



Desired Bear (Windridge Den #1)

Author: Jena Wade, Lorelei M. Hart

Category: LGBT+

Description: Fate might not make mistakes, but they sure do have bad timing.

I'm a people pleaser and a fixer. When a problem pops up in the den and I have the solution, I don't think twice before suggesting it. It's who I am. Usually it's no big deal— I have an extra spreadsheet to run, or a new chore to add to my list. This time it's different... this time I offered my freedom.

Now I'm going to mate an Alpha who will be joining our den to strengthen our numbers. His reputation isn't the best, but my brother would never put me in danger. What's the worst that can happen?

Walking in and discovering that my brother's right hand bear, Zane, is my fated. That's what.

Time is running out before it's too late and I am bound forever to an alpha who isn't mine. I need to figure out how to get out of the agreement without endangering the safety of my den. Where are my fixer skills now?

Total Pages (Source): 19

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 1

Corey

“Are you certain this is all you need?” My bestie Jayce looked over the bed where I had my two suitcases laid out.

They were packed full of clothes, books, and the few other belongings that I wasn’t willing to part with—the pie plate a kind den member had given me on a day when I needed the smile and a collection of pressed flowers that the cubs and I had picked last spring. It was fair to say I was a pretty sentimental guy. Those things might not have held any monetary value or even be that practical, but they meant a great deal to me, and even if I had to leave my favorite joggers here, they were coming with.

“Yeah, the house I’m moving into is fully furnished.” Which was good, because the few furnishings I had weren’t worth the expense or the trouble of moving them.

“You won’t be living with your brother?” he asked.

I’d intentionally not gone into too much detail. Not because I wasn’t excited about going, but because the more I said, the more questions I had, and the more questions I had, the more nervous I got. What if I wasn’t making the right decision? What if I was wanting out bad enough and missing my brother hard enough that they were clouding my vision?

I shook my head. “As much as I love Aydan, I can’t live with him.”

My brother was the Alpha of a brand-new den called Windridge. I loved him tons and we got along, but also, we were siblings and we fought like them. Besides, if he was going to hold his place in power as the den went through this part of their growth, he needed to be seen as someone doing it on his own, not with the help of his omega brother—even if his omega brother was coming to help. All about the optics.

The den was a good size, but they lacked omegas, which was why I was moving there in the first place. Eventually, my friend Jayce would come there, as well. He wasn't quite ready to make such a big change, but when he was finished with his job here, that was his plan, and I was glad for it. As much as I loved my brother, he wasn't my confidant. That was Jayce.

I'd put out feelers to other dens as well, to invite omegas to join us. It was a great opportunity. If our mates were in our birth dens, or even in my case, my second den, we'd already have been mated. Sure, you didn't need to find your true mate to settle down and make a life for yourself, but it was what many omegas were looking for. Mates aside, the opportunities for meaningful work were minimal for omegas in the den. This was a new start with a promising future, and the added bonus of having a furnished place for us already waiting.

"I need my own space, and Aydan needs to manage the den."

The more I spoke with him, the more I worried that maybe he'd bitten off more than he realized. He could handle it, but it was a lot, and he didn't have an omega mate to balance him.

"I'll have a job when I get there, and I don't want to be some sort of pseudo alpha-mate while he looks for his own." I shuddered at the thought. I loved the idea of belonging to a new den and to helping it grow—but having people rely on me to solve their problems and be there for them ALL the time? Not my cup of tea. And it wasn't good for my brother either. This was definitely for the best.

Jayce wrinkled his nose. "Your brother is strict and scary."

"He's not scary, and you've never met him." I had to admit that he could be scary when needed.

"I've overheard enough phone conversations over the past few years." He shivered. "Do you think you will find a mate there?"

I grimaced because I knew for a fact that I would find a mate at Windridge. It might not be my fated one, but it was a pairing that would help solidify and strengthen the den. I was resolved to do it, but also sad that it was coming to that. Maybe fate would shine down on me and plop them in the same den. I wasn't holding my breath. Not in time, anyway.

Aydan was in talks with another den about an arranged mating, one that would start an alliance between them. He wasn't forcing it on me. He asked and I agreed, under the caveat that I didn't find my mate before then. It felt like a good compromise, but the closer I got to go time, the more anxious I became. I was more than happy to help, but that didn't make it less scary.

Growing up, I'd always wanted children. That didn't change as I became an adult. If this was how I got them, then, well, that was fine. Half a dream fulfilled was better than none of it.

Aydan didn't understand the desire for a mate or children, not after how our parents had been. Due to their lack of attention, I was more determined than ever to be better parents than them, whereas Aydan was sure he would be just as terrible as they were.

"I'm hopeful," I said. My brother wouldn't let me be paired with an alphahole, no matter how strong the alliance would be. This was going to be a good man. If it wasn't a love match, so be it.

Or so I kept telling myself.

Jayce dropped the book he had been holding and narrowed his eyes at me. “There’s something you’re not telling me.” He always could see through me.

I shook my head. “When I have details, I’ll let you know.”

“If you’re not going to like it there, then I don’t want to go.”

“Who said anything about not liking it there? It’s going to be great,” I said, and I held his hand. “I’m going to miss you, though. That part won’t be great.”

“You’re going to be so busy organizing your new life, you’re not even going to notice I’m gone.” He grinned.

I knew that aside from the normal worry when someone in your life made a huge change, he was happy for me and that this was him putting on a brave face about me leaving without him. He was going to miss me too. But it wasn’t forever or even for a long time. We’d be back together gossiping over a bag of chips sooner rather than later. Just not soon enough.

It was true that I was excited about starting my new job slash company. There were several businesses that were run by den members, and all of them had expressed interest in having an accountant to do their payroll and keep their books for them. That was something I liked doing and was highly qualified for. I was more than happy to take over.

“Still,” I said, “you’ll follow soon, right?”

Jayce was my closest friend. He and I had become pen pals when we were barely ten years old, and we’d kept in touch as we’d grown up. When the two of us went to

college, we picked the same one so that we could finally meet in person. That had been four years ago, and we had been inseparable ever since.

My home den wasn't the greatest, which was why my brother started his own. And so, when school was finished, I stayed with Jayce. His den was small, though, and there were not many alphas to speak of. Joining my brother's den was going to be a great opportunity for both of us.

I zipped up my suitcase, and he grabbed the other one.

"You sure about this?" he asked.

I laughed. "It's going to be a little difficult to go back on it now. Besides, our lease is up in three months, which is when you'll be coming, right?"

"Right." He didn't sound as sure as I wanted him to, but it was better than a maybe, so I was going to take it. "One last shift before we go?"

I shook my head. "I was supposed to leave three hours ago." And had been dragging my feet, letting my nerves get the best of me. "But you can walk me out?"

I wasn't ready for me to go either, but it was time. We each grabbed a suitcase and went out to the drive, walking far slower than normal.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. "Promise me you won't let your brother tie you down too much. Don't let that stick up his ass dull your sparkle."

I laughed. "You speak as if he is some sort of overbearing, crazy person. He's just—"

"Boring." He gave me one final squeeze and took a step back.

“Not boring.” Although I could see why he sounded that way. “He likes his schedules, and he likes to be organized. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Jace wrinkled his nose. “We’ll see,” he said.

One last hug and I was on my way. The drive was smooth, which was good as far as timing and safety went, but also problematic because it meant my head was wandering the land of what-ifs. What if this wasn’t as grand a plan as I thought? What if I failed at my new attempt at a career? What if my arranged mate smelled bad and ate smelly food that clung to his breath?

I called my brother when I was about an hour out to let him know my ETA since I started so much later than I had told him I would. He answered on the first ring.

“Corey!” I could hear his smile in his voice. My brother might’ve been strict, organized, and set in his ways, but he did love me very much. And I knew exactly why he was the way he was. It was the same reason I wasn’t holding out for my fated mate.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m about an hour away.”

“That’s perfect. I’ll let Zane know.”

“Zane, your second?” I’d not met him, but my brother trusted him. I still didn’t get why he needed to know how long I’d be driving.

“Yeah. He’ll make sure you get where you need to be.”

And then it clicked. “You’re not at the den?”

“I’m not. I had business with another den.” Normally I’d have seen that as a reason to

worry, but he was far too chipper for it to be anything bad. “And actually, it’s a good thing you called.”

“Is it?” I said, my stomach doing a little flip-flop. I had hoped my brother would be there when I first arrived, but I understood that he was busy.

“You know I mentioned about an arranged mating?”

“Yes,” I said, unsure what I wanted him to say next. I wanted a family, but also it was scary to mate someone you didn’t know.

“I think it might actually happen.” He hadn’t told me it wasn’t a done deal. Or maybe he did and I was so busy processing it all I missed that part. “Are you certain that you’re okay with this?”

I took a deep breath. It was one thing to have that be a hypothetical situation, but this was real. “I think so,” I said. “I mean, I’d like to meet the alpha first, but you know, I just want a home and some cubs with someone who is reliable.” Someone who was nothing like our deadbeat parents.

Maybe it was my omega tendencies, but I really just wanted a family. One that I never had growing up.

“When I return to the den I’ll be bringing some visitors from here. One of them is the alpha who will be your mate.”

Oh, damn. He said it like it was a foregone conclusion.

“Great,” I said. “I look forward to meeting him.”

“Thanks, Corey. This is going to be great for the den. I just know it.”

Please let him be right.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 2

Zane

I leaned into the hood of an old busted-up truck that I was bound and determined to get running again. The damn thing had been on the property when we took over this territory, and then it had become my pet project. There was just something about it that called to me.

It was good too, because that thing kept me busy when I wasn't doing things for the den. I didn't get a lot of time to work on her, but she prevented me from getting into my own head and giving me a focus that wasn't just the den.

One of these days, the engine would turn over and stay running, then I'd need to get a new pet project.

Today was not that day.

The engine sputtered and spat, while smoke billowed from one of the belts. As sad as that was, it was progress. Sputtering was a heck of a lot more than it did the first dozen or so times I attempted to get it going.

"Call it a night, Zane, before we break something in here. You're going to set off the fire alarm... again," Russ, one of my mechanics, yelled from across the shop.

I tossed my rag into the bin. "It was one time. One."

“Math is hard. It was one time this week.” He rolled his eyes. “Good thing Alpha’s brother is coming here to take over accounting, because if you can’t count all the times you made this alarm go off, you sure as shit couldn’t balance the books.”

Russ grabbed the back of his neck, the way he did when he was good and done for the night. “Call it quits.” I might’ve been Beta and technically his boss, but he wasn’t asking. And frankly, I needed to hear it.

“All right, climb out of there,” I said.

My apprentice, Nate, opened the creaky door and hopped out, slamming it shut. With it, the window came down. That was yet another thing on my to-do list. Or maybe it was a feature—every time you closed the door, the window came down. That could be a perk. Unless it was raining. Or snowing. Or hailing. Fine. It wasn’t a perk at all.

“You gotta give up on that truck. You’re going to put more into parts than it’s ever worth.” Russ grabbed a wrench from the workbench and put it in the toolbox it belonged in. The man couldn’t sit still for a second. He always had to be doing something—just not helping me with the truck.

“Well, I’m not looking to sell, so what does it really matter?” I said.

He shook his head. We’d had this conversation before, and it always ended with me being stubborn and him thinking I lost my mind. It was no surprise that today was the same.

“Are we on for poker tonight?” Russ latched the box.

Now that we had started the weekly poker game with the group of Betas and some older alphas in the den as a way of building camaraderie, we had never missed a week. Only this week, our Alpha wouldn’t be there since he was visiting another den.

These games were a perfect way to unwind and learn about what was happening within the den in a safe setting. As second-in-command, it was my responsibility to take care of any situations that arose that our Alpha couldn't deal with because he was away or that he assigned to me. I loved my position, but damn, was it hard, especially when the den was so new and alphas outnumbered the omegas two to one.

Having that sort of imbalance led to fights. I'd blame it on our beast, but I had a feeling it was more to do with alphas being lonely. Sure, we had each other, but when the sun went down and everyone went to their own places, it got lonely. There were no two ways around that.

"Yeah. Wouldn't miss it." I wasn't king of poker, but also, it wasn't about that.

"I'll see you there then. I gotta shower before I go anywhere." Russ pretended to smell his armpit and be disgusted.

"You guys aren't going to get a clean me. I have to close this place up and do some paperwork before I head home," I said. They would have to deal with my greasy self.

"Isn't the accountant arriving soon?" Nate asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, but I don't want him to find all the paperwork a mess. Just because he agreed to take it over doesn't mean we don't have a responsibility to make it organized for him." Not that I was counting on our "organized" to be what he would do, but the best we could was far better than the pile of horror that was waiting in there for me now.

"Yeah, yeah. Tell that to Patrick." Russ stuck out his tongue. Some days I swore he was a teenager trapped in an adult body.

Patrick was the chef at the diner. He was also the owner, but really, he just liked to

cook. As far as I could tell, the paperwork, the schedule—and everything else that had to be done to manage a business—was a goddamn mess. I knew it drove Aydan insane. Maybe his accountant brother could help with that, too.

My phone rang just as Nate and Russ were leaving. Speak of the devil. It was Aydan.

“Alpha.”

I could practically hear the eye roll and see the steam rolling out of Aydan’s ears. “Listen, man, when we’re on the phone, and most certainly when we’re not around people, you can just call me Aydan.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. I wasn’t even that kind of rule-following guy. It’d started out as trying to figure out my role and morphed into an ongoing joke.

He chuckled. “Smartass. How are things going there?”

“Good. Damn Chevy still won’t start. But we’re close.” We were not any closer than we had been two weeks ago when I last tried it, but I still considered that close.

“Awesome. Listen, my brother should be there today, and you should know that I’m moving forward with this arranged mating idea. Corey has agreed to it.”

My eyebrows shot up my forehead. I’d assumed this old-fashioned notion was going to fall by the wayside. Looked like I was wrong. His brother wasn’t mine, but if he were...

“Really? I know you want to bring in more people to the den, but this is how you want to do it?” An arranged mating wasn’t something I’d agree to. I hadn’t given much thought to settling down, but I’d always assumed I’d find my fated mate or none at all. Why accept less than the goddess was offering, right? But this wasn’t

about me. This was about my Alpha and his brother, and Aydan's mission to establish our den.

"Corey agreed. It's what's best for the den. It really is." Was he trying to convince me or himself?

"I trust you, man." We had talked about it at length. I didn't like the idea, but several of the other Betas didn't hate it. And really, it was his brother whose opinion mattered the most.

Who knew, it might be a good thing. This arrangement would bring more people here, especially if an alpha from another den mated with Aydan's brother the way it looked like he was going to. This guy was a "buy one, get three free." He was a package deal, bringing along his three omega brothers with him to start their lives here as well, with the hopes of finding their own mates.

"Can you show Corey around for me? I feel bad leaving him on his own after he moved all that way. He is going to need a friend."

"Of course," I said.

"Good. He's moving into the house next to us."

"He's not moving in with you?"

I didn't say "us," even though I did live in Aydan's home officially. I liked staying at the apartment above my garage. It was small, but it was mine. Officially, though, my residence was with the den Alpha. But it wasn't really living with him, not the way I had assumed his brother would.

"He wanted his own space, and so he's got it."

That made me smile. It meant that his brother didn't let him walk all over him and that this truly was his agreement. Aydan wasn't a dick, but he could be persuasive, and mating wasn't something to be persuaded into.

"All right, then. Sure. I can show him around." I didn't necessarily love the idea of babysitting the Alpha's younger brother, but I would do what I had to. It was my job.

"And Zane, you know the rules. Keep your hands to yourself."

I rolled my eyes. "Jesus, man. He's practically engaged. And I am most certainly not looking for any sort of relationship. Least of all with your brother." That was a fast route to getting my ass challenged in front of the entire den. I was so not in the mood to be bled out all because I wanted to get a piece of ass. Heck no to that one.

"Hey, you don't even know him." Leave it to Aydan to be offended on his brother's behalf when I just promised to do exactly what he wanted me to.

