



Tamed Wolf

Author: *Kelsey Soliz*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Dance for us...

It's not that my mates don't want me, it's that don't want me to be happy. They want me just fine, as long as I continue to make them money and know my station.

Technically, they rejected me, and pathetic as it is, being around them daily helps to fill the hole they made in me the day they sentenced me to a life at the shelter for rejected wolves. Or maybe being around them only keeps the hole open. Not sure which is true anymore.

At first I stayed because they told me that if I didn't dance at their club, I'd never see my son again. Then my son grew, and as he did, he learned to hate me as well. Sometimes I see glimpses of the sweet boy that wanted nobody but his mom, but more often than not these days, I only see him when he needs money.

I thought this was how I would spend the rest of my life, but I never accounted for the triplet sons of the alpha befriending my son and walking into my club. The second they saw me, it was game over.

Total Pages (Source): 70

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

Chapter One

Lark, Before

“Wild wolf prowls,

Wild wolf dances,

She knows who she is down to the finest points of her being.

Wild wolf stands under the light of Mother moon and praises.

All of us admire—

The way she hunts,

The way she moves.

All of us respond to her call.

Wild wolf won't be tamed, won't submit.

We rejoice in the sway of her fur,

And the touch of her paws upon the soft dirt.

Even her mate must show their reverence,

For the wild wolf is above all.

Above all of us.”

I hold my breath and stare down the audience, waiting for the finality of my words to sink in.

A few people snap in support, and then the voices begin to murmur, picking up conversations lost when I took the stage and commanded their attention.

I make sure my legs are strong and sure as I stand from my stool, smoothing out my black sweater and bowing my head toward them all, thanking them for their time, almost forgetting to collect my bag before I settle back into my small booth in the corner. I’m eager to watch the next poet take the stage, excited for them to share their art.

I know I don’t really fit in here, I’m way younger than this mostly college-aged crowd, but nobody at my school is into this at all. My parents know where I am and will be picking me up in a little bit, but this coffee shop is one of the few places that feels comfortable to me.

A lot of my friends think that performing at an open mic poetry night is weird, but I don’t let it get to me.

“This seat taken?”

The breath escapes my lungs as I lift my eyes up to find two men, clearly shifters, staring down at me with reverence. Shaking, I set my coffee down before I spill it everywhere.

I don’t know anything about these strangers, but my wolf insists they’re ours.

I shake my head, unable to speak.

They scoot in carefully so as not to spook me, one on either side of me. The small booth suddenly feels about a million times smaller, and the oxygen has been completely removed from it.

“We liked your poem,” the one on my left tells me. His hair looks freshly buzzed, close to his skull, and aside from the shiny piercing in his nose, the thing that is most memorable about him is the sharp line of his brow above eyes about the same color of the now tepid coffee I’m pretending to still be interested in.

“Pretty brave to put yourself up there in front of all these strangers,” the other guy nearly growls as he looks about the room, scooting closer to me.

I fight a smile at his show of possessiveness, because this is the moment I’ve always dreamed of. Human laws and customs don’t always overlap with those of shifters, so my being so much younger than them isn’t too unusual.

When the one with longer hair tied up seems satisfied no one is looking at me, he throws an arm around the back of the booth and smiles down at me, his hazel eyes crinkling at the corner. “I’m Ivan. That’s Trevor. You know who we are, right?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I nod, still unable to speak.

My hands feel clammy, and my wolf is pacing like mad inside of me, telling me these men were picked by the goddess. I run my hands down my thighs, trying to discreetly dry them off, but of course they notice.

Trevor gently picks up one of my hands, bringing it closer to him so he can hold it up to his mouth and kiss it.

If I wasn't panicking before, I am now. His mouth just touched me. "We gave you our names, do we get to know yours?"

"I'm Lark. I've never seen you guys in here before; why are you here?"

I chastise myself when I realize how rude that sounded, but I'm so outside of myself I can barely function.

Trevor's eyes narrow a bit and then straighten out and his mouth tilts up in a smirk. "We had some business nearby and wanted to grab a coffee to take with us. Didn't think we'd be walking in to hear the voice of an angel."

Great. Now I'm blushing like an idiot. They probably just think I'm a stupid kid. "My voice isn't that great. It's lucky that you decided to come here. Otherwise, who knows when we would have run into each other?"

"Indeed," Ivan drawls, pulling out his phone. "How old are you, Lark?"

“S-sixteen,” I stutter.

“Here’s the deal, sweetheart,” Trevor says as he tilts my chin towards him. “You’ve got some growing to do,” and I can’t help but notice his eyes dip down to my underdeveloped chest as he says this, making me feel self-conscious. “So we’re going to have to take this a little slower than we’d like. Can you handle that, sweetheart?”

“You’re my m-mates. Of course I can wait. I have to finish high school anyway.”

“Good girl,” Ivan says in a deep tone that sends a shiver down my spine. “Do you drive? Can we bring you home or something so we can have a few moments with you and introduce ourselves to your family?”

“Oh, wow. This is happening, isn’t it?”

Trevor’s hand lands on my thigh, making me all tingly. “You’re pretty lucky to have us, Lark. You know that, right? We’re going to be able to look out for you and help you become the woman you were meant to be. Bet none of your friends have anyone batting for them like that.”

“That’s true,” I say with a smile and a drunk sounding giggle. “I only know one other person that has met their mate so far, and she’s always bragging about how hot he is because he’s a senior.”

Ivan scoots out of the booth and offers me a hand while Trevor grabs my bag for me, trashing the coffee I stopped drinking.

“Are you okay, miss? Do you need help?”

I blink at the woman suddenly in front of me and notice her concern for the two men standing really close to me, looking kind of scary. Scary if you aren’t me, anyway.

“Oh, no, I’m fine. Thank you, I know these gentlemen. Good friends of the family. Thank you for checking.”

She doesn’t look sure, but Trevor pushes past her with a grunt, grabbing my arm as he does. I send a wave back to her as I’m brought outside, where the air is fresher, and my mind clears a bit.

They walk to the darker side of the building where there are less people and a bunch of cars parked, and a few trees rooted nearby. “Sorry if she made you uncomfortable,” Trevor says as he tucks my hair away from my face. “A lot of people won’t understand us, but as long as you know how we feel for you, that’s all that matters.”

I feel that dopey grin spread on my face again. Oh my gods, is he going to kiss me?

Trevor drops my bag to the ground and lifts me up, tucking my ankles behind his back as he presses my back to the cold and scratchy brick wall. “Is this okay?”

I nod, feeling like a grown up.

“You going to give us a taste of what’s ours?”

I nod once more, relegated to silence from his close proximity.

When his mouth presses to mine, I can taste a faint hint of tobacco and the coffee he must have drunk already, and he presses so forcefully against my mouth that it’s hard to keep up with him. By the time he pulls away, his eyes are dilated and he’s breathing hard, and my lips feel puffy. I press my fingers to them, tracing the new shape as something hard pulses against my bottom.

Oh my gods, is that his penis? They getthat hard? “Is that uncomfortable?”

I hang my head in shame as I rest my forehead against him, trying to hide. Me and my stupid mouth.

He laughs, shaking me with him. “You like the way that feels? Someday you’ll let us claim you and you’ll get very acquainted with it.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I breathe a sigh of relief that he's not expecting anything right away, because this is already moving really fast. Ivan comes up against my back, completely encasing me as he brushes a kiss on my neck. "My turn," he whispers before turning my head to him.

His kiss is a little gentler and he tastes of peppermint gum, but it doesn't last nearly as long. He wipes his mouth when he pulls away, and I'm once again mortified.

"Sorry, I don't have a lot of practice with the whole kissing thing."

"That's okay, sweetheart. It's kind of cute; I like that you're all innocent for us." I smile tentatively back at Ivan, feeling slightly less bad about myself.

"We don't want your family to hate us, so we're going to have to put this on pause before it goes any further. I hope you understand that it's going to be really hard for us to wait for you. It will be you we're thinking of later when we get home. You'll have to meet our girlfriend sometime; she's going to think you're adorable." Trevor smiles, like he thinks that was supposed to be a compliment.

Surely that was an actual fist that punched me in the stomach. "G-girlfriend? No. I'm sorry, but that's really inappropriate."

"Baby, you can't expect to wind us up and then not allow us a way to relieve ourselves. It's you we'll be thinking of. You're our mate; the day you're ready to make this bond real, she's gone. She's just a pretty face to pass the time with while we wait for you."

“I mean...I hate that. You’re right though, I’ve heard it’s really uncomfortable when you...get aroused and don’t take care of it. I don’t want you to be in pain...” I close my eyes and grip on to Trevor a little tighter, wanting to stretch out this moment where it’s just me and them for a little longer. “My dad is going to be here soon; we should probably head to the front of the building.”

“We hurt your feelings, didn’t we? I’m sorry Lark, I knew you weren’t ready to hear that. It’s just, we’re 25. Men have a really high sex drive. And here you are with this tight little body, all pressed against us, and I’m sort of losing my mind. Call your father and tell him you have a ride. We can talk to him, if you want.” Trevor hardly looks chastised, but what am I supposed to say, it’s okay? I feel powerless to stand up for myself.

“Are you sure? He’s used to picking me up here.”

“Lark, we said we would take you. Stop trying to be difficult. Just call your father, already.”

I nod at Ivan and wiggle to get down so I can retrieve my phone out of my bag. Dad answers on the second ring, dependable as always. “Hi daddy, um, so I don’t want you to freak out—”

“What’s going on, Lark? I’m leaving right now.”

“No! Um, I—”

Trevor pulls the phone from my hand gently, bringing it up to his ear. “Hello, Sir. My name is Trevor Gray, and my good buddy Ivan Drake and I just had the marvelous pleasure of meeting your daughter, and we are beyond the moon to tell you she’s our mate.”

I can hear my father's incredulity as he takes this in and then begins peppering Trevor with questions.

"We're both 25 Sir, so we know this is a bit delicate, but we have nothing but honorable intentions with her. We are simply asking for the chance to get to know her and her family for now...of course, we understand completely...absolutely. Yes, Sir. We will make sure she gets home to you safely. She's our treasure now, too. See you soon."

Trevor looks through my phone, scowling at my background. "Who's that?"

"Oh, that's one of my best friends, Cheyenne. She's going to be so excited when I tell her about you."

"You two look really close."

"Almost like sisters," I say with a smile.

"Well, you're not going to have a lot of time to hang out now, but I'm sure she'll understand," Ivan says as he watches Trevor put their numbers into my phone and send a text to both of them.

"What did Daddy say?"

"He's waiting for us to bring you home and introduce ourselves, but he seemed happy, I think."

I take Trevor's extended hand as they lead me to a shiny lime green car with really dark tinted windows. They have to fold down the front seat to get me in the back, and I try not to be curious about who Ivan is texting while Trevor drives us, punching my address into his navigation system.

There's a shift happening and I don't know if I want it to move faster or halt and rewind. Meeting my fated mates is a lot heavier than I ever imagined it would be; but then, I never thought my mates would be so much older than me and find me when I was so young.

"What you thinking about back there? Not having second thoughts about bringing us home, are you?"

I shake my head and meet Trevor's eyes in the mirror. "It's just...a lot to process."

"We'll look out for you, don't worry your pretty little head about a thing."

By the time we pull up to my house, I notice all the lights are on even though everyone is usually locked in their own rooms for the night by now. It's not so late, but it is a school and work night, and Momma likes to go to bed early.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

My brother stands on the porch with my parents, scowling out into the night as Ivan helps me out of their car with the utmost care, brushing a kiss to the top of my hand that has me smiling sweetly up to him.

They're all charm as they introduce themselves to my parents, keeping themselves a respectful distance away from me as my family lets them inside, offering them tea and cookies.

My mom keeps smiling at me and patting my knee as all the men chat amongst themselves, and I just sip on my peppermint tea for something to keep myself busy. It's surreal watching these men that I somehow already know interact with my family, in my home.

"The age gap doesn't bother us," I perk up to hear just in time from my father. He puts his arm around momma and pulls her to him. "I was in my twenties when I met her, and she had just turned 17. We know it's near impossible to resist the mate pull, we only ask that you put off anything physical until you all feel ready to make a commitment."

"Of course, Sir," Ivan says, nodding earnestly. "We aren't going to pressure her, we're just so relieved to have finally met her." He sends me a smile that surely would have buckled my knees if I were standing.

"This is so exciting!" my momma exclaims. "There's so much to do. You'll have to think about when you want to have the mating ceremony; we'll start shopping for a dress, and you just figure out between the three of you when you're ready to make it official."

“Couldn’t come soon enough, ma’am,” Trevor says. They’re so...pleasant, winding my parents around their fingers.

My mom pushes me onto the porch with them to say goodnight when the conversation starts to lull, winking at me as she closes the door behind us.

“I was worried they wouldn’t want us to be together,” Trevor says as he leans his forehead against mine. “We can give you rides whenever you need them, and here,” he says as he pulls his wallet out of his pocket. He removes a small wad of cash and folds it in half, pressing it into my palm. “If you’re ours, we’re going to take care of you. We want you to learn to rely on us for everything. Your parents seem great, and that’s going to make this all so much easier. We’re going to head home, but send us your schedule and call us after school tomorrow, okay?” He kisses me again, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me so I feel myself relax into it. Some of the stress melts away with the pressure, the unsureness dissipating.

“I will. I don’t need your money though, really.”

“Keep it,” Ivan says as pulls out a credit card from his wallet and adds it to the stack of cash. “We make pretty good money, so use this for whatever. We want you to find a pretty dress for our mating, and we want you to have everything you need.”

Ivan cups my face, looking down into my face and making me feel like an adult as he tucks my hair behind my ears and seems to find joy in just admiring me. “You’re so damn beautiful. Not sure if we told you that or not yet, but you’re absolutely stunning. The goddess has blessed us, indeed.”

This time when he kisses me, it’s a whole lot less awkward. And a whole lot less filled with spit.

His lips press against mine so softly it almost tickles, making me chase after him to

keep the pressure between our mouths. Before I know it, he's picking me up and wrapping his arms around my lower back so we're closer in height, claiming my mouth with surety.

I'm breathless when he pulls back but he stabilizes me with his hands on my hips. "Sweet dreams, mate. Dream of us."

He smiles as he walks backward off the porch, Trevor sneaking in one more kiss with a longing I can't quite describe as they climb into their car and pull out of our gravel driveway, leaving my head spinning.

On lead feet, I haul myself upstairs to get ready for bed, wondering if everything will still be real when I wake up in the morning.

Chapter Two

Lark, Before

"Say that again?"

My father sighs, quite dramatically I might add, and rubs the bridge of his nose. "Your mother and I are going to sell the house. With your brother moving out to stay with his own pack, there's just no reason for us to stay here. You know we've always wanted to travel."

"But...but I'm in high school! How am I supposed to do high school while traveling? And what about Ivan and Trevor? I don't think they'd like me moving around like that."

"How long are we going to do this, Lark? Humans may view 16-year-olds as children, but wolves know better. Yes, you're young, but you've found your mates

and are more than capable of making adult choices. You cannot continue to hide out here while your mates sit there, patiently waiting for you to feel ready to be with them. The goddess chose them for you; are you saying you think she's wrong?"

Am I going crazy? What on earth is happening? "No, no, of course not; but dad, we told you we were going to wait until I graduated; it would be so weird to get mated right now; plus, they're in their twenties. Do you have any idea how much side eye we get in public? We got stopped by cops last time they took me out to dinner."

"Honey," my mom butts in, trying to soothe the situation because my dad is getting visibly irritated with me. "Don't you think you're being just a tiny bit selfish? Those men care for you a great deal. Do you not feel comfortable around them? Moving in with them doesn't mean you have to start a more physical relationship, but I remember what it was like at your age. Why are you fighting this so hard? You've known them for nearly five months now. Most wolves move into matehood immediately when they meet each other. Do you really want to risk them losing interest in you if you keep putting things off? I don't think it's going to be as bad as you have it built up in your mind. Sometimes, there are things us women must do to keep our mates happy, and this is just one of those things. I really do think you need to give them an actual chance, Lark. We're merely offering you that opportunity. With us travelling, you'll have to rely on them more and it will bring you so much closer. I'm sorry, but our decision is final. Whatever you don't wish to bring to their place with you will be donated because we don't want to pay storage fees while we're out there exploring. The house doesn't close for another week, so you have plenty of time."

"You already sold it? Are you just sick of having kids? Is that what this is? Trying to live out the glory days you missed by getting mated so early? Do you hear what you're asking me to do?"

My father backhands me, which is more than enough of an answer.

“We’re going to meet Sue and Robert for dinner, and then we’re going to evening service to thank the goddess for all her gifts. I suggest you reflect on what put you in this position and adjust your attitude. Is it really so bad that your mother wants to see you grown and happy? You’ll see; this is going to be the best thing we could ever do for you.”

The door shuts behind them and I’m left there on my knees, shaking in anger and fighting tears.

I’ve noticed them pulling away since I met my mates, leaving me alone more and having far less patience than normal, but it’s not like they ever had a high amount to begin with.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I lift my head to look at my childhood bedroom, all the stupid posters of boy bands and supermodels, magazine ads I thought were cool, my collection of stuffed animals that Ivan likes to make fun of; am I acting like a child?

Since meeting the guys, it's like my body has been on a fast track to fill out. My chest has been outgrowing bras almost faster than I can buy them and my hips are curving so much that I've resorted to only pants with stretchy waistbands because nothing else fits right anymore.

But maybe it's because I've been trying to act like a sixteen-year-old kid instead of the adult everyone wants me to be.

I wipe my eyes off with the sleeve of my sweatshirt and stumble to my closet, brushing a hand over the section of clothes I've barely touched that Ivan and Trevor bought me. They're all lacy and form fitting and very...mature. Hardly what I'd wear to school, skirting on the edge of the dress code, but clearly this is what they want to see me in.

I need to call them. They hate it when I wait too long to tell them I'm upset because then I tend to blow everything up into a bigger deal and I get too emotional to properly process things.

I take a few deep breaths and hover over both their names, searching through my history to see who I called last time. I have to alternate so they don't think I'm paying more attention to one of them over the other.

“Lark, what's up? This isn't a great time. Shift just started.”

Music blares in the background, making it a bit difficult to hear Ivan. “I’m sorry, you can just call me back later. It’s nothing we need to talk about right this second.” My voice cracks and I have to cover my mouth with the back of my hand to block out the sobs that want to break free.

I just want to be held and listened to, want someone to tell me it’s okay to feel hurt that my parents basically just dumped me.

“One second.”

The sounds start to get quieter until Ivan comes back on the phone, wherever he is completely quiet now. “I’m here. What’s up?”

“I’m sorry. I forgot you were working tonight. Really, we can just talk about it later. I could maybe come over tomorrow after school?”

“For fuck’s sake, Lark, just tell me. I walked all the way down here so I could hear you. What happened?”

“My parents just told me they’re selling the house; they’re gonna go travel or something. They don’t want me to go with them and I only have a week to pack up my stuff.”

“So why are you crying? Is the idea of moving in with us such a hardship?” I hear some soft voices in the back and the phone gets muffled while Ivan says something to somebody, and then he’s back on the phone, his voice a little strained. “You know we’re going to take care of you. Fuuck. I—sorry. Yes. Okay, um, fuck. One second.”

The phone gets muted again, and I sit there twiddling my thumbs, wondering what’s wrong with me that this feels like a bad thing. Most wolves are over the moon to be able to move in with their mates and begin a life. There’s just something holding me

back.

When Ivan comes back, he's slightly breathless. "Pack a bag and one of us will come pick you up in a little bit, okay? I know you aren't going to want to stay there after your fight with your parents."

"Are you like working out or something? Why are you so out of breath?"

"Erm, yeah. I just had to run up the stairs and grab something, sorry. Are you okay?"

"He hit me again. I probably deserved it because I was talking back, but—"

"He fucking did what? Lark, listen to me. He does not get to put his hands on our mate. Pack your shit, I'm on my way."

I think about texting Cheyenne, but we've been fighting a lot lately. She doesn't like my mates, but it's not like I can do anything about that. She just doesn't understand them. I don't want to fight with anyone else tonight, so I grab my suitcase off of the top shelf of my closet and start grabbing everything. When that's full, I run downstairs to the now empty kitchen and grab the box of trash bags, then begin emptying my dresser into those. Finally, I make sure I have all of my school stuff, makeup, and hair products I can think of and dump it into a bag and start hauling everything downstairs. I've just gotten the second bag to the front door when headlights paint the dark living room wall, the crunching of gravel announcing Ivan.

I'm out that door as fast as can be, running barefoot down the steps and into his arms, somewhere I know will make me feel better.

He smells a little different than usual, but his arms are just as strong as they always are as he lifts me up and carries me back inside. "Baby, you're not wearing any shoes. You're going to hurt your feet."

He brings me straight up to my bedroom and sits on my bed, keeping me on his lap as he sits. “Let me see your cheek.”

He’s tender as he turns my head, his anger a tangible thing. “He had no right to do that. What the hell was he thinking?”

Why do I want to defend my father at all? I shake that away and focus on the facts. “It doesn’t matter. I just want to get out of here.”

“You know, there’s no one here. I know a good way to get all these emotions running high in you to fizzle down and wear you out.”

He wags an eyebrow at me, making me giggle. He’s always good at bringing me out of a bad mood. “I thought my bedroom weirded you out?”

“A man can change his mind. Besides, don’t you want to stick it to your parents by making sure they know exactly what we got up to in here before you move out?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“And what exactly did we get up to?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Lark. I’ve waited so long. Don’t you trust me by now? Haven’t we treated you well?”

“Of course you have, Ivan.”

“Then what is it?”

“I—” everything I want to say flees, because it’s what I’ve been repeating since I met him. The age gap is too big. He’s too old for me to touch when I’m so young. It’s gross. It’s predatory.

But then I trace the side of his face and feel his legs underneath me, supporting me, I think about how he rushed over here because he knew I was upset, and I realize it’s actually none of those things. Why would the goddess give me mates she didn’t want me to be with? I’m nearly seventeen, which is the legal age for consent here anyway.

“You’re right. You’ve been more than patient with me.” I kiss him and wiggle over his lap, trying to put myself in the right mind set, willing myself to get aroused.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

I lift up my shirt, revealing the black and white polka dot bralette I have on, my breasts barely contained in it. His face looks like Christmas morning and every birthday rolled into one when he sees me topless. I’ve never done anything with them that necessitates my clothes being off, only over-the-clothes touching.

“Fuck, I knew they’d be this fucking gorgeous. Take that off, too. I want to see all of you. And these leggings. Fuck, I can’t wait to see how incredible you feel when it’s just your skin against me.”

I do as he asks, shaking the whole time because I’ve never been this vulnerable with anyone before. But the way he’s looking at me makes me feel grown up and beautiful, so I don’t stop until I’m completely nude.

“Get over here. I want to see you on the bed with your hair splayed across the pillow.”

He stands over me and unzips his jeans, pulling himself out. It’s much bigger than I thought, and I’m worried about how it’s going to fit inside of me, but I have to do this. Everyone does this at some point, and it’s time to grow up and do what’s expected of me. He’s my mate; he would never hurt me.

He kisses me everywhere, but he’s too excited to wait very long. He starts working himself inside of me and I want to yell at him to stop because it hurts, but he looks so happy. Maybe if I just get this over with, it will get better.

“You were made for me, Lark. You’re going to remember this day for the rest of our lives. It’s going to be so great having you at home with us. We’ll get to do stuff like this all the time.”

He starts to pump in and out and eventually the burn does subside a bit, making it start to feel slightly better. But maybe everyone just greatly over exaggerates sex. It’s not so special.

“Going to fill you up so everyone knows who you belong to.” He reels back onto his knees and stares down at my body as he gets himself off, and I just sit there and wait for it to be over. His hands start to caress my breasts, and before I know it, he’s

making weird grunting noises and collapsing on top of me, sinking his teeth right into my neck.

“What the fuck? You weren’t supposed to bite me yet!”

I’m panicking, but there’s no going back. He sinks his teeth in a little farther, keeping them in there until he’s satisfied that it’s going to scar nice and obvious like. “I couldn’t help it, Lark. You just make me so goddess damned crazy. You have no idea the level of restraint we’ve been exercising around you.

“You’re moving in with us, it’s time to wear our marks. You’re not going to be there and not be our actual mate. We don’t do roommates.”

Tears burn my eyes, but I force myself to control my breathing, telling myself this is a good thing. I’ve been conditioned my whole life to be the kind of mate my mom thinks I should be, the kind that she assured me every wolf wants, and I’m fucking it up.

He pulls out of me and buttons his jeans back up, running a hand through his hair. “You should get dressed, Trevor needs me back at work. We’ll have to leave your stuff in the car for a bit, because I can’t head home quite yet. You going to be okay there? You can hang out in the office and do some homework or watch a movie or something. Do you have your laptop we got you?”

“Yeah, it’s packed,” I tell him as I struggle to get up, wincing a bit at the soreness between my legs.

Ivan falls to his knees and crawls between mine, pressing a kiss to my mound. “I was probably a little rougher than I should have been. We’ll make sure you get a hot shower before bed tonight. Forgive me?”

I palm his face and press a kiss to his mouth when he puckers his lips, making me smile. “Not like I can actually be upset with you. You know how wonderful you are.”

“That’s true,” he says as he stands and starts collecting the clothes I discarded. “Did you get all your stuff packed up? There’s not a whole lot of room at our place in the closet; but I suppose we can make it work.”

“I got everything I think I’ll want, but if there isn’t room, I can get rid of some of my older stuff. I just want to get out of here.”

“Go on and head downstairs, I just want to take care of something real quick.”

I'm halfway down the staircase when I start hearing loud crashing noises and breaking glass, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. They last for a few minutes and then Trevor appears at the top of the stairs, breathing hard, knuckles red and puffy.

“What did you just do?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

He wipes a little bit of blood off his hand and smirks. “Just leaving daddy dearest a gift. He hurt something of ours, so I hurt something of his.”

What I really want to do is run upstairs and look at the damage, but the look on his face tells me that would be a bad idea. Besides, what's my father going to do, kick me out?

Ivan walks down to me on the stairs, chucking me lightly under the chin. “Don't worry hotness, it'll only knock off a few thousand in potential profit when he does sell it. I wouldn't expect to get a birthday card from them, though.”

And as easy as that, he pulls me, stunned, out of my childhood home and into his car, and I don't even have it in me to look back in the mirror after we get all my stuff in his trunk.

This part of my life is over now, there's no going back.

Chapter Three

Trevor, Before

I'm pacing up and down the front entryway waiting for them to get back, freaking out because I have no idea how she's going to react to what we do. It's not like we've kept it a secret from her really, but we haven't exactly been plain and upfront about it, either.

This whole thing is just a mess. I've been a little bit pissed since we met her that

she's so godsdamned young, because she won't do half the shit my wolf and I need, even if her body is what dreams are made of. It'd be impossible to ignore the way she's been changing for us, but a lot of good it does us when she's so against doing anything remotely physical.

Good thing we manage a strip club for our uncle then, huh? All the godsdamned women we could want as long as we keep them separate from Lark.

"There you are, I was wondering where you went to. Ivan left me the second I got him off and I need you badly. Let's go to the lounge room and break in that new couch that just got delivered."

I'm so fucking tempted. Unfortunately, I have to unwind Denise's arms from my waist and push her leather bikini-clad body away from me, and she nearly undoes me with that botoxed pout.

"Don't give me that. I have something important to do."

"More important than fucking me? Come on, we both know I'm the best on offer tonight. You really want to pass this up? Might not bother asking you next time I'm in need."

I growl at her and wrap my hand around her neck, pushing her into the shadows and against the wall. "You don't get to manipulate me. I'm your fucking boss and I said I got shit to do. We clear? If you want to pop an attitude and act like you have some sort of fucking claim on me, I can replace you in a heartbeat. Hot girls that want to get paid for dancing naked are a fucking dime a dozen. There ain't nothing special about you, sweetheart."

I watch her face turn red and then redder still, only letting go of her when I'm sure my message has fully sunk in. "Now get the fuck out of here. I need you long gone by

the time my brother gets back.”

She scampers off, nearly bowling over Lark in the process.

Fuck.

“Hey, baby.” I paste a grin on and pretend like nothing at all just happened, hoping she’ll believe it if I do.

“Um, hi, Trevor.”

Her eyes are wide as she looks around, taking in all the topless women serving drinks and the one on stage upside down on a pole with her legs split wide open. Damn.

Ivan punches me on the arm to get my attention back to who actually matters, and I get angry again that she has to see this shit. “Why the fuck did you bring her here? I thought we agreed she wasn’t cut out for this place? She’s going to freak out and run. She’s not mature enough to accept how we make the money she likes to spend.”

“When you said you guys ran a club...” Lark trails off, stepping back into Ivan. That’s when I get a view of her godsdamned neck.

I prowl towards her and tilt her chin up, looking at it up close so I can take a good measure of it. “Why’d you let him bite you, Lark? That wasn’t the plan. You kind of fucked everything up.”

She swallows hard and tips her head back to make eye contact with Ivan, likely looking for a bailout, but he’s busy scanning the room, ensuring everything is running smoothly.

“It wasn’t exactly planned. I got in a fight with mama and daddy, and he was trying

to make me feel better.”

Ivan finally looks back down at her and winks, shoving her towards me with his hands on her ass like a damn offering.

“You okay?”

“She’s moving in,” Ivan says somewhat bitterly.

“That so?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“They’re selling our house and leaving town,” Lark says quietly. She looks pretty torn up, which I just can’t handle, so I wrap my arms around her and inhale her scent, buttery caramel and maple soaking into me and making me nearly seize with how much I fucking need her.

“I’m sorry to hear that, sweetheart. Sounds like you had a pretty rough night.”

“He hit her again,” Ivan says, furious. Same.

I stiffen up, making him know exactly how I feel about someone else harming what’s mine.

He eyes me over her shoulder and nods, telling me he’s already taken care of it. Good enough for me.

As I calm down, I inhale another scent; Ivan is positively reeking off of her. How did it take me so long to notice? “Did you two fuck without me? Seriously?”

Lark nervously tips her head up to me as Ivan laughs boisterously, patting me on the shoulder to tell me he’s got the floor for a bit so I can get Lark ‘settled up in the office’.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” she whispers against me, clutching to the sides of my shirt.

I link my hands across her lower back and kiss her, trying to reassure her. “You didn’t upset me. Just want to make sure you know that if that’s an avenue open to

him, it has to be open to me too, because we're a pack. We can't play favorites or things are going to get messy."

"I know," she says on an exhale, shaking slightly. "I figured I've made you guys wait long enough. I'm ready."

"Oh sweetheart, you have no idea how happy it makes me to hear that."

I sweep her up into my arms and head down the hallway that has a private staircase, nodding at our security guy we've got monitoring it. When we reach the top and I unlock the office, I immediately close the curtains so she won't get distracted by the club view down below.

"It smells weird in here."

"Some of the girls have to come in occasionally with private clients if the other places are full. Here, I've got some candles I can light. Give me a sec."

Wolves hate artificial shit, so I pull out the candles we splurge on that are supposed to simply neutralize smells and are made with just a little bit of balsam fir essential oil, placing a few around the room to override whatever the fuck bullshit Ivan got into in here earlier.

"Thank you, I appreciate that. So, this is where you two mostly work?"

She starts looking around the sparse space, cataloguing the black leather couch and file drawer in the corner and the desk with our computer, and not much else. "When we have computer shit to do, yeah. But is that what you really want to talk about? When we finally get to be together?"

I prowl towards her, hunting her, feeling my wolf stretch inside of me at finally being

able to get our claws on our mate. He's been a bitch to handle since we met Lark, more of an asshole than usual. Good thing I'm a bigger one and can subdue him.

"Why don't you sit on the couch, and I'll rub your shoulders for you? Help get some of that tension out of you so you can relax?"

"Really? That sounds...wonderful. Thanks, Trevor."

She smiles at me, far too trustingly, and kicks off her shoes as she climbs onto the couch. She immediately pulls out a red lace thong from the crevice, scrunching her nose. "Gross. Was someone using this earlier? Maybe we should...do this somewhere else."

I grab them and toss them in the trash, cursing my brother mentally. Dumbass. "Sorry sweetheart, hazard of the job. I promise it gets cleaned regularly. You think you're too good to use what we provide?"

"N-no, not at all. Sorry. I'm grateful Ivan could come get me. This is all just a little bit of a shock to me, I guess. There's a lot of pretty women down there. Makes me feel a little lackluster in my stupid sweatshirt and tennis shoes. They're probably wondering what the heck you're doing up here with a kid."

I fall to my knees in front of her, daring to grab two handfuls of her breasts. "Do these grow on kids? Lark, you're a woman. And we have to have attractive women around, it's how we make our money. People spend more money when there are pretty women to bring them drinks and entertain them. You're our mate though, so you don't have to worry about them. You'll always get special treatment."

Fuck, she's got great tits.

"I know, I don't mean to sound whiny. I know you guys like your job, and you've

done a really good job of providing for me. I'm more grateful than you know."

"Care to try and show me?" I ask with a sly smile.

She smiles right back, nervously, but still pulls her sweater and top off, bra too, leaving me with a face full of plump pink nipples and tits I can sink my face between and smother myself with.

So I do.

I moan as all that soft flesh melts around me, the warmth of her seeping into me and making it so much better. Real tits are always so much more fun to play with, they squeeze better. "Perfect, sweetheart."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I pull a nipple into my mouth and get lost, taking my time so I can distract her while I slip a hand in her pants at long last, getting my fingers wet so I can make sure she's good to go for me. Not about to fucking chafe when my wet dream is about to come true. "You want my bite?"

"P-please. Want a matched set. The bond feels weird with just me and Ivan."

I push her back and finish getting her naked, admiring the curves she's been blooming. "Can't wait to sink into these thighs, Lark. I'm sorry how your night started, but I'm not sorry about how it's ending."

I get myself prepped and kneel on the couch, salivating at the view of her. "Going to make this good for you, Lark. Got to show you everything you get by being our mate."

The first thrust is heaven, the second fucking nirvana, and by the third I'm already fighting off my orgasm. She's just too godsdamned pretty; it's almost a fucking problem. "Rub yourself for me, sweetheart, make yourself feel good. You see how good your body's taking me? Fuck, Lark. This cunt is perfection."

She's mostly quiet, which I don't mind, so I close my eyes and get lost in her body, only opening them when I can't hold it off anymore. Her face is slightly pinched but nothing else matters when my spine starts burning with how intense my release hits me, my wolf snarling through all my barriers when I'm most vulnerable, ready to claim his mate.

I bite right into the fleshy part of her leg above her knee, feeling that bond snap into

place. It is weird and will take some getting used to, but it's also kind of cool, I guess.

I wipe a few tears out of Lark's eye as I pull out of her, smirking that I made it so good for her she was shedding tears. Bet I gave it to her better than Ivan did, that fucker.

"Can I get you a soda or something while you wait for us to finish working? We've got pillows and blankets in that cabinet over there because sometimes we end up too drunk by the end of our shift to get home," I say with a laugh, buttoning my pants back up.

"Um, just some water, maybe. Where's the restroom at? I think I want to...clean up a little."

"Oh, yeah, of course. There are some body wipes in that cabinet as well, but if you walk out this door and turn right there's a private bathroom there. Code is 1549. There's water in the mini fridge next to the cabinet, but you have your phone, right? You can text if you need anything else. Should just be a few more hours before we can head out."

"Um, okay." She stands and sort of waddles over to the cabinet to get body wipes while I enjoy the view, reaching for the cigarettes I've always got in my back pocket. I light one up and inhale it, loving the rush of nicotine.

"Is there any way you could just get my backpack? I'm not sure what Ivan did with it, and I have some assignments for school I was going to work on. Or I could get it if you tell me where to go."

"I'll take care of it. I don't want you to leave this office unless one of us is with you, okay? Our girls are pretty, but they're mean if they think they've got competition. I don't want you to get involved with them. Just relax, sweetheart. I'll order some food

for you to snack on. Oh shit, I said I'd rub your shoulders for you, didn't I?" I bite my lip and eye the doorway, hoping she backs out.

"Oh, um, that's okay. I'm sure you're busy, right? Maybe I could get a rain check?"

"You're too good for me, babe. Whatever you want." I head out of the room, whistling, and step outside to finish smoking my cigarette before getting everything my girl needs. I know it's going to be more than a few hours, but maybe she'll fall asleep on that couch and not notice.

My dick is so damned happy I might even offer to stay late and close because I'm in a really damn good mood.

Chapter Four

Lark, Before

Fuck.

Out of all the times I've been scared in my life, this takes the cake.

When my heat hit a few months ago, I was terrified because I know what heats normally lead to, and there was no way in hell that Ivan or Trevor would ever allow me to go on birth control.

Do I want this baby for the sake of what they'll be to me? Of course.

The thought of having someone to actually love, someone to fill the void that my life has quickly spiraled into feels like a hope too big to grasp. But I know that my being pregnant will simply be another thing they can use to control me.

While they've never physically hurt me, there are things much worse than a few bruises. The feeling of constantly feeling like I'm going crazy because they make me feel like I remembered things wrong, or constantly making me feel like I have to accept anything they want because if I don't, they get cold and hateful and make me feel like shit about myself.

I've become a quick study in how to smile and keep my head down. I'm losing everything I used to love about myself, and they've taken everything good away from me already. Once I fully accepted them as mates, it wasn't long until they convinced me that going to school to finish my diploma was worthless.

What need did I have for a high school diploma when they kept me so well? What was I going to do with an education, leave them and get a job?

None of my friends talk to me anymore and I haven't heard from my parents or brother since I moved out. I've never felt so godsdamned alone, and I think that's the worst part.

I'm nearly always around someone since they don't trust me to be alone, yet I have no one that actually wants to talk to me or spend time with me. They've gone so far as to make sure no one at the club will even make eye contact with me, let alone speak to me. The last time someone tried to befriend me there, they got jumped in the alley and didn't show up for anymore shifts.

Then again, I have nice clothes and a home and a bed, so what do I really have to complain about?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I splay my hands over my belly, knowing this baby is far too small to feel yet, but I know this is going to change everything again. Maybe they'll treat me better once I give them a kid, because they have mentioned on multiple occasions how badly they want one, and since I'm the only fated mate they get, I'm the only one that can provide that for them. In that, I'm valuable.

But what happens once this kid is born? Will I become something they still want to hang around?

Some days my mind gets so dark that it's hard to remember what it felt like before I met them when I had friends to hang out with and activities I could enjoy. Now all I'm really allowed to do is follow them around and hang out in their office and take dance classes so I can understand how hard the women in their club actually work.

That happened when I complained too many times about the attention my mates show some of the girls that work for them; I'm not dumb, I know there's no way they're faithful. I don't think they've ever been.

In fact, I've figured out that they've pretty much slept with other women while I'm on the phone with them or in the other room doing paperwork for them, but I'm not allowed to chastise them for it because they tell me I can't keep up with their needs.

In truth, it's starting to feel a lot like relief when they're with someone else because that's one less orgasm I have to fake for them, one less time I have to get on my back for them and pretend to enjoy the awful way they touch me.

They think they're sex gods, but if my experiences are what good sex feels like, it's

the single most over-hyped thing in this world.

They're sweet occasionally, but most times they make me feel like a drain on their resources.

I'm looking pretty good and jaded for being 17, aren't I?

If my friends could see me now, pregnant at 17 and with no prospects for the future, I'm sure they'd have a field day with it. They'd have enough gossip material to last them until graduation and then some.

"Lark, you coming out? Breakfast is getting cold. We need to leave soon; we don't have time to pander to you being lazy today."

Maybe I can just hide the pregnancy from them for a while and hope that I can figure something out.

I splash water on my face and stuff the pregnancy test into my shoe, because while they provided it, they don't need to know I had cause to use it.

"Sorry, I can just eat on the way. I know you have a big meeting about the new property. I'm ready to go," I tell Trevor as I open the door. Avoiding conflict has become a big hobby of mine.

"You're not fucking eating in my car. Last time there were crumbs all over the seat from you. I'm not dealing with that again. Let's just go, I'll feed you later."

I nod at him and follow him downstairs, passing by the clean kitchen. This means they didn't even save me any food; they didn't plan on feeding me. They've complained a few times about my weight, so I think they're trying to force me to lose a few pounds.

