



This is Beast

Everleigh Fox

An MM Mpreg Vallaverse Novella

His Beast

Everleigh Fox

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A BIT ABOUT THE VALLAVERSE

The Vallaverse is a shared Omegaverse universe created by Avanne Michaels and N. Slater—and then handed over to five authors who were apparently trusted to behave responsibly with it.

We did not.

At its core, the Vallaverse takes everything you know and love about Omegaverse and adds its own rules, lore, characters, corners of the world, and a particularly ruthless designation known as the Valla.

Valla sit above Alphas in the designation hierarchy. Ruthless, protective, and more than a little animalistic, they're the nightmares parents warn their children about and the people most likely to operate somewhere in the shadows rather than in polite society. Put a Valla in a pack, though, and beneath all that terrifying reputation is a designation fiercely protective of their mates—especially their Omega. And because apparently being terrifying wasn't enough, Valla come with their own instincts, ruts, rules, and complications that continue to unfold throughout the Vallaverse.

Note: Valla is both singular and plural.

The Vallaverse also plays a little differently when it comes to mating. Scent matches and fated mates can happen, but they aren't the only way people find their pack. Attraction, scent, romance, choice, and the relationships built between characters matter just as much as biology. Omegas are deeply cherished within this world, although that protection comes with its own restrictive rules, traditions, and expectations—including Omega centers, mating customs, and events like *The Night of Scarlet*.

The Vallaverse includes both standalones and interconnected standalones, so you can jump into individual stories without reading every book in the universe. Come for the darkness, stay for the heartwarming moments, the

hurt/comfort moments, the found family moments, and of course all of the shenanigans that come with having a Valla in a pack.

Read enough of them, though, and you'll start catching the connections—familiar characters showing up where they have no business being, shared places and organizations, overlapping events, bits of lore, and little threads stretching from one author's books into another's until everyone else's business eventually becomes somebody's problem.

Five authors. One universe. All chaos.

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Trigger Warnings

- Fast burn. Like stupid fast. This story takes place over a series of months.
- Self Hatred/low view of one self
- Aggressive MC
- Illegal fight ring
- Nonconsensual drug use
- Manipulation by others
- Manipulation of a minor
- Use of derogatory language by others
- Mentions of suicide and parental deaths
- Non-sexual assault on a minor
- Descriptions of blood and beatings
- Death of minor character
- Sex near corpse
- Mpreg (in epilogue)

Your mental health and wellbeing is always first and foremost. While the author did their best to include potential triggers, they are human and may have missed one or two. It is okay to take a break, seek guidance, and check on your mental health before continuing.

To Slater and Avanne

thank you for letting me be apart of this world

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Zayn

The crowd's cries and cheers are nothing more than background noise, barely reaching past the numbness in my brain while I focus on the Alpha in front of me, the scent of stale blood permeating the air. His cocky grin trying in vain to goad me into making a move, elated that he had managed to land a few punches on a Valla. The vision in my right eye begins to blur and swell, blood dripping into it from the gash above my eyebrow. My arms and shoulders ache while the Alpha across the ring continues to mock me, bouncing around on the balls of his feet in a poor simulation of a true fighter, as if he was one of us.

Markus catches the corner of my eye from outside the ring, his dull blue gaze focusing on mine. Once he's sure he has my attention, he gives me a signal, and I turn my glare back to the Alpha, an almost animalistic grin spreading across my face, causing him to freeze in his fancy footwork. The color drains from his face as he realizes his time is up before I even pull my arm back, calculating the power needed to end this.

Releasing the punch, I knock him out cold as he lands on his back on the mat covered in blood, sweat, and mold while the poor excuse for a referee rushes forward from the sidelines to check the guy's pulse to make sure I haven't actually killed the guy. With a grin, he stands up and grabs my wrist, lifting my taped bloody knuckles to the sky in a show of triumph while the crowd cheers in excitement.

"Who else wants to test their strength and stamina against the great and powerful Valla!" the referee roars out to the crowd, exaggerating my designation and prolonging the last vowel.

Silently, I pray that no one will take him up on the offer. I am exhausted, my head hurts like a bitch, and my vision swims at random intervals. I'm pretty sure I have a mild concussion. Alphas tend to hit harder than Betas, making them a slightly better opponent, but I'm stronger than them, which makes many hesitate. Truth be told, the whole thing was rigged

and simply for show to boost the confidence of other designations and Markus' pocket.

I could easily take out anyone they put in the ring, unless it's another of my kind. Those fights are typically scheduled in advance with payments upfront, as long as the price is to Markus' liking. A fight like the one tonight was more about the thrill the others experience, the thrill of going toe to toe against a Valla and getting so close to winning that they often get cocky, just like the Alpha had. I glance down to watch two Betas drag the unconscious Alpha away, catching the glint in Markus' eye as they pass by him. Sometimes, I will be instructed to intentionally lose, pretending to be knocked out while the others cheered above me in victory. After all, always being the winner is bad for business.

"Going once!" the referee shouts as if I'm nothing more than an auctioned product. I guess in some sick sense, I am. I'm a novelty, something unique, and Markus always makes sure to remind me of that. "Going twice! Going three times! And closed! Thank you all so much for coming this evening, and we hope you'll visit us again next week! Bring us a fighter or two when you do!"

Relief floods through me as the referee drops my wrist, my arm swinging forward while my stiff shoulder protests the sudden movement. Markus probably has the ice bath already prepared for me. I've always hated the sudden shock to my system, but it does help with the inflammation and prevent muscle stiffness later.

Through the crowded cheers of the spectators, I'm pushed out of the ring and directed toward the lockers at the back of the rundown building. Around me, fans create a narrow path, many reaching out to touch me, making my skin crawl. I don't like being touched, certainly not by strangers whose hungry hands don't care where they grab. As if to prove my point, my head is roughly jerked backward as someone tugs on my hair, releasing it from the bun I have it in, piled at the base of my skull. Snarling, I whip around, glaring at the female Beta who had the audacity.

She immediately backs up, her eyes large while the color drains from her face as she clutches my hair tie close to her chest. Immediately, a large Alpha steps between us, blocking her view of me as he pushes me forward, herding me like a lost sheep. My anger pivots toward him, growling at him but he ignores me. Markus doesn't pay Peter enough to deal with my attitude.

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He leads me through the double doors that separates the fight ring from the private facilities and through the doors of the locker room to our right where my ice bath sat in the center of the locker room. Honestly, the term “locker room” is being generous. It’s nothing more than a small room with an industrial fluorescent light hanging from the ceiling that flickers at random intervals. Milk crates are stacked on top of each other to create little cubby holes for items and a makeshift bench of twelve-by-fours held up by cinder blocks was placed in front of them. A small fridge sit in the corner, struggling on its last leg to keep water bottles cool for us.

Peter stands on the other side of the door, leaving me alone in lockers; the muffled sounds of the crowd leaving the building echo off the tile while I strip down to my underwear. No matter how many times a week I do this, I still have to psyche myself up before jumping into the ice bath, its temperature causing me to hiss and my heart to stutter. I know it’s important, reducing any soreness and inflammation the fight may have caused, but I’m not a fan of practically skinny dipping at the North Pole.

The average incubation time to become a Valla-shaped popsicle is around ten to fifteen minutes, and I always push myself to see how far I can marinate before I can’t take it any more. My body begins to shiver, moving the water in small ripples. Inching deeper into the tub, I cross my legs to give myself more room so the water can come up to my chin, and I clench my jaw to prevent my teeth from chattering. Taking a deep breath before psyching myself up once more, I dive beneath the water, my head aching with the cold like an odd external and internal brain freeze. The wound above my right eye sears with pain, but I revel in it. Pain means I’m here, that I exist. Even unwanted, I still took up space in this reality.

Unable to stand the cold any longer, I break through the ice, gasping for air and looking around me, my eyes settling on Markus who stands silently beside the tub, looking down at me. Use of scent suppressors is mandatory, a rule set in place for all fights, so I wasn’t able to scent him when he entered the room. Being Valla means my senses are stronger than

the average Alpha, so even through the water I would've known he was here, and the fact that I couldn't unnerves me. Markus reaches forward, gripping my chin. With his thumb and index finger, he turns my face away from him to view the cut, letting me go with a huff.

"It shouldn't scar, not that that would matter." he says, his voice deep and monotonous.

I glare at him as I step out of the tub, reaching for a clean towel and the scratchy blanket we keep nearby to slowly bring my body temperature up after a dip. Tying the towel around my waist, I shimmy out of my wet briefs, letting them fall to the floor with a wet *plop* before reaching for the change of clothing in my cubby when a white envelope flutters to the ground. Confused, I bend down to pick it up while Markus lets out a gruff laugh.

"Personally, I think it's a sick joke, sending someone like you to a place like that. As if you stand a chance. Charitably, I figured, why not let the other fighters have their fun. It's not my money wasted, and we both know you won't attend. Who would want someone like you for a mate?"

My confusion deepens as I open the envelope. I saw the lettering before I pulled out the scarlet ticket, my heart falling into the pit of my stomach like a heavy weight. The *Night of Scarlet* was an event that is held annually in the city where Omegas and Betas hope at a chance to find their perfect Alpha. Tickets are sold to Alpha's in small quantities, but it's not unusual of for Valla to get one, which means the one I now held in my clenched fist is costly and rare.

I couldn't refute what Markus said. I'm always aware of the stares and whispers from strangers. There was a chance that I might've been good looking once I grew into my features, but someone made sure I would never know by attacking me. I had killed him, but not before he changed my life forever.

I say nothing as I pull on dry underwear, dropping the towel to get dressed. It doesn't matter that I'm still cold, I just want to be as far away from here as possible. Stuffing the ticket into my hoodie pocket, I make my way to the doors.

"You did well tonight, Zayn. Keep it up and you'll earn your freedom in no time."

I ignore him, but his words echo in my head. We both know my contract was bullshit. After all, where else was I going to go?

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Quinn

I don't want to be here. I have a deadline to meet, and instead I'm in a room surrounded by people who want a shot at fucking me and take any freedom I have fought to earn away from me. The room is stifling and hot, the scent of designations mingling is giving me a headache, and I. Am. Over. This.

Scanning the room I find the reason as to why I'm here. Alec stands across the room, holding a bouquet of red roses that had been given to him by other Alphas. He chats animatedly with someone, accepting the rose they offered him and sliding it into the collection in his hand. This whole event is based around those stupid roses. Alphas can present them to an Omega as a token of interest and at the end of the night, it is up to the Omega to decide who forms their pack based on appealing scents.

Alec and I have been friends since we were children, and it was his idea to attend this godforsaken event. He had called me a week ago, begging me to attend the *Night of Scarlet* with him, stating that his brother's Alpha would accompany us.

Blake is Alec's older brother, and had found his own mates – Morgan and Edris – at the event about three years ago, and Morgan is presently expecting their first child in a month. I have a sneaky suspicion that Alec's sudden desire to attend the horrid gala has something to do with the sudden awareness that his biological clock is ticking away into spinsterhood and he wants what his brother has. I had a feeling that Alec pulled out all his charms to convince them and his parents to attend this year.

Begrudgingly, I agreed to go just to make my best friend happy, a decision I instantly regretted the moment I walked through the door. A couple of Alphas have attempted to speak with me, even going so far as attempting to give me their rose. But I wasn't interested, and I'm trying my best to turn down each rose as politely as possible. Even going so far as to mention that I'm here for mutual support, not mate hunting. I entertained

their attention and conversation because it's expected of me, not because I want to. I fully plan on walking out of here without a mate.

I sip my soda, ignoring the collection of alcoholic drinks that have been ordered on my behalf by those interested in me. I'm only half listening to the Alpha in front of me, prattling on about the pack he wants to start, trying his hardest to entice me and convince me that I would be at its center while also making it clear that he wanted to be the leader. That kind of pack management mentality never appealed to me. Either we work together as a group or not at all. Choices impact everyone, there is no leader who makes the rules. I just smile politely at him, nodding along while my gaze dances around the room.

The sharp scent of smoked birch cuts through the room as the murmur of conversations turn to whispers, everyone glances toward the entrance where a Valla stands, his shoulders slightly hunched as if he believes he didn't belong here. His wrinkled navy suit implied that it was the only one he owns judging by the fact that it doesn't fit him very well. Evidence being that the hems of his coat and trousers doesn't reach his wrists and ankles, while his shoulders and large thighs test the seams of the fabric. His long ash brown hair cascades over his shoulder, creating a curtain to hide the left side of his face, but it's styled with a light curl to it in an attempt to dress appropriately for the event. He ducks his head and immediately makes a beeline for the bar, the bartender's eyes widening as the Valla attempts to place his order.