I chuckled. "Trust me. I won't be interested."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 3

Corey

I was more tired than I had any reason to be. Sure, I had an emotional good-bye with my bestie, but it wasn't a forever good-bye. Still, I was starting to run on fumes, to the point where I considered pulling over and grabbing a nap.

After getting off the phone with my brother and assuming I had only a little bit longer to go on my journey, I ran into some traffic caused by an accident. It looked like it wasn't too bad and that everyone was probably fine, but it slowed me down. The way people stopped to look at accidents like they were a blockbuster movie or something had us backed up on the highway for miles.

Then there was the construction. That had me hitting a top speed of 35. Worst of all, my tire picked up a nail as I had to hit the shoulder to allow a construction vehicle through, and it blew. I could've called my brother or someone from his den to help me out, but he taught me well, and I knew how to change my own tire. But it also meant that I was driving the rest of the way on the donut-size spare at half speed, adding several more hours to my trip.

Come to think of it, no wonder I was exhausted.

It was well past dark when I arrived in the itty-bitty town. Even the diner was closed. If there was a bar, I couldn't see where it was. Everything was quiet. I'd seen pictures of it, but now that I was here, I fully appreciated the size. If I blinked while driving through, I could easily have missed it.

I pulled carefully into the drive of the address I had been given and shut my car off. I grabbed my suitcases and made my way up the front porch of the house, trying to remember where my brother said the spare key lived. I could bother his Beta if I had to, but I preferred to handle this myself.

From what I could see, it was an adorable little house, but with the trees casting shadows with what little moonlight there was, I couldn't quite see how much it might need in the way of cosmetics. Part of me hoped at least some. It would give me a project to do while I waited for all of this arranged mating stuff to work out.

It still didn't quite feel real, but it was, and soon enough my life was going to have an even more drastic change than it was already undergoing.

"Look at you." I smiled at my new home.

This would be a little place of my own. I knew that even if there were cosmetic things that needed to be adjusted, it was in good condition for me and Jayce to live in. My brother had inspected it himself.

Of course, when I was mated, my mate might want us to move or have Jayce move out. Or maybe Jayce would want out. I guess I hadn't thought about a lot of things, and time was ticking.

I hefted my one bag inside the door, making my way through the entryway toward what I hoped was the living room. I tossed the bag onto the couch and turned to grab the other from the porch when the couch let out a screeching yell.

And because I was apparently a walking sitcom tonight, I yelled in return, yelling long enough that when I was done, an alpha was standing toe to toe with me, his body an entire head taller than me.

“Who the hell are you?” I said and swung my fist, as if that was going to do anything.

The man was clearly bigger than me, and if I took just one moment to take in his scent, I would realize he was a bear. My brother taught me how to defend myself, but all of those scenarios started with them lunging for me and me turning their momentum on them. That wasn't the case here. He was standing there, looking me dead in the eye.

The man caught my fist. He didn't strike or try and harm me. He simply stopped my attack.

“Who the hell am I? Who the hell are you?” he barked back.

“I live here.” Or at least I thought I went to the right house. No, I did. I double-checked. He was just messing with me.

“Nobody lives here,” he said.

“Well, I do,” I said with a stomp of my foot because that made me sound oh so much stronger.

This didn't make sense. Had my brother given me a home that was already occupied by this brute? Where was a light? I could hardly see in the dark. Some shifter I was.

The alpha moved away and brushed past me as if I was nothing. That's when his scent hit me—a delicious aroma of leather mixed with tangy metal and grease. The light flickered on, and I finally got a good look at his face. He had to be a good eight inches taller than me, if not more. His shaggy black hair curled around his ears and at the nape of his neck. He narrowed his eyes at me. They were brown as far as I could tell.

“Corey,” he said. “Are you Corey? You look enough like Aydan to be a sibling.”

“Yeah, I’m Corey. Who are you?”

“Zane.” He stepped closer to me and stuck out his hand. His nostrils flared as if my scent hit him for the first time. The sweet scent of arousal mixed in the air. He stepped back. I stepped forward.

“Oh no,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “This... Shit. I’ll come back in the morning. Why don’t you get some sleep? There’s a bedroom through there.” He pointed, but I didn’t look away from him. His scent was wrapped around me now, capturing me in its allure. I was entrapped.

“Why were you here sleeping on the couch?”

“Your brother asked me to greet you.” He took another step back until he hit the wall. Then he started scooting away as if he couldn’t get away from me fast enough.

“Shouldn’t we talk about—”

“No.” He cut me off. “Were your travels safe or did something happen that made you late?”

I ran a hand through my hair. Clearly, he wasn’t going to address the elephant in the room. “I passed an accident that slowed down traffic and then I had a flat tire and there was some construction.” None of that mattered, not with... not with his scent stealing all of my attention. Why was he so far over there? Why?

“But you’re all right?” Concern clouded his features, and for a moment his bear roared to the surface.

I nodded. “I was able to put on the spare, but it’s one of those smaller ones, so I had to drive slower.” Even at that, I drove on it far more miles than I should’ve.

“Smart. It’s good that you knew to do that.”

“Well,” I shrugged, “Aydan taught me well, I suppose.”

He swallowed thickly, looking away from me. Stubborn bear was bound and determined to ignore what we were to one another. “Well, how about I call on you in the morning? Or one of the other den members will. I must go.”

“Were you waiting for me?”

“Sort of. Yes. Zane asked me to show you around. I thought I’d make sure the house was in order. Everything’s good here. Bedroom’s through there if you need to rest. There’s food. I really must go.”

My heart constricted. I thought we might talk. I stopped myself from saying more. Clearly, talking was not what he wanted to do, despite the fact that his scent called to me like nothing I had ever experienced before. It could mean only one thing, yet I wasn’t going to say it out loud. Not if he was going to deny it.

It already hurt having him react this way. Pairing that with words—no. That would be too much.

“Right. Well, I do need to sleep.” Not that I was going to be able to, not with his scent hanging in the air, not with all the unanswered questions, not with knowing that he was pretending that fate hadn’t paired us together—that something about me made me unworthy for him. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Right, someone will see you in the morning.” Fuck. That wasn’t the same thing. Not

at all. “Sleep well, Corey.”

“Thanks,” I said, and then he was gone, leaving me in a new house, in a new den, waiting for my new arranged mating, knowing that I’d had my real mate so close for a smidgeon of time.

My bear was restless, begging to be set free, but I didn’t trust him. Instead, I forced him down and grabbed the other bag from the front porch and then climbed into bed. Maybe I’d be lucky and sleep would come.

I wasn’t lucky.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 4

Zane

It was a fluke. It had to be. There was no way that my nose truly scented what it did in my Alpha's brother. Fate didn't make mistakes, did they?

It was a trick of being too tired and being woken up by having a suitcase tossed on top of me. That's what it was. Fate would not be this cruel to gift me a mate who was a man I had been told—in no uncertain terms—was completely off-limits. A man who was, for all intents and purposes, betrothed to another.

It couldn't be. It just could not.

Yet, when I laid my head down that night after walking back to the garage, I'd been unable to get the scent of him out of my nostrils. I was bathed in the scent of oranges and a hint of rose, and something else I could not quite pinpoint. Whatever it was, it kept me up for the entire night. My sleep was short, bits of dreams about an omega with thick, dark hair that I could bury my fingers in as I held his head to kiss him.

And that wasn't even the worst of it.

I woke up with a rock-hard dick and an absolute refusal to do anything about it. Because the minute I reached for it, visions of Corey filled my mind. I had only been in his presence for mere moments, yet I could easily picture him there with me while I fisted my cock. And sure, maybe it was within the letter of the law to jerk off to the image and memory of Corey, but it felt like a deep betrayal to the promise I'd made

Aydan.

It was extremely difficult, but I stopped myself. I could not, would not, continue down this path. Unfortunately, there was no avoiding him completely. The only thing I could do was control my own behavior.

I was tasked with giving him the tour this morning. Even if I wanted to pawn him off on another, which I didn't—my need to be near him growing by the second—but I promised his brother that, as well. I was good and screwed and not in the fun way I wanted to be screwing the sexy omega a brief walk away. And so, at the crack of dawn, I was awake, drinking my coffee, hating the predicament I was in.

I opened up the shop and handed over the reins to Russ, who would handle things while I was gone. He was good at his work and didn't mind. Even if he did, Alpha's orders came first. I tasked him with getting a tire to replace the one my mate had blown.

By ten, I was making the short trek to Corey's home, the one that sat directly next to the Alpha's home. It'd be a good place for Corey and his new mate, whenever he arrived.

My bear grumbled.

Just because we want him to be our mate, doesn't mean he is our mate, I reminded him. And besides, he didn't acknowledge us either. Although there was no denying his arousal.

Within a few moments, I had my bear under control and was knocking. Corey opened the door. He bit his lip and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He was so fucking adorable I couldn't stand it.

“Come on in,” he said, stepping out of the way to allow me passage. I hated how much I longed for him to have thrown his arms around us or given an encouraging smile.

I followed him into the kitchen where he was enjoying his own coffee, his hands wrapped around the mug.

“Would you like some?” he said, indicating the half-full pot. My little omega liked his coffee.

Only he wasn’t mine, and I needed to stop allowing my brain to wander to scenarios where he was.

I shook my head. “I already had my cup for the day.”

His brow furrowed. “Just one?”

“That’s all I need. How much do you drink?” The way his eyes went wide, I was anticipated double digits. Or maybe instead of measuring in actual serving sizes and to be fair, by that model, I had about triple the amount I stated, he’s say a bit.

By that standard I had more, too. Not my fault I got a huge-ass mug at a Secret Santa one year.

He chuckled. “Way too much. I like to try out different flavors, too. Is there a coffee shop in town? I like lattes.”

I wasn’t even sure how they were different from au lait, but they both had milk. That was something, right?

Gods, I longed to get him one, to show him I was worthy. It was dumb. Getting a latte

because someone said they liked it only meant you did a nice deed one time, nothing more. Still, if I could manage it, I would've.

Instead, I shook my head. "We've talked about opening one, but so far no one has stepped up to run that endeavor. Everyone just makes their own coffee at home."

"Oh," he said. "Maybe I'll see about getting one of those fancy machines for here then."

Not me, standing there trying to follow the promise I gave his brother while at the same time calculating if I had enough money to buy Corey a top-of-the-line fancy coffee maker. I was screwed. There was no way I was going to make it through today at this rate. None.

"Right, so how about I give you a tour of the town." And do it walking and outside in the hopes a breeze will sweep your delicious scent away from me . "Then I can get back to work."

Or let my bear out. He was even more on edge than I was. He needed the time to run.

"We're not going to talk about this?"

I stiffened. "I don't know what to say, Corey."

He smiled. "I like the sound of my name on your lips."

Corey wasn't helping.

A shudder went down my spine. I pinched my eyes closed. "You can't say things like that."

“Sorry.” He didn’t look sorry. His grin was downright mischievous, and it made me want to chase him around the kitchen until I finally caught him and pulled him into my arms.

“Your brother has talked to you about his plans, right?” I didn’t see him as someone who would lie about that, but given the situation, I wasn’t so sure. Shouldn’t he be concerned for the same reasons I was?

Corey nodded.

“I’ve been given strict instructions that came directly from Aydan. He’s my Alpha, the Alpha of this den. I’m his second-in-command. I cannot disobey him.” Gods, I sounded like a jackhole.

“Surely, Aydan—”

I cut him off. “We don’t know anything about what we are.”

Lies. All lies.

Corey’s brow rose. “You would deny it? Deny me?”

I grimaced. I couldn’t fathom the idea of denying my fated mate. But wasn’t that exactly what I was doing?

I licked my lips, still not able to look directly at him. “I don’t know,” I said. “I know that you have been promised to another. You’re practically engaged to another alpha.”

Engaged, what a human word. But then again, what they were doing was taken directly out of the human playbook.

“Surely if we tell Aydan and—”

“Disrupt his carefully orchestrated plans?” I said with a raised eyebrow.

Corey flushed. “You’re right. He does not like his plans to be disrupted. Perhaps you’re on to something and it’s not anything. It’s just attraction, right? That’s nothing.”

If that was true, why did hearing that hurt so much. I refused to let Corey see my pain. He deserved better.

I nodded, though I hated to hear him dismiss our connection so easily. Even though that was exactly what I was doing. Even though this entire situation sucked beyond measure.

“Let’s get through this tour. And then your brother will be home, and we can talk to him about it.”

“No, thank you.”

My fingers twitched as if I couldn’t bear not to reach out and touch him. My animal roared underneath the surface, clawing like he was an animal in a cage, pacing the length of his barrier. I would not make a move.

Corey was off-limits, and I needed to remember that.

“It’s for the best.” But if it was right, why did it hurt so badly?

“Of course,” he said, straightening his back and rolling his shoulders. “You’re right. I’m engaged. I just talked to Aydan about it yesterday. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Was he trying to convince himself or me? If it was me, he was failing. Everything was not going to be fine. It wasn't possible given the hand we were dealt.

"Right," I said to him.

"So, show me around this place. I didn't get to see it in the light yet."

I grinned. "You're going to love it."

And if luck was on our sides, we'd discover that we weren't at all compatible, that we found each other annoying or something.

I had a strong feeling that would not be the case.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 5

Corey

I was excited to see the town and den that my brother has bragged about for the past several weeks. For the size of it, he said it had almost everything I looked for without the hustle and bustle of Main Street. I liked towns that were hardly more than a blip on the map.

It would've been perfect, except my tour was thick with tension... sexual tension. My brother always talked about Zane as his right-hand bear, the person who supported him through everything. That was great and all, but right now, I wished that he wasn't any of those things and was a rando den mate. How much easier this all would've been.

I could hear the love and respect that Zane had for my brother and this den in his voice, underneath the tension that lingered between us. He wasn't doing this to be an alphahole. He was choosing duty first. It was commendable, but also the suckiest thing imaginable.

My bear drooped with sadness within me because Zane's scent was telling me one thing, yet his human side was telling me another. Whatever connection we had, fated or otherwise, could not be. Promises were made, ones Zane refused to break and ones my brother made on my behalf.

To most people, the prospect of having a fated mate would trump having an arranged mating. Right? It wasn't like we were in the days of old where omegas were traded

like livestock and this was strictly a business transaction.

My brother could and would see that, right? It wasn't like I found a random guy from speed dating or what have you. Zane was my fated mate. Done.

Or in this case, very much not done.

Perhaps later, I'd call him and ask him straight out. It wasn't like we were the types to keep secrets from each other. Or would that put him in a bind with the timing? I for sure didn't want to make things harder for him.

He sounded jolly enough when I called, but also, he was in negotiations... negotiations for me. Calling and asking him if he could take it all back so I could get it on with his second... that'd be a yikes if I ever heard one.

But this evening, when he was alone, maybe that would be a good time. Keeping it from him was a shit choice too. Why were all the options crappy? Why?

I wasn't planning to mention any of this to Zane. For whatever reason he seemed hell-bent on pawning me off. It didn't make sense. It wasn't that he didn't feel it too, and I might not have been the best catch on this planet, but I for sure wasn't the worst.

He opened the door for me, and I climbed into the passenger seat of his truck. The place was saturated with his scent, and when the door shut me in, it only amplified it. I quickly rolled down the window, needing some fresh air if I was going to make it through this.

Given how quickly he dismissed my bond, he was being quite the gentleman—opening and closing the door for me, letting me control the air and radio, and asking me what sights I was interested in seeing. Such a difference from his

immediate rejection. I swore the man was going to give me whiplash.

“That’s the mechanic shop.” He pointed to a brown building with four large, white, overhead doors and a little office building attached. It looked pretty active for the small town.

“That’s yours, right?”

“The den owns it,” he said.

“Right, but you run it? And Aydan mentioned that your business is one of the first ones that will need the accounting help since you have the most business.” It sounded like I was on a job interview instead of talking to my mate. Ugh.

“The den owns the business,” he said. “I’m just a mechanic.”

That was not what my brother had said, but I could understand his modesty. We were, after all, driven by our need to provide for our den, not just ourselves.