Before we even get to the door though Ivan is laying on the horn, being rude as fuck as he makes sure I know he's ready to go.

I take off down the stairs and hop in back, because goddess forbid they let their mate sit in front, buckling in and combing through my hair before they start commenting about how I look like shit.

When we reach the end of the driveway, Ivan slams on the brakes, skidding to avoid the mailbox that belongs to one of the neighbors.

My heart sinks to my stomach, because I didn't think about how my scent might have changed or how obvious it would be in this incredibly small space.

Sure enough, both sets of eyes swing my way, accusatorily. "You're pregnant. I fucking hope you haven't realized yet, because you know you're supposed to tell us the second you find out."

"I-I am? How do you know?"

"You're fucking lying," Ivan snarls. "Your top lip twitches when you try to fake your way through something. You trying to make us look dumb? Is that it? You think we're stupid, don't you?"

"You know I don't think anything like that. I just found out, okay? I'm kind of freaking out about it. It's a big change, and I'm still really young. I don't think a lot of girls hope to become teen moms."

"Well, most girls don't have us for mates," Trevor whips at me. "Is that why you were taking so long in the bathroom? You were taking a pregnancy test, weren't you? Where the fuck did you hide it? We're already late, don't make us more so."

We're not late at all actually, but I can't point that out.

Hoping to cut my punishment, I slip the test out of my shoe and pass it forward, but that was the wrong choice.

When Ivan speaks again, it's with a terrifying deadly calm tone to his voice that I just know is going to haunt me later. "The fact that you knew to hide that tells me everything I need to fucking know. You weren't planning on telling us, were you? What was your grand plan? Run the second we had our backs turned? How far you think you would have gotten without any money? Hmm? A pretty little thing like you? You think some benevolent stranger would have just stepped forward and solved all your problems? Taken you in and made you feel good about your situation?"

Tears are welling up and I hate that they can still stir such shame in me because somewhere in my chest I know I don't deserve this treatment, but they're also right that I had nefarious intentions with hiding it from them.

"Maybe we should just leave her and watch her flounder. Let other idiots take a shot at her. Is that what you were hoping for, mate? You want some other wolves to sweep you off your feet and fuck you? You think they'd be impressed with the way you flop on your back and stay completely inanimate when you're getting fucked? Why do you think we hook up with so many other women? You're a lousy fucking lay. The only use you are to us is that pup."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I bite my tongue until it bleeds, making sure I don't say anything to damn myself further.

Eventually, Ivan takes a deep breath and shakes his head like he's disappointed by me and drives in silence.

I shadow them through the meeting, taking notes for them. At lunch they order in and hand me a salad with chicken on it, no dressing or cheese or anything to make it taste remotely good, but I choke down what I can.

Then they have to visit the office for the construction company they're hiring to do some reno work at the bigger building they're moving their club into, and I stumble along behind them like a doll, completely ignored.

They don't say a damn word to me all day other than to tell me to fucking write down everything that's said in each meeting, but then they don't even look at my notes, and I'm convinced they only made me take them so that I'd have something to keep me busy. They're of firm minds that idle hands are devils' play.

By the end of the day my feet are aching from standing so much (I was never offered a chair while they discussed any business deals), my head hurts from stress, and my heart is hammering away in my chest because I have a feeling that when we get home, things are going to get bad.

I spend the drive home mentally going over all the worst-case scenarios I can think of so that I'll be prepared for anything. I imagine them hitting me, I imagine them starving me, I imagine them taking away more of my comfort items, but what

actually happens is a hundred times worse.

The drive drags on and on, and when I finally look up to try and figure out where we are, I realize none of the surroundings are familiar, and the way they're teasing each other about stupid shit is a giant red flag amidst the way they're completely ignoring me.

They're talking about moving things around at the house and reclaiming closet space and being able to not worry about their side pieces getting found out, right in front of me.

Nothing makes sense until they pull up somewhere that I think would send chills to the very core of any female wolf out there.

I don't jump out of the car when they park, I start to hyperventilate and stay buckled until Ivan reaches a hand in that I ignore, only for him to crawl in and unbuckle me himself.

He pulls me out and stands me up, pulling off my shoes and jacket and cute designer top they insisted I wear today, until I'm left in nothing but thin slacks and a camisole that's meant to be worn under something warmer with more coverage.

"I'd take the rest of your clothes too if I thought you wouldn't fight us, but we bought these so they're coming with us. I just want you to know, Lark, that we really fucking tried."

Trevor nods and pats Ivan on the shoulder like he's offering him support. "You're not easy to live with. You're difficult to care for and your attitude isn't worth how great your body is or how pretty your face is. We've got a solution though." He turns to Ivan to take over again and I stupidly move my head to him, praying to the goddess he'll refute what Trevor just said.

“When we realized how stuck up and ungrateful you were, we kind of had this option in our back pocket in case we needed it. The idea of having a mate fated for us was really exciting in the beginning. We’ve had some good times, haven’t we? But the truth is, being mated isn’t as great as we thought it would be. Or maybe it’s just being mated to you. You’re always bitching at us when we act like the independent adult men we are, and you’re fucking frigid. It’s like you hate sex or something, and for a couple of wolves that own a strip club, that just won’t do.”

“This is only temporary,” Trevor promises. “This is the best place for you right now because you’ll be out of our way while you grow that kid for us and we won’t have to deal with any of the unsatisfactory side effects of pregnancy; we don’t want to see you blow up and get all fat, you dig me?”

“We’ll come back when the baby is born and make sure he’s healthy and take him off your hands, and then you can live the rest of your days here, amongst other sad women that hate men. It’s really the perfect place for you; I hear they give the residents their own rooms and everything.” Ivan steps closer and cups my face, like he used to do when they first met me and were pretending to be nice men. “I hate that you’re making us do this.”

“Then don’t fucking do it! Really, what have I ever asked for? Is it really so much to ask of you guys to treat me with the tiniest bit of respect and keep your dicks in your pants? Is it really so awful being mated to me that you want to break apart everything we’ve been building after less than a full year of being together? How is this where we’re at?”

Ivan’s hand slips to my neck and starts to subtly squeeze, warning me. “You’ll not talk to us like that. We’ve been good to you, Lark. We haven’t done you any harm. You’ve done your best to make us miserable at every turn though, and it’s affecting our mental health. A separation is best for all of us.”

They can't reject me. I won't allow it.

I turn and try to climb back into the car, waiting for them to drive me home, but turning my back on them was absolutely the wrong call.

Trevor grabs me by the hair, keeping a tight fist on it so I'm forced to follow his hand unless I want my hair ripped out, and no doubt he'd blame it on me if it happened. After all, it's not him pulling my hair, it's me working against him that's causing me pain.

The air escapes my lungs as they lead me to the desolate front doors, Ivan checking me out like he wants to take me one more time before he lets me go, but I start thrashing, wanting nothing more than to stay with them, even if that makes me pathetic.

"Please, you're my whole world! I love you guys, I n-need you. How can you abandon me? I've done everything you've asked of me! I've bent over backwards to take care of you and keep you happy, and I'm sorry, okay? I made a mistake! That's all this was, I was going to tell you, I was! I was planning a big reveal for you, I knew how happy you'd be when you found out."

I'm sobbing, a complete wreck, but something cuts through because Ivan steps up and kisses me sweetly, making me believe that there's something inside of his twisted chest that acknowledges how important I am to him.

"Maybe we'll come back for you in a few years when you've grown a bit. You gonna better yourself for us, sweetheart?"

Someone on the sidewalk catches my attention, someone that looks like maybe they're a resident here, the shelter for rejected mates, and she's watching this all play out like it's not somebody's life.

She meets my eye and shakes her head, taking a deep breath before striding right up to us. “That’s enough. Can’t you see you’ve broken her already? Congratulations. Get the hell out of here.”

She tries to separate me from them, which just pisses them off more because it’s no longer on their terms, and I’m clinging to them like a stupid child, wanting the comfort of their arms that I’ve felt so many times since they came into my life.

It hasn’t been all roses and sunshine, but there have been so many times I’ve laid there next to one or both of them where everything just felt so incredibly right. They’d rub my back and hold me like I was the most important thing in the world.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

And they're trying to throw that away. And I'm fucking pregnant.

"Don't do this," I beg them. "It's not too late. We can just go home and pretend this didn't happen. I swear, I'll never even mention it! I'll make that pasta dish you like so much, and we can crawl into bed and—"

"We reject you, Lark."

There goes the final dagger.

My knees collapse and I fall faster than anyone can catch, smacking my face on the metal doorstep that's cemented into the ground. The cement is cold against all my bare skin but the bonds in my chest are ripping to shreds, and screaming is the only thing I can rightfully handle.

I start clawing at my chest, just wanting it to stop, but it doesn't.

The place where our bond sat when they claimed me feels like it's embedded with razor blades, cutting through all the muscles and sinew in my chest and slicing me to ribbons, sending me to my own version of hell.

Someone touches me but then there's a skirmish of some sort that I can't track, because my head is so loud, and my body feels like it's on fire. I'm on the ground thrashing, and someone drags me inside and shuts the door, separating us completely.

The bond snaps completely in two, emptying me out.

Chapter Five

Lark, After

I wake up screaming, as usual, the room around me too dim to matter. I roll over and throw myself off the bed while protecting my stomach, letting the rough, scratchy industrial carpeting press into my face until I can feel the indents all over from it.

Sometimes I have to do stupid things to remind myself that I'm still real.

"Sorry, bean, hope I didn't scare you. At least one of us gets to sleep." I sit up and watch my hands press against the pale flesh of my distended stomach, stretched over the tiny being that was the only good thing to have come from my brief stint at being a respectably mated wolf.

The baby is pressing firmly against my bladder so that's my first stop, then I figure since I'm already awake, something useful might be done.

So, I drag myself down the hall after slipping a sweater on, aiming towards the computer lab that's somehow decent, with the aim of finishing some more online schoolwork. There's no one anymore to care how well I'm doing, so I'm trying to do good for myself. To prove to myself I can still become something even if Ivan and Trevor tried to ruin me.

It's not comfortable to sit in the hard molded plastic chairs with my belly pressed up against the desk in there, but that's only more penance to keep a hold of reality.

Online high school isn't at all the same, but I'm determined to finish my diploma, even if I have no idea how it's realistically going to benefit me in a tangible way.

The shelter comes awake slowly around me while I work, lights flickering on up and

down hallways as doors start opening, the shuffling of feet permeating the stillness I've been working in for hours now.

I'm supposed to be on rotation in kitchen today, so after logging out of the online portal, I head that way, grateful to have something that's going to occupy me for the next four hours. It's when I'm not on rotation that bad things happen.

The second I try to relax and do something fun, all the pain rushes back in with a vengeance, stealing every bit of happiness my body tries to create. I know if I'm not actively exhausting myself, I'll sit and dwell on every interaction I've had with Ivan and Trevor, trying to look at it from a new angle so I can determine what I did wrong.

I don't think I did anything, not really, but the mind games make me feel like maybe that's not really true.

They put the new girls here on dish duty because we don't have to talk to others in order to function. The different duties are all assigned to best help the rejected women in their different stages of grief and recovery, which is a sick kind of science that I hate that someone had to figure out.

I'm given breakfast and then I get to work, scrubbing pot after pot, plunging my hands into the hot, soapy water, hoping each clean dish blesses someone else later.

By the time the shift ends my back is aching something fierce, so after grabbing a sack lunch to bring to my room with me, I decide a hot shower might make me feel slightly better.

The sight awaiting me in my room nearly makes me laugh. There's this strange phenomenon that happens these days; when I'm triggered, my heart becomes so elated by the familiar idea of mates, but the rest of me that remembers the severing of those bonds retaliates something fierce, and I end up laughing in a very morbid, over-

the-top way.

There is a myriad of reasons why there are counsellors on staff to help guide us.

There's a gift basket sitting on my side table overflowing with expensive bath products. This isn't the first time they've sent me gifts, and it's not the first time I've set them aside to donate them to the free shop in the basement.

Why Ivan or Trevor think I would want to touch anything they try to provide again is a mystery, even if the thought of exfoliating my tired skin with a lush smelling body scrub sounds like literal heaven. I will suffer extra if it means spiting them.

This is my existence now. It's hard for me to grasp that this is what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life; living in this dingy room that can't be bothered to look clean because it's so worn, constantly battling mental fights against myself, and always looking for some reason to think about them just so I can remind myself that they don't fucking matter and that I hate them.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

The shower only gets lukewarm, but that's fine. Maybe the pain of carrying a baby and having to stoop over and run on such little sleep will be the reason I'm able to cling to my sanity for the rest of the afternoon. If that doesn't do the trick, I'm sure there are plenty of other opportunities around the property for me to find success in.

Chapter Six

Lark, After

"They're here."

"That's not funny."

I look down at my six-week-old and drink up the little bit of contentment while I can. Tomorrow I get put back on rotation for the shelter, so this is our last lie-in before I have to baby wear him while I work the never-ending pile of laundry that the shelter processes.

The director of the shelter steps into my room, a tear dripping out of her eye. She makes eye contact with me, and the expression on her face stills my breath.

"You're...serious?"

She nods, wiping a tear off her face.

"But—"

“You know if there was anything I could do about it, I would in a heartbeat. It kills me to be the caretaker of all you girls without any power to actually protect you from the rest of the world. As of now, pack law states that babies belong to the fathers in a case of separation. It’s patriarchal bullshit, but until we get some worthwhile alphas running things, it’s not likely to change.”

I clutch Camden to me, gently of course, already trying to prepare myself for how bad this is going to hurt. “I haven’t heard from them since they brought me here. I didn’t believe they’d actually do this. To reject me is an act vile enough, but to come with the intention of taking my baby away from me?” I shake my head.

“Do you want me to let them in, or would you rather meet them out in the visiting room?”

“Can you... maybe hold him while I get dressed?”

“Of course, Lark. It would be my pleasure. Let me just wash my hands first.”

She steps up to my rust-stained sink that I’ve scrubbed tirelessly to no effect and soaps up her hands, drying them off before reaching for Camden.

“Don’t— that is, would you mind just staying in the room? I want to be able to see him if he’s about to...well...”

“I’ll just turn towards the door and sing to him. Take your time. I say make ‘em wait. We might have to comply but don’t have to do it joyfully or succinctly.”

I nod my thanks as tears start running down my face, and I grab the one of three outfits I have; used sweats somebody left behind and a t shirt that was donated from some painting company, a hoodie that’s entirely too big but comfy, and the shoes that have been passed through at least three other residents before they were given to me.

I have no shame in what I'm wearing, because I'm clothed, and I didn't choose this. I've been going to counselling and I'm a little stronger now, but I'm still only 18 and it's difficult for me to be too mature about any of this when I just want to scream to the world about the injustices being done and demand somebody do something about it.

When I feel about as ready as I'm going to get, I throw my unwashed hair up into a bun and take the baby, making sure his diaper is clean and he's nice and swaddled with a cap on his tiny head before bringing him outside of the room.

"I don't even know what to say to them. Now that I've been here about as long as I was with them, living with them and being a part a pack feels like it might have happened to somebody else."

"I don't want to sound like I'm trying to downplay anything you've gone through, because I've been here to witness every step of your grief and I'll be here every step you continue to take towards healing. I'm still going to be here when they leave though, and you're strong as hell. I'm going to help you work through whatever they decide to put you through today, and remember you have something vital that they can't take away from you. Spirit. It may feel broken, it may be polluted or feel useless to you right now, but it's going to emerge when you really need it to, and they can't touch that.

"Just breathe in that baby you made all by yourself, feel his weight in your arms, and revel in the fact that your incredible body created him from just a tiny deposit made by those idiots that don't know the difference between a diamond and a sack of trash."

Chapter Seven

Ivan, After

“This place smells like gravy.”

I nod at Trevor and stay as still as I can, not wanting to lose count in my head.

“What the fuck is taking her so long? This place can’t be that big. You’d think she might be a little excited to see us. It’s been what, eight or nine months? How long are shifter pregnancies? She probably had the kid, right?”

“You’re fucking stupid. I sent you that app to track the baby’s growth the week after we brought her here. You haven’t been reading at all, have you? You been lying about it all this time?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

He shrugs and I just don't even fucking care. Not worth fighting over. That's all we've done since we cut the bonds with Lark.

It could have been any baby cry anywhere, but somehow, I know it belongs to my son. Nobody notified us when he was born, so we just waited a little extra to make sure we were well past the possible due date before showing up.

Seeing her hurts much worse than I expected.

I thought sending her here would free all of us up to live lives separately so we could just move on from a terrible pairing by the goddess, but time hasn't done her any damn favors.

Her hair is greasy, and her clothes are old and don't fit right, and the bags under her eyes feel like a mirror of my own. But I know she's got it worse, because she had to go through the whole pregnancy and childbirth and recovery process without anyone there to care for her.

I've never deserved her, and that is so glaringly obvious right now.

I reach out and she pulls back, the accusation in her eyes loud.

"Why aren't you wearing anything we sent? I thought we sent in some clothes a few weeks ago when your body became your own again."

She glares at Trevor, and I simply rub the bridge of my nose.

“Do either of you even know how to take care of a baby? Do you know the first thing about feeding schedules or diapering or formula? I’m breastfeeding him and he’s going to be pissed when you take me away and try to give him a bottle. Do you have a crib with a safe sleep space, and are you aware he wakes about 4-5 times a night for food or diaper changes? You do realize how much babies cry, right?”

“We’re not here to take him, Lark.”

She narrows her eyes at me, challenging me. “Then why the fuck are you here? No one wants you here.”

“Wasn’t expecting a warm welcome,” I smirk. “I wanted to see him. Wanted to see you. This idiot found out and demanded to tag along.”

“Well, you’ve seen us both. You can rest easy knowing I was capable enough to give birth and that we’re both still breathing, no thanks to either of you.” She turns and starts to stalk out, my hollow arms aching.

“Wait, can I...can I just hold him? Please? If he’s the only one I’m going to get, I want to know what it’s like to hold him when he’s still so small.”

“Glad you’re admitting you’re not getting anywhere near me again.”

“We don’t have to make this difficult, you know? We made our choices, and you made yours. I’d like to be able to keep you in his life when we’re ready to bring him home, but if you can’t be decent to us, I don’t know how that’s going to work.” The words hurt as they spew from my mouth, but dealing with her just makes me fucking crazy, always has. I don’t know what it is about the girl that just zaps every ounce of compassion I have, but it’s a damn talent.

She steps towards us but the venom in her eyes is clearer than the ugly specks on the

linoleum tile we're standing on.

"Coercion. Classy. If you want to touch him, you need to wash your hands first. I don't know where the fuck those hands have been."

I get up calmly and cuff Trevor on the back of the head to make him come with me, soaping up and drying them off without a single argument across the room at the kitchenette that was likely installed 30-40 years ago. I can respect that she's trying to keep the baby healthy.

I extend my hands when I get close enough, tunnel vision on the bundle tucked close to her body. I can't see his face the way she's holding him, but I know it's a boy. I've known since we found out she was pregnant. It's like the goddess implanted the knowledge into my head.

She's shaking as she hands him over, tears instantly flowing from her eyes like she's imagining me running off with him and never looking back.

"You really love him, don't you?"

"I grew him in my body for six months and spent day and night nourishing him from my body and caring for him. He's the only bright spot I have left. Only a monster could go through everything I went through and not feel anything other than absolute adoration for the child they went through it for."

I relax a bit, because if nothing else, I know she's a good mom, even if she is young.

The second I get a look at his wrinkly little face and those hazel eyes that are a near direct translation of mine blink open, all the frustrations from the last few months melt away. I created something good. Me, a total fuckup that can't do a damn thing right.

“He’s perfect,” I say in awe.

Even Trevor is silent as he takes in our son. He leans forward and kisses his tiny little forehead, and I can almost feel the flashes he’s experiencing of those early days when we first found Lark and felt hope. Because I’m experiencing them too. There may be a decent future for us yet.

“I feel like I could stare at him all day,” I admit.

Trevor snaps some pictures of us together, and then he gets to hold him while I snap some pictures, and it’s then I realize I haven’t even asked what she named him.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

My eyes snap up to the tear-filled ones of Lark, watching her crumpled up and leaning against the woman that led her in, and I almost want to be the man that is there for her, comforting her, even if I know that we're bad together. "What's his name?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess he'll be needing one of those. I'm partial to Trevor Jr.," the idiot says with a smile.

"I went through the labor, I get to choose. You both lost the right to have any say in his name when you abandoned us. His name is Camden James."

"Cute."

Her fingers are twitching as we handle the baby, and I know she's probably dying to hold him again so she knows he's safe.

When we hand him back over, she lets out a big sob and takes several steps backwards immediately, planting space between us as a form of protection.

"Do you...need anything?"

She shakes her head as she buries her face into the tiny little body, and I reach for my wallet anyway. "Here. We were assholes when we brought you here the way we did. I want to apologize for not leaving you with the clothes you were wearing or for letting you take anything from the house. It's all still there, if you want me to bring some of it for you. Or all of it. Or maybe you could come stay the weekend sometime?"

Trevor starts laughing. “Rich. Grow some backbone, man. Why the fuck you apologizing? Do you not remember what put us in this position in the first place? Her lies? She doesn’t have need for that nice stuff here. I bet she’s perfectly content with what she’s got now, aren’t you sweetheart?”

I swear to the fucking goddess I will murder this man someday. I settle for a sharp elbow to the kidney. “Don’t be a fucking asshole. Can’t you see how much she’s suffering?”

“Fuck you. She’s just a little washed up. Looks like she’s got enough anger in her flabby body to incinerate us if she wanted to.”

The woman with Lark is quick to intercede. “That’s enough. If you have no more business with Ms. Drake, I’ll just ask you to be on your way.”

Hearing my name attached to hers hits me good. “Can I just have a moment of your time? Please? Without Trevor?”

“Fine. I’ll fucking wait outside, you pussy. Go kiss up and make yourself feel better for putting her somewhere that’s been literally providing for her. Bet she complains about everything here, too. You get jealous when the matron helps other residents, Lark? I remember how much you used to whine about us touching our employees.”

“I said, that’s enough! Leave now or I will have you removed and banned. Your lack of sensitivity is appalling.”

“Whatever. Peace. Congratulations on not fucking up your pregnancy.”

He walks out, and the second he’s out of the building, something inside of me cracks.

I slump down in the nearest chair and bury my face in my arms, exhausted. “As you

can see, it's not so great without you, Lark. I know we weren't perfect, but losing you made me and Trevor a totally empty pack. Our bond is basically destroyed too. We've been living apart, only seeing each other at work."

She sits next to me, draping a blanket over her shoulder when the baby starts to fuss, then uses the cover to feed him. "Do you expect me to feel bad for you, Ivan? I don't think you understand how completely you fucked up my life. I'm living in a shelter, for fuck's sake. Him saying all my needs are being met is incredibly ignorant."

"You always were so smart, using big words. Would you consider trying again with me? We can keep Trevor out of it; I think he's always pushed me to be a worse version of myself and I just always seem to let him take me there."

"You're joking, right? You mated me against my will, pressured me into sleeping with you, never made me come once, and then dumped me here the day you found out you knocked me up because you 'didn't want to see me get fat'. And I very much donotcomprehend the saltiness about me not wanting you two to touch other women. Do you have any idea what that was like? How hellish it was to feel through the bond when you'd be getting off with someone else?"

"You could feel that?"

"Do you fucking know anything at all about shifters, asshole? Of course I could feel that. Every damn time one of them made you come I'd get a rush of pleasure down the bond that made me sick to my fucking stomach.

"I'm a fucking kid, Ivan. When we met, we all agreed to wait to start anything until I graduated high school so I could bring my best self into the mating."

"You forced our hand when you asked to move in with us early."

“You mean when my parents fucking left me homeless unless I agreed to move in with the two guys that were nearly ten years my senior and owned a fucking strip club? You honestly think that was my plan A? And that is no excuse for the way you’ve treated me; if you had any respect for me as your mate, you’d have encouraged me to graduate and supported me while I became the adult I should have been allowed to morph into. Not hold me back and then cut my feet out from under me.”

I sigh, letting go of the fight. I don’t have it in me to continue to hash things out with her. It’s clear we’re not going to get anywhere. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry you got mated to us. You should have been mated to someone closer to your age that wasn’t told how stupid they were their whole life. You should have been cherished and fucking cared for, and we didn’t really do that, did we?”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response, not after everything you took away from me. You didn’t get hit like I did when you dumped me here because you’re the one that rejected me, but the pain you thrust upon me was so much worse than labor. It’s something I actively have to fight every damn day here. The sadness inside of me has embedded itself into my bones, and I can’t shake it. The depression...thank the goddess for Camden because he’s the only thing that makes me strive to complete basic self-care tasks.”

“You really won’t take my money?”

“Will I take the money you made by exploiting women and/or fucking them in between sets? No. I don’t want anything you have to offer, Ivan.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I stand and press a kiss to the top of her head, fighting tears. It feels impossible to go against every instinct my wolf has, because he still recognizes her as our lost mate, and wants to wrap her up and protect her from everything. He wants to feed her and care for our young and provide a good home.

But we're just shit on her shoe, and even if she doesn't get yet that living here is a step up from living with me, I do. Maybe she'll get it someday. "No matter what you think, I still care about you, Lark. My need for other women doesn't diminish that."

"Just fucking stop, already."

"I'll come back and visit at some point so we can work out custody. I want you to have this time with him though, because I think it's important for him to have time with his mother in the early part of his life."

"You're really going to take him from me, aren't you?"

"It's pack law, Lark."

"Not a requirement though. What the hell are you going to do with a kid? You going to make your girlfriends take care of him? This is a child, Ivan, not a trophy for you to show off. He is the only thing I have. Please, don't take him from me."

"You know I have to. Not today, but someday."

I walk out of that room that does indeed smell of gravy, pain in my chest convincing me I'm in imminent threat of a heart attack even if they're nearly unheard of in

shifters.

I can't tell her that having a kid is the only way to get my inheritance, because then she'll really know how weak I am. Especially because that makes it obvious that my number one priority is always myself, not how my actions or needs affect those around me.

Trevor is just sitting next to the car smoking, but I don't miss the ragged way he breathes or the redness in his eyes that matches the need to cry in mine.

We're both fucked up, but there's nothing for it.

Chapter Eight

Lark, After

"Ready or not, here I come!"

The giggles behind the tree give him away, but I pretend to be confused for a good few minutes before 'accidentally' finding his hiding spot.

"Mommy! You're too good at this!"

I scoop him up, which is difficult these days, his long legs dangling as I squeeze him. "I've had more years to practice. I thought you said you've been practicing at school during recess? I bet you could find me in half the time."

"Oh, you're on mom-lady!"

I roll my eyes at the weird term he's coined for me and won't let go of, waiting for him to spin and begin counting before I sprint as quietly as possible to find a tree with

good climbing limbs.

“Ready or not, here I come!”

I sit perfectly still, laying down on the thick branch, waiting for his footsteps to come in my direction. Of course he heads the opposite way first, but that’s okay, I have nowhere to be.

But then I have to throw myself from the tree and run on the ankle I just turned, half tripping the entire way to the parking lot, because they’re back.

They’re back and I think I know why.

I throw myself in front of my eight-year-old, blocking him. “Leave.”

“Holy fuck, Lark, you look smokin’ hot! Last time we saw you, you were in those hideous sweats. These leggings are a fuck ton better.”

“Donotuse that language in front of my child. Leave.”

Trevor steps forward like he thinks I’ll want a hug, but that’s a hard no. They look like shit. This makes me happy.

“Mom-lady? Who are they?”

Trevor laughs, “Say hi to your daddies!” and I flinch.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

Camden cuddles against my back, gripping onto my sweater. “Can we go inside now, mom? I’m done playing.”

I start backing up, hoping they’ll just leave, but I’m unsurprised it doesn’t work. I’ve ignored every visiting attempt they’ve made, shredded every letter that’s been sent, returned everything they’ve tried to give me. I want absolutely nothing to do with them.

“Time to pack up your stuff kid, you get to come live in a real house now, instead of this dump heap. Wait ‘til you use the bed we hooked you up with. You’re going to love the big ass tv in the room as well.”

“No thank you.”

“Let’s see you then,” Ivan says, staying true to character and being the less abrasive of the two.

“Can’t you see he’s uncomfortable? He wants to stay with me.”

“You know that’s not possible,” Ivan says with something that’s suspiciously parallel to regret.

I can feel Camden’s fingers turning to claws, shredding my shirt because he’s fucking terrified. These two in front of us give off nothing but slimy, menacing vibes, and Camden has such little interaction with men at the shelter. Sure, he sees some at school and we interact with them when we need to go in public for something, but there’s been none in our lives the entirety of our time here at the shelter.

My heart is compressed so tightly it's fit to explode, and I'm racing through a million different scenarios in my mind, looking for any possible obstacle that might prevent this atrocity from coming to fruition.

"What if we start doing more visits? If you want to get to know him, we could have some outings, maybe? He doesn't know anything about you."

Trevor snarls and steps closer to me, nicotine-tinged breath far too close to my face. "And who's fault is that, bitch? You gonna raise my kid and not tell him about me? Huh? You think that was fucking smart?"

"Please don't talk to my mom like that. She's too good of a person. Maybe we should go get the matron and ask for help; she's really good at fixing problems. We c-could maybe get a soda from the vending machines? I think we still have a few quarters left in our room."

Hearing my kid beg guts me, and I have to throw in my offer as well. "P-please. I'll do anything."

"Absolutely not, Trevor," Ivan growls as he grabs the back of his packmate's neck when he opens his mouth to offer me something. "I don't care how good of an idea you think it is; she's not doing that shit. I don't want her anywhere near there. Don't want anybody looking at her like that."

My thoughts are racing again, trying to figure out what they're discussing right in front of me. Trevor doesn't make me wait long. "You know it's the best solution. You either want her or you don't. Since you haven't rescued her from here like a fucking knight in tarnished armor, I'm going to assume she thinks she's too good for us now. You know what no woman anywhere is too good for? Making money. I bet you she'd do it in a heartbeat if it meant being around the boy."

All these years, I hardly ever hear from my wolf because of the rejection. A lot of wolves just die off after their human gets rejected, but because I was fully claimed before being rejected, mine is a bit stronger. She's weak now and likely always will be, but she's there when I really need her.

Like now.

I don't have the strength to go through with whatever half-cocked plan they've come up with, and I'm sure this is all a trap, but I wasn't lying when I said I'd do anything to stay with my child. So, I use the strength of my wolf to hold my shoulders back and keep my voice steady.

"Just tell me, please. You can't separate us."

"You'd have to live with us part time," Trevor says, laying the trap.

Not what I was expecting, but even that isn't a deal breaker. "Okay. What else?"

"Seriously?" Ivan asks, intrigued.

"Yes. I told you, anything for him. Do I at least get my own room? Or I can share with him. In fact, I prefer it. We've been sharing all this time, and I don't know if I could sleep elsewhere."

"Don't really give a fuck where you sleep as long as you take care of the meals and laundry and all that shit you used to do. You also don't get to comment a damn thing on who comes in and out of that house."

I know he's referring to women, but I could even listen to them fuck somebody else if it meant staying with Camden. I will become a fucking maid if it keeps me with him.

"Fine. What else?"

“You’re really fucking motivated, aren’t you? Are other things on the table?” Trevor wags his eyebrows, telling me exactly what he means.

“There’s a fucking kid, right fucking there, ass wipe. We’re not going to talk about sex in front of him. Especially sex with his hot mom.” Maybe I should appreciate the sentiment that Ivan is going for, but it falls so far below the bar that all I can do is stave off the tension headache trying to form between my eyes.

I start nudging Camden towards the building, but he’s not at all interested in leaving me here alone. “Just plug your ears, baby. Pretend we’re on the bus and there’s a stranger trying to talk to you. We’re going to get this figured out, okay? I don’t want you to worry about me. Why don’t you head inside and read a few chapters of your book? I’m going to talk to them, and I’ll be there soon.”

“He can’t—”

I glare at Trevor and take a step towards him, blocking him from chasing after Camden, completely over him ruining my life. “You just showed up out of nowhere with the intention of completely disrupting our lives. He doesn’t deserve that. If you want to be involved with him, this is something you must do. You must consider him above everything else. If you don’t show us the most basic of courtesies in this manner, I will fight you fucking tooth and nail every step of the damn way. I may be a nothing rejected wolf, but you haven’t taken my voice.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“I’ve made connections in here and I can get help. So try taking my kid away from me while simultaneously acting like you have no vested interest in his wellbeing and you bet your ass, I’ll take it to the alpha and get your ass in a tribunal. Pack law might say they belong with the fathers, but I’m sure there’s also a clause in there about the child’s wellbeing.

“You want to work through this situation as a fucking adult, then let’s do that. You have already clearly demonstrated that you have no idea what sort of language is appropriate for a child. You want anything to do with him, you will clean up your fucking act.

“You will in no way degrade me in front of him, keep that toxic shit private. You will not proposition me in front of him, but I can make your life real fucking easy and real fucking nice if you give me these basic things. All I ask is that I stay in his life.”

Ivan surges forward, grabbing me and pulling my mouth to his like he thought that was a damn proposal and invitation for fucking around, but I knee him right in the balls to stop that notion in its tracks. “I have no desire to touch either of you intimately as long as you’re touching other women; if you want my body on the table, that’s the rule. I don’t want to sleep with you, but I literally will do anything for my kid.

“I know that’s a lot of fucking power to hand to a couple of assholes who don’t give a shit about me, but Camden is the only damn thing I care about.”

Trevor eyes me up and down, thinking, which must be excruciating for him, before he finally nods. “You’ll do whatever we ask?”

“As long as it doesn’t endanger me or Camden. And you have to be a respectable father. You cannot parade women in front of him. He is eight years old and he’s far too young to learn how to disrespect women.”

“Fucking burn!” Ivan whoops, far too happy right now.

“And you,” I say, averting my eyes onto Ivan, “shut the fuck up. Don’t kiss me unless...actually, just don’t kiss me. I don’t know where your fucking mouth has been. I don’t do sloppy seconds, and I don’t want whatever incurable diseases are likely covering your dicks from how often you dip them into your employees and goddess knows who else without wrapping them. If any wolf could figure out how to contract an STI when it’s supposed to be biologically impossible, it’d be you two through sheer dumb determination.”

I storm off and head towards the door, typing in my access code to get inside.

“Wait! We still want the kid!”

I flip them off over my shoulder.

“Fine, wait. We’ll... fine.” Trevor catches up to me, followed by Ivan, and they’re looking inside the halls of our home, the one they condemned us to, with the purest form of distaste I might have ever seen.

“Still smells like gravy, and it’s...gross. I think I know why you said you’ll do anything to get out of here.”

I correct Trevor and his stupid mouth immediately. “This building has nothing to do with me wanting to get away. In fact, I’m not getting away from here, not permanently. I need my room here because I know there are going to be times when you don’t want me anywhere near you, or when you make me so batshit crazy that

I'll need somewhere safe to be. I need somewhere I can take Camden if I feel like you're not holding your end of the bargain and we're in danger. I don't trust you two fucks as far as I can throw you, so we're keeping the safety net. And you sure have a lot of shit to say for a place you've lauded as being so highly optimum in the past. Fuck right off. This place kept me alive and fed when neither of you could be bothered."

I feel their eyes on me the entire length of the halls, and it's empowering to know that they see me as a woman finally, even if it comes at a point in time where it's laughably unreturned and purchased with a cost so high it nearly broke me dozens of times.

They might think they're controlling me and Camden, but they're still wolves and wolves are ruled by their basest of instincts. Even if they've smothered the shit out of their wolves to reject me and fuck other women the way they have, I know I can find ways to get their wolves to take over and piss them off.

"We're stopping at the matron's office before we do shit. We are her wards until papers are signed. She also has legal status to create agreements that will be held up in any sort of legal battle, so I need her apprised of the situation so that when you two fucks break your end of the agreement, I have ground to stand on."

"That's twice now," Ivan rambles, "you've called us that. Is that the best endearment you can think of to call us? Surely if we have to be civil, you do as well."

That makes me smile, something that's usually as foreign to my face as health is to theirs. "I'm sure I can come up with plenty more names, many times better than 'two fucks', just give me a bit of time. I'll absolutely be civil to you in front of Camden but only if you can reciprocate. In case you're confused, that word means you have to be civil to me if you want to see that action returned."

“I know what reciprocate means,” Ivan grumbles.

Matron is busy with someone else when I arrive, so I take a seat in the chairs in front of the office where she’ll see someone is waiting, relaxing for a moment because I’ve learned to take things one step at a time. I know right now at this moment that Camden is safe and in familiar surroundings, and if he needs anything until I get back, there are neighbors he is comfortable approaching. We all have to help each other out here.

When it’s finally our turn, I’ve returned somewhat to my inner peace I always try to use as a baseline, throwing mental darts at the faces of the assholes beside me.

“Hey Lark, come on in. Let me get my notary seal, I have a feeling I’ll be needing it for this conversation.”

“These two upstanding citizens would like to request custody of our son. In exchange for me not fighting them on it, they offered me a bed to sleep in at their home. The agreement is I get to stay in Camden’s life if I carry out the domestic duties they’ve requested of me. Don’t need to be specifically outlined. I just want it noted that they are required to treat me with respect in front of our son, and that sexual favors will not be happening as long as they continue to fuck the women they’re so fond of taking advantage of. I would like to require a minimum two-month pussy sobriety before any sort of negotiations happen on mine.”

Ivan is choking, but I’ve got this.

Matron takes this all in stride, because the deals us shelter girls learn to spin when our entire livelihoods are on the line get pretty wild. “Okay, I can do that. Gentlemen, is there anything you’d like to add to the contract?”

She looks up at them, eyes full of condemnation, and I fucking love her for it.

“When the boy turns 16, the extra stipulations are void. I’m only dealing with her bullshit as long as I absolutely have to and that’s the age wolves are considered adults in our community.”

“Fair enough,” she mumbles as she types everything up.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

She prints a few copies and presents them to us all. “I’d like you two to know that this is a legally binding contract. I need your signatures on this line signifying that you agree to these terms presented therein.”

“That means you have to write your name there,” I say slowly as if they’re absolutely stupid. Let’s be honest though, I might actually be helping them out here. “And by doing that, you’re saying you will follow the things she typed up already.”

“Dumb bitch,” Trevor snarls under his breath. It doesn’t hurt me though, I’m too happy with myself currently.

While they’re reading over and signing, I address my other needs with Matron. “Since I’m still rejected, Matron, I would like to retain my rights to keep a room here. I don’t have enough faith in them that they’ll uphold the contract, and I need to know there’s somewhere else that Camden and I can get to if we’re endangered.”

“I was going to suggest that, actually. Normally I’d be an advocate for cleaning out rooms so we have them available for new tenants, but this is a different sort of situation. Your room remains yours as long as you need it, Lark. To do that though, you will need to pull a few shifts each week to contribute. Is this something we can make work?”

“I can bring her,” Ivan mumbles.

“Excellent. Lark, if you need alternate transportation, give me a call and I can help you figure out a bus route or something.”

“Thank you, Matron. I appreciate it.”

When we start heading back to my room, Trevor adopts a troubling sneer, but I need to start steeling myself for whatever games he’s going to try to break me with.

“You’re going to have uniforms when you’re with us, I hope you know that.”

“As long as said uniforms don’t come with your fucking slimy fingers all over me, I can manage.”

“And you’ll be dancing at our club. Just a few times a week to start while you train, and we’ll increase the frequency as we see fit. You’re going to rake in so much money.”

I stumble and have to catch myself on the wall. I did say I’d do anything, and if I tell myself I must do this to support my kid, it’s completely fine. I have no problem with people that dance for money, I just hate that my mates are taking advantage of me and forcing me into it.

“Patrons will not touch me.” That’s a hard and fast rule. That’s how strip clubs operate, right? I’ve never been to one other than the few times I was at theirs with them, but I kind of remember that being a thing.

“Nobody fucking touches you,” Ivan spits, glaring at Trevor who I’m pretty sure was going to say something ungainly.

It’s interesting to me that there’s such a wedge pitched between them. I feel like I could work with that knowledge and try to sway Ivan to my side more just so I have some sort of protection.

I have to pause and take a few deep breaths before I walk into my room and pretend like my world isn’t falling apart again. The important thing though is they aren’t

taking me away from him.

