



Alpha Talk (Hemlock Wolf Pack: Life in the Happily Ever After #7)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: True-mates Cody and Micah thought their baby making days were behind them. Content with running their businesses and hosting foster kids as needed, everything changes for them when Cody finds himself wanting to give pregnancy another try. The first time around was hard on his mind and spirit as a war raged around him. This time Micah is determined to give him all the rest and relaxation every pregnant omega deserves.

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Cody

I hated spring and summer. Any day where the sun was still yapping its jaws at seven in the evening was a day I wish I lived somewhere else right then. When I was younger, I dreaded winter. It was cold outside. It was cold inside. The cold gnawed at my bones and organs. Only now, decades removed from what the Raven Hollow Pack had once devolved into, I preferred the cooler, darker months. Summer made me itchy under my fur. It left me restless and sometimes agitated with others. Micah liked to joke that maybe I had reverse season depression, but I didn't think that was it. The dark was safer.

At least that's how I felt when I opened Dark Soul last year. Micah and I had lived on nearly every continent since the Raven Hollow War ended. It got worse once the girls grew up and we ran out of babies who needed foster care. It was as if the adrenaline of those days crawled into our cells and lived there. Moving around made Micah's support group complicated but he made it work everywhere we lived. He mostly hosted online and trained other qualified alphas to lead their own groups all loosely laced together through his organization: Alpha Talk.

A year ago, we found ourselves back in the Raven Hollow Wolf Pack Territory on a whim. I missed Silas – my friend and fellow babysitter from the war – like part of my soul had been carved away. We owned what Micah called 'a summer house' there but this time it was to be an all-year house. As restless as our cells were, Micah and I agreed it was time to attempt to put down roots again. Maybe we'd gotten our 'spiritual zoomies' out of our system now or maybe this was just another pitstop on the way to wherever we were actually going.

Micah had become a certified psychologist less than a decade after the war ended. I dabbled in various online classes while raising the girls, but nothing really stuck with me. It was as if the only way my nervous system stayed regulated was flittering from one thing to another – one obsession to another. Raising our girls and caring for the various foster kids that found their way in and out of our home over the years had grounded me in ways nothing else did. I had a love/hate relationship with schedules but moving from one thing to the next with our kids kept me sane.

As time and research poured into our lives, we discovered that we weren't the only ones who showed signs of whacky nervous systems after the war. It was as if a whole generation of us were just broken and on edge. Of course, that didn't apply to everyone. Everyone healed at different paces and in their own ways, but the evidence was there. That's how we ended up back in the territory of my birth. Sure, we found kindred spirits all over the world. Micah traveled wherever Alpha Talk was needed to set up support groups and networks. He did his best to prevent anyone else from turning out like Brone, Floria, Uriel, Grady 'Jeb' Moore, Bram, and so many other nefarious names that stayed with global consciousness in bad ways. He was good at it too. Though, it didn't hurt that he was a member of an off again/on again boyband. Though, calling him, Xander, and Jonah boys now felt like calling a t-rex a chicken. There was nothing boyish left in the guys.

While Happy Omega Magazine and other publications dubbed Dark Soul the 'omega' company to Alpha Talk it was all a bunch of baloney. Dark Soul wasn't about being anything in particular – gender/creed/ABO status. None of it mattered. It was all about nervous system regulation for those of us who needed chronic and continuous upkeep. Part meditation club, part gym, part 'found family' if that's what someone was looking for – we were always exploring new ways to calm down the pieces of us that never came back from the war. Sometimes it was as if a piece of me stood there in the woods where they kidnapped Micah, still screaming for him even though he was right beside me.

Looking down at the pixelated baby test, I knew I was going to need the family I built up at Dark Soul more than ever. There was a baby there in a bright green blanket. I never could keep them straight. Which color test was for what, but I knew enough to know that the baby meant you were pregnant.

Since our twin girls, Coda and Michelle, were born all those years ago we prevented conception. We went out of our ways to do so: birth control, condoms, and of course, Micah's recurring vasectomies. We tried so hard for a long time to conceive our girls but a pregnancy during war left me sucked dry. Even now, my fingers trembled at the thought of undergoing the process again. Only, I had decided that I wanted to try again. That's how we ended up back here.

Micah got his reminder that it was time to check to see what he was shooting (blanks or babymakers), and I said no. Well, I didn't just say no. It was a weeklong discussion about whether we really wanted to try it again. Micah loved being a dad and I didn't mind all the post-pregnancy parts of being a parent.

"I think it would be different this time," I had told Micah. "I think my nervous system isn't as whacked out. I think that time has done some good. I'm not saying it'll be easy and if it's too much for you, we won't. This is something we have to be all in on."

"I won't be learning to use a hand this time," he held up his prosthetic.

Journalists loved to ask me if I forgot the hand wasn't his natal hand. They'd ask if he touched me with it during sex or if he jacked off with it. Once I bit one of them. Took a real chunk out of him. He was an alpha douche who thought since Micah was famous, we deserved no privacy. I almost went to jail for it but took a big enough chunk out of his arm that every omega might be warned away from him. In the end, no one pressed charges because he didn't want to admit to what he asked me. The answer to the first question was easy. No, I never forgot. Not because Micah didn't

excel with the prosthetics over the years but because neither of us could forget how it happened. Why forget? Those who forgot history, sweeping it under the rug, were doomed to repeat it and I never wanted to see another Brone rise to power. So we remembered and Micah flew all over the world to help people who lost their hands adjust to what their lives might look like.

That was my point. We regulated ourselves through endless ‘community’ service. We found comfort in ensuring that others were okay as if we could send that hero energy back in time to ourselves when we needed it the most. Hell, maybe that’s how we survived those days because, looking back, neither of us know exactly how we got through them.

In the end, Micah agreed that we should try the whole pregnancy thing again. The girls were great. Grown, with their own children and grandchildren now but great kids still. We hadn’t passed our historical injuries onto them. After many late-night conversations, it was agreed that we’d move back to my birth pack where my best friend now leads with his mates. It’s where we had the most support, after all.

Conceiving wasn’t easy this time either. After a few months of romping all over our ‘summer house’ we decided not to focus on trying. Micah went back to work at the local Alpha Talk, and I opened Dark Soul. Silas and I argued a lot over the name of my company. He thought calling it Dark Soul would draw the wrong sort of attention. I fell in love with the name. Dark didn’t mean evil. Dark meant hidden and most of us with dysregulated nervous systems had to hide it. I wanted to build a place where we didn’t and where we could come to regulate. He let me have my way and signed off on the business license in the end just as I knew he would.

Now, Dark Soul was a thriving business that employed twenty people, including myself, and three doctors who rotated their hours so that there was always a doctor on call. We worked closely with the medical community to ensure we didn’t lead anyone down the wrong path but mostly we were an agnostic spiritual community. Sure,

most of our members followed the Crow King or Frost and Juda or all the above but the business in question didn't align itself with any founder or spiritual practice so that everyone felt welcome. There were plenty of temples in the territory for that part of life. In fact, there was a Temple of the Crow King down the block from us. A Cuddle Club franchise was housed next door and sometimes referred people to us and vice versa.

My first call should've been to Micah, but I was too nervous to poke him over our mating link. It was a good thing. This was a good thing but the moment I smelled nervous his wolf would be a mess. Not in a way that meant he couldn't function as an adult but in a way that meant we'd sink back into being attached at the side until the baby came. I wasn't dreading Micah's undivided attention but sometimes I wondered if it was healthy for us to cocoon away from everyone so often.

"We don't do it often. Often means almost all the time," my wolf cut into my thoughts. "We do other things in between 'cocooning.' We do or we'd never help anyone or raise any pups. Sometimes we have to cocoon. Sometimes together is the only safe place in the whole crow-damned universe."

"Silas is safe too," I said aloud to him.

Micah had a few hours of work left. I'd tell him when he came home. Hell, maybe I'd order in something fancy and tell him over dinner. Maybe I'd just write it on my stomach and let him find out when he undressed me tonight. The options really were limitless because when he was in private group sessions, he kept his end of our mating link closed. If there was an emergency, I could yank on him really hard and get his attention, but it had been a long time since I had to do something like that. So, instead of interrupting what might've been groundbreaking work with his support group I sent Silas a text.

ME: Guess what, brother!

SILAS: What?

ME: GUESS!

SILAS: WHAT?!

ME: DON'T BE THAT WAY, UNCLE!