“Perhaps tomorrow I can swing by and look at the books? See where I can get started.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I suppose,” he said. “I have one of my guys tracking down a new tire for your car also.”

My cheeks heated. He was taking care of me. I loved it.

He continued, “You could start with the diner’s books. That also has a lot of business.”

Ouch.

“Aydan mentioned that the chef, Patrick, is keeping up with his books just fine, but yours needed more help.”

He flinched.

“I’m under strict instructions that come directly from Aydan.”

And now I pivoted away from job interview mode to asshole mode. What was wrong with me? Why did I feel the need to throw his words back at him? He didn’t want me around. I knew that. I tried not to take it personally but, well, it was personal. More personal than any other rejection I’d ever faced.

His jaw tensed again, and I had the strangest urge to cup his cheek until he relaxed under my touch. That wouldn’t go well.

“Okay. Tomorrow then.”

He pulled into the diner, which was across the street from the mechanic shop. It was another place bustling with activity, which was no surprise. Diners were often the heart of a town.

As we exited the car, he flagged down a couple walking along the street and they both broke into a huge smile and jogged over to us. At least someone was happy to see me.

“Cynthia, Carmen, I’d like to introduce you to Corey, Alpha Aydan’s brother.”

I smiled wide and held out my hand. They both shook it. It was such a human thing to do, but I’d had it so engrained in me that in human spaces you act human, and this might’ve been a den-heavy space, but there could easily be a human in the dinner or the parking lot.

“It’s really great to meet you. Aydan’s told us so much about you,” the one named Carmen said.

“Likewise,” I said. “I’m really happy to be here.” Ish. I was happy-ish. Things weren’t exactly turning out the way I wanted them to, that was for sure.

“If you guys aren’t doing anything right now, would you like to finish the tour for Corey? I need to get back to the shop.” And just like that he tried to pawn me off on anyone who would take me. Fabulous.

A man wearing a set of greasy overalls came out of the diner and caught his comment. “We cleared your schedule today, boss. You don’t need to be at the shop. You wanted to welcome Corey and give him a tour.” He turned to me. “I’m Russ, by the way.”

I smiled at him. “I think perhaps Beta Zane doesn’t like to be away from his work for too long.” But he sure likes to be away from me.

Russ’s brow furrowed. “It is an honor to welcome the Alpha’s brother to the den. Zane was looking forward to a day off.”

That muscle ticked again in Zane’s jaw. The playful side of me loved the reaction that we were getting from my ma—from Zane. But I didn’t wish to cause him more stress. He might not want me, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t already starting to care about him.

The entire emotional roller coaster I was on was only getting more intense by the second.

“Of course, it’s an honor to show Corey around. I’m more than happy to do it. But you know how I wanted to fix that truck?” Why did that sound like a question?

Russ let out a bellowing laugh. “That truck’s been broken for longer than we’ve been here. It’ll probably remain broken. Have fun today, boss.” He clapped Zane on the shoulder and walked across the street. “Welcome to Windridge, Corey! We’ll have your car back in ship-shape in no time!”

“Thank you.” I turned to Zane. “Shall we continue our tour?” I gave him my widest grin, unable to stop the teasing smile.

“Of course.”

He thanked Cynthia and Carmen, and then we walked along the sidewalk. It was as if a magnet pulled me closer to Zane’s side. I wanted to hold his hand or maybe have his arm around my shoulder, heck, I’d accept just brushing against him from time to time.

More than that, I wanted to learn everything there was about him.

The fated mate pull was strong. I was sure this was what I was experiencing, even if he denied it. In hindsight, I wonder if Russ sensed it too, and that was why he was so quick to push his friend to stay with me.

Would I do to my own children what my parents had done to Aydan and me? If I let the mate pull consume me the way they had them? My parents—they were not who I wanted to be. They were not who I wanted anyone to be. They practically abandoned Aydan and me as soon as we could hunt for ourselves. They were consumed with their need for one another, it was like nothing else existed in their world.

Zane’s hand came to my shoulder.

“Is everything all right?” he said.

I suddenly turned and said, "Fine." I pasted on a smile. I was very much not fine. "Everything's fine," I lied. "I do appreciate you showing me around today."

"Of course," he said. "I'm happy to do it." Even though he just tried to pass me on to someone else.

I chuckled. "Well, you're obligated to do it."

He let out a long breath. "Yes, I did volunteer, and I am obligated because it was a command from my Alpha. But I'm happy to spend time with you."

It seemed to pain him to admit that. Was it because he didn't want this attraction or because of the fact that I was promised to another? Was he maybe scared of my brother? I never had been, but he'd always been my protector, so I saw him differently than others.

I might've been promised to another, and perhaps it was wrong of me to flirt with this bear. But my beast told me that he was mine. There was no denying him, the way he denied me.

His scent called to me, and I had learned to always trust my instincts. But what if they were wrong this time? What if instead of leading me into the future I long for, they were leading me down the same path my parents had taken? What if I was like them after all?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 6

Zane

Corey's scent followed me no matter where I went. It clung to me, and as much as I loved it, I hated it... hated the way it reminded me of what I couldn't have... what I would never have. Stupid fate.

After dropping Corey back off at his new home, I tried to return to work and failed miserably. How foolish I'd been thinking that grease and engines and Russ would distract me from my omega. Only he wasn't my omega. He was the Alpha's brother, and there was no distracting me from him.

His scent was there, clinging to my skin, my clothes, and tickling my nostrils. And because I'd taken him all around the territory, that's where his scent was too—everywhere. And worse than that, I saw him everywhere. And not just in my imagination. He wasn't the kind of accountant who stayed home hidden away. No. He was Mr. Social Butterfly.

He'd mingled so well with the rest of the den. There wasn't a shy bone in his body, and the way he interacted with everyone was so authentic and real you couldn't help but like him. He wasn't as serious as his brother. He set everyone at ease when they met. He was going to be a fantastic member of the den, which meant I was never going to be able to get away from his scent.

This sweet torture was going to be my life.

I'd been so focused on not going against my word, that the fact that he would be here permanently, mated to another, had somehow not sunk in until now. How could I possibly continue on as if this was totally normal, as if I didn't desire him with every fiber of my being? I'd say it would get easier with time, only if the past day had taught me anything, it was that the pull toward him got stronger, not weaker.

This went well past physical attraction, although gods, was that there.

My bear craved his touch, but also his conversation, his smile, his presence.

As Corey met members of the den, he'd asked them questions about themselves. He'd set up dinners and playdates and conversations so that he could fully immerse himself into the den. He was perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect. He wasn't just a random omega coming in to even numbers—he was here for all the right reasons, and it showed.

But even so, he couldn't be mine.

I closed up my laptop and put it in my bag. I planned to give it to him so that so he didn't need to work at the actual shop tomorrow. His scent may still be hanging in the air everywhere I went, but I didn't need to amplify it at the place I spent the most time. This was difficult as it was.

But before I saw him to pass the laptop on, I needed to shift. My bear demanded it. I needed to get away so I could get him out of my mind and to let my bear work off all the pent-up frustration he was feeling toward me for not giving into the mating pull. He didn't understand why I was doing what I was. All he knew was that fate sent him our mate and I was thwarting that.

I stripped off my clothes and walked out the back door of the mechanic shop. It led directly into the woods, thankfully. I didn't want any company.

Eventually, we might actually expand the town to have more side streets. It was part of Aydan's long-term plans. If it came to fruition, I'd no longer have direct access to the woods from here, but that would be several years down the road, and I had plenty of other things to worry about without inviting trouble that wasn't even on the horizon yet.

I fell back and gave my bear his fur. He landed on the ground with a thud and took off at a full run. My beast was large but didn't let his size get in the way of his speed. Being a grizzly, when I stood on my hind legs, I was well over nine feet tall. As a shifter, I was larger than regular grizzlies. Stronger, too.

Once I was deep within the woods, I slowed to a walk, letting my bear wander around, sniffing out berries and other things that we both enjoyed, including a squirrel that wasn't wise enough to get out of our reach. He needed this time to be. Heck, I needed it too.

Eventually he was worn out, but also not ready to give back control. He found a nice spot in the sun and took a nap. Any human seeing us would be perplexed at seeing my bear just chilling. He might've been all grizzly when he needed to be, but he was also part me.

I needed space from Corey so I could wash his scent away and regroup myself, and this was the perfect opportunity.

Except his scent seemed to only get further into my soul with each step I took in the woods, each second I lay in the sun, each sound I heard. Everything I saw reminded me of him. Every. Single. Thing.

Did he enjoy blackberries or red berries? We had both kinds growing wild in the forest. Did he like them? Should I come back with a basket and harvest some for him? Or better yet, I could show him this spot where the berries were plentiful.

Only it wasn't better yet. That would only lead me down a path of heartache. So did hearing the stream and yearning to bring him down to the banks with me for a picnic. Did he enjoy fishing in his bear form? I knew that I did.

I got up and lumbered toward the river. I could catch him some fish and take them to him. Alphas provide, right? I shook my head. Dammit, I needed to cleanse him from my mind, get him out of there completely. If only it were as easy as that.

At the river, I sat down on the bank and dipped my paw into the cool water. The fish scattered once they caught a hint of me. I wasn't hungry, so I wasn't going to catch them. Not now, anyway.

What sort of fish did my mate like?

Fuck, I needed to not think of him that way.

I tried to shut off my human brain; only that made it ten times worse. My bear, driven by instinct, didn't care that my mate was promised to another or that my mate was my best friend's brother, my Alpha's brother, and I had explicitly been told that Corey was off-limits. No, my bear did not care about any of that. He'd scented Corey, and that was all he needed to know.

Rolling onto my back, I stared up at the midday sky. It was slightly overcast now, but the warmth permeated my fur. I loved that I could enjoy the warmth without being blinded by the sun.

Why did this mate thing have to be so complicated? It wasn't fair. But then again, what in life was?

The sun moved in the sky, and I could no longer hide from my life. It was time to return to the den, to my responsibilities. I rolled back onto my paws and began the

walk toward the garage, slower this time. I wasn't in a hurry to return to my responsibilities. At least that had been my plan.

My bear? Yeah, he had other plans. He knew that Corey was there and refused to delay getting back to him, pushing through my attempts to meander. He moved faster with each step, bringing me closer and closer to our mate. And even though I should've been heading back to the mechanic shop, I found myself on the trail that came out directly to Aydan's backyard—the one that connected to Corey's.

I refused to shift to my human form right there, naked. Even though shifters didn't care about nudity, I wasn't about to expose myself to the man who my beast called mate, especially since just thinking about him got my cock stirring. At the very least it was inappropriate.

As if sensing I was there, Corey stepped out on his back deck. He smiled when he saw me. He might never have met my beast before, but there was recognition in his eyes. He knew who I was, and he was happy to see me. I did that. I made him smile.

All thoughts of how much of a bad idea this was left my mind.

I couldn't deny Corey any longer, and I had a feeling he wasn't going to deny me either.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 7

Corey

After spending the entire day with Zane, the last thing I expected was to see him in my backyard, least of all in his bear form. But the second I saw his bear, I recognized him, so did my beast. He was stunning.

Why did I step outside in the first place? I couldn't even remember. Perhaps it was simply because my bear pushed me to, maybe he sensed out mate. Whatever the reason, I was glad for it.

I smiled as I saw him, taking in the ridiculously large size that he was. I bet he'd be up to my shoulders when he was on all fours. And his fur—I itched to reach out and run my fingers through it. Everything about his beast was a combination of fierce powerfulness and snuggle-worthy.

My body felt the second he realized I was there, and I held up a finger, indicating that I needed a minute. He nodded in understanding. I slipped inside the house and shed my clothes quickly, tossing them aside. I didn't know how long he had been shifted for. Perhaps he wanted to return to his home and go to bed, or whatever it was he did in the evening. I hoped not. My bear wanted out—wanted to join him.

So did I.

I wanted to meet his bear, to get to know his other half. There was a strong possibility I was setting myself up for more heartache as I stepped outside naked, but I didn't

care. I needed this, and before it could get awkward, I shifted to my bear form and lumbered down the deck steps. I was much smaller than him, but we were of the same color.

He watched as I walked up to him and touched my nose to his, then rolled over and exposed my belly. I pawed at him playfully. My bear was in heaven. He was with his mate, and unlike me, he didn't hold a single worry about what consequences there might be from this. There were some times I needed to be more like my bear, and this was one of those.

My mate stood there, not reacting poorly, per se, but also not really reacting at all. He watched with large brown eyes but didn't move. Maybe Zane was one of those types that did not enjoy the playtime that came with being a bear, but I did.

After a long moment, he hopped and stood on his back legs, then swatted at me in a playful way. I chuffed out a laugh and rolled over, joy flooding through me. If he wanted to play, we could play, and so we did—pushing and pawing at one another, wrestling to the ground and rolling in the grass, behaving as bears did. It was. Everything.

Except it didn't stay playful, not in the same way. When he had me pinned to the ground, my nose buried in his neck, the scent of him engulfed me, and I couldn't stop my shift from taking over. Before I knew it, I was pinned underneath him in my human form. And then, within moments, he was also in his human form, gazing down at me with those soft brown eyes.

I reached up my hand and trailed my fingers down his cheek. He shuddered under my touch, his eyes fluttering and his breath hitching.

“Your bear is beautiful,” I said. He was so much more than that, but it was a start.

“As is yours.”

“Though quite smaller than you.” I didn’t think that would be a problem, but it might be. Some shifters were weird about their beasts not being similar in all ways. It was a weird stance, but out there.

He laughed. “Nearly everyone is smaller than me. I quite like you just the way you are.”

My heart melted. Never before had those words been uttered to me. My gaze drifted to his lips. Gods, how I wanted to feel them pressed against my own, to taste them.

“Kiss me,” I whispered. It was an idea of the worst kind. I was practically engaged to another. Zane had said he was off-limits, but yet I couldn’t resist, couldn’t stay away from him even if I wanted to. “Please, alpha. Kiss me.”

When his lips lowered onto mine, time stood still. There weren’t fireworks, no explosions, just time ceasing to exist. In that moment it didn’t matter that I was the Alpha’s brother and he was a Beta. I was just an omega, and he was my alpha. I knew it as sure as I knew my name.

I moaned against his kiss, arching my body higher so that I could feel more of him. His weight pressed against me, keeping me secure in the safest of bear hugs. If I stayed like this forever, I’d be the happiest bear on this planet. And yet, he managed to make it better.

His lips left mine, and I whimpered.

He chuckled against my neck as he left featherlike kisses against my skin. He worked his way down my body, one sweet kiss at a time. I was powerless to resist him. His own concerns about us being together must have slipped away from him, because

everything about the way he was moving shouted that he was all in.

His words? That was a different story.

“This is a terrible idea,” he said when his lips hit the V above my groin. My cock stood at attention, waiting for his touch, pleading for it.

“Do it anyway,” I begged, not caring where we were or the circumstances surrounding us. I needed this—needed him. “Do it anyway.”

And he did.

Another sweet kiss on my hip and he hovered over my cock, his warm breath tickling my length. He closed his mouth over my cock, sucking me down as far as he could go, without a single hesitation.

I gripped the grass beneath me to keep from bolting upright at the heat of his mouth.

He flicked his tongue over my shaft and cupped my balls with his hand. It was more than I could take, my orgasm already so close, and he’d only just started. My hands flew to his head, and I buried my fingers in his dark curls.

He didn’t let up. He held my hips still while he worked my cock, licking, nibbling, sucking, and doing some magic thing with his tongue around my tip. The man was going to kill me, but what a fucking way to go.

“Oh, fuck. I’m going to come.” I tried to pull him off me, not wanting this to be over so soon. I knew that once it did, the real world would come crashing back down on us, and I didn’t want that—not yet. I wanted to dwell in this one where lips and tongues did the talking.

Instead of heeding my direction, he doubled down, his nose buried in the short hair at the base of my cock. He swallowed, and that's when the fireworks started.

Stars burst behind my eyes as I came down his throat.

