn’t given up.” She twisted her lips. “If he corners me again, I may pull some of Theo’s strength again and Kern’s vision.”

Theo openly scowled. “Kern knows?”

“He knows. He tried to divert him, but the dude is weirdly obsessed.”

Theo smiled. “How long did he stone him?”

“Two days, as far as I know. I do hope he isn’t still in that locker.”

Theo chuckled. “You would be better off hoping he hasn’t been broken up for landscaping.”

She sighed and propped her chin on her fist. “Why does that thought make me feel happy?”

Theo laughed. The doorbell rang. “I am about to ruin your mood.”

“Why?”

“The clock is ticking, and there is going to be a photo shoot at six, so my sister-in-law has arrived with her team. You are going to be waxed and plucked to within an inch of your life.”

She heard the chatter of at least five women, and she glared at him. “This is not a fun thing.”

“I know, sweet. You get your present tonight.”

She snorted. “I had better not. Nothing regarding me on this day has ever been something to celebrate.”

Magnus frowned. “You are joking.”

“I am not. You have heard about my mother. Do you think that a woman like that would celebrate me? Rikoth tried, but things didn’t go well. It made things worse.”

Alicia walked into the kitchen with the familiar faces of the salon staff who had worked on her. “Hello, little sister. Theo. Where can we set up?”

Theo grinned, and Kagan answered, “The poolhouse.”

Alicia nodded. “Bring all the stuff from the van, Theo. You too.” She pointed at Magnus.

The esthetician grinned at her. “Well, little sister, time to get worked over.”

Kagan paused. “Do you want her dress for the evening?”

“Yes, please. That way, we can make sure the eye makeup matches.”

Rhymbia was hustled into the poolhouse and settled into the chair Magnus had brought in. She was tilted back, and a gentle hydration treatment started.

Hours and snacks later, Rhymbia emerged from the dressing area and walked toward the mirror while her crew was gasping. Alicia asked, “Where did you get that dress? Because wherever it was, I want one.”

Rhymbia looked into the mirror, and her body was encased by all the colours of her mates’ eyes with two shades of blue and green. She was wearing all metallic shades and looked like a warrior goddess. She had to find out where Renner had gotten the dress. It fit like a second skin but was classy at the same time.

The sunset was firmly in control of the sky, and Alicia handed her her phone. “Here you go. Magnus and Theo are waiting.”

“Thanks. I am sorry that this was so last minute.”

“That primary of yours handsomely compensates them. Theo and Kern have been friends for years, but I have never seen him so eager to part with his funds as when your name comes up.”

Rhymbia smiled. “That will stop. I have told him to focus the funds on Kern-junior.”

Alicia said slyly, “Are you sure it’s Kern’s?”

“Yup. That night, Theo was close but not in the target area.”

Alicia paused and then giggled. “Right, so you know where he was during that activity.”

“Yup. And no marks that night.”

Alicia winced. “Ouch. Right, so your pregnancy has been tense.”

“You could say that.”

She sighed. “I want to hug you, but you look perfect now, and I don’t want to mess you up.” Alicia handed her the small purse with her phone in it. “There you go. Your chariot awaits.”

Alicia took a quick photo and snickered. She started typing on her phone and grinned.

Rhymbia sighed. “What are you doing?”

“Extortion. If they pay, they get a picture of you.”

“Oh. Cool. Act fast. I am heading to the house.”

“I don’t need to worry. Your guys are gone, and a car is waiting for you.”

Rhymbia blinked. “Oh. Right. Well, thank you for your efforts.”

“See you soon, sis.” Alicia wiggled her fingers.

Rhymbia left the poolhouse and nodded to the four armed men who greeted her as Mrs. Meksoren. They escorted her to a limo, and she settled herself in the back with two men who would not give her an idea of why they were needed.

She checked her phone, and it was silent. No one was contacting her, texting her, or sending her cat pics. The silence was eerie.

The car pulled up in front of a well-lit building with a full parking lot of expensive cars. When they were next to the security guard, she was escorted out and surrounded, and she walked the red carpet toward what appeared to be an observatory with an event structure attached. That was the direction they were taking her.

