



Ravaged Bond

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Description: In exchange for the money needed to support his family, Omega Bryan Turner has no choice but to sign a mating contract to the minister of his small town, the powerful and horrible Alpha Josef Zamgarg. But Bryan has yet to fulfill his end of the bargain. He just can't seem to get pregnant. With time running out and his family's welfare on the line, Bryan desperately seeks out a tribe of feared barbarian shifters whose magic may be able to grant his desires... But when he encounters Gan, Nugai and Munok, the three Alpha shamans of the pagan tribe, Bryan learns they've been waiting for him... And the cost of his request is far more than he bargained for.

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Chapter 1

The weather in New Pixia had turned unusually warm for so late in the year. The deep aroma of the Grimault Forest blew across the town, entering open kitchen windows and curling under the noses of young pups, teasing them of a place they were forbidden to ever visit.

New Pixia was a small town. It'd only been founded forty-five years ago during the great expansion of the Xyletian Empire, when the Emperor had sent expeditionary forces and colonists to settle the vast tracts of untamed wilderness in the harsh regions of the western continent.

There'd been people living there, a few barbaric societies that had yet to catch up to the civilized world, and the colonists were given the go-ahead to push them westward into the primeval Wild Lands. The Grimault Forest marked that border. It was a dark place, thick and twisted with massive ancient trees that even the heavy logging machinery had trouble chewing through. It was the kind of place that could make even the most level-headed Alpha consider the possibility that the stories of evil spirits could be true.

Bryan Turner drew in a breath of the musty forest air flowing through the house and was immediately taken away, transported back to the dreams that'd disrupted his sleep for the past month.

Dreams... or nightmares.

They were always the same, always so incredibly vivid. The forest. That place, which

he'd named the holy ground--a circular clearing surrounded by a ring of towering gnarled trees strung with crimson fabric, like trolls holding the entrails of their kill. The men, faceless and numerous, encircled him, their naked skin luminous under the light of the moon. Then the three red priests emerged from the shadows, faces obscured by the robes draped over their bodies.

In every dream Bryan sat paralyzed, watching helplessly as the three Alphas advanced on him. That's when his body would thrum with a sensation he'd never experienced before in his waking life: lust. An unrestrained and completely bewitching desire to befucked.

Then every man's monstrous cock stood at attention, veined and throbbing, tips dripping with fluid. There seemed to be dozens surrounding him. Wicked grins spread on darkened faces, canines gleaming. Hands reached for him, tore his clothes from his body. He tried to scream, but instead a begging moan emerged from his lips. He couldn't possibly want this to happen, and yet his body responded to it. His cock was impossibly hard, his entrance soaking wet, dying to be filled over and over and over.

Most of all, he wanted them. The red priests. But they never moved. And when the first cock was about to be thrust into his wanting asshole, that was always when he snapped awake, terrified, drenched in sweat, his cock throbbing and soaked with his own come.

Why was it that he couldn't orgasm any other way? For his entire adult life, Bryan had found arousal and climax to be an enigma. He'd never been able to make himself come, and his Alpha certainly couldn't. Not that Josef tried. Bryan was simply a sex toy to the man. As long as he was satisfied, that was all that mattered.

And of course, he wanted a child. But that hadn't happened, either. Three months of being mated, of having that despicable man's seed dumped into him, Bryan hadn't

become pregnant.

"Traitors," Josef grunted to Dan Whitetail, who was the Minister from the neighboring colony of New Lykia. The two Alphas sat naked next to each other on the couch. Like Josef, Mr. Whitetail was a large man, and his bulbous belly hung down so far that the man could hardly make out his own privates anymore. They were both old enough to be Bryan's father, as were most of the Ministers throughout the Xyletian colonies.

"Yes, indeed," Mr. Whitetail replied, leaning back into the couch and tilting his hips in an attempt to make his cock stand taller.

"Ludicrous," said Josef. "It's a doomed mission, Dan. No one can defeat the Empire." He gestured to Bryan, who was kneeling on the carpet in front of them like a good Omega mate was expected to. "Come on. Get to it. Do our guest first."

Wordlessly, Bryan moved forward. He would get this over with as quickly as possible, and he knew he could. He knew what Josef liked, and Mr. Whitetail had been over enough times that he'd learned his preferences, too.

The man groaned as Bryan took his stubby cock into his mouth. With no relish he performed his duty, sucking him down, cleaning his smelly member with his saliva. He reached over and stroked Josef at the same time, twisting his hand in the way that he liked.

"The Emperor is dead, Josef," Mr. Whitetail said between satisfied moans. "The capital is in the hands of those two traitors, and from what I've heard, they have agents all across the Empire who are independently taking control of territory. It's not good."

"And what are you implying?" Josef demanded. "That the Empire will fall?"

"I'm saying that we must prepare for the worst. The war may come this side of the world. Ahh,fuck." He tilted his head back. "And I might come already."

Josef grabbed a handful of Bryan's blond hair and yanked him off of the man's cock. "No, dammit. We're just getting started. Mine,now." He pulled Bryan's face over and jammed his dick into his throat. Bryan gagged but held it together, blinking away tears. He was afraid to further displease the Alpha--there was too much on the line.

"Don't tell me about war," Josef said. "You're so far east that you've forgotten about the damn threat from the forest. We have to deal with suppressing those barbarians. You'd think by now they'd get the idea that there's no place for them here. But no. We push deeper and still find their damn villages right there, just beyond the border." He grunted. "Fuck. Enough of this. Bryan, present yourself."

Bryan did as he was told, backing off and getting down onto all fours.

Josef sniffed. "You let me have a go at your Omega last week. Why don't you go ahead and fuck Bryan, Dan?"

"Oh, with pleasure."

"Use a sheath. Wouldn't want you to get him pregnant. Though I'm beginning to doubt he's even functioning. Any longer and I might just have to return him."

A sudden panic struck Bryan. "No," he begged. "Please don't. My family needs the money, and--"

"Then you better hope you get pregnant soon. One more month and no child, and the deal is void."

"It'll happen," Bryan said. "The healers say it can take some time. I promise, it will

happen, so please don't break the mate contract."

Josef grabbed Bryan's face and leaned in close. "It better happen." He pushed him, sending the Omega to the floor. "Enough. You're making our guest feel uncomfortable."

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Whitetail unrolled a condom onto his cock. "We ought to be prepared, Josef. How long will the colonies stand while the nation is being torn apart?" Bryan felt his clammy palm grip his ass, and then the press of his cock against his entrance. He wasn't wet, but that didn't stop the man from thrusting in anyway. Bryan cried out and immediately had his mouth stuffed with Josef's fat member. The two Alphas fucked him, and Bryan allowed his mind to float away to other places as he always did when serving Josef's needs.

Why hadn't he been able to get pregnant?

The healers had said it could take time, but this much time? Especially when Josef was filling him up nearly every night? He'd secretly visited the healer clinic and had them run some tests on him to make sure that everything was normal. Now he was waiting to learn the results. If he couldn't fulfill his side of the contract, his parents would lose the thousand mark dowry and the yearly support payment that had been agreed on. And if that happened...

If he were to be sent back home as defective goods, he couldn't imagine the kind of wrath he'd face. Josef Zamgarg was New Pixia's Minister. He was the most powerful man in the colony, and to be mated to him was a "privilege that any right-headed Beta or Omega would kill for." His mother's words, of course. But it was more than prestige. The money was supporting his injured father, who up until a year ago had been the family's sole source of income, and his younger brother who was only eight. Before the sickness, his father had been a foreman in the forest clearing effort, a respected Alpha commanding teams of men and machinery to fell the massive Grimault trees and fight off Direlings, the barbaric cult of indigenous shifters who lived beyond the border.

He didn't care about his mother, but he couldn't let his father and brother down. As an Omega, being mated to a good Alpha was the only thing he could do to help the family. So he had to get pregnant. He had to make Josef happy.

Whitetail pounded into him, his sweaty stomach slapping against Bryan's ass with each thrust. He wrapped his arms around Bryan's waist and leaned over him, panting into his ear, his hot repugnant breath tickling the back of his neck. Bryan clenched at the carpet, fighting through the pain and resisting the reflex to clench his teeth in agony--accidentally biting off Josef's dick would probably not do him any favors.

He wished he'd used lubricant. It didn't make it enjoyable, just less of a nuisance. A little more bearable. At least Whitetail wasn't as rough as Josef was.

Back when this whole arrangement had been settled, during those first horrible nights in the Alpha's home, there would've been no way Bryan could've ever imagined growing accustomed to this abuse. But a part of him had died and withered away. He was almost numb to it, now. Almost.

With a groan, Whitetail thrust in as deep as he could manage, his body shuddering as he came. His cock bulged in a weak knot, and when it subsided the man withdrew and stumbled back, heaving himself onto the couch as he gasped for breath.

Josef came not long after, spilling his bitter semen into Bryan's mouth and onto his lips and cheek. He rose to his feet and left Bryan on the floor as he went to the liquor cabinet and filled two crystal glasses with brandy. "He's not as lively as yours, but he's learning." He handed a glass to Whitetail. "How'd you like it?"

"I must say, Josef, I've been waiting to try him ever since he was mated to you. Delicious young thing. But you're right. My Erik has his skills. I'll bring him for you again next time."

Josef raised his glass in a salute and then turned to Bryan. "Clean him up. Don't you dare spill a drop on that couch."

Bryan crawled over to Whitetail and carefully tugged the condom from his sagging cock, tying the end in a knot.

"Tongue," Josef commanded, stopping him as he turned to dispose of the rubber. "He's still dirty."

Without protest, Bryan lapped the residual semen from Whitetail's cock. Whitetail laughed and sipped his drink. "He knows his place much more than Erik does."

"Of course. He has to. You see, Dan, it helps when they need you."

Whitetail nodded. "Alright, that's enough. You've done a fine job, little puppy. Run off, now."

Josef snapped his fingers and pointed to his lap. "Come here."

Bryan disposed of the condom in the trash and then quietly sat in the man's lap. He swallowed his disgust as Josef's slug-like fingers began to make their way around his waist, caressing him.

"Anyway, whatever happens in the motherland doesn't really matter," Josef said. "Xyletia remains strong as long as its colonies remain. There's no possible way they could overcome the entire empire. We're the most powerful nation in the world. And we are the most powerful men in the western colonies."

Bryan felt the man's cock stiffen against his rear. He grabbed Bryan's thighs and pulled his legs back with surprising strength, exposing him. "No one can touch us," Josef said, and without any warning he took his raw cock and jammed it into Bryan's

asshole.

He fucked him in front of Whitetail, who watched with an amused smirk on his face. Bryan closed his eyes and bit the back of his wrist in an attempt to stop himself from screaming. He felt like he was on fire, like the man was tearing his insides apart. Every thrust was like being jabbed with a hot blade. It was moments like these that Bryan wished arousal were possible outside of the dream world. To make this bearable, that was all he wanted. But he felt nothing. That part of him was as blank and empty as it'd always been.

If it weren't for those dark nightmares, perhaps he would never have known the feeling of sexual arousal, of an orgasm.

Josef's cock throbbed inside of him as he came, knotting up deep. Bryan hated the feeling of it, but still he adjusted himself to take the man's come as deep as he possibly could. Josef wrapped his arm around his neck, pulling him against him. "It'd be a shame if I had to give you up. I love ruining your body." Then he pushed him off of his lap, sending him sprawling on the floor.

"Maybe that will be the one to do it," Whitetail said. "Then I can claim to have been there for your child's conception."

Josef laughed. "I wouldn't hold my breath."

Bryan lay still. He felt Josef's semen dripping down his skin, and all he could think about was if he truly was broken.

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Chapter 2

He was dreaming.

A part of his mind was aware of the dream, but he could not control or change the events that occurred. He drifted like a ghost, both observing and experiencing, and even though he'd been through the same thing so many times before, it still felt like the first time.

The branches reached towards him like greedy fingers as he made his way through the forest, following a trail of red fireflies glowing like eyes in the darkness. The path seemed to stretch to infinity, an endless reach of red starlight that suddenly vanished, crumpling inwards on itself like water spiraling down a drain. He was sucked down with it all, too, his naked body whirling in space, all colors and all forms mixing and coalescing until he finally snapped back onto his feet.

It was the holy ground, a circular clearing formed in the center of a ring of massive trees with trunks that could easily engulf an entire car. Bryan looked around at the monstrous trees, which were draped with long strips of red cloth that gave the impression of splashes of thick, coagulating blood, and he felt a creeping feeling of dread. He wasn't supposed to be here. This place was not meant for him.

From the dark spaces beyond the clearing, wolves began to emerge, encircling him like a pack surrounding their prey. Bryan had nowhere to run, and when he tried to shift into his wolf form, he found his responses dulled and sluggish. Trapped.

"What do you want from me?" he shouted, a question met with silence. Then, each

wolf began to transform into human form. Naked, their faces obscured in shadow, the Alphas closed in on him, their huge cocks hard and ready, eager to bury themselves into his holes.

Then the heat began. A low hum vibrated from deep within him, building slowly like hot embers re-stoked. He felt a tingling ache grow between his legs and inside his belly, and a hunger so great that it frightened him. He wanted every single one of them. He wanted to be pounded and filled with every cock until the itch went away, but he knew with absolute certainty that no matter how much they fucked him it would never stop until they arrived. The red priests. The three hooded demons.

The faceless Alphas grabbed at him; so many hands pulling at his body, holding him down, forcing his legs apart. He was cold with fear, but that nagging want continued to thrum through him. Their cocks were so close he could feel their heat. He wanted to both flee and to succumb to them.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"We know who you are."

The voice rumbled through him like an earthquake. He turned his head and saw them emerging from the crowd of Alphas. They were clad from head to toe in hooded red robes, their faces hidden by shadow.

Bryan's heart hammered. He'd never heard them speak before, never in all the dreams he'd had.

His body responded to them. His rigid cock pressed painfully against the cold earth, his entrance slick with lust.

The priest in the center came towards him and Bryan could make out two glowing red

eyes from beneath the darkness of his hood. He tried to break free, squirming and fighting and writhing against the hands that bound him, but it was no use.

"We've been waiting for you." The voice was like a thunderstorm in his mind. Then, the red priest reached up and drew down his hood.

Bryan screamed. In place of a head there was only a skull. A massive wolf's skull with piercing red eyes.

He bolted upright in bed, gasping and flailing his arms to fight away the demonic figure that still lingered in his mind's eye. Panting to catch his breath, he looked around the room and slowly came back to reality. Then, hesitantly, he reached under the covers to feel himself. Again, like every night, his cock throbbed from climax, completely soaked with come.

Groaning, he collapsed back onto the pillow.

Why was he having these dreams?

Maybe it was because of what Josef was putting him through every day, his mind processing the things he tried to suppress. But the orgasms. The deep pleasure and desire he felt. Why could he only experience these things now, and in this way? What was wrong with him?

Bryan had a bigger problem. He needed to have a baby. He needed to get pregnant. There wasn't much time left. If Josef broke the mating contract and sent him back to his parents, that would be it. No Alpha would take him, at least none that could provide the kind of compensation that he needed. He was an Omega, the only one in New Pixia, and that made him rare and desirable to Alphas, but if he couldn't bear children...

He poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher by the window. His room had only enough space to fit a small bed and table. He didn't sleep with Josef; not his decision—though he certainly wasn't complaining about it. Josef's mansion was set on a hill that overlooked the rest of New Pixia, and through the window he could see the lights of the town twinkling below. He could see the Grimault Forest, too, just beyond the edge of town. Smoke curled into the night sky from the logging machinery that worked to chew through and open up the forest. And beyond that...?

The Direlings.

Just like every other child born in New Pixia he'd been raised to hate and fear them. These days they mostly kept to themselves, but he remembered the monthly raids when he was a child, when the Direling wolves would storm the border and attack. The Empire sent more and more soldiers out to the colonies to help keep them at bay until they hardly ever emerged from the forest, only coming to fight when the loggers reached a new settlement in their effort to expand the Xyletian territory further west.

He'd never encountered a Direling in person, and he hoped he never would. According to those who had--people like his father--the Direlings were violent and ruthless shifters who worshipped pagan gods and practiced dark magic. But whatever "magic" they did practice, it certainly wasn't enough to win against the Xyletian Empire.

It was close enough to sunrise that Bryan didn't bother trying to get back to sleep. He went downstairs to start preparing breakfast. Having it ready before Josef woke was ideal—the less time spent in the man's presence the better. After breakfast, Josef would go straight to the temple to serve the morning prayers. From there, he would meet with the other town officials and take care of administrative duties until afternoon, when Bryan was expected to come serve him lunch—and his body. That gave Bryan several hours on his own, and he had important plans for the day.

On the way to the kitchen, he was startled to see Josef sitting at the table in the dining room, his face illuminated by the glow of a viewscreen monitor. He looked up at Bryan and frowned, turning off the device.

"What are you doing awake?" Josef demanded.

"Oh, I was just going to make breakfast."

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Josef grunted in reply. "Well, hurry it up, then."

Bryan nodded and went to the kitchen and began cooking. Half a roasted game hen, potatoes, sausages, a rasher of bacon, fried squash. Josef demanded these every morning. He ate vast amounts of food for every meal, leaving Bryan with leftovers. He wasn't allowed to cook his own full meals.

He fried the bacon on the stove and jumped when he felt the man's hands creeping around him. He grimaced, but tilted his head so that Josef could suck on his neck as his hands crept down to his trousers and grabbed hold of Bryan's crotch, squeezing and caressing it. Bryan's body didn't respond to the touch, so he forced out a false sigh of pleasure in an attempt to assuage the man.

The terrible thing about the mate bond was that Bryan did feel attached to Josef. He did what he could to placate him because he needed to, but there was still some sickening part of him that was compelled to. The bond ensured that.

"I think I'd prefer to have your little Omega ass for breakfast," Josef said. He yanked open Bryan's trousers and thrust them down his thighs. Then he pushed him over the hot stove, took his hips and yanked his ass back against him. Bryan cried out and threw his arms out to steady himself against the wall. The bacon grease splattered up onto the bottom of his arms and against his chest, burning him. The Alpha tugged out his erect cock and pushed it against him.

"Wait," Bryan said. "Please use the lubricant, I'm not wet..."