"Mate!" I shouted, unable to hold back. He was mine. Fuck all the noise. He was mine.

He moaned around my spent cock. Drinking down everything I had to give, but not once mirroring the words back to me, not once declaring me his.

My head fell back onto the grass, my body limp. He rested his head on my belly, not saying a word. There was much to say, but anything spoken now would ruin this, and I wasn't willing to risk that.

Instead, I was going to pretend this was the perfect start to our perfect life which would be filled with perfect orgasms and perfect naked naps in the backyard.

Real life could wait.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 8

Zane

Today, it was all about routine. If I allowed myself to go outside it, I was going to be in trouble. As it was, I was on the struggle bus. Keeping my hands and my mind busy was my only hope not to spend every second thinking about him .

I couldn't even think of his name, because that would send me into a tailspin. It was safe to say I was a hot mess. I never should've let last night get that far. And yet I did, and if I was in the same position again, I'd do the same thing. I was weak— at least when it came to Corey. And if I was being honest with myself, I wasn't sure that was a bad thing.

The taste of him lingered on my lips, and my skin tingled where we had touched. I was walking around in a constant state of arousal like some sort of hormone-driven teenager. He had infiltrated every fiber of my being.

I couldn't let him affect me like this. It wasn't good for either of us. But also, there was nothing I could do to avoid it, not for long. Instead, I decided to allow today to be a game of pretend.

My plan was to act as if today was like every other day before I met him. I worked at the shop, I was there for my den, taking care of whatever needs they had. That was it. There could be no more. My duties came first, second, and every other spot. I was Beta because Aydan trusted me, and even though I slipped up, I couldn't allow myself to break that trust again.

My plan was solid.

Except, it wasn't.

I was on my third oil change of the day, and I could do those in my sleep. So, my mind tended to wander even if I did not want it to. Right now, it was wandering to a certain bear who, instead of working here on my books, had gone to the diner. Probably because both of us needed a break from one another. Or rather, we had decided that a break was what we needed, lest we were going to lose control around each other.

Gods, that would be wonderful.

No. Awful. We needed to not cave in.

My bear was protesting our distance very much and was hanging close to the surface. He didn't understand any of this. Corey was our mate. To him that was all that needed knowing. It wasn't as if I wanted to be away from Corey. If it was up to me, we would be spending every waking moment together. That just wasn't in the cards for us. At least not yet.

"Hey, boss, I thought Corey was going to be working on the books today. I have a lot of receipts organized for him." Leave it to Russ to find a reason to talk about Corey. He wasn't doing it to be a dick or to poke the bear. The books were a mess, and Russ was all about getting them back on track—or at least giving them to someone who could get them on track.

"Not today," I said, dipping the dipstick back into the oil reservoir and then removing it to check the levels... again. Mostly I wanted a reason not to look Russ in the eye. He'd see instantly that I was covering something up.

“How many times have you checked that, boss?” Nate asked.

Fine. Maybe my crew had already noticed something was up.

“What?” I said, dipping the stick back in. The car was an old Buick with six figures worth of miles, but it had been well maintained. It was from the days when you could keep a car running forever if you wanted to, unlike now when everything was designed to have a shelf life.

“That’s the third time you’ve checked the level on that machine. I think it’s done.” Russ gave a knowing look. But what did he know?

“Right,” I said. “I’ll just top off the washer fluid.”

“You did that twice already, too. That’s why we have a spill on the floor,” Nate piped in and gestured to where the blue liquid pooled in the center of the bay where we stood.

Had the two of them talked or was I... Fuck, I was way worse off than I thought. When had that even happened?

“It’s close to lunchtime. Why don’t you take a break before you change the oil on a perfectly good machine?” Russ patted me on the back as he walked by. At least he had the decency not to laugh at me. The rest of the guys on my crew were barely containing their grins. And fair. I deserved it.

“Right,” I said. I couldn’t go to the diner, though, where I normally went. That was where Corey was working, and if I did, the sweet torture would only get worse.

The last time I left him, it physically hurt. I wanted to carry him inside and take care of him, I wanted to make love to him all night long, I wanted to mark him, to show

the world that he was mine.

Even though he wasn't and couldn't be.

Before I could think of another lunch solution, the garage door opened and one of the den members, Pete, pulled his SUV in. Pete worked at the barbershop. He and his family lived in the apartment above it and were one of the nicest families. One nice thing about being a barber in a town of shifters was that you never ran out of business. We grew a head of hair like nobody's business.

"I'll work on this," I said.

Pete got out, smiling like a goof.

"What is it?" I said.

"I just had lunch at the diner. That little omega Corey, Alpha Aydan's brother, was there. He's a sweet kid. Very funny. He's going to work on our books for us at the barbershop. Isn't that great?"

My jaw clenched, my teeth grinding together. "That is great," I said.

I knew better than to think that Pete was any kind of threat. Still, the irrational jealousy built. But then again, wasn't all jealousy irrational? I pushed my beast down. Pete didn't need to see my lack of control. Nobody did.

"He started at the diner first. He was eager to jump in and help the den." He tossed me the keys. "But he's going to hit up my shop later this afternoon. We're lucky to have him."

"We are." It seemed as if I wasn't going to get a break from thinking about Corey

after all. Not when the newest customer was a member of his fan club, one that couldn't stop gushing.

“Well, just a heads up, if you wanted lunch at the diner, you better wait a while. Seems like every alpha in town learned that we had a new omega on the territory. They're all lined up around the block to meet him.”

My bear pushed at me, begging to be let out, and I pushed him down. Although I agreed with my bear this time. This wasn't something I wanted to hear. Not at all.

I'd hardly thought about the fact that many of the alphas in our den would be looking for a prospective mate, even if that prospective mate was the Alpha's brother and completely off-limits. Not that they'd know the prospective mate part. It wasn't as if Ayden had announced to the world that he was going to try to arrange a mating to strengthen the den. To the other alphas he was a single omega, one that was free for the scenting.

I hated it.

“I have to get back to work,” I all but growled. “What's wrong with her?” I indicated his vehicle. He told me, and I promised him it would either be ready by close of business or I'd have an update for him by then. Thankfully he didn't seem to know just how close to the edge I was.

“Everything alright, boss? Corey settling in alright, isn't he?” Russ asked once Pete had left. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and though I wasn't a violent man, I sort of wanted to slap it off his face.

“Everything's fine. We just have a lot of work to do,” I replied, looking around the shop. Nearly everything that needed to be done had already been done, with the exception of Pete's car which sounded like a ten-minute job at most. There was no

line of cars waiting for service, anything that wasn't being worked on was either finished or we were waiting on parts to arrive.

“Not really, boss. Unless we get an emergency, we might be able to call it an early day.”

Great, just what I needed—more time on my hands to sit and think.

“I need to get Pete's vehicle all set.”

And just like I thought, it took less than fifteen minutes. When I added in a complimentary oil change to keep my hands busy, as well as a full inspection and some random maintenance he didn't need for another ten thousand miles, barely an hour was done. It was going to be a long-ass day. That was for sure.

Chapter 9

Corey

Today was an odd combination of sucking and being awesome.

I loved starting my new work, meeting the people whose books I'd be doing, collecting all the documents to be able to begin. Even the diner, which was a hot mess of a mess, was going to be fun. It was like a puzzle I had to put together. Only in the end, instead of having a pretty picture, I was going to have their "get out of jail" card for them if they got audited, because right now, all they had to give the government was a box of confusion and possibly nightmares.

And the barbershop... what a sweet family that owned that one. They could easily be taught how to get their books on track. They'd been doing a pretty good job at it already, but they insisted I do it. Said they'd feel better about it being professionally done.

But as awesome as all that was, there was the torture part of the day—the part where I was no longer anywhere near Zane—the only place I wanted to be. When we were in my backyard, it felt like he accepted me as his mate for the first time. But then he left, mumbling something about it being late and he had to get home. I'd known it was coming; I'd braced myself. It didn't stop it from hurting, and it didn't stop me from thinking about him all day.

Sitting in the diner with a box of random slips of paper I should've been weeding through, I instead stared at them and wondered when he was going to come in, if he

was going to have the special BLT they made for the day, or if he had a favorite that he got every single day. I even wondered if he was a milkshake kind of guy or if he just drank water with his meal. He didn't come though, and he didn't get a haircut when I was there later on. Not that I expected him to. It didn't stop me from hoping.

And now, it was dinner time, and here I was my new house, which felt very much unlike my home. My two suitcases were still not fully unpacked, and a box of macaroni and cheese sat on the counter next to a package of hotdogs waiting for me to make my elegant dinner.

The water on the stove was working on coming to a boil so I could make the dinner of champions. I rolled my eyes, although I guessed in a way it was the dinner of champions or at least one—my brother. More than once, he'd made it for me when my parents were being less than parents. It had become my comfort food, and gods, did I need comfort tonight.

The water started to come up to a boil, and I poured in the macaroni. I grabbed my knife and started cutting the hotdogs into little pieces, tossing them in as well. Maybe I should call my brother, tell him what happened, ask him what to do. He'd always been there for me before, and he'd always be there for me, even when I messed up, and I sure was good at that lately.

But also, Aydan was busy, and just me mentioning another alpha had the chance of undoing everything he had done. It was best I wait until he came home.

When the noodles were tender, I drained the water, added the butter, milk, and powder, and mixed it up. The familiar aroma of the meal did calm me some. I filled my bowl and brought it outside to the back and sat on the stoop. I was officially a glutton for punishment, sitting there looking out at the place where Zane and I first kissed, kissed and more. I chewed forkfuls of my meal slowly, wondering what I should do next.

Maybe I needed to go find him. Just have it out—put it all out there. Yeah, that was probably what I'd have to do. This for sure wasn't working.

But then I scented my mate. I wasn't sure at first if it was my imagination or not, but then he came into sight.

“Hey,” he said after fully rounding the corner. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “We need to talk.”

He was right; we did. I nodded in reply. He came over and sat down beside me.

“That looks good.” He pointed to my food.

“It's silly. Kid food. My brother used to make it for us.”

“He still does. I wonder if yours is as good as his.”

I shrugged and then offered him a taste. Why was talking about us so hard?

“Yeah, I'd like that.” Only instead of reaching for the fork, Zane kissed me. “Delicious,” he mumbled against my lips and then froze. “I can't... Sorry, I shouldn't have.”

“No, you absolutely should.” I stood up, grabbed his hand, and dragged him inside.

“I know we need to talk, but also...” I shut the door behind us, set my bowl down, and pressed him against the door, kissing him with all I had, only breaking when we were both out of breath. “I need this more,” I pleaded. “I need this more.”

The moment Zane's arms wrapped around me, the world outside our bubble ceased to exist. Den politics, arranged matings, none of it mattered. There was only the

rhythmic pounding of my heart in my ears, the heat of his body searing against my skin, and the unyielding desire that coursed through my veins.

His grip was firm yet tender, as if I were something precious, something he both revered and hungered for with an intensity that burned. I'd never been this turned on before, my slick trickling out of my needy hole. He did that. Only him.

"Ready?" Zane nipped on my earlobe.

"Beyond," I managed to whisper back, complete sentences not an option.

He lifted me as if I weighed nothing, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist as we moved toward the bedroom. The strength in his step never faltered, each stride filled with purpose and raw anticipation, his grizzly making sure I felt safe and secure in my mate's embrace.

My fingers wove through his hair, tugging gently—a low growl from deep within his chest telling me I was doing something right.

"Need you," I murmured into his neck, nipping at the tender skin there.

"Gods, yes," he groaned, the words barely escaping him before he was crossing the threshold of the room. We were doing this, it was really happening.

As he laid me down onto the bed, I saw for the first time that we were two halves of a whole, incomplete until joined, and right now, every cell in my body screamed for completion. No wonder our attempts at staying apart had failed. We needed each other in a way I had and would never need another.

"Zane," I breathed out, a plea, the only word that held any meaning in that moment.

"You can't deny me again."

Our eyes locked, and I saw my own desperation mirrored in his gaze. A silent vow passed between us. Never again would we deny fate. It was more than physical need—it was a deep-seated bond that only true mates could understand, and the world would have to deal with it.

“I won’t,” he promised. “Never again.”

As Zane hovered above me, ready to claim me in the most intimate way, I knew that this wasn’t just another act of passion. It was a promise.

“Too dressed,” I whined, and he sprang into action.

Gently, Zane helped me to the edge of the bed, ridding me of the pesky cloth. As each article of clothing was removed, his lips followed, branding my skin with kisses.

“Zane,” I murmured, reaching for the hem of his shirt in a desperate attempt to draw him closer, to get our skin pressed together. I needed to feel his body against mine with nothing between us, to explore the planes of his muscle, to feel each breath he took.

But he shook his head. “Not today, mate. I need to do this,” he said, his voice thick with restraint. “I’m too close, and I want... I need to be inside you when I come.”

A growl rumbled in his chest as he stepped back and began to shed his own clothes, his movements less gentle than they had been with me. He wanted them gone, and when the button of his jeans flew from the force, he didn’t even pretend to notice.

I watched, entranced, as the man fate sent revealed himself to me. My fingers twitched, aching to touch, but instead, they found their way to my own erection. I stroked myself absentmindedly, lost in the sight of Zane’s body bared for me, every line and curve designed to fit against mine perfectly. Fate sure knew what the fuck

they were doing. That was for sure.

My breath hitched as Zane's growl vibrated through the space between us. I loved how close his beast was to the surface, how he didn't hide him from me.

"Zane, please," I begged, voice thick with longing and the weight of our unfulfilled bond. The urgency of our shared need was palpable. No more waiting.

I got up and spun around, placing my hands flat on the cool sheets of the bed, offering myself to him. No, not offering, pleading with him to take me. I parted my legs and spread my cheeks. "I'm slick for you, so ready. Please, take me. I can't wait anymore."

There was no hesitation from Zane. His powerful rough hands gripped my hips, pulling me back against him just before he sheathed himself inside me. It was exactly what I needed. A jolt of sheer ecstasy shot up my spine as he entered, his thick cock stretching me deliciously, filling me in ways only he could, connecting us the way I needed.

The room was filled with the sounds of our movements, the slap of skin against skin as he pummeled into me hard and fast, our labored breathing, and the low, continuous thread of Zane's growls. I never thought of growling as sexy, but gods, it hit every button.

His rhythm followed my lead, each thrust driving deeper, stoking the passion that consumed us both.

"Zane!" I cried out, my voice breaking as my orgasm came barreling toward me, nothing but sheer will keeping it at bay. I wasn't ready for this to be over. I wasn't going to be able to hold out for long.

And then we were there, teetering on the edge of oblivion together, his breathing becoming erratic, my body beginning to quiver.

With one final, deep thrust, Zane's growls crescendoed into a roar. I didn't even know bears did that. Maybe they didn't. Maybe this was all Zane. My own climax shattered through me, the intensity of it growing as his knot began to fill me.

His knot. It was true. He was my mate, the one sent here only for me. For a timeless moment, there was nothing but Zane and me, two halves of a whole joined in the most intimate way.

He managed to get us both up and on the bed with minimal tugging, pulling the blanket up and over us.

Lying there in the aftermath, I was overwhelmed by the urge to mark Zane as mine. Somehow, I managed to keep that desire suppressed enough while we were in motion, but now? Now that we were in post-orgasmic bliss, now the need to show the world he was mine became nearly unbearable. But I couldn't. Not yet.

First, we needed to deal with the den.

"Everything will be okay," Zane murmured, the warmth of his breath caressing my skin. It was as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. Or maybe he was thinking it too. But whatever the case, he was right. I refused to believe anything less. "We'll figure it out, together."

I nestled into him, the steady thump of his heart beating a lullaby that promised safety, promised forever. As sleep tugged at the edges of my consciousness, I held onto his words, letting them be the last thought before sleep took me.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 10

Zane

Corey stood at the stove with frying pan in front of him and a spatula in his hand, pushing around some eggs. He wore only a pair of boxers, and in my opinion, that was too much. I preferred him naked. Not that it was wise to cook that way.