The double doors opened at their approach, and Rhymbia channelled her focus to keep her calm. She stepped into the facility and took in the tastefully decorated swags and flowers on the level below the grand staircase. She stood for a moment and spotted Kern. She smiled and started to descend the stairs. Magnus, Theo, and Vasuki were moving toward the base of the stairs with Kern. They lined up and waited for her.

Rhymbia stopped halfway down and looked around. Family, friends, strangers. Everyone was looking at her with an anticipatory grin.

She focused and walked toward Kern, and his eyes were glowing wildly while the others were all intent on her. She felt like dessert in a dress.

When she was on the last step, Kern took her hand and kissed her. “Happy birthday.”

She smiled. “Happy birthday.”

“So, this party is for us. And for them. For all those who missed our wedding, we have repurposed the party and are having it now. After tonight, we need to relax and get comfortable.” He whispered it against her lips. “Jeffrey has also found a designer for the baby room.”

“Are they related to me?”

“Perhaps. We will have to enjoy the formalities before we can talk and dance the night away.”

“Formalities?”

“Oh, yes. Come this way.”

He took the fingers of her right hand in his left, and they walked through the crowd with familiar and unfamiliar faces. The crowd made a path, and he walked with her to a huge archway made of familiar brambles twined with roses.

Elsbetha, Altar, and Renner stood to one side of the archway with designer gowns and big grins. Elsbetha stepped forward with a bouquet and a big grin.

The smell of sage and mint mixed with the roses, and Renner sniffed her bouquet and whispered, “Are you having fun yet?”

Rhymbia laughed and looked around at Kern and the rest of her mates. “I think so. It is certainly unexpected.” She accepted the bouquet and stood next to Kern as her mates took up the positions on Kern’s side.

The officiant was familiar. Dark hair and dusky skin, and it looked like there were marks on his face. His silvery suit was just as formfitting as the rest of the guests. “Well, as the astronomer of this facility, I spend my time looking at the sky and sifting through the stars. Now, those with a less scientific bent seek meaning in the celestial, and now and then, we have a couple who is obviously meant to find each other. This particular couple lit up like fireworks so bright that most of their close circles could see. They are also generous and allow others to come close to their energy, joining them to burn bright as a community.”

“Today, it is that community that has gathered around them, rings and bands that expand outwards, and then the ripples are going to begin over and over. Today, we gather to celebrate their finding of each other and appreciate the effort on both their parts to fuse two lives into one, and those two lives will continue to gather others to hold them close.”

Rhymbia still shook that the creature who had granted them their wishes that day was here blessing their wedding.

She held Kern's hand, and when vows were requested, she widened her eyes at Kern.

He grinned. "Rhymbia, you insisted on coming to me and making me an offer I would have been an idiot to refuse, and then... you made the same offer to Theo. Neither of us was strong enough to refuse you, and as men fall in your path, I am sure that more of them will be added to the household.

"I treasure you, dream of you when we are not together, and am really looking forward to seeing who we created. If he looks like you, he is going to be one popular guy."

There was laughter from the witnesses.

"I pledge myself to you day in and day out and will make a home that you are comfortable bringing children into."

She smiled and said, "As some here may guess, I wasn't aware of today's events. I thought I was going to Kern's birthday party because his ego needs to be stroked."

Laughter.

"But, once upon a time, I knew I needed to strike a deal with Kern, and when Theo came to escort me into that house, it felt right as well. Our interaction has had the settled feeling from the moment we cemented our bargain, and my heart is calm when you are next to me." She smiled. "I may collect a few others, but you are the one who issues the invitations. They make me happy, but you make me whole. I will be your rest if you will remain my home."

He snapped forward and lifted her for a kiss that nearly melted her dress. Thunderous applause from nearly a thousand people was their background sound as their kiss went on and on.

When he finally lifted his head, she moved her thumb to swipe off the lipstick. That move made folks laugh, and she smiled. "I think it's safe to meet your parents now."

He nodded and led her back the way they had come with the ladies and their guys following behind, arm in arm.

Kern knew where they were going and led her to a table, and he held out her chair before he settled next to her.

