



Aching for His Mate (The Wolves of Luven #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: For a woman who wants to run, he might be the only one who can get her to stay

As a citizen of the southern lands, Domitia is used to moving around. She's sailed the seas, hopped from city to city, and never stayed in one place very long. When the dragons grabbed her on a raid and traded her to the wolves, suddenly she's living in a wolf city and expected to take part in some very animalistic rituals.

While Iota's friends have spent the last months pairing off and beginning their happily ever afters, he's been impatiently waiting in the wings. All he's ever wanted is to find his mate, but the moment he's paired with Domitia, the threat of wild wolves on the border of Luven has him leaving her behind to protect the city.

When a brutal attack leaves Iota injured and broken, Domitia steps into her place as his caregiver. With a stubborn wolf acting the part of terrible patient and a strong woman determined to make their relationship work, this pair will have to relinquish their independence and open their hearts and minds to building a future together.

Total Pages (Source): 27

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:11 am

Summer heat was hell for wolves, and June was upon them in all her sunny glory. Iota finished his shift of patrolling, then found his discarded t-shirt and wiped the sweat off his brow. He ached for the cool days of autumn, which seemed eons away after a shift like that. The sun had beat down all day long with only a few puffy white clouds drifting by around midday.

It had been near torture.

Iota jogged through the woods of east of Luven until he came to the lake. Surprisingly, it was empty, but darkness was coming quickly, and most of the families that filled the water during the day would be headed home before full dark.

Good. Iota wasn't in the mood to dive among splashing families or mates stealing glances and gropes beneath the surface of the water before heading home to be alone.

Iota dropped his shirt and stepped out of the rest of his clothes then dove into the cool water. On a day like this, it still felt warm to him, but better than the air. Autumn couldn't come soon enough, and he still had a solid three months of this heat.

It had been a long shift. The roaming wolf packs were coming closer to Luven these days, so anyone working security had switched from twenty-four hours on, thirty-six hours off, to thirty-six hours on, twenty-four hours off. Plus, Gamma and Epsilon both had pregnant mates, so they were working the areas much closer to the city, while Iota and the other security workers were going much further out. It was a rule in place in case there was an emergency, or in Gamma's case, if Jaine went into labor. Iota hadn't seen her in a week or two but the last time he did, he could not imagine her not giving birth immediately, by both the swell of her belly and her

insistence at lunging while walking to try to get the baby out.

Hopefully some of the younger wolves in Luven would choose to join the security team and the hours would go back to normal.

He ducked under the surface and tried to cool his head off. The water rushed through his hair, and Iota finally relaxed. He'd been feeling off lately. The weird hours at work alongside his entire friend group suddenly flush with mates and babies on the way had him bent out of shape. So much was changing.

Iota popped back up and shook out his hair. He was letting it get a little longer, and his beard was a bit wilder as well. He should shave it all off now that summer was here. Hell, if he weren't a wolf, he'd shave the pelt on his chest, but that was considered nearly blasphemous. The Moon Goddess gave him his chest hair, and he wouldn't offend her by shaving.

He floated on his back and closed his eyes, reflecting on his last shift. At least, his territories had been quiet. He caught a couple scents of unknown wolves on the wind, but they stayed away, far out of the scope of Luven. They didn't police the whole of wolf territory, only made sure that none of the bands came too close. There were rules in Luven, ones most wild wolves didn't want to follow, so they were not welcome.

He pulled himself out of the lake, shook off, redressed, and headed back into the city.

Iota could muscle together some plans tonight, even if they weren't ideal.

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"We're planning a trip to Muchan for the winter this year. You should come!" Iota's mom passed him a plate piled high with venison steaks, homemade bread, garlicky

greens, and a fruit salad of strawberries and herbs with honey.

“I don’t think I can get work off for an entire season.”

“Oh, but just for a bit? You know Sayla would love to see you. And her twins are going to be five. When was the last time you saw the girls?”

“They were about three.” Iota’s older sister lived in the other major wolf city, about a four-day run or nine day walk south of Luven.

“It’s been too long. And it’s too hot to go there anytime other than winter.” His mom pulled a face.

Iota smiled. “I’ll think about it.”

“I heard,” his dad began coming to sit beside him, “there is another ritual tomorrow.”

“There is,” Iota confirmed.

“Crazy times. When we moved into Luven, there was maybe one human a year. Now, they’re flooding in.”

“I wouldn’t call less than ten flooding,” Iota pointed out. “And a bunch were traded. They didn’t really have a choice whether they came to Luven. Plus, Millonia left with Sigma.”

“Hm,” his dad grumbled. “I don’t like the attention it’s garnering from outsiders. Too many non-citizens sniffing around after these humans trying to find their mates. It’s no wonder Alpha has you working these crazy hours at security. If you ask me, we should be a little more critical as to who we invite into our borders.”

Iota fought the urge to roll his eyes. Sure, Iota didn't love roaming packs hanging out at the borders of Luven, especially given his job was to deal with these wolves. But his dad sounded so...old. Luven, in this iteration, had been around for under fifty years. It wasn't like some long-lived institution. So there were more humans now, what of it? Clearly the Moon Goddess had it planned out. Five of his friends had found their mates among humans. Four of them in the last half year. Who was he to disparage the plans of their deity?

"Let's talk about something else," his mom interrupted. "Iota, any plans to move out of the townhouse?"

He stifled a groan. "Not yet, Mom. The townhouse is working fine for me."

"Yes, but what if you find your mate, and she wants six kids! Better to be prepared."

"And what if I never find my mate? I can cross that bridge when I come to it." He exhaled slowly. "Tell me about your herb garden, Mom. The salad is amazing." Iota watched his mom light up, and just like that any thought of him moving or settling down was extinguished from the conversation.

He spent the rest of the night chatting lightly with his parents before heading home alone. They meant well, but the older Iota got, the harder it became to simply talk with them. Now that he was nearing thirty, there were always questions about the future, and frankly, he didn't have any of the answers.

He turned down his street, dotted with lights, and looked down the row of houses. A few weeks earlier, Rho, Sigma, and Lambda would have been sitting on the steps, shooting the shit, drinking beers, and happy to see him.

Now, the steps were empty. Sigma had gone off to Juniper Knoll with his mate, Millonia. Rho and Lambda were spending their evenings with their own mates.

Occasionally, they still had big dinners, but those were planned out ahead of time now. Spontaneous hangouts were over.

Iota looked up at the sky, the white face of his Goddess glowing among the fainter stars.

“Please,” he whispered. “I just want to find her.”

He didn’t pray often; it wasn’t a marker of his species. The Moon Goddess watched over them, but she didn’t expect worship. There were no temples or sacrifices made in her name. But on dark nights, Iota couldn’t help but call out to Her.

Iota wanted his mate. Badly. He tired of waiting, hoping for her to appear to him. He felt like he was trapped in a limbo until she arrived. He couldn’t make any plans. When his mother asked him to go to Muchan, all he could think was that he hoped she would be here by then. That he couldn’t go to Muchan because he’d be spending his first Midwinter in Luven with his mate. They’d buy cakes from Chi and spend cold, snowy mornings wrapped around each other.

He couldn’t conjure a face when he thought of her, only a feeling. That missing piece finally slipping into his soul and making him whole.

His mate.

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Domitia Helena Aetos had lived many lives in her twenty-seven years. She had traveled across the sea and worked shipping lanes along the southern coast. She had slept in taverns and cooked for sailors and learned bits and pieces of more languages than most people knew existed.

Born to a desperate woman hoping this continent held better prospects than her own did, Domitia and her mother found them much the same, but at least here, there was work to be had. So they lived off the sea—the trade it brought, the people it brought, even the death it brought. Domitia's mother, who was called Lydya by those who were not her daughter, held funeral services for those lost to the waters, collecting shells and rocks and bits of seaweed to stuff into glass jars and bury instead of bodies that would never be found.

As far as Domitia knew, her mother still lived in Javel, helping newly arrived people grieve those who hadn't made it.

She hadn't stayed still in Javel, though. Domitia took jobs on ships, sometimes returning and seeing her mother, sometimes leaving for years at a time, finding work in other coastal cities. She lived like a sailor—never in port for very long—until the raid on Fent. That led to three years with the dragons and all the ill it brought her.

And now, she sat in a hospital in Luven, a city nowhere near any coast, where the scent of the sea had completely disappeared from her hair and begun to fade from memory.

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“Ready for PT?” a very chipper Omicron entered her room.

Domitia groaned. Yes, she loved the side effects of doing these exercises. Hell, yesterday she’d been able to grip a cup for five seconds before dropping it, but it absolutely wore her out. Domitia never thought she’d sweat trying to hold something with her hand.

Only Domitia would have the poor luck to be both right handed and then break that arm so badly it had been unusable for a year and a half.

“What are we working on today?”

“Writing utensils.” Omicron revealed a handful of pencils with varying thickness.

“Do I need to write?” she asked, moving from her bed to the chair in the room. Omicron wheeled over the moveable tray and lowered it to her height.

“Need? No. But you might want to. Do you know how to read and write?”

“Yes.” Domitia had kept monstrous lists at many of her jobs. From recipes to needed ingredients to manifests and supply lists. She could write in English, Spanish, and Portuguese plus she could read a bit of Italian and French.

At least, she could three years ago. She wasn’t sure if all that had been lost during her time with the dragons. “I’ve learned to do most things with my left hand, though. It’s gotten much stronger over the past year.”

“Writing might not be as easy for you with your left hand. Takes a bit more finesse. And it’s a good skill to keep. Most of the citizens of Luven can read and write. Did you ever go to school?”

Domitia suppressed a snort. School? No. Never time for anything like that. But her mother had seen the positives in teaching her daughter skills which could earn money. Domitia was never going to be a sword for hire (too squeamish) or a prostitute (she couldn't feign interest if her life depended on it) so if she wanted to eat, she needed skills. She didn't have her mother's calm nature to help people see the other side of their grief. That woman had lost everything other than her daughter, yet still surrounded herself with death. But, Domitia supposed she ended up losing her as well.

"I did not go to school. But, sure. Let's see if I can grip a pencil."

An hour later, Domitia's right arm was packed with ice and she was breathing through the pain.

This was all so fucking hard. She tried to stay positive, to focus on the strides she'd made—hell, before coming to Luven, her arm was basically useless. But that didn't stop her from dreaming—if she had never been taken, never gone to Balaur, never left the sea.

She pulled her blanket over her body and tried to conjure the smell of the saltwater, and the feel of the warm breeze against her face as the ship cut through the deep teal water in summer. She thought of the taste of crispy fish against her tongue, seasoned with chili peppers and cilantro, a fat slice of tomato on the side...

Her stomach growled.

The food in Luven was good, better than anything she'd had in Balaur, but she still missed the food of the southern cities, cooked over open flames or eaten straight off the vine.

She rolled onto her left side and carefully tucked her right arm beside her, still

wrapped in ice. She'd let herself daydream a little longer before having her standard meal of venison and potatoes.

What she would have given to have an arm thrown over her. She didn't crave a mate—though one might be coming anyways. She only wanted someone to touch her. To hold her. Domitia wanted a warm body against her own. It didn't matter if they were destined to love each other or even like each other. She only wanted someone.

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"That might be as good as it gets," Dr. Tau explained as she tested Domitia's grip. "How's the pain?"

Domitia shrugged. "Nothing compared to what it was. The real pain is when I'm working it. I get a little achy in the evenings, but I barely notice it. If you told me a year ago, I could have felt this good if only I murdered Vallie, hell, I would have thought it over."

"Oh, fuck you," Vallie laughed and rolled her eyes. Her best friend stood next to her bed, insistent on being present for any important doctor meetings.

"I don't know, Vall. This is pretty unbelievable." Domitia raised her arm, bent it slowly at the elbow, then opened and closed her hand gingerly.

"Yeah, no shit. I can't believe they didn't cut it off when we got here. Hell, I would have cut it off if the dragons had given us any sort of sharp objects and fire to cauterize the wound."

"Let's all be thankful the two of you made it to Luven before Vallie attempted surgery." Dr. Tau turned back to Domitia. "I believe you know what this means."

Domitia nodded.

“She’s going to get railed by Alpha and then be able to come to my house for dinner!” Vallie jumped up and down in celebration.

“I’m glad you are so excited at the prospect of me fucking Alpha,” Domitia said dryly.

“Oh, you’ll be fine. Trust me.” Vallie leaned toward Dr. Tau. “No secrets between the two of us. She can handle two-ish minutes with Alpha.”

“Two? Wow. Lucky woman who ends up with that one,” Domitia snorted.

In truth, she didn’t really care. She wasn’t a virgin or a prude or someone who believed sex was for love. She’d had plenty of it in her time before Balaur, for lots of different reasons. There were men she liked, men she needed, and men who had something she wanted. Alpha fit into at least one of those categories at the moment, so it would be fine. Plus...while she didn’t relish the idea of being fucked in front of an audience, there would be a bit of touching. She’d lean into that if she could.

“I’ll contact the wolves and let them know you are ready for release,” Dr. Tau continued. “With scheduling, the ritual will probably be in two days. You’re still sure you want to stay?”

“Of course,” Domitia answered quickly. While there was a chance she could make it to Javel and find her mother, there was also a chance she could get captured by another group—dragons, wild wolves, vampires—and end up in a much worse place than living in a city with her best friend. “I can’t wait to have dinner with Vallie after I have sex with Alpha in front of a bunch of wolves.”

“Lucky for you the bunch has dwindled considerably with all these new pairs. I think

there are only ten unmated wolves over twenty years old at the moment. Maybe your mate is among them.””

Domitia shrugged. “Maybe.”

A mate. Domitia had never given much thought to a forever person—or wolf—until Tella explained it all. She had been content to sail through life with people who came and went, no constants.

But, someone to depend on? Forever? It sounded like a dream, and a nice one at that. But Domitia wasn’t holding her breath. So far, her life had been anything but predictable. She would more likely be stuck in Luven without a mate and without anyone interested in a one off, if her luck of the past few years continued.

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It was a hot summer evening, and Domitia threw open the window in Verona’s room. Occasionally, the women still in the hospital snuck away from the watchful eyes of nurses and doctors, and simply sat and talked. Like normal women. They could leave behind their past of dungeons and captors and simply be a group of friends enjoying the breeze on a summer night.

Eelia sat in a chair in the corner, and Natya laid next to Verona in her bed. She technically wasn’t supposed to be out of her room since she was still healing, but what was the harm in a few minutes?

“Thank the Moon Goddess Vallie got the two of you, or else I’d be all alone after tomorrow,” Eelia said wistfully. “Though, I am so glad you are finally healed Domitia.”

Domitia raised an eyebrow. Thank the Moon Goddess? What the fuck? Eelia had

been here as long as Domitia, yet she'd picked up the religious customs here a little quickly. Domitia didn't give thanks to any deities, least of all ones she hadn't known existed before spring.

"How much longer does Dr. Tau think you'll have to stay?" Natya asked. She was still gaunt, but better than when she arrived as a refugee. The infection she'd left Balaar with had been a hard one to beat, and after several rounds of antibiotics trying to find one that worked, Natya was finally focusing and gaining strength, rather than just not dying. But she'd showed Domitia the wicked scar it had left on her hip, proudly claiming it to be her exit fee.

Eelia shook her head. "We aren't sure. My...ailments...are more difficult to see and heal."

"What about you, Verona?" Domitia quickly changed the focus. She wasn't sure what was going on with Eelia but she was certain it wasn't any of her business. While Domitia's arm was hard to miss, especially before her surgeries and physical therapy started helping, she didn't love getting bombarded with questions when it came to the actual injury.

"Not much longer. Because Bedek treated me so well, comparatively," she added, "I'm pretty healthy already."

"Comparatively," Domitia reiterated. "Still an asshole dragon."

Verona nodded. "Another dead one."

Natya chewed on her lips nervously. Domitia felt for her. She was the only one in the room whose captor still lived. Hakkan, Phaebe's former dragon husband and Natya's captor, was alive and well in Balaar as far as they knew.

“Hey,” Domitia said quietly, “maybe whoever your mate is will rip Hakan’s throat out in front of you like Epsilon did with Cade.”

Natya smiled a little. “Maybe.” She shifted off the side of the bed. “I’m pretty tired. I think I’ll go back to bed.”

Eelia stood and wrapped her arm around Natya. “I’ll walk you there. Goodnight, you two. Domitia, good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I’ll come visit afterward.” Domitia promised. She watched them leave the room then turned back to Verona.

“You okay?”

“Of course,” Verona answered quickly. “No big injuries, not starving.”

Domitia nodded. “You know, your sister saved me, both literally and figuratively, in that dungeon.”

“I’m sure she did. She saved a lot of us.”

“Yeah. I want you to know that I care about you. Even though we don’t really know each other, I feel like I know you. If you ever need anything, and you don’t want to go to Vallie, I’m here.”

Verona smiled a little. “That means a lot. It really does.” She sighed. “I guess we’re a little bit in limbo here? We don’t truly know what the future holds. Mate, no mate, Luven, no Luven—”

“If you leave Luven, I think Vallie will flip out.”

Verona laughed. “Millonia left Luven.”

“You’re not Millonia.”

“I know, I know. I can’t imagine leaving but...I’m going to have to fuck someone who has fucked my sister.”

“And Tella and Phaebe and me and one day Natya and Eelia...”

“It’s kind of gross.” Verona shuddered. “I haven’t been with anyone since Maidenhead and I can’t believe I have to fuck some old wolf.”

“It isn’t ideal,” Domitia agreed. “But—again just putting this out there—Vallie will lose her damn mind if you don’t. Not that I’m saying you have to. But, you know, lots of shit is gross. You took care of a dying dragon for years.”

Verona laughed. “That was different. I can handle fluids and sick people fine.”

“So if Alpha only had to come all over you, that would be cool?”

“Domitia!” Verona cackled. “Now, that is gross.” She giggled. “Get out of here, I have to go to bed. And you need to sleep before you bang that wolf.”

“I’ll let you know how gross it is. I’ll see you soon, Verona.”

“See you soon.”

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“Do we have a human ready to join the Luven pack?” Hadie nearly sang as she entered Domitia’s room.

“Uh, yes?”

“Sorry. I have never been so busy in my entire life, and I love it. Let’s go!”

Domitia picked up her bag and followed an extremely chipper Hadie to the door. In the small hallway, all the women of Balaur were standing in their thresholds, ready to see her off.

“Good luck,” Verona said.

“I hope it isn’t too bad,” Natya added.

“You will do fine,” Eelia interrupted, throwing Natya a look. “Before you know it, you’ll be living in Luven and enjoying everything this fair city has to offer. The Moon Goddess watches over all of us, her chosen flock.” She offered a reassuring smile. “Be sure to visit us when you have time. If you have a mate, don’t hurry back. Take your time with him. The Goddess would want it that way.”

“Okay,” Domitia answered, raising an eyebrow. Eelia was so strange. Had she always been super religious? None of them knew her well in Balaur. She’d been one of Cade’s servants, not a pet, so she didn’t live with them. They saw her at parties while she passed food around, cleaned, and kept the wine cups overflowing. Maybe she was from an area of the continent where everyone spoke like that and gave heed to gods they’d only just learned of.

Domitia hugged each of them, then followed Hadie out of the hospital and to pack housing where she would prepare herself for the ritual.

Another chapter of her life closed and a new one opened, one with more freedom, but no sea, in the woods of the north.

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Iota woke up, made his bed, and took a shower. There was a ritual in an hour and for the first time, he wasn't meeting anyone beforehand. Sure, he knew some of the other single wolves, but he wasn't friends with them. There was no one to sit beside and hold back, or anyone to hold him back anymore. Epsilon had Tella, Rho had Phaebe, Sigma had Millonia, and Lambda had Vallie. Iota had no one. Not even a solitary good friend without a mate.

He padded down to the kitchen to grab some breakfast before leaving. He'd never been so depressed in his life. Hell, Rho had a mate! Baby Rho! It was insane. He knew the Moon Goddess didn't operate on "fairness" but hell. It definitely felt unfair. He was nearly twenty-eight, mateless, and lonely. His last half-hearted relationship with another wolf had been seven years ago and ended abruptly when her mate came to Luven.

He washed and dried his dishes, took some chops out of the freezer to thaw for dinner tonight. Maybe he'd see if...Chi wanted to hang out. He kept to himself, but he was nice enough. And he might bring something delicious from the bakery.

Yeah. Iota would invite Chi to dinner tonight. He could entice that lone wolf into some company. Well, he could try.

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The streets were bustling this summer morning. Wolves going to work, families going to the lake, everyone had somewhere to be. Iota caught a glimpse of Beta hurrying into the auditorium. He'd be in the audience with the rest of the unmated wolves.

Iota suppressed a shudder. Since Beta turned twenty, he'd had to watch his father initiate every human woman in Balaur. Iota imagined that Beta didn't pray to the Moon Goddess for any mate. He needed a wolf mate. Otherwise...he couldn't imagine the hell that would follow.

"Good morning."

Iota turned and found Chi walking a few paces behind him. "Oh, hey Chi!" he replied a little too cheerfully. "How are you?"

"Fine." Chi exhaled. "We could sit beside each other. Help out if it's one of our mates."

"That would be great, thank you."

