



# His Sweet Omega

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Dane escaped the brutality of his sire by running away from the Strongblood Pack. Physically and emotionally scarred, he has lived a feral life for many years. The lure of returning to pack life proved too strong to resist, however, so he has made his den in the woods outside the packlands. He has also kept tabs on his omega brothers and even interfered with how they were treated, his judgment clouded by the trauma of his puphood. Although he is now confident that his brother is a good alpha, he does not trust his ability to return to the pack.

Remy is a naïve omega who has been kept ignorant of his nature. He sees the world with an open heart while also worried that he seems to have trouble keeping up with others of his kind. When his sister flees their pack with him, he does not understand why, but his trust in her is something that he does not question. Living on their own is hard and with both winter and his heat coming soon, they have run out of time to find a safe place to live. Their situation changes unexpectedly as they run into a feral beta.

The moment Dane finds Remy, he is determined to protect him – even from himself. He knows that the best place for this omega to live is with the Strongbloods. Wintering in his den is out of the question however appealing it proves to be. Remy's instant comfort with Dane does not help with his resolve. It is perplexing, as is the fact that their wolves can communicate. Dane has never believed in having a fated mate, but Remy is forcing him to reconsider his life.

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## Page 1

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Cool air ruffled Dane's fur, a reminder that winter was approaching. He didn't mind. The cold was preferable to the hot, humid days of summer. Living as he did mostly in his wolf form, the former weather was always preferable to the latter. And while he could spend more time in his human skin, part of him figured it was pointless. He was an outcast shifter—feral—and no matter how tempting it was to accept his brother's offer to try to rejoin the Strongblood Pack, he knew deep down that he was a lost cause. He was broken, not fit company for anyone no matter how welcoming his former pack would be. It didn't matter. He was fine on his own, better in fact. His new cave was spacious, too. He'd be comfortable during the frigid nights and game would remain plentiful. Only a weak dominant would complain about his circumstances and while he often thought of himself as a coward, he was strong in the ways necessary to survive.

The wind blew particularly blustery as Dane loped around a stand of trees near the river he liked to drink from. He froze, his beta brain struggling to make sense of what he smelled. It can't be. Sticking his muzzle higher, he inhaled deeply and nearly staggered from the strength of the male omega scent. And there was no other shifter around that he could detect. He moved cautiously forward, seeking where the boy might be. He may have been an outsider to his kind, but he still held to the ideals of his obligation as a dominant to protect servients. No omega should be this far into the forest, and certainly not on his own. It didn't take long to find his quarry. Along the riverbed, a small black head peeked out from behind a tree. The sight of the omega wolf nearly caused Dane to trip over his own paws. Instead, he froze once more to ponder his next steps. The last thing he wanted to do was scare the poor boy and he knew all too well how frightening he looked with his scarred face and one eye.

The decision was obvious and easy. His human form wasn't appealing, either, but it

was less menacing. Shifting, he walked toward the omega, then stood still once he was sure the boy had seen him. He waited. Patience was something he'd learned to be good at. There was no hurry. Now that he had arrived, the omega was safe from the many harms that could befall such a small, delicate creature. It was a good sign that the boy stayed where he was, watching to see what Dane might do. Someone had taught the omega some survival skills, which was all to the good, but not enough to fully protect him. Dane kept his stance loose, his expression placid, and was rewarded after a few minutes by the omega coming out from behind the tree.

The little wolf was not much bigger than a juvenile in his first shift since birth. Yet, the scent told a different tale. This was a mature omega, or nearly so. His heat was imminent, and that fact only served to emphasize that the woods were no place for this boy to be. While the two of them stared at one another, the omega unexpectedly shifted, losing what protection he had in wolf form. And the sight of the beautiful boy with copper-colored skin and long black hair punched Dane in his gut. Air whooshed from his lungs and he staggered a step before regaining control of his composure. All thought, however, fled his mind except for one word—mine. No! He rejected the idea as soon as it popped into his head. He didn't believe this fated mate crap that Graydon and the others swore by. Their sire's brutality had beaten those fanciful notions out of him. There was no such thing as a shifter destined to be his. Dane knew that wandering on his own was his fate. No mate fit into that life, let alone an omega. He pushed the notion aside as well as reined in his cock. That dumb beast rarely made an appearance and now was not the time for a reemergence.

The omega derailed his thoughts entirely by smiling. "Hi. I'm Remy. Are you a beta?"

Dane found it disconcertingly hard to get an answer past his tied tongue. "Yes, I am."

The boy practically clapped with glee. "Oh wonderful! I got it right. I'm not very good at telling sometimes. It gets me into trouble," he added, lowering his gaze and

the brightness of his smile.

Dane knew a moment of murderous rage, an overwhelming desire to seek out whoever dared to discipline this sweet boy. He tamped it down for the omega's sake. "You did very well to spot my pack role. I'm sure it was hard given how I look." It had been so long since his fight with the bear that he rarely considered how strange his face was to others. The fact that the omega hadn't recoiled at the sight of it surprised him.

Remy's eyes lit up once again. "You look wonderful. I think you're the most handsome dominant I've ever seen. Is it okay that I said that?"

Once again, Dane was stunned, yet the sincerity in the boy was obvious. His openness was so endearingly sweet. Dane was at a loss as to how to react. "Yes," he finally replied in a gruff voice. "You can say whatever you like to me."

"Thank you, sir. Merida says I talk too much, that servients should be quiet around dominants to be safe. I have trouble remembering that rule," he added with a quick frown that left his face almost immediately. This boy was obviously inclined to be happy. "I'm an omega, by the way."

Dane couldn't help but smile at that declaration. "I know."

The boy rolled his eyes. "Of course you do. I should have known that. Merida says dominants can always tell. I guess it's because I'm small."

The omega's response puzzled Dane. It seemed as if the boy understood little about his nature and didn't realize the powerful scent he was emitting. That was perhaps not surprising. He knew some packs believed in keeping omegas ignorant of what their lives would become. A stupid idea given that pack living meant everyone knew about each other's business. No omega could go into heat without some idea of what it

meant. He had a lot of questions but before he could ask a single one, the omega chirped up again.

“What’s your name?”

“Dane.”

“That’s nice. It’s very powerful, which isn’t surprising because you’re very big and strong looking. I bet you’re really smart too.”

“Not always,” Dane muttered. Shaking off the impending mental castigation he routinely gave himself, he refocused on what was important. “Remy, are you out here alone? And who is Merida?”

“She’s my sister and a sigma.” He frowned briefly again. “She’s not very good at being one. Everything she cooks burns and her sewing is terrible. The head sigma made her clean instead, although she’s not good at that, either. She got in trouble a lot, too, but not anymore. We ran away.” Remy’s face lit up with excitement as if he truly didn’t understand how dangerous it was for him and his sigma sister to be out on their own.

Before Dane could figure out a way to gently explain that to Remy and query him further on where his sister was, the sound of breaking branches interrupted him. A gamma crashed through nearby bushes, dragging a deer carcass, and planting himself between Dane and Remy. Dropping the kill, he bared his fangs and growled menacingly. Dane kept his eyes on those teeth and tried to calm his opponent down, even as he worried about who this interloper was. Before he could say anything, the gamma abruptly shifted. Standing in the wolf’s place was not the man Dane had expected. Instead, it was the biggest female he’d ever seen. She confronted him in a fighting stance, her black hair tangled about her shoulders and gore surrounding her mouth.

All he could think as his brain worked to keep up with this unexpected situation was no wonder she can't cook or clean. No gamma could. Her pack must have worked hard at being blind to her nature. When he'd been younger, he might have done the same. He'd seen enough of this world now to be more questioning of everything he'd been taught. This oddity was a distraction, however. He needed to remember to do what was best for the omega. "I'm no threat," he declared with his hands up.

But his words were drowned out. "Stay away from my brother!"

Dane took a couple of steps back, working hard to appear non-threatening. "I mean no harm to the omega or you. I scented him and was worried about such a vulnerable shifter being on his own out here."

Remy's sister didn't so much as blink, her angry gaze remaining fixed on him. "Leave, now!"

It would be easy to do as the gamma commanded, shift and run back to his original path. Whatever was going on here, it was none of his business. His feet wouldn't move, however. He just couldn't bring himself to abandon that sweet omega no matter what the boy's sister said.

Keeping his hands up, he stayed firm. "I won't. I can't. You shouldn't be out here on your own with winter coming." He grimaced before continuing. This female wouldn't like what he was going to say but as a beta, he had a duty even if he weren't still living in a pack to think ahead to address problems even before they started. "Your brother is in danger without the safety of a pack. Whatever drove you to this desperate journey, you haven't considered how it's going to end. Or, have you? Where are you headed?" It occurred to him that this Merida was leading her omega brother somewhere he would be safe.

Safe from whom?

Once again, his anger rose at the idea that Remy was in some kind of danger.

“Where we go or why is none of your concern, beta.” Beneath the forceful reply, there was an underlying worry in the gamma’s tone. She was in trouble and knew it.

Dane slowly shook his head. “That’s not true and you know it. The protection of an omega is every shifter’s business.” He took one more step back and lowered his hands. “Let the boy eat. I won’t interfere, and I’ll stay in human form. Once you’ve both fed, we can talk about your options. There is no one here who poses a danger to you or the omega. Of that, I swear.”

Dane wasn’t sure that his words would make a difference and for long seconds, the gamma remained with her feet firmly planted and her arms spread—a literal barrier between him and her brother.

Remy remained where he’d been before his sister had arrived. He was obviously listening to the exchange, but he made no effort to interrupt. A well-trained omega he obviously was but also he clearly trusted his sister. His seeming lack of fear when it came to Dane was both heart-warming and terrifying. This boy should always be wary of strange dominants, in general, and in Dane in particular. He was a scary shifter. He knew that. Why didn’t Remy?

Merida shifted suddenly back to a wolf. Keeping Dane in her line of sight, she tore at the underbelly of her kill, exposing the nutrient-rich organs of the deer. Then she chuffed at her brother. Remy shifted himself and loped over on his short omega legs. He didn’t hesitate to stick his muzzle into the flesh and eat.

Dane couldn’t see much of what was happening, but he heard the omega’s dainty yet steady chewing. The boy was obviously hungry. This time of year, it would be hard to catch any kind of game easily. No matter how good a hunter the gamma was, shifters had become dependent on cultivated sources of food. Dane managed fine

with surviving on only what the forest had to offer and his size allowed him to consume a lot in a single feeding and build up stores of fat when necessary. Smaller, more delicate shifters like an omega needed to eat more frequently and with a greater variety. Surely Merida understood that. Whatever had driven her to take her brother away from their pack must have been dire indeed.

Dane desperately wanted to ask the gamma what was wrong, what was she running from. But he needed to be patient. Letting these two feed first would make it easier to talk—or so he hoped. Hunger had a way of chasing reason from one's thoughts as much as fear did. He needed to bide his time before questioning the female further.

It didn't take long before Remy had eaten enough. The omega lifted his face out of the carcass and with a quick look at both Dane and Merida, he returned to the river to drink. When he'd had his fill of water, he lay down by the tree where Dane had first found him. He looked intensely at Dane in the way of all servients who were waiting for a dominant to give them an order.

Dane found himself puffing with pride in a way he hadn't in a long time. His heart gave a hard thump, and his wolf barked and pushed to get out. There was a faint yip in response echoing within him. When he focused hard on the omega, he noticed a little shake run through him. What is going on?

Remy wasn't sure what the strange, low rumble inside him was all about. It skittered all over his body, a not unpleasant sensation, yet nothing he'd ever felt before. It's the beta. There was no particular reason for him to think that, but he did. Since Dane had appeared, Remy had felt a surprising sense of relief. All of the fear he'd experienced since Merida had fled with him from the pack disappeared just like that. He knew the beta would take care of them both now. He could only hope Merida would come to feel the same way. Dane's presence didn't seem to be having the same effect on her.

The beta nodded toward the deer carcass. "Go ahead and eat, Merida. I'll stay right

here while you do.”

At first, it didn't look like his sister would trust the beta enough to eat. After a few tense seconds, though, she started in on where Remy had fed. Merida needed a lot of food to keep up her strength, but Remy wasn't surprised when she stopped after only a few bites. She was always denying herself so that he never went hungry. He hated being such a drain on her but wasn't good at hunting himself. They only had whatever she could bring down.