I sent him a line of crying wolf face emojis. Silas and I didn't text a lot unless you counted photos, memes, and information about pack gatherings. We usually used the phone or the pack link for little conversations but I didn't want word getting out over the pack link until I had a chance to tell Micah. I didn't want my alpha to hear it from anyone else before he heard it from me. Keeping any secret was harder than it should've been when your true-mate was a Grim Howler.

SILAS: REALLY?

ME: YES! FINALLY!

I sent a howl emoji and then a line of them. What could I say? I was freaking happy! Even if all the old anxieties tried creeping back into my head.

SILAS: OMW!

SILAS: WAIT!

SILAS: Does Micah know? Do I need to not be on my way?

ME: Micah is at work for a few more hours. He has a private group today and I don't want to interrupt that. I only took the test on my own because I was sure it was my imagination that the hashbrowns made me not want to eat. You know, wishful

thinking and all of that. But I guess it wasn't my brain.

SILAS: Nope. Your nose did that. Potatoes always smell like poison when I'm pregnant apparently. Fried potatoes are the worst, though. I hate those weeks. Though, it's been a while since I had those weeks. Our house is going to be emptier than yours when your pup comes along.

ME: Are you over the break? Ready for more?

SILAS: Not sure. Sort of digging the childfree life. Though, we're not childfree. I don't care if people are but it sounds weird to call us that. We're parents. We still have people to worry about even if they're not toddlers or teens. I guess we're empty deners for now. Well, not you anymore. Micah filled up your den.

I sent him a line of laughing wolf emojis and headed into the kitchen to see what might not set my stomach off while I waited for him to get here. I spent almost fifteen minutes sniffing everything in the kitchen before I realized I was craving jerky. Micah and I didn't eat it often. We hadn't eaten it often since the days we traveled from the west coast out here to negotiate with Brone after his nephew Roger was killed for being a dangerous creep. We ate too much of it on that trip for it to be appetizing again. We still went through phases though. Mostly when one of our kids was really into it. So, despite them all being grown now, we still kept some on hand just in case. I tore into a bag of deer jerky and wandered onto the porch to wait for Silas.

He pulled up a few minutes later, with a to-go bag of burgers from one of the newer restaurants. They smelled just on this side of okay, but I was grateful he'd skipped the fries. Besides, I'd try anything once and after this stage of pregnancy passed – the everything is probably poison stage – I'd be ravenous if I didn't get enough to eat in this phase.

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Micah

“Sidney still isn’t sleeping with me,” Coil grunted when it was his turn to speak.

He met his true-mate three months before. Sidney was a few years older than him and focused on his medical degree. He had acknowledged their meeting but would do nothing to consummate it. At least, not in the ways that Coil felt he was entitled to. His doctor had referred him to Alpha Talk. Apparently, he went off at Sidney about not ‘giving him what he was due’ at an appointment and the doctor about tossed him out of the window. Seeing that the doctor was Clyde, Coil was lucky he didn’t end up splattered on the road. Not all of the alphas in our group were would-be predators in the making. Most of them were normal people like anyone else dealing with hard times or an unfair world.

“Coil?” Raziel cocked his eyebrow.

“Yeah?”

“How much would you pay me to solve your problem?” Raziel asked and I almost stepped in to stop the conversation.

“Wait!” my wolf yipped into my thoughts.

“Why? What’s your idea?”

“It’s not an idea, it’s a promise, pal. If you don’t shut your crow damned muzzle about Sidney not sleeping with you, I’m going to cut your balls off. You’re crossing

lines that aren't cool, dude. None of us are going to sit here and pat you on the back and say he's some sort of horrible monster."

"You don't get it!" Coil snapped. "He's mine!"

"And I'm sorry for him for that," Raziel said. "I haven't met the guy but I'm sure he deserves better."

"Thought this was a supportive group?" Coil huffed in my direction.

"We are," I said. "If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn't let Raziel castrate you for talking about your frustrations but I would intervene if I thought you'd push the issue in the wrong way with Sidney."

"He'd totally let me castrate you," Raziel laughed.

I sniffed the air but nothing was given away. I knew that. In fact, it was my fault. I insisted that everyone wear pheromone blocker spray to the meetings to stop any possible fights. I wasn't sure why Raziel was here. He was a wolf-elf by his own admission. He talked about society here and there. He wasn't referred to us by anyone but he started showing up a few weeks after Coil did. We were open to any alpha who wanted to sit in and talk but sometimes I wondered what Raziel hid.

"Probably," another guy nodded.

"Okay. Let's stop the castration talk," I glanced at the clock and stood up. We had another forty-five minutes of group left but figured it was time to send the rest of them for a run while I talked to Coil one on one. Raziel was wrong. I wouldn't let him castrate him. I'd do whatever it took to stop Coil from turning into a monster myself.

“What’s this?” Coil asked once the others had left. “I’m being kept after class? Like a school kid?”

“No, not like a school kid, Coil,” I shook my head. “You’re not a kid. You’re a university student and an adult. Being an adult sucks. Sometimes it means making hard choices but respecting your mate’s boundaries shouldn’t be one of them.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, tossing his hands in the air and looking a lot younger than he actually was.

Shifters didn’t age like mortals of old but if we had wisdom to show from age it usually showed behind our eyes. Coil hadn’t reached any level of wisdom I could discern there.

“Explain it to me because what I’m hearing is Sidney owes you sex and that’s not true.”

“He picked me, though! Out of all the men in the Other World he picked me, Micah,” he groaned.

“Yeah, he did and you picked him too.”

“I’ve done the therapy. I’ve done the wooing! I just want to get fucking laid!” he growled.

I fought off the urge to rub the bridge of my nose and ask him what happened that his hands magically stopped working when he met his mate. Sure, Cody and I hadn’t waited long but if we had met under different circumstances, I liked to think we would’ve had a courtship.

“The end all be all of relationships isn’t sex and penetration isn’t the end all be all of

sex,” I told him. “I understand you’re frustrated. I understand that you’re feeling rejected but...”

“Exactly!” he shouted over what I attempted to tell him.

“What’s Sidney feeling about it all and would you be okay if anyone else made him feel that way?” I asked Coil.

“No but ---”

“But what?” I asked, the urge to square up to him tickling the back of my neck.

My wolf could totally take this guy. Hell, I could’ve taken him with my prosthetic locked up in a vault. He was a pup. A horny, hormonal pup who was going to cause a lot of damage if he didn’t check himself. Where did this entitlement come from?

“He’s mine. He’s my other half. He should want me.”

“And he probably does. He wants you but he doesn’t want to have a baby yet and that’s fair. You have options. You stick to non-penetration or get a vasectomy. If those don’t work, let him top you.”

Coil’s face turned red. Sometimes you had to embarrass some of these guys to get them to pay attention.

“If you want to get laid and you want your claiming vows that last one works and no one gets pregnant,” I shrugged, tucking my hands into my coat pockets. “Seriously, think about it and if it’s a no from the get go think about how Sidney would respond to that. How you’d hope he’d respond to a boundary.”

He took a few steps closer to me and my wolf stood up inside his inner sanctum. I

didn't want to fight Coil. Fighting with the guys from Alpha Talk defeated the purpose of keeping them from violence but sometimes shit happened. He leaned in close and took a deep breath.

"Are you going to kiss me, Coil?" I laughed, trying to break the tension.

"No, I need to ask you a question and I don't want everyone else to hear me," he whispered.

"No, you can't have a kiss," I teased him but didn't like people I didn't know that well getting close to my face. It was too much like waking up tied to a bed and getting kissed by Creon. Sure, I did my best not to hold it against him anymore, but PTSD was a bitch.

"Is that allowed?" he asked.

"What? Him topping you?" I asked, not bothering to lower my voice because the other alphas didn't bother to stick around to eavesdrop on Coil. They heard most of what he had to say in group over the last few months. They all knew he was horny and not getting what he insisted was his birthright.

"Yeah," Coil nodded and glanced around.

"Coil, you're a grown up. You can ask sex questions. You can within sanity, consent, and want to do just about whatever you want in the bedroom as long as your partner is down for it."

"I mean, does it even work?"

"Yes, Coil. Betas and alphas have bottomed probably since the dawn of time. Historically, everyone was as horny as you are. They expressed that in different ways

but talk to Sidney and buy some lube. If that fixes the problem for now, you can thank me by not turning into some cave-alpha dragging your mate around by the scruff.”

“I’d never--- I wouldn’t make him do anything,” Coil crossed his arms.