"Promise you will not react like Epsilon? Or Sigma?" Chi continued. "I do not want a separated shoulder. Midsummer feasts will be here soon and I'll be swamped at work."

Iota smiled. "I'll do my best. You the same?"

"Of course. I cannot imagine what they felt, but I also have no interest in murdering anyone. Least of all, wolves I know and live beside."

Iota nodded. But the truth was, neither of them knew. Once his mate walked into his life, Iota had no idea how he would act. He might burn down all of Luven to get her away from Alpha.

He hoped he wouldn't do that. Especially since his parents and all his friends lived there.

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Contrary to the bright summer morning, the auditorium was darkened. There were no windows, only low lights on the floor where Alpha, Hadie, and whoever walked in would be. Iota and Chi found seats with the ever-lessening group of unmated wolves. There were a few new faces—often younger wolves came to Luven looking for work or a mate or simply a home they did not need to defend on a daily basis.

“How many more women are waiting to be released?” Chi asked.

“I think three after this one.” Iota kept his voice low.

“Hm. It has been an odd year.” Chi crossed his arms across his chest and settled into his seat.

Iota blew out a breath and looked at the dwindling group. Maybe Luven wasn’t where he was supposed to find his mate. Maybe the Moon Goddess had created a path for him to Muchan. His mate could be living in the southern city, or along the road there. Iota liked living in Luven, but there wasn’t much of a point in staying there if he was to remain mateless and unhappy here. No luxuries were worth living a lifetime alone.

He resolved to go to Muchan for the winter with his family. He’d figure out work somehow. It didn’t mean he had to live there forever, but giving himself a chance to find a mate was better than sitting around and waiting for one to come to him. He was the wolf, the man. He was a hunter. He should have been spending his days off searching for her—running to Juniper Knoll and the other settlements, meeting Rho’s sisters and the wolves who lived in small communities. Yet, he’d spent years hoping his mate would fall into his lap in Luven. He shook his head. He’d been such a fool—

Mine!

She was here. Her scent wafted through the room like a merciful cool breeze at midsummer. She smelled like starry nights and rushing water. She was already deep in his soul, knitting herself through every fiber of his being. His girl. His love. His forever.

“Welcome, Domitia.”

Domitia. Iota had never heard such a beautiful name in his entire life. He would whisper that word over and over for the rest of his days.

He slowly got to his feet so he could see her face. Chi eyed him, but didn’t move to tackle him to the ground.

Her hair was a beautiful mess of curls, and a million colors—amber, hickory wood, the sweet shine of maple syrup—it would take him years to pick out all the colors catching the low light. Domitia. She turned to the side and he saw her face for the first time. Round cheeks and chin, a small smirk on pillowy lips.

By the Moon Goddess she was lovely.

He wanted to run down, profess his protection, his love, his undying adoration. He wanted to fall to his knees and swear his entire soul to her.

Instead, Alpha reached out his hand and Domitia took it.

Iota took a deep breath and sat back beside Chi, who clapped his shoulder.

“Won’t be long,” he muttered. “She’ll be yours before you know it.”

Iota nodded. He was determined not to make a scene, not to give the other wolves a reason to take him to the ground. He didn’t want to scare her or make Domitia feel

any more anxious than she did.

So, he sat and wrapped his hands together, and waited for her scent to change. For it to interlace with fear or regret or pain. He needed to know how this made her feel, how she would react. It would paint the picture of how he would move forward with her. If she would need space. If she would need reassurance that Luven was a good place to live. If she would need a man to step up and promise that nothing would ever hurt her again—

Domitia smelled bored.

Alpha grunted quietly behind Iota's mate, and she smelled bored. Not hurt, not uncomfortable, just bored. Like nothing about what was happening was even slightly interesting.

A smile broke over his face.

Fuck yes, his mate was bored with another wolf. She was made for him.

He'd make sure she was never bored. He'd give her everything she wanted. Hell, she'd never be less than melting with excitement when he was behind her.

Or below her. On top of her, beside her...His imagination ran wild.

Iota left the ritual with a smile on his face. He sauntered to Alpha and Beta and told them he'd be there to pick up Domitia in a few days. He floated home with nothing but her beautiful face in his mind.

Once home, he looked on it with a new light. He was bringing his mate home. This would finally be a home.

Domitia, the love of his fucking life, was here.

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“Ritual over!” Vallie exclaimed. She had pushed her way into Domitia’s room, even though Hadie insisted it was highly inappropriate. “We’ve officially fucked the same guy!”

“Hey, me too,” Hadie added.

“And every human woman living in Luven!” Domitia quipped. Vallie came bearing a huge tray of food—thick hunks of bread, a log of herbed butter, tiny cakes, some thinly sliced meats and cheese, and sliced stone fruit. She set it on the foot of Domitia’s bed and they all crowded around it.

“Fun little club we’ve created,” Hadie said, grabbing some bread and smearing butter across it. “You know, if you didn’t bring snacks, I might have kicked you out.”

“I would have made a huge scene. Domitia knows. Also, be prepared. I plan to do the same thing when Verona gets out.”

“Thank you for the notice.” Hadie sighed. “It’s nice the group of you all got out. And now you’ll get another chance at a good life. Together.”

Domitia took a piece of cheese. “Where were you before Luven?”

“The Badlands. It’s a human territory surrounded on all sides by wolf territory. Not sure why they never took it. Probably because it’s absolutely awful there and nothing grows.”

“Well, shit,” Domitia answered.

“I shouldn’t complain. I’ve been here ten years, you’ve been here a few months and Vallie even went back to Balaur.”

“Only to get Verona! And as a bonus Natya.”

“Uh,” Domitia interrupted. “I didn’t have a shitty life before Balaur. I had a shitty afternoon that changed the course of my life, but living in the southern lands, working on the sea—it wasn’t a bad way to spend the years.” Reminiscing about life on the ocean had Domitia craving a drink. She could really have gone for a bit of alcohol. Wine or beer or a hard spirit.

“Ah yes. Domitia’s time by the sea made for good stories for us on those few quiet nights.” Vallie smiled. “And if I really couldn’t sleep, Domitia would sing to me in one of the other languages she knows. Wonderful.”

Domitia shuddered. Those days were awful, terrible ones, but now, looking back...hell, that time really bonded her to Vallie. She’d never get rid of her as a friend, no matter what happened. They were stuck together, much like they had been in Cade’s dungeons.

“Let’s take bets as to who Domitia’s mate is,” Vallie joked.

“I don’t think I have one,” Domitia countered.

“Impossible. You are too beautiful and your body is too perfect. Every wolf in there wanted to fuck you, I’m sure of it.”

Domitia couldn’t suppress a laugh. “Doesn’t matter if they wanted to fuck me. I don’t think my mate was there. No one yelled, there was no kerfuffle—just calm silence in the viewing deck.”

“Lambda didn’t make a fuss,” Vallie pointed out.

“If you say so. I think you were trying too hard to get a little something out of Alpha to notice.”

Vallie cackled. “I was! Poor Lambda. The second scent he caught off me was an attempt at coming with someone else.” She held onto her stomach while she laughed. “Oh, Alpha. Not great at sex.”

“In his defense, how could he be?” Hadie said.

“Are you saying you were into Alpha?” Domitia asked.

“Fuck, no,” Hadie laughed. “I’m saying he’s definitely trying to be as few pumps as possible. Not everyone wants to fuck a wolf with an audience.”

Vallie raised her hand as she giggled. “Too bad Lambda would never go for it.”

“I swear to god,” Domitia began, “If you orchestrate me walking in on you banging Lambda I am going to be so mad at you.”

“Relax. I’ve calmed my exhibitionist ways now that I can have an actual wolf chase me through the woods. And then catch me.” Vallie wiggled her eyebrows.

“I know too much about you,” Domitia moaned.

“I know too much about everyone,” Hadie added. “Like, way too much. Do you know how weird it is to see your boss’ orgasm face? Sometimes twice a month?”

“Gross,” Domitia laughed. “At least Alpha gives us the gift of coming at it from behind. If he’d been like, let’s missionary style this, I think I may have laughed.”

“I would have given pointers. Like, can you roll your hips a little more? Get a hand down there? Come on, man.”

Hadie burst out laughing, and fell onto the bed beside both of them. “Vallie! What would Lambda say?”

“He’d say, Vallie knows what she likes.” She smirked.

“Hell, I wish I knew what I liked.” Hadie sighed. “The last wolf I slept with was Sigma and we were...not great together. Pretty much everyone I’ve been with has been not great with me.”

“You need to find your mate,” Domitia said slowly. “Apparently any human who ends up here is destined to be with a wolf,” she added half-joking. She was still nearly certain her mate hadn’t been at the ceremony, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t wandering around here somewhere. Maybe he was lost in the woods.

“Story of my life,” Hadie groaned. “Even before...when I was in the Badlands. Never felt right with anyone. I would really appreciate if the Moon Goddess sent my mate to Luven. As soon as possible, high priority,” she laughed. “For a simple human woman who just wants a good fuck.”

“Great,” Vallie corrected. “With your mate, it’s great.”

“All right. You two are getting sappy and I might not be allowed to shower, but I can go to sleep. So, Vallie go home and have a great fuck with Lambda and Hadie...”

“I have to stay. I’ll crash on the couch. I can sleep basically anywhere.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Domitia marveled at the couch being a “bad” place to sleep. She would have traded her food for a week for the same time on something so

comfortable.

“Okay, okay, I’ll get out of here.” Vallie threw her arms around Domitia. “I’m still convinced you have a mate here, somewhere. You too, Hadie. So tonight, I bid you both sweet dreams. Dream of the face of your mate. Domitia, I’ll see you tomorrow after you are declared Alpha-fetus free. I’ll come pick you up either way.”

Domitia patted her back a few times, then let her friend go.

She changed into pajamas, pulled back the covers on the bed, and climbed in. Hadie spread a blanket over the couch and snuggled under it.

“Good night, Domitia.”

“Night, Hadie.” It was another new bed, another new place. The apartment was much quieter than the hospital. No shuffling feet down the hallway or dulled beeps from other rooms. The summer evening didn’t even have a breeze to rattle against the window.

Domitia took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Sleep still came easily to her. She was warm, fed, and safe. She couldn’t ask for anything more.

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Iota looked over the bedroom for the twelfth time. The bed was perfectly made—fresh sheets and a summer quilt spread over top. Usually Iota slept with nothing on the bed but himself these months, but he wanted Domitia to be comfortable. Especially the nights she spent in their bed alone. He wanted to buy her clothes, but he wasn't sure what she liked or what size she was, so he decided to leave that until after they'd had some time to get to know each other.

He walked through the rest of the house, double checked that the bathroom was spotless and two new towels hung beside the shower. He had gone to the market and gotten fruit and vegetables, thawed enough meat to feed her for a week, and picked up four different kinds of cake from Chi. Iota couldn't be sure which flavors she preferred so he decided it was better to simply have everything.

Three loud knocks on the door made him jump, but he hurried over and opened it.

"She's not pregnant," Beta said matter-of-factly. "You can pick her up from pack housing. Room seventy-three. Her name is—"

"Domitia," Iota finished.

"Correct. Please refrain from going within one hundred yards of Alpha until your rage towards him has quelled. Studies show this takes between three and six months." Beta sounded like he was reading from a script.

"If she doesn't mind, I don't mind," Iota answered through a smirk. Why would he care about Alpha? He didn't hurt Domitia and she wasn't into him so there was no reason for him to feel any kind of way towards that wolf.

“Still, please stay away from him in case your beast feels differently. Dr. Tau gave Domitia recommendations for continued treatment, which she has all the information for.”

“Wait, what? Why does she need continued treatment?” Iota felt panic rise. “Is she not well? I thought the hospital didn’t release anyone until they were cleared.”

“She has long term consequences from her time in Balaur that can be helped by regular appointments. She can fill you in on particulars, I was not given them.”

Suddenly, Iota didn’t feel so calm. The dragons hurt Domitia so badly she still needed care after months in the hospital? What the fuck did those monsters do to her?

“Iota, your eyes are flooding black. We recommend not meeting a human mate with your wolf pressing against your control.”

“I’m fine,” he said quickly, concentrating on calming the wolf. The dragons weren’t here, Domitia was safe in Luven. She would be even safer with him. He’d never let anything bad happen to her again.

“You sure? She’s human and might not understand—”

“I know how I have to behave with my mate,” Iota cut. He shook his shoulders out and stepped onto the porch, shutting the door behind him. “I’ll collect her now. Thank you for the information you’ve given.”

Beta nodded. “Good luck and congratulations. I wish you all the happiness.” It sounded like his second command was reading off a script. Which after the flood of new mates Luven had experienced, probably wasn’t far from the truth.

“Thanks, Beta,” Iota answered and walked past him. Now that he knew Domitia was

ready, it was taking all his control not to shift and race down the streets.

But meeting his mate completely naked, in either wolf or man form, was probably not how she envisioned their meeting going. Hell, it wasn't how he envisioned it either. He wanted her to fall in love with him, at least a little, and the wolf wasn't an easy sight to take in for non-wolves.

He jogged down the street, noticing that he started sweating immediately, then stopped and walked more slowly. If he kept running, he might stink by the time he got there. He crossed the street to walk in the shade and willed his legs to calm down.

"Iota!" Gamma called from down the street. He had Celyn in his arms and Renny walking beside him.

"Hey," Iota yelled back and his voice cracked a bit. Fuck, he needed to quell these nerves.

"She all clear?" Gamma asked once Iota stood in front of him.

"Yup."

His friend smiled and nodded once. "Then I won't keep you. As always, once she's settled, we'll have everyone over. Maybe not right away. After we get settled with the new baby."

"Thanks."

"Now, go on. Get your mate."

"Iota has a mate?" Renny piped up.

“He does. Now, we’re going to leave him alone so he can spend time with her.” Gamma winked as Iota continued on his way.

“What does mate actually mean?” Iota heard Renny ask. He smothered a smile as he continued on, wondering how Gamma would explain that to a three-year-old.

Iota got to pack housing without any other stops and took a quick look at his reflection in the glass door. He’d taken his beard down to a light stubble and knotted his hair in a bun at the nape of his neck. Should he have cut it? Too late now. He pushed through the door, and took the stairs over the elevator.

Iota made his way to room seventy-three and knocked. He blew out a breath and closed his eyes, his heart bouncing around his chest in anticipation.

“Holy shit! Iota? Iota! Yes!!” For some reason unknown to him, Vallie stood in the threshold instead of Domitia.

“Uh,” he mumbled. “Do I have the wrong room?”

“No, no! She’s here!” Vallie finally stepped out of the way and revealed Domitia sitting on the foot of her bed, eyes as wide as full moons.

“Hi,” he breathed. “I’m Iota.”

She smiled softly. “I gathered as much from listening to Vallie scream.”

In that moment, locking eyes with his mate, a smile playing over her lips, he knew he was done for. He would do anything for this woman. He knew why Beta said he needed to stay away from Alpha because if she asked him to burn Luven to the ground, he’d do it.

“I am so excited! This is perfect. Domitia and I are best friends. We’ve been really close ever since...well, Cade chained us together in the dungeon.” Iota felt his rage start to bubble at the mention of his mate’s ill treatment in Balaur. “She is the most amazing person, you are so lucky to be mated with her! And she’s so hot. I mean, right? Look at the body on her.”

Domitia’s cheeks pinkened a bit and she looked down as she rolled her lips between her teeth.

“Ah! This is amazing. The four of us can hang out all the time! I invited Domitia to dinner tonight, but you’ll probably want to spend time together. As soon as you’re done with the non-stop fucking though, you two should totally come over. It’ll be a blast. We can all get drunk and tell stories and—”

“Vallie,” Domitia interrupted. “I’ll see you later.”

Vallie giggled and nodded. “Right.” She gave Domitia a quick hug. “Have fun! Remember what I said... great. ”

“I remember, now get out of here.”

Vallie scooted out of the room, giving Iota’s shoulder a quick squeeze as she did. He stepped into the apartment and closed the door.

Now they were alone.

He took a deep breath and let her scent invade every corner of his body. Heaven, home, right. She was here, and she was his.

“I’m Domitia. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Iota. I’m even more excited than Vallie.”

She grinned and stood up off the bed. “Yes. Vallie can be a lot. But I love her.”

He nodded and looked around the room. “I’ve never been in pack housing before. Pretty nice.”

“Yeah, comfy bed too. Cozy couple nights Hadie and I had here.”

“Did you eat breakfast? Are you hungry?”

“I already ate.” She paused and took a step closer to him. “You want to show me where we’re going to live? Vallie should be out of the elevator by now.”

“I would love to.”

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Iota led Domitia up the stairs, keeping his hand just behind her back, but not touching. It was summer; there wasn't any ice or snow, it hadn't rained in four days, but he still felt the need to have a hand out in case she slipped.

"Vallie lives three doors down. Sigma used to live next door but he moved to Juniper Knoll with Millonia."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Poor Millonia. It was all a lot for her."

"And you?" he asked as he opened the door for her.

"I'm pretty resilient."

They stepped into the house and Iota felt his anxiety rise a bit. He hoped she liked it. It was a simple townhouse, not a true house, but he took good care of it.

"Holy hell. This is nice," she commented immediately. "It's huge." She slipped her shoes off and left them by the door. "This is all for us?"

"Yes, just us here."

"Wow. Vallie told me the places were nice but I had no idea." She stood in the middle of the front room. "You have tertiary furniture?"

Iota furrowed his brow. "Uh...what does that mean?"

"Like there is a couch and a chair and a table with four chairs. You have furniture you

don't need for people who don't live here. That's insane. Wow."

Iota swelled with pride. She liked it.

Domitia turned towards him and locked eyes. She seemed to be sizing him up, really looking at him now. And her scent...

Oh, it changed.

Lust laced the air in the room. Iota's cock hardened impossibly more. She wasn't...they weren't...tomorrow. Tomorrow was the day he was supposed to touch her, make her come, and only if she wanted it. Today was supposed to be when he left her alone, showed what a good provider he would be. He was supposed to leave tonight after feeding her.

"Can I show you the kitchen?" he asked, struggling to keep his voice from cracking on the end.

"Yeah, course," she answered and followed behind him.

Fuck, he thought. It wasn't going away. If anything, her scent was becoming...more potent.

"This is it," he managed.

"Another amazing room." She ran her hand over the stove. "I can't wait to use this."

"You like to cook?" he asked.

She nodded and smiled, looking at him as she leaned against the wall. "I spent a lot of years cooking to earn my keep. Joyful times. Never cooked in a place like this." She

held his gaze like she was daring him to look away.

He wouldn't.

“You want to see the rest of the house?”

“Sure.”

Iota held out his arm to let her walk through the door first, back into the living room to the staircase that led...to their bedroom.

He blew out a breath.

“So,” she said, stopping and turning to face him. “I’ve gotten a lot of intel from Vallie.”

“About me?”

“No, about wolves in general. The connections you have with your mates. Certain things you might be able to tell.”

Iota nodded and worked down a swallow.

“That is to say, I know you can smell me right now. I know you’re trying to be all gentlemanly and follow your rules and keep your hands off me, but,” she leaned towards him and lowered her voice. “I’ve never been much of a rule follower.”

“Fuck,” Iota breathed.

“I’m not saying I want to start the whole frenzy thing now, I’m not in the headspace for days-long fucking. But three years in Balaur was a long time. And then months in

the hospital...I like to be touched. I'm no blushing virgin and I've had no sexual trauma to keep me from wanting the very attractive man who stands in front of me." She licked her lips and Iota's knees buckled. "Is it true that getting me off is almost as good as an orgasm for you?"

Iota exhaled. Was this happening? He had half a mind to pinch himself and make sure he wasn't still in his bed sleeping and late to pick up Domitia.

"I..." he cleared his throat, "I'd love to test that theory."

"Mm," she moaned, "thank god." She reached for his hands and wound her fingers through his. Her skin was a mix of soft and rough, a few calluses that were hard-earned and permanent, a scar on her left thumb from the nail bed to the knuckle. She walked backwards, taking him with her, until her back hit the wall. "I just...I need to be touched." She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest.

He suppressed a growl and mirrored her action. He pulled her body against his, tucked her head under his chin, and snuck his hands between the wall and her body. She was so soft and warm, snuggled against him. He breathed in the smell of her hair, marveled at the perfect way she fit against him, and threw up a prayer of thanksgiving to the Moon Goddess for sending Domitia to him.

"You are very muscly," she said, her voice muffled against him.

"It is a trait of my species," he explained.

"I am not complaining. You are also so warm. That's going to be nice in the winter."

"You will never be cold again," he promised. "Maybe a little overheated in the summer, though."

“I don’t mind,” she murmured and raised up to her toes and pressed her mouth against his. She didn’t open her mouth or lick his lips apart. Simply kept her mouth against his for a few moments, then pulled away.

“We don’t know each other,” she began. She moved her hands over his chest, under his shirt, against his abdomen. Her fingers extended and explored him. She teased through the hair of his chest. “But I need this. I need skin on skin. I’ve been so deprived. I just want to feel like I’m not alone anymore.”

Iota nodded and pressed his forehead against hers. He ran his hands up her arms, over her shoulders, until he could cup her chin.