Josef snarled angrily, and he grabbed Bryan by the arm and flung him to the floor.

With his pants pooled around his ankles, Bryan had no way of catching himself. He crashed painfully against the tile.

"What's the matter with you? Does your hole not work properly? Is that why you can't ever get wet?" He leaned over him. "Or do you just hate it that much?"

Bryan glared back at him but made no reply. Josef stood and tucked himself back into his pants. "Forget it. You know, it really is a shame that you can't function right. For both you and I. I don't want to have to settle for a Beta but if you won't give me what was promised, I have no use for you." He nodded towards the stove. "The bacon is burning." He left the kitchen.

Bryan made no complaint, no response whatsoever. He stood, brushed himself off, and pulled up his trousers. Then he went to the stove and removed the scorched bacon from the pan and replaced them with new pieces. Grey smoke curled up to the ceiling, so he opened the window the air the room out. Outside, the sun had cracked on the horizon.

He did hate it. He hated it more than anything. But he would endure. He would suffer through it and do everything he could to make the man happy because that was the only power he had to take care of his family.

He had to figure out why he wasn't getting pregnant.

* * *

Once Josef had left the house, Bryan prepared lunch to take to him later. He cooked a bit of extra food and packed it into a separate container to bring to his younger brother. Josef forbade him from doing this, but there was no way for him to know as long as the amounts were small.

Bryan shifted into wolf form and set out for his old home on the edge of town, close to the stone wall which ran along the border of New Pixia, separating it from the forest.

His mother, Anna, was outside weeding the garden. She looked up and smiled when she saw him approaching. In the field just beyond the house was a large graveyard, which interred the remains of those killed when the first colonists like his grandfather had arrived. The edge of town had always been the most dangerous, the first to be attacked in Direling raids. It was where New Pixia's poorest lived; mostly those whose job it was to either watch the forest or cut it down.

Past the graveyard was the wall, which stood only four feet tall and was made of stacked rocks. And past that was the Great Clearing, an area of land that continued to expand westward every year as the loggers cut deeper and deeper into the forest. The trees of the Grimault Forest once hung over the wall, but now their stumps stretched for almost half a mile west until they reached the new forest border where the machines worked.

He shifted back to human form, and his mother came and wrapped him up in a tight hug. Bryan hugged her back, but with slight hesitation.

"Mother," he said.

"Hello, Bryan," she said, smiling sweetly. "We weren't expecting you today."

"No, but I wanted to see Father. And I brought some lunch for Lukas."

"Oh," she said, looking surprised. "Well, isn't that nice. Just for Lukas?"

"You know that I'm not even allowed to do that, Mother. I wish I could, but I can't bring enough for everyone." He knew his father especially could use the extra

nourishment.

"Hm," she said, turning to go inside. "It certainly must be nice for you to be able to eat so well every day. I'm sure Minister Zamgarg's home is bountiful with food."

Bryan chewed his lip and followed his mother inside. "How's Father?"

"Well. Still unable to stand, but the wheelchair you provided certainly helps things."

"Good. And... you? Any news about the job at the restaurant?"

She laughed. "Bryan, please. I don't have the energy to work. I'm an old woman, and I spend all day taking care of your father and your brother."

He frowned. "Did you not even apply?"

She waved her hand like she was swatting away a fly. "I'm beyond that now. Why do you ask me to work? I've worked my whole life."

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"Mother, you never worked a day in your life."

"Don't tell me that," she snapped. "I worked to raise you. To keep this home. To raise your brother."

The bare minimum, he thought to himself. All she'd ever seemed to do was complain. Why wasn't his father making more? Why couldn't they move further east, away from the forest? This, that and the other. It seemed to never end. So of course, when Bryan had come of age and been chosen by Minister Zamgarg, she was beyond ecstatic. Her golden ticket had arrived—or so she'd thought.

"Besides," she said, "Why does it matter, Bryan? We're now in the good minister's graces. Once you have his child, everything will be fine. And it's only a matter of time. And how is that faring? I know the Minister is a pious man, but you two are mates. Has it not happened yet?"

"It's happened," Bryan muttered. "I'm trying. It's just... It's taking a little longer than expected."

"Well. The Minister is an older Alpha. But that also depends on his mate, you know? His mate needs to sufficiently please him in order for his seed to perform as well as it can. Are you pleasing him, Bryan?"

He no longer wanted this conversation to continue. To his relief, at that moment Lukas burst into the room. In his wolf pup form, he skidded across the floor.

"Brother!" he barked.

"Lukas!" Bryan shouted, grinning. He pushed past his mother and the little wolf sprinted and leaped at him, shifting mid-air into a boy. Bryan caught him and spun him around. "How's my favorite brother?"

"I'm your only brother," he pointed out. "Of course I'm your favorite."

Bryan laughed and carried him into the kitchen. "Are you hungry? I've brought you some good things."

Lukas nodded hesitantly. He was a proud little boy and didn't like to admit his pains, but the food from the minister's house was too good to deny. Bryan set him down and opened the container of food, which he'd wrapped in a cloth. "Dig in," he said. "It's all for you. There's cuts of lamb shank, cheese and some apple slices."

"Yay!"

"How's Father doing?" Bryan asked.

"He's alright," Lukas said, stuffing his mouth with food. "He talks more now."

"Good, good." Bryan ruffled Lukas's hair. "I'm going to go see him. You enjoy your food, alright?"

Lukas nodded. "Thank you."

Bryan passed his mother in the hallway. "You know," she said. "It does worry me. It's nearing the end of the month, and you still aren't pregnant. Certainly the minister plans to extend the contract? He must understand that these things take time and effort..."

"Don't speak to me about this, Mother. I don't want to talk about it."

"But if the contract ends—"

"That's not going to happen," he said, glancing back to the kitchen where his brother was eating. "I can't let that happen."

Bryan's father, Michael, was sitting in his usual place in the bedroom by the window. He turned his wheelchair around when he heard Bryan enter, slowly rolling himself towards him. Bryan would never be able to get used to his father's diminished appearance. He'd always been such a strong figure, a trained soldier and logger whose physical prowess was his pride and calling card. But now, ever since the sickness had consumed him, he was so gaunt and weak, hardly able to move himself around.

"Bryan," he said, his voice nearly a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"I had some time, so I thought I'd come by and visit." He bent down and gently hugged him. He remembered the massive hugs his father used to give him, squeezing him so tight he thought he would nearly pop. Impossible now. "How are you feeling?"

"What do you think?" he asked with a slight smile. "Like absolute shit. But I live." He turned his chair around, his frail hands struggling to turn the wheels. Bryan helped him and pushed him back to the window, which had a view looking out over the graveyard and the forest operation off in the distance.

"Is this good for you, Father? Staring out there all day?"

"I like seeing the cutters doing their work. Damn mongrels probably fucking it all up, but I like to see. I'd be out there if I could. Wheel me right to the edge so that I could smell the sawdust and see the trees come down."

"You'd just end up shouting at the men," Bryan said, laughing. "You'd go right back

to work. That'd be no good."

"Yeah, well. That's where I belong." His father reached out and grasped his arm with bony fingers. "How's matehood? Is your Alpha treating you well?"

Bryan forced an easygoing grin. "Oh, yes. Things are excellent, Father."

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"Is he as kind a man as he is in the temple? I've never been one to trust a priest."

"He's... he is." Bryan looked away. He hoped his father wouldn't be able to see through the lie. If he'd had his strength, there would've been no hiding anything from him, but now...

"Then the arrangement was a good thing after all." His father groaned. "I should be out there. Damn healers can't do a thing for me. They say their medicine should be making me stronger, but I only feel worse. You shouldn't have been forced to take a mate."

Hearing him speak this way caused Bryan's heart to ache, but he swallowed the pain and put a reassuring hand on his father's shoulder. "I'm fine, Father."

"The healers are useless. There's some insane part of me that's willing to go the Direlings at this point."

Bryan was horrified. "What? Father, don't say that. They'd kill you."

"Or maybe they'd grant my request and use their magic to heal me."

"You're not making any sense."

He coughed a hoarse laugh. "I know. Why would they accommodate an enemy?"

"Direling magic isn't real, Father." His father had always spoken ill of the Direling tribes, so to hear him speaking like this was alarming. Was his mind going now, too?

"Yes," his father murmured in a low tone.

Why did he sound so skeptical?

"Father," he said slowly. "Direling magic isn't real. You know this."

"I've... seen things." He gazed out the window, his eyes distant and his voice thin. "Things I couldn't believe. Refused to believe. I shared them with no one. Not even your mother. Not even my own men."

"What are you talking about?"

"My first encounter with them. I was about your age. Sent into the Grimault Forest with a scouting party. We thought that the Direlings had fled far into the Wild Lands after the last incursion, when we'd killed their clan leader. But they were still there, not far beyond the border. They'd cut this... this temple into the forest. I don't know what else to call it. There was this ritual. I'd never seen such vile depravity. And in the center of it all was him. The man I'd seen killed before my own eyes. They resurrected him. They'd brought him back to life."

Bryan shivered. "Father, certainly that can't be true. And wouldn't everyone else have seen him?"

"All were killed. Except me. They spared me, for some reason. To tell the story, maybe." His father seemed to slump further into the chair, becoming even more decrepit. "I kept the details to myself. You're the first to know." He sounded vaguely surprised, like he couldn't believe what he'd just said. And Bryan couldn't believe it either.

"But... afterwards? The other raids? No one recognized him? Someone would've seen his face and known."

"I was the only one to see his face. I saw it was him."

"Father..."

His father pounded his fist on the armrest. "Dammit, Bryan, I know what I saw!" The sudden outburst sent him into a fit of harsh coughs. "Shit. I know what I saw."

"Okay," Bryan said, rubbing his back. "I believe you."

"Don't tell anyone. Especially Lukas. Or your mother. I don't want them to think I've lost it."

He agreed, but even he wondered if his father was all there. Not wanting to further disturb him, he didn't pursue the topic any further. The hour was getting late, and he needed to get to the temple to deliver Josef's lunch. He said goodbye to his family, promising them he'd visit again soon, and departed in wolf form.

He was worried about his father. His condition was obviously deteriorating and what could be done? Nothing. Just like so many things, he was powerless to help. He felt the shadow of death slowly creeping over his family's house, ready to slip its cold fingers around his father and drag him into the beyond. And he was worried about Lukas. What could he do to provide for his brother if he was unable to become pregnant? What would become of them?

As bizarre as it was, Bryan was unable to stop thinking about the Direling story. He'd grown up hearing all sorts of silly rumors about their supposed magic, like that they kidnapped people to sacrifice to their dire wolf gods in order to make the trees grow into monsters and take back the town, or they had the power to summon murderous wolf demons. The Direlings were frightening and dangerous, but they were just ordinary shifters. He knew that.

But his father had never been the kind of man to exaggerate what he'd seen. Or to fabricate. He'd always been no-nonsense, straightforward. Could he really have seen what he'd claimed to have seen? Bryan couldn't be sure. He didn't want to believe it, but also didn't want to believe that his father could be losing his mind.

"You're late," Josef said as Bryan walked into the temple. The great prayer hall was empty, the morning worshippers had long gone. Josef gathered the stack of handwritten prayers, raised them to his forehead to utter his blessing, and then tossed them into the flaming cauldron so that the wishes could be raised to heaven.

"I'm sorry," Bryan said, trotting up to the altar with the fabric satchel pinched between his fangs. He shifted back to human form and set the lunchbox onto the table. "It's lamb shanks."

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Josef's hand shot out and grabbed Bryan by the throat. He gasped and grabbed the man's wrist in surprise. "Stop," he coughed. He couldn't breathe. Josef was killing him.

"I've warned you not to be late." He finally released him, and Bryan sank to his knees gasping for breath. "Ugh. Don't be so dramatic," Josef muttered, opening the box of food. "I hardly touched you."

Bryan clutched his throat with a shaking hand. His skin felt hot where Josef's fingers had been. He slowly got back to his feet. "I'm going to return home," he said.

Josef waved his hand dismissively as he tore off a chunk of lamb from the bone with his teeth. "I expect you to be ready for me when I return."

Bryan hurried out of the temple. He was unable to bring himself to utter a single prayer. The gods he'd once trusted in his youth no longer held much precedence in his life. They'd all forsaken him.

What would life be like if he were to get pregnant? Would things change for the better? It frightened him to think that Josef would treat a child the way he treated him. He was so obsessed with receiving an heir that Bryan had to believe he would be a better father than a mate. Josef had always been very good with children. He was always so kind with them at the temple. But the man was obviously a skilled fraud. Bryan hadn't known his nature until he'd been mated to him.

He did what he could to steady his mind. It was during these long stretches of empty time, alone with only his thoughts, that his strength began to waver. He reminded

himself why he was here and who he was fighting for. He would endure anything and everything to make sure that Lukas was safe, even face the Hounds of Hell themselves.

For the sake of his little brother, no pain was too great.

But he didn't know if he could continue to protect him. He was running out of time. He needed answers.

On the way home, Bryan stopped at the healing clinic and asked to speak with Lulu Fielding, the head healer who had run the tests on him several days back.

"Bryan," she said, welcoming him into the examination room. "How's your father?"

His father's strange and disturbing episode flashed through his mind.

"He's fine," he replied. "The wheelchair is helping, I think."

"Good. And the strength tonics?"

He smiled and shrugged. "I think they're doing something."

"Excellent." She gestured to the table in the center of the room. "Take a seat. I'm glad you stopped by."

"I'm sorry for interrupting your schedule, Healer Fielding," Bryan said. "I was eager to know if the results had been completed."

"As a matter of fact, they have. I was going to call for you today, actually. It's a fortune that you've come by."

"Oh, good," he said, trying to subdue his nerves.

"It's, um... Well, Bryan, I'm afraid the results have shown that you cannot bear children."

He froze. It felt like the world had ground to a halt, leaving him spiraling endlessly. Everything was whirling around him. He grabbed the side of the examination table to keep himself from falling over.

"W-what?"

"Some Omegas simply lack the potential to become pregnant. It appears this may be the case for you."

"So it isn't a certainty?"

"The healing arts are never exact. But with the tests available to me here, I'm almost certain that this is true. I'm sorry, Bryan. I wish I had better news to give you, and—"

"No!" he shouted. "Don't tell me that. There must be something that can be done. Is there a healer in one of the other colonies that can do something? Or from Xyletia? I'm sure Josef would pay to have a healer sent from the capital..."

"Bryan," she said gently, "You know what's happening back in Xyletia. The country is in turmoil. We have no access to the healers from the capital. But even if we did, even if I could call the grandmaster healer himself, he wouldn't be able to do anything more than I can for you."

"Well, what can you do?" he demanded desperately. "What can be done?"

"Short of magic, nothing can be done, Bryan. I understand that having a child is

important for you. But... you should know that the inability to doesn't have to hamper your life."

"You don't understand," he said angrily. "You don't." He moved to leave.

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"Wait," she said. "I can speak Minister Zamgarg. Explain to him the situation."

"No!" Panic rose within him. "No. He can't find out about this. Understand? He can't."

Healer Fielding nodded, shocked, as Bryan fled the room.

He shifted to wolf form and broke into a sprint, his mind twisting within the news. He ran all the way back across town, back to Josef's house where he collapsed on the floor in his human form, crying and gasping for breath. He felt everything crumbling around him.

Why?

The only power he had as an Omega, gone. He could do nothing now. There would be no child, and the contract would be nullified. He would be sent home. No one would hire an Omega, not in a place like New Pixia.

All was lost.

His mind felt broken. He couldn't think straight. The world continued to gyrate and swirl around him like a never-ending vortex. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Short of magic, nothing can be done.

Magic.

No. Now he'd gone insane. He couldn't possibly be considering that as an option, but his father's story was ringing in his mind like a bell. If the Direlings could really bring a man back to life, couldn't they give an Omega the ability to bear a child?

"You're mad," he whispered to himself. "You've finally snapped, Bryan. Finally snapped."

But now his thoughts were running off on their own wild path. He was mulling over a way to enter the forest without anyone knowing. To find the Direlings.

The thought of death hadn't even crossed his mind. He couldn't have explained why, but he wasn't worried about the danger. The only thing that filled his mind was the idea that they could help him. When Josef returned to the house, Bryan was waiting for him in the bedroom. He presented himself as he was expected to every night, his entrance lubricated and ready. He barely even felt the pain of penetration. All he could think about was Direling magic. What could he offer to them as an incentive to help him? What did the Direlings even want?

He knew nothing about them. He barely knew what they looked like. He imagined a terrible, primitive people. Unkempt. Vicious.

As Josef pounded into him, his cock violently crushing into his insides, Bryan made the decision. He would seek out the Direlings. And he would give them whatever they asked in order to save his brother.

Chapter 3

There was no way Bryan could sleep that night.

His heart pounded as he stared at the clock ticking away next to his bed, counting down the minutes to midnight. He planned to enter the forest that night. Finding the Direlings had quickly become an obsession. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about it, completely possessed by the idea that this was the answer to everything. He was driven forward, unable to stop himself.

When the clock struck twelve he left his room, stopping to check on the minister's door. Inside, the man was snoring loudly. Bryan snuck downstairs, then outside. He shifted and began to run, just a trot at first and then a full charge toward the edge of town as fast as his paws could carry him. A short while later, he arrived at his parents' house, which was dark. The kitchen window was unlocked, as he expected. Shifting back to human form, he pushed it open and crawled inside.

Silently, Bryan crept into his parents' room. His mother and father slept in separate beds now, his father close to the window he liked to spend so much time looking out of. Bryan went to the desk with his father's old work materials, found the folded site map of the clearing project, and tucked it into his pocket.

Bryan stopped as he passed Lukas's room. He cracked the door open and peeked inside. It still didn't seem like long ago that they'd shared this room. His old bed was still there, on the opposite side of the room from his brother's. Lukas slept quietly, the blanket thrown halfway off his body. Bryan quietly entered and tucked his brother back in. He looked down at the boy's face and felt heaviness in his chest.

"I love you, little brother," he whispered.

Lukas stirred and opened his eyes, but Bryan was already gone.