“Camden, honey, I’m back,” I announce as I slip inside. The two fuckers step inside and look around, seemingly fascinated by the hovel we call home, but they don’t exist to me right now. “We need to talk, baby.”

“Is this about them being my daddies? I thought daddies spent time with their kids; how can they be my daddies if I’ve never met them?”

“Well, there are all sorts of types of families Camden, you know that. You know that I used to be...mated to them before you were born, and that was wonderful because it gave me you.

“It’s very important to them that we go live with them. I’ve seen their house, and unless it’s changed a whole bunch, I think you’ll be much more comfortable there. You’ll have to switch schools, but I’ve told you that this was always a possibility.”

He thinks about this for a few moments, looking at his fathers and trying to make a decision on them. “Are you nice?” He asks them, going straight for the throat.

Trevor tries to speak, and I snort, try to cover it up with a cough, then wait for them to figure out how to get themselves out of this hole they’ve dug by forcibly injecting themselves into our lives.

Ivan squats down and tucks his hair behind his ear, honestly trying to be decent. “I think we need to spend some time getting to know each other. We weren’t a good fit to be partners to your mom, but I think she’s done a really great job raising you, just like I knew she would.”

“Yeah?” Camden asks, a little smile on his face.

Ivan meets my eyes and answers, “Yeah.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere without my mom.”

“I know, buddy,” he falsely sympathizes. “She fought pretty hard for you, and we think it will be good for you to have her around, too. I really think you’re going to like our home; there’re a few kids on the street you could play with, and you’ll have a bunch of really nice things.”

“I guess that sounds okay,” Camden says, looking to me for approval.

I give him a nod. “Let’s just pretend it’s a new adventure, okay C? We’ll find all sorts of new quests to complete when we get there.”

Chapter Nine

Beckett, Now

“Hey Camden, what’s up man?” I balance the very drooly baby in my other arm, taking two steps before realizing, belatedly, that I forgot to move the dirty diaper I just took off of him. Like a total schmuck, I left it on the ground. Fucking great. There’s baby shit on my foot and I can’t move at all, because if I do, I’ll track that shit all over our already destroyed house.

“Just reminding you about my birthday— you promised you’d come out with everyone. You haven’t been out in forever.”

Fuck. Is that tonight? “You know we can’t just leave Rowan home, man. He’s got this whole routine we have to stick with, or he gets so damn fussy we don’t sleep for days. And that’d be on top of the already not-sleeping thing we have going on.”

“I know you guys have a kid and all, but there’re other people in the world, you know? It would mean a lot to me, man. Plus, with all the shit that went down, I want to buy you guys a lap dance so you can feel like fuckin’ men again.”

“Please don’t talk about lap dances while I’m holding my kid. You really want me there? I don’t know how long we’ll be able to stay. I might be able to ask my friend Aspen to hang out with Rowan.”

“Even if it’s for an hour and you only stay long enough to down a few drinks, I want you there. You haven’t seen the club yet, and it’s gonna be mine someday, you know. It’d be cool if you supported that.”

The shit is soaking through my socks. “I need to go wash my foot. And find somewhere safe to deposit this drool factory. I’ll text Aspen and see if she’s up for hanging with Rowan, but no promises, okay?”

“Where are your brothers? You by yourself?”

“Working. Remember I told you I’ve been staying home with him the most?”

“Right.” He laughs like he finds this amusing, but whatever. He’s young and single and doesn’t know anything about how incredible it is to hold someone you helped make. Someone that looks to you for every damn need to be met, and who giggles until they’re red in the face when you disappear under their highchair.

“I’ll try my best to be there, man.”

He gives me some sort of acknowledgement and sign off but I can only focus on the disgusting warmth squishing between my toes and the stench rising up to me. “Bro, we have got to get you toilet trained. This is just embarrassing.”

Rowan doesn’t do anything other than reach for the collar of my flannel to try and chew on, but then, he’s only six months old so I guess that’s fair.

I eye up my options before jumping, very precariously, on one foot a few feet away to the little pack and play we’ve got set up, set the baby down gently and reach for one of the dozens of packs of baby wipes we’ve got stashed around the living room. Obviously for moments like this.

I sit on my ass right in front of him and rip my sock off, debating on whether or not getting baby shit on it is a good enough reason to throw it away, just to end up doing the responsible thing and tossing it in the basket we reserve for the explosive shits and things that need a second wash.

“One day dude, you’re going to be so embarrassed by all these stories I’m storing up here,” I explain to him as I tap my head. “It’s a good thing you’re so damn cute, because if I stepped in anyone else’s shi-doodoo, I’d probably never speak to them again.”

I go through three or four wipes even though it was mostly clean after the first, simply because I can’t get the feeling of that disgusting ooze pushing against my skin.

“What you think, R-Man, you wanna go hang with Auntie Aspen tonight? You’d be the big baby on campus with her little guy there. He’s not as proficient as you are at the babbling thing, but maybe you can work your baby magic and teach him something. Who knows, maybe you’ll be best friends and part of the same pack someday!”

I throw all the toxic waste in the diaper genie before washing my hands twice, then I pull out my phone and start begging Aspen to watch Rowan for a little bit tonight. She’s offered so many times and we’ve given in a few times, but she’s got five mates and two kids, even if one is a newborn, so there’re plenty of bodies around to make sure my kid stays alive.

When she immediately sends an emoji of a thumbs up and then a party sign, I figure I should be worried but decide to let my brothers know instead. I don’t think they’ll be pumped to come home from working outside all day and then turn around and go hang out with a bunch of horny guys at a strip club, but Camden wasn’t wrong that we don’t get any action these days. Might be exciting to see a good pair of boobs. Almost like a vacation.

Fuck it, I’m the alpha of our misfit pack. I’m making the call.

Me: Aspen’s taking Rowan tonight. We’re going out. Camden’s birthday, it’s

happening.

Blake: Suck it. No.

Brooks: Please don't suck me off, but yeah, I'm with Blake. I just want to cuddle Rowan and sleep for like 18 hours

Me: Alpha command in 3...2...

Blake: fuck you, man. You know I hate it when you pull that shit. I give up. I have no will left in me to fight. Where we going?

Brooks: I just shoulder checked him for giving in so damn fast. Cuddle sessions are sacred.

Me: We don't have to stay long. Just have a drink and hang out and then we can swing by and pick up Rowan and be back in bed at a reasonable hour

Brooks: I'm laughing hysterically right now. If we're going to bed at a reasonable hour, who's watching Rowan all night?

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

Me: Just start heading home soon so you can shower. Camden wants us to see his dads' club. Be warned, I've been promised a lap dance. I bet you we can get a stipulation that she's not blonde

Brooks: You had to bring my dick into this, didn't you? Gods, I hate you sometimes. If you didn't look just like me, I'd probably make sure you knew how much I hate your ugly face, too.

Blake: oh, no, please twist my arm harder

Me: Fuck. I think Rowan just shit himself again. Damnit, I just changed him. Wish me luck

I get the changing station set up before grabbing him, lighting a cookies and cream candle too to hope it will burn through the incredibly potent smell that is my son right now. "Really, dude? Maybe we should just let you live in the bath, you'd like that, wouldn't you? How does your stomach still have anything to digest? Okay, okay, don't yell at me, I've got ya."

I kiss his crazy cute puffy cheeks before laying him down and unsnapping his gray onesie with little wolves all over it. Fucking cute.

???

By the time I got Rowan to nap and have packed up a diaper bag for him, Aspen and some of her mates are there to pick him up, cooing at him like she doesn't have a smaller version at home. "He's getting so big! Oh my gosh, look at those eyelashes!

Showstopper. Alright little man, you ready to party hard? We've got all the toys spread out and the best party playlist ever cued up. We're going to wear you out!"

"Thanks again, Aspen, we really appreciate this."

"Hey, you know we love this kid. And no rush. If you end up meeting someone...and you know...well. We've got an extra crib all ready because our little one is still in the bassinet. We've got this. You should go out and have fun, get rip roaring drunk, make some questionable decisions. You guys deserve it."

Brooks comes stumbling out of the shower in time to give Rowan a squeeze and buckle him into his seat, and Blake is repacking the diaper bag we've already checked twice because he's paranoid we forgot something. Being a parent is scary.

"I don't know about all that, but we'll keep you posted on when we're swinging by to pick him up."

Once he's buckled into the car safely and they're all pulling away, our house feels strangely empty. There are still three of us in it, but Rowan is the life of it.

"I don't like it here without him," Brooks whines.

"I know. It's weird."

Blake sighs. "Let's get this shit over with. Five bucks says Camden's already drunk when we get there and won't even remember us coming, though."

"He'll remember. Let's just try and have fun, okay? I know this isn't really our thing, but maybe it will be good for us to be adults instead of dads for a little bit."

"I'm driving. That means I don't have to drink, and that means I get to shovel your

asses out of there when I'm bored," Blake says as he grabs the truck keys off the hook.

We'd been so hot and cold with our mate for so long before it ended that we avoided anything that might even involve other women, so we haven't been to a strip club, well, ever. Now that she's gone and we're single though, I can have fun looking.

With Rowan taking up so much of our mental energy, we have no desire to date anytime soon, and couldn't even if we wanted to since the wound from she who we ignore is so raw still, but maybe one day, when Rowan is much bigger, we could find somebody to bring into our lives and make us feel like men again.

"Okay, this place actually isn't as sleezy as I was expecting," Brooks announces as we walk towards the door.

The bouncers look pretty bored but sizeable enough to do their jobs, so we pay our cover and head in, walking down the masculine furnished entry room where our eyes can adjust to the dimmer lighting.

"Good evening gentlemen, welcome to The Humble Abode. Have you visited us before?"

It's so fucking hard to try and hold a conversation with a woman wearing a flowy black dress that is doing very little to conceal her breasts. But I'm a professional, so my eyes never dip beneath her chin. Adding karma points for myself. "We have not. We're actually supposed to meet Camden here."

"Oh, excellent! You must be the Storm Pack. I have explicit instructions to give you a very warm welcome." She climbs onto the desk, which is one of those two-tiered ones with a higher ledge, leaning over so you can see all the way down her dress.

Blake is stumbling behind me and Brooks is studiously staring at anywhere but the woman, but she clearly wants me to look, so it'd be rude not to, right?

“That’s uh, mighty kind of you, ma’am.” Fuck. My cheeks are bright red, aren’t they? Fuck. Areolas.

“Mmm, you three are totally innocent, aren’t you? You’re going to have so much fun. We’ve got the crowd favorite prepping for some special alone time with you. I’ve been instructed to bring you right to her before you’re permitted to join Camden’s party.”

“This was a fucking mistake,” Brooks mumbles.

“I have no idea what that means, but...lead the way?”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

She laughs as she finally fully sits on top of the desk, her hips at our chest level, and spreads her legs.

Chapter Ten

Blake, Now

I should have known better than to let that asshole Camden make our plans for the weekend. That guy is completely obsessed with women. I know that's going to bite him in the ass when he finally meets his mate, but whatever. Let him learn his own damn lesson.

“Let's get this over with, then,” I complain as I follow my identical brothers down the hall.

I'll give them this; it smells a hell of a lot better than I thought it would in here.

There's something incredibly mouthwatering floating around, something that smells like a maple bar or something, which feels like a strange choice of air scent for an upscale strip club, but it only gets stronger as we're led to a private room.

If I look at this somewhat objectively, it's sort of nice that Camden went through the trouble to do this for us, and I think in his own strange way, he's honestly trying to help us seek out some dopamine and boner-mine, but it still feels a little uncomfortable.

“Since you've never been here, I just need to let you know our rules. Our girls will be

respected at all times, understood? Your companion will get close to you and touch you if you're comfortable with that, but you are not to reciprocate in any manner. There are a couple of bodyguards inside to ensure her safety; she's the owners' most cherished dancer and they won't be happy if she's disrespected. She's the favorite for a reason though. I was told you don't want anyone blonde, and well, she's as far from that as you can get. Absolutely stunning, sweet as pie, and she's going to have a great time giving you an unforgettable evening."

Wow. She really knows how to sell this. I'd probably be slightly more clearheaded though if she hadn't just flashed us her cunt a few minutes ago. Makes it a bit difficult to take her completely serious.

Until we get in the room anyway, where a pair of massive bodyguards eye us up and down like they'd like nothing better than to return us to the dirt. I throw up my hands. "Chill, we're cool. We've got a kid; you can bet we ain't looking to get into any sort of trouble."

They don't do anything other than grunt and nod their heads towards a collection of chairs.

"Now, do you handsome men have any objections to being touched? We need to get consent beforehand. Triplets, huh? Wow. I thought you looked awfully similar out there, but it's impossible to miss when you're sitting together like this. Mistress Ryot is going to have so much fun!"

I look at my brothers as if to ask, we really doing this? But the damn scent is getting stronger still, making my mouth water. "Can we revoke consent later if we change our minds?"

"Oh, absolutely. Mistress Ryot is very accommodating. Even if you decide to not be touched, she'll be a feast for the eyes."

“She can do whatever,” Beckett mumbles, somehow already popping a chub. Amateur.

Fuck, I am too.

“Enjoy, gentlemen. Oh, and it’s vital that no recording of any kind takes place within these walls, or you’ll be thrown out on your cute little asses, understood? Toodles!”

She slips out and for some reason, my heart is racing in my chest. Getting a private dance at a strip club is a hell of a way to break a dry spell.

My eyes can’t look away from the pole centered in front of us, my ears taking in the slow, sultry beats that start pumping through the hidden speakers.

The chairs we’re in are plastic and easily disinfected thank the good gods, but they’re sturdy and mostly comfortable. The room feels luxurious and expensive though, total opposite from our décor at home. All dark, rich jewel tones everywhere cascaded in soft lights, and with the doors closed it feels like we’re shut away from everything. There are no sounds from the rest of the club bleeding through, just the three of us fidgeting and waiting; that is, just the three of us besides the guards we’re going to pretend aren’t there to watch us embarrass ourselves.

I’m guessing that’s mostly their role, I don’t really know much about how these situations work.

The lights flip off completely and then start pulsing for a second at a time. A silhouette appears from seemingly thin air, that maple scent rich and fucking incredible. What the hell is that perfume?

“Hello there, Storm Pack, it’s my pleasure,” and she emphasizes that word with a throaty purr, “to take care of you this evening.”

Her voice turns my chub into a raging hard on; that's embarrassing. I had no idea how much I missed sex.

When the lights flip on back to the low, intimate setting they were on prior, there's a woman upside down on the pole in front of us, legs completely parallel to the floor and open wide, wearing a black corset thing that's covered in little rhinestones that keep catching the light.

It cuts over her ass cheeks so they're bared completely, and my eyes nearly bulge out of my eye sockets as her crotch just hangs out so close to us, so barely covered by fabric.

"Fuck," one of my brothers mumbles.

She starts doing spins, slowly, working the pole like it's a lover and not a piece of equipment, caressing it and flipping her hair around expertly.

"Gods, you're fucking beautiful. I thought we were getting a talented dancer, not a damn angel," Beckett remarks like a total simp.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

She giggles at this, and it honestly sounds genuine to my ears, but I'm sure she's used to drowning in compliments. But thinking of that makes me realize she does this all week, and that all kinds of men get to see her like this, and I really don't like that at all.

What does it say about me that the first time I come to a strip club, I want to what, abscond with the stripper and throw her in my clothes and see her in my bed and establish some sort of claim on her? Maybe bake some blueberry muffins together? Fuck, I love a good brunch.

I'm fucking delusional.

She's a little older than us I think, but her body is so fucking curvy and she's so admirably strong that I get completely lost watching her dance for us. She's not even onto the lap dance portion yet, but the way my body is reacting to her, you'd think she's rubbing herself all over me, not a pole.

She makes it safely to the ground and puts her back to the piece of metal that I desperately wish I could shift into, sliding down slowly with her knees out and spread, making eye contact with each of us. I swear to the gods my heart fucking stops.

If I hadn't already met and lost my fated mate and seen the kid we produced with her, I'd be damn near certain this woman was meant for me.

Maybe they put some sort of hallucinogenic drug in the air? Something that makes anyone watching think that they've got a sacred connection, so they'll tip the women

better?

But even as I think that it doesn't sit right with me. There's something sad deep in her eyes that I don't think she's ever able to fully banish, even when she's smiling at us like the temptress she is.

“Not often do I get such pretty playthings for the night. Anything special I can do for you gentlemen tonight? I feel like I should be the one paying for the pleasure of your company.”

Brooks snorts. “Flattering, but no fucking way. You're proof that the gods have favorites. I'm sure you hear this all the time, and I know that other lady said you were the owners' favorite, but fuck, I can see why. I don't think anybody else in this club is going to do anything for me after this. You're stunning, love.”

For the compliment, the woman, Mistress Ryot I guess, heads toward him first.

Brooks goes stiff as a board as she straddles him, looping her arms over his shoulders to hold onto the back of his chair. The music flows seamlessly into another song, her body sliding and twisting to it like she's the one creating it. I can't look away.

It looks like she's whispering sweet nothings into his ear, and I'm so fucking jealous. What I wouldn't give to have all of her attention, my brothers be damned. It's like I'm under a fucking spell or something, but I really don't think I am.

She sends me a wink as she flips around and starts wiggling her ass all over my triplet's face, his white knuckles and heavy breathing proof that he's definitely about to blow his load.

Mistress Ryot's head tips back and exposes her neck, making my mouth water even more and my canines throb. What the fuck is wrong with me?

I have to suffer through her dance with Beckett as well before she can touch me, and it sort of feels like I just won the damn lottery when she straddles me and looks into my eyes. Her voice is low, just for me to hear, and even though I just saw her communicate this way with my brothers, I feel special and sought out.

“What are such fine gentlemen doing out tonight, hmm? Surely, you’ve got a special lady at home that you’ve swept up.”

Her words seem to travel straight to my brain, massaging it. “W-we’re widowers actually. Not to kill the vibe, but yeah. You have no idea how badly we needed something like this. We’re just here with a buddy of ours, but fuck. I had no idea how much I’d be getting out of this.”

Just to add another ‘holy fuck’ to the list, she’s a goddessdamned wolf. It makes sense since Cam’s dads own the place, but like, for some reason the thought of wolves as strippers wasn’t something I even considered.

Yep, I’m in love.

“Is that so?” her hair is down to her waist in long straight layers, black so dark that it shines blue in some of the brighter lights when they pulse. Her cheeks are round, and her lips painted blow job red, her gray eyes looking for something in me I’m dying to give to her.

“Can I just say you smell fucking incredible? Please tell me where you bought your perfume because I’m about to go by stock in the company and live the rest of my life rolling around in it sprayed over everything I own.”

She laughs as her head falls back onto her shoulder, exposing that exquisite column of flesh again.

And the way she's moving over me is hypnotizing.

"I'm actually not wearing anything right now. What do I smell like to you?"

I groan low in my throat. "That's just your natural smell? Fuck, woman. How soon can we get married? Is a kid a deal breaker? He's cute, I promise."

She laughs again, but it's more fragile this time. "Not sure marriage is in my cards, but congrats, you're my first proposal today. You really want to discuss children when my ass is making imprints on your jeans?"

"You make an excellent point. And you smell like a maple bar and a cinnamon roll fucked and had deliciously decadent offspring."

"There you go talking babies again; I think we know what's on your mind."

She flips around and presses her back to my chest, and I have to fight so damn hard to keep my hands from wrapping themselves around her stomach and pulling her into me. "Can you blame me? You're just so fucking sweet. I didn't even know women like you existed."

Fuck, I want to kiss her.

Time seems to stand still as she finishes up her set; it takes hours but at the same time only minutes, keeping me suspended in this haze where I'm so enamored that nothing else matters except the way her body contorts and twists, the way her breathing lifts her chest and the way her eyes keep trying to look at us when she doesn't think she'll be caught.

I just want to grab her and run away. But obviously, I can't do that. Right? Right.

I expect the feeling to disappear soon after the private dance is over, and surprisingly my nuts are still unbusted, though they're definitely throbbing. It feels like an insult though to go jack off to the thought of her; that's too cheap for a woman like her. So, when she exits the room with a lip bite and an over-the-shoulder air kiss, I throw myself onto the floor, thankful I can't catch sexually transmitted diseases.

"Fuck," one of my brothers chokes out.

I have to turn my head to give them focus, because none of my senses are working correctly. "I don't think she was real. I think she was a fucking angel animatronic or something; can robots feel warm like that? Fuck."

"Did you propose to her?" Brooks asks, not seeming too upset.

"Fuck yeah. You miss 100% of the shots you don't take. That's the saying, right?"

"We should leave. If she has to come back in here and sees us like this, she's going to

think we're total losers. She needs to leave with the impression that we're mysterious and sexy."

I look at Beckett, who's also slumped on the floor. "I highly doubt that's what she's thinking right now. Highly doubt she's thinking of us at all, actually. A woman like that?" I whistle, shake my head, and force my body to stand up.

"We need to go thank Camden for helping us to find love," Blake whispers in a totally deranged voice.

The door clicks open again, behind us this time, and other than the logistics of how Mistress Ryot left in front of us, part of me thinks it's going to be her, tiptoeing back into the room to tell us how incredible it was to spend a few minutes with us. And also, maybe we should run away together?

Of course, it's 'here's my vagina' lady, ready to bring us to the party.

"I think she ruined women for me," I mumble.

"Funny, you'd think that would be our ex-mate's claim to fame," Beckett tries to tease, but it falls flat.

"Ew. We tried to make it work with her why?"

"Gotta be honest, I'm actually blanking on her name," I say, not too worried.

Camden is surprisingly still somewhat sober when we get to his VIP section, topless women serving him and sitting on the laps of some of his friends that we don't really know, but none of the pretty women hold any interest at all for me.

My eyes roam around the club as we sit and drink and try to make ourselves have fun,

hoping to see Mistress Ryot again. Really wish I knew her actual name so I could go buy a notebook and write it a few hundred times in pink gel pen. Throw some hearts in.

“What’s with you?” Camden asks, kicking my foot to get my attention.

My brothers are also studiously avoiding the women, though their eyes linger occasionally. “Just taking in the atmosphere.”

Beckett snorts. “No, you’re not. You’re hoping for our dream woman to come back into view.”

“Oh yeah?” Camden asks, taking an interest. “Tell me more.”

“Like you don’t know her,” Brooks says. “That woman you set us up with for the private dance. Fucking stunning, man.”

“Yeah, you don’t...please don’t talk about her,” Camden says as he slings back a drink. And then another.

“Why, you involved with her?” Beckett asks, getting slightly alpha.

“Me?” Camden asks like it’s the most outrageous thing he’s ever been asked. “Fuckno. New subject. Stat.”

We don’t get to linger on her like the lovesick men we are, and instead are forced to sit and paint on smiles when Camden and his buddies tell all the stupid stories they’ve seemingly been saving up for this very moment.

All I really want to do now that the shiny has rubbed off is pull my phone out and stare at the photos that Aspen has been sending us of Rowan sleeping peacefully, then

make my way home to him. It feels wrong to be sitting in a place like this when our son is with others.

“I think it’s time to go, Camden. Thanks a lot for inviting us out. Happy birthday, man.”

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“Already? Alright, I guess I appreciate you three coming out. We’ll have to do this again sometime.”

He stands up to give us a bro hug goodbye, and then we’re making our way outside, the cool air hitting us like we’re waking from a fever dream.

“Did that actually happen?” Brooks asks once we’re back in the parking lot staring back a bit wistfully at the club.

Chapter Eleven

Lark, now

“Anyone seen Lark?”

“In her dressing room,” someone responds.

I pull myself back into the corner, burying my face in my knees.

I can’t pull myself back into my normal level of pretend-happy. Not after...whatever that was that happened in the private room.

“Where the fuck you go? Diamond had to cover your last set because you didn’t fucking show on stage.”

“Not tonight, Trevor. I’ll take my punishment.”

He ducks his head and crawls into my large kennel, my “dressing room” as they mockingly call it. No one else is allowed in here—it’s got a fake door out front and curtains so if anyone gets a peek inside, they won’t be able to tell the luxury I’m drowning in.

I can feel his eyes staring me down, but I’m too broken right now to react or start anything.

“What happened?”

It’s the softness in his voice that finally has me looking up to peek at him. I will not cry in front of him. I won’t. “Just feeling down.”

“Don’t fucking lie to me.”

“Am I supposed to be happy with my lot in life? Is that it? You think I enjoy this life I’ve been forced into?”

“Not this fucking argument again. We gave you the choice years ago. You chose to stay here and work. You made the choice, so now you get to live with it.”

“Not much of a choice when it’s the only way to see your child.”

“Your child is a grown ass adult. You banked on him wanting to stay in your life. Not my fault he realized what a disappointment you are, as well.”

I breathe deeply, then scoot my heels closer to my ass and rest the side of my cheek on the top of my knees again, peering sideways at the small strand of lights hung outside the kennel, their attempt to spruce the place up.

“You can’t feel sorry for yourself when you signed the contract with your eyes wide

open. Stop fucking moping, it's bad for business. I'll bring dinner later— you need anything else?"

I shake my head no and grab the oversized hoodie I brought for nights like this, sinking onto my side away from him as I lay on the pillow they've so generously allowed me to have.

It doesn't take long for the door to click shut behind him, and for some reason that has me feeling lower than it normally does.

I knew what would happen if I didn't show for my final set, but after those three men looked at me the way they did, like I was a miracle or something, there was no way I could go on that stage and dance for a bunch of lewd and hungry faces glazed over by alcohol and naked women.

I try and drift off, wanting to pass the time, but it's always a little difficult when I'm trying to sleep in a night club that goes until the early hours of the morning.

Sometime after closing something wakes me up, but I can't go back to sleep immediately because the voice I'm hearing is like electricity. I panic when the phone I tucked in my bra starts going off, because I forgot to do something with it earlier and now, I'm going to get caught red handed.

The footsteps are Camden's but he's talking to one of them. Does Camden know him? They sound...friendly with each other.

He's thanking him for helping him to get in and look for...fuck. Yep, he's here for his phone.

I pull it out of my bra and shove it through the bars of the cage before I get into any worse trouble, then go back into my ball and try to make myself as small as possible.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“That’s weird. Let me just open this for you, man. I don’t know how it got in here, but I’ll check it out. You can wait here.”

A sliver of light slides in, and I don’t breathe.

“Hey, Mom.”

I don’t respond. I hardly ever do. Just hearing his voice and knowing he’s alive and well gets me through the day most of the time. I don’t need an interaction that’s going to end in my heart breaking again.

“You should have told somebody that Beckett left his phone here. He’s kind of frantic about it. You did good earlier; they had a good time. Right. Well, sleep well.”

He shuts the door but there’s a shuffle of some sort, and I’m mortified when he shoves his way past Camden, seeking me out.

He falls to his knees outside my cage, and I look at him through my mostly closed eyelashes, glad I drew the hoodie tight around my face. Less to try and cover from him. “What the fuck is going on here? Why is she in here?”

“Not your business, man. Come on, you got your phone.”

“I’m not walking the fuck out of here while she’s in there. I don’t know what kind of fucked up indentured servitude you’ve got going on here, but this is fucked up. Pretty sure I can make you release her if you’re not going to do it willingly. Which you really fucking should. Camden, what the fuck?”

He sighs, and I can just imagine him rubbing his forehead the same way Ivan always does. “She chose this, okay? She signed up for this. She’s fine.”

“You want me to lock you in a fucking dog cage and then tell me it’s fine?”

“Honestly, let it go. Please.”

He reaches for his phone and unlocks it. Beckett. Good, strong name.

“Woah, what are you doing?”

“Calling my fucking dad. You know, the alpha of the pack? You want to hear what he’s got to say about this shit? Get her out. Now.”

“She missed her ride to the shelter. This is where she stays when she can’t get there. The floor is softer than it looks; it’s got a mattress cut into the floor.”

I’m so humiliated, shaking, because no one is supposed to know what my life is really like. They see me dancing for men, smiling, and see the way the men tip me, and they think I’m good at my job and banking all this extra money, living a good life...but they’d pity me if they knew what actually goes on when the owners are on private time.

“Fuck. My dads are going to be pissed if I let her out, you know that, right?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what the fuck your dads are going to do. And what do you mean shelter? She’s a rejected?”

I can still feel his eyes on me, can practically feel the ghost of his hands on me, soothing me, but I don’t get to experience that sort of care.

“I really wish you’d have let this just go. Yes, she’s rejected. I grew up at the shelter. This...this is my mom, Lark. Mom, you might as well come out and say hi. Tell him you don’t want to leave.”

The silence is louder than the words.

Then the meaty sound of a fist hitting flesh is louder, and then I have no choice but to get involved because he might hate me now, but he’s still my son, and I don’t want him to get hurt. “Stop! Stop! I’ll do whatever you guys want me to, just please, don’t fight. Don’t hurt him.”

Beckett drops Camden mid swing, darting to see me now that I’m no longer curled into a ball. “What are they doing to you, little wolf?”

“He’s right,” I say on an exhale. “I did sign up for this. I earned my night here, I disobeyed orders. I’m safe, I promise.”

“No. I want you out of that fucking cage. I’m taking you home.”

I laugh. “No, you aren’t. They’d fucking kill you.”

“Who? Your...oh my gods. His dads. The owners of the club. They’re your mates?”

“Not for a long time, but I don’t need help, okay? I’m sorry I took your phone; I should have given it to the front desk. I just...I don’t know what I was thinking. Please don’t be angry with me.” I drop my eyes, making sure I don’t come across as challenging him in any way. If he’s indeed the alpha’s son, he’s important. Powerful.

“I’m only asking one more time. Get. Her. Out.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

Camden barely hesitates this time.

I scoot to the back of the cage, already anticipating what kind of punishment I'll be given if I actually leave.

"You're alright, sweetheart. Look, I'm not going to hurt you. Please come with me?"

I shake my head and try not to look at him, but his face is magnetic. It's been a while since I've wanted like this. I thought they conditioned it out of me long ago.

He sighs, but he's not giving up. He sinks back onto his heels, squatting down and giving me a little space. "We've got these massive cookies our friend sent over. Surely that's tempting."

"Are you seriously trying to bribe me with a cookie? Do I look like a toddler to you?"

"Huh. I guess I'm really easily bribed. Also, it's likely I don't spend enough time talking to adults. What are they going to do to you if you leave this cage? Sweetheart, I promise we can take care of you. Whether that's at our place or wherever you feel comfortable."

"Don't call me that. Please. That's whattheycall me. I hate it."

I feel a bad sort of shiver wrack me, my head shuddering in disgust.

"Okay, sweetheart is gone. Can I call you by your name, then? Lark, was it?"

I nod.

“That’s beautiful. You going to answer my question?”

I take the chance to look at my son, my grown-up baby that I always thought I’d have on my side. He looks ashamed and can’t hold my eyes very long, and it hits me that I’m never going to get another opportunity like this again. Ivan and Trevor left for the night already, and I’m not sure why Camden was still waiting around, but if I don’t try and get out now with this man I know nothing about that is offering to help me, I might be dancing until it kills me. Or until it stops making money for my mates, at which point who knows what they’ll do with me.

I look around my cage in case I don’t come back right away, grabbing my small toiletry bag. The sweater I’m in falls to my knees so my legs are covered, but I keep the hood on, covering up as much of me as possible because it’s shameful to be seen as something that needs rescuing. I’m almost 40, for fuck’s sake. I should be able to stand up for myself.

I used to have more fight in me.

Beckett extends his hand and stares Camden down as he helps me out, and I can’t help looking back at Camden as we walk out. Instead of watching us, he’s just staring into the cage I just vacated, thinking.

It’s colder outside than I expected, but Beckett’s SUV is parked right in front of the exit since the club is closed now, and it’s still mostly warm from him driving over here. He opens the door for me and lifts me into the seat, lingering in front of me.

“You’re safe with me and my brothers. Always. I don’t know anything about your situation, but as the future alpha of the pack, I vow to you I will do nothing but respect you and protect you. I don’t know how much weight you can put into a vow

from a stranger, but you're mine to care for now, okay? That doesn't have to mean anything at all, either. I'm not trying to put any moves on you or angle in some ulterior motives. I just...I couldn't leave you in there. Tell me you understand that."

I curl my hands into my pocket against the sudden urge to hold his face. It's got stubble sprouting all over his jaw, but he's so much younger than me and I know they were all in the moment when I was dancing for them, but I'd be completely stupid to think they wanted anything romantic with me. Not now that they know I'm somebody's mom and that I'm completely tamed.

I've got to make sure I keep this friendly and don't allow myself to hope for more even though I haven't wanted a man like this since I met my mates.

"I'm sorry for upsetting you. I knew taking your phone was going to end badly for me, but when I realized it belonged to one of you, I was desperate for something to tie me to you, even a little bit. I'm really sorry."

"You don't apologize to me. Ever. I'm really fucking glad you took it, because otherwise I wouldn't have found you and I'd be returning home without you; are you comfortable going there? It's a bit messy...but the couch pulls out so you can have my bed. Don't know how much actual sleep you'll get because we do have a baby, but it's got to be better than what you had going on in there."

My heart hurts at the thought of being near a baby again. I feel like I never got to fully enjoy mine when he was little because I was struggling so much and always looking over my shoulder. "I love babies. Can't wait to meet him."

"You want to get out of here, then? I won't push you for your story until you're ready to tell it, and you don't even have to tell us at all if you don't want. We've got a few of our own, though. I bet we could have a throwdown on the shitty ways of fated mates."

“That’s right. You guys are widowed?”

He snorts. “Yeah, but we weren’t really with her when she was alive. Rowan is the only good thing that came from being with that woman. Let’s get you home and cozy, alright?”

His elbow rests on the armrest the whole time as we drive, fist flexing like he’s fighting to not grab my hand, but I’m sure he’s just mad about how he found me; if he’s the alpha’s heir, he’s got to have a high dedication to the pack’s wellbeing.

He sneaks a look at me every few minutes to make sure I’m still there, as if I could just disappear into thin air. It’s not long before we’re driving down a crazy dark dirt road amongst nothing but trees, and I’m a bit worried that he’s taking me to a remote cabin to do me in or something, but I shake that notion off quickly.

I kind of do want that cookie.

It’s almost like I’m on autopilot as he leads me inside, the lights all off except for one in a bathroom. In the shadows I can see baby stuff piled up everywhere, but the room’s more or less tidy. The kitchen looks lived in and colorful from my vantage point, and the whole place feels more home-like than I’ve ever experienced.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

I take in the log cabin aesthetic and the soft furnishing as I stand and breathe. I stay rooted there in the middle of their living room, trying to take in what I can, daring myself to understand why I feel safe here.

“Hey, you found— woah. Uh, hi.” One of the other triplets pokes his head out of a bedroom, then walks out in nothing but gym shorts hanging low on his hips, scratching the back of his neck.

“Brooks still awake?” Beckett asks.

“Think so. I’ll grab him.”

I feel a soft touch on my elbow. “I want to put some fresh sheets on the bed for you, can I get you some water or a snack or anything?”

Why is such a simple gesture so overwhelming? “N-no. I’m fine. You don’t have to bother with the sheets, really. You’re already doing so much. Any chance you’d let me take the couch?”

“None at all. And the sheets are necessary; pretty sure there’s baby puke in at least two different spots, I just haven’t gotten around to fixing it yet. Give me one second. Please, make yourself at home.”

Beckett slips away and I try to memorize anything about him to help me tell them all apart, because it would be really embarrassing to call them by the wrong names.

I breathe in the faint scent he leaves behind, my wolf straining to pick it up since

we're weaker. It's sort of minty, like maybe eucalyptus or something. Whatever it is, it's fresh and soothing.

The other two come back out now, both with shirts on, approaching me like I'm a wounded animal. "Thought he was just heading out to get his phone. Didn't realize he'd be coming back with you. Um, shit. I don't know how to do this; have fun? He's a good guy? We'll take the baby tonight so you can just hang out...or whatever."

They start backing up, eyeing me up and down like they're still ravenous for me and it takes me too long to process what they're saying, and then I'm mortified. "No! That's not why I'm here. He sort of insisted on offering me a safe place to sleep for the night; but if that makes you uncomfortable, I can totally figure something else out. I've slept outside before; this hoodie is pretty warm. I can—"

They approach now that I'm spinning words like an idiot, looking concerned. "You needed somewhere safe to sleep? What's going on at home?"

"Don't think she really has one," Beckett explains gently as he walks out and dumps an armful of linens into another room before returning to the living room.

Before I know it, he's standing behind me with his hands on my shoulders, resting gently to give me a little support. "How much you comfortable telling them, Lark?"

I wave my hand. "If you're opening up your home to me tonight you deserve to know anything. I'm an open book."

"We aren't owed anything simply because we're doing the right thing; if you don't feel like talking about it or want to keep things to yourself because they're personal, that doesn't change our offer to sleep here. If you need somewhere to stay, and you feel safe here and can promise you can treat our home respectfully and won't harm our kid, then you're welcome."

Tears prick my eyes, because is this how adults are supposed to talk? How they're supposed to feel? No manipulations? "I uh, usually live at the shelter; that's my permanent residence, anyway. You know my son, Camden?"

The eyes of the two triplets in front of me bug out of their heads. It'd be funny if this wasn't the literal story of my life. "You're his—fuck. Didn't see that coming. Okay, his reaction earlier makes more sense. Wait, you're too pretty to be his mom."

I laugh a little, and it's actually genuine, to my surprise. "Thanks. His dads and I split when I was pregnant with him, but I've been working for them since Camden was about 8. That's a long, tangled story, but I've gotten myself into a bit of a bind. Signed a contract I never should have signed, but if I wanted access to my son's life, I had to. I didn't feel like I had any other options at the time."

"Wait. Back up. I already have so many questions. First and foremost, I need to know; are you working at that club because you love the job, or because you're contractually obligated to?"

I itch my neck until I feel it getting red from the abuse, beginning to feel a little trapped. "I haven't been given many choices in my life. I don't think there are any easy answers when it comes to my situation."

"Fair enough..." one of them drawls. Then he reaches over to a cup of stuff on a side table and grabs a permanent marker. He turns to his brother on the left and scrawls 'Brooks' on the side of his neck, then leans forward to scribble 'Beckett' on the triplet behind me, before handing off the marker to Brooks so he can write 'Blake' on his neck.

"There, we're labeled. Might make us slightly less confusing. I trust you can tell the difference between three adult men and an infant? Kind of feel weird about scribbling on Rowan."

Another laugh falls through my internal filters, which surprises the hell out of me again. “Yeah, think I’m all set there.”

“Good. Now. Where were we? What’s going on with you and your mates? You’re separated?”

“They rejected me after I fell pregnant; long story short, they always told me they wanted the kid. They stayed away mostly for the first little bit, visited once when he was a newborn, but I hated it and refused them after that. Messed up and played outside once, feeling free for once, and they showed up to take my kid. So, I did what I had to do and promised I’d do whatever they needed of me to stay in his life; I could handle anything I figured as long as Camden was still mine in some capacity. Working at the club was one of those stipulations; the deal changed when he turned 16. I had to hand more of myself over, but in return I’d be able to see Camden still. I knew he was technically an adult, but I just couldn’t stand the thought of being somewhere he wasn’t.”

“And he couldn’t have visited you why?”

“His fathers are very...persuasive. It only took a few years of us living with them for Camden to start treating me differently. I think that’s why I hate them the most. Out of all the shit they’ve put me through, that’s my biggest regret.

“But I figured I had made the dancing work that long, what was a little bit more? The contract...was so stupid. But I was desperate.”

When I don’t say anything else, lost to bad memories and suddenly exhausted, Beckett fills in for me. “She had my phone. Camden led me right to her and tried to keep me out of her room...but guys, they had her locked in a dog kennel. It was a big one, granted, but it was still a fucking kennel. There was even a fucking dog bowl for water. I couldn’t leave her there. You get that, right? Camden fought me on letting

her leave, had to convince her a fair bit too, but I told her we could help her.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

He turns me around so I'm facing him. "I don't know half of what's gone down with you and those asshole wolves of yours, but know that things are going to be different now. You've got us as friends, and we'll figure it out one day at a time, okay? You don't ever have to go back there if you don't want to. I won't keep you from working if you actually want to dance there, but...I'm kind of hoping you stay away so they can't control you anymore. We're not going to tell you what to do, though. Our help isn't conditional."