“Begging and trying to wear someone down for a yes is making them, Coil. Just keep that in mind, friend, and keep going to couples’ therapy. I think you still need it.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes as he headed outside. It wasn’t the best one on one that I had with one of the alphas from the support groups but I prayed to Frost and the Crow King that Coil took what I said to heart. Everyone thought having a true-mate was easy and sometimes it was. Loving them was usually easy because you loved them before you ever met them. Making the relationship work took time, effort, and compromise. Not every omega wanted a thousand kids. Not every alpha wanted to start a family straight away. I hated that the path to ‘true-mate’ happiness was presented as something written in stone.

1) Meet true-mate in some epic way. During a battle is the best but any high stress time will do.

2) Fuck as soon as possible. It’s even better if it’s inconvenient for everyone else in your life. This is what it’s all about anyway. Make sure you get your claiming vows and bite them hard to show you’re in charge. If you don’t conceive a baby the first time, you’re probably a failure.

3) Keep having kids until your brain and your house explode.

4) Have more kids.

5) Keep having kids until your door shows up. Never stop. Never breathe and if one

of you ever makes a mistake in your relationship it's the end of the world because you're perfect for each other with no work needed.

"Alpha?" Cody popped into my thoughts. We didn't use our mating link a lot during working hours and I usually kept my side of things closed off when I was in a session of any caliber.

"Everything okay, babe?" I asked, glancing around the room before grabbing the broom to sweep. I hated leaving any of the group rooms even slightly untidy. If you let one thing slip on Monday by Friday the whole place looked like a frat house. We had cleaners come in every Sunday morning, but I would hate for them to think we were all pigs.

"Yeah. You just... You went tense there for a minute. Don't worry. I didn't hear anything. I just felt you."

"Coil got a bit close. Thought he wanted to fight but he wanted to ask weird teenager questions," I chuckled. "This is one I wish I could tell you because you'd laugh. Though, it makes me want to write Wrynn Heart-Hemlock and ask him if he includes some stuff in his Omega Studies curriculum. They use that shit here too. So, either he doesn't, or Coil slept through that class."

"Probably the latter," Cody chuckled. "Want me to come help clean up?"

"If you haven't eaten yet you can meet me here and we'll swing by that new little pizza place on Cro---"

"Okay," Cody said, almost too quick.

"You've eaten already, haven't you?"

“I’m still hungry, though,” he said, and I could almost see him biting his lip.

The broom clashed to the floor, and I almost fell over a chair on my sprint to the door. Cody had struggled to find an appetite for as long as I knew him unless he was pregnant. Some days were better than others but growing up where he had shaped his views on food in ways I’d never fully understand.

“Are you running?” Cody asked over our mating link.

“To you.”

“Stop and get pizza?” he asked, his tone raising an octave.

“Anything for you,” I told him for the millionth time since we met, and I still meant it.

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Cody

We knew most of our friends celebrated the news of pregnancy by practicing to get pregnant next time but we sat on the floor between the sofa and the coffee table with our pizza, sodas, chips, and chocolate bars planning for the future. I ate more than Micah did, which was rare. The last time I did that I was chest feeding the twins. He beamed at me as I chomped into a slice of pizza, taking half of it in a single bite.

“The doctor says I should be fine,” I said after I swallowed, more to remind myself than him. “I was last time after everything was said and done.”

“And the likelihood of it being twins again is slim,” Micah reminded me, pushing a lock of hair behind my ear.

“I know you’re going to hate it, but I’m cutting my hair before our pup is born. No one is playing chimpanzees in the trees with my hair,” I chuckled.

“I’ll miss your hair, but I’ll still have you,” he said and kissed my temple.

“And I don’t want to shut down Alpha Talk and Dark Soul yet,” I reminded him.

“I know. We keep life as normal as possible. We were both stuck inside too much last time around. We’ve already reinforced the porch swing to be a sort of bed if you have to lay up again.”

“You make me sound fat,” I laughed.

“No, I’m just paranoid something will happen to you and the baby. I said it back then and I’ll say it now, I wouldn’t survive in a world where you didn’t exist, Cody. I can live without a lot of things and without a lot of people, but you’re not one of them. You’re still my world.”

I set aside my pizza crust and kissed him. We still had a lot of details to plan out but we had time for a kiss or two. Besides, his wolf was still on edge from whatever Coil did to him. I held his face in my hands, toying with his five o’clock shadow with my thumbs.

“That goes both ways. So, if Coil gets to be too much let me know. I have decades of rage stored up and can rain down out on him,” I laughed.

“I think I sorted him out. It’s so strange that I had a Creon flashback today. That hasn’t happened in years. We’ve even had them all over for dinner. I mean, your best friend is shagging him.”

I laughed and playfully hit Micah on the shoulder. Silas wasn’t just shagging Creon. He was part of his and Kodiak’s thruple. Creon was also cursed when he kidnapped Micah. My mate was brave and noble and tried to save Creon and his intended victim only to lose his hand to Meadow Berry poison in the process. Somehow despite all that he still came back to me.

“I always will,” he whispered, picking up my thoughts over our mating link.

We stayed up late into the night rehashing our pup plans. I’d take things slow when I needed to and follow the healer’s orders. It would be Clyde of course. He was the one here who set Micah’s wolf off the least. It’d be a lie to say that we didn’t struggle with trusting others over the years. Sometimes it seemed like we were the only people in the world who we could really trust. We didn’t search ourselves on the internet or social media very often but every once in a while some photo montage of us would

pop into our lives labeling us ‘couple goals.’

It always made us laugh. Maybe we were the sort of mates other shifters aspired to be but we didn’t set out to be that. Micah was already famous when we met but had purposely slunk away from the public as the years rolled by. I wouldn’t have minded if his fame dwindled. He’d just be more mine then but any time we went too far from home someone recognized him. While we were ‘couple goals’ sometimes Micah was labeled the playboy turned asshole of the Grim Howlers. He wouldn’t always stop for autographs or photos. He usually said no to interviews these days too unless it was about Alpha Talk or one of the charities he worked with.

That wasn’t to say that every few years he didn’t meet back up with Xander and Jonah to write and release a couple of songs. In the two years following the death of Lotus Cromwell-Moonscale the band released three albums because where else could any of us put that pain?

Despite all the conversing we did the night before, Micah wanted to change our plans the next day. We were meant to lead a joint group of alpha and omega mates at Alpha Talk but he wanted to see if Clyde could squeeze us in. I was sure that I was pregnant. I was more than positive because I ate enough bacon and eggs for three wolves while Micah laid out what he wanted the new plan to be.

“Nope. Nope. Nope,” I shook my head. “We’re not canceling that group. There’s no other time this week that fits for everyone who signed up for it.”

“I’ve already talked to Silas. He and Kodiak can lead it. Creon will even go.”

I sighed. Kodiak led plenty of Alpha Talk groups and I couldn’t totally toss out the idea without implying that Silas’s relationships weren’t as healthy as ours. If they

couldn't lead the group that meant I thought they weren't as connected as we were.

"You know that's sort of mean, right?" I arched a brow at him.

"I didn't think of it that way. There's him, Tim, Linus, and Ewan that you trust. Okay, Zoey, Lee, and Blake too but the others either aren't here or aren't trained to lead the groups. I know Silas is the person you trust the most besides me. I just..."

"I know," I nodded. "I ... It's my hormones, I think. I trust you. I know you didn't mean it like that. I just... Once we go to get the ultrasound this all becomes real."

"You want it to be real, right?" Micah asked, turning our chairs to face each other. "You still want this, right? It's not too late to change your mind. It's not--"

"I do want our baby. This baby," I pointed at my stomach and met his gaze. "I'm still afraid. I'm afraid that my nervous system is going to revolt again. I'm afraid that there is something wrong with me on the cellular level. Maybe I didn't get enough to eat as a pup. Maybe I was just abused too much or something. Maybe I'm more hypervigilant than I think and that's why my body has such a hard time doing what it's supposed to do."

"We can lead the group if you want," Micah said.

"That's all you have to say?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"There is nothing else I can say. If you want to do this, we'll find a way to get through it. I'm not saying it'll be easy. It might not be, mate," he tapped my fingertips until I uncrossed my arms and he could hold both of my hands in his. We took a deep breath together as our fingers interlocked. Decades of practice had synced us up in some ways that would never come undone.