A glass of water was brought to them, and she murmured, “You can drink alcohol. I was never a fan of it before the baby, so this isn’t a hardship for me.” She looked at him. “Did you do all this?”

He smiled. “Now, this day is not about the accident or your birthday or mine, but rather, our anniversary of the day we publicly chose.”

“So, this will be the day we celebrate?”

“We will celebrate both, but this will be with all our friends and your other mates.”

She smiled, and an older couple walked toward him, looking like they were holding back some kind of emotion. Kern took Rhymbia by the hand and walked her around the table to his parents. She met Laura and Weller, and Laura leaned in. “Are you really pregnant?”

“Yes. Due in seven months or so.”

Weller frowned. “It’s Kern’s?”

Rhymbia and Kern both smiled. “Yes. There was no way for Theo to get me pregnant that day.”

Laura blushed. “I think I understand.”

Kern chuckled. “I can explain it in detail. It was a memorable night for me.”

Weller grinned. “Oh, I can give her a refresher course.”

Laura slapped the sleeve of her mate. “Hush, you. I am embarrassed enough.”

Rhymbia smiled. “Just know that the child was started in attraction, grown in affection, and will be born in love.”

Kern slid his arm across her back and pulled her in tight. “And Rhymbia is a ferocious guardian.”

Laura said, “Do you have family, dear?”

“I am a granddaughter of Lady Olyna.”

“Oh!” Laura beamed. “That is very good. We occasionally play bridge, and she has been considering offering us one of her great-granddaughters for Kern. Was that how you met?”

Rhymbia smiled. “No, I propositioned him, and he said yes. I didn’t even know about Lady Olyna until after some genetic testing on me and the baby. That is how we have confirmed it’s Kern’s, by the way. No possible doubt.”

Relief flickered in their eyes, and Kern snorted. “Don’t worry. It’s an actual grandkid. Now, we are going to have our reception, dance a little, and then go home with our den.”

She leaned to him. “We are going with den?”

“Yup. Executive decision.” He chuckled. “We discussed it while we waited for you to get here.”

“We?”

“Me and the guys.”

“You didn’t strike me as a team player.”

“We all play in the same arena.” He was grinning.

“You know, when I first saw you, I thought you were a serious guy.”

He nodded, and his parents nodded. “I was until a charming beta with a deal on her mind walked into my house smelling sweet.”

Her eyes went wide. “Wait, you could smell me?”

“I will tell you about my remembrances of that night but only if we settle at the table and start dinner. Alicia sent Theo a message that you haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

She looked over and saw Theo standing near Teddy and Alicia. “How did she get here so fast?”

“Your limo took the long way around. By the way, I love the dress. Renner chose well.”

“She’s good that way.” She looked around the gathering and saw Renner standing with Altar and the officiant. Renner was wearing a subdued outfit for her. Some of the guests were looking her way, but Renner was busy talking to the officiant.

There was a discrete chime, and she watched as the catering staff moved with precision to serve her and Kern, and then everyone else found their tables. It was a big room.

Kern chuckled and leaned over as they ate. “Elias is staring daggers at me. He was about to close on this for his ceremony. He has more time than I do, so Elspetha punched him and ordered him to let us go first.”

She laughed. “That does sound like something she would do. She would pull his power to do it as well.”

She caught the eyes of her father and his family, and she waved. They all waved back.

“You would not believe the stack of stuff that they brought as gifts. Each of their vehicles was full. It is going to take a lot of time to unpack everything. Thirty years of birthday gifts plus a wedding gift. You have a lot of presents to play with.”

She exhaled and said, “I can deal with that. Or rather, we can, Mr. Rhymbia. Get used to that. It is what any kids that I shepherd or interview will call you.”

He laughed. “I like the sound of that.”

She forked up a tiny tomato. “Now, what were you saying during the vows? Collecting alphas?”

He chuckled. “It is bound to happen. Vasuki and I are interested in children, but Theo won’t be necessary. He provided the sample that made Alicia and Terry’s kids. He and his family have descendants.”

“Wow. He never said.”

“There hasn’t been much time. All the little doctors and surgeons will come from his branch of the family, just born from a different tree. Act surprised when he tells you.”