There are those damn tears again. "Why? Why let me into your home, around your child, when you know nothing about me? Why the hell am I so special? You could have dropped me at the shelter, you know. I would have been fine there. Maybe it was just too late at night? You can take me to the bus shelter tomorrow, how about that? Then I'll be out of your hair."

There's a growl behind me that has me spinning around, eyes wide. "No. You're not going to the shelter because you're really fucking wanted. You can't be rejected if there's an offer for you." Blake sinks to his knees and bares his neck. "Be our mate. Be under our protection. Let us give you everything you deserve."

I sidestep them all, needing air. "One marriage proposal in 24 hours is funny, two looks a bit desperate," I try and joke. "I appreciate all this, more than you know, but respectfully, we know nothing about each other. You don't have to offer me anything to change my life. I would never even entertain the idea of shackling you to me, because you guys... it doesn't matter. The shelter's not so bad. Where should I sleep? You sure I can't take the couch?"

Blake stays on his knees, staring me down, daring me to not take him 100% seriously.

“Guess you made quite the impression on us earlier,” Brooks jokes.

“Let’s get you to bed, you’ve got to be exhausted. Can you sleep in tomorrow? Do you have to be anywhere?”

I wince. “Depends on if we’re giving into my exes’ demands or not.”

“You’ve nowhere to fucking be then,” Blake says as he stands and grabs me in one movement, hauling me down the hall to a bedroom that definitely doesn’t smell like eucalyptus.

It’s got to be his room, and it smells softer, like sage or something.

“Let’s go to bed.”

He turns out the light without dropping me and shifts me to one ridiculously buff arm so he can pull back the blankets, then he deposits me gently and scoots in behind me, resting a hand on my hip before fluffing up the pillow under my head. “Don’t ask to sleep out there, my wolf is fucking flipping out that you’re here. He thinks you’re his.”

“So that’s an excuse to be bossy and tell me what’s going to happen without asking me what I want?” Fuck. Why did I just say that? I know better than to get lippy. I curl up a bit, bracing myself. “Sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that. You can sleep here, of course. It’s your bed. Sleep.”

I stay tense, but nothing ever happens except a big exhale that sounds shaky, and then he brushes a light kiss to my shoulder and the bed gets cold. It sounds as if he’s making a bed on the floor. “Night, angel.”

Chapter Twelve

Brooks, Now

I'm fucking wired.

When Rowan started talking nonsense to himself upon waking, I listened like I always do for a few minutes, enjoying his voice and the little inflections he's already learning to put into it, then I couldn't get out of bed fast enough when I remembered we have a house guest.

I know the little guy will need a fresh diaper before anything else happens, so I grab him and blow a few raspberries into his chubby neck, soaking in his giggles. It's imperative that he's entertained while I wrestle his dirty diaper off of him so that he doesn't fight me too much, so I'm all weird noises and goofy faces. Once he's clean and air dried, it's time to convince my son he wants a fresh diaper on.

Rowan's always happiest when he's naked, but that's terrifying with the amount of waste products his tiny body produces, so we're definitely not doing that.

"Bet you're hungry, baby. What are we thinking for breakfast? You want some apple oatmeal? Yeah, that sounds good today. Let's see...let's get you in your highchair and you can have a couple pieces of cereal to chase while I get your real food ready, 'kay? Gods, you're cute. Your hair's a mess though, my dude. Maybe we should do something about that."

Once he's situated, I get my hands a tiny bit wet in the sink and rub my hands together to warm it up a bit before smoothing his bed head down. "There we go. So dapper. Let's see how long you can go without absolutely decimating my kitchen floor, shall we? It feels like a good day for a personal record."

I keep my eye on him while I get my coffee and his breakfast going, humming to myself a little bit.

Sometimes it hits me how fucking lucky we got to have this kid all to ourselves, but then I'll feel bad for maybe 2.5 seconds because that means his mom is gone, but honestly, good riddance. I'm not always a proponent for the death penalty, but the amount of wreckage that woman left in the wake of her mad science experiments absolutely warranted it. I'm thankful that we don't have to worry about her trying to insert herself into Rowan's life.

“And that's enough of those morbid thoughts. I'm thinking daddies one through three aren't working much today. What do you think we should do, hmm? Oh, we've got a friend for you to meet. She's awfully pretty, but hands off, 'kay? We might try and make her your new mommy.”

I say this mostly joking, because I get the feeling Lark isn't in the best place for a relationship and I have no idea if she's even interested in us at all, but I'm still remembering the way she looked moving above me last night at the club and I fancy myself in love with her at least a little bit.

Rowan takes this opportunity to blow raspberries, one of his myriads of talents, but unfortunately his lips are covered in oatmeal, so it lands all over my face. I make a weird choking noise and then he's laughing at me, so I turn it into a game.

Each time I act surprised by the mess on my face he laughs harder and harder until I'm sure he's barely breathing, so I reluctantly get up to grab a washcloth and clean my face, bringing it with me to wipe down his table the first of many times, and then he decides to go absolutely savage and grab a whole fistful of the oatmeal I left too close to his pudgy hands and starts slapping the table and splattering it everywhere.

“Truly, that was a ten out of ten in the mess factor, Rowan. Very impressive.”

I give up on myself and end up just whipping my cereal-covered shirt off and balling it up, tossing it in the general direction of the laundry room. “Well done. Now I have

to make you more food. If you wanted me to hang out with you longer, you could have just said that, dude.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

There's a soft, girly giggle from the doorway, and I nearly trip over my own feet trying to turn my head fast enough to catch her.

"You two are adorable. He's really making you work for it, huh?"

She steps into the kitchen, face all warm, no trace of the awful treatment she suffered last night, and it makes me wonder how many times she's had to cover something like that up with a sunny disposition.

"How'd you sleep?"

She sighs dreamily. "I forgot how great mattresses could feel. I slept like a log." She's bending down now and smiling at Rowan, telling him hi and trying to get him to smile, and I'm...a puddle of goo.

"He's darling. How old is he?"

Rowan just stares up at her, but when she starts playing peek a boo, he gives her one of his radiant smiles, and I watch her fall for him. "Six months."

"Aww, such a big boy, aren't you? Oh yes, you look just like your daddies."

She straightens and eyes the coffeepot hopefully, so I grab a mug and fill it for her, grabbing the sweet creamer I can't live without from the fridge and offering it up.

"Thanks."

I nod and let her find a spot to lean against the counter and get somewhat comfortable, crossing her feet at the ankle as she cradles the mug.

“You look good in my kitchen.”

Her eyes fly open all the way.

“Shit. Sorry, I have a filtering problem. Here, why don’t you take a seat, and I’ll get some breakfast going for us more discerning adults?”

She snorts a little into her mug, but is still smiling, so I call it a win. “You’re a morning person, aren’t you?”

I grab a carton of eggs out of the fridge along with some milk and cheese and set them on the counter while I grab a frying pan from the dish rack. “It is the best time of the day, so of course I am.”

“What do you think, Rowan? He’s awfully cheerful for this early, don’t you think? It’s suspicious.”

“No, no, no. You don’t get to make him gang up on me.” I walk over and pretend to nibble on his fat little fingers. “You’re on daddy’s side, aren’t ya?”

She doesn’t say anything else as I start cooking, but it’s a somewhat comfortable silence.

When I slide her omelet onto a plate, she blinks down at it in confusion. “This is for me? You didn’t have to go through all that trouble. You guys have done enough already, you don’t have to feed me. Save your resources; I don’t usually eat breakfast.”

I lean over the counter, trying to figure her out. She's...unlike anyone I've ever met. I don't know how to read her or what experiences have shaped her, but it's seeming more and more likely they weren't too great.

Without thinking too much about it, I grab the fork I laid neatly next to her plate, cut off a good bite sized piece, and pretend it's an airplane.

She opens her mouth in shock, and I land right on her tongue, waiting for her fucking perfect lips to close over the fork before pulling it out of her mouth. Fuck. Is it weird that made me like 30% hard?

She chews and clears her voice. "You did not just do that."

"Hm, pretty sure I did. Do I need to do it again? Or are you going to eat it all by yourself?"

"Wow, okay, going there. Fine. This is excellent, and I'm not going to be rude and turn down your incredible hospitality. Thank you."

I watch her eat in fascination, completely forgetting about the omelet I was supposed to flip several minutes ago, that's now very fragrantly burning in the pan. "Fuck!"

I run over and grab the pan, flip the eggs and consider trying to salvage it for about three seconds, before deciding that there's no way that's going to taste good at all and throw it away. I hate wasting food, but apparently, I can't multitask with such a beautiful woman in my kitchen.

"You think someone's going to be able to bring me to a bus stop in a little bit?"

Footsteps behind her produce a very sleep-addled Blake, who brushes a barely-there kiss to her shoulder before pressing into the kitchen and scooping up the baby,

propping him on against his chest with one arm while he makes himself a coffee.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“He eat?”

“Sort of. I was going to mix up some more of that baby cereal since he decided to paint with the last bowl. Still needs a bottle, though.”

“I’ve got it,” Blake says, waving me off.

Lark is just watching us both, mouth hanging open.

“You good?” I ask her, amused as hell.

She shakes her head. “Sorry. I’ve never seen men around a baby before and It’s doing something weird to my insides. Ignore me. I’m uh, just going to go use the restroom and brush my teeth.”

She tries to wash her plate, but I grab it from her and block the sink, nearly fighting her to get it out of her hands. “You don’t do dishes here. You’re a guest.”

“But...you cooked for me. I want to clean up after myself.”

“Nope,” Blake says, hip checking her a little bit as he herds her from the kitchen.

“You’re too cute to clean. Go do what you were going to do.”

“I don’t think that’s a thing,” she says as she stands there, looking very confused.

“Oh, it’s a thing for sure,” I agree as I start rinsing the plate to throw it in the dishwasher. “At least in this household.”

Chapter Thirteen

Lark, Now

Is that honestly me in the mirror? I stare at my reflection every time I have to do my makeup for work, making sure every detail is flawless, but I never take the time to really look at myself; I'm always looking at the blending or the contouring and the application of eyeshadow, making sure my eyeliner matches on both sides and that my eyebrows are even and my mascara coats every lash.

I've no makeup on right now. There's no getting away from the shadows in my eyes or the way my lips just won't do anything other than show mild enthusiasm.

I've been the broken girl for so damn long that I've forgotten what it's like to be around normal people that aren't paying me for my time. That are with me simply because they want to help.

If they weren't just a few years older than my kid, I'd say I have a bit of a crush. But I'm 39, and crushes aren't something my lifestyle can support.

Even hot ones that play with their babies and can't seem to keep shirts on.

They're the fucking alpha heirs though, there's no way they're honestly looking at me.

Since I'm just heading back to the shelter today, there's no point putting on my makeup. I'm grateful for the toiletry kit I've pieced together, because having something familiar when I'm in such a strange environment helps.

The act of brushing my teeth and putting on my own deodorant, of combing my hair and dousing it with a little dry shampoo, the ability to cleanse and hydrate my face so

I feel like it's actually time to start my day helps clear my head a little bit.

I wish I had clothes besides this hoodie that flows to above my knees, but it is what it is.

I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing right now, so I just sort of wander out to the living room and look around, smiling at all the photos they've got tacked up and the colorful baby toys Rowan has around; I was never able to provide for Camden this well, it makes me happy to see a baby not wanting for anything.

I spot a stuffed owl that makes me almost tear up, and I have to grab it.

"Hey. All good?"

I spin, read the name 'Beckett' in permanent marker still on the side of his neck and try to manufacture a smile. "Camden had one almost exactly like this when he was a baby. Of course, his was plenty used when we got it, but he loved this thing. Kind of funny to see it's still being sold."

"You uh, want to talk about it? The shelter?"

I shake my head and put the plush in a basket nearby. "Nobody wants to talk about that place."

I reach for a blanket hanging off the side of couch and just have to test its softness. It's got little wolf prints all over it and it might be the softest thing I've ever felt.

"I know some things about it; we have a friend, Aspen? She used to live there."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“Oh, I think I’ve talked to her a few times. Yeah, I remember her. She got out?” I look up hopefully, wanting to hear about a happy ending.

“Yeah, it was kind of crazy, actually. Long story short, most of her pack didn’t know she existed, or that she was in the rejected shelter, or that they had a kid; pretty shocking when they found out.”

“I bet,” I say with a small laugh.

“Her and her mates are happy now, though. Have another baby, too.”

“That’s so sweet. I love that she got another chance to be happy.”

“You ever think about that for yourself?”

I fold the blanket for something to do, fidgeting with the tag on the side of it. “It’s not in the cards for me. Some people...some people meet the one and they ride off into the sunset together. Some people have to wait longer before they meet the one and then they get to build a life together; some people are meant for neither. Some people...some people think that what they were given is really great, but it only lasts for about a year before it goes completely wrong, and everything falls apart. Some of us just aren’t meant to have good things, so we make the most of what we have.”

He steps closer to me, making me hitch my breath. It’s absurd how dang good they all smell.

“What does it say that I can’t get enough of the way you smell? I noticed it as soon as

we walked into the club last night; my mouth was watering the entire time we were walking to that room. Then when you entered, and I realized it was coming from you?" He shakes his head. "Most delicious thing I've ever fuckin' smelled."

I make myself meet his eyes. "I was literally just thinking about how good you smell, too. Maybe we can schedule monthly meetups just to smell each other," I joke.

His finger lands under my chin and tips my face up again, so I'm forced to look at him. "I could think of a lot better ways of getting your scent on me."

I step back, flashing hot. "I'm not really sure what you all want with me; I really appreciate you taking me here last night, I slept amazing, but...this isn't my life. Eventually I'm going to have to face my punishment for running out on them, and every second they can't get a hold of me, it's going to get worse. Might be best if you just bring me back so I can get it over with."

"I want to know more about these punishments," another deep voice says as they join us in the living room.

"You guys have been in relationships, right? You were with Rowan's mom for a bit, right? I'm sure you know all about keeping your girl in line."

Blake lets out a snarl as he strides up to me, sandwiching me between him and his brother and sending filthy thoughts through my head. "No man worth his salt would ever need to punish his mate. Punishment is for children that misbehave, not grown ass women that know their own mind. What on earth could you have possibly done in the past to warrant a fucking punishment?"

I sigh, not really wanting to detail every bit of my fucked-up life. "I've never been able to do right by them. I used to try so hard; I was only 16 when we met and I sort of got pushed off the deep end, but they didn't want a teenage mate that didn't know

shit about the world. We were never going to work, I don't think. They need more help than I can give, and I have no more will to stand up for myself. The power is too unbalanced and rejected wolves have hardly any rights. It's usually easier to not fight, because fighting just makes you hope something will change, only for it all to come crashing down around you ten times worse."

"We've done some work with the group called Heroes; you know about them?"

I nod at Beckett, but I haven't gone to too many meetings, so I'm not too familiar.

"We've helped some rejected wolves, been trying to work things through and affect change. We've been bringing things to our dad's attention, and we're working on making things better. I hate that you're even called rejected wolves, it drives me crazy. It has such a negative connotation, when really the reasons some of these wolves reject their mates are more about their over big ego or other shit than the person they're throwing out. I don't get how people can be so disconnected with their wolves."

"People ceased surprising me long ago."

"You mentioned a contract with your exes; do you know if they filed it properly?"

I shrug. "I would assume so. No point getting me to literally dance for them if they can't legally enforce my work there."

"You thinking what I'm thinking, brother?" Blake asks Beckett.

"Yeah, for sure. Lark, let's go to the Alpha House and take a look at it, shall we? We can talk to dad and see what we can do about it. I want to know what those assholes have on you."

“You can’t just—”

They’re already halfway to their rooms to get dressed. Beckett turns around. “Actually, we can. You see, there’s this thing we have, called privilege. Our dad runs the pack, so we have access to everything we’ll inherit at some point. He expects us to step up when we can to take care of stuff, so really if you think about it, this is our job. If there are wolves in our pack that are taking advantage of the mates the goddess gave them and we have proof, you bet your ass we’re going to fix the fuckers up.”

“Here, you want to play with a cute baby while we get dressed?”

I have my hands extended to snag the kid from Brooks before I even really process why they’re trying to give me their kid.

“Oh my gods, you’re so freaking cute. Your daddies better watch out, I might just have to run away with you. What do you say, Rowan? I bet we could find some really fun things to do together.”

“Don’t steal our kid,” Brooks calls from over his shoulder as he disappears into a bedroom as well.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

“Well, there goes that plan. You like to walk? Let’s see. You’re probably just crawling now, huh? Here, you can stand on my feet, and I’ll help you take some steps. Just don’t tell your daddies I taught you better ways to get in trouble.”

He starts giggling and it just completely lifts my mood. Eventually he starts fussing and straining towards a light up aquarium toy that’s sitting in another pile, so I set him down and let him crawl over there, digging for it. I turn it on for him and watch as he sits there, mesmerized as the glitter floats around inside and a simple melody plays.

“That is pretty cool, I can see why you love it so much. Oh, for me? Thank you, Rowan.” I press the button and then hand it back, only for him to repeat the process when it goes off again.

It’s very entertaining until he sees my socks, and then suddenly he’s desperate to grab onto them so he can try to pull them off.

The guys are all in their rooms, so I don’t think much about taking the sock off and showing it to him. It’s dirty from walking around their place so I’m not going to let him hold it, but he’s fascinated as I put it back on. Of course, he just wants it off again. “Really wish I could be so easily entertained. Things would be far better if I could.”

“What the fuck happened to your foot?”

I freeze and then slowly slide the sock back on, but Blake is there scooping me up, throwing me on his lap while he sits on the sofa nearby. He grips my ankle gently and

pulls my sock off, probing around the injury.

“This looks like fucking silver. How many times they burned you here?”

“Not a lot of places they can injure me when I’m usually wearing next to nothing and making them money. Customers don’t like blemishes. Shoes are easy enough to slide on though, I just can’t wear the platforms with the clear straps on them. Hardly bothers me anymore, I’m used to it. You don’t need to worry about it.”

His voice gets low, and it’s so fucked up that it makes me shiver with need.

“We’re way beyond worrying right now, Lark. I see a stunning woman with a spirit that’s been crushed over and over it seems, yet she continues to be able to shine so fucking bright. If you were mine...fuck. If you were mine, you’d be so fucking worshipped, Lark. We might have been talking out of our asses when you were dancing for us yesterday, but only because you came on so fucking potent. I don’t think you realize half of the allure you have. You want to know what I was thinking but was too chicken shit to say while you were dancing for us?”

I try to wiggle, desperate to put a little space between us because this just got heavy so damn quick, and all the others are in the room now as well, witnessing everything happening, and it’s...too much like a pack. “I don’t think I want to, actually. Whether you’re just playing with me because I seem like easy prey, or whether I’m something pretty you want to play with for a bit and try to fix before moving on, this isn’t going to go anywhere good for me. I really appreciate the help last night, but I think I need to get home.”

“Wrong answer,” Beckett says as he falls to his knees in front of me. He cups my face and tilts my head, so I’m forced to watch him strike the blow. “I was so damn confused by how fucking incredible you smelled, and the way you called to my wolf the second you entered that room, I was thinking you looked a hell of a lot like you

were mine. We spent the rest of the night stupidly trying to catch a glimpse of you, and if you'd have walked back into that room once you walked out, you'd have found us more or less face down on the floor because the way you worked us up and connected to us fucking wrecked every damn one of us."

I clear my throat, desperate to cut some of this tension. "Aren't you uh, at least a little worried about your kid learning some of this vulgar language?"

"You're not getting out of this that easily," Blake says as he catches my attention again. His thumb is rubbing along the arch of my foot softly, his long fingers wrapped around my ankle, and fucking hell it feels like he's stroking me in much more intimate places.

"This is about more than playing with something pretty; we've had pretty and it fucking sucked. The three of us didn't really have the time to talk about what it was we all really felt when you walked in that room, but I'm on the same page as him. I was confused why you hit so hard when I already had the chance to have a mate."

"I actually needed to remember I had proof that Arabella was our mate," Brooks admits as he bounces Rowan on his hip. "It was... I don't know what it was, but it got me deep. Are you telling us you didn't feel it? Are we just totally coming off as obsessed creeps that fell in love at first sight?"

"L-love?" I choke out. "You don't know the first thing about me, and there's just so much..." I lose words and freeze, and then it just washes over me and completely drowns out anything I wanted to argue.

I can't lie and tell them I felt nothing, because there was a damn good reason I was so eager to snatch up the phone I found with the three of them on the wallpaper. It's just cruel that somebody is finally trying to make a big, romantic gesture when I'm way past my prime and have lived through so much shit already. I'll never be able to give

them what they need, and that really fucking sucks.

“Woah, woah, woah, why are you crying, angel?”

“Why couldn’t you guys have been around when I was younger? I hate that it’s taken me this long to finally be interested in another wolf, only for the timing to be so incredibly off. You’re what, 25, 26? I’ll be 40 in a few months. I don’t like being tempted by things I can’t actually have.”

“Baby, we are 100% available.”

“You aren’t getting it. Let’s just...can we get out of here? Take me home, or...whatever it is you are convinced we need to do?”

“We’re going to win you over, Lark, mark my words. We’ve got some time to prove it. We’re just going to make sure you know we’re serious. That starts with taking care of this issue with your asshole exes. How many we talking here, by the way?”

“Two. I don’t see much of Ivan anymore; I think he at some point realized he wasn’t doing me any favors. Trevor though...Trevor you need to watch out for. He can get nasty. You guys have a baby to worry about; I really wish you’d just let this go and keep him away from all this.”

“That sucks. Because we want Rowan to grow up knowing you always do the right thing, especially if you think you can help someone who needs it. We’ll keep him safe. And we’ll do it while we get you to fall for us.”

Chapter Fourteen

Beckett, Now

We spend way too much damn time combing through records that day, and the only consolation has been that while our parents have been all too happy to play with Rowan while we look, Lark has been getting more and more comfortable with us touching her.

I know we're all pushing our luck here, stepping up too close behind her as we reach for something, sitting too close on couches, blatantly pulling her legs over our laps, but at some point during the day, she stopped flinching or freezing when it happened.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:12 am

And now as we drive her back to the shelter she insists she wants to sleep at, I can see her pinky linked with Brooks' in the back seat over the bottom of Rowan's car seat. That's kind of huge, right?

It's been a while since we were this excited about somebody, and the thing is, it transcends rationality. Wolves are very instinctual beings, and when we know, we fucking know.

I haven't really heard about too many people having more than one fated mate, and maybe it's not hitting us quite as hard as it did with our ex when we met her, but there's something between us we need to keep pursuing.

"You hungry? Lunch was a long time ago, we could stop and grab something before we take you home, if you want."

She looks over at Rowan, who's been so good all day. "I'm sure he doesn't want to go sit in a restaurant and be expected to behave. I can grab something in the kitchen when I get there."

I look into the mirror briefly and meet Brooks' eyes, and he shakes his head saying that's not happening.

Brooks has always been the sweetest, cuddliest of us all, and he's probably working very hard to restrain himself because I'm pretty damned sure he just wants to suffocate her right about now. Age gap or not, she's someone that we feel needs our protection and that's driving our instincts hard.

I exit and head towards one of our favorite places nearby, a little compound with an array of food trucks, somewhere chill where a baby that may get fussy won't bother anyone.

The gravel hits the tires as we park and she just rolls her eyes at the blatant overhandedness as I open her door for her, helping her down so I can walk in with my claim on her.

Brooks grabs Rowan and Blake is walking behind us all, always looking out for anyone that we might need to be careful of.

“Oh my gods. This is...why does every single menu look so good?”

She stands in the middle of the compound, just looking around. Garlic, bread, meat, all sorts of scents are floating in the air as different people eat at the picnic tables strewn about, and music is pumped through big speakers at each corner.

“So, what you're saying is we need to get one of everything? Done.”

I start walking off, aiming to do just that, but she grabs my arm, stopping me. “Don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to...I can pay you back. I just have to get my wallet from the guys.”

“Wait,” Blake says, perking up. “Please tell me you have access to the money they force you to make for them.”

“Can we not do this here? I told you taking me out was a bad idea.”

“No, that's not what happened. Taking you nearly anywhere is a great idea if we get to go, too. And we're not asking you to pay us back, because we took you here. I will buy one of everything if you don't tell me what you want though. We're far from

being rich, but we do alright and we're pretty comfortable. We can afford to feed you, we promise."

"I know what you need, come here," Brooks says as he grabs her hand and passes Rowan off to me.

I watch them go to a truck tucked in the corner, shaking my head. If she can't pick, then I guess a massive supply of nachos should hit the spot.

Blake and I snag a table while we wait, trying to keep Rowan entertained with a baby food pouch. When we hear her laugh, Blake and I both instantly snap our heads to the sound, because it's so fucking beautiful.

She's got tears streaming down her face as she tries to balance a big armful of drinks and napkins, while Brooks balances two trays, both with massive piles of food on them. One chip-based nacho fully loaded down, the other with fries absolutely drowning in gravy, meat and cheese.

She's laughing though because while he walks, Brooks is singing some ridiculous song he seems to be making up on the spot about how pretty Lark is and comparing her to all sorts of cheesy things, doing anything he can to take her mind off of us doing stuff for her, I think.

"No one was going to mention how embarrassing he is when you let me wander off with him?" she asks as she drops everything off on the table.

"Me? I'm the embarrassing one? I'm sorry, did you or did you not tell the guy at the first stall that tried to take our order that you were dying for a taste of his big, juicy meat?"

She giggles again and covers up her reddening face, and I'm just stuck watching her

interact with my brother, because this is so different than what we're used to feeling.

"Not everyone has a gutter mind," she says somewhat quietly as she reaches for her soda.

"Pretty hard not to take anything dirty when it's coming out of lips like yours," he says easily as he reaches for a fry.

She frowns, looking down at herself, wearing borrowed clothes, hair simply down and unstyled. "I'm not wearing any makeup or anything, and I'm completely shapeless in these clothes."

"It's not the clothes or the makeup that make you beautiful," I reassure her. I keep watching her out of the side of my eye as we all start reaching for food, and I think she's recalculating things inside her head.

When we're about halfway through our meal, she stops eating and reaches for a napkin, cleaning off her fingers and bridging them above the table before clearing her throat slightly. "When they first made me start dancing for them, I had to go through makeup classes and sit still for over an hour each shift while someone did my makeup for me. They're...really good at gaslighting me into thinking everything they were making me do was to improve me. They were always so much nicer to me when I had a full, perfectly applied face of makeup on with the lashes and the contouring and the...drama. I guess they trained me to do it all the time, until I became uncomfortable without it. I don't even remember the last time I went into public without a basic makeup look on."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

We weigh her words, but it's Blake that finally addresses it. "I'm getting the feeling that those two fucks the goddess thrust upon you to wouldn't know a quality woman if she bit them in the fuckin' face. You were stunning at the club yesterday, but you're no less stunning like this. In fact, I almost love this natural face better, because I know I'm only seeing your real skin, and I know that if I were to do this," and he leans forward and brushes a kiss on one cheek, and then slowly does it to the other, "you're feeling every part of me touching you. We just want you to get to a point where whether you do or you don't wear makeup on any given occasion, you're doing it for yourself, because you enjoy it, not because you think it improves your value."

Before he can say another damn word, she leans forward and smashes her lips against his, but then just as abruptly pulls back and covers her face in horror. "Oh my gods, I'm so sorry, that was...totally uncalled for." She tries to scoot back and cower, but Brooks is sitting there, so he swings a leg over the picnic bench and pulls her into him, holding his arms crossed over her front firmly to help her calm down and prevent her from running.

When her fight or flight seems squashed and she deflates a little bit, Blake scoots forward as he straddles the bench until his knees are encasing hers, and he grabs her face gently, broadcasting what he's about to do.

Brooks loosens his hold so she has the option to dodge out if she's not feeling it, but instead, she sinks into Brooks' chest and takes every bit that Blake gives her.

It's a chaste kiss under most descriptions, but it feels important because she's choosing it.

When Blake pulls back, I can see even from across the table how dilated his eyes are, and then Rowan breaks all the tension by throwing his sippy cup across the table and splattering gravy over all of us.

Blake returns to his original seat, but Brooks keeps Lark where she is, even going so far as to offer her a bite of food.

I can't fucking believe he's being that damn bold...offering someone food when you're considering a relationship is almost as big as a proposal. It conveys that they want to provide for you and care for you, and I can see that Lark knows exactly what it means as she looks at him over her shoulder.

It's really just a fry, but in our world, taking it would be a sign that she wants to pursue something real with us.

They hold a silent conversation while I try to distract Rowan with a toy from his bag, and I hold my breath as she keeps eye contact and opens her mouth to accept the bite.

She chews carefully, swallows, and then closes her eyes and lets her hand rest on his knee as she gives herself an internal pep talk.

The entire ride back to the shelter with her in the front, I'm dying to just lean across the console and kiss her stupid, and it's never been this nerve inducing for me to make a move before.

With Arabella, we were naïve and just assumed everything was going to work out exactly how we had been raised to believe mates operate, and so we were excited to feel grown up and claim our mate and everything that goes with it.

I don't want to fuck this up, if this truly is the second chance we didn't know we desperately wanted, and I know Lark has a lot she's still got to work through, but I

know if I don't make any sort of move on her before I let her go inside that I'll be up all night kicking myself.

"Oh, we need your phone number," Brooks says from the backseat as the sign for the shelter tells us to turn.

Even the drive in feels desolate and depressed.

"I'm not allowed to have a phone," she mumbles. "They always know where to find me and make sure I know that there's no one else that would want to contact me anyway."

"But you have a job...surely you could just go get one, even a basic one, if you wanted one?" Blake asks, not really getting that it pisses her off.

She's quick to retort. "A job isn't the same as having money. Did you know that there are caps in place to prevent rejected wolves from accumulating too much money? Because we get shelter for free, which includes the food and the thrift shop that people donate clothing to, there are measures in place to prevent us from dreaming too big.

"For starters, we get half of what any other person would get as a minimum wage, and any tips I get are garnished heavily by my mates, and even Camden on occasion. They all say there's nothing I need to spend it on, and that it would just go to waste if they let me keep it.

"Tips would be the one thing I could keep since it's under the table, but trying to hide it from them has never ended well. So no, I can't just go and buy a phone. Even if I somehow did have the funds for it, I'd have to take a bus to get to the store, and it would take an entire day to travel to the city where the shops are on the city bus. I don't often have an entire day of leisure to give up for something so pointless. Thank

you for the ride.”

She jumps out before the truck is even fully in park and since we brought her right to the entrance, she’s able to slip inside before I can put it in park and jump out.

I try knocking on the door, but it goes completely unanswered until a grumpy looking woman finally opens the door just a sliver.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am, we were just trying to say goodnight to our friend, Lark.”

“If she wanted to hear such a thing, she wouldn’t have torn down the halls as quick as she just did. Remove yourself from the premises before we get security involved.”

I back up, resigned, feeling like shit that our day ended so badly.

I get back in the car and throw it in drive, feeling my chest tighten with each mile I put between us and her.

“Sorry I fucked that up,” Blake mumbles.

Rowan sounds like he’s on the edge of sleep, and since we just changed him, I’m hoping we can just carefully get him in his crib when we get home and make an easier night of it. Car rides always knock him out. “Not your fault. We need to learn her triggers and learn more about the fucked-up ways past alphas have tried to keep the rejected wolves in line so we can start to undo every damn thing for our pack,” I say calmly.

“I have half a mind to go straight to Camden’s and punch his fucking face in for contributing to her pain,” Brooks says, voice thick.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“I’m fucking texting him. I want to make sure he hears it from us that we’re pursuing something with his mom.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” I ask Blake. “What if her mates retaliate?”

“Considering who we are and who they are in terms of pack hierarchy, I’m pretty sure we can take care of that problem,” Blake responds. “That agreement they filed is far from watertight. I know we already told her she no longer has to comply by it because there are so many red flags and violations on their part that it’s completely unenforceable, but if they touch her now that she’s under our protection, they’re going to have a whole fuck ton of mess to contend with. I want Camden and any other fucker he runs with to know that she’s off limits, and that if they harm her in any way, they’re going against us. I hope they fucking retaliate, because I’d love nothing more than to have an actual reason to punch their fucking lights out.”

“And that, dear Rowan,” I say under my breath, “is not how we handle bad feelings.”

Chapter Fifteen

Lark, Now

I stumble to my room, feeling so stupid for ruining what was a really good day. Probably top five most pleasant since I landed here at the shelter, actually, and one stupid little remark that I’m sure he meant nothing by, and I had to go and bite his head off like a psychopath.

The worst part is that I probably could have easily talked myself into hanging out

with them again, because I was already fighting the daydreams of finding a pack that wanted to be with me.

Good thing I'm here to get in my way.

I make it to my room and fit my key in the lock, but my hand is able to turn the handle before the key does anything. I carefully open the door, and there, sitting on my spring-filled bony mattress, is one of the men responsible for getting me into this whole mess. "What the hell are you doing here? And how did you even get in?"

Ivan sits up slowly, trying not to spook me, but I'm too pissed off to be spooked.

He puts his hands out, placatingly. "Just hear me out, sweetheart—"

"No. Get. Out."

He sighs as if I'm the one that's the disappointment in this scenario, making no move to get up. "I just want to talk. Please?"

It's late, and I definitely don't want to be the one that keeps all her neighbors awake, so I close my door and sit against it, hanging my head in exhaustion. "Stay the fuck over there."

"I...I came here to apologize."

I snort but hold my position.

"That's all? I thought you'd be happy."

Okay fine, I'll look at his stupid face. "You said you came here to apologize."

“Yeah.”

“And are you going to?”

Now he’s looking at me like I’m crazy. “I just did.”

Is it weird that I want to laugh? “No, you said you came heretoapologize. You know that’s different thanactuallyapologizing, right? If you’re going to apologize, you have to actually say the words, ‘I apologize’,and if you’re seriously hoping to apologize for all the shit you’ve put me through over the years, you better have a hell of a lot more words to offer me after you start there.”

Ivan rubs his face, and I notice the dark rings under his eyes, and take in the hair that’s shorter than I’ve ever seen it, buzzed like Trevor likes to keep it. “I fucked up, okay? Is that what you want me to say? When we met you, I wasn’t ready to settle down, and I probably resented you. You were so young and beautiful, and I think part of me knew I’d never be enough for you, so maybe I sabotaged myself. I don’t know, but I’ve been actually trying to fix myself, and every day new memories hit me, and it’s just really been weighing on me. You didn’t deserve any of that.”

“I agree. Now will you leave?”

He scoffs. “You could make this easier on me, you know? You think it’s easy to humble myself this way after you’ve spent the day around other males, and you come stumbling in here late, smelling of them? This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Don’t you ever just get tired of spinning bullshit? Ivan, you’re in your late forties. You mated me against my will, took everything from me, ruined my fucking life, and still can’t seem to take any accountability. You’ve taught me I’m only worth the money I can make you. Well since I no longer work for you, I guess I’m worthless to you, so just do me a favor and walk out. Don’t even bother looking back.”

It feels so good to finally be able to say those words, but there's a part of me that's still terrified of the repercussions. I know legally he can't do anything to me since he's been violating the contract he had me stuck in for years, but he's conditioned me to expect the worst.

I don't feel the kick to my ribs until he's collapsing back onto my bed and crying, sobbing about how I always make him out to be the bad guy.

The crunch of my rib is still reverberating in my ear, the thud of something snapping piercing my side in pain as I cry out and hold my side.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“You’re going to come with me, okay? I don’t like hurting you, Lark, but you make it so damn hard sometimes to stay sane. What is it about you that just pushes all my buttons?”

I manage to choke out a ‘fuck you’ as I shake my head and try to reach for the door handle, but of course he’s quicker.

Ivan squats down beside me, gripping something in his hand that I can’t quite see. “Nothing else needs to happen here, okay? If you just cooperate, it will be so much easier. We messed up the first time, but I want a do-over. I know we can do better by you. I just want a chance. If you can’t come with me peacefully, then I’m going to have to dose you with this, and it will force a heat into you. You know we’re the only ones you can tolerate when you’re in heat. We just need to get another pup on you, and everything will be okay. I know you’re older now, but I’ve been doing research, and plenty of shifters have pups at your age. So, what’s it going to be? Can you come with me, or are we doing this the hard way?”

With that one well-placed kick, I’m right back to being his pretty little tamed wolf. My head hangs in supplication, and the fight drains right out of me.

“You need to change. You’re not getting in my fucking car or going anywhere with me wearing another male’s clothing.”

He starts digging through my meager supply of non-work clothing as I try to sit up, every tiny jostle sending shards of pain through my body, tears openly flowing from my eyes as I cry silently like they’ve taught me to.

I let him dress me like I'm a doll, grateful he doesn't linger on the naked body underneath, and I watch him take the clothes that the triplets loaned me and throw them out my tiny window, immediately mourning the amount of comfort they brought me.

"Do you need me to carry you?"

I shake my head no, because I've learned too many times that doing things on my own always makes them happier. I'm in too much pain now to fight, and as he leads me down the hall, pretending to escort me, I pray we come across somebody that can slow him down, while simultaneously praying we don't because I know that will implicate anybody else and he'll just snatch me and run anyway.

I can't do much of anything when I'm hurt like this, and he knows that. It's why he did it. He likes me docile.

If I were to hit the emergency button they've got mounted outside, he'd snatch me up and bolt before anyone could get there, and then I'd just be in bigger trouble with him, so I just resign myself to my fate.

The drive back is fucking awful, every bump jostling the injury and making me very nearly black out in pain, but I fight through it.

"I don't know why you thought you could replace us, Lark. You had to know that we would never allow that."

"Why, Ivan? Why can't I just be happy for once? You don't want me, not really. What if somebody else wants me? Do you really hate me so much?" The effort it takes to get the words out is excruciating, so I'm gasping and slouched over by the time I'm done, sweat trickling down my temple from the effort.

“They don’t want you, Lark. They saw a beautiful woman dancing for them and fell under your spell. Give it a weekend and they’ll forget all about you, I guarantee it. I watched the footage from the club after we realized one of them sprung you out; it’s kind of pathetic how easily you believed them. They’re going to be the alphas. What use do they have for a used-up woman almost fifteen years their senior? It literally doesn’t make any sense. You should see how beautiful their fated was; you can’t even compete.”

I allow these words to hit their targets, internalizing the pain as all the self-doubt rises within me, drowning out all the helpful voices telling me I’m good and deserve good things. He’s right. The Storm Pack wanting me doesn’t really make sense. And with Ivan and Trevor in the picture especially, I could never allow that energy anywhere near their sweet little baby.

“Don’t you think it’s better for everyone if we all just keep things the way they are?”

I give him a nodded yes, because I know that’s what he wants, and he hums to himself as he navigates to their home.

It’s never really been mine, but it’s familiar at least. I know where everything is and what the rules are, so I can sort of relax into my shitty role there.

Because his favorite activity is fucking with my head, when we park, Ivan is out of his side and at mine immediately, opening my door and helping me down with all the care he apparently has saved for this one moment.

“You okay?”

I glare at him, because, no, I’m fucking not. “You fucking kicked me in the rib and broke it. What do you think?”

“Let’s get you inside so you can rest. You’ll heal before you know it.”

“You do realize my wolf is fucking barely there, right? I heal at nearly a human speed.”

He trips, looking at me in a panic. “What?”

“Do you have any idea how things work for rejected wolves? No. Of course you don’t. Why would you? You’re the rejector here, you get to live like a king.”

“Why the fuck you running lip?”

Awesome. Trevor. Yay.

“She’s hurt. I pissed her off, okay? Just be nice for a bit. Help me get her situated.”

“Mom?” Camden asks as soon as we’re through the threshold.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“Hey, baby.” I try to muster a smile, but I don’t think it’s too convincing.

“What happened? What did they do to you?”

“She has a broken rib,” Ivan says, clearly insinuating that it was the alpha heirs’ fault, not his own. “She’ll be okay, she just needs to take it easy for a bit.”

Camden rushes over, fluffing up a throw pillow on the couch and getting a blanket for me. “I’m going to fucking kill them,” he spits.

The look Ivan and Trevor give me tells me all I need to know; I can’t tell Camden fucking anything. “It was an accident, Cam. I’ll be fine. They were kind.”

He doesn’t look like he thinks they’re kind though, he looks like he wants to go try and kick their asses. I love my son, but he does not have the sort of build that those guys have. “Don’t do anything rash, Cam. This really wasn’t their fault.”

“Good thing I was there when I was to help her home,” Ivan says. “We have something to tell you, Camden. Your mother and I talked a bit, and we’re going to try again. We know it’s always bothered you that we didn’t have a good relationship, so we’re going to work on it, okay? I know you’re all grown up and forming your own pack, but I think this will be good for all of us. Who knows, maybe you’ll get a little sister sometime, too.”

Camden’s whole face lights up, as if all the shit we’ve been through hasn’t happened. A sibling is the one thing I’ve never been able to give him that he’s always desperately wanted because I knew I couldn’t stand to go through another pregnancy

as long as Ivan and Trevor were the ones stuffing me with their fucking awful sperm. “We’re still talking about it,” I say, trying to temper the enthusiasm. “I need some time to think. It’s been a long day; can I please sleep?”

“Of course, mom. I’ll get you some water in case you get thirsty.”

When Camden’s out of ear shot, Trevor leans over me, almost looking normal. “You’d consider having another one with us? Really?”

Oh my gods, how fucking daft are all these men? I hate how they make me feel like I’m living in this alternate reality, where nothing is the way it actually is in my head for anyone else. “I definitely didn’t agree to that. But I really am not sure how much say you’ll give me in the matter. I’m sure raping me isn’t below you.”

“It’s not rape when you’re mated,” Trevor says too easily.

“First of all, yes, it is, second of all, did you forget you rejected me? We’re not mated.”

“Guess we know what we need to do then,” Ivan says, calculatingly. He pulls the syringe out of his pocket that I was hoping had fallen into a trash can, and while Trevor grabs my arms, he stabs it into my thigh. “We can just bite you again. That should re-ignite the link. This is our second chance, Lark. Everything’s going to be better this time.”

Chapter Sixteen

Blake, Now

“Are we seriously going to a strip club when we’re on the clock?”

“I’m not even responding to that. You know exactly why I’m driving there.”

Brooks sighs and leans back in his seat more. “I just feel like there’s a better time to do this, that’s all.”

“I don’t know how you’re not going out of your skin, man. It’s weird; we had her for a fucking night and a day, and it’s been four days since we dropped her off, but it feels like something really important is missing now.”

“Do you really think the goddess would grant us another mate?”

The hope in his voice kills me, but I was right there with him when everything fell apart with Arabella. “I figure there’s a damn good reason we all felt so strongly for Lark the second we saw her, even before that, actually, if you consider the fact that we were all attracted to the scent of her and were able to pick it out of the hundreds of other scents floating in that club.”

“We shouldn’t have let her leave our house. It feels like it was a stupid move to let her go back to the shelter, even if that’s what she insisted she wanted.”

“Yeah, well, if we’re able to track her down, we’ll fix that.”

I throw the truck in park and pull the keys from the ignition, slide them in my pocket and hop out of the cab.

It does feel slightly sleazy to be here in broad daylight, but whatever. It amazes me how many patrons are here at this time of day, in the middle of the week no less, all of them male of course and mostly wearing what looks like office attire.

The women dancing up on stage don’t have half the appeal that Lark does, and I’m not even tempted to pull up a seat and watch. I know she’s here somewhere; it’s crazy

but I swear I can feel her.

A couple of guys in cheap suits with women draped all over them perk up when we walk in, no bouncers around at the door to keep us from entering.

I look around the room, trying to see if I can get a sense for her, looking over to find the two guys casting their companions aside and storming up to us, a fight in their eyes.

I backhand Brooks' elbow to get his attention, bracing myself for whatever bullshit is about to happen.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“You’re not allowed in here,” one of them spits at us.

“I’m sorry, who are you?”

“We’re the owners of this club. And we say you aren’t allowed in here.”

“We’re just here for our girl, then we’ll leave,” Brooks says.

That pisses them off.

“She’s not fucking yours.”

Oh. It’s them.

I feel a rictus grin split my face wide, and don’t bother hiding it. “She’s here, isn’t she? Guessed right. I love when that happens.”

They crowd into us more, our commotion starting to gather attention. Camden appears out of who knows where and tries to usher us to somewhere quieter, but when we get to a smaller version of the room we were in last week, Camden is lined up right next to his dads, arms crossed, tension visible in every bit of exposed skin. “I ought to kick your fucking asses,” he says as he eyes me and my brother up. “Real fuckin’ dumb of you to come back here after the damage you caused.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Brooks asks for the both of us.

“Cam, could you go watch the floor while we talk to them?” the one that seems

slightly more rational says.

“No, let him stay. I want this all out in the open, and it’d be a hell of a lot easier if he were here as witness.” I pull the papers out of my back pocket I brought just in case and hand them over. “You’ve identified yourselves as the owners of this club, which is good enough for us. You’re being served. Report yourselves to the Alpha House within 72 hours to prevent further complications.”

“For...for what?” Camden screeches. “You’re the sick fucks that brought my mom back with broken fucking ribs! Why don’t you turn your own asses in instead, huh?”

Every muscle in my body locks up and I narrow my eyes at the men that I’m now looking at as though they’re roaches, and I can feel my wolf rising swiftly inside of me.

I shift before I have time to think about what I’m doing, and I start backing the two ex-mates of my girl into a corner, growling and exerting my alpha dominance to keep them from shifting.

“What are you talking about, Camden? We brought her back to the shelter in perfect health. We spent the day at the Alpha House and then took her for dinner before bringing her home safely. If she was injured in any way at all, it’s not on us, and that means these two men that seem to think they still have a claim on your mother decided the hell they’ve put her through already just wasn’t enough.”

I can feel Brooks shaking next to me, trying to stay in his human form, fighting the tide of anger I’ve fully given into. I don’t take my eyes off of the two exes though.

“Which one of you took that precious woman and fucking broke her? Huh?” A chill runs down my spine from Brooks’ tone, and my fangs are just dying to rip into something.

“This is clearly a misunderstanding,” Camden says, putting himself between us and them. “Mom said...” he thinks about this but doesn’t seem to find a conclusive answer. “We should just get her.”

“Take me to her. He’s going to stay and keep an eye on these two,” Brooks commands while he follows Camden out of the room.

I refuse to let them leave me behind though when I could be there with him, finding Lark.

Keeping my back away from them, I herd them to follow. We end up in a hallway that’s clearly not meant for patrons but still smells like sex, and Camden knocks briefly before pulling his keys off his belt on an elastic and lets us in.

The sight that arrests us makes the decision for me. I lunge for the nearest asshole to me, getting a good chunk of his upper leg, and shake my neck until he’s bleeding and rolling around on the floor. I’m feral as I go after the other guy, but like an asshole he runs to jump behind the cage where Lark is currently being kept, in what I’m assuming is the kennel that Beckett found her in.

“Calm down!” Camden yells. “Nothing is happening if you can’t keep control of yourselves!”

“Are you fucking blind?” Brooks yells. “You’re keeping your mother in a fucking dog kennel again, and have the audacity to tell us to calm down?”

Camden plays with his keys, and I relish in the blood dripping off my teeth, staining their white floor.

“It’s just so we can keep control of her. She...she’s been a little wild lately. I didn’t want her to hurt herself.”

Lark is lying there more or less comatose, staring up at the ceiling without any sort of reaction to any of our presences.

“What the hell did you guys do to her?”

I shift back so I can be more helpful, using my alpha dominance to demand Camden’s sweats so my ass isn’t casually hanging out. Then I grab Brooks’ phone as he snatches the keys off of Camden and dives for the cage, hands shaking as he digs through the ring for the one that will let us into the padlock.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I'm calling for backup as fast as I can, sending out a red alert with a location, slipping into the training that dad's spent so many years pushing into us.

This is the very reason we have wolf hierarchies, why alphas are needed. To keep little bitch wolves like these in line. The wolves that think they're better than even the most basic of decencies.

Once Brooks has Lark in his arms, all bets are off for the three grown-ass adult wolves in the room with us. In this moment, it really doesn't matter that Camden's our friend, or that her ex-mates have any redeeming qualities hidden deep, deep in their black hearts, all that matters is that my wolf sees the she-wolf he wants, damaged at their hands. All of them are complicit in this.

I see the moment they realize they've stepped in it, the moment it crosses their brains that they're not in charge here after all. This might be their club, but it's our pack, and we don't drug people to get our desired outcome.

"We can do this two ways. One, you play along and get in that fucking cage you forced the most perfect goddess-blessed woman in, likely countless times, and I keep you in there until I feel like letting you out. Two, you fight me on this and I sink my teeth into your soft necks. I can promise you it's not going to be as fun as you think it is. For you anyway. I think I'll take great joy in it."

"Why?" one of the idiots asks. Literally don't even care to know their names. "What's so godsdamned special about her, huh? She's just another piece of ass. What the hell do you see in her to make you go this crazy on us? We're good, contributing members of our pack. We pay our dues; we respect the alpha. We don't cause no

trouble ever.”

“I’m sorry, you consider forcing someone that was supposed to be your mate into a contract to stay in her son's life no trouble? You consider making her sleep in a place made for actual dogs to be an okay thing? You think she doesn’t deserve all the fucking respect you could muster up in your stupid little brain? No.

“I haven’t heard much about you yet, but I’ve heard enough to know what I need to know. You’re trash. You could have been the highest contributing citizens in our entire pack, but the second you decided that that woman wasn’t worth your time and you rejected her, and the moment you started threatening custody of her child if she didn’t do what you wanted, the second you decided to blame her for some of your bullshit, was the second you became the lowest piece of filth.

“So, no. You aren’t ‘good contributing members of our pack’, because good contributing members of our pack respect their mates. I had to sentence my own mate to death. You think I’m going to be lenient with you pieces of shit? You got another thing coming to you. Get in the cage or give me blood.”

“Dads? What is he talking about?”

“Camden, we’ll deal with you later, too. There’s no way you’re innocent in this when she told me you were partially responsible for taking her tips. There may be some messed up pack laws, but it doesn’t mean you have to make it harder on her. And Camden, if your mom has a broken rib, you can thank the two assholes standing next to you. We would never hurt a woman like that. Especially not that woman.”

While Brooks gently carries Lark out of the cage, I can see Camden rethinking many of his life decisions. He can do that on his own time. I extend my hand, asking for the keys to the cage from Brooks, waiting for them to crawl in there and get scrunched up together before slamming it shut and locking them in. “Any of you bozos have extra

keys on you? You lie to me, I promise you're not going to like what happens."

One of the guys pulls a key ring out of his pocket and I snatch the entire thing from him. "Now, I'm going to go tend to Lark. I've got backup coming. Any of you so much as think about putting a pinky outside of that damn cage, I'm cutting it off. You get me?" I wait until the smell of fear permeates the dank room before I follow my brother, and while Lark has somewhat responded to him in my absence, she's not nearly as alert as she should be.

"We need to get her to a healer. I don't know what the hell they gave her, but she's not well." Brooks has her laid out with his shirt balled up under her head, and her eyes are almost completely dilated as she stares around.

She sits up slightly when I get on the other side of her, grabbing onto the hem of my pants, but her voice is very thready when she uses it. "Don't belong here. Why are you here? You want another dance? Just— just give me a minute," she says as her eyelids flutter, and then she's back to staring out into space.

"I'm gonna go see if I can figure out what the hell they gave her," I tell Brooks before bending down and pressing a firm kiss to Lark's forehead.

All three of them look kind of funny scrunched up in a cage that should realistically only hold one person, and this improves my mood the tiniest bit. "Why is she like that?" I demand. "What did you give her?"

The idiot mates don't say anything, but Camden does speak up. "She's been in and out of her heat all week, I'm sorry we had to lock her up. She's not herself and I don't know if it's because she won't allow herself to give in to the heat or what, but she's been unresponsive like this all day."

I shake my head. "She's on something. She smells different. What did you do?" I

stare right down at the two I'm ready to chop up into bits.

"They said it was safe," one of them says.

"Gods, what are you talking about? Dad, you gave her something? Tell me you're not responsible for this."

"Camden, from here on out, let's just assume every bad thing that's been done to your mom is because of them. Better think real quick about switching your loyalty there, buddy. What did you give her? Do not make me ask you again. You can already bet that whatever you dosed her with is coming your way soon."

The one that seems slightly more amenable to helping us stretches his leg far enough out in front of him to pull something from his pocket. He hands me a case with a few small syringes in it. "Might have given her too much. It was just supposed to kick start her heat so she'd want us again. I thought if we could just start over, everything would be all right this time, you know? I didn't really mean to hurt her."

I get down close in front of him so I'm on his level. "Let me guess; just like you didn't mean to break a rib?" I see the admission in his eyes when he looks at me, so I shove my hand between the bars and snap two of his ribs for good measure. He starts immediately crying like a little bitch, making me want to break more of them. "You better hope this is reversible, or you're joining my dead mate sooner than you think."

I go back in to see Lark, and this time she's slightly more coherent, sitting up on Brooks' lap. She's drooling a little bit, and she's still flopsy, but her eyes try to track my movement as I approach her.

"They give you anything helpful?" I can tell by his tone he's not expecting much.

"Yeah. I'm going to call the healer and get him ready for her. I'll tell you what they

said in a bit, I don't think I want to discuss this in front of her in case it triggers her or something."

"Okay, that makes sense. Might as well call Beckett too, let him know what's up. He'll want to know."

"Yeah, I'm on that."

Because I don't like leaving them alone too long, I step back into the other room while I call up our healer, explaining to him what's going on, and he promises me he's going to have a bed ready as soon as we can get her there. Alpha house has all the best equipment for situations like this, and I know he'll get her sorted out if it's at all possible.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

Then I have to call Beckett and try and rein in my anger enough to be coherent as I recount what we're going through, what we found, how Lark is, and that we're going to be bringing her to the Alpha House so that the healer can look her over.

"I'll meet you guys there. Just let me know when you have an ETA," he tells me without further questions.

Chapter Seventeen

Brooks, Now

I've been told many times throughout my life that I'm too soft to be an alpha. A lot of people told my father that my empathy was something that needed to be trained out of me if I was going to help my brothers take over the pack someday. But right now, as I cradle this woman in my lap and we get her to the healer, it's exactly what she needs. Blake is so pissed that he's vibrating, and I know that if we weren't such high profile in the pack, Blake would have murdered those scumbags the second we walked into the club tonight.

"You're so beautiful, and you're so strong. I'm so sorry that they didn't know what they had, I just want to give you everything. I guess we both got dealt pretty shitty hands in the mate department."

She looks up at me and blinks. "Mate?"

Gods I love how that word sounds coming from her mouth. I know she's out of it, so I have no idea how much of this she's going to retain later, but I know I need to keep

talking to her like she's herself. "Yeah, mate. I've wanted one for so long."

"You'd be perfect," she sighs dreamily. Then adds, "Good dad."

"Is there anything I can do for you right now as we drive to make you more comfortable?"

"Don't let go," she whispers before her consciousness seems to fade away.

"Never," I whisper as I kiss her forehead.

Maybe some people would think it's weird that we're attracted to this woman who is so much older than us, but I can't really think of age as anything other than a number now that I've had a taste of who she is. I don't even know her much, but my wolf tells me I'd be the dumbest shifter alive to let her go.

When we finally make it to the Alpha House, a few healing assistants bolt outside, ready to carefully bring her inside. Nobody questions why we're so attached to her, and my dad is there checking everything out, seeing the condition she's in, which is only going to build a stronger case against her ex-mates.

I stay by her side and hold her hand while Blake passes the stupid syringe to the healer, explaining what we know. Her vitals are all shit of course, but her heartbeat is strong enough that he's not worried about anything real serious happening immediately.

"Alright you guys, stay with her. I'm going to run some tests and see if I can figure out what exactly is in the vial."

I can see that Beckett's just itching to be where I am, so I switch places with him and take Rowan, needing something to hold on to. "You should use some of your sweet

baby magic on her. She could really use it, buddy,” I whisper to him as I use him as an anchor, kissing his head and hugging him to me.

I try and keep Rowan calm as we walk around the room, because I can’t bear to walk away and not be here.

Just when my patience starts running really thin, the healer comes back in looking somewhat resigned. “Alright. Her blood work just came back. They’ve administered a lot of that stuff, and her body hasn’t been given what the medication makes her body need. The way these hormones work is that they make the body believe they’re going into heat, but if the brain isn’t willing, or the partner isn’t acceptable, then oftentimes we see a lot of adverse reactions. We use this in packs that are struggling to conceive, to try and kick start a heat or make them arrive sooner so that they can try for a baby, but clearly, it’s being abused here.”

I bite back the urge to give a sarcastic reply, but I'm going out of my mind witnessing Lark in this state. It's wrong.

“Okay,” Beckett drawls. “Can we help her? It's reversible, right? What are the long-term effects? How do we help her through this?”

The healer removes his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose and exhaling as if he doesn't want to say what he's about to say. “Reversible, if the heat is satisfied. We could potentially sedate her for a few days while her body tries to metabolize everything they gave her, but I worry about adding anything else to her system right now. She could be just fine, or she could react even worse to that course of action.”

I get up nice and close to her, resting my hand on the shin of her leg. The hospital blanket is thin, and all I want to do is pull her out of here and bring her somewhere soft and cozy. “What do you suggest?” I ask him.

“I take it you all are romantically involved with her? I don't say this to be nosy, but in interest of medical pursuit.”

I'm sure by the look on all of our faces he realizes that saying we're romantically involved with her is a stretch, but we're about to be involved any which way if it helps her through this. “What does she need?” I try asking again.

“The best and quickest way to get her through this,” he starts explaining slowly, “is to fully trigger the heat, let her give in to it, and indulge it. If that were to happen, the hormones her body would naturally produce would flush out all the false ones and help her regain balance. And I suspect that with a proper heat, she'd be back to normal as soon as it ended.”

“The problem, Doc,” Beckett says, “is that she's not quite able to give consent to us, now, is she?”

“Maybe not with her human side,” he insinuates, “but you could see if her wolf is amenable.”

We all shake our heads. “Not good enough. If we don't know if she wants this, we can't touch her.”

“What he said,” Blake agrees, nodding his head toward me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“If it's that important to you, I could give her a small hit of adrenaline. It ought to clear her mind for a few minutes or so, but she'll likely crash afterwards.”

It seems like an obvious question, but I need to ask it anyway. “Would that harm her?”

“Look, I'm going to be straight with you. She's strung out. I'm telling you what her body needs, and I respect that you want to respect her; we're talking about her health, and you're worried about whether or not she'll hate you after you help her. I get it, I do, but wolves... we operate differently. I suspect you'll know if she wants it or not, I trust you guys to know the difference between a woman who's into it and a woman who's not.

“Obviously I'm not telling you to start forcing yourself on her, I would never. I'm saying get her somewhere comfortable and quiet, spend some time with her, help her relax, start with gentle touches on her arm or her hand or her head, see how she reacts. You'll know pretty quick what she wants. Your smells will permeate whatever state she's in, and it's going to help her know who's with her.

“Or, you know, just let her keep suffering. That's a good option too I guess, if you want to wait until she can look at you wide-eyed and say she wants you. You're not going to get the consent you're really looking for; it's going to be a lot more nuanced than that right now.”

“Thanks doc,” Beckett says, sounding resigned.

“Call me if there are any changes, you know I'll stop by. I assume you'll be taking her

to your place?”

“Considering her other option is the shelter, yeah. She's coming with us.”

“We should go get our things from the shelter,” I suggest. “That way she'll have something familiar with her.”

The doc looks at me and nods. “That's a good idea. Anything familiar to her will help immensely. If you try all this, and she shows no outward change of healing or coming back to herself, let me know and we'll run some more tests and check her levels. If her heats have been delayed too long or if she's taken suppressors in the past, it could greatly affect how she handles this. Just keep an eye on her for me like I know you will. You're good guys, I trust you.”

Then it's just us and our dad who I definitely forgot was in the room, and Lark, who's still unconscious.

I look down at the cute baby in my arms, knowing it will be a challenge to keep him entertained and occupied while the house is full of who knows what kind of pheromones and noises.

Dad walks up to us, face sober as he appraises the woman laying out before us. “She's special?”

Beckett takes point, shaking his head. “I don't know what it is, Dad. It's just weird. We met her under interesting circumstances, but there was instant recognition. Have you ever heard of somebody getting another chance at a mate?”

“Actually, yeah. Under the right circumstances a mate bond can be triggered. It's called a trauma response mating, and it presents differently than a natural one, but you'll definitely feel that pull. If you and your potential mate are both feeling the

connection up front, it can slide into place. It's rare, because the condition has to be just right, everybody has to be receptive, but..." and he meets all of our eyes, "it's no less real. I'm not going to be dumb and ask you guys if you're sure, because I don't give a flying fuck if she's a bit older than you. Not if she treats you right and makes you happy. Goddess knows you need all the happiness you can get after what that other awful woman put you through.

"We've had to watch you guys suffer so much, and you've been so strong and been such good dads to little Rowan here. I really want this to be a good thing for you, to really give this the attention it needs, and take care of her and explore this. Not for the pack, but for you. If there's even a chance she's feeling this like you are, then you're the only ones that can help her right now anyway.

"Which is why," he says, coming over to my son and plucking him out of my hands, "me and mom are gonna hang out with this guy while you help Lark. I know you guys have a hard time accepting help, but please don't fight me on this. You know we love this kid to pieces; he'll want for nothing. We know what we're doing. And you know if we have questions, we'll call you. If she's had it as rough as I suspect she has, she deserves a happy ending, too. I'm gonna put a call out to the pack and we'll get some supplies delivered to you guys."

"I want to go get her stuff," I volunteer. "I don't want anybody else touching her things."

"That's fine," my dad says, trying to fight a smile.

"Whether this takes two days or six or longer even, we've got this. You just do what you need to do. This could be the start of something incredible for you."

He walks out of the room pressing little kisses all over Rowan's cheeks before then moving to his neck, and while it's weird to think of being away from my kid for

several days, the idea of having a break makes my knees want to buckle.

“If either of you have any objections to this, you need to voice them now,” Beckett announces, dead serious.

Blake gets closer to Lark, rests his forehead against hers, and inhales slowly. He traces her face with a finger more gently than I've ever seen him touch anybody, then takes his place right next to her head. He stares down Beckett, daring him to tell him to move away.

“Understood,” Beckett says and then he meets my eyes. “I think I know what you want, but I still need to hear it. Are you good with this, brother?”

“What if it doesn't work out like we want it to? What if we build up all this hope and we take the time and the bond gets stronger, and she doesn't want us?”

“No risk, no reward,” Blake says.

“If we only did things we knew for sure would work out, we'd never do anything,” Beckett responds. “You in or out, Brooks?”

With my arms itching to pull her into them, I state, “In.”

???

With all of that decided, I head to the shelter which will take me a good while to drive to and from, wishing I could completely clear out her stuff. My mom popped in to tell us she'd call ahead and let them know one of us was coming, and that we had permission to access Lark's room and her things. Not having to explain my presence there will be helpful, but I'm not excited about being in that place again. Haven't been there much but seeing it with fresh eyes knowing it's where Lark has spent most of

her life, I know it's going to enrage me.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

The entire drive over I can't get Lark's face out of my mind, but I know the sooner I get this done, the sooner I can inhale that decadent scent of hers again and drown in it. We shared a heat with our ex, but I don't think this one's going to be anything like that.

That one was triggered as well, but she was always so cold, and I always felt like she was putting on an act around us. What would it be like to be with somebody that truly wanted us?

I know we're working off of a lot of assumptions here, because there's a good chance that Lark won't want us to touch her, but the thought of it has me rock hard. I'm grateful for the baggy pants I'm wearing as I park the truck and ring the doorbell at the front of the shelter.

"Alpha," the woman that answers says in deference, bowing her head.

"Um, hi. I think my mom called ahead?"

She opens the door and beckons me in. "How is Lark?" she asks instead of responding.

Just hearing her name on somebody else's lips makes me jittery, feeling like I need to get back to her. "Not great."

"And the two idiots that squandered their gift?"

I shrug. "Last I saw them, they were locked in a dog kennel. I think Dad's taking care

of them; Lark was our first priority.”

She cackles and it changes her whole face as she leads me down the hall. “Excellent.”

“Now isn't really the time,” I start, “but I know there are a bunch of old laws that need to be fixed. We'd love to work with you. Me and my brothers are intent on making things better for the wolves that have to live here. Starting with funding,” I say as the leaky ceiling drops water right on my forehead. I stop and look up at it, noticing how outdated and stained everything is. “We need to do something about this building. People that live here don't deserve this.”

“I appreciate that, but we make it work.”

“I'm certain we can do better than that.”

She squeezes my arm as we get to a door that I know is Lark's purely from the scent emanating from it. “She's lived here a while, then?”

“She gave birth to that 22-year-old kid in this room. Yeah, she's been here a while. Of course, there were a few years where she was in and out, mostly out, but this has always been her room. Do you need anything else?”

She opens the door for me, and I walk in, trying to take it in. But words don't do it justice. I wanna burn it to the fucking ground. Maybe my voice comes out a little short, but I hope she knows it's because I think it's vile that this is how these wolves are living. “Give me a list of the most urgent needs,” I prompt. “I want to do something about this, and I don't want to wait.” I pull out my wallet and grab a business card with my contact info, passing it to her. “I'm serious about this. If I don't hear from you by tomorrow, I'll show back up, and I don't think either of us want that. Lark needs me, but so does the rest of my pack.”

“There is more than one alpha that has wolves here,” she reminds me. “This is every pack’s cast-offs.”

“Then I’ll be the liaison, and I’ll contact the other pack alphas. We’ll figure something out.”

A tear wells in her eye as she nods and walks out, gripping the business card tightly. “Thank you,” she whispers, and then she’s gone.

I sit on what passes for a bed in this room, my tailbone immediately hitting the creaky rusty metal frame underneath the mattress. There’s no padding at all. I lean forward and rest my face in my hands, depression washing over me. This has been Lark’s existence. And I thought we had it bad?

I take pictures of everything I can, because I know that people need to see this. No one knows what it’s really like here unless they have someone close to them that was rejected. I don’t even know the last time any alpha stepped foot here. It seems as if all the packs just pass forward the requisite tithes to keep this shelter running and then call it a day, because it’s depressing and completely run down. A few of the packs consider these wolves not to be their problem once they’re rejected, but these are people that need somebody on their side.

With ideas flowing through me, I muscle open the sticky closet door to gather her belongings, and the closet is so moldy that I’m sure there’s a leak somewhere in the walls.

There’s hardly anything in here worth taking, but I pack it all anyway. I also pack the thin blanket spread over the bed and a folded up blanket the size of an infant, the only nice thing in the room that’s tucked into the top of the closet. I’m assuming this was the baby blanket of Camden’s, and while I can’t relinquish this room for her without her permission, I can hope that she doesn’t ever have to step foot back here again.

In fact, I'll make sure of it. Surely as the heirs to the pack, we have some say in where somebody can live. I'll build her a damn house with my own two hands if she doesn't want to live with us. That's fine. She's not coming back here, though.

Chapter Eighteen

Lark, Now

Everything hurts, and I have no concept of time. I've been a prisoner in my own head all week, because after that first dose of whatever shit my exes gave me, I had to mentally distance myself if I wanted to get through it.

I spent a full day hating myself for ending my date with the triplets so badly, because if I'd been even slightly more gracious about it all, maybe they would have checked on me and gotten me out before it got to this point. I only have myself to blame that no one wondered about my well-being.

By day two it was my exes that became the enemy. They've always been the enemy, but they've always been so good about getting inside my head, making me talk to myself like I'm shit, telling myself that I need to do better if I wanted to be worth something. It was somewhat healing to do nothing but mentally list all the exact reasons I hated them.

When I disassociated long enough, I started to dwell on other things. Like the way the triplets talked to me, remembering the reverent way they touched me, the crazed way they looked when they smelled me. I have no business wanting a pack so much younger than me, a pack that is friends with my own son, but I can't deny how badly my entire body yearns for them.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

On day three the heat ramped up, and I felt like I was being incinerated. But even in that awful state, my head and my body knew better than to give my exes an ounce of what I could offer. I decided right then and there that I would rather incinerate in real life than let them anywhere near me again. If they wanted me, they'd have to take me by force.

As big of dirt bags as they are, I know they would never take me against my will. I think they enjoyed watching me hurt for rejecting them, though. For turning down their advances like I was being dumb. Like I was the one messed up in the head.

I couldn't keep track of how many days passed after that, because they kept injecting me when I stopped reacting to them. I can still hear the awful way Trevor would laugh as he stabbed my thigh, plunging the foul liquid into me. And at some point, it didn't really matter anymore. I felt like I was going to die anyway, so I just tried to hold on to happy memories.

Like the way Camden felt in my arms when he was little, the secret way we used to be able to play together with nobody around to interrupt us. How we'd cuddle under the bed in a ramshackle fort and read all the library books we could get our hands on. The sweet sound of his giggle, and the way his eyes would light up when the shelter had chocolate pudding for dessert.

I spent time just trying to be with the goddess, trying to accept her and communicate with her, to feel her presence. I couldn't pray, that felt too complicated. But I imagined lying in her lap as she stroked my hair for me, pulling the tension from my body.

I know my body needs sustenance, but Trevor and Ivan have never been great about feeding me when they put me in the cage because they tell me they don't want a fat stripper, and the more they feed and water me, the more they have to let me use the bathroom. I think they realize if they don't give me anything I won't have to go. Easier for them, I guess.

I honestly thought I was dreaming when I felt the triplets nearby. I thought I was hallucinating, because good things don't happen to me.

And yet, here I am, back in their house. A place I can't help but feel safe in because nothing bad has ever known me here. Maybe I only spent one night here, but that's more happy memories than I've had anywhere else.

Having them near me is twisting the pain inside of me into something new. It's blooming, growing, making my body twist in new ways as it tries to tell me what it needs.

And this mattress I'm on? Ohgodsthe feel of these sheets alone could probably set me off at this point. "I need my clothes off," I say, maybe out loud and maybe not. The room is spinning a bit, my eyes are blurry, and my head's a mess, but I know that I need to feel the soft flannel of the sheets against my skin.

"Here, let me help you with that, baby," an angel says in my ear. The most delicious smell overcomes me as my eyes close, my body crying out when his hands skim against my skin, trying to pull off my shirt. The weight of his body on top of me as he works has me soaking through my underwear, my head thrashing back and forth. It's been so long since I've felt actual desire, that it takes me far too long to figure out what it is I really want.

But then he gets close to me, close enough that I can actually see his face, can trace the shape of his mouth. I need to kiss him like I need to breathe, need to feel him

pushing me into this mattress like I need sleep at night.

I'm still in a bra and panties, but I can feel the roughness of his jeans and the obstacle of his belt buckle keeping us apart, and even that texture on my skin that's so overly sensitive right now has my head spinning even more.

“Do you know who I am, Lark? Do you know my name?”

I put my arms around his neck and breathe him in, in that spot between his neck and his shoulder that's so richly scented of eucalyptus and lavender, doing wonders to clear my head. “I'd know you anywhere, Beckett. You're the morning sun. You can't forget the sun even though it disappears at night. Even when the sun goes away for months in the winter, you still know it when it comes back. Are you real? Are you actually here? Or is this all a dream I'm going to wake up from and hate?”

“Can you feel my fingers on your side, Lark? Do you feel my breath on your skin? Can you feel my tongue on your skin?” And he licks against my collarbone, slowly and purposefully, then pulls back to catch my reaction.

My eyes nearly roll into the back of my head from the contact, so I try to get further into the bed so I can pull him tighter to me. “I feel you,” I whisper against him. “Can you make it better?” I know I have no right to ask, but I need this so bad. I'm shamelessly rubbing myself against him, using his body in any way I need to, any way I can reach, but the way his scent changes, intensifies even, tells me I'm okay.

“I'm going to give you anything you need, baby. You want the moon? I'll find a way to go get it. You want the world? It's yours. Nothing is too much for you right now. What do you want?”

He runs his nose against me, and I hold his head to me, my fingers running through his messy hair, trying to use his chin to push my bra out of the way so I can use his

tongue all over my breasts.

“I don't think I can have all the things I want,” I pant. “There's too many of them. I want way too much. I'm not allowed to want. It took me far too long to learn that lesson.” Sadness rushes through me and I feel so shameful, so wanton, but not in a good way. “I feel like a paper plate that's all used up. I've carried out any purpose I was supposed to have and now I'm just waiting to be thrown out. Again.” The heat rising within me is unbearable, and I'm sweating and I'm gross, but my mind won't stop focusing on how good he smells.

“I know you're completely out of your mind in the fog right now baby, and you probably won't remember any of what I'm about to tell you, but I'm going to say it just the same. I don't care if I get zapped by the goddess for saying so, because I think she'd agree with me. She gave you shit mates. I don't even have a word bad enough in my vocabulary to describe what I think of them, but they're definitely not men.

“We don't know half the things they put you through, can't list all the ways they've manipulated you over the years or how many times they made you think you're less than, but I want you to know that we're going to do whatever it godsdamned takes to undo each and every way they've made you feel bad about yourself. So when I look at you? I gotta be honest here, baby. All I see is perfection.

“Never been to the strip club before, never need to go again. You're all I need, all my brothers need, and just in case you're ready to hear it, you're all my kid needs. I don't just think you hung the moon; I think you created it. I think you've got a piece of the goddess inside you that outshines everybody else I've ever met.

“It fucking kills me to see you so messed up like this, knowing that all you ever asked for was to be loved, to be cared for. So no, there's nothing you could ask for that I will deny. If it's within my power, it's yours. If it's not within my power, I will find a way to get it within my power so I can give it to you. So, I'm going to ask you

again. What do you want?"

If this is all in my head, then I've gotten a hell of a lot more creative than I knew I could be. Beckett dips his head again, running his tongue slowly across my collarbone and up the side of my neck, his teeth nibbling right over the spot that I was marked before. I have an instant fantasy of them erasing it for me, somehow getting rid of the filthy bond that I never really wanted, the one that they took from me when I was too young and too weak to stand against all the adults in my life intent on destroying me.

If all I have is right now, and if this is all I'm going to get, then I better make it count. "Take these stupid pants off," I beg, running my hands down his side lightly, catching on the buckle there. "They're pissing me off."

He does so much more than just take them off. He backs up, smiling at my attitude, and takes everything on his body off. I didn't think I could want like this. Not really. I always thought there was something intrinsically wrong with me, but now I think it's just because Trevor and Ivan broke me. They tainted everything that sex could be between two wolves who actually want each other, and these wolves, this pack, makes me feel safe and valued.

I fumble with my own underwear, hands uncoordinated and jerky. I can't do much and my mind is racing, my body out of control from all the shit I was given, feeling like a junkie in need of a fix.

"You need me to stop at any point, you just say so. Do you understand me, Lark? The second you start to feel discomfort, the second your desire wanes, you tell me. I don't care if I'm half a second from pumping you full of my cum, I'll pull out and back away immediately."

"Don't...don't leave me I... I need this. I feel so broken right now, out of control. I

think you guys are the only thing that can make it better.” The admission is choked out of me, but once it's out there, I don't want to take it back.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“Do you need me to take control, Lark? Is that what you need most from me right now?”

I nod and he carefully removes my underwear, then my bra, fingers skimming me and driving me higher the whole time. I can't spread my legs fast enough, dying to feel his bare skin against the heat of me.

“Goddess, look at you. You're dripping. Are you hurting right now, Lark? Can I make it better for you?”

“Need to feel you inside of me moving, slamming into me, flipping me over and smacking into me. If that's something you can do, I need to experience it. I need to know what it's like.”

“Whatwhat'slike, love?” he asks as a hand drops around the thick, hard length of him, pumping up and down slowly.

How many times have I been in this position with Trevor and Ivan? Every damn time it's felt lecherous, like I was just there to get them off. But Beckett is looking into my eyes, and I can tell that he appreciates my body because it's part of me, not because it's appealing to him. “Need to know what it's like to feel like I matter, like I'm worthy of having someone care for me. I know that's a lot to ask of you, and maybe this is just sex to you—”

“You have no idea how goddessdamned possessive we already feel of you. I know getting us all out of this whole mess might be a bit tricky, but for now, I want you to revel in the fact that I'm gonna make you feel so fucking good. Pretend like they can

still feel that tainted mate bond they shattered, and while I'm moving inside of you, let them know how much better we can take care of you, because they failed."

And with that, he eases inside of me. I can feel the latex barrier he's sheathed himself with which makes me feel respected, but also stirs up more complicated emotions. I know it's the safe, responsible choice, but I don't feel like being safe or responsible.

I want to get as far away from the sad, tolerant version of me as I can get. I want to be reckless and free, but I don't know how to even take that first step.

That first thrust is already so different. I'm used to them forcing themselves in and not caring about how it is for me. But as Beckett slowly works himself inside my body, I decide then and there to stop thinking about the wolves that put me in this condition. No matter what it takes, I'm going to find a way to get them out of my life. No matter the cost.

When he's fully inside of me, Beckett immediately withdraws and slides back in, changing the angle of his hips and watching me, making sure I'm not wincing or anything. "Too slow," I croak out.

"I'll get you there, baby, promise. I want to make sure your body's ready for me. I can't hurt you, you're too precious." He starts driving me crazy, filling me up and then taking himself away, over and over again until I feel as if I'm going to go mad from need. I hook my heels behind his back, trying to push him into me more, and eventually, he gives it to me.

My legs get draped over the top of his arms as he presses forward to kiss me, connecting us on every plane. I can feel his abs curling as he works himself in and out of me, making me feel in control for the first time in days as he nibbles on my neck, pressing his teeth lightly into the skin there. Just enough to tease me, to make me even needier.

Another wave of heat washes over me, making me cry out, and he gets the hint. He pulls out and swiftly grabs me by the hips, flipping me over like a damn pancake as he rams into me from behind. He pulls my ass high in the air, making me present for him while he runs a hand down my spine and whispers “Good wolf,” in my ear.

Oh yeah, my wolf likes that a lot.

To be fair though, she is a good wolf.

From this angle everything feels so different and he's able to go even faster, so I take what he gives me, letting the euphoria wash over me. I've never climaxed with just penetration before, so I'm surprised when I feel a deep pull inside of me, hitting me far different than I've felt. But it hits me hard, and I can feel my body clenching, daring Beckett to keep trying to move in and out.

I scream out, unable to stay quiet; it's just too much. The heat likes this, demands more.

Another voice comes in the room, murmuring something to Beckett that I can't make out when I'm in this fog, but I know that voice, and I whip my head around so fast I'm surprised I don't sprain it. “Blake? Are you here for me?”

I hate how unsure I sound; love the way he growls as he stalks across the room. He gets down on the bed next to me, bringing his face close to me so that we're breathing the same air. “Of course I'm here for you. Think there's anywhere else I want to be?”

“Rowan?” I don't want to remind them that they have somebody else important in their life, somebody way important than me in fact, but I should have known they wouldn't let me down. I don't need to worry about them parenting that angel baby, because everything they do is perfect, apparently.

He shakes his head. "He's with our parents. We're all yours, Lark."

Just that bit of sacrifice overwhelms me, and I don't even notice that Beckett isn't inside me anymore because my brain is having a hard time focusing on more than one thing. Now I feel empty, and also like I kind of want to crawl inside Blake's skin.

Scooting as close to him as I can get, I curl into him, pressing our bodies together. I bury my face in the column of his throat and inhale the calming scent there, letting it wash over me and center me. "This is too much," I whisper against him. I feel his rough hands smooth back my hair, then run down my back. Once again, I don't feel like an object as he holds me even while I'm naked. He's treating me like he's just here to give me what I need, not to take anything for himself. Even though he just walked right in and saw what I was doing with my body, he's not helping himself to what his body may want. This is revelatory for me.

"Why do you look confused?" His thumb sneaks out to my eyebrows and smooths them out, flattening them.

"I just thought... do you not want me?"

He presses his hips against me firmer, showing exactly how useless that question was. "Lark, if you're wondering why I'm not making a move on you currently, it's because this is your body. I have no right to it. I know that must be novel thing for you to hear, but you have full agency over your body. If you want to share it with me, you're going to have to tell me so. Just like you had to tell my brother. And like you'll have to tell my other brother when he comes. And just so you know, if Beckett is the only one you want right now, that's completely allowed. You don't feel bad if that's the only thing driving you at the moment. We're not going to throw a fit because we don't get our dicks wet. We just want to take care of you and help you through this. We want to see you back to your normal, gorgeous self that isn't listless and glassy-eyed. You scared the shit out of us, beautiful."

Sadness hits me, because what happens after this? Then I decide that I've already been through the worst that could happen, and I ask him that exact question out loud.

“After this? You mean when we tame your heat? The ones those fucks forced on you?”

I nod, scared to hear the answer. I'm scared of everything and I'm sick of it. I'm sick to death of being scared of my own damn shadow, of being tamed and poised to please.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“What's going to happen,” he starts, “is that we're going to give you every damn thing you want while your body is going through this. You want three hours of back rubs, you're going to get a three hour back rub. You want a specific milkshake from a specific joint two hours away? Guess what? There's three of us; one of us would be more than happy to go get whatever it is you want. Nothing is too good for you. You hear me?”

“When we make it through this heat of yours, and we will make it through, we're gonna continue to take care of you. We don't end just because your heat does. And we have no expectations, so don't think we're trading favors. That shit won't fly here. Not in this pack.”

“I'm not in your pack,” I say almost too quiet for even his delicate hearing to pick up.

He holds my chin up and makes me look him in the eye. “You forgot the ‘yet’ in that sentence. You're not in our pack yet. We'll have time to talk about that later. Right now, you need to know that we're not running when this is done. Don't forget though, we got screwed over with our mate just like you did. Maybe she didn't mess with us the same way yours messed with you, but we've got scars just the same.

“Something about you calls to us though, and our wolves are desperate for you. We're desperate for you. For now, all you need to know is nothing ends when your heat does. This is just the beginning, Lark. Say that. I want to hear you say those words. Out loud.”

It's terrifying, laying here completely naked and bearing myself like this emotionally, and maybe I trusted the mates I got before too easily, but I don't want that experience

to ruin what could possibly be the best thing that's ever happened to me aside from my son. "This is just the beginning," I hear my voice telling him.

"And you're not going to give us shit about our age difference," he says and then stares me down, waiting for me to repeat it.

I blink my eyes and exhale a little bit forcefully. "And I'm not going to question you about the age gap."

"And you're not going to complain when we want to wait on you hand and foot, even when you're not in heat anymore."

"Seriously? Is this necessary?"

"Say it, Lark," he growls.

"And I'm not going to complain if you want to take care of me."

Blake shakes his head. "That's not what I said. Verbatim, Lark.

A whine escapes my throat, and I start rubbing my thighs together, because even this brief reprieve is almost too much for me. I need them to be pounding into me, need to feel connected.

"I'm losing you, Lark. If you want me to touch you, you've got to tell me. You need to tell me exactly what you need from me. Get used to talking for yourself, for asking for your needs to be met. I don't care if you think the needs are pointless, if it's something you feel you need, it's important to us."

"Need you inside of me, Blake."

“You going to let us knot you?”

My eyes widen at the unexpected request, my brain immediately shutting down that option because it knows it's not a real offer. It can't be. “I've never... and you can't. I'm not your mate,” I say pathetically.

“You've neverwhat?” His eyes dilate even more, and I know his wolf is coming closer to the surface. “Are you telling me those worthless mates of yours didn't knot you?”

I shake my head, ashamed. “They didn't like me talking about it, because they would barely inflate anytime we were together. Even if they wanted to, it wouldn't do much. Looking back, I think they were self-conscious. I think it made them feel less like males, that they couldn't knot me properly. They made me feel like it was my fault. That I didn't deserve it and that's why they couldn't get it up.”

The sounds he makes are more animal than human, voicing his aggravation and anger. But I know it's not towards me.

He grabs my hand, places it over his crotch, hissing in a breath at the simple touch over the clothes. “Tell me again, Lark. What can't I do?”

He presses my fingertips up and down his thick erection, outlining him, and then we get to the base of him, and I don't understand what I'm feeling. I can't breathe, the blood is rushing around too fast inside of me, and I feel like I'm going to hyperventilate. I meet his eyes, not knowing exactly what this means, afraid to hope for something impossible.

“That's for you, but only if you want it.”

I don't know how, and I don't really care at the moment; I just know that I need it

inside of me. The emptiness inside of me is aching, pulsing, and demanding to be filled. To be stretched to glorious torment and choked.

I thought I felt something when Beckett was working me over, but I chalked it up to wishful thinking because I wanted so badly to be knotted. Hard to convince myself I'm crazy though when I'm getting such blatant confirmation.

Chapter Nineteen

Blake, Now

I can read every damn emotion flying through this woman's mind, am sharing the sweet torment stemming from physical touch without me being buried inside her, and we're having a moment, lying here wrapped up in each other as if nothing else matters. Right now, it doesn't.

"I need your limits, love. Once I have those, I can really take care of you." I know the fact that my knot inflated for her is huge, and I don't want to brush it under the rug, but after everything our dad told us earlier, it was more confirmation of the fact that she really is our second chance.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“We can sit here and answer questions,” I tell her, “or I can make the pain rising within you go away. I can tell by the way your eyebrows are getting closer and closer together that you're hurting. It hurts me to see you in pain. Please, Lark. Let me fix it for you.”

The heat radiating off of her is threatening to incinerate the both of us if we don't quench it and give in to its demands. And yet, I can't do anything she doesn't ask for explicitly. I will not give her the treatment she's used to.

“Give me everything, Blake,” she finally says, looking at me with so much trust that it nearly breaks my heart. “If that knot is somehow for me...”

“If?” I nearly laugh. “See any other sexy ass wolves around here domesticating mine?”

She bites her lip at my comment, driving me even crazier. “Fine. Give me your knot, Blake.”

“Thankfuck,” I utter as I quickly lose all of my clothing.

My mouth is on hers in the next moment, sipping from her and branding her with my own heat, fighting against her and daring her to fight back.

Eventually I'm rewarded. Her ambitious creativity kicks up a notch and she tries to flip us, and if she's feeling confident to take control, then you damn well better believe I'm going to give her that power.

She holds herself just above me as if weighing the moment and making sure she really is allowed to do this, and then she throws all caution to the wind and sinks straight down on me. My whole body goes taut, my legs locking up at the incredible rush I get from her encasing me.

I punch up into her, making her throw her head back and moan, making sure she feels my inflated knot hit her opening. I'm not going to surprise her with it, she needs to know about everything. That's the only way she's ever going to feel confident with us.

She lets out a whine as she grinds herself down, trying to take me all the way in, furiously moving her hips, sweat pouring off of her.

I thought I had it good with our late mate the few times she let us touch her, the few times we tried to show her how good we could be for her, but there's no comparison. The way that Lark is scrambling onto any bit of skin she can reach on me, clawing me up as if she's trying to wear a really creepy skin suit, it'd be almost adorable if I wasn't buried to the knot in her body.

Her eyes flash open and she stares me down, her voice a low timbre as she grinds out, "Give me your knot," in the most aggressive way I think she's capable of producing.

I'm helpless to give in, working myself up into her and pushing against her, stretching her, enjoying every damn bit of ground I gain. She's fronting just as much effort, pushing herself down and swiveling her hips, trying to lodge me inside of her. But if she's never taken a knot before, it's going to be a little tricky.

The nerves running through my knot are going haywire, lighting up my spine and warning me that I'm about to blow my load, so I focus on the way her body looks on top of me, legs splayed wide, obscenely pulling me into it, and I give one last push before there's an audible pop and my pelvis is pressed against her at long last.

She's instantly screaming, orgasming and clamping down on me in waves, pulsing and bouncing, giving me an eyeful of her perfect breasts. Her nipples are begging for my mouth to take them into it, but I'm incapable of any sort of function other than just sitting here as she takes me now.

“Oh fuck, Blake,” she cries out, head thrashing as her orgasm goes on and on. “Stop holding back,” she demands. “Give me what I want. Fill me up, make me doughy inside.”

I try to flip us, which takes way too much fucking effort in our current states and completely tugs on our connection in the most intense way but seeing her on her back for me is worth it. “You want my cum? Is that it?” She nods furiously, wrapping her legs around my back. “Ask and you shall receive.”

I stop trying to hold anything back, and I feel my canines elongating as I produce what little bit of movement I can when I'm stuck inside her like this, my knot pulsing as she keeps squeezing me.

I know this moment is important, that it's going to be branded in my entire body, and I'm good with that. I go still as I finally release in her, flooding the condom and wishing I was flooding her instead. I don't like the condom, but I'm glad that we decided to have them because if we can get a knot for her, then that means we can get her pregnant. We're not doing anything against her will.

We both still at the same time, aftershocks running rampant through both of us the whole time.

She's staring at me and I'm staring right back, wishing I could say all the creepy possessive shit I wanna tell her.

You're mine, and I'm never letting you go.

I want to ride your pussy every day for the rest of my life and hear you screaming out every name in my pack.

I want to make a home with you and share my son with you, because I know you're everything we've ever needed and that terrifies me but I'm so fucking excited about having you in my life that it doesn't matter.

Let's spend an entire day in bed just staring at each other.

I see you.

Okay, those last two might produce mixed results.

I can't do anything to jeopardize what she's giving us right now, so I tone down my thoughts and hope my feral wolf mentality doesn't go rogue and slip into my conversation with her. "How are you feeling?" Her face is flushed and sweaty, absolutely gorgeous.

"I think... I think I'd be feeling a little better if we didn't need the condoms but thank you for having the forethought to use them. I know we didn't talk about that..."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“If it concerns your safety, we don't need to have a discussion. Consider it handled.”

She starts to cry so I turn us again and hold her, our bodies still joined. I know my knot is starting to go down, but being able to hold her like this, while I'm inside of her, is making me feel pretty damn important.

Beckett slides back onto the bed behind her, keeping her back warm as he starts to pepper kisses on her shoulder, giving her comfort while her body processes all the heavy emotions running through it.

“Thank you for coming to find me,” she eventually whispers. “I thought I was going to die in there. I didn't even care.”

Nothing we have planned for those fuckers is going to do enough damage to appease me, and so what if I'm daydreaming of ways to better torture them.

“You have to know we're always going come for you, Lark,” Beckett tells her. “We were giving you space after the date because you made it clear you wanted some. I'm just sorry that it took us so long to get you out of their grasp. We should have checked on you sooner, should have known they were slimy enough to weasel their way into the shelter and take you. You're never going back to them; do you hear us? Even if you don't want us, we'll get you somewhere safe. You never have to see them again. For any reason.”

“I don't see how that's possible,” she sniffles.

“You have a couple of options,” I say gruffly.

Her eyes fly open, and she grabs my shoulders. "Please tell me you didn't kill them."

"Would it bother you if we did?" It's a hypothetical question, but it still needs to be answered. I need her reaction.

She thinks about this, her face confused. "Them being dead... I don't think would bother me. Does that make me a horrible person? I think it would be knowing that they were dead because of what would make me feel guilty. And I know that's messed up because they've effectively ruined my life, but I don't know how to turn that part of my brain off. They still fathered my child, even if they managed to turn him against me.

"I understand they've made their own choices, but I don't know how to turn the part of my wolf off that still thinks they can change. That somewhere deep inside they care for me, and maybe I've misunderstood things.

"Then I circle back to knowing, without a doubt, how fucked up I am directly because of them, and I want to kill them myself. It's too soon for me to make a decision about that. I don't know how I feel about that option.

"But I believe you that you'd do it if I wanted you to. And I'm alarmed that that makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside. Just a little," she says pinching her fingers together in the cutest fucking way possible. Even if she's talking about literal murder.

I bark out a laugh and send a prayer up to the goddess for fixing the past wrongs, for getting this woman into our life so we could connect like this and begin to really heal, to live up to the full potential our wolves need.

"They're alive for now," Beckett says, making sure she understands that that's not promised for the future. "Ultimately, it's going to be up to our dad, the alpha, to mete out the punishment. For now, he's letting them hang out completely ignored in a very

controlled environment, but we'll figure all that out later. Have you ever heard of a trauma bound mate?" He presses another kiss to the back of her shoulder, pulling her attention over to him.

Lark's eyes narrow, daring him to spring something else on her. "Should I have?"

"It's rare," he explains as I begin to carefully untangle her hair, gaining immense satisfaction from taking care of her in this simple way. "Dad told us about it, though. Basically, we were in the right place at the right time, in the right state of mind. All of us being essentially rejected helped, but that instant attraction we felt for you must have been returned, because there's a bond between us."

"And what bond is that?"

She's playing hardball, refusing to take the facts in front of her and put them together. We're going to have to make her understand though that what we're doing with her isn't a fleeting thing or a one-off. We're building a future. "You felt my knot," I tell her. "Tell me Lark, when is shifter male able to produce a knot?"

Her eyes light up and she starts to cry again, her lip trembling. "You mean I'm..."

She can't even get the words out, so I help her out. "I like to think the goddess is trying to atone for what we all had before. We can be your mates now, if you'll have us. But nothing needs to be decided right now. Why don't you rest?"

"Do you have a bath? I can't remember. My head still feels all foggy."

Beckett hops up quickly. "I'll get it running for you. There should be food getting delivered any minute for us as well, and we're going to expect you to eat a good meal and get some rest while you're lucid enough. I don't know how this heat is going to function, if it's going to act like a normal one or if it's going to be wonky because it's

artificial, but will you please let us take care of you?"

Voice soft, her head tucked under mine, she nods. "I won't fight you. Thank you, both of you. Not that I don't love both of you being here with me, but is Brooks going to be back soon? Or is he too busy?"

Beckett nods his head towards me, telling me to field this question so he can get the bath going. I rotate her a tiny bit so she's flush against me again, now that I don't have to share her attention. "He's getting you some of your things from your room in the shelter," I explain. "He wouldn't miss this for the world."

She's barely conscious by the time the bath is ready, her body finally able to relax after we gave it a little bit of what it's been forced to crave. I get in the bath with her and wash her up. Beckett comes in to wash her hair, then we get it combed and dried, working together to prop her up at the table long enough to get some protein and fluids into her body.

At that point though, sleep is going to be the best option for her, so we tuck her in and hold her, resting while we can, expecting her to wake us up as soon as the heat spikes again.

Chapter Twenty

Beckett, Now

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

Blake and I managed to stay awake until Brooks got home, his eyes tight with worry as he walked in the room to make sure Lark was exactly where she was meant to be. He just stood in the doorway, took in the scene, and then started stripping down to his boxers before making his intentions clear that he was about to climb into bed with us.

Since I have alpha privileges, and because Blake already got some quality time with her, he reluctantly scooted over to the edge of the bed so that Brooks could get what he needed from our potential new mate.

Eventhinkingthose words is a shock to my system; I did my best to ignore my own, saw that my brother was able to produce a knot for her, but part of me still wants to challenge the notion that she could truly be our mate. Not just one we chose, but one that's blessed and sanctioned by the goddess. I'd be trying for a shot with her regardless, but knowing she's meant for us is incredible.

That was about six hours ago, and now I'm the first to wake up to a mewling, needy mate. I spent way too long thinking I'd never get this connection, but here we are.

"I've got you Lark, I'm here. I told you we were gonna take care of you," I remind her.

She leans into my touch, turning towards me and wrapping her leg around my hip. I don't have time to think poetically about how great it feels to be sought out by her because I can tell that the heat has its full control over her. "I just need to get a condom, sweetness."

"No, no, no, no, please don't do that," she begs, voice desperate. "I need you inside of

me, Beckett. I thought you said you were going to take care of me.”

“I don't want you to get pregnant, Lark.”

She's clawing against my chest, rubbing herself against me, coating me in slick. My underwear is instantly soaked from her, and I can feel my knot swelling rapidly and this time I plan on testing it out. Fuck, it's hot to think of her pregnant.

“You're probably right, I'm not good enough for that privilege, am I right?” And then she starts crying, big wracking sobs that wake up my other brothers.

Brooks is alert in a flash, wrapping an arm around her and rubbing his cheek along her shoulders and neck as if to leave his scent on her. “What's wrong, sweetness? What can we do for you? How can we help?”

“I'm not good enough,” she starts to wail, shaking and withdrawing, but we clamp down on her hips, keeping her between us.

“If you're hearing a voice inside your head tell you that, who does that voice sound like? I know it's not yours, baby,” Brooks tried to reason with her, “because the woman I'm holding knows her worth.”

“Then why won't you touch me without a condom? They feel wrong against my skin.”

“It's because we know your worth, that we want to protect you,” he explains. “If we take you bare and you get pregnant, that's just another expectation on you. If that's something you want, we can talk about it—”

“And wait ‘til my next heat? After everything has already been taken away from me? I never got to enjoy Camden's babyhood; I was always looking over my shoulder

waiting for him to get taken away. It's probably just as good; I can't raise another baby in that shelter. I'm going to... to get myself under control. I am."

While she's been distracted, I've managed to slip a condom on, and I tease her inner thighs with my fingers, to see if she's open to touch right now. She reacts beautifully, widening her legs and throwing her head back, wiggling like she wants me to touch precisely where it's aching.

"It hurts. I need..."

I slide inside of her, and she exhales in a rush, but her face never gets completely relaxed. "I'd give anything to feel you bare," I whisper in her ear. "I just don't want to do wrong by you. I'm terrified of doing something in the moment that feels good and messing this up by making things worse for you, Lark. We only want to mean good things for you."

She's pressing against my groin, trying to get me to move faster, and I know that this position is not gonna cut it. "Need you on your knees for me, baby." She scrambles away from me and complies quickly, pressing her face into the mattress and raising her ass high up in the air for me. "Such a good wolf," I praise her, knowing she reacted well to it last time. I don't make her wait this time; I slip inside her gorgeous body with ease, getting lost in the way her entire body moves every time I plunge inside of her.

"That's it, Lark, let me fix this for you."

She's scorching. I want to brand every minute detail about the way she feels as she takes me into my memory, but I'm too caught up in making sure she's getting relief.

As male wolves, we are made to learn exactly how painful a heat can be for our mates so that we know the gravity of the situation when we're in the throes of it. It's not a

fleeting discomfort, it's not an ache, it's deep-rooted pain that was described to us as tongues of flame grabbing at the internal organs and pulling.

I was hoping we'd be able to soothe her enough with the condoms on, and that wasn't even counting on the fact that we'd be able to knot her because I wasn't sure, but you can't reason with biology. The thin barrier between us is preventing Lark from getting true relief.

She's been made to feel like she's not worthy of so damn much, and I can tell even now that though she's enjoying this, it's not what she needs. What she needs is to be flooded with our cum, because it's the compounds in that that are going to truly satisfy the heat.

There's not a lot of birth controls that really work on our species, at least not reliably. Wolves have an innate desire to procreate, so every time advancements get made in that field, the method seems to become less and less effective every year. It's like the shifter species is actively evolving, outsmarting every scientist's ability to make reliable birth control for our species. What can I say? Wolves fucking love to make babies.

My girl is whimpering underneath me, but she's not giving me what I want either; she's not thrashing. It's not fine that she's trying to take what she thinks she's allowed to have. That won't do.

"Start like we mean to go on," I mumble to myself and to my brothers. I meet their eyes in the dark, reading their expressions, because we all knew this was a possibility. There's nothing for it.

I pull out of Lark's body and flip her yet again, laying her out on her back while I press kisses up and down her throat. I nibble on her skin until she relaxes more, until she's pliant in my arms beneath me.

Then I reach down and pull off the condom and toss it on the floor somewhere, watching her eyes tear up at the show of trust. Going at this bare is about as big of a commitment a shifter can make, because it's telling your mate that you want her to have your pups.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

By ditching protection, we're telling her we know what the consequences of continuing are and saying we're going to do it anyways. "You're mine—ours to have, ours to hold from this day forward. You're the second chance we never thought we'd get, you're our literal dream come true. I know your brain is foggy right now from the heat, but I don't want you thinking for one minute that we don't want everything with you.

"Whatever the goddess chooses to bless us with, we'll navigate together. If we get through your heat and nothing happens, we can try again if that's what you want."

"You already have a baby though, and I have no business having another at my age," she whispers. "I know Rowan is your priority, I can't jeopardize that by taking your attention from him."

I kiss her, partly to get her to stop that line of thinking, and partly because she needs to know how I feel about her right in this moment. "Lark, it is entirely possible to have more than one priority. Rowan is the joy of our life, but it doesn't have to be the only one. It's asking a lot of you to be with us knowing we already have a baby—"

"He's not a hardship," she immediately tells me. "Not a deal breaker. If anything, I'd say it works in your favor." I can tell that the fog has receded from her just a bit from the physical touch we've given her, enabling us to have a short conversation.

"Let's just take care of you right now and we'll figure out the rest when and if it happens, okay?"

"Okay," she whispers.

I keep my eyes on her as I work myself into her body slowly, bare skin against bare skin a million times more potent. “Godsdamn I can feel every ridge inside of you, Lark.” This seems to please her, and with the next thrust I pick up speed, then I finally get what I've been looking for. She gives in to the heat, face relaxing, reaching up to massage her own breasts, getting her body higher as she loses herself in our joining.

It doesn't take long for my brothers to replace her hands with their own, and it doesn't take long after that for her to start silently demanding I knot her.

I've only done this once before; it's terrifying and exhilarating at the same time trying to wedge myself inside a space that shouldn't actually fit what I'm trying to give it. My knot is so damn sensitive, and every press against her body has me nearly biting my tongue off in pleasure-pain.

“Please make it,” she starts to beg, “I need it. Need you filling me up. I need to feel you stuck inside my body...”

I'm trying to take it easy, but she wants no part of that. Before she gets too frustrated, I wedge myself inside of her fully, with no small effort on my part, and she's squeezing me so damn tight, rocking into me, coming apart.

It's absolutely stunning, knowing I'm responsible for the way her body's feeling right now, getting to use the knot the goddess gave me to take care of my mate.

“Oh gods.” She's whimpering now, and I keep trying to thrust into her, making sure I prolong her release as long as possible. With the way she's squeezing me, I lose the fight pretty quickly. I cry out as I start emptying myself inside of her, getting high off the fact that my cum is making its way deep inside her body and satiating her at last.

She's been in a pseudo heat for days, denied relief and only offered mediocre options,

so the fact that she wants us is a huge honor.

“There you go, Lark,” I say through gritted teeth.

She clings to me as I fall next to her, refusing to let go while her body trembles against me. I think she's crying again, but I'm pretty sure this time it's because she's overwhelmed with everything happening and not because she's upset.

By the time I'm able to pull out of her body, a gush of fluid escapes, but we can't have that. She wants my cum inside of her, she's damn well gonna get my cum inside of her. “This belongs in here,” I tell her as I push it back in, using my fingers to get the mess back where it should be.

Since I'm basically just fingering her now, she starts getting needy again.

My beautiful second chance mate fires right back up, immediately thrashing, needing so much more than just a few hungry fingers.

So, Brooks takes over, calmly and reverently climbing between her legs while he looks down at her, trying to memorize her like I've been attempting. He's pretty much already worthless as he slips inside of her, bare as well, fitting his knot inside of her easily now that she's already been taken once.

She's different with him than she was with me, different still than she was with Blake. She's starting to understand our personalities and figure out what we can each give her and reacting accordingly.

Blake was a little rougher, I was a little more cautious, and Brooks is bringing nothing but heart to the table.

I almost feel uncomfortable being on the bed next to them while he takes her, because

it seems as if they're establishing exactly what they want to be to each other.

Whoever coined the phrase a picture is worth a thousand words has never been mixed up with triplet alphas, because the looks they're giving each other right now as they work together to find completion are worth about twenty million.

Wiping her down and keeping her as cool as possible, working as a pack to make sure every need is met before she even has to ask, makes me feel like the pack we should have been all along. It feels good to be on the path we've always wanted, to have the affection of a good woman and hope for a future together.

We don't complain when we're only able to nap two more hours before she needs us again, and we give her everything we have once again with no complaint. We drain ourselves into her over and over again, letting her dictate who she wants and when and giving her the freedom to explore us in any way she feels called to.

We try to ensure that she always feels safe and cared for, and not just lusted after. This is important to us, and the foundation of the type of pack we want to build with her.

By the time her heat has finally burned itself out, I'm sure it's been days and I've never been so excited to see a shower before. I've never been more grateful for building ours so big, because we're all able to get in there with her, to massage her and wash her hair and make sure she doesn't have to lift a finger to do anything for herself after what her body just went through.

Heats completely deplete female wolves, and so even though we tried to feed her when we could, it's only after her heat is fully over that she's finally willing and able to sit upright and eat a full meal and then some.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

She's humming contentedly to herself while she picks at her food, choosing what she wants to eat first and tapping her foot as if she's listening to a song no one else can hear. Her hair is shiny and tangle free thanks to me and my brothers' comb work, and she's wearing my shirt, Blake's boxers, and Brooks' tube socks that go halfway up her calves. In short, she's happy but I can also tell she's antsy.

It takes her a few minutes to realize we're all standing here like creeps, watching her enjoy the food we gave her.

“You're pretty fucking cute, you know that?”

She waves me off. “I'm much older than you. I don't think that's something you can say.”

It's risky to bring up her past so soon after her heat, but I have questions I'm dying to know and I'm not sure I'll get another chance like this.

Maybe if we offer some of our own truths, she'll feel like she can share part of her story, too. “Our late mate was a bit older than us as well; I guess the goddess just knows we prefer older women.”

She takes a sip of her coffee and another bite of toast before daintily wiping her mouth and leaning back against the back of the chair. “You don't say.”

I grab her hand in mine, palm to palm, and run my other hand over the top of hers, making invisible patterns. “She was in an arranged/transactional mating when we first met her. We thought she was beautiful of course. And she was.”

“What happened? Am I allowed to ask that?”

I nod and continue my patterns, giving myself something to focus on. “We were young, and her pack was wealthy. She had a good setup. She made it seem like she’d be ready to start something with us when we got a bit older, but now we know she was just brushing us off.”

I know my brothers hate telling this story, but they also know this is part of bringing Lark’s world into ours.

“She never really wanted us,” Blake says, tone laced with venom. “She didn’t appreciate the humble life we live here, didn’t like the home we were able to provide, didn’t want the lifestyle of being in service to the pack. She wanted money and prestige, things she already had with her chosen pack.

“Her arrangement with them was supposed to end once her or her pack found their fated, and most of this information we only found out after everything blew over, but...” Blake is right back in those moments when we were lost and desperate to form a connection with a woman who couldn’t get far enough away from us to appease her.

Brooks jumps in and tells the next part of the story. “When we met Arabella, we started working so damn hard to ready ourselves to take care of her. We thought, like schmucks, that we were simply biding our time before she felt ready to be with us.

“And then one day, kind of out of the blue, she showed up, in heat and in our doorstep, begging for us to help ease her through it.”

Brooks is starting to get teary eyed, so I tag myself back in to the storytelling. “So naturally we dropped everything and were thrilled because we thought it was finally our time. It wasn’t easy being patient for Arabella because we knew exactly how to

get ahold of her, and we were too naïve to even think that she was playing games with us.

“So we got her through her heat, expecting her to move in right after so we could make everything official. She never let us bite her, but we wanted to go at her pace.

“After the heat, she basically told us she had no further need for us, and we didn't hear from her again until other shit started going down.”

“Turns out her heat was manufactured because she wanted to trick the pack she was desperately trying to cling to. Her plan was to trap them into a real mating by making them think they were the ones that got her pregnant through some miracle of the goddess; they never even knew about us, of course she didn't tell them she found her mates. That was a real slap in the face,” I admit, sick to my stomach over past me's mistakes.

“They had found their mate as well, but Arabella was interfering there too; she was basically some sort of evil genius, developing what she called ‘cure-alls’ to relieve shifters of unwanted bonds. She completely fucked up countless lives in her games, and very nearly cost her pack their fated mate and child they didn't know about.

“For her role in everything, and because raids revealed how truly horrific her experiments were, she was sentenced to death once our baby was born. So, we became single fathers, which has been exhausting, but also sort of the best thing that's ever happened to us.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Lark, Now

My eyes ping between the three of them when they finally run out of words, my

mouth opening and closing a few times because at first, I don't know what to say in return.

It seems to shock the hell out of Beckett when I grab each of their hands as best as I can between my two, connecting us all. "Nobody deserves to be treated like that. I guess not everybody gets that fairy tale magic mating we all grew up learning about. Thank you for taking such good care of me during my heat. I've never experienced something like that before. They've always been something I dreaded, because I never really had a good option for them."

"Why do I feel as if you're trying to brush us off, Lark?" Blake's eyes turn accusatory, but they need to hear me out.

"You're all... incredible. I love your ideas and hopes for a brighter future for this pack, and how kind you are to me. You're good, honorable men with a baby, and I'm, well, I'm a stripper. That's the extent of my worth." I can already feel my heart breaking, because doing the right thing is hardly ever easy. "You can't bring somebody like me into your life, because I'm no good for you. You deserve to have somebody wholesome and good, somebody without all this baggage I have. Someone that can take your word at face value and believe you, instead of mistrusting and dissecting everything you're going to say. I don't know how to fight for myself anymore, I've been tamed for years, unable to break away from the bonds inflicted on me."

I can read the room, and I know that they're upset, as they should be. They dropped everything to help me through my heat and this is how I repay them? It's not fair to them, but I couldn't control what my body needed or how they responded to it broadcasting that need.

Blake is nearly shaking, and he smacks his hand hard on the table as he stands, commanding my attention. "That is unacceptable, Lark. Would you like to try that

again?”

I bring my hands back to myself, tucking them into my body so that I don't do anything embarrassing with them. “I don't understand.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

His chair makes an awful screeching sound as he kicks it behind him, rounding the table to confront me. I flinch back because that's how I've been conditioned to react to such outbursts, and that seems to break him.

Blake hangs his head low, breathing hard for a minute as if to contain himself before speaking. His voice is so much lower, so much kinder when he's ready to talk again. "What is your worth, Lark? I'll give you a hint. It's not tied to the roles those assholes forced upon you; it's not tied to what anybody has done to you. It's tied to who you are in here," he says as he taps on my chest, right above my heart. "Even the goddess can make mistakes and be disappointed in people. We have to believe mother moon will right her wrongs, though, and take care of us. Sometimes, that means we have to be patient for everything to work out. Sometimes that means that the first letdown was not a stumbling block, but a step towards what we actually deserve.

"I don't regret what we got from our nonexistent relationship with Arabella, because it brought us Rowan. That kid is perfect. We had to go through those trials in order to understand what kind of a pack we truly wanted and what we will and will not settle for in a mate. Your strength is what defines you, Lark. How old were you when you met Trevor and Ivan, again? You were a teenager, right?"

"16," I tell them in a clear voice.

"And they're what, about 10 years older than you? I just know somehow that they took advantage of you and your inexperience."

I find myself shaking my head, which disgusts me. But it's a habit so ingrained in me to defend them, that I don't know how else to behave. "We weren't physical until just

before my 17th birthday,” I explain. “They took care of me before that point though, respected me.”

Blake takes my hands in his, making sure I'm still looking at him and nowhere else in the room. “Did they actually respect you, Lark? Or did they make you feel as if you owed them something because of the bond you didn't ask for? Tell me, did they make you feel bad for not giving in to them, or make you feel as if you had to give them something if you wanted them to stick around?”

I don't know how he's reading me this well; maybe he's just a really good judge of character and can figure things out without somebody actually telling him point blank. Embarrassingly, I feel tears start to leak out of my eyes as I remember some of the earliest memories of when my life started to spiral out of control. “My parents have an age gap as well,” I tell the room. I might just be speaking to Blake, but I know the others are right next to us and listening, taking everything in as well. “They were happy for me when I brought Trevor and Ivan home that first time; my mother immediately started talking about planning a mating. I guess it was exciting, because here I was, 16 years old, and I'd found my mates.

“They were older than me, had this whole bad boy thing going on and I felt important. I was able to get some counselling while I was in the shelter, so I know now that they started separating me from my parents immediately. They didn't want me relying on anyone but themselves for anything, so maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise when less than a year later, my parents informed me they sold the house I had grown up in and planned on traveling without me.”

I'm an adult woman, damn it, I should not be hurt by the actions that 16-year-old me experienced. But I am, because there's a deep hurt in me that I don't think I'll ever actually get over.

Blake sucks in a breath, and his thumbs begin to trace soothing circles over my

hands. “Whose choice was it to get physical?”

I shrug because maybe it was me, but he's right; I was pressured. “I tried to talk some sense into my father,” I recall out loud, casting my memory back to the night that changed everything. “I remember screaming at my parents, asking them what I was supposed to do because I was still in high school. Asking them what was wrong with me, why they didn't want to be my parents anymore. My brother had just moved in with his own pack, and I know my mom and dad were sick of the responsibility of having me around. I think they used my meeting Trevor and Ivan as the excuse they needed to abandon their responsibility to me. They talked themselves into believing it was okay for them to do that, because I wouldn't be alone. I had mates that were more than capable of providing for me financially, and for all they knew, they were more than willing to do so.”

“But even back then,” Brooks asks, also seeming to understand what I'm not saying, “your so-called mates didn't really take care of you, did they?”

I shake my head again and steel myself with a deep breath, wanting the catharsis that comes from ridding myself of all these demons that have been locked inside of me for so long. “You know what they said to me the night we met? That they couldn't wait to tell their girlfriend about me. That she was going to think I was adorable.

“The night that fight happened with my father, when he slapped me and I knew I had to get out of his house, I called Ivan crying, wanting nothing more than for them to come pick me up and make everything better. My foundation was falling apart underneath me, and I needed something to hold me up.

“So, I turned to my mates, because that's what I had been conditioned and instructed to do. My father made me feel as if I was being selfish and immature by not moving forward with the guys, for being cautious as I went through high school. My mother told me it was my duty to take care of my mates. But when I called the guys and told

them what happened...” I let out a little sob because after replaying this situation in my head countless times over the years, after putting together all the clues of being in their club directly after, I know exactly why Ivan was out of breath when he was on the phone with me. “He was at work, and he changed rooms when I called him.

“While I was pouring my heart out, he was getting sucked off by one of his employees. And they brought me to their club after I packed up all my stuff, after I stupidly gave myself to Ivan because he convinced me it would be a good fuck you to my parents after the way they treated me, for them to know what we did in my room. He took things too far when he bit me without me giving him permission to do so.

“When we got to the club, I told myself I was okay with what was going to happen, because I knew there was nothing to do about it. They had been clear from the start that whatever I did with one of them the other one was owed as well. So as soon as Trevor saw the bite and knew what we had gotten up to, he acted like he was going to take care of me and make it sweet, but they were never careful with me. They always just took what they wanted without any consideration for how it felt for me or that the way they did things might be uncomfortable or even downright painful. I never enjoyed it. Not once did I actually enjoy myself with them when we were intimate.

“And I don't mean just that they never got me off without significant assistance from my own hand, because that's also true; I mean not once did I come away from a coupling with them feeling closer to them or feeling as if it meant anything more to them than just a way to relieve their balls.

“I felt every damn time they slept with somebody else. I don't think they were smart enough to figure that out, I had to tell them in plain words after Camden was born. Had to use my own voice to explain to them that every time they let somebody else touch them, or they touched somebody else, which was often, mind you, I basically got a front row seat.

“I hated that bond. I hated it so much. But I was trapped. I was young, I had nowhere else to go. They had very methodically cut me off from all my other friends.” I'm full-on crying now, but Blake is quick to sweep me up and carry me to the living room, sinking onto their couch and holding me firmly against him. He's wrapping his arms around me and trying to comfort me, letting me cry without making me feel bad for getting his shirt all gross.

I don't think I've ever felt like I was allowed to actually cry, to feel this deeply. I've always had to suppress it, always pressured to be strong for everybody else's sake.

Blake doesn't tell me to shush, he doesn't tell me everything's going to be okay, he just holds me. He lets me break apart, giving me a safe space to do so. And Brooks and Beckett are on either side of me, wordlessly lending me their strength as well, waiting for me to feel ready to move on.

I keep my head against Blake's chest because it's comfortable, and because he smells like sun-soaked sage and I can't get enough of it. “I was terrified when that pregnancy test came back positive.” My voice is quiet, but I know they can hear every word I'm saying. “I just wanted time to come to grips with it. I was 17 and pregnant and they talked me into dropping out of high school, so I had a pretty good idea of what my future with them was going to look like. They controlled every aspect of my life and knew how to use everything I wanted against me. I knew they would use my pregnancy to further control me.

“So, I hid it. I didn't tell them immediately. I knew that I had to sooner rather than later, but I wanted some sort of plan first. In my disbelief and disquiet about the pregnancy test results, I forgot that wolves could smell when their mates become pregnant. They figured it out and they were pissed when they realized I didn't tell them the second I found out. They ignored me the entire day, made me follow them around their meetings doing pointless tasks, barely fed me, and then they dropped me off at the shelter.

“They ruined me and then ruined me some more. It didn't matter how desperate I was when I begged them not to leave me there, they did it anyway. They didn't want me, but they made it clear that they were going to be back at some point for the baby. Made it seem like when I was older and more mature, we could try again, but they liked not being nagged too much to ever consider that option seriously. Not that I would have taken them back after everything went down the way it did.

“They came to visit me a few weeks after Camden was born, and I thought they were going to take him then, but I think the idea of caring for someone so wholly dependent scared the shit out of them.” That actually makes me laugh, helping my sobs to get somewhat under control. “I got a few years with Camden where we were mostly happy, or as happy as we could be under the circumstances. I got him to myself, and I had other women at the shelter helping me through everything, going through similar things themselves. I had a job there and childcare, and food to sustain me.

“But they came back, because of course they did. I don't think they intended to take me with them, I just knew I couldn't let my son leave me. So, I did what I had to do to stay in his life, and I gave all my pride to move in with them. I became their live-in maid, their servant. I felt my son slip farther and farther away from me as they turned their thinking into his thinking, and I jumped every time they asked me to. I was so sure I'd be able to carry the strength and identity I had worked so hard to establish in the shelter with me, that I'd be able to come through everything remade and strong, but it only took them a month or so to break me again. I guess I'm not strong at all.

“I took dance classes and trained at their club, then became their highest earning dancer, all so they wouldn't take away access to my son. I found out later the only reason they even wanted him was because of some inheritance clause that Ivan had; to gain control of the club and everything that went with it, he had to not only have an heir, but custody of said heir. He comes from a line of shitty men, apparently. And naturally, that club and that money was way more fucking important to them than

anything, and I had entered some sort of sick game where they tried everything they could think of to humiliate and use me, because they knew I'd do anything for Camden.

“By the time I realized why they were so motivated, my son didn't want anything to do with me because of who I had morphed into; my transformation was complete. They had me sleeping in a dog kennel, tamed to within an inch of my life. I don't think I had a single independent thought for myself from then on. I had no aspirations, no hope for a better future, until the three of you walked into my club and I got to touch you.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I wipe my eyes as best I can, and I take a deep breath as I look between the three alpha wolves sitting around me. The alphas that all alphas should measure themselves against. “It felt wrong wanting you the way I did, because I could tell how much younger than me you were. I didn't want to come off as predatory, the way I had experienced. I know you were adults, so it was a completely different situation, but the whole time I was dancing for you guys, I was getting lost in the fantasy that you were mine. I was there dancing for you because I meant something to you. And you flirted right back.” I shake my head, because that night still feels like I was in some sort of a trance.

“Of course we flirted back,” Beckett tells me. “We were lost to you the second we caught your scent. And then you came walking into that room like a damn fantasy brought to life, all curves, and gorgeous smile, and sultry voice, the very definition of temptation.”

Brooks smiles at me and reaches forward to tuck my hair behind my ear. “I told myself there was no way you danced that well for other customers. I was so convinced of our connection that I was shocked when you just walked away at the end of the allotted time.”

I let out another small laugh, surprisingly. It's crazy to think that this all started because of a lap dance that my estranged son coordinated. Talk about needing therapy. “I definitely didn't dance like that for other people. With you, I was different. I don't know how to explain it, other than to say I wanted it to mean something. That session with you was the one rare bit of happiness I'd been granted in who knows how long, and I was determined to give my time with you my all so that I could think about it later when I was alone again.”

Brooks gently gets hold of my chin and tilts my face back towards him. “Lark, what's really holding you back? Is it that you don't see yourself being happy with us? Is it the age difference? Is it our lifestyle? I know you said it wasn't Rowan, but we want to know if it is. We're committed to seeing this through. This is the mating we all were meant to find from the very beginning. I hate that you had to go through everything you did to get to this point, but you have to understand that when I say we're going to take such good care of you, I mean it more than anybody has ever meant anything they've ever said.