The beta solved the issue. “Eat as much as you like. I have provisions that I will gladly share with you both and with two of us hunting, you don't have to worry about the omega not being well-fed through the winter.”

For a moment, Remy thought his sister still wouldn't listen to the beta, which made him sad. Then she suddenly went back to eating, tearing into the flesh and devouring it with obvious relish. It was a relief. His sister had always bucked the hierarchy of the pack in ways that he never understood. This time, however, she was acting like a pack member should—obeying the orders of a dominant.

Remy rested his muzzle on his outstretched paws and let the languid feeling from eating sweep over him. He was tired enough to sleep, and yet his body was also strangely alert, as if it were waiting for something to happen. This feeling had plagued him since even before they'd run from the pack. His appetite had increased and his skin in both wolf and human form felt too tight. Most disturbingly, an unnamable ache deep inside made him restless. The presence of the beta didn't help in this case. In fact, it made it worse. Remy kept his eyes open a small amount, his gaze on the beta, wanting to both enjoy looking at him, but also to see if he could tell what the male wanted from him—if anything.

Merida finished eating and trotted over to him in order to drink from the river herself. When she was done, she sat beside him. Her large body served as a shield as it had

done for Remy's entire life. The sigmas in their pack had given her a wide space because she was bigger than all of them. Even the dominants kept their distance, ignoring her for the most part and showing little interest in him, as well. That was how it had been until early spring. The dominants had suddenly started paying attention to him in a manner that frightened him. That was especially true of the alpha's heir, whose incessant staring had made him whine and try to hide. He didn't know what they wanted but Merida must have. It was then that she'd forced him to flee under cover of night. Her presence gave him comfort as it always did, except for the first time, he didn't feel as if he needed it.

The beta nodded. "Good. Now that you're fed and watered, let me show you to my den. It's nearby and will give the omega a safe place to spend the night, at least. I'll stay in human form and bring what's left of the carcass." When Merida didn't answer, he added, "I promise I'm no danger to the omega. Besides, you may not be the biggest gamma I've ever seen but I'd be foolish to tangle with you. And," he added looking skyward, "there'll be snow tonight. Do you really want your brother outside in that kind of weather?"

Merida cocked her head and stared at Dane. A biting wind ruffled Remy's coat, making him whine despite his efforts to remain quiet as a good servant should. There was an immediate yipping inside his head, a reassuring sound. He lifted his head. The beta was staring past Merida and right at him. The expression on the man's face showed surprise. I don't understand any of this.

It didn't matter, though. Merida had caught his distress and nudged him to stand. Then she led him closer to the beta, who seemed pleased by that. They waited until Dane had lifted the deer across his wide shoulders, indifferent to the gore coating his skin. Without another word, he started walking. Merida waited until he was past the closest stand of trees before following. Remy stuck close to her side because that was how she always wanted it unless she was hunting. The beta kept to a slow pace, so Remy had no trouble keeping up. Their journey ended surprisingly quickly by the

beta stopping in front of a wide entrance to what looked like a natural cave nestled at the bottom of a tall cliff.

Dane gestured with his hand. "Here is where I've made my den. It has a water source sluicing down the back wall and I've furnished it with some comforts. Please make yourselves at home."

Merida shifted and stood tall on her two sturdy legs. "Why are you helping us? What would a feral beta like yourself want, other than the obvious? You can't have Remy and I'm not going to be your drudge. I'm not a good sigma anyway." She bared her teeth.

Heaving the deer down to the ground, the beta stretched his neck before answering. "I don't want omega. I'm not worthy of him because as you say, I'm feral. I can't provide for a family even if I wanted one. And why would I expect a gamma to keep my den for me?"

Merida put her hands on her hips. "Why do you keep referring to me as a gamma? I'm a sigma."

Dane actually snorted out a laugh. "No, you're not."

"I'm a female and clearly not an omega, so..." She frowned with obvious confusion.

Remy looked from one to the other and tried to understand what they were saying. Why did the beta refer to a family when he said he didn't want Remy? And what did want mean anyway? No one had ever explained to him his role in the pack, exactly. Not even Merida. She snapped her lips shut whenever he asked her. He had a feeling, though, that this beta would tell him anything he wanted to know. The idea of this man wanting him in some nameless way wasn't upsetting. It only piqued his curiosity.

“You’re a gamma,” Dane insisted. “Anyone with sense can tell that. Now, come on. The wind is really picking up.”

Merida grimaced before nodding. “It doesn’t matter what you think. I’ll accept your offer for shelter tonight for Remy’s sake. You enter first.”

“Very well.” Grabbing the deer by one leg, the beta entered his den, dragging the carcass behind him.

“Come on. Stick to my side and if there’s trouble, don’t wait for me to order you to flee. Just do it. Understand?” She glowered at him, her way of emphasizing how important it was for him to do as she said.

Remy gave a low yip of understanding. And when his sister shifted to her wolf, he stayed close to her flank, and crept into the den with a mix of apprehension and excitement. He’d never seen how a feral shifter lived in the forest. It was a bit of an adventure, one that didn’t scare him as his journey with Merida had so far.

The interior of Dane’s den surprised him. Remy had expected it to be rough and simple. Instead, he walked into a cozy place bathed in a golden glow by an oil lamp. The back corner had water sliding down it in a steady curtain, as Dane had said, much of it pooling in a rock basin that looked unnatural. In one corner, there was a pallet with a bearskin blanket, and in another, tools and other useful goods were gathered next to a flat rock. It was there that the beta had laid down the carcass, obviously for skinning and dressing what was left of the meat. In its own way, the cave was a small version of the longhouse where he’d been raised. He felt as if he had come home.

Dane went to wash the blood off his upper body, squatting on his thick haunches as he did so. Normally Remy would have looked away because staring at another shifter was rude. But with this man, his manners were overridden by the need to take in all the details of the mesmerizing sight. Every muscle of the beta bulged with the

slightest movement and the parts that made him male dangled and swung between his legs. There was something about those bits that made him simply...want. Something. He didn't know what. He just couldn't look away and that ache he felt deep inside grew suddenly.

Merida's hand covered his eyes. "Stop staring, Remy, and go lie down." Lifting her hand, she pointed to a spot near the entrance.

Remy was disappointed but knew better than to argue. And he was tired, so the command was almost as appealing as watching the beta was.

"No." Dane rose to a stand, the water dribbling down his arms and chest glistening in the lamp light. "He should take the pallet. It's comfortable enough and the skin will keep him warm, so he doesn't have to stay in wolf form."

Remy's legs started moving before he even thought about it.

Merida blocked his way. "No. He'll be trapped back there."

The beta pressed his finger and thumb across the bridge of his nose before saying anything. "I'm only thinking of what's best for the boy. You can sleep with him or stay by the entrance with me once I've tended to the deer."

Merida balled her hands into fists. "You intend to block us in."

"No. I intend to keep others out." He paused for a moment. "You're going to have to decide, gamma, what is the best path now for your brother. You either trust me or you don't." He pointed past her. "Out there is obviously dangerous. In here, you have what he needs while still being able to defend him, if necessary. Which it won't be. I'm not going to harm either of you."

Merida and Dane stood staring at each other so long that Remy sat from tiredness. He looked back and forth between them, hoping that something would happen soon to end the fight. He wasn't so much worried about what the beta might do. It was more that conflict upset him and since they'd been on their own, there hadn't been any, of course. He never argued with his sister or defied her. Now, with the beta issuing commands, he was anxious about who he should obey.

Finally, Merida relented. "Fine. For Remy's sake, we'll stay here for the time being. But I don't trust you, just so we're clear."

The beta nodded once. "That's fair. I only want what's best for the omega and I'll let my actions speak to my character. For now, you are in control of the boy."

That reassurance seemed to mollify his sister. With a quick wave, she sent Remy over to the pallet. He shifted into his human skin, wiggled under the weighty hide and let himself drift off.

## Page 2

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Dane skinned and butchered the deer with the quick efficiency he'd mastered during his long time living feral. No amount of the animal was wasted as was the way of shifters, and as there were no sigmas to perform the task, he'd had to teach himself to do it. He was never going to be as good at it as the servients were, but he did a passable job. The antlers and hooves would be crafted into useful tools, and there was still a good amount of meat to dry despite the voracious appetite of the gamma in particular. He was glad that she'd been able to eat as much as she's wanted. It was obvious that she'd been denying herself in favor of taking care of her brother. As it should be.

The little omega had fallen fast asleep as soon as his head had hit the pallet, testament to how tough his time in the forest had been on him. That would stop now, though. Dane was determined to tuck them safely into the Strongblood Pack. It was the only solution that made sense. Even as he made those plans in his head, part of him rejected them. Seeing the omega lying where he normally did himself sent a strong feeling of possessiveness shooting through him. He's not for you. His wolf chuffed in disagreement before settling down again. And there was that faintest of an echo from another wolf in answer before it, too, settled down. Dane forced himself to ignore the noise. He wasn't going to get caught up in that fated mate nonsense. Whatever connection the two wolves might be experiencing, it was an anomaly that would break as soon as Remy was away from him.

Merida sat nearby, between him and the omega, her muscular legs crossed and her heavy breasts dangling above them. She was a striking female, one that he would have pursued back in his days of being a pack member. That fact that she was a gamma was of no matter. In fact, he'd always liked big women. They were sturdy so he didn't have to worry about accidentally hurting them. But there was no chance of his

pursuing this female. It wasn't merely because he knew his face was disturbing to others—hardly appealing for sex—there was also the disturbing matter of his desire being absorbed entirely by the omega. There was no sense in how he felt. If any shifter was delicate, it was omegas. And Remy was smaller than most—and the sweetest thing he'd ever come across. Those facts should have scared him off. Instead, he was drawn to the boy as if an invisible line tethered them together, pulling him closer. At least the fact that he'd given the omega a safe place to bed down was a comfort.

Thinking of how the boy had been living rough angered him all over again. He gathered up the undesirable parts of the deer and left to scatter them away from the cave. When he returned, he began the laborious process of cutting the meat into strips. "I won't ask you why you ran from your pack."

Merida said nothing in response. Instead, she shuffled closer and held out her hand. "Give me a knife so I can help you with that. Not that I'm good at it," she added under her breath.

Dane didn't hesitate to hand over his own knife before getting another for himself. "Dominants are never going to do this as well as sigmas can, but we'll muddle through."

"Living feral as you do, you've had no choice but to learn how to prepare your own food. Except you could just live in wolf form and need none of this." She tossed her head to take in the cave.

Dane kept his head down, concentrating on his task. "I did for a while. I travelled a lot, too, before returning to the place of my whelping." He paused, turning his face to look at the gamma. "I didn't like how I was losing the human in me. This is an important part of me, too. I don't want to sacrifice one for the other."

Merida grunted. “Fair enough. I know Remy can’t live outside a pack for much longer,” she added with a sigh. “I can’t trade one danger for him with another.”

Dane took strips and laid them on his drying rack. Beneath it was a small fire pit and above it was a natural crevice that permitted the smoke to rise out of the cave. It was an indulgence to process food this way just so that he didn’t have to go hunting in the dead of winter. But at the moment, he was glad he’d bothered to do so. With Remy there, the omega would need an easy food source and... What am I thinking?

As he started the fire, he spoke again in a low voice. He didn’t want the omega to hear. “He’s more mature than he looks, isn’t he? Nearing his first heat.”

Merida brought him her own strips of meat. “You’d know better than I, wouldn’t you? He’s my brother, so his scent doesn’t register with me...in that way.”

Dane merely grunted. Just thinking about Remy in that way caused his blood to heat. If he weren’t careful, his dick would do the answering for him. “What was the plan, where were you headed with him?”

Merida blew out a breath. “I’d been thinking of this for a while. We’re a fairly isolated pack but I heard things. There’s a pack south of here that is rumored to be different, a place where Remy wouldn’t be exploited.”

Dane nodded. “The Rogue Pack.”

Merida’s head shot up. “You know if it?”

“I’ve run into them.” He wasn’t going to tell the long and shameful tale of what he’d tried to do with Wren. “Their alpha is a good shifter. Lorcan would certainly take you in and give you both shelter. But,” he said on a sigh, “it’s a journey of another few days at least. And with the weather I can scent coming in...you shouldn’t chance it

with Remy. If you get caught out in a storm..." He shook his head and turned his mind away from the frightening thought.