The scent of me clung to his skin and I never wanted him to wash it off. I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his middle, resting my chin on his shoulder, loving the way it felt so natural to be here with him like this.

He immediately tilted his neck in invitation, and I kissed him right where his shoulder met his neck. He groaned, and I wanted to kiss him and so much more. It probably wasn't the best idea given the stove was on.

"You know, you can put your mark there, and I won't complain, not even a little bit," he said.

I sighed, not letting go of him, but loosening my hold. I wanted to do exactly that. Mark him. Show the world that he was mine. But it wasn't something I could do because we wanted to. There were other people to consider, as much as I hated that. Mating was a private bond and shouldn't have any of the politics thrust in the middle of it this way.

"I must speak with your brother first, you know that."

It had been a week since we had given up on denying what we had—a week of spending nearly every moment that we were not working in each other’s company, whether we were exploring the territory together, meeting den members, or simply spending time at home. We were always together. No one in the den had mentioned anything about it, but others had to have noticed. We were hardly subtle.

Whether or not they would say something to Aydan, well, that remained to be seen. But I refused to keep what we had a secret, so while I wanted to be the one to tell Aydan, I understood that we were taking a risk by being seen in public as cozy as we had been.

“Have you spoken with him?” I asked.

Corey shook his head. “I’ve been texting him just like I normally do. But he hasn’t mentioned us or anything about my prospective mate.”

My bear growled at the idea that anyone would be Corey’s mate except me. It had to be a good sign that Aydan hadn’t been mentioning him, right? Wouldn’t he be attempting to sell the idea of him to his brother if things were a go? Or was that wishful thinking?

“Have you spoken with your friend Jayce?” My mate missed his friend, who sounded more like a second brother to me. It stank that he hadn’t been able to come at the same time. But also... maybe it was good in a way since it gave Corey and me the time we needed to get to know each other.

Corey let out a laugh. “No. I haven’t told him yet. He’s a little too excitable. He’d have come here immediately to throw us a celebration.”

If the circumstances had been any different, I’d have liked the sound of that.

“I don’t hate the idea of a party to celebrate us. But we do need to speak with your brother first, you know.” Every time I said that out loud, the guilt settled deeper inside of me. Sneaking around wasn’t fair to his brother, and it very much wasn’t fair to my mate. We needed to end that sooner rather than later.

Corey flipped off the burner and plated the scrambled eggs with the bacon he had made earlier in the same pan. There wasn’t much better than eggs cooked in bacon grease.

“You spoil me, mate.” I hesitated at the word as soon as it passed my lips. Calling him my mate in my head was one thing; acknowledging it out loud was another, especially when I couldn’t put my mark on him yet.

He patted my cheek. “Stop. You’re worrying. It’ll all work out. Aydan is reasonable.” His confidence helped some.

“I know that he is, but he’s also very driven on making this den a success.” Which was why he was perfect for the job. This den wouldn’t be half of what it was without him. “Part of that success has been reaching out to other packs, prides, and dens to attract new members.”

“Yes, and offering me as a little morsel to be mated to was part of that strategy.”

I flinched.

“Fate had other plans, though. And I agreed to his plan, but circumstances have changed. You cannot fight fate. He’s well aware of this.”

“I know,” I said as I kissed his lips. “I can’t believe we even tried.”

Corey snorted out a laugh. “We didn’t put much effort into it.”

“The hell we didn’t,” I said as we sat down. “I tried to convince myself for a good day—two days—that I could not have you.” It had been torture. I never truly understood what the big deal was about a mating pull. Now I did, and it was still difficult to believe that he was mine.

“Oh yes.” He wrinkled his nose playfully. “And that’s why your bear lumbered into my backyard that day.”

Best day ever.

“Well, I didn’t say I was successful at it.” No amount of effort would’ve worked. Corey was mine. Full. Stop.

“No matter what happens,” Corey said, “I don’t regret a single thing. If my brother is upset, that’s his problem. You’re mine. And I’m happy to have you.”

“Same.” Only I did have a regret. I regretted trying to keep away from him as long as I had. If it caused me discomfort, it did to him as well, and he deserved so much better than that. He deserved everything. “I’m also happy to have this breakfast and to be spoiled by all of the cooking that you do.”

“Well, you’re going to be even happier when you see how else I’ve spoiled you.” He bit his lower lip. I waited for something sexy to pour from his lips, but my mate, in true fashion, kept me on my toes. “I think I have most of your books in order, and I’d like to work with your employees on a new system for tracking parts and processing work that’s being done.”

“We just write it all down,” I said with a shrug. It had worked so far. I didn’t see a reason to get fancy. “We have a notebook.” A few actually, but I wasn’t sure where two of them had disappeared to. Fine. Maybe it didn’t work that well.

“Right. And that has been a great system so far,” Corey said, a smile hinting at his lips. “But you could have a better system where we use something called a computer and inventory.”

“Not sure I love that.” Computers and I didn’t get along. “I’m not sure my people are going to love that, either.”

“I’m quite sure your customers will love it because last month you accidentally charged poor Mrs. Smith for an a new fuel filter twice.”

“I corrected it!” She’d been so nice about it, and I gave her three free oil change coupons as an apology. Coupons—scrap piece of paper with it written across. Same thing.

“I know that, sweetheart, but there are about a dozen other little mistakes like that that I’ve found. A real system will be nice.”

I hadn’t realized there were more mistakes than that one. Ugh. Maybe he was right. Of course he was. He was my mate—the most smartest, sexiest, kindest bear on this planet.

“Okay,” I grumbled. “As long as I don’t have to learn it.”

He patted my hand. “Whatever you say, dear.”

I was so going to have to learn it. But with him as a teacher, I was happy to be the student.

“What do you want to do today?” I stood up, collecting the plates.

“I’m pretty sure I need some help in the bedroom, if you have time.” He took the

plates from me and put them in the sink. “These can wait.”

“Did that picture fall again?”

“That’s not what fell.” He walked around me and smacked my ass.

“No? What did?”

“My boxers... in about 30 seconds.”

Gods, I was the luckiest alpha in this den. Scratch that. In this world.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 11

Corey

Knowing that your brother is Alpha and seeing it in action were two very different things.

I knew that he was good at his job—that he was a good Alpha. And it wasn't just because he was my brother and I saw him as being great at everything, even though he kind of was. It was so much more than that.

Walking around town, I could see his success in the way his den members talked about him. And the way Zane respected him so much that he tried to deny fate? Yeah, most shifters wouldn't have even tried.

The success of his den, despite the challenges they still faced, was a testament to his leadership. One thing about my brother was that he was a strict, by-the-book type. No room for error, no room for spontaneity. He expected that of not only others, but also of himself.

As my friend Jayce would say, he had a massive stick up his ass. I found it equally endearing and a pain in the ass and was honestly surprised people didn't mention it when speaking of him. My guess was because that was the exact character trait that made him good at his job. It was his Alpha superhero power, as it were.

After the way we grew up, I didn't blame him for being like this. It was sort of weird that I wasn't that way too. My brother played a role in that. He made life far better for

me than my parents ever did.

Our parents were chaotic, and half that time we hadn't known where our next meal was coming from or what type of roof we'd have over our heads. Had we been human children, we never would have survived, at least not without interventions like foster care. They were that bad, and there were days it made me feel less than and others that it made me angry. Parents were supposed to love and protect you. They did neither.

Aydan's response to that had been to make everything orderly and "perfect." At the time it was exactly what I needed. He made sure I had shelter and food and clothing, sacrificing his own childhood to make mine better. I owed him so much more than I'd ever be able to pay back, which was why I carried so much guilt over this.

No, I wasn't willing to give up my fate for his politics. But there were so many times along the way I could've been more clear about what I wanted and how much I was sacrificing to agree to his plan. And sure, there were times I'd convinced myself it was for the best, but deep down, I never believed it. And now? Now it was all coming to a head.

I wasn't quite prepared for seeing the organized, by-the-book side of him jumping into action when he arrived home from his travels. But prepared or not, I was going to have to. Trusting my brother with all that I was had always been integral in our relationship. I needed to focus on that, on how he was going to be happy for me despite the politics.

The den felt different today. Everyone seemed to be excited and bustling with activity. Had I not been a bundle of nerves, I'd have enjoyed it. Heck, it was so festive that if a marching band had played in the street, I wouldn't have been surprised.

A few of the den members made sure to have the Alpha house cleaned and a meal ready for him when he arrived. He didn't ask them to, and I'd have been shocked if he expected them to. It wasn't an act done out of obedience or submission. It was done out of love and respect and had me beaming with pride. They even stocked his fridge so that he wouldn't be hungry if he didn't love what they prepared. And his lawn? Mowed. In a word, he was spoiled, and I was glad for it. He deserved it.

I hadn't been sure what to expect when he finally did pull into the drive around noon. There was no one there to greet him except for me. They might've been ready for him, but he came in on the sly. I wasn't sure if that was by design or not. I had a feeling that on my brother's part, it was. Being "on" for days on end, having to be the perfect Alpha of the perfect den in order to make an alliance had to be wearing.

As soon as I saw his truck pull in, I went out to greet him. Zane was at work, and so it was up to me to get a feel for how my brother would react. Zane had not stayed at my home the night before, and so I had showered off the scent of him. Unfortunately, my bear hated that I no longer smelled of my mate.

I did too. And not just because I missed it, which I did. But because it felt dishonest not only to my brother, but to my mate. Removing his scent... it felt wrong. There wasn't anything I could do about it, though, even if I wanted to, and I wasn't sure I did. I was walking a tight rope, and falling wasn't in my plans.

Aydan smiled wide when he saw me. He had his duffel over his shoulder, and he gave me a one-armed hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"It's so good to see you, little brother." He dropped the duffel and pulled me into a bear hug. "I'm so happy you're here. I hope you've settled in nicely."

I hugged him back tightly. Gods, how I'd missed him. It had been right for each of us to follow our futures where they naturally led us, but every fiber of my being was

glad that our paths led us back to each other. Sure, it was complicated, but that was the way of things, wasn't it.

"I'm happy to be here. I love my little house." I stepped back and reached down to grab his bag. He swooped down and grabbed it a nanosecond before I could. "Do you need anything carried inside from the car, then?"

He shook his head. "No, everything else can wait. I really don't have much. Just some paperwork. Mostly I need my laundry done."

"Will you do that yourself or does someone from the den come pick it up?" I arched a brow.

His cheeks reddened. I hadn't meant to embarrass him.

"I'll do it myself. I take it that there have been den members in and out of the house since they knew I was coming home?"

"Yes, you're fully stocked with all of your favorite things, including two apple pies and one coconut meringue. I didn't even know you liked that." How he was going to eat three pies was a mystery to me. I secretly hoped that I might take one of them home for me.

His eyes sparkled. "I didn't know I liked it either. But you have got to try Miss Murray's pie. It's fantastic."

I laughed. "You really have set up a beautiful den here, Brother. You should be proud."

"Thanks, Corey. That means the world to me. Let's get inside. I have much to talk about."

My stomach dropped. I could do this. I could. There wasn't another choice.

"Me as well," I said.

Once we were inside, he set his duffel in the laundry room. I noticed that he didn't unpack it and start the laundry like I thought he was going to. Instead, he dished himself up a piece of the apple pie and then one for me.

"I have a meeting with my Betas later. But I suspect if there was anything too important they needed to tell me, they'd have done so already." He was making small talk, so why did it feel like he saw me, saw how his Beta and I broke our words. "I did hear from Zane that you're getting ahead on all the books."

"Yes, financially the businesses are doing great." The bookkeeping? Yeah, that was a hot mess. "Well, the diner could use a little bit of additional income, but the mechanic shop and the others are doing just fine."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it."

"I've been wanting to talk to you about Zane."

Aydan moaned around his fork. "Oh, this is good stuff. Did you try yours?"

Was he even listening to me?

"Yes, I did. But—"

"Did I tell you that tomorrow, the alpha Griff and his three omega brothers are coming here? They're from the den I was just at. Griff is the alpha I'd like you to consider mating with. It will go along way in establishing our alliance."

Consider. At least he was open to me turning it down. He wasn't going to like it, but still...

“Right, about that—”

“You don't need to be worried. He's a kind alpha.”

He needed to stop cutting me off or I was never going to get this out.

“I'm sure he is—”

Aydan's phone rang. He sighed. “Sorry, I have to take this.”

I shoved a bit of the pie into my mouth. If I wasn't going to be able to use it to tell him what he needed to know, eating pie sounded like the next best thing.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 12

Zane

Normally, my apartment above the shop was my refuge, my place where I could sit and relax without a care in the world. I could shut off my mind and not worry about the business, the den, or what I needed to get done. Except now, my home, my safe haven, was with Corey. And Corey wasn't here.

He was alone in his house, sitting directly next to his brother's home where I couldn't go without arousing any suspicions. Sure, I could go stay with Aydan, technically I lived in his house, but my bear wouldn't tolerate being that close to Corey without actually being able to be with him. And my acting skills? Yeah, they couldn't get me through a town play, much less fooling the person who knew me best, second only to his brother.

I knew that the conversation with his brother didn't go the way that Corey had wanted it to. It wasn't because Aydan took it poorly. Aydan was so busy, so charged up worrying about building this partnership with the other den that there was nothing else that you could talk to him about. And just when my mate thought he was going to be able to—the phone rang.

And I got it. Ayden was playing catch-up from being gone for so long and seeing his brother for the first time in a long while. His head was probably spinning, and when he got like that, he moved from one thing to the next to the next, conquering his internal to-do list like a boss. It was how he was made.

Ayden also needed to make his rounds to see our den members. They had been fine with him being gone, but their beasts? They needed the reassurance that their Alpha was here. That was what he'd spent the majority of his day doing. And that was good. It was great for the den.

It was the best for everyone except Corey and me. We needed to talk to him, especially with our guests about to come.

I cracked open a beer and sat down on my couch, putting my feet up on the coffee table, my mate's scent tormenting me even in its absence. My eyes were closed when the door squeaked open. I leapt forward and turned to find Corey coming inside.

"What are you doing here?"

"I missed you," he said. He came inside, closed the door, and curled up on the couch next to me. "I missed you so much, I had to come."

I held my drink in one hand and wrapped the other around his shoulders as he snuggled into my side. His scent wrapped around me like a warm fire after a cold winter day. I kissed the top of his head, assuring him that I missed him too.

"Where does your brother think you are?" I asked.

"Resting," he said. "I haven't spoken with him since earlier. I couldn't even get a word in. I should've just said what I needed to say." He looked up at me. "I tried. I really did, but he was so distracted by other things, and he kept interrupting me. I don't even think he realized he was doing it."

He'd already told me this by phone, but it was clearly still upsetting him, so I listened as he replayed his brother's entire homecoming.

“Your brother is a determined Alpha with a one-track mind. Sometimes he needs to sit back and listen to what others have to say. You and I’ll talk to him together. Perhaps tomorrow.” Or maybe today. It had to be soon, though. Time was ticking.

“The other den is arriving tomorrow, Zane. How are we going to talk to Aydan before they arrive? And once they do arrive, how is Aydan going to show that it’ll work out even without me as a bargaining chip?” My mate held me tighter with each word he spoke, as if he was afraid I’d be taken away from him that moment.

“You and I are meant to be, and there is not going to be anything that comes between us. Our den and Aydan will have to accept that.” I kissed his head and inhaled his scent, crossing my fingers and toes that my words were true.

“I want to believe that, I truly do.”

“I should’ve gone with you today. I’m sorry.” In hindsight, of course being there as a couple was the right way to do it. But we couldn’t go back in time. We could only move forward and try to learn from our mistakes.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “I should’ve been able to just say the words and not let him keep cutting me off.”

I chuckled. “Your brother is a force of nature.”

“He is that,” Corey agreed. “Let’s talk about something else, though. How was your day?”

“Good. I finally got the truck running and out of the shop, so I have more room for another project.” It wasn’t the best vehicle in town, but it was going to be helpful.

“That’s exciting.” His voice lightened as he relaxed against me. “And what other

projects will that be?”