He tipped her face towards his and kissed her lightly. What a lovely mate he’d been granted.

“Tell me what you want.”

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She couldn't help it.

It had been years since someone had held her. Years since she'd connected with someone physically. Domitia wasn't a prude. She didn't believe that intimacy was reserved for great love stories. Sometimes, the only way to survive this gray world was half an hour with another human, desperately trying to claw out some happiness in a passionate moment.

And this was Iota. She didn't know him, didn't love him, hell, she didn't even like him yet. But, after talking with Tella, Phaebe, and Vallie, she wasn't stupid. There was a pattern, and the Moon Goddess didn't make mistakes. If this wolf claimed she would love him someday, she had no problem believing him. Plus, he had a nice face.

There really was no point of waiting, then, right? She wanted to come. She wanted someone to hold her and touch her and make her stop thinking about her arm and her mom mourning her. She wanted a reprieve. Iota could give it to her.

His stood against her, pinned her between his body and the wall as his cock nudged against her belly. If she had any fears that he wasn't attracted to her, that would have dissuaded them.

She didn't have any fears though. Domitia loved the way she looked. She loved her wild hair, her deep brown eyes. She loved that no amount of starvation from the dragons made her lose her tits, ass, belly, or thighs.

She had a sneaking suspicion Iota would love all those things about her, too.

Plus, her mate was hot. His hair was so dark she'd call it black, his silver eyes framed perfectly by straight eyebrows, his jaw peppered with stubble she was already imagining scraping down her neck. He was strong, broad, and a bit taller than her. He looked like he'd never missed a meal or spent a moment of his life in captivity.

"Are you a jealous wolf?" she asked slowly.

His brow furrowed and he ran his thumb over her lips. "If you're about to tell me you want someone else to join us, then yes. I am a very jealous wolf." His voice lowered, almost growled back.

"I wasn't."

"What do you mean?"

"If I tell you I like something, that I want something, will you be jealous or angry thinking about me experiencing it before?"

He smirked. "As long as you only want me doing it from now on, I'll be fine."

Domitia nodded and licked her lips. "Promise?"

"Promise. Tell me what you want, Domitia."

"I want you to use your mouth on my clit," she said slowly. Vallie had been very forthcoming about what it was like to be with a wolf, but she didn't want to assume Iota would be as open as Lambda.

Iota leaned against her, burying his face in the crook of her neck and growling.

"Are you sure?" His voice was rough against her skin.

“Uh, yes.”

“You don’t want me to take things slow? Leave you alone in the house for a little while. Kiss you goodnight and then fuck off out of here?”

“Iota,” she began. Domitia gripped the hair at the base of his skull and pulled him back to look him in the eye. “If you leave me, right now, when I know that you know how wet I am...I will not be happy.”

Iota kissed her softly. “I want you to be happy.”

“Good. Take me against the wall.” Domitia slid her hands to her hips, snuck them under her skirt, and pulled her underwear off. She stepped out of them, then looked back at Iota.

He looked ravenous.

“You’re going to kill me,” he growled.

“Hopefully not.”

He kissed her again, lingering this time. She split her lips for him, tentatively touched her tongue with his, and let a moan slip.

Hell, this man...there was something about him. Sure, she was starved for touch and dying for an orgasm, but there was more here. When his hands moved over her, it felt like they belonged there. Like he belonged to her.

He moved down her body, his hands traveling over her breasts, her hips, her thighs. He got down on his knees and groaned as he raked his nails from her ass to her knees.

“Last chance to back out,” he said as he spread her thighs and hooked one leg over his shoulder. “Once I get a taste...I mean, I’ll stop if you tell me to, but I’ll probably have to get away from you.”

Domitia grabbed a fistful of his hair. “I’m not going to tell you to stop. The only thing you’ll hear out of my mouth is, ‘don’t stop.’”

Iota grunted and dove between her thighs, splitting her with his tongue.

She screamed. In relief, in ecstasy—she wasn’t sure. But Domitia had needed this, needed someone. Iota was there for her.

She leaned her head against the wall, raised her chin, and closed her eyes. She focused on the feeling of it all. The way he strummed against her, teased her clit—all of it felt amazing. She wanted to feel this so badly. Contact, intimacy, hell, nothing more than chasing an orgasm.

And currently she had a wolf on his knees willing to do that for her.

She relished the delight of building toward climax. Her skin felt cool, then hot, her blood rushed around, making her dizzy. She grabbed onto Iota’s shoulder to steady herself, and let go.

Damn, it felt good to come. She felt a twinge of guilt that it wasn’t Iota making her come. It was, but it wasn’t. At this point, she truly felt that anyone would do. That she could have gotten off by anyone. Hell, if Alpha hadn’t made it painfully clear that fucking her was an absolute chore, maybe she could have gotten somewhere with him.

If he’d managed a couple more minutes.

But, she was here with Iota, her mate, and all she wanted from him at this moment was this—pleasure.

Iota slowed his tongue, and moved to her thigh, nibbling the skin beside her core. He was so tender. Being with him was nice. Knowing that he wouldn't rob her or sell her or beat her had Domitia more relaxed than she'd ever been fucking someone in the Southlands. But she wasn't ready to love him.

That didn't mean she didn't absolutely love his mouth on her clit.

"Please," Domitia began. She kept her eyes closed and her face to the ceiling. "Don't stop yet."

"Oh, fuck," Iota groaned. "As I said. You're going to kill me."

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Iota had been told that there was nothing quite like being with one's mate. That fucking her, tasting her, kissing her, touching her—it would all be different.

Iota had fucked women and he'd licked them and made them come, but nothing, nothing , compared to going down on Domitia.

Her taste was addictive. He'd never be able to go a day without dreaming of the ecstasy of her.

He did as she said. He'd stay here all day, his face pinning her against the wall, if she asked him.

But...she didn't look at him. She didn't run her fingers over his head or grasp his hands. She'd held his shoulder while she came, but a moment later, her hand was back against the wall.

She wanted this—there was no mistaking the smell of a mate's desire—but he wasn't sure if she wanted him yet. Him above all. Him forever and no one else.

It didn't matter. It would come. It had to. Any of the stories of rejected mates were just folktales told to young wolves so they treated their mates well.

He settled the worry growing in his chest and focused on Domitia. She wanted to come again, and he would make certain she did.

Iota ran his right hand up her side, then belted it across her belly for stability. Her knees were already shaking and she needed a bit more support.

She moaned, over and over, but his name never crossed her lips. Only pants and squeaks and groans. He wanted to hear his name, but he could wait. He'd get her there.

This was the best day of his life. He still couldn't believe she was here. His mate was in his house. His mate was in his life. Hell, his mate was in his mouth right now.

"Almost there," Domitia panted. "Just keep doing that," she begged.

Iota slid over her clit, again and again, not changing a single thing, until a few moments later, Domitia went silent for a moment and then gasped.

"Okay, okay, okay," she said in quick succession and moved her leg off his shoulder and back to the ground. Iota jumped to his feet and grabbed onto her before she slid to the floor. He slipped his arms around her waist, lifted her up, and deposited her to the sofa.

"Thank you," she breathed. She slunk away from him and against the couch, then rubbed a hand over her face. "Hell, I needed that. My legs are like jelly. I don't think I'll be able to walk for an hour."

"You don't have to get up." He picked up her feet and laid them on the couch, then stood. "Stay here. Do you need anything? Blanket? Food? Something to drink?"

Domitia laughed softly. "You literally just finished eating my pussy and you are jumping on my needs already?"

"Aiming to please. So, yes. What do you need?"

Domitia shook her head and smiled. "Is it too early for some alcohol? Do you have any?"

“Beer. Would that work?”

“Hell, yes. I haven’t had a beer in years. Got anything salty to go with it?”

“Jerky?”

“Perfect. My first day out of the hospital and I’m having beer, jerky, and two orgasms before lunch. Luven really is a paradise, huh?”

Iota shrugged and went back to the kitchen. He grabbed two bottles of beer, put some jerky on a plate, and delivered it all to Domitia. In the time he’d been gone, her underwear had disappeared off the floor, so he assumed she was wearing them again. She definitely didn’t smell aroused anymore, but she still smelled content. Maybe a little sleepy. He’d have to hone his ability to detect all the little nuances in her scent.

“Blanket?” he reiterated.

“Nope. Plenty warm.” She grabbed one of the beers and took a big swig. “So you’re friends with Lambda?”

“Yeah. And Epsilon, Tella’s mate. And Rho, Phaebe’s mate. And before he left, Sigma.”

“Shit.” Domitia shook her head laughing. “All this Moon Goddess fate shit seems legit when you put it like that. Any more wolves in your little group? There’s three women left in there.”

“Not really,” Iota said. He took a seat on the chair beside the couch, wanting to give Domitia her space. “There are other unmated wolves, but that’s pretty much all of us. Gamma’s in our group, too. He’s been mated for a while though.”

Domitia ate her jerky and drank her beer and they sat in relative silence for a while. Iota wasn't certain if he should leave, or offer to show her where Vallie lived, but then, Domitia stood up, brushed her hands together, and said,

“I'm going to take a shower. Is that cool?”

“Of course,” he jumped to his feet, “you don't have to ask. I'll show you the upstairs.”

Iota showed her the rest of the house, handed her a towel, and then gave her some space. He didn't want to hover. Domitia needed to get used to the house and then she'd be able to get used to him. It was the way the wolves worked, and so far it hadn't led anyone astray.

*

“Hey. Iota. Wake up.” Iota stirred from his place on the step. He was outside...because Domitia was sleeping inside. He was protecting her. He jumped to his feet and started to shift.

“Stop! By the moon.” Beta sounded exasperated. “You're in Luven. No need to shift.” Beta looked around and tossed Iota his discarded pants. “Get dressed. You need to work today.”

“Are fucking with me? It's my second day with my mate.”

“I know. It's unorthodox, but the overnight shift smelled no less than fifty wild wolves near the border. More than one pack, and much closer than usual. We need a full shift.”

“Can't someone cover for me? Domitia just got here.”

“No. Everyone is working.”

Iota couldn't believe it. He was supposed to have this day with Domitia. He needed to get to know her.

“This is bullshit,” Iota bit back.

“It is. That is true. But at noon today, you need to be patrolling the southeastern quadrant, beyond the Cypress River.”

Fuck. Not only was he working, but he was working the far-flung areas.

“Who's working inner?”

“Gamma.”

Damn it! Iota couldn't even ask him to switch. Expectant fathers had to work the inner ring and Jaïne was about to give birth any day.

“Try to keep in mind that your work for Luven keeps the city a place where a wolf can have a human mate. I don't think you'd want to bring Domitia out into the Emptylands. You'd be killed and then she'd be killed.”

Iota felt his wolf press against him, aching to come out and tear Beta apart for simply mentioning harm coming to Domitia.

“And with that, I'm out of here. You have about six hours until you need to report. See you then.”

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Domitia woke to the sound of someone clanging around the kitchen.

She hoped it was Iota.

She stretched and rolled out of bed after the best sleep of her life. Domitia was pretty certain she closed her eyes, passed out immediately, and hadn't even twitched a toe in the last ten hours. She threw on a pair of shorts, used the bathroom, then walked downstairs to either see Iota or confront an intruder.

Thankfully, her wolfy mate was the one making a racket in the kitchen. He had two frying pans and a pot on the stove and a full breakfast laid out on the table.

"Uh, good morning?" Domitia said.

"Hi. Breakfast is on the table. Eggs, toast, bacon, strawberries, and I made oatmeal too. Added a bit of maple syrup to that. Coffee and apple juice are in the cups."

Domitia looked over the legitimate feast in front of her and raised an eyebrow. "Are we...leaving? Do we need to eat a lot for some reason?"

"No." Iota paused his cooking for a moment. From here, it looked like he was making some sort of potato fry, a stew, and a jam. "I've been called into work. I'm not supposed to have to work for at least a week, maybe longer, but the wild wolves are close and they need everyone out there." He paused and exhaled. "I'm sorry. I should stay home and show you the city, take you to the store..."

"It's cool. I like that you have steady work." Plus, Domitia could explore a new city

without Iota. She'd done it dozens of times before. "You work security?"

"I do. Not the best hours, I'll be gone overnight a lot, but it's dependable. I'll never need to change careers."

Domitia nodded.

"I've made enough food for lunch and dinner, too. I can show you how to warm it up on the stove, if you'd like."

"Yes! Please. Teach me how to use the stove." Nothing against Iota's cooking, Domitia appreciated his initiative to feed her, but she loved to cook. She wanted to make her own meals for the first time in years.

"All right. It's pretty easy. Each knob controls a different burner, and how hot you want it. I usually cook at about halfway unless I'm boiling water, then put it all the way to the right. Just turn it on a little to keep something warm."

"Got it." Domitia was going to have so fun with this. "Do you want to take some of the food to eat while you're working?"

"Oh." Iota scratched the back of his head as his cheeks pinkened. "I'll...I'll grab a rabbit or something."

"Oh! Wait. Do you patrol in your wolf form?"

"Not the whole time. But I'll definitely shift to catch my meals. I'll run too far to keep my lunch somewhere I can remember. It's more of an eat on the go situation."

"So is it always rabbit?"

“For a day like this, yes. Mainly because the population is out of control and we’re their main predator. I could take down a deer but I can’t eat a whole deer in a day and I would never want to waste that much meat.”

“So, rabbit it is.” Domitia absentmindedly stirred the stew a couple times, then tasted it. “Show me where your spices are.”

“Is the stew bad? I can make something else,” Iota offered quickly.

“No, not at all. But I really like to cook. And now that I know how to use the stove, I’ll probably want to cook for you sometimes.”

“Oh. You don’t have to. I can cook for you. That’s sort of a wolf thing. Feed our mates.”

“Okay,” Domitia answered. She wouldn’t push it. “Do you have to leave soon?”

“Yeah. About ten minutes.”

“Do you mind sitting with me while I eat?”

A smile spread across his face. “I’d love to.”

They settled in their seats and Domitia took a bite of bacon. “Tell me two things about you I don’t know.”

“Hm. I have an older sister named Bevie and last week I was planning to go visit her all winter to try to find my mate in Muchan, where she lives.”

“What! Well, thank that Moon Goddess I was released in summer. Good thing I wasn’t more injured.”

“More injured?” he prompted. “Beta said you still have some appointments.”

Domitia hesitated. She’d been trying to keep things light with him and didn’t want to deal with an overprotective wolf, especially when they barely knew each other. There was no reason for him to go all wolfy over something that happened a long time ago.

“It’s not a big deal, old arm injury. They’ve gotten it so much better though. Could barely move my right arm. Now, I can do most things. Probably shouldn’t hold a baby or anything breakable, but otherwise I’m good.”

Iota nodded and didn’t press.

“But Muchan. That’s the city in the south right?”

“It is.”

“Hadie dropped off some books for us to read in the hospital. That’s where they were printed, right?”

“Yeah. Lot of industry there.” Iota sighed. “I should go.”

“I can walk you out,” Domitia said and started to stand.

“Please stay and eat. And have a good day. I put some money on the table by the door, if you want to go shopping or anything. Vallie is three doors down if you want to see her.”

“Thanks, I’ll say hi to her. Hope work is good.”

“Goodbye, Domitia.”

“Goodbye,” she echoed.

*

Domitia waited all of three minutes after Iota left to scarf down the rest of her breakfast and then head out the door to find Vallie.

She scooted up her friend’s stairs and knocked on the door, then waited patiently for someone to answer.

Which Vallie did. Wrapped in nothing but a towel.

“Oh,” Domitia said, startled. “I can come back.”

“What? Oh, no you’re fine. Lambda got home about an hour ago, we had a quick tumble, I showered, and now he’ll be passed out for at least seven hours. What’s up? Is something wrong? Where’s Iota?”

“Had to work. Until tomorrow. Was not happy about it at all.”

“Whoa. I didn’t think that was allowed. Lambda took at least two weeks off. Well partially because he had silver poisoning from crossing the wall and then we had our mating frenzy...I guess it wasn’t too traditional.” Vallie stepped back in the house and motioned from Domitia to follow her.

The layout was similar to her and Iota’s house, with different furniture.

“We weren’t too traditional either,” Domitia began.

“Shut up. Did you already sleep with him? Are you in the midst of the mating frenzy? How on earth will Iota work!”

“Okay, you are being very loud and just said Lambda is sleeping.”

Vallie pulled a face. “That man can sleep through anything. Tell me everything.”

“We are not in the mating frenzy. But I did let him, you know, touch me a bit.”

“Good for you. If I hadn’t been climbing over the wall and back into Balaur, I totally would have fucked Lambda on day two. The Moon Goddess knows what she’s doing. My mate is hot. I’m sure you feel the same way.”

Domitia nodded, but didn’t say anything. She did find Iota handsome and so far he seemed sweet, but love, lifetime commitment—those both still felt very far away.

“I’m going to get dressed and then I’ll take you to town. We’ll have a total friend day. We can visit Tella and Phaebe, maybe sneak some muffins into the hospital for Verona, Natya, and Eelia. We’ll have a blast. But first I need clothes.” Vallie hurried up the stairs. “You won’t even realize you are supposed to be hanging with your mate in an hour!”

Domitia sat on the couch and thought about Iota, running around the wilderness surrounding Luven. Security was a big job, and he’d be gone a lot.

She worried she should care, but right now, the idea of a lot of time doing whatever she wanted sounded amazing.

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Iota jogged out of Luven to Surco, the checkpoint for eastern security. Here, he would meet up with the wolves ending their shift, get any important information, then head out into the wilderness for the next thirty-six hours.

He was so pissed he could howl. This was his and Domitia's time. They shouldn't be separated so fast. How was his mate supposed to get to know him if he was working regular hours before they'd had their frenzy?

He let a low growl rumble quietly in his chest. It wasn't fair. Iota had been waiting for her for years. And now his second day with her was shot, and probably the third as well. He wouldn't sleep for the next day and a half, so he'd definitely have to crash once he got home. And then Domitia would need to sleep and...

"Fucking sucks," he grumbled.

Within a half hour, Iota made it to Surco. Gamma and Mu were already there talking with Phi, Xi, and Upsilon.

"Iota?" Gamma called. "Why are you here?"

"Beta's request. We can't be low on patrols today, apparently."

Phi and Upsilon exchanged a glance. "Probably a good idea," Phi cut in. "I smelled at least fifty wild wolves during my shift."

"Fifty?" Gamma repeated. "Together?"

“No. Three or four different groups. They might be migrating towards the wall, hoping to intercept refugees coming from Balaur or any of the other dragon keeps.”

Shit. Fifty wild wolves were no joke. Iota felt his heart pang. He wished he had eyes on Domitia. He shook his head. She was safe in the city. The best he could do for her was keep the borders of Luven secure and those wild wolves as far away as possible.

“Where were they?” Iota asked.

“On the move. But the greatest density was due east. As if they were coming from the border with the human lands. And they might be coming from there. With no wall, it’d be easier to grab anyone over there.”

Iota nodded.

“You sure you’re good doing the far-flung patrol?” Gamma asked lowly. “We could switch. Don’t want you to be so far away from Domitia this soon.”

“It’s okay. Jaine’s about to have a baby. If she goes into labor and you miss it because we switched territories, she’ll never invite me over again.”

“Nah,” Gamma began. “Well, maybe for a couple months. And she did look...ready to go this morning. Tella’s hanging with her and Renny and Celyn just in case. But she usually has our babies in the middle of the night. I’m sure we’re fine for a while.”

“You’re taking the closer patrol,” Iota answered. “I’ll be fine.”

Phi, Mu, and Upsilon grabbed their notebooks and started on their notes for the session. They’d be compiled and read by Alpha at the end of each day. That way if there were legitimate threats or new packs moving in more permanently, Alpha could decide what the next course of action should be.

“I’m going out now. See you tomorrow.” Xi headed north. He’d do the border of the wall between wolf and dragon territories. That used to be the quietest patrol, but ever since Tella made it over the wall, they’d taken it much more seriously. You never knew when another refugee might make their escape.

“Good luck,” Gamma said to Iota and clapped his shoulder. “Thanks for taking the far patrol.”

“Same to you, and don’t worry about it.”

Iota raced off. It wasn’t the sort of job that if he did it quickly, he could be home sooner. He’d put in his full day and a half no matter what. But, the sooner he was in his section, the sooner he’d be able to sniff out any problems.

Fifty wolves. That was serious. Most of the wild wolves knew that Luven was off limits, but every few years a small pack leader with big balls and bigger ambition tried to push the boundaries. It was a city with a lot of resources, but many rules.

Alpha had no problem with visiting wolves as long as they minded their manners. Luven wasn’t the woods. No shifting indiscriminately, no fighting in the streets, no grabbing citizens of Luven. If a single wolf wanted to become a citizen, he needed a job or a trade, to agree to the ritual ceremonies, and swear his allegiance to Alpha. Three years ago, a trio of unmated wolves had come to Luven in search of a place to live, but refused to swear their allegiance and were thrown out. It wasn’t easy for wolves to put so much trust in another.

Iota paused his running and pulled his shirt over his head. He was already a sweaty mess. For now, he’d keep his pants on. There was still a chance of running into families of wolves enjoying a summer day in the woods and while nakedness wasn’t something generally frowned upon in the wolf community, a wolf in his...pre-mating state was. No one needed to see Iota’s hard cock right now.