"Agreed. We can't stay here, though. As nice as it is, Remy needs comfort, especially if you trip him into his heat."

Dane's wolf stirred restlessly at the notion that he might be virile enough to breed an omega. He tamped the thought down before it could blossom. He's not for me. "I was going to suggest that you join my old pack, the Strongbloods. We're close to its territory here and I can guaranty the alpha would welcome you both."

Merida huffed in obvious disgust. "Of course he would. An omega like Remy would always be welcome. But I didn't bring my brother all this way only to put him back into the same danger he was in before. I won't have him bartered away like a thing." Her fury and fear were palpable.

Dane blew on the small flame to make it flare and smoke. Then he turned to the gamma. "It won't be like that with Graydon. Although the Strongbloods stick to the old ways for the most part, the alpha is also trying to modernize it for the sake of everyone. He's a good and decent shifter and I assure you he won't treat your brother like an object to bring him wealth and power."

"And how are you so sure of what this alpha will do?"

"Easy. He's my brother." A dull ache in the middle of his chest that never left caused him to rub at it. "I can go to him and explain the situation. I know what his decision will be, though. Caring for an omega is one of his top priorities."

"If he's so great, why are you living out here?"

Well, that was a fair question. Dane grimaced. "It's complicated and it goes back to

our sire. I'm out here now because I choose to be."

Merida didn't say anything in response for a long time. They finished processing the deer, then went to wash away the gore in the pool he'd created. The water entered from the wall and drained slowly at the bottom. It was a great luxury to have when the river iced over.

The gamma shook her wet hands before wiping them on her thighs. "Even for an omega, Remy is special." She hung her head. "He's...uncomplicated, innocent in every way, trusting, as well. Too much so."

This was no surprise to Dane. He knew from the first moment that Remy had a pup-like quality to him that hadn't matured along with his body. "He has no idea what's going to happen to him, does he?"

"No. He has a basic understanding of mating and whelping, but only with males and females. There is no other male omega in our pack and the alpha made it clear that no one was to educate him on anything. He wanted him to remain ignorant. Thought it added to his desirability." The bitterness in her tone was unmistakable. "And I've been too cowardly to tell him anything even after we'd left."

Dane clamped his hands into fists, pushing down his own anger at how the omega was going to be exploited. "Your first priority was keeping him safe. Explaining his nature to him was never supposed to be your responsibility, anyway. What of your sire?"

"Our parents are dead, mother from sickness, and father died on a hunt. It was an accident, the others said, but I'm not convinced of that. The alpha hated the fact that a beta had sired a male omega when he himself hadn't been able to."

Dane wanted to comfort the female but such a thing was foreign to him now and he

sensed she wouldn't want him to anyway. Typical gamma, stoic to the point of stubbornness. "Graydon's mate is a male omega and raised in a very modern pack. I'm sure he can guide Remy through everything. And we have an omega brother, as well, living in the pack with his beta mate. The two of them will take good care of Remy."

Merida sniffed. "This alpha brother of yours will trip the heat quickly I imagine. What then? Who will service him?"

Me!No, absolutely not. Remy deserved better. "There are any number of decent dominants in the pack. And Graydon won't force Remy to mate with whoever impregnates him. He'll leave the choice to Remy the same as he did for our omega brother."

"I want him to mate and be cared for. Of course, I do. It must be someone with patience and kindness, though. Remy will break under harsh treatment." Now there were tears underling her voice, testament to how scared she was. Gammas never cried.

"He will be treated like the precious boy he is. I promise you." Dane didn't know if his words mattered to someone who'd only known him for a few hours. He put as much sincerity as he could into them because he meant them. If anyone dared to harm Remy... His wolf rose up and howled.

There was a whimper in response and over on the pallet, Remy stirred. Dane's wolf immediately calmed down and let out a series of reassuring barks. There was no question at this point about what was happening. Against all reason, he was connected to a shifter he hadn't even mated with. He shook his head internally. It didn't matter. Remy deserved better than he, and he would make sure the boy got it.

"Go and rest. We'll talk more in the morning."

Merida said nothing as she obeyed. Before lying down next to Remy, she shifted. Ever the vigilant sister, she would guard him through the night. The boy sighed and rolled against her, snuggling into her fur.

Wishing he were the one giving comfort to the omega, Dane rose and walked away. Outside the den, fat flakes of snow were falling and the cold air made him shiver. Good. He needed the cooling down and if freezing to death was the price of protecting that sweet omega, he'd gladly pay it.

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Remy woke truly refreshed for the first time since leaving the pack, and he no longer worried about being alert. He lay snuggled under the warm bear skin and simply basked in the sense of security. Merida had always been a good protector and he believed in her ability to do so without question. But things were different now. They were under the leadership of a beta and that made everything all right again. There was no question that Dane would take care of them and Remy had even less to think about with that assurance. He opened his eyes slowly and blinked away at the last haze of sleep. He knew even before he looked around the den that he was alone.

Not completely, though. He scented his sister right beyond the opening of the cave. Shifting, he stretched, then trotted outside to relieve himself. Merida sat to one side on the ground littered with a coating of snow. She cocked her head as he came out but otherwise left him to his business without staring at him. Instead, she scanned the area constantly, always on the lookout for trouble. The air was crisp, something that delighted him, and he liked the way his paws made crunching sounds as he picked his way over to a tree.

There was no sign of Dane, not even a faint scent of him. A spark of alarm shot through him before his human mind calmed him from the unnecessary worry. The beta will not leave us. Returning to Merida's side, he dared to try something. He let

out a howl inside his head, something that no one should be able to hear. And yet, there it was, an answering bark that rattled through him. He shook himself as if he were wet to throw off the sensation that still bothered him as much as it thrilled him. Then he went back into the den before he gave away too much of what he'd experienced to his sister. He didn't understand what was happening, but nevertheless, expected that Merida wouldn't like it. She'd been worried enough throughout summer, and he didn't want to cause her more upset.

Remy went to the back of the cave and lapped at the pool of water. Then he went over to the pallet to sit beside it. In the far corner, strips of venison hung over a smoldering fire pit. His stomach tightened with hunger. He knew better than to simply take, however. A servient couldn't eat before a dominant permitted it. It was hard to wait, especially as Merida had never made him once they were on their own. There was a beta leading them, now, so the old rules must apply again. He stayed in wolf form for both the warmth and to control his hunger better. Lots of things were easier for some reason when he was in his fur.

Merida came in, too, shifting as she went to the drying rack. She grabbed a couple of strips of meat and brought them to him. "Here, change and eat."

Remy shifted and eyed the food. "Is it okay with the beta if I eat?"

His sister huffed with obvious impatience. "I'm telling you to do so." She pushed the strips closer to his face.

The smell of it with the sharpness of his hunger, as well as, the commanding tone she used, proved too much for him to resist. Taking both pieces of venison, he bit off a hunk and chewed.

Merida pulled the bear skin closer and draped it over his shoulders, then sat beside him in her quiet way. When she wanted to be, his sister was like an unmovable rock,

sturdy and silent, yet ever watchful, too. He leaned against her as he always did, appreciating the extra warmth and the safety of her presence. Before he'd finished the second strip of meat, his wolf went on high alert. The beta entered the den with a leather sling filled with sticks clenched in his teeth. Dane dropped the bundle near the fire pit before shifting. As always, his magnificent body caught Remy's attention. He stopped mid-chew to stare in a most impertinent manner. It was until Merida jabbed him in the ribs that he was able to look away.

It didn't matter anyway because the beta came to them with his hands full of dried berries. He squatted in front of Remy. "Here, have these. Venison is delicious but fruit is good for your human self."

Remy looked at him with eyes cast downward as he'd been taught and cautiously took some of the berries from the beta's large hands. He popped them into his mouth and savored the explosion of taste on his tongue. There'd been precious little of this kind of treat while on the run. His hunger seemed to grow even as he ate. He couldn't help taking more and more until the beta's hands were empty.

Swallowing down the last of his mouthful, he peered up at the beta with trepidation. "I'm sorry, sir. I've eaten them all."

Dane did something very un-beta-like in Remy's experience—he chuckled. "Not to worry, omega. I have more and besides, you are too thin. You need fattening up."

No one had ever said such a thing to him before. If anything, his old pack members had insisted that he needed little of their precious food. All except Merida, of course. She'd always shared her own meals with him and had snuck him what she could pilfer from the pack's stores. Not knowing how to respond, he continued to finish his venison.

"Have you had anything to eat this morning, Gamma?"

It took Remy a few seconds to understand that Dane was talking to Merida. The male seemed positive that Merida was a gamma and not a sigma. Remy didn't understand how that could be true, but if the beta said it was...

Merida kept her gaze downward, too. "Not as yet, Beta. I was waiting for permission."

Dane tipped his head back with a narrowed gaze. "Permission? The food is there and I'll tell you if we need to portion it out." He waved toward the fire pit. "Go and fetch as much as you like. There's plenty and besides, the venison was your kill. You won't be here for long anyway."

Merida didn't hesitate to do as told.

Remy sat blinking back sudden tears at the beta's last statement. "We have to leave, Beta? Did I do something wrong?"

"Of course not." Dane moved his position quickly so that he sat next to Remy. He cupped the back of Remy's neck. "Settle down. There is nothing to be worried about."

The feel of that warm hand pressing into his skin caused Remy to calm instantly. He closed his eyes and leaned into the comfort. No one had made him feel this way since his sire used to. It reminded him of how a dominant's hand could bring pleasure as well as pain.

"Better now?" the beta asked.

Remy could only nod his head. He was vaguely aware that Merida had returned to join them.

“He is easily upset.” Merida’s tone was chastising as much as it was informative.

Remy would have tensed at the disrespect his sister was showing her superior, but the way Dane’s fingers massage his neck kept him relaxed.

“The way of all omegas. I should have been more careful in my words.” Against the nature of a dominant, the male was acknowledging a mistake. “What I meant to say, Remy, is that your sister and I have agreed that I’ll see about the Strongblood Pack taking you in for the winter...perhaps permanently.”

Remy opened his eyes and looked at his sister. “Is that the pack you said we were going to?”

She shook her head. “No. This is one close by and where the beta is from.”

Surprised, Remy tried to turn his head to look at the beta before remembering his place. “You have a pack, Beta?” He couldn’t keep the surprise from his voice and inwardly cringed at his usual loose tongue.

The beta didn’t seem to take offense. Instead, the male turned Remy so that they were face-to-face, his hand still on the back of his neck. “I had one, yes. I...choose to live in this den but my brother is the alpha of the Strongblood Pack and he can be trusted to care for you both.”

“But you’ll come too, won’t you?”

Dane didn’t answer right away. Of course, he didn’t. Dominants didn’t have to explain themselves to servients. Then, he said, “I’ll take you there.”

Remy smiled at the answer. “Thank you, Beta. I know you don’t have to tell me anything. It’s nice to know what’s happening, though.”

Dane moved his hand to cup Remy's chin. He lifted Remy's face such that he had to look him in the eye. "You may ask me anything and I will always answer with the truth."

The intensity of the beta's gaze made Remy's skin tingle and the ache deep inside flared up. His wolf whimpered. The strong wolf call he heard inside his head, which was now becoming routine, answered with a reassuring yip.

The beta abruptly let go and stood. "I must go and talk to Alpha Graydon. Make yourselves comfortable in my absence, but don't wander away from the cave." This last bit was said to Merida.

"Yes, Beta."

Dane shifted as he walked away and bounded out of the den.

Remy stared at the empty mouth of the cave. "Is this what you want, Merida?" His sister always did what was best for him and even now that a beta was in control, he couldn't help worrying that she was upset to be under another's power again.

Merida went to get more venison and handed him another strip as she bit into her own. She sat cross-legged in front of him. "The pack I was taking us to is farther than I thought. A winter storm could hit any time now and we can't afford to be caught out in one." She bit off more and chewed with her usual vigor. "I've spoken with the beta and I believe him when he says we'll be safe with the Strongbloods. We have no reason to trust any dominant, but this one is not like those from our old pack. I see an honesty and caring in him that I've never known before."

Remy ate some more before saying anything. "I like him."

Merida smiled, almost sadly. "I know you do." She looked away. "But you need to be

in a pack regardless of the weather, and I bet there will be other dominants there that you'll like just as much."