I watch him, completely ignoring the Alpha in front of me, as the Valla grabs his beer before locating an empty corner of the room, preferring to hide in the shadows it provides. He doesn't even glance around the room as he pulls off his jacket, probably keenly aware of the eyes on him, as he drapes it around the back of the chair and placing his bouquet of roses on the table in front of him. I'm not aware that I even moved, a weird feeling in my gut propelling me forward, leaving the Alpha that's talking to me mid-sentence. While it's not uncommon for Valla to show up to these events, it is rare, and I realize that he's the first one of the evening. Typically, if a Valla is mated to a Beta or an Alpha already, they usually send their partners instead to find a mate. Does that mean this Valla is unmated? Or does he just prefer to do things himself?

He must pick up my scent, like warmed spiced honey, as I approach him. His head snapping up, and I stutter in my steps, my breath catching in

my throat. Jesus fuck, he's beautiful. Sage green eyes full of mistrust and apprehension stare back at me, cautiously. His fair face with its striking features are hidden behind a beard of stubble and the curtain of hair that he seems to use like a barrier between us. Long gashes mar his face from the top of his left temple to his nose, some extending past to his right jaw line. They're old, faded to pink scars that would make anyone think twice about approaching him. What catches my attention, however, is the fresh cut above his right eye and I frown. Someone has hurt him and for some reason, that doesn't sit right with me.

His eyes never leave my face as I finally stop in front of his table, but before I can say anything, he shakes his head lightly so that his hair covers his face evening more, hiding him from me completely as he mumbles something to his beer. My frown deepens and I reach out, pushing the curtain of hair behind his ear, startling him.

He raises his head to me, surprise in his eyes as his mouth gapes slightly. I can't help but smile as my hands slide through his soft hair, watching his tendrils curl around my fingers before I look him in the eye.

"Hi."

The Valla blinks at me, surprise still on his face as he registers that I'm speaking to him. I get the impression that people rarely approach him, let alone speak to him first.

"Hi." His greeting back comes out almost as a whisper.

"May I sit?" I ask, gesturing to the metal seat beside him.

With large eyes he nods and I nod my thanks, acutely aware of the stares being flashed our way. I take the seat, breathing in his deeply rich scent. I rarely pay any attention to other people's scents, as they can cause headaches if they're too strong, but this one intrigues me. Reminding me of a bonfire on a warm summer night.

"W-will your Omega be joining us?"

Pulled from my thoughts, I tilt my head in confusion, looking at him as his cheeks turn a light shade of pink.

"My Omega?"

"You smell like honey...with a hint of spice? But there is something else. Black Currant?"

My confusion progresses until I realize that he's also scenting Alec. I rather liked the fact that he doesn't seem put off by me having an Omega partner, though he does look a little panicked at the idea of the two of us.

“Alec. He’s mine in the sense that he’s my best friend, but not mine in the way you’re thinking. He didn’t want to come alone tonight so he roped me into it. He’s off flittering around somewhere, a large bouquet of roses in his hands. We’re practically brothers, not lovers.”

“Oh.”

A weird look crosses over the Valla’s face that looks a lot like relief, yet also disappointment. It doesn’t escape my notice that his eyes also drop to my hands, and I raise them slightly in a gesture that showed that I wasn’t holding anything. His frown deepens but he remains silent.

“How did you get the cut on your forehead? Above your right eye.”

His body language stiffens as my question begins, but the tension eases slightly.

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“I’m a fighter in a club.”

“Did you win?”

“Knocked him out cold,” he smirks, continuing to talk more to his beer than to me.

“That’s my boy,” I praise, unaware of what I said until his eyes fly to me in shock. I blink for a moment, shocked at my words, before a laugh bubbles up inside me.

He stares at me but then his face softens, stretching into a slight smile as he chuckles with me.

“I’m Quinn.”

“Zayn.”

Reaching out, I shake his hand with a firm shake, his skin warm against mine, biceps bulging slightly. I can feel the callosus and the scabs on his knuckles, a story engraved into his flesh like the scars on his face.

“And what type of mate are you looking for, Zayn?”

“I-I don’t know. I never thought I’d get this far.”

Again I'm confused, and it must show because he's hasty to explain with blunt honesty.

"The guys at the club thought it would be hilarious to send someone like me to an event like this, leaving the ticket in my locker as some sort've cruel joke. I was going to ignore it, sit in my apartment, and continue on with my life as if I never saw the ticket. But then my mind wandered to possibilities I had no right having, and next thing I knew, I'm here."

"Why do you feel you don't have the right?"

Zayn blinks at me as if it was glaringly obvious before gesturing to the other event goers. They often continue to glance our way, mainly watching me as if I need to be protected, while engaging with their partners.

"The perfect specimens of their designations. They want your standard stereotypical partners. The ones they can show off and parade around because they have the looks to match. Then look at me. I don't stand a chance. But at least I got to see this place for once in my life. Always heard about the Night of Scarlet. It's beautiful, a memory I'll keep for years to come."

"You're beautiful too."

I can't stop the words falling from my lips, but they were spoken with honesty. Zayn is beautiful in a way I can't explain. My inner Omega has shown interest, and the scars on his face seem to only enhance its curiosity. I don't know how he came about them, but I get the feeling that they were a result of an event he had to survive. Valla are supposedly fiercely protective of mates, and despite his biceps that showcase how strong he really is, I have this innate feeling that he would never hurt me if he claimed me as his. I came here as a favor to Alec and had every intention of leaving here without a mate, to continue through my life alone as I had been. Suddenly, that idea no longer appealed, and I can't help but wonder what it would be like to be by his side.

"W-what about you?"

"I'm not looking for a mate. That would require giving up what little freedom I have, and I worked too hard on my career to do that. I won't be controlled by anyone. I won't be forced to be a broodmare and made to obey. Like I said, I came here as a favor." I shrug.

Zayn frowns and looks down at his beer. It was empty, the label long since peeled to shreds in a small pile on the table. "What do you do?"

“I’m a writer. Alec’s brother is listed as my official guardian, so I’m able to publish my work while also possessing a bank account that he had set up for me. He doesn’t control anything, like what I do or how I do it, but by listing himself as my guardian, he’s able to grant me a freedom that society would otherwise deny me, like owning my own home or having a career.”

“What if you meet someone who wouldn’t ask you to give that up? Especially if it brought you happiness? What if they have no desire to control you or use you as a... ‘broodmare’?”

I smile then, watching the wheels work behind those sage green eyes. He’s thinking, and honestly it was adorable. I get the feeling that he may be younger than me, but honestly, that doesn’t put me off in the slightest. Somewhere deep within me, I think I could be content with him. True love and fated mates are only things I write about, that doesn’t mean they happen in real life. Love isn’t always part of the equation, it certainly wasn’t for my parents. They formed a companionship built on understanding and agreeable conditions. I don’t think I ever saw them kiss if I’m being honest, but they were happy in their own way. I step off my chair and pulled a rose from his bouquet, twirling it in my fingers.

“Then I’d love to meet him.”

Zayn

The Omega walks away from me, taking my rose and his spiced honey scent with him. I'm baffled that he had approached me out of everyone here. He didn't have a rose when he came to my table, but he left with one. Mine.

Quinn is alluring with a head of curly deep brown hair that bounces slightly when he walks. It's long enough in the front that part of it falls into his hazel eyes that seem to see right through me. Not once did he mention my scars, only focusing on the cut that I had already forgotten is there. But above all else, he said I'm beautiful. There was no sharp edge to his pheromonal scent that hinted he was lying, and he genuinely seemed surprised when he said it, as if it was an internal thought that he hadn't planned on voicing. I have never been called beautiful. Freak, disgusting, disfigured, heinous, ugly, scary. Those are things I've been called since the incident when I was seventeen, but not once have I been called beautiful.

I can't take my eyes off of Quinn as he orders another drink at the bar, twirling my rose in his hand. As he moves back to his table, I notice he doesn't have a bouquet waiting for him. He smiles softly as he lifts the flower to his face and I hope he could smell my scent among its petals. An Alpha quickly moves from the shadows, grabbing Quinn around his bicep and twirling him around to face him. Quinn stumbles on his feet, a mixture of surprise and annoyance in his expression as he drops the glass in his hand. It shatters in a thousand pieces on the floor, and the room falls silent.

The Alpha growls in Quinn's face, his voice low and threatening, attempting to assert dominance. "That? Really? You left our conversation for that?"

"*He* is not a *that*. Our conversation was over, *he* seemed interesting," Quinn snarled back, jerking his arm quickly to pull it from the Alpha's grasp.

The Alpha crowds Quinn, pushing him into the table behind him. The glasses on the table teeter and begin to fall, shattering along its surface and onto the floor. The Alpha makes to grab him again, as if he had already claimed Quinn. But it's my rose he holds. A low vibration starts in my chest as I step off my stool. Quinn's eyes dart to me, and he shakes his head slightly, turning back to the Alpha.

"Sir, you need to back up. I'm not interested in finding a mate, so you need to back up right the fuck now."

A loud bark of laughter from the Alpha echoes through the silent room, the scent of damp cardboard radiating from him, mixing with the distressed scents of several Omegas who crowd around us. My eyes remain fixed on Quinn, his expression changing based on whatever he sees on the Alpha's face. It's akin to fear, his scent tinged with it, yet he continues to stand his ground.

"Yet, you talk to *that*, and take *its* rose. I watched you all night, little Omega. Rejecting rose after rose, yet you take this one."

"Rules of the *Night of Scarlet* explicitly state that I don't have to accept a single rose. I will tell you again, Zayn is not an 'it' stop referring to him as such. You're simply proving that I was right not to accept you."

The scene that unfolds feels as if someone had slowed time down, only to speed it back up again at two times the speed, jumbling everything. I must've blacked out briefly because the next thing I know, I have the Alpha pinned against the wall by his throat. His fingernails pathetically scratching at my grip as I cut off his air supply, my canines extended, while an inhuman sound emanates from my throat. Violence of any kind is strongly prohibited at these events, something I was told as I walked through the door, yet no one stops me.

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The Alpha's lips begin to turn blue, his damp cardboard scent slowly fading as his eyes struggle to focus on me. Suddenly a hand dripping with

blood is thrust into my field of vision, distracting me with the metallic scent mixed with spiced honey and deep in color. I see blood every day in the ring, yet for some reason, I didn't like that sight, not one bit. My hand squeezes a little tighter around Alpha's throat.

"Zayn, stop."

I look down to see Quinn, not realizing how much shorter he is compared to me until that moment. I stand at around six foot six, and I thought Quinn was rather tall for an Omega as he walked away from me, he still barely comes up to my shoulder. He held his hand up, blood dripping from a gash across his palm and down his wrist, darkening the sleeve of his shirt. He uses his hand to block the Alpha's face so that I'll focus on it, on him.

Immediately dropping the Alpha in my grasp, he crumples to the ground gasping for air. Gently taking Quinn's bleeding palm into my hand, I bend the fingers to the side to expose more of the wound. He hisses, wincing slightly, and I let out a low growl but he says nothing, my gaze flickering between his face and his hand.

Leaning forward, I flick my tongue across the gash; the taste of copper pennies coated in a thin layer of honey blossoming across my tongue. I lick the wound again, the fragrant scent of spiced honey perfuming the air as Quinn's eyes darken while staring at me in the silence of the room. He pulls his hand back, slowly, but the bleeding has stopped and the wound no longer looks jagged and ugly. I have no logical explanation as to why I did what I had, no memory of what happened that caused me to pin a fucking Alpha to the wall. The only thing I can conclude is that instinct took over.

A small Beta appears at our sides, his coloring pale in panic and sweating as he approaches us. He trembles slightly as he opens his mouth, fear evident in his words. "S-sir, I'm going to have t-to ask you to leave the e-event, p-please."

Ah. He's scared I'll hurt him because he's asking me to leave. Makes sense, I did just almost kill someone. My shoulders fall as I nod, making my way back to my table to grab my jacket from the chair. I don't need to look around the room to know that everyone has been watching us.

"Wait."

The Omega's voice stops me, and the small event organizer almost walks into me as I turn around slowly. Quinn bends down and picks up the rose that lies on the ground, surrounded by shattered glass. It looked wilted,

probably stepped on in the scuffle I had caused. Quinn glowers down at it, attempting to fix the petals but it only makes a few of them flutter to the ground. His frown increases and distress laces the edges of his scent while he looks around the room frantically, locating my abandoned bouquet at my table. He moves quickly, grabbing it from the table before he makes his way back to me. He stares at me briefly as if hesitating for some unknown reason, before shoving the entire bouquet into my hand, startling me enough that I almost drop them. Confused, I tilt my head at him, but it is clear everyone else in the room is let in on the secret I wasn't privy to because the silent room quickly fills with the fresh murmurs of those around us. I hear someone call Quinn's name, but he ignore it. He watches me carefully, almost defiantly, seeing if I was clued in like everyone else.

“Why are you giving these to me?” I ask, looking down at the flowers.

Quinn stares at me, deadpan, blinking at my question as if I'm stupid before he bursts with laughter. “Did they not explain how the roses work at the front door? I'm picking you, dumbass.”

Picking me? I look at Quinn who smirked at me, arms crossing over his chest, daring me to argue with whatever he was saying. Then it clicks and my eyes grow wide. Quinn just picked me to be his mate.

Quinn

ZAYN

I picked up one of your books.

QUINN

That's embarrassing. Why? I would've given you one if you wanted it.

I stare at my phone, watching as the three little dots appear in the text window. It's been about a week and a half since the ball, and I haven't had a chance to see Zayn since. He asked once if I was willing to go out to dinner or something, hinting that he's as clueless as I am about what comes next in our relationship. As much as I hated to, I sadly turned him down, explaining that I had a deadline to reach and edits to go through for my next book. I even sent him a picture of my current work in progress. Zayn and I both went to that party not expecting to find each other, but I got the impression that he thought I chose him out of pity, which—incidentally—is what Alec thought as well as he lectured me the next day about my choice of mate. That wasn't the case at all, though.

My Omega responded to him protecting me against the other Alpha that night, going so far as to create a sound that I had never made before in hopes to distract Zayn. Sadly it hadn't worked and I had to put myself between him and the Alpha or he was going to kill someone. I can still feel the touch of his tongue against my palm, watching him as he stared back at me with hungry eyes as he tended to my wound. I had slicked my underwear that night, but if Zayn had noticed, he didn't acknowledge it. My palm twitching at the memory.

Before he had been escorted from the premises, and told not to come back, we exchanged phone numbers and have been texting daily since.

When I had informed him that I had a deadline to meet, he asked if it had been okay to have my address. While hesitant, I couldn't bring myself to say no to him and gave it to him.

Totally safe to do with someone I just met, I know.

I hadn't anticipated dinner being delivered to my door, nor did I anticipate a second delivery of a coffee traveler from the local coffee shop down the street. The one most people order for big board meetings to caffeinate everyone.

When I opened his messages to find out what the hell he had been thinking, I found a picture of him with a plate of food in front of him, smiling at the camera.

ZAYN

We can still have dinner together. Let me know when it's safe to message again, I don't want to be a distraction.

My heart melted at that text, and I couldn't bring myself to lecture him about sending me enough coffee to drown myself in. Incidentally, in that time, he had picked up one of my books, and that's embarrassing as hell. Not even Alec read my works. My phone finally vibrates with his response and I stared at it, baffled at the screen.

ZAYN

But if you had done that, then you wouldn't have gotten paid for the book. This is your income we're talking about.

Part of me had been worried that he would insist that I stop writing, that as the one higher up on the societal totem pole, he is to be the one to provide. Instead, he's insisting on continuing to support me by purchasing my book instead of demanding a free copy. My phone vibrates once more with his message, drawing me out of my thoughts. Upon reading his message, I can't help the bark of laughter that erupts from me, tears springing to my eyes as I struggle to regain my breathing.

ZAYN

I didn't realize books could have sex in them! Do you know how hard it is to hide a hard-on in a locker room?

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Unable to resist any longer, I tap the camera in the corner of the screen, moving to my nest in my office. I have two nests, one in the bedroom and one here, but this one is my favorite because I'm surrounded by the one thing that gives me comfort. Growing up, books had always been my escape while my parents fought. They were living proof that biology and instinct have no place in a relationship without love. I'm pretty sure they hated each other and I'm pretty sure my father resented me being an Omega. When I had first presented, he basically informed me that I was going to turn into a whore like my mother before drowning himself in alcohol. My mother killed herself shortly after, and I was sent to live with my aunt and her pack. They were the ones that taught me all I knew about becoming an Omega.

Even though Aunt Francis was amazing, heats were complicated once I started having them. I couldn't be anywhere near the house and was often sent to their cabin in the middle of nowhere half an hour away with Uncle Ian checking on me frequently since he was a Beta. I didn't resent them leaving me or sending me to the cabin, I knew it was for everyone's safety. Aunt Francis' pack took care of me as if I was their own child, and thanks to them, I met Alec.

My face splits into a large grin as Zayn's profile fills my screen, his surprised expression softening as he takes me in. His eyes dance behind me, as if trying to catch any glimpse he can of my surroundings to learn more about me, and I extend my arm a little to show off my nest that I built

between my bookshelves. Nests are a sense of pride, shown only to our mates or family, and having him see my safe place feels a little unnerving. He seems to realize what I had done and copies me, showing me that he is in a room that is scarcely furnished with milk crates stacked along the wall. He sits on a thin board in a room with low lighting, his long hair pulled into a bun at the back of his skull. He's shirtless, my eyes falling to his bare chest while the low lighting creates shadows that seem to dance against his upper torso as he moves. His chest had a few scars as well and I'm genuinely curious if other parts of his body are scared too, but I also don't want to ask. It's very clear something traumatic happened, and I don't want to push into his past unless he was ready.

"Hi."

"For your information," I begin, ignoring his greeting. "Spicy romance is a very popular genre, and I'm sorry you have been sheltered up until now. But I am happy to know that what I write turns you on."

It takes Zayn a moment to register what I'm talking about, but once it clicks, his cheeks turn a beautiful shade of rosy pink, and he digs around in the bag beside him, pulling out a set of headphones and connecting them to his phone. I can't help but grin at him out of amusement, curious if anyone is nearby, which brings his location back to me.

"Are you at work?"

"Yea. My next fight is in about twenty minutes. Once Jake gets done, then I go on."

"Are they giving you any trouble? You mentioned they bought you the ticket to the ball as a joke."

Zayn shakes his head, his eyes dancing around the room as if looking for someone that I can't see from the phone screen. "No. They were only curious if I even went. I haven't said anything to them about that night or about you. I'm not trying to hide you or anything I just—"

"Hey, hey, hey! Shhhh." I try to soothe his panicked rambling through the phone. "Are you worried that I'll take back my claim on you?"

Zayn shyly nods, reminding me of his insecurities and our age differences. I admit that the night after the party and getting his contact information, I did an internet search on him and learned he is twenty-five, making him five years younger than me. But his insecurities make him appear younger. It's almost as if he was waiting for me to admit that I was in on the joke the other fighters in the locker room had set up. I had also

found out that Zayn's job is at an illegal fight ring that boldly advertises his designation and it doesn't surprise me that the law looks the other way, seeing as his employer, Markus Capri, can easily afford to pay off anyone who comes snooping around.

"Is that why you seemed disappointed at the *Night of Scarlet*? I told you that I wasn't with Alec, but did you like his scent too? Are you disappointed that we're not together?"

Zayn immediately shakes his head quickly, making me dizzy just by watching. "No. You smell like spiced honey, he smelled like black currant. While I didn't hate it, it just felt slightly off, tickled my brain oddly. I like your scent. Warm and comforting, inviting. For some reason, you see something in me that I don't, enough to choose me and enough to still be here almost two weeks later. I don't think I'm worthy enough to court one Omega, let alone two, and I didn't think I stood a chance with you. But it's easier to be rejected by one person instead of two."

Mulling over his words, I take in his words. Someone has twisted his way of thinking, forcing him to believe that he is nothing more than his designation. That the scars on his face mean that he isn't worthy of love, that he's some hideous creature to be locked away and never experience life. It's nothing more than a lie. He is worthy, and in my eyes, worthier than anyone else. And I make it my vow to fix whatever someone else broke.

A sound off camera startles Zayn and his eyes snap forward as he converses with someone I can't see. He nods and the expression on his face changes, wiped clean of any emotion. He looks back down at the screen and gives me a sad wave before disconnecting without another word. I guess that means it is his turn to fight, and I feel my heart drop into the pit of my stomach. I showed him the same respect for his profession as he showed me, we don't have the right to tell the other person to quit what they do to earn a living, but I'd be lying if I said it doesn't bother me. I don't like the idea that he had the potential to get hurt.

Rubbing at the ache in my chest, I climb out of my nest and refill my steel tumbler with ice water before sitting back at my desk, hoping edits will provide a distraction. No sooner have I set my phone on the desk does it light up, vibrating across the wood. Picking it up, I grin, chuckling softly.

ZAYN

For the record, I love your writing.

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Zayn

“What the *fuck* was that out there?”

Markus is furious with me, and he has every right to be. We lost a lot of money tonight, and there was no doubt in my mind is Markus going to add it to my contract, expecting to be paid back what he owed. Markus is an Alpha, so he knows better than to throw a punch at me since I’m stronger and I can easily kill him before it even lands. However, It doesn’t mean I’m exempt from punishment. Truth be told, my head just wasn’t in the fight. I was distracted by a certain Omega I last saw laying in his nest. An Omega’s nest is the most private of places, and I was shocked that he so casually shared it with me, giving me a full view of where he felt safest. From what I saw, it looks beautiful.

I wished he were in the crowd, cheering me on and waiting to celebrate my win. He would scream his claim over me at the top of his lungs before I took him to bed, where his voice would grow hoarse from screaming my name. The scenes in his book are enough to make me blush, my cock thickening and straining against my pants, eager to participate in the fictitious scenes he wrote about. I can’t help the thoughts as I pleasure myself to his words. Is he as soft as he looks? Would goose bumps follow my touch as I trace my fingers over his slight curves? Would my fingers catch in his curls as I run my fingers through them? Would he accept my body easily? Would he taste as sweet as his scent? What did he sound like when pleased? What sound did he make when he came? How many people have heard that song? It was the first time I have ever thought about someone in such a way.

I wonder if Quinn has done the things he describes in his book, using past partners for research for the things he writes about. A tidal wave of jealousy consumes me, drowning out Markus’ rant as he lectures me. I have no right to be jealous. Whoever it was that came before me doesn’t matter, I’m here now, but I lack experience. If Quinn has done any of the things he

writes about, would he be satisfied with someone who doesn't know what they were doing? Would he know if I copied what I read?

"Zayn!"

Markus reaches forward to grab my chin, forcing my gaze to snap to his, his red face inches from mine.

"Pull your fucking head out of your ass and focus! If I thought allowing you to get your dick wet at that stupid event would distract you, I never would've let you go."

"Allow me?" I blink slowly, processing his words.

"You think you get to do anything without my permission? I knew what the others were doing and I could've stopped it and you never would've known. You should be thanking me; instead, you pull this shit and cost us money! If this pity fuck is an interference, it can easily be dealt with."

A mixture of fear and anger surges in my gut while a low rumble starts in my throat. Markus doesn't flinch at my glare, instead he smirks, pulling away and dropping his hand.

"Use that to fuel your next fight. There is a championship happening in the city in a few weeks, make it up to me. Win it, and I will consider a fourth of your debt paid. Don't let some *breeder* distract you."

Instantly, I jump to my feet, my hands curling into fists at my side, my low rumble growing louder while my body vibrates with its intensity. Or anger, I can't exactly tell which. But Markus ignores me, leaving me alone in the empty locker room with a wave, his smirk still planted on his face. Without anything to take my rising anger out on, I kick my foot forward, knocking over the shitty bench. Picking up the plywood, I swing it to my left, hitting the milk crates and splintering the wood while a roar tears from my throat. I hadn't meant to lose, but I couldn't deny that my brain was elsewhere. Quinn has already changed everything for me in such a short time that for the first time, I decided that I don't want this life any more. I want to wrap myself around my Omega, breathe in his sweet honey scent. I want to start my life over, claim him as mine, and maybe start a family. My brain latching onto the last idea as images of him swollen with our child and I can't suppress a soft groan as I reach down to readjust my thickening cock.

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Instantly, lust and desire replace the anger, dulling the flame, but a different emotion mixes its way into my thoughts. *Longing*. I can't ignore the fact that I am completely, and utterly, obsessed with the first person who gave me the time of day, and that it's a problem. It isn't normal, but I knew from the moment he walked away from my table that night that I wanted him to be mine. He chose me, out of everyone in that room, he chose *me*. For the first time in my life I might have an opportunity past the ring, and I don't want to fuck it up.

The shrill sound of my phone's ringer cracks through the silence, echoing off the stone walls. Scrambling to find it in the mess of overturned milk crates, I manage to grab it the second the call goes to voicemail. The screen lights up with a missed call from Quinn, as if he was summoned by thoughts, and my heart thuds in my chest. Ignoring the incoming voicemail, I quickly dial him back, hoping we won't have to play a game of phone tag.

"There you are!" Quinn's bright voice comes through the receiver, soothing the storm that rages within me. "I didn't know if your fight was over, did you win?"

"No. It was an unscheduled loss."

"Oh."

There is confusion in his voice, which is to be expected since I don't elaborate, and I appreciate that he doesn't push. Sighing, I sit on the floor next to the knocked over crates, resting my head on my arms.

"There are certain nights, low-risk nights in the betting game, where I'm scheduled to lose. This gives people a false hope that they can beat me or bragging rights when we rig the fights. Tonight was not one of those nights, but I was distracted and lost."

"I see."

Silence follows his words, but I can hear soft movement and banging on the other end of the call. I sit in the silence, closing my eyes, while I listen to him. I can hear what sounds like the metallic clank of a pot being placed

on the stove and the burner being flicked on. There is a long pause of silence before Quinn broke it with his hesitant words.

“Do you...maybe want to come over?”

“What?” I blink, raising my head as my brain tries to comprehend what he just asked.

“I can make us dinner if you want to come over.”

“What about your deadline? That’s coming up soon, isn’t it?”

“I’m not worried about deadlines, Zee.”

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Quinn

Zayn stands at my front door, his face swollen with bruises and caked in dry blood, soaked to the bone from the rain that started a few minutes ago. Even in the summer, you can almost always count on rain in the Pacific Northwest, I just hadn't anticipated it to come down hard enough for him to be soaked. Over the phone his voice sounded empty and disengaged, my inner Omega longing to reach for him, to comfort him, which had prompted me to invite him over.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. This is the first time having anyone outside of Blake and Alec in my space and I had spent the past twenty minutes panic cleaning and straightening my nests to appear somewhat presentable should he want to look at them. Reaching forward, I gently touch Zayn's swollen face, my heart sympathizing with him. He winces at the pain but straightens his face quickly, as if he doesn't want to show me how much his face hurts. Moving to the side of the entrance, I gesture him through the front door, where he takes his shoes off and looks around before looking down at his soaked clothing.

"I don't want to drip in your house."

"Oh please." I wave him off. "I might have some clothes you can change into, but I can't promise they'll fit. You're huge."

Grabbing his wrist, I pull him into the open plan living room, smiling as his head swiveles around to try to see as much of the house as he can on his way through. In the bedroom, his eyes widen as he spots my bed and nest in the corner, his gaze darting toward me quickly while his cheeks blossom with a pink tint.

While I don't consider my shower complicated, I did feel the desire to turn it on for him anyway. It's rather large with glass doors, a standard shower head on the wall, and a rain shower head hanging from the ceiling. The shower handle has a separate knob that will activate the rain shower, but I left it alone so only the standard head is running. Without thinking, I

turn around and reach for Zayn's shirt, pulling it over his head and getting my first glimpse at his torso in person, and I have to fight the urge to reach out and touch him.

Holy fuck he was stunning.

His defined chest is absent of any hair with dusty pink nipples standing at attention either from excitement or from the cold, I'm not sure which. His chest and abdomen are riddled with pink scars of different lengths, some raised while others smooth against his skin. His broad shoulders with bulging biceps flex slightly as he moves, crossing his arms over his chest as if he were shy. As I reach for his pants, he steps back, the blush returning while his smoked birch scent deepens, filling the room.

"I-I got it."

"Shit, right, sorry," I reply, suddenly embarrassed.

I find that I just want to take care of him, and in my haste to do so, I probably crossed a boundary, making the situation more awkward than it already was. Yet, as my hands fall limply at my sides, I'm itching to reach for him again.

"You can use any of the products in the shower, spare towels are in the cupboard to your right. I'll leave a change of clothing on the bed and shut the bedroom door."

Retrieving the first aid kit from under the bathroom sink, I glance at Zayn once more, my eyes roaming over him while my heart thuds against my rib cage. I feel slick gather at my entrance, forcing me to quickly leave the bathroom before my honey rich scent betrays me, shutting the bathroom door behind me.

Refusing to give myself a moment to think, I quickly go through my wardrobe, pulling out a shirt and a pair of pajama pants that are slightly too big on me and hope that they will fit him decently enough. Setting them on the bed, I make my way into the kitchen, placing the kit on the kitchen island.

Moving to the fridge, I pull out three of the four salmon filets I hadn't separated for the freezer yet as well as the broccoli that needs to be used soon before it goes bad. Retrieving the rice cooker from the cupboard, I make sure to also grab the bag of rice. I had gone through my kitchen while on the phone with Zayn, hoping I had something I could offer him and was happy to find something that could potentially meet his dietary needs as an

athlete. Most athletes I know need high-protein meals, so I hoped grilled salmon with steamed broccoli and white rice would be enough.

The clothing doesn't fit at all like I had hoped, and I'm momentarily distracted as Zayn emerged from the bedroom, tugging on the shirt as he enters the kitchen. The shirt has stretched against his chest due to his shoulders, with the hem of the shirt just above the waist of his pants while the pajama pants hang low on his waist. He moves stiffly like he was worried he'll rip the seams around the ass and thighs, the pajama pants hid nothing, like the fact that he wasn't wearing underwear, or the fact that there was nothing small about him. My mouth waters at the outline of his soft cock, taunting me as it's squished against the fabric of the pajama pants. His birch scent mixing deliciously with the fresh scent of body wash and the shea butter shampoo I use.

"Where can I put these?" he asks, lifting his wet clothes and the towel he used to wrap them in.

Forcing myself to pull my gaze from his groin, I use the rice paddle to direct him toward the laundry room that is off to the left of the kitchen and he nods, loading them into the washer quietly. It all feels rather domestic in a way that my Omega approves of. I hear the chime of the laundry machine before the clunking sound of the lock sliding into place while the system kicks on, leaving Zayn to stand awkwardly by the laundry room.

"Smells delicious. Can I help with anything?" he asks quietly, reaching behind him to tie up his hair in a bun.

"I'm actually almost done, but if you wouldn't mind getting down two bowls from the third cupboard on your right, that would be really helpful."

Nodding, he grabs the deep green pasta bowls and brings them to me, laying them out on the counter. Thanking him, I grab his first, filling the bowl with rice before laying on the broccoli and the salmon, making sure his bowl gets the two filets and handing it to him, before reaching for my bowl.

"Really hope you're not allergic to fish. I know you need a lot of protein and calories, but this is all I have at the moment."

"It's perfect, thank you, Bee."

I stop mid-rice scoop and turn to him, eyes rounding at the nickname. It was as if he hadn't meant to let it slip because it takes him a second to realize what he said before the pink blush that I am starting to love spreads across his cheeks.

“Shit, sorry.”

“Bee?” I question, shaking my head.

“It’s weird, right? It’s...it’s just you always seem so busy with your writing and your scent...my brain connects them to a honey bee. I won’t say it again.”

“I don’t hate it. We’ll rhyme if I continue to call you ‘Zee’.” I grin.

His shoulders deflate as the tension leaves them, returning my grin with his own. God, he truly is beautiful, his smile softening his features and making him look more his age. I continue to serve dinner and together we take our bowls to the dining table. I didn’t have much in the way of drinks, but he accepts a soda that I have in the back of the fridge.

We eat in moderate silence, and I’m rather surprised that I didn’t feel awkward at all. Small talk always makes me feel uncomfortable and itchy, but with him it’s as effortless. He asks me about the book I’m currently working on while also mentioning the one he’s reading, telling me that he’s really enjoying it. We avoid discussing the fight he lost as we wash the dinner dishes, standing beside each other at the sink as if it’s a usual routine. I can’t get the feeling of how complete I feel having him stand beside me. I know fated mates is completely bullshit, but it certainly feels to me as if he has always been by my side.

“C-can I ask you a personal question?” he suddenly asks, hesitating in his words.

“Of course.”

“The stuff you write about...have you done any of it?”

I noticed the blush creep back into his cheeks and I began to wonder if he’ll always blush like that for me. I can only hope so. It takes me a second to realize what he’s referring to and then it was my turn to blush. I chose Zayn to be my partner so, logically, at some point we will have sex and with my heat expected in a few weeks, it would probably be sooner rather than later.

“Despite my writing, I have no experience with intimacy.” I respond truthfully. “I’ve spend my heats alone with a toy I keep in the drawer by the bed. It’s not ideal, but it works.”

“Oh.” Zayn grows quiet, shaking excess water off the dish I hand him before putting it in the dishwasher. He’s silent for a moment, processing my words before he mutters out, “I have no experience either.”

I firmly believe that the obsession over virginity and purity is bullshit. The idea is hilarious to me, because how are you supposed to know what you like or don't like in order to inform your partner so that you both can enjoy being intimate? Despite holding this belief, the idea that no one has touched Zayn sends a thrill of possession through my body. I will be his first. The first to touch him, to hear him in pleasure, the first to experiment and find out what makes his heart race and what has him crossing the finish line faster than either of us anticipated.

A soft groan beside me startles me from my thoughts, and I watch Zayn shift, leaning forward slightly to use the edge of the counter to adjust his swelling cock. I hadn't realized that my thoughts had caused my scent to fill the kitchen and I blush again, avoiding his gaze. Now would probably be the perfect moment to invite him into my nest, and we could explore these feelings we are experiencing, but at the same time, I can't bring myself to make the first move. What if he isn't ready? Am I? It was a subject we need to discuss quickly, because for the first time, I don't want to spend my heat alone.

Zayn puts the dish he is holding into the dishwasher before turning toward me. Hesitantly, he reaches forward, brushing my curls behind my ear, his gaze searching my face.

"May I kiss you, bee?"

"Please," I whisper, practically begging as I move into his body.

He instantly lowers his head, his soft lips touching mine as if even his kiss is uncertain. I lean into him, wrapping my arms around his firm waist as he cups my cheek, the kiss growing the longer we stand in my kitchen. What started as a soft, shy touch, evolves into one of hunger and desire, desperate to not end so quickly. Zayn reaches under my ass, effortlessly lifting me up with a small surprised squeak from my throat. Our lips never leave each other as he wanders down the hall toward my bedroom, my legs firmly wrapping around him. He begins to move past my office, and I pulled away from him quickly, his lips swollen and red from our embrace. Shaking my head, I tap his back before nodding toward the open office door, not wanting to pass up the perfect spot for this moment.

"In there. To the left."

Tilting his head, he moves into my office while I reach up and pull at the hair tie securing his bun in place, watching as his hair cascade down his

neck. With a practice shake of his head, hair unfurls from its knot as he looks around the room, eyeing my favorite nest.

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“It’s beautiful,” he says reverently, lowering me onto the plush blankets while taking in the low glow of the fairy lights that I wound across the bookshelves. Pride at my mate’s approval of my nest warms my chest as the light’s glow casts shadows across our bodies. Reaching up, I pull off my shirt before pulling him close to remove his, refusing to let him be distracted any longer. His larger size seems to dwarf my frame, creating a birch-scented barrier between me and the rest of the room, making me feel small. I thought that would be frightening, but instead it makes me feel safe and protected, and my Omega’s purr begins to rumble low in my chest, showcasing how much I truly love his size.

Zayn slowly kisses his way down my neck, his tongue flickering over the frantic thump of my heartbeat in my throat, nipping gently. It isn’t enough to break skin but hard enough to draw a hiss from me while I arch my lower body against him, my erection pressing firmly against his noticeably larger one. My hiss turns into a low moan, my head tilting forward to rest on his shoulder as his thumb brushes across my hardened nipple, causing me to shudder. Nipping and licking, he creates a path down my chest and stomach as if I’m something to be devoured, a rare dish he has been starving himself for his whole life. Desperate to savor me, while also impatient enough to swallow me whole.

“One day,” Zayn whispers against my stomach, his warm breath causing goosebumps across the sensitive flesh. “Not right away obviously, but one day, I hope you’ll allow me the honor of putting our child here.”

Well fuck me.