Except Domitia.

He groaned. Sexy Domitia. He wanted to stop his running. Conjure her taste. Duck behind a tree and tug his cock to the memory of her.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

Fuck it all. Fuck this job, fuck those wild wolves, fuck Alpha and Beta for making him work when he should be home with Domitia. Hell, she’d wanted him to touch her a few hours after meeting. Who knows what she wanted today?

Probably more than to sit around the house and maybe hang out with Vallie.

He was supposed to be catering to her every need. More than the physical, Iota couldn’t believe he had to pre-make her meals. They wouldn’t be able to eat dinner together. He couldn’t ask her a million questions about her past. He wanted to know every little thing about her—her favorite food, if she liked to sing, where she was born. If she still had family somewhere.

His heart panged. He still couldn’t believe his mate had been captive of the dragons for three years.

Three whole years. That damn wall kept the wolves away from the dragons and the dragons away from them, but if he had been able to go to Balaur, smell her, save her...

It was no use thinking about what he could have done. The past was past. If Domitia had never been taken by the dragons, he may never have found her. She definitely wasn’t living in Muchan waiting for a wolf mate.

Iota set his sights on the horizon and looked at the sun. About thirty-five more hours.

Fuck.

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Phi may have smelled fifty wild wolves, but after six hours, Iota only counted twelve.

It wasn't a small number, but more likely a small band moving through the lands surrounding Luven.

Iota kept moving, running the length of the land they considered "theirs." If those wolves smelled a lone wolf near Luven, they might realize they were getting too close to the border and back off.

Or go on their way to the wall or the human border, or wherever the wild wolves wanted to go.

Iota had never been a wild wolf. He was born in Luven, to two wolves who had lived in a small settlement before that. There wasn't much wild in him. He liked city living. He didn't mind working security. It was an easy job to fall into. He wasn't a baker or particularly smart. He didn't have a trade or a calling. But he liked to run. And he liked the idea of doing a job that kept his city safe. When he turned eighteen, security was the obvious path.

A path that now sent him running through the woods when he could be home with his mate. In a home that this job afforded him.

Iota huffed.

Suddenly, he stopped. Pricked his ears. Lifted his nose to the wind.

There were six wolves under a half mile away.

And they were between Luven and him.

He loped in their direction, his mind racing. How did they get behind him? Had he been so distracted by dreams of Domitia that the scent of unknown wolves had wafted past him without any notice?

Iota tried to straighten his thoughts. Six wild wolves far past the known border of Luven's lands. There was a chance they were from the south or the far west and didn't know the city existed, but considering where they currently stood, that was nearly impossible.

They knew Luven was there. And they were encroaching on his city.

Iota squeezed his fists a few times as he pumped them. There might be a fight coming, and he needed to be ready. Given their position, there was a chance Gamma had caught their scent too, maybe even Xi depending on how the wind blew. He'd get there first, though.

Shit. He'd get there first.

Iota conjured up an image of Domitia. He couldn't let those wild wolves get to Luven. No matter what. His mate, his human mate, was there, unprotected and without warning. No part of Iota was going to allow those wolves anywhere near her.

Just as their scent became unbelievably overbearing, the wolves came into view.

They were on the young side. Mostly younger than Iota. Older teens, young twenties, wolves just coming into their adulthood. They wore low slung pants, which Iota noted as interesting, especially in the summer. A lot of wild packs went without clothes in the hotter months, some even year round.

Their heads snapped in Iota's direction, and he raised his hand in greeting. No use running into this confrontation without first trying to be cordial. Especially when it was six against one.

He slowed to a jog and took a moment to search the air for Gamma or Xi, but came up empty.

"Hello, there," Iota called. He stopped about twenty yards away. "Looking for something?"

One of the wolves, with ashy blonde hair and a full beard, stepped to the front of the group.

"Hello. You looking for a pack?"

"No," Iota answered quickly. "Do you know where you are?"

The leader huffed a laugh and smirked. "Wolf Territory as far as I know. And judging that you're a wolf too, I'd guess I'm right."

"You're encroaching on Luven."

"What's Luven?" The wolf smiled slyly, making Iota think this wolf knew exactly what Luven was.

"A city. With rules for entry."

"Rules? Hell, we don't care for rules, do we boys?" The other wolves laughed a little.

Iota scanned the horizon. Still no sign of Gamma or Xi and he had a sinking feeling these wolves weren't going to be on their way soon.

“You heard the rumors?” the leader asked.

“What rumors?”

“Human women, coming here. Looking for salvation.” He licked his lips. “We could use a few women in our ranks. Ones who’d be really grateful we found them.”

Iota simply shook his head. “If you’re looking for human women, why not go to human territory? There’s no wall.”

“Meh. I’m not one for stealing a woman. They have too much fight in ‘em. Need to find some who are properly desperate. Dying to be found. Willing to do anything.”

Iota tried to keep his wolf at bay but every fiber of his being was screaming to tear this wolf apart. He didn’t want him anywhere near Luven.

There were good wolves in the world, but there were bad ones too. And this was definitely a bad wolf.

“I’ve heard the women in Balaur are looking for ways out,” Iota mentioned offhandedly. “Have to cross the wall, though. Or go around the long way.”

“Balaur? Isn’t that dragon territory?”

“It is.”

“Hell, I have no interest in fighting a dragon for a woman. Rather just find one needing a loving hand of support, you know?”

Iota didn’t answer.

“Maybe we’ll go check out Luven. See what the city has to offer,” he dared.

“You’ll have to check in at one of the posts. Go over the rules.”

“Can’t pop in for the day? See if there’s anyone interested in joining us?” the leader goaded. “What about you? What’s your name?”

“Iota.”

“Iota, I’m Beren. We’re a small pack, but growing. No rules here.”

“Not interested. And to answer your other question, you cannot enter the city without agreeing to the rules. If you want to visit a city with looser regulations, try Muchan. A lot of traders go through there.”

“But Muchan is so far away. And a lot of wolves are talking about a hospital full of unmated, worn down, half-starved human women. What if my mate is there?”

At that moment, Iota knew he would have to fight them and that he would probably lose. They weren’t a big enough pack to take Luven, but they’d make it through him, maybe Gamma and Xi depending on how many Iota could take down.

There would be bloodshed and losses. He’d be the first.

Fuck. What a time to have met his mate.

Iota looked over them, and sized up each. He’d start with the two youngest. It wasn’t fair, he was definitely stronger than both of them, but he had to think of his pack. If he could take out those two, Gamma would only have to face four. If he could take out three, hell...If Gamma and Xi got here soon, these wolves might never make it to Luven at all.

“If your mate is there, swear your allegiance to our Alpha and give her a good life in an established city. A chance to heal after a hellish life. Humans aren’t designed to live these wild lives.”

“Doesn’t sound like something I care about.” Beren smirked. “We’ll be heading to Luven now. Unless of course, you want to stop us?”

Iota took a breath. Watch over Domitia he begged the Moon Goddess.

“I can’t let you. You can leave, or we can fight.”

“You want to fight all six of us?”

“I will.”

“Hell, you sure your Alpha appreciates you? I’d love to have you.”

“As I said before, not interested.” Iota’s eyes flicked across the pack. Two of the midsized wolves stepped forward to block Beren.

Shit. So much for fighting the young ones first.

Iota turned towards Luven, howled loudly to Gamma, then gave into his wolf and shifted to his monstrous form. He stretched his claws, gnashed his teeth, and sprinted towards them.

When in wolf form, his thoughts were sharper, more animalistic. He saw the two young wolves step back a little. Afraid. Good. They might run. Maybe they’ve never had a true fight. If there were only four willing to fight...hell, maybe Iota could kill them all.

He hit the first wolf like a boulder crashing down the side of a mountain. The other wolf shifted the moment Iota grabbed him, but it was too late. With a closed fist, Iota pummeled his forehead and temples as many times as he could before the other wolf pulled him off and tossed him to the side. He took a minute to catch his bearings—the wolf he had beaten looked shaken up and dizzy, but the other wolf ran in his direction.

Iota jumped to his feet and crouched, then sprang to meet the wolf midway before he could pounce on Iota. They grappled, growling at each other as they did. Claws were out now, both of them swiping at the other. Iota felt the other wolf draw blood a few times, but he also drew some of his. They tumbled around, smashing each other against the earth, getting in punches when they could. Iota protected his neck at all costs. A wolf claw to the throat was nearly impossible to survive.

Iota got a good, deep slash in and the other wolf jumped off him for a moment. Iota took stock.

The first wolf had crawled away and held his head between his hands. If needed Iota could give him one more punch to the skull to finish him. For now, he'd leave him there. He didn't pose any immediate threat.

Beren still stood, arms crossed, beside the other midsized wolf. The young ones seemed less scared now. Their stature was stronger, and they didn't cower back. The wolf beside Beren took a step forward.

Fuck. Iota needed to incapacitate the wolf he was currently fighting so he could focus on the rest of them. He risked a sniff on the wind and while the scent of wolf blood, both his own and theirs, was hard to smell beyond, he thought he could smell Gamma coming closer.

Before he could howl again, he was knocked to the ground. His head hit the earth

with a thud.

Fuck. His brain felt all shaken. He couldn't lose consciousness. Iota focused on the wolf atop him. He clawed at his sides, scratching through his fur but failing to make any deep wounds. The wolf growled and chomped towards Iota's neck, but he blocked him with his forearm, earning him a nasty bite.

Iota grumbled in pain. He bore through the pain and used the leverage of the wolf's teeth impaled in his arm to flip the wolf onto his back. With his other hand, Iota drove his claws deep into his belly, so deep the other wolf released his arm and howled in despair.

Iota quickly scrambled away and put some distance between the wolves and him.

Beren was gone. So were the two young wolves. Shit! Only Iota, the concussed wolf, the bleeding wolf, and a perfectly healthy wolf remained.

Iota howled as loudly as he could, to both Gamma and Xi, and maybe even someone on the border of Luven would hear him. Epsilon didn't live too far away from the boundaries. If he was home, he might be able to come help.

The last, uninjured wolf slowly shifted. Iota glanced at the wolf he'd clawed in the stomach. He looked more than half-dead. The wolf whose head he'd battered was unconscious. All that was left was for Iota to survive this wolf.

And then chase down the other three.

He put his claw up to his side. Blood flowed freely there. The bite of his left arm throbbed terribly. His bone was definitely broken and he was certain a big chunk of muscle and skin was sitting in the mostly dead wolf's mouth or stomach.

Iota took a breath. If he didn't survive this, he could know that Domitia would be well taken care of. And she would have Vallie and all the other women of Balaur to keep her company and keep her loved.

Domitia, he growled towards Luven, my love. Then Iota turned toward the wolf who ran at him.

They hit the ground with a thud and Iota managed to throw his bitten arm up to block his neck. The wolf responded with a jab to the gut.

Fuck. He couldn't withstand much more blood loss. Iota's vision started to blur. He used all the energy he had left to headbutt the wolf on top of him, then slumped to the ground. The wolf reared back, but returned and raised his claw above his head.

Goodbye, Domitia. I wish I could have given you so much more. Find happiness in Luven. Hell, I wanted to watch you fall in love with me.

The wolf found purchase in Iota's shoulder. He howled in pain and turned his head to the side. His vision clouded with fat black splotches. But as his sight failed, he saw a figure running toward him.

Darkness took over.

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The shops in Luven were bizarre. No one screamed about what they were selling, no one haggled in the street, no one stole anything. They were all little organized places, inside buildings, with one or two people watching over a huge amount of goods. It would have been a place ripe for stealing in any of the places she lived before.

Domitia marveled at the pure variety of textiles available at one shop. A million different colors lined the shelves in the clothing store. Almost like a rainbow of clothing. She'd seen clothes dyed in different colors, but all in one place? Never. It was an unimaginable luxury.

Even though Iota had left her money, Domitia didn't buy anything. It felt odd spending something she hadn't earned. She'd have to get over that if Iota expected her to stay home and keep house while he protected the city.

Domitia had a strong work ethic. She took care of herself. Hell, she even tried to keep some money hidden for whenever she would see her mother. She had worked her entire life. Was her new life in Luven meant to be one of leisure? She wasn't sure she liked that idea.

"Are you going to get a job?" Domitia asked Vallie.

Vallie shrugged. "Eventually I will. Right now, I like my job of lots of orgasms and eating. It feels like a nice trade off from twenty years half-starved in Maidenhead followed by eight years more than half-starved in Balaur. I have a mate who can take care of me, it gets him off, so I'm just going to let him." They walked down the street towards the bakery. "Let's pop in and grab something to eat before heading home."

“Iota left me a lot of food.” Domitia was also excited to try out using the stove. Once she mastered reheating meals, she could start trying to make some of the dishes she did in the south. Her mouth watered at the thought of fish with stewed greens and lemons. Maybe some sticky rice with mango. She knew there were lakes and rivers nearby, but in terms of what types of fish lived there, she had no idea. She was thousands of miles away from home, and the climate and animal life were wildly different. She’d yet to see an alligator or a panther, even the birds here were less colorful. She doubted red snappers or blue marlins lived up here.

“Well, I’m going to grab myself a loaf of bread and you are welcome to have a few slices.” They ducked into the bakery and Vallie quickly ordered from a wolf named Chi. He didn’t speak much, or introduce himself to Domitia, just completed their order and then returned to the backroom.

They exited and walked the few minutes back to the row of townhouses. The sun was still shining and hot, but Domitia’s stomach grumbled at the prospect of a good meal. She’d heat up the food, sit at the table, and then maybe...take a shower? The days were so empty when there wasn’t work to be done, food to be earned. She could go to sleep at this moment if she wanted to. What an odd life she’d fallen into.

When Iota wasn’t working, she would need to get to know him. They would spend time together, and then of course they’d have the mating frenzy, but what about after that? Domitia didn’t want kids yet but she didn’t think sitting home alone in the townhouse every day would be any kind of life. She’d traveled the southern coasts, never let grass grow beneath her feet, and now she was looking at a sedentary life. It felt overwhelming.

“Hunk of bread for your thoughts?” Vallie interrupted.

Domitia shook her head. “My mind is racing. I can’t believe this is my new life. I...I was always moving before.”

“But isn’t it nice to have a place to call home? I leave the house every day and never worry that my clothes will be gone when I get back. Or more importantly, all the food.”

“I guess. I like that I don’t have to think about where my next meal is coming, but what am I supposed to do all day in that house?”

“Now, you can hang out with me. And it’s summer! We can walk to the lake someday to go swimming. We can do whatever we want! We’re free. Doesn’t freedom feel amazing?”

Domitia knew it should. And maybe once she got to know Iota, it would. But right now, it felt stifling. Sitting alone in the house whenever Iota went to work? Having no work of her own? That didn’t sound like freedom. It sounded like another—albeit more comfortable—cage.

“Um,” Vallie started, grabbing onto Domitia’s arm. Domitia looked up to the house that was now hers. A wolf she didn’t know stood knocking on her door.

“That’s Beta,” Vallie explained. “He’s kind of like Alpha’s emissary. All important business.”

“Oh.” Domitia walked up the house. “Hey! Iota isn’t home. He’s working.”

“Domitia, hello.” Beta responded. “I was looking for you. There’s been an attack.”

Domitia felt the blood drain out of her face. An attack? In Luven? She thought this was the safest place on earth. The wolf city where everyone left their doors unlocked and no one stole. How could there have been an attack here?

“Iota was injured.”

“Wait, what?” She couldn’t process what she was hearing. “Iota was injured? How?”

Beta flicked a look to Vallie. Her friend wrapped her arm through Domitia’s and held onto her.

“A band of wild wolves crossed into the territory east of Luven. Iota, Gamma, and Xi were patrolling at the time. The wolves were aggressive and injured both Iota and Gamma. Xi was able to run off the wolves that were still alive.”

“Where’s Iota?” Domitia asked.

“In the hospital.”

“Is it...is it bad?” Domitia suddenly didn’t know what she was supposed to be doing. Should she run to him? Stay away? She barely knew him but he was her mate. Was this a simple checkup or was he really bad?

“His injuries are dire.”

“Dire?” Domitia repeated. “Shit, can you take me there right now?”

“I have to go inform Jaine.”

“I’ll take you,” Vallie said quickly. She set her bags on the front step. “Let’s go.”

Beta nodded and took off, running through the streets away from them.

“I thought wolves were sort of indestructible?” Domitia said.

“To a point,” Vallie answered. She linked their arms together and led Domitia quickly back towards town. “But they can still be really hurt. Dr. Tau is great. I’m

sure Iota will pull through.”

Pull through? Was Iota dying? Hell, Domitia may not have known him well, but she didn’t want him to die.

“Can we walk faster?” she asked. “I want to get there as quickly as possible.”

“Yes. Follow me. Let’s jog.”

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The hospital was a flurry of activity. A bunch of wolves Domitia had never seen before stood in the waiting area. Kappa, one of the hospital employees, waved to Domitia.

“Come here, I’ll take you to him,” he said quickly. Domitia nodded but held onto Vallie. She wasn’t sure what she was going to see, but she was sure she didn’t want to be alone.

Kappa took them into the back of the hospital, down a long hallway, then up a flight of stairs. Domitia was pretty sure this was where she was first taken for her evaluation. When the doctors had contemplated amputating her arm, but then decided to try surgery. She flexed her hand slowly.

“He’s in here,” Kappa said. “He’s unconscious. He’ll be going into surgery in a few minutes. Dr. Tau wanted him more stable before they attempted.”

“What are his injuries?” Domitia finally snapped awake. She needed to be present, and find out what was going on with Iota. She’d be no use if she stood around mute with wide eyes.

“Several. A lot of blood loss from claw stabs and bites, his left arm was nearly torn apart. His arm will need a closer look, but right now, Dr. Tau needs to repair his spleen. That is her biggest concern.”

“Oh, Domitia,” Vallie breathed and squeezed her hand.

“You should talk to him until he goes into surgery. Be prepared. He’s not going to

look like himself.” Domitia nodded and Kappa pushed through the door.

Iota looked like one of the bodies left on the side of the water. He was covered in blood up to his elbows, his face was bruised, his left arm was bandaged, but looked much thinner than his right. His shirt was off, and there were packs of bloodied gauze all over his torso.

“Iota,” she whispered. He didn’t even look like the same person.

Vallie gave her arm a squeeze and Domitia shook her head. She released Vallie, walked up to her mate, and threaded her fingers through his right hand.

“I’m here. Domitia is here. You are safe. Dr. Tau is going to make you better. You did good. Amazing. I can’t believe how strong you are. But I need to you to be strong a little longer. There’s a lot the doctors need to do. You need to let them, and you need to fight to survive. I promise, I’ll be here the second you wake up.” She rubbed his arm a moment, hoping that by some miracle he would open his eyes, but he slept on.

“We gave him something to keep him under,” Dr. Tau said, walking up behind Domitia. “Surgery will take about three hours. You should wait in another room. Kappa will take you. Someone will come get you the moment he can have a visitor.”

Domitia nodded. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Dr. Tau motioned to a few other medical workers, and they wheeled Iota past Domitia and into the hallway.

Domitia stood frozen in her spot. What was happening? Yesterday she met Iota and now he was fighting to live?

“Domitia? I’ll take you somewhere a little more...comfortable.”

She looked around the room, now empty of the bed. The floor was littered with bloodied gauze and discarded implements.

“Yeah,” she answered. “Thank you.” She didn’t want to spend the next three hours staring at her mate’s blood.

She and Vallie followed Kappa to another room. It wasn’t a true hospital room, but had two uncomfortable couches and a small table, plus a corner with coffee, tea, and water. Domitia realized this must be the place family or loved ones wait whenever something goes wrong.

She didn’t like it.

“Are you okay?” Vallie asked.

“I...I think so. You can go home if you want. Lambda is probably wondering where you are.”

“Absolutely not. Lambda will figure it out. I’m sure someone will tell him what happened and he’ll know I went with you.” Vallie led Domitia to sit and then sat beside her. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Thanks,” Domitia breathed. She leaned against Vallie and closed her eyes.

A wail down the hall made her jump.

“Oh no. I think that’s Jaine,” Vallie said quickly. She stood up and opened the door. Down the hall, Kappa was holding Jaine from falling over.

“You have to save him, you have to save him!” She cried as she grasped onto Kappa. “I don’t know how—I don’t know what—I need him!”

“The doctors are going to save him. He’s going to be okay. He’ll wake up soon, I promise.” Kappa soothed. “You need to try to stay calm. We don’t want the baby coming right now, right? You want Gamma to be with you?”

“Yes,” Jaine cried.

“Okay. Let’s walk down the hall and get you situated with Vallie and Domitia. You can sit with them while we make sure Gamma is okay. But I need you to stay calm. Gamma is going to be just fine.” Kappa walked Jaine into the room and she collapsed onto the chair beside Vallie.

“Oh, Jaine. He’s going to be okay.” Vallie wrapped her arm around her. “Where are Renny and Celyn?”

“Tella is watching them,” Jaine sniffed. “This can’t be happening. We live in Luven—it’s safe here. Only place in the world I’ve ever felt safe. And now Gamma is hurt.” She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. “What if...what if he doesn’t get better?”