Remy frowned. He was certain that wouldn't be the case, although why he was so certain was a mystery to him. Not expecting his sister to understand his feelings, he didn't dispute her expectation about the personal stuff. He focused on the idea of joining another pack. "I don't understand why a pack is necessary. You're really good at taking care of me, and if we could stay in this den until spring..." He wasn't sure why he even brought it up as a possibility. Here or in some pack didn't seem obviously different, yet they were for him. There was something so perfectly right about being in this cozy place with the beta.

"We can't stay here. The Strongbloods will give you better food and a safer place to...mature."

Remy scrunched up his nose. "I don't think I'm getting any bigger than this, Merida." He looked down at his small, skinny body. "I can't imagine that the Strongbloods will find me any more helpful than our old pack. I can't do sigma stuff much better than you can. Being an omega makes me pretty useless. What were the Gods thinking of when they made me." It was a puzzle he'd struggled with his whole life. Even when the dominants had started paying attention to him in that strange way that made him uncomfortable, he hadn't understood why. And Merida had only said they were nasty males and running away was necessary to stop them from being mean to him.

As usual whenever he brought the subject of his purpose, Merida looked away and didn't say anything. At least she didn't at first. As she went to get a drink of water, she said, "You'll understand soon. The Strongbloods will make it clear."

He knew that tone of his sister's. She was done with the topic. So Remy pulled the edges of the bear skin closed and huddled in its warmth, waiting for Dane to return.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Dane approached the perimeter of the Strongblood lands slowly, letting one of the sentries catch his scent so that there would be no alarm. Not much of one, anyway. Despite Graydon's assurances that he was welcome to rejoin the pack, Dane didn't take it for granted that he wasn't perceived as a threat. He'd lived feral too long and had done too many stupid and dangerous things to be fully trusted. He didn't blame them and while he was content to remain as he was, it was important that he get his brother to agree to take in Merida and Remy. There really was no doubt of how his brother, an honorable shifter, would react. But there would be no answer at all if some hot-headed dominant decided to take him down first and ask questions later.

It was some relief when he spied the sentry who'd noticed him. The gamma had been a pup when Dane had left the pack. Now, he was as big and imposing as his kind should be, except that Conan had always had a more even temperament than was typical of his type. Dane shifted and stood with his human feet already starting to freeze in the small amount of snow covering and crossing his arms against the bite of wind.

Conan loped up, clearly not alarmed, and shifted into his human skin as well. If he was cold, he didn't show it. "This is a surprise, Beta."

"I have an urgent need to speak with the alpha. It involves an omega and..."

Conan held up his hand. "No need to explain further to me. You had me at 'urgent' and 'omega'. I'll take you to Graydon." He paused a moment. "You know that the alpha mate whelped a few days ago?"

Dane shook his head. How would he given his isolation? It's not as if shifters made

announcements like humans, nor was there anyway to reach him in the forest even if his brother had been inclined to tell him specifically. “Are father and pup both well?”

Conan nodded. “Yes, but it’s the alpha’s story to tell.”

They spoke no more. Shifting, they headed at a trot toward the compound. Other sentries made themselves known but none tried to interfere. Word must have been spread anyway because Graydon was there to greet him by the side of the longhouse. Dane was surprised and pleased at how...relaxed his brother looked. Becoming a sire was good for him, apparently. He stood with legs braced and arms crossed, as usual. He wore boots, leather pants and a thick shirt in deference to the cold. Those would come off as soon as Graydon stepped back into the warmth of the building, as was true with all of the Strongbloods. And it was also a sign that his brother wanted to speak with him before letting him inside. Otherwise, he would have stuck to wolf form.

Dane stopped a few feet away and shifted once more, ignoring his human’s skin instant displeasure. He bowed his head. “Alpha. Thank you for seeing me. I have a favor...” The breath got knocked out of him as his brother wrapped him in a hard hug. Dane returned the embrace. “I guess we’re doing this first.”

Graydon thumped him once on the back, hard enough to make him wheeze. “Brother, I am glad to see you. Have you come to winter with us?”

Dane pulled away and caught his breath. “No.” At the look of disappointment that shot across his brother’s face, he hurried to distract him. “But before I explain myself, tell me how your mate and pup are.”

Graydon had always been a classic alpha—full of obvious pride and assurance of his own virility and power. Now, he practically burst with it. “They are well. Despite Ethan’s trouble with the pregnancy, he weathered the whelping with ease. And...I

have an alpha son.”

Of course. Nothing pleased an alpha more than siring the next leader of the pack and the first time around, too. “I am happy for you, Alpha. May I ask the boy’s name?”

“Duncan.”

Dane nodded. “A strong name.” He stamped his cold feet before saying more. “I’ve come begging for a favor, brother. It involves giving sanctuary to an omega.”

Graydon’s expression turned serious. “Then you’d better come inside.”

Dane was grateful for the chance to get out of the cold. His den suited his needs and would prove to be an excellent shelter even in the dead of winter. But there was nothing like being inside the longhouse—the instant heat and the mouthwatering smells of the food that was prepared all day long to feed such a large group of shifters. He allowed himself to bask in the pleasure of it all while he waited for Graydon to strip his clothing off, then followed him as he headed toward the back of the structure.

The sigmas noticed his presence immediately as they went along and gave him furtive looks as they hurried on with their tasks. There was no fear in their faces or emanating from them, which made him happy. He’d never intended harm toward his old pack and didn’t want to become a source of concern. Again. Not so long ago, his actions had done just that. No amount of regret was going to change his past behavior. And he wasn’t entitled to a second chance. All he needed to do was make sure Remy and his sister had a safe place to go. Then he would be back to living in the forest like the feral shifter that he’d become.

Instead of leading him to the alpha’s council room, Graydon brought him to the great room. “I don’t want to disturb my mate and pup. They sleep a lot still.”

“Of course.” Dane would never have pressured his brother otherwise but he did long to see his nephew. Maybe someday.

Once they were seated at the family eating mat, Graydon waved for him to proceed. “Tell me.”

Dane opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut again as a sigma hurried over to put hot mugs of cider and small meat pies in front of him. It was obvious proof of how long he’d been out of pack life that he hadn’t even noticed Graydon giving the silent order to give him refreshments. It was as much out of hunger as politeness that he didn’t hesitate to take a big bite out of the pie and down half of his drink before telling his brother what he knew of the siblings.

He told the tale of how he’d stumbled upon Remy and his unusual sister with the efficiency that came natural to a beta and ended with, “The boy is near his first heat and needs a safe place for it. From what the sister has told me, he doesn’t even understand what it means to be a male omega. Finding out right as he’s going into heat is going to be hard on him. And even if he weren’t ready to breed, the forest is no place for him notwithstanding his gamma sister to protect him.” He knew he was saying the obvious and also dredging up his own dubious past actions. Still, he let the information sit with the alpha while he finished up his food.

“A female gamma, you say?”

Dane wasn’t surprised that Graydon focused on the most unusual fact of the situation. The fate of the omega wasn’t in question. His sister being a gamma...? “I know it’s shocking, but there’s no denying it. Her old pack must have been willfully blind—not surprising, really—trying to force her into performing sigma tasks.”

Graydon toyed with his own mug. “If all you see are the female parts and she’s obviously not an omega, you’re only left with one thing. I can always use more

gammas...” He looked sharply at Dane. “Betas too, of course.”

Because any mention of his rejoining the pack forced him to remember how he’d abandoned it, as well as his mother and brother, out of pure cowardice, he ignored the comment. “I’d like to bring them here for at least the winter months even though I’m sure they might bring trouble as well.”

“Well yes, we have to assume someone is pursuing them. No one lets an omega get away, especially as they probably already had plans for him.”

Dane had assumed as much himself, even though Merida hadn’t said it in so many words. “I could take them to Lorcan. The Rogue Pack is used to dealing with this sort of thing.” That was the wrong thing to suggest.

Graydon puffed out his chest. “You think the Strongbloods aren’t up to the challenge of protecting our own?”

“Of course not!” Ancient habits kicked in and he lowered his gaze and exposed his neck. “I meant no disrespect. I merely thought that with your mate newly whelped...”

“Ethan would be the first to skin me alive if I turned away an omega in need.” Graydon huffed and stared into his mug. “Bring them.”

Dane drained his mug and set it back down. “And when the boy goes into heat, what then?” It was incredibly foolish to court more of Graydon’s ire by asking him questions that were none of his concern.

His brother gave him a weird little smile. “Someone will service him, naturally. Conan, maybe. He’s a good lad, bright for a gamma and modern in his thinking.” Graydon shrugged.

Dane's fingers curled into fists of their own volition and his wolf rose under his skin to howl. "You won't force him to mate with anyone." It wasn't a question, and his gall took even himself by surprise, but his wolf wouldn't let him back down.

Graydon's smile increased. "Certainly not. I'll let him choose who services him and who he mates with."

"Like you did with Wren?" Really, he wanted to bite his own tongue off and nearly did. He'd thought he'd put aside this urge to distrust any alpha and the need to fight against shifter customs.

Graydon's gaze narrowed. "That was different. It was obvious to all except that very hard head of Elijah's that they were fated to be together."

Dane started to argue against the ancient belief even though he'd seen enough to know that it wasn't pure nonsense. Then there was a distant whine in his head that caused his wolf to become even more agitated. With a grimace, he worked to get himself under control and to not shift.

"Is there something wrong, Dane? Is your wolf acting up? Maybe he's worried about someone or hearing something that disturbs him?"

Sudden irritation took control. He leaped to his feet and took a step back. "Everything is fine, Alpha. I'll go fetch Remy and Merida now. If that's acceptable. I mean, I can keep them at my den for longer if you need time to..." He shut his mouth, realizing that he was close to babbling.

Graydon took his time rising to his own feet. "Now would be best. There is snow in the air again. By tomorrow, the journey will be more difficult for the boy."

Dane nodded a few times. "Yes, of course." He put aside the images that kept

popping up of Remy snug in Dane's den as the world around them turned inhospitable. "I'll leave now. It won't take long for us to return. My den is not far."

"I know."

Of course, he did. There was no way that the alpha had not learned the exact location of Dane's den. It might be outside of the Strongblood territory, but Graydon was not the kind of alpha that took chances with his pack.

As there was nothing more to say, Dane left. This time, as he headed for the nearest door, no one accompanied him. His brother trusted him that much, apparently. The knowledge heartened him, but he didn't linger on it. Getting Remy and bringing him to safety was paramount and if that thought bothered his wolf...tough. For once, he was going to do the right thing.

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Remy kept an eye out for Dane's return, as much as Merida permitted him to. She wouldn't let him sit at even the mouth of the den, instead forcing him back out of sight. He sat cross-legged on the pallet because it was soft on his human backside. It felt nice and when he rocked back and forth, the fur pressed into his flesh in a delightful way. He didn't understand the sensation but it was as if he were scratching an itch inside. He liked the way it made his skin tingle and it helped settle his wolf down. Maybe it was because he'd become accustomed to being in wolf form most of the time, but it seemed as if the beast within him was unusually agitated. He wanted to come out and the urge to shift was strong. Normally he and his wolf were in harmony. Something was off now.

He tried to ignore, as well, the fact that he was starting to feel hungry again despite his large breakfast. As much food as there was in the den, however, he knew better than to take or even ask for more. It wasn't his place to decide whether there was

enough food. He had to wait for permission.

“You need more to eat?”

Remy shouldn't have been surprised that his sister had realized he did. She was far smarter than he and always took good care of him. He took his gaze off the den's entrance to smile at her. “Yes, please.”

Merida grabbed a few strips of venison and brought them over. “From now on, you must say when you're hungry. It's important that you eat enough.”

Remy stopped his rocking, feeling instinctively that it wasn't something he should do in her presence. “Thank you.” He took the meat and bit off a large chunk. “Why don't I need to wait for permission to eat? Is it because there's enough food here in Dane's den?”

Merida looked away. “No. We're probably not staying here anyway. It's just that...you're an omega and omegas get hungrier than most at a certain point.”

Remy frowned. “Why?” He stuffed more venison in his mouth.