“I’m not sure yet.” I had so many ideas floating around. I loved to tinker and fix the unfixable. That opened the door to a lot of options, but there had been one that kept popping back up. “I thought it might be fun for den members to have golf carts to drive around rather than vehicles. We could have an ordinance where people could drive golf carts between certain hours of the day as long as they were well maintained.” It would keep the exhaust down and save on gas, that was for sure.

“That could be fun. I’m sure they’d all like that. I’ve noticed many people like to walk around town.” He fit in so beautifully with the town and the den. This was his home already. And the den? They were his family. He didn’t wear his childhood trauma on his sleeve, but I knew his brother well enough to know that it was there. Finding the right den, that was going to go a long way.

Only he didn’t find it, his brother built it for him. Not that Aydan had said those words, but it was true. Everything Ayden had done since he was old enough to be responsible had been for his brother. And that was how I knew everything would work out with me mating his brother. At least I knew it in my mind. My heart? It was still a little unsure.

The arranged mating aside— Would he think I was good enough for Corey? His brother deserved the absolute best this world could give, and I was many things, but the best wasn’t one of them. Yes, I’d love, cherish, protect, and provide for him until my final breath, but would that be enough for Aydan?

“Walking is popular.” I was one of the people who loved to walk the town. There was a quaintness and feeling of home even here, where the businesses were.

“Do you want to get golf carts just because you think it would be fun to see how fast you can make them go?” He was sassing, but also not far off the mark.

I chuckled. “Maybe some of them. The other idea I had was a go-cart track and that would be all about the speed.” Or as much speed as one could get out of a go-cart. “I think it would be a great way for den members to have a good time together without causing too much ruckus.”

“I don’t know much about them, but they sound like a lot of fun. The field out behind that old bank would be a great place for it.”

“Now you’re thinking.” I kissed his temple. “Whenever I thought about being mated, settling down with someone, moments like this are the exact thing that I imagined,” I said. “Cuddling with my mate, talking about our day. I’m so thankful that you’re here, Corey. So thankful that you’re mine.”

I expected him to respond, perhaps with hopes and dreams of his own. But when I looked down, my little mate had his eyes closed, and he let out a soft snore. He hadn’t even heard my words, but I knew that he felt them, and I knew that he understood.

His day had been long and stressful, and when it was over, where did he go? To me, to his mate. And it was here, in my arms that he was able to let go of the tension of the day and drift off into slumber. The pride my bear felt at being able to give that to our mate was contagious.

I didn’t know what tomorrow was going to bring, but every cell of my being believed that when it was all said and done, Corey and I were going to be just like we were now, snuggling together, the love that was growing between us wrapped around us as our scents intertwined.

“Night, my sweet mate.” I brushed a kiss to the top of his head. “Sleep well.”

Chapter 13

Corey

Sleep had eluded me after I had woken up in Zane's arms and had to leave to return to my home. If I wasn't there in the morning, that would raise questions with my brother. I hated to leave Zane, my bear hating it even more, but until I dealt with my brother, it was the only option.

If Ayden noticed that I was arriving home late, he didn't say anything, which was good. It wasn't his business. Or maybe it was, given he was bringing someone here in the hopes I mated him. Leave it to me to make my life such a mess in so few days.

I laid in my bed, tossing and turning until the early hours of the morning when I finally passed out... which of course meant that it was late in the day when I woke up. I flew out of bed, showered, and got myself dressed. I needed to speak with Aydan before the other den arrived. We had to find a way to make the other alpha understand that I wasn't available and that it wasn't personal and that an alliance with this den was still an amazing idea.

I should've given up on sleeping early this morning instead of allowing the day to be sucked away. Past Corey had been foolish. And now? Now there was hardly any time before the alpha showed up.

Surely they'd understand that nothing could come between fated mates. It wasn't an unreasonable request. Any good alpha would insist on not separating fated mates, right? And my brother said he was good.

I raced across the lawn to Aydan's house. While he wasn't there, there were other pack members preparing a meal for the arriving den. The house was filled with den members scurrying about to make the place shine. Based on the smells, whatever they were making was going to be delicious.

"Have you seen Aydan?" I asked.

They shook their heads. "He might be at the diner. I know that's where he planned to greet the visitors. They should be arriving any moment."

Great. Time was running even shorter than I realized.

"Really?"

They nodded.

Fuck. Why was everyone such early birds! Weren't bears known for their hibernation?

"They let him know early this morning that they were on their way," he continued.

"Fuck, I thought I had more time." Or at least wished that I had.

I needed to get there and talk to him before they arrived. This wasn't the kind of news to learn in front of everyone and for sure not in front of the person he had sort of arranged for me to mate. What a freaking clusterfuck this was turning out to be.

Not wanting to waste even a second, I didn't take the time to get into my car. Instead, I jogged down the sidewalk to the main street, picking up speed with each step.

It was busier than I'd seen it before. There were cars and people everywhere just

milling about. Everyone wanted to put on a good face for the visiting den. It was sweet while at the same time adding an even greater sense of urgency to me finding my brother.

I slowed down, to not draw too much attention to myself. Most den members I recognized, and they waved and said hello as I raced through the street. The crowd got thicker as I got to the diner. I didn't recognize everyone now, and a new scent was in the air. The other den was here. I was too late.

"Fuck," I grumbled.

"Oh, there he is now. Corey, come meet them." I caught sight of my brother through the crowd. His eyes narrowed at my attire, he probably expected me to put on something more formal rather than the black joggers and blue t-shirt I had grabbed. It was the best I could do at the time, and really, it wasn't like the entire town was in their finest clothing.

I stiffened.

My face had to show the shock that I felt reveling through me. Panic built in my chest. Aydan was waving at me to come forward, as if that wasn't going to be extremely difficult.

Next to him stood an alpha and three younger omegas. They scented similar to one another, so they were probably siblings. Next to my brother, on the other side, was Zane. He stepped toward me as if he was going to say something, do something. But there were too many people here. We couldn't.

The visiting alpha stepped forward and extended his hand. His smile was kind, and if I wasn't already taken, I'd have considered him quite handsome. Now I only had eyes for Zane. He'd ruined all other alphas for me. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Corey. I

look forward to our mating.”

To him this was a done deal. We were getting mated and that was that. And the worst part? He seemed genuinely happy about it, as if this was the best of news. And what was I going to do? Squash it.

A growl escaped Zane’s lips. It sounded exactly like a bear who’d had his family threatened. And I suppose that in a way that was exactly what this was, even if the alpha had no idea what he was doing.

“Zane,” I said, hoping to stop him from erupting in this crowd. Bloodshed on Main Street wasn’t the way to form alliances, that was for sure.

“What the hell, Zane?” Aydan stepped between me and Zane. Big mistake.

Never step between an alpha bear and his omega. Zane’s eyes were taken over by those of his beast, a deep rumbling in his chest warned off all others. He was ready for a fight. A fight that didn’t need to happen.

“Do you have a problem, Beta Zane?” Aydan said. His voice was full-on Alpha now. He would not tolerate insubordination at this moment. To do so would make him look weak to the other den.

Zane didn’t take his eyes off me. His body rippled and trembled as he fought back his shift. My brother might’ve been Alpha, but Zane wasn’t going to bow to anyone when he thought I was being threatened.

“Zane, stay calm, please,” I said.

“What is the meaning of this?” the visiting alpha asked. He pushed his brothers behind him, and the crowd all stepped back. It was just Aydan and Zane, the center of

everyone's attention.

The poor alpha was thrown in the middle of this, and his only crimes were being lonely and hoping to strengthen his den.

"That's what I would like to know," Aydan said. "My apologies to you all. It appears that my Beta needs to take a break." He went to touch Zane, to push him farther away from me. Even as this played out, my brother had no idea what was happening before his eyes. He was going to soon find out.

"You can't do that," I said. "Zane's reaction is totally natural. He's not meaning any disrespect, Aydan. It's just—" I turned to the visiting alpha. I really ought to have learned the name of the man I had been intended to mate with. "I apologize, alpha. I had every intention of coming here to my brother's den and helping him to form alliances. We know how important that is. However, when I arrived, I found that my fated mate was here."

I went to Zane's side and put my hand on his arm. He instantly calmed and so did I. "Zane is my mate, Aydan. I cannot mate with anyone else."

The other alpha's eyes darkened. "Are these the sorts of promises I can expect from your den, Alpha Aydan?"

"He didn't know." My words came out in but a whisper and everyone ignore them... ignored me.

The last thing I'd wanted to do was do this out in the open for everyone. It wasn't meant to embarrass the visiting alpha or my brother, but leave it to me to manage to do both of those things.

"Perhaps we should speak someplace more private," Aydan suggested, his face a

calm facade, his beast closer to the surface than normal.

“Yes, perhaps,” the alpha agreed.

I wasn't sure things could get any worse, but given the way things were going today, the chances were, they would.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 14

Zane

The bear in me hated that my Alpha was displeased. Shame filled my gut and weighed down on me like a heavy, wet blanket. I was his second, the one he relied on the most. My job was to make his job easier, not more difficult.

It wasn't as if I had a choice, though. His brother was my mate. Fate deemed it so, not me. Denying him was outside my abilities. He was mine, full stop.

I followed Aydan and the rest of his visitors back inside the diner to the back room, where there was a private area set up for us to chat. I don't believe the intention had been to utilize that room today, but it would work well now. I wasn't sure I'd have been able to wait long enough to get us all back to the Alpha house before talking. This had to be dealt with now if I were going to keep control of my bear. He wasn't having any of this arranged mating thing, and his power was rivaling my own at the moment.

"Go ahead and deliver our food in here, Stacy," Aydan said, his voice calm to all who didn't know him. But I saw it as the facade that it was. He was holding on by a thread and it was our fault.

No, screw that. It was fate's fault, and I couldn't allow myself to be sorry about it. It wasn't fair to my mate, and he came first. Always.

The young bear waitress nodded, her eyes wide. She could feel the tension radiating

off her Alpha. Aydan touched her shoulder. "All is well," he whispered. "I promise you that."

She visibly softened at his words. "Thank you, Alpha."

No, Aydan wasn't mad at anyone else in the pack or in this room even. It was me who had disappointed my Alpha. A man who was not only my Alpha, but my closest friend. I wished that my mate could be by my side for this conversation, except I didn't want him anywhere near this other alpha who thought he had a claim on him.

We should've told Aydan before now. It could've avoided all of this. My mistakes in this were piling up like a laundry heap.

"Zane," Aydan's voice broke me out of my stupor. The rest of the group had sat down. I sat next to Aydan on his left, just as I would as his second, which for the time being I still was. I didn't know what the future was going to hold on that front, though. Only time would tell.

"So, this omega you promised me you have also promised to another? This man here, your Beta?" the visiting alpha asked.

I couldn't read him. Was he mad? Frustrated? Relieved? He needed to take up poker. The guy was good. I opened my mouth to speak, but Aydan held up a hand.

"I'm not sure what has transpired while I've been away, Griff. As you know, this mating was not set in stone; we had talked about it. That was all." Aydan could've gone in so many directions, and he took the one that protected his brother. He was a good man, a great Alpha. That didn't mean this was all going to work out with ease, but there was hope. "It appears that my brother is rethinking his decision, and I will respect his desire to do so. I do apologize that it seems you have come all this way for nothing."

The alpha's jaw set hard. Mad it was. "This is the way you run your pack? They're allowed to do whatever they wish? We may not have come to a final agreement, but it was close, Aydan. I brought my brothers here on good faith."

"Everyone in my den is allowed to pursue their own happiness in whatever form that may take, yes. As long as they don't infringe on the rights of others. I don't rule with an iron fist. I'm not a tyrant." He sucked in a deep breath. "I've seen how that turns out, and it is never good."

The alpha sat back, seeming to think this over.

"It doesn't change the fact that I came here with the thought that there'd be a mate provided for me so we may strengthen our alliances between our dens. I brought my omega brothers along so that they may find their own mates here, as well."

I could see how very much this had to suck for him.

"My Alpha will not be pleased with this. However, if it is fate that has brought your brother and your Beta together, I won't stand in the way of that. But I can't allow our omegas to stay if I won't be staying with them. They'll be returning home with me."

All the hard work Aydan had done was unraveling before his eyes. His purpose had been to bring more omegas here to boost our numbers and help his own den find their mates. Now those omegas were leaving.

"We'll be returning to my den tomorrow. My Alpha will be in touch with you shortly." His curt tone said he wasn't going to be happy. And honestly, I couldn't blame him. But that didn't change anything. Not for me, anyway.

Aydan nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate your understanding and honesty in this matter."

The other alpha got up and left, and it was just me with Aydan and his two of his other Betas. He stayed quiet. He didn't need to say a word. Disappointment exuded from his pores.

My head dropped, my shoulders hunching forward.

"I'm sorry, Alpha. That's not the way I wished for you to find out."

He let out a long sigh. "You were to leave my brother alone. He was promised to another."

"I know that. But I also know that he is my fated mate, and I wasn't going to deny him. Trust me, I tried."

Aydan raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"It is," I said. "You can ask him. It sucked, and we both ached from it. Neither of us wanted to mess up what you'd accomplished."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I've got so much to do after being gone for so long. I still need to meet with at least half the den. And I'll have several pissed-off alphas on my hands since the whole purpose of this endeavor was to secure more omega members of the den."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, and I went to speak, but he shook his head, a silent order.

"I'm not sure that I'll have a chance to speak with you or my brother until tomorrow. I'll make a determination on what the repercussions of your actions will be."

Fuck. I hadn't been expecting that. He'd defended us to the alpha, and I thought he'd

be disappointed, sure, but repercussions? If he asked us to leave, it would break his brother. He'd only just arrived, but the den welcomed him with open arms, and he was at home here.

"Can I see him?" I asked.

Aydan shook his head. "Both of you need to be working right now. Touch base with me later in the afternoon. I'll make a decision by then."

I wanted to argue, tell him that Corey had conquered the books like a beast and that he had the time. I did too. Last I knew, all we had was a couple of oil changes left. It was going to be a boring day at the shop.

But I knew better. When Aydan laid down the law, it wasn't a suggestion.

"He tried to talk to you yesterday, Alpha," I said. Even though I wasn't sure I necessarily had permission to speak freely, I was going to anyway. His brother was going to be beside himself over this, and his brother needed all the facts before making any decisions.

If it came between choosing my den and my mate, I was choosing my mate every day.

"Clearly, he didn't try hard enough. We could've saved ourselves a lot of embarrassment if the two of you had come forward sooner."

Ouch.

"Perhaps he didn't get room to speak. Did you allow him any?" I asked.

Aydan narrowed his eyes. I knew I was tiptoeing over the line. But it needed to be

said.

“As your Beta, it is my responsibility to make sure that you’re being the best Alpha that you can be. Sometimes that means I have to remind you that you have a one-track mind.”

Aydan nodded. “Noted. I’ll speak with you this afternoon,” he said, and then he left.

That went better than it could’ve but nowhere nears as well as I wanted. I needed it to be this afternoon already.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 15

Corey

“It was awful, Jayce. I was sure that a fight was going to break out.” My brother had barely been holding it together. I could see his tells, his bear not quite demanding to come out, but only a fraction of a second from doing so.

“Oh, no. Did the big bad bear protect his mate? What did you think was going to happen if Zane saw someone trying to lay claim to you? That’s like Fated Mate 101—don’t come between the two.”

Jayce was attempting to lighten things up, and I appreciated it, but I also needed him to see the seriousness of this. My brother wasn’t just my brother. He was the Alpha of a new den, one trying to grow its roots.

“I know. And now Aydan is pissed off.” Or disappointed. I wasn’t sure which was worse. “Probably. I haven’t actually talked to him, and I don’t know how the meeting went.”

I thought for sure he’d be here as soon as the meeting was done, and the rumor mill said that it was. But my brother? He was nowhere to be seen.

“Have you texted your mate or called him?” Leave it to Jayce to be practical, with solutions that made sense and were sitting there in front of me.