“He’s a wolf,” Vallie cut in. “Their healing abilities are nothing like ours. Lambda was poisoned by silver twice in four days and he is fine. Gamma is going to survive. Think of everything this hospital has done for us.”

“I never thought I’d be able to use my arm again,” Domitia offered. “Two surgeries later, I can move it. The doctors here are miracle workers.”

Jaine nodded. “Is Iota okay?”

“I don’t know. Dr. Tau wasn’t...overly reassuring. He was in pretty bad shape.”

“What happened?” Vallie asked. “Beta only said there was an attack.”

“A band of wild wolves. They think six in total. Xi heard Iota calling out for help first, then Gamma. They split into two groups. Iota killed two, Xi killed one, Gamma killed two. One escaped. Hopefully permanently.” Jaine rubbed her hand over her face.

“Shit. Who is guarding now?” Vallie asked.

“Epsilon went out immediately. I don’t know who else. Xi went back out once he got Iota and Gamma into the city. He wasn’t injured.”

Domitia nodded. Numbness washed over her. It felt like she was watching this all play out from afar.

“I guess the only thing we can do now is wait,” Vallie said. She reached out and held Domitia’s hand, then Jaine’s.

It was going to be a long three hours.

*

Three hours and forty-two minutes later, Dr. Tau finally came into the waiting area. Two hours earlier, Kappa had gotten Jaine to come and see Gamma who was awake and doing well. Vallie still sat beside her, even though hours passed.

“Iota is through surgery. There was serious damage to his spleen and liver, but wolves are not the same as humans. I did some repair, gave him a blood transfusion, and tomorrow I’ll focus on his arm. He needs to rest though. Putting him through

another surgery immediately wouldn't be wise." Dr. Tau took off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment. "If you are up for it, I would love for you to sit with him, talk to him. I'm not sure how much he can hear, but for wolves, hearing the voice of their mates can be healing."

Domitia nodded. He had survived his first surgery. She didn't really know what a spleen or liver did, but she knew they were important in staying alive. Serious damage? How was he going to survive?"

"You think...he'll make it, right?" Domitia confirmed.

"Yes. Definitely. I don't have promises for his arm. I have to see how much damage was done to the bone."

An arm didn't matter, in the scheme of things. Domitia knew that much. An arm was never worth a life.

"I'll go sit with him." She turned to Vallie. "You should go home. Tell Lambda what happened. He should talk with the rest of security."

Vallie nodded. "Have someone come get me if you need me. No matter what time it is. I don't want you to be alone if things get rough again."

"I'll be okay." Domitia took a deep breath. "Take me to Iota."

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We don't know each other very well, and while I've never been a follower of the Moon Goddess, I have a lot of respect for deities. And if yours says we are meant to be together, that I am meant to love you for the rest of my life and find all my happiness by your side, I believe her. So, fight for me. Fight for all the days we haven't spent together yet, all the adventures we still need to experience. There are so many things I want to do with you. So many things I want to tell you. Fight Iota. Stay with me, my wolf.

*

Iota felt like he'd been stomped on by a beast the size of a mountain. His ribs ached, his abdomen felt too tight and throbbed. His arm still hurt like hell, but that felt like the least of his worries at the moment.

Was he alive?

He blinked a few times against the bright light. Did the other wolves leave him for dead and he somehow made it through the night? His head pounded awfully as he forced his eyelids apart.

He was in the hospital. He should have known from the beeping machines, but he'd chalked that up to whatever was going on in his brain right now. He tried to sit up, but his torso enflamed at the attempt.

Iota looked around the room and settled on a figure beside the bed.

Domitia. She sat in a chair at the foot of the bed, a blanket tucked around her while

she slept. Domitia was here?

Domitia was safe. He focused on that. And he was in the hospital. Gamma and Xi must have heard him, come to him. The wild wolves didn't make it to Luven. They didn't hurt Domitia.

He tried to sit up again, get closer to her, but the pain was too much.

"Hm," he grumbled and settled back down.

Domitia's eyes popped open and she threw the blanket off her body. "You're awake? You made noise?" She searched his face.

"I am," he muttered. Hell, his throat was dry.

"Okay. I am supposed to press this button when you wake up." Domitia fidgeted with a remote. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes," he huffed a laugh.

"Stupid question. Of course, you're in pain. You were in surgery less than twelve hours ago."

"Surgery? What time is it?"

Domitia leaned her head back. "It's four-thirty in the morning. And Dr. Tau repaired your spleen and liver. She could explain it better but she said that your wolf genes should hopefully do the rest. You'll need surgery on your arm."

His arm. That fucking wolf had taken a chunk out of it. And his sides had taken more than one claw stabbing.

“Are you all right?” he asked her. “When did they get you? Did you sleep at all?”

“I’m fine, please let me worry about you. I slept a bit. Came to find me right after Xi brought you and Gamma back.”

“Wait, Xi brought Gamma and I back? Is Gamma hurt?” His heart sank.

“Not as bad as you. He’s been up for hours. Keeping him for observation overnight, and I think Dr. Tau is mostly concerned Jaine is going to worry herself into labor.”

“Xi ok?”

Domitia nodded. “By the time he got to you, you’d...killed two of the wolves. He only had one to finish off. And Gamma had killed two as well, the last ran off.”

Iota blew out a breath. So, he had killed two wolves. Fuck. He’d never killed a wolf before. Deer, small mammals, fish—never a wolf.

But he couldn’t feel guilty about it. Those wolves, they were coming for Luven, the home of his mate. He couldn’t have let them cross into his city.

Plus, they had straight up tried to kill him first. And nearly succeeded.

“You look better,” Domitia said. “Yesterday, when they brought you in and then I came to see you, it wasn’t a pretty sight. And then Dr. Tau...” she looked down.

“Dr. Tau what?”

“She wasn’t sure if anything could be done. If you were a human, you’d be dead.” Domitia’s voice was still laced with worry.

“I’m not a human. I’m okay.”

“You’re wincing every time you move. You fought three wolves.”

“I thought I was going to have to fight six, so it ended up not being as bad as I expected.”

“If Xi hadn’t come—”

“Yeah, I’d probably be dead. But those two wolves who were looking for more than trouble in Luven would be dead, too. And I’d do it again. My job is to protect Luven. More than that, it’s to protect you.”

“Are you going to risk your life every time you go to work? How am I supposed to make peace with that?” Domitia’s voice rang higher than usual.

“Sounds like you want me around for a while,” Iota teased.

“I’m being serious. You didn’t see Jaine. She’s about to have a baby and Gamma almost died. She has two kids already. If he had died, she’d be all alone.”

Iota shook his head. “She wouldn’t be alone. She’d have all of Luven to support her.”

“You know what I mean.” Domitia crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I’ve known you less than three days and you’ve got several gaping holes in your body.”

A knock on the door silenced both of them.

“Come in,” Domitia called.

Dr. Tau walked in. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days. Her hair was piled into a

messy bun on the top of her head and her glasses slid down her nose.

“Iota. You gave us a scare. How are you feeling?”

“Not great,” he answered truthfully. He turned to Domitia. “You should go home and sleep. Get something to eat also.”

“No.” Domitia sat back down in her chair and crossed her arms and legs. “I want to be here to see what Dr. Tau says. Plus, you’re having another surgery today. I’ll go home and change and shower after that.”

Iota started to refute her but she raised an eyebrow as her scent changed from annoyed to something along the lines of “I dare you to cross me.”

He did not.

“Well, then.” Dr. Tau cleared her throat. “Surgery yesterday was successful. With your quick healing, you should be back at full capacity in a few days. Today, we’ll repair what we can of your arm. That might take a little longer, as—”

“A big chunk of it is decomposing in some wolf’s stomach?”

“Exactly. But, your muscle should regrow, your bone will heal. I am going to recommend Alpha take you off security rotation for half a year.”

“Half a year?” Iota exclaimed. “I should be fine in weeks, not months.”

“Maybe. But,” Dr. Tau hesitated, “I’ve been treating more and more injuries from scuffles with these smaller packs. Yours were by far the worst. The council is meeting tomorrow to come up with a new plan.”

“What kind of plan?”

“I’m a tertiary member, but I believe we will count the far patrol area as lands lost. Concentrate on the land between Luven and the wall, and the lands closer to us. More density in terms of wolves staying together.”

Iota closed his eyes. No security for half a year? That was bullshit. What was he supposed to do?

“I know it’s a lot to take in. And you need to rest. I’ll have Kappa come give you a fresh bag,” she looked over his IV, “but no food until you’re out of your next surgery.”

Iota nodded but his mind was still stuck on what Dr. Tau had said. The borders of Luven were changing? They were losing land rather than taking more—that wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Domitia—”

“Dr. Tau wants you to rest.” She pulled the blanket back over her. “I am going to do the same. It’s been a long night and I think we’re just beginning a long line of them.”

Fuck. Iota rubbed his head with his good arm. He was supposed to be taking care of his mate, not putting her through hell. These days were meant to be nothing but pampering her, showing her what a good protector he could be.

Instead he was lying in a hospital bed missing a chunk of his arm and a lot of his blood.

“I’ll try to sleep,” he conceded and pulled his blanket up.

“Good. Tell me if you need anything.” She shut her eyes and burrowed her face against her own shoulder and slumped in her seat.

“I will.”

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Iota could walk across the hospital room.

It wasn't much, but it was better than he'd been a few days ago. His arm was still healing and bandaged past his elbow and his abdomen was tight where Dr. Tau had repaired his insides. He was being released with strict instructions to allow Domitia to care for him until he felt completely back to normal. Which for a wolf meant able to lift his mate, run at high speeds, and jump over six-foot walls.

All of that felt ages away, yet there he was, being discharged by Dr. Tau, with Epsilon and Lambda here to take him back to his townhouse. Domitia was already home, getting the house ready as instructed.

"This is embarrassing," Iota grumbled as he walked slower than he ever had down the street. "At this rate we won't make it home before dark."

"We offered to carry you," Lambda pointed out. "Offer still stands."

"I will not be carried like a child to my home. Where my mate is waiting."

The worst of it all was Domitia showing up just before his attack. He had to do all this shit—surgery, therapy, helped by every employee of the hospital—with a raging erection that would not go down until he and Domitia were together. Which, according to Dr. Tau, was not allowed to happen until he was at full strength.

Fuck, even his parents had seen him like this. Iota had planned that he would introduce Domitia to his mom and dad after the frenzy. Which in turn would keep him from seeing his parents until after the frenzy. But instead, they'd come one day

when she had gone home to change and shower and he had to sit in the shame of them fretting over him while his body was screaming to go fuck Domitia.

At least she had shown no interest in consummating their relationship at this point. One waft of her desire would have thrown him over the edge of despair. No, when Domitia looked at him now, she only felt pity.

Iota limped along the road, stopping and resting against buildings far more than he wanted to. After what felt like over an hour, the row of townhouses came into view, with Domitia sitting on the steps of theirs.

“Hi,” she called with a small smile playing over her lips. “You look good.”

“I feel like a newborn fawn,” he bemoaned.

“Where do you want him?” Epsilon asked.

“Upstairs. I figured we can set him up in our room, that way he won’t have to do the stairs to get to the bathroom.”

“I am here and listening,” Iota reminded them.

“All right, all right,” Lambda said. “Slow and steady up the stairs.”

Thirty minutes later, Iota was lying in his bed and ready for a nap. Trying to get up the front steps, then the house stairs, had taken everything out of him. Downstairs, he could hear Domitia walking Epsilon and Lambda out.

“If you need help, I’m only a couple doors down,” he heard Lambda promise. “Day or night.”

“Thank you. Now, that he’s upstairs I’m sure I’ll be able to manage.”

Fuck, Iota hated this. He was glad to be out of the hospital, but now he had to depend on Domitia for everything. That wasn’t how this was supposed to go.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as she walked back into the room. Domitia busied herself folding a stack of clothes on the dresser.

“Fine.”

“Do you want something to eat? Or to sleep? I know that must have taken a lot out of you.”

“I’m a wolf,” he growled. “Walking up the stairs doesn’t take a lot out of me.”

Domitia pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows.

Damn it. “I’m sorry I growled at you,” Iota said. “I am frustrated with my current lot in life.”

“I’m sure you are but think of how much more annoying it would be if you had died.” She scrunched her nose at him playfully. “Now. Dr. Tau said rest is key and if you want to be back to normal as soon as possible, I think you should take a nap and I’ll make a big lunch for the two of us. Does that sound good?”

“It does.”

“Okay.” Domitia softly clasped her hands. “Call me if you need help getting to the bathroom.”

“I—” he started to refute her and then realized he probably did need at least a hand to

get down the hall. “Thanks.” Iota settled in bed and stuck his hands behind his head. “I’ll try to sleep.”

After she left, he found that he was pretty worn out from getting home. And listening to Domitia putter around downstairs was the loveliest ambient noise he’d ever heard. He closed his eyes and thought of her. Thought of days to come instead of days passed, thought of running through the woods in the winter, the moon fat and low in the sky, the stars like pinpricks all over the inky black night, and the beautiful mate who waited for him at home...

*

When Iota woke, it was evening. He’d slept hours instead of the few minutes he thought to grab. Fuck his body. Fuck those wolves.

“Are you awake?” Domitia whispered from the doorway.

“Yeah,” he answered. Iota slowly pushed himself to sitting.

“I’m going to help you to the bathroom.”

“Domitia, you don’t have to,” he began.

“Stop it. I won’t stay in—I’ll even shut the door. But Dr. Tau gave me a lot of instructions and this was one. Make sure you are peeing.” She marched to his side and reached both her hands to him. He took them, and for a single moment, Iota let himself simply hold his mate’s hands. He didn’t think about how much it was going to hurt to stand, or how he’d hobble to the bathroom when he should have been running miles every day. No, for this moment, Iota only thought of the feel of Domitia’s skin against his. Her hands felt warm and soft...and like they’d been in water recently. He ran his thumbs over the tops of her hands, memorizing the rise and

fall of her knuckles.

“Ready?” she asked. He nodded.

It was slow work between the two of them. They got him up, then waited, walked to the doorway, then waited. They finally made it the bathroom and the second Domitia closed the door Iota realized he did in fact have to pee with a ferocity he’d never known. After he’d peed for over 60 seconds straight, he heard Domitia giggling outside of the door.

“See? This is why Dr. Tau gave me directions. I’ll be getting your ass out of bed at regular intervals to pee.”

Iota blushed, embarrassed for a moment, then laughed too.

“Didn’t realize how badly I had to go. Too blinded by your beauty,” he called through the door as he washed his hands.

“All right, charmer.”

He opened the door slowly and locked eyes with Domitia.

“Let’s get you back in bed.”

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Domitia barely had a moment to sit down. Between running to the markets before Iota got home, to cooking up a storm, cleaning up after herself, and looking after Iota, her hours were crammed full. The first night after he'd returned, they ate dinner together for only the second time.

She loved it. It was like finally having a purpose after years of doing nothing. It made her feel alive.

Domitia wanted to ease Iota into her cooking and made fried trout with a peppercorn crust, rather than diving in with some spicier options. She served it with crispy potatoes, but she had also found a solitary bag of rice at the market, which she had plans for. She didn't want to shock Iota too much—he was still healing after all.

“This is good,” he said slowly as he tried the fish. She couldn't tell if he hated it or was simply surprised by the taste, but he wasn't spitting it out or pretending to eat it. Domitia would call that as a win.

“I grew up on the coast,” she offered. “Until Balaur, my diet was mostly fish. And a lot of fruits and vegetables I didn't see at the markets.”

Iota perked up a bit. “Did you fish yourself or trade?”

“A bit of both. I,” she hesitated. She hadn't shared much about herself, not for any reason, but telling Iota about her life seemed like a big step. “I worked on boats mostly. Not deep-sea voyages. Coastal traders mostly. Lots of days that included fishing.”

Iota raised an eyebrow. “What is life like on a boat?”

“Different,” she laughed. “It’s a transition. You live on land for a long time, then a boat feels like the world is trying to knock you over. But then, you live on a boat a long time, dry land tends to have the same effect.” Domitia set her plate on the dresser and put her hands out to her side and bent her knees. “I usually spent the first day back on land walking like a toddler. Trying to get my bearings again.”

Iota half-grinned and paused his eating. “I’ve never been on a boat. There are some really big lakes close by, but they’re in human and dragon territory. I’ve heard stories that traders work those waters as well.”

“The Great Lakes.” Domitia nodded. “Vallie, Verona, and Tella are from Maidenhead. It’s on the coast of one of them.”

“Did they work on boats too?”

“Nah. Maidenhead isn’t like the south. As far as they’ve told me, it’s a real shitty place to live as a human. The south...we have our problems, but the dragons only come by once in a while. We didn’t have to actively hide from them. Also, it’s warm down there. If I didn’t have shelter for the night, I was usually fine. Slept many nights on the beach.”

Iota furrowed his brow. “What’s the beach?”

Domitia couldn’t help but laugh. This man was so serious. “It’s the piece of land beside the coast. Do you have sand lakes here?”

“We do.”

“So, it’s the long strip of sand between the sea and proper land. Not a terrible place to

spend the night so long as it's clear."

"Do you..." Iota took a breath. "Do you have family in the south? Anyone waiting for you to come back?"

She hesitated. Domitia wasn't stupid. She knew telling him would change something about their dynamic. But lying to her mate? That was a betrayal she couldn't stomach.

"My mother. I didn't live with her, but I visited occasionally. She's probably worried. But not terribly. Three years is a long time for me to go without a visit, but if the weather had been bad, if I couldn't get a job...she would keep her worry in check."

"Oh." He busied himself with his plate, forking a potato so hard the dish clinked.

"If you are worried I'll disappear in the middle of the night to traverse the length of wolf territory to land back in the south, don't. You might not kill me for such an offense, but Vallie most certainly would." She grabbed her plate and settled back in her seat. The trout was good. Not as delicious as fried flounder, but she'd take it. Better than venison at any rate. Domitia didn't hate the meat, and after Balaur was happy to eat anything set in front of her, but after a lifetime of fish, red meat was beginning to feel like a holiday meal every day.

"How's your stomach?" Domitia asked.

"My stomach? The food is fine."

"No, Dr. Tau said that you might have some nausea from all the medication you are taking."

Iota sighed. "I'm fine." He took a few more bites of food, then set his plate on his

bedside table.

“You don’t like it?” she asked. “I can make you something else. Do you want soup? Something lighter?”

“It’s not that. The food was good.” Iota grumbled and pushed his blankets down his body. A thin strip of skin showed between the hem of his shirt and the waistband of his shorts. His skin was as tanned as the rest of him, giving Domitia visions of him running shirtless through the woods.

She blinked and refocused on Iota. “What is it?”

“I should be cooking for you. That’s part of it, part of your first days with me. I am supposed to be taking care of you, cooking for you, putting you to bed and then guarding the threshold so you can sleep. I’m doing none of those things.”

“Well,” Domitia set her plate down and moved to sit at the foot of the bed. “You were injured guarding the threshold of Luven. That’s more important than my door. And don’t feel guilty you aren’t sleeping on the front steps. You saw how I was our first day. There’d be no reason for you to sleep outside.” She paused and took notice of a sudden relaxation in his shoulders. “I love to cook. I regret to inform you, you are not the family cook. I am. I will be making the majority of the meals we eat because it brings me joy. And I have a bunch of dishes I want you to try. I might have to start a little garden out back so I can grow my favorite herbs.” Now, he graced her with a small smile. “And as for me taking care of you over you taking care of me, I don’t need care right now. You do. I’m not stupid, I know what it means to be your mate. Just because I am not feeling the intenseness of this relationship yet, doesn’t mean I don’t trust that it will come. We’re going to be lifelong partners, and right now you need me to help you. That doesn’t mean I won’t need you to help me sometimes, too. Hell, who knows what the years will bring? But right now, I am happy to have the privilege to be your partner.”

Iota nodded. “All right. I’ll try not to complain so much.”

“Thank you,” Domitia said with a grin.

“I have a request, though,” he added.

“You want something else for dinner. I knew it. Do wolves not eat fish?”

He shook his head. “That’s not it, I promise. I want you to sleep in here tonight. Not on the couch downstairs.”

Domitia was taken aback. She’d had a conversation with Dr. Tau about Iota, what he could handle. The two of them decided that she should sleep separately to remove any temptation he might feel before healing properly.

“Dr. Tau said—”

“She doesn’t want us starting the mating frenzy until I am fully healed. I understand. I’m not going to jump on you tonight. But I cannot have my mate sleeping on the couch. Especially when our bed is right here. It’s bad enough I am in the bed. You can’t sleep outside of it.”

Domitia raised an eyebrow. It must be killing this wolf that he wasn’t able to take part in any of his traditions.

She hadn’t been relishing the idea of another night on the couch. When Iota was in the hospital, she’d spent every night there on the chair, but often came home and grabbed a quick nap in their bed before showering and heading back.

The bed was really fucking comfortable.

It was like her own little nest. The quilt was cozy and not too hot, the pillows were softer than anything she'd ever laid upon. Plus, when she woke from sleeping there, she didn't have to roll her neck for a solid ten minutes before it felt normal again.

"Okay. I will sleep in the bed tonight. But you have to be good. No touching."