She nodded.

“And Magnus’s family are all made of adopted children. They don’t even try for their own, so he will take any little person you produce as his own.”

She blinked. “I am still adjusting to that. I might be a little more focused when he starts moving so I can feel it.”

“If you just want something inside you that you can feel, I can oblige.”

Rhymbia looked at him, and he waggled his brows. “Not until we get home. This is a very nice party, and I don’t want to miss any part of it bent over a counter in the bathroom.”

He grinned.

Their den members came over as soon as dinner was done, and they were escorted to the huge cake decorated in the same colours as the bride’s dress.

No one did more than flick icing on the tip of her nose, and then the music started.

Kern led her to the dance floor, where they had their second first dance. When the next song started up, Theo cut in, and then the others took a turn.

The rest of the evening blurred by as she was partnered for every song. She burst into laughter when Renner arrived. Renner took her in her arms, and they swayed to one of the slow songs. “I thought you could use a break from looking up. We don’t want your neck to get a crick.”

“You look subdued.”

“Enclosed building, and I am having an issue.”

“What?”

“Uh, my heat won’t shut off. I have started popping nullifiers and taking three showers a day.”

Rhymbia frowned. “What do you think is causing it?”

“Dunno. Not enough fibre in my diet? I have been chasing sin? Not a clue.”

Rhymbia laughed. “Right. Of course. It couldn’t possibly be you finding an alpha who was mate material, right?”

“Not a clue. I haven’t seen him tonight.”

“So, Than, then?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I just know this is annoying, and I am scaring the cats.”

Rhymbia smiled. “Well, where are you getting the meds?”

“Bars, nightclubs. I use some of the vet equipment to check the doses.”

Rhymbia snorted. “Keep checking in with me. That’s an order.”

“Yes, boss.”

“And try and find Than to see if he will scratch that itch. I thought you would have done it already.”

“I would love to, but I can’t. He is seeing someone his grandmother set him up with.”

Rhymbia paused. “You are kidding.”

“Nope. We went our separate ways.”

“I am rather sad about that.”

Renner shrugged, but her lower lip stuck out, and her eyes got shiny.

“Oh, honey.”

Renner sniffled and got herself together. “I am not trying to bring your day down, boss.”

“You aren’t.” She cupped her jaw and wiped the tear from Renner’s cheek. “You asked the officiant about it?”

“I did. He said all was as it was meant to be.” Renner smiled weakly. “Which sucks.”

The song ended, and someone else took control of the bride for a dance. It happened to be Vasuki.

Vasuki had been smiling down at her, and then he paused. “What’s wrong?”

“Does Lady Fen set up males in her family with women?”

“Sure. She tries to link us to close families. Why?”

“Thanatos won’t talk with Renner because of your grandmother and a mystery date.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and I am pretty sure he triggered her heat, so she’s in pain right now. I really want to tear your granny a new one.”

He looked around and nodded. “There she is.”

Rhymbia nodded, and they left the dance floor, going to see the elderly Lady Fen. A few minutes of conversation with the tense woman, and Rhymbia nodded in satisfaction while Fen cancelled the date with Thanatos and her business partner and suggested he call the tiny woman from the other day with the huge rack.

Rhymbia took her phone out and sent a message to Renner. The dots told her a message was coming in, but after a minute, Rhymbia tried to find the small woman in the crowd, but she couldn’t see her.

She sent Kern a text. *Can you find Renner?*

He was reading the text across the room and looked up to meet Rhymbia’s gaze. He nodded and scanned the room before striding to the exit. She turned and bolted after him with their den joining them.

There was a path through the gardens on the way to the parking lot, and that was where Renner was lying, but it wasn’t heat that had brought her low. It was a bullet wound. There was a puddle of blood under her.

Theo turned her to her back, and Renner groaned. “Fuck, that hurts. Distracting too. I was trying not to make a fuss.”

Rhymbia glanced behind her at the fifty people who had sensed stress and came running. “You attract attention wherever you go. Did you see who shot you?”

“Yeah. Numbnuts. The stalker.” Renner held still as her dress was shredded at the shoulder to show the wound. She

wincing.