“It might be harder than last time. I don’t think it will be,” he continued. “I believe everything you said when we had this conversation that first time. You are healthier now. We know what to expect. You’re better fed now than you’ve ever been before. I like to think you feel safe too.”

“Alone with you is the only time I ever feel completely safe,” I whispered.

“I know. I know and I understand how that is,” Micah whispered. “Today I was sizing up Coil to see if I could win a fight with him if somehow my prosthetic stopped working. I get it.”

“I hate that you get it. Sometimes I think you caught my hypervigilance. I’m not downplaying what happened to you but...”

“So what if I did?” he shrugged. “What if that’s where it comes from? What if I’m that in tune with your emotions? On a logical level, we know how to keep ourselves safe and we know we have friends and family who have our backs.”

“They tore down the house when Creon kidnapped you. We couldn’t get the omegas to rebel for their own sakes, but they did it for you,” I whispered. “Kidnapping a Grim Howler was just too far into fascism for them.”

“I think it was more than that. I think so many of them were robbed of their chance to meet their true-mates that they couldn’t stand the idea of one of their own meeting his and then having them torn away at Brone’s whims. You can fight a lot of things. You can spin a lot of stories in your favor but true-mates are something that’s older than the oldest known atoms on Earthside. You can’t fight with that. You can’t spin splitting them up in a way that makes you look good.”

“I’m not jealous. I wasn’t even mad at them back then. I was just glad something was too much,” I sighed and Micah squeezed my hands. “I think a lot was too much. They

figured the world couldn't ignore me being kidnapped."

I leaned back in the padded kitchen chair and let my eyes drift closed for a long moment. Micah grew up privileged in ways I couldn't imagine. Even someone like me with Silas as my best friend who had as many perks as any omega could in those old, dark days couldn't imagine it. Micah grew a lot over the years in understanding how those of us who lived under such tyranny viewed the world.

The whole first year after our girls were born, I hoarded large pallets of canned food and dried meats and fruits. I hoarded blankets, buying more than they could ever use. I hoarded everything I thought they might need some day in case those days came back. In case even money couldn't fill our stomachs again.

"We can---"

"Let's go to the healer," I said before he finished his sentence. "I know we can lead the support group. Let Silas do it. It'll be good for him and his empty den." I manage a smile for Micah. I was too raw from memories of my first pregnancy to dive into anyone else's trauma today. Under different circumstances, I wouldn't even leave the house. I'd drag Micah into the bedroom and keep him there all day: romping or not.

"We could do that and go to the healer tomorrow," Micah grinned at me. "I'm sure Clyde will squeeze us in whenever is good for us."

"I know he will," I nodded. "He's a good guy."

"Hell, I'll call Barry and remind him of when he cut off my hand and say he needs to come out here," Micah laughed.

"Don't," I whispered. "Xenos is pregnant again too. About to have his baby. Don't do that to them. We live with it every day. Don't drag them back into the past too. It's

ours.”

“Our curse and blessing,” Micah said, squeezing my hands again.

I moved onto his lap, straddling him. His chair was larger than average and custom made just for this reason. Almost every seat in the house was wide and sturdy enough to hold us in this fashion. My knees fit with extra room on either side of him without biting into the edges of the chair.

“We’re okay,” I whispered. “We’re safe.”

“And sound,” Micah whispered back and pressed his lips to mine. “We can do this. We’ve raised enough kids. A few months of the hard part and then we have our pup. Harder for you than me, I know,” he added the last part before I could say anything. “I’ll be here, though. Whenever you need to stop working, I’ll stop too. Or I’ll stop first and go to work with you.”

We sat there with our foreheads pressed together, blocking out the world for a long time. There was something about his scent that still smelled like home. Wherever he was, I wanted to be. We didn’t move until our hearts slowed down and synced up and whatever mechanism of the true-mate magic that allowed our nervous systems to co-regulate did its job.

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Micah

I hated going anywhere near a healer almost as much as my mate did. More than once, I had whacked Clyde with my stump when he asked to see it. I'd taken care of it myself for years without letting any more of it fall off. It was a good thing that Clyde grew up with bigger assholes than me and learned to duck. It was more wrestling around than anything, but some healers wouldn't have taken it so well. Usually, if we weren't close to healers who already knew my history, I wouldn't go in as a patient. I didn't like it when Cody did either.

I trusted Clyde. He wasn't going to eat anyone unless they fucked around with his mate, Ashley, or their kids. Cody trusted him too, but I knew everything to do with pregnancy set off bits of his anxiety. It was a mine field we would have to navigate again.

Clyde had his own practice now and we preferred to see him there. It was less busy than the hospital with fewer people to snap our photos and post online that they spotted the 'asshole' Grim Howler. As soon as we were inside the room, Cody stripped down and pulled on the hospital robe as if he might change his mind if he didn't do it in a hurry. I guarded the door out of habit.

Not long after our girls were born someone tried to snap photos of him in the changing rooms at a department store. That was one of the times I probably should've been locked up somewhere. I busted out three of the journalist's teeth with his own camera phone.

"Don't beat Clyde up with his magic wand," Cody teased me as he hopped up onto

the examination table. He stretched out on his back and I fussed with his robe to ensure his dick wasn't peeking out.

"He's gonna see it all anyway if he's forgotten how it looks," Cody teased.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked him, entwining my fingers through his.

"I am. I'm not afraid of this part. This part only goes one way. We see the jellybean and then Clyde tells me how much trouble we're in for," he said. "Then we go home and face the trouble."

"It's not gonna be all trouble," I said and ran my fingers of my freehand through his hair. "Not entirely."

"I know," Cody said.

"You smell calmer than I expected," I observed.

"It's you. Coregulating works. That research isn't faulty. It's why The Cuddle Club works and why our exercises at Dark Soul work. True-mates, best friends, siblings sometimes. Anyone with deep connections – coregulation works. It's as if we can do the work for each other but not ourselves. Or maybe it's easier to be calm when our 'person' is calm."

"Knock knock," Clyde said from the other side of the door before it swung open.

"On a scale of one to ten how bitey is he today, Cody?" Clyde said in lieu of hello.

Everyone said Clyde was a raging dickhead before he met his true-mate. That he raised hell and harassed omegas at Hemlock Academy. I didn't know him back then. I met him right as the war began to groan and grumble. He'd never been anything

except a pain in the ass who loved his mate and kids and tolerated most of the rest of us.

“Eh, three probably. Though, more likely to bite me than you,” Cody smirked.

“Good to know but keep the kink on the table to a minimum. Moaning, like laughing, makes it hard to get a clear image of the baby,” Clyde chuckled, flipping through the papers on his clipboard. “Any changes since we last spoke, Cody?”

“No. Well, unless you count the positive test and how hungry I’ve been.”

“Anything else?” Clyde asked, scribbling his blue-capped pen across the clipboard.

“Nothing I can think of. Am I missing something?” Cody blinked at him and his scent started turning nervous.

“Not all at. I find that patients often forget stuff and sometimes if I ask enough times they’ll remember it. Not because of pregnancy but because most patients don’t trust us.”

“Do you blame them?” I laughed because I couldn’t help myself and Cody slapped my chest playfully with the back of his hand. I caught it and kissed it.

“Any sickness?” Clyde asked, setting aside his clipboard so that he could scrub his hands at the little sink in the corner of the room.

“Not yet. Mostly starving. Always starving. If you don’t find a baby you might want to look around for a tapeworm,” Cody laughed.

A few seconds later, both of our eyes were glued to the monitor attached to Clyde’s little machine. The damn thing wasn’t much bigger than my cellphone. Regardless of

its size, the whooshing thing did its job. There on the screen, mounted to the bright, brick wall was our jellybean. A wolf. Our wolf pup. Our perfect little wolf pup. Just one. My wolf shifted my eyes to his to confirm that. Just one puppy. I swallowed a sigh of relief. Though plenty of people would disagree on my methods, I kept a lot of my worries about Cody's pregnancy to myself after our initial conversation. My worries would only drive his on and he wanted this baby. I wanted another baby too but would've never brought it up. Mine wasn't the body who would have to go through the metamorphosis to bring life into the world. I would've supported him for the rest of our lives if he decided he never wanted to be pregnant again.

"One pup will be easier," my wolf whispered into my thoughts before he started licking his paws inside his inner sanctum.

I kissed Cody's forehead while Clyde talked about measurements and possible due dates. He was almost three weeks along which meant his pregnancy was almost to its second trimester already.

"About two months," my wolf said between licks.