He passed the graveyard and entered the field beyond it. He skidded to a halt when he reached the wall and shifted back to his human form. He peered over the top of the moss-covered stones at the vast clearing of tree stumps that stretched out to the dark face of the forest. It was like another graveyard, one far more eerie than the one next to his parents' house. He sat down and unfolded the map on the ground, using the moonlight to read it. None of it made any sense to him. There were a series of red circles marked all across the map, but no labels describing what they meant. How would he find the Direlings?

As he looked back out at the Grimault Forest, he felt an odd tension in his gut. Something urged him to go forward.

Why am I doing this? he asked himself as he hauled his body over the wall. The forest was calling to him like the vast space at the edge of a cliff. He felt the pull of the void, begging him to leap.

He shifted again and charged. His paws hammered the ground as he barreled around and over the massive tree stumps. As the forest grew closer it became monstrous, the trees far larger than he could ever have expected. He looked up at them with wide eyes, cold fear running through his body, but he didn't stop. He passed through the field of logging machinery sitting at the edge of the forest like slumbering metal beasts and tore into the forest. He kept running, bounding over the moss-covered boulders and downed logs that had been rotting away for centuries in the dark understory. It felt like he was fleeing something, only he was running the wrong way...

The air around him grew cold and dank. Finally, he stopped. Looking behind him, he

saw the lights of New Pixia glowing dimly through the dense trees. It was very far away. He was inside the Grimault Forest now, the place he'd grown up believing was the most dangerous place in the world. As he moved onwards, deeper into its belly, he wondered if perhaps he had a death wish.

Had he come here to die?

No. He shook the thought away. He refused to believe it. But who could blame him? Everything and everyone had its breaking point. If plucked at enough, anything could eventually unravel. Maybe he was just unraveling.

He continued, moving carefully through the foliage. Soon it became impossible to move at any faster pace than a slow walk. He sniffed at the air, trying to catch a scent trail that would lead him to the right place. The canopy stretched up endlessly above him, blocking the moon. Soon there was barely any light. He turned around and could no longer see the edge of the forest—he could no longer see much of anything. He lowered his nose to the ground, using his sense of smell to guide him, but he quickly became overwhelmed by the vastness of the place. There were so many smells—far more than he was used to. But out of everything, there was one vague musk that he detected, like the dimmest glimmer of light in a fog. Its warmth stood out amongst the dingy, musty scent of decay that pervaded everything, and something told him to pursue it.

It felt like every tree was watching him, reaching towards him with their spindly branches. Every snap made his ears twitch and his tail straighten. He kept looking over his shoulder, expecting to catch them moving towards him.

"Trees," he muttered. "Why I am afraid of trees? There's more to be frightened of than trees."

He walked for some time, still following that vague scent. The forest seemed

incredibly silent. There was no wind, no sound of insects, nothing. He stopped and raised his nose. It'd suddenly vanished.

Bryan scrambled up a slippery boulder, sniffing frantically at the air. He thought he caught the trail again and dashed down, but it again eluded him. Every time he thought his nose picked up the scent it seemed to drift away, like a taunting ghost. He ran blindly trying to find it, but nothing smelled familiar. He spun around, trying to regain his bearings. The forest surrounded him.

He shifted back to human form and pulled out the map, turning it this way and that, trying to make sense of it, trying to find some kind of landmark. "This way," he said to himself. He hurried forward and shouted as a branch snagged his arm. He tripped and stumbled into a large spiderweb, which blanketed his face and sent him into a panic. He broke into a run, shifting midstride, but suddenly the ground gave way beneath his paws and he tumbled headfirst down a small slope and crashed to the bottom in a heap.

"Dammit," he groaned, shaking away the stars that spun wildly around his vision. Then suddenly the scent was back, only this time it was powerful and all-encompassing. Bryan pushed himself up onto his paws, and when he looked up he learned where the scent had come from.

Surrounding him on all sides was a group of vicious-looking Alpha wolves, fangs bared, eyes glowing like fire. Bryan screamed in surprise and shrank back.

"Who are you?" he asked, though he already knew the answer. "What do you want?"

He'd found the Direlings—or rather, they'd found him.

Out of the group of warriors, three had intricate necklaces of colored gemstones strung around their necks. The one in the middle had jet-black fur crisscrossed with

wicked scars, and wore a necklace of red stones. He advanced from the group, coming towards Bryan. He was massive, so much larger than the average wolf. It was his scent that Bryan had been following. Bryan was frightened, but he held his ground and stared back at the black Alpha.

"It's you," the Alpha murmured.

Bryan shivered. That voice. It was like a rolling thunder that penetrated to his very bones. He knew that voice.

"I've been waiting for you," the beastly Alpha said. "We've been waiting for you."

A cold dread crept through his body as he realized how he knew that voice. He'd heard it in his dreams.

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They formed a circle around him and forced him through the forest, the three leaders at the front. All Bryan could think about was events of his dreams and the three hooded Alphas that had haunted him every night. There was no doubt in his mind that was the same voice, but how could that be possible? How could someone he dreamed be real?

The forest terrain began to change. It became less wild and dense, and there were soon signs of settlement. A dirt pathway wound through the trees until they reached a small village lit by candle lanterns hanging from the branches. The houses were made from raw timber, stripped of bark and lashed together with fiber cording. In the center of the village stood a large circular structure, with smoke curling out from a hole in the middle of its roof. On the very outskirts of the village, standing like two looming guardians on either side of the path, were two massive trees. Bryan stared up at them in stunned awe as they passed between them. The trees were draped in ragged strips of a blood-red cloth, just like the ones from his dreams.

The head Alphas entered the main building ahead of the group, leaving the rest outside. One of the two remaining head Alphas was a man who wore a blue stone necklace and had an intricate tattoo that climbed up across his side from beneath the waistline of his woven trousers. The other wore a green necklace.

"Shift," he commanded, but Bryan refused. He was frightened, and being in wolf form was always safer than his human form. "Shift," the man repeated. "Or I will force you."

Still, Bryan didn't shift. He didn't know how he expected to force him. There was a weapon that could make a shifter transform back to their human form, but these

people didn't seem like they'd have such an advanced tool—after all, de-shifting rods were rare and had barely made their way out to the western continent.

Suddenly, the man thrust his hand out and grabbed Bryan's skull, his palm covering both of his eyes. Before he could react, there was a swift and blinding flash. A burning sensation shot through his entire body, as if for that instant his blood had been replaced by molten lava. He shrieked and writhed on the ground, shaking violently. Gasping for breath, he looked down and saw that he was back in his human form.

"How...?"

The two lead Alphas hauled him to his feet and threw him through the building's fur-draped entrance. He stumbled and fell, rolling across the ground. There was a fire smoldering in a pit in the center of the floor, surrounded by hide and fur rugs that covered the bare earth floor. Looking up at the walls, Bryan saw they were constructed of massive tree trunks that had been propped and jointed with equally massive crossbeams. Everything was draped in that red fabric. The flickering firelight cast shadows around the room and caused the crimson streamers to glow like splashes of blood. The lead Alpha sat in a wooden throne raised up on a mound of earth on the far side of the chamber, and mounted above him was a huge direwolf skull. Bryan glimpsed the monstrosity through the dancing flames and felt life drain from his body.

"No," he whispered.

In his human form, the main Alpha was just as massive as he had been as a wolf, the sculpted angles of his imposing body draped with fur and leather. The red gem necklace hung around his neck over a bandolier that sheathed a curved blade. His skin was covered in long scars, including one that slashed across the side of his neck down to his chest. He looked at Bryan with piercing eyes.

"I am Gan," he said. "Shaman of the Uridimm. These are my high priests, Munok and Nugai."

The two Alphas circled around the room and joined Gan, sitting on either side of him. Munok was the Alpha with the blue necklace who'd forced Bryan's shift. Nugai seemed to always wear a thin smile on his thin lips. His narrowed eyes glared at Bryan with soft amusement.

"And you are Bryan Turner," Munok said.

"How do you know my name?" Bryan asked.

"Come before us," Nugai said, pointing to the furs spread out in front of them. From their raised perch, the Alphas towered over him like gods—or demons.

"We've been waiting for you for a long time," Gan said, rising to his feet. The dire wolf skull loomed behind him as he walked down the mound to where Bryan kneeled. He reached out and stroked his hand through Bryan's hair and brought his face close to his neck. "I know why you've come."

Bryan was overtaken by the Alpha's presence. He could taste his scent with every breath. He had an energy, an aura. Bryan had never experienced anything like it before. And there was something else, a kindling deep inside, like a tiny flame growing brighter with each second.

What was this feeling?

Munok and Nugai descended from their thrones. Munok knelt in front of Bryan and leaned in close, bringing his palms to the Omega's temples. Bryan gasped. It felt as if a jolt of static electricity had passed through his head. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice trailing off as all strength sapped from his body. He felt like he was

floating. Behind Munok, the dire wolf skull seemed to move, watching them as the flames made shadows dance across its grinning visage.

Nugai took Bryan's hand and turned it over, palm up. Then he drew a gleaming blade from his belt and held it up towards the skull. "Uri, grant this union."

Munok closed his eyes and began to murmur a strange, droning chant. His hands, still pressed to Bryan's head, felt like they were glowing with heat.

"Wait," Bryan said, but his voice was slurred and slow. "What are you..." He tensed as cold steel bit his palm. He looked down and saw the blade in Nugai's hand and the pearl of blood that grew from the wound. Nugai placed a small stone bowl beneath his hand and collected the drops that fell, and then placed the bowl inside the skull's jaws.

Munok's chant grew louder. Gan moved behind Bryan, his huge hands slipping around his neck. They explored down to his chest and slipped beneath his shirt, and then in one explosive motion, ripped the garment down the center. It fell from his shoulders to the floor.

The chant was reaching a guttural crescendo, the Alpha's voice echoing about the room, filling the space and Bryan's head. The Omega's eyes rolled back. It felt like fingers were reaching into his mind, plucking through his thoughts. He had no power to resist or fight back, but also had no desire to. The fingers grasped at some invisible strand running through Bryan's being that had been anchored there when Josef Zamgarg had first mated him. They pulled it taut, and suddenly a shrill alarm penetrated through his entire body, sending goosebumps erupting across his skin. Gan locked his arms around his body, holding him as he began to writhe and shake, screaming as the piercing wail became too much to bear.

Then, in an instant, the strand snapped. Everything stopped and Bryan slumped.

Munok withdrew his hands and nodded to Gan. "It is done. The bond has been severed."

Nugai threw a handful of something across the fire, which exploded into a glitter of sparks that twisted upwards to the hole in the roof. The place filled with the thick smell of incense.

"Under the blessing of Uri, you've finally been brought to us," Gan said. Bryan began to see trails of light and color, and the Alpha's voice reverberated endlessly in his mind. The three Alphas stood and removed their garments, dropping them to the floor. Bryan looked up at them with bleary eyes as the world continued to tremble madly around him. His heart pounded wildly. He should've been afraid, but all he could feel was that flame inside himself building and growing. His eyes moved across their naked bodies, watching the firelight dance across every curve and ripple of muscle, every scar and vein. Their cocks stood erect, impossibly prodigious in their size.

A strange hum began from somewhere deep within Bryan's gut, like a vibration from a plucked wire. He felt its pulsing ripples traveling through him, tugging on his heart and putting a strange ache into his crotch. He squirmed as heat built between his legs like a furnace, charging his body with a hunger he'd never experienced before in his waking life. He needed them. He needed to know the taste of their cocks, and he needed them to satisfy this impossible ache that had settled down below and throbbed through his loins. He needed to be filled. He needed to be taken.

He should've been frightened. His dreams had become a reality, but this felt far from a nightmare. When Gan flipped him over onto his stomach, he didn't resist or protest. He lifted his hips so that the Direling Alphas could strip him naked. Gan's huge palms pressed against his ass cheeks, spreading them open. An electric jolt of pleasure shot through his body as something warm teased his entrance. Gan was tasting him, swirling his tongue around his hole. Bryan pushed his face into the soft fur and

clutched at it with his fists. Every inch of his skin tingled with heightened sensitivity, and having the Alpha's tongue exploring him was driving him to a fit of ecstasy.

Then he felt another set of lips on his skin. It was Munok, tasting his ass cheek and kissing upwards across his lower back. Bryan's cock pressed hard against the fur, the hardest it'd ever been in his life. His hole was dying to be filled, the heat inside of him blazing wildly.

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What was happening to him? Was this the Direling magic? The questions shimmered through his mind and quickly vanished as more pleasure arced through him. He could hardly form thoughts.

Nugai stroked himself and muttered a low incantation as he watched the other two work on Bryan. He threw another handful of incense into the fire and it shot a twist of green sparks up into the air.

Then, Gan grabbed Bryan's hips and pulled him so that he was on all fours, his ass raised into the air. His chin glistened with the Omega's wetness and he wiped it with the back of his hand, his smoldering eyes fixed on Bryan's hole.

"It's time," he said. "You will be my mate."

Bryan screamed as the Alpha's huge cock penetrated him with one clean thrust, but his reaction wasn't because of pain. He wasn't used to this. It was more than pleasure—this feeling transcended everything else. It was deep and primal, like his very life's purpose was being met. At that moment, this was everything he wanted. His cries became guttural as the Alpha slammed into him, filling him up to a level that Josef Zamgarg could only dream of reaching. Then he sensed more. He looked up with hazy eyes and saw two other cocks waiting for him. Munok pushed forward, bringing his member to his face, and Bryan didn't hesitate to show him what he could do. The tattooed Alpha's face scrunched in a snarl of satisfaction as Bryan sealed his lips around him. His hand found Nugai's cock and he began to stroke him, too.

Josef had forced him to learn how to please multiple Alphas, but this was nothing like those emotionless, loathsome sessions. Bryan wanted this. Every part of him was

being quenched with a pleasure that had once only seemed possible in his dreams.

Gan drove him into a frenzy. The delicious pressure of his member touched his deepest spots and he could feel the man's primal energy with every thrust. He moved his lips from Munok to Nugai's cock, his moans muffled by the thrust of his girth down his throat. The fire roared and crackled, radiating its brilliant heat through the room and gleaming off their sweaty bodies.

Bryan's own cock throbbed achingly, every thrust pushing against spots of pleasure he never knew existed. Something was building. He wanted more.

"Do you know who is taking you?" Gan growled into Bryan's ear. "I am the shaman of the Uridimm. It was your fate to come here tonight. And if the great Uri blesses it, you will have your wish. You will be the mate of a king."

The words echoed around Bryan's mind. He was too far gone to respond with anything except a moan. He was in another world, drunk on the heat that smoldered inside of him.

Gan roared and buried his cock to the hilt, his powerful fingers clutching Bryan's waist. He could feel the Alpha's cock swelling up inside of him, anchoring itself with a rigid knot that put Josef's to shame. Bryan's body drank in the hot semen that pulsed from Gan's dick, and when Gan slowly extracted himself he felt empty, longing for more. The thirst had not yet been quenched.

Munok and Nugai looked to their king for his order. Gan nodded to them, wiping the sweat from his cheek. His huge cock dripped with a mixture of his own seed and Bryan's wetness, and his muscles twitched from exertion. "Finish it," he said, and he climbed up to his throne to watch.

Nugai slid beneath Bryan, his cock standing straight in the air like a pillar. Bryan

crouched over it, needing to have the space filled again as soon as possible. He grasped Nugai's cock, held it steady and then slowly sank onto it, accepting him inside. The cock entered him easily. He wasn't quite as thick as Gan, but he was longer, and his cock hit new depths as Bryan lowered to take him as deep as he could go. Nugai grabbed him by the hips and held him as he bucked in and out. Bryan's moans filled the room again. Nugai had a completely different energy to Gan. The massive Alpha had been explosive with his sex, full of power, but Nugai had finesse. His cock hit just the right spot with every deep thrust. His gaze penetrated as deep as his sex, and Bryan quickly became entranced. The man's eyes were a vibrant emerald, as striking as the jade necklace he wore around his neck.

Munok approached on Bryan's right. He took Bryan's head in his palm, turning it to face his erect cock. A tattoo decorated his pelvis down to his thigh, and Bryan's eyes followed it before he opened his mouth and accepted the Alpha back inside.

Gan watched the spectacle with a severe expression on his face as if he were judging their performance. The dire wolf skull also seemed to be watching, the deep pits of its eye sockets shifting from the shadows cast by firelight, making it seem like it was tracking their every movement.

Bryan was reaching his limit. The climax had been building and was now at a boiling point, and when it finally hit him his mind nearly tore in two. Nugai's cock contacted that perfect spot and set off an explosion that rippled through Bryan's body in the greatest feeling of release he'd ever experienced. His cock flexed and throbbed as he experienced his first waking orgasm, and it shot thick ropes of semen across Nugai's chest. The Alpha seemed to have been holding his own orgasm in for that moment. He snarled and groaned, pushing deep into Bryan's asshole and knotting up inside of him.

The waves of pleasure continued to crash through Bryan's body, contracting every muscle and sending his ears ringing. But he still continued to suck Munok down,

compelled by some profound need to please them all. He knew how to make an Alpha come. He was good at it, and soon Munok was roaring, his fingers clutching Bryan's hair as he came into the Omega's mouth.

The final echoes of Bryan's climax were beginning to fade, but his body continued to twitch from those last waves of pleasure. His body twisted on the furs, writhing in a shocked state of bliss. He couldn't control himself or even think. His body was wet, a combination of his own sweat and the Alpha's, his chin dripping with Munok's come and his thighs drenched with Gan and Nugai's.

The heat inside of him was cooling—this new hunger had been sated, for now. He watched as Nugai took the stone bowl from the dire wolf's jaws and brought it to the fire as he stirred a crimson powder into it before tossing the contents into the flames. Orange smoke puffed up along with an acrid smell. Gan remained on his throne; his gaze had never left Bryan the entire time.

Munok knelt and placed his fingers onto Bryan's forehead. It was the last thing Bryan saw before the world crumpled in on itself, enveloping him in darkness.

Chapter 4

A loud bangingsound filled Bryan's head, jolting him awake with a startled gasp. Josef stood next to his bed and slammed his fist repeatedly against the side table. Bryan sat up, bewildered.

"What are you doing?" Josef shouted. "Where the hell is breakfast?"

"Uh..." His head felt fogged up.

"I'm going to be late! Come on. Useless Omega..." Josef stormed out of the room and Bryan heard him stomping his way downstairs.