"I promise I will not touch you unless you ask," Iota answered quickly.

"That is not what I said," she scolded him with a twinge of humor. "No touching period."

"Domitia, if my mate asks me to touch her, I'm going to touch her."

"Iota! I am not going to ask you to touch me," she insisted.

"Then, it shouldn't be a problem. But if you ask—"

"Iota!" She laughed hard now. "I am not going to ask you to touch me tonight! Stop it!" She shook her head. "Finish your food and give me your plate. I need to clean up before we go to sleep, and I'm ready for bed."

"It's still dusk," Iota mentioned, pointing at the window.

"I don't care. I'm exhausted, you're supposed to rest, we're going to bed. Give me some time to wash up, then I'll walk you to the bathroom. Are you going to want a shower tonight?"

"Will you be getting in with me?"

"No."

“Then, I’ll pass,” he grumbled. Domitia rolled her eyes and collected the plates. Iota definitely felt better than he had if he could make these jokes at her. And she knew that going through multiple surgeries and the injuries and pain he’d been enduring would have been terrible on a normal week. Adding that she knew he was basically hard for her all day every day had to make it even worse.

“Be right back,” she said then headed downstairs to tidy up.

They were small steps, but Domitia was pretty sure they were making them together.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:11 am

Iota sat in bed and listened to the sounds of Domitia cleaning the kitchen. Water rushed into the sink, pans were clanking together, and she was singing. He didn't recognize the song or even the language it was in, but all the same it was beautiful.

He would have enjoyed it more if this was happening a year from now. If he had already amazed her with his ability to provide everything she needed before she took over cooking and cleaning and every aspect of caring in this relationship. Domitia had cooked him an amazing dinner. The fish and potatoes were perfect, and he couldn't even help clean up.

At least she smelled happy. She hadn't smelled like desire since their first day together, and he couldn't blame her. Who could desire a weak and broken wolf? He sighed. Dr. Tau told him that healing with wolves wasn't as measurable as it was humans. He'd wake up one morning and feel back to normal. It could be tomorrow or the day after or in a week. Dr. Tau was confident he wouldn't take longer than a fortnight, but she wasn't specifically sure. Every day he wasn't healed was a thorn in his side.

He needed to get back on his feet, show Domitia he would be a good provider and protector, get her smelling like desire again, mate the absolute fuck out of her, and start the rest of their lives, injury free.

The sink quieted, and he heard Domitia switching off all the lights downstairs. Her footfalls on the steps were quiet, as if she was wondering if he might have already fallen asleep. She peeked her head through the doorway.

"Ready?" Much to Iota's dismay, his mate walked him to the bathroom, then waited

outside while he peed, brushed his teeth, and splashed cold water on his face. He wanted an ice-cold shower to both cool him off on the summer night and tell his cock and inner wolf that there would be no sexy time with Domitia tonight. But, the last thing he wanted was Domitia bathing him in a medical sense.

If he was going to shower with his mate, he was going to shower with his mate.

She helped him back into bed, then said, “I’m going to use the bathroom. I’ll just be a minute.”

“Take your time.” Iota settled into his bed. Maybe if he was lucky, he’d nod off before she came back and the entire room smelled like her, before he could feel the weight of her body on the other side of the bed, every small movement a torment.

Iota took a deep breath. If he was going to survive sleeping next to Domitia he needed to get a hold of himself.

She returned after the quickest shower known to man, her hair piled in a damp, curly bun on top of her head. She climbed into bed next to him, but stayed on her side, and pulled the quilt over her body.

“Okay, good night.” She curled onto her side and tucked her hands beneath her chin then closed her eyes.

“Are you going to fall asleep right now?” Iota asked.

“Probably.”

“It’s still light out,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been dreaming about sleeping in this bed again since that first night

and since you are okay with me sharing it, I have a feeling the moment we stop talking and I let myself relax, I'll be out like a light." Domitia rolled onto her side toward him. "Do you feel all right?"

"Yes."

"You're not hungry or thirsty or in pain?"

"I'm fine. I promise."

"Okay." She yawned. "I'm going to sleep. Wake me if you need anything. Good night."

"Good night, Domitia."

*

Iota kept up his side of the bargain and stayed away from Domitia. He didn't run his hand up her arm, or push the one curl that kept falling over her face behind her ear. He didn't wrap his arms around her while she slept, put her ass against his cock, or bury his face against her neck to bask in her scent.

Instead, Iota stared at the ceiling until the Moon Goddess took pity on him and he finally passed out.

Hours later, Iota woke to the sounds of Domitia in the kitchen. She was singing again, some quiet and sweet song, and the aroma of whatever she was making made its way up the stairs.

Fuck, it smelled delicious.

Carefully, Iota swung his legs to the side of the bed and sat up. Damn. It wasn't the morning he'd wake up feeling fine. He tested some weight on his feet, and the floor creaked so loudly Domitia called, "Don't get out of bed! I'll be right there!" which was followed by the sound of her racing upstairs. She barreled into the room.

"Even if you are feeling back to normal, I should watch you get out of bed the first time in case you fall."

"I don't feel back to normal," Iota said, easing off the bed and onto his feet.

"That's okay. Dr. Tau said it can take time. We've got all the time in the world, right?" she reminded him.

"Right." It was true. Even if it didn't feel true, and every moment Iota wasn't himself was killing him, she was right. Domitia was his forever. He didn't have to rush. He would heal—tomorrow, Goddess willing—and they would begin their lives.

Domitia helped him to the bathroom, waited dutifully outside the door, got him back into bed, and then finished making breakfast. She brought up a literal feast.

"You're going to have to tell me what all this is," Iota began, his eyes wide.

"Yes! This," she pointed to a hearty soup, "is usually called chicken souse. But the market only had turkey, so it's turkey souse. Turkey, potatoes, lime, peppers and onions, some spices. I know you aren't sick, but whenever I feel less than myself, this is what I want to feel better. These," she pointed to a plethora of items, "you eat together. Take a piece of flatbread, spread some fava beans on it, and then top it with an egg. I can put yours together. And lastly, this is a bread pudding. It's very sweet, has strawberry jam in there, and tastes good with a cup of tea or coffee, both of which are waiting downstairs. Which would you like?"

“I...” Iota was flabbergasted. She must have started making this either last night or hours before the sun came up. “Coffee. I’ve never had tea.”

“Oooh. I’m a tea drinker over coffee. I’ll let you have a sip of mine.” She disappeared and left Iota with a mountain of food on the tray at the foot of the bed.

Who the hell was his mate? She could open a tavern. Even Chi didn’t make things with such variety.

“Here you go.” She set his coffee on the bedside table, then pulled up her chair beside the tray. “I’m going to start with the turkey souse.” She ladled a bit into one of the bowls she brought up. “Would you like a bowl as well?”

“Domitia. How on earth did you learn to make all of this?”

“I’m from the south,” she said quickly.

“Yes, but my sister lives in Muchan, I’ve been there several times. Their food is different, but not like this.”

“That’s because the wolves don’t trade outside the continent.”

“What? Have you been off the continent?” Iota was shocked.

“I told you I worked coastal boats. That’s technically off the continent.”

“Have you met people who don’t live on these lands?”

“Of course.” She smirked. “You’ve met one too.” She set her plate down on the tray. “There are a lot of islands that didn’t drown in the sea. People still live there, come over in boats to trade with us. Where do you think you get your sugar?”

“I was under the impression humans in the southlands grew and traded it.”

She grinned. “They probably tell you that, but sugar doesn’t grow where the humans live on this continent. But there are islands that grow it. Humans in the southern islands and continent grow it too.”

“The southern continent? How many are there?”

Domitia shrugged. “On the water, we call this place the northwestern continent. Below is the southwestern. I know of two others, we call them Ice and Sand. There could be a lot more though. I know the earth is round, but I don’t know what’s on the other side of it.”

“You said I’ve met someone not from this continent. Is that you?”

She nodded. “I wasn’t born here. Been here since I was a kid though, so I don’t remember living on another continent, but my mom told me stories.”

“Which continent are you from?”

“My mom used to say, where the sand met the ice.” Domitia shrugged. “So somewhere between those two.”

“You came here on a boat?” he asked, taking a heaping spoonful of turkey souse.

“I did. My mom said it took months to cross the ocean. The storms that year were terrible. Lots of people died on the crossing from sickness. But, my mom and I made it.”

“Wow. Why did you leave?”

Domitia took a big spoonful of her food, then gulped down her tea. “She doesn’t talk much about before. Only that it was just the two of us left, and life was terrible over there. There’s a lot of talk about this continent being the promised land and all that.”

“Really?”

“In a way, the south sort of is. Ripe farmland all around the cities, a sea you can pull food out of. It wasn’t a bad hand of cards to be dealt. I get the feeling we lived more on the sand than the ice, and there wasn’t much in terms of food to be had. We came here for another shot at life, and we got one.”

“No working on boats where you’re from?”

Domitia shook her head. “My mom said it was much too dangerous. Pirates on every turn.”

Iota searched his mind for the definition of that word before asking, “What are pirates?”

She smiled. “Someone who illegally boards a boat and steals the haul, usually after murdering a good deal of the people working the boat.”

“Hell, are there pirates where you worked?”

“Not many. Pirates around here are usually half-starved and most of the captains I worked for would just offer them a job and a full belly and they’d take it. Why have one haul when you can have a lifetime of food?”

“Good point.” Iota finished his turkey souse and then put together a flatbread with beans and egg, which may have been the best thing he’d ever eaten. That is until he tried the bread pudding and immediately realized that Domitia could put Chi’s bakery

out of business if she wanted to.

Domitia and Iota finished eating, and she took all the dishes down to clean them.

“If you could help me down, I’ll do the cleaning up,” Iota offered.

“Absolutely not. I’m not trying to get you down the stairs and then up the stairs so I can watch you struggle doing the dishes. I promise on the Moon Goddess and any other deity who might be listening, that the second you are well, I will never wash another dish in my life. But for now, please, be content to rest. I don’t need to explain to Dr. Tau that you fell down the stairs because I couldn’t handle washing a few dishes.”

“Fine,” Iota agreed. “But I’ll hold you to that. Not another dish washed in your life.”

“I don’t think you realize what a good deal I’m getting out of this,” she called as she walked down the stairs.

He did. And he didn’t care. He wanted Domitia to have the best deal around. Nothing but easy living for her once he was healed.

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Iota's good mood lasted until about noon, when he heard something crash downstairs and Domitia relay a string of curses.

"Are you okay?" he yelled. He pushed up from the bed and hobbled toward the door.

"I'm fine! Don't get out of bed! I broke a glass. I just need to clean it up."

"Don't cut yourself!" Iota called. "I'm coming to help!"

"Get your ass back in bed, Iota!" she scolded. "I'm not kidding! If I see you down here, I'll be mad as hell. Let me clean up the glass, then I'll come back up and entertain you."

"I don't need entertainment," he called back. "I need my mate not to have to do everything for herself," he huffed quietly. Goddess, he was so useless! Maybe he should ask her to have Lambda come down and help him down the stairs a couple times a day so he could help with some of the household chores. Obviously, she liked cooking, but no one liked cleaning. No one liked picking up broken glass while trying not to cut themselves.

Iota stayed on his feet for a while, testing out how long he could stand without holding onto the wall or bed. It wasn't as bad as he thought. His muscles felt unused more than sore, and the stitch in his abdomen was calming down. He could walk.

As luck had it, he had to pee and didn't want to bother Domitia. Nor would she bound up the stairs and catch him in the hallway. It was the perfect time to test out walking to the bathroom alone. The last two times she hadn't even held onto him. He could do

this.

Iota took a tentative step away from the bed, waiting for a creak in the floor to have Domitia hollering at him, but it didn't come. He took another step and another, keeping his right arm outstretched towards the wall in case he stumbled. He made it to the threshold and paused, catching his breath.

So far, so good. He may have been abnormally winded from walking from his bed to the doorway, but he did it. Iota turned toward the hall as he kept one hand on the doorway for support. He took another step into the hallway and the room swirled and—

His knees gave out. He hit the ground hard, unable to stifle a groan as he did.

“What was that?” Domitia called.

Iota tried to shuffle back into the room, scooting along on his hands and knees. If he could get into bed before she got up here maybe he could convince her—

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Domitia's voice was low and beyond pissed. “Why are you on the ground?”

“I...fell walking to the bathroom.”

Domitia exhaled, her hands on her hips. She took two steps toward him, then squatted beside him and extended her hands. “Well, come on then. I'll walk you there.” She pulled him to his feet, then stood behind him with her hand on his back. “Go slow.”

Iota nodded and did what she said. They made their way slowly down the hall, into the bathroom. He could have waited at least another half hour before he needed to go, a fact that now had him feeling like an absolute fool. Domitia was downstairs

cleaning up glass by herself, and now she was walking her idiot mate down the hall, afraid he might fall again.

He was a terrible mate.

He washed his hands and opened the door slowly. Domitia grabbed onto his forearm and led him back to bed, pulled the covers back, and got him situated.

“I need you to be a better patient.”

“I’m sorry. I will be.”

Domitia nodded. “You better be. I am going to finish cleaning up the glass and then I’ll be back. And if I find out you out of bed—”

“You won’t. I promise.”

“Good.” She raised an eyebrow. “I’ll be back soon. Try to keep your promise.”

Iota nodded, knowing he’d never break a promise to Domitia. Even if she didn’t come back up for three hours, he’d be sitting in bed like a good little wolf, waiting for his mate to return.

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Domitia was going to make that stubborn ass wolf a deal. One that had him healing in bed, no complaints, until he was ready to resume normal life. Because as much as Domitia didn't mind taking care of Iota, hell, she wanted that first week of doting as much as the next wolf mate. Tella and Phaebe spoke about it like some sort of heaven and after the last three years of her life, Domitia needed a little bit of heaven.

She carefully cleaned up the rest of the glass, then wiped the floor down with a wet cloth to catch any stragglers. Then she poured herself a beer and enjoyed it while tidying up the kitchen. There was a stew simmering for lunch, some rice soaking for dinner, and a mess of chopped herbs on the counter. She finished her preparations for both meals, downed the rest of her beer, and headed up stairs.

Oh, Iota. What was she going to do with him?

He was awake, arms crossed, staring at the ceiling.

"Hey," she said softly. "I know it sucks staying in bed."

"The last thing I want to do is make life harder for you," he started. "No matter what I do, I feel like you end up with more work."

"I don't mind the work. But this isn't forever, so stop treating it like it is. Does it suck we're not three days into the mating frenzy? Sure. Does that mean we're never doing it? Of course not." Domitia took a deep breath. "I know you've probably been out of sorts because I'm not smelling turned on."

Iota's cheeks pinkened and he looked down.

“It’s not that I am not attracted to you. I am. You are very handsome. I obviously remember how good you are with your hands and mouth. This last week has been packed full of big, bad things, and I haven’t been able to turn my brain off unless it’s to sleep.” Domitia sat on the foot of the bed and stretched her bare legs out alongside him. “Throw me a pillow.”

He did, and Domitia tucked it behind her back. “From now on, we’re doing this. I’m going to get to know you. You’re going to get to know me. I’ll go downstairs to get us food or cook, but no more cleaning. I’m going to leave the kitchen an absolute disaster for you. You’re going to feel better and immediately spend six hours doing all the dishes I’ve created.”

A huge grin splayed across Iota’s face. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy to hear I have to clean the kitchen.”

“You’re going to regret saying you’d do it forever. I make a huge mess.”

“I’ll never regret it. Not when the tradeoff is eating all the meals you’ve made. Best food I’ve ever eaten.”

“Really? What was your favorite?”

“The bread pudding. Hell, that was better than anything Chi has ever baked. You truly have a gift when it comes to food.”

“I appreciate that. Thanks.” Domitia bumped his upper arm with her foot. “So, you’re friends with Epsilon and Lambda?”

“Yup. Sigma and Rho, too.”

Domitia nodded. “I hope Millonia is doing okay out there with him. Poor girl.

Captivity hits us all differently but it hit her like a brick in the head.”

“How did it hit you?” Iota asked. He moved his hand to wrap it around her calf loosely.

“Some days were worse than others.”

Iota motioned to her arm. “Was that a bad day?”

“Oh yeah. Probably the worst. Massie—she was with the four of us, Vallie, Tella, Millonia, and I—she escaped, about a year before Tella did. Cade was pissed as hell. Like a wasp whose nest had been kicked. After looking for her all day, he came back to take it out on us, try and get out of us which way she’d gone. We had no idea. Massie hadn’t breathed a word of her plans before she left. That didn’t matter to Cade though. He thought he could beat it out of us. Well, I saw him take a real big swing, like he was going to knock all my teeth out, so I put my arm up to block him.” She shuddered. “That hit rang through my entire body. Definitely broke my forearm. Tella goaded him to come after her for a while then, Vallie tried to tie my arm so it would heal, but it never did properly.” Domitia sighed. “Saved my face, but fucked up my arm. At least it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“It was still hurting?” Iota pressed.

She forced a laugh. “Yes, very much. Dr. Tau rebroke it, reset the bone, and now I’m working on getting my strength back. It’ll probably never be back to normal, but hell if this isn’t a lot better than it was.”

“Cade is the dragon Epsilon killed, right?”

“He is. No need to avenge your mate. I have been avenged.” Domitia sighed. “And I never really felt like Balaur was forever. I was never resigned to the place. I don’t

know if the Moon Goddess buried some seed in my heart, but I knew I wouldn't die there. Too much of a wild wind in me."

"It sounds like you've made your peace with it all."

"I think I have. I've never been one to squander good fortune. I've found that here. In this house. With you." She smiled. "The past is past, not erased from me, not gone, but away. Every time I try to lift something, I'll be reminded of Cade's cruelty, but there's no need to let it consume me. Just as you will probably be reminded of this attack any time someone asks you when we met. You'll have to say, I had a beautiful twenty-four hours with my perfect mate before I was whisked away to fight wild wolves and nearly lost my life at it."

Iota snorted. "I don't think anyone could whisk me away." He shook his head. "I'll tell them all I was injured protecting the city I love which held the woman I'd die for."

"Hm. I think I'd rather you stay alive, but thank you for the sentiment." She nudged him again. "So what do you do for fun?"

"For fun?"

"Yeah. You live in a relatively safe city in the middle of a bleak world. You must have some fun."

"Well, I really like to swim in the lake. If I weren't all beaten up, I'd be going there every day."

"I love to swim!"

Iota grinned now. "Nothing beats the feeling of floating on a hot day and staring at

the clouds.”

“Is there a river around here? With a strong current?”

“Yeah, a couple not too far away. One that’s within the borders of Luven.”

“You know what we should do?” Domitia began. “Once you are healed, we should ride the current. Pick a real hot day and float down the river for miles.”

“That sounds amazing.”

Domitia nodded. “Maybe someday I’ll get you to the sea. Then you can ride a wave to shore with me.” She smiled. “Now. I’ll bring up some food, would you like a beer?”

“Am I supposed to be having a beer mixed with my pain meds?” Iota asked.

Domitia shrugged. “Dr. Tau said it was unadvisable for you to mix alcohol with your medication but also that it would just make you super drunk.”

“I think I’ll hold off for now. If you want one though—”

“I’ll be having one. Second of the day.” She winked.

There. This was better. If she wanted Iota to stay in bed, she simply had to stay there with him. There were worse fates available in this life.

*

Four beers and two meals later, Domitia laid with her legs entirely draped over Iota’s body.

“Why on earth have you never been to a human settlement?” she asked.

“No interest? No offense, but I like it in Wolf Territory.”

“Yes, but don’t you ever wish you were somewhere a little more...dangerous?”

“I think we’ve proved that twenty miles outside Luven is pretty dangerous.” He squeezed her knee. “Plus, the closest human settlement to Luven is Maidenhead and no one has ever made that sound like a place to visit.”

“Sure, but Becnal or Sava? Or Charles’ Port? Those cities are fantastic. A little dangerous. You can’t walk around alone after dark, but with a herd of shippers? Nothing safer.”

“You are not selling me on the southern cities. That and the fact that I know you were captured by the dragons there.”

Domitia dismissed him with a wave of her hand. “That was a fluke.” She hiccupped. “Dragons come down south every couple of years. Usually you only have to worry about men.” She laughed and covered her mouth. She caught his eyes twinkling with amusement and her breath rushed out of her.

Damn, he was good looking.

A week without a shave had his beard looking a little wild, and his hair, which often was slicked into a bun on top of his head, had escaped its tie and lay against his shoulders. His t-shirt was mussed and the neckline a little stretched out, giving her a view of his collarbone.

“Fuck, you’re hot,” she breathed.

“You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” Iota answered quickly.

Domitia laughed. “You sound so serious. You can say nice tits or something.”

Iota chuckled. “While I do find your tits...which I assume are your breasts...very nice, I am serious. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. All the best parts of the world are reflected in you, Domitia.”

“Charmer.” She stretched her arms overhead and looked at the ceiling. “I’m going to get another drink and your pill. Then we can both be a little drunk together before we go to sleep.” She got to her knees and leaned over him. “Try to get better soon. Okay?” On a whim she pressed a kiss to his mouth then jumped off the bed to rush downstairs.

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Iota used every single morsel of self-control he had not to grab his cock the moment Domitia left the room. Desire pulsed off her like electricity.