Two months wasn't any time at all. Two months would pass us by in a heartbeat. We'd already prepared the nursery and baby proofed the house. We started a college fund and trust fund that would be easy enough to add our unborn pup's name to when the time came. We did all the tasks that kept us busy while we waited for biology to do its job.

"He's our only job for the next two months," my wolf said, pausing in his grooming. "He can say what he likes. We'll go in and talk to the numbskulls, but he's our focus. Maybe we keep it a secret, though."

Xander and Jonah both hit me with congratulations before we ever left the office. My phone vibrated like a rocket ship about to launch out of my hand. Nothing stayed

secret long when you were on two different pack links but this was something to celebrate. Maybe this time Cody could even have a proper shower. Maybe I'd host a feast and give out gifts or...

"Alpha, don't get carried away," Cody laughed and squeezed my hand. "I love the idea of a feast but let's see how I feel next week before we start planning what you have in mind. The images I'm picking up look more like a fair or a carnival than feast."

"Yes!" I mock howled the word. "Let's have a carnival to celebrate. I'll rent a merry-go-round and a ferris wheel and one of those teacup rides. We'll have a dunking tank and make Kodiak sit up there and...."

"Uh.... How about we donate those to kids in need or something," Cody laughed.

"Frost above me," I shook my head. "All the kids in the pack can come! We'll hire one of those funnel cake guys and the cotton candy dudes and...." I shut up because Cody's stomach growled. "Just a thought, but do you want to go hunting?"

A second later, Cody was furry and darting down the streets of Old New York – rebuilt shiny and new – on his way to the woods. I followed behind him still in human form, jumping from foot-to-foot trying to take off my new sneakers because shoes didn't always survive the shift. Eventually, I got them off and stashed them in a tree before shifting and racing off to catch up with him.

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Cody

We arrived home full-bellied, bloodied, and ready for a nap. If the very human part of my brain wasn't worried about the carpet, I might've not bothered to undress outside the front door. Nudity wasn't that big of a deal to shifters, but I preferred to be nude inside my house and not outside of it when I could help it. In this fleshy form, being nude made me feel too vulnerable. Clothes wouldn't protect me against an attack but fighting naked wouldn't be fun.

Micah stood in front of me, trapping me between his broad shoulders and the door. Sometimes the position left me claustrophobic but not this time. He blocked me from the view of any passersby while I stripped out of my clothes. They weren't the bloodiest post-hunt clothes we'd ever brought home but we tried to keep the house clean. Once I was down to my underwear, I slipped off my socks and stepped inside. At least my underwear survived the blood bath.

Micah stripped naked as if he wasn't a wolf man who had a huge following and the occasional stalker photographer who'd love to get a photo of him in the buff. As soon as he was clothes-free enough, I pulled him inside and shut the door behind us. I locked it up tight and bunched up all our clothes under my arms and headed toward the laundry room. Micah started in the other direction, prompting me to call his name. I didn't want to be alone.

"Starting the shower, love," he called back.

"Oh, thanks," I laughed.

Yep. My hormones were going into full swing. The safest place to be was alone with Micah. The safest place to be was home with our alpha behind a locked door. Maybe we'd den under the bed, or we'd hide in the closet or the pantry. I started the laundry and glanced around the room. We could technically den down in here.

"We have to go to work tomorrow," I said aloud to my inner beast but wasn't sure the furry guy was listening.

I glanced around the laundry room again. My wolf shifted my eyes to his and started taking his own measurements. He was almost positive the futon sofa from the office would fit up against the far wall under the shelf if we were careful. I shook the thought away as Micah appeared in the doorway.

He was naked and still bloody which meant he hadn't showered without me. A smear of deer's blood marked his stomach and chest, dried on the tip of one of his nipples. Another smear was across his mouth and up on his temple. A dot on his earlobe and a spray across his legs. We'd let ourselves go primal on the deer once he was down for the count.

"Everything alright?" Micah asked, careful not to touch the doorway.

"Yeah. My wolf is...."

"Not going to work tomorrow," Micah offered, arching a brow. "I think we might get held hostage, mate. By our own traitorous inner beasts at that."

"We need to work. People are counting on us."

"Other people work at Dark Soul," Micah reminded me.

"Yes, but they're not me."

“We can go in on days you feel like it,” Micah said. “It’s not a bad thing to take time for yourself. It’s not a bad thing to take time off when you’re pregnant. Think about it. We’re legally obligated by pack law to give paternal leave to all of our employees!”

“Not everyone takes it---” I tried but Micah cut me off.

“I know but they are encouraged to. You encourage them to! Taking time off doesn’t mean the whole pregnancy. Maybe we den down for a week or two. Maybe he feels better in a few days,” Micah pointed at my stomach, and I wasn’t sure if he meant the wolf or our pup.

“Wolf,” Micah said, picking up on my thoughts over our mating link. “Your wolf. My mate. We’ll talk to Silas and them about it too. I’m sure Silas will agree...”

“We agreed,” I stood akimbo and narrowed my eyes on him. “We agreed we’d work as long as we could.”

“Yes we did,” Micah nodded. “We did, but that doesn’t mean we work until one of us falls over or has a mental breakdown. As long as we could is open ended. I think you should listen to your wolf. How about we just go in for those coregulation classes or whatever you call them.”

“What about Alpha Talk?” I asked.

“Alpha Talk centers operate around the globe without me, mate. I’ll keep in touch with the clients I think need the most attention but I don’t need to go in every day. I don’t want to go in every day. I missed too much of your pregnancy last time. Between being kidnapped, losing my hand, and trying to figure out how to live with that it felt like I let you down in every way known to shifterkind.”

“I don’t want to end up locked in bed again!” I growled. “You didn’t let me down but I can’t go through that again, Micah! That was the scariest part about it! Being locked in bed and told if I didn’t rest we’d lose the girls!”

Micah took a deep breath and glanced down at the black and white tiled floor. Whatever was on his mind I wasn’t going to like by how his scent turned.

“What?” I barked.

“Maybe if we rest when you want to, it won’t get like that. You couldn’t rest last time, Cody. You couldn’t take time and sit and not be upset. I should’ve made you wait to go back or---”

“Micah, people would’ve died. We’ve been over this. You did not fail me as anything – not as a mate, a partner, an alpha, or a protector. If you remember, I wasn’t the one kidnapped and tortured!”

“What do we do?” Micah asked. “I’m done arguing. I don’t want you upset. So, just tell me the plan, mate.”

“I--- I shouldn’t have said that,” I said, tripping over my words as I stepped toward him. “I meant, you saved me. I know it didn’t feel like it at the time. I know how I felt. I know how it must’ve felt over our link before he clamped it off. I’m sorry. I – I only meant I wish you wouldn’t beat yourself up, Micah, because you know how to make the hard calls better than anyone else. If anyone ever says you weren’t there for me I want you to punch them square in the nose or the balls or...” I was tearing up more with each word I said. “I know I can count on you. I can count on you no matter how hard this gets. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for that – not just for making sure they did get me and the girls but for everything you gave up for my pack.”

“They’re family. That’s what family does,” Micah stepped closer and took my face in his hands. He bowed it and kissed the top of my head before pulling me into his arms.

“It’s not that I don’t want to take time off,” I said, still fighting against the tears rolling down my cheeks. “I don’t want to end up helpless again.”

“You were never helpless, mate. You’re one of the strongest people I know.”

We stood like that, holding onto each other in the laundry room for a long time before Micah scooped me up and carried me down the hall to the shower. Luckily, the water was still warm.

“Gilmore magic,” Micah winked at me as he sat me down on my own two feet.

We scrubbed the blood from each other’s skin in silence. We didn’t have all the answers. Hell, by the old crows, we probably didn’t even have most of the answers, but we had each other and that had to be enough. It was always enough for us.

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Micah

We stayed up late that night all cuddled up naked together in bed talking our lives in circles again. It was clear that our inner beasts wanted a break from the lives we'd been living. Cody's wolf was already desperate to den down and both of our hunting instincts were running wild. It was like negotiating with a business tycoon who didn't want to budge. In the end, I agreed I'd do one group a week at Alpha Talk – Coil's group and we'd both go to the biweekly coregulation classes at Dark Soul for as long as Cody could comfortably lead them.

I fell asleep stroking Cody's soft hair. I'd miss it when it was shorter but it was hair and hair almost always grew back. I'd rather have him bald and happy than snatched bald and frustrated with our pup. I tried to imagine who might be growing in his womb. Our pup for sure but who would that little baby grow up to be? Our girls surprised me at every turn with how much like us they were and how different too. Coda even preferred classical music. While I didn't have a problem with it the genre was never going to be my favorite.