“No, I was afraid to.” I still was. “What if he’s still talking with Aydan? What if he

had to take his fur to run this off? What if the other alpha challenged him? There are so many possibilities.”

“That’s because your head is good at creating turmoil.” I didn’t need to see him to know that he was rolling his eyes at me. “Aydan’s going to have to get that stick out of his ass and let the two of you be together. He can’t come between mates. It’s like the law.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s no law that says that.” It would be nice if there were. “And you know how my parents were. I don’t think that Aydan puts as much stock into fated mates as the rest of us do.”

Jayce was the one person who had heard all the good, the bad, and the ugly of my childhood. He understood better than anyone, other than my brother.

“I hadn’t either until meeting Zane.” And even then, I hadn’t jumped to embrace it. Sure, I thought he’d rejected me and there was the whole promised-to-another thing, but still... “But of course, he’d been able to change my mind.”

Jayce chuckled.

“I just want to talk with Aydan so he can see my side of things.” And because I wanted to help him fix the mess I created. There had to be something I could do.

“You tried to do that, and he wouldn’t listen.”

“He was preoccupied. I could’ve tried harder.” At the time I didn’t see a way, but that was me being scared. Looking back, I gave up too quickly.

“He also could’ve tried to shut his mouth for five minutes and let other people talk.” Now he sounded like Zane.

I rolled my eyes. “Jayce, I do love that you’re being a loyal friend and having my back on this, but he’s my brother and you don’t even know him.”

Not that he was wrong.

“That’s fair. Listen, I know stuff’s kind of crazy right now, but you and Zane are the real deal. Aydan’s going to see that. He’s going to understand and, hopefully, get better at being a good listener.”

“Thanks, Jayce. I do appreciate you, and I miss you.”

I hadn’t realized how much until I heard his voice. He needed to get his ass here and stat. That was if my brother was fine with me staying. If I caused him too much political turmoil, I’d understand him asking us to leave. I’d hate it, but I’d get it.

“I miss you more.” I needed to hear those words. “Now tell me about this house that we’re moving into. Is this Zane of yours going to be there too? Where do I go now?”

I laughed. “Yes, Zane will be here. You’re still welcome to have the spare room.”

If I get to stay. Now that I thought about that, it was all I could focus on.

“How many bedrooms is it?”

“Just two, but there’s room to add on if we wanted to.”

“Yeah, listen, I love the idea of living with you and your mate, but I guarantee that spare room isn’t going to be a spare room much longer.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, knowing full well what he was hinting at, but not quite ready to formalize an answer about it.

“Well, ya’ll have been intimate, have you not? I know you don’t have a bite on your neck, but you’ve screwed, right?”

I had. Of course, I had. “Yes. And there was a knot.” I may not have worded it quite that way, but we had been intimate.

“We’ll get back to the knot. I want to hear everything, but first—what exactly do you think happens when you and your fated mate get together in such a way? Did you miss biology class?”

“Of course not,” I said. “But I guess it just didn’t occur to me.”

“Goodness gracious, Corey. It didn’t occur to you that you could get pregnant? You need to get your butt down to the healer and get yourself a test.”

Fuck. What if he was right? “Listen, Jayce, I gotta go.”

“Give me the results later!” he shouted just before I hung up the phone on him.

I didn’t necessarily look forward to seeing anyone else if I left the house, not after what happened this morning, but I did need to get to the healer. Luckily, they were close by. I sent them a quick text, and they let me know that I could come right over.

I ran—not in my bear form, as I didn’t wish to arrive naked—but I ran as fast as my human legs could take me. They met me on the front porch, eyebrows raised in question.

“I think I might need a pregnancy test.” I knew as a healer, they would keep the information confidential.

“Yes, I assumed that you would be coming to me for that sooner or later. Let’s go

ahead and get it done here.”

I squeaked. “Here?”

“Well, do you want to carry it back home and have to explain to your brother why you have one?” They had a very solid point.

“No, no, that does not sound good.”

Five minutes later, I had the answer to the question I didn’t even know was on my mind until good old Jayce.

Pregnant.

I was pregnant with Zane’s baby.

And currently, my brother was not speaking to either one of us.

What a clusterfuck.

“What are we going to do?” I said to Rissa.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” they said. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen two fated mates having some trouble, whether it’s with each other or some outside force. Someday, I’ll give you the lowdown of all the fun things that happened at Northbay when I lived there. Your brother’s a stubborn man, but he’s reasonable when he is forced to sit down and listen.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” I said.

“Now, your mate is going to be over-the-moon excited when you give him this news.

So why don't you go on home?"

"I don't even know if I'm allowed to see Zane right now."

"You will be. Your brother might set some rules, but he can't keep fated mates apart. Go home, get some rest, and start taking your prenatal vitamins. And if you start getting some morning sickness, I have a tea that works well."

"Thank you," I said. "I do appreciate all your help."

"Yeah, yeah, get out of here."

I liked Rissa. I liked them a lot.

Recruiting them had been another thing my brother had done well for his den.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 16

Zane

Though bears were not as driven by the full moon as wolves were, it was still a sacred time of celebration for us. Aydan tended to plan our den celebrations around the full moon. This one was no different. Though for the first time in a long time, I was not looking forward to a den gathering.

It was meant to be a celebration of the alliances, alliances that never happened.

Of course, the alpha Griff was still visiting with his three omega brothers. Why they hadn't left as they said they would, I wasn't sure. I left the den politics to Aydan and another Beta, Heath. I'd already helped create a mess for him. It was best to stay far away.

It wasn't my job, anyway. My role was to make sure that the den itself was taken care of the last few days. That meant putting a new roof on the healer shop, because it needed one and Rissa had been waiting patiently for far too long, and fixing the potholes that were plaguing the side streets. I also mowed several yards and had helped to plant fruit trees. All the while, I had been kept away from my mate. Aydan was putting off his discussion and decision.

Perhaps this time apart was our punishment.

Now it was the night of the full moon and we'd quite the celebration planned. I caught sight of my mate from across the road, standing outside the diner. I missed

him, and it took all I had not to rush over to him. But until everything was settled, I wasn't going to chance making it worse. Not for me, and especially not for him.

Tonight's den celebration began as a bit of a block party. Tables and chairs were set out on the road, and we all ate our dinner. I loved how we each brought our specialty. Sure, for some, it was a bag of chips, but there was such a wide array of choices and it felt like going to a huge family dinner. After dinner, we'd head behind the buildings to the woods where we would run and play.

This was exactly the kind of event I wanted to share with my mate. And while we were both here, it wasn't together and that sucked.

I hadn't been able to see my mate in several days, and I hated every minute of it. We had spoken, of course; I wasn't going to cut off communication from him. But the conversations had been short, and Ayden insisted on being with his brother when they happened. I didn't see that changing until our guests left.

Several den members mentioned Corey was getting to know the den, meeting people and visiting all the shops. Not a bad word was said about him. They were all growing to love him. So at least there was that.

He crossed the road as soon as he saw me and launched himself into my arms. I stiffened under his embrace, though I hated myself for it. As far as I knew, he was still forbidden.

Corey slapped my chest. "Quit that," he said. "Aydan's just going to have to get used to this. I don't think he's upset as the Alpha. I think he's upset as a brother and a friend. He's butthurt that we didn't tell him."

I wished I believed that, too. I could understand being hurt. But if that was the case, then Aydan needed to say it himself, not act like an alphahole.

“You’re my mate, Zane. I’m not going to deny you to our den, and I’m not going to let you deny me either.” He kissed me, no care in this world. “You promised me you wouldn’t deny me again, remember?”

I needed to be more like my mate. I had promised him.

“You’re right, mate,” I said, and I nestled into his neck, inhaling his scent that I had missed so much. “You’re right.”

“Keep that mindset and this mating will go just fine.” He pulled back, waiting to make eye contact with me before he winked.

We linked our hands together and walked back to where he’d been enjoying a meal with a few of the other den members. And so that was it. We were mated in the eyes of the den. I was his, and he was mine. There was no denying that.

And Aydan didn’t say a thing about our display. My mate had been correct about that. I didn’t want to push it, but for the first time since everything went down, I felt like we were moving forward.

After dinner, we all made our way to the woods, walking around the back of the buildings to the edge of the woods, where there was an open area where we could all gather. Aydan stood at the center on a small platform. To a stranger passing through, it would look like a typical park set-up for a community event, nothing more. But any shifter who saw it, would understand the importance of the space.

“Good evening, den members. It’s great to be back home in time for this celebration. I want to thank everyone who put in the time and effort to make our meal for this evening. And a shout out to Jamie for bringing all the chips. I don’t think there’s a crumb left.”

There wasn't, and Aydan wasn't teasing Jamie, it was his way of telling both the man and the den that we all brought what we were able to this den and that it was all cherished. The first time Jamie brought chips, he felt bad. Now, it was his thing, and I loved that.

"And I want to thank our honored guests, Griff, Alexander, Samuel, and Finnegan." He hesitated for a moment. "I also want to officially welcome my brother Corey to the den."

A round of applause rang out. Aydan had to see us now, standing together, our hands linked. I couldn't read his expression from this far away, nor catch his scent to determine how he felt about it. In the end, it didn't really matter. If he didn't like it so much, he could cast us out, though I doubted he would.

"I'd like to do a little something different this evening and bring back an old tradition from other dens," he said. "The Ritual of the Roar."

There was a murmur of excitement in the crowd. I knew what he was doing. And if this was how he wanted to play it, so be it.

"What is that?" Corey asked.

"It's a game that other dens play, all in fun. A way to allow alphas to fight, almost like the human equivalent of a boxing match. Friendly, but still competitive."

"They fight in their bear form?" Corey was suspicious, and he probably should be.

"Yes. Generally, the den nominates people to fight, or you can volunteer yourself."

"Why is Aydan doing this?" my mate whispered to me.

“It is fun. It’s a great way for alphas to build camaraderie. But mostly, I think he wants to be able to kick my ass without actually hurting me or him.” And if that would make this blow over, I was happy to let him get in a few hits.

“So this is a pissing contest?”

I snorted a laugh. “It is indeed, mate.”

“Will he hurt you?” The worry in his voice was sweet, but not needed.

“No, he won’t. Your brother and I have sparred before over the years. In the Ritual of the Roar, it is customary for the Alpha and his second to fight first so that everyone knows it is in good fun and not malicious.” It wasn’t like old-school wolf packs who bled each other for fun.

Just then, Aydan shouted into the crowd, “And who shall I take on as my challenger?”

“Beta Zane!” Nate, my little apprentice and current traitor shouted into the crowd.

“Yes, of course. My second-in-command. My best friend.” Aydan’s lips quirked. “And also, my brother-in-law,” he added, gesturing for me to come up. The crowd parted for me. They formed a circle, as was customary.

“Goddamit,” I muttered, even though I knew it was coming. There was no way out of this. But if this was what it took to put this behind us and move on as friends, then so be it.

Aydan and I stood face to face, stripped of our clothes, ready to shift and fight.

“Do you think perhaps we could’ve done this differently?” I asked.

He shook his head. “We’ve talked about bringing back this tradition. It seemed only fitting that now would be the time for it.”

“No time like the present to kick my ass, huh?”

“I’ll take it easy on you,” he said. He wasn’t going to. For some reason he felt like he needed this.

I grinned. “Likewise.”

We shook hands, and I knew then that perhaps my mate was right. Aydan wasn’t upset at our mating. He was just upset at the course of events and that we hadn’t come to him sooner. We would have to talk that out. But for now, if his bear wanted to fight it out, a fight was what I would give him.

After we shook hands, we shifted to our bear form. I couldn’t even begin my attack before Aydan was on me.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:29 pm

Chapter 17

Corey

“Is it always like this?”

I glanced at the omega next to me. It was one of the alpha Griff’s brothers. Finnegan, I thought his name was.

I shook my head. “Not sure. This is my first den celebration.” But also, it wasn’t normal for my brother like this. Aydan had a bug up his ass about my mating, and this was his way to pound on my mate without a formal challenge. Thank goddess for small favors, I guess. A black eye was a thousand times better than bleeding out and either submitting and getting removed from the pack or going to be with the goddess. It was scary how many packs were still that old-school.

He smiled. “Same. At least at this den. Though if my brother has his way, I’ll be staying longer.”

I raised a brow. The plan had been for them to be gone already, and they weren’t making many moves to have that happen. It shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. The entire situation was confusing.

“I thought he was hell-bent on taking all of you home after... you know.” Me ruining everything.

My stomach twisted. Hopefully Griff’s brother was more understanding about the

whole thing than mine seemed to be. It wasn't as if I sought out my fated mate, though I was incredibly glad that I found him. And really, I'd asked the goddess for him, so maybe in a way I had sought him out.

I refused to be sorry about finding him. How things played out? Sure. But never for Zane. Never.

It made me sick to my stomach to think that at one time I'd been willing to throw away the chance at ever finding my fated, just because having an arranged mating was easier. And it wasn't really because it was easier, but I'd convinced myself that at the time, so same difference?

Finnegan grinned. "After he came all this way to marry you sight-unseen and you denied him?"

I nodded.

"But instead, you found your fated mate and kept it a secret?"

I blushed. "Yeah that."

Finnegan shrugged one shoulder. "He's over it. I think it sounds quite romantic how you and your mate met. Griff isn't going to stand in the way of fated mates. He's bummed and his pride took a hit, as often happens to alphas. My omega brothers and I came here to find mates. There are too many omegas at our den. It only makes sense that we'd come someplace where there are too many alphas. They don't know that I know, but my Alpha and Alpha Aydan have talked about he and I mating." He was talking a mile a minute. It was adorable, but also, I could only half listen. My brother and Zane having their pissing match had most of my focus.

The mating-my-brother thing pulled me right back into focus. "Oh, and how do you

feel about that?” My brother was a good guy, but being a good guy and being the person you should mate weren’t the same thing.

I turned and watched my brother and my mate spar. He was not putting his best foot forward if he was looking to mate Finnegan, that was for sure.

So far, the hits were pretty mild, though they did seem to be having fun, which was good. Probably. I initially feared it was going to be my brother taking out his frustrations on my mate, and there was still time for that—which I learned oh too well a few dozen punches later.

Aydan landed a heavy blow against my mate’s muzzle. I winced. The omega wrinkled his nose. Maybe I hadn’t been so far off in my initial assessment of this whole boxing thing, after all. Alphas.

“No, I don’t think that I’d like that—your brother is great and all, but he’s not my mate.” He lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. “The romantic in me is still hoping to find our fated mate. The realist in me...thinks he probably doesn’t exist. Griff says I live with my head in the clouds and my paws off the ground. But I can’t help it.”

The omega shrugged one shoulder.

“You should speak up then.” May he learn from my mistakes. “There is nothing wrong with wanting to wait for your fated mate. Trust me. You should tell him.”

“I will,” he said. “I’ll just take my time at it.”

I hoped whatever stubborn-fueled alpha-headiness my mate and my brother needed to work out got handled soon because I was ready to have my brother back. Whatever the heck this was that I was watching was at least entertaining, though. The crowd was sure into it. There were screams and cheers with every blow that landed. I’d be

shocked if this didn't become a regular thing, not just with them but with all the bears.

The loud crack of a landed punch to my brother had the crowd erupting, the conversation I was having with Finnegan abandoned. Yeah, the den was for sure going to want this to be a thing.

"Ow, that stings." Zane winced as I pressed a cloth to his swollen face. The split in his eyebrow hadn't quite healed but was off to a good start. And he had plenty of shifter ability to ward off infection, and the cut would likely heal overnight, which was good. I still felt the need to baby him a bit. I crossed my fingers that maybe the sting of the antiseptic might persuade him not to go rounds with my brother again. At least not for a while.

"Serves you right. Fighting like that is silly." Even if I did kind of enjoy it near the end. Once I figured out that it wasn't going to escalate and the two of them started playing to the crowd, I was all in. I'd have liked it a lot more if my brother and mates hadn't been the ones throwing the punches.

"Well, I think Aydan took it a little bit beyond the playfulness that it was supposed to be."