His sister didn't answer, looking away instead. It was always this way. Whenever he dared to ask questions, it rarely led to any answers. No one seemed to think it was important that he know anything. He existed to obey, although he rarely was told to do much. It was all very confusing, and he wished someone would tell him all the things he wanted to know. Dane will. That was an odd expectation. He barely knew the beta, and yet for some reason, he trusted the man and believed he could be the source of all knowledge in his life.

Remy's wolf rose up right before his human ears heard Dane's approach. He was sure it was the beta and shifted in order to fully take in the sound and scent of him. He

pranced in place, eager to greet the beta yet cowed by Merida's brawny wolf standing between him and the entrance. When Dane finally entered and shifted into human form, Merida relaxed and did the same.

As did Remy, although for him, it was for a chance to speak easily with the beta. There were so many questions on the tip of his tongue. Only a lifetime of training kept it in check.

Dane wasted no time with his news. "We are leaving for the Strongblood territory as soon as you are ready. Alpha Graydon has agreed to welcome you into his pack. He's a good man and will keep you safe and well-cared for."

Remy's first reaction was one of disappointment if not outright fear. The idea of rejoining a pack was scary. But Dane said it would be okay, and that reassurance chased away the rest of Remy's feelings. Besides, the beta would be there with them, wouldn't he?

"We're ready now," Merida said. "My brother has just eaten so there is no reason to wait."

"Good." Dane's response said one thing, but his expression indicated he wasn't so pleased.

No, that's silly. He wants us safely in his pack. His old pack, rather. Dane hadn't lived there in a long time, or so he said. But didn't the fact that he'd approached his alpha brother on their behalf mean that things would be different for him too? Gods, he hoped so. His wolf whined before he could stop it. There was a deep chuff of reassurance in response. Remy blinked at Dane in continued surprise that their wolves seemed to be communicating much like he'd heard mated shifters did.

Dane's expression for a brief moment said he felt the same way. Then the look was

gone and replaced with beta sternness. “Let’s go.”

They each shifted as they left the cave, then headed off at an easy pace. Dane led, of course, with Remy next and Merida bringing up the rear. He’d never felt so safe and allowed himself to enjoy his surroundings as they made the journey. There was nothing new to the scent in particular, but still it was nice to take them all in without worrying about detecting danger. A few times, his curiosity got the better of him and he started to wander off track. Each time, Merida nudged him back into line. But for the first time since they’d left their pack, she wasn’t as tense. With Dane in control and there to lend his power to any problem that might occur, she didn’t have to be the one in charge anymore. He hadn’t appreciated how difficult it must have been for her to take care of him for the many months they’d been on the run. Knowing that joining this new pack would help her as much as himself made him even happier.

Remy couldn’t stop the worrying from returning once he scented the first of the Strongblood sentries. As if out of nowhere, two gammas approached from each side and moved in to flank them. Merida growled briefly and came closer to him. But Dane circled back to yip at them with reassurance. Remy instantly relaxed again and even Merida seemed to settle down. As they approached the heart of the Strongblood packlands, excitement mounted. The sight of sigmas going about their daily chores—the simple normality of it all—forced him to realize how much he’d missed pack life.

So absorbed by what he saw, he didn’t notice they had reached the alpha until Dane and the others came to an abrupt stop. Remy skittered to a halt and shifted without thought to join his sister and the beta. He stood between them yet couldn’t help gravitating closer to Dane. Knowing not to stare directly at the alpha, he kept his gaze down and waited for those who knew better than he to tell him what to do next. Even standing in a patch of sunlight couldn’t ward off the sudden cold, either. Dane’s body gave off a nice warmth. It was a relief when everyone’s focus started with Merida.

“You were right, Dane. A female gamma.” The alpha’s voice was low and powerful.

The sound of it caused Remy’s skin to prickle with fear. He slid closer to Dane until their bodies touched. He would have pulled away, embarrassed by his boldness, but the beta stopped him by taking him gently by the arm and holding him in place. The feel of his touch caused heat to flare deep inside Remy, although it also caused a shiver to run down his spine.

“Indeed, Alpha. I’ve witnessed Merida’s strength firsthand.” To Remy he whispered, “It’s all right. There is nothing to be afraid of.”

A wave of both emotional and physical warmth washed over him and he relaxed enough to listen to what his sister’s fate would be.

“I welcome you to the Strongblood Pack. This will be your new home.” The alpha’s statement made it clear that it wasn’t a choice. He paused. “I don’t suppose anyone has taught you the proper way to guard a perimeter?”

Merida held her head high, showing no fear, as usual, although she was careful to keep her gaze down, as well. “No, Alpha. I can...work in the kitchen.”

The alpha surprised Remy by chuckling, and the sound didn’t have the nasty edge that Remy was used to hearing.

“I would no more put you to that kind of use than I would myself. You’d probably burn the longhouse down before the day was over. Conan!” One of the gammas who had escorted them in came forward. “Train her.”

The young gamma smiled. “Now, sir?”

“Is there a reason to wait?”

The smile disappeared. “No, sir. Come on, Merida, is it?”

Merida hesitated. She lifted her chin. “I appreciate the opportunity, sir, but my brother needs me.”

The alpha waved that away with a sweep of his hand. “You and he are now part of the Strongblood Pack. His safety is my concern. You have done well by him,” he added in a kinder voice than any dominant had ever used. “But his welfare is my burden, not yours.”

Merida said nothing, but looked as if she were going to continue to argue. Remy’s heart raced with sudden panic. She’d taken punishment before on his behalf. He didn’t want that to happen all over again.

“I’ll be fine, Merida. Truly.” Remy would have gone to hug her if Dane hadn’t held him in place. “Please, don’t argue,” he whispered, worry for her making him indifferent to the others hearing.

“He’ll be looked after,” Dane chimed in.

“Of course, he will.” The alpha gestured with his chin.

Conan got closer to Merida. “Come on. I bet you’re dying for a good run. We’ll go around the perimeter so you can learn where it is.”

Merida hesitated on a moment more, her gaze sliding over to Remy. He gave her an encouraging smile. Whatever she saw there, it was enough. With a nod, she shifted and bound away in Conan’s wake.

“Wyatt!” The boom of the alpha’s voice made Remy jump. A boy—no, an omega—came from behind the alpha and smiled broadly at Remy. “Take him to my

mate. Remy could benefit from learning certain things from other omegas.”

Wyatt stepped closer and held out his hand. “Hi, Remy. I’m the alpha’s brother, if no one has told you, and I hope we’ll be fast friends. You can ask me anything.”

Remy perked up at the news. “Oh, Dane said something about having brothers who are omegas. I’ve never met another male one before.” It was going to be so much fun, he hoped, having someone in the pack like him. He had so many questions, too, and would feel comfortable asking Wyatt about them instead of Merida or even Dane. He took Wyatt’s hand.

“Come on, then. You must be freezing out here.”

He should have been but his body was generating that odd warmth and Dane’s big body gave off heat enough to keep him toasty. He started to go with Wyatt, then a stopped as a thought occurred to him. Looking over his shoulder, he caught Dane’s eye.

“I’ll see you later, won’t I?” He’d just assumed the beta would be sticking around even though he had his den in the woods. It was impertinent to ask, as if an omega had any right to question a dominant about anything. An uncontrollable need to be near Dane had caused him to blurt out the question without thinking.

Dane grimaced and his gaze skittered away. “Um no, I...”

Fear swamped Remy once more, and once again, he couldn’t keep his tongue in check. “No? But...but.” Tears welled up and threatened to spill over. He didn’t care. He was used to being foolish in front of other shifters, and the thought that he might not see Dane again was overwhelmingly horrible. His wolf whined piteously before he could stop him.

There was a howl in response and Dane took a step toward him with his hand outstretched. “Easy now. I’ll stay here. For a while anyway.” He eyed the alpha, who grinned back at him. “I’ll see you at the evening meal.”

Reassured by the beta’s words, Remy relaxed again. He didn’t allow himself to dwell on the short-term promise. He had to believe everything would be fine.

Wyatt tugged him gently toward a door leading into the long house. “Come on, we’ll go see the alpha mate and I bet you’re hungry, too. We’ll have some food brought in.”

Remy laid his palm on his stomach. “I am, actually.”

“That’s not surprising, given your age.”

“Isn’t it?” Remy shifted his face for a moment in order to inhale the scents of the long house deeply. It was wonderful.

Wyatt squeezed his hand. “No, but we’ll get into that later.”

“Okay.” Remy knew better than to push on any matter. Besides, the more immediate concern was that he was about to be in the presence of the most important pack member next to the alpha himself. “I’m a little nervous about meeting the alpha mate,” he confessed.

Wyatt chuckled. “Don’t be. He’s really nice.”

Remy stumbled as the words hit him. “He?”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Remy entered the alpha's chambers with his eyes wide. He was sure that Wyatt was teasing him, something that made him a little sad. Everyone in his old pack, other than Merida, had found it amusing to play on his natural impulse to believe what he was being told. He liked to assume shifters were honest and didn't understand why others wanted to fool him with lies.

But he had to change his belief about Wyatt's words when he saw a boy lying against a mound of pillows, nursing a pup. "Oh!" His shock was so great, he couldn't pretend not to be so.

The alpha mate grinned at him while settling the pup against his shoulder. "Hi. I heard we had a couple of new pack members. Welcome, and I'm Ethan."

At Wyatt's urging, Remy crept closer. The pup's alpha status was obvious and as big as he was, the alpha mate had his arms full. "Thank you, sir, but I'm very...confused. How was that pup whelped? Surely the alpha has a female mate too?" He didn't know what he was talking about. The whole situation confused him. Pups were whelped from females.

Wyatt came to stand next to him. Having shed all of his clothing, his rounded belly was easy to see. "There is no female, Remy. Ethan is a male omega, like me and you. That means he can carry and whelp pups." His tone was kind, except his words made no sense.

Remy blinked back more tears threatening to leak out. He was so emotional these days, more than usual. "That can't be." His voice hitched and he swallowed hard to regain control.

Wyatt put his arm around him and helped sit on a large pillow by the pallet. “Here, it’s okay. There’s nothing to be scared about. I promise.”

Remy allowed himself to be settled and wrapped his arms around his waist. “Please don’t tease me.” He really wanted this pack to be different. If even other omegas sensed his vulnerability, then he’d be just as alone as he’d been in the old pack. Only Merida and their parents had ever been truly kind and patient with him. And Dane. I mustn’t forget him. Except it didn’t seem as if Dane would be around to spend time with.

The alpha mate put the pup down on the pallet before sliding over to take Remy’s hands in his own. “No one is trying to make fun of you, Remy. Wyatt and I understand how hard it is to be an omega and we want to help you in any way we can. It starts with being clear on what it means to be one.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Male omegas are bred by dominants and produce lots of pups, just like female omegas do. That is the purpose the Gods have given us. I’m sorry you’re learning this now when you’re so close to your first heat.”

Remy’s heart skipped a beat and he couldn’t hold back a whimper. “Heat?”

The alpha mate’s gaze remained steady. “Yes. You’re going to need to be mounted by a dominant until his seed takes hold. Then you’ll carry his pup inside you until it’s time for it to be whelped.”

Remy was already shaking his head. “No. No, that can’t be right. How is it even possible?” He’d caught glimpses of males mounting females back in his old pack. Many dominants seemed to like showing off their virility. And the females seemed to like it—mostly. He knew how pups came out, too, even though no one had ever explained it to him. Life in a pack held little secrets. But this? A male breeding made no sense to him.

The alpha mate looked at Wyatt. “Why don’t we have a snack and explain while we eat. I bet you’re hungry,” he added to Remy.

At that moment, his stomach rumbled. “Um, I guess I am. Nothing satisfies me for long.” He dared to look the alpha mate in the eye. “Is that part of...all this?”

The nodding response wasn’t a surprise and it made sense that the rest of his weird feelings were as well. Before he could dwell too much on everything, Wyatt pulled free and came back with a plate of dried fruit and oat cakes, as well as a jug of cider. The sudden and urgent need to eat overtook all of his thoughts. He’d stuffed his face before the alpha mate spoke again.

“Let me explain what it means to be a male omega, and please believe me when I say you’ll be fine. We’ll take care of you.”

Remy focused on eating as the alpha mate’s words washed over him. What the boy said was too fantastical to be true. And yet, deep down inside, pieces of his life started to click into place. He’d known he had to have some purpose within the pack. The way his old alpha and the alpha heir had looked at him before Merida had taken him away made sense now. He could finally put a name to the...hunger he saw in their eyes. But with each new detail being explained, he couldn’t help being frightened. He didn’t want these things to be done to him by a dominant...unless...Dane. The mere thought of the beta seeing him through this scary point in his life instantly calmed him. It would all be okay so long as Dane was the one to service him. The beta had to stay now. He just had to.

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It felt wonderful to be back in the long house again, more than Dane would have expected. He’d convinced himself that living feral suited him just fine. That had been a lie. He was as much a creature of a pack as any other shifter. Sitting in a corner of

the great room, sipping mulled cider with his alpha brother was as close to pure happiness as he'd ever experienced. Without the constant fear of his sire's volatile nature, the longhouse was a place of peace. It made him extra glad that he'd brought Remy to this sanctuary.

He drained his mug. "I accept whatever constraints you put on my being here. I only want to make sure Remy is settled in before I return to my den."

Graydon eyed him over the rim of his own mug as he drank. Setting it down, he said, "You've brought me an omega nearing his first heat, trusting me with him. I think I can extend the same faith to you."

Dane grimaced at the reminder of how he'd once been so damaged by their sire's way of life that he'd believed their brother, Wren, was better off away from the pack. "It is I who has come to believe in you, Alpha. I know now that you will take good care of the boy."

"I will certainly give him a safe home, but his more urgent need of being mounted I expect will be met by you."

Dane didn't even try to hide his startlement at that statement, said so casually and as if there was no doubt. "I've never known you to joke around, Graydon."

His brother grinned. "You must know I'm not. The boy needs servicing...and soon. I don't have to tell you that. He might not even last the night under my influence."

Dane sputtered, lost for words for the first time in his life. "That may be true, but I'm not the one suited for the responsibility. He needs a steady pack member, someone who will mate with him."

"I don't disagree. Are you so sure you can't meet that requirement?"

For a few long seconds, Dane allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to be back in the pack and Remy's mate. Oh, his wolf liked that image very much. He preened beneath Dane's skin and his dick hardened. It had been a long time since he'd had that kind of reaction around others. Embarrassed, he covered his groin with crossed arms.

Graydon chuckled. "I see you're intrigued by the idea."

"Of course I am!" Dane hadn't meant to snap but this whole discussion was becoming akin to torture. Remy was never going to be his because the boy deserved a better dominant. "I'm feral now, ruined for pack life. And I'm ugly. What omega would want to be mounted by me?" Normally, his disfigured face didn't bother him. Seeing himself through Remy's eyes forced him to accept that he was never going to be the desirable beta he'd once been.

"You don't seem to be having any trouble acting civilized at the moment. You haven't forgotten how to drink from a mug, for example." Graydon's baiting tone and words made Dane bristle but he said nothing. "And as for your face...? I've seen how the boy looks at you. It's obviously not an issue for him."

Dane's wolf chuffed at that statement and he had to stop himself from running his fingers over his scarred eye socket. "He's been out of a pack for a long time. Gratitude for a dominant taking care of him explains his interest. If there really is any," he added with grumble. This notion of his servicing Remy was a dangerous one. He couldn't allow that kind of hope into his life. It was doomed to die.

"I've seen how you look at him, too."

Dane waved away that observation. "He's beautiful. How could I not want him? The omega needs a mate and that's not going to be me."

Graydon sighed. "I'd forgotten how stubborn you can be." He shrugged. "Very well. There are other dominants who would welcome the opportunity. Conan, perhaps."

Dane and his wolf immediately rebelled at the idea. He had to force them both to settle down. "Conan seems like a fine shifter." He nodded once as if to convince himself more than anyone else. "I think Remy would like him."

"I suppose it's settled then. But it's clear the omega wants you to stick around as he gets comfortable here, so I expect you to stay until his heat starts."

"Of course." Dane swallowed back the bitterness that threatened to make him take back his words.

"You should see our mother now."

Various emotions swamped him—guilt and longing chief among them. "Yes. It's been too long."

"I'll bring her here. Take care of that first, though." Graydon flicked his gaze downward.

Dane ground the heel of his hand onto his dick. "I will." Even as he said the words, he couldn't help picturing "taking care of" his erection any way other than sinking it into Remy. "Give me a little time." He all but choked the words out as he rose and fled the longhouse to find privacy.

It had been so long since he'd lived in a pack, he'd forgotten how difficult it was to find an isolated spot to take care of business without the concern of some shifter stumbling upon him. And he felt ridiculous squatting behind a bush, tugging his cock with hard, irritated strokes until his seed spilled. Release of this kind had been few and far between over his long time in exile. The opportunities for doing so had been

endless in his solitude but his interest in doing so had waned. There'd been no one to stimulate his appetite and pleasure always paled in the face of survival. Now since stumbling upon Remy, his strong sexual drive had come roaring back. No surprise there. He really needed to get away from the boy and back to his den before he embarrassed himself or took the disastrous step of making the omega his.

He's not for me. As he reminded himself of the cold, hard facts of his life, he gave his dick one more vicious squeeze. Then he rose to go the outdoor cleaning trough to make himself more presentable for his mother. The few pack members that he encountered kept their gazes down and gave him a wide berth. He could only imagine how nervous his presence made them. Any shifter who rebelled against the communal way of life was to be viewed as aberrant and a possible danger. That the alpha had blessed his being there only served to keep them from running away. No decree from an alpha was going to override the instinct to distrust him. Only time would make the others welcome him and he wasn't going to stick around long enough for that to happen.

By the time he returned to the longhouse, he was presentable again, but also very nervous. Seeing his mother again would be a test of his courage. His love for her had never diminished. She would have every right, however, to resent if not hate him for running away when she and her other children had needed him the most. The thought of her rejecting him was too painful to contemplate. He could only hope that she would dress him down for his cowardice yet still welcome his return, no matter how temporary.

Dane stopped and gaped at the sight of her. She stood beside Graydon, gloriously naked as she should be. The sack-like dresses she had taken to wearing to hide her scars right before he'd left were gone. The sight of her lovely skin marred by the violence of her mate was hard to see. She deserved the dignity of baring her past without being gawked at, so he stared into her eyes instead as he approached her. His wolf pranced with the excitement of a pup at the reunion. The beast part of him didn't

care about the past. He was just happy to be in the presence of the shifter who had whelped him. Because Dane didn't know what to say, he remained silent, allowing her to speak first.

And she did, in a heart-breaking way, not with words but with a soft gasp and tears welling up. Celia closed the gap between them, standing within reach. She lifted a trembling hand and ran her fingers lightly over his scar. Dane had forgotten his own marks of violence. He could see the horror in his mother's eyes.

He clasped her raised wrist. "It is nothing, a long ago wound that made me stronger more than anything else." His voice was rough, as if he hadn't spoken in a long time. He knew, though, it was emotion that clogged his throat.

Celia cupped his face. "As are mine. We both survived what we couldn't avoid and nothing more needs to be said about it—about anything in the past." She stepped even closer, her eyes still moist but no tears were being shed, holding them back being a lesson she'd learned long ago. "I'm just so happy to have you back again, for however long you choose to stay."

Dane let that last bit go unaddressed. He didn't know how much time he'd spend in the pack, although he would visit more for his mother's sake if nothing else. "We can spend as much time together as you wish." He flicked his gaze over to Graydon. "And as much as the alpha will permit."

His brother sighed heavily. "You may stay as long as you like, as you well know."

Dropping her hand, Celia took a step back. "I'm sure it is hard for you to return, my son. There shall be no pressure for you to do anything you aren't ready to."

Pack life had indeed changed if his mother felt free to speak so boldly. He gave her a smile that he knew didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm here to help the new omega settle

in and of course, I can't wait to feast on whatever evening meal you have prepared."

The idea of feeding her children had always pleased his mother. It was the right thing to say. Her smile was warm and generous. "Then, I should get back to the kitchen to see how it is coming along." She turned, paused and looked over her shoulder. "Remy is a sweet boy. I've only spoken to him briefly, but it's obvious he needs a gentle hand when his heat begins. I'm glad you are here for him."

Dane opened his mouth to explain that he wasn't in charge of servicing the boy. Graydon's steely glare and quick shake of his head cut him off. Resigned, he waited until Celia was out of sight and beyond hearing before he went to his brother.

"I really shouldn't stay after the evening meal." Even as he said the words, his wolf growled with displeasure.

Graydon shrugged. "You're free to make that decision, of course. Good luck explaining that to the boy and our mother. In any event, you will eat with the family, naturally," he added before Dane could summon a retort.

"Will Remy be joining us?" Dane could have kicked himself for asking the stupid question. Since meeting the sweet omega, his tongue seemed to have a life of its own.

"No. Why would he? He's not a member of my family, is he?" With that he strode from the room.

Dane stood staring at nothing in particular, unusually flummoxed. His entire life, he'd known what he wanted and needed to do, however miserable those decisions had been. At the moment, however, he felt unsure of himself. Part of him wanted to flee that very moment back to his den and the solitary life of a feral shifter. But he couldn't quite make himself do it and his wolf had dug in his paws over the matter. If he shifted to run away, he had no doubt, the beast would simply turn around again.

One thing was certain, however. He was in the way as sigmas started their chore of setting up for the meal. So he retreated to the outdoors, appreciating the cold sting of the air and trying not to warm himself with thoughts of seeing Remy again.

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Dane stood impatiently by his spot on the alpha's dining mat, ostensibly waiting for Graydon to arrive with his mate and pup, but really using the time to catch sight of Remy when he entered. The two things happened close together with Graydon coming into the great room carrying his mate, who in turn cradled the new alpha heir. His brother's joy was obvious, even more remarkable because it was visible for all to see. Being mated and a sire had cracked Graydon's hard facade. The sight of him was the best indication yet that the Strongblood Pack had changed for the better.

And right behind the alpha family came the newly-found lost omega brother, Wyatt, and Remy. The boys split up quickly, Wyatt following Graydon, while Remy hurried over to his sister. Merida was beaming, not only at seeing her brother, but in general. That was what happened when one found the right place in a pack, he supposed. Dane followed the pair as they went to sit with a couple of other families. Celia must have decided that was better than having Merida eat with the unmated dominants given that she was all the family Remy had. Dane couldn't help noticing that the female nevertheless stole glances in the direction of where gammas sat with their usual boisterousness barely contained. Or more to the point, at Conan. The gamma male did the same with her. Maybe he was really catching glimpses of Remy given that he was all but assured to service the boy's heat. The very thought caused his wolf to rise up with anger. He tamped him down before he made a scene.

"Hi!" Wyatt grabbed Dane into a tight hug, taking his attention away from Remy. "I'm so glad we'll have a chance to catch up."

Cupping the back of the omega's neck, Dane grinned. "As am I. You seem to be

adjusting to pack life well.”

Wyatt blushed and cupped his growing belly with his free hand. “I am. The alpha lets me play most evenings and the pack has been really receptive to my music.”

Dane nodded. “That is good. And your human parents?”

“They’ve visited a few times and Graydon has made sure that they get as much help as they need with the farm. I don’t have to worry about them at all.”

“That is also good.”

Because Graydon had settled his family down to eat, Dane pulled away and made to do the same. Wyatt started to sit beside him but was plucked up by his mate.

“You will sit here on my other side.” Kael’s tone was firm enough to worry Dane that the beta had changed since mating.

Wyatt looked unconcerned, though. “He’s my brother.”

Kael gave the boy a hard look. “Other. Side.”

With a roll of his eyes, Wyatt obeyed. Before his ass hit the rug, however, Kael had him in his arms and lowered him as gently as if he were made of blown glass. Then the beta sat heavily between his mate and Dane, giving Dane an even harder look.

Wyatt peeked around his mate’s large body. “He’s become intolerable as my breeding has progressed.”

With a grunt, Kael snagged a juicy piece of meat and held it to the omega’s lips. Wyatt took the offering with a delicate bite of his teeth. Kael watched him until he’d

finished chewing and swallowing before handing him a hunk of bread.

Then the beta turned to Dane while getting some food for himself. “So, Remy, huh?”

Dane glared at the man as he also grabbed bits of the succulent pork. It had been a long time since he’d eaten anything other than what ran in the forest. He savored the taste before giving Kael any kind of reply.

“I stumbled upon the boy and his sister and have delivered them here for safety. That’s all.” He belied his own words by stealing a glance at Remy. The omega was laughing at the antics of a pup sitting with him.

“Uh, huh.” Kael handed Wyatt a mug of cider before saying anything more. “How often do you hear his wolf?”

In the process of taking a long swallow of his own drink, Dane sputtered. Wiping his chin, he snarled at the beta. “None of your business.” He kept his voice low so as not to disturb anyone else in the family.

Kael held up his palm. “Sure. Sure. It’s just...well, finding my fated mate and breeding him has been the best thing to ever happen to me. All dominants should be so lucky.”

Dane tore off a hunk of bread and chewed his way through his anger. “Yeah, you look real relaxed to me,” he said just as Kael lunged to get some more meat for Wyatt before the omega could manage it for himself.

Shaking off the uncomfortable encounter, Dane turned to his mother and started asking her questions about pack life. All the while, though, the sound of Remy’s voice filtered through all of the other noise in the great room. The sound skittered across his skin, making him twitch, and his wolf pranced and howled in conflicting

responses. Worse, there was that answering call from Remy's wolf.

Damn, Kael anyway.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

“Learning to guard the perimeter of the packlands was amazing.” Merida lay back on her pallet with her hands behind her head. She’d never looked so happy.

Remy fussed with the covers of his own pallet, appreciating how thoughtful the Strongbloods had been in giving them a new home. The tiny room was a bit cramped with his sister’s large body in it, but he supposed it was intended to be temporary. Soon, he would be breeding and denning with his mate, while Merida would bunk in with the other unmated gammas. It was a daunting thought because they had never lived apart. And because whenever Remy tried to picture his future, all he could see was himself with Dane. The beta had been pretty clear that he wasn’t going to stay with the pack.

He sat cross-legged and hugged his knees. “Do you think he’ll stay and service me through my heat?”

Merida didn’t even pretend not to know what he was talking about. “I doubt it.” Her tone was gently, yet her words cut through him like a knife.

“Why not? If I want him, can’t I have him?”

“You know that’s not how things work. It’s up to the alpha to decide who your mate will be.”

“But...but Ethan and Wyatt said Graydon would let me choose. He’s modern in that way.” It was hard to believe that the Strongblood alpha was anything other than like his birth one. The very sight of the man made Remy want to shrink away. Except Dane said his alpha brother could be trusted to be just and that was good enough for

Remy.

Merida rolled into a sitting position. “He’s a good alpha, I’ll give you that. If he weren’t, I’d have you out of here. But he can’t afford to let an omega be bred by any kind of shifter unless he has control over him. Graydon expects you to stay in the pack for the rest of your life, and that’s what’s best for you and your pups, anyway. Dane is an honorable shifter, but he’s determined to continue to live feral. You need the sire of your pups to be someone always by your side.”

Remy swiped at the useless tears that slid down his cheeks. He’d never been good at holding back his feelings and lately that had been particularly so. “He’s the one I want.” His wolf whined and in the now-familiar and comforting response, Dane’s chuffed to calm him.

Merida cast her gaze downward. “I know and I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, although I wish you’d told me before the full truth about what I am. It’s...scary.”

His sister left her pallet to join him. She wrapped him in her arms. “I’m sorry about that, too. I wanted to explain things to you, but first the old alpha had forbidden it, and then I simply didn’t know how to do it. I told myself that keeping you alive and safe was good enough until we re-settled in another pack.”

Remy snuggled into the warm embrace, taking comfort as he always had in his sister’s love and strength. “It’s okay. You’ve always done what’s best for me. I love you.” Such words weren’t spoken often by shifters, at least not where they’d come from. “I’m so glad we’re here and that you’ve found your place at last.”

Merida squeezed him. “I love you, too, Remy. Nothing is more important to me than you. If you’re unhappy here, we’ll run. We’ve done it before and can do it again.”

“No. That’s okay.”

Remy didn’t want to leave. He wasn’t sure it would do any good. From what he’d been told by the other omegas, he would be trying to run from his destiny and that seemed like a dumb thing to do. Besides, Merida was truly happy now that her gamma nature had been accepted. She’d sacrificed so much for him, putting herself in danger, taking the brunt of any punishment he’d earned by being too slow or saying the wrong thing. He’d always been a burden to her. This was his chance to do something for her.

“I want to stay. Everyone is so nice here. How can I be anything other than happy.” And so long as he was with the Strongbloods, there was at least a chance that Dane would service him through his heat...and maybe if the Gods listened to wishes, he’d have even more.

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Remy jerked awake with a pounding heart as a wail pierced the quiet of the longhouse. He sat up and peered through the dark to where Merida lay. Another cry of utter anguish caused him to hug himself and shudder. The strike of a flint was followed by the flare of light from the oil lamp. Merida held it aloft and turned toward their door as the crying dropped to a muffled sound of grief.

Remy looked at his sister. “What’s happening?”

Merida stood. “Stay here.”

Remy always tried to be an obedient servant, but it only took a few seconds before he jumped to his feet and followed Merida out of the room. He just couldn’t stay by himself. Not only did he feel compelled to find the source of pain and give whatever comfort he might, he also needed reassurance from someone other than his sister.

Dane. Where is Dane?

It didn't take more than a couple of steps for his plea to be answered. Out of the gloom strode the beta. His expression was grim. With a quick hand signal, he stopped Merida from going any farther. He passed her, however, and went to Remy.

Dane cupped the back of Remy's neck and drew him close. "It's all right."

Despite the soothing touch and tone, Remy knew that was a lie. "No, it's not. What's happening?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he tried to shrink away. It wasn't his place to gainsay a dominant.

Far from being angry, Dane pulled him closer and wrapped him in the warm embrace of his big arms. "It's Wyatt. He's lost his pup."

"Oh!" Remy's eyes filled with tears at the horrible news. He let them fall unchecked and snuggled closer into Dane. "That's horrible." He pictured the other omega as he'd seen him last, laughing by his mate, seemingly in perfect health and his slightly rounded belly on full display. "Why did it happen?"

Dane sighed. "The healer said there is no way of knowing, that these things are usually only understood by the Gods. The good thing is that Wyatt himself isn't in any danger. The pupped passed without...hurting him."

When the beta said no more, Remy was tempted to ask more questions, such as what could have happened to Wyatt? It hadn't occurred to him yet that breeding could be dangerous. He searched his memory and couldn't remember anything like this happening in his old pack. Of course, much of what occurred in private stayed that way. His old alpha didn't like anyone to show pain or grief. It irritated him. He insisted on every pack member being strong, as well as, obedient. But as he thought of it, there had been a breeding sigma that suddenly died. No one had explained why

and because sickness and accidents were common, he'd never thought to press Merida on what had happened.

Remy sniffed sharply to inhale Dane's comforting scent. "I'm scared." He hadn't planned on revealing how he felt. The words just came out and his wolf punctuated them with a mournful howl. Dane's wolf responded immediately and with their bodies this close, he could swear that he felt the sound as well as heard it.

Dane's embrace tightened. "I know." He didn't admonish Remy that his fear was foolish or unfounded. "You need to go back into your room and try to sleep. Wyatt and Kael's grief is theirs alone right now. We'll mourn with them later."

Remy let the beta shuffle him back to his pallet, keeping a tight hold on him. When Dane tried to let go, however, Remy balked.

"No, stay with me! Please." He couldn't help digging his fingers into the man's waist to keep them together.

Dane sighed. "Remy..."

Merida entered the room with the lamp. "Please do stay with him, Beta. He's frightened and needs your comfort more than mine. I'll find a pallet elsewhere."

Remy closed his eyes and waited for the agonizing seconds it took for Dane to respond.

"Very well. Take the lamp. You're not familiar enough with the longhouse to go without it."

Merida said nothing more. Her footsteps faded and with them, the light. Remy didn't care if he could see or not. He held onto Dane and complied with gratitude as the beta

urged him to lie down once more on the pallet. Even as he was repositioned onto his side, facing away from Dane, he clutched at the man's arms to keep him from separating them.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I need you to hold me. Is that okay?"

"Of course it is." The beta's voice was rough. "I'm here for you. Try to get some more sleep. Wyatt is going to need his friends, as well as his mate, to help him through this."

The words warmed him. "Do you think he sees me as his friend already?"

"Certainly. Omegas share a special bond with each other." Dane went silent for a while. "But I don't want you to worry that his fate is yours."

"How can I not? He was fine when I last saw him and now, he's not. I've only just learned about how I'm going to breed like a female. It's too much to know that it can also go wrong." The tears came again. He didn't try to stop them, understanding that it was okay to show his feelings to this man.

"Shh. You must let go of the worry, hard as that is. You need sleep and while I can't promise that nothing bad will happen to you when it's your time to breed, I can promise that for right now, I'm here to keep you safe from everything else."

The beta's words had the right effect. Remy relaxed and so did his wolf. It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt out how he wanted Dane to be his pups' sire. But he held back the urge, as he'd learned to do. Dominants didn't like impudent little servants demanding things of them. Dane seemed different but still... Then Remy felt something hard press against his bottom. That itch inside him flared.

Dane gave a muffled grunt. "Don't pay any attention to that. I'm not as in control of

myself as I should be.”

Despite the misery of the moment, Remy couldn't help but smile. “You...want me?” He knew what happened when a dominant was aroused. He'd seen it often enough. The funny thing was, his own little dick thickened. “I want you too. I think.” His body's response was both alarming and exciting. He wasn't sure what it all meant for him, but he knew what he wanted. He managed to move Dane's hand from where it sat loosely across his waist down to the hardness now sticking up.

Dane didn't resist very much. Instead, he clasped Remy's hard cock in a loose grip. “This is a natural response to having a dominant touching you so close to your heat.” He paused and breathed out a heavy breath. “Have you ever given yourself pleasure?”

Remy reveled in Dane's light touch and even dared to buck his hips once. “No. I was taught to touch it only so much as necessary to pass water. It's dirty,” he added because the sentiment had been delivered along with a cuff from his old alpha.

Dane tightened his grip in a way that sent a shudder through Remy. “It's nothing of the sort. It is a natural pleasure that we all have the right to enjoy.”

Remy couldn't stop from wiggled his ass and hips. “Will you show me?” He held his breath, not sure how he'd dared to make such a request. All of the old rules for how to conduct himself were falling away under Dane's presence.

At first, the beta made no response. Then, instead of admonishing Remy for his insolence, the beta began to move his fist up and down Remy's shaft. The grip was delightfully snug without being uncomfortable and the movements were slow, yet still managed to arouse a strong reaction. Remy's breath quickened and came out in increasingly panting puffs of air. His balls twinged and his dick swelled inside Dane's grip within moments. He cried out and dug his nails into Dane's arm as his whole body lit up with intense pleasure. The power of it caught him by surprise. He'd

expected something muted, like the feel of a warm bath. Instead, it was as if he'd been tossed in the air and was falling back down with a rush that left him breathless. He shuddered and moaned in Dane's embrace and when it was over, he lay limp.

Tiredness stole over him, but as he started to drift off, he remembered that hard length pressed against his ass. "Your turn." His words slurred but he mustered some energy in an effort to turn around and do to Dane what had just been done to him.

Dane held him in place. "No. Go to sleep, Remy."

"But..."

"No."

The firmness of the beta's tone kept Remy from trying to roll over. His need to obey coupled with overwhelming sleepiness sent him under. As he drifted off, however, he smiled with a happiness he'd never dreamed of.

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It had been many seasons since Dane had attended a shifter funeral. It was both heartbreaking and uplifting the way the entire pack, other than the sentries, gathered around the sadly small pyre laid out in the clearing used for such matters. No one, not even the pups, made any noise. All gazes were fixed on Kael as he carried his mate to lay the tiny, white bundle onto the stick platform that the sigmas had built that afternoon. The night was cold, so everyone was dressed to one degree or another to ward off the chilly air. Wyatt was barely visible, wrapped as he was in furs. Even so, his trembling hands were easy to see as he put the body of his pup onto the pyre. A sob escaped the boy as he did so.