His heart hammering, Bryan looked around the room. A vague and cloudy memory hung in his mind of three powerful Alphas and a depraved, carnal act that he'd participated in. He couldn't get his thoughts straight. Had he been dreaming again?

No, the soreness between his legs suggested otherwise. He grabbed the blanket and winced. He had a small cut on his palm, slightly red and swollen but mostly healed. "Ouch," he muttered, and licked it. Memories broke through the haze. Gan, Munok, and Nugai. He remembered Nugai gripping his hand and piercing his flesh with a knife. He saw the flickering glow of flames on the Alphas' faces, highlighting their grimaces of pleasure. He felt their hands on his body, especially Gan's. The Alpha was beyond well-endowed in all aspects.

Bryan clutched his stomach as a strange buzzing sensation filled him, and he lurched forward in surprise like he'd received a punch to the gut. The buzzing was faint, but

he could feel it travel down to his groin where it terminated at the tip of his cock. His lips parted in a silent moan. Memories exploded through his mind like fireworks. Gan filling him up with his come. The swollen heat of their members grasped in his hands. The way they'd used him, shared him, and how much he'd loved it. Then he saw that dire wolf skull, like some ghostly specter watching the entire scene. Uri. That was its name. And they were called the Uridimm. Not Direlings, but Uridimm.

"BRYAN!" Josef screamed. "BREAKFAST, NOW!"

Bryan tossed the sheets aside and hurried downstairs. Josef sat fuming at the dining table, glaring at him over a viewscreen pad as he passed by on his way into the kitchen. "I apologize," Bryan mumbled, bowing slightly.

As he cooked, his mind wandered back to the memories. Everything seemed so far away. He grasped at pieces, trying to put them back into place. Even the faces of the three Alphas seemed fragmented and unclear. He wanted to remember everything about them.

A shiver of desire pulsed through him and he nearly dropped the egg he was holding onto the floor.

Thinking about these things made Bryan's cock hard and his entrance slick. He'd never dealt with this feeling before. He'd gone his entire life devoid of this kind of want, never experiencing the burning heat that he'd been told came to all Omegas—until now.

He wanted them to fuck him again, especially Gan. He wanted to feel the stretch of his cock filling him up entirely. He wanted to please him.

Bryan stared at the eggs sizzling in the cast iron skillet. The mate bond between him and Josef had not conjured up the natural feelings of desire it was supposed to, but it

had turned on a compulsion to be subservient to him. Not that he'd wanted to, but it was like his body had no choice. In order for things to feel right, he'd done what Josef had commanded. He realized that feeling had vanished. The connection had been severed. Aside from needing to please the man for the sake of the contract, Bryan felt absolutely nothing. If anything, the contempt he had for him had been amplified. It was like blinders had been removed from his eyes. He could think straight—at least when it came to matters of Josef Zamgarg.

A string of thick saliva dripped from his tongue onto the eggs, sputtering as it dribbled onto the hot pan. "Fuck you," he whispered, and scooped them onto a plate and then brought them to the dining room.

"You'll be meeting with the healer," Josef grunted, scooping a bite of the eggs into his mouth. Bryan sat with a cup of tea on the far end of the table, watching with quiet pleasure as the man ate the tainted food. "I've scheduled an appointment for today."

"What for?" Bryan asked, surprised.

Josef frowned. "Are you questioning me?"

Feigning submission, Bryan shook his head and lowered his eyes as the man shoveled more eggs into his mouth. "I'm going to get you tested," he said. "It'd be a shame to have to give you up. But I'm not going to waste more time than I have to on you."

"But the contract says—"

"I know what the contract says." He scarfed down the last of his breakfast. "You give me a child and the terms are fulfilled. If you can't, then the contract is void. Sooner I know, the less time I waste." The chair clattered noisily across the floor as he stood up. "I'd always had high hopes for you, Bryan. Such a shame if the only Omega in New Pixia couldn't bear children. Let's pray that's not the case. I know how

desperately your family needs my money." Josef gathered his things, and before leaving he grabbed Bryan's arm and yanked him close. His pungent musk smelled worse than normal. "I expect you to be on time this afternoon. I'm going to get my use out of you." He grabbed Bryan's ass and forced a messy kiss on his lips.

When Josef had left, Bryan sat at the kitchen table and poked glumly at a plate of eggs. Suddenly an intense feeling of desire struck him and sent that odd vibration in his gut humming at a new peak. He gasped and doubled over, clutching his stomach as he squeezed his thighs tightly together. His body yearned for their touch. He'd never experienced anything like it before. It pained him, like a fist squeezing around his heart that could only be released through their presence.

"I am going insane," Bryan muttered, glancing out the window to the forest in the distance. He didn't even know who they were. Just what had they done to him?

That ritual, Bryan thought. Was that their magic? Maybe they'd cursed him.

There was a part of him that doubted the entire thing had even happened. It felt like a dream and Bryan might've believed it had been if it weren't for the physical evidence.

The forest seemed to call out to him. He needed to go back there. He needed to know who they were. But most of all he needed them to quench this hunger that gripped him.

That afternoon, Josef accompanied Bryan to his appointment with Healer Fielding. Bryan was relieved that she was quick to catch on to the situation, acting as though she were running her tests for the first time and not giving away the fact that Bryan already knew what the results would be.

"I'd like a moment with Bryan if you don't mind, Minister Zamgarg."

"Certainly," Josef said with a good-natured smile, and he left the room.

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"I'm sorry," Bryan said. "I'm wasting your time doing this."

"No," she said. "It's alright. Listen, I wish I could do something further to help you. But you know that I can't falsify the results of this test. I can stall and postpone as long as possible, but eventually he will learn the truth."

Bryan nodded weakly. "I understand."

She looked concerned and touched his arm. "Will you be alright?"

"Healer Fielding, do you know anything about Uridimm?"

"Uridimm?"

"Uh, the Direlings."

Her expression changed, like he'd mentioned something extremely unsavory. "They're a brutal, savage people with little regard for a civilized way of life. I think it's dangerous to have them so close to our borders. Why do you ask about them?"

"No, it's nothing," he said.

She eyed him. "I know your situation is less than ideal, Bryan. And desperation may lead you down some dark pathways. I know about the rumors of Direling magic."

"You do? What of them?"

She squeezed his arm and smiled gently at him, the way a healer did when giving serious news to a fragile patient. "I've had many ask me out of distress for their situation, and I can tell you that it's all false. The Direlings are a barbaric tribe of primitive shifters. They're shamans. Their healing arts are vastly underdeveloped compared to ours. It's all just silly superstition."

"I've heard that—" He stopped himself from mentioning the story his father had told him, about seeing the Uridimm bring a man back to life. "Ah, no. You're absolutely right. I just have a lot on my mind."

She nodded. "I understand. You can come see me for anything, Bryan."

He wanted to ask her how he could suddenly experience such intense desires when he'd found it impossible his entire life. Something had changed within his body last night, but he didn't want to accidentally reveal what had taken place in that forest.

"Thank you, Healer Fielding," he said, and he excused himself.

He would need to find out on his own.

That evening, Josef bent Bryan over the bed and fucked him from behind. Bryan's body was as unresponsive as it had always been—until the moment he looked out the window at the forest and imagined himself back in the hands of the three Alphas. He felt his entrance growing warm and wet and his cock swelling slightly from the thoughts that rushed through his mind.

"Oh, you like that?" Josef grunted. "This is good. This is very good."

Even though Bryan moaned into the sheets, the pleasure he experienced came only from his fantasies and lust for the Alphas. The Minister's cock did absolutely nothing for him.

The sun smoldered behind the tree line and Bryan could sense something pulsing from deep inside the forest, like a heartbeat. It rolled across the land, passing through every tree, every piece of machinery sitting on the edge of the forest, every wall and building, invisible to everyone except him. It beckoned him, intertwined itself around him and tugged his heart and mind to the darkness of those trees and the men who waited for him there. And when the sky had gone black and Josef was asleep in his bed, Bryan snuck out to find them.

He moved through the trees in his wolf form, trying to catch a whiff of Gan's scent and quickly found it lingering in the air like a trail of breadcrumbs. He followed it deep into the forest, no idea where he was or where he was going, blindly trusting the scent would lead him to the Uridimm like it had the night before. It remained strong, and he followed it for a long time. They were the ones who'd found him, he recalled. He looked around and saw nothing but trees, no discernable landmarks whatsoever. He'd gone much further than he had before, hadn't he? And yet the trail had not diminished.

The forest grew even denser, but the thought of turning back never crossed his mind. He was singularly infatuated with the need to find them. The scent grew stronger and stronger until he was moving at a brisk trot towards its source. Finally, he stumbled into a clearing of bare ground, nearly tumbling over himself. His heart just about stopped. Surrounding him was a circle of massive trees draped in the Uridimm's sacred red cloth. It wastheplace from his dreams, the exact same. The holy ground.

Breathless, he fought the urge to panic. It was real. Then he sensed a presence approaching. For a moment the image of the red priests flashed through his mind, and then he smelled them. Bryan turned. Instead of three red hoods, he saw a trio of wolves trot out from the darkness, each one returning to their human form: Gan, Munok and Nugai. Bryan shifted, too.

"I'm pleased to see you've come back," Gan said.

Bryan stared at their faces, drinking them in, feeling the pull of their bodies. They were real. Then he was able to break through the spell and bring some clarity back to his mind. "What did you do to me?"

Gan came to him, towering over him. He touched Bryan's face with his huge, calloused palm and the Omega shivered as a deep need rushed through his body. He felt that strange vibration again deep in his gut, and winced as his cock pulsed to life. He wanted answers, but his ability to think clearly was quickly eroding. "I've never felt like this before. It feels like I'm about to lose my mind if I don't..." He hesitated. He felt paralyzed in place as the Alpha stroked his skin, his fingers trailing down behind his ear to the back of his neck.

"I've only followed destiny, Bryan," Gan said, "by claiming the mate who was fated to me."

"You feel the heat of a mating bond," said Nugai, his voice like a soft breeze. "It would only be ignited by your true Alpha."

Munok stood with his arms crossed over his tattooed chest. "Why do you think you came to us last night?"

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"Why? I was desperate."

"For what reason?" Munok asked.

"Because I needed to become pregnant. The healers can't help me, and I heard the Uridimm practice magic. But I never could've expected this. I've never wanted an Alpha before in my life. But now..." He turned his palm up, showing the wound. "Last night was some kind of ritual. Youdiddo some weird magic. You put some kind of spell on me."

An amused smirk pulled across Munok's lips and Gan broke into a booming laugh that seemed to shake the trees around them. "Through my long life as Shaman I've learned countless incantations to the great Uri, but none of them could have the power to mesmerize you into being in heat for me. Munok reached into your mind and severed the bond to the Alpha who falsely claimed you. The rest was as fate determined. Your body responds to me because it was always meant to be mine." Gan spread his palms, gesturing towards the other two Alphas. "Ours. They are my hands, and what belongs to me belongs to them."

Bryan recalled how he'd felt around Josef that day—even more detached than normal. It was the same way he'd felt before they'd been mated, he realized. Was it true? Did he feel that way because somehow, he and Josef's mate bond had actually been severed? He'd always been told that connection was unbreakable.

Another question lingered on Bryan's mind. "How did I get back last night? I woke up in my bed."

Munok answered. "It was uncertain whether Uri would grant the union. Leaving you with knowledge of our location would've been a risk. But you're here. You've not died. Uri has deemed it good."

"Died?" Bryan stammered, horrified.

"Never mind," said Gan. "What matters is that you belong to us now. As you always should have."

Gan grasped Bryan's face in his hands and kissed him. The Omega murmured a cry of resistance and pleasure as he succumbed to the desire burning within him. He couldn't help himself. "I don't belong to you," he tried to say, but the words got caught in his throat. Obviously, his body did. He knew without a doubt that he was powerless to control himself, that the three of them could make him do whatever they wanted and he would enjoy it.

His will crumbled, and he sank to his knees before them. This was different from how things had been with Josef. Eagerness bubbled up within him to the point where resisting wasn't even a thought in his mind.

Fated mates? Destiny? Why was this happening to him?

Gan's cock emerged in front of Bryan's face. Then Nugai's. Then Munok's. Their erections stood pointed to his lips waiting for him, and he eyed them hungrily.

"Why didn't you keep me here?" Bryan asked quietly. "You let me return home." He reached up and wrapped his fingers around Munok and Nugai's cocks, feeling their heat radiating against his palms.

Gan looked amused. "The Uridimm do not take prisoners." He thrust his hips forward and Bryan opened his mouth to accept him. "You choose where you go."

Bryan moved from Gan's cock to Nugai's and sucked him down, savoring the expression of pleasure that broke across the Alpha's stoic face.

"This wasn't what I wanted. I don't want this but I can't stop myself."

Bryan presented himself to the Alpha. He bent over and pushed his ass into the air, spreading himself to invite the first cock into his hungry entrance. His body was acting on its own accord—or at least that was what he told himself. He dripped with lust and his cock throbbed painfully, waiting to be sated. And as Gan's cock pierced him, filling him with that wonderful, satisfying thickness, he felt his mind begin to give out again.

What choice did he have in this madness? He didn't believe Gan. They had done something to him. He was convinced they were controlling him.

Gan's fingertips squeezed into the meat of Bryan's ass cheeks as he pounded deep into him, burying every inch of his massive cock into Bryan's hole. The Omega's depraved and unrestrained screams filled the air, reverberating off the trees into the open night sky. Munok and Nugai waited for their turn to fuck him, their cocks gripped tightly in their hands as they watched. Bryan eyed them greedily. Every part of his body thrummed with heat, taken by a feral need to have as much of their seed inside him as possible. He'd been reduced to a beast in heat, moaning and writhing against the Alpha's sex.

He thought of Josef and felt a surge of hatred sear through his body. He imagined what the man would do if he saw him being taken by these Uridimm Alphas—the Direlings Josef hated so much—and the thought gave Bryan such pleasure that it catapulted him to climax. His forearms scraped against the raw earth and his eyes fluttered back into their sockets as his orgasm sent electricity to every part of his body. He tightened around Gan, who let out a long groan as Bryan's orgasm triggered his own. The Alpha's cock knotted up deep inside, throbbing thick gushes of come.

Munok's cock soon replaced Gan's, pushing Bryan further into his state of frenzy.

Gan sat in front of him, watching as he was fucked from behind. "I know you have many questions," he said, and he reached out and touched Bryan's face. "What I can tell you is that we were always meant to meet. I've always known about you. Before I was of age, I knew about you. Before Munok and Nugai joined me as my priests. Even before you were born, Bryan."

"I don't understand," Bryan moaned, grabbing fistfuls of dirt as he clenched at the ground. He could barely form words or even thoughts.

"You will understand." Gan's fingertips caressed Bryan's cheek, trailing down to his lips, and Bryan found himself sucking on them, so eager to please his Alpha. "With fortune, Uri will grant everything you desire."

At that moment, Munok finished into Bryan, his cock knotting and leaving him dripping with an overflow of hot seed. Nugai didn't hesitate to take his place and Bryan was eager for more. He accepted him inside, bucking his hips against the Alpha's cock. The dark soil clung to his sweaty skin, his cries of pleasure so loud that he wondered if someone might hear. But they were deep in the woods, their sex hidden from the world.

Bryan came again, his body trembling with the intensity of the climax. He could no longer hold himself up. Nugai flipped him onto his back and drove into him, holding his thighs back. Bryan sprawled out on the ground, writhing against the earth like he was on his own linen bedsheets. I've become their slave, he thought. They've enchanted me with some dark magic to become their slave. Why else would his body react like this?

Nugai groaned, his face tensing slightly as he finished inside of Bryan. "Once you're with child, you will become ours forever," Nugai murmured. "You will take your

destined place amongst your new people, the Uridimm."

"I thought the Uridimm didn't take prisoners," Bryan said between heavy breaths as Nugai slowly pulled his cock from him.

"You will want this."

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"I won't," Bryan breathed. His body still shivered with pleasure, the humming vibration and the smoldering heat just barely quenched with their sex. How could he ignore what had happened? They had captured him. And more than that, Bryan didn't want things to be reversed. He was addicted.

"You already do," Gan said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have returned to the forest."

Bryan looked down at his dirt-caked body, wincing as control and clarity returned.

"Come back to the village with us," Nugai said. He reached out to help him stand, but Bryan recoiled. He couldn't reconcile the fact that he wanted to go with them despite everything he thought he believed about Direlings. It was like he was suddenly tempted to do something that he'd always known was dangerous. He'd gone his entire life being told stories of Direlings and how brutal and horrible they were, and now he wanted nothing more than to disappear into the forest with these Alphas. He was being tugged in two directions, and it felt as if he might split apart.

"I can't," he said, muttering to himself. "My family. I can't..."

Gan crouched in front of him. "This is a place for rituals and mating, not for conversation. Come with us. Clean yourself, eat, and we will speak."

Gan offered his hand and Bryan stared hesitantly. Could he even trust his own judgement? How much further down this rabbit hole could he go? He reached out and took the Alpha's hand.

He was willing to find out.

Chapter 5

In the back of his mind, Bryan expected the three Alphas to throw him into a wooden cage and keep him as a human sacrifice for their dire wolf god. After all, that was what the Direlings—Uridimm—did. At least, according to everything he'd heard while growing up. His mind conjured images of the place they'd claimed him with that snarling skull watching over their unholy act, and when they entered the village his heart began to pound as they neared the structure. He became absolutely certain that it was about to become his prison and he would never return to New Pixia again, but they passed it without entering.

The pathway twisted ahead of them into the darkness, the lanterns flickering deep in the forest. They passed little huts with warm firelight glowing behind animal hide curtains and smoke curling from thatch roofs. SnORES drifted from the homes. Bryan heard a mother singing softly to a crying baby. There was quiet conversation and hushed laughter. Restrained murmurs of pleasure. It was peaceful; the normal sounds of a village at night.

They approached one of the huts. Munok entered first and Nugai held the hide curtain open for Gan, bowing his head slightly as the Alpha walked inside. Bryan paused, afraid to go in.

"Come on," Gan said.

A crack of flint sent sparks flying, illuminating Munok as he crouched in front of the fire pit.

"Come inside," Nugai urged.

Bryan entered just as Munok got the fire started, and it quickly filled the one-room structure with light. The construction was simple but beautiful, the walls and ceiling consisting of uniformly stacked and positioned logs which were stripped of their bark, polished to a smooth sheen and painted with intricate pattern-work. Three sets of sleeping furs were spread out across the ground, which had been evenly tamped down and cleaned of all debris.

"Welcome to our home," said Gan, sitting by the fire.

Nugai brought in a large wooden bucket filled with water and set it down next to the fire, into which Munok transferred three smoking-hot stones that squealed and bubbled as they submerged. Soon steam rose from the surface of the water. In the far side of the room was a sunken pit dug four feet deep into the earth, its bottom floored with hardwood boards. Nugai climbed down the ladder with the bucket of water.

Gan gestured over to the pit. "There's hot water, should you wish to cleanse your body."

Bryan's face and arms were coated with mud, so he went down where Nugai was waiting. "You can keep your clothing here," Nugai said, touching a woven basket standing in the corner. "Tell me if the water is not warm enough." He left a small woven towel on top of the basket and climbed out, leaving Bryan in privacy. Bryan took off his clothes, put them into the basket, and sat on a log next to the bucket of steaming water. He used a wooden ladle to spoon the water over his head.

He found himself taken aback by the homely coziness of the den. It was nothing like the place they'd brought him the night before, and it certainly wasn't anything like he imagined a Uridimm home to be. "The Direlings live in the trees," a friend had told him once. "And in tunnels underground. They only come out to eat and to kill."

"Why was I drawn back here?" Bryan asked. He pulled another ladle of water from the bucket and poured it down his back. He couldn't see the three Alphas over the walls of the pit, but he could see their shadows projected up on the wall, dancing with movement of the flames as grey smoke drifted through the hole in the ceiling. He wasn't self-conscious about being naked around them. In fact, he felt more secure around them than he did around Josef, and that startled him. How could he feel this way about three strangers?

"This question has been answered," said Munok, sounding irritated. "How many times must we explain it to you?"

"It's alright, Munok," said Gan. "He's a Xyletian."

Bryan frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Have the Xyletians no concept of destined mates?" Nugai asked.

"Not everyone believes in things like that," said Bryan. He finished washing himself, and then dried, dressed and climbed back out of the pit. The three Alphas were seated around the fire sipping from wooden cups. Nugai offered a cup to him. It was filled with a hot, sweet-smelling liquid.

"Tea," said Gan.

Bryan was wary, but drank anyway.

"Sit," Gan commanded. His tone was firm, unshakeable. He was the kind of Alpha who expected compliance when he demanded things—but not the same as Josef. Bryan knew he was completely different from Josef. He was imposing and intimidating, but he had an aura of integrity. At least, that was what Bryan sensed. The problem was that he didn't know if his own judgement could be trusted.

Bryan sat next to the fire, across from the three Alphas. "The three of you live together in this little shack?"

"This 'little shack' is our home," grunted Munok.

"You were expecting something grander," Gan said.

"I suppose I thought the leader of the Uridimm would have something grander."

The corner of Gan's lip curled into a slight smile. "I'm pleased to hear you use our proper name."

"Somehow, I can't bring myself to call you Direlings anymore," Bryan said. He didn't know why, but it just felt wrong. Disrespectful. Not that he'd thought much about respecting them prior to the night before, but now that he'd apparently been bonded to them his feelings towards the Uridimm had changed.

"We have no room for extravagance," Nugai explained. "We share what we have and live simply. What matters is family."

"It'd be difficult for a Xyletian to understand," Munok said. "You take and you take. You value nothing but greed."

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Gan raised his hand to silence Munok, who lowered his head deferentially. "We do not hold much regard for your kind. The Xyletians have pushed us out of our home and continue to drive us further west into the wildest reaches of the forest. The bones of Uri grow dark, tinged with blood and a lust for vengeance."

"If you hate Xyletians so much, then why did you take me?"

Munok was unable to hold back a laugh. "He really doesn't understand anything. Remember, it was you who came to us. Why was that? By accident?"

"It wasn't because I was looking to be..." Bryan paused. "To betaken. I was desperate. Stupid. I wasn't thinking right. I thought that maybe your magic could fix what's wrong with me."

"Is there something wrong with you?" asked Gan.

"Well, according to Josef Zamgarg, there is. My family doesn't have much. When my father became ill, my mother arranged for me to be mated to Josef. He's a very powerful man in my colony—"

"We know who he is," Gan said, exchanging a look with the other two. "We were unaware you were mated to him."

"Then I'm sure you must know what kind of person he is. He did agree to compensate my family for taking me, but on the caveat that nothing will be given until I became pregnant within a month. With the amount of times he's stuck that disgusting thing inside of me, I should've been a long time ago."

Bryan noticed Gan's hand tighten into a fist—a reaction to his words? Was the Alpha angry on his behalf?

"But it never happened. And now I've been told that it will never happen. I'm not capable of bearing children. My family—my little brother—he's..." He found himself on the verge of tears thinking about it. "I need to help him. I need to make sure he's taken care of. And I'd gotten some stupid story about Uridimm magic in my head, thinking your people could do some spell on me to fix whatever is wrong with me. Or, I don't know. Maybe deep down, I was hoping the Uridimm would rid me of my responsibilities. I thought you would kill me."

"You have the wrong idea about who the monsters are here," Munok muttered.

"There is nothing to fix," Gan said. "You will bear a child. Not to that man, but to us. A healthy baby boy, who will grow to be a strong Omega. And you will bear many other children to us after him, too."

Bryan had to laugh. "I don't think you get it. I can't. The healer told me I can't." He patted his stomach. "Whatever goes on down here to make babies doesn't work."

"Your healer is wrong," Nugai said plainly. "It has already been written into time that these things will come to pass, just as you came to find us."

"How do you know that?" Bryan asked.

"Because I saw it," Gan said. "I've been dreaming of it since I came of age. My fate."

"You've been dreaming of me since you came of age?" Bryan repeated skeptically.

"Uri showed me that I would take an enemy as my mate. Even before your people came here, I've known this. Though it wasn't until more recently that I knew your

face—and knew of the children you would bear me and my priests."

Bryan frowned. The Xyletians had come to the eastern continent nearly fifty years ago. "Wait... How old are you?"

"Eighty-two."

His jaw dropped. "What? How is that possible?"

"Uri has granted me protection and long life," he said, and absently touched the scar on the side of his neck.

"So, you can do magic."

"It's only the will of Uri. Things happen, or they don't." He reached out and put his hand onto Bryan's chest. "You happened. Just as I'd dreamed, you came to us."

Bryan didn't want to believe any of what he was saying was more than superstition, but if he really was the age he claimed, how could he explain that? And the dreams? Bryan had also been having prophetic dreams. He hadn't known their faces, but deep down he knew that these three were the same Alphas from his recurring dreams.

"Uri has deemed Gan to be the protector of our people," Nugai said. "And you are part of that fate."

"Why?" Bryan asked. "Why me?"

Gan shrugged. "Not everything has an answer."

A log snapped, sending a swirl of sparks into the air. The fire was growing dim. "I will get more wood," Munok grunted, and quickly stepped out of the den.

Bryan stared after him. "Munok dislikes me."

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"We all have reasons to dislike Xyletians," said Gan. "Each one of us has suffered a loss at the hands of your people."

"And yet... you've mated with me. The three of you."

"When I first learned that I would be mated to an enemy, I didn't want to believe it," Gan said. "How could I mate with someone I hated? After a time, I realize that my destiny was greater than anything else. Seeing you in my dreams every night, I no longer saw you as an enemy, just as my mate. Understand that for my priests, the experience is different. They were not given the luxury of years to come to the same conclusions that I did."

Nugai sprinkled a handful of herbs onto the flames and whispered a prayer. "For Munok and I," he said, "our fates have always been to serve Gan. We are part of him. Extensions of him, helping him to fulfill his purpose as Shaman. We act in service of his greater destiny. But do not worry. I have no hatred for you. I serve Gan. And to serve Gan, I mate with you."

Hearing all of this gave Bryan an empty, sinking feeling. Was his only purpose in life to be a tool used by Alphas to serve their own agendas? He was used to it. And at least Gan, Munok and Nugai were different from Josef. But what did that matter? The psychic bond had been cut, but he was still chained to the Minister.

"The Uridimm raids when I was young," Bryan said. "And all the fighting before that. We've suffered a lot on our side, too."

"Who started the fighting, Bryan?" Gan asked.

"The Uridimm."

"Is that so? This was our home until the Xyletians came and forced us out."

"We didn't force you out," said Bryan. "We settled nearby and the Uridimm began attacking us and raiding the colonies. So, we pushed back. If the Uridimm didn't stay on the border and send raids to attack us, we could have both lived in peace."

"Is that really what you've been told? That we were the first to attack?"

"Yes, the Uridimm Raids.."

Gan shook his head. "Why should we have been expected to leave this place? It's our home and has been for thousands of generations. Look to the edge of the forest. Who is the one encroaching?" He gestured with his hand. "Our village wasn't always like this. Little shacks, as you call them. Dark and surrounded by wild, overgrown forest. We lived in the light before the Xyletians came, in grand lodges open to the sun, carved from the mightiest trees. There were hundreds. A beautiful, thriving village. The Xyletians burned it all to the ground. Some of the men responsible are still alive today. Your former mate may not have thrown the torch himself, but he was certainly old enough to remember it."

"I can't believe it," Bryan said, horrified. It was all against everything he'd grown up learning.

"I witnessed it myself," Gan said darkly.

"I'll show you." Munok had come back inside, cradling a bundle of firewood in his arms. He placed two of the logs into the fire and sat back down next to them. "I can show it all to you."

"How?" Bryan asked.

"Uri granted me the ability to touch minds. I can show you Gan's memories."

"Munok," said Gan. "It's too much."

"Let him see the truth. He should see it. Why do you protect him from it?"

"Don't question me," Gan boomed. "He is our mate."

"No," Bryan said. "Show me. Please. I want to know."

Gan rubbed his face, sighing. He looked tired. Pale. "Yes, Munok, of course you're right." He nodded towards Nugai, who then began to go through a series of clay pots lined up on a wooden bench by the wall, pulling out various herbs and mixing them into a stone bowl. Gan pointed to the space in front of him. "Sit here."

Bryan obeyed, sitting cross-legged in front of the Alpha. Gan reached out and grasped both of his hands, enveloping them into his huge palms. Chanting quietly, Nugai tossed the contents of the bowl into the fire, and it filled the room with a pungent smell. Munok knelt next to Gan and Bryan and placed his open hands on the sides of both of their heads. Bryan closed his eyes. Then, without warning, he felt like he'd been yanked forward by a rope around his neck. His vision shook with vertigo and he felt his stomach turn, and suddenly his mind was filled with memories that weren't his. They overwhelmed him, slamming into him like an onslaught of punches to the skull.

He saw visions of a quiet village occupying a landscape he recognized—it was where New Pixia stood now, only it was surrounded and touched by virgin forest. Roads and pathways wound through the trees, some of which were painted in ornate red patterns and beautifully carved with the shapes of wolves. He was in wolf form, though not

his own, running through the forest with a pack of young Alphas. He knew he was seeing Gan's memories. He felt it intuitively—he was sharing the Alpha's self. HewasGan. They ran and played and hunted, exploring the forest around the village. In a flash the memory changed. He felt fear, fury, confusion. Everything was burning. Uridimm wolves were fleeing as deafening machinery rolled down trees, the sounds of their snapping trunks echoing like thunderbolts. Through Gan's eyes, Bryan saw a wolf running with his fur ablaze. His name was Vor, and Gan had known him since childhood. In his panicked frenzy, Vor smashed headfirst into a tree trunk and collapsed into a smoldering heap.

The memory shifted. Ignoring the pleading of the others, Gan left the safety of the deep forest and stalked to the edge of what used to be the Uridimm village. Everything was blackened and burnt. He witnessed the huge tractors ripping up the ground with their treading as they bulldozed the remains of the village while armed soldiers patrolled the area.

Time whirled by. The surviving Uridimm had developed a small settlement inside the forest, eking out a meager existence, but the people found a way to be happy. They could tame the wild forest and rebuild and grow.

The rumble of machinery broke through the quiet of a peaceful afternoon as Gan was receiving lessons from his mother, Emi, the head shaman. He rushed outside and saw smoke rising from the edge of the forest and heard the terrifying cracks of felled trees. They were here again.

Their machines flattened the forest as men used flame weapons to torch the village. Xyletian wolves prowled through, rooting out the hiding Uridimm. Gan watched them slaughter his mother.

Years passed and again they rebuilt. When the Xyletians spread further into the forest, this time Gan and his warriors were ready to spill blood. They barely fended

off the encroaching soldiers and loggers as they made their way through, again using fire and machines to push the Uridimm out. The faces of those responsible flashed through Bryan's mind as Gan fought them. He saw people he knew. Gan was struck down and nearly crushed by a tractor as it plowed through the village before Nugai and Munok dragged him to safety. His body was mangled and on the verge of death, and they performed a healing ritual, asking for Uri's help to recover him. The face of Uri had gone dark—she demanded sacrifice, so the captured Xyletians were summarily executed, their blood offered to the dire wolf goddess, and three days later, Gan's strength returned. He knew his fate. He wasn't destined to die yet.

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Whiplash rocked Bryan, lurching his stomach violently, and suddenly he was back in the den, back in his own body, and he was wailing at the top of his lungs, tears streaming down his face. Gan slumped backwards, pale and sweaty, his body trembling. Nugai held Bryan's head between his palms, locking eyes with him.

"Look at me," he said. "Gather yourself. You've been touched by Gan's memories, you're feeling the weight of all of them at once. Gather yourself."

All of that loss and despair was towing Bryan's heart like an anchor to the bottom of the ocean. All of it felt as real and vivid as if he'd experienced it firsthand. He could see the faces of those who'd died—so many people over Gan's lifetime. He really was as old as he said he was, and had lost so many friends and family. And he knew Nugai and Munok's loss, too. He saw it all.

"It's too much," Gan muttered, rubbing his temples. "Munok, it's too much. Seeing it all again..."

"He had to know, Gan," Munok said.

Bryan sobbed and grabbed Nugai's wrists, pulling his hands away from his face. He collapsed against the Alpha and found himself clutching him tightly. Surprised, Nugai gently held him and whispered a soothing incantation.

"I'm sorry," Bryan said, recovering his breath and his voice. He wanted to smash his knuckles raw and tear the clothes from his body. He trembled violently as the images flashed through his mind, over and over again. He'd always been afraid of the Direlings coming and killing his family, murdering Lukas. He'd had nightmares about

it. But all the things he'd feared might happen had already been done to them. Innocent families slaughtered. And people he knew were amongst those complicit—including his own father.

Slowly, he managed to gather himself. He may have felt the memories like they were his own, but they weren't. He wasn't the one who'd experienced these horrors first hand.

He moved out of Nugai's arms and went to Gan's side. The Alpha looked at him, pain shimmering in his eyes. Bryan no longer saw a stranger sitting in front of him. He didn't fear him, nor did he question him. He felt a pull inside of his chest, like a magnetic force drawing him to the Alpha, and he knew without explanation that it was the power of the mate bond. He wrapped his arms around Gan's shoulders and held him close, wanting to comfort him in his touch.

A part of Gan had merged with his consciousness, and Bryan finally understood that something inexplicable had carried them together.

Chapter 6

"Ridiculous," Josef muttered to himself as he stroked his cock above Bryan's upturned face. "How long can a test take to complete? It's been nearly a week. Open your mouth."

Bryan opened just as Josef came, his bitter semen spurting onto his tongue. He swallowed the disgusting fluid and cleaned Josef's dick with his lips, milking out the rest of his come using his fingers. He just wanted the old man to finish and go to sleep so that he could sneak out.

"I shouldn't be wasting this on your mouth," Josef said, waddling naked to the bathroom. "But I've just about given up on putting it in your belly. I've started looking, by the way."

"What do you mean?" Bryan asked.

Josef smirked and splashed his face with water from the sink. "A new mate, obviously. I've had Dan Whitetail send me prospectives from New Lykia. There's an Omega coming of age next year, as luck would have it." He shrugged. "What's another year of waiting? Honestly, I'm looking forward to ending this contract. I'm getting quite bored of your lack of enthusiasm, Bryan."

Bryan was silent. He couldn't bring himself to beg, not when he already knew it would be fruitless. Healer Fielding could only delay for so long and eventually the results of that test would be in Josef's hands. And that would be the end of it.

At this point, Bryan was only appeasing the man to stretch his time out as long as he possibly could. Even though he knew Josef would not give him charity, he still held on to a vague hope that something could be done for his family.

He wanted to return to the forest and the three Alphas who waited there. That dark and once-frightening place now felt more like home than New Pixia did. He felt safe there, away from the Josef's abuse and the stained memories of the town that lingered in his mind. This place was tainted, and it made him sick to be there.

"I'd like to be excused," Bryan said. "I'm tired."

"You don't get make requests," Josef said. "I tell you when you're tired. I tell you when you go to sleep. Useless Omega." He stormed back into the room, tying a bathrobe around his potbellied frame. He grabbed Bryan's wrist and pushed him hard onto the bed. Despite his age and physical condition, Josef still had an Alpha's strength. He pinned Bryan down by the shoulders and glared down at him, studying him with angry, suspicious eyes. Bryan stared back, his expression blank. He wouldn't provide Josef the satisfaction of knowing his fear. "Get out," Josef grunted after seconds of ringing silence, and let him go.

Without speaking a word, Bryan rose and returned to his room, shutting the door behind him. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the wall, his thoughts racing. He was caught, a prisoner to the circumstances of his life with no way out. His entire being was drawn to the forest, constantly aching to return to the presence of the Alphas. His body was tied to them, like it was dependent on their touch, and each day he'd gone back to be with them had only made his attachment stronger. What could he do? Continue sneaking away to the forest in the middle of the night?

He'd asked Gan this question before, and the answer didn't bring him much reprieve. "Choose us. Leave it all and join us. Follow your destiny."

But he couldn't. He couldn't just run away and leave his brother behind.

If only the Uridimm did take prisoners. This life was the one holding him hostage.

He waited an hour until he heard Josef's snores, and quietly made his exit through the bedroom window, climbing down the side of the house to the ground floor. Soon he was back in the thick of the forest, passing between the two giant trees that marked the edge of the Uridimm village. He made his way towards the Alpha's den, moving silently through the sleeping town, when he spotted Munok sitting in his wolf form outside one of the huts. Bryan approached him slowly—he'd never been around him alone. Even though Munok participated in taking him alongside Gan and Nugai, he was still quite distant with him. Bryan sensed the distaste the Alpha had for Xyletians, and he couldn't blame him.

"What are you doing out here?" Bryan asked.

Munok looked at him, the blue stone necklace showing through his shaggy fur. He stayed in his wolf form even as Bryan came up to him. "A man is sick. I must channel Uri's attentions to him."

"Will he be alright?"

"I don't know," Munok grumbled, irritated. "I will need to be here until morning. Nugai is inside with Gan performing the ritual. If he survives, then we know Uri blessed him."

"I should leave," Bryan said. "I don't want to disturb you. I'll head back home for tonight."

"No," Munok said. "Your presence will be helpful."

"How?"

"Does that need explanation? Why does everything need to be explained to you?"

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you. I know, I'm just a Xyletian, I don't know things. I think I will head back." If Nugai and Gan were occupied, he wasn't going to sit around and be berated by Munok—even though he was craving him...

"Because it'll be soothing to me," Munok barked. "Sit. Please."

Bryan eyed him, surprised, and then sat down on the ground next to him. He was about a head shorter than Munok's wolf form, coming up to his shoulder. The Alpha looked down at him, sighed, and then shifted to human form. The two of them sat cross-legged, side by side on the dirt. Nugai's muffled chanting emanated from within the hut.

"I thought you didn't like me. Or at least, I know you'd prefer not to interact with me," Bryan said. "I completely understand the feeling of being bonded to someone you dislike, and I'm sorry about that. This whole thing—it sort of feels like none of us have had any choice in it."

"We haven't. This path was set, we're merely walking it."

Bryan hugged his knees. "I hate to think I have no control of anything, but that's certainly been my life."

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"Not everything is carved into stone," Munok said. "Sometimes, paths can be changed. Though some are permanent. I don't dislike you. I've always known it was my fate to be mated to you, just as I've always known it was my fate to serve Gan. It's all I've ever known. But it is hard to ignore what your people have done."

"I understand," Bryan said. He felt the pain of those transmitted memories surge up again. He knew who Munok had lost, and he found himself reaching for the Alpha's hand. "I wouldn't be able to either. And I can't, knowing everything I know now. I'm sorry about your brother, Munok. I can't even imagine losing mine."

Munok stared into the distance. "I suppose that was his fate," he said, after a long silence. "So, what will you do? What will be your choice? You can't expect to secretly come here forever."

"Lukas needs me," Bryan said. "I won't abandon him."

"Nor would I expect you to."

"I think this is one of those situations where the path can't be changed. Unless the impossible happens, I can't leave. And our people will never be able to open to each other."

Munok didn't respond, to Bryan's curiosity.

"Right?" he asked.

"We'd always understood that our fate was to be bonded to an enemy. But as far as

prophecy is concerned, that was the extent of what we knew. Gan's dreams never told much more. My question is, why? If we were connected, then for what reason? There is one explanation that I wasn't so ready to believe."

"Which is?"

Nugai's voice came from behind them. "A bridge," he said, emerging from the tent with Gan. The two of them looked exhausted. "A connection between our people."

"I just can't imagine that happening," Bryan said quietly. "There's too much on both sides."

Gan caressed Bryan's hair, gently running his fingertips behind his ear and down his cheek. "My Omega, you have much to learn about the Uridimm. It's your side who would not be able to accept a bridge. And it always has been."

"The Uridimm would be able to live with Xyletians, even after all that's happened?"

"Yes," he said plainly. "If good faith were offered."

Bryan shook his head, thinking of Josef and all the other colony leaders who'd used their power to spread fear of the Uridimm and had been responsible for the massacres. "You're right. I don't think we'd be able to accept it. Not with the way things are." He took Gan's hand into his. "How did things go in there? Is everything alright?"

"We've done all we can. It's up to Uri now."

The four of them returned to the den, where Munok prepared a fire and Nugai and Gan reclined on their sleeping furs. Bryan sat with them, feeling particularly useless. He'd been coming to the forest just to satisfy his own cravings. He wanted to be more

of service to them than just for sex. He wished he wasn't confined to coming in the dead of night when the village was asleep. He wanted to be a true mate.

But what use was he to them, really? Eventually, they'd realize the truth: that he couldn't get pregnant and wouldn't be bearing them children like they so adamantly believed. And when that happened, Bryan knew he'd find himself back where he started—with nothing. But perhaps that was for the best. He would be free, at least, tied to no one.

* * *

Bryan woke to Josef shouting in his face as he banged his fist against the wall. He'd overslept again.

"What is going on with you, Bryan? You're going to make me late, you useless Omega." He grabbed his arm and hauled him from the bed. "Come on, come on!"

Since he'd been returning from the village later and later, Bryan had been feeling the effects of sleep deprivation. Oftentimes, he would lay with the three Alphas as they slept, unable to himself.

Bryan stumbled hard to the floor, and Josef stood over him shouting profanities. "Get breakfast ready, you idiot! What am I wasting my time on you for? You're useless."

"Fuck you," Bryan muttered, pushing himself to his knees. He looked up at the man with fury. He couldn't take this anymore.

Josef's eyes widened. "What did you say to me?"

"I said, fuck you. I'm done."

"How dare you," Josef seethed. He grabbed Bryan's wrist and yanked him to his feet and then slammed him against the wall. "How dare you talk back to me." Then he raised his hand and slapped Bryan across the face.

Bryan's head rang with stars and his eyes welled up with tears, but he didn't back down. Using all of his strength, he drove a knee into Josef's stomach. The man stumbled back, spluttering bug-eyed.

"I'm leaving," he said. "Nullify the contract. You no longer own me."

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Josef's coughs turned to laughter. "You don't make that decision, Omega. You're bonded to me. You understand? I have command over your body." He grinned. "You can walk out that door but until I break the bond you'll be crawling back from withdrawals for my cock."

Without saying another word, Bryan hurried downstairs, Josef following after him. "Your family will receive nothing, Bryan! You'll rot. And don't think you'll be finding yourself work. Your reputation will be squashed to the dirt. I'll make sure of it." As Bryan left the house, the Minister shouted at him from the doorway. "You'll be back. You'll be begging for it!"

Bryan couldn't help but smile. Even though Josef would do everything he'd said, he was wrong about one thing. He had no control over Bryan. There was no mate bond tying them together; that connection had been severed by Munok. He wouldn't be back, and he relished the thought of that old man realizing the truth as his absence stretched on.

For once, he was in control. But now he was faced with the issue of his family, and he had very few options.

He made his way across town, not stopping until he reached his parents' home. His mind raced, trying to come up with some solution, some plan. He didn't know what he'd tell his parents. How would he explain that they would not be receiving the money that was promised? That he was incapable of bearing children?

The house was quiet, the kitchen empty. "Father?" he called. "Mother?" There was no answer. He peeked into his old bedroom and found it empty, the bed made. He went

to his parents' room and paused at the sight of his father slumped in his chair by the window, his eyes closed.

"Father?" he murmured, walking slowly.

The man was even more diminished than the last time he'd seen him, like he was on the verge of blinking out of existence altogether. Bryan approached carefully, fearful of what he would find. For a moment he was convinced that he wouldn't be able to rouse him, but as he got closer he saw his father's chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

"Father," he said, shaking his shoulder.

He grunted and opened his eyes. "Eh? Bryan. What are you doing here?"

"Are you home alone? Where's Mother and Lukas?"

His father blinked groggily. "Must've fallen asleep," he muttered. "Your mother took Lukas to school. What are you doing here?"

"I'm..." The words caught in his throat. He just couldn't find a way to tell his father. "I wanted to come say hello. How are you doing?"

"Fine, fine. Nothing to worry about." He coughed and hacked into his palm. "Did, ah, Mr. Zamgarg mention when we'll start receiving payment?"

Bryan's heart pounded. "Father, you know we weren't to receive anything until I got pregnant."

"Oh, right." He wheeled his chair away from the window and went to the kitchen. Bryan followed after him. Looking at the emaciated old man, Bryan thought about his

father's participation in fighting the Uridimm. He would've been too young to have been a part of those very first aggressions, when the Xyletians had destroyed the original village, so Bryan believed his father had been ignorant of the full truth. He'd acted under orders, thinking he was defending the town's wellbeing. But after the things he'd seen in Gan's memories, Bryan couldn't help but wonder if his father was now being punished for it all.

The old Alpha struggled to reach for a cup of water from the kitchen table, nearly knocking it to the floor. Bryan quickly helped him. "Can you wheel me back into the room, Bryan?" he asked, clutching the glass with his bony fingers. "Your brother will be happy to see you. How long will you be staying?"

"I'm not sure, Father," Bryan said, pushing the wheelchair.

"I hope everything is going well with the Minister. I've never been one to trust a priest. They never seem to have much good news."

Bryan said nothing. He felt some distress at the way his father seemed to be repeating things—he'd asked something very similar the last time he'd visited. How much time did he have left?

A wild thought occurred to him: could Gan, Munok and Nugai do something for him? Could they ask Uri, or do some kind of ritual to bring his father's health back?

He immediately kicked down the idea, telling himself it was ridiculous. Why would they help a man who'd participated in doing such terrible things to their people?

From the bedroom window, Bryan could see the trees of the forest swaying gently in the wind. "Father," he said in a quiet voice. "I need to tell you something about the contract. Something's happened, and—"

His father's droning snore interrupted him. Bryan stood and stared at him, wondering if he should wake him again, but he decided against it and left him snoozing in the room. He went to Lukas's bedroom and picked up the old toys scattered around the floor, toys that were once his own. He examined a figurine of a wolf with faded black paint and red dots for eyes, smiling as he remembered how he used to play with it.

He'd failed his brother. Walking out on Josef had guaranteed it. How could he expect to support Lukas with the most powerful man in New Pixia threatening to sabotage him? No one would hire him. No Alpha would take him. He was out of options.

Bryan went outside and stared out at the forest. He could hear the echoing whine of saw blades as the loggers continued their daily operation. He felt the magnetic force of his Alphas calling him to come to them, and he wanted nothing more than to go. If he left now without the cover of darkness, he would be spotted and there would be no way to explain himself.

"What bridge?" he muttered to himself. "What fate?"

He was stuck between the two worlds. He had to remain in one while he so desired to leave for the other, and it would be like that forever—or at least until Lukas came of age. But Bryan knew he couldn't last that long. He was already unraveling. Each visit to the forest spread his energy a little thinner as he sacrificed another hour of sleep to be with them. And now he would need to find some way to earn an income against all opposition. He'd travel to New Lykia or beyond and sell his body if that was what it took. But he knew that eventually he would have nothing left. He'd become like his father—a depleted husk.

The thought of asking the Alphas to break their bond didn't even cross Bryan's mind. Nor did the thought of stopping his nightly visits. The option wasn't even possible for him to consider—the mate bond was strong. The only thing that mattered more to Bryan was Lukas.

"Bryan?" his mother's voice called. He turned around and saw her coming down the path towards the house. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Hello, Mother."

"I ran into Healer Fielding today while stopping by the temple." She gave him a hug and ushered him back into the house. He went along with her; the mention of Healer Fielding piqued his curiosity. "She said she had some news for you and the Minister. She wouldn't tell me what it was. Is that why you're here?" His mother looked excited. "Healer Fielding seemed quite eager. It seems like good news. Tell me what happened."

Good news? Bryan thought. If she had gone to see Josef to tell him the test results, he couldn't imagine her seeming eager.

"Uh, I don't know, Mother," Bryan said. "I haven't spoken to Healer Fielding in a week."

"Well, you should find out what this news is. I'm dying to know." She went into the bedroom where his father was still asleep. "Kramer!"

He jolted awake. "Eh? Did I doze off again? Bryan. What are you doing here?"

"Just stopping by, Father," Bryan said.

His mother shook her head. "We could really use some good news," she confided to Bryan. "Your father needs better treatment. And I need a break. Looking after him all day is just too much for me to handle. I've been praying for that baby to come. Have you asked the Minister about extending the contract? Giving us a bit more time? I'm sure a man like him would understand."

"What if it's not good news?"

"Well, like what?"

"I don't know. What if... What if she says that I'm not capable of having children?"

She gasped. "Bryan. Don't say that. You'll give me a heart attack. Right, Kramer?" She took the water glass that was on the verge of tipping out of his lap and set it on the windowsill.

"What if that were the news, Mother? What would we do?"

"Really, Bryan, I'd rather not think about something so horrible."

"Mother," he said firmly, doing everything in his power to keep himself from snapping at her. She stopped and looked at him, startled by his tone. "How would we provide for Lukas? And take care of Father?"

He could see a shimmer of fear pass over her face as she considered the possibility that Bryan was trying to tell her something. All he wanted to know was that she would do her part to take care of things, to rise to the occasion for once in her life. After a moment, her expression softened. Bryan felt a sinking feeling in his chest as he recognized that face of denial, of convincing herself that responsibility was beyond her, that everything would be fine.

"Nonsense, Bryan. There's no point in discussing something that isn't going to happen."

He nearly did snap. The words were on his tongue. "I can't get pregnant," about to be fired out at her. But a knock on the front door stopped him.

"Who is that?" his father asked. "Someone's knocking. Waking me up."

"Can you go get your father some more water?" his mother asked, leaving to answer the door.

Bryan sighed and took the glass from the window sill and went to the kitchen. He didn't think his mother would be able to handle the reality of the situation, not that it was much of a surprise.

He heard her open the front door. "Minister! Oh, it's so wonderful to see you." Bryan froze and turned around. He had a straight view down the hallway to the entrance and saw Josef standing in the doorway. He wore a pleasant smile on his face, and he gave Bryan's mother a hug.

"Hello, Mary-Anne. Ah. Good, Bryan is here. I've come to deliver some excellent news."

She took Josef's hand. "Please come inside?"

"Very kind of you, but I won't be staying for long. I've come to get Bryan. He's been requested by Healer Fielding." Josef looked up, locking eyes with Bryan. "Her tests came back." His smile spread into a wide grin. Bryan felt a chill go through his body, like ice water being injected into his veins, and a strange sensation rippled out from deep within his belly.

No, he thought.

Josef spoke the words that had come into Bryan's mind, and his mother squealed with delight. Bryan's world came to a halt. The glass slipped from his fingers and smashed on the tile floor.

Pregnant.

Chapter 7

Back at his mansion, Josef slammed the door behind them and threw the deadbolt. "I thought you'd be grateful for my forgiveness. For not nullifying the contract for what you did. No matter. Everything is finally in order. Your end of the bargain is good and your family will get what's promised. And I will get everything that's been promised to me."

Earlier they'd gone to Healer Fielding's clinic, where she'd confirmed he was pregnant. "I don't know what happened," she'd told Bryan privately. "The second round of tests showed completely different results from the first. I must've made a mistake."

Bryan stood silently by the front door. The impossible had happened and he should've been happy about it. Lukas would be cared for. But after tasting freedom from being Josef's slave, Bryan wasn't able to accept he was once again a prisoner.

Josef poured himself a glass of brandy. "Just about bloody time, too." He took a deep swallow and poured out more. "Damn traitors. Calling themselves the New Adosh Empire. Ridiculous. They think they can take down the Xyletian Empire so easily?"

Bryan watched as the man paced around the living room before finally plonking himself onto the couch.

"Come," Josef snapped, jabbing his finger at his lap. "I'm calling Dan Whitetail over this evening to have a word about the situation in the capital, and I expect you to be ready."

"What situation?" Bryan asked.

"Nothing that can't be handled by the Empire," he grunted, swigging down another glass of brandy. "New Lykia may end up being the first defense against these bastards, and Dan says he wants to negotiate? We don't negotiate with traitors. It's completely ludicrous." When he realized that Bryan was still standing by the door he snapped his fingers again. "Comehere."

"No."

"No?" He laughed. "You don't have a choice."

"The contract states that I need to have your child. That's it. I owe you nothing else."

"You're my mate. You will do what a mate is required to do. Now come here and please your Alpha."

Without the bond, there was nothing compelling Bryan to do what he was told. "No," he said.

With great effort to heave his bloated body, Josef stood from the couch. "You will not tell me no!"

Josef went for him, trying to grab him, and Bryan evaded him and ran up to his bedroom and barred the door with a chair. Josef's thumped up the stairs after him and hammered on the door with his fist. "Where are you going to go? You can't deny me, Bryan. We're mates. We'reforever, understand?"

Bryan listened as Josef's footsteps thudded back downstairs. He sat on the edge of the bed and concentrated on controlling his breathing and the fear threatening to take control. He waited in anticipation for the man to come barreling back at any moment,

for his door to come smashing off its hinges, but it didn't. He was left alone for now, but Josef's words rang in his mind. He couldn't get away from him forever. He'd once believed he had the strength to endure being Josef's toy if it meant the health of his family, but now he knew that just wasn't the case.

He was pregnant. He had a new life to protect.

Josef came back to pound on the door three times over the next several hours, attempting to persuade him with kind words and false promises. Each time Bryan expected him to break his way in. His last resort was an attempt to get to him using his hunger—it was dinnertime and Bryan was starving, but he held fast and paid him no reply, and Josef eventually gave up entirely. It wasn't until a few hours later when he heard Josef's snores vibrating the walls that Bryan felt he could leave the room, but even then, he decided not to. Instead, he opened the window and climbed down the trellis. He had no intention of staying in that house. He needed to be with his Alphas.

Bryan streaked towards the forest beneath the glow of the moon, his fur billowing in the wind. He entertained the idea of running away and leaving New Pixia forever, but that could never happen. He may not have been bonded to Josef but he was still bound to him, now more than ever.

* * *

When he reached the Uridimm village he was greeted by the sound of ghostly chanting, like the howl and barks of hundreds of wolves in perfect harmonization. He followed the sound through the forest until he reached the holy ground, and was surprised to find the area full of wolves. It seemed like the entire village had gathered there, lining the perimeter of the circular clearing with their noses raised to the sky, howling in unison. In the center of it, all the lifeless body of an old wolf lay on top of a large pyre. Gan, Nugai, and Munok stood in their human forms, each of them

carrying a lit torch. They lowered them to the wooden pyre and set it ablaze, and soon the wolf's body was engulfed by a roar of flames.

Gan sensed Bryan's presence. He turned around and looked directly at him, acknowledging him with a nod before looking away. The ceremony went on until the pyre had burned down to embers, and the wolves slowly began to leave. They filed past Bryan, surprising him by bowing their heads respectfully in acknowledgement. They knew who he was, he realized. They knew that he was mated to the shamans.

"Sometimes, Uri deems it a man's time to leave this plane," Gan told Bryan as they walked back to the den. "He didn't survive the night."

"I'm sorry," Bryan said.

"There's no reason to be," Nugai said. "He was chosen to sit by Uri's side. The inevitable end for all of us."

"And now a new life has begun," said Munok. "Isn't that right?"

Munok's knowing smile made Bryan's heart skip a beat, and he unconsciously touched his hand to his belly. "How did you know?"

"We're shamans," Munok said. "It's our life to know these things."

They returned to the den, and Bryan couldn't help himself. He wrapped his arms around Gan and kissed him, and then took Nugai and Munok by the hands and traded kisses with them too, nuzzling his face into their necks and drawing in their scent. It'd only been a day since he'd seen them, but he'd missed them so much. They hadn't had sex in two days and he ached to feel their hands on his body again, and to have the pleasure carry him away from everything else.

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He pushed Gan onto the furs and straddled him, thrusting his hand beneath the Alpha's robes to reach his cock. His erection swelled in Bryan's palm, filling out to its full prodigious size. Bryan tugged it free, stroking it as Nugai and Munok moved to surround him on either side and stripped themselves of their clothing. Bryan took off his trousers and slowly lowered himself onto Gan's cock, taking the entire thing inside to the hilt. He cried out in satisfaction and relief—he'd been craving this feeling, needing to have them inside of him again so badly. He rode Gan as he sucked down Nugai's member and stroked Munok with his free hand, occasionally switching back and forth between them.

Gan held Bryan's waist as he slammed into him, pounding upwards to fill him up deep with his cock. Bryan moaned and rocked his hips, drinking in the power of the three Alphas, reveling in their energy. His mind swirled with pleasure as he entered that deep state of bliss like he was drunk on their bodies, unable to control himself.

They moved Bryan onto all fours, and Munok traded places with Gan, inserting his member into Bryan's waiting asshole. The three of them traded off on him, fucking him from behind with his face pressed firmly into the sleeping furs. Bryan moaned into the furs, gripping the soft fibers into his fists. The stretch from their cocks was like heaven, and every thrust brought him closer to paradise.

As usual, Gan was the first to finish. He roared with the climax and his cock knotted deep inside of Bryan as it throbbed out a heavy load of potent seed. Nugai came in Bryan's mouth, and he clenched a handful of Bryan's hair as he released his come down his throat. Munok had Bryan on his back when he came, pumping his cock into him as he gripped the Omega's ankles. The thick throb of Munok's cock against Bryan's inner spot triggered his own orgasm, and his cock erupted with a thick line of

come that continued to pulse out with each throb of Bryan's heart.

It was at that moment Bryan realized the truth: There was no way this baby belonged to Josef.

He didn't know how he knew, but he could feel it with as much certainty as his hate for Josef. One of the three had gotten him pregnant. Who it was didn't matter—the child belonged to all of them regardless of whose seed had been responsible. Bryan also knew that he didn't need to say anything about it. The three of them already knew.

After they'd finished, Bryan felt compelled by some unknown force within him to shift into his wolf form. Now that he was in the safety of their presence, he felt a powerful drive to create a nest for where he could birth his child. Everything around him faded away as this singular mission took hold of him. He dug into the furs with his teeth, rearranging them, discarding some, making it comfortable and perfect. The three Alphas watched on the periphery—they knew what this was about and wouldn't disturb him.

He curled up in the center of the nest and the Alphas joined him, shifting. Bryan's instinct had driven him back to this place where he and his baby would be safe. He'd chosen his nest and bonded to it. This place was now his home. In that instant, New Pixia was a world away, an impossible place to return to.

Bryan slept soundly with his Alphas. They curled up together on the sleeping furs, the three Alphas in their wolf forms with Bryan safely in the middle, and for the first time he stayed with them through the night, not even waking when the sun first peeked into the sky. It was the best sleep he'd had since before being mated to Josef, and when he woke up hearing the forest birds chirping he wasn't concerned. No doubt Josef would soon discover he wasn't inside his room, but Bryan wasn't in no hurry to return. For once, he would take his time.

Gan gathered the village inside the sacred structure where Bryan had first been claimed by the Alphas. Children came with flowers and placed them as offerings into the jaws of the dire wolf skull, bowing their heads and then bursting into giggles as they hurried off to play. They stopped in front of Bryan and looked up at him curiously. When he smiled and nodded to them they all squealed and shifted into wolf form, tumbling and flopping over each other to escape back to their parents.

"Bryan Turner, our promised Omega," Gan announced to his ecstatic people. The Uridimm all knew who Bryan was. They'd all been waiting for his arrival, some their entire lives. "He carries our child, who I believe will lead us out of this dark time."

Every person in the village wanted to greet him, and Bryan sat beneath Uri's skull with the three Alphas and met with the steady line of people who came around to touch his face or sniff him in wolf form. He was amazed. Not a single person expressed hatred towards him, despite knowing he was one of the Xyletians. They whispered blessings to him and expressions of welcome, so happy that he had finally come to them, and after a while Bryan began to truly understand the significance of his arrival.

He was a sign of hope that suffering would soon be over, that they wouldn't have to worry about being driven from their homes again and chased into the forest like animals. His arrival meant no more loss. No more death. It was a promise Bryan didn't know how he could fulfill. The Xyletians weren't going anywhere; they'd continue to push against the border, clearing more and more land until New Pixia became a city and engulfed everything. That was the mission, after all. He'd heard Josef speak about it many times with the other colony ministers. Domination of the Eastern Continent and the taming of the Wild Lands. The eventual, slow eradication of the Uridimm and all others who came in the Empire's way.

The Alphas gave Bryan a tour of the village, and he saw the vibrancy and life it had during sunlit hours. He watched Betas harvest fruits and vegetables from a garden of

plants that used the forest trees' trellises. Little packs of wolf pups stomped and rolled around in the dust as elder Alphas kept an eye on them. Bryan met warriors who'd defended the village and fought the Xyletians. None resented him. They paid him the same respect they did Gan, Nugai and Munok.

He didn't want to return to New Pixia to be Josef's slave. He realized that he wasn't willing to endure that man's abuse for anything, nor was he going to raise a child in New Pixia. And he certainly wasn't going to let Josef believe it was his own.

"I don't want to put the village in danger," he told Gan and the others. "Which is what I fear could happen if I reveal the truth. But I can't hide this forever."

"We don't expect you to," Gan said. "You have our strength behind you. All of us. Every Uridimm."

Bryan shook his head. "I'm incredibly grateful, but I honestly don't understand why. Why would your people be willing to support me at the risk of their own lives? They don't even know who I am."

"Everyone here knows who you are," Nugai said. "And they have known for a long time. You're Xyletian--but now you're also Uridimm. You're our Omega and our child grows within you. He is the future of all of us. The child of a shaman with the strength of an Alpha-Omega bond. This is why they would defend you. Your importance to us cannot be overstated."

Warmth spread through Bryan's body, and it tingled through every nerve and sent tears to his eyes. It was a feeling of security, love and hope he'd never known before.

He stayed in the village for another day, where he watched his Alphas work and learned more about the ways of the Uridimm. They were a peaceful people, and though they were without much of the technology Bryan was used to, they were by

no means barbaric or primitive. They were masters at crafting things from wood and other forest materials, and even if they no longer built the spectacular structures that made up the village before the Xyletians came, Bryan could see the evidence for their skill in the other ornate household objects they created. In the Alphas' den there was a series of beautiful boxes and wooden jars that he hadn't seen during his nighttime visits all lined up on a table carved from a large piece of solid wood.

Gan presented one of the boxes to him, and from it, Bryan lifted a shimmering necklace made from beads of polished amber.

"This signifies your place among us," Nugai explained. "Only the shamans and their mate may wear these colored necklaces."

"Put it on," Munok urged.

When Bryan slipped the necklace over his head and felt the cool weight of the stones against his neck, he felt his heart ascending as strength and pride filled him. Gan nodded approvingly. A small smile pulled on Nugai's thin lips. Munok crossed his arms over his chest and grinned.

"I like what I see," Munok said.

Bryan looked down at himself, rolling the shimmering amber between his fingers. "Really? What do you see?"

"An Omega fulfilling his destiny."

Nugai produced a finely woven robe of dark red fabric crisscrossed with intricate pattern-work, and slid it over Bryan's shoulders.

"And now you look like an Uridimm," Gan said proudly.

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Bryan drew the robe tight around his body. Not yet. Not until everything in New Pixia was taken care of.

* * *

He waited until the cover of night to emerge from the forest, leaving his new sacred decorations under the safe care of his Alphas. Gan had wanted to escort him, but Bryan had refused. It was his own battle to fight, but he was worried about triggering violence between New Pixia and the Uridimm and wanted to mitigate that possibility as much as he could, though it felt like an inevitability. He couldn't expect anyone to believe or understand what had happened to him. He was afraid of what Josef would do, but Bryan was prepared to tell the man the truth. He wasn't going to continue to be subjugated by him, and wasn't going to allow him to get his hands on the baby.

Making his way through the clearing, Bryan saw the lights of his parents' home were on. He slowed, thinking it was odd that they were still awake at this hour. It was for the best—he'd intended on speaking with them anyway. He crossed the field of stumps and walked up the path through the tall grass next to the graveyard, and the closer he came to the house the slower his legs seemed to move. It was like walking through mud. His heart pounded nervously, but he needed to tell them. Not just about the Uridimm but about Josef, too. They needed to know what kind of man he was.

His mother answered the door and gasped when she saw him. "Bryan, where have you been?" She was on the verge of tears. "We've been in a panic. The minister was here today looking for you!"

"Can I come inside?" he asked, finding his calm.

His father was sitting at the kitchen table, frowning at a series of maps he had spread out. He looked up when the two of them entered. "Hounds of Hell," he cursed. Finding a long absent strength, he tried to stand from the wheelchair.

Bryan rushed over to his side and stopped him. "Father, don't."

"Where the hell have you been? Minister Josef came by thinking you were here. Said you've been missing for two days! He was talking about putting together a search party to look for you."

Out of the corner of his eye, Bryan noticed something about the maps that were out on the table. "These maps are of the forest."

"The minister thought you'd gone to one of the other colonies. I just couldn't understand why he'd think that. He didn't explain why."

"Your father got the ridiculous idea that you'd gone to the Grimault Forest. I haven't the faintest idea why he'd think something so ridiculous, especially when the minister said he might've gone to New Lykia."

"I told you," his father grumbled. "One of my old site maps went missing." He looked up wearily at Bryan.

"Kramer, you lost it. In your state, it's not a surprise. That's it. It's nonsensical to think that Bryan would go to the forest."

"It's not," Bryan said.

His mother gaped at him. "What?"

"Mother, I think you'd better sit down. There's a lot I need to tell you."

He went over everything, omitting no detail. He told them about Josef and what he'd endured. He told them about the dreams and his journey into the forest. He told them about Gan, Nugai, and Munok. His father had his eyes closed, his hands clenched tightly in his lap. It was what he did when trying to control his anger. His mother's face was ashen.

"Bryan, they've done something to you," she said, a panic in her voice. "They must've... It's some kind of brainwashing. Kramer, what do we do?"

"It's not brainwashing," Bryan said angrily. "From everything I just told you, that's what you choose to believe?"

Her eyelids fluttered and she began to stammer. "He's the minister! He would never do something so terrible."

"I'm yourson."

She sank into a chair, shaking her head. "I don't believe it. Those barbarians kidnapped you. It's too much to handle. It's too dreadful... Kramer! Say something!"

The old man opened his eyes. "It's my fault. I should never have allowed you to be mated to that man. If I hadn't gotten sick, none of this would've happened."

Relief flooded through Bryan. His father believed him. "I don't regret this. This was the way it was always meant to be."

"We need to take you to Healer Fielding," his mother declared. "She'll know what to do. We'll correct this immediately, you'll have this child—Minister Josef's child. Everything will be fine."

"Did you not hear a word he said?" his father barked. For a flash he looked like the

Alpha he'd once been before he sank back into the wheelchair, coughing. "Dammit."

Bryan brought him a glass of water which he accepted gratefully, still coughing as he struggled to drink it.

"I'm going to see Josef and tell him the child doesn't belong to him."

"Bryan, you can't!" his mother pleaded. "He'll break the contract! Bryan!"

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"Don't worry, Mother," he said flatly. "I'll take care of things."

As he turned to leave, a small voice called out to him. "Bryan?" Lukas stood in the hallway and peeked nervously into the dining room, roused from bed by the loud voices.

"Lukas!" Bryan went to the little boy and wrapped him up in a hug. "I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"What's happening?" he asked sleepily.

Their mother came over and guided Lukas back to the bedroom. "Nothing, sweetie pup. Just discussing things with your brother, nothing to worry about."

"I have to go now, Lukas, but I'll see you very soon, okay?" Bryan ruffled his brother's hair and turned to leave.

His mother grabbed his wrist. "Think of your brother. Don't do this."

"I am," he replied. He pulled free and quickly left the house, charging up the gravel path to the road going into the heart of town. He moved as fast as his feet would carry him and then shifted to wolf form, wanting to be as far away as possible. He'd managed to keep his composure, but just barely. His heart strained, like it was being stretched and twisted into knots inside of his chest. He refused to give in to the hurt and disappointment. He knew he should've expected doubt from his mother, but it didn't change how horrible it made him feel.

He'd told his Alphas not to follow him, that he didn't need their protection, but as he neared the road leading up the hill to Josef's mansion he became frightened and wished they were there. He would be with them soon. Once this was all over, he'd go freely between the forest and New Pixia, and nobody would be able to stop him. Bryan hoped that once the truth was out about the child he carried, he might be able to open a bridge of healing between the two people.

Of course, doubt surged in the back of his mind, like storm clouds on a distant horizon. He was afraid of what Josef might attempt to do to the Uridimm when he found out. But this didn't stop him. His anger fueled him, pushing him forward. He ascended the path to the house and had a sudden vision of what once was—a flash to Gan's memories that had been imprinted into his mind. He saw the old Uridimm town as it had stood in the spot where he was. Josef's mansion, on the pinnacle of the hill, occupied the location of the old clan lodge—the sacred structure that held the skull of Uri. The people who'd destroyed the village had chosen this holy ground to construct the Minister's residence. It was a disgrace, an absolute insult to the Uridimm, and it intensified his boiling hatred of the man and everything he represented.

Bryan shifted to human form and approached the front door. The lights were on inside—Josef was still awake. Bryan used his key to unlock the door, and as he removed it from the deadbolt the door flew open. Josef stood there, wild-eyed, and his expression became even more crazed the moment he laid eyes on Bryan. "Where have you been?" he spat, snatching Bryan by the shirt and yanking him inside the house. "I told you you'd be back. You understand now? Your body is bonded to mine. You can't live without having me."

Josef went to the living room and started to unbutton his shirt as he grumbled to himself. Bryan followed him, keeping his distance. The man was out of sorts, but not how Bryan had been expecting. He was distracted, his anger directed elsewhere. "Bloody Whitetail," Josef muttered. "That bastard Dan refuses to meet with me. I know why. He's afraid. I told him, the Empire won't fall, that the colonies will be fine

if we stick together, but he's going to show his belly to those damn Adosh traitors when they arrive on our shores." He stabbed his finger at the carpet. "On your knees. I expect to hear a full explanation of where you've been."

"No."

"How dare you? I'm your Alpha. Get on your knees."

"I'm here for one reason," Bryan said, and the casual disregard of his comment made Josef's jaw drop. His commands weren't working. "I'm not your mate any longer. The bond was dissolved. I don't have to do anything you say."

Josef glared at him. "What are you talking about?" His eyes narrowed. "Where have you been these past two days?"

Bryan gathered his courage. "I have a new Alpha."

Josef snorted. "Impossible. The bond can't be broken."

"But it was. Where do you think I've been the past two days? I've been with them." Now it was Bryan's turn to laugh. "You didn't even know I'd been sneaking out every night to see them. You don't even know how long I've been with them. Oh, and one more thing—this isn't your baby."

"You're lying."

"I'm not. I know Healer Fielding can verify what I'm saying."

Josef seethed silently, and it became obvious from the expression on his face that he could see Bryan was telling the truth. "Who?" he demanded. He was sweating, his fists shaking furiously at his sides.

Bryan's pulsed raced, pumping adrenaline through his veins as he stared the man down. He'd been prepared to reveal the identity of his Alphas, but now he hesitated. He was afraid of what lengths Josef would go to for revenge. Something had changed. He was deranged, more than usual at least. Now he began to worry about the baby. He snuck a glance at the door. It seemed very far away.

"Who?"

Bryan shook his head. "I'm not saying."

Josef snatched up a glass sitting on top of the nearby alcohol cabinet and hurled it at his head. Bryan quickly ducked out of its path, and it exploded against the floor behind him. Josef threw another and Bryan dove behind the couch.

"Who is it?" Josef screamed. "Where have you been going?" He thundered across the room and, before Bryan could get away, grabbed the Omega by the shirt and yanked him to his feet. He raised his fist to strike Bryan when a look of realization crossed his face. "Hounds of Hell. I know where you've been going. Of course."

Bryan grabbed the man's wrists, trying to free himself.

"Whitetail," Josef snarled. "I let that coward fuck you and now you've run to him. That's why he's been avoiding me. Thought he could take my property." His eyes flashed wildly. This was definitely not the usual Josef Zamgarg, and Bryan was absolutely terrified. "He's a traitor. Of course. Of course. He betrays me and now he'll betray his Empire."

Josef threw him to the ground, and Bryan was just fast enough to curl his legs up against his body to protect his stomach. Josef kicked and slapped Bryan until finally he moved away, gasping from the exertion. "You wait here," he said. "You better not go anywhere, or I'll kill you. You hear me?"