"Or you were both showing off for the crowd?"

He blushed slightly.

"Anyway... at least now, in his eyes and the eyes of the den, we are mated."

"We are indeed." I pressed a kiss to his cheek, careful to avoid the injury. "There's no getting away from me now."

Zane settled in my arms. I was sitting on the couch with him between my legs. We were at my home now and finally alone. I'd hated not being able to be with him the way I'd wanted to while all this crap with my ex-arranged mate was worked out. This was where we were meant to be.

We'd given up all pretense of having him stay anyplace else. There was no longer any need for it, and even if there was, I couldn't do it anymore. My bear needed to be with our mate. Full. Stop.

Tomorrow we'd officially move all his things from the apartment over here, along with what little things he had in my brother's home. I couldn't wait.

"You sure that Jayce won't mind staying here, even though I'm here?" It wasn't the first time he'd asked, and I appreciated him giving my bestie the respect he deserved.

"Yes, we talked about it during... recently, and he knows the story. He's convinced that we'll have outlived our honeymoon phase by then, so it'll be safe."

Zane snorted. "Not likely." He was right.

"Well, he might change his mind anyways, once he realizes that it's not just me and you that he will be sharing a house with."

"Oh, and who else will be here?" Zane asked. He was practically liquid in my arms, nestled so comfortably against me. I soaked it all in.

"Listen to your bear, Zane. Take a deep breath. Do you notice anything different about me?" I was honestly surprised he hadn't already figured it out. It wasn't unusual for alphas to scent their mate's pregnancies before the omegas even knew.

Zane did as I asked. He inhaled deeply, his eyes closed, his body still. I felt the

second realization hit. His eyes opened, and he went still in my arms. “Is that—it is! It is! A cub. We’re going to have a cub?”

“We are.” And seeing his excitement mirroring mine was everything.

“For real?”

“For real. I had a test at the healer the other day.” My only regret was not having him there at the time.

“And you’re just now telling me?”

“Well, kind of a lot has happened, and I wanted it to be just us when you found out.” I pressed a kiss to his lips. “So yeah, I’m just now telling you. I take it you’re excited.”

“I am. Very much so, mate. I love you.” He held me tightly. “I love them too, our little cub.” He pulled back enough to look me in the eye. “I didn’t know it was possible to love someone I’ve never met before.”

I brought his hand to my belly. “They are going to be the most loved cub on this planet.”

And I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Chapter 18

Zane

“This is an absolute pain in the ass.” Aydan frowned down at the instruction manual he held in his hand. In theory, they were “easy to follow,” according to the reviews. I swore the reviews were trolls, because it wasn’t in English, the pictures weren’t to scale, and if the instructions were complete, I’d be shocked.

I held on to two identical slats that were supposed to connect, only there was no way to connect them. Maybe I was supposed to possess furniture magic? Was that even a thing? Were there furniture witches out there? If so, I could use one about now.

According to the instructions, I wasn’t even supposed to have two identical slats—they were supposed to be slightly different. At least I thought that they were unequal sizes, bringing us back to it not being to scale. Argh.

“I’m starting to see why this was on sale,” I said. “Maybe they should’ve paid us, instead.”

“Is there enough money to make that worth it?” He was teasing, which was good because I was stressed about this, and it counterbalanced pretty well.

“Probably not.” But I’d have thrown money at them if they had offered to come here and do it for us. That was for sure.

“Can we just give up and get the one from Northbay like I had first suggested?”

Corey asked from the doorway.

Aydan and I looked around at the parts scattered all over the floor of the nursery. The nursery that we had just finished painting.

“Well, I’ll let you get to it,” Aydan said, pushing himself to his feet.

“Quitter,” I mumbled under my breath. Gods, I wished I could join him.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But is this really my responsibility as uncle?”

“It’s your responsibility as Alpha of the den to make sure we’re set up with everything we need.” I was glad to finally have us back to a point where we could be like this with each other.

Had I known all it would take was for him to get in a few punches, I’d have offered him my jaw initially. I should’ve known from the beginning that he’d have wanted his brother and me to have our happiness above politics. At least when push came to shove.

“Right. Well, get to it then,” he said and left.

I shook my head. “I suppose we can let him go. He was a big help with all the painting, but he’s not good at this part.” Not that I was any better.

“So what do you think? We can head over and buy it today and burn all of this in the fire pit.” His offer was extremely tempting. “I bet my brother would even let us take the nice truck so it didn’t get greasy.”

Like all things that Aydan did, he had jumped headfirst into being the best uncle he could possibly be, offering his help wherever we needed it. If he thought for even a

nanosecond that I truly needed him here, he'd have stayed until the last screw was in place. He only left to give us privacy. It was pretty sweet.

After he discovered the pregnancy, the first thing he did after hugs and tears—tears we all pretended not to see—he arranged for Corey to have his own office space so that he didn't have to drive around town to get the paperwork from all the businesses—they brought it to him. It wasn't even a far drive, but he said he wasn't going to like to get in and out of the vehicles soon, and it was better this way. He was going to be a good mate someday.

Aydan had also been a huge-ass help around the house. It was in good shape, but not really baby friendly at first. It was now. Uncle Aydan to the rescue. It might've bought out an entire baby-proofing aisle to do so, which somehow made it extra sweeter.

I pushed myself to my feet, kicking at the various pieces that were on the floor. "We can go ahead and let Northbay know that we'll take one of their used cribs. I give up on this thing."

"Smart." Corey patted my cheek. "I hope that others get mated soon. Otherwise, our little guy is going to be one of the only cubs in the territory."

"If they do, we need to warn them about this." I pointed to the directions from hell.

It was true that we were going to be one of the only bears with cubs and the only with baby cubs. We didn't have many young ones around. There were a handful of toddlers and a few older kids, but no babies. It had been part of the reason Aydan had been so focused on getting some omegas here. A den that didn't grow, faded with time, if they didn't fall apart before then.

"Maybe we should find someone for your brother," I suggested. Aydan was Aydan,

and it was going to take the right omega to appreciate his greatness, but what a lucky omega that would be. I didn't like to see him all alone.

Corey snorted. "He's already looking. If it were up to him, he would've arranged a mating months ago."

That was news to me.

"I'm surprised he didn't. I'm not sure what held him back."

"Let me tell you all about the conversation I had with Finnegan." He took my hand.

"I didn't know you two had become friendly." I was happy they were. It was nice that they had been staying. I wasn't sure for how long they would. I was hoping permanently. I knew Aydan was too. But that was for den politics to decide—not ours, but theirs.

"We bonded over you getting your face bashed in." He stuck out his tongue. I loved seeing him so playful. "Come. Papa bear needs to eat. I'll tell you all about it over lunch."

My mate led me down the hall into the kitchen where he had lunch waiting for me. And it wasn't just any lunch. It was one of my all-time favorites, and I wasn't sure what he did that made this better than all the others I'd ever tasted, but wow!

"You spoil me," I said as I grabbed my grilled cheese and dipped it in the tomato soup. He'd even cut it into dippable strips. I could see my mate being one of those dads that made fancy lunch boxes of fruit cut to look like little animals for our cubs.

"I do indeed, but this was more me craving tomato soup."

“Cravings for the win.” I took a huge bite of the buttery goodness, the sound of his spoon hitting the side of his bowl echoing in the air.

“I guess. Now that I’ve had a spoonful, I don’t really want it anymore.”

This wasn’t the first time this had happened. Sometimes it was the smell of an item cooking, other times he thought of something else he wanted more, and a few times in the beginning, they made him sick to his stomach at first bite. Pregnancy was weird.

Corey’s pregnancy had been progressing quite well according to the healer. There were a few minor complaints, like swollen ankles after a long day and difficulty sleeping. But according to the healer, if you felt normal and nothing hurt or was amplified, that’s when you needed to worry. Apparently, pregnancy sucking was the goal.

But it didn’t suck for Corey. Not really. He enjoyed it. I would walk in and catch him with his hands on his belly and telling our little one all about work or what he was going to do the next day. It was adorable.

There were times it was also heartbreaking, like when he promised our cub that he wasn’t going to be like his parents, that we were going to love and cherish him and always put his needs first. The more I heard about his life growing up, the angrier I became at the people he called his parents. I refused to call them that. A parent loves and cares for you, they don’t treat you like garbage.

I took every opportunity I had to assure him that he was going to be the perfect father for our cubs. My hope was that one day he would truly believe me, that he’d no longer second-guess himself. Ha. As if I didn’t question myself just as much. Although, in a way, didn’t that mean we were going to be good parents, by default?

“I’m surprised you wanted to risk the heartburn with the soup,” I said. Tomatoes were not his friend.

“I really didn’t. But it sounded so good.”

“And what sounds good now?” I was already standing, not wanting him to say he was full so I’d sit and eat. As good as this was, I wouldn’t be able to enjoy it knowing he was going without.

“Milkshakes at the diner?”

“Milkshakes at the diner it is.” I grabbed the keys from the counter. “We’ll even get fries to dip in them.”

“And who says the perfect mate doesn’t exist?”

“Not me.” I ran a finger on his mating mark. “I have you. I already knew they did.”

Epilogue

Corey

Being pregnant was an emotional roller coaster. There were days when I felt invisible and like I was about to master this parent thing and others when I was scared. And sure, some of that was fear had to do with taking the huge teen-size cub growing inside of me out, but Rissa assured me that our baby was a normal size. They lied. At least my huge-ass belly that reached the house five minutes before the rest of me suggested they did.

Corey swore I wasn't that big, that I was sexiness personified. I'd have thought he was just being nice had he been able to keep his hands off me. Not once did I look the hot mess I felt like.

I overdid it the day before, and I was feeling it. The whole "nesting" thing I'd heard about, I'd always half assumed was a way of convincing omegas that they needed to be sure and have everything clean and ready for the baby. Not once did I think it was real, that I would wake up one morning and decide out of the blue that our very clean and tidy nursery needed to be scrubbed from top to bottom. But yesterday, I did.

I had a bucket of hot water and the furniture moved to one side when my mate came in after his Beta meeting. He took one look at me and shook his head before taking it from me and calling all the Betas.

"You can't be doing this now," he insisted as he asked me for a list of things that needed doing.

Five minutes later, my brother and the other Betas were scrubbing the nursery for me. My mate's intention was to do it so I could relax, and I did, if relaxing meant reorganizing the pantry. Because of course newborn cubs were all about organized canned goods. And from there I found a project in every single room. I was an organizational boss.

And today? Today I was paying for it. Even walking around took more energy than I had. Lesson learned.

I was ready, yet I wasn't for this baby. Some days I was willing to do anything and everything to meet our little one, and others when I was happy that they were nestled inside, completely protected from the world.

According to my calculations, I was several days past my due date. According to Rissa, due dates were omegas trying to quantify what only our bodies could now or something cryptic and unhelpful along those lines. But did it matter? Not really, because it seemed that our little cub was fully content to wait around in my belly until his graduation day.

Each day felt like I dragged a little bit more, if you didn't count what I deemed, "superpower" days like yesterday. Sleep was not happening. I felt bad for my mate. I tossed and turned my huge self all night long chasing sleep and waking him far too often. I offered to sleep in the recliner, but he refused, saying he wasn't going to be able to get any sleep if he wasn't by my side. He was sweet, but also sleep-deprived.

I was too. Not that I expected to sleep a whole ton once my baby arrived. At least that was what all the baby websites said. I couldn't figure out why the first-time parents didn't just sleep when the baby did, figuring I'd be able to sleep a little easier without a beach ball attached to my middle and could play catch-up. Given I'd never found one person saying they did, there had to be a reason, one I'd find out soon enough.

"It's time. We should get going." I held out my hand, and Zane grabbed it, helping

me out of the recliner that I had been relaxing in for the past few hours. It would've been longer than that if it weren't for our little one's newest pillow—my bladder. Two, three hours max was the longest amount of time that I could sit without having to go to the bathroom.

I stood up, and the urgency to go slammed into me. "I've gotta pee real quickly," Was on my way down the hall as quickly as I could waddle.

In theory, we weren't in any sort of hurry. It wasn't as if Rissa had several clients waiting, and the baby wasn't going to just fall out because I was a little late. Rissa had said pregnant people had preggo time, a close friend of ish time, and not to worry about it if we were late or early to our visits. But technically, we did have an appointment that was five minutes ago, and I didn't want to keep them waiting if we didn't have to.

Once I used the facilities and washed my hands, I waddled my way back out to Zane, this time less hurriedly. He smiled brightly when he saw me.

"What?" I said.

"You're gorgeous like this."

"I'm bigger than I am in my bear form." And I wasn't small in my fur.

He chuckled. "Not quite. But close."

I shot him a glare.

"Seriously, you're glowing with pregnancy. I know that you're uncomfortable, but you're beautiful like this, carrying my child. You've done wonderfully."

"Thank you, mate. I do appreciate it. You've been pretty great yourself." The best,

really.

Once we were inside the healer clinic, Rissa had me set up on a bed-like thing. “Drink this tea,” they said and handed me one of the most foul-smelling things I’ve ever come across.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’ll induce your labor. Just trust me.” I did trust them. I didn’t, however, trust myself not to gag.”

“Can’t you use what they use on humans?” my mate asked. He’d been spending too much time on the human pregnancy sites.

They scoffed. “We use natural remedies that are safe for our shifter bodies. Unless you want to wait another week until your baby decides to make an appearance on his own, which we can do, but when I saw you at the den meeting last night, I sensed today was the day.”

“Okay?” I wasn’t untrusting, it just wasn’t the direction I thought today would take.

“If he gets much bigger, though, I can’t promise that we won’t be doing this without a C-section.”

That was all it took to have me ready to down the shot of gross and have this baby already. No shame to C-sections. Our job was to get our babies out of our bodies and into our arms in the safest way possible, and sometimes that meant surgery. But if there was a way for me to avoid it, heck yeah, I was doing that.

I took a deep breath, plugged my nose, and drank down the liquid sludge. Fine, it wasn’t sludge, but it was close.

“How long is it supposed to take before...?” My stomach tightened. “Do I have to wait around for it to—” I moaned, holding on to my stomach. “Wait, what was that?”

Could it really be working that quickly?

“The first contraction,” Rissa said as I winced from the pain rippling through me. Then, just as quickly as it arrived, it dissipated.

“Oh, wow, that was... surprising. How far apart are they going to—” I screamed again, grasping for Zane’s hand.

There wasn’t much talking after that, but there sure was a whole lot of screaming. They kept coming harder and faster until they blurred into one huge contraction. I knew there would be pain. I wasn’t naive, but this was a level of intensity I never imagined possible.

Zane held my hand, praising me, his bear so close to the surface, I could feel his presence. Rissa flitted in and out, checking on me, but not staying too long. I wasn’t sure if my screams were getting to them or if it was their way of giving me privacy.

They came back in and during a brief moment of reprieve and handed me a shot glass.

“Drink.”

Did I know what it was? Nope. Did I care? Also, nope. Instead, I swallowed the cool liquid as they commanded.

“Fire!” I was burning up from the inside out. They had me drinking fire.

“That’s your signal to push.” Rissa set the glass down as I tried to decipher their words.

“What?”

“Push, mate. Push.”

Even if I hadn't heard him, I'd have started to push, the urgent need taking over. I pushed and pushed and pushed. And the fire, it burned hotter and hotter until suddenly it was gone and the room was filled with the beautiful sound of our cub crying.

Our baby, our adorable and healthy baby was here.

Rissa cleaned then up and set them on my chest for their first meal. “Congratulations, Dads. It's a girl.”

“Hello, beautiful,” I whispered, exhausted but overjoyed. “We're so glad you're here.”

“Your papa and I have been waiting for you.” Zane sat on the bed beside me.

She latched on, and we watched in wonder. This was our cub. We made her.

“How does Willow sound?” Zane kissed my cheek.

“Willow.” I tasted the name. “I think it's perfect.”

“Just like you mate, just like you.” I was hardly perfect. the two of us had managed to make more than our share of mistakes in the very short time since we'd met. But we were perfect for each other, and that was all that mattered.