My phone vibrated off the hook until I finally looked over to see a line of texts from Kodiak. Apparently, he waited until Silas and Creon passed out before trying to get a hold of me. Before we started our serious discussion, we shut ourselves off from the pack link. We didn't want anyone to think we were arguing when really we were negotiating with our traumas more than each other.

“Yes, Kodiak?” I yawned at him over the pack link.

“One of your guys are strange.”

“Is Coil still rambling about not getting laid?” I groaned. “The couples’ group really isn’t the place for him to do that.”

“No. Sidney came with him today. Couples group after all. I wasn’t sure Sidney would come but they seem to have exchanged their claiming vows. I haven’t smelled Sidney so relaxed since before the pair of them had their true-mate response. Raziel. At least, I think it was Raziel. As soon as Creon walked in he walked out. Creon shrugged it off but thinks it’s probably something to do with his past. Maybe Raziel is a you fanboy or something and...”

“Raziel is the most levelheaded guy in the group,” I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “I’m sure it’s not that. Hell, I don’t even know why he comes to the groups. If he has any hangups, he’s not talking about them. I’ll ask him. Did you want me to get him to apologize or something?”

“Not exactly. I just want to make sure that I don’t need to kick his ass to make a point. He moved here from the extended Hemlock Territory.”

“Heartville?” I yawned.

“No. The other one. The one Star runs. He’s Star and Zeke’s kid. That’s why I think maybe it is about Creon even if it’s not about you.”

“Maybe he got upset at seeing Creon in the flesh,” I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll talk to him. Well, I’ll try to,” I said and explained the new agreement Cody and I had come to. “But Raziel is definitely Raven Hollow then. So, chill. I don’t think he’s dangerous. I don’t think he’s here for trouble. I think if I saw my dead granddad’s true-mate I’d freak out too.”

“Don’t say it like that. Creon isn’t related to that little jerk.”

“No, he’s not. Zeke was Hans and Uriel’s baby.”

My wolf made a huffing noise, and I told Kodiak I had to go before all the drama woke up Cody. I wasn’t sure what annoyed my wolf but a wolf with a pregnant mate wasn’t that difficult to irritate. I wiggled down onto the bed properly and Cody moved so that his head rested right above my heart. I relaxed into the pillows and our heartbeats synced up. What Cody called coregulation was part of the true-mate pact. Maybe not for some of the other relationship pairs but for true-mates it was.

“Coregulation can be magic and still called coregulation,” my wolf yawned into my thoughts. “Now, shush and let him sleep. We’ll deal with Raziel when it’s time.”

“What do you mean when it’s time?” I thought back at him, but mum was the word with the furry ass as he curled around Cody’s wolf and pretended not to hear anything else I said.

That night I dreamt that I was flying on a magic carpet with Cody. Magic carpets were real but weren’t used often. They certainly weren’t part of the Gilmore Witch magic but per usual my dreams knew no bounds. There we were on the cynosure of a carpet. Every eye below us was locked on the magical artifact as we soared through the sky. We kissed, near oblivious to the shifters watching below us. I ran my fingers through Cody’s thick, soft hair and when I woke up his hand was on my dick.

“Good morning,” I said, the words coming out a growl as my wolf stirred awake too under our mate’s soft hand. His fingers curled around my dick, tightening his grip as our lips met for a good morning kiss. Cody’s lips were as soft and supple as ever. Kissing him had long been one of my favorite things to do. His lips parted under mine, and I slid my tongue into his warm, welcoming mouth.

He shifted his weight, moving closer to me and his hard dick brushed against my thigh. I swallowed hard as the tangy scent of slick arousal filled our bedroom.

Romping whenever and wherever we wanted in the house would be off the table soon but it wasn't yet. As much as I looked forward to the birth of our pup, I knew their arrival would signal the end to early morning sex. Babies usually wanted attention at this time of the morning and our children always took priority.

"That's why I have to get you while the getting's good," Cody teased, pulling away from the kiss to straddle my thighs. He stroked me, almost lazily. The smell of sleep clung to his skin and hair but the sleepy little smile he wore said it all. Hormones or time had made him horny. During his first pregnancy our lives were too messy for us to squeeze much romping around in. I had just lost my hand, and his pregnancy was a rough one.

"How are you going to get me?" I asked, quirking up my eyebrow.

"I already have you," he said and squeezed my dick for emphasis.

I let out a long growl. It vibrated up my throat, releasing some of the pent-up pressure from all the stress. I was worried about Cody. I was worried about Coil and Sidney. Maybe even Raziel after my short conversation with Kodiak the night before but all of that faded away to background noise as my mate ran his soft hand up and down the length of my shaft. Everything and everyone except me and Cody faded away.

I trailed my fingers across his chest until I found his nipples. He leaned into my touch, and we kissed again. Long and hard this time, with our tongues battling it out between our mouths. He leaned in closer, and I ran my hands down his stomach to his hips and then finally to cup the firm, round globes of his ass. Cody sighed into the kiss, and I would've grinned if my mouth wasn't already busy. I loved coaxing and teasing little sounds of pleasure from deep within him.

He rose up slightly, just enough to move over my dick and line up our bodies. My brain zipped to condoms for a second. An old habit that hadn't quite died even while

we were attempting to conceive.

“Already put the pup in there,” Cody teased and then bit his lip as he rubbed the hard head of my dick over his slick omegahole. I let out a long, slow breath and fought off the urge to thrust upward. I loved burying myself inside my mate. Loved how his body contracted around me, holding on for dear life when we were together. A hot blush dashed across Cody’s face.

“What?” I teased, realizing he’d picked up my thoughts over our mating link. “It’s true.”

“For dear life, huh?” he smirked.

“Yep. That’s what it feels like,” I nodded. “Like you’re never going to let me go.”

“Micah!” he said, his eyes growing wide. “Is that what “Never Let Me Go?” is really about?”

“Don’t worry. The guys don’t even know,” I chuckled, as my dick now slippery from his slick arousal escaped his hand.

“You wrote---” his blushed deepened and I kissed him again.

“Don’t be embarrassed. No one knows. Besides, you really like that song. It’s one of the first I wrote after losing my hand,” I reminded him. “Being with you was one of the few times I didn’t feel useless,” I switched to our mating link to keep the conversation going while we made out.

“You were never useless,” Cody said over our link. “Never. Not for one second. You were my tether to this life when I wanted to be anything but alive.”

I deepened the kiss and kneaded my fingers into his flesh.

“Alive we know we get to stay together,” I whispered to him.

Somewhere along the way, that had become our mantra. When trauma reared its ugly head, it’s what we focused on. Being together was the one thing no one could take away from us. In a million ways we were both so fucking replaceable but not to each other. No one could ever replace your true-mate. We clung to that and to each other and we stayed alive.

I wrapped my hand around Cody’s dick and stroked him while we kissed. I lost myself to the curve of his muscle as I slid my hand up and down him over and over again. I circled the mushroom head of his dick with my thumb and wiped away a drop of pre-cum. Cody moaned against my lips, and I swallowed down the sound of his pleasure as he reached down again taking my dick in his hand. This time instead of teasing us both, he led me home.

Whatever tension hid inside my body left as Cody slid his warm, slick omegahole onto me, consuming my dick. I leaned back against the pillows, keeping one hand on his ass and the other wrapped around his cock as we found the familiar rhythms between our bodies. I stroked him in time with how our hips ground together. He leaned in close, pressing his forehead against mine until he was the entirety of my field of vision. Our gazes locked as the fusion of our bodies stoked the fires burning inside of us. There was no such thing as too much Cody for me.

Our pleasure mingled over our mating link as if we were a single entity drawing breath and pleasure together. His dick slipped from my hand, and I gripped his hip, helping him keep pace as our thrusting and grinding quickened. My heart pounded in my ears or was that his? It didn’t matter. Our hearts were synced together again, beating in time as we sought out our pleasure. His slick omegahole tightened around me, threatening to milk out every drop of my self-control. He leaned back on the

heels of his hands, panting and grinding down on me. Cody was a fucking sight to behold – all lean muscle sheened in sweat, riding over my dick with his head thrown back in pleasure. He licked his lips as I kneaded my fingers into his ass, moving him faster over me.

He brought up one hand and wrapped it around his dick. I groaned as those tiny points of pleasure translated over our mating link. He stroked himself, slow at first, as if to give me a show and then faster and harder in time with my thrusts up into his tight body. His dick trembled in his hand and my name poured off his kissable lips in a howl as he came, making a mess of us both with his warm, sticky streams. He kept riding me even as his body contorted from pleasure. I drove up hard into the familiar warmth of him, seeking out my pleasure even. It didn't take much. The whole bedroom smelled like us and sex. Everything about Cody was everything I needed. As much as he claimed I kept him tethered to the living parts of Earthside – he was the one who kept me around. He was always my reason for something as simple as the act of breathing.

His body tightened around me and I howled, not bothering to hold back. Loud romping would be off the table soon too. My wolf howled inside his inner sanctum as my pleasure rocked through him too. I came hard in warm, sticky spurts into my mate's body.

When there wasn't a drop of pleasure left in either of us, Cody slid his legs out from under him and fell onto his back. Moving with him, I licked him clean, reveling in the taste of his salty pleasure dancing on my tongue before I gave him a post-coital kiss. He pulled me on top of him and kissed me hard while holding me close. This wouldn't be allowed much longer either. We'd have to change up positions to accommodate his belly.

“Are you excited or dreading it all?” Cody laughed when our kiss finally broke.

“Excited,” I said, pressing my forehead against his. “My wolf worries. It’s what we do. It’s like he’s afraid we’re going to forget something and mess everything up.”

“Believe me, once my belly starts to show there will be no forgetting that I’m pregnant,” he laughed.

Tempted by his laughter wrapping around me, I kissed the tasty hollow of his throat. Then lower onto his collar bone before licking down to one of his nipples. He let out a wolfish whimper and I bit him.

“If you get me hard again, I’m topping you, mister,” he said playfully.

I shrugged and bit his other nipple. He couldn’t threaten this guy with a good time like that.

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Cody

Whereas it felt like my first pregnancy came in like a sudden hurricane this baby took their time and moseyed into my life. Pregnancy sickness only came and went a few times and was easily kept at bay by morning sickness gummies. My ravenous appetite for food and Micah stuck around but that left me little to complain about. As much as I was loathe to admit it my wolf and Micah were right. I didn't feel that much like working. Being away from Micah left me feeling both exposed and melancholy. I still kept my normal twice a week lunches with Silas but by the end of the first month of knowing I was pregnant even that was hard.

Micah didn't work much either. He made time to talk to Coil, mostly via video chat, but it seemed whatever problem that particular alpha was facing had resolved itself. Micah looked sexily full of himself whenever he got off the phone with him. Part of me wanted to know the down and dirty things it smelled like they were talking about but I respected Coil's privacy.

It wasn't until Micah and I led our first coregulation meditation group as a pregnant couple that I realized how pregnant my body felt. The group was led much like how we coregulated on our own. We had our couples in comfy chairs with one straddled over the other's lap and when I leaned in to model the position and wrap my arms around my alpha my belly made its first real appearance. Micah grinned and I had to shush him over our mating link to stay on track with leading the class. Coregulation was an important skill for couples to learn. Sometimes I wondered why folks didn't teach it in schools and decided that was a conversation to have with Silas later.

I loved leading the coregulation class because throughout the course of the evening

the whole room went from smelling tense and on edge to relaxed, happy, and sometimes a little horny. You could always tell which couples ‘synced’ up the ‘best’ by who left early and who raced out as soon as the meditation was over. Most folks stuck around for the after class snacks and that day I wanted them to leave. I didn’t bother to get up from Micah’s lap and he didn’t give me the boot. It’d been awhile since I wasn’t in the mood for a snack but I was more in the mood for the hard dick resting just under my ass.

After we were alone, I had Micah lock the door using his sexy Gilmore witch magic and we made love right there in the classroom. I made a mental note to spray pheromone neutralizer before the next class meeting but Dark Soul was my company and my pregnant ass would romp in whatever closed off room I wanted to. If pregnancy wasn’t the best excuse to have worry-free sex, I wasn’t sure what was.

The more pregnant I got, the more pregnant I grew, the less often we left the house. Slowly but surely our bedroom morphed into a den. We hung heavy blankets in layers over the big windows blocking out the sun and hiding us from predators. In a way, it reminded me of my childhood except these blankets had nothing to do with inside climate control. One by one I somehow managed to carry every pillow in the house into our bedroom. I tried to keep them all on the bed, but some always escaped during the night or during sex or when Micah carried in trays of food for us to eat.

Micah carried the bassinet into the room to mark out where its permanent spot would be. He left me alone long enough to buy a mini fridge to hook up in the bedroom too. For now, it stored drinks but it could store chest milk and other baby stuff in the future. He stuck all our weekly sonograms to the front of it with little rainbow-colored paw magnets.

“Speaking of sonograms,” Micah said the night before the BIG one. “We haven’t

been out of the house since your last appointment. Well, you haven't been out since then. Are we going tomorrow or do you want me to see if Clyde will make a house call? Do you want him to? I mean, you haven't even had Silas over to visit and I think you like him more than Clyde."

"Silas can come over if he wants to. Clyde too. Even Kodiak and Creon. Just not in here. In here is ours. This is where the pup will live. They have to stay out there," I pointed to the door.

"Well, I don't think Clyde can perform an ultrasound through the door," he laughed, tracing circles on the zenith of my pregnant belly.

"Why not?" I teased.

My wolf wasn't in a joking mood. I was in the middle of my second trimester, but he was already denned down for the birth. Often I'd fall asleep as a human and wake up in his form as if he trusted himself more than me to keep whatever threats he was worried about away.

"Dunno. Maybe one day," Micah shrugged and stole a kiss. "So, where are we seeing the healer?"

"Here. I should probably go for a run soon but I don't want to leave the room. This is the best place ever, you know?"

"I do know, because you're here," he whispered in my ear. "We can skip this one, if you want. A surprise baby never hurt anyone. It's not like it makes that much difference to the rest of the supplies we need to buy."

"I sort of want to know but I sort of can live without knowing," I shrugged.

“Okay. Then I’ll tell him we’re holding off for a while. If you change your mind, let me know.”

“I will,” I nodded, and it was my turn to steal a kiss.

Eventually, I dozed off and woke up to Kodiak and Micah’s hushed voices drifting in from the living room.

“He did it again, Micah,” Kodiak said.

I couldn’t see him until I tuned into my mate over our link. Kodiak stood in the center of our living room with his arms crossed. His eyes narrowed on Micah as if my alpha was supposed to be the one who had all the answers for him. Part of me wanted to tell the overgrown bear to buzz off. The other part of me wanted to know who did what. We’d heard a rumor that Kodiak’s dead brother, Finn, was haunting the Nightshade Bears again but if that was his issue I didn’t know what he expected Micah to do about it. He was a Gilmore Witch but right now he didn’t have the time to travel that far away from me.

“Raziel?” Micah asked and I felt his eyebrow quirk up.

“Raziel,” Kodiak nodded.

“Man, come on. I’ve never had any trouble with him. I can’t find a single person who has. His parents are good people. Hell, if we did monarchy here, he’d be a prince.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s good. Brone thought he was some sort of god sent damned king,” Kodiak pointed out. “And don’t even get me started on Creon’s mother. Seriously, don’t get me started on it.”

“What did he do this time?”

“He left again – as soon as Creon walked in. He just up and fucking left! I want to go to his house and drag him out and...”

“Dude,” Micah warned. “I have a pregnant mate in the next room. Your mate’s best friend. So, let’s chill on the violence. Seriously, chill. You’re raising my wolf’s heckles and it’s not about Raziel. Unless he actually does something chill the fuck out. If he has some problem with Creon, he’s allowed to have a problem with Creon!” Micah threw his hands up in the air. “He’s allowed to feel however he wants. Unless he actually does something, we don’t have a problem. Leaving when someone walks into a room isn’t treason. No matter how badly you want it to be.”

Kodiak huffed sounding more like a bear than ever. He opened his mouth and shut it again. It’d been a long time since Kodiak smelled so annoyed. No, annoyed wasn’t the right word. Territorial and ready to tear this other guy apart was the right word.

“Look, sometimes I wouldn’t mind punting Creon across the soccer field, okay?” Micah laughed, trying to break the tension but Kodiak’s spine went ramrod straight. “Hey, I’m allowed to think like that. He’d have offed himself if I hadn’t tackled him. I lost this,” he raised his prosthetic hand to emphasize his point. “But think about it for a minute. We’re always telling the alphas in the groups that they are more than thoughts and instincts. Thoughts are just noise unless you line them out or act on them and instincts are what the world trained into us. So, even if he despises Creon, that’s okay unless he does or says something to hurt him. If you’re right and that’s a big IF for me, he’s doing exactly what we tell the guys to do. If you can’t handle a situation you get up and you get your ass out of there.”

Kodiak rubbed the bridge of his nose before running his hands through his hair.

“Something’s off and I don’t know what, Micah,” he said, a growl tracing his words.

“You probably need a break. Dealing with other people’s problems all the time is

fucking hard. If you need to pause the groups for a while do it or let someone else lead or---

“You think I’m losing it, huh?” Kodiak asked.

“I don’t. I think it’s good for you to be protective over Creon. I’m not saying he might not have enemies out there. I’m just saying I don’t think Raziel is one of them. I’ve met with him a few times at his house. I’ve smelled him without the group required pheromone blocker. He’s not a bad guy.”

“I’m going to trust you on this but if my bear eats his bone marrow it’s not my fault.”

“He’s a wolf with dragon and elf heritage. If you’re able to suck his bone marrow out more power to you,” Micah said.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I liked to think that Silas and Creon would’ve laughed too. Silas might’ve even made a joke about how much elves liked to be sucked off.

“I’ll let you get back to Cody,” Kodiak sighed.

“Hey, just take some time off, okay? Raziel is cool.”

“If you say so. Between us, I hope you’re right because if I need help killing him, that’s your job.”

Micah held up his hand again to show that despite being best known for being in a ‘boy band’ he was no stranger to war.

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Micah

Outside of reassuring Cody that Raziel wasn't a danger to anyone, I kept Kodiak's worries to myself. There was no use in turning everyone against a guy because he didn't want to be in a group with Creon. Alpha Talk was a therapy and support group. Those who attended had every right not to speak in front of anyone they didn't want to. That was the only way groups like Alpha Talk worked out long term. Under different circumstances, I would've thought that Kodiak was sweet being so worried about his mate but every minute I spent telling him to put his furry bear balls on ice was a minute I wasn't spending with my Cody.

While we opted not to have the BIG ultrasound, I did eventually convince Cody to allow Clyde to make a house call. Then I spent the whole time growling as the healer measured and listened to my mate's pregnant belly.

"I could bite his whole arm off. Make him match you," my wolf grumbled into my thoughts. "Maybe if I eat his hand yours will grow back and even if it doesn't work – because let's face it that is fucking absurd - he'll keep his dirty paws off my mate. Cody is mine! That baby is mine! If Clyde doesn't---"

"All finished," Clyde said. "Everything is sounding really good. You're right where you need to be. Before you know it, your pup will be here. How are preparations going?"

"We know what we're doing!" my wolf growled into my thoughts.

"We have everything," Cody spoke before I managed to get a single word out.

“Great,” Clyde smiled, but kept me in his peripheral vision. “Let me know if there is anything I can do to help and I’ll get out of your hair before Micah eats me.”

“You make a run for it, and I’ll let him gobble me up instead,” Cody teased.

Once we were alone, I locked up the house and came back into the bedroom to stretch out next to my mate. I stroked his pregnant belly, covering him with my scent. Clyde wasn’t a threat. He’d never been a threat to us. I knew that. On some level, even my wolf knew that, but that primal urge was still there. It didn’t help that Cody only begrudgingly agreed to see the doctor. I’d have done anything to keep him safe and happy.

“Scoot closer or lean over or something, alpha,” Cody said. “Lean over and press your head to mine. My belly’s in the way.”

I did and his calm swept over me. This was what we’d practiced coregulation for. So that one of us could share our calm with the other or so that we could find it together if neither of us had it at any given moment. I lost myself to his gentle breathing as our hearts synced up.

“I wish I could keep you like this for the rest of my pregnancy,” Cody chuckled.

“If the laws of nature allowed, I’d never move again, mate,” I said, sweeping a lock of hair out of his face and tucking it behind his ear. “I’d stay right here with you forever.”

I sang to him as he drifted off for a nap and it wasn’t a lie. I’d stay right here with him forever if I could. Still, the demands of life would rear their ugly heads again. Someone had to cook and clean and eventually one of us would need to pee.

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Cody

Micah made good on his promise to stay with me as much as he could. He was there for every ache and pain and every crying spell. He was there when I needed my feet rubbed or help up to go pee. He was there right by my side when a week before my due date I shifted into my wolf and decided that I wasn't coming out again until my pup was born. Micah didn't even run off when I growled and snarled at Clyde when he tried to come in and look me over. Instead, he settled for asking Micah questions through the door. I didn't let Micah out again until I was good and sure we were alone in the house again. To the pit of crows with the rest of them. Unless they were Micah, Silas, one of my kids, or one of the few friends I counted as family they could fly straight off. Pregnancy was hard enough without someone coming in here and poking and prodding my belly like they were the alpha who assisted in making my puppies. Clyde could go cop a feel on Ashley. He was his mate, not me.

Yes, even as I settled down surrounded by pillows, I knew I was being unreasonable. The human side of me knew it very well but it all made sense to my wolf, and he was the one in control. He paced in circles on the bed and then around it as the days wore on. With each passing hour it became more and more difficult to find a comfortable spot to lay. Sometimes we had Micah lift us up and carry us around the room. His strong hands taking on some of the bulk of our pregnant belly was the only reason we survived some of the last hours of our pregnancy.

We even begrudgingly agreed to soak in a hot bath a few days before our due date. Though, Micah was a Gilmore Witch and we should've known he was up to something. Had I been a little more human and a little less wolf, I'd have seen right through him. Whether his nose told him that we were close, or someone was

whispering in his ear, not long after I stretched out in the hot tub everything inside me exploded in a warm gush of breaking waters. I howled as a contraction tore through me, squeezing and squirming, until I thought I might die right there in the bathtub. Silas said something I didn't catch over the pack link, and I slammed it shut. No one needed to hear me sound so miserable. I'd scar my whole pack for the rest of their lives.

Micah rubbed the sides of my stomach, stroking with downward force. Had these past few days been early labor? Was that why Clyde had tried so hard to come see me? Why hadn't Micah told me?

"I thought you knew," he whispered, picking up my thoughts over our mating link. "I thought that's why you didn't want him in here."

"I.... I guess, I just let my wolf have at it. The whole thing. I just let him take over. As long as you were there, I knew it'd be okay," I told him over our link. "I trust you. I always trust you."

"You're okay. Everything is going as it should be," Micah said, still pushing on my sides.

"How do you know?" I asked just before another train wreck of a contraction tore through me.

"Because I can smell it. It all smells right. You smell right. The pup is coming but you smell right," Micah said.

"I love you!" I howled into Micah's thoughts because the pain of our incoming pup made it too hard to think in full sentences for any length of time. So, I gave into the pain and into my wolf and let his primal nature take over. He knew how to have puppies without a doctor. He knew how to push and growl and howl all at the right times. Unlike me, my inner beast held no doubts about what he had to do. So slowly

but surely, there in what was supposed to be a relaxing candlelit bath our puppy was born. He was born with long fur that stuck up at every angle because it was wet. It was dark brown and he had big brown eyes to match. Micah cleaned him and lifted him away from the water to wrap him in a towel even as he threw his head around whining for a teat. My mate couldn't stop grinning as I climbed out of the tub and made my way to lay on top of a pile of towels that seemed to magically appear in the bathroom. Exhaustion pulled at every bit of me but our pup had come yipping into this world a healthy boy.

“Stevie,” I whispered over our mating link. We weren't the first in our pack to name a baby after my friend who gave his life to get Brone's heir out of the way. Without his sacrifice I doubted any of us would be here today. So, his name was Stevie and he was the most beautiful wolf pup in the world.

Hello and thank you for reading! Whether this is your first book in this universe, or you've been around since the beginning, thank you!

Some housekeeping notes:

- 1) Yes! Everyone will find out what the heck was up with Raziel and Kodiak come the next book in this series.
- 2) We have family trees ! Really – trees in the plural! Thanks to the awesome Riley Morgan ! Thank you so much!
- 3) You can follow me here to keep up with all the upcoming releases and other fun stuff 3 3 3
- 4) Thank you all for your ongoing support. Y'all mean the world to me. I have lots of fun stuff planned for the Hemlock Universe after this series that I can't wait for you all to explore! 3