Of course I want children, always have, but I also don’t want to give up the freedom I have fought so hard to procure for myself. Children would change how I work, how I live my life, especially in the first years before

they become little independent creatures and realize that Daddy is working when he's in this room. I know I could hire a nanny for a few hours a day so I could work, but at the same time, the idea of someone else looking after my child makes me feel like I would be a failure as an Omega, that I should feel ashamed for not dropping everything to take care of our child. But I also have this feeling deep within me that Zayn wouldn't see me that way. That he would support me in the same way he is already supporting my career by purchasing my books. That he would ensure I could continue to maintain as much of my freedom as a child would allow. In that same feeling, I just know that Zayn would be an amazing, doting father. Obsessed with our child as much as I would be. And the idea of giving him one puts a strange sense of urgency within me, as if I can't wait.

Zayn's hair falls forward, creating a curtain between us before I reach up to tuck it behind his ear, pushing it off his face so that I can get a good look at the man before me. His designation doesn't matter to me, what matters to me is that I feel safe with him, that our future is a possibility that I can finally allow myself to consider. That he's mine. I went to that ball with no desire for a mate, and instead I left with someone that I feel was perfect for me.

"I'd be happy to give you a child."

Zayn gawks at me with impossibly large sage green eyes before his face splits into the largest grin I have ever seen, his smoked birch scent devouring my honeyed one as his arousal and happiness become more evident. He lurches forward, his lips crushing into mine as he reaches between us, pulling down my pajama pants and the ones I gave him that practically clings to his body for dear life.

His cock springs free from his pants, twitching against mine, and I can't help but stare, precum weeping from his tip. He's thicker and longer than the dildo I've used for my heats, and I'd be lying if I wasn't slightly worried, especially if his knot expands within me. Logically, I know my body is designed to take him, but there is a difference between seeing it soft in the outlines of fabric and seeing it hard and eager for me now. It was the first cock I have seen that wasn't my own or on a screen, and I'm not entirely sure if that thing is going to fit inside me. I look up to find Zayn watching me, his expression soft but cautious.

"We don't have to."

I firmly shake my head. “You’re just bigger than I expected, which is stupid of me because everything about you is big.”

“If it hurts, tell me, please. I’ll stop immediately. I don’t want to hurt you.”

My gaze softens as I look at him, cupping his cheek. “You would never hurt me, Z.”

The low growl that emanates from his throat vibrates across my stomach while he nuzzles into the flesh, nipping at it once more, slick pooling between my legs as if an answer to his song. He moves down my body before swallowing my smaller cock in one fluid movement, my back arching against him as a loud surprised curse erupts from my lips, the fingers of my right hand tangling themselves in his hair.

His mouth is liquid heat, creating a pleasure I have never in my life felt before. It’s euphoric and mind numbing, leaving me dazed and thoughtless. There is no real rhythm or technique, but his mouth felt like heaven—warm and inviting, threatening to undo me before I can even catch my breath, slick puddling onto the blankets.

My balls draw up close to my body, the tingling sensation enveloping me as my orgasm grows closer and closer to the surface, but I don’t want this to end so soon. Tugging lightly at the strands of his hair, I urge Zayn to pull away from my body with a gasp but he resists, twirling his tongue around my tip and thought leaves me once more. His fingers run down my thigh before sliding between my legs, tracing the rim of my hole. I grind my hips against his finger, encouraging it to enter me, slick coating his digit effortlessly. I felt him push into me at last, and the groan that escapes me doesn’t sound human even to my own ears as he slowly pushes inward, sinking deeper into my inner channel.

“So tight and wet for me, baby.” he mumbles, pulling off my cock briefly to nuzzle his nose into my sack, licking and sucking each testicle.

“More,” I beg desperately, breathlessly guiding him back to my aching cock.

I feel the rumble of Zayn’s chuckle as he takes me into his mouth once more, inserting a second finger followed immediately by a third, spreading them slowly to stretch my hole in preparation to accept him. His long fingers graze my prostate and white heat blossoms throughout my body, a strangled, moaned cry rips from my throat as I arch off the the blankets of my nest. It feels so different to have something other than a toy hits that

spot within me, and the feeling was almost impossible to describe. A toy is cold and hard, brutal with every thrust. His fingers are lightweight, soft and warm, driven by a mission and insistent with every touch. Without warning, I'm pulled over the edge, spilling into his mouth with my fingers tangled in his hair while he greedily gulps me down.

Unaware I have closed my eyes, I slowly open them as Zayn removes his fingers from my body and looks at me with a proud smile on his face.

"Mmm tastes like honey."

"It does not, you perv." I pant out a laugh, my brain still foggy.

Zayn leans over me to devour my mouth with his, the salty yet sweet taste of my cum still on his tongue as he slides it between my lips, and I can't argue with his assessment any longer. It did taste faintly of honey. Reaching between us, I lube my fingers with my slick before sliding them around his cock, eliciting a deep groan from him while my fingers stroke him lazily, slick coating his shaft as I enjoy the feel of the velvety soft weight in my hand.

Twisting my hand gently around his shaft, I was becoming addicted to seeing the pleasure he presented, as he tilts his head into the crook of my neck, his breath heavy against my skin while his low groans echo in my ears. He begins moving his hips in time with my strokes, and I can't wait any longer—I need to feel him inside. Shifting my lower body slightly once more, I position the blunt round tip of his cock at my wet entrance, slowly sinking my body around him as it tenses at the foreign sensation of something warm and not cold silicone. He slowly pushes forward, stretching me more than his fingers had—than any dildo had before.

Letting go of his cock, I grip his biceps, which flex beneath my touch. The stretch of his intrusion stings slightly, but not enough for me to tell him to stop as it slowly turns from pain to pleasure while my body adjusts to him. I feel so full, fuller than I had ever expected to feel and I know he's not fully inside me, yet something settles deep within me in contentment. I suck in a breath, only to exhale slowly before opening my eyes when I feel him no longer moving. He staring down at me with concern etched onto his face as he watches me, his body tensing beneath my fingers. I can imagine the war raging behind his worried gaze. His body, his nature, telling him to surge forward, to take me and claim me as his mate. I know that voice well, because it is the same one shouting in my head, demanding he move

quickly, to consume all of me. But his insecurities are telling him he is too much, too big, and he's hurting me.

"Does it hurt?" he questions, shakily, and I felt him slowly withdrawing himself from my body. But my inner Omega growls, desperate to keep him where he is.

"Don't you fucking dare!" I snarl, shaking my head furiously, while wrapping my legs around his waist and moving my hands to his lower back. My fingers brush over the raised edge of a scar I hadn't noticed before. "Do not leave me."

"I don't want to hurt you, but you feel so fucking good, bee. I'm struggling to hold back," he practically whimper, nuzzling into my neck.

"Stop holding back, then! I'm not fragile, I can take it."

He pulls back, our eyes locking into each other as he searches for something in my expression. For what, I'm not sure. Maybe permission to let go, to give into his instincts? The scent of smoked birch clashes furiously with my honeyed one once more as his hips roll forward, pushing deeper into me and stretching me in places my toy never could, reaching the end of me in one thrust. Cursing together, our breaths mix as our foreheads meet, panting at the sudden wave of pleasure and desire rushing through us like lightning.

Zayn waits once more, buried to the hilt within me as I adjust to him, while he savors the feel of me wrapped around him. With a nod of encouragement from me, he begins to move, easily aided by the abundance of slick my body produces, soaking the blankets between us with a puddle of pleasure I can't prevent. The combined scents fill my office, thickening the air so that I could practically taste it, taste us. He kisses me, our tongues tangled in a dance, lost in the experience of each other. The blunt tip of his cock slides over my prostate with each thrust, eliciting moans that he devours greedily as if they give him life. Angling my hips upward, he thrusts hits that special place inside me that sends bolts of electricity through me, my second orgasm of the night began to build, nails digging into his back, but I need one last thing from him before this is over.

"M-mark me, Zee. Mine. Y-Yours."

I feel the growl that rumbles low in his throat vibrate along my body, my cock steadily dripping precum between us as it rubs against his stomach with each thrust. I honestly don't care where he marks me, but I can feel it deep within me that it is something I desperately need. I need his mark like

I need air to breathe. His knot begins to swell, catching on the rim of my entrance while he becomes more erratic, giving in completely to his instincts with each push forward. Shifting my lower body slightly, I changed the position we were in, allowing him even deeper access as his cock buries itself deep within me. His knot swells completely, stretching me past anything I have ever experienced on my own, dancing on the edge of discomfort as he seals us together. With a sharp pain that quickly morphes into pleasure, his teeth sink into my left collarbone, creating a bond between us.

Instantly, I feel a flood of emotions as our bond begin to form, his cock twitching as it spills inside me. Affection, happiness, love, possession, but also humility, gratefulness, and insecurity. Holding him, I run my fingers slowly through his hair while he lays his head on my shoulder, lazily licking his mark. I feel complete in a way I never imagined, solid, and blissful and I make sure to push those feelings through the bond in hopes to erase the insecurity he still felt. I'm pretty sure his insecurities will probably never go away, but I vow to spend the rest of my life reassuring him every chance I get.

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Zayn

Quinn is pure perfection. When I claimed him as my mate I anticipated to feel pity, resentment, hesitation, especially since it was done in the heat of the moment. But instead, I feel satisfaction as he purrs quietly against my chest. I squeeze him tighter to me, rolling over so we're face to face and he smiles at me with a lazy grin, taking my hand in his and tucking it under his cheek with his. Warmth fills my heart, which I guess he could feel through our bond since his smile widens sleepily. God he is beautiful, and I find that I desperately want to be inside him once more, but I'm worried it would be too much too soon.

"How are you feeling?" I inquire, genuinely concerned.

"A little sore. Empty. But otherwise fine. You?"

"Oh, I'm perfect," I beamed, rather full of myself as I match his grin. "Was...was it okay?"

"It was perfect," Quin replies, chuckling and leaning forward to kiss me.

It's odd having Quinn in my head, almost like a cheat sheet to his emotions. It doesn't make me a mind reader obviously, but it certainly gives an insight into how conversations will go from now on. A perfect example of this is how his happiness flickers to trepidation as he looks at me, reaching over to trace the scars down my face.

"Can I ask?"

Instinctively, I reach up to run my fingers over the raised flesh. I've never had to explain them to anyone before, no one cared enough to know. Most people easily avoid the Valla, so it was a topic that just never came up. It doesn't help that they were tied to my business with Markus and shame that I felt over that night. Quinn opens his mouth, and I assume he's going to say nevermind and apologize, but I interrupt him.

"My parents were both Valla, and like most of us do, kept mainly to themselves on the outskirts of the city. We got an unusual rainstorm that

night and their car slid in the rain, pushing them into oncoming traffic where they were hit by a truck, killing them instantly. No one was going to take in a sixteen-year-old, let alone a Valla, and I had no other family. I won't bore you with the trivial mundane stuff, but I sorted out their affairs and attempted to live on my own when I met Markus, just as I got evicted from my apartment. Markus offered me a job fighting in his underground fight ring, and said he would cover my basic living expenses if I did well. The first few weeks I slept in the locker room, but as I began to prove myself, I earned things like a cot in the locker room which turned into my own studio apartment.

"As I told you, bets are placed on fighters and we rig fights that I pretend to lose to keep business, a lot of the lost fights are against other Valla who join the ring to burn off frustrations. These are very popular fights, and earn Markus the most money. A Beta had lost everything that night, confident he could make up his debt with my loss, but like others, he hadn't anticipated I would win against a Valla bigger than I am. I was dumb, living off the high of my first real win against another Valla that I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. Betas don't usually have a scent so I didn't know he was waiting in the parking lot for me when he got the drop on me, his knife slicing through my back. I turned around, but before I could protect myself, he got my face.

"I hadn't meant to kill him, I just wanted him to stop attacking me. I'm not entirely sure what happened, blacked out most likely. I came back to my senses with his limp body under me, blood everywhere, covering my hands. All my life I had been taught to keep myself in check, that the outside world would view me as a monster. It was my duty to protect the public from me, but I lost control and I hated it. I hated being the monster everyone saw me as."

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“Hey,” Quinn extends his right hand, cupping my cheek, his expression sad and tender. He traces the scars upward with his thumb, but his gaze never leaves mine. “You’re not a monster, Z. You were a fucking child and some asshole attacked you. He was trying to kill you, you were protecting yourself. I’m grateful you killed him if it meant you got to be here with me.”

I smile sadly, placing my hand on his as I speak again. “I called Markus once I realized what I had done, but I couldn’t stop shaking. I was bleeding everywhere, so he immediately called a doctor and stitched me up while Markus called a clean up crew. It came out later that the son of an up-and-coming politician had gone missing, and Markus would flash me a look any time it got mentioned. I hadn’t realized that Beta was the politician’s son. Markus said I owed him for everything. I already owed him for taking care of me, but now he added on medical expenses and the price of anyone he had to pay off anytime someone came asking too many questions. I offered to turn myself in, but he told me he would kill me before I ever set foot in the police station.”

“How much do you owe?”

“I don’t know.” I wince. “Markus keeps finding new excuses to add to my debt. I’ve been fighting for him since I was sixteen. Surely I’ve paid it off by now? There is a fight in the city in a few weeks, and he said if I win it, he’ll knock off about a fourth off the debt. But when I don’t even know much I owe, it does it honestly matter? I’m just exhausted and I’m just not into fighting any more. But it’s not like I have anywhere else to go.”

Hot anger floods through the bond as Quinn bolts upright, rolling me onto my back and climbing on top of me to sit on my hips. He leans in closely so our eyes meet, but he reaches forward to hold my face in place so I’m forced to look at him while he slowly begins to grind his ass against my cock. I suppress the guttural moan that threatens to escape as my body rises to attention, my hands falling to his waist.

“Is this nothing to you? You belong to me now, which means *this* is *your* home. It matters because he is using you, knowing you don’t have options, but that changes now. If you want to keep fighting, fight. If you don’t want to, then quit. We’ll find something else for you to do, or you can do nothing and lounge around the house all day, I don’t care.”

Placing his hands on my chest, he pushes upwards before reaching behind him, lining my hard cock up with his entrance before slowly

lowering himself down, his body stretching around me. We gasp in unison as Quinn moves lazily, creating a slow rolling rhythm as he takes me, riding me for his own pleasure.

“You have options, Zee.” Quinn pants. “You have a home. You’re wanted by my side with the only commitment being to love me.”

“I will love you well into the afterlife.”

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Zayn

“Why is there a breeder calling me, asking about your debt?” Markus storms into the ring where I’m sparring with another fighter, narrowly dodging my swing. “No one pays that off except you, especially no breeder.”

“Stop calling him that,” I grumble, glaring at him.

“It’s what they are. Not good for anything more than putting their legs in the air and pumping out—”

Markus never finishes his sentence before my fist collides with his face, knocking him off balance and breaking his nose in the process with a sickening crunch. Instantly, four Alphas are on me, trying their best to restrain me as if I’m not able to shake them off easily. Blood begins to pour profusely down Markus’ face while my opponent rushes to his side, ignoring the glare my employer throws in my direction.

“Would be a shame if that just cost you our little deal,” he snarls, lowly.

Anger ignites in me as my opponent carries Markus out of the ring, a low rumble in my chest as they walk by me. The urge to stick my foot out to trip Markus is far too strong and I have to shake off the other fighters that hold me back before I do something stupid. My body feels tight and hot, on edge and constricted as I pace in the ring like a caged bull. I need an outlet, but no one in the gym is as strong as I am and can go toe-to-toe with me. My only opponent was myself.

Fine.

Exiting the ring, I make my way to the corner of the gym where there is a collection of punching bags, and I select my favorite one, the free-standing heavy bag. It’s less likely to break under my punches like the hanging heavy bag, and I can drag it over to where I need it to be. To the right of the punching bags is a series of hanging punching bags such as the speed and double end bag, but that in’t what I’m after. Narrowing my gaze, an intimidatingly low growl leaves my throat while the Alpha using the slip

bag halts in his movements, paying the price as the sandbag hits the back of his skull.

“Asshole,” he grumbles, glaring at me as he rubs the back of his head, leaving my space.

The idea of the slip bag is to improve coordination, my balance, and head movements while I punch the standing heavy bag. Essentially, it works as an invisible opponent as I land my hits. From my pocket, I pulled out my phone and noticed a text from Quinn. Our bond had solidified over the past few days and , now that I’m focusing on it, I can feel his anxiety as strongly as he probably feels my anger.

QUINN

What’s going on? Everything okay? Why are you angry?

ZAYN

I’ll explain tonight. I guess you called Markus?

QUINN

**embarrassed emoji* Did I overstep? I just wanted to help.*

ZAYN

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I know, bee. He came into the gym calling you names.

QUINN

He called me names??

ZAYN

He called you ‘breeder’. I punched him and broke his nose.

QUINN

Ah. So nothing original. Disappointing.

The anger slowly ebbs away as I chuckle at Quinn's text, loving how unbothered by the slur appears to be. Pulling my headphones from my pocket, I load up the audiobook I was listening to. I'm almost done with all of Quinn's books and I'm eagerly anticipating the next book in the series I had started with when we first met. It's due to come out this Friday, and I already preordered it so it'll hit my e-reader immediately at midnight. Hitting play, I pull back the swing bag to begin its motion and I step in front of the free standing heavy bag, breathing in through my nose and letting it out through my lips before zeroing in on the words feeding through my earbuds.

When I told Quinn my story, I already knew he was going to try to find out how much I owed Markus, plus I couldn't hide Quinn forever. As I dodge and weave around the sling bag, I realize that what I felt was shame. I'm angry at the discriminatory comments that Markus made toward Quinn, but I was ashamed for the first time in my career that I'm in a situation that Quinn felt he had to save me from. I didn't lie when I said I was tired and wanted to stop fighting, but fighting is also all I know now. How am I supposed to provide for my new mate if I don't fight? All my life, my worth has been tied to what I can do for others, what my fists could do. Without them, without my career, I'm nothing. I would not be worthy to stand by Quinn's side.

An ache settles in my chest and all I can think about was Quinn. As my thoughts focus on him, I suddenly feel annoyance run through our bond before it dissipates into jealousy, and then suddenly I feel nothing at all. Tilting my head in confusion, I step off the gym floor, retrieving my phone from my pocket while I make my way toward the locker room. Shooting him a text to check on him, I grab my gym bag, needing desperately to be with my mate.

Quinn

“So it’s done then?”

I narrow my eyes at my phone screen, an irritated sound escaping my throat, annoyed. Alec keeps glancing from the mark on my neck to my face, as if he can’t believe what he’s seeing. Through the video call, I can see his own marks, displayed rather high on his neck. Alec had found two Alphas and a Beta that wanted him at the *Night of Scarlet*, and while I’m happy for him, his judgement of my partner is pissing me off.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just think you could’ve done better than a Valla, Quinn. And he’s just so...”

“So what?”

“You know...” Alec scowls.

“Elighten me.”

“Scary? Intimidating? Valla are violent and aggressive, surely an Alpha would be better.”

Okay, now I really am pissed off.

“There is no one better, Alec.” I reply, defensively. “I went to that stupid event as a favor to you, if you remember, not because I was looking for a partner. If you called to insult my mate, my partner, my relationship, then I’m hanging up. I have better shit to do.”

“I didn’t call you to fight!” Alec backpeddles, panic rising in his voice. I can hear the low rumble of an Alpha in the background, and I fight the urge to tell him to fuck off. Zayn may not have had anyone to stand up for him in the past, but he does now, and I’m not tolerating anyone insulting him. Not even Alec. “I wanted to tell you something, and I was just taken aback. The reputation of a Valla isn’t a good one, I don’t want you hurt or worse.”

“Nothing will happen to me. Zayn isn’t defined by his designation any more than you and I are defined by ours. He’s good to me, he makes me

happy.”

“That’s ultimately all I want for you, Q. I’ve found my happiness, I want you to experience that too.”

“What did you want to tell me?” I inquire, already over this conversation. A large smile spreads across his face, and my heart plummets. I already know what he’s going to say before he’s even opened mouth.

“I’m pregnant!”

“Already?” The words are out before I can stop them and I wince, jealousy replacing my anger.

“Mhm! My heat came shortly after the *Night of Scarlet* and I’ve been feeling rather unwell the past few weeks. The first clue should’ve been how I couldn’t stand the scent of Richard’s brown sugar and rosemary glazed pork chops. Anyway, we took a test last night. And two pink lines!”

It’s been at least a month and a half since the event, and I thought it would be too soon to have children, yet I can’t help the jealousy that’s flared up at his announcement. In the past few days since the conversation Zayn and I had, I realize that I wanted the future he’s envisioned for us, with a child to call our own. I want it so badly that I’ve begun to resent my impending heat because I know this wasn’t the right time to try and conceive, and I’m forced to face the fact that we will have to use protection. I know it won’t be forever, but my inner Omega doesn’t give a fuck about logic. A text comes in from Zayn, but I swipe it away without reading it, involuntarily returning to the conversation.

“I’m happy for you,” I say, half-heartedly, forcing a smile.

“Thank you! I’m really excited. My brothers are as well, and I honestly love that my nephew will have a cousin around his age.”

“How is Blake and their Omega?”

“Doing well. Apparently Morgan is already talking about having another baby. I don’t know if I could be pregnant that close together. We’ll see how this pregnancy goes first.”

Nodding, I pretend to do something off screen, not really wanting to be part of this conversation any more. Why am I so upset that Alec is pregnant? He’s my best friend so it doesn’t make sense. I watch the banner notification appear on my phone, telling me that motion is detected at my front door just as I hear it chime open, the strong scent of smoked birch reaching me from my position on the couch. Zayn’s scent is strongest when he’s done at the gym, waiting to shower at home now because some days

the strong scent soothes me in ways I can't explain, and today I couldn't be more grateful to have that stronger scent.

He comes up behind me and leans over the edge of the couch, ignoring my video call to lick his mark on my neck, sending shivers down my body, before he nuzzles against it. Turning my head, I return the greeting, burying my face into his neck to breathe in his thick rich scent. He's still in his gym clothes, hair piled high on his head in his usual messy bun, the sight of him drawing an appreciative purr from my throat that his inner Valla answers with a song of his own. I loved that sound, deep and soothing.

"Hi," he whispers, smiling softly.

"Hi." I return his smile, leaning forward to kiss his lips.

Alec clears his throat and I turn back to my phone screen to see him blushing with large eyes, shifting in his seat as if he's uncomfortable. Good. Let him see how my mate reacts to me and how I greet him—with the love and affection he deserves. Fuck his earlier words saying that I could do better. I didn't want better.

"I'll let you go, you seem busy," Alec remarks, his gaze drifting to Zayn, who doesn't seem to notice him.

"Keep talking, I'll take a shower." Zayn mutters softly, leaning in to kiss me once more before leaving.

Despite what he says, it gave me an out of the call, so I said raise my eye brow at Alec—as if challenging him to say something—before proving my goodbyes. As I start dinner, I'm lost in my thoughts to the point that I feel rather overwhelmed. I have so much going on in the next few weeks that I don't know how to compartmentalize everything. My next book releases tomorrow, followed by Zayn's fight a week from today, and my heat is supposed to arrive shortly after that. We have no idea how the fight is going to go, and there is still the situation of Zayn's debt. It makes sense that right now isn't the best time for biology to dictate how my heat goes, and I find that I'm rather upset about it and can't shake the hyperfixation. Pulling down the box of pasta as the water bubbles loudly on the stove, I'm forced to remind myself that this is temporary and my turn will come.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't even notice Zayn until he's behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me against his chest, resting his head atop of mine. The scent of soap and smoked birch invades my nose and I tilt my head backward, resting it against his big chest as I awkwardly add pasta to the boiling pot.

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“What’s got my little bee thinking so hard?” Zayn’s rough voice vibrates across my back while he nuzzles my neck, his size once again making me feel small. I’ve become addicted to that feeling, almost craving it like I crave my nests when I need comfort. The way his arms wrap around me, or his body enveloping mine, protecting me from anything that could ever come our way. We had begun a routine of watching mindless television in the evenings on the couch, where I had begun to build a third smaller nest, and I looked forward to curling up against him every night and feeling cozy in his embrace. But right now, it’s distracting as fuck while trying to cook.

“Alec is pregnant.”

My voice is devoid of any emotion, sounding robotic even to my own ears, as if I’m discussing the weather. While I am getting better at it, our bond is still new, and I instantly feel the flood of emotions that came from him. Happiness, excitement, eagerness, impatience, but also hesitation and worry, all flooding through the bond before they were abruptly cut off as he gains control and processes how to proceed.

“Bee—” he starts, but I shake my head.

“Timing isn’t right, Zee.”

I pull out of his arms, my Omega lamenting at the absence of his warmth as I gather the rest of the ingredients from the fridge to make the sauce and the frozen precooked chicken I use when I don’t really feel like spending all my time standing at the stove. He takes the bag of frozen chicken from me and places it on the counter before reaching over and turning off the burner. Sliding his hand under my chin, he lifts my face toward him, but I turn my gaze away, unable to look at him. He stands there silently until the moment becomes uncomfortable and I try to move away, but he loops his arm around my waist, lifting me upward to set me on the counter, pinning me in place with his larger body.

The height means we’re now at eye level, making avoiding his gaze even harder. Patiently he waits for me to look at him. When I finally do, I

notice his hair is loose, draping over his face, but his sage green gaze still pierces through my soul.

“You forget that I can feel you. Talk to me.”

“I can feel you too,” I snap, harsher than I intend to while trying to change the subject. Why do I have to talk about the things that I feel when he’s said nothing about the anger I was engulfed in earlier before Alec’s call. “Why were you so angry?”

“Because Markus insulted my mate and then threatened to go back on our deal.”

“He didn’t answer my call, so I left a voice message. That’s how he knew I was inquiring about your debt.”

“He entered the ring like an idiot. I broke his nose.”

“Alec doesn’t like me being with you. He says I can do better.”

“You can. You should’ve.”

“But there isn’t ‘better’ for me, Zee.” I practically whine. “You’re who I want. And finding out that Alec is pregnant...I grew envious.”

“Why?”

Taking a deep breath, I tilt my head back against the cupboards, closing my eyes. Up until a few months ago, I was pretty sure I knew my future. A big house with two nests, alone, with the books I wrote. I was going to grow old here, maybe get a dog or a cat in a few years, and Alec would find my body when I finally died because I refused to give up everything I worked for. I didn’t do signings or events because if it got out that an Omega was an author, I would get into a lot of trouble. I was an enigma of sorts, but anyone with two brain cells to rub together could figure out that ‘Q. Casey’ was me. That was my future, I wouldn’t —or couldn’t— entertain anything else. Until Zayn Shepherd.

“My future was set in stone until it wasn’t,” I finally mumble, opening my eyes and tilting my gaze down to look at him. “Now it’s a possibility to have a similar life, but until we figure out what’s going on with your debt, I realized this heat would serve no purpose, just like the ones before it. And for some reason I can’t explain, that hurts.”

Moving my hands over my abdomen, I place them over my empty womb with the realization that the idea affects me a lot more than I thought it would. I don’t realized my scent has soured until Zayn makes a deep soothing rumble in his chest. Leaning forward, he nuzzles into my neck, meeting my pheromones with his in an attempt to comfort me.

“If we start looking for reasons to not have a child, we will always find them. We should look for reasons to try, and I believe the best reason is because we want to. Because we love each other and we want to share that with any child we may bring into this world. There is no guarantee that it’ll happen with the first heat, and we can attempt it again at next one. But I don’t see why we can’t try this time.”

I don’t need our bond to sense his sincerity, but I can also sense how much he loves me and how ecstatic he is that I want this too. I smile at him and he grins, leaning down to pull my shirt up to place a kiss over my womb. He then proceeded to blow the wettest raspberry known to man against my skin.

“The actual fuck!?” I exclaim, laughing as I push him away before hopping off the counter in a fit of giggles. “Go sit down while I finish dinner, weirdo.”

Zayn’s laughter echo through our kitchen, a sound I could listen to for eternity.

Zayn

The last time I was nervous before a fight, I was sixteen. It was my first fight, and I remember thinking that my heart was beating so fast it was going to launch itself into my throat and suffocate me. I was still a kid, so the Alpha I was up against seemed so huge and big to me that I was pretty sure he was going to kill me, and it was going to hurt like hell. When I expressed my worries, I hadn't expected Markus to hit me, his fist colliding with the side of my face so hard that it broke my jaw. I've had many broken bones since then, but I'll never forget the first one.

"There," he'd said triumphantly, looking me dead in the eye with a sickly grin on his face. "Now you've been hit. Nothin' to it. Get out there, man up, and win this."

He was right. I wasn't afraid of being hit again because I knew what it felt like; my brain had me overthinking the whole thing, and I already knew what it felt like to break something. I entered that fight with a broken jaw and came out a winner.

After the fight, Quinn and I have a plan to confront Markus about the debt, armed with a lawyer Quinn had already contacted in case Markus refuse to tell us anything but, my body feels tight and on edge. I can't stop wiping my palms on my thighs while my heart threatens to suffocate me once more. Sitting on the floor of the locker room, I close my eyes while Quinn runs a brush through my tangles, trying to reign in my nerves as he separates my hair for braiding. It's a routine we started at home, our evenings ending with him braiding my hair while we watch television before climbing into bed, sometimes making love before we fall asleep wrapped up in each other. I never thought I'd enjoy being taken care of, but through our bond I can feel the satisfaction and pride radiating from Quinn as he cooks for us, washes our laundry, and braided my hair, as if it brings him immense pleasure to do so. Sometimes he'll even run the towels through the dryer while I'm in the shower so they'll be nice and warm when

I get out. He started packing my lunches for the gym as well, and I'll often catch him looking into new recipes that suit my dietary needs, changing how he cooks and eats to match me. He takes care of me because he *wants* to, because he gets satisfaction from doing so, not because I'm an obligation or an investment. It reminds me far too often how Markus provided the bare minimum to keep me alive to keep fighting for him.

"Hands."

His soft voice is loud in the empty room, startling me slightly as I rotate around, confused. In his hand, he holds the spool of elastic bandages, waiting for me to give him my hands. Stunned, I give him my right palm and he begins to wrap the gauze around my wrist, ensuring the anchor is firmly placed over my thumb. He wraps it around my wrist three times before wrapping around my thumb and wrist once more before doing my knuckles, under my wrist, and then between my fingers like one would for MMA fighting. Once done, he reaches for my other hand and repeats the process, ensuring the tape is smooth against my skin and doesn't wrinkle to create friction and discomfort.

"Where did you learn to do this?" I ask, amazed.

"Online. Been watching videos."

Dazed, I watch him finish with my left hand with the expertise of someone who knows what he's doing. Suddenly it occurred to me that in the days leading up to my fight, Quinn had been practicing on himself so he could wrap my hands. Jesus Christ, I love this Omega. I'm about to tell him as such, my eyes lifting to his face when I notice for the first time his complexion seems off. He looks a little pale, but his cheeks hold a slight rose tinge to them and his breathing is labored.

"Bee?"

I learn forward, brushing my fingers against his skin and I'm startled to find his skin is burning hot to the touch. Worry blossoms in my chest as I scramble off the floor, grabbing a water from the small fridge in the corner. Pressing the bottle against the back of the neck, I sniff around him but can't detect anything past the pheromone suppressors he took earlier, and I growl in frustration. Omegas aren't allowed at the fights, often seen as a distraction to the fighters, and can potentially cause problems. He'd assured me he would wait in the locker room, or the car until the fight was over, but now I'm wondering if he should've stayed home if he isn't feeling well.

"I'm fine." He gives me a weak smile. "Just a cold. I couldn't miss your fight. We'll get some hot and sour soup on the way home, and I'll sweat it out in no time. I normally get sick around book launches, the hazards of the stress and late nights I put into getting the book out. This is normal."

"That was a week ago," I counter, brows furrowed.

Whatever Quinn is about to say is interrupted by Markus, entering the locker room as if he's some main character of a fantasy novel, opening both doors with the importance he doesn't have. His nose has since mostly healed, albeit a little crookedly. He'll have to break it again to get it straight, but his focus has been too firmly set on this fight to bother with his image. Instantly his eyes zero in on Quinn and I step between them, blocking him from Markus' point of view.

"Who the fuck are you?" Markus snarls, ignoring me.

"The breeder," Quin replies, his tone flat as he stands up from the bench, looking Markus dead in the eye.

I watch as the dots slowly connect in Markus' head, his eyes shifting from Quinn to me, anger flashing through his gaze. "The fuck you thinking bringing *that* here?!"

A low-rumble in my chest chases away any anxiety that may have been linger while Markus narrows his eyes at me, challenging me to do something, but Quinn bravely steps between us. In a show of absolute dismissal toward the Alpha before us, he blatantly turns his back toward Markus, giving me his undivided attention.

"I'll go wait in the car. Call me when it's over. Go be amazing."

While it seems impossible, his skin feels even hotter to the touch as he stands on his tip toes to kiss me. I try to search our bond for any hint toward his state, but all I encounter is a wall, blocking me from sensing anything from him. Unease and worry replaces the anger as Quinn pulls away from my grasp, glaring at Markus as he left the locker room, middle finger of his right hand extended in my mangers direction. The second he's out of sight, an ache and emptiness settle in my bones and I turn my gaze to the man who honestly believes he still owns me. He hasn't the moment I stepped into the *Night of Scarlet*.

"Hey, Markus?" My voice is empty of any emotion as I move toward the door, my fingers flexing, testing out the tapping Quinn had done. "This is my last fight. I'll find another way to pay off the debt, but I quit."

On any other day, any other moment, the kaleidoscope of emotions that dances across his face would've been funny. He processes my words faster than I thought he would, his face showcased disbelief, anger, surprise, back to anger before settling on a sickening neutral grin. It's the same grin he often uses when conducting business, probably thinking it makes him approachable and friendly. In reality, it puts you on edge, wondering when he'll go for your throat.

"We'll discuss it after the fight, okay?" Markus remarks sweetly, handing me my water bottle.

"There is nothing to discuss," I reply, taking a swig of water, letting the cool liquid soothe my dry throat. "I am simply informing you. I left the keys to the studio you got me on the kitchen counter, keys for the car are in the glovebox. I'm done."

Markus only gives me silence as we make our way to the main room.

The fight is taking place at an away gym with a small ring sitting in the center, surrounded by a roaring crowd. It's small enough that it puts me in close proximity to my opponent, who also happens to be another Valla, making the ring even smaller. The cries of the crowd echo around the concrete room, so loud and deafening that I can't hear the referee above their chants. I shake hands with the Valla across from me, who stands a foot taller than me, but his build is similar to my own. He just stares at me blankly as we take our places, waiting for the round to begin.

A shrill bell rings through the room, drowned out easily by the cries that surround us. Immediately, the Valla begins to move, forcing me to round the small enclosure with him like an awkward dance. His gaze wanders the length of my body, sizing me up before our eyes lock once more, a smirk on his lips. As his shoulder squares up, I expected him to swing of his left arm and not his left leg to come upward instead. Failing to see the false movement for what it was, I catch it out of the corner of my eye at the last minute, unable to stop the blow completely to my side. I am, however, able to soften it a bit by jutting my left arm downward sharply. As he focuses on kicking me, I take the opportunity to swing with my right fist, connecting with the side of his head and setting him off balance.

He stumbles slightly before rotating around quickly, rushing me to grab me around my middle and landing blows to the side he previously kicked, bruising my ribs instantly. Blows like that, backed by full Valla power,

should've cracked my rib, but he's controlling his strength, intending to draw out this fight.

Fuuuuck. I just want this over with already!

Pushing me against the edge of the ring, the rope bites into my back as I fight to push him off me, finally managing to loop my leg around his and brushing him off his feet, where he landed on the mat with a dull thud. My head begins to swim, vision blurring, as my heart thuds loudly in my ears. In any fight, it's normal for adrenaline to pump through my system, what isn't normal was the fresh feeling of bugs crawling along my skin, an itch deep beneath the surface of my skin. Shaking my body to rid itself of the feeling does nothing and my heart seems to pump faster, as if I'm a caged animal, thumping a bruise against my rib cage. Trying to clear my head only seems to make the vertigo worse, nausea rushing to the surface.

The Valla rolls onto his back, attempting to sweep my leg but I dodge him easily. Looking sideways briefly, I catch Markus staring at me, a weird smile on his face as he shakes my water bottle as though he was taunting me. It takes my sluggish brain far too long to realize he had put something in the water, whatever drug he used finally kicking in, but it's making me sick while agitated at the same time. This gym may have been nicer than the one I normally fight in, but the rules are the same. This fight is still illegal, and I'm determined to win, but I never wanted to do so by cheating. I have to end this quickly.

I rush my opponent to curl my body around his, his legs folding around my waist, my fists connecting with any part of his upper body they can reach. He folds his arms in front of him to protect from the worst of my blows, but isn't enough. I feel bone and muscle give way under my fists, his skin red and bruising beneath my touch.

The energy of the room noticeably shifts suddenly like a chill through the air along with the chaos of the audience and its clear something else was distracting the crowd. The scent of spiced honey reaches me, a whimper splicing through the murmurs.

Quinn.

I immediately let go of the Valla, twisting his knee at an unnatural angle to loosen his hold around my waist. The cracking of bone echos in my head mixing with the Valla's cries of agony as his legs fall, but I pay attention to none of that. My hazy vision scans the room until I find Quinn, surrounded by Alphas closing in quickly, drawn in by the scent he's produced. Finally, I

realize why he had been so warm in the locker room—the unmistakable scent of heat and slick calling to those around him. With an animalistic growl, I dive out of the ring, shoving bystanders that don't move out of my way fast enough.

Reaching for the closest Alpha, my fist connects with his face with a sickening crunch before I reaching for the next one, tunnel vision closing in. Screams erupt through the room and people begin to move as far away from me as they can, practically tripping over each other in their desperate attempt to get away. Quinn immediately surges forward, the scent of slick reaching my senses as I lift Quinn upward by his thighs, his arms instantly looping around my neck while I bury my nose into his neck.

His hard cock connects with my chest and he struggles against my hold, attempting to grind against me for friction, biting and sucking at my neck while he scents me, creating a mark. But he can't get the friction he craves as his heated body tries to take control, mewling in frustration. I try to sooth him with shushing sounds, a low purr in my throat as I try to fight through the crowd to get him to safety. Fighting the crowd in't my smartest moment, and it creates the chaos akin to that of an escaped circus animal as people push and shove each other to get out of my way while also trying to move toward the exits, forcing me to go against the flow of traffic to head toward the locker rooms.

The moment I step into the safety of the locker room, pain erupts in my skull as something solid and metal slams into the back of my head and my body pitches forward. Cradling Quinn against my body, we crash into the concrete floor, my shoulder protesting as it takes the brunt of the impact as I feel it dislocate. Bile crawls up my throat as I lay disoriented, dizzier than I was earlier. Lifting my head to see who hit me, my vision swims into focus, blood trickling down the back of my skull. With a yelped whimper, the weight of Quinn's body leaves my arms as he's pulled away from me. I let out an animalistic cry, my teeth bared as instinct takes over, my mate gone from my protection.

The metallic sound of a gun's hammer being cocked reverberates through the room, my body freezing at its sound. My heartbeat thuds loudly in my ears as I force my eyes to focus, finding Markus in the shadows of the locker room, a bloody metal baseball bat at his feet and a gun pointed directly at Quinn. The fingers of his free hand are threaded harshly through my mate's curls, gripping them tightly in his grasp to pull Quinn's head

backward, holding it at a sharp angle. Quinn appears to be more lucid than he was just moments ago, his eyes wide and slightly clearer as he pants, fingernails scratching at the Alpha's hand as his gaze flickers toward me while tears fell down his cheeks. Panic pumps through our bond like a heartbeat, fearful and frantic.

"I warned you," Markus seethes, spittle flying while his chest rises and falls with his rage. "I warned you that if some wet hole was going to be a distraction, I was going to fix the problem myself!"

Markus glares down at Quinn, his focus solely on my mate that he never saw me coming. Nor the bat.

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Zayn

“Zee!”

Quinn's straining cry finally reaches me through the haze and I slowly turn to look at him. Blood is splattered across his face, but I don't think he notices. Quinn curls in on himself, whimpering as his heat begins to take over once more, stronger than it had been. His scent floods the locker room, mixing with the metallic scent of blood and the acrid scent of burnt birchwood. Rage consumes my senses, my head throbbing with each heartbeat.

Danger! Kill! Mate! Claim! Protect!

I let the metal bat slip easily from my bloodied grip, moving away from the remains on the floor to the pretty precious thing that calls out to me as he lets out another pained whimper. Crowding Quinn's body with my own, I capture his lips in a kiss that's more aggressive than I had intended it to be. He mewls against me, lowering himself on to his back as I free my aching cock, my hips thrusting forward into the cool air, desperate to be inside him, to claim him. Blood from my hands mixes into his curls as I grip the back of his head, harder than I intend to, staining some of them a deeper brown. Leaning forward, I flick my tongue against my mark, an uncivilized growl rumbling low in my chest. My body feels feverish, as if we were sharing the same fever while he pants and whines through our embrace, echoing the animalistic need that's clawing to the surface.

He's was safe now, I made sure nothing will hurt him, but my brain is struggling to process that information as Quinn let's out a frustrated cry. He struggles with his jeans and my feral brain doesn't know patience enough to help him carefully as I grab the waist band in front, tearing easily through the fabric, liberating a slick hard cock and eager hole. I probably should've been gentler, kinder. I probably should've taken my time to open him up to

me, give in to his pleasure before seeking my own. Instinct cared not for 'probably's.

His body effortlessly swallows my cock as I push deep into his body, my knot already forming. My fingers bruise his flesh with bloodied fingerprints as I take him roughly, unable to stop the snapping of my hips as I surged forward, his screams bouncing off the walls of the locker room.

"Deeper," Quinn cries, fingernails biting into my biceps as if he's clinging to me for dear life, arching his back and spreading his legs to give me more space to take him. "Deeper, Valla, please!"

Snarling, I moved forward and place his legs on my shoulders as I bend him forward, his knees almost connecting with his chest while I bite my mark, desperately trying to claim him once more. The taste of honey coated copper pennies spurts across my tongue as he lets out a surprised yelp, head thrown back in the throws of pleasure, his hard cock leaking precum across his stomach. Blood from my past mixed with the blood of my future into his beautiful curls as it seeps from my bite and the carnage beside us across the concrete floor. My past was over, my future beneath me. Unable to fight it any longer, my knot slips into his warm embrace, expanding and locking us together as my orgasm rushes through me in white hot waves, filling my beloved. Quinn lets out a grunted moan, fingernails digging into my arm hard enough to create bloody half moon shapes, his cum splashing across his stomach and chest. Panting, his gazes down at me, his eyes clearing slightly as he stares at me. His beautiful Omega's song fills the room, while he reaches forward, cupping my cheek.

"My precious beast."

Quinn

Epilogue

I knew going to the fight was a bad idea. My heat had arrived early, but I had refused to sit out the biggest fight of Zayn's career. I should've gone and waited in the car like I said I would, instead, I ended up making a mess of everything, and the guilt is eating at me. The side effects of the drug Markus gave him didn't last very long, but while it had remained in his system, Zayn wasn't really aware of what was happening around him, only experiencing aggression and unquenchable lust. In between heat spikes, I was able to get us home, re-emerging later from my nest and diving headfirst into chaos.

Markus is dead, beaten to death with the same baseball bat he hit Zayn with before trying to kill me. I hadn't realized we had sex next to his mangled corpse until after the fact, and I'm trying very, very hard not to think about it. The day after my heat ended, detectives showed up at the house to ask Zayn a few questions about his part in Markus' death. Reeking of Omega heat pheromones and being Valla made the detectives a little uncomfortable, which only amused Zayn, who refused to answer any of their questions in the house, insisting they sit outside for their interview.

Apparently, Markus owed a lot of people a lot of money, and he used his fighters to pay off his debts. Zayn was his best cash cow, an almost guaranteed win in any fight, which provided consistent income to keep the creditors happy. He had a lot of money placed on the campaign fight and had purchased an illegal drug on the black market to make sure Zayn had won. It was also discovered that because Zayn had been a minor at the time of his attack, the state had attempted to contact Markus as his guardian. He had refused to claim Zayn, so the state had covered his medical bills, which meant Zayn had owed him nothing. Markus hadn't expected Zayn to come back after the attack, and when he had, he had used it to his advantage. The apartment and car that Zayn owned were seized as assets to pay off any remaining debt that Markus may have owed, but the detective assured him that no one would be expecting Zayn to cover the remaining balance.

Because Zayn had murdered Markus to save me, it's been ruled as self defense and that'll be handled in court in a few months. While Zayn hasn't been arrested, he's still informed not to leave the state. Markus' death

spread through the underground fight ring like wildfire, with many rings trying to get Zayn to sign with him, many offering him absurd amounts of money to fight in their ring. He's turned each of them down, much to their disappointment.

In the three weeks that followed, I've started having nightmares, replaying that moment over and over, remembering the cool metal of the gun's barrel against my temple. The visions of Zayn seemingly impossibly too far away to help me as he bled from the back of his head, anger and terror on his face. There are random moments when my chest feels tight and I feel like I'm sweating, even though my heart beat never changes. It's like an active anxiety attack, but without the symptoms. I remember the fear of being separated from Zayn so vividly. The fear that my life would be ending, that I would never see the future he had envisioned for us.

"I want to open my own gym," he announces one evening as he sets the table for dinner. "But I want it to be open to children and teenagers. Any designation can join, but a space where they can learn the basics. Despite everything, Markus still gave me a place I needed as a confused and hurt teen. I had nowhere to go, no outlet. Punching a bag was very therapeutic."

"Then do it," I encourage, dishing out the salmon and broccoli alfredo.

"I'll need to take out a loan," he states matter-of-factly. "Markus took everything so I have no savings. I'll need a location too."

"I think Alec's brother has an Alpha in real estate, they should be able to find you a location. I can probably just loan you the money, depending, of course how much the building is."

Zayn shakes his head quickly. "No, bee. You've done so much for me already, a loan is fine. It's what I want."

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"And I can't convince you to just pay me back?"

Zayn shook his head again, a soft smile on his face as he comes up behind me, nuzzling into my neck, his tongue flicking over my bonding

mark. His purr rumbles across my back, and I close my eyes briefly to savor his touch while swaying slightly at the counter as if we were slowly moving to music that only we can hear. Since that night, I've sought out his touch more frequently, spending more time in the new couch nest I've built, snuggling against him so often that my deadlines for the next novel are starting to suffer. I'm struggling to be separated from him, and even at dinner I need to touch him. I'm back in therapy again, and my therapist explained that trauma tends to manifest in weird and confusing ways, but that's normal. We're working through it slowly with the aid of low dosage anxiety meds that seem to be helping, but lately they're making me nauseous and exhausted, my body heavy.

Zayn pulls away from me slightly, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. "Why do you smell different?"

"Excuse me?"

Pulling out of his embrace to look at him better, I glance up at him, equally confused by his question. I open my mouth to seek clarification when a realization hits me unexpectedly and my eyes went wide. What if it isn't the medication making me so sick?

"Bee?"

Immediately moving around him without a word, I dash down the hall to our bedroom before Zayn can say anything. Entering the bathroom and begin digging through the cupboards before finding the pink box I was looking for. I had bought it on a whim after my heat, but in the chaos of Markus' death, I had forgotten about it. But surely not, right? Zayn is only a few steps behind me, slowing his pace when he sees the box in my hand, his eyes mirroring the look I had only moments before. Looking up at Zayn, kaleidoscopic emotions flooding our bond: trepidation, anxiety, hope, but above all, love and reassurance. Opening the box with shaky hands, I follow the instructions diligently, before capping the test and wait.

A new form of anxiety is trying to take root and my body shakes from the abundance of adrenaline it creates. Without saying a word, Zayn scoops me up and carries me down the hall to the nest in my office, laying me down among the blankets and pillows. The scent of books mixing easily with his smoked birch fills my senses as he turns on the fairy lights, creating a low glow in the room. I didn't know I needed my nest until I was surrounded by it, and I love that he automatically knew to bring me here. Dinner sits long forgotten on the dining room table, thoughts swirling

around in my head as I listen to the low rumble of Zayn's purr, soothing my anxiety.

The nightmares of the locker room linger in my life every day, but to me, a positive test would be the ultimate 'fuck you' to Markus. He wanted to keep Zayn trapped, controlling him, and giving him rewards as he saw fit. Markus hated that I had foiled his plan by showing Zayn what affection can truly be. That genuinely caring for someone isn't transactional. Despite his situation, Zayn saw a better life for himself, and he was willing to do what he needed to make it happen. A child would be evidence that Zayn's sacrifice wasn't for nothing, that Markus' death wasn't for nothing. That Zayn has moved on and will have a brighter future going forward. But... what if I'm wrong?

"What if it's negative?" I whisper, hands still shaking around the test.

"Then we'll try again."

"And you would still love me?"

"I would still love you even if you were a little honey bee."

I chuckle softly before taking a deep breath, trying my best to block my emotions from him as I flip the test around, tears springing to my eyes.

Holy fuck.

"Looks like our hive just got a little bigger."

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Acknowledgments

The Vallaverse is such a unique world that it felt as if my skills were being tested and I'm so happy to see my introduction into the world finished. I hope you all enjoyed Zayn getting his happily ever after and enjoyed Quinn finding something he was never looking for. Getting into Zayn's head was a little more difficult than I had anticipated but I am so happy with the results. My poor man just wants to be loved!

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their visit with you as much as I have. Thank you for inviting us.

And you, Current Reader, if you are a returning reader. Zayn and Quinn are different from Luke and Aidyn, but I hope you enjoyed them just as much. It was a pleasure to visit with you again and I look forward to my next visit soon!

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