Damn, he wanted to touch her. He wanted to touch her so badly his teeth hurt.

He wanted to kiss her and strip her bare, touch every inch of her body, use his tongue against her clit until she came against him, weeping. He wanted to spread her thighs and dive between them, bury his cock in her for the next three days.

And then he wanted her on all fours under the moon for his beast, his teeth plunged into her skin while she cried out his name into the echoing darkness.

“Fuck,” he grumbled. It was going to be a long night.

Domitia returned, bearing his fat white pill, which he took dutifully. Most nights, he nodded off with a vague swimming sensation caused by the medication, but tonight he felt too alive to succumb.

Her shirt had shifted and revealed the smooth skin of her shoulder. It slipped further when she handed Iota a glass of water and he couldn't help stare past the material at the soft mounds of her breasts.

“You looking at my tits?” she asked, a sly smile on her face.

“Sorry. I shouldn't have done that,” Iota answered quickly. Domitia popped up from leaning over him, pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it to the side. She was naked from the waist up, her perfect breasts swaying as she moved, taut nipples

teasing him with every passing moment.

“Look all you like,” she said casually and sat back at the foot of the bed against her pillow. “Soon enough I’ll be bare every night.”

“Bare every night?” Did Domitia want to spend every night tangled up with him as he was dying to do right now?

“Well, in the summer. It’s too hot to sleep with clothes and with all this privacy there’s no reason to. I’m sure in the winter I’ll wear some sort of shirt.”

“I’ll keep you warm in the winter.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Domitia reached over her head and stretched. “Take your shirt off, Iota.”

He did not have to be told twice. He sat up, grabbed the hem, and tossed his shirt so forcefully it hit the window with a thud before falling to the ground.

Domitia bit her lip and whimpered. “What the hell, Dr. Tau? I seriously have to stay off this wolf until he feels completely better?”

“I am positive I would be absolutely fine getting you off right now.”

“No, no. We’re not supposed to. But hell, do you have to be that muscular? And fuck, I’ve never been with someone with chest hair like that. Super curious how it would feel rubbing against me while you’re on top.”

Iota’s head began to swim. Was it a side effect of the medication or of Domitia being so damn sexy?

“What about if you used my hand? I can lay very still and only move my fingers,” he offered.

“Iota! Stop. You’re going to weaken my resolve.”

“Good.”

“Plus. Don’t you want something too?” Domitia moved to her knees and leaned forward as she pressed her breasts together.

“I don’t think you have any idea how much I am getting from simply sitting here watching you move around.”

Domitia giggled and ran her hand up his calf and thigh, then stopped right before the bulge beneath his shorts.

“I don’t need anything,” he choked out.

You on your knees looking up at me, you on the bed with your thighs spread, you sitting on my face crying my name, you taking me from behind, you coming and coming and coming and—

“What if I really really needed to see your cock?” She reached to the waistband of his shorts and tucked her fingers under the fabric.

“Far be it from me to deny my mate something she needs.”

“Good. I honestly think it’s a good idea for me to see what I’m working with before we’re in a non-stop situation.”

“Domitia, I won’t not stop. If you ask me to stop, I’ll listen to you.”

“Hm,” she pulled his shorts down and his cock sprang free. “I’m pretty sure I’ll want to be non-stop. No breaks, just orgasms?” She wrapped her hand around his cock roughly. “Can’t say I mind this. Shit.” She ran her hand up and down a couple times. “What I’d give to fuck you right now.”

“Ah, you can fuck me right now. Get on top. I am yours to be used. Do whatever you want with me. Please.”

Domitia smirked. “I would get in so much trouble with Dr. Tau if I did that. And while I don’t mind being a bad girl, I’ll only take on that persona for you.” She moved and straddled his legs, still working his cock with her hands. “You’ve had a rough couple of days. If anyone deserves an orgasm, it’s you.”

“But,” he inhaled sharply trying not to get lost in the sensation. “Shouldn’t I get you off first? Come sit on my face. I promise I won’t move anything but my mouth. You can just ride me.”

It was Domitia’s turn to blush. “While I would really like to try that in the future, you won’t be getting me off until you are better. But,” she dropped his cock and shimmied out of her shorts. “Dr. Tau said nothing about me getting myself off while you watched, right?”

“She did not. Please do that.” Iota sat up a bit more and stared as Domitia settled herself against her pillow, threw one leg over his and the other off the bed, then licked two of her fingers before plunging them inside herself.

“Fuck, Domitia. You’re the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” He gripped her calf and watched her fingers disappear and reappear before settling over her clit.

“Better be. I’ve never touched myself for anyone before. This is mate’s only business.”

Iota grinned. He liked the sound of “mate’s only business.” He had a lot of business in store for her.

Domitia snaked her other hand over her belly until she cupped her own breast and ran her thumb over her hard nipple.

“You like playing with your clit and nipples at the same time?”

“Mmhmm.” She let her eyes flutter closed.

“So, if I were to play with your clit and suck your nipples while I fucked you...”

“I would like it. A lot. Let’s do that the first time.”

“Oh, we will,” he promised. He watched Domitia’s back arch off the bed. Her bottom lip snuck between and teeth and she held her breath.

Fuck, he wanted to help. But he also didn’t want to move and break the spell. So, he lightly raked his nails down her leg and then gripped her ankle.

“You’re mine, Domitia. I can’t claim you at this moment, but know it’s coming.”

She nodded and threw her head back, her legs jolting and buckling as she came. Her hand slowed then fell away from her but she kept her legs splayed wildly over him. Carefully, Iota lifted her leg and pressed a kiss against her ankle.

“You are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen,” he breathed. “Come lay by me and I’ll rub your back until you fall asleep.”

Domitia laughed softly and blinked her eyes open. “Oh, Iota. We are not done yet.”

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Look, Domitia understood that Iota was trying to be noble. The wolves were weird about the order in which orgasms happened. Hell, Vallie had given Domitia way too much information about her physical relationship with Lambda and how she was supposed to come three times before he came once.

But, if they were being honest, Domitia had come twice on day one. And she just came. Even if Iota hadn't been the one with his hand on her clit, knowing he was watching her writhe—feeling the grip he had on her—it had definitely hurried things along.

All of that was to say that she wanted to watch Iota come tonight and by god that wolf deserved it. She knew the amount of pain he'd been in, how hard it was for him to be cared for and listen to her and Dr. Tau over and over again when all he wanted to do was run and fuck and cook and clean, like a goddamn savior.

Domitia got to her knees and crawled toward Iota.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to straddle you while I make you come,” she answered simply. She arranged her legs on either side of his thighs and grabbed his cock. “And don't tell me to stop. You want to please your mate? I want to watch you come like a good wolf.”

Iota growled and bucked his hips once. “Yes, Domitia.”

“Keep your hips still. No moving.” She teased and gripped him hard. “I'm in charge

tonight.”

Iota’s eyes darkened as he hissed a breath through his teeth. “You’re in charge. For tonight.”

Domitia licked her lips and kept her eyes on his cock as she worked him. Damn, she really couldn’t wait to fuck him. Before the interlude with Alpha, it’d been years since Domitia had been with someone and judging from the size of the cock in her hand, they might have to do a little fun stretching before she could take all of him.

She reached her free hand up to massage her breast. She definitely wanted to come again.

Domitia had always been a two-orgasm sort of girl. One rarely satisfied her completely, and two usually did the trick. But now, she’d won the mate lottery. Wolves were notoriously thorough lovers and she couldn’t imagine going to bed with Iota without close to a handful of orgasms before she was spent.

“Fuck, I can smell you,” Iota growled. “You want to slip that pretty pussy over my cock?”

“Soon,” she teased. “I want to watch you come. Let go, Iota. Come all over my hand. Your abdomen. Now,” she commanded.

And he did. Like a good wolf listening to his mate, Iota clenched his teeth over a growl and came, spurting his thick seed over her hand and his belly.

“Good wolf,” Domitia praised. “I’m not going to fuck you, but it seems a terrible waste not to use all this come as lube.” She kept a grip on his cock, but propped up to her knees until her clit rested against the head of his erection. She rubbed his sticky cock over her pearl and played with her nipple with her other hand. “Let me use you

to come. Stay still just like you did before.” Domitia already felt the beginnings of another orgasm. Fuck, being with a wolf mate was no joke. She wondered if she’d always be this hot for him.

“Oh Goddess,” Iota moaned. “You’re so fucking warm. And soft. And wet. So wet. Are you sure you don’t want to sit on my face? Fuck, I’m going to come again,” he babbled.

“Come whenever you want. The beauty of you staying hard is that I’ll just keep using your cock to get myself off.”

Iota grabbed her thighs and squeezed hard. “You are fucking killing me, Domitia. The best death.”

Domitia looked down at him, his lips parted, silver eyes wild. His hair like a halo of darkness around his face against the pillow.

He was so fucking beautiful.

She wanted to get lost in his eyes every morning, fall apart in his arms every night. She wanted to cook him every recipe she knew and watch him fall in love with her. She wanted to ride his face and his cock, she wanted to swallow his come and know every inch of his soul. This was her mate, her future, and her forever.

He came against her, the heat of his seed rushing over her clit and throwing her over the edge. She gripped his cock hard, rubbed him against her, and cried out her pleasure.

“Iota!”

She collapsed beside him, her legs like jelly. He rolled to his side and pulled her

against his chest, pressing her breasts against him.

“I’m right here,” he soothed, his breath against her hair. “I’ve got you.”

She threw an arm over him and drank in deep gulps of air until her heart seemed to beat regularly and her lungs didn’t threaten to burst. She rolled around until her ass pressed against his cock and his arms encircled her waist. Iota reached up to cup one of her breasts, not in an insisting way, more out of comfort.

“Sleep now, Domitia. You may have been in charge tonight, but once I’m healed, once I can fuck you for days, I’ll want you to submit to me. On your back, on your knees, and with your mouth.” He pressed a kiss to the back of her neck. “Get your rest now.”

Domitia wasn’t sure if she would be able to fall asleep now, with the gentle pulsing between her thighs suddenly feeling awakened once more.

But, moments later, exhaustion washed over her and she was out like a light in the darkness.

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Iota woke up with his cock pressed against Domitia's ass.

Perfect. He slowly unwound his body from hers and shifted to the side of the bed. Hell, he felt fine. He stretched his arms above his head, no dizziness. He stood up and took two strides to the wall, nothing. He risked walking to the bathroom and was able to do his entire morning routine, including a shower, without incident.

Iota was back to normal.

While his wolf bounced around his head clamoring to go wake up Domitia and start the mating frenzy, the man Iota had different plans.

First, he went downstairs and cleaned the entire kitchen. Domitia had kept her word and left all the dishes of the day soaking in the sink. He took his time washing and drying every dish, sweeping the floor and wiping down the countertops. He found some food in the fridge that she had made the day before and heated up a bit of the turkey souse for her breakfast. He made coffee and tea.

Then he went out into the living area. It was relatively untouched, but he fluffed the pillows, straightened the mat by the door, and opened the downstairs closet where he pulled out fresh sheets and blankets for their bed. While last night had been extremely fun, it had also made the sheets quite...used. He set the bedding on the stairs, then went back to the kitchen and poured Domitia a cup of tea.

He brought the tea, bedding and turkey souse upstairs, quietly setting it on the dresser in their room. Then, he filled the bathtub with steaming water.

Now, the day was ready for Domitia.

Iota crept back into the room and knelt next to her side of the bed.

“Domitia,” he whispered, brushing her hair back from her face. “I’ve put breakfast on the dresser. The bath is full and ready whenever you are. Once you are in there, I’ll change the sheets. Take your time waking up, I’ll be downstairs.” Then he kissed her nose, and left the room just as she was rolling over and waking up. Iota knew that if he got one look at her sprawling, naked body there was no chance she’d get the morning she deserved. While Iota hadn’t been able to give her the days of pampering he had wanted to, there was no way he was squandering today. Domitia would have whatever she wanted, she would feel cared for and protected, she would be fed and given comfort.

And then maybe tomorrow she’d be fucked so thoroughly she wouldn’t be able to walk.

*

Two hours later, after Domitia had eaten and bathed and Iota changed the sheets and scrubbed them in the washtub out back and then hung them to dry in the summer sun, she emerged down the stairs like a goddess.

She had braided her hair away from her face in two plaits, wore one of his shirts with nothing on beneath it, and looked like the most relaxed person on earth.

“I get it now,” she said, collapsing beside him on the couch. She stretched her legs over his lap and nudge his chest with her knee.

“What do you get?” he asked. He ran his hand over the back of her thigh lightly.

“Why the whole pampering thing was so important to you. You are very good at it.”

“You feel taken care of?”

“I do. I’ve never had a hot bath before. It might be heaven. You think we could both fit in that tub? Might be fun in the winter months to warm up together.”

“You’d have to sit on my lap, but I think we could squeeze in there.”

“Twist my arm,” she teased. “What are we doing today?”

“Whatever you want. I’m off work for the foreseeable future. You might get sick of me hanging around so much. But today, we can go to the shops, buy whatever you might still need. Or if you want we can see if Vallie and Lambda are around, have a meal with them. I could get out of here and let you have the house to yourself, run down to the market to get you whatever ingredients you’ve been looking for—”

“I don’t want to leave the house. We have enough food, and I’ve never been one for lots of clothes. I still have to get used to having a place to keep things. When you carry everything you own, there isn’t a reason for a lot of stuff.” She licked her lips. “We have the rest of our lives to hang out with Vallie and Lambda.”

“Do you want me to leave so you can have the house to yourself?”

“Absolutely not. I like you around.”

“You do?” A lovely warmth spread through his chest.

“I know I’m not a warm person,” Domitia began, “and I’ve never been good at expressing my feelings. Even with my mom. Hell, I can’t remember the last time I told her I loved her and I will probably never see her again.” She took a breath. “That

is to say, I won't be the kind of mate who tells you she loves you every morning. Or even every week. But I don't want you to worry that it hasn't hit me yet. It has hit me."

"How?" Iota asked. "I've done nothing but lay in bed for weeks."

"You were not lying in bed, you were injured. Terribly. Protecting the city I live in. And...I don't want to say I'm glad things happened the way that they did, but part of me is relieved we weren't able to fall into bed for days the moment we met. It gave me a chance to speak to you, get to know you. The first time, that first day—"

"When I made you come twice?"

"Yes, then. I'm sure you could tell, but it didn't matter who it was. I only wanted touch. I had been so deprived for so long I would have taken anything from anyone. But now, I know that I don't want anything from anyone. I want you. Only you."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to explain how much it means to me to hear you say that," Iota began. "But I will do my best to make certain you feel loved every day of your life. If you feel loved by my touch, I'll always keep a hand on you. Any way you want me to show you I love you, I will. Because I do. With all my heart, both man and wolf."

Domitia smiled and pressed a kiss against his cheek. "I'm so glad my path led me here. It wasn't an easy one, but I made it."

Iota wrapped his arms around her and pulled to her to sit on his lap. She fit so perfectly, her curves against his abdomen, her soft skin against every inch of him. Domitia had always belonged in Iota's arms, he knew that now.

He buried his face against her neck and breathed in the scent of her. Hell, she smelled

like desire, but she also smelled like love and happiness and that was the best thing Iota could have imagined. He made his mate happy.

“You’re healed right?” She asked. He nodded. “Prove it to me. I know you were able to do the stairs alone, but are you sure you are at full wolf shifter capabilities?”

Iota grinned. “I’ll show you,” he growled. In a swift motion, Iota lifted Domitia off the couch and into the air, then walked her to the side of the room where he pinned her against the wall, so high that he pressed a kiss to the top of her thigh.

She buried her hands in his hair and tilted his face to look up at her. “If you feel this good, why on earth aren’t we fucking?”

Iota slowly lowered her until her feet touched the ground, but kept her body trapped between him and the wall.

“I am supposed to pamper you for three days. Not a couple hours one morning. Now, if you’d like to jump ahead to the pussy licking portion of the day—”

“Yes. I would. And I would like it to be immediately followed by the cock riding portion of the day. And then maybe the bend me over the table portion of the day which then morphs into the cock sucking hour.”

“Goddess, I love the filthy things you say,” Iota groaned. He pulled her back into his arms and cradled her against his chest.

He was finally going to be with his mate. He tried to play it cool, slowly walk his mate upstairs, maybe lie her on the bed gently before slowly seducing her.

But, he couldn’t. He let out an excited growl, then bounded up the stairs like a pup.

Domitia giggled as he did and held on.

“I’m glad you are as excited as I am.”

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Domitia held on while Iota ran her up the stairs, bouncing against him.

Damn, she wanted to fuck this wolf.

She didn't just want to fuck him. She wanted to ride him for hours, yes. She wanted to have as many orgasms as he could wring out of her, she wanted to make him come more times than would seem possible, and she didn't want to put clothes on until sometime next week.

But she also wanted to make her life with him. She wanted decades of this feeling, this love. She wanted mornings and afternoons and evenings and middles of the night in his arms.

Domitia was falling in love with Iota. Sure, she believed in all the Moon Goddess lore so she knew she would love him. But she had no idea what that would feel like and now that it was happening she knew. It was amazing. And a little scary, but as long as she had Iota by her side, she could handle it.

Their relationship had been a whirlwind to say the least. Thrown together after the ritual, his horrible injury. Domitia couldn't think about it too long now. How she'd almost lost him. It was too much to bear.

Iota paused beside the bed, and slowly lowered her to the ground.

“Are you sure you're ready?” he asked. “We don't have to start the mating frenzy today. I want you to feel—”

Domitia put her hand on his chest and looked up at him. “Are you sure you are ready? You’re the one fresh off an injury. We’re planning to fuck for days. I just had the most restful morning of my life. Barring needing to stop for food and water and an occasional nap, I am ready. How about you, wolf?”

“The Moon Goddess herself couldn’t keep me away from you another moment.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “Domitia Helena Aetos, my mate, my love, mine.” He growled the end of it, sending goosebumps over her body.

“And you’re mine,” she answered. The reverberation of his growling against her chest shook her in the most delicious way. “Always.”

Iota dug his hand into her hair, undoing the plaits, and pulled gently until she raised her chin and exposed her neck.

“Always,” he echoed then scraped his teeth along the column of her neck.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned. She gripped his biceps to keep herself from falling over.

“Last night,” he began, “you were very much in charge.” His hands moved down her body until he gripped the outsides of both her thighs. “But today,” he grabbed the hem of her shirt, “I am in charge.” His eyes flashed black for a moment. “You are mine, mate. I will touch you and lick you and fuck you all day. All night. All week.” He pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. “When you come,” he got down on his knees and slipped her underwear down her legs, then helped her step out of them, “I want to hear you moan, scream, yell. I want people walking by to perk their ears in interest.”

“Uh huh,” Domitia answered. Her mouth fell open and her eyes went wide. She’d never seen this side of Iota. She fucking loved it.

He looked up as he knelt in front of her. "Say, yes, Iota."

"Yes, Iota."

He growled in satisfaction. He got back to his feet, pawing her body the entire time. He squeezed her ass, thumbed her nipples, cupped her pussy. He pushed a finger inside of her for a moment, then withdrew it.

"Goddess, you are wet for me," he hummed. Iota picked her up by the waist and moved her to the bed. He covered her body with his and pinned her beneath him, her arms above her head, wrists crossed, beneath one of his hands.

"You still..." Domitia moaned as his free hand played with her breast. "You still have your clothes on. And I'm naked."

"You want me naked?"

She nodded.

"How about I'll take off a piece of clothing every time you come?" He kissed her hard before she could answer.

"Wait," she broke away as he moved his mouth down her throat and to her nipple.

"Hold onto the headboard," he commanded, then flicked his tongue across her nipple.

"How...How many pieces of clothing are you wearing?" She squirmed under him, but held onto the bed.

"Two." His mouth moved down her belly.

“Two? Wait, are you not wearing anything under your shorts?”

He kissed along her hip bone, over her thigh, then nudged her legs apart with his shoulders.

“Oh, sweetie. It’s summer. I’ll usually be naked when we’re inside. You’re lucky I have anything on today.”

“I think I’ll be luckier watching you strut around naked,” she teased.

“Open up for me, Domitia.” She obeyed and widened her legs. “All I wanted last night was for you to sit on my face. Do you know how hard it’s been knowing what you taste like yet unable to get my face right here?”

“Well, far be it from me to delay you any longer.”

Iota growled and dove into her, his mouth against her clit, his arms pinning her body against the bed. He palmed her breasts and teased her nipples. His tongue ran over her clit and Domitia let go.

She moaned, yelled, and cried, “Iota!” just as he had asked. She let herself feel everything: lust, pleasure, love—even a bit of fear. Because this unfaltering adoration of him didn’t come without it. If she loved him this much, needed him this much, it meant that losing him was a fear greater than she could imagine. She thought of Jaine wailing at the hospital. The fear of losing her mate was greater than any Domitia had faced before. She and Iota were partners, forever, and a life without him would never, ever be anything compared to one with him.

But she let herself feel that fear, and bask in it. There was no going back. Fear would be mingled with this love. But never overshadow it. The fear could never outweigh all the joy they would experience together.