“We want to learn everything about you. We want to provide a safe home for you, somewhere you feel free and comfortable, somewhere where you can pursue whatever you want to pursue. We want to feed you and make this a real home. Selfishly, we want to see you with Rowan. What you've been doing with your life up until this point is irrelevant, especially considering none of it was actually your choice. We could never hold your career against you. You are not worth so little. Feeling you give in to us during your heat was incredible. It was a snapshot of how great this pack could be if we give it the breathing room it needs to flourish.”

“What if I'm not ready for all of that?”

Beckett steals my attention next, shrugging. “Then we do whatever you're comfortable with. You can move into the pack house until we find you something more permanent. You'd be safe as hell there. We could get you a job there if you wanted. Or you can just rest and heal.”

“Or,” Brooks suggests, pulling me onto his lap, “you give in to this crazy thing I know you feel, too, and decide to ignore all of the little voices in your head telling you it's not going to work. You do something you want to do for once, and you throw caution to the wind for all the right reasons. You allow yourself to truly get to know us and understand us and you come to realize how flawless we could be together. I know you're scared, Lark. We're scared too.”

“You are?” I ask dumbly.

He nods his head. “Of course we are. We have a lot at stake here, too. A lot of eyes are on us as heirs to the pack, and we want to do right by our son. It would be unwise not to be terrified of this, whatever it is currently. However, the idea of never seeing how this could all play out scares me more. That's how I know this is the right decision.”

That logic hits me square in the chest, it makes me see things clearer. He's right.

It's downright terrifying to just decide to give this a go on what feels like a whim; to try and build a relationship unlike anything I've ever built before. To put my trust in people I barely know but seem to trust, nevertheless.

But if I walk away and decide this is a bad idea or that the timing is off, I know that I'll be right back to hating myself and I'm terrified of learning what it's like to lose this tentative connection we've already built. That terror is far greater than the uncertainty I feel in putting my heart in their hands.

“Is it okay if I wake up some days and want to go slow, and other days I'm ready to race towards forever? Will it be okay still if I go back and forth 100 times before I stop doubting my own mind? Is it going to be okay when I come to you with concerns about the same thing for the 50th time and you have to explain to me, yet again, that you meant every word you told me? Are you going to grow to resent me when you realize how long it's going to take me to stop waiting for something bad to happen to us?”

“Lark, I want you to do something for us,” Beckett tells me. “I want you to tell us all the reasons why you want to try something with us. Give us the reasons why building a pack with us is the right thing for you. Not why you think we want to, but why you want to.”

I swallow nervously, feeling completely put on the spot as I search through my head and my heart to give them an answer that feels genuine. “I never felt as if Ivan and Trevor were the best choice for me, I only felt like they were my only option. I think, in this pack, with everything you're already offering me, it's not my only option. I want to be with you, because...”

I close my eyes, willing the courage to keep flowing through me. And I keep them closed until I'm done talking. “I want to be with you, because I like who I am when I'm with you. I like the version of myself that you bring out, and I like the thoughts my brain has when you're touching me. I like the way I felt when I first walked into your home, how quickly I felt comfortable here, and how perfect Rowan feels in my arms.

“I want to be with you, because you're giving me a choice. I want to be with you because Ichooseto do so. Because I don't like when the negative thoughts win, because I don't like the voice in my head that tells me to be quiet and stay out of people's way.”

I open my eyes finally, my conscience clearing. “I feel strong when I'm with you three. And maybe that's a crazy thing to say given how little time we've actually spent together when naked body parts weren't involved, but I can already feel the bond that wants to grow between us, and it feels healthy. It feels like my every dream come true; I think, no I know, that I deserve to be happy just like everybody else.”

Brooks looks like he might cry and everybody's silent as my words echo in the quiet spaces between us, hanging over our heads like a threat that's quickly disappearing. Like the storm clouds are dispersing and there's incandescent sunshine on the way.

“This only works if we can all talk about what we need,” Beckett tells us all. “You can't be afraid to tell us what you need, Lark, because we want you to be able to speak for yourself. Don't assume that we know, even if we might. We want you to

feel emboldened to tell us exactly what you want, exactly what you need. And maybe we're not going to provide a lavish lifestyle for you, but we'll make sure you have the things you need, no matter what it takes to do so.”

“Never in my life have I been granted that freedom.”

“Does that scare you?” Brooks asks me. Nobody tries to talk over me or guess what I'm going to say, they just sit there patiently, waiting for me to gather my thoughts and speak them aloud. Yet another first.

“The only thing scary about that is it means I'll be responsible for my happiness, for what my future holds. If nobody's holding me back, I won't have anybody to blame if things go south again.”

“We understand that you've tempered yourself to expect things to go badly,” Beckett says as he leans forward to brush a kiss on my shoulder. “And I think the only thing that will cure you of that is time with people who want nothing more than to see you flourish. I can't promise you we'll never fight, but I can promise you we'll never intentionally hurt you or be cruel to you, and I can promise you we'll wake up every day and choose to put in the effort we've so desperately been wanting to give somebody. Nobody's been worthy of that until now. Until you.”

With all the new freedom coursing through my veins, and the high of the last few days still embedded into every inch of my skin, the only thing I can think to ask for in this moment is just more of them. More of everything we've already been doing.

“You're biting your lip, baby. Is there something you thought of? Something you want? Your entire look just changed.”

My first tendency or impulse is to look away from them and lower my eyes as a show of submission, but I'm emboldened by the power they're putting in me. So instead, I

keep my eyes on theirs as I answer Beckett's question. "What I want more than anything right now, is to be with you with a clear head. I need something to hold on to that isn't flush with the haze of my heat. A memory that won't be tainted by the fog that's been over me since they began to drug me."

Brooks' lips are on mine the second I finish speaking my command, not dominating me or trying to lead me a certain way but letting me know instead that he's fully on board with this plan. "I'd take you to bed, but we haven't gotten around to changing those sheets and I think they're pretty rank right now. Think we can make the couch work?" He asks between kisses.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I press myself more into him, showing him with my body that I don't want to move. During my heat, I know they enjoyed themselves, but I know that they were doing it because I needed it, not because they felt free to give themselves to me. But the way Brooks is holding me and touching me and kissing me now is very different. He's pressing me between himself and Blake, and the thought of taking more than them at once has my chest flushing with heat.

“Both of you together,” I demand as I twist my head to Blake to kiss him as well. And to make sure they know I haven't forgotten that there is in fact a third replica of them, I reach out to Beckett and put my hands on him, greedily running over his shoulders until I feel ready to pull away from my kiss with Blake.

I should be sore and exhausted and wanting nothing to do with sex, but I need this proof that when I'm completely sober, they're just as intoxicating. I want to be selfish for once in my life. I want to feel adored, wanted. I want to feel like I'm somebody worthy of connection.

I don't have to do any of the work of removing my clothing, their hands are steady as they pull off my borrowed clothing, smoothing my freshly cleaned hair away from my face they start to twist themselves in different ways so that I can touch all of them at once.

“Before this goes any further, Lark, I want to reassure you that none of us are going to bite you. Not yet, that is. This isn't for that. You are going to make the decision when and if you want that from us, alright?”

I nod in response to Beckett's statement as I continue to be ravished by his brothers.

The way Brooks is touching me makes me feel completely sensual, and then I can feel the rougher touch of Blake as he works his hands between my legs, feeling the parts of me he's learned so well over the last few days.

I gasp out loud when I'm lifted and sat on a very bare and exposed Blake, not realizing he was ready for me; but Brooks doesn't waste any time using that to his advantage. He does a sneaky move that has Blake laying on the couch, me continuing to be impaled by him with my back facing his front. I'm sitting up, giving Brooks ample room to straddle his brother with a moderate apology. Brooks' fingers begin to probe my backside, stretching a part of me I've never enjoyed having touched. Sure, Ivan and Trevor took that from me as well, but it was just one more thing that was painful and something to get through instead of being enjoyed.

I find that the slow gentle touches Brooks is offering me takes all of the sting away though, igniting the nerve endings and making the heat within my body raise several degrees in anticipation.

He stretches me so swiftly, so efficiently, that I find myself leaning forward across Blake's legs to grant Brooks better access. And weirdly, my mouth opens of its own accord, silently begging Beckett to fill my mouth as well.

Convenient that there're three holes on my body and three of them to plug them.

"Never seen anything so perfect," Brooks murmurs as he starts gathering slick from my body to coat the easing of his passage. The rate at which I'm leaking slick for them means there's zero friction when he starts pressing himself into me, making me burn in such a concentrated way that I have to pull away from Beckett so I can moan.

"And fuck if I don't want to be where you are right now," Beckett says under his breath to his brother that's filling me so beautifully. "Fuck it. I need to see." He moves himself, stepping off the couch to get behind my shoulders where Brooks is

gently pushing me down against Blake's legs, moving himself slowly further into my body and making it feel completely at capacity in the best way possible.

Beckett disappears for just a moment and comes back with a bottle of lube, dripping it all over his brother so the entry is even better. It's pure slide now as he starts to push into me more, working himself into me and rubbing against his brother through my body.

My mouth feels empty though, and I'm turning my head, seeking out Beckett again.

Never one to disappoint me, he knows exactly what I want. "Good girl," he says as he slides himself against my tongue. "Taking your three mates so well, aren't you?"

I whimper when he calls himself that, loving the way it sounds coming out of his mouth, directed at me.

"You liked that baby, didn't you? You like when we call you our mate?"

I nod even as he's lodged in my throat, swallowing around him as he pushes as deep into my mouth as he can go, completely cutting off my air supply. Who needs oxygen though when you have glorious dick?

"Gods, the way your throat is just taking me so damn well. You look so beautiful with your lips wrapped around me, Lark. Perfect fucking woman for us."

I get lost in their sweet words, letting them use my body as they continue to praise me. My orgasm sneaks up on me so fast I don't even have time to scream before another one piles on right next to it.

For the first time in my life, I'm in a situation where I'm lucid enough and relaxed enough to not understand if I'm experiencing one extraordinarily long orgasm, or a

chain of them separated by the tiniest of breaks.

I use the hips I've perfected to ride the two alphas underneath me, working myself onto them, moving fluidly, then I'm tasting the delicious salty precum slowly dripping into my mouth from Beckett. His hand in my hair is gripping tighter, and I know he's getting close. If they're going to offer me everything I've ever wanted on a silver platter, then maybe it's time to blow their minds. Just a little.

I pull off of Beckett enough to get a good breath and regulate my breathing, making eye contact with him as I pull away from all three men. I'm hovering right above Brooks and Blake, my lips just millimeters away from Beckett.

Keeping eye contact with the alpha in front of me, I let the two alphas under me back inside my body, pushing and pushing incessantly until their knots are flush against my body. Only then do I take Beckett back into my mouth, easing him down my throat. With a fortifying inhale of air, I use the core muscles the good goddess gave me, pushing my body down and getting not one, but two alpha's knots wedged inside of my body at the same time.

It's impossible, really, and I know my ass is going to hurt like crazy later, but the way they're pushing on every single nerve ending inside of me has me gushing all over them, screaming as I force Beckett even farther down my throat, getting his massive knot behind my teeth and locking it in place as I try to breathe through my nose.

They all start whimpering at the same time, shaking against me as the overwhelm of sensation overcomes them, crying out my name as I grip onto all three of them, trying to milk them for all they're worth. My orgasm has me nearly blacking out, but the discomfort and the delicious stretch my body is undergoing keeps me conscious.

I feel the warmth down my throat first, my air supply coming back in a slow trickle through my nose, my body fluttering and clamping around Brooks and Blake,

cramping up my entire body in the process.

I'm completely boneless, maybe more so than after my heat by the time my orgasm has fully passed. I wait breathlessly for their knots to deflate, and there's an obscene amount of cum in all the holes they can realistically possess. Even though Beckett shot straight down my throat, somehow my mouth is still full of him.

I make eye contact with Beckett and open my mouth enough to show him, swallowing with intention as I flop sideways on the couch. The squelch my body makes as Brooks and Blake fall out of me would be comical if I hadn't just sucked the life out of all three of them.

“Oh yeah, we're keeping her,” Blake pants as he tries to catch his breath next to me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lark, Now

My hands are trembling as we walk up the front steps of the Alpha House, my heart racing. After another shower I could tell the guys were itching to get their baby back, and since I'm feeling clingy as hell, here I am, accompanying them.

At least this time I'm in my own clothes, even if they're the shabby ones I have from the shelter. But even in these old rags, the guys still make me feel beautiful. They don't berate me for not looking nice or make fun of me for how worn out everything is, they just smiled at me when I came out of the bathroom and told me how comfortable and relaxed I looked.

Brooks opens the door for us all, keeping a hand on my back when he follows me through. I've never been here before, but it's warm and nearly as welcoming as the guys' cabin. It's got huge soaring ceilings and activity everywhere you look, people coming and going with smiles on their faces.

It feels like a sham that everybody could be so happy when there's members of their pack suffering in the shelter. I've never understood how nobody cares that we're there, that nobody has tried before now to make things better.

Oops, my bitterness is showing again.

I can feel eyes on us as the guys lead me expertly through the place, nodding at people that call out a greeting, but not stopping to talk to them.

It's a maze of hallways, and I didn't know what I was expecting, but the alpha's quarters aren't very lavish at all. They're just as simple and comfortable as the rest of the large lodge style building, modest even.

I can hear Rowan babbling before we get through the door, and my heart lurches in my chest. I'm scared to feel a connection to him because I've basically already lost one child. But knowing that Rowan is part of the incredible men that seem to want everything with me has me reaching for him the second the door is open.

The moment is heavy as their mother and Luna of the pack puts him into my arms, smiling at me with tears in her eyes. But I can't look away from their pup.

I blindly sink into a rocking chair tucked into the corner, holding the adorable pile of chub in front of me. He reaches for my hair, wrapping his meaty fists around it and pulling his face towards my cheek with a slobbery open mouth. And I don't mind. In fact, I love it. He smells so good, like baby lotion and sweet things, and his eyes are locked on me.

"Hey there, Rowan," I say quiet enough for just him to hear. I know these guys want to step forward and see him, that they must be missing him like crazy, but they all give me space to greet their son, to bond with him for a moment.

He babbles back at me, but when eyes track to where his dads are all standing, I turn into chopped liver. "Alright, alright, yes, yes, your daddies are here. Sorry," I tell the guys. "I tend to get dumb around babies."

I hand the baby over and step back as they greet their son, feeling a twinge of guilt that it was because of me they were parted from him.

Those age-old thoughts are racing behind my eyes, asking me what the hell I think I'm doing here, why I'm here when I'm not needed. But then their mother is next to

me, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me into her. “You look so much better dear,” she tells me quietly. “I didn't see you very long when they brought you in, but you had everybody so worried.”

“It was rough, that's for sure.” Not sure what else to say about it, but she lingers as if there's something else she wants to talk about. Without turning my head away from the family reunion, I try to open up a line of conversation with her. “Your sons, they're... incredible.”

She looks at me, rolling her lips in. “Thank you,” she finally says. And then after waiting a few more minutes while we watch her grown children interact with their own, she says, “You know, I didn't believe my husband when he told me you had formed a trauma mate bond with our sons, but I believe him now.”

I turn my head to her, feeling awkward and unprepared for a conversation like this with somebody so important to the pack, so I have to tell myself to think of her as the guys' mom and nothing more so I don't come off even crazier than I am. “That's... an unexpected development,” I admit. “I don't want you to think I'm using them or anything.”

“You don't think you're good enough for them, do you?”

At that question, all eyes in the room rove to me and wait for my answer. “It's clear as day I'm not,” I say to my own embarrassment.

“I disagree, though you're not what I would have expected for them to fall for. You're beautiful, of course—

“Mom.” Blake interrupts her before she says anything she might regret, then strides across the room and tucks me under his arm, kissing the top of my head.

“This isn't up for debate,” he tells her. And then to me he says, “She's never really interacted with a rejected wolf before.”

Feeling defiant, I find the fire within me to stand up for myself. “We're not some different species, you know? I'm exactly the same as you. I was simply given mates that didn't give a shit about me from the beginning. Nothing I've been through is my fault.”

“Amen to that,” Beckett says, eyes still on his son but looking proud of me, nonetheless.

“It's just the stories we hear about that place...”

“You've never been there?” I ask her, unimpressed. “Why would you? You have everything you need right here. Comfortable lodging, supportive people... you know, sometimes we need to make ourselves uncomfortable when we're given the power to help other people.”

With that, I see myself out, shrugging away from Blake. I remember most of the turns we took to get back to the part of the lodge we're in, but I decide to get lost instead. I'm sure one of the guys is following me, but I don't really feel like apologizing for the way I just spoke to their mother.

It's hard not to feel unwanted as well as rejected as I stand in this pack house meant for the entirety of the pack. I've never gotten to be invited here, never got to join in any events. First I was too young, then not included by my family, forbidden by my mates, and then unable to because my shelter address.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

When I make it to the main hallway where everything leads off from, I stop before a tapestry we'd walked by earlier.

It's massive, spanning several stories high and depicting in great detail the history of the Storm Pack.

It's clear the pack has pride, that they're proud of where they come from and what they stand for, but to me as an outsider, it means nothing.

I feel lost. I want to go back to the shelter and hide, go back to what I'm used to, what's comfortable, but the last time I was there something bad happened to me, so it doesn't feel like a safe place anymore.

Blake slides up behind me silently, wrapping his arms around me and giving me exactly what I was looking for. "What are you crying for, Lark? Talk to me."

"I just I don't fit in here. I don't fit in anywhere. I'm always going to be the freak, the odd one out. The anomaly everybody wants to know about."

I feel his head shake back and forth above mine. "Mom needed to hear that. We've been trying to get her to the shelter for a while, to interact with the wolves there. I think too many people from my pack have gotten too comfortable and forgotten the true meaning of the word 'pack'. For generations, rejected mates have been talked about like they're a contagious disease, something to fear. We need to change the narrative."

I spin in his arms, inhaling his herby scent that puts me at ease every time I get a

whiff of it. “I don't know where I belong,” I admit. “They got into the shelter before, so I can't go there. I don't fit here; nobody wants a rejected wolf walking around these sacred halls.”

“You have just as much right to be here as I do,” he informs me. “If it makes other people uncomfortable, they can go fuck themselves. Come with me, I want to show you something.”

He tugs me to an office space a few halls over, shutting the door behind us and then pulling me onto his lap as he sits in a chair in front of a computer. He types in passwords and clicks on programs, opening up a file that looks like a quickly illustrated visual of a new construction building.

“What's this?” I ask.

“We told you we've been working with Heroes for a while, that group that works behind the scenes to aid rejected wolves in any way they can. This... is something I've been toying around with. The current shelter should have been replaced years ago. I thought building little cabins like this might be a better fit. Wolves that needed them would have their own quarters with access to pack events, and the ability cook and even make a home.”

“There's no way there's a budget for something like this though,” I volley back. “Where would they even go? And how are you going to get every other pack on board?”

“For now, I need to help wolves in our pack. That's where we need to start. I'm hoping once we get this program running, we can work with alphas from other packs to get something similar going on their own lands.”

I hate that, but I get it.

“As far as financing,” he starts, “we’re looking into different options. One of the things we want to spearhead as we start to get more power in the pack, is a mating tribunal. We want to make a council, for when a wolf is rejected.

“It’s blown my mind for years, that anybody can reject their mate, and they automatically have to go live in poverty. It’ll take a little bit of time to really implement, but the idea is that when somebody is rejected, part of the in-processing for the shelter will be to take an account of what happened.”

“Good luck with that,” I say snarkily. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to simply function after being rejected? I highly doubt anybody’s going to be able to sit down and calmly explain what went down so that blame can be appropriately placed. Assuming that’s the point of the tribunal.”

He nods, confirming my assumption. “That’s why the pack that rejects them will have to chip in for their mate to stay in a medical rehab facility until they’re well enough to have a discussion,” he explains. “Being rejected is treated as an inconvenience, when really with our species, it should be treated medically. Sedation should be offered for instance, and comfort. We want to build a clinic to service women in those initial weeks, to get them stable.”

“That would actually be really helpful,” I reply in a quiet voice, wondering why that’s never been thought of before.

“It’s going to take time, Lark,” he says as he turns me on his lap, making me look him in the face. “None of this is going to happen easily or quickly. Would you be interested in helping us, though? You have insight we don’t. You know what would be likely to work and what wouldn’t, what things those wolves will be able to handle and what they won’t. You’re the best resource we have for helping the rest of our pack that’s stuck in that goddess forbidden shelter.”

“Uh, yeah; but can I ask why this is such a passion project of yours? It doesn't seem as if you were raised in a way that would expose you to the plight of rejected wolves nor to becoming a champion for them.”

“You're right,” he admits. “My brothers and I have always known we'd take over the pack one day. Therefore, we've always been looking for ways we could make it better for everyone. The rejected wolves are still part of our pack, even though they're treated as if they're not. They're not just rejected by their mates— they're effectively rejected by the entirety of the pack.

“That's always bothered me. When I got involved with the Heroes, I started to hear some of the stories, and it was impossible to let go of. It...affected me. I heard Aspen's story, witnessed the evil that people like Arabella were capable of, how they were able to take advantage of a system that in no way serves the wolves that really need it. This feels like the thing we need to focus on to make our pack great.”

It's almost too good to wish for. Just thinking of other, younger wolves going through everything I had to deal with twists up my insides, because there has to be a better way. “Do you really think other packs would change if we did?”

He shrugs. “It's worth a shot. There's a forum every year where all the packs get together. If this program is successful, we're hoping to present it then, and we're hoping we can show some of the positive outcomes. If we were to empower the wolves that get rejected, imagine all they could accomplish.”

“And you're sure you want me to help?”

“We're courting you. Of course we want you involved.”

That's news. “You are?”

“Fuck. I was supposed to wait to tell you that. Beckett had this whole thing planned.”

Warmth blooms in my chest. “He did?”

Blake nods.

“I can...pretend to be surprised.”

“It's just us two right now, Lark. One of us can totally give up our room if it will make you more comfortable, but we want nothing more than to have you under our roof.”

“That feels sudden.”

He shrugs again. “We're not human. Hard to feel like things are moving too quickly when you have a goddess giving you proof that you belong together. And as a reminder, you know moving in with us doesn't mean you're giving us permission for anything else.”

“What about Rowan? Won't that confuse him?”

“You're really cute with him, you know that?”

“He's a cute baby.”

“I know we jumped into the deep end because of the heat, but I'd like to think we'd be in this position either way. Do you see yourself building a family with us? Becoming part of our family?”

“You just love offering me things I shouldn't say yes to.”

His smile is so big it nearly falls off his face. “But you want to?”

“I wouldn't want to offend the goddess or anything,” I reply self-consciously, trying to rein in the hope blooming inside of me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Brooks, Now

Once Lark leaves the room and Blake follows her, it doesn't take long for questions to start pouring out of my mom's mouth. I know she only wants the best for us, and she is a great mom and Luna to the pack, but at least she doesn't question the bond we seem to have struck with Lark.

Even thinking her name has me grinning like a fool, something my mother likes to comment on every time it happens, of course.

My parents are just filling us in on everything they've done with Rowan in the last few days when there's a knock on the door, somebody entering before actually being given permission, but that's my dad's business, not mine.

“Brooklyn, what can we do for you?”

“Hi Alpha,” she says with a little bow. “I just came for my daily playtime with Rowan.” Then her eyes meet Beckett's, where he's holding the kid in question, and I have to hold in a groan. She may be innocent enough, but I smell a scheme.

“That won't be necessary,” Beckett says a little sterner than he needs to.

My mother has a sudden interest in looking anywhere else but us, and I sense her play in this, but I'm not going to call her on it now in front of company.

“Oh,” the girl says, pausing and putting her hand on the couch next to me. It's too close and my wolf doesn't like it; she doesn't smell like maple bakery treats. Pretty weird criteria to desire in a woman, huh?

“Well if you're sure... you know, Beckett, I make a pretty mean roasted chicken. I'd be happy to come cook for you and your brothers. And then I could get my time in with that cutie you've got on your lap there.”

“Appreciate the offer, but I don't think our mate would appreciate another she-wolf in her space so soon after her heat.”

She looks down at me in confusion, eyes wide, calculating something in her head. “But I don't... can I speak to you outside, Brooks?” She bats her eyes, trying to come off as pleasant, unaware I'm not the least bit interested in taking her bait.

I look to Beckett, who gives me a nod, making sure I know that when she exits this room, she doesn't come back in. As heirs to the pack, it's important that we're accessible to anybody who needs us, so I can't just refuse her. Unfortunately. She might actually have something important to say. I'm only giving her a few minutes though, because I know we're all anxious for some family time.

Not wanting to come off too intimidating, I lean against the wall down the hall from the room we were in, kicking up a foot to rest behind me as I cross my arms. “What can I do for you, Brooklyn?”

“Well,” she says as she steps towards me a little bit. “I wasn't aware that your pack was seeking applicants to replace Arabella. I've been biding my time, waiting. I'd like to apply.”

I snort. “We aren't taking applicants,” I tell her succinctly.

“But I thought you said—”

“Look, I know things haven't been going great with you and your mates—”

“They're not my mates,” she hisses.

I hold up my hands, warning her off. “I'm not getting into this right now. If you're just looking to piss them off or make them jealous, this isn't the way to go about it. You guys need to sit down and figure out your issues and then work them out. Running off to another pack isn't going to help.”

She holds her hand out like she's going to touch my arm, so I grab her wrist to stop her. “I wouldn't do that.”

“I'm really great with Rowan,” she tells me. “Every day he's been here this week, we've been playing together. He loves me.”

“That's an oversight that shouldn't have happened, but I appreciate your honesty. I'm glad you enjoyed your time with my son, but we have a mate. Rowan needs bonding time with her.”

It's at that point that Blake and Lark round the corner. I still have Brooklyn's wrist in my hand, so I drop it like hot coal, putting more distance between us. “There she is,” I can't help but drawl, eyes only for my girl.

“You guys ready to go?” Blake questions, clearly ready himself. Lark and Brooklyn are taking measure of each other, but there's no competition here.

It's been too long since Lark has been in my arms, so I pull her to me, pressing her back against my front and wrapping my arms around her. "Brooklyn, this is our mate, Lark."

Lark reaches out a hand to greet her, but Brooklyn hesitates. "Is this a joke?" she asks.

"Pardon?" Lark bites out, spine stiffening.

Brooklyn looks from Lark to me, then to Blake, who's getting more irritated with the girl by the second. "Why would this be a joke?" Lark asks, giving the girl another chance to redeem herself.

"You're nearly old enough to be their mother. Not to mention you're parading around the pack house in your pajamas. Come on, Brooks," Brooklyn begs me, "you can do better than this."

Blake snarls at the girl and corners her, all niceness gone. His hand whips out to grab her by the neck and then shoves her against the wall in an act of dominance, not hurting her, but making sure she knows he could.

"Sorry," I whisper to Lark. "Sometimes being heir to the pack means people think they deserve time with you. Every once in a while there're people who have ideas in their head about how they can get to the top."

I pitch my voice so Brooklyn hears me, and her face turns beet red. "I'd make a perfect Luna," she spits out, apparently unaware that her neck is still being pinned to the wall by a pissed off Blake.

I'm nervous that this might set Lark back, because I know she already struggles with her self-image, but apparently, she's choosing violence. That's my girl.

I know we're in for a treat when Lark cocks her head to the side. "Hey Blake, sweetie," she asks in a voice that's so saccharine it makes my teeth hurt. "Do you want to give me and this sweetheart darling here a tour of the Alpha House? Nobody ever did tell me where you were housing Ivan and Trevor."

Blake's eyes meet Lark's in front of me, and I can practically feel the heat brewing between them. Remind me to find the closest closet to shove her into before we get back to the room.

He takes measure of our girl for a second before smiling, but it's out of sync. "It'd be my pleasure," he finally says.

"Am I allowed to put a leash on her?" Lark asks far too sweetly, making me laugh.

"Sorry baby, don't have one on me."

I get the feeling that Lark is pouting in front of me, but she shrugs and then wraps an arm around the daft girl's shoulders, steering her as Blake leads us to where her exes are being held.

Lark says nothing to her and neither do we the whole way there, and I'm not really sure where this situation is going, but I have a feeling Lark is trying to make a point, so I'm going to let her. She looks too happy to be given the power to do so.

The pack holding cells are basically what you'd expect jail cells to look like; all metal, slightly cold, but mostly clean. Apparently, we have to be humane or some shit. Personally, I'd like to revisit the days where we could take fingernails off with pliers for each infraction the alpha deemed they had committed.

We have to walk through lots of empty cells before we get to the one that's occupied by who she's looking for, and she drags Brooklyn along with her the entire way. And

then Brooklyn starts giggling. “What's the deal with this?” she asks like it's hysterical. Okay, it kind of is.

Blake grunts. “Dad asked us what we wanted to do with them, I told him to just let him be for now.”

Camden, who's in the separate cell right next to them, clearly wants to talk to his mom, but it's up to her whether or not that happens. Right now, she's too amused by the fact that Trevor and Ivan are still in that damn kennel that somebody went to the trouble of hauling to the Alpha House so they could lock these men back in it together.

“Get us out of here Lark,” Trevor says, voice laced with venom.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“Good boy, good speak!” And then Lark spies a box of dog biscuits some asshole brought down here and claps with glee. “Does the mangy dog want a treat?” She reaches in and throws one at his stupid face, getting all the karmic points available to her as it slides right through the thin wire bars of the cage.

Not going to lie, I'm drawing immense joy from this situation right now.

“Umm, can I leave?” Brooklyn says as she tries to figure out the dynamic between Lark and these men like Lark is slightly off her rocker. Maybe she is, but it's damn hot.

“Brooklyn?” Camden asks in incredulity from his cell.

She spins to him, not having realized he was here at first because he was pouting in the corner. “Camden? Why are you in here? What did you do?”

“You know each other?” Lark asks, hands on her hips.

“This is my mate, mom.”

Brooklyn looks a bit green in the face. “She’s yourmom?” She looks at Lark again, clearly sizing her up.

Slightly unhinged, wants-to-do-damage-Lark transforms instantly. She marches over to where Camden is and stares him down. “When did you meet her?” Her tone changes completely and Camden looks like he's about to shit himself.

“You want to tell her, or should I?” Brooklyn asks.

“Let's hear what he has to say.” And then Lark stares Camden down, waiting for him to talk.

“Dad said—”

Lark makes a buzzer sound in the back of her throat. “You want to be taking advice about mates from them?” She looks deliciously unaffected as she tilts her head towards where they're stuck in a cage together. “I don't think it's working out too well for them.”

Camden looks at his dads and gulps down some air, looking back at his mom sheepishly.

“Leave the boy alone, Lark,” one of her exes exasperates as if he's bored out of his mind.

She picks up another dog biscuit and throws it at him again. “Eat that,” she says and turns back to Camden. “Well?” How the fuck is she so good at getting those through the damn bars?

I pick one up and try my luck too, but no dice. It smacks into the cage and tumbles down sadly, meeting its demise on the cement floor. No more treats for puppy.

“She doesn't like the club, mom. She doesn't like me going there. Doesn't care that that's how I make money. She says she's too good for it. Won't be caught dead in there.”

Camden's fully expecting his mom to take her side, I can tell.

Lark turns to Brooklyn, who's starting to grasp some of the situation, so the hostility has bled out of her face and is being replaced with sympathy. "Your turn," she tells the girl softly.

"Like you're gonna take my side. You're his mom."

"Please?"

Brooklyn takes a deep breath and sighs. "We met at a pack run a few months ago, like he said. It was great at first; we ran together, and he said the rest of this pack would be there later for the bonfire. So we hung out and I went home with them." She looks ashamed of what she has to say, but Lark knows exactly how to handle it.

"Then what happened?" I immediately clock that this is the side that comes out when she's talking of the women in the shelter. Without further implications, Lark has already read the room and realized that this woman is in danger of horrific experiences if Lark can't intervene. She's sympathizing with the girl, getting on her side when so many other wolves in the pack would be so quick to tell Brooklyn that it's her duty to fit into her mates' life, not the other way around.

"We started texting a lot, hung out a few more times. I was waiting for some sort of formal proposal. One night, I got a text saying they wanted to take me out. I got dressed up, did my hair, bought a new dress, and... they had me meet them at a strip club. Well, Camden and one other. Kyle wasn't there.

"Not only that, but Cam looked so proud of himself when I walked through the velvet ropes to the VIP area. A VIP area, mind you, in which my mates had other women on their lap, and they didn't even have the decency to kick them off for me."

I look to Brooklyn, who is now shooting daggers at Camden, who finally has the little bit of good sense to hang his head in shame. Maybe he can be taught.

“I think I've heard enough,” Lark says. It's obvious that this is distressing to Brooklyn, and I'm suddenly glad I stepped out into the hall to talk to her. Quite the coincidence that this all ended up this way. There the goddess goes again, guiding Lark into somebody's life that needs her.

Feeling the pressure to defend herself further, Brooklyn steadies herself and squares her focus back onto wonder woman. “I don't think I'm too good for a strip club. I do, however, know that I'm worth more than a pack of mates that will let other women dance on them, especially when I'm around. I don't want anything to do with men that need validation from other women when they've got me.”

Brooklyn turns to Camden again, making sure he heard her loud and clear, daring him to defend himself. Proving he might be a little bit smarter than we thought at first, he says nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“I see,” Lark says, and then she turns to face her exes. “You two must be so damn proud of yourselves, raising up a man like that.” She hikes a thumb behind her shoulder, pointing to Camden.

“Oh, shut up,” Trevor says and then Ivan elbows him. In such close confines, they can't get away from each other and it's clear they've already been tussling, because they've both got some sort of bloody lip and black eye that's mid-heal.

“No, I don't think I will,” Lark defies. Then she turns back to her son. “Camden, we'll get in contact with her other mates. You've never cared for what I have to say to you, not since you've become the adult wolf you like to think you are. So let me set the record straight here.

“I'm moving in with the Storm Pack.” She holds eye contact with her exes as she says this, waiting to see every hit they take. “We're getting mated. Apparently, there's this thing that can happen when the stars align just so, so this mating is blessed by the goddess.

“But even if we were just chosen mates, it would still be a hell of a lot better than what you guys ever offered me.” Back to Camden. “If you continue down the road you're travelling on, Camden, then you can look to your fathers for what your future will look like; miserable, alone with your pack, while your mate finds something better. You guys aren't men,” she says full of ire, focusing once more on her exes. “You're pathetic and useless. You can rot in this cage for all I care. I just wanted you to know I'm finally fucking happy. No thanks to either of you. I love knowing you get to be miserable while I live my best life. I hope it hurts like hell.” And then she dismisses them and spins back to Camden.

He's not in a kennel because his transgressions were far fewer, but we still weren't quite sure what to do with him, so we thought it was best to keep him in here along with his fathers for the time being. "And you, I used to think I did wrong by you. That it was my fault that you came out the way you did. But somewhere along the way, I've realized you're old enough to make your own decisions. I gave up every part of me I had to be a mother to you. To take care of you. When they came into our lives, you didn't want anything to do with me, did you?"

"I don't blame you for being a kid desperately trying to gain the approval of his fathers, but you outgrew that stage years ago. And don't even think for a second I didn't want you to have a relationship with them; you know I always encouraged that once we moved in with them; I guess I just hoped a bigger part of me would have lingered inside you when they started rolling their normal tricks. It didn't matter how much I tried to correct your behavior or redirect your thinking; you'd always go back to them.

"I'm done trying, Camden. You can have the distance you want. It breaks my heart and you'll always be my baby, but I deserve better than this. I deserve better from you."

Camden stands and approaches the bars, eyes leaking tears that are far from the first to seep into the cement floors down here. "You don't know what it's like, mom."

"Whatwhat'slike, Camden? To be physically and mentally abused for years? To have to pretend like you're worth nothing just to get by day-to-day? To live with nothing and act like you're happy about it? No. What you don't understand is all the goddess damned privilege you've been given. Maybe I coddled you too much, tried too hard to make you like me when I realized my other tactics weren't working, but that ends now.

"You've never wanted to know the truth about your fathers, never let me tell you my

side. Well, now you're going to hear it. And since you're back there and I'm out here, you're going to listen.

“We moved out of the shelter and in with them because they made us. They rejected me when they found out I was pregnant with you, because they didn't want to see me get fat.

“From the day they met me, they were with other women. Even after they bit me and claimed me, they were with women daily. I had to feel every time they slept with somebody else through the bond, and it drove me mad.

“But I stayed. And you know why? Because of you. When they came and took you, I gave up everything to follow them because pack law didn't grant me any parental rights to withhold you from them.

“Maybe you don't remember a whole lot about our life at the shelter, goddess knows you never went back once they gave you the big screen TV and the giant bed. But that was our home. Humble beginnings where people actually cared about us.

“I wanted you to get settled in what I knew would be your new life, and I had to wait out my contract with your fathers to even be allowed to take you back to the shelter, but at that point, you didn't have any interest in it; you never went back to visit, and I always had to make excuses for everyone that asked after you. They were counting down with me until you turned 16, knowing how much it meant to me that we could potentially be together again without all the toxic bullshit your fathers love to bring to every relationship they sustain.

“You are better than this,” she tells Camden, “and honestly, I think you deserve to stay here for a while. You went along with every scheme they did, and how dare you not look out for me. When you turned 16 you had the power to protect me, and you didn't. instead, you started to demand things of me, just like them. So don't ask me to

protect you now.

“They've done nothing but abuse me and manipulate from day one. They gaslit me, they made me feel like shit and they took everything from me. Everything. This heat I was in? They drugged me. Repeatedly. And that was after Ivan abducted me from the shelter and kicked my ribs hard enough to break them. The wolves standing with me now are the type of men you should have been emanating. You'd do well to take note.”

“You can't actually be moving in with them, mom. That's... embarrassing.”

“Your mate is actively looking for other situations. That's embarrassing.” She turns back to Brooklyn. “I want to say I brought you here so I could show you exactly why I deserved to have a good pack behind me, but I found so much more. I'm hoping my son comes to his senses, but in the meantime, you have a mother-in-law if you want one, okay? And you are absolutely correct; you do deserve more than they're giving you. Don't make the same mistakes I did, don't you dare settle.”

“You know I was coming onto your men, right?” Brooklyn asks in disbelief, always far too honest for her own good.

Lark waves her off. “It's always important to look beneath the surface, because you never know what somebody's going through. Empathy will get you everywhere.” And then she starts walking off, taking us with her and giving Brooklyn the option to stay and talk to Camden if she wants.

“What about us, Lark?” her exes call out.

In response she flips them off and keeps walking, asking us to give our contact info to Brooklyn if she does want to talk.

“How long do you think they’ll stay in there?” she asks when we’re climbing the stairs back to the main part of the Alpha House once more.

“Yeah, we’re not going rush to figure that out,” I say as I laugh under my breath.

Because it’s absolutely imperative that I do, I herd Lark into an empty office space, making sure to lock the door behind my brother.

I don’t even give her time to ask what my plans are, I simply proclaim them by lifting her up, pinning her against the door, and kissing her senselessly. “Been too long since we did this, and you were so sexy down there,” I say against her perfect mouth. “I know it’s not easy to face them—”

“It’s easier when they’re stuck in a dog kennel and I’m not,” she laughs, but I know it’s still hard for her.

“Either way,” Blake says, “we’re proud of you. Proud of you for standing up to Camden, for reaching out to help somebody that did nothing to earn it from you. You’re incredible.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

It's not long before Blake squeezes his way between us and steals her for himself, making sure she knows he wants her just as badly. Far too soon however, our phones start buzzing like crazy and I know that Beckett is waiting for us, probably wondering where the hell we got off to.

So we meet back up with Beckett with promises to explain everything later, we get Rowan buckled up, and we head home. As a pack.

And the whole way there, I'm grinning like a madman, because Lark just willingly boasted that she was going to mate us.

Let the plans begin.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lark, Now

A gentle hand on my arm wakes me up, making me realize I fell asleep in the rocking chair. Beckett takes the fully asleep Rowan out of my arms and lays him in the crib carefully, smiling down at him before reaching a hand out to me and pulling me from the room.

"I guess I was more tired than I thought," I admit as I cover up a yawn in the hallway.

"Be ours," he says in response, holding the sides of my neck with his thumbs brushing my cheeks, backing me into the wall right outside of Rowan's room. "I've had to watch you charm my son for the past week, been forced to take a front row

seat as my brothers fell for you as hard as I am, and I'm goddess damned tired of seeing you strutting around this house without our marks on you. Be ours."

My throat is suddenly too dry to swallow, but that's okay, because there seems to be an excess amount of moisture coming from my eyes. "What?" I ask incredulously.

"Make honest men of us, Lark. Put us out of our fucking misery. I want to feel you inside my head, want to spark a bond to life and erase the idiots that came before us."

"You can't undo a mate bond, Beckett," I remind him. "If I let you do that, you won't be able to take it back later."

His eyes soften and he pulls me into his body, wrapping his arms around me. "Oh Lark, you're still waiting for the other shoe to drop, aren't you?"

"I told you I would always be doing that, nobody just lucks into this much goodness." My voice is muffled against his shirt covered chest, but it's still incredibly loud.

"Hard to drop the other shoe when we burnt it to a crisp weeks ago," he says.

I have to laugh in spite of myself. "That doesn't even make sense. That was a stupid analogy."

"If it was so stupid, then why'd you laugh at it?"

I tip my head up to say something caustic, but he cuts off that notion real quick by pressing his mouth to mine. "Is it the orgasm count? We haven't given you enough, have we? Okay, team meeting," he announces. Then he turns back to me, face serious. "We can do better."

He starts to wander down the hall, but I grab him by the arm and stop him, pulling

him back into me. “I swear to the goddess if you guys give me any more orgasms, I might implode at a cellular level.”

His answering smirk says it all. “This morning was particularly creative, wasn’t it? I did not know you could bend your legs that way, my dear. See? We are still learning new things about each other. It’s so fun.”

“Stripper,” I remind him as I point to my chest. Then I clear my throat and look back to the door of Rowan’s room longingly, scared to ask for what I really want.

His eyes follow mine. “You know he’s part of the package, right? If you let us mate you, then he’s officially yours as well. Did we not make that clear? Yeah, we aren’t getting rid of the baby.”

I laugh again, finally realizing he’s completely serious in his demand, even if he’s still joking to put me at ease. I study his face and his eyes soften as I lock onto them, baring his whole soul for me to look over. “You’re not sick of me yet?”

He gasps dramatically and picks me up, wrapping my legs around his waist as he carries me to what has sort of become the master bedroom. I thought it would be weird to move in with them and had every intention of sleeping alone, but that definitely didn’t work out very well for me. Puppy pile it is.

Brooks and Blake are already in bed, reading books in an identical pose, legs crossed at the ankle as they sit against the headboard like old men. Oh my God, they’re wearing matching pajamas. So many of my dreams are coming true right now.

“Boys,” Beckett announces as he drops me in the middle of them. “We have a serious issue here. Cannot spare a moment of time to waste.”

Blake keeps reading and flips his brother off, Brooks abandons his book and pulls me

in for the snuggles he loves so much.

“She just asked me if we were sick of her yet.”

“That’s dumb as fuck, Lark,” Blake says without taking his eyes off his book.

“Sick of you?” Brooks asked like he also thinks it’s dumb AF. “Sick of having the most beautiful woman that’s ever existed in my bed everyday? Of being able to feed her and hold her and watch her play with my kid? Hell to theno,woman. You feeling okay up here?” And he knocks on my forehead like it’s a door.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“She also asked if I knew that mating us was irreversible,” Beckett informs them like a total traitor.

“Lark, you’re smarter than this baby,” Brooks says as he squishes me tighter.

“I just wasn’t sure if—”

“We are,” Blake argues, finally putting his book down.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.” Would it be too much if I folded my arms across my chest like I mean business? Never mind. I forgot I don’t currently have use of them, clingy ass wolf shifter.

“You were going to ask or insinuate that you weren’t sure if we were ready for a huge commitment like that to you.”

“Well, you haven’t—”

“Because we haven’t said anything in a few days, right?” Brooks finishes for me again, far too smug for his own good.

“Have you checked the calendar lately, Lark?” Brooks asks as he nuzzles into my neck and rubs his cheek against me.

Is that a trick question? “Why would I need to check a calendar?”

“Alright then,” Brooks says as he stands. “I owe you 10 bucks, Beckett.” And he

whips off his shirt and his pants and strides from the room, leaving me very confused.

Especially when Beckett copies him, and then it's just me and Brooks in bed with a whole lot of unanswered questions.

"Come on, love," Brooks says as he sits up and pulls me out of bed. He strips down to nothing as well, and somehow, I just can't stop staring at the chest in front of me.

I'm halfway to leaning forward to lick his nipple when he flicks me lightly in the forehead and snorts. "Outside, woman," he says before throwing me over his shoulder.

"Not complaining about this angle," I say as he carries me through the house.

The question about the calendar makes sense when we step onto their small back porch, because it's a full moon. Not that we need the full moon to shift, but it always feels a little bit more magical to shift during it.

Blake and Beckett have already shifted, putting me face to face with their wolves for the first time. It's been forever since I've been around other wolves like this, but surprisingly it's not traumatic. They're beautiful, dark wolves with white accents and bright blue eyes, identical even in animal form.

Brooks takes my hand and pulls me away from the soft puppies I was about to start playing with, leading me through the wooded area behind their cabin until we get to a space full of flickering LED candles where the moon penetrates right down to the forest floor in a perfect circle. There's an arch set up with wild roses wound all around it, and standing under the arch is the Alpha and Luna of the pack.

"Welcome boys, wasn't sure if you'd remember. Was starting to get impatient."

The ‘boys’ shift back to their human skinsuit, pulling some sort of fabric coverings from a tree nearby. I look around trying to take everything in, feeling the moon beating down on me, wondering what's happening. And then their mother is grabbing me by the hand to pull me over behind a big tree nearby. “I had to kind of guess on style, but the boys helped. We made sure to get a dress that had a bit of stretch to it so that it would fit you okay, didn't want to risk something not fitting right. Not on a night like this one.”

“Rowan’s sleeping, we don’t even have the monitor with us. I need to go check on him,” I protest, suddenly scared out of my mind and feeling the need to run.

“Rowan is fine, Lark,” she assures me. “I have somebody I trust about to enter your living room to keep an eye on him. If he wakes, she’ll take care of him until you guys get back.”

I can’t even question her, because I know they love that kid as much as I do. If she says he’s safe, then he’s safe. Then I look at the dress hanging from a tree in front of us. It’s a beautiful silver dress, a mating dress. “I’ve never worn one of these,” I mumble as I let my fingers run over the lace detail at the hem. “With the silk, it reminds me of moonlight.”

“That’s why it’s traditional for mating dresses to be silver,” she explains. “Seems to be trendy nowadays to go with other colors, but I had a feeling you’d want to stick with this.”

I nod, not really thinking much other than to admire how pretty and simple it is. But it’s not boring; it has accomplished that perfect balance between looking extravagant and rich without overdoing it.

“Take your time, Lark. This is for you and them, so if you need to stand there for a bit and think through some things, then do it. And just so you know, if you decide that

this is too much, that you need to leave, they're going to try again next month. You not being ready is not going to be a deal breaker. You know that they're going to understand, and you know that we'll happily meet up again at the next full moon to help out. Of course, I'm hoping you'll stay, because I sense that you want this but are just too scared to reach for it. Remember, it's your life to live. If you let the past dictate what you do, then you'll never get anywhere, and they win."

She steps away and I hear voices back in the clearing talking in low tones, but I tune them out.

I know Beckett just asked me to mate him, but I wasn't expecting something like this. Something somewhat formal that was clearly thought out ahead of time.

"How badly do you want to punch me right now?" Beckett asks from right next to my ear.

I yelp because I was not paying attention to my surroundings, too lost in thought. "Beckett! Don't sneak up on me like that. I'm having an existential crisis right now. Can't you respect that?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

He snorts. How rude. “No, you’re not,” he tells me. He reaches for the hem of the oversized shirt I’m wearing and pulls it over my head. Then he takes my hands and places them against the tree, pulling my hips back.

He braids my hair and ties it off with an elastic he must have had on his wrist, placing the braid over my shoulder, making me frown.

“How do you know how to do that?”

“Don’t worry about that right now. Hands on the tree, Lark. It seems I have a nice opportunity here to convince you to go through with this ceremony while the moon is still high.”

He peels my leggings down my hips and shoves his face between my legs, licking me indecently.

I give in to it before I realize his parents are about 30 feet away. “Beckett!” I snap again. “We can’t do this here. I’m not going to let you get me off while your mother and father are right over there.”

“Wow, it sure is a beautiful night,” his mother suddenly says far too loudly. “It would be a shame if I kept talking really loudly for a few minutes and ruined the solitude of it, wouldn’t it?”

There’s soft whispering I can’t quite make out and then his father is in on it too, speaking loudly with his mother about nonsense.

“They fully support this plan,” he says she continues shove his tongue into me.

“Oh my gods, fine. Put the damn dress on me.”

He pops up immediately, wide fucking grin on his face, cheeks glistening from me, and shoves the tongue that was just deep inside my cunt into my mouth. Lovely.

Beckett carefully removes the shimmery dress from the velvet hanger and unzips the back, holding it out for me to step into. It seems like it's got some sort of built-in support system, so I don't even bother asking for a bra, I simply stand there and try not to cry like a baby as he zips me up. It is tight; everything with form is going to be on my ridiculous boobs, but like his mom said, it has a bit of a stretch so it's still mostly comfortable.

He runs his hands up the outsides of my thighs, under the skirt, feeling my bear pussy and cupping it. “Not sure if you've been to a mating before, but I get to do fun things to this after,” he says as he taps against me.

I can feel my wolf bristling under the skin, dying to shake out her fur and run. The pull of the moon is calling to her heart, making me think that I probably could shift if I wanted to.

For years I haven't felt that ability in my fingertips; it's been beyond my reach since I was rejected. But tonight feels different. And I'm hopeful, because this feels right, as much hesitancy as I'm showing.

“Yeah, we'll see about that, with you guys springing this on me like this.” I saunter off to find my other guys, feeling like hot shit in this dress. I don't know what it actually looks like on me since there's no mirror in the forest, rude, but if we're going by the guys' reactions, I look pretty fire.

“It wouldn't be a mating ceremony if I didn't ask you if you were here of your own free will,” the alpha says to me.

I narrow my eyes at the guys because of their coercion, unable to hold it long because I'm here and I'm not letting this moment go. “Yes alpha, I'm here of my own free will. Let's get this show on the road.”

“Brooks, Beckett, and Blake, it has been the absolute joy of my life to watch you grow into the wolves you are today. Your mother and I are so proud of the direction you're taking the pack, and of the choices you're making.

“In front of me, I see wolves perfectly matched for each other. The things the goddess asks of us are not always easy, but all of you have taken her lessons in stride and are making this pack so proud.

“I know that when the time is right, the four of you are going to lead the next generation of our pack to great heights. Beckett, Brooks, and Blake; if you do anything to harm this woman the goddess is giving to you, there is nowhere that'd be out of her reach for reconciliation.

“My wish for all of you as you start your new life with your new mate, is to always find joy in the small things. To remember the good moments as they happen, and to also save them for the days when frustration seems to bleed through in everything you do.

“Lark, we're just getting to know each other, but I would challenge you to go into this mating with your eyes as open as your heart. I hope you find peace and healing and love and come to learn how joyful a good mating can be. I hope you smile more than you do anything else, and I pray that the goddess blesses this new family you're building together tonight, easing your path as much as possible.

“We gather under the full moon because that's when mother moon can reach us the best. I would ask that my sons gather the hands of their new mate and bow their heads so they may pray to the goddess for a blessing.”

Their hands are warm in mine as they do as the alpha instructs, and I bow my head right along with them to give thanks to the goddess for this incredible blessing. It's not every day a wolf gets another chance like this, and there's an ember in my heart telling me that this mating will be one for the history books.

A tingle runs down my palm as we all finish our prayers, and then the alpha is asking us to repeat traditional mating vows, which I do on auto pilot. I'm promising myself to them body, mind and spirit, vowing to respect this union and to work for it.

In the darkness, three sets of identical eyes blink back at me, saying the same words I am, and it's unreal to go through a ceremony I wrote off long ago.

When I come back into myself, the alpha is telling them to kiss their mate and I have three hungry wolves trying to ravage me, teeth elongating as they press kisses against my neck.

“Lark, the boys would like to leave it up to you as to whether or not you'll accept your mating bites now under the full moon, or if you'd rather return home to do them in a more private atmosphere.”

I lift my face up to the sky, closing my eyes as the night breeze stirs the little hairs around my face. Anybody can have a mating bite when they're at home being intimate, but not many go through the trouble of restraining themselves enough to get bites beneath the full moon during a formal mating ceremony.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I meet my mates' eyes, wishing I knew what they preferred, but thinking I have a good idea, nonetheless. "Sometimes, I think it's important to uphold tradition. I would be honored to receive my bite beneath mother moon."

With tears in his eyes, Blake sinks to one knee and lifts the hem of my dress up to my mid-thigh, seeking out the place my old mate bite is still scarred somewhat. I've never told them where the other one was, so the fact that he knows exactly where to go means he's been paying attention.

Blake maintains eye contact as he puts his mouth to my skin, caressing my leg and putting me at ease. Anticipation runs through me like a drug, lighting up my nerves and hitching my breath. As the sharp points of his canine teeth finally rest against the skin right above my knee, I'm more than ready.

I give Blake a little nod and close my eyes, crying out as he marks me as his, completely erasing everything that Trevor left behind. Now all I feel is hope and joy and yes, love. Maybe it's too early to say it, but he can't hide the way he feels for me.

He's meticulous about cleaning the wound when he finally pulls his teeth from me, each brush of his tongue sending electricity through my body. Then Beckett is at my neck, behind me, ready to erase another set of marks then never should have been forced on me. He's quicker, as if he knows that it's taken a lot of willpower for me not to rip off my dress and mount them.

With Blake still kissing around my leg, Beckett sinking his teeth into my neck, and Brooks on the opposite shoulder from where Beckett is and sinking his teeth right into my shoulder, I'm inundated with them.

The spirit of them races through me right along with all the endorphins, making every little reservation that I might have been holding onto incinerate. When they're satisfied with their work, they step away, but I'm not left cold. I can feel them swirling through me, their consciousness wrapping me up in comfort while their parents congratulate us politely and leave us to be.

“Do you want to do the next part?” Brooks asks in a low tone that's hard to decipher.

“I'm not sure if I can, but I'd like to try.” I spin so Brooks can unzip me, and they all slip out of the robes they wore for the ceremony, placing a hand on me somewhere as I start to call my wolf forward.

I haven't been able to shift since my life was ruined, but when I reach for her, her legs tremble with the effort to get back to me. She's whining but eager, strong and unashamed.

Sweat dots my brow as I pull that last little bit to get her forward, falling to all fours on the soft forest floor. I suffer through an agonizing transition like it's the first time all over again, fur and bones fighting for dominance with the human side of me. It's agonizing, yet the joy I feel when I'm finally in wolf form again is unmatched.

As soon as the guys shift, I'm ready to run.

My wolf and I are proud of our new mates, excited to be able to run with them under the light of the moon, to be wearing their bites and feeling connected to them.

We run around in large looping circles before I'm too fatigued to go on, at which point I shift and all but collapse as Beckett catches me.

“You did so good, love,” he says to me as he carries me to our home, suspiciously not even a little bit out of breath. “So damn proud of you, my mate.”

I'd like to say that we got down and dirty the second we walked through the door, but the exhaustion of shifting for the first time in so long and the long day has gotten to me, so after we clean up I get to fall asleep knowing that when I wake up, they'll all be there and they will be every day going forward. That I don't have to worry about being alone anymore, because I found pieces of my soul I didn't even know I was missing.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Beckett, Now

“What’s this?”

“One of your mating presents. We were going to give it to you as a courting gift, but we were too antsy to wait. We figured, why bother with courting if we can just mate you instead?”

My beautiful girl rubs the sleep out of her eyes and pulls herself to a sitting position in bed, yawning and stretching. “You got me a mating present?”

“You're going to like it, I promise.”

Me and my brothers take spots on the bed as she opens the box hesitantly, giving the ribbon to Rowan to play with when he starts reaching for it. It's cute as fuck when she ends up just pulling him into her lap, letting him help her open it.

“What do you think we got in here, bud? I think your daddies did something they shouldn't have,” she says as she aims a look towards us. Saucy, this one.

“Trust me we really should have,” Blake says.

I'm not going to tell her about the shopping trip we have planned for later to get her a new wardrobe, but I'll make sure she gets lots of shiny things then.

She pulls the manila envelope out of the box and opens the clasp, sliding out a stack of papers with confusion painted all over her face. She starts reading through the paper on top, eyes flicking to us when she gets to the bottom of it. She goes to the next page, scans it and covers her mouth agape with what I'm hoping is good feelings, not making a sound until she gets to the last page.

“Are you guys shitting me right now?” She puts the papers on her lap and stares us down.

“No, but he might be,” Brooks says as he grabs the baby and takes a whiff of his bottom.

“What am I supposed to do with a strip club?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“Whatever you want to,” I tell her. “You could keep it as a business if you wanted to. Dad has awarded it to you fair and square after your exes held you to employment there for so long under a false contract.

“Or I could sell it,” she says thinking.

“O you could sell it,” Blake agrees.

“What about Camden? Shouldn’t he inherit it? It’s a family business.”

“Here’s the thing about that,” I start to explain as I pull another sheet from my back pocket. “The paperwork that entitled Ivan to the club in the first place had stipulations that he didn’t meet.”

She looks so confused, which just proves her exes kept her so in the dark, power hungry to control everything they could when it came to her. “What do you mean he didn’t meet them? He had custody of Camden. Wasn’t that what enabled them to inherit from their uncle or whoever?”

“Yes, but if they would have been slightly more careful with their legal documents, they would have realized that there were other things they had to do to maintain ownership of the club once it was formally given it to them.” I pass the paper over to her and she reaches for it, poring it over immediately.

“Wait, is this real? You guys didn’t fabricate this?”

“Nope,” Brooks tells her as he comes back with a clean baby. “If they couldn’t stay

above the law, then the ownership of the club automatically passes to their goddess blessed mate. Since it doesn't stipulate that rejection would cancel any such claim, the pack lawyers, in light of everything that's happened between you and your exes, have deemed that you are the rightful owner. Forcing you into a contract that had so many holes in it, threatening you for custody, drugging you, abusing you...they 100% brought this on themselves.”

The glee shining through Lark’s eyes as she thinks of possibilities is exactly what I was hoping for when we got these papers back. “Would it be really fucking awful if I called up Trevor's biggest competitor and offered the club to him for pennies? He’s been sniffing around for years, offering Trevor money for the club so he can expand his own brand and eliminate competition, and Trevor fucking hates him.”

“Not awful,” I start, “but you can do better than pennies. Give him a deal if you’d like to spite Trevor, but their business is worth something and I’d hate to see you shortchange yourself just to make a point.”

She starts chewing on her lip, running through things in her head. “Do we need the money? We haven't talked about finances yet.”

I shake my head firmly. “Lark, any money that would come from selling that place is purely for you. For whatever you want to do with it. Our pack has everything it needs to care for you, Rowan, and anybody else we find ourselves in custody of. If you want to invest this money, or use it for an education,” she makes the face of this, “or not. The point is you can get a good amount of money if you’re serious about selling it. As much as I hate to admit it, it is a successful business and I’m sure somebody would scoop it up in a heartbeat if the price was right.”

“Could I give the money to the shelter?” she asks quietly. “They did everything for me. It would be kind of incredible, I think, to be able to give back. To maybe buy new beds and blankets for the women there, little pieces of comfort maybe.”

I knew she was too good for us. “If that's what you want to do, Lark, we will support you 100%. It would be pretty poetic justice to take the money and use it for that purpose.”

“I don't have use for the money,” she says. “I'd feel gross to spend it on myself knowing where it came from. No, I'm going to give it to the shelter. I could do a lot of good there, I think.”

“Then that's what we'll do, you crazy, incredible woman.” I lean forward and kiss her, running my thumb over her mate mark on her neck.

“Camden's gonna be pissed,” she says with a shrug as she crawls out of bed, kisses each of us on the cheek and heads out to the kitchen. She pauses in the doorway though to look back at us. “Thank you, all of you, for doing that for me. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

???

“Really? Bending me over while I'm doing laundry?”

“Rowan just went down for his nap,” I tell her as I gently shove her over the top of the washer and slip her pants down to her ankles.

“Good call.” Her voice is immediately breathy and thin, because in the few days we've been mated, we've gotten so damn good at sneaking in quickies when we can.

It's not always the most romantic atmosphere for a newly bonded pack when there's a baby shitting himself left and right and throwing up milk and flinging food...damnit, my dick is getting soft.

“I've got you, baby. You started thinking about daddy stuff again, didn't you?”

Then comes one of the most glorious sights in the world; Lark sinks onto her knees in front of me and opens her mouth, touching herself while she starts to suck me down.

“GodsdamnLark. Fuck. This isn’t how I wanted this to go.”

Instead of sassing me off, she swallows me down her throat, gagging but hanging on while I lose my ever-loving mind.

I can’t help but sink my fingers into her hair, so that I can try and control anything about this situation. The thing is, Lark has discovered how powerful she feels when she’s in control of things, and she’s way too damn good at sucking dick.

“Lark, you’re not supposed to finish me.”

Her eye is on the prize though, and she stares me down from the floor with every intention of coming out on top. I suppose I’ll just have to get a little creative so I can get her off, too.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

Her perfect fucking tongue keeps twisting around my tip, fluttering right over my slit in a pattern that's too fast to even keep track of. My knees are already shaking, and then she starts playing with my balls. I have to give in to the pull and fuck her mouth the way she's silently daring me to.

She didn't ended up getting pregnant from her last heat, which is something I think she's slightly grateful for in the aftermath, but I know we would have been ecstatic if it had come out differently.

Now, we just get to enjoy her and do the nasty all over our house when Rowan's otherwise occupied.

She hollows out her cheeks and starts sliding over me as fast as she can, sucking the cum right out of me. It shoots down her throat in pulses and waves, leaving me weak in the knees and lightheaded.

The washer behind her starts a spin cycle, so while I'm down on my knees recovering, I might as well put the position to use. "Spread them, Lark," I demand once she's sitting on the edge of the washer. I drape her knees over my shoulders and dive in.

I try to remain somewhat careful of the neatly stacked piles of laundry next to her on the dryer I walked in on her folding, while still trying to give it to her as good as I got it. Hard not to when she tastes as sweet as she does, and I have discovered how fucking fun it is to go down on her. Something about having your face buried between your woman's thighs, makes you feel really fucking manly. Especially when those glorious thighs start clamping down around you and she starts wriggling and screaming, pulling your hair and trying to fuck your face.

“Seriously Beckett? What the hell, dude? I've been trying to call you.” I flip off Blake over my shoulder but don't quit what I'm doing, because I think she's starting to get a little bit close. Her thighs are starting to do that shaky thing occasionally, so I give her a couple fingers to push her higher

“As hot as this is, we've got company coming.”

Company or not, I don't want to waste this opportunity. I'm taking advantage of her while she's vulnerable.

When I don't respond, Blake leans over me, pushing me even further into her if that's possible, so he can kiss her. The washer starts to really spin now, and that along with everything else I'm doing to her sends her over the edge. She stiffens and starts screaming, flooding my mouth as she does.

Blake kicks me out of the way, dropping his pants and sliding into her before I even realize what's going on, taking her hard and fast while she's still sensitive. Man, it's good to be mated.

I get some washcloths to clean up with while he desecrates our laundry room further, filling up a glass of water to choke down and bring to Lark. I know her throat will be dry from screaming, and I can't not take care of her.

Luckily my pants are back on when I hear someone knocking at the door, realizing that Blake was telling the truth about someone coming over.

“Can I help you?” I ask the older couple standing on my porch. There's something familiar about them, but I'm not sure I've ever seen them before.

“We're looking for our daughter,” the guy says in a slightly irritating tone of voice.

I study them and then realize they must be Lark's parents. The ones that abandoned her. I shut the door behind me as I step outside, the faint echoes of Lark still happening if you're listening carefully enough, giving my brother and mate a moment of privacy while I figure out what the hell these people are doing on my porch.

“We don't have any daughters here, Sir.” I cross my arms and lean against my door, rage filling me on Lark's behalf.

“You are the alpha's son, yes? I know she's in there.” He clearly isn't catching how I'm insinuating that they're no longer her parents.

“We're sorry to just spring this visit on you like this,” his mate says, trying to soften up his clearly gruff demeanor. “We've been trying to find her you see, and we heard she was here and we just had to drop everything and come visit. Couldn't wait another minute!” She titters, but it's clearly forced.

“I see.” I don't buy it for a second, I'm not as dumb as they think I am. “Are you aware she was rejected?”

“That's none of our business,” the guy says, face turning slightly red.

“It's simply awful what those men put her through,” Lark's mother says, trying to affect some fake sobs. “I just didn't know how to get ahold of her.”

One of the windows must be opened, because a sudden burst of Lark's laughter floats to us as she runs through the house, two pairs of feet slapping on the hardwood floors as she's apparently chased through the rooms. Fucking love how happy that laugh sounds.

“Wait here,” I tell them with all of the respect they deserve, which means none. “I'll ask my mate if she'll see you.”

“You let a woman tell you how to run your household, son?”

I had planned on opening the door after I put my hand on the knob, but I rethink that pretty quick. “You hit children, Sir? All I know of you is that you caused my mate more pain when she was already starting to go through it. I know that you couldn't keep your hands to yourself and that you didn't take care of her when she really needed you to. I know,” I continue, crowding them so they have to take a step off of my porch, “that you didn't visit her once when she was in the shelter, pregnant with your grandchild. I know you've never reached out to your grandchild, so you know nothing about him either. Don't you dare come on my property, in my pack, and try to push your fucking chauvinistic ideologies on me. You're damned right we let her run the household. She's smarter and more capable than the three of us combined. As far as I'm concerned, she doesn't have parents anymore. They were dead to her a long time ago.”

The door opens behind me, revealing a pink-cheeked Lark carrying a sleepy Rowan. He must have woken up early from all the excess noise around him. That's fine, that just means that bedtime will be easier later. “Who are you—” she starts to ask and then stops mid-sentence, face paling and then reddening again in anger. “What do you guys want?”

“Lark, honey,” her mom says, reaching out with eyes wide and on my son, but Lark twists her body so that she can't reach him.

“No. You don't get access to him. What do you want? Why are you here?”

“We've just bought a new place in town, and we heard that you had moved in here. We thought we'd surprise you for a visit! We've missed you, honey.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I take a step back so I can wrap an arm around Lark's waist, lending her some extra strength if she needs it.

“You didn't come here for a visit. You came because you must have realized who I was mated to now, and you thought you'd try and curry some favor with the next alphas.”

Snap. Her father's face flushes deep red again. “How dare you. You will speak to us with respect, Lark.”

She shakes her head. “You don't get to ambush me at my home and demand my respect. You don't deserve it. I don't forgive you for abandoning me and pushing me into an abusive mating, I don't want to talk to you, and I have nothing further to say. Please leave.” She keeps her voice somewhat soft for Rowan's sake, and then kisses him on the forehead and goes back inside, and I give her parents a salute as I follow her.

I lock the door for good measure, sinking down onto the couch next to her as she plays with the baby.

“Sorry about that,” she murmurs. “It's embarrassing that they'd show up like that.”

“Wasn't your doing, baby. You think that's really why they came?”

She sighs heavily. “Who knows, who cares. I don't need them.”

“Oh, I missed it didn't I?” Blake asks as he takes a seat on her other side. “I got word

that they'd stopped by the pack house to ask for directions here, and I was looking forward to scaring the shit out of your dad before I ran them off."

Lark rolls her eyes. Unnecessary, but yes. That would have been amusing.

We hear a car starting and tires crunching on the dirt as it pulls away, and then she relaxes a bit more. "I appreciate the amount of effort it probably took them to throw their pride down and break our no contact after all these years, but their attitudes still suck and I've got too much trauma in my life to want to pander to them."

"That's my girl," Blake praises her. "Have you thought anymore about the pack run tonight? Do you feel like going? Might as well keep this sexy-ass 'I won't take your shit' streak while we're at it."

Lark thinks about this, because any interaction with others is always a coin toss, but her smile tells me that she's feeling brave. "You know what? Yeah. Hell yeah. Let's do it. And you're right; I'm not taking anyone's shit, am I?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

Brooks, Now

"That should keep the fire fed for a bit," I say to myself as I brush off my hands and take a few steps back. It's glorious. Built halfway to the goddess, big enough to keep my girl warm when she gets here.

"Hey, Brooks."

I spin, putting my hands up defensively.

Brooklyn shakes her head and rolls her eyes, linking hands with the guy next to her.

“This is Kyle,” she says as he reaches forward to shake my hand. “One of my mates.”

I narrow my eyes at him, ready to give him a tongue thrashing.

“We're good,” Brooklyn immediately interjects, leaping between us. “Kyle and I are good. We've spent a lot of time together lately, worked through some things, and made some decisions. He's being good to me, I promise.” She angles her neck to show off a fresh mating bite.

“Congratulations,” I tell her, genuinely happy for her. Also, I can relax a bit now that I know she's not going try anything again.

“Is Lark here yet? Is she coming?”

“Yeah, she should be here any second.”

“Okay, thanks. I wanted to ask her something. We're gonna go grab something to eat over there, but if you see her, let her know I was looking for her, would you?”

“Of course, Brooklyn, I'd happy to do that.”

I keep my eyes on them as they walk off, deciding their body language shows that they actually are comfortable together, and that maybe they are really happy. One less thing for me to try and worry about, I guess.

I can feel like the second my mate gets close, the bond telling me to get over to her. Her hair looks like it's been freshly blow dried, flowing halfway down her back and reflecting some of the fire light bouncing around us.

“There you are,” I say in relief as I grab her and start carrying her to the fire. “I saved you a seat.”

I don't care what people think as I keep her legs wrapped around my waist, sinking onto the giant log I threw my sweater over to keep any other wolves from sitting on it. “Did you have a good day?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

“Your brothers double teamed me over the washing machine,” she giggles into my ear. “During the spin cycle!” She covers her mouth like she did something shocking. “Do you have any idea what that did to my orgasms?”

I throw my head back and laugh, trying to imprint this happy face of hers into my head. “What I’m hearing, is that I missed out and need to make it up to my mate.”

“I mean, I won’t stop you.”

I watch as my parents steal our baby the second they see him, leaving my brothers with empty arms and eyes tracking the woman in my lap. They can damn well try, but she’s not going anywhere. “You hungry?”

She shakes her head, looking around at the crowd gathered. “No, I’ve been snacking all day. Maybe I’ll get something later.”

“Alright, just let me know.” Then I spin her around so she can watch the fire, keeping her back pressed to me as I wrap my arms tightly around her waist.

“Oh, my parents came by.”

“I’m sorry, what? What happened?”

“Nothing really. It was pretty stupid; I think they were just trying to get into the good graces of you guys now that I’m mated to somebody they deem important. We pretty much chased them off, though.”

“Are you alright?”

“Fine,” she says waving me off. “I’m not going to let them upset me, they don't matter enough. This fire is incredible, by the way. I know you said you were good at building them, but damn.”

“Thanks. I might have made it a little too big, but I wanted to make sure you had a good time tonight.”

“You guys are here, so that's pretty much a given.”

I smack a big kiss on her cheek. “You say the sweetest things to us, Lark. Oh, Brooklyn was looking for you.”

“Where is she?”

I shrug, figuring if Brooklyn wants to talk to my woman, she'll come back and find us soon.

My brothers join us eventually, and we introduce Lark to a few people that stop by and a couple of our buddies we hang out with on occasion and their mates. My favorite thing is that none of them have anything but nice words to say to Lark, and by the time the alpha is about to make his usual pre-run pack announcements, she's got a couple phone numbers and invitations from some of the female wolves in the pack to get together sometime.

Not sure she'll take them up on the offers, but it would be cool if she found some friends she could hang out with when she wanted to.

“Alright, alright, let's bring it in,” my dad calls out, still holding my son. Rowan’s clapping, making people laugh as he tries to get their attention. He's such a ham.

“Hopefully everybody's enjoying the food, thank you to everyone that pitched in to help make it. Tonight is a special evening, as this is the first time my new daughter-in-law will be joining in a pack run. Welcome, Lark. We're very happy to have you.

“Also, we have some business to take care of. I know everybody's having a good time here, but let's remember that sometimes packs need to take care of difficult tasks.

“I've been in contact with some of the alphas from other packs, as my sons are spearheading some changes we're going to be implementing into our pack in the near future. There will be more details soon about ways to help and ways to get involved, but it's going to take all of us to make their dreams a reality.

“A very generous donor,” he says as his eyes flick to Lark, “recently upgraded the beds at the shelter out of the goodness of their heart, and that's a great solution to get things off the ground, but we're hoping to take those beds out of those rooms and move them to a series of small cabins we want to build behind the Alpha House.

“I know we've been talking about what to do with that land for years, but it's past time we take care of the wolves from our pack that reside at that shelter. They're suffering and need their pack to support them. There will be informational meetings next week at the Alpha House at the normal meeting time, and if anybody has questions or concerns or would like to donate time or materials, you're encouraged to join.

“Also, I've decided to open up communication with the Wild Pack.” There's murmuring at this, and my dad allows it for a moment before taking the situation back in his own hands. “If you don't know, many years ago the The Wilds is where we used to send wolves when they got ejected from our pack. There's a high security compound there to reform them, and we have our first set of wolves set to travel and join them tomorrow. This may be an option we keep open as we investigate things in the pack that have been overlooked.”

He starts talking about more inane things like he didn't just drop a massive bomb on everyone, but we tune him out, because Lark has gone still as stone in my hands and that's all the three of us can really focus on.

We found out a few days ago that her exes are getting pushed out of the pack, sent to a place that we haven't sent wolves to since I was probably a kid. I don't know why we stopped, but when we were talking to my dad about what to do with her exes, it felt like an aha moment.

They'll be far away so Lark doesn't have to run into them or think about them, they won't be able to interfere with her life. No one will question the heavy beating they took from us for disrespecting Lark after we met her, or ask why they're healing so slow. In short, out of sight out of mind.

Lark will be able to move on with her life knowing they're living out the rest of theirs in a shitty place, where they'll have to perform hard labor daily if they want to remain fed and sheltered.

“You okay, Lark? Say the word and we'll get you out of here.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I wait for her to exhale and relax into my arms, shaking her head no. “I’m fine. Really. It’s a relief to know I won’t accidentally run into them at the grocery store or something.”

“It’s okay if you’re taking it hard, though. Even if they were a bad part, they were still a big part of your life for a long time. They fathered your child. It’s okay to feel mixed emotions about this. You’re allowed to be sad for it, even while you’re celebrating.”

She spins and straddles me again, kissing me. “Thank you, for always knowing exactly what I need to hear.” She rests her head against mine, calming herself back down. “It’ll be an adjustment, and I can’t say I won’t think about them from time to time, but thank you guys for all the work you’ve been doing to solve that problem for me. I think this is the perfect solution.”

“I do, too. I’ve heard the wolves in charge of The Wilds are pretty hard-core. Hopefully Ivan and Trevor will finally come to realize they ain’t shit.”

“Hey Lark, do you have a second?”

Lark turns her head to see Brooklyn, offering her a real smile. “Of course.” She stands up and takes a few steps away, staying in sight of me and my brothers, who are now on the other side of the fire talking to people.

I don’t want to be nosy, but I do want to make sure nobody’s upsetting her. The women both smile a little, and even end the conversation with the teary hug. Lark looks genuinely happy for her. And then Brooklyn turns to the tree line to beckon

somebody forward, and I'm up out of my seat quickly, because Camden is here.

“Easy, Alpha,” he says quickly, baring his neck in submission. “I'm not here to cause trouble.”

My grunt is all I say in response, making it clear I won't leave my girl's side. “Actually it's good you're here,” he tells me. “I'm starting my mandatory volunteer work at the shelter tomorrow, doing repairs and such.”

“Did you hear about the club?” Lark asks him with zero voice affectation.

He nods, clearly upset about it, but wise enough not to say anything negative. “I did. I'm happy that the shelter is going to get something it needs. And mom,” he says, giving her his sole focus, “I'd like to work on this. Whenever you're ready. I know it's going to take time, but I've been doing a lot of thinking and asking questions I never thought to ask, learning things I wish I could unlearn.

“I'm so sorry,” he says as his voice breaks, and he falls to his knees in front of Lark. “I'm so damn sorry, Mom. I don't think I wanted to know how bad it was for you, because I felt like a king. I just told myself you were fine, that you smiled enough so it couldn't be too bad, and that I'd deal with it later. Well, later never came, did it?”

He's full on crying now, and he bends down to put his head on the forest floor in front of my mate, showing submission and respect. “I'm going to find a way to make everything up to you, Mom. I promise. I don't want to throw my life away like they did, I want to be better.” This he aims at Brooklyn, who seems somewhat affected by the speech, too. I can tell there's a promise in those words to her, that that promise goes for her as well.

“And I don't want to ruin your night,” he continues, “but I just wanted you to know that I love you. I love you, and thank you for everything you've given up for me. I

know I've been such an asshole, but I'm going to try and earn my way into being the son you should have had all along. I...want to be there for you, to be a part of your life again. My head is starting to clear, and I've lost the rose-colored glasses. I want my dads to pay for everything they did to you, and I know I need to pay for my part in that, as well."

He doesn't wait for her to respond, but he does press his forehead into the tops of her shoes before shifting and running off.

"We'll talk more later, okay?" Brooklyn asks, gently holding Lark's arm in comfort before turning off with her mates to go run. Cam pauses before disappearing, sending up a loud howl to the moon in Lark's honor.

Well.

I start looking around as my brothers come up to meet us, trying to see if there are any more surprises we need to deal with. "Looks like we're getting our happy ending, doesn't it? Everything seems to be falling into place."

Lark smiles and nods, easily falling into the middle of all three of us without much thought. "Couldn't have planned it better if I wrote it myself," Lark says, still slightly in shock and maybe a little hesitant about her son's speech. "I hope working at the shelter teaches Camden some godsdamned manners. I think he's got himself a good mate though. She's gonna make him work for it, which is exactly what he needs."

"Speaking of needs..."

"You're not fucking me here, Beckett," she spits, eyes amused but trying not to be, before yanking her shirt off.

She steps out of her jeans, making me want to groan at how luscious her legs look in

the firelight. Nobody else is looking, because they like their tongues and their eyes attached to their bodies, but then she shifts into a gorgeous wolf, and we're all staring at her, so damn happy it hurts.

She nips at my ass trying to get me to play, and there's no way I'm going to leave her hanging. I playfully snap my jaw at her once I'm shifted as well and I pounce on her, having an incredible time rolling through the pine needles and chasing her through the trees.

As we run, it's almost as if we can feel mother moon smiling down at us, encouraging us to live life to the fullest and make every moment important.

We run as a pack, the paws of the pack at large surrounding us, and the knowledge that when we're all tired and ready to go home, Lark will be in our arms between us, while our son she's decided to adopt (we had to persuade her hard for that one, let me tell you) sleeps down the hall, safe and sound in his room that Lark has been filling with all sorts of books they can read together.

We'll figure out how our work schedule looks, and we'll start showing Lark the ropes when it comes to construction because she's decided that's something she wants to do with us.

So our little family's going to flourish and be the happiest, most awful to be around pack in existence.

Me and my brothers don't care if she tames the shit out of us, because we've never been better.

I'm not sure about everything our future will bring, but I do know I'll have the strength of my pack behind me, braving and overcoming anything.

We might have started our story as broken wolves, and goddess knows we all got lost along the way, but thanks to Lark taking a chance on us, and a big helping of luck and guidance from the goddess, we're ending this story with an ellipsis.

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:13 am

I know we'll live happily ever after, just as I know that somewhere else, another wolf is waking up to start their own journey.

Maybe the goddess doesn't make mistakes. Maybe we all made the mistake of not trusting in her, in thinking our past was going to define us.

So tonight, we'll run and live, and then we'll get up and do it all again tomorrow.

Storm Pack out.

P.S.

Maple bars taste fucking delicious when they're celebrating finally being rid of their exes.

Especially when they're all hyped up from a good run and a good heaping of closure.

Wait, I think I lost the analogy...