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The man snatched up his car keys from the counter, his boots crunching over broken glass, and he slammed the door behind him. Bryan lay trembling on the floor, listening to the sound of the minister's car roaring away from the house. Slowly, he got to his feet. He'd managed to guard his stomach, but his arms and legs and side were welted and swelling. The fear slowly began to dissipate and was replaced with a calm fury. He would not be threatened.

Bryan moved with focused purpose born from an intense lust for revenge. He didn't care anymore. He went to the fireplace and knocked over the pile of wood onto the living room floor. There were a few bricks of fire starter there, and he broke one up and tossed it onto the pile. Then he opened a box of matches, lit one and touched it to the kindling. The material was designed for quick combustion. It flared up, quickly spreading to the wood. Bryan dropped the entire box of matches onto the flame and it shot up, sending the whole thing into a blaze. He was silent at first, but then a wild frenzy took him. He remembered every assault, every abuse, every day he'd had to endure. He turned the couch over onto the fire, screaming as he did, tears running down his face. He ran upstairs and ripped the sheets off Josef's bed and hauled them downstairs to the flames. He would've taken the whole mattress, but he couldn't lift it. He wanted to see it burn.

Thick black smoke billowed across the ceiling, sending Bryan into a fit of coughs. He wanted to throw more of the things that reminded him of the transgressions against him onto the pyre, but it was becoming impossible. He rushed outside, watching as the fire spread quickly through the house. The windows exploded, allowing the smoke to pour out to the sky. Across town, the fireman's watch sounded their alarm, and it wasn't long before most of New Pixia was awake. People began to arrive, and by the time the fire spread to the outside of the house, Bryan's mother came running

up the driveway. She shifted from her wolf form when she reached Bryan, who was staring blankly at the raging flames.

"Bryan!" she shouted. "Where's the minister? What happened?"

He turned to face her, and her hand flew up to her mouth when she saw his brutalized state. He was bruised, swollen, obviously beaten. It was finally enough for her to realize that he'd been telling the truth. She wrapped her arms around him, weeping. He didn't pull away.

Firemen arrived to try and stop the blaze, but their equipment wasn't meant to handle dousing such a large structure. Then the New Pixia Military Police arrived, and when asked if the minister was alright, Bryan replied that he wasn't inside the house. He gestured to where his car was usually parked. "He left. He went to New Lykia."

A large crowd had gathered. It seemed like almost the entire town had come to watch the house burn down.

The heat was tremendous, but Bryan didn't seem to feel it. The crowd shuffled away from the raging inferno, squinting and turning their faces. Bryan's mother and two others pulled him back to safety, but his eyes never left the house. He couldn't believe what he'd just done, but he didn't regret it. Not one bit.

Soon the firefighters gave up trying to save the structure and stood back with the crowd to watch the thing go down. The second floor imploded and collapsed inwards with a thunderous cracking noise, like the sound of trees being taken down in the forest. An hour later, the mansion was a heap of smoldering timber. The crowd began to leave, murmuring their condolences for the poor minister and his mate. Then, headlights lit up the road. People shouted and leapt out of the way as Josef's car raced madly up to the house and screeched to a halt.

"Minister," one of the firefighters said. "I'm so sorry. We did the best we could."

The Minister pushed the man out of the way and stumbled towards the house in shock. He tore at his thinning hair and groaned curses of disbelief. Then he turned around, his frenzied gaze falling on Bryan.

"You... You did this..."

Bryan glared back at him, straightening up in defiance. He didn't say a word, but his eyes spoke volumes. "You're absolutely right," they said. "I burned your fucking house down."

The Minister charged in a blind rage and struck Bryan across the face with his fist. A gasp echoed out through the crowd. All eyes were on them. Bryan's mother screamed and covered him with her arms. "Stop!" she shouted. "Stop, he's pregnant!"

Josef ignored her. He had murder in his eyes, and he shifted into his wolf form. Bryan was ready to defend himself and the child growing inside of him. He began to shift too, his focus narrowed to nothing but the enemy standing in front of him.

Josef was stopped before he even had a chance to move. The police stepped in and restrained the Minister, knocking him to the ground. "Get off me!" he barked. "You don't dare touch me."

"Shift, Minister Zamgarg. We just got a call from New Lykia. We know what you did to Minister Whitetail. You're under arrest."

He struggled against them, snapping his jaws wildly. "He was a traitor to the Empire! He deserved what he received. I'm the minister! Stop this!"

One of the officers ignited a de-shifting rod from his belt and jammed the end into

Josef's side. Purple sparks arced through the air as the man was forced back into his human form, and they easily pinned his arms behind his back and put him in handcuffs. The crowd watched, astounded and dumbstruck by the entire scene that'd unfolded in front of them.

The officers stuffed Josef into the back of their car just as another police car pulled up with its sirens blaring. Healer Fielding and an assistant emerged from the vehicle and ran up to check Bryan's injuries. Firefighters began to douse the remainder of the weakened flames. The onlookers slowly dispersed, realizing that nothing else interesting was going to happen but greatly satisfied with what they'd witnessed. Tonight would be the fuel for conversations for months.

"Are you alright?" Bryan's mother asked.

He nodded. "I'm fine."

A wave of exhaustion greeted him as everything caught up with him at once. He finally could let go and put his guard down. This was definitely not the outcome he expected from this evening, but it was more than he'd hoped for. He was beaten and bruised but he was alive, and he was free from Josef. He wouldn't have to worry about the man's threats or anything else from him ever again.

Chapter 8

Bryan woke to a view of his brother's worried face. The boy stood at his bedside, their mother watching from the doorway. Everything ached. He tried his best to sit upright, and his mother hurried forward to help him.

"Are you okay?" Lukas asked. "What happened?"

"Sorry, Lukas. You must've gotten scared to see me in your room like this." They'd come back to the house after the ordeal and Bryan had passed out in the spare bed in Lukas's bedroom—his old bed, his old room.

"I'm not scared. Why are you all beat up?"

"Minister Josef wasn't the man we thought he was," their mother said. She put his hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Bryan. I wish I'd..." She paused, struggling with what to say. "I'm sorry."

Bryan nodded, not quite ready to forgive her. He slid out of bed and found that he could stand. "I need to go back to the forest, Mother."

She looked like she wanted to protest, but she stopped herself.

"The forest?" Lukas asked, sounding frightened.

He smiled at his brother. "It's a beautiful place."

"It's scary."

"Have you been there?"

Lukas shook his head.

"I have," Bryan said. "Many times now. It's not scary. The people there are very nice. There are kids like you, and they have the whole place to play in. You'd like it."

"Bryan..." His mother looked uncomfortable.

"The Uridimm aren't our enemy, Mother."

Bryan left the bedroom and went to his parents' room, where his father was sitting in his usual spot. The weary old man turned his wheelchair around to face him. "I heard about everything," he said. "My boy. This should never have been. None of it."

"I told you, Father. This is exactly how it was supposed to be." Groaning, he took a seat next to his father.

"That bastard. He beat you. If I were... If it weren't for my condition, I would be kicking his ass right now. I would've stopped him."

"I don't need anyone's sympathy. And I don't need anyone's protection." He smiled. "I can take care of myself."

A question nagged on Bryan's mind, but he struggled to ask it. How much had his father known about the Uridimm? Had he known they were peaceful? Had he known how they lived? Then he realized that the answers didn't matter anymore. If he was to be the bridge between the two peoples, he couldn't worry about the past. He only needed to focus on the future.

"Father, if my mates could do something to heal your body, would you do it? Would you trust them?"

"What? Like some kind of Direling magic?"

Bryan couldn't help but chuckle. "They're called Uridimm, Father. And no. I don't really know what it is. They say it's not magic. They say it's the will of Uri, their goddess. It's up to her which requests are granted and which aren't."

"Sounds like magic to me. But if you think they can do something that Healer Fielding can't, I'll try it."

"I don't know if they can. It's possible that you could die."

"Well, it seems like that's the way things are going, no matter what. Right?" His father laughed. "I'll take the risk."

* * *

That afternoon, Bryan returned to the forest. When he entered the logging area the workers tried to stop him, thinking he'd gone crazy with grief over the previous night's events. It wasn't until they showed them a handwritten letter from his father that they let him pass, watching with disbelief as he disappeared into the trees. His Alphas were waiting for him at the village. They brought him into the main sacred den, where Nugai and Munok lit incense and a fire and made offerings to Uri. Gan brought out Bryan's amber necklace and carefully replaced it around his neck.

"You've won your battle. Now you are Uridimm," he said, and he gently touched Bryan's bruised face. "Sit. Let us care for your wounds."

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Bryan sat. Munok removed his shirt, revealing the bruises covering his body. He knelt down and placed his hand on Bryan's stomach.

"The baby is safe," he announced.

Though he'd already felt it with his intuition, Bryan was still relieved to hear Munok's assessment. He stripped out of his trousers and cringed at the sight of the dark bruising all across his legs. It was the first he'd properly looked at them, and he was shocked by how bad it was. Nugai whispered a chant and mixed a concoction of ingredients with a mortar and pestle, and then flung the powder into the fire. He then mixed a series of strong scented ointments and passed the bowls to Munok and Gan.

Bryan tensed as the three Alphas went to work rubbing the ointment into his skin. The pain was immense, but he didn't cry out or protest. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears.

"We must work the medicine into your skin," Nugai explained. "It will be over soon."

"I can take it," Bryan hissed through gritted teeth.

They covered his entire body with the stuff, and his skin began to tingle with a warm numbness. He felt euphoric from the pain that was now beginning to fade away, replaced with a comforting heat. And as the discomfort disappeared, Bryan was able to enjoy the touch of his Alphas. He was with them now. For the very first time, he felt completely free. The realization grew brighter, and a great happiness welled up inside of him like he'd never felt before. At that moment, he truly understood the meaning of destiny. This moment was what he had been born for. To be with them.

To be their mate.

He slipped his hand around Gan's neck and drew him into a kiss. Then Nugai, then Munok. He held them tightly, breathing in their scent and basking in their presence.

How wonderful it was to know one's purpose. It was like the future had opened up to him, the parting of trees from a dark forest leading to a gorgeous rising sun.

His hands caressed their firm bodies, gliding across the ripples of their muscles. When he reached beneath Gan's robe for his manhood the Alpha protested, saying that Bryan needed rest.

"No. I need you."

He opened their robes and stripped them naked before gripping their cocks, eager to reacquaint himself. Munok and Nugai throbbed in his hands as he sucked Gan down, swallowing his massive length into his throat. He switched between them, pleasuring them hungrily.

When they took him they did it gently, cautious not to cause Bryan any extra pain. But he didn't care about the injuries or about how much it hurt. He held them tightly, felt the warmth of their skin against his. It hurt where they touched him, but he found that he enjoyed it. The pain made their presence that much more real and vivid. He moaned as Gan filled him, the bulge of his cock occupying and satisfying the deep void inside. The Alphas took turns, and Bryan knew the feeling of each of them without even having to look to see who was inside of him. He knew their energy, and he felt them on a deep and primal level.

Bryan's climax sparked a surge of gripping ecstasy through his entire body, powerful enough to completely erase the pain from his injuries. His mind blanked, purged of everything except his connection to the Alphas. He floated with them in a realm all

their own, connected by a golden thread of energy that emerged from the depths of time and terminated in a far distance not even the most astute shaman could perceive. For the three Alphas, a lifelong prophecy had finally come to pass, revealing an exciting but unknown future. What mattered was that they were together.

Later, they returned to the home den where they relaxed on sleeping furs around the fire. Bryan's body tingled, a mixture of the afterglow of their sex and the potent ointment, and he found himself incredibly relaxed despite the discomfort of his bruising. He asked them about his father, if they would be willing to perform a ritual to cure his sickness.

"There are no guarantees," Nugai warned. "As long as you both understand that."

"We understand. We know the risks."

"Then of course it will be done," said Gan.

The very next day, Bryan brought his father out to the forest. When they arrived at the logging site he was greeted by a collection of his former workers, who were just as shocked to learn their old boss planned on communing with the Direlings as they had been to see Bryan enter the forest the day before.

"If this goes well," he told them, "You bet your asses I'm coming back to work."

Bryan stopped the wheelchair at the edge of the tree line and waited, shifting to his wolf form. From the dark of the forest, the three Alphas appeared, trotting forward in their wolf forms. A murmur of fear went out through the loggers. Bryan could feel the tension in the air, and he prayed that none of the men did anything stupid. None of them liked the Uridimm, and Bryan knew that there was more at stake here than just his father's life. If he wasn't healed, if Uri took him, how would Bryan be able to bridge the gap of distrust between the two peoples?

Gan came forward, his ruby-red necklace glinting in the sunlight. He lowered his head respectfully towards Bryan's father. "Kramer, father of my mate. I'm honored to meet you again in peace."

"Again?" Bryan asked.

His father looked up at the massive Alpha and his eyes flashed in shock and recognition. "You're the one I saw come back to life."

"Uri blessed me on that day," Gan said. "And my priests were able to heal my wounds. You will receive no lesser treatment than I had. We will summon the extent of our abilities to heal you. If Uri deems it, you will be recovered."

With the help of the others, Gan took Bryan's father onto his back and they proceeded into the forest and returned to the village.

Bryan was surprised to find all the Uridimm waiting for them. The ceremony began the moment they passed through the tree gate, with dozens of wolves casting howls into the afternoon sky. They brought him into the main den and laid him down beneath the skull of Uri. His father stared up at it, obviously fearful of what he saw. Bryan sat next to him. "Don't worry, Father," he said.

"It's a damn dire wolf skull," he murmured weakly.

"That's the skull of Uri," Bryan said. "Maybe it's not a good idea to talk badly about her."

"Ah," he groaned. "I'm sorry, skull. Uh... Please forgive me."

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Nugai tossed a mixture into the fire and the air filled with the pungent scent of incense. "You must leave now, Bryan. This is a realm that only the shamans and the afflicted can tread."

He nodded and whispered to his father. "I'll see you soon."

Munok was outside sitting in wolf form by the entrance to the den, deep in concentration. Bryan sat next to him, watching him silently. The rest of the village gathered around the structure and contributed a low and resonant howl that reverberated around the forest. It became like a song, a haunting operatic that could've been mistaken for the voice of the forest itself.

The ceremony continued on through the day. Without knowledge of the ritual Bryan could only watch, but he refused to move from his place outside the tent even after the hours moved on and the sun dropped in the sky. He felt like his presence might contribute somehow, and he didn't want to stray far from where his father was. As time wore on, thoughts and worries began to fill his mind. He was terrified to lose his father, and only now did the brunt of that potentially reality break on him.

"Stop," Munok growled.

Bryan looked over at him in surprise. The Alpha had been in a silent trance this entire time. His eyes were still closed, but he spoke again. "You're thinking too much. Stop it. It's not going to help. You understood the risks. So did he."

"I don't know what to do. I can't help it."

Munok grunted. "I'll teach you how to call to Uri. Shift. Now close your eyes and clear your mind."

In his wolf form, Bryan closed his eyes and did his best to blank out his thoughts.

"Now imagine a howl that can reach the moon. Listen to the voices of the wolves around you and using your mind, project out with that howl."

Bryan tilted his head back and howled.

"No! Yourmind. Howl with only your mind."

"And that's it?"

"Don't stop. Not until they emerge from the den. It won't be as easy as you think. This is shaman knowledge, Bryan. Only few can learn how to use it. But I believe you can. Now howl."

He closed his eyes and imagined as Munok had instructed. He was right—it was more difficult than he expected to sustain the howl mantra for an extended period of time. His own intrusive thoughts continued to interrupt, but he didn't give up. Time went by, and eventually the low droning howl in his mind became something outside of himself, something that he wasn't creating but that just was. It permeated through him and thrummed from his body like ripples on the surface of water. He could feel everything and everyone around him, and he felt his father's life force from inside the den.

He no longer had a sense of time. When Nugai and Gan emerged from the tent and broke his meditation, he discovered that he'd been in his trance for over seven hours. It was near morning.

"It's Uri's choice now," Gan said. "We sleep. Tomorrow, we'll know."

But Bryan couldn't sleep. He couldn't bring himself to even leave the entrance of the sacred den, so his Alphas brought out furs and lay with him on the ground outside. He continued his meditation, and they stayed awake with him despite their exhaustion and together watched the sun break through the canopy.

When it was finally time to enter the den, Bryan found himself free of the anxiety he'd had before. He was tired, but his mind was clear. He was ready to face whatever reality might greet him inside.

The village had gathered again and waited around the sacred den. Back in human form, Gan entered first and was followed by the trio. The fire had reduced to coals and a haze hung in the air. The four of them knelt at the side of a motionless figure that lay beneath the skull of Uri. Bryan leaned forward. His father's face was painted with red ochre and other pigments, and his eyes were closed.

"Father?" He slowly reached out to touch the man's shoulder.

His father stirred, his eyelids struggling to pull open like he was coming out of an impossibly deep sleep. "Bryan?" he murmured.

Relief poured into Bryan's heart. He was alright.

Nugai brought over a bowl of steaming liquid and Munok helped him sit up. "Drink this tea."

It wasn't long before strength and clarity returned to him, and though he was still an old man, Bryan saw a vitality in his father's eyes that had been absent for a very long time.

"Can you stand?" Gan asked.

"Let me try," Bryan's father replied.

His legs shook and he held his arms out to balance, but after a moment of adjustment he was fine. He was standing, and he looked just as shocked about it as Bryan did. Munok offered him a wooden cane, and he took it and used it to walk around the room.

"Uri has granted your health," Gan said. "You will recover."

Walking with his father from the forest back into town was a moment Bryan would never forget. From the looks on the loggers' faces, it was like they'd seen a ghost. Bryan knew that everything was going to change now. The door had been opened and he would take the steps to walk his people through it. He would do everything he could to heal the wounds that had been caused over the last 50 years, to work out some way the Xyletians could live with the Uridimm. He believed it was possible, but he knew that in the end it wouldn't be his battle to win. It would fall into the hands of his child, the Alpha he knew was growing in his belly.

This was the destiny he ordained for his son. It would be his precious mission; the extension of the prophecy that had bound him eternally to his three fated Alphas.