She felt her orgasm building, starting in her fingers and toes, a slight tingling that turned warm. She grabbed the headboard and held her breath, trying to make it last as long as possible.

Then, Iota growled against her, reverberating through her entire body, and she was lost. There was no holding on any longer, she crashed apart into a million pieces, each and every one belonging to him.

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Iota crawled up Domitia's body, making a trail with his mouth up her thigh, hip, belly, the hollow between her breasts, and her neck. He settled next to her and kept his arms firmly around her.

He was so glad he was better.

"Why did you stop?" Domitia asked, her voice still groggy.

"Mm," he hummed. "You want more?"

"Yes, I do. But also, you were supposed to lose some clothing. I came. Get naked."

"I think I said one piece of clothing," Iota teased as he pulled his shirt over his head.

"You're such a tease," Domitia moaned. "Take off your pants and start the mating frenzy. Please. I love your mouth on me but I want to fuck you. Right this second." She got to her knees in front of him and roughly grabbed the waistband of his shorts.

"But...don't you want to come again?"

"If you think I'm not going to come when you fuck me," she shook her head. "I will. I definitely will." Domitia pulled his shorts down and grabbed his cock, startling him.

"Oh, fuck," Iota moaned.

"Ready for a power switch?" she murmured against his ear.

A loud banging at the door had Domitia jumping away from Iota and grabbing the blanket to cover herself.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Iota roared. He jumped out of bed, opened the bedroom window, and looked down. Beta was standing on the front steps.

“Beta! Fuck off!” Iota called.

“I need to go over a few details of your attack—”

“I’m fucking my mate, get away from my house!” Iota yelled back. “Seriously! I don’t want to accidentally murder you for being too close to her.”

Beta huffed, but turned and walked away from the house. Iota closed the window and turned back to Domitia who had dropped the blanket and had a huge grin on her face.

“You’re going to murder Beta? For getting too close to me?”

Iota shrugged. “Seemed the easiest way to get him to leave. He doesn’t have a mate. He doesn’t know what it’s like.”

Domitia crawled off the bed and stalked toward Iota. She put her hands against his chest and walked him backwards until he hit the wall and every inch of her body was pressed against his.

“Hands above your head,” she commanded. Iota furrowed his brow. “I promise. You’ll like it.” She took his hands in hers and guided them over his head. “Stay like that,” she whispered.

Domitia ran her hands down his arms and chest, then settled on his hips. She dropped to her knees and looked up at him. “Watch me. The whole time.” She spread her

hands wide across his low belly. “Ready?”

Iota nodded, his mouth going slack as he watched her take his cock in her mouth.

“By the Moon,” he hissed and slammed his fist against the wall. He watched her work over him, her eyes closed, her fingers flexing against his skin. She was so enthusiastic as she moved, and he swore she was smiling.

“Domitia,” he stuttered. “Domitia, I want you.”

She popped her mouth off him and looked up at him, her eyes wide as full moons. Like the first time they met.

“You have me. The question now is how do you want me?”

“I want you as my mate. Officially.” He pulled her to stand, then walked her to the bed until she fell back. “I want every wolf, dragon, vampire, and shifter on this continent to know that you are my woman. I want them to smell me all over you. I want everyone to know that you have a wolf.”

“When you talk like that...” her eyes went hazy and she wrapped her arms around him. “I feel like I could get really used to all this possessive stuff.”

“Possessive?” Iota crawled over her, splitting her legs with his hips. “Who me?” He couldn’t hold back a wide grin. “You’re mine, baby. Forever and always. And once I bite you,” he groaned as he notched his cock at her entrance, “we’ll be linked by the Moon Goddess.”

Domitia reached her hands around his hips and guided him inside her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “And you are mine.”

Iota moved slowly, as if it was his first time ever being with a woman. In a way it was—this was all different. He was with Domitia, his mate, his everything.

His soul was flying with joy.

“Iota,” Domitia breathed. “I need...” she shifted her hips and wrapped legs around him.

“What do you need?”

She pressed her forehead against his. “You. Stay here.” She cupped his jaw as they moved together. “Right here with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he assured. “Are you okay?”

“I am. I...It’s never been like this.” She gripped him harder. “I feel like my heart is on fire.”

“So do I. It’s our mating bond. Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” Iota kissed her softly. “I’ve got you.”

She nodded. “I trust you.” Her whole body clenched around him, her thighs gripping his hips impossibly tight. “Iota, Iota, Iota,” she whimpered as he rode the waves of her orgasm.

He kissed her cheeks and the tip of her nose and her forehead until he couldn’t hold on any longer and let go.

*

Domitia’s stomach growled loudly against his. It was the middle of the night, and

while he was currently inside her, they'd both already come twice since waking up.

"By the Moon! You must be starving." Iota slid out of her and scrambled off the bed.

"We forgot to eat dinner!" He couldn't believe he'd been so careless.

"We were a little busy," she laughed and stretched her arms overhead. "But I could go for a midnight meal." She peeled herself off the bed and wrapped up in the quilt.

"Let's go put something together."

Iota followed his mate like a mesmerized puppy. He couldn't keep his eyes off where the blanket slipped down a bit and revealed her bare back. As if he hadn't been wrapped up in her completely naked body for hours.

"Here," Domitia pulled out a tomato and an orange pepper, "start chopping. There's rice and chicken leftover from the day before. I can toss it all in a pan and it'll be ready in no time."

Iota grabbed his apron and slipped it on. He didn't think he'd be so clumsy as to drop the knife he was using, but he'd had enough injuries lately. His arm and abdomen were covered in scars. His cock wasn't being added to that list.

He watched Domitia flit from the refrigerator to the stove, pull out the pan, and get straight to work. She looked so at home in their kitchen. Like she'd always lived there with him. Everything in his life was settling into place.

"Thank you," Iota said and set the knife down.

"You're helping. It's a team effort."

"No. Thank you for taking care of me. You could have easily left me in the hospital until I was completely well. We didn't know each other yet. And thank you for sitting

by me all day and night while I was in the hospital. I didn't make the first week of this easy on you. I wouldn't have blamed you if you wanted to wait until I was completely better to start things."

Domitia paused and turned toward him. "You're welcome. I...It's hard to explain. I have a lot of faith, not in a particular deity, but more like in the universe in general. If four women I know meet their mates and fall head over heels in love with them, I believe that when I meet my mate, I'll fall head over heels in love with him. Sure, I didn't feel any of that a week ago, but knowing it would come was enough for me. And...There was something about seeing you so injured. I knew I needed you to pull through. The Moon Goddess doesn't make mistakes, and she didn't with us." She walked to him and put her head against his chest. "There will be times in our relationship when I need you to take care of me, and not because it's pampering time." She lifted her right arm. "Who knows what's going to happen with my arm?"

"You and me both," Iota chuckled and held up his left arm. It felt completely healed, but to a random onlooker, it still looked mangled.

"We'll be okay. Together." Domitia raised up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss against Iota's cheek.

"Together." He breathed in the scent of her—his beautiful, kind, talented mate. Domitia. "I love you. Don't say anything back to me. Let's finish cooking and eat and get back into bed and play a little before we fall asleep."

She pulled back and looked at him with her big eyes and a smile on her lips. "Oh, Iota. You're the first good thing in such a long time."

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“Oh God,” Domitia moaned. She buried her face against Iota’s neck and dug her nails into his shoulders.

“You’re close,” he grunted. “I can feel how close you are.” He slammed into her mercilessly as he pinned her against the wall.

Domitia had never been pinned against the wall and fucked so well in her entire life. She wasn’t a small woman and there was no small amount of trust involved in believing a man wouldn’t drop her. But she knew Iota had her. He would always have her.

“Don’t stop,” she breathed.

“Never.” Iota pulled his head back to look at her. “Come for me, baby. I want to feel your pussy clench on my cock. Nothing feels better. Goddess, you are so wet and warm. Fuck, you are the best thing in the world.”

Domitia loved when he talked to her like that. It made her feel sexy and loved—so loved. There was nothing in the world that had ever made Domitia feel as loved as Iota did. Sharing his bed—or his wall, shower, kitchen table, and the floor twice—and his heart was a perfect combination.

“Hold onto me,” she whimpered and grabbed onto his back as she shuddered with relief.

“Baby, you feel amazing,” he growled. “Perfect.” He slid in and out of her until he fucked her hard and groaned against her hair.

She ran her hand down the side of his face, over his shoulder, down his arm.

“I’ll never get tired of that.” Iota chuckled as he slid out of her and carefully set her on the ground.

“I’ve gathered as much.” Domitia picked up a shirt off the ground. “I know it’s getting to the point that we should, you know, complete the frenzy.”

“You want the wolf?” Iota growled.

“I...I’m not going to lie, I am a little nervous about the wolf,” she began.

“We don’t have to do that. Ever. The frenzy will end without it, eventually.”

“It’s not that I don’t want the wolf. Your wolf is a part of you. I want all of you. But, I don’t really like the idea of being out in the woods alone.” Domitia liked Luven, she really did, but it was really different than anywhere she’d ever lived. It reminded her a lot more of Balaur than the Southern Cities.

“Oh. Well, being in the woods isn’t mandatory.”

“Really? Can you be the wolf inside the house?”

“Sure.”

“Are you going to destroy the furniture?”

Iota burst out laughing. “Domitia, if I was worried I would destroy the house in my wolf state, I sure as hell wouldn’t go anywhere near you. You’re way more precious than the couch.”

“But I thought you were supposed to chase me down? That’s what Vallie said.”

Iota tried to swallow a smile. “Um, that sounds like a personal preference of Vallie and Lambda. Yes, usually you would go out into the woods and I would track you by scent alone to find you, but you don’t need to run from me. I like that you like me. I don’t need to hunt you down.”

Domitia nodded. “Tonight at midnight? We can open the window so it’s breezy and we can see the moon.”

“I can’t wait.”

*

Domitia waited in their bedroom, the light breeze tousling her hair. She sat on the edge of the bed waiting for her wolf. She was still nervous—this would be like nothing she’d ever done before. But, it was Iota. She trusted him in every form. He would never hurt her.

She could hear him first—heavy footsteps on the stairs, heavier breathing in the air. She wavered for a moment—was she actually ready for this? Domitia believed that Iota was her mate. But...being with a wolf. That was something she had never dreamed of. Would it be painful? Or terrifying? Would it ruin everything between them?

The door creaked open and Domitia saw Iota as a monster. He was taller, broader. His shoulders nearly took up the entire doorway. His hands were replaced with claws, his jaw was angular, and his mouth couldn’t contain his canines. He’d taken his hair down and it fell against his chest, now grayish and hairier. His scars still crossed his abdomen and his left arm was still smaller than the other.

Iota was a monster. Her monster. She locked eyes with the beast and knew that this form would never hurt her. He was her greatest protector in the world.

“Domitia,” he hummed. “My mate.”

She nodded in response, unable to form words. The sound of his voice was intoxicating. If she’d had any doubts that this was the wolf who she would spend the rest of her life with, the effect the deep rumbling of his voice had on her would have quieted them.

“Domitia scared?”

She giggled. “A little.”

“Wolf leave?”

“No. Wolf should stay.” She reached her hand out to him and brought him close. They were both naked as they had been all day, but something about the wolf being here made Domitia suddenly shy. Would the wolf like her as much as Iota did? She wasn’t sure how much of her mate was actually in this animal form.

The wolf nuzzled his face against her neck and inhaled so sharply her hair lifted off her sticky skin.

“Mate ,” he growled.

Domitia ran her hand over his thigh until she wrapped her hand around his jutting cock. It was both Iota and not. He shuddered as he usually did when she touched him, but the feel was different. Domitia understood why the mating frenzy culminated in taking the wolf—there’s no way she could have handled all of this a few days ago.

She climbed onto his lap and pushed the wolf to lay back on their bed. She had always figured that if and when she was with a wolf, it would be something that scared her. She'd be outside, worried someone or something was watching. But here, in the bed she loved, with the wolf she loved, she felt safe and cherished.

The wolf set his palms on her thighs and grinned a toothy smile as she sunk down on him.

“Good mate,” he grumbled, his voice vibrating to the point that Domitia felt it deep inside her.

“Hell,” she gasped as she rode him. He was definitely hitting her in new places in this form. She moved over him, first slowly as she stretched to accommodate his new size, then quickly once she could take him. She moaned wildly now, feeling animalistic herself. He was the wolf, but she was a wolf's mate. A human built to take on a monster. Her pleasure built and built, coming to a height she'd never experienced before. She thrashed wildly over him, unable to control what her body did any longer. Instinct took over and led her crashing over the edge as she screamed her wolf's name in the darkness.

In an instant he was on top of her, sliding out, then flipping her onto her belly before burying himself deep inside her again. It was his turn to move wildly. She arched her spine, already feeling another orgasm on its way.

“Bite.” Iota commanded her and she responded by offering her neck to him. He sunk his teeth into her skin the moment her orgasm broke. Domitia sobbed through the soaring waves of ecstasy crashing through her body. She grabbed at the sheet below them and tried to catch her breath. It was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room.

“Shit, Domitia, are you okay?” Iota scrambled off her and to her side. “I'm so sorry,

baby.” He ran his hand over her back. “Did I hurt you? I thought the bite was supposed to feel good. I’ll get you some ice.” He moved to climb off the bed but Domitia grabbed his hand.

“I love you,” she breathed. “I love you so much.”

Iota paused, then a grin spread across his mouth. “Really?”

“Yes. I love you an insane amount. Don’t get out of the bed. I’m shaking and I need my wolf to hold me for a while.”

“Rest of my life,” he murmured as he pulled her against his chest.

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“Are you sure your mom won’t be offended that I’m bringing food?” Domitia asked. She was carrying a pot filled with turkey souse and Iota had a dish of bread pudding.

“No. I promise. She’s going to love it.”

Domitia raised a suspicious eyebrow. She wanted to make a good impression on Iota’s parents, especially since they lived about two miles away and she would probably see them frequently.

They walked up the path to their front door and Iota knocked, then put his arm around Domitia.

“You’re here!” A very chipper woman answered the door who had Iota’s dark eyes and hair, but none of his width or stature. “Come in, come in! Domitia, let me take that for you. It’s wonderful to finally meet you! I wanted to come to the house when Iota was injured but he said he wanted us to wait until the two of you were officially mated. Such a rule follower.” Iota looked at Domitia and grimaced, then grinned.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she answered. “And now that Iota’s feeling better we can have dinner together.”

Iota’s father walked in and shook his son’s hand, then turned to Domitia. “Well, I’m prepared to be blown away by your cooking if my son’s praise is anything to go off of.” He stuck his hand out. “Nice to meet you, Domitia.”

“You, too.” She licked her lips nervously. She looked over at Iota. He looked so proud she could melt.

“Come sit!” Iota’s mom called. “I want to ask Domitia a million questions about her travels.”

She snuck a glance at Iota.

“My world traveler,” he whispered. He squeezed her hand and led her to the table. She looked at her mate and his parents, and for the first time in her life she thought...

Staying in one place might be nice.

“Have you heard Alpha’s new decrees? The far lands are considered lost,” Iota’s father broke in. “I never thought Luven would lose territory.”

“Better to keep the borders tight and our wolves safe,” Domitia said, wrapping her hand around Iota’s. “When he returns to work, I’ll know that I won’t have to worry as much about an attack. And if there is one, he’ll be closer to Luven where reinforcements stand.”

“Enough about politics,” Iota’s mother exclaimed. “We are here to meet our new daughter, and she has been on the sea! That is what I want to hear about. Life on a boat.”

Domitia settled into her seat. “Well, it’s much hotter than here, and the food is very different. But the sea is beautiful.”

*

Domitia left the house with a warm heart and very full belly. Iota’s mother had been positively delightful, and while his father had been slower to warm up, she had high hopes for the powers of persuasion that rested in her bread pudding.

“You were wonderful tonight. You’re always wonderful.” Iota pressed a kiss against her forehead.

“Mmm. It was fun. And neither of your parents asked me when I plan to have a baby, so that was nice.”

Iota laughed. “They’ll keep their questions to themselves, I hope. No one’s business but ours.” He pulled her a little closer. “Speaking of a baby...”

Gamma, Jaine, and their three children were in front of their house. Jaine was sitting in a rocker holding their new infant.

“Gamma!” Iota called. “Jaine! You had the baby!”

“I did. A week late, adorable little stinker. I’m not sure why she didn’t know third babies are never supposed to be late.”

Domitia leaned over to get a look at the baby. “She’s so tiny! And very cute. Is she named yet?”

“We named her Zeze,” Gamma said. “After Xi. If it weren’t for him dragging the two of us back to Luven, I don’t know if I would have been around to meet her.” Gamma bent down and kissed Zeze’s forehead, then Jaine’s cheek.

“Is Xi single? There are three more women in the hospital you know,” Domitia mentioned.

“Xi’s been mated for almost fifteen years.”

“Whelp, guess he isn’t for a Balaur woman then.” Before Domitia could say another word, Celyn fell into a bush and immediately started screaming, which startled Zeze

who joined in the racket.

“We’ll leave you to it,” Iota called to them pulling Domitia away.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “No babies for a while.”

“Let’s enjoy some time for just us.” Iota kissed her quickly. “And let’s start enjoying that time the minute we get home.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:11 am

“How on earth did you live here?” Iota complained as sweat dripped down his body in rivers.

“It’s not that bad! You should feel it in late summer. Now, that is hot. Early summer is nice. Perfect weather to sleep under the stars.” Domitia giggled as she walked beside him.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep until we are back in Luven.”

“You’ll be fine. I promise. There’s a nice breeze off the water once we get on the beach. You’ll be able to sleep there.”

Iota looked over the land in front of him. As a wolf who never envisioned leaving Wolf Territory, standing on a crowded street in Javel was never in his plan. But, new roads were going up all over Wolf Territory, and after a quick visit to his sister in Muchan, Iota and Domitia were going to try to find her mother.

It wasn’t going to be an easy feat. Javel was a huge city, and Domitia hadn’t seen her mother in seven years. She could have moved on, or worse, died. But, they were undeterred. Before leaving Luven, they decided they would look for her for two weeks, and if they could not find her, Domitia would leave a message at the harbor, in case her mother ever went looking for her again.

“Oh, there’s Tine! She had the best textiles but was an awful cheat. Her prices were never fair. She used to make me so mad because I could never afford anything she sold. I could save a half-year’s worth of wages and it would only buy me a single dress from her.” Domitia scrunched her nose. “Good to see she is still alive though.”

“Does it look the same?”

“A little. I can tell it’s Javel. But Javel never really stayed the same. Whenever I came back, there’d be new merchants to replace the old, new buildings to replace whatever had collapsed. It was always changing.”

There were so many people here—mostly human, but Iota noticed a few wolves in the mix. The streets were crowded, people pushed, and more than once, Iota put his arm up to block someone from knocking into Domitia.

“Now I know why you spent so much time on the water,” he remarked.

Domitia barked a laugh. “I didn’t mind the crowds after being at sea for months with no one but my shipmates to keep me company. Then I’d be starved for new conversation.”

“Where did your mother live?”

“A few blocks south of here, nearly on top of the beach very close to the docks. That’s where she would meet the families of those deceased at sea and make arrangements for funerals.”

“An interesting field your mother entered into.”

“She is good with grief. And people flock to her. You’ll see when you meet her.” Domitia wove her hand through his and held on tight.

His brave girl. When they discussed this trip, Iota brought up that if she never went, she wouldn’t know what happened to her mom, and her mom wouldn’t know what happened to her. Which might be easier for all of them. And even if she did go, she still might not know. Domitia had disappeared without a trace. Her mom could have convinced herself that her daughter had settled down with someone and started a

family and couldn't travel anymore.

This trip would up end a lot of comfortable norms.

But Domitia had insisted she had to try. Even if it meant finding out something horrible had happened, even if it meant cementing she would never know.

"This is the street she lived on," Domitia said quietly as they turned the corner. "Only another block until we'll be there."

Iota pulled her to the side so the flow of people could make their way past them. "Are you ready? We can walk further if you need more time."

Domitia shook her head. "I want to know. Now. I've been waiting for years. Longer than I ever thought I would have to." She set her jaw in determination. Goddess, Iota loved this woman. "I'm ready to know, whatever happens."

Iota leaned forward and kissed her softly. "Let's go find out then."

They walked on, Domitia's grip becoming stronger by the minute. She moved like a woman on a mission.

"Here we are," she said, stopping in front of a doorway. Iota wrapped his arm around her and squeezed.

They pushed through the door into a darkened room. The walls were lined with glass jars filled with sand, stones, colorful glinting pieces of rock. There was a small table surrounded by chairs in the center and a staircase in the back of the room leading upstairs.

"Mom?" Domitia called, loud enough that anyone upstairs would be able to hear her.

“Domitia!” A woman’s voice called back. “Domitia, you are back!”

Iota looked at his mate just as her mouth broke into a grin and her eyes shed their tears. Relief crashed over him. No one deserved happiness like his mate did.

“Okay, baby. Introduce me to your mom.”

*

Thank you so much for reading Iota and Domitia’s story!! I hope you fell in love with them as much as I did when writing them. I really loved writing this book, especially all the yummy food Domitia makes.

As an indie author, reviews really help readers find books! I’d be over the moon if you took the time to write one: