



# Enforcer's Little Warrior (Little Paws Haven #3)

**Author:** *JP Sayle, Layla Dorine*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Romy, a rare rhino, is abducted as a child, tortured and used for horrific tests, but he escapes, hiding out in Cookietown. When Fate steps in with his mate, an Enforcer for the crash, will he be able to protect Romy from what hunts him?

When Bash, an Enforcer for the crash, hunts down stolen young rhino's, he gets more than he bargained for. Discovering Romy is his fated mate, is only the beginning of how his life is about to be turned upside down. Two abandoned, rare rhinos, a mate whose past makes him wary of everyone, including Bash, and trying to set up home with the two young stretch Bash to his limit, leaving everything he holds dear, vulnerable.

What else could possibly go wrong? Everything.

Romy learns the hard way that life is not for the fainthearted. Seeing—what he knows is his mate—with another Little, reinforces just how bad things are. Then life takes a swing in a different direction and Romy finds himself with his mate and the gift of two little boys. Only his happiness is short-lived when Romy's past comes back to claim him.

Now it's a race against time, where Bash must work fast to unravel his mate's past to find the answers before it's too late. Will Fate be so cruel to give Romy hope, then take it away?

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

Nothing in the two days since bringing his mate home had gone as Bash had planned. For one, it wasn't his home or even their home. Just a random house owned by a crash member who was graciously allowing them to stay there, so it didn't continue to sit unoccupied.

Other crash members had donated beds for the two young rhinos in their care, who still hadn't shifted back to their human forms, if they even could. They had a specialist coming, if the vetting process turned out favorable, then they would stay with their crash. Until then, they didn't even have names to call the little ones.

The crash had donated a bed for him and Romy too, not that he'd slept in it. The couch facing the front door was where he positioned himself each night, a watchful sentinel to stand between them and the world.

Romy didn't sleep in it either. Instead, he insisted on piling a mound of blankets on the floor so he could sleep in the room with the little ones. Bash hated seeing him that way. Being unable to move the other bed in there for Romy left him frustrated. None of the rooms in the house were big enough for three beds except maybe the living room and that had too many windows, making it no option at all.

Was he paranoid, maybe? But after everything they'd just exposed about the council's corruption and experimentation on rare shifters, he wasn't about to take any chances with a mate the fates had finally seen fit to send to him. And yeah, his mate didn't seem all that happy with Fate's choice. Every attempt Bash made, no matter what it was, made a negative impression on the pretty rhino.

For a brief moment, when Bash had first met Cosmo, he'd been certain that the little black-footed cat was destined to belong to him, which was why he'd grown far closer and far more familiar with him than anyone he'd ever teamed up on missions with.

Or any Little, for that matter.

The trust that had formed between them had happened initially out of necessity and a shared desire to put things right and rescue those stolen from their homes, and now he had Romy. Bash knew of the horrors and experiences Romy had felt at the hand of the shifter council who were supposed to protect them all.

It made Bash want to wrap Romy in soft things and hug him in front of the bay window where they could watch the setting sun. The only problem with that was all the blackout curtains that hung over each and every one of them, some of them layered double. Again, protection was the key in Bash's mind. He couldn't put enough in place when it came to his mate and the two babies in the house. If anyone was lurking around, they wouldn't be able to spy on what was going on in the house, not that anything was really going on but a lot of playtime and naps for the little ones. Along with and a great deal of silence between him and Romy when they were alone.

Bash had no clue what to say to him, what subjects might be triggering or flat out off limits, or even how to broach the ones that weren't. The only thing he knew was how to be an enforcer, how to protect and be hypervigilant, so no one got hurt on his watch.

It was doubly important now that he'd found his mate. A mate that those rogue council members and others that had been working with them might still be hunting.

He couldn't afford to fuck this up.

Passing in front of the doorway to the room where Romy sat with the two young

rhinos cuddled in his arms. He noticed Romy read to them from one of a stack of books crash members had donated to them. There was this tug, deep in his gut, flooding him with the urge to scooch up behind him and hold Romy and listen to the story, too. Especially when one of the little ones huffed and nudged at Romy, who leaned over him to kiss the tip of his horn.

If no family existed to return them to, Bash's crash had already made the decision to formally adopt them into it, if approved. What was still up in the air was whether or not they'd remain with him and Romy or be given to another pair to raise. Mates with a well-established bond and roots in the community were more likely to get them. Unlike Bash, who never knew when he was going to be sent on a journey that could keep him away from home for weeks, if not months.

He stared at Romy, thinking hard on what that could mean. He wouldn't be able to accept those kinds of assignments if he had a family .

His pulse skipped a beat. Hell, he wouldn't even want to.

He didn't even want to leave the doorway, only the moment Romy turned and spotted him there, that was exactly what he did. Retreated with all the grace of well, a rhino in a teacup factory, meaning he ricochet off the doorframe and backed into the far wall in his haste to get away from that piercing stare.

It was like Romy could see how unsettling it was to have them there and took some sick pleasure out of seeing the badass enforcer flustered and at a loss for what to do.

Like when Romy had sent him to give one of the little ones a bath.

Baby rhino 1

Bathroom and enforcer 0

And yet he was smiling about it when he reached the kitchen, checked the time and started making them lunch.

What the hell did that say about him?

Romy

His heart melted at the clumsy rhino bouncing off the door and walls before he fled. He wasn't sure how to approach the big guy because half the time he looked frickin' scary and the other half he appeared to have lost the ability to function like a normal shifter.

He was a conundrum, but Romy tucked that away to think about at night when he lay on the floor between the babies he was desperate to protect from the harms he'd suffered at the hands of the fuckers the press had a field day talking about.

The news was full of it. Full of the gruesome discovery about what lay inside the owl shifter eyes. Cosmo, a Little Romy had gotten to know at Little Paws Haven, and his two mates Nomad and Harley, who ran the club, had retrieved. It had definitely put the cats amongst the birds.

He sniggered as he watched the two baby rhinos snuggling up against each other, seeking comfort the way they did often, their eyelids growing heavy. He figured it wouldn't be long before they were asleep, meaning that the sounds coming from the kitchen were gonna be for nothing. It also meant he'd be spending another uncomfortable, silent meal with Bash.

If he had small talk in his repertoire, he hadn't revealed it to Romy. The night before, he'd stared at himself in the mirror in the bathroom, trying to figure out if there was something about him that caused the rhino to not want to talk to him.

He was pretty, or so he'd been told a time or two by the Daddies when he'd spent time in daycare at the club, looking for some reprieve from his thoughts and shitty life. Daycare was where he'd first met Cosmo, being all cute with... Bash—his mate.

Don't think about it!

Bash hadn't noticed him—not once. Romy had blended into the background, it was how he survived. A part of Romy didn't get why others had gotten a shock at discovering just how the two parts of Cosmo, Little and lethal, were who he was. Romy had noticed something different about the little cat as he'd watched him with Bash.

Cosmo gave off a cute innocent vibe, but Romy's past had taught him the ability to read others really well. He'd seen past the act to the cat shifter's inert nature to hunt and, as it turned out, kill for the council.

“Lunch is ready,” called Bash, loud enough to give the babies a start.

They both lurched up off the ground, whacking into each other, then plowing straight into Romy's legs, upending him on to his backside because he wasn't concentrating. He cried out, his bottom throbbing from landing hard.

The babies cowered back at the thundering sound of booted feet hitting the ground as Bash burst into the room, looking fit to kill with his horn on full display. “What is the threat?” he demanded, weapon drawn.

For the fact he'd hurt himself, Romy couldn't decide if the quivering his belly did was because of how Bash looked or if it was the shock from falling. His eyes glistened with tears as he willed them to stay put, opening his arms wide for the cowering babies. “It's all right, I'm sorry I cried out. It's not your fault.”

Romy cast a look at Bash, directing his inner turmoil at the big shifter who was the cause of all his frustration. “Maybe next time you could try walking the few steps like a civilized person rather than shouting at the top of your lungs and frightening the babies into a charge?” he asked super sweetly, but with a whole lot of sarcasm to not alert the babies to his hurt pride.

Bash blushed and stuttered, “Shit... oh fuck... crap.” He shoved the gun into the back of the waistband of his low-slung jeans that accentuated the leanness of his hips and the enormous breadth of his back. He blushed a rosy pink and dropped his gaze to the babies now in Romy’s arms. “I’m sorry.”

Romy sniffed, and cuddled the babies closer, needing the comfort as much as them, thinking he’d much prefer the massive arms of the man towering over them. “Accepted,” he stated rather stiffly. “Now, can you bring whatever you’ve made in here, please? They’ve had enough drama for one day.” And so has my poor ass!

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

Not everything is a threat.

Not everything is a threat.

His heart still hammered in his ears as he turned and headed back up the hall to do as Romy asked, humiliation flooding him as he realized how clumsy and inept he must have appeared, charging down the hall that way.

He was the wrong rhino for this assignment, and yet, this was his mate, so who else could he expect to take it on?

Fucking hell, they'd taught him to assess the threat and then react, not pull his gun and go stomping through the house looking to shoot the first thing that moved. He needed to get it together.

They needed him to keep it together and not add more trauma to the upset the baby rhinos had already suffered.

As carefully as he could, he loaded the food for the little ones and Romy onto a tray and carried it back into the room where Romy was still cuddling the pair, who'd settled down considerably. Of course, the moment he sat down and placed the tray on the rug between them, the pair caught a whiff of their lunch and clamored out of Romy's arms, causing a mini stampede as they rushed for it.

He managed to move Romy's bowl out of the way before the thundering little ones



got their snouts into theirs, a little side nudging and snorting ensuing as they tucked into their meal.

“I’m sorry I upset them,” Bash said as he passed Romy a bowl of the vegetable stir-fry he’d made, super diced, so the little ones wouldn’t choke on any of the pieces. He’d made sure it was balanced too, not too much of any one vegetable, so they’d get all the vitamins they needed, just the way Sasha, his friend, had shown him on the video when she’d explained to him how to make it.

Of course she’d been snickering too, getting a good laugh at the badass rhino enforcer with a leather apron around his waist, poised with a cleaver like he’d been able to stab someone as he’d squared off with the cutting board full of vegetables.

“Do not hack at them like you’re dismembering a body,” she instructed. “Chop evenly, and slow down before you take off a finger.”

He’d managed to keep his digits intact, though he had nicked his hide a time or two. Thankfully, it was thick and used to being abused, so he’d healed instantly. His pride, however, might take a while to recover from the mess he was constantly making of things.

“I’m a poor choice for this,” Bash admitted, making a conscientious effort to keep his booming voice low and his eyes everywhere but on his mate. “I know next to nothing about little ones and have even less experience spending time with them. If you’d like, I can try to find you someone better to help from among the crash. Maybe someone who isn’t going to startle them every other time they’re in the same room.”

“Or you could slow down, sit with us, and practice instead of pacing around the living room,” Romy suggested, this time with an element of patience that gave Bash’s heart a little nudge against his ribs.

“How’d you know that’s what I was doing?”

Romy just raised an eyebrow at him. “Um, hello, you do not exactly tread softly. If these floors weren’t retrofitted for rhino hooves, you’d have been rattling the windows with how hard you tread.”

“Shit, sorry, I...” Bash stammered, feeling his cheeks heat. “I’d better go clean up the kitchen.”

He fled back to the kitchen before it dawned on him that he was probably making as much of a commotion doing that as he had when he’d sprinted into the room thinking the trio was in danger.

Damnit all.

He rested his hands on the edge of the sink and hung his head. He took a few deep breaths and berated himself for his awkwardness and apparent lack of home training, which was likely making Romy wish the fates had sent anyone else to him as his mate.

Bash wasn’t even mate material.

How many enforcers did he know that were mated?

In a word, none.

Everyone knew you couldn’t be both. You couldn’t divide your loyalty and focus between the crash and an individual rhino, or family of them, in this case. There was always the risk of choosing wrong in a chaos situation. Head or heart. Biggest threat. When shit hit the fan, Bash already knew which way he’d turn.

Straight to Romy and those little ones, even if he was the worst thing for them. It made his heart shudder in his chest at choosing any other option.

If only they'd gotten the blessing of a third mate. One who knew what the hell they were doing on the domestic side of things. Then maybe he wouldn't feel so useless.

Okay, who did he think he was fooling... someone else touching Romy... no way. As for the rest, he was positive he'd still feel this way. But he supposed if Romy had someone else, they'd make up for his ineptitude.

His shoulders drooped. Get it together, dammit!

Do what I can and clean up the mess I made.

With his inner voice hollering at him, he cleaned up the vegetable scraps and wiped down the counter, rinsed out the sink, then swept the floor to remove any scattered bits from his less than gentle chopping methods. It wasn't a lot, but there was still enough to remind him to take it easier next time with the knife.

When his phone vibrated in his pocket, he welcomed the interruption, checking it to see that he'd gotten another text from Cosmo, who'd been checking in on the little rhinos repeatedly.

Hey, how's everything going?

Bash typed a quick reply . I suck at this.

Don't feel bad, so did I. The level of broken glass was epic.

Romy is amazing with them though. They are so lucky to have him.

You should let him teach you so you can be amazing with him and them, too.

Bash considered how Romy was with him and sighed. I doubt it will be that easy.

Since when do you do easy?

Okay, so Cosmo may have had a point there. They were both known for taking on some of the toughest assignments because they had a hard time trusting in others to get things done. Then it struck, he knew someone who was mated—Cosmo. He had been lucky enough to find mates he could share that burden with. Ones with the same level of dedication and attention to detail as he had. While Bash...

He stared at the phone and contemplated whether being all maudlin and grumpy wasn't his problem. The two cats mated to Cosmo, Bash had watched, hadn't had an easy ride with the little fireball that was Cosmo, but they never gave up.

He nodded to himself. He'd yet to figure out what kind of mate he had in Romy, but hiding would not change that.

Just think about it , Cosmo texted. I've gotta run. My playroom wall is calling to me.

And just like that, Bash remained alone with his thoughts again. He glanced at the doorway which lead to the trio of rhinos in the other room, waiting for him to get his head out of his ass.

Maybe it was time to change tactics.

Romy

Romy stood just behind the edge of the curtain, staring out the window at Bash. Sunlight glinted off Bash's dark silver speckled hair. His bare upper torso had a coat

of sweat as he swung the spade, throwing the big clumps of dirt into a large wheelbarrow. The hole he was digging in the front garden was massive after the hours he'd been at it.

He stopped now and swiped the back of his hand over his face, his bicep bulging and giving Romy a nice little buzz in his belly. The expanse of chest and back was a sight to behold. Clothed, it was impressive. Unclothed, it was a minor miracle. Romy blew out a hefty breath, feeling much hotter than he had a minute ago.

What was he doing?

Since Bash's mad dash into the room the day before, something about the rhino had changed. What and why, Romy couldn't quite fathom.

First off, he'd been quieter, that Romy got, he supposed it was to do with the conversation they'd had. He'd also spent a lot more time in the same room as Romy and the babies, not something he'd expected. So much so, that the youngest rhino had eventually, last evening, gone over to investigate Bash, finally they'd nudged their way under Bash's arm to snuggle in and fall asleep.

The huge ass smile Bash had given the rhino and then him made it really hard not to go and join them and create a snuggle pile.

Romy rubbed a hand over his hot cheek, his eyes roaming over all the bare flesh on show and snuggling was the last thing on his mind. It had been some time since anyone had touched him. When his world had gotten turned upside down by the council, it left him with too many trust issues to get close to others, though he had tried.

Shoving aside the past was getting harder when he'd had no time to be Little, to have some time to sink away and be free. It felt selfish to think about it when he got the

trauma the two little ones must have gone through. They both needed Romy, and his own needs weren't a priority. He was used to it. The important thing was keeping both rhinos safe until they discovered where and who they belonged to.

Bash had explained last night they were none the wiser about how they'd found their way to Cookietown. How they had learned the exact spot where everyone had gathered—to discuss what the next steps were after everyone heard about the evidence in the owl's eyes, that revealed just what the council was up to—remained a mystery.

They had more questions than answers about the two babies and Romy felt Bash's frustration at every hour that passed and still they'd found no answers.

A sound coming from the nursery had Romy glancing back over his shoulder, listening out. He'd left the two rhinos sleeping. When he heard nothing, he returned his attention to the window, only to meet Bash's gaze.

A slow smile spread over his mate's face and Romy's chest expanded as he sucked in a breath to calm his pulse, that hammered hard enough it almost knocked him into the window.

Bash lifted a dirty hand in a beckoning motion, then pointed at the hole.

Romy hesitated, then went to the front door, going out into the sunshine. The house they were staying in was separate from others. Its position meant no one overlooked the place, but the openness at the front meant they could see a threat coming. The rear had protection from a fully enclosed twenty-foot wall that surrounded the big back garden.

“What you doin’?” Romy enquired, walking to where Bash was now leaning on the spade.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he answered, his grin growing wider.

Romy stared at the hole. “Should you be digging up someone else's garden?”

“I... it’s like this... I checked with Constance... the house... I bought it... you know... like as a place... for our family ... a family,” he stuttered, blushed and wiped at his sweaty face no less than four times.

Dirt streaked his forehead and brow, and he looked anywhere but Romy as he processed the stuttered information. “You bought the house for us?” His pulse fluttered at the fact this man had bought a house— for them .

“I did...” he frowned. “That’s alright... isn’t it?”

The color disappeared from his cheeks and the stark contrast of pale skin and streaked dirt made it obvious.

Jeez, he’s a sweetheart.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Romy

Romy eyed his mate and tried to think beyond the desire to climb up his body with how adorable he looked when he wasn't being all bossy and demanding. Although, Romy did like that side of Bash, too.

He got the impression that he'd stood too long when Bash's head tilted to the side and his eyes narrowed. Romy attempted to recall what Bash had asked. With no clue, he nodded at the hole. "So, what are you doing to the front lawn?"

"Oh.. yeah, I was thinking about how the summer's approaching and how warm it gets. The little ones don't wanna be cooped up inside and maybe y'all needed a wallow."

It was impossible to resist the big lug when he was being so thoughtful. Romy's smile emerged like the clouds had shifted and revealed the sun behind them.

"You're so damn pretty it hurts my eyes," Bash murmured, his eyes appearing glued to Romy's face.

Before Romy could think of a comeback—not that he had one, as no one had ever called him pretty like that before—there was a loud crash from inside. "That's the little ones," he said like a moron and fled back into the house, cussing himself out for stating the obvious.

He skidded to a halt in the bedroom doorway when instead of rhinos there were two little blond boys looking guiltily at him.



The slightly bigger boy of around five or six pointed at his brother, who was possibly three or four. “Wasn’t me whose broke it, Nambi did it.”

“Did not,” said Nambi, revealing a front missing tooth as he wrinkled his nose at his brother. “Toofus, ya did it!”

As days went, Romy hadn’t had a better one in a long time. His smile remained in place despite the pieces of broken chair scattered at the two boy's bare feet. “Nice to meetcha Nambi, Toofus, I’m Romy.”

“Hi,” Nambi said shyly. “Where’s your clumsy friend?”

Romy chuckled at the apt description of the big enforcer. “He’s digging us a wallow. Wanna see?” He held out his arms, holding his breath as both boys looked warily at him, then at each other.

Nambi rose first, lifting his arms up. “Carry,” he murmured, looking now at the mess on the floor.

Romy side stepped the wooden bits and effortlessly picked up the boy, tucking him on his hip, who weighed nothing compared to his rhino form. Nambi slung one arm around his neck and gave him a shy smile that Romy felt hit his heart with all the feels. First Bash, and now this, Romy’s heart was taking a few hits, removing the barriers better than a bulldozer.

He looked at Toofus and smiled, holding out his other arm. “Wanna come too?”

Toofus hesitated, the desire there on his face as he eyed Romy and his brother. “Is it safe?” he whispered, breaking Romy’s heart.

He swallowed past the lump that had developed in his throat and nodded. “Bash is

going to protect us. Keep us all safe.” When he uttered the words, he knew he was speaking the utter truth. The enforcer had proven himself to have only their safety at the heart of everything he did. Yet the wallow showed something else—thoughtfulness.

It seemed Toofus heard the truth too, as he rose and held up his arms. “Can you ask him to make us burgers with all the cheese? I like burgers a lot.”

Romy released a shuddery breath at how Bash would do whatever the little tyke wanted. Gods, he’d grown attached to the little rhinos and Bash. “I can, but don’t you want to ask him yourself?” he encouraged, needing them to see that Bash wasn’t a threat to them more than he’d admit to the big lug.

Toofus looked undecided as he copied his brother and put an arm around Romy’s neck over his brother’s as he settled on Romy’s hip. “Will he shout?”

“He’s loud, I know, but he’ll never shout at you, I swear.”

Another hesitation before Nambi nudged his brother, giving him begging eyes. “Okay... I’ll ask him,” Toofus muttered.

Those words captured hold of Romy’s heart and tugged with the bravery. He’d lost his family and had no one to shower with all the love he had held inside him.

As Romy walked through the house, thinking about what Bash had done for him, for the boys, he grinned to himself. Whether Bash realized it or not, he’d opened a door today into Romy’s heart and now there was no escape. The big enforcer had better be ready for what came next because Romy was ready to fight for his future.

Bash

Seeing Romy step outside with both boys in their adorably human forms, left Bash frozen, spade poised midway between the wheelbarrow and the ground. That they had shifted meant they weren't stuck and hadn't become trapped in their rhino forms the way the other imprisoned young had. That alone was enough to let Bash breathe a sigh of relief. What added to it was the knowledge that they had grown comfortable enough with them, or at least Romy, to show them who they were. Now they had additional descriptions to add to the ones they'd already circulated—discreetly—of course.

“Toofus, Nambi, meet Bash,” Romy said, looking all kinds of pleased.

Nambi had his thumb in his mouth as he eyed Bash with wide eyes, while Toofus gave a little wave.

“Heya, boys,” Bash said, being careful to keep his voice low, especially with how much bass it carried.

“Can you make us burgers with all the cheese?” Toofus blurted as he clung to Romy.

“Pweeeese,” Nambi added around his thumb.

“Of course,” Bash said, eyeing them and then the wallow that was just about done. “I tell you what, let me get a little water going and you three can have a little cool off while I clean up and take care of your food.”

“Yey!!!!” Toofus said, already wiggling to be put down, but Romy kept a good hold of him until Bash was able to add several inches of water to the bottom of the wallow, and get the sprinkler set up beside it. Not only would the boys be able to roll in it and crawl through the sprinkler, but it would provide an easy rinse off spot for when Bash brought their meal outside to them for a bit of a messy picnic.

I can do this.

How the hell do you make burgers again?

Shit.

Okay. No. It was fine. Sasha would know.

With everything in place, Bash blush-smiled at Romy, then hurried inside, first to shower quickly and clean himself up so he could cook and cool off. The heat had been growing despite how early he'd gotten started. Because he could only sweat in his human form, his rhino was going to come to appreciate that wallow as much as Romy and the little ones, especially deeper into the summer months when the full heat of the season hit. They'd need to keep lots of water on-hand too, which reminded him he'd just done an idiotic thing in leaving his mate and the boys outside without providing a drinking source beside the sprinkler.

That he could quickly remedy.

Stepping from the shower, he hastily wiped the water from his skin, stepped into a pair of cutoff jean shorts, and hurried to the pantry, where a large red and white cooler rested beneath a lower shelf. He meant to fill it earlier and carry it outside where it would be in easy reach while he was working, then the thought had slipped his mind among thoughts of earning another smile from Romy, and by the time he'd remembered he'd already been dirty and so used to discomfort that he'd just convinced himself that it wasn't a need.

For him, that was fine. He was used to denying himself things and going without. Enforcers trained for sacrifice and that included discomforts like prolonged thirst, hunger and heat exposure. Romy and those boys, however, risked a heat injury if he didn't provide for them correctly.

Filling it with the two bags of ice he'd had delivered earlier along with their groceries, he added a case of bottled water too, all short, round bottles with flip top lids for easier consumption by the little ones, but also easier if Romy or he needed to help them. He'd filled one whole shelf of the fridge with natural juice blends of all assorted flavors, no sugar added because sugar could dehydrate them in summer according to Sasha, who'd explained that they could give the boys those in place of meals if they ever got too hot to want solid foods. At least, with their request for burgers, they didn't need to worry about that at the moment. He checked the thermostat on the way out and made a mental note to show Romy where it was so he could adjust it if he ever needed to.

Romy and the boys had shifted and holy shit, his body's reaction at seeing his mate's rhino form was instant lust-need-holy fuckin' desire. He knew the front of his jean shorts bulged as his eyes roved over that rear end. He immediately shut those thoughts down out of fear at his bulkier form, trying to trap and mount Romy and wind up hurting the much smaller rhino.

Blowing out a breath, Bash set the cooler down in easy reach of his mate, along with the large new bowl he'd brought out, that he filled with cold water, so they wouldn't have to shift to get a drink while they played.

Now he could make the burgers, though walking was next to impossible until he adjusted himself when he was certain Romy wasn't watching, and hurried back inside as quickly as he could manage, which was pretty damned painful.

Fuckkkkkkkkk.

His phone pinged with the recipe Sasha had promised him. He'd already sent her the latest information on the boys.

On the counter, right in front of where he began assembling ingredients, sat four

small, state-of-the-art monitors, each linked to the motion sensors and security cameras he'd installed before he'd begun work on the wallow. Nothing would be able to get close to his mate and the boys without Bash knowing about it, and the best part was being able to watch them enjoy themselves.

One of the little boys had his legs in the air as he rolled side to side, coating his back in cool, muddy water and having what looked like the best time ever. The other was a little more cautious, while Romy had sprawled on his side and squirmed in such a way that left Bash thinking about other ways he could prompt him to move like that.

Shit.

Fuck.

Focus.

Blowing out an even bigger breath, Bash scrolled over the directions, then started dicing the onions and mushrooms to be mixed in with the burgers, having to text Sasha a question about where the line was between cheesy and too cheesy and did she really mean for him to put cheese inside the burgers too.

Yes, yes, she did.

Shape burger, insert cheese, add a little more meat, wrap meat around it, add to the pan, and be prepared to melt more on top, but only once he'd flipped them.

Check, check, check.

With careful precision and attention to details, Bash crafted each one, then set the heat between medium and medium-low so they wouldn't char.

Sasha had been thoughtful enough to give him that tip too, and a reminder about sunscreen for when the boys were human, especially with them being fair-haired blonds.

In between cooking, he ran up towels and body wash for Romy and the boys, then laid out a large, thick blanket for them to have their picnic on. He remembered the sunscreen too and had the whole thing set up for them before he needed to flip the burgers. When they'd finished cooking, he set them on a platter to rest before heading out to see that Romy had already gotten them out of the wallow and was beginning to clean up Nambi, so Bash immediately jumped in, rinsing then washing Toofus and helping to get them settled on the blanket before he retrieved their feast.

"Ohhhhhh Cheesy!" Nambi said, clapping the moment he saw them.

"I hoped they turned out okay," Bash said as he sat across from Romy, so he could help the boys with their food and give Romy the chance to eat without too much interruption. "I've never made burgers before or much of anything, but I promise I will learn for the three of you."

And with that, Bash carefully filled each of their plates, though the big rhino only took one for himself. It wasn't that he wasn't hungry, he was ravenous, actually, but no way in hell was he taking more until they'd eaten their fill. He just wasn't hard-wired that way.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Romy

Three days later

It was exhausting watching Bash run around, but one thing was clear—he was trying his best to make sure everyone's needs got taken care of. So Romy offered encouraging smiles and did his best not to think about the scent of his mate when he'd first caught sight of Romy in his animal form.

No, not thinking about that at all. He didn't think about that for the remainder of that day. He didn't think about that as the boys shifted to get in the wallow just the day before to play with Bash in his human form. Splashing and playing with the boys like it was the most natural thing to him, when clearly he had little experience. Romy most definitely didn't think about it with the way Bash's clothes clung to his wet skin, showing off all the muscles he had. His days were definitely none thinking ones...

Romy sagged against the bathroom door where he'd come to escape. He shut and, for good measure, locked the bathroom door, needing to give himself a minute to regroup from all the non-thinking he'd done.

All right, he'd thought none stop about the delicious smelling Bash and all the hotness and Daddyness that made Romy want to swoon. What he'd seen the couple of times he'd peeked out the window from daycare to spy on Bash—not to mention the time he saw Bash cuddling Cosmo in daycare, which was when Romy finally figured out that Bash was his mate—had not prepared Romy for just how wonderful Bash could be.



Nothing disputed his mate was the most caring person that Romy knew. Ab-so-fucking-luty-ly, nothing could deny it with days of watching and yearning. The achy feeling happening inside his baggy shorts, the only ones that hid his problem, spoke to a bigger issue. He'd volleyed the ball at Bash, basically leaving all the chasing to him. Romy had done it on purpose because he'd been more than a little miffed at how Bash behaved with Cosmo in the past.

His rational side, with all the understanding that Cosmo and Bash were playing a part, sharing information so the big rhino could get back the stolen crash members, got that. The irrational side of him hated the idea that Bash might have preferred someone as pretty as Cosmo. Someone trained to look out for himself and be able to handle any situation.

Romy was not that.

Yes, he'd survived when his family had not. Witnessed things no child should see happen to his parents and sibling, along with other members of his crash. He'd suffered through their torture, but he'd no skills to fight them. He'd escaped through cunning, but that still didn't make him like Cosmo, did it?

"You alright in there?" Bash asked, his voice more a rumble, but Romy heard concern.

He supposed the way he'd fled after the boys had gone to sleep said something was up, more than he needed an urgent pee. "Just need a moment," Romy replied, going to the sink to run some icy water to splash on his overheated face.

"Erm... yeah... okay."

The sound of booted feet hitting wood faded away and Romy stared at himself in the mirrored cabinet above the sink. "Why can't I just ask for what I want?" Because he

wasn't built that way. He liked someone else to be in charge. It was why, when he discovered the daycare at Little Paws Haven, he'd felt an immediate kinship with the others who liked to go in there.

Sinking into that playful place inside him had saved him. Watching how the Daddy's took care of the boys, that had struck a deep chord in Romy. One that the man in the house was playing a damn fine tune on despite the fact they were mates.

Bash was a wonderful Daddy.

He slipped his hand into his pocket as he continued to look at himself in the mirror. Fate had chosen for him. More than a week in Bash's company and Romy was more than willing to admit Fate had done a good job. Romy wanted him as his Daddy.

He gave himself no time to worry about how to achieve that alone, instead he dialed the one man who understood Bash's daddy side: Cosmo.

Four rings and Cosmo answered breathlessly, "Hey Romy."

"Hey," he replied, starting to feel a little uncertainty creep in.

"Whatsup? Problem?"

"I... yes..."

Cosmo chuckled. "Okay... can you give me a little more to go on?"

He sighed, disheartened around his own lack of verbal skills right then. "How did you entice your Daddies to..." he blushed scarlet, "claim you?" The latter was hardly a whisper, but he knew Cosmo's cat would hear him.

“I wouldn’t recommend doing what I did.” The chuckle turned into full on gales of laughter.

“What did you do?” Romy asked intrigued, he tugged at a stray lock of hair and tucked it behind his ear.

“I kicked Nomad into my house and ran into a burning building, resulting in Harley chasing after me and setting his clothes on fire. I got spanked!”

The way he said it, his voice full of awe, got Romy frowning. “You did all that to get them to claim you?”

“Nah, I did all that to save some things, and it turned out it was a hard limit, one I hadn’t encountered before and proved to me just how much my Daddies wanted me, even with all the stuff I’d done.”

“Oh.” He could see why that was a hard limit. Problem was, none of that helped Romy figure out how to move Bash along to the claiming side of things.

“That didn’t answer your question, did it?”

“Not really.” He sighed, his shoulders slumping.

There was a pause before Cosmo spoke again. “Bash wants you.”

“Does he?” It didn’t feel like it. All right, it did a little, he’d gone to so much effort to provide him and the children with a safe place. What worried Romy was that Bash was just being an enforcer and looking out for them. He said as much to Cosmo.

“Bash is an enforcer. It’s what he knows.” There was a sound of scratching in the background. “If you want my advice, then you have to show him how to be your

mate. Bash will follow your lead on this. It's what I did with my mates eventually, and it worked out great."

Romy thought on that as they finished the call, with Cosmo planning to come the next day to have a play date with him and the children. Cosmo was more than a little excited to see them in their human form.

He slipped the phone back into his shorts and considered how to show Bash what he wanted. He rubbed his jaw and eyed what he had on.

Baggy clothes hid everything...

A grin formed full of cheekiness, one that Romy hadn't seen in years. He swung around and opened the bathroom door, creeping out down the hallway, not once considering the surveillance cameras.

He went into the bedroom that, as yet, he'd not slept in and eyed the bed before going to the closet, opening the door to eye the shelves. Something on the middle shelf caught his attention, and the smile he wore widened.

Perfect.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

He got it now, why Romy slept on the floor between Toofus and Nambi's beds. It wasn't just about listening for nightmares and being right there if one of them couldn't sleep. More, it was about the soft snuffle of breathing when little snouts let out puffs of air. It was about watching hooves churning when a little one tried to run in their sleep. How peaceful they were when dreaming, and the easy way it could lull one into thinking that kind of bliss could last.

If it wasn't for the need to pause constantly and remind himself to be alert and remain on guard, he'd have given in to the urge to get lost in the whole domestic vibe, pretending this was the only life they'd ever known.

In another time, they might have met at a group wallow, two crashes lazing the day away together, its members lazily becoming acquainted with one another as they rolled in the mud beneath the midday sun. Maybe they'd have bumped snouts and said hello, or knocked horns and had a laugh when the vibration led to them sneezing on one another. With no rogue council to worry about, they might have found a spot beneath the stars, touching, rubbing, claiming one another until they were too tired to join the others in the morning wallow.

The images in his head painted a pretty picture until Bash considered the skills it would have left him without. So many of the shifters who had lost their lives lately had lived blissfully unaware of the danger they were in until it had crept into their midst and destroyed them from the inside out.

He, Romy, Toofus and Nambi were alive. That's where Bash's focus needed to stay.

On that and on keeping them that way.

Creeping forward, he carefully plucked a stuffed duck off the floor and tucked the stuffed animal back beside Toofus before the boy woke and realized it was gone. Grazing the back of his hand over the boy's cheek told him that he was still nice and cool, even with the sheet draped over him. That was good, it meant they finally had the air conditioner set to a temperature where the little ones were comfortable. He just hoped that meant they'd get a full night's sleep tonight. They needed it after all the playing they'd done, especially when Nambi had already proved what kind of cranky rhino tantrums he could throw when he got overly stimulated and too frustrated to take a nap.

He and Romy had done the only thing they could think of at the time, which was set Toofus out of harm's way, over by the sprinkler, while guarding each side of the wallow to allow Nambi a safe place to rampage and stomp. Even fussy and charging from one end of the wallow to the other, throwing mud in the air with his horn, the little one had been too damned adorable. It made it impossible for Bash to keep a straight face, let alone a stern one, when Nambi had been on his little rampage.

Hell, if Bash was being honest with himself, he'd wanted to join the little one and stomp out some of his own frustrations at being unable to find answers, unable to find a solid trail, unable to find anything but proof that someone had cared enough about those boys to carry them as close as they could to Cookietown. Then they'd given them a shove in the right direction before turning around and stomping every which way under the sun just to confuse the trail. They had done such a damn good job of it that even the best trackers they had couldn't untangle it. A fact that had been particularly galling to the pair of rhino's whose job it had been. Bash, who'd tried his hand at it only to come up just as empty-handed, and Arlo, who was too stubborn to give up, continuing to go back time and time again.

The wallow got more tempting with the reminder of his frustrations.

Too tempting.

Way too tempting to resist, actually.

Without giving it any further thought, Bash turned away from the door and the sleeping rhinos to walk carefully through the house. He deposited his shirt on the couch beside his pillow, his pants he left halfway between the front door and the wallow, while his boxers he left on the lawn chair beside the wallow, just out of reach of the sprinkler so they wouldn't get wet for when he needed them. No one wanted to frighten Romy when he'd disappeared and hadn't come out of the bathroom.

There was a brief sound of water splashing, but nothing else. What had he been doing in there?

Naked in the moonlight, he rolled his shoulders, pushing aside his thoughts while cracking his neck. He took one last look around, listening out for any sounds, and a moment later determined it was safe.

For the first time in over a week, he let his guard down a little and slipped freely into his rhino form with a grunt and a loud enough burst of flatulence that he'd have pinked up some had anyone been out there with him to hear it. Instead, he sighed contently as he slid into the wallow, tail flicking rapidly as he brushed at a fly on his flank.

Oh yeah, even better than skin.

Muddy water lapped up his sides. He ducked his head beneath the surface, then popped up and shook mud splatter everywhere. It landed in plops like heavy rain, then Bash gave in to the temptation to plod, squishing mud beneath his hooves with every pass he made along the length of the wallow.

No doubt about it, he needed this. Almost as much as he needed relief for the below the belt issue he was rarely without these days. Only a mate wasn't someone to just scratch an itch with.

A mate was supposed to be everything one could ever ask for or need.

And that's where things got complicated.

Romy

His plans flew right out the window as he watched Bash strip off his underwear and place it on the lawn chair. Romy held perfectly still watching Bash's ass flex in the moonlight. The light cast shadows over the dips and curves of a man who looked like one of the Greek gods that Romy had read about. Perfect.

Romy released the tiniest shuddery breath, absolutely not wanting to spoil the show and alert Bash to his presence. When Bash shifted and the sound of his ass firing off came with a splodging sound, Romy quickly placed his hand over his mouth to hide his giggles.

Bash was a big man, but his rhino was huge and powerful looking. His own rhino side was desperate to come and play. Romy hesitated for several moments, watching Bash have fun.

I can do this.

Yes, I can.

Could I?

Oh crap...



Romy continued to watch his fingers trembling as he peeled off the tiny shorts and little crop top he used on occasion to sleep in when it got too hot. He really didn't like to sleep naked, it just felt wrong.

Naked and aroused, Romy went to the door, treading silently, having learned to do this when trapped by the council. His hands fluttered at the sides of his bare legs before he stepped outside into the warm night air.

The sounds of joy coming from the wallow were too much to resist. Romy shifted and slowly made his way to the wallow.

Bash's colossal head lifted, and his eyes glinted like steel in the moonlight. He snuffled loudly and wagged his head up and down in invitation, but he never moved from the far side of the wallow, giving Romy plenty of room. It was a generous thing to do, but that was not what either he or his rhino wanted.

He plotted into the muddy water, keeping his noises low so as not to wake the boys, and shook his body, creating muddy waves to splash over his skin. It was bliss. Bash's thoughtfulness of creating such a luxury for them was all his rhino half could think about as he splashed his way over to the huge rhino and lifted his snout, wanting a kiss.

His rhino was much more forward than Romy in his human form could be. Seeing this was maybe a good thing, he watched Bash's rhino edge closer, being real careful not to squish him, and bumped their snouts together.

Romy whistled, his rhino giving all the signs he wanted to mate and making Romy blush hard and be grateful Bash could not see him do that.

Bash's rhino responded by vocalizing low rumble grunts as they continued to bump snouts. His big lips nibbling at Romy. With Bash being so much bigger than him,

Romy's rhino didn't feel in the least bit intimidated and in fact was loving it.

Bash the whole time, let Romy's rhino lead and when his rhino wriggled to turn around in a kind of chase me fashion, Romy rolled his eyes as his rhino's side behavior.

He was going to be mortified when he shifted back, but nothing was stopping his rhino from wiggling his butt at their mate.

The loud gasp that came as hands stroked over his ass, got all of Romy's attention and he squeaked as he shifted, landing with a splash in the mud.

Oops.

Mud dripped down Bash's face, making him appear gray in the moonlight.

"Sorry," he mumbled, unsure what he was actually apologizing for, the mud splashing or his rhino's pushy behavior. Everyone knew alphas didn't like to be pushed, especially a Daddy alpha.

Bash's chuckles were not what Romy expected as he watched him swipe the mud off his face and grin at Romy. The next thing Bash splashed him, his grin getting bigger. "I enjoy playing in the mud."

Romy's eyes narrowed and his heart beat a little faster as he scooped up a handful of mud and threw it purposefully at Bash, giggling the whole time it slid down his massive chest.

"Now you're askin' for it," he said gleefully, reaching out to grab for Romy.

He squealed and darted backwards, sending mud flying everywhere.

“You ain’t gonna escape me, little bumper.”

At the use of the affectionate name, he squealed, loving it as he nimbly darted to the left before Bash could reach him. Mud sloshed everywhere, blinding him for a second as he once more tried to evade, laughing so much he struggled to get his breath.

Large powerful arms scooped his wriggling body up, slippery with mud he slid sensuously against Bash getting a rumble of approval that went straight to his cock.

Romy stilled in Bash’s arms and stared at the filthy man grinning at him in such a way his belly did a big flip-flop like when he dived in the mud. His world narrowed down to those dark soulful eyes, and he darted forward and planted a kiss on Bash’s mouth, reacting while his thinking brain was off line.

The arms holding him tightened just enough to hold him steady and Bash’s breath came in a fast staccato. “Can I kiss you?” he whispered against Romy’s lips.

A shuddery breath made his body press more firmly against the slick chest, and he found he’d lost his voice. Romy nodded his head, hoping that the big rhino caught the move, because he wasn’t sure he could find his tongue any time soon with what he could feel touching his thigh.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

Groaning, Bash nipped his mate's lower lip and nibbled along the edge, kissing the corner of his mouth before slotting their lips together completely and swiping his tongue along the seam, urging Romy to open for him. When his mate's lips parted and Bash got his first taste of Romy, all he wanted was a way to stop the universe, so they could stay like this, making out in the wallow, his hands on Romy's tiny behind, slowly rocking him against his erection.

Leaning back against the edge of the wallow, Bash squeezed Romy's rear and grunted against his lips, their breath mingling as they panted, occasionally nipping each other's lips in between short, peppery kisses that kept their arousal levels ramped up.

Bash's fingertips grazed up and down Romy's crack, never enough to truly touch that most intimate place. He wanted to. Fucking hell, he needed to bury himself there and feel Romy's tight walls squeezing him. Grunting, Bash rocked Romy against him, shifting his hip so instead of rubbing alongside Romy's thigh, their cocks pressed together, the motion and the mud creating delicious friction as Bash deepened the kiss again.

The need to claim his mate was at war with his desire to be careful of him and not push too far, too fast. To make Romy feel like he had to be ready for whatever Bash wanted when they hadn't even talked about what either of them enjoyed or craved with a partner. Right now, the thing Bash craved the most was Romy riding him, the smaller rhino with his knees pressed tight to Bash's sides as he squirmed in his lap.

Bouncing would come later. He wanted the feel of Romy's hips rolling against his, the tightness, the shuddery feel of his mate coming apart on top of him. Gruff and groaning, Bash rocked Romy against him a little faster, pressing up with his hips, wanting to feel him unravel first. The way Romy clung to him, little scratch marks slowly forming on Bash's shoulders, each pinprick of pain heightening his pleasure.

He pressed a fingertip between Romy's cheeks and rubbed, the action prompting Romy to squirm with more urgency. Bash was so on edge, so lost in the pleasure of his mate's lips and tongue dancing over his, that he lost his footing a little. The slide and subsequent jarring of their bodies as Bash landed on his ass, Romy straddling his lap, drew a curse from Romy as he came, thank fuck, because Bash couldn't keep from coming any longer. With one hand gripping Romy's ass and the fingers on his other hand running through his hair to tug gently, Bash promptly spurted all over his mate's belly, chest and chin.

Even as they panted, they still squirmed against one another, neither cock fully deflated. The only thought churning through Bash's mind was that they needed to clean up so they could get filthy again.

Then the snap of a branch changed everything.

Bash lurched up, his senses on full alert, twisting, he spun Romy around to press him beneath Bash's larger body at the edge of the wallow, water lapped up over Romy's shoulders. But at least Bash could leave him a little room to breathe as he scanned the darkness, cursing the fact that his nearest weapon was on the lawn chair with his underwear.

A rhino's vision being notoriously bad in the dark, Bash had installed strobe lights around the entire property, all of which he'd turned on when he'd come out here. It was the other reason for the thick, heavy curtains in front of all the windows. To keep the light out while they slept. Now, Bash attempted to use it to his advantage, only

instead of an enemy, what ambled out of the tree line was a seriously rotund racoon that looked like he'd raided every trashcan on the crash's land and hadn't found them lacking in things to sustain him.

Little fucker seemed completely oblivious to their presence, as was evident when he jauntily wandered up to the edge of the wallow furthest from them, dipped his hands in the water, rubbed them together then rubbed his face and set about cleaning his whiskers.

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Bash grumbled, feeling even more outraged when the racoon jerked his head up at the sound of Bash’s voice, before clumsily whirling and scampering off with a disgruntled bit of chatter. “Yeah, fuck you too, you nosy bastard! You come back here again, and I’ll make a hat out of you!”

Beneath him, he heard Romy snicker, then break into full on giggles, and could only imagine what he thought about the way Bash had pinned him against the side of the wallow, his cock resting on Romy’s chest as he’d carefully kept the other man protected. He knew he could relax a little now and ease some of his bulk, and his dick, off Romy. But damn it all, it was so close to Romy’s mouth, and they hadn’t had nearly enough fun with one another. He was just about to suggest taking things to the shower, when he caught movement out of the corner of his eyes and this time it wasn’t a harmless racoon that stepped out, but something feathered and standing almost as tall as a human which did not look right at all.

His shift was swift despite knowing it would squish his mate, Bash scrambled over the edge of the wallow and charged, chuffing and snorting, only to miss when the bird launched into the air before Bash could gore it. Whirling, he was too big and too slow to avoid those talons lashing out at his shoulder, but his hide would not be pierced, and he was able to smack the side of his head into the bird, knocking it crooked before it “hooooottttted” down at him like a battle charge.

Fine by him, Bash let out the loudest, growliest, squealiest trumpeting sound he'd ever trumpeted, even as he swung his head to keep the bird in sight. Three more times it lashed out with claws, three more times it failed to pierce, and once, a loud, dry crack split the night as a claw broke off and hit the ground. Then it made the mistake of going for his eyes, talons outstretched, but not enough to avoid Bash's 15 inch horn, which he thrust upward, catching the bird in the belly.

Impaled, the horn trapped behind its breastbone the owl went for a bone crushing ride as Bash shook his head side to side, tearing up the bird's insides and snapping bones, especially when Bash stepped closer to a tree trunk and started beating the feathered form against the trunk. Bits of bone, ruffled feathers and blood splatter soon decorated the ground at the base of the tree and the trunk. The battered form slipped off the horn, leaving jagged ribs and a gaping hole that shockingly revealed a still beating heart.

Oh, fuck, that noise.

Trumpeting again, Bash reared up and brought his heavy front hooves down on the fallen bird. Then he did it a second time and a third, the crunching, squishing noises coming from it leaving him with a feeling of satisfaction, specifically when Sasha arrived, and they finished stomping it to bits together.

She wasn't the only member of the crash to come running either, as rhinos in both human and animal form responded to his call. Bash blinked and was finally able to take a full look around now that the bird had stopped twitching, and what he saw was the best kind of reminder of why this crash was the safest place for Romy and those boys. His home had become surrounded by members of the crash, all looking outward and upward, protecting his mate and the boys. Bash didn't need to look for Romy, he knew his mate had rushed inside to care for the boys the moment Romy became free to climb from the wallow and went to protect them. He didn't have to ask to know they were safe. He could see it in the stance his crash had taken.

It was a good thing, it really was, because suddenly Bash wasn't feeling so hot. A wave of dizziness hit, then nausea as the bird's blood continued to drip from his horn over his lips, the coppery taste impossible to escape now.

Grunting, Bash's front legs buckled, then his chin hit the dirt, his skull rattled, and every fucking thing faded to black.

Romy

When the squawking, trumpeting, and stomping stopped, Romy struggled with his need to go and check on Bash. He fought with the necessity to take care of the little ones who'd shifted before Romy had reached them. Covered in mud, slipping and sliding over the wooden floors to get to them, he'd nearly head butted the wall. They had been all he could focus on at the time.

Now the commotion had stopped, Miranda, one of the older crash members, who'd remained in her human form and had come to check on the boys, nodded to the door. "It's okay, I'll protect the little ones. Go on now. I can see you want to go check on your mate."

He didn't argue and didn't question how the woman knew he was Bash's mate. Not that they'd had a chance to mate with the owl interrupting things. He'd save being miffed for later.

He hadn't reached the front door when he felt a shudder under his feet. What was that? He was running, unsure why his gut believed something was very wrong with Bash. He flew out the door, the crash, or most of them were there. It took a second to see Bash's rhino slumped on the ground amongst a gory mess.

No. No. No, his mind screamed as he launched himself at the rhino, slipping and sliding once more, this time in blood and guts from the thing that hadn't looked



human or an owl but a combination of both. Romy would need to think about that some other time, his brain right now had once focus—Bash.

“Is he dead?” he asked those crouching next to Bash as he came to a breathless halt, looking down at the still form of his mate.

“No, injured and something is off with the blood. It don’t smell right to me,” the large rhino Romy couldn’t remember his name said.

Romy spun around and jumped into the wallow. He sniffed at the muddy water. The lights didn’t show any guts floating about. “Bring him into the wallow,” he demanded. He wasn’t naturally bossy, but this was different. “I’ll wash his hide. Come on,” he encouraged frantically in his panic.

Four rhinos carefully used their front legs to roll Bash into the wallow. He was big and the wave of muddy water Romy hadn’t anticipated hit him full frontal like a mini tidal wave. He gulped the dirty water, knocked on to his ass only to come up spluttering.

He scrubbed his face, blinking the dirt off his eyelashes. His own needs were not his first priority. He climbed on top of Bash’s vast body and directed the nearest rhino. “Splash him.”

He kept his mouth shut this time when the rhino did as he asked, and Romy started washing away the gunk covering Bash’s head first, checking for wounds. Then he moved down his body. Muddy water wasn’t ideal, but it would help his rhino.

Romy counted off in his head the seconds between each breath that Bash took. The jagged wound to the top of Bash’s shoulder, he could see was knitting back together. “That’s it, you can’t leave me all alone,” he sobbed as the shock tried to seep through his barriers.

His past was there wanting to use its nasty, biting grip to drag him backwards to when he had no one. “I need you. I need your kisses. Do you hear me Daddy? I’ll be really cross if you leave me,” he hiccuped, sounding anything but forceful the way he wanted to.

Time passed by with no awareness while he carefully examined, cleaned, and moved over Bash’s gigantic frame until he reached Bash’s tail and worked his way up between his legs. Romy’s arms were heavy with fatigue as he continued over Bash’s chest and to his head again. Exhausted, Romy listened and watched Bash breathing. Had it deepened?

Was it faster?

Slower?

Shouldn’t he be waking up now?

“Wake up,” he snapped, his fear leading the charge. “I mean it, if you don’t wake up, I’m gonna... I’m gonna spank your bottom for scaring me, Daddy.”

He peered closer.

Had his eyelids fluttered?

He held his breath and got close to the big horn glowing in the moonlight, giving it a stroke. “Please, wake up,” he sobbed. He used his other hand to rub his drippy nose and squinted. Was he...

Heart pounding, Romy’s lips curved up at the edges as slowly Bash opened his eyes and stared at him. The relief was immense, and Romy collapsed, his knees too weak to hold him. He wrapped his little arms around Bash’s head, careful of his horn, and

clung on even as a set of hands tugged at him.

Sasha's gentle voice didn't initially break through his inner turmoil. "Come on Romy, listen to me, you need to let him shift, darling."

Romy gave Bash's rhino a little room to move, like two inches, as he glanced back at Sasha, trying to blink through his muddy eyelashes. "What?"

"He needs to shift, get his wounds checked, and eat."

"He does," he answered stupidly, too tired to think now with his adrenaline crash.

"Yep, you can sit on his lap. I'm sure you'd both like that. But let's give Bash a little room now to shift, okay?"

Romy went with her, but never took his eyes off Bash. Didn't blink for fear that he was imagining his mate sitting upright, bleeding from his shoulder and looking grayer than he did in his rhino form. "Daddy," he sobbed, needing Bash to get his breath back.

He lifted his arms. "Daddy."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

Romy's heartbroken wails did more to rouse Bash than anything else, including the muddy water washing the blood from his body. The sound stabbed at him, along with each cry of Daddy that Romy let out. His sobs, Bash could barely breathe, they hit him so hard. Harder even than the blood of the owl when it dripped into his mouth from his horn. It didn't matter to Bash if his legs wobbled and his vision kept zoning in and out, he was getting to Romy.

Stumble-staggering, he crashed into a solid wall of muscle only to feel solid arms steady him. Glancing up, he could barely make out Arlo's face as his fellow enforcer kept him from face planting in the muddy water.

"Look at me," Arlo snapped, the order helping to sharpen Bash's focus. "There's poison in your blood. If you don't burn it off and puke it out, it will kill you. If you let that happen, I will claim your mate and those boys for my own."

Now that was not gonna fuckin' happen.

Grunting, Bash attempted to shove away from him, only to find himself shaken like a rag doll, which further pissed him off.

"No!" Romy wailed. "I want my Daddy, not you!"

Shaking his head to clear the fog, Bash huffed, snorting out his fury even as his stomach twisted up again and he nearly doubled over. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sasha restrain Romy to keep his mate from stumbling between them.

Her mouth pressed to Romy's ear, but Bash couldn't hear what she was saying to him. Not over the roaring in his ears at Romy's continued sobs.

"You hear your boy?" Arlo asked, drawing Bash's attention back to him. "He wants his Daddy, but his Daddy is about to pass out on my feet. Guess he's not going to get what he wants, is he?"

"F-fuck you," Bash stammered, trying again to shove him away, but it was like smashing into a wall made entirely of titanium and tungsten.

"Is that what you want?" Arlo spat. "Me to fuck your corpse in front of him after that poison kills you? If that's the case, I promise to give him one hell of a show."

Snorting in fury, Bash finally mustered the strength to rear back and take a swing at Arlo, which the bastard ducked. He returned fire too, forcing Bash to get his arm up so he didn't get a huge fist square in the face. The force of the impact on his arm sent a stab of pain through his injured shoulder, while the rapid movement tore something, making it bleed more. Blood dripped down his arm as he tried to tackle Arlo, only to have the fucker sidestep. Face first in the wall Bash went, the water smacking him in the face and left him sputtering. More furious than before, he rumbled out his displeasure. Not only was the bastard threatening to take everything from him, but he was forcing Bash to humiliate himself in the process.

Desperate to prove that he deserved Romy and those boys in front of the whole crash, Bash thrashed in the water and rolled, slipping and staggering, to regain his footing, turning in time to avoid the kick Arlo had aimed at his ribs. Heat and fury drove him to unleash a flurry of punches and kicks, all blocked by Arlo, who shoved him off his feet once more.

Mother fucker!

“Fuckin’ weak ass enforcer!” Arlo snapped. “Do better, or don’t, and lay there and watch me claim your mate in the mud right beside you. I promise I’ll have enough left to make you my bitch after I get done with him.”

Roaring, Bash came up out of the water with an uppercut that actually connected, though Arlo got his arm up to block the haymaker Bash swung at him next. Half blind from the water and mud in his eyes, Bash slugged it out with him, until a stiff shot to the midsection doubled him over and all that twisting his belly had been doing finally resulted in him spewing dark, bloody bile everywhere. Heave after heave, he brought it up along with the remains of his supper. Until he went to his knees in the wallow, humiliation warring with the sting of defeat as he knelt, shaking and puking his guts out.

When an arm draped over his back, he feared it was Romy attempting to cling to him again, and he swung his head so he could see him one last time, only to find Arlo kneeling beside him in the mud. “Breathe and finish getting that shit out of your system,” Arlo said. “Forgive me, my brother, for the things I said. I needed you mad enough to fire up your system to purge that shit eating at your insides.”

It took a moment to sink in and once it did, Bash swiped at his mouth, then embraced Arlo, patting his shoulder. “Nothing to forgive, my brother,” Bash said, the haze of anger fading at the reality of the truth. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” A bottle of water appeared from the left, and he nodded at Zander, another enforcer. He nodded his appreciation, then took a mouthful to rinse and spit out the foul tasting poison. When he finished cleaning his mouth, he drank the remaining water, happy when it didn’t upset his stomach.

Arlo took the bottle from his trembling fingers, grinning. “Let me help you to your mate.”

Bash felt no shame at all about letting Arlo bare the bulk of his weight when that meant he finally got to gather his sobbing mate in his arms and hold him close. Stroking his back, Bash nuzzled his neck, chuffing and murmuring comforting sounds in Romy's ear until they both finally settled.

"I've got you," he murmured past his thickening throat, his emotions riding him hard. "I've got you. Daddy is right here, and no one is taking him away from you. You're going to stay right here in Daddy's arms for as long as you need to. Safe, you are safe, my little bumper. Safe with me, I swear."

Someone checked his shoulder, but they weren't impeding him holding Romy, so he let them do what they needed to do.

"I tried to explain," Sasha whispered, her eyes full of tears.

Bash nodded and mouthed "thank you," understanding now what she'd been doing when he'd caught sight of her whispering to Romy, who had fallen too deep into his little space to comprehend why Arlo had done what he'd done. Bash would make sure Romy understood it fully once he'd settled down and had time to see that Bash was okay. What he needed now was comfort and reassurance. Bash had more than enough energy for that.

Romy

Sinking away from the chaos was what he did to protect himself. His brain was fuzzy, his heart had beaten so fast, it made him shake. His desperation caused everything to feel like the world was spiraling around him so fast he couldn't catch his breath.

Large hands rubbed at his clothes, causing the wet cloth to itch him. But he could smell Bash under all the other smells, so he buried his head close to the warm, sticky body and snuffled to seek the purest bits.

There... there is Daddy.

Voices rumbled through him and around him, only he paid them no mind. He wasn't ever gonna move from this spot. Happy in those big arms holding him, he let them carry the weight that could make him feel small and useless.

We aren't useless with Daddy, the Little voice insisted. We helped him and now he's rewarding us, even though you got bossy.

He held on tighter, he wasn't normally a naughty boy.

"I've got you. Daddy's right here."

The rumbling helped, then other hands touched him, and he flinched away. "Noooo, don't touch me," he wailed in distress. Fear from before came out of its box, the one he carefully tucked away to keep hidden everything that hurt him.

"No one but Daddy is going to touch you, okay little bumper. Daddy promises. I just need help to get up."

He lifted his head, blinking hard. "I's can help you, Daddy." He shifted his bottom off the legs and wobbled to his feet. Not looking around, he offered his hand.

It was hard, because Daddy was so much bigger and heavier than him. But with some huffing and puffing, they were standing, and Romy was grinning. "See, I's good boy."

A gentle hand cupped his cheek. "The bestest boy in the world. Let's go get you cleaned up."

He looked up shyly when the hand dropped away. "You need a bath Daddy, you're



dirty too.” He gave him a thoughtful look and went to click his little fingers. It was hard, but he managed on the second try. “We’s could have a bath together,” he offered, giving one of his biggest smiles.

“I’ll go run it,” someone said, chuckling.

But Romy was ignoring them because they were the one to say they’d touch him. He didn’t want anyone but Daddy touching him ever again, so he said so. “No touches from anyone but my Daddy,” he said in a snappy tone, scowling at those close by.

His lower lip trembled because he used his naughty voice again. He looked up at Daddy from under his eyelashes to check if he was mad. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” he whisper-shouted.

Daddy chuckled, and he got his cheek caressed. “Daddy feels the same and if I had the energy, I’d carry you to the bathroom.”

He grinned, seeing he was going to be a great help to his Daddy. He slipped under his big arm and lifted it with effort over his shoulders. “Lean on me Daddy, I’s can help.”

Huffing, puffing once more, he also panted, getting stickier from helping by the time they got to the bathroom. But it was worth it as Daddy continued to chuckle. The sound was like happy birds chirping in the morning. Then he was back to scowling, thinking about the horrible bird-thing who hurt Daddy.

At the side of the big bubbly bath, Daddy ran a finger between his brows and stopped his chuckles. “What’s up, little bumper?”

“That bird was bad.”

“He was.” He kissed the tip of Romy’s nose, making him giggle when his dirty

whiskers tickled. “Let’s not talk about that. Daddy needs to brush his teeth and then give his boy a bath.”

“Together Daddy, a bath together,” he stated quickly, so Daddy wouldn’t forget.

“Yes, together.”

Two minutes later, Daddy’s teeth were clean and sparkly in his dirty face, he helped Romy into the bubbles. They tickled his skin and went a gray color as he sank down. “Oh no, they’re getting dirty,” he exclaimed.

“We can wash off the dirt, then run another bath with fresh bubbles.”

He bounced in the water, getting more bubbles to change color. “We can.”

“Absolutely. Now make room for Daddy.”

He squished himself up one end, but still he ended up on top of Daddy because he was so big. It was all right because when Daddy touched him it made him feel good and tingly.

As promised, the water got emptied, and they got fresh bubbles. Daddy fed him bits from the large plate someone left outside the door for them while they waited for the bath to fill. Now Daddy’s skin was all clean because he’d been a good boy and helped, so they were squeaky clean. They were dry and in snuggly clothes. Ones that felt soft against his skin.

He crawled up on top of Daddy when he lay down next to him and opened his arms. Romy moved around, looking for the comfiest place. His face pushed into the crook of Daddy’s neck and sighed in contentment. He inhaled and got a good whiff of clean Daddy.

He lay there for a moment, something inside him nudged at him. His lips parted, and he mouthed at the skin, then his teeth bit hard and true. The scent surrounding him changed, only not in a bad way. There was a low rumbled groan against his cheek as he sucked hard.

There, that fixed everything. No one was going to threaten to take him from Daddy again or touch him. He was Daddy's forever. He shut his eyes and sighed happily.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

His boy had marked him. No waiting on an invitation, no waiting for Daddy to take charge, his boy had done what he needed to do to protect himself, and as a result those boys. Bash couldn't have been prouder of him over it. Little Bumper just kept proving how hard he'd fight for the life he wanted, and Bash would be damned if he closed his eyes and let sleep claim him before his boy wore his mark, too. He needed to be certain Romy and the boys had the full protection of a claim.

His heart, his soul with Romy's claiming bite, knew it was more than that. Tonight, when he'd been faltering and on his knees listening to Arlo threatening to claim Romy, icy talons of dread had clawed at his gut worse than even the poison. For the first time since becoming an enforcer for the crash, failing at his job wasn't the thing that haunted him. Leaving Romy and those boys alone with no security and no assurances that their needs would be met, had terrified him. Coupled with his mates' sobs, Bash forced himself to dig down deeper than he ever had before, if only to survive long enough to secure that for them.

Still, he'd need to be careful. With Romy tucked against him the way he was, nose pressed to Bash's neck, continuously inhaling the scent of him, it was going to be difficult to maneuver him into biting range without potentially triggering a burst of separation anxiety.

He'd felt the strength of it the moment someone had touched Romy while attempting to help Bash to his feet. Little Bumper had sucked in a breath like he was about to shatter the moon with his cries, and Bash was eternally grateful that whoever had touched him had hurried away and allowed Bash to settle him down. Pride surged

through Bash at how even in his Little space and under extreme distress, Romy had the presence of mind to problem solve and the strength to help Bash stand and get into the house, despite the difference in their sizes.

The entire way there, he'd been aware of Sasha following at a respectful distance to be certain they got there safely, and knew she was the one responsible for the food left outside their door. He was as aware of her presence in the living room, standing guard, as he was of Miranda's just a few doors down, a silent, watchful presence in the boys' room, making certain they remained safe and cared for through the night.

His crash mates had his back and evidently already developed a soft spot for Romy. His actions tonight would only lead to them holding him in higher regard. Strength of character, every crash member valued.

But Bash would address the flash of fear he'd felt from Romy after his mate had grown a little snappy at the thought of others' hands on them. To a Rhino, every one of them would have understood where Romy's fear had come from, especially after the things that Arlo had said. It was an old custom, and outdated practice that went back to a time when challenges could only end in death and victorious rhinos had made a sport out of ensuring that the last site a fallen rhino saw was the claiming of all they'd held dear.

Sliding his hand behind Romy's knees, he gently drew his boy up his chest, the top of his head bumping lightly against Bash's chin as he tugged him until they were face to face and he could kiss Little Bumper's nose and caress his cheek. Even at rest, there was a hint of stubbornness to his features and whether or not Romy realized it yet, he was going to be a force to be reckoned with.

Encouraging his confidence to grow would be key.

Bash rubbed noses with him and decided that was going to be one of his favorite

ways of showing his boy the affection Romy deserved. Brushing Romy's hair back in order to expose the side of his neck, Bash pulled his mate further up his body and nuzzled the spot where he was about to leave his mark.

Romy's soft sigh and the pliant way he was allowing Bash to maneuver him spoke of the trust Romy already had in him.

"Daddy," Romy murmured.

"Right here, Little Bumper," Bash said, nuzzling him more.

He took his time breathing in his mate's scent, mouthing at his skin and lightly nibbling, all warming him up for the main event.

Romy smelled like the perfect blend of their scents merged. With a low groan and a burning desire to claim his mate in other ways too, he growled "mine" against Romy's skin, then bit hard.

He felt the skin part easier than their hides, but still their skin was tougher than a normal human's. Bash's hand moved down to cup Romy's ass as he added just a bit more pressure, to be certain every imprint took.

Romy's low, shuddering gasp left Bash aching hard even as he eased his teeth out of his mate's skin.

"All mine now, Little Bumper," Bash murmured before rubbing noses with him again. "All mine."

Romy

He thought he should show signs of embarrassment at his own behavior, but he just

couldn't find it in himself. The stressfulness of the night before wouldn't allow him to dishonor his claim, no matter how it had happened. Bash hadn't seemed to mind he'd taken control—because despite him being in Little space, it was he who'd claimed his mate first. No words, just a decision to prevent Arlo from doing what he threatened. Something he acknowledged in the light of day with Bash's mark right there for all to see.

He'd found a top that showed off Bash's claim on him, just to make sure the other crash member who was currently sitting at their kitchen table drinking the strong black coffee Romy had made understood. If there was the very smallest part of him who wanted to spit in Arlo's drink for how he hit Bash and said those dreadful things, then he accepted it.

Bash's eyes sparkled with amusement as he glanced in Romy's direction when he pulled out a seat right next to him, dragging it closer so it touched him. Then and only then did Romy sit and look at Arlo.

Bash placed a hand on Romy's knee and squeezed gently, looking back at the rhino sipping his coffee. "Did you find anything in the owl's eyes?"

Arlo nodded, swallowed, and placed his mug down, the smile of seconds ago disappearing. "The recording device was a little damaged after..." he glanced at Romy before continuing, "anyway Levy, he spent most of the night working on recovering the footage."

"And?" Bash questioned, his hand pressing a little firmer against Romy's thigh when he fidgeted.

It's all right, Little Bumper.

D-Daddy, I can hear you.

His fingers caressed at his sweats as if trying to soothe him while he paused as Arlo spoke.

“Harley killed the things mate.” Coffee sloshed in the mug as Arlo picked it back up and stared into the dark contents. “Mates...” he glanced up, fury there in the depth of his eyes, “how fucked up is this nonsense? Create monsters, then somehow manage to mate them, like Fate had been a party to it... to that.” A dangerous look crossed his tight features.

Romy released a shuddery breath and before he could ask for what he wanted, Bash lifted him right off his seat and placed him on his lap. He didn’t hesitate to snuggle right in. Being vulnerable in front of others, he hated it, but with Bash, it was easier now to reveal his feelings.

Bash brushed their noses together, then gave him a sweet kiss before he tucked his chin on top of Romy’s head. “That’s some fucked up juju they have in their arsenal.”

The rumbled words got a growl from Arlo. “It is. How many others have they messed with? The fucking council members are all claiming innocence. Pointing fingers at others to cast the blame away from them. The video footage doesn’t show exactly who was in charge of this shit show.”

“Someone was,” Bash snarled, but as it wasn’t at Romy, he didn’t get upset.

“It’s gonna get messier before it’s over. We still have two council members out there somewhere. Someone has to know where they’re hiding,” he hissed in frustration.

The sounds of hooves on the ground followed a loud shout of, “come back here you two, the wallow is empty,” got all of Romy’s attention.

Miranda had remained with the boys, but it seemed they were getting bored with



being kept inside. One of the other crash had brought a tanker earlier that morning to drain the wallow of the contaminated water, while others had come with a digger, dug out around the wallow and then replaced the soil, ridding the ground of the owl-thingsy bits.

He wiggled and Bash gave him a quick kiss, patting his bottom as he went after the boys who, by the sound of it, had gotten outside. “Better go see what the boys are up to.”

“Nooooo,” Miranda cried right as there was a sound of splashing, then a squealing.

Romy gave chase and exited the front door right behind Miranda, where he came to an abrupt stop, his lips quivering with laughter at the sight she made. Muddy water dripped down her white frock, landing on her sandaled feet. A drippy, muddy mess from head to toe, she glowered unsuccessfully at the two tykes right in the middle of the wallow, rolling about, splashing.

It appears the crash member had refilled it... oops.

The hideousness of the night before, gone, and it now looked like nothing had happened. It was hard to push away the images of the blood and guts, but two playful rhinos helped. The urge to giggle when Miranda pushed back her mud slicked hair, hitting Romy in the face with a bunch of wet strands, was too much to control.

A wet trail slid down his face as she eyed him. “I’m sorry,” she said, yet now her lips were quivering too. Never one to let go—not since what had happened to him—Romy didn’t think twice as he jumped fully clothed into the wallow and splashed about getting another squeal from Miranda.

The small rhinos made a dash for him. They as yet hadn’t shifted back into their human sides since last night, but Romy suspected they would once they’d burned off

some of the anxiety by playing.

It had worked for him last night.

“Romy,” Miranda warned as he spun and sent more muddy water in her direction.

His giggles grew louder as he ran to the other side of the wallow, the little rhinos giving chase. The little legs were no match for Romy, even as he slipped and slid about.

He was unsure how long it was before Bash appeared with Arlo, by then everyone, including Miranda, had shifted and was playing in the wallow. The heat of the day made the muddy water the perfect place to be.

Romy’s head came up, and he trumpeted his glee. Minutes, hours, days, weeks, months he’d suffered, never thinking beyond getting through any given painful moment. As he held Bash’s stare, something that hadn’t truly become cemented with their claiming, merged into a reality. Romy’s heart and mind connected with the belief that they had a future, and it was all because of the large rhino giving him a dopey grin that warmed him to his hooves.

He had a mate.

A strong rhino, who would fight to protect him to the death.

I will, Little Bumper, always.

Bash

As an enforcer, Bash was used to being on the move, going where the crash sent him, and sleeping wherever he could with little concern for comfort or amenities. It was the lifestyle he'd chosen, but not the lifestyle he would choose for his mate or the little ones the crash already acknowledged as theirs. Papers were in the process of being drawn up that would make it official, while Bash had slipped away early that morning to take care of another vital issue he hoped would restore some of the sense of security the council had stripped from Romy.

As he stepped inside the house, remembering to close the door gently so as not to scare Romy or their boys, he heard soft singing coming from the kitchen and followed it to see Romy preparing a fruit salad for the midmorning meal. Growing rhinos required way more than three feedings a day, and his mate clearly planned for their next one to be a healthy one. Slipping up behind him, Bash hugged him close and rested his chin on the top of Romy's hair.

"That looks delicious," Bash said as he inhaled the blended scent of himself and his mate that permeated from Romy.

His efforts at stealing a piece of honeydew got thwarted. Romy caught his hand and brought the piece to his own mouth, sucking the juice off Bash's fingers.

"MMM, tastes delicious too," Romy said as he tilted his head back to smile up at him. "And so do you."

Bash chuckled and slid a hand into his hair, tugging just enough that he could kiss his

mate and find out for himself just how good the honeydew tasted on Romy's lips.

"Maybe I'll just let you eat the fruit so I can taste you in between the pieces," Bash murmured before rubbing noses with him.

"I wouldn't mind that."

"I have something else here that I hope you won't mind," Bash said, working on keeping his thoughts to himself for now. "Can we sit for a moment? It looks like all the fruit is in the bowl."

Romy shot him a cautious look even as Bash reached over him, picked up the bowl and put it in the refrigerator to chill further until the boys got up from their nap.

When Bash pulled the chair out, he did so with enough space that Romy could sit on his lap, rather than in a chair of his own. Not only did it let him hold his mate, but he'd already learned that his hugs and presence helped ground Romy and keep him settled when he felt nervous and insecure.

"First, breathe, Little Bumper and focus on me, not whatever whirlwind of thoughts just got stirred up in your head," Bash said, drawing Romy into his arms to hold him close. "This is nothing bad. In fact, I'm hoping you'll see it for what I intended it to be."

"Okay," Romy murmured, but the caution was still in his voice.

"It's just that I've never set up a home before," Bash explained. "I was worried about that at first and not knowing what you and the boys might need. Then I talked to Sasha, and she nearly clobbered me over the head with the marble cutting board you were just using when she found out that I hadn't mentioned any of what I was thinking and feeling to you. She made me see I don't need to know how to set up a

home because this is our home to set up together.”

“I like her.” Romy grinned cheekily. “She’s smart.”

“Yeah, she is, and I appreciate her guidance and yes, I made sure to tell her that, too.”

“Good, I’m sure she appreciated it.”

“I went out this morning to get a few things for you,” Bash explained, indicating to the bag he’d set in the room’s entryway. “There’s a laptop inside, but also bank account information and a debt card. I don’t want you to have to wait for me to be available if you need anything, I want you to be able to order whatever we need for the boys, but I also wanted us to sit together and order anything we think we’ll need to make this space a truly comfortable one to raise the boys in.”

“I… b-but I don’t have anything to c-contribute,” Romy stammered, eyes wide.

“Yes, you do,” Bash explained as he kissed the side of his head. “You have your knowledge, which is all you need to contribute. Enforcers get paid well, and I never required much. All that I’ve ever earned has pretty much been sitting in the bank waiting for, well, now. It’s how I was able to purchase the house and there is still plenty left over. You should never have to ask me if we need something. You should never have to feel like you are dependent on anyone else to make decisions for you and the boys. I don’t want you to have any cause to worry about how you will take care of yourself or them. It’s important you have the security of knowing that you have control and access to everything you would need to provide for yourself and them if anything should ever happen to me, not that I plan for it to .”

“It better not!” Romy declared with a fierceness shining through.

Chuckling, Bash squeezed him close. “Well, I did take a step to lesson that

possibility.”

Romy’s eyes narrowed on him. “Really?”

“Yup,” Bash replied. “As of this morning, I am no longer classified as an Enforcer. I spoke to our crash Alpha and asked to be downgraded to a security position. It means I would have regular patrols here on crash grounds, but that the missions that used to send me away from here will no longer be part of my duties.”

When Romy froze, Bash feared he’d made a mistake, especially as his silence drew on and Little Bumper snuggled close but still didn’t say a word. All he could do was hold him and wait to see how he felt about the bombshell Bash had just dropped on him and hope he wasn’t upset that Bash had decided something important to them without speaking to him first.

Romy

Overwhelmed. Emotions swamped him better than the babies jumping in the wallow and spraying everyone. Every day since he’d managed to escape the council and work to forge a new life for himself alone, he’d kind of been holding his breath.

Waiting... waiting... waiting.

For what, he wasn’t sure, but he’d learned the hard way, that good things weren’t always things he could trust in when handed to him. Then Fate had given him a gift, only it came with strings—enforcer strings. Romy had accepted it when those strings were essential to a rhino like Bash. He was a protector, built for it in every way. Romy got that. Experienced it before their claim. The powerful arms holding him, offering what he needed, revealed what had changed between them in the weeks they’d been together. He’d connected with this wonderful man, and he was offering him something Romy hadn’t let himself think about a future—together. Not part time.

Not a few weeks here and there between missions, ones he'd heard Arlo talk about.

Had Fate rewarded him for being brave? For carrying on when it hurt so much to do so when he was so alone, with no one.

His thoughts crashed together. Would Bash be happy, truly happy, doing a lesser role for the crash? Bash was an enforcer—a protector of all. Romy had known this and kept his concerns—fears tucked deep inside. Not looking at them or examining them too closely because it was selfish—greedy—to want everything.

Yet...

A shuddery breath left his chest as he peeked a look from under his lashes. “You aren’t leaving me?” he asked hesitantly, desperate not to give himself too much hope.

Large, gentle hands stroked up his quivering back, offering reassurance. Lips brushed his cheek, the merest of touches that curled his toes in his sneakers. “Never.”

“Will you be... happy with this lesser role?” Could he be? Would he really be okay with sticking close when the life he'd known before now was one of seeking and investigations?

Bash's chuckle rumbled through his body as he eased Romy away and put a finger under his chin, tilting his head back until they were looking at each other. Romy searched the expressive, dark eyes, wanting to believe. Wanting to be able to breathe...

Their noses touched in the endearing way that turned Romy's tummy into jelly and Bash's lips curved up slowly, a beautiful smile reaching his eyes. “This... you, me and the boys, that makes me happy. The decisions are all about giving me happiness... selfish, but true.”

His bottom lip wobbled at how Bash blasted him with a big dollop of exactly how Romy and the boys made him feel. He sniffed, blinked and gave up. “Daddyyyy,” he cried and buried his face into his thick neck, snuffling to find the perfect spot that smelled of both of them.

“I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere without you or our boys, I swear.”

Romy’s head fired up and back to knock right into Bash’s chin, which made his eyes water at the loud banging on the front door. They both sat rooted to the chair for a second, before Bash glanced towards the hallway, standing up and lowering him to the floor.

Everything about him changed. There was the enforcer, alert and fierce, he moved silently to the cabinet where Bash stored the guns, high up away from the boys.

Stay here.

Daddy—

No, Romy, don’t argue about this. Whoever is outside, they aren’t part of the crash. Bash slipped the gun into the back of the waistband of his low-slung jeans, tucking his T-shirt over it as he walked to the front door after checking the security cameras.

Romy stared at the man and woman stood at the front door looking... nervous? Romy’s heart raced at the possibilities when he could see similarities to...

“Romy,” called out Toofus, “where are you?”

“Shit,” Romy exclaimed, already running, his gut twisting with anxiety. He heard Bash speaking, but it was too late, the boys were doing what they loved to do post nap and that was charge down the stairs looking for a snack.



In the hallway, Romy witnessed the tall blonde woman sink to her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Toofus, Nambi,” the women said in a strangle cry as the boys shouted with excitement.

“Momma.”

“Momma.”

Two sets of feet charged down the stairs as if they had wings attached and Romy froze. He hated how conflicted he was because he was so happy for the boys and absolutely gutted to know what was going to happen next, at the same time. His—the boys would leave with their momma.

Not mine.

They aren’t mine.

Bash opened his arms and Romy dashed into them, his tears blinding him at the loss of something he’d desperately wanted—family.

Bash

How many times had he absorbed a punch? Had the wind knocked out of him? Been driven to his knees by the fierceness of an attack? It was more times than he'd cared to keep count off and yet Romy's sobs and the sight of the rhino couple kneeling in the doorway with their arms around their calves... well damn... this was something he couldn't just shake off.

Manners dictated he speak to them. Ensure that they had safe lodging and provisions for the children now that they'd been reunited. The mother...her scent hit him, and Bash knew she'd been the one to carry her boys as far as she could before setting them down to finish the walk on their own. She'd been the one to fool some of the best trained rhinos in the community, Bash included, with the way she'd changed directions, masked her trail. Then left her scent in so many different places that it had been impossible to tell what her fate had finally ended.

When they'd discovered the sight of a battle and the stench of dead rhino, they'd assumed it had been her to perish. For the sake of those boys, he was glad he and Arlo had been wrong in coming to that determination, but the ramifications now...

Bash took a deep breath and hugged Romy harder, needing to get his own emotions in check so he could tend to his mate. It had been too good to be true, the way the universe had handed him a ready-made family. Maybe he'd needed a greater reminder of how easily the ones you loved could get snatched away. Who was to say why fate unfolded the way it did? Maybe it was just to test his readiness and commitment to family and the changes being mated brought. The one thing he knew was that it changed nothing about the decisions he'd made, that was what he needed

to convey to Romy.

Nuzzling him, Bash gently murmured soothing sounds in his ear, keeping his voice low with the boys continuing to chat excitedly at their parents, wanting to know what had happened, where they'd been, when they were taking them home.

All the questions.

They had sharp minds, those little ones, and Bash had ordered several learning toys, all with some kind of puzzle aspect, just to see how the boys would handle the challenge. Little minds needed to be stimulated, or so Sasha said when she'd helped him choose the website to shop from.

Breathe.

He could do this for Romy. Bash hugged him tighter, inhaling his scent and reached out along their connection, continuing on working to soothe the anguish they both felt. The boys are lucky. They had us when they needed us most. We will miss them, and while I can't imagine what those parents felt, not knowing if they'd been successful in getting their boys to safety, I know how easy it is to love them and worry for their futures. We need to greet our guests and make sure they have a safe place to take the boys when they leave here.

B-b-but....

I know, Little Bumper, I know. I am going to miss them too. I had already come to think of them as ours.

Romy hiccupped, but at least his sobs were slowing some even while his shirt clung to Bash's skin from the tears.

This changes nothing. I'm not going to return to enforcer status just because the boys will be returning to their parents. I wouldn't do that to you, or us. I like the thought of being crash security and helping my neighbors. Hell, I like the thought of getting to know my neighbors and crashmates and spending time with them. Especially if that doesn't involve bloodshed and worry about our survival. You will see me every day. He added extra cheer. You may even tire of that after a while, but all you'll have to do is tell me and I'll go let Sasha school me at the pool table until you're ready for me to come back home.

Another hiccup. Promise you won't leave me?

I promise. Everything is going to be okay. Let's wipe our tears and offer them some of the delicious fruit salad you made. Then we can make sure they have what they need.

As he eased Romy back from him so he could wipe his face, Bash let him see the tears on his own cheeks so his Little Bumper would know that he was just as upset about their loss. It was crushing seeing Romy's puffy and blood-shot eyes, and yet Bash couldn't help but feel like they'd rebound once they could sit together. Hold one another. Talk and plan about getting the house set up so the way they wanted. Then maybe talk about a family they both so clearly desired. They'd be ready, he was sure for every joy and challenge that it would bring, just once they'd caught their breath.

Carefully, he cleaned the tears from Romy's cheeks, leaning in close so he could kiss them away before rubbing noses with him.

"You will have everything your heart desires," Bash murmured, staring him straight in the eye. "That is my promise to you."

Only after hugging him once more did he take Romy's hand and led him to where Nambi and Toofus' mom had the boys. Her mate, because yes, Bash could smell the

bond on them, was there holding her and the boys from behind as he murmured quietly to them.

He looked up when they approached though and scrambled to his feet, offering his hand to Bash as he thanked them for caring for and protecting their children.

“We heard it was safe here,” the rhino stated with a croaky voice. “So we hoped the rumors were true. We were so desperate to get them to someone who would protect them. We got separated from our crash, which was a good thing, because they got slaughtered. I could only buy time for my mate to vanish with our children. As I was never trained to fight so many at once, I barely survived.” His hand rested on his mate’s shoulder. “She came back for me.”

“Most of us haven’t been trained for this,” Bash said as he shook his hand and clasped the other rhino on the shoulder. “You did what you needed to do to ensure your mate had the best chance at success with your children. We’re just glad you both survived the council to make it here to us and can reunite with your boys.” He gave them a sympathetic smile. “Come inside, please, and sit down. If you’re without a crash, we’ll be able to help with that too? These little guys have come to mean a lot to us.” Bash couldn’t look at Romy at the wave of sadness at their loss.

“Thank you, for everything,” the other rhino replied as he bent to pick Nambi up so his mate could stand with Toofus. “We’ll happily accept your hospitality.”

“Then come this way,” Bash indicated, motioning with his head towards the kitchen. “My mate has made an amazing fruit salad he refuses to let me taste.”

That brought chuckles as they headed to the kitchen, Romy’s laugh more than a little brittle. Bash knew he didn’t have his experience with masking his emotions in situations like this, so he rubbed his hand up and down Romy’s back as they walked into their kitchen, pulling out a chair for Nambi and Toofus’ mom.

“Thank you,” she said, her face, up close, still baring faint scars from the ordeal she’d gone through. Toofus clung to her, just as happy as a rhino could be as he got snuggled while she stroked his hair.

“You were so good, for looking out for your brother,” she murmured to him as she kissed his cheek, the love she had for them unmistakable, as was the love they saw shining in her mate’s eyes as he watched her with their son.

Bash had to look away and busy himself so as not to fall apart. Romy needed him to be strong, so helping him get the fruit salad out and the plates on the table was easier. He took every opportunity to touch Romy’s shoulder or stroke down his back.

It’s all gonna be okay, Little Bumper, you’ll see.

One day soon. That’ll be us. He swore it. Bash never went back on his promises—ever.

Romy

It was a struggle to act like his heart hadn’t walked right out the door with the boys. His attachment to them was so strong. He’d protected them. Played with them. Seen them as his own. None of this he could really share with Bash because he couldn’t contain all of his own emotions. So Romy attempted to keep his in check around his mate. Three days on, Bash was at work and Romy couldn’t find anything to help him settle. He’d cleaned, tidied, packed more of the things they had bought for the boys for Bash to take to their new home.

Romy had thought about dropping them off himself, but it was too far to walk, and he couldn’t quite persuade himself that it was all right to pick at the fresh and throbbing wound of loneliness the boys’ absence brought him. He wandered aimlessly through the house, finding himself at the doorway to the boy's bedroom, and heaving a sigh.

Stop it.

He spun around and went down the stairs once more, near the front door, he went in that direction. Outside, he stood next to the wallow and debated about stripping to shift. Then thought about the fact he'd be alone with no one to play with.

Another sigh and his shoulders sagged. The heat of the sun seared through his thin T-shirt, droplets of sweat slid down his spine as he tried to think beyond his misery. Stop it. I mean it. This is getting silly. No matter what he said to himself, it wasn't working.

The phone in his shorts pocket chimed, and he dug in to pull it out, wanting the distraction to not care who was messaging him when he knew it would not be Bash. When he was working, they had a rule that messaging or calling only happened when it was an emergency. Feeling down in the mouth didn't constitute as that, or that's what he thought, he'd not asked Bash. Seeing Cosmo's name, his lips quivered.

Wanna come to mine for play time, my Daddies have made me a new maze?

Romy couldn't use the maze in his shifted form, he was too big, but he could in his human form.

Yes please, he typed back, then hesitated because he didn't have any way to get to Cosmo's. The crash was based several miles away from Cookietown, and Cosmo's home was on the other side of town, miles away. But I don't have any way to get to you, sorry.

The second the message delivered the dots appeared and Romy waited.

That's okay, Nomad said we can come get you, if you wanna come.

His eyes glimmered with tears he struggled to hold on at the generous offer. Thank you. I'll be ready.

There was a 'thumbs up' a moment later and Romy gave his phone a watery grin, then headed back into the house to go to his bedroom to find an outfit that he'd like to wear for his play date.

In the closet, he stared at all the outfits Bash had insisted on buying him the day the boys left. They'd arrived the day before and he'd not even taken them out of the packets because he hadn't felt like it. Now he could see how ungrateful that was after all the effort Bash had gone to. He'd need to apologize when he came home later, for now, he peeled off all the wrappers and laid them on their bed. A bed they'd still not used for more than cuddling and sleeping. He shook off the worrying thought that neither of them had been in the mood for more than cuddling.

He eyed the six outfits, sucking his lip in between his teeth as he considered his choices. The little sunshine yellow outfit that had a bib and braces came with pretty rainbows on the braces. It had rainbow trim around the cuff of the shorts and a little crop top that went underneath. He'd bet he'd look real cute in that. The outfit sat next to it was a dino onesie in purple with big orange spots that had scales down the back in bright blue. The hood also had them too, which Romy loved as they looked—and felt—silky soft.

There was another short set with cars on it from a movie he loved of the same name. There was another onesie, this one was lighter and covered in tiny little bears of different colors. He had also gotten a long-legged outfit in gray, that the top had a hood with a horn, same as his rhino. They didn't do a white one, but Romy hadn't minded.

He went back and forth until he picked up the sunshine yellow outfit and the purple onesie. He carried them down stairs minutes later after folding them and placing them



in his rucksack that was in the shape of a turtle. Going to the kitchen, he went to the snack cupboard and found several things to go into the bag to nibble on when they got hungry. If he was acting more like a Daddy than his Little self, he ignored it. It was how he'd always done it because he'd not had a Daddy before to do it for him.

Happy he had everything, he went outside after shutting up the house as Bash had shown him and sat on the grass waiting for Nomad to come collect him. For the first time in days, he had something fun to look forward to, so he gave no thought to letting anyone know what he was doing as his Little side came to the fore.

When Nomad pulled up minutes later, he eagerly jumped up when he spotted Cosmo in the front of the car. "Cosmo, wanna see my outfits?" he called excitedly before Nomad had a chance to open his car door.

"Yeah. I wasn't allowed to wear mine on the trip over, Daddy said I'd get too hot and sticky," Cosmo answered glumly, then bounced in his seat and wriggled his fingers when Romy sat in the back and Nomad had him strapped in. "Can I see yours?"

Romy clutched the bag for a second, undecided when they were his new things Daddy bought for him. When Cosmo gave him a bright, pleading smile, he huffed before handing over his rucksack. "Okay, but be careful, they's new."

Nomad chuckled but didn't say anything as Cosmo cooed over Romy's choices, making him grin happily. "I like rainbows," he said, just so Cosmo knew that was his favorite.

Cosmo's curls bounced around his face as he looked back at him. "They're the cutest." He dug out the purple onesie giggling, then made a roaring sound. "I'm a big bad dinosaur."

Romy giggled at his friend because he didn't look scary.

“Could I wear this one, pleasssssseeeeeee,” Cosmo begged, fluttering his eyes at Romy, making him think that something was in Cosmo’s eyes that hurt him.

He chewed his lip, tucking it behind his teeth.

“Pleassseeeeeee,” Cosmo said in a voice that made Romy’s heart ache a little.

“Okay... but promise you won’t dirty it.”

Cosmo gave him the biggest smile. “I won’t, my daddies will make sure I’s good.”  
Cosmo looked at his Daddy. “Won’t you Daddy.”

Romy couldn’t see Cosmo’s Daddy’s face, but his head nodded, so Romy felt better someone would make sure his dino was safe from sticky fingers. He wanted to be the one to make it sticky with Daddy. His belly clenched at thoughts of his Daddy not there to play with him.

Daddy was important, doing important things so he couldn’t play with Romy. He sniffed and looked out the window, wrapping his arms around his middle. Next time, maybe Daddy could play with them?

Bash

Coming home to an empty house would have thrown him, if not for the sensors he'd linked to his phone. They were the only way he'd have felt comfortable leaving Romy alone while he went to work. Originally he'd installed it so he couldn't miss any of the fun things his mate and the boys got up too. But having it on meant added security for his mate when he couldn't be there, and Bash hadn't experimented with the alerts. If a mouse sneezed on that property, he'd know about it, which was why he headed away from crash grounds the moment he had a chance to change out of the black t-shirt and jeans that made up his security attire. Just to make certain other crash members recognized them from a distance, whoever had designed them had emblazoned the word security in big, bold letters across the front, and down one of the legs of his jeans.

At least it's not across your ass, Daddy, then everyone else would be staring at it and I wouldn't like that. He'd chuckled at the time, loving that Romy said whatever was on his mind. Only Bash was starting to recognize the signs when he was holding back, like whenever the subject of the boys came up.

Not that Bash was doing any better. He'd found one of Toofus' socks when he was folding laundry the night before and gotten hit with a sense of longing that had left him immobile and staring at that sock for a good twenty minutes before he moved along to the next piece of clothing.

Bash was grateful for the friendship that Romy had formed with Cosmo and hoped his mate knew that never once during the time he'd been playing with Cosmo at the club had they ever crossed the line into something truly physical. He'd provided the

safety and comfort Cosmo needed to let his Little self out and put some distance between himself and the things he'd seen and experienced while working for the council, while Bash had been entrusted with valuable information that had saved more than one crash member's life.

Due to the troubles they'd all recently experienced, and all Bash had learned about Nomad and Harley, he sent them a text before heading up their driveway, so they wouldn't have cause to worry about who was approaching this late in the day. That Bash had changed into soft sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt had not just been out of comfort. From the moment he'd seen Nomad and Cosmo on the video feed picking Romy up to for a playdate at their house, Bash had hoped to finish his rounds and make his report with enough time left to get a little playtime in.

He hadn't even seen Little Bumper in any of his new outfits yet and wished he'd been there to dress him when he'd changed for playtime. He was also hoping for a chance to speak to Nomad and Harley about how they'd approached the creation of Cosmo's playroom, so he'd have a starting point to begin work on Romy's. If there was one thing he'd learned through the care he'd offered Cosmo, it was the importance of a safe space to be Little, especially when that Little had experienced the things Romy and Cosmo had. In the whirlwind of things that had happened since they'd discovered that they were mates, he hadn't been able to provide that for Romy and was now worried he might have failed his mate right off the bat.

Especially after the way they'd had to let those boys go.

He rubbed at the center of his chest at the crushing feeling returning. Damnit. He was supposed to be the badass...well no longer enforcer, but security was just as tough a gig. On top of it all, he was the Dom, he was supposed to know what to do to help his boy feel better. But how was he supposed to do that when he couldn't keep his own emotions in check?

This might be the time to humble himself a little and bring that up to Harley and Nomad, too. With all they'd faced together already, if there was one thing he could trust, it was that any weakness he showed in front of them would remain with them.

As he pulled up in front of their house, he let out a long breath and opened the SUV door to hear laughter drifting from inside. Now that made him feel better just knowing his boy was having fun. Nomad opened the door before he reached it, a reminder that his boy could be in no better hands beside his own when it came to being protected.

"Perfect timing, they're building a stuffed animal fort in preparation for movie time," Nomad said, grinning widely.

"Have they eaten yet?" Bash asked, hoping he hadn't missed the chance to feed his Little Bumper.

"Supper, but not a snack."

That would do. Bash followed Nomad in and gratefully accepted the cup of coffee Harley slid him.

"Romy said you'd switched from enforcer to security," Harley mentioned, his brows rising. "How've the first shifts been?"

"I don't want to say the Q word and jinx it, but it's been a nice change to know exactly what time I get to go home to him each day and when I'll have to leave so I can at least make sure everything is set up for him before I have to go. I just... I felt like we started and now we're starting over and it's hard to wrap my head around the way everything turned on a dime," Bash admitted in between sips of a deep roast coffee that smelled amazing.

“It’s easy to roll with the punches when someone’s shooting at you,” Harley said. “It’s all instinct then. You shoot back, you evade, you survive and live to fight another day. That’s all our lives were for so long that there are times when the domestic shit that should be easy throws me for a loop because I start second guessing just how easy it is and go looking for a problem that isn’t there.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot easier when you can shoot the problem and move on, isn’t it?”

“You can say that again,” Harley admitted, getting a groan from Nomad.

“That’s what’s killing me about the situation with the boys,” Bash admitted before he lost his nerve. “I can’t fix it. There is no part I can order. There is no grave I can dig and there’s no bullet that can solve it. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Accept it,” Nomad said from where he’d perched on a stool at the far end of the counter, a steaming mug in front of him. “Anything less than that and you’re asking for problems.”

And what was Bash to say to that? When as much as he hated to admit it, deep down, he knew Nomad was right.

Romy

His little heart beat fast as he added another toy to the fort, holding his breath. “Ohhhhh.” He giggled at the wobbling it did as Cosmo picked up the last stuffie to add to the top.

“Don’t move,” Cosmo murmured, his eyes gleaming like bright stars at Romy.

They had played all afternoon and Cosmo’s daddies had played with them before they went and left them a few minutes ago.

“I won’t, I promise.” He clasped his hands together and held his breath once more.

A rumbling noise coming from the open door got Romy tilting his head, grinning. He looked at Cosmo, bursting to say something, but he’d promised to be quiet.

The second Cosmo placed the stuffie on the top, Romy dragged Cosmo from the tower towards the door. “Shusssshhh,” he shout-whispered to Cosmo, “I hear my Daddy.” Excited, he got down onto the floor wiggling his bottom as he moved onto his knees to crawl out to find Daddy like Cosmo’s kitty-cat. He was so quiet and could hide in small spaces, Romy had been practicing.

“Keep your bottom down,” Cosmo said in his ear, crawling next to him.

“I am,” he hissed back, looking over his shoulder just to check.

“Now, what do we have here?”

Romy craned his head back as far as he could to look up at Daddy. “It’s a kitty-cat, can’t you see,” he exclaimed. Couldn’t Daddy see that?

“His bottom is too high,” Cosmo informed Daddy.

“Is not,” Romy said, his lower lip quivering.

Daddy scooped him right off the floor and cuddled him into his chest. The smell of his aftershave tickling Romy’s nose as his legs dangled while a large hand held his bottom. “You looked gorgeous, Little Bumper, like a rainbow kitty-cat. I’m sorry Daddy missed playtime with you and Cosmo.”

Romy looked down at Cosmo, the smile back in place. “See.”

Cosmo shrugged as he got up, the knees of the onesie covered in dust.

“Nooooo, you got my dino dirty,” Romy wailed, tiredly. His lips back to quivering.

A kiss brushed over his forehead. “I think my Little Bumper needs a nap before snack time, but maybe Daddy should take you home.”

A big fat tear rolled down Romy’s cheek as Cosmo’s daddies came into the room right as he hissed at Romy.

“You’ve played so nicely together all afternoon, so we’ll have less of that.” Nomad gave Cosmo a stern look that made Romy sniff louder at his friend getting into trouble.

Cosmo got up and sniffed.

“I’m sorry, Cosmo,” Romy muttered, rubbing his face in Daddy’s neck as his skin got all hot and itchy.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get it dirty. Daddy will wash it, won’t you?” He batted his eyelashes at Nomad, making him grin.

That had to be good? Maybe Romy hadn’t gotten Cosmo in trouble.

“I will and I’ll give it to your Daddy, Romy, okay?”

He nodded, his head only moving a little because he was tired and wanted a nap. His eyes drifted shut a moment later when Daddy started to sway with him in his arms. He liked that a lot.

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He blinked sleepily, his brain trying to fathom why there was sunlight shining in his eyes. A soft rumbling noise came from under his ear. He moved and his naked body slid against silky hard muscles, even as the arms holding him close tightened a fraction.

“Are you awake?” asked a gruff voice that didn’t sound like Bash usually did.

He chuckled and rubbed his cheek against the bare chest beneath him. “Maybe,” he replied cheekily, feeling content all the way down to his toes. He had no memory of getting into bed or being undressed, both of which had happened, but when was the question. The sun out the window lying low could have been sun rise or sun set.

Bash moved, and he got jiggled a little as they came to rest against the head of the bed, which stopped the sun shining directly into his eyes.

“What time is it?” he asked, his belly rumbling.

Bash reached over to the bedside drawers and picked up his watch, careful not to knock Romy while he did. “Five-thirty am.” He dropped the watch, and it rattled on the wood before he settled back, appearing unwilling to let go, which was fine with Romy. “You were a very tired boy last night.” He kissed his head. “You must have had so much fun?”

In the light of day, Romy considered his answer when there was nothing in Bash’s tone to indicate how he felt about Romy leaving for a play date. He had a brief memory of Bash swaying and him feeling ready for a nap, then nothing. He chewed his lip and moved ever so slightly to get a better look at Bash.

“I did.” He paused, feeling his tummy knot. “That was alright, wasn’t it, Daddy?”

Bash

Bash cuddled him tighter and rubbed noses with him, then kissed his forehead for good measure.

“Of course it is,” Bash said. “In fact, Daddy should have thought to arrange it for you so you wouldn’t be home alone. I’m sorry I didn’t think of it, but you never have to apologize for going to visit one of your friends.”

“So, you’re not upset with me?” Romy asked, his tiny brow furrowing.

“Absolutely not. I’m proud of you,” Bash reassured, seeing Romy needed it.

Romy snuggled with him more at hearing that and Bash knew it was time to have a talk with his mate about the things he needed and wanted, so Bash could make sure he got them.

“Did you have fun playing with Cosmo in his playroom?” Bash questioned softly.

“So much fun, Daddy,” Romy answered, giving Bash a beautiful, shy smile. “We built a fort out of stuffies and we was gonna watch movies but then I heard you and that was okay ‘cause I’d played so much I got reallyyyy tired.” He yawned widely.

“Awe, I bet you two wore each other out,” Bash said as he tugged Romy over the top of him to lie against his chest while he reclined against the headboard.

Comfy, cozy and absolutely perfect with the way Romy fit in his arms, Bash took a

moment to inhale their mingled scents, sigh and let his eyes drift shut for a moment to enjoy the start to his day.

“We did.” He ran his fingers over Bash’s chest, almost absently.

“Good.” He kissed the top of Romy’s head. “I want Cosmo to be able to come play with you in your playroom too, but first we have to create your perfect space,” Bash explained, feeling his own excitement at giving Romy a safe place to play. “So, Little Bumper, tell Daddy what you’d want for features.”

He felt as well as heard Romy gasp, then their eyes met, and Bash could see the bright smile on his mate’s face and his heart did its best to trip in his chest.

“Even if I wants lots of light?”

Seeing Romy slip towards Little space, Bash gave his boy a kiss on the tip of his nose, thinking about what it was Romy wanted. “Like a sunroom?” Bash questioned and got an eager nod. “That can be done. I’ll insist upon the glass being bulletproof and shatterproof for our protection, but if my boy wishes to have a space where he can enjoy more of the sun, then we’ll make it happen. We can even add an addition of a small indoor pool and splashpad where you can play in the water safely, even when I’m not home.” Bash warmed to the ideas as he spoke, thinking about logistics.

Romy wiggled. “Can we pick out fun swim shorts with cartoon characters and have water toys, too?”

“We sure can.” Bash’s grin widened. “And I think we should add something else to the remodel.”

The top of his nose wrinkled as he eyed Bash. “What’s that?”

“A whirlpool bathtub for two in the master bathroom for big boy playtime with Daddy.”

Joyous giggles filled the room. “Yey!”

“Yey indeed,” Bash replied, loving how eager his boy was. “We can start looking at styles later today, but we’ll also want to have a dry play space for you too, including a special naptime area.”

“Can I have clouds on the ceiling and grass painted along the edges of the wall, I want it to look like I’m playing outside.”

“We can even paint a sun in a corner or on the wall between the windows and get a soft green carpet to complete the look,” Bash suggested, watching as Romy got deeper into Little space with his excitement.

“And draw in some cartoon animals watching me?” His smile was a little lopsided and wistful.

“You tell me which ones you want, and I’ll make sure they’re added by someone far more talented at creating artwork than Daddy.” Bash’s thoughts were already way ahead with who in the crash could do that for him. “We’ll create you a little jungle play space and some massive beanbag boulders you can climb in and lay on when you’d like to watch something on your television or color.”

“I gets a television?” Romy asked in wonder.

“Yes, you do, and a smart speaker with playlists just for when you want music to sing along with.”

“Can I have glow in the dark stars too, please?” Romy blurted out, looking like he

would burst if he didn't say it fast so Bash could give it to him.

He was as eager as Romy, and nothing would prevent him giving his boy the stars—fuck the moon too if it came to that. “Stars, planets and comets,” Bash added before continuing as ideas popped into his head, “we can even get the holographic nightlight, so you'll have the comets on the wall too.”

Romy squirmed on top of him, doing a little happy dance that rapidly brought Bash's cock to life.

“I get stars, I get stars!” Romy sang, while Bash groaned and finally gripped Romy's hips, stilling him even while he attempted to wrestle his arousal back under control.

When that didn't work, he groaned. “You'll get something else if you don't quit squirming on top of Daddy like that, Little Bumper,” Bash tried to add enough of a warning, giving his rear a little swat when he felt more than a little out of control. Because, of course, that just caused Romy to rock forward a little, rubbing right over Bash's cock and drawing a rumbling huff from him.

“You did that on purpose,” Bash grumble-groaned, heating enough to make him sweat.

“Nos I didn't, Daddy, you did it when you swatted my bottom.” Romy's guileless smile wasn't helping.

And okay, Bash couldn't argue with that or anything with the way his balls were aching at Romy having fun on his lap. There were only so many squirms he could take before his rhino side burst forth and demanded the part of the claim they hadn't completed yet .

Fuck!

Romy was in the wrong headspace for what Bash wanted to do with him. The end result, his nuts were throbbing worse than when Arlo had gotten in a sly kick while training.

All the while Romy sang a stars song. “Stars, stars, stars, twinkly stars, all the stars for me. Stars, stars, stars, shooting stars, stars are all I’ll see.”

Every damned ‘ stars’ got punctuated by a wiggle or a squirm and Bash growled and let his head loll back to thunk against the headboard. It wasn’t enough pain to distract him from the throbbing onset of blue balls, so he did it a second and a third time, until he gave up on distracting himself from the squirmy menace that was his Little Bumper.

Romy

Everything sounded like the most special, magical place in the world, which was why Romy felt a little cautious about asking for one more thing, only it was a little, itty bitty thing compared to everything Bash was offering, so he thought it would be okay. He stopped singing and eyed Daddy, trying to figure out why he’d bang his head on the bed. That has to hurt?

He screwed up his face. “Daddy use’sll hurt yourself like that.”

“Something is hurting,” he muttered, and Romy tilted his head, trying to work out what could hurt worse.

“Do you want me to kiss it better?” he offered, giving Daddy his bestest supportive look, ‘cause that’s what he’d been told was a good thing. Getting a hurt kissed had worked when he hurt himself when he played at Little Paws Haven in day care.

Daddy shut his eyes, and he breathed so hard it hit Romy’s face like a big wind. He

giggled and rubbed his face. “That tickles, Daddy.” When Daddy didn’t open his eyes, he wiggled, and moved closer to cup Daddy’s cheeks so he could reach his lips, ‘cause maybe they were what hurt.

Daddy made more grunty noises, so Romy quickly kissed Daddy’s lips to see if that would help.

“To the God’s save me,” Daddy muttered against his lips, his eyes still shut.

Not sure what the Gods had to do with it, Romy tried again, grinding his bottom down to get a better purchase to try kissing somewhere else.

Loud giggles erupted out of him as he dangled in the air above Daddy, all arms and legs dangling. “Fly me, Daddy,” he cooed in excitement. “I wanna be a plane.” He spread his arm and legs wide, rocking his body. “Come on, Daddy.”

Another growly noise came from Daddy, but he was flying right over his head, tipping and diving. He giggled until his chest hurt and he couldn’t catch his breath. “S-stop D-Daddy,” he called out breathlessly.

Plonked on the bed on his back, he stared up at Daddy. His little nose wrinkled. “Nose kisses Daddy, I want nose kisses,” he demanded.

The second Daddy came closer, Romy wrapped his arms around his neck and lifted his head in eager anticipation. “Kiss me, Daddy.”

“You’re a menace.”

Daddy kissed his nose three times so Romy didn’t think Daddy meant it, but just in case, he rubbed his cheek against Daddy’s whiskers, giving him a neck hug.

He sighed happily when Daddy scooped him up and rolled them off the bed. “Breakfast, then a shower.” There was a pause, and Romy got a funny feeling in his tummy. “Then Daddy is going to have to get ready to go work.”

Those words jerked Romy right out of his happy place. It was jarring, and he sucked back a sob that came at the reality of being left alone once more. He clung a little tighter, not wanting yet to let go.

“I’m sorry, Little Bumper,” Bash murmured, sounding upset. “That was thoughtless of Daddy.”

“It’s okay,” he mumbled, despite it wasn’t. Being alone sucked. He rested his head on Bash’s wide shoulder and inhaled their combined scent. Needing a moment to regroup. To put back in place the barriers.

Bash moved, and then they were back on the bed with Romy facing Bash. He cupped his cheeks and angled his head, so they were looking at each other. “Little Bumper, Daddy can hear your thoughts, feel your upset.”

Romy wanted to sag and shy away at that, but Bash was holding him, keeping their gazes locked. “Talk to Daddy, tell me how to make it better.”

Problem was, Romy wasn’t exactly sure what would help. Spending time with Cosmo had been great, but he wasn’t sure that was the answer, not really. “I feel lost,” he murmured, knowing that was the crux of the matter. He had purpose with the boys and now that was gone.

A look came into Bash’s eyes that hurt Romy’s heart, but he couldn’t lie to Bash—Daddy—he couldn’t.

“I have to work... but maybe you could come with me?” As if warming to the idea,



Bash's eyes narrowed. "What about helping at the community center with the day care? They need someone as good as you at managing all the children in their wallow. Or we could ask Nomad and Harley if there's a job at the day care at the club on the days Daddy has to work. Those would be fun things to do, right?"

Romy listened and got a little worm of excitement in his belly at the thought of helping at the community center with the children. He'd never had a job before and hadn't thought it possible to have one now. But one at the community center with the other rhinos playing sounded exciting. "Do you think they'd let me help at the community center?"

"Of course they will, you're amazing with children. They'd be very silly not to want you." He brushed back Romy's hair from his cheeks and rubbed noses with him. "I think Sasha mentioned they needed an extra pair of hands."

Romy got the impression that Bash was just saying that, but it didn't stop the hope that came with the thought of having a job with children where he got to play—all the time. What could be more fun than that while he waited for Bash to finish his day?

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Bash

Please tell me you need help at the community center? Bash read the text, then hit send to Sasha the moment he was free enough to do so.

In between making super cheesy loaded omeletes for him and Romy, he waited for the sound of the phone chiming, hoping to have good news for his boy before it was time for him to report for his next series of rounds. He diced mushrooms, spinach, and onions as fine as the ground sausage he'd already cooked, and he mixed all the ingredients together before sprinkling them over layers of cheese and egg. He'd barely gotten them assembled and triple checked that the heat was low when the phone chimed. Wiping his hands on the dish towel he'd hung from his belt, he then swiped up to see what she'd had to say.

Please tell me it's Romy who's offering to come down and lend a hand? Her reply made him grin.

It is, and he really needs to be there and around others. He feels isolated here and alone when I'm on patrol.

It hurt that he felt that way, but Bash was grateful for his honesty, now he just needed to fix it. He waited a beat, watching the dots on the screen.

Perfect, bring him down with your patrol schedule, and we'll have an assignment for him to coincide with when you need to do your rounds. This way he'll also get to see you a few times during your shift, when you stop in to check on us.

He fist pumped, then looked over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't got caught before placing the phone down to fold and flip the omelet, careful not to jostle the ingredients too much and displace them.

Happy the food would not burn, he picked back up his phone.

There is that. I think it's the perfect solution for us. Romy would have the opportunity to interact with crash members of all ages, especially when some of the seniors start dropping by in the evenings, which will only speed up his assimilation in the crash. He needs to see that he has a place here separate from being my mate, and spending time there at the community center will give him a better sense of that.

He didn't have time to think when his phone chirped again.

Exactly. When can I expect you?

One look at the large omelet he typed back. In an hour and a half.

Ohh, that's perfect, we have five little ones that come who always require extra eyes and hands. I'll see you then .

The grin got bigger thinking about Romy playing. See you then, Sasha, and thank you.

She texted back a thumbs up, making him chuckle.

His focus back on breakfast, Bash finished plating their food and divided the fruit smoothies he'd made for them into glasses. Romy had set the table before he'd gone upstairs to use the bathroom. He cubed half a melon for them and placed the chunks in bowls beside their plates.

“Romy, it’s ready,” he called out, hearing the sound of bare feet thudding on wood as his boy rushed down the stairs.

Flushed and gorgeous, Bash inhaled to keep hold of his emotions, pulling out a seat for Romy before taking his own. As he looked to check they had everything, he remembered the thing he’d gotten for Romy the day before but had no opportunity to give to him yet.

Seeing it as the perfect time Bash got up.

“What you doing, Daddy?” Romy questioned as he went to retrieve the backpack he’d dropped in the hallway.

“Just getting something for you.”

“A surprise?” he called out excitedly.

He hoped what he’d bought would make Romy feel less cut off from Bash while he was away from the home they were slowly building together. Carrying the phone he’d purchased with the cartoon rhino case, he came back into the room, watching his boy bounce on his seat.

“Is that for me, Daddy?”

He set it beside Romy’s plate, nodding and retook his seat, watching Romy lift his hands, then hesitate. “It’s yours Little Bumper. I’ve programmed in my number, along with all the emergency contacts, if for some reason Daddy can’t answer his phone,” he explained. “This is to use for emergencies, okay?” He nodded solemnly. “But I promise I will send little GIFs whenever I can, just so you always know that I’m thinking about you even when we’re apart.”

Romy's mouth dropped open, his bottom lip quivering. "Can I text you too, Daddy? That way you'll know I'm thinking about you, too."

"Of course you can, Daddy would love that. I've texted Sasha while I was cooking." Bash's grin widened. "From now on, whenever I go on patrol, I'll drop you off at the community center and then when I'm finished, I'll pick you up so we can go home together."

His lips made a perfect O as he continued. "She'll talk to you about the different things they do there, from daycare to providing a space where the elders can gather, socialize and enjoy one another's company. You won't have to be alone out here, and I drop in three times a shift, so you'll be able to see me too and even get a hug."

Brows rose to disappear under Romy's bangs. "Really?" He finally picked up his new phone and turned it over to see the cartoon rhino on the back of the case. It even had a ring where Romy could slip it over his finger while he was holding it, so he wouldn't have to worry about dropping it if something else demanded his attention.

"Absolutely. It makes me feel better to know that you'll have other members of the crash to spend time with when we can't be together. You were so amazing with the boys, I know the little ones down at the community center are going to love spending time with you," Bash added, using their link to ensure he wasn't saying anything to upset his boy. "It's a much better solution than asking Nomad and Harley if there was something that you could do at the bar. Even as I was suggesting it, I got this twisty-jealous feeling in my guts I'm not too proud to admit to. I wouldn't have wanted so many other shifters, especially daddy shifters, around you when I couldn't be there to make certain they kept their hands to themselves. Call me possessive, but the thought of it makes me wanna headbutt someone, and not in this form, either."

He giggle-snorted. "In other words, you want to gore them and pin them to the wall." Romy's cheekiness was right there, shining through.

He stroked a hand over Romy's forehead, pushing his bangs back and tucking them behind his ear. "Pretty much."

For a moment, it looked like Romy was trying to picture it, then he placed his phone down to reach for his fork. Bash picked up his and waited until Romy took his first bite. He made a groaning noise that reminded him he'd been left hanging this morning once more. He didn't want to rush his Little Bumper. Problem was, he wasn't sure how much more he could take when Romy made noises like he was, and they were going straight to a place that wasn't best pleased at the lack of action.

In between bites, the smile on Romy's face grew as he swirled a bit of omelet in some of the cheese that had oozed out. "Do you have a repair bill fund, Daddy?"

"Not at the moment," Bash admitted, not sure where Romy was going with this.

"Then you might want to wait until you have one before you start denting the walls with other shifters' bodies," Romy suggested, giving him a shy look from under his eyelashes, tempting him. "Otherwise, we'd never be able to build my playroom."

Laughter caught in the back of his throat while he had a mouthful of omelet. He cough-laughed and pointed his fork at Romy, trying to catch his breath while his boy giggled. One part truth and one part playing with him, that was his Romy. Just like back in the bedroom when Bash had swatted him on the bottom. He was a menace in the best possible way, and Bash loved the impulsively impish side of him. That he'd come through the ordeal he had with his spirit still intact was something Bash would forever be grateful for.

"Do you want Daddy to spank your bottom for being cheeky?" he managed, chuckling, making the threat pointless, which they both knew.

He shook his head, putting another forkful of food into his grinning mouth. Bash dug

back into his own meal. As he ate, he thought about how much pleasure it would give him to see his mate each time he popped in to check on the community center. And if he should decide to add an extra round to his rotation when things were quiet, well, then all it would be was him doing his duty. Who could argue with that?

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Romy

The initial couple of shifts he'd done at the community center had his nerves kicking his butt, but Sasha was great and patient with him. Two weeks in, he felt like he knew what he was doing and that he'd gotten his first paycheck made him feel all kinds of things. Bash had given him a credit card and money to buy whatever he wanted, and that was wonderful. Yet, this felt different, as he'd earned it himself.

"So, are you gonna go treat yourself to something nice?" Sasha asked, not looking at him as she piled up the toys, whereas Romy was stacking the seats.

He grinned cheekily, thinking about the shop on main street that had the cutest top he'd seen the other day. "I might have seen something."

On Mondays they shut the center at three-thirty in the afternoon after the last little one got picked up. Looking after the children was the best part of his job. Initially, he'd considered that Sasha had only given him a job because of Bash. He couldn't have been more wrong. Sasha needed him, and he worked hard to keep up with the children. They really did need eyes in the back of their heads to keep up with the fifteen regular children that used the nursery part of the community center.

There was also an after-school club on Tuesday and Thursday. The older kids came to that. It was more about giving them a place to come and hang out, so they didn't get themselves into trouble, or that was what Sasha said.

"Might? Or have?" Sasha walked over to him and took the last seat from him, smiling. She had an easy-going nature, unless riled up, that made everyone migrate



towards her.

He blushed at how easily she had read him. “There is a top I’ve seen. It’s got these cute little splashes of color like someone has splashed paint on it.” He didn’t say it was a crop top, one he hoped would entice Bash to do more than cuddle with him. Not that the cuddles weren’t amazing, they totally were, but these last few days being so close to him, yeah, he’d like a little more than cuddles.

“Cool.” She checked her wristwatch. “You officially finished ten minutes ago, so go on. I’m sure the money is burning a hole in your pocket.” She winked at him. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

Out in the bright sunshine when Sasha all but shoved him out the door, Romy waved at a few people as he strolled towards the main street. Every day, he felt more at home with those who lived in the crash. Sometimes it reminded him of what he’d lost, but mostly it made him happy to have found his place. Bash was the key to that. The man made sure he had everything he needed and more. The warm feeling in his chest was a constant. Love, he was sure that’s what it was, only his Little side was brave enough to say it aloud.

He sighed to himself, crossing the street, lost in his own thoughts. He needed to be braver, he did. But how? The top was a step towards that, buying it with the intention of seducing Bash—hopefully.

He’d never tried it before and he’d asked for some pointers from Cosmo, who’d come for a playdate at the weekend. What with the house renovations—which were coming along slowly because of Bash’s work, and he liked to help—Cosmo and him had played in the wallow. Romy kept his impatience to himself with the reminder of how amazing his life was now.

Down the next street, he cut through the alleyway, wondering if he needed to buy the

shorts he'd also seen in the shop that looked like they'd hug his bottom and show it off.

So lost in thought, it took a second to register a sound behind him. He turned and yelped when something struck his neck. The sting lasted but a second as his eyes narrowed on the huge shifter dressed in black, only his eyes were visible.

He staggered back, there was something about the eyes that were familiar, turning his bowels to water.

Da-dd-yy-yy-yy.

Legs wobbling, his body felt like it had several weights pressing down on his shoulders as a beefy arm caught in around his middle as his brain became emersed in fog. He struggled, or he thought he did, but his body wasn't working. Panic flared deep inside, digging at his past, sending him right back to places he didn't want to go. The scent of rancid meat and filth filled his mouth as he sucked in greedy breaths working to get his lips working to call out. Only no sound came out as the alleyway swam in front of his eyes. A sinister voice whispered, "got you, you little fucker," right as everything went black.

Bash

Da-dd-yy-yy-yy.

The wail came tumbling through his mind, drawn out and panicked, Romy's fear immediately translating to him and in a flash, he'd spun away from the rhino he'd been speaking to and raced towards the community center, crashing headlong into Sasha a half a block away. The impact with the ground was jarring, but not as jarring as the echo of Romy's voice in his head and the silence that had soon followed his heartrending plea.

“Where’s Romy!” Bash asked before either of them could pick themselves up, Sasha looking equal parts pissed and shocked as she sat up on the pavement.

“I... he... something about a shirt!” Sasha stammered, shaking her head while trying to gather her wits after their collision. “What the hell, Bash.”

“Something’s wrong! Did you see which way he headed off in.”

“Obviously not this one or he’d be the one picking himself up off the concrete, which is now cracked, by the way. “

“That was there before, not that it matters,” Bash snapped. “I’m not overreacting, and this is nothing to joke about. Romy is in trouble. He never would have called out to me over our link the way he did, unless something was really wrong with him. You’ve got to help me find him.”

He’d already climbed to his feet and quickly helped her up too, the panic coursing through him making it difficult for him to breathe, let alone focus.

“Call it in and let’s move,” Sasha said, then thought better of it and snatched Bash’s walkie off his belt, quickly informing the head of security that Romy was missing, and Bash would be ceasing his rounds in order to locate him. Even as they raced in the direction of the clothing store, she requested additional security in the vicinity of the community center, and for them to fan out and begin a search.

Moments later, they hit upon a smell that had her back on the radio again, this time reporting the presence of an intruder on the grounds, though neither of them could quite pinpoint the species that went with that smell. Whatever it was bore the stench of rot and disease about it, making it difficult to catch a whiff of what lay beneath the funk.

“It’s stronger this way,” Bash said as he whirled left and began following the traces of it on the breeze.

Dread twisted his guts while the hammering of his heart made it difficult to breathe. The enforcer in him knew not to panic while the mate in him wanted to lose his shit and trample everything until his mate had been returned to him. Maybe it was better for everyone that Shaha had the radio because the only words in Bash’s mind were find my fuckin’ mate , and that was sure to earn him a reprimand somewhere down the line, especially if he bellowed it at the wrong rhino.

The phone, the phone, Romy’s phone. The find a phone app. Holy shit! He yanked his own device from his pocket, large fingers hitting the wrong place on the keypad the first time he tried to cue it up. Please do not let him have left it somewhere. Do not let him have left it somewhere . The mantra ran through his mind, a silent plea to the universe to cut him a fuckin’ break here. They needed to find him. He needed Romy back in his arms and fuck letting him out of his sight ever, ever again. It wasn’t going to happen, even if he had to carry Romy in a specially made pack on his back when he made his rounds from now on.

When the blip appeared, almost a half a mile away from them, Bash bellowed and took off, phone gripped in his hand hard enough to crack it. He’d have shifted if it wouldn’t have meant dropping it and leaving him without a map to follow as he sprinted the distance, confused by the lack of scent in the direction the phone was pointing him to.

Sasha hadn’t joined him either. Had she stayed with the scent, or had Bash simply outrun her in his haste to reach the blip on the map?

Right here.

It was right here.

Whirling round and round, Bash looked for anything out of place. Any sign of Romy or the phone Bash had given him, only nothing stood out along the edge of their crash-lands but an uneasy silence and a wild rosebush.

Shiiiiinnnnkkkkkkkkk.

He ducked the moment the first wiz of sound registered, an arrow imbedding itself in a tree directly behind the spot Bash's head had previously occupied. A second wiz and he went into a low crawl, concealing himself among the thorns and decaying roses even while he attempted to peer around to see if he could spot where the would be sniper was.

The glint of light off metal caused him to duck his head again, but the arrow suddenly imbedded in his ass was proof positive that the sniper had accurately pinpointed his location and wouldn't hesitate to rain a hail of arrows down upon his chosen hiding spot. With no choice left but to whirl around and make a mad dash into the first building on the left, Bash bolted just as an arrow bit into the dirt beside his foot.

Fucker didn't give off the same filth-ridden stench as whatever had been in that alley, but he was an enemy just the same, and currently standing between him and his efforts to locate Romy.

Romy

He groaned as he attempted to move. Everything hurt and the reality of what had happened sank past whatever the asshole had given him. His eyes opened and his vision swam in the dimness. He closed his eyes at the wave of nausea, then breathed in through his nose, breathing out through his mouth four times before he tried again. He listened carefully for any sounds, something that would alert him to the presence of whoever had kidnapped him. There were enough memories to tell him exactly what would happen next when the frigid air brushed against his naked body as he tried to move once more. Binds held his arms pinned to his sides and his legs were spread eagled, each trapped by rope.

The shame and sadness at once more finding himself in this position wanted to take hold. Wanted to dig their fingers into him and take him back to the dark place he went to for the longest time when he'd been stolen from his family. Abused in awful ways, all in the name of science, so he'd been told.

Only this time, he wasn't in a huge concrete building with white walls and medical instruments laid out on tables around him. He twisted his head as much as the binds around his neck would allow. Whoever had taken him had strapped him to something padded, he wasn't lying down, but he wasn't sitting all the way up either. He sucked in another breath, desperate to quell the panic that made the bile burn the back of his throat. The burger he'd eaten at lunch time wanted back out of his stomach.

He focused on the scent of earth and dirt. The scent of who had taken him... he couldn't smell it. No stench of rotting meat met his nose, why was that?

Not the same. It's not the same.

He needed to keep that thought in his head to hold back the past. If it was Raul—eyes they didn't lie—who'd come for him, then things were going to get decidedly worse for Romy.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been out. It was dark where he was, but not pitch black. He squinted into the dimness. Was he underground?

Think Romy, think!

He evened out his breathing, shutting his eyes, letting his senses take over. This time, his rhino wasn't trapped under whatever they'd injected him with. The panic eased off a little. Daddy?

He wiggled his fingers, feeling for edges of what he lay on.

Daddy can you hear me?

He waited another second, not quite sure if he could feel Bash when the drugs were there circulating in his blood. Daddy, I need you! He made sure to shout it as a tear slid down his cheek into his hair at the quietness in his mind when he was sure he had felt Bash's connection to him. Had the drugs managed to sever their connection? Or had they done something else to Romy while he'd been out of it?

Those who'd taken him the first time had liked him awake when they did shit to see his reaction. That didn't mean they hadn't changed tactics.

He gripped the edge of the padded seat, working to hold back the sob.

Could he shift?

Could he break his animal free?

He concentrated, sweat beading on his forehead as he worked to focus. His limbs shook as his eyes stung with sweat as he felt his bones reform, his skeleton changing until it ripped at the rope binds. They held strong, but Romy had learned not to quit. He ground his teeth together as he willed his animal to break free fully. One moment he was human next the bench broke under the weight of his rhino. The drugs burned away, and his clarity returned.

Romy.

Romy.

Where are you?

The sound of Bash's distress made his animal snort and charge blindly in the dimness. His vision adapted as he charged towards the thready light. His horn leading the charge when he heard a scraping sound.

Romy, answer Daddy, now!

His rhino snorted its distress, unable to find Romy's voice to answer as the sound increased, sending shards of fear through Romy at what lay hidden in the darkness despite his rhino form.

Bash

Every moment without his mate was upping the level of frenzy Bash had slipped into, meaning the only rhino in the crash able to keep up with his crazed hunt was Arlo and even he was struggling to rein him in. He could feel Romy's stress, his fear and his anxiety and it was revving Bash's up even more.



Romy! Romy answer Daddy! Answer Daddy right now!

He projected his thoughts blindly, enraged, in pain, blood still pouring from the wound where the arrow had struck him, each movement of his frantic search tearing it open despite the efforts his body made at healing him.

Should have done better.

Should have protected him.

What the fuck had he been thinking, not being there today when he'd known the center closed early? But Romy had asked for alone time. Nibbling his upper lip, he'd looked up at Bash with beseeching eyes because he'd wanted to do something special for them. That's all he'd say. He wanted to do something special, but it was a secret, and he needed Bash to wait. He'd pleaded and Bash had caved, wanting to honor Romy's request to wait to show it to him.

His boy didn't ask for a lot. When Bash offered to stop off and get treats after a shift, Romy always hesitated to choose something fun, like pastry or cupcakes. At first, Bash had wondered if it was because he wasn't fond of sweets, then he'd caught Romy eyeing them, and his eyes had lit up the first time Bash had reached over and selected two in addition to the grapes and berries that Romy had already selected. It was so easy to say yes to Romy's plea after that, and now Bash was kicking his own ass for it.

He should have been there.

Even if he'd had to wait outside wherever Romy was going and promise not to peek. That was the whole point of lining up their shifts.

So Romy wasn't alone.

So he had no reason to be scared

Two weeks.

Two fuckin' weeks.

That was all the time it had taken for Bash to fuck up the routine he'd created.

He was a failure as a Daddy. Romy deserved better and now Bash had gone and allowed his mate to tie them together permanently and cost himself the chance of someone better. Maybe if they'd had a third, like Harley did with Nomad. Someone older, someone to take charge, someone who could focus on....

Ouch!

Fuck!

Backing up, he staggered a second, then sat down on his haunches with a groan, ears ringing after how hard Arlo had kicked him in the head.

Arlo snorted, then pawed the ground. In this form, they couldn't communicate with words, but Arlo's actions spoke volumes.

Focus.

Stop beating yourself up.

You'll be a liability if you can't get your shit together.

Shit, even Arlo was better at this than he was.

Head hanging low, Bash nodded, vision still spotty because Arlo had held nothing back when he'd kicked him. Was enough to make him wonder how long he'd been trying before he resorted to that?

With focus came awareness... and that scent.

No wonder Arlo had been desperate to get his attention, that smell was back, and it seemed like they were closer to it than when he'd stampeded the wrong way and gotten himself shot in the ass by an arrow.

Okay.

He got it.

Focus.

They had to be close.

He could feel that his connection to Romy was stronger. He could use that like a beacon, home in on it and follow.

Lunging to his feet, he swung his head right, ran a few feet, felt the connection dim and spun around, charging left this time.

Brighter.

Larger.

Head bobbing up and down, hooves kicking up dust as the earth rumbled beneath the force of his footsteps, he ran until Romy's emotions were like a scream, only Bash still couldn't see anything.

Camouflage then, some hidden entrance.

Where?

Where the fuck was it hidden?

Snorting, pawing, he and Arlo worked outward, trying to unearth anything that would reveal where they had Romy hidden. Wasn't enough that they'd taken his mate, they had to put him through this bullshit.

Anger left him trumpeting, feet crashing down hard on something that splintered underneath them, dropping him unceremoniously to his knees. His jaw hit the ground with enough force that another piece broke away.

Scrambling backward, Bash felt teeth clamp like a vice on his tail and he bellowed, even as the ground beneath his hooves began to crumble. Arlo didn't falter though, the fucker hauled him back so hard Bash felt the flesh tear and rip partially free of his body before he was back on solid ground.

That was gonna leave a mark...and maybe a missing body part when all was said and done. But down into the darkness, they were going. Just as soon as they could work out a method that wouldn't land them in a heap at the bottom, useless as rescuers, while they had to wait to heal broken bones.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Romy

His rhino was in a stampede heading through the tunnel when it caught the scent of their mate. It didn't hesitate, snorting and chuffing as he charged. The sound of crashing came with a sudden light pouring down from above.

Romy skidded to a halt. Was this a trick?

In the past, they'd done all sorts of things to make him believe shit that wasn't real. Was this the case now? Would he reveal himself and then get attacked because he'd gotten conned?

His rhino was a simple creature. It wanted its mate, and he could smell him and therefore they should keep going. But Romy had learned the hard way some things weren't always what they seemed. In his rhino form, there seemed to be some barrier preventing him from talking to Bash, so he made a decision and shifted back.

It's going to be okay.

It's going to be okay.

Naked and shaking, he crept forward, staying within the shadows, listening carefully and avoiding the splintered wood on the dirt floor.

You can do this. He took a deep breath and peeked up at the hole. Seeing the sky made Romy feel a little better as he inhaled and got a whiff of blood that was his mates. Daddyyyyyyy, he wailed through their connection.

Romy! Romy, where are you?

The frantic response actually calmed him, despite how Bash sounded. Underground, Daddy, I can see daylight now above me. I can smell you bleedin'. He sniffed, his eyes leaking tears because it meant Bash really had to have hurt himself.

It's okay, Daddy has a couple of injuries. Look up, Little Bumper, I'm going to look over the edge of the hole so I can see.

Romy edged back and there, peering over the edge, was Bash's rhino. In all of Romy's life, he'd never felt happier to see someone. A special someone who had come looking for him. Who'd come to save him and even injured hadn't given up.

"Daddy," he sobbed out, "I need you."

Next thing there was Bash's gorgeous face peering down at him, along with Arlo, one of the other enforcers.

Bash seemed at a loss for words as Arlo looked around, his dark gaze focused on their surroundings as he called, "Is there anything there that we can use to pull you out?"

Then a sound came from the direction that Romy had been held. He shook as his fear rolled back over him. Someone's down here with me . They've come back to get me!

Keep back against the wall in the shadows. I will not let anyone hurt you.

Bash's reassuring voice helped quell some of the fear as Romy slunk back and pressed against the wall. Doing his best to keep his breathing slow and even as there was a noise from above and other noises coming from the tunnel.

Dirt fell from above, scattering over the floor, sounding like it was raining. A root of a tree lowered down through the hole a moment later, dangling close to where he was.

Grab this and hold on.

Okay. He slunk forward until he was right under the hole, grabbed the dirt cover root. Got it. Something whizzed past Romy's ear as he got jerked up off the ground without any preamble. The arrow hit the wall and imbedded in. Romy wheezed at the close call as he sailed through the air to the sound of vicious curses from below him.

His feet hardly hit the ground when he shouted, "Watch out! Someone's firing arrows."

Scooped up at a run, Bash was off and darting for the trees. Romy buried his face into Bash's neck and clung on. There were the sounds of thundering hooves as Arlo stayed behind them, protecting their rear.

Once in the tree line, they still weren't safe, and Romy didn't let go of Bash's neck as he bobbed up and down at the frantic movement. He wasn't sure how long they were moving or where they even were when Bash finally stopped. He sank to the ground and carefully placed Romy on the impacted earth, then retched madly on the ground, his large body heaving.

It was then that Romy noticed the gaping wound on Bash's flank. Blood pumped from it.

"Shift, Daddy. Shift now," he demanded, knowing it had to happen, or he'd lose Bash, holding back the need to cry with terror, knowing it wouldn't help. Bash's safety was all he could think about.

Arlo came to a stop and laid his horn on Bash's shoulder, giving him a hard knock. "Alright," Bash gasped, "give me a fucking second."

Hurry Daddy.

Hurry.

The air shimmied, and there was Bash's rhino snorting. Romy didn't get more than a chance to release a breath when he heard someone running towards them.

Oh fuck, what now!

Bash's words filled his head as he staggered to his feet and Romy rose too, prepared to fight for his mate to his last breath. He shifted and snorted, his horns ready to do battle.

Bash

There was no time to think of the pain he was in, or the terror that was rolling off Romy, all he could focus on was finding the energy to get them to safety and away from whatever it was that was coming for them.

Arlo let out a loud chuff and Bash nudged Romy between them, so he'd have protection from both sides. They were in unfamiliar territory and his sense of direction had grown scrambled with all the twisting turns they'd made in the effort to track his mate.

The last thing he expected was the earth-shaking rumble that announced the arrival of reinforcements in the form of several additional crash enforcers. The blood dripping from the initial arrow wound had no doubt given them a path to follow. Coupled with the way he'd started gushing blood after Arlo had yanked him backwards by the tail,



tracking them had probably been an effortless task.

As they circled around them now, creating a protective wall against their enemies, he was grateful for the damage, despite the lightheadedness that was beginning to creep in. With all the noise, it was impossible to tell if whatever had been chasing them was still lurking nearby, but at least now, they wouldn't have to face that danger alone. Romy was safe, and he'd stay that way, goddamn it.

Anger warred with exhaustion, and he snorted and stomped the ground, pawing it and kicking up dust. Several of the others did the same, all preparing to charge as a unit the moment whatever it was made itself known. When the attack came, it didn't come from the forest in front of them, but from the trees above them. Arrows rained down on them. Razor sharp, they sliced even their tough hides when they landed, but fortunately, they could not penetrate too deep. Even the arrowhead still imbedded in his ass had not traveled far enough into his body to do significant harm. Most glanced off, deflected by the thickness of their skin and their movement. But it certainly put them at a disadvantage when it came to fighting back.

Bash looked at the trees surrounding them. They were old and thick, too thick for even a charging Rhino to fell. All they'd accomplish was knocking themselves silly attempting it, leaving themselves even more vulnerable.

With Arlo leading, they made the decision to retreat as swiftly as possible, back to their crash lands. Being able to fire arrows hopefully meant that their attackers had hands, though after what they'd seen with the mutated owls, there was no telling what was in those trees and unfortunately, they were ill-equipped to find out. Unlike Cosmo and his mates, they couldn't stalk their advisories from the trees and level the playing field that way.

Fuck, even in their human forms, most of them weren't good climbers. Whirling with Romy at his side, Bash followed the lead enforcers as they crashed through brush and

wove past trees, the crack of old, fallen branches breaking beneath their feet. Shrubs got leveled, and several smaller animals fled before them, trying to keep out of the way of their heavy hooves. In another situation, it might even have been comical, but as Bash floundered and struggled to keep up, he realized he might not get to experience that humorous moment, or any other, if they couldn't find a way to defeat this enemy.

How many had fired upon them was unknown. Who and what they were was also unknown. He hated it. He feared it for Romy.

They needed reinforcement and calling on Harley, Nomad and Cosmo was going to have to be something their crash leader considered, among other courses of action, once they'd reported this attack to him. That Romy had been snatched off crash lands was infuriating enough, but that it had happened so close to the community center, where the most vulnerable members of their crash spent a great deal of time, was simply intolerable.

Bash understood that for the protection of their people, they would need to gather in the great stone cavern at the southern edge of their grounds. The rocks there would provide protection and put them out of reach of the trees. The depth and span of the cavern meant the entire crash could fit.

For years, they'd stored supplies and material there to ensure that their needs could and would be met. It would be the best place for all of them and Bash dearly hoped their alpha would give the order, though he wasn't sure he'd be up to making the trek upright. As it was, his eyelids felt heavy and his head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, only Romy was still running, and his mate's Rhino was constantly encouraging him to keep moving.

Then he saw it, just ahead, the edge of their crash lands and more of their brethren waiting to help defend them. Romy was safe. That's all Bash could think about.

Nothing else mattered now, not even the indignity of having to ride to the caverns in the back of a truck rather than in the driver's seat. Relief poured through him the moment they were safely behind the line.

He swung his head around to nuzzle Romy, inhaling the mingled scent of him and his mate and chuffing with relief. Stubborn pride kept him from leaning against his boy, even as his body trembled, and he felt his knees try to buckle. Stiffening his spine, he forced himself to stay steady and turn, waiting to see if anything had pursued them. Determined not to let his eyes close until he knew, with one hundred percent certainty, that they'd escaped. He'd already appeared weak in front of his mate, and on more than one occasion, these motherfuckers were not about to be the cause of it happening again.

Romy

He wanted to fuss, only one look at Bash's pale and wan expression, and he kept his thoughts to himself. His mate staggered into their home, weaker than a newborn kitten. Three of the enforcers had escorted them home when they'd deemed those who'd attacked, for now, were not a threat. Bash had put up some resistance, but not as much as was usual, and that made Romy worry all the more.

His mate had lost a lot of blood, and it hadn't helped when one of the nurses had to dig out the arrowhead that got stuck after shifting twice in Bash's hide. Then there was the gaping wound on his flank, shifting had healed some of it, but Romy could see that there would be a scar. All that had happened to him, nothing terrified him more than thoughts of his mate dying.

So he didn't fuss and followed close to Bash as he dragged his bare feet over the floor looking ready to trip at any moment.

His hands itched at his sides, and he cursed in his head when Bash crashed into the wall, dropping plaster to the floor. Romy gave in and shoved his shoulder into Bash's side. "Lean on me." Seeing Bash was about to refuse, he tagged on, "Please Daddy, I wanna be near you."

Bash's brows tugged together, but he did as Romy requested. He gritted his teeth at the sudden weight and staggered right alongside Bash into the kitchen. Settled in a chair, breathing hard, Romy went and retrieved a large carton of fresh orange juice. Pouring them both a big glass, he laid one on the table next to Bash. "Drink Daddy."

His lips trembled as much as Bash's hand as he did it without argument. Romy drank his own, then refilled the two glasses. He didn't make small talk with his thoughts being scattered and chaotic. He occupied himself with heating food Bash had put in tubs in the freezer.

Bash watched him silently from heavy-lidded, exhausted eyes. His waxy complexion not improving. He nuked the food rather than heating it in the oven like he'd wished. Bash needed food now. The plate overflowing with meat and pasta, he put it in front of Bash. "Daddy, I want to see a clean plate," he joke-sobbed.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled tiredly.

Romy stopped on his way to take the seat where he'd put his food. "What for? You saved me." The moment the words came out of his mouth, everything came crashing down on him. He wobbled his way back to Bash and shimmed past the table, naked and dirty, and climbed on Bash's lap. The tears came in ugly sobs as he clung to the solid form of his mate.

"They took you f-from m-me." Bash's reply came out choked and Romy ran his wet nose down his throat.

"But you got me back. You came when no one did last time." And that made a world of difference to Romy.

Bash shuddered and clung to him harder, rocking him on his lap. "I'll always come for you, never fear."

Romy hiccuped and sniffed. "Let's hope you don't have to." Even though he said it, he knew whoever took him would come again. The crash lands were now guarded with more enforcers than Romy had even considered they had. Someone had gone around the town and directed security cameras to all the vulnerable spots. The alpha

of the crash was currently meeting with the top enforcers to decide the next move. Bash had wanted to be a part of it, but Romy had used his own wounds to get Bash home.

They both needed to eat a ton of food, shift once more, and sleep to heal fully, but they both needed this more right now. He looked at Bash's claiming bite and he nuzzled it before biting true, wanting to feel his mate's life force.

The guttural groan rumbled through Bash, and he tilted his head, giving Romy more room. "That's it, Little Bumper, renew our connection."

When his teeth released, he licked the patch of skin. Seeing it knit together, he made a satisfied sound in the back of his throat. "Eat now Daddy."

With a little maneuvering, he stayed on Bash's lap to eat, paying attention as Bash slogged his way through until he'd cleared the plate. Happier, Romy made a second, then third plate of food, by which point Bash had regained a little of his color.

"Bath time," he murmured, his own full belly and the events making him sluggish, but there was no way he was getting into their wallow stinking like he did.

In the bathroom, they both eyed the bath. "Shower," Bash muttered. "We'll shower this time."

He didn't argue when he caught sight of Bash's rear. The skin was puckered and raw, parts still bleeding. Naked, they stepped straight into the stall when the water was warm. He picked up his body wash and tried hard not to think about how Bash had to brace against the wall to keep upright.

Everything was going to be fine.

It was.

He'd shift, then be better.

He kept up the litany and made sure none of it seeped through their link as he helped Bash, continuing to use the need to be close so he'd agree. Dried and outside twenty minutes later, he nudged Bash towards the wallow. "We need to shift." Bash looked around at the quiet neighborhood, looking about to disagree. "No Daddy, the crash will keep us safe. We both shift together." It wasn't in his nature to be bossy like this, but right now, he had to be. Daddy could tell me off when fully healed.

Is that right? A tired grin appeared, and it was the best thing Romy had seen.

He grinned back. Yes, now come on Daddy, I wanna lie next to you in the wallow and snooze.

Anything for my Little Bumper.

Romy counted on it.

Bash

Waking in the wallow, Bash felt a hundred times better than when they'd first sunk into the cool depths. Even now, he had no desire to move. Not with his snoozing boy pressed up against his side. When Romy had been taken, he'd felt like someone had ripped his heart out and stomped on it. Their hometown should have been safe for Little Bumper to live life with no need of an armed guard every moment of every day. It wasn't fair to him to not have that sort of safety and feeling of security here, of all places. He was desperate for a solution. It didn't sit well with him, not knowing who or what the threat was or how it connected to everything that had taken place with the council and the experiments they'd been conducting. For as much as he

wished for an end to things, he'd known it wouldn't be as easy as exposing them. What he'd never imagined was how far-reaching their deception and unscrupulous behavior were truly proving to be.

It wasn't just Romy who was in danger, but it was Romy who had his heart, it was Romy he nuzzled now and gently chuffed over, his rhino wanting the time to spoil their mate. Hell, his rhino longed for the opportunity to mate properly, then hand feed his mate strawberries and melon pieces as they lay wrapped up with one another. A part of him felt like he should be actively ensuring that the threat became neutralized, but a dark, nagging voice had been creeping into his thoughts ever since the night the owl had attacked them in their wallow. One that said he did not deserve a mate if he could not protect him properly. That it wasn't enough to have retrieved him and brought him home and made certain he was healthy and cared for. As they lay there, it was that voice that whispered that Bash wasn't enough.

Not strong enough.

Not attentive enough.

Unworthy.

That feeling was beginning to creep into his soul, every weakness picked at until it bled, then picked apart again even after it had scabbed over.

Chuffing softly, he inspected his sleeping mate to ensure that every wound had healed, pleased to see that no trace of the damage remained. Romy huffed in his sleep and rolled just enough to snuggle closer, so adorably endearing just like earlier, when his little bossy self had taken charge, again, and half guided, half directed Bash through the process of eating, and shifting so he could heal properly.

A hundred times better still didn't mean a hundred percent. He could feel the



weariness still weighing him down, the exhaustion having crept into the very marrow of his bones, beginning to take root right alongside that feeling of not being enough.

You're thinking really loud, Daddy.

The flicker of Romy's thoughts in his head elicited a chuffing huff as he nuzzled him a little more, excited that he could now hear his mate in their animal form.

Sorry Little Bumper, I'll try to think quieter.

Feels more like brooding than thinking, Daddy. What's wrong?

Daddy should have done a better job of protecting you, so they couldn't take you from me. I'm sorry. They scared you, and that was my fault. I took for granted the security we had in place, letting myself think it was enough when I should have known it wouldn't be.

Romy rubbed his head against Bash's shoulder. There was no way you could know that would happen.

But I shouldn't have let myself think it wouldn't. I should have been on guard every moment of every day and right there when you got out of work to ensure that you got where you wanted to go with no issues, and that's not what happened. I failed you.

The council failed all of us. Romy said it with such certainty that it suddenly clicked for Bash that he didn't hold Bash responsible for anything that had taken place.

Nuzzling his mate, Bash nipped lightly along the back of his neck and felt him shiver. You'll get no arguments from me about that.

Good. Otherwise, I might have to get mad at you, Daddy, and I don't want to do that.

Something tells me you can be quite the force of nature when someone pisses you off.

Do you want to find out?

Chuffing, Bash used his head to rock the water, so it flowed gently over Romy's back. Not particularly.

Romy

Good answer, Daddy. It was so wonderful to hear Bash's rhino in his head and be able to respond. Romy felt the disquiet inside Bash, he might think he'd deflected but he hadn't, not totally. What to do about it?

He could feel Bash's fatigue linger, nothing like it was, and he turned over options. His plans that had gone awry before he'd gotten to the shop to buy the cute top to entice Bash weren't going to happen. He did not want to be away from Bash as much as his mate wanted him by his side.

He rose out of the wallow and shifted, muddy water ran down his naked body as he stood in the sunlight letting Bash inspect him. His cock plumped at what he could see in the eyes of the rhino. Barely a second later, Bash shifted, and he stared at the man who had changed his world for the better.

He gave him a bashful smile. "I think I need a bath, Daddy. I'm a little muddy."

Bash came out of the wallow, and Romy's gaze dropped to his flank to check out the wound. His heart twisted in his chest painfully at the jagged scar gracing Bash's skin. Ugly and puckered, but healed. That was what he held onto as he offered his hand to the man towering over him.

He ignored it and swept Romy up into his arms. "My turn to look after you," he murmured softly, his nose touching Romy's. Tips rubbing he held Bash's gaze. "I've not been the best Daddy, I'll do better."

“Shush, Daddy. You did what I needed best.” He gave him another shy smile. “But kisses, I could do with some Daddy kisses, real bad.”

A chuckle rumbled out of him. “Is that so?” Hot breath touched his lips before they were claimed. Gentle, so gentle, Bash teased his lips over Romy’s, time and time again until he felt like he was floating in a sea of warm water.

He blinked his fuzzy eyes into focus when the kissing stopped to find they’d somehow gotten to the bathroom. Bash lowered him to the floor, his heart pitter-pattering at how much he wanted his mate.

The sounds of water broke the silence as it splashed, filling the bath. Romy remained standing where Bash had put him, watching his mate roam around, grabbing what they needed.

Bubbles floated on the top of the water when he turned off the taps and tested them before coming back to Romy. He shivered in anticipation as strong arms lifted him effortlessly under his arms and placed him into the bubbles. He squealed at the warmth and feel of bubbles tickling his skin.

Bash had him settled in the middle of the huge tub before he stepped in front of him. His cock was semi-erect, thick, veiny and long. Heat flooded Romy’s body, and his ass grew slick at thoughts of where he’d like it. Bash’s balls were large and hairless, and Romy wanted to feel the weight of them in his hands while he nuzzled along the shaft that grew harder the longer he stared at it. Doing his best not to overthink it, Romy rose on his knees, bringing himself closer to what he wanted.

Bash towered over him and didn’t move. “What does Little Bumper want?”

He met those gorgeous eyes and followed his heart. “Everything, Daddy. Can I touch?”

He lifted his arms in offering. Romy didn't need a second invitation. His soapy hands ran up hard muscled, smooth thighs that flexed. He washed off the muddy water, his hands creeping higher as he didn't think too hard on what he was doing.

Bash bit back a moan, making him sound like he was in pain. One cheek between their link and Romy held back a grin at how much Bash wanted his hands all over him. He took his time, washing and rinsing as he went, teasing them both. When his hands cupped the sac, heavy and tight, they both moaned. Bash's fully erect cock poked out towards the ceiling, it bobbed with each stroking movement of his fingers.

Giving in, he pushed his face into the crease of Bash's thigh and inhaled his musky scent, groaning as his body responded. He nuzzled, and licked at the skin tasting him, groaning once more.

Hands fell onto his shoulders, holding him as the thighs trembled with each touch, flick of his tongue, each nip as he nibbled his way over Bash's lower abdomen feeling it contract as Bash rocked into the light touches.

He ran his tongue up the ridged length and moaned at the flavor and feel. Everything was alive inside him as he slipped his hands up to hold on to Bash to get closer, to snake his tongue around the head of his cock, looking up. He whimpered at the desire flashing in Bash's dark gaze. It burned a path to Romy's cock, making it jerk in the water.

He sucked the large head between his lips and teased the crown with his tongue seeking out his essence. The slight bitterness added to the intoxicated smells assailing him, drugging him until he felt heady.

He slurped and sucked as much of the shaft into his mouth, not once breaking eye contact.

“Such a good boy. Daddy’s Little Bumper, so perfect.” The praise continued and ramped up Romy’s level of desire to please. To be all the things Bash said he was.

Bash’s whole body shuddered so hard, his cock poked the back of Romy’s throat making him choke and saliva drip out of his mouth as Bash pulled back the second he started to cough.

“Sorry, Daddy got a little overexcited.”

Was that a bad thing?

“Fuck no, I just don’t want to impale you from that end,” he replied, chuckling.

Romy’s body heated at exactly what end he’d like to be impaled on. “What end would Daddy like to impale me on,” he asked, all sugary sweet and innocent.

Bash’s responding groan came with a strand of pre-cum sliding off the end of his cock. “Are you teasing your Daddy?” As he asked, he came down into the bath, water sloshing over the edge onto the tiles, but neither looked away from the other.

He gave a cheeky grin. “No,”—he fluttered his eyelashes—“Daddy…”

Bash's laughter boomed off the walls as he lifted Romy from his kneeling position, so he hung over Bash’s body, dripping water everywhere. His heart back to racing at the show of strength.

When he was clear of Bash’s legs, he stretched them out and more water swished onto the floor when he lowered Romy. “Spread you legs so your knees hug Daddy’s side.”

He didn’t need asking twice when his ass hit something hard and slick.

Bash

Sliding a hand between them, Bash gently stroked Romy's cock, caressing while he held his mate's gaze, loving the way his little tongue poked out as his eyes drifted to half closed and he sighed contently. Only then did he let his fingertips slide back along Romy's taint, rubbing and lightly probing before slipping a finger inside his mate.

"Daddy's been wanting this for a very long time," Bash cooed as he took his time, prepping him. "Want to make sure you only feel good once you're on Daddy's cock."

Romy groaned at that, especially as Bash teased further, circling that finger around inside of him before adding the second. With his knees wide and Bash caressing his cheek with his free hand, a light tremble wracked Romy's body, and he chuffed and pressed down, rocking himself on Bash's fingers. A third finger had him throwing his head back, then Bash tweaked a nipple and Romy clenched around his digits, drawing a low chuckle from him.

"How did I get so lucky," Bash murmured. "To have found a mate with the strength to take charge when his Daddy can't, the cunning to evade his captors despite the circumstances he found himself in, and a mouth—gods be damned—sensuous like no other."

Bash kissed him then, tongue fucking him really, invading his mouth to match the rhythm of the digits he had buried inside Romy, loving the way his mate responded with enthusiastic grunts, groans and more squirming. There would be one hell of a mess on the bathroom floor by the time they were done sloshing water everywhere, but Bash wouldn't mind cleaning it up in the slightest.

The look in his boy's eyes told him all he needed to know as they broke apart. Romy was more than ready for the second phase of their mating and that final claim that

Bash had been longing to bestow upon him. Withdrawing his fingers, Bash wrapped them around his aching cock and moaned as he guided himself inside Romy's slick and willing body. Inch by inch, Romy slid down his cock, taking more of him. The sensation was slow, torturous and maddening in its intensity, lighting all of Bash's nerve endings on fire. The moment he bottomed out inside Romy, they groaned together, gasping as Romy rocked and Bash thrust up, water lapping against their skin as Bash locked an arm across the small of his back and crushed him close.

"You are the most stunning being I have ever laid eyes on," Bash murmured. "I feel like I've been waiting my whole life for you, Little Bumper, now you are mine in every, single way."

Not only did he thrust up again, but he tugged Romy until he was molded against his chest, his lips nuzzling Romy's neck, his teeth finding the original claim mark and biting it again. He tasted copper and held tight, teeth embedded in his mate's skin until Romy shook and trembled, his orgasm scenting the water around them and even then Bash didn't let up, keeping him pinning on his cock and pinned in place by his teeth as he thrust up into him, claiming, claiming, until his own soul shattering orgasm rolled through him.

Only after he was a little more sated did he ease his teeth out of Romy's skin and lick over the marks, watching them close to reform that perfect scar, a message to every member of the pride, crash and pack they might encounter, that Romy belonged to him.

Didn't mean he was done with the love making though. With gentle hands, he brushed his mate's hair back from his cheek and kissed all over his face, making him laugh and splash him. A squirming Romy meant his slowly softening cock started thickening immediately, their shifter genes making prolonged matings easily attainable.



“Naughty, Daddy,” Romy giggled, so Bash pinched his bottom, a reminder of just how naughty he could be.

Romy’s bright eyes and the way he gasped at the feel of Bash’s fingers led to him laughing and pinching him again, this time on the other cheek. This time Romy attempted to glare at him, only his lips gave away his joy, all turned up in a bright smile the way they were. Tickling his boy meant Romy squirmed on his cock some more, getting him harder, even as Romy tried to turn the tables and tickle him back. All he did was create more slippery sliding moments of skin against skin until the laughter gave way to low moans and the squirming became gentle rocking again as Romy rocked and Bash caressed his water slick skin.

The second bout of love making was slower. Gentle and filled with caresses and slow, sensuous kisses, as they touched and clung, enjoying the slow, unhurried lovemaking they finally had the time to enjoy without risk of interruption. At some point, the weather outside changed and Bash could hear the patter of rain pelting the frosted glass window, but all it did was mask the sound of the water slowly dripping over the edges of the tub and leaking onto the floor.

“My precious Little Bumper,” Bash murmured when they were both on the cusp of the next orgasm.

Even the lap of water along his sensitive sides sent shivers through his body, every sensation heightened. Thunder rumbled, then crashed as lightning flashed outside the window, the inside lights flickering as their pleasure spiraled higher, then flared into a supernova of passion that left them limp, spent, and clinging to one another in the now cold water as the power went out.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:26 am*

Romy

Laying snuggled against Bash's side, he breathed in deep their combined scents in the darkness, listening to the storm rage outside. They'd gotten out of the bath a couple of hours ago and although Romy had dosed initially, his brain wouldn't quit.

There was so much going on in there, he wasn't sure he knew where to start processing what had happened to him and what would happen next.

His mate had gotten injured because of him. It was a hard thing to live with, and Romy needed time to adapt to that reality when the scarring was there. A reminder that they weren't invincible to such things. Taking the irrevocable step in their mating was precious.

Bash, gods, he'd been amazing, loving, caring and so gentle even now Romy's eyes ached with the sweetness of it. He could feel Bash inside his heart, in his soul, they were a prized part of him. Was it selfish to have allowed this to happen when the threat to him put Bash at risk? Possibly, but he'd learned life wasn't always fair. Now he needed to figure out if those who'd taken him the first time were those who hunted him now. He wasn't sure how he could achieve that. But he suspected that Cosmo, Nomad and Harley would. It wasn't that he didn't trust Bash, he did, or else he wouldn't have chosen to mate with him. No, the thing was, he didn't want to put Bash in harm's way once more.

Did that make him a bad friend when he considered putting Cosmo and his mates in harm's way?

He sighed quietly at the obvious answer. He could argue they were trained for such things. Only Bash was an enforcer who'd also trained in undercover ops. Another sigh and the large arm holding him close tightened, but Bash never stirred beyond that.

Romy breathed slow and steady working on keeping Bash asleep, he needed the rest after the amount of times he'd shifted and the injuries he'd sustained.

His fingers traced gently over the bicep of the arm holding him as Romy stared up at the ceiling, at the small sliver of moonlight that slid through the blinds which weren't fully closed.

Had he recognized the scent of his kidnapper? Or was his past merging with his present due to fright? If it was someone from his past, why were they interested in him now?

Was it to do with the children Bash had rescued? Were they looking to get back at the crash for what they had done? Rhinos such as Romy and the boys were rare, and a prized commodity. Was it just that they'd lost that?

Romy's innards didn't think it was fully that. Why he felt that way, he couldn't be sure, but he'd always listened to his gut. Something about the whole situation niggled somewhat. Could it have something to do with what had happened to him a long time ago? Did he have some information that made him a danger to those two council members still on the run? All a possibility.

Frustration grew inside him as he forced himself to think back to a time he usually avoided thinking about. His brain was so used to keeping him safe from those bad times, he struggled to recall anything that made any sense to him, other than the pain. Endless pain from tests, needles poking him, men in white jackets subjecting his body to heinous experiments.

His breathing became choppy as he struggled to regain some perspective. To tell himself it was over, that it wasn't happening in the here and now. Chugging oxygen into his lungs didn't help and in his panic, Romy bolted upright, dragging Bash with him.

"What is it?" Bash's voice was instantly alert and deadly in the darkness. He pulled Romy to him, keeping him safe.

"C-can't... b-breath," he gasped, white spots forming in front of his eyes even in the darkness.

The room suddenly filled with light and Romy's eyes watered as they adjusted while feeling lightheaded. His head dropped in shame, hating that his own silly head had brought him to his knees after being so brave earlier.

Useless. I'm useless.

You are not. "Breath Little Bumper, Daddy's got you."

The assertive tone helped along with the hand stroking up his naked back as Romy shuddered and dragged in precious air into his lungs. As did the reinforced words of Bash as he continued to tell him, my strong boy. So brave for Daddy when he needed you. You are the bestest boy Daddy could want.

On and on Bash filled his mind with everything he believed, and it got past the panic eating at Romy until he was sobbing. Sobbing out all the fear of his past he'd held in. It mixed with his fear of losing Bash into one ugly mess. His thoughts mushed, pummeled by the past and the present as they merged. He was helpless, unable to do anything other than cling to Bash and ride the storm.

"Daddy's here. That's it, let it all out, my brave Little Bumper. Daddy's got you."

Bash

Romy waking to a panic attack wasn't surprising after everything they'd been through, and while Bash would love to rush creating a space for Romy where trouble was the last thing his boy would ever think about, he knew that wasn't a solution to the problem. What weighed on Romy's mind could only be shoved aside so often, and with so many unknowns, it wasn't wise to keep prolonging the conversation Bash knew he needed to have with his mate. Once they were past it all, there would be plenty of time to create a rhino utopia for his mate to wallow in, no matter the season.

He envisioned what he had already started to build projecting it to Romy. An indoor wallow, as well as a hot tub and an indoor pool for both swimming laps and floating in while staring up through glass skylights to stare at the stars. At night, with the lights low, they could float on a two-person raft and enjoy the calm lapping of the pool water along the edges of their float while they cuddled or held hands, lost in the feel of each other and the infinite universe sprawled overhead. Those twinkling celestial bodies reminded him of the fireflies he'd chuffed at in his youth as he had chased them, unable to entice them into landing on his nose. He'd had the benefit of a childhood filled with love and magic, something he didn't know if his mate had ever experienced.

Those were things he longed to see that Romy had as his mate and Daddy. Everything he'd ever desired, Bash wanted him to have.

Maneuvering them into a seated position with Romy in his arms and on his lap, Bash bundled the blankets around them and cuddled Romy close, stroking his hair as he stared down into Little Bumper's eyes.

"I know life hasn't been kind to you," Bash began, letting his heart and his gut guide him as they ventured into potentially hurtful territory. "In a perfect world I would have found you years ago, and you'd have had years of feeling safe, loved, cherished

and protected by not just me, but a crash that doesn't believe in abandoning a single member to the experiments and atrocities the council has submitted so many of our kind to. As an enforcer, the mission that Cosmo and I embarked on together was the most important one I was ever assigned. We were not willing to rest until our young were returned to us. Now, we are committed to seeing that none are ever stolen or mistreated again."

"Does this mean you have to leave me to go help?" Romy asked in a small and tired voice.

"No, Little Bumper," Bash replied as he hugged him tighter. "It means that you and I need to work together to unravel the secrets that are still tangled up in your head."

"I-I..." Romy stammered, unable to utter another word.

"You talk in your sleep," Bash informed him as he caressed Romy's cheek, occasionally smoothing his hair back.

It helped him stay settled and grounded while continuing to strengthen their bond.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"It's nothing to be sorry about, Little Bumper, I'm glad for it," Bash insisted.

"G-glad?"

"Yes," Bash said before pressing a kiss to his nose. "Because there's no hiding things when you're asleep."

"I'm not..." Romy stammered, trying to protest until Bash gazed down at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Are you trying to lie to your Daddy?”

Romy’s voice was low and contrite when he answered. “No, Daddy.”

“Exactly. Because you are a good boy and you know good boys don’t tell fibs, even if they think the fib will protect somebody.”

Romy flushed, but he didn’t look away.

“Do you know what the most special thing about a mate is?”

Romy nibbled his lower lip for several seconds before finally attempting an answer. “That they were made for each other?”

Nodding, Bash combed his fingers through Romy’s hair. “That’s a big part of it,” Bash said. “But it also means that there is nothing they can’t accomplish when they work together. The strongest force, outside of the love of a parent for their child, is the love of a mate for the one they’ve pledged themselves to. You’ve proved that several times since we found one another, with the way you fought for me, fought for us to have a chance at forever together. I don’t want you to stop ever doing that.”

“But what happens if you get hurt again because of me?” Romy asked, half question and half wail that ended in a low, choked sob.

“Get something straight, Little Bumper. I didn’t get hurt because of you, I got hurt because there are shifters out there determined to wreak as much havoc as they can while they’re still above ground and breathing. That isn’t something you can control. All you can do is trust Daddy with everything you remember, even if you think it’s insignificant, then together you and Daddy will decide who the best person would be to share that information with, so we can keep you and everyone else safe, okay? Please? Can you do that for Daddy?”

Romy

Sharing everything he could remember two days earlier left Romy feeling like a pumpkin shell hollowed out for Thanksgiving. It made everything more real, and that became even more so with him now sat on Bash's knee in front of Cosmo, Nomad, Harley, several enforcers, along with Evander, the head of the crash, Bree the pack alpha, and Ethan the pride leader who'd helped reveal the shitshow the council were involved in.

The noise in the room was loud and although Bash had invited them all to their home, and they had come, Romy was nervous. That was with Bash's reassurances, everything would be fine. How could it be when he was once more going to talk about those who had tortured him because of what he was?

Rarely did he talk about his parentage. He didn't want to think about what made him different from others. What got his parents killed because Romy was different—special to those fuckers.

He felt the quiver start in his belly and he nestled closer to Bash, needing his warmth and solid presence.

Be brave.

Be brave.

He kept up the mantra, shielding his thoughts from Bash, not wanting to worry him.



“Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I know I was a little vague, but Romy is going to explain everything. I ask you all to let Romy talk first and save your questions for when he’s finished, okay?” Bash asked, pressing Romy closer to him as he spoke.

It had taken two days to get everyone in the same room and Romy was grateful they’d all come without really knowing why.

“I’m grateful to you all,” he murmured, then coughed to clear his throat. His fingers curling around Bash’s. “I can’t remember when or how old I was when the council captured me and murdered my family. To start with, I never understood why they wanted me. I was just a rhino from a loving family. Why did they let me live? Their arrogance was how I discovered how rare I actually was. They were so confident in their believe that I was theirs forever they’d talk like I wasn’t even in the room.” Romy wet his lips, meeting each and every person’s gaze, willing his pulse to calm the heck down so he could get the next words out. “I’m a mixed breed rhino.” There were some murmurs, but Romy knew when they stopped, he suspected Bash must be glaring at them over the top of his head.

“I’m a Sumatran and Javan rhino. I’m rare. Extremely rare, as in I believe I’m the only one of my kind. My father was a Javan, my mother a Sumatran.”

Evander gasped, and there were more murmurs between the enforcers. They understood before the others what this really meant.

“Sorry, but what relevance are your breeds to the council?” Evan asked, coming forward wearing a look of confusion. “There have to be others of your kind in the world. What does the combination have to do with anything?”

Bash shifted underneath Romy, and he gripped his hand a little tighter. I’m okay Daddy, honest. “My horn is claimed to have power, some mystical, others in

regeneration. My white hide is stronger than some metal's. Combine the two and you have a rhino with unimaginable potential. They used my biological make-up to create stronger shifters. Create monster shifters ." Raul sprang to mind. The one who caused Romy to avoid—bury—his past deep in his mind to avoid re-living those nightmares. A coping mechanism he had unpicked with Bash to help protect them both now.

"Fuck!" Cosmo ground out, getting up from his seat to go and sit on Nomad's lap. Harley placed a hand on Cosmo's knee and the other on Nomad's shoulder, connecting the three of them.

"They harvested bits of me. They used them to create other things, inhumane things. Monsters with no soul..." Black eyes that had no soul were something Romy used his Little side to hide from—Raul.

"Mother-fucking shitheads," Evander growled, his eyes blazing a trail of fury around the room.

"They used me. I believe that owl that they created had some part of me in it. The two missing council members... I remember them coming. Bash found their pictures so I could look at them to see if they triggered my memory." Romy had to stop and wet his lips, swallowing back the bile burning his throat at how distressed Bash had gotten over Romy sharing everything they'd done when he'd opened the vault that was his mind. His past.

"They visited the place they held me. One of them has a mate, Raul, he smells funny, distinct and I think it was him who captured me." Romy could think of no other way that the smell from his past could be anything else and shuddered at the horror of Raul touching him again. "He liked to torture me after the tests. Hurt me..." Romy trailed off, working on catching his breath. His lungs burned as tears welled in his eyes.

The room was silent except for Romy's choppy breathing.

Bash helped him, stroking his back until they were breathing in sync. So brave. Daddy's boy is so brave.

"I think I know where they'll be hiding. The place I escaped from in the swamps was self-contained, with accommodation at the back of the building behind where the labs were." He released a shuddery breath, knowing he had no choice if he wanted Bash safe. "I could lead you there. Get you inside through the tunnel I escaped through."

Bash

Though he had known the moment was coming, hearing Romy's offer to lead them to the labs left Bash's heart pounding like he'd just finished sprinting through the forest with hunters chasing them. It took him back to that moment when Romy had been missing and he'd been so desperate to find him that his recklessness had left him with scars where his tail had once been.

Several individuals were talking among themselves, but Bash couldn't focus on the conversations or make out more than a few of their words, his focus was on his mate.

"You said you think you know where it's located," Arlo said. "But if you are wrong, we could wind up marching into an absolute waste of time and leave the Crash lacking protectors in the process. How certain are you that you can find it again after the way we fled blindly through the forest to escape those arrows?"

"Because there are things I remember now that I didn't when we were fleeing from them," Romy replied, his voice steadier now, which was the only thing that kept Bash from telling Arlo to just sit there like the hulking mass of muscle he was, shut up and wait to be pointed towards the fight.

Didn't he get it? Didn't he understand that Bash could lose Romy for good this time if something went the least bit wrong? And it wouldn't be the kind of wrong that they could rescue him from, either, it was the kind of wrong that left Bash with no chance of ever feeling his mate in his arms again. Deep down, he knew it was selfish to be focused on that when there was a greater good at stake, but Romy had become Bash's entire world, and a small, cowardly part of him longed to encase him in bubble wrap and keep Romy tucked against his side for the rest of eternity.

He was an enforcer though, and since the day he'd made his pledge and taken up the mantle as a protector of the crash, he'd become dedicated to a life of sacrifice and ensuring that those around them could live the lives they choose, oftentimes unaware of the atrocities taking place right down the road. If they were ever to return their crash to that level of blissful harmony again, then Romy needed to do this. Bash needed to be at Romy's side to bolster his confidence and protect him so that if shit went sideways, ensuring Romy survived and get the life they'd tried to rob him of. That's what it meant to fulfill the oath he'd made.

"We cannot ask others to stand up for us if we are unwilling to take the biggest risks ourselves," Evander declared, shooting a harsh glare at Arlo. "After seeing the remains of both owls and the devices that were implanted in their eyes, I see no reason to delay what needs to be done. Romy may be the only rhino of Sumatran and Javan descent at this moment, but our thinking and our actions must reach beyond the here and now. In order to protect the future of our most vulnerable rhinos, we need to see this lab destroyed, and those who assembled it rendered incapable of ever causing harm again. That is the only acceptable outcome." Behind his words was a force that few would argue with if they had sense.

Those in the room were all in agreement quickly became clear, and Bash felt like he could relax a little, knowing that they would have numbers on their side and skilled warriors at their backs.

“If there are more abominations like those owls, then we have a duty to seize the records from the lab so that others might ferret them out,” Evander said. “For too long, the shifter communities have lived separately and allowed miscommunication and distrust to run rampant, keeping them at odds. That is how the council’s misdeeds were able to continue for so long. It took Cosmo finding his mates, other cats he could trust, before he was willing to divulge the full extent of what he’d learned. Let’s all think about that a moment.”

As if to reiterate his point, Evander fell silent, while those in the room sat with their attention wholly fixed on him, but in their eyes, Bash could see the truth begin to dawn.

“Cosmo’s friendship with Gabai wasn’t enough to entice him to turn over his evidence, nor was his allegiance with Bash, despite the knowledge that Bash was working to retrieve our missing rhinos,” Evander said. “Ask yourselves why that was?”

“Why can’t we just ask him?” Arlo enquired, deep lines forming around his lips.

“If you insist,” Evander said, flicking his wrist Cosmo’s way. A gesture that was clearly meant to encourage Arlo to do just that.

“Why didn’t you reveal the evidence you uncovered?” Arlo questioned, his gaze scrutinizing Cosmo.

Bash watched Cosmo lean forward a little, chewing on his lower lip as he looked around the room. He saw Nomad give him a little squeeze while Harley ran a hand down his arm.

“Because I didn’t think it would matter to them unless a bear, a wolf, or a rhino were the one who were under threat,” Cosmo admitted. “But Evander is wrong about me

waiting to find other cats to share my secrets with. I wouldn't have told my mates if they hadn't had even more training and experience than I did. When I met them, I wanted them to stay away from me. I knew the danger I was going to be in, and I didn't want them getting hurt."

Arlo's face screwed up. "Then who did you intend to tell?"

"I didn't know who I could tell," Cosmo replied, giving a small shrug. "Opening up to the wrong person and it would have all blown up in my face. Then no one would have ever learned what was happening, and that scared the hell out of me every day when I had to hold on to my secret." He waved a hand towards the differing leaders. "The divides within the shifter communities are gaping and difficult to navigate. Some trust the council, some tolerate them, and some are outright suspicious of anyone who represents them. It wasn't an easy road to travel and I'm glad that I don't have to walk it alone any longer. No one should be forced to do that."

"It's how I felt too," Romy murmured, his gaze on Cosmo. "If the owl hadn't come after Bash and they hadn't snatched me from here, I doubt I'd have ever spoken of what I endured. Here I was safe among you, with a loving mate and a new home with a life I've always wanted. I didn't want to upset that in any way. They made me feel small, insignificant, alone and helpless, with no power to make what was happening to me stop. They are horrible feeling that I hope no others are forced to endure. If I can help stop it, I'll gladly take the risk of leading you there."

"Then I believe we have settled on a course of action," Evander said with all the finality of a slamming door.

And in those words, Bash knew that their fates, good or bad, became sealed and their path clear. The lab and the missing council members, they would destroy along with anyone who stood between them and the justice Romy, along with every other shifter they'd harmed, deserved. It was the only way to ensure a future for all of them.

Romy

The brightness of the day and heat of the sun didn't prevent an icy shiver running down Romy's spine as he kept vigilant while they moved swiftly towards the forest. Branches creaked together, breaking the heavy silence that hung between them all. Romy suspected their thoughts were on what they would find.

The coolness of the breeze coming down the valley increased as they reached the tree line. Leaves rustled above them, like they were chattering to the branches, warning to stay clear.

His breath was a white puff as he exhaled, searching the trees for attackers. Their cars they left a couple of miles back, hidden under brush they had scavenged to conceal them from prying eyes from above.

Romy discovered once they made a decision, things moved swiftly. Less than twelve hours later, a pack slung over his shoulders with things he might need, they were here. Ready or not, Romy now had to face his past. He released another shuddery exhale, entering the trees, glad that Bash wasn't next to him because he wasn't sure he'd have been able to resist climbing him like a tree just to feel secure.

Those around him were hand-picked by Bash. Five enforcers, along with Bash, came from the crash lands. Three at the front that led the way with Bash. Three at the rear of the group protecting them. They had four of Bree's pack enforcers too; they were to the side of them, meaning protection surrounded Romy and the others with him. Not that Romy thought Cosmo, Nomad, Harley, Evander, Evan, or Bree, who'd all come, needed this level of protection.

He considered Bash had a hand in the formation. His dark head was next to Arlo's and whatever they were discussing didn't carry on the wind or in Bash's thoughts.

As if sensing his gaze, Bash glanced back, and he gave Romy a smile that removed a little of the chill coursing through his veins.

When he returned his attention to Arlo, Cosmo stepped closer and rubbed his shoulder against Romy's. "We got you covered."

"I know." He did, just Romy wasn't so sure how he'd react being back in that place. He wanted to be brave, problem with that, he knew what those assholes were capable of.

When they'd talked about Gabai and Asher coming, Romy selfishly thought it was a great idea. Strength in numbers, that's how he saw it. Only that was selfish and something Bree had vetoed after a call with Gabai. They did not want to leave Cookietown vulnerable, or the crash lands, so Gabai and his mate were staying to watch over the town, and they had sent some of the club Dom's to protect the crash.

The different shifters in Cookietown had no issue working together to support each other. This was new for the crash who initially were resistant until Bash pointed out the dangers lurking. Safety of everyone took precedence over everything else, and Romy reminded himself that including his fear.

There were other children like Toofus and Nambi, they all needed Romy to step up and he clung to that like a survivor holding onto a life raft.

How are you doing?

I'm... okay. It was the best he had and seeing Bash glance back once more, Romy's lips quivered, even as he forced them to lift in a smile.



We can stop—

No, Daddy. We have to do this. His belly might be doing somersaults, and his pulse a two-step, but Romy would not stop now. They relied upon him to guide them and turning back wasn't an option.

There was a lot of huffing coming through their link, but at least Bash didn't stop.

The deeper they went into the forest, Romy tugged his jacket closer to him, feeling the icy chill increase inside him. The trees above blocked out the sunlight and Romy had to watch where he was stepping to ensure he, like the others, kept the element of surprise from those who may be watching.

Which way now?

Romy eyed the tracks that split in two different directions, then the markers, that unless someone looked up past eye level, wouldn't notice unless looking for them. Romy had scratched marks into the wood, so he'd know if he was going in circles. To the left, Daddy.

Are you sure?

Yes. Look up at the tree, the second one on your left. It has a little round pattern in the bark. See it?

Yes.

I made that mark, so I knew I wasn't doubling back on myself.

Smart move, Little Bumper.

Despite the situation, Romy grinned at Bash's pride. Bash's head went back next to Arlo's and then they took off in that direction. Everyone wordlessly following.

It was the smell that alerted Romy to how close they were after traveling several more miles. Daddy stop.

Bash did as he asked without question, the others following suit, all looking at Romy, who pointed up. There in the trees were large nooks that the owls used to nest in, only these were all empty as they had been the night Romy had escaped. Why, he didn't know then or now, but they couldn't let their guard down.

At the side of him, Cosmo shifted, his outfit shrank with him and fitted like a second skin over his tiny, black-footed cat. Romy had seen the suit in Cosmo's closet when they had searched through his Little outfits to give Romy some ideas about things he might like. The suit, Cosmo explained—one made by the council—allowed Cosmo's body to be protected in either form, stretching and shrinking with him.

It was neat and the only positive thing Romy could see the council had given Cosmo.

They all watched him climb up the nearest tree until he disappeared in the branches, high up. Romy held his breath, knowing the upper branches weren't as strong or sturdy.

Nomad and Harley used hand signals, the enforcers all seemed to understand because they continued on.

Feeling a tightening band around his chest, Romy heaved out a breath at the reality he wasn't breathing. Bree hooked an arm through his, whispering in his ear, "Cosmo knows what he's doing."

It was true he did, but that didn't stop Romy from fretting for his friend. They'd

become close and Romy didn't like that Cosmo could get hurt because of him.

Guided by Bree, while Harley and Nomad continued to signal, they reached an outcrop of rocks, which Romy knew shielded the entrance into the laboratory.

His nose wrinkled, as did the others, at the scent of death and decay. There was no one place it came from. It surrounded them. From the earth underfoot. In the trees that took sustenance from the ground. In the plants. Even the air became touched by death. Romy felt its depravity coat his exposed skin, making him have to resist rubbing to get it off, knowing it was impossible.

The rocky outcrop, Daddy, the entrance is there.

Bash moved closer to the rocks. I can't see it.

From the front, it looks like two rocks pushed together. Look to the side, there is a gap between them. There was, but only big enough for someone of Romy's or Cosmo's size. Something he'd not mentioned because he'd known that Bash wouldn't have suggested coming at what that meant.

It took but a second for Bash to realize. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

Bash

With Cosmo in the trees, the only one small enough to fit through the entrance was Romy. His mate had known it all along and concealed it from him.

Because he'd known you wouldn't bring him or come yourself since you'd have been too busy protecting him to worry about the greater good.

Yes, he was a selfish rhino, far more so than his inner voice, which chided him for

once again forgetting the oath he'd sworn.

Romy wasn't selfish, though. His mate had come all of this way, knowing there would come a moment when he'd have to face his greatest fears alone, with no way for Bash to reach him. If his mate ever tried to put himself down again or suggest in any way that he was weak or undesirable, Bash was putting him across his knee and spanking that pert little bottom of his.

Anything he said or did to dissuade Romy from entering that cave would come across as a lack of faith in him and rob Romy of his chance to take back some of the sense of self they'd robbed him of. Bash motioned him forward, his heart hammering the whole time, but he refused to let it show and dishonor the strength Romy displayed right now.

Once you are inside, your only task is to find a way to open a passageway for the rest of us.

Bash gave his instructions through the mind link they shared, not wanting to risk any sounds that might trigger a detection device.

Promise me that.

I promise.

And if you are in danger of being spotted, you evade and get the hell out of there. Don't try to face them on your own.

I won't.

Okay, go on and keep your mind open to me.

I will. Love you, Daddy.

I love you too, Little Bumper, so you'd better come back to me in one piece.

Saying that was almost ironic, considering the minor incident with his tail. He was just grateful that the moment was far too serious for his mate to point that out to him, or he'd have been feeling rather sheepish indeed.

I will, Daddy, don't worry, I can do this.

I know you can.

As Romy disappeared through the opening, Bash focused on the surrounding area, looking for any signs of a second entrance. Arlo was doing the same on the other side of it, the two of them fanning out to search for clues. If experience had taught them anything, it was that tunnels had several dead ends, some natural and others deliberately created by those who were utilizing them. In order not to become confused themselves, they mark any they found in notable ways, they just had to find them.

Bree's enforcers joined the hunt, but it was Cosmo who spotted a shaft in the mountain's top, only visible from the air, which meant that only the eagles and other avians would have been able to use it.

But would they fit?

Bash waited with as much patience as he could muster up, occasionally reaching out to Romy. He had spotted the shaft from the inside and informed him that the descent was a more than fifty-foot drop, which meant they'd need to anchor in and repel onto a narrow ledge that there was no guarantee they'd been able to transverse to the other side.

Not the way in for them, then.

Bash signaled to the others to let them know what he'd learned. We need to keep looking.

They relayed their understanding, while Cosmo moved to another branch and Romy worked from the inside.

Wait, I think I've got something. Romy sounded excited.

There's a lever next to what looks like a wall of rock, but I can feel air flowing through it. If it's not a door, then it's got to be another shaft.

Which side of the tunnel?

Northeast.

Don't pull the lever yet, let me get everyone assembled close to the area.

Okay, Daddy.

It took a series of hand signals passed between him, Nomad, Cosmo and Bree's enforcers before everyone moved around to the northeast side of the hill, and even then, they remained hidden in the tree line in case what Romy did alerted others to the lever having gotten pulled. It wouldn't do to give away their numbers or lose the element of surprise that was their only advantage.

Open it, Little Bumper.

A low, rumbling sound, like rock shifting, reached their sensitive ears, complete with vibrations that left them all on edge. Several crows burst from nearby trees, and they

all crouched in shadows as they cawed and circled overhead before flying off. Whether they were true animals of nature or enhanced ones seeking anything in motion so they could report back to the hidden council members and their lackies was anyone's guess. But when the hidden entryway finally opened, the only one waiting on the other side was Romy, who'd tucked himself as far back into a corner as he could get.

Bash could see his eyes blinking in the darkness through and the light scent of his fear until he realized it was them entering the cavern. Bash reached him first and wrapped one arm around him, drawing Romy to his side.

Good job, Little Bumper, now let's dismantle this place.

Gladly.

With one last squeeze, Bash turned him loose again, allowing Romy to take the lead to guide them through the maze of passageways. It wasn't easy for him when Romy was in the forefront that way, where he'd be ground zero for any tripwire or trap. He just had to trust that Romy knew what to look out for, and through his attempts to escape, he's learned as much about what not to do as he had about the way out. If not, none of them were leaving this awful place where the stench of death clung to every stone and crevice, and as far as Bash was concerned, that was simply unacceptable.

Romy

It made him braver with Bash right there at his rear, but the stench of death Romy inhaled through his nose made bile burn the back of his throat. He led them anyway, deeper into the maze of corridors that held cells where they'd held them captive. All that remained in the empty unlocked rooms was the fear that permeated the place. It seeped deep into rock, ensuring the tales of the captured, the dead, the tortured, lingered on. Along with the soiled mattresses thrown on the floor were the threadbare, stained blankets that had never held back the cold.

When Romy reached the cell they had held him captive in, the burn in his throat worsened. Every swallow was painful with how the shards of the past swam through his mind. He struggled to keep his thoughts to himself, knowing sharing them would destroy something precious between him and Bash. Romy understood his mate would never forgive himself for not finding him sooner, not protecting him from the evil that roamed these passageways.

"You don't have to go any further," Arlo said, touching his shoulder, bringing him to his senses and the reality he stood crying, staring blindly into his prison.

It took several attempts to get his mouth to work. "I do." He turned away, seeing Bash had moved up ahead, a wolf beside him indicating why he'd moved on by the way the large, dark head moved, scenting the air.

The wolf nosed at Bash's leg and then was off running toward the clinical area where tests got carried out. Romy gave chase as Bash ran after the wolf.



What is it?

Little Bumper, stay back, the wolf has caught the scent of something fresh.

Cosmo appeared at Romy's feet and passed as fast as lightning flashing through the sky. Next came Nomad in his panther form with Harley, who hadn't shifted. They moved with such speed, Romy had no way of keeping up, he fell behind as others passed him.

Chest heaving, panting, his nose wrinkled as something struck him before his brain could figure out what. He slowed, inhaling the smell of death and something more pungent. Before he could register what it was that set him off. A huge hand came out of the darkness, much like his nightmares, and gripped his throat in a punishing hold that stopped him from making a sound.

"I missed you," Raul whispered in his ear, licking up the side of his face, leaving a trail of spit running down his cheek. The smell of decay intensified and made Romy gag.

Daddy!

Daddy!

Help me! He screamed in his mind before lights danced in front of his eyes and his brain became foggy from the lack of oxygen. He fought the darkness, clawing at Raul's hold, attempting to draw in air despite knowing it would come with Raul's awful stench.

Fight.

Fight for me, Little Bumper, floated through his mind along with Bash's terror,

forcing him to focus.

He kicked out wildly as he dangled in the air. Raul's tremendous power, too much to fight. He swung out blindly, clawing at anything he could reach. Raul's laughter chilled him to his core.

Where was everyone?

A noise barely registered in his foggy brain, when Romy landed with a thud, his knees buckling and his ass bounced painfully on the ground, rattling his bones. He blinked, dragging in deep gulps of air to see Raul planted to the opposite wall, pinned on the end of Bash's rhino horn.

"Don't kill him," Arlo shouted, coming to a stop at the side of Bash, he was breathless as Romy. "We need to interrogate him."

There were shouts, other noises coming from different directions, but Romy never looked away from his mate. I'm okay. Listen to Arlo. You can kill him after they have finished with him.

Romy knew his mate would hear him. Would understand what he was saying. Killing Raul was the only way Romy would have peace, just they needed justice too by finding out everything the fucker knew first—if Bash hadn't done too much damage.

Bash's rhino made a sound that was terrifying before he relinquished his prize. The second he pawed his way backwards, the ungainly rhino came around and nudged at Romy gently.

Romy shifted, didn't think twice, his clothes in tatters on the ground around his hooves as his horn touched his mates despite the gore covering it.

They both needed the moment.

Bash

Being able to smell Romy beneath the scent of the being whose guts clung to his horn, was the only thing that kept Bash from ramming the creature until there was nothing left but bits and excitement smeared along the floor. Bash still couldn't figure out what he was yet, not that it mattered a great deal as long as he'd be able to deal the killing blow. He'd leave that bit of the interrogation to those who specialized in unraveling secrets. He was an Enforcer; he was just there to smash and trample things.

You're more than that.

Romy's thoughts mingled with his and Bash nuzzled his mate, gently rubbing his cheek against Romy's until his mate's scent masked some of the disgusting stench clinging to his horn.

You're a protector. You're courageous and you encourage me to be more than I think I am, so you shouldn't diminish yourself because that might piss me off.

I wouldn't want to do that.

No, you wouldn't, or our homecoming won't be as fun as it could be.

Do you have something in mind?

Several things.

Bash really liked the sound of that and hoped that their return to the crash would mean a chance to finally start settling in and bonding with one another without being

under constant threat of life altering interruptions.

“We need to question him here,” Arlo declared as the rotten heap at his feet groaned, blood still spilling through the hole Bash had made in his belly when he’d gored him. “I’m shocked he’s still breathing.”

“A little to the left and it wouldn’t have been an issue,” Bash declared once he’d shifted and stood naked and glaring down at the wretch who’d tried to take his mate from him.

“He bleeds....so beautifully,” the creature rasped. “and his screams...”

He might have said more if Bash hadn’t stomped down on the back of his head, driving his face into the stone floor of the cave, shattering several teeth.

“What part of do not kill him yet, didn’t you understand?” Arlo grumbled as he backed Bash away from the creature again.

“Then he’d better watch what the fuck he says and only open his mouth to answer the questions we ask, or I swear to the goddess I’ll take great pleasure in shattering his skull and kicking what’s left of his teeth down his throat in the process.”

“I hear you, just remember what’s at stake,” Arlo cautioned him.

Bash nodded and turned his attention back to the man on the ground. “Who do you work for?”

“What makes...you think...I’m not in charge?” The creature asked before spitting a glob of blood and tooth on Arlo’s foot. Now it was Bash’s turn to keep the other enforcer from destroying him, and really, where the fuck were Nomad and Harley? Weren’t they trained to extract information without killing?

“You’re too stupid to run anything, even a slaughterhouse, which is exactly what this place smells like,” Bash snapped.

“Oh... there was plenty... that took place... before a slaughter.”

“Why?” Arlo growled. “What is it about Romy and the other rare rhinos in particular that makes them such a target for your cruelty?”

When he didn’t answer at first, Bash knelt and rummaged around in one of the packs that had been dropped, until he came up with one of the rock hammers they’d been carrying with him. While they didn’t need it to enlarge any of the seams in the cage, it was great for smashing bones. Bash took immense pleasure in shattering the creature's fingers and the delicate bones in his hand until he finally started screaming out his response.

“We’ve already... succeeded in blending Avians...” the creature howled, choking in between words as breathing grew more difficult. “Rhinos, rare rhinos, there is something in the DNA that makes it easy to infuse with the genes of others. Some say it’s the magic in their horns... but more tests... we needed more of them. None of the little ones survived as long as that one.”

When the creature got the words out, all eyes immediately turned towards Bash’s mate.

“It doesn’t matter what he carries in his blood!” Bash snapped, fury surging through him at the thought of his mate being experimented on for a fucking theory, and one based more in superstition than fact. “Each creature you harvested from was an individual with a right to live their lives free from interference. Now tell us what the council hoped to get out of this.”

“Enforcers... with no allegiances... except to them... a nearly unstoppable army...

with the strengths of several breeds... but none of the limitations. In short... they were creating... the strongest shifters in the world.”

“Guess what, they’ve failed.” Bash grumbled with satisfaction. “Unless they bred a being with bones made of titanium, they aren’t strong enough to withstand a horn.”

“Or the hooves of the entire crash stomping over them,” Arlo pointed out.

“You tell yourselves that,” the creature hissed, his voice nearly above a whisper now.

“But do you truly believe it?”

Romy

What they found made Romy's heart bleed. Shifter children, dead, left lying on examination tables, festering without any consideration even in death. He had not taken no for an answer when Bash had said he was not to go further, after Raul had taken his last breath. It came via the aid of Bash's boot to his throat.

The relief Romy had expected was short-lived when the evil the thing was capable of residing in these tombs. And tombs they were with the amount of slaughtered children lay inside the testing area. What had once been a pristine white expanse was dirty, caked with blood and entrails crusted, dangling from gaping holes that had once been children.

Cosmo came and stood next to him, his eyes as sorrowful as Romy's when he looked directly at him. "One of the missing council members is dead, that leaves one to contend with. Did Bash kill the freak?"

Romy forced himself to look away from the dead children. "Yes. The things he said." He met Cosmo's gaze, keeping his voice low. "What if they succeeded in creating other monsters besides the owls? What if they used me to achieve that?" It was easier to ask it of Cosmo, because Bash's fury lingered. Romy had caused his mate enough pain for a lifetime. He didn't want to add more to the growing weight.

"There's no evidence of it. I can't smell anything like we did when we found the owls." He cast an arm in the direction of the computers where others were dismantling them. "If there's any evidence in there, we'll find it and then take the next steps. It's unraveling, or it is unraveled and now we tug and find out the rest.

Then we just need to tie up the one loose end!”

Nomad strode over, naked, his attention moving between them. “Everything alright?”

Cosmo nodded, although he reached for Romy’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “We need to burn all the bodies. Then burn this place so it can never get used again.”

Nomad’s dark eyes traveled to the slain. “I know it’s for the best, but it feels wrong to burn them without knowing who they were. Who they belonged to before all this.”

Arlo, who must have heard, strode over, his grimy face bearing an expression Romy couldn’t read. “I’m sure they’ll have records. We need a good computer hacker.”

“There’s a little at the club who is a computer whizz,” Cosmo supplied. “They might help us.”

Arlo gave him an interested look. “Who?”

“Let me talk to him first, see if he’ll help. He’s a little shy around strangers.”

“But he goes to a club?” Arlo questioned, frowning, sounding utterly confused.

“He goes into Little Paws Haven, but only the daycare, and through the back entrance, not through the club.”

“Back entrance?” The frown deepened as Arlo looked between them. “Why a back entrance?”

“You’ve not been to the club, have you?” Arlo shook his head. “The back entrance is for those who are a little shy about revealing what they like. Being little for some is a private thing that those close to them might not know or understand.”



“Oh.” Arlo shrugged. “Folks should mind their own damn business. Live and let live, is my motto.”

“That maybe so, I’ll still need to check if I can give you his name.”

“We have all that we need from in here,” Harley called out. “Let’s do a sweep of the place, check we haven’t missed anything. Then let’s get out of this hellhole.” Harley glanced at Romy and cursed. “Shit, sorry, that was insensitive.”

“Maybe so, but you’re right, it is a hellhole.”

He scented Bash before he wrapped an arm around his middle, lifting him clear off the ground to sit him on his hip. With them both being naked, it was a little disconcerting to be this close to him in front of others. “Let’s get this done.”

It took another hour before they had everything gathered that looked of interest and could have information on it. It took another hour to wrap up the dead children and put them together to burn them. Romy sent up a brief prayer, even though he wasn’t religious, that they would find peace now.

Smoke filled the testing room, but still Romy lingered as he heard the others move out. Bash clutched him tighter to his side. “That could so easily have been me.”

Bash shuddered and exhaled sharply. “I know and I thank the fates every day it wasn’t. Selfish maybe, but we have made these bastards pay. They haven’t walked away Scot free, and we have to believe that counts for something.” He infused positiveness into his voice, but Romy felt the lack of conviction coming through their bond when his attention returned to the small burning bundles.

Romy hung on a little tighter, turning Bash’s face to him. “One of them still is free. And we need to make sure no one forgets that.” He held Bash’s gaze as the smoke

thickened and scented the air with burning flesh. “He needs to pay for what he did in here, no matter what. Because until he’s caught, then no one is truly safe.”

Bash

The first thing he did, after engaging the locks and checking to be certain that the security system was armed, was carry his mate into the bathroom and turn the water on. As steam slowly began to fill the bathroom, Bash simply stood there with his mate in his arms, hugging him and nuzzling the side of his neck until the entire room was warm. Even then, he was reluctant to move.

“In we go,” Bash murmured as he carried them beneath the hot spray.

Despite when he became forced to relinquish his hold on Romy so they could get clean, he kept one arm around him, constantly touching, smoothing suds over his back and shoulders, nuzzling and nipping his neck and along the ridge of his collarbone.

Sweeping his hair up, Bash rubbed shampoo in the silky strands, massaging Romy’s scalp until the scent of rot and death no longer clung to the strands. Only then did he work his way down, following a trail of suds as it slithered down Romy’s spine.

He danced his fingernails through the bubbles along Romy’s hips and felt him shiver, giggles bubbling up from deep inside of him as Bash deliberately waltzed his fingertips through every ticklish spot.

When Bash turned Romy to face him, his mate wrapped his arms around his neck and pressed his head against Bash’s shoulder, sighed and hugged him as the water beat down on their heads.

Next, Bash moved to bend and slowly rubbed circles over Romy’s calf, lifted his foot

and cleaned the sole of it, earning more giggles as he cleaned between Romy's toes.

Gazing up at his boy, Bash felt nothing but love and admiration for his precious mate. That he could still smile and laugh after everything he'd experienced and all that they had taken from him was something Bash wasn't sure he'd have been able to do. Quiet strength and steely determination, that's what made up the core of his boy.

So precious and amazing.

Bash knew he'd spend the rest of his days making certain that all of his mate's dreams came true. He deserved that, and so much more. He earned the life he dreamed of before he'd landed on the radar of those rogue council members. Bash, if he could, willed that the final one's death become filled with the most agonizing torments known to creature-kind. And if someone should dream up something more hideous than any tortures known to man, then he more than fucking deserved it.

Water ran down Romy's chest and thighs, so Bash leaned in, lapping up a trail that curved towards his bobbing cock. The flared crown looked so adorable poking from that nest of neatly trimmed curls that Bash sat in the tub, running his hands up Romy's legs to his thighs, lightly gripping and tugging him closer until that cock was centimeters from his lips.

When he looked up, Romy had his head tilted back, water slicing over his face as he washed it.

That wouldn't do.

Eyes on me!

Romy jerked, eyes snapping open as he immediately complied. The moment he did, Bash wrapped his lips around Romy's cock and gripped the mounds of that bouncy

backside, kneading them as he sucked Romy's cock to full harness and beyond.

His boy's hands in his hair, gripping and lightly tugging as he squirmed, was one of the biggest turn on's Bash had ever experienced.

Dipping one soapy finger into Romy's crease, he sought his hole and tapped, lightly rubbing before tapping again, occasionally pressing the tip of his finger inside just to feel his mate's knees shake and release beads of pre-cum till they oozed onto Bash's tongue.

Each time it happened, Bash swirled his head around the crown, lapping up every trace before the water washed it away. Every time his boy got close, Bash eased up on the suction so he could wash him more, until his boy was squeaky clean and snarling about Bash being a tease.

When the water grew cooler, and he didn't want his boy in there when it got cold, he hummed, gliding a digit upwards, tapping on his hole again until Romy came. The taste of his mate filled his mouth, and Bash groaned in delight. Taking his pleasure from Romy's.

The force of his release made Romy's knees sag until he slumped against Bash's shoulder, clinging as he came down from his high. Only when Romy was steady and had caught his breath did Bash ease back, quickly rinsing him, setting him just outside the shower, where a mound of fluffy towels sat.

"Daddy will be out in just a minute, Little Bumper," Bash said. "You go ahead and get dried off. As soon as we're dressed, we'll head to the kitchen and see about putting together a meal for us."

"Can I have something funky and fun?" Romy asked, his little side peeking through some after the release he'd had. That was good, and exactly what Bash had hoped for.

His boy needed the break after everything he'd experienced in that cave, and Bash intended for him to get it, even if that meant an ice cold and somewhat miserable end to his own shower. His balls shriveled up so tight and he went from turned on to blue balls and a turtle in less than a fucking minute. Still, he finished cleaning the scent of death from his skin and turned the water off to join Romy in dressing for the evening. Sleep pants and tank tops, comfortable and not too warm.

"I can't stand the thought of you being out of my sight right now." Bash took hold of Romy's hand. "So how about we take one of your new block sets to the kitchen so you can put it together while I cook?"

"You got me blocks?"

"I sure did, Little Bumper, I just never had the chance to give them to you. It was the day..." Bash began before determining that he didn't need to finish the rest of that statement for Romy to know which day he was talking about.

Romy tightened his tiny fingers around Bash's bigger ones and together they walked to the room that had once housed the children. Everything was neat as a pin and exactly the way it had been when Romy had seen it last, save for the stack of boxes Bash had left on the little art table.

"Go ahead and check them out," Bash urged as he led Romy to the table. "I hope you like them."

With a chuff and squee, Romy bounded around the table, picking up boxes, his little mouth forming an O as he saw all the different plants he'd get to build.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh," Romy said, giggling as he picked one up and clutched it to his chest. "This one is a Venus flytrap."

“Yup.”

“Ohhh, and you got me an orchid and a lily with a lily pad that even has a frog on it. I wanna build that one first!”

Chuckling, Bash scooped him and his block set into his arms and kissed his face until his Little Bumper chuffed and kicked his feet, giggling all the way to the kitchen, where Bash deposited him in a chair and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

“Now, you have fun with that and Daddy will work on feeding you, okay?”

“Okay Daddy.”

“That’s my Little Bumper.”

It didn’t take long to put together the perfect meal for his boy, who’d sunk fully into his little space and allowed the horrors of the day to slip from his mind for a little while.

While the tray of meatballs he’d quickly and carefully rolled cooked in the oven, he plugged in the air fryer and loaded it with mozzarella sticks. In the time it took for them to get crisp, he’d loaded five containers with warm dipping sauces: marinara, cheesy garlic, bacon maple jam, nacho cheese and Swedish gravy, all lined up on a tray he placed beside their platters full of food.

He’d cut up honeydew and cantaloupe, sliced strawberries and cubed a mango to add to their little fruit salad, dressed in sweetened lime juice with a few candied cherry pieces mixed in.

When Romy spotted everything, his eyes immediately lit up, and he hopped from his seat to rush to go wash his hands.

When he'd finished and carefully dried them like the good boy he was, Bash tugged him to sit in his lap and pulled the table close so they'd be able to reach everything.

"This looks so nummy, Daddy," Romy said as he hugged Bash, who kissed him on the forehead.

"Let's see if it looks as good as it tastes," Bash replied, grinning. "Which sauce would you like to try first?"

"Let's just go in a line, Daddy, then I get a new flavor in every bite."

"Brilliant idea, Little Bumper," Bash said as he picked up a meatball and dipped it in the marinara for him. Romy did a little shimmy on his lap the moment the taste hit his tongue, letting Bash know he'd done a good job with the food this time.

"Ohhh, Daddy, Daddy, I really like this one," Romy declared after Bash fed him a meatball dipped in maple bacon jam.

The little sounds he made and the grabby hands when he lunged to grab another meatball and dunk it himself were all the proof needed that the choice to pick that particular flavor was the right one. In fact, he was kicking himself now for only buying the sample size and not a bigger jar.

"I'm glad, the new market had several flavors I've never even heard of before, I was thinking it might be fun to sample them all, since you love having foods you can dip, so I got a sample jar of each one."

"Mini pizzas!" Romy declared.

Yes, his boy had dipped his pepperoni, sausage, onion and cheese creation into several varieties of ranch until he'd determined the one he liked the most. Buffalo,

though he loved regular buttermilk too and had eaten even the crusts as long as he had something to dunk them in.

Such the good boy and so absolutely adorably messy with different sauces coating his fingertips, streaking on his cheek and chin. He even splattered tiny droplets along the tip of his nose.

How the hell he'd managed that was anyone's guess, not that it mattered. Bash cleaned each mess away with his tongue, kissing his fingers and tickling them with the scruff of the beard he needed to trim.

"What would my boy like to do after Daddy finishes with cleanup?" Bash asked as they stood at the sink after supper, Bash cleaning him up properly so he could finish building his lily pad and frog. His lily looked amazing, with both solid and clear pieces making up the petals and swirling yellow conical pieces to make up the center.

"Go bouncy on your lap." He gave Bash a lopsided grin. "Cuddle and watch a movie."

"Go bouncy on my lap, huh? Is that going to be with or without clothes on?"

"Both, please." Romy said, his grin was full of sass.

"Then I guess we'd better wait on that part until after our food has the chance to settle," Bash declared. "We wouldn't want to bounce up that awesome meal now, would we?"

"Uh-uh, it was so yummy. I can't wait to try more new flavors."

"We have several more adventurous flavors to try, I bought them when I bought your blocks," Bash admitted.



“Yey!”

“Yey indeed.” Bash replied, pressing another kiss to the top of his head before sending him back to the table to finish working on his block set while Bash got the last of the dishes rinsed and the dishwasher loaded and started so everything would be ready to put away in the morning.

The best feeling in the world was when they’d finally made it to their bedroom, Romy held in his arms, The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh playing in surround sound while they watched all the colorful characters play. Laughter, sunshine, good friends, and plenty of games to play and fun activities, that’s how Romy deserved to spend the rest of his days, even if Bash had to move heaven and earth, and stomp a few heads, to make sure no one and nothing stood in his way.

Romy

He followed Cosmo through Little Paws Haven towards the Little's day care, feeling out of sorts because the last time he'd been in there, it was watching Cosmo cuddle with Bash.

"It didn't mean anything," Cosmo muttered, reading Romy very well.

He shrugged, not looking back at the bar where Bash was talking to Rocco and Arlo, who had come to speak to the hacker. "I know. It's just... weird." It was the best he could come up with when things between him and Bash were amazing.

They had spent all Bash's down time over the last few weeks creating a playroom for him. The house was messy, but Romy didn't care when he could already see how wonderful it was going to be when they finished. His job at the day care came with an escort, he was never left alone, and he didn't mind at all when it made him feel safe.

Cosmo wrapped an arm around his middle and hugged him. The furry hood of the outfit he wore tickled Romy's cheek. "I've got two wonderful mates. I told you when I cuddled with Bash, I already knew they were mine."

Romy stopped at the door and quirked up a brow. "All the time?"

"Alrighhtttt," he hissed. "Not all the time, but it was never anything more than him working with me."

"Okay." Romy kissed Cosmo's cheek, showing he wasn't worried about it. "Let's go

meet your friend. Taggart was it, that can hack things.”

“Shush, keep your voice down, no one knows he does that here, only Gabai and Asher.”

Romy blushed, looking around to check that no one was watching them too closely. “Sorry.” He wasn’t up to this spy stuff, it seemed.

“So ‘kay.” He punched in the code to the day care and pushed open the door, bringing Romy with him.

Inside most of the Littles sat on a large rug watching a movie, Cosmo skirted around them, heading to a blond-haired guy sitting on the floor who was bigger than most of the others. He had his thumb in his mouth, and he was concentrating on something in front of him. Romy squinted and saw the Winnie the Pooh book. It was one of his favorites.

He was in a full room, yet he was alone, and Romy got an odd sense he was lonely for reasons he couldn’t fathom. He’d been in day care and had been in that position with others, where no one really saw him. That was a choice, because at the time he had still been hiding. Was Taggart hiding from something?

When Taggart glanced up as they came to a stop, a hand tugged on the short strands of blond hair as he gave them a shy smile. “Hey,” he mumbled around his thumb.

“Hi Tag, been a while,” Cosmo replied as he sank down next to him, forcing Romy to follow when he didn’t let go. “This is Romy, my friend. You’ll like him.”

The thumb popped out. “I will?”

Romy could see Taggart change from being Little as his shoulders straightened, and

he lost the softness of his expression. “Hi.”

“Yeah, he’s fun and...” he dropped his voice, looking at the busy rug and back to Taggart, “you can trust him.”

Taggart's head bobbed, and he wiped his thumb over the leg of his Batman shorts, giving Romy another shy smile. “Cool. Where do you wanna talk?”

“So you are happy to meet with Bash and Arlo to talk about the computers we... got that need fixin’?” Cosmo kept his words vague, but Taggart seemed to know what Cosmo was getting at.

“From what you’ve given me, I think I can help.” He lost the smile when he looked at Romy. “I want to help anyway I can. They shouldn’t get away with what they did. To you. To...” he sucked him a breath and his eyes glistened, “you and the others.”

“We won’t let them,” Romy murmured. It was why he’d come. Bash wasn’t happy that Romy wanted to be involved. But Romy wasn’t going to be satisfied until he knew the last council member got held accountable for what he had done. Only then would Romy be able to rest easy. “Are you finished in here?”

Taggart rose in one fluid movement.

He was a good foot taller than Romy when he stood next to him with Cosmo.

“I’ll go get changed and I’ll meet you at the bar?”

Cosmo giggled. “Alright. You can’t miss us, ‘cause we’ll be with the rhino daddies.”

Romy looked at Cosmo when Taggart disappeared. “Why’d you say that?”

“Taggart is a meerkat.”

“Okay.” He frowned, not sure what Cosmo was getting at.

“His animal is small next to his human side. Some folks find it off-putting. Taggart loves big daddies. Like really big.”

“Bash is mine,” Romy made sure to point out.

“I know that.” Cosmo’s curls bounced around his face. “But Arlo is single, isn’t he? No one mentioned he had a boy, did they? So it wouldn’t hurt to introduce them, now would it?”

Romy grinned, liking Cosmo for wanting his friend to find a Daddy who fit him.

“You’re right. I don’t think it would hurt at all.”

Bash

They’d picked the perfect time to come. The place was practically dead, and no one was seated near the part of the bar they’d claimed. From that vantage point in the corner, he and Arlo could see everyone who approached, and if the only seat Bash had left open was the last seat of the bar, directly to his left where he could put his arm around Romy when he joined them, well, who could fault him for wanting to hug his mate.

“I see why you were always in a better mood when you came back from here,” Arlo grunted over the drinks Rocco had just set on the bar in front of them. The eagle shifter moving along swiftly to serve another customer at the other end of the bar.

“It was only ever about gathering the Intel we needed.”

Arlo rolled his eyes. “Next, you’ll try to tell me that you never got any gratification at all out of your time here.”

“I’m not saying that,” Bash insisted. “I’m saying it wasn’t the focus of my mission. It’s different when you come with the intent to play. Yes, I played, but it was all part of the facade I needed to keep up so I could meet with the shifters I needed to speak to in a place where they’d feel safe.”

Arlo gave a curt nod. “No, I get it. I just envy you is all.”

“How, after all the ways I put the mission and my mate in jeopardy?” Bash was quick to add, not seeing how.

“Because you found someone to love enough that you put them before our training,” Arlo pointed out.

Bash just grunted at that and let out a little snort.

“Hear me out on this,” Arlo insisted. “Think back to the way we came up through the ranks, and even before then, all the training that we received when other rhinos our age were free to meet and mate. Start their lives and families that we were training, then protecting. We sacrificed a huge chunk of our lives for our people, and because of it, we’ve seen a lot of shit, man. A lot of shit.”

“Too much, after what was in that cave.” Bash didn’t think he’d ever rid himself of the images of the small, broken bodies.

“My point exactly. I will spearhead this final portion of the mission, but afterwards, I’m gonna step away from the bloodshed for a while. Patrol locally, as you do now, help settle the stupid, petty, everyday disputes that too many take for granted. Hell, I wouldn’t mind engaging in a few myself, just to get to the fun of the makeup sex,”

Arlo admitted, looking wistful.

Snorting, Bash wondered if he knew just how much apologizing and groveling went into making things right when you accidentally put a scowl on his mate's face.

Bash had learned that lesson just last week, when he'd gotten a bit overbearing in his efforts to protect Romy from, well, the dust bunnies up on the high shelf that Romy had been attempting to reach by standing on a chair.

Bash's offer to get it for him and attempt to take the duster away had been met with the lecture to end all lectures, and resulted in Romy sitting on Bash's shoulders and Bash getting to carry him around the house so Romy could dust, since he was so worried about Romy falling off something. "There, problem solved. Now you get to stop worrying and I still get to do my work," Romy scolded, seconds before breaking into giggles when Bash tickled his toes.

Definitely required work, for sure.

"It's been more than five years since I've had a boy in my life," Arlo admitted. "And that look you've got on your face right now while you think of yours is exactly what's made the time feel twice as long. You should see yourself. Badass enforcer staring off into space with a bit of drool about to drip off your lip."

"I'm not drooling, and you just came dangerously close to cracking a joke." Bash slapped Arlo's shoulder, laughing. "Who are you and what have you done to Arlo?"

The grin Arlo was sporting disappeared as he ran a hand through his cropped hair. "Wrapping those little bodies nearly broke me," he admitted in a strangled voice. "I'm pretty sure I left most of the Arlo you know back in the cave. The faster we wrap up the business with the computer and wrangle the final council member, I'm out. I'm serious. I can't walk into another room like that."

“I hear ya, brother,” Bash murmured, hating seeing his friend look so upset.

“You know that I would have taken care of Romy and those boys in a heartbeat if you hadn’t been able to fight off the poison from those owls, but I’m eternally grateful to the Goddess that you were. That’s all it would have been, you know, taking care of them. Filling in for a fallen brother. That little rhino loves you. He’d have gored the hell out of me if I’d even thought about doing more than putting a roof over their heads.”

Chuckling, Bash nodded. “I hear ya, and I appreciate it, but wouldn’t you rather find your own mate once things settle down with the hunt?”

Arlo shook his head, shoulders slumping a little. “I truly don’t believe they exist anymore, not after everything we’ve discovered. I figure they were one of those we couldn’t save, and it will haunt me for the rest of my days. Why couldn’t we put it together sooner? Gotten to those little ones before they slaughtered them and left them to rot in that damned place.”

“All you can do is remember what you said to me,” Bash assured him. “There is only so much damage we could mitigate when faced with so much deception. In the end, the only ones who should bear the weight of those losses are the ones who chose to betray us.”

“Was much easier to say it than it is to hear it.”

Hearing Arlo, of all of his fellow enforcers, upped the feelings Bash had been struggling with for the past few weeks and made him feel a hell of a lot less alone.

Before he could say anymore, his Little Bumper came skipping along with Cosmo, joined hands swinging until Romy spotted him and pulled away, rushing to him so Bash could pick him up and kiss the tip of his nose before setting him on the seat next



to him. Cosmo took the one beside Arlo, folded his hands beneath his chin, and batted his eyes at Rocco who returned to their end of the bar and placed strawberry milk shakes on it in front of Cosmo and Romy.

“Is Taggart going to join us?” Arlo asked, his head twisting to look back at the day care.

“As soon as he’s changed,” Cosmo said before taking a dainty little sip from his shake. Romy did the same, pressed to Bash’s side as he kept an arm around Romy.

A platter of crispy golden chicken chunks and cheese and bacon covered crinkle fries were placed on the bar, along with a third shake, this one vanilla as Bash spotted Taggart coming from the changing area. His jean-clad legs ate up the distance between them in long strides and, without ceremony, he plopped down on the stool beside Cosmo.

He didn’t so much as acknowledge anyone. His focus on the milkshake as he reached for it and took a long slurp from his straw, sighing contently, then letting out a little burp.

“Where is your home training?” Arlo immediately asked in a voice that was all Daddy.

Bash got the immediate sense there was something about Taggart that set off his friend. A tension radiated from him as Taggart finally looked at Arlo.

“In the dumpster behind the pizza shop on Mulberry Lane,” Taggart snarked before slurping on his straw again.

The collective pause that followed, shrouded in silence, was abruptly broken when Arlo grunted, then let out a long series of loud, rumbly shorts and chuckles. It was so

unlike him, Bash's jaw dropped.

"Whoa... I didn't know you could laugh," Cosmo said, looking like he was struggling to hold his giggles back.

When Arlo muffled his laughter and shot him a look, Cosmo just shrugged, fluttering his eyelashes and feigning an innocent look.

"Alright guys," Arlo said, though his lips quirked several times and holy shit, the typically unflappable Arlo looked like he was struggling to keep his composure, especially when Taggart smirked at him, in a cute and sassy fashion that was adorable.

Bash filed those observations away for later, though he was certain he'd caught more than a flash of interest in his fellow enforcer's eyes.

"Let's get down to business," Arlo grumbled, though Bash noted the way the harsh edge that typically left his voice sounding cold and emotionless had softened a little. Enough so Bash, who'd spent many long hours in the grumpy bastard's company, got the feeling things were about to get interesting for his friend. Real interesting!

Taggart

Keep it together. Come on, don't go losing it.

Taggart had that on replay as he did his best to act all causal, listening to the rhino chuckle snort. The guy was fucking huge and his mate . I have a mate. A huge mate. Someone bigger than me. Holy flip balls, he can bounce me on his knee!

With how his senses were screaming at him in a way they never had, Taggart was surprised he wasn't dancing off the seat. He felt like he could at any moment. He had a lot of energy, he hoped would get used up by the rhino.

What would his horn feel like against his fur?

Would he let him scamper up his back? Lie on his belly and bask in the sun? Taggart loved to do that in his animal form. The questions never stopped, he was used to it. His mind was often like the computer code he loved to play with full of twists and turns.

“Straight to business, as always,” Bash muttered, eying Arlo in a way that Taggart didn't understand.

“It's what Taggart is here for,” Arlo replied, and Taggart was sad that the rumbly snorting had stooped.

The guy—Arlo, he watched out the corner of his eyes as he sucked on his straw, wishing he could drop his gaze just a little to see what Arlo was packing. Taggart had

a sensitive mouth, it was why he preferred to suck his thumb. He did his best not to appear all starey in Arlo's direction because a niggles of worry wormed its way in past the happy vibe. Didn't Arlo feel the pull between them?

Taggart did. It was smack bang right in the center of his chest. Not knowing the others, except for Cosmo, Taggart had no clue how to act. Had he been too cheeky? Arlo had laughed, so he had to have given just the right amount of sass—hadn't he?

"What experience do you have mining information for computers?" Arlo went straight to the business end. Talking about the computers they had found somewhere they didn't refer to as an actual place. Not that the data pack that Cosmo had given him hadn't smelled of death and given him a clue and no wish to ask.

No, Taggart had spent years mining information on the dark web, seeing untold nasties, so he preferred to avoid talking about things. They often got stuck in his head and wouldn't shake loose. When things got bad, he came here, Little Paws Haven was exactly that for him, a haven, despite many of the Daddies not paying more than a cursory amount of time with him. Being big and liking to be Little for him had not always been easy. He got he wasn't a cute, dainty Little, like Cosmo, but he tried.

The straw popped out from between his lips when everyone looked to be waiting for his answer. He swallowed the sigh. "I've lots of experience with computers. Working with code. Creating programs to search through information looking for keywords," he offered Arlo a flirty smile. "Stuff like that."

"So, do you think you can retrieve whatever is on the computers we got?" Bash asked, arching a brow in a way that suggested that Taggart could have missed something vital.

Taggart gave a cautious nod. It was tricky being overconfident, when some folks could outsmart even the best techy guy. "I think so. The data box Cosmo gave me, I've got set up at home, I'm running a virus scan right now, once it's done, I can then

start mining the information.” He spoke directly to Bash, but his gaze flickered over to Arlo, who looked to be listening intently. “You might need to give me some clue as to what I’m looking for, otherwise it could be a needle in a haystack—type situation. Which isn’t impossible to find, but could waste a lot of my time.”

“We don’t wanna do that. I’m sure you got folks who wouldn’t want us monopolizing all your time.” Arlo’s skin darkened when Bash grinned. “Work, I’m sure you got a job.”

Not sure if Arlo was seeking information about whether he had a boyfriend, Taggart was quick to answer. “I live alone, just me on my lonesome and I work for myself, so only me to please.” How many ways did he need to point out what a loser he was?

There was a glint in Arlo’s gaze that sent a shiver through Taggart. The good kind that made his body feel all tingly and warm. “Good to know.”

“Why is that good to know?” Romy asked, looking confused with his brow wrinkled.

“Just that I ain’t gonna be having to explain my presence at Taggart’s,” Arlo explained to Romy while his gaze never left Taggart. “I got the rest of the equipment at mine, when do you want me to drop it off?”

Right now. Then I want you naked and sprawled on my bed so I can jump all over you. Nibble on the thick chords of your neck and claim you.

None of that came out of his mouth, thankfully. “Whatever works best for you guys,” he hedged, “I’m easy.” In every conceivable way for you!