“Fuck. Is he still here?”

Renner nodded.

Kern lifted his head, and shadows snapped around him. “I have him.”

Rhymbia watched as Kern moved at high speed, and his body blurred. He disappeared down the hill, and everyone waited. There was a shout, a gunshot, and then the sound of stone hitting stone.

Rhymbia clenched her hands together and held her breath. When Kern returned, dusting his hands, her knees buckled. Vasuki caught her. “Easy. He’s fine.”

She looked at her mate and nodded. “He’s fine.”

Theo looked at the wounds. “You need stitches.”

Renner sighed. “Thought as much. If you can give me some help to my feet, I will just drive my ass to the hospital.”

Vasuki stepped forward. “I can heal you.”

Rhymbia was shocked when Renner said, “Nope. I am in heat, and you and the other healers here are all mated. I will take my chances with the twenty-minute drive. You may need to call the police and report the shooting.” She got boosted to her feet.

One of Rhymbia’s new cousins stepped forward. “I can call it in, but you should stay here, miss.”

“Theo, I can lend a hand. I will just get the kit from my car.” A younger version of Theo walked by.

Rhymbia saw Renner swaying, and she walked in close. Renner snapped her hand up. “No way are you going to get my blood on that dress. I had to sell my soul for that dress, and I am not going to wreck it.”

Rhymbia extended her hands. “Then take my hands.”

Renner took her hands. “I am so sorry that this happened.”

“I am so sorry that you have gotten shot.”

Theo's relative came with a large medical kit, and he nodded to the building. "I will be more comfortable indoors for this."

Rhymbia guided Renner into the reception hall, and things were resuming slowly.

The area was cleaned and stitches went in.

The police arrived, and Renner got up and headed into a small office in the building. When she emerged ten minutes later with the bandages on her shoulder, she smiled. "I am going to say congratulations and take myself home. It was a great ceremony, and I wish you nothing but the best."

"Are you sure you want to drive?"

"I am sure. I feel fine if a little ouchy. I might call in sick tomorrow, boss."

"Take care of yourself, Renner. I depend on you."

"I know. Have a great night." She grinned, and it was the grin that was the same on male or female body.

She laughed, and Rhymbia kissed her cheek as her friend left the reception.

Vasuki came up and spun her in a dance. When they moved together, he said, "So, if my cousin takes your friend as mate, we will be related to her."

"Oh, I doubt she will take him."

Vasuki paused. "What?"

"He rejected her at his grandmother's insistence. No one rejects Renner when she propositions them. So, he is honourable but is now going to have no luck with the stubby beta." She smiled. "Renner can take no for an answer."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"So, why did we speak to Lady Fen?"

"To make it certain that she understands what she did because of prejudice and control issues. They would have been

really good together, and now, she's going to have to try and survive through unattended heats."

"Doesn't she have other alphas?"

Rhymbia frowned as the roar of Renner's car sounded in the distance. "They don't remember her if she doesn't want to keep them. So far, she hasn't kept any."

"Shit."

"She'll shift forms and wait until she can go to the mountains and let the heat burn off on her own. With this level, it should be a few weeks before she's back to normal, and then it will start all over. So, this will probably be the last time that girly Renner is seen."

"So easily? She will just give up on him?"

"On what? A guy who suited her and who distanced himself because his grandmother is looking for someone better?"

He blinked. "You are mad."

"I am furious, and I want to kick his ass, so if you get really weak one day and find out that your cousin has been lit on fire and smashed into a wall, that would be me."

"You don't want to do that."

She shared her frustrated rage with him, and he wrapped her in his arms. "Fine. You do want to do that. Should we try and find her a proper mate?"

"He has to have a lot of tattoos. If that is what her body is telling her, it is what she needs."

He nodded.

Kern softly spoke while sending reassurance. "We will help her find someone."

She looked at him and stretched a hand to his. "He must like cats."

The guys chuckled, and they returned to the party that was now less fun for Rhymbia as she had to go over her stalker's

habits with the police. She forwarded the files, the years of restraining orders, and all family testimony over the years.

It was a bit of a buzz kill, but she felt free when it was over. Kern sighed. “This is not what I had planned.”

“It is wonderful. It has wiped out all the days with this date that have come before it.”

“But Renner...”

She smiled sadly. “She knew she was going to get shot. That is the only reason for her to wear a bland dress. She didn’t want to trash a favoured outfit. Not even for me.” She chuckled with genuine amusement.

Kern squeezed her hand. “Do you think she would tell me where she got that dress?”

“Oh. She won’t tell you, but I can. She made it. She can see connections between mates. It is one of her tools for survival, and she saw this day coming a long way away.” She leaned back from Vasuki. “She made this for me, and all of you are on it.”

Kern smiled. “We noticed.”

Theo said, “Stop hogging her, Vasuki.”

Vasuki chuckled. “No.”

They were muttering with each other, and she was being eased from one to the other until she was giggling, and they were grinning.

The rest of the night was her hugging and thanking people who came to the party. Lady Fen looked stricken when she was coldly thanked, and her mates hustled her away.

Rhymbia’s ride home was spent leaning against Kern with the others following in different vehicles. It had been a good night, and she had definitely blotted out memories of her upbringing. Tonight had been for her, and even Renner being shot had been for her. Rhymbia often walked out of large gathering on this particular day. It had been her stalker’s guess that she was the one who had come out. He wasn’t very bright.

“I am really glad that Zyrella wasn’t injured with the destruction of her ex-alpha.”

Kern hugged her. “From what your sister’s alphas told me, they had reduced his link to her over the last four years. She would have felt relief from the crazy.”

“Good. She just smiled, cried, and hugged me.”

“It just shows that her other mates are doing a good job.”

She smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

Kern smiled. “So do I. How tired are you?”

She laughed. “Well, I am alert enough for a proper or improper wedding night.”

“Alone or with company?”

“Alone and then with company.”

He turned her head and kissed her. “I do appreciate your honesty, Mrs. Meksoren.”

“And I appreciate your thoughtfulness in hijacking your mother’s party. Mr. Meksoren.”

“It was the best present ever, and I think she will forgive it all when Ford sends those photos to her. You are beautiful, stunning, smart, and wild all in one.” He sighed against her lips.

“That kind of talk is going to get you laid. Oops. Too late.”

He chuckled, and they shared soft words and soft touches on the drive home. She saw the huge gates and remembered that stormy night when Theo came out to knock on her window while she tried to get the nerve to take a step that she knew was necessary. His eyes were so kind that she would have followed him anywhere. Her intuition never steered her wrong, and she had paid the price for it.

They drove through the gates, and she gripped his hand again. He squeezed her hand. “By the way, you won the show by a ridiculous margin. Even splitting the vote between the two alphas didn’t make a difference.”

She chuckled. “There was no doubt. It is the modern equivalent of foxy boxing with a slightly hot-looking woman running and sweaty and cursing under her breath. The fact that I was in dangerous situations on camera made me more popular. Women were cheering for me, and men were waiting for a wardrobe malfunction. I was fun to watch.”

He stroked her cheek. “You certainly are.”

She snorted. “I hadn’t thought this out. More interviews. More programs. Training someone to do what I did for the JN Foundation.”

“What about Renner?”

“She’s starting to go into heat frequently. It doesn’t really lend to a lot of activity in public places from what Elspetha has said.”

“Not you?”

“Mine are silent. There is just a twinge then I get a period a few days later.”

He smirked. “Not as silent as you think. Theo and I could both detect it. When you didn’t contact me after, I just thought I had missed.”

She stared at him with her mouth open, and he tapped her jaw.

“A beautiful and hot beta walks into my home and is willing to trade sex for strength? The perfect woman could not be ignored.”

She closed her jaw with a snap. “So, all of this…”

“When Arkos asked me to look for his mate’s friend, I thought it was cute. Him showing off to impress his lady. When I caught your scent in that shattered set of rooms, I was petrified. The scent was so old, and it was giving hints about your tiny passenger. I had to find you, and I did. And now we are home.”

She smiled and cocked her head. “Yeah, we are.”

He got out, and when she emerged from the car, he lifted her and carried her over the threshold. “So, I think our birthdays are going to be big anniversary parties.”

She laughed. “Sensible. At the next one, we are going to have a five-month-old. It had better be close to home. Do you have names that you want to put forward?”

He carried her up the stairs. And she caught the scent of flowers as he walked to his room and opened the door. The room was bright, pretty, and filled with flower petals.

Kern set her on the floor and flicked off his lenses. He smiled down at her, his eyes glowing and the occasional shadow flickering.

“So, what are the shadows for?”

“Figuring out how to get you out of that dress.”

She smiled and reached back, opening the corset strings. She slowly turned. “I can do it, but if you cut it, you will be sorry.”

He slowly unlaced her, and when the bodice fell away from her breasts, she clutched it to her. The sudden cold was startling.

He eased her wide straps off her shoulders and kissed her marks. All of them. He slowly eased her dress off her body, and she sighed and leaned back against him. “One of us is overdressed.”

“You are underdressed.” He wrapped his arms around her. “You should be wearing me.”

Rhymia smiled and gripped his hands with hers. “I think you should help with that. You seem to have turned part of yourself to stone, after all. Best to attend to that.”

He let go of her and stripped out of his formal finery. She stared as he walked toward her, every inch of him perfect. He was all lean muscle and seductive intent, and she wouldn’t want anything else. The guys were just a delightful bonus.

When he was finally inside her, moving over her with slow thrusts, she finally got it. Her intuition had told her that this

was where she needed to be, and his instincts had told him the same thing.

He leaned in and kissed her. “What is that expression?”

“I am exactly where I am supposed to be at this moment.” She locked her legs around his hips. “And so are you.”

Kern slowed his hips, and they kissed and cuddled more than fucked, but they both shuddered and panted together as one of his erections was spent. When he was able to move, he inserted the second one.

“Not hiding anymore?”

He shook his head. “Not hiding. Don’t hold back from me as well. Ever.” He started a slow undulating rock.

“I have something I have to know...”

“Sure, dearest. What?”

“How the hell do both of those erections fit in your trousers?”

He chuckled. “They are only both there when I catch your scent. It takes some getting used to, even for me, and it feels fucking weird when it happens.”

She laughed and moaned as he went deep. “Feels okay to me.”

The slick slide and retreat was heaven, and she gripped him with nails and legs while she tried to pull him all the way in. She groaned as her body started pulsing, and then she screamed as a bright burn lit her body.

He groaned and jerked against her, slowly lowering himself onto her. Rhymbia wrapped herself around him and heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Rhymbia murmured, “Wow. Still formal.”

Theo grinned and removed his tie. “That is about to change, but this seemed like a formal event.”

She smiled. “Can I have a quick nap?”

Theo nodded. “Of course, but we brought plenty of cake back.”

Kern rolled them to the centre of the bed. “Come in, but let her sleep.” He grinned. “Bring the cake.”

Magnus smiled. “We got the top layer of the cake for your anniversary. I don’t know why, but the ladies said it was important.”

Rhymbia yawned and said, “High rate of divorce in the beta world, so you have the cake on your anniversary and celebrate staying together. Betas don’t mark and link.”

She snuggled against Kern and was dozing off when she felt something cool and sticky placed down her spine. Groggy, she muttered, “Seriously?”

Vasuki chuckled. “Very seriously. This place smells like sex, and we are being good and having a snack. Have a nap. We can wait.”

She was almost asleep when the licking started. “You guys are mean.”

Kern shifted and slid out of her. “Of course, we are. You like us that way.”

She blushed as she realized the truth of that statement. She had picked her mates to suit her situation, and her situation was a little odd. They were tremendously loyal, very affectionate, and had useful muscle. She had a thing for useful muscle.

Rhymbia felt the soft licking that didn’t stop when the cake was gone, and she realized that she wasn’t going to get her nap for a while. She wasn’t upset about it. It was her wedding night after all.

Author's Note

Renner's story is next as you may have guessed. But she hasn't exactly taken no for an answer. Her book will be titled *Must Like Cats*.

It will be fun to write about my favourite subject. Fluffy psychos.

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.