Dane tightened his grip around Remy's shoulders. The poor boy had been terribly

upset all day after a fitful night's sleep. Dane had done his best to comfort him, lying with the boy in his arms, bringing him food when he couldn't face leaving the room, and listening to him voice his fears. His efforts had seemed meager to him, but Remy had indicated otherwise. So, Dane had put his priority on keeping the boy company over mourning with his family. He'd made only a short visit to join the others as they sat with Wyatt and Kael. The room had been heavy with grief, even the alpha letting his show. It was the best sign yet of how Graydon was different from their sire. That old bastard had never shown any sadness over another's loss and hadn't tolerated others bothering him with their own.

Graydon handed Kael a burning torch. The beta used it to light the pyre, then stood back with his mate still clutched in his arms. The fire caught quickly and as the flames engulfed the tiny bundle, all who were capable of shifting did so with their heads only. They lifted their muzzles into the air and howled out their grief. The young pups imitated their elders using their human voices, as did the couple who had raised Wyatt as their own son. The presence of the humans was unsettling, but only to him, it seemed. And Remy, of course. The Strongbloods had been exposed to these people many times Graydon had said. That the alpha tolerated the presence of non-pack members, and humans no less, was remarkable. If he'd needed any further proof that his brother was a different sort of alpha, this was it.

As the howls died down, one-by-one, everyone shifted back. The young pups were hustled quietly away, back to the warmth of the longhouse. Dane briefly considered doing the same with Remy. The omega would have undoubtedly obeyed if he'd pressed the point, but that would be treating him as if he weren't the mature shifter that he was. Although there was a pup-like quality to the boy, he was no longer a youth. Soon his adulthood would be undeniable. The mere thought of Remy entering into his heat set a flare of arousal through him. That reaction was totally inappropriate given the circumstances, though he knew many of the adult shifters, mated or not, would seek such comfort this night. Mounting was a life-affirming need after dealing with death.

When the pyre was nothing more than embers, everyone remaining turned away. Kael carried his mate back to the longhouse, but Wyatt stopped him as they started to pass them.

The grieving father turned his moist eyes to Remy. “Will you please come visit me tomorrow?”

A shudder ran through Remy. “Yes, of course, if you want me.”

“I do and thank you.” Wyatt turned to press his face into his mate’s chest.

The moment the pair was past, Remy did the same with Dane and let out a muffled sob. There was nothing else to do except enfold him into his embrace and hold him tightly. He didn’t bother with giving words of comfort because he knew none that might help. Instead, he gave the boy his physical strength and did his best to make him feel safe. Over the top of the omega’s head, Dane saw Graydon doing the same for his mate. Ethan had been clearly distraught. Not surprising given that he’d recently whelped. Plus, Dane knew that the alpha-mate had experienced trouble in his own breeding. This sudden loss must hit especially close to home.

Graydon caught Dane’s gaze and with a brief jerk of his chin commanded Dane to look after Remy. At least, that’s what Dane read in his brother’s expression. Maybe it was what he wanted to see. If the alpha ordered him to care for the boy, then his own wants couldn’t be held to account. But only a coward would use such an excuse. He wanted Remy and the shy boy had been bold enough to voice his own desires. While he remained convinced that Conan was the right choice as a mate for the boy, it didn’t mean he couldn’t snatch a little pleasure for them both before the boy needed to be bred. He simply had to be careful not to pressure Remy by word or deed. I must resist. It’s not right for me to exploit the omega’s curiosity.

He nudged Remy toward the longhouse. “Come, you need to retire.”

“I’m not really tired. I am hungry, though. Is that a bad thing to want to eat after all of this?”

“Of course not. Your need for food is natural. I...I’ll bring you some after I settle you in your room.”

Dane grabbed a lantern once inside. He could find his way around no matter how dark. Remy hadn’t had a chance to learn the way through the many corridors of the longhouse well, however, and he didn’t want the boy to be unnerved by not seeing where he was going. Once they arrived in the room, he gently placed Remy onto the pallet, taking a small amount of pleasure in how the omega clung to him briefly before allowing himself to be separated.

Dane placed the lantern on the low cubby. “I’ll get some food.”

Remy looked up with wide eyes. “You won’t be long, will you? And you’ll stay the night?”

Dane’s cock hardened at the question and the knowledge that he would do just that. Good thing he hadn’t yet stripped off his outdoor clothing. His dick had intruded into Remy’s space too much already, and he wanted to take things slowly with the boy. “Yes.” He bent down to cup the back of Remy’s neck. “Take off your clothes so you don’t overheat. I’ll be quick.”

Remy closed his eyes briefly and nodded. “Yes, Beta.”

The boy’s biddableness appealed to Dane’s dominant nature. He’d tried not to wield his power over other shifters more than necessary. It was too easy to get caught up in it and abuse it. He’d seen that often enough. Right at the moment, however, he was glad to have been born in such a position. It meant that he could use his ability to control in order to serve and protect Remy. He let go reluctantly and strode from the

room, eager to return with sustenance for his...mate. No, that was not right, not what he was doing at all. Remy was a temporary responsibility, nothing more.

He was so lost in his thoughts about the omega, he nearly ran into his mother outside of the kitchen. The area was bathed in light because there was always some type of food preparation going on. A large pack needed constant feeding.

Dane pulled up short. "I'm sorry. I was just looking to get something for Remy. Not surprisingly, he's hungry."

Celia held up a basket filled with bread, cheese, strips of dried meat and dried fruit. "I thought as much. I was bringing this to him. And you," she added with a shy smile.

Dane relieved his mother of her burden. "Thank you. It was kind of you to think of him." He dropped his gaze. "I know today has been hard on you." Even though she wasn't Wyatt's mother, Celia's grief had been obvious.

His mother clasped her hands in front of her. "Yes. That poor boy. He's lucky to have such a loving mate. Kael is lending him his strength even through his own grief. It's a good thing in a mated pair."

Something in Celia's tone jogged a distant memory. "You lost a pup, too, didn't you?"

Celia nodded. "Many, actually. Your sire was very angry."

Dane could well imagine his fucker of a sire blaming his mate for something she couldn't control. "I don't remember any funeral pyres for them." He racked his brain but could only remember the one loss and he'd been too young to even shift.

Celia moved to hug herself. "That's because he only honored the one that was

stillborn. The others I lost early, as Wyatt did. He simply had one of his gammas toss them into the woods.”

Dane’s wolf howled in outrage before he could calm it down. He didn’t want his fury to upset Remy. And while his heart ached with new understanding of what his mother had endured, he didn’t want to add to her heartache by voicing his fervent wish to be able to tear his sire’s throat out.

So he merely put his hand lightly on her shoulder. “I’m so very sorry for leaving you here with him.”

Celia clasped his hand with hers. “No, you must never feel guilty about that. Graydon saved me—saved us all—as was his alpha duty. I was glad that you got away and even gladder to have you back.” She hesitated before adding, “I hope I will see more of you.” Her gaze skittered away.

Guilt swamped him. But his view of his situation was no different than when he thought about Remy with this. He squeezed gently before dropping his hand. “I promise to visit as often as I can.”

Celia nodded once before turning back toward the kitchen. “Take care of the omega. He needs you right now.”

Dane felt an urge to go after her. As there was nothing more he could say in the way of reassurance, he stifled the impulse and returned quickly to Remy. The omega had done as told and stripped down to his skin. He glowed with exquisite beauty in the lamp light. The sight of him made Dane’s breath catch and for a few moments, he could only stand and stare. He had to shake himself to move.

Kneeling in front of Remy, he placed the basket on the floor. “My mother beat me to it. She made this for you.”

Remy peered at the food. “I think she made it for the both of us. As hungry as I am, this is too much for just me.”

“Eat your fill. What you don’t consume will keep overnight in case you need it before breakfast is served.”

Dane stepped back despite the urge to feed the boy with his own hands. Instead, he stripped off his own clothing, realizing when it was too late that his cock remained hard. It bobbed with its liberation, a testament to how little control he had over himself these days. He thought to leave to tend to his need but didn’t want to upset Remy. So with some resignation and a lot of trepidation, he joined Remy on the pallet with as much distance as he could put between them. The omega had proven to be far more accepting and surprisingly curious about what transpired in the breeding process. Dane had hoped the boy would be reticent, and therefore, an effective check on Dane’s desires. The previous night had demonstrated how unlikely that was to be. Still, the funeral might have dampened Remy’s interest.

As he chewed a big mouthful, Remy’s gaze homed right onto Dane’s dick. The boy’s cheeks pinked up and he swallowed hard. “Is that because of me?”

Dane sighed. “Yes.”

“May I...touch it?”

Dane nearly came with that unexpected question. He opened his mouth intending to give an emphatic “no” and perhaps an admonishment that good omegas didn’t ask such questions or act so bold. That was how he should react, he knew. He simply couldn’t say those words. His desire for the boy was hard to keep at bay, especially when his interest was reciprocated.

“Yes.”

Remy scooted closer, the sweet scent of his omega arousal punching Dane right in the gut. He had to bite back a groan. The boy's touch was slow and tentative, a mere wisp of his fingertips skittering along Dane's shaft. It was nearly enough to make him come, so Dane fisted his dick at its base to cut off the orgasm.

Remy stilled his touch. "Why are you doing that?"

Dane strained to get his labored breath under control. "We dominants are simple creatures. Your caress will make me come if I don't choke it off."

Remy clasped Dane's cock lightly, and he swiped his thumb across the underside of the cockhead. "Would that be a bad thing?"

Dane could only bark out a laugh. His wolf pranced and yipped at the notion. Remy's wolf responded with shy encouragement. "It's not proper." He couldn't believe his own ears. Of all the times for him to fall back on shifter customs. "You should only be sharing this with your mate."

Remy's reply was to get even closer and to tighten his grip. He lay his free hand on Dane's fist, not quite trying to dislodge him, but Dane could tell the omega wanted to. "You did this for me earlier. How is it different now?"

Dane's grip was starting to loosen of its own accord. "That was for comfort. It's my duty to care for you however you need it."

"Well, I need this now. Please." Remy's voice was barely above a whisper.

Dane could no longer fight his wolf, himself and the omega. He released his dick and came nearly instantly. Remy jerked his shaft with endearingly clumsy movements. Dane's orgasm was so powerful, he had to grip the pallet and grit his teeth to keep from shouting out his pleasure. His wolf had no such restraint. It howled with

unrestrained joy.

When the last of the shudders stopped, Dane realized he'd closed his eyes. He opened them now and gasped in horror. Remy was taking a tentative lick of Dane's cum.

"Stop that!" Dane lunged to grab the boy's hand and yanking the cloth out of the basket, wiped away the evidence of his lack of control.

Remy whimpered and his wolf whined. "I'm sorry." The distress in his tone cut like a knife.

Cursing himself for his aggressive reaction, Dane pulled the omega into his arms and cupped the back of the boy's neck. He massaged it gently as he murmured words of reassurance. "I'm the one who is sorry. You did nothing wrong. I'm just...traditional, I guess. More than I thought I was. I fear I'm allowing too many liberties. Your mate will not be happy about it."

Remy sniffled. "I...I don't mind risking a beating for this. You make me feel so wonderful."

Pushing the boy away from his chest, Dane gave him a hard look. "No one will ever again lay a hand on you in anger. This I promise you."

Remy looked at him with watery eyes. "Not even my mate?"

"No one." Dane wanted to emphasize his declaration by hugging the boy some more, but that wasn't going to help with the very thing he worried about.

Reluctantly, he maneuvered the omega until he lay on his back. The boy's erection was impossible to ignore. Despite the words he'd just spoken, Dane convinced himself that the best way to calm Remy down and get him to sleep was to tend to his

needs.

“I want to do something that you’ll like. I really shouldn’t but I can’t leave you in such a state.”

“Please, Beta. Do whatever you want to me.”

Such trust. It humbled Dane. Before he could talk himself out of it, he straddled the omega’s lower legs and dipped his head down to suck that lovely little cock into his mouth. It was easy to swallow the slender shaft down to its root. Working his throat muscles, he brought Remy to a climax within seconds. The omega stiffened and cried out. Dane rode the orgasm to its finish before reluctantly pulling his mouth off the dick.

Dane sat back on his heels, trying to think of something appropriate to say. Then he stopped. The omega was fast asleep. Dane slid down beside the boy to gather him into his arms. His embrace would make it easier for the omega to sleep well. Or so he told himself. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the entire truth, either.

He wanted Remy more than life itself. It was going to be impossible to hand him over to another. Except that he had to, for the omega’s sake. He needed to do what was right no matter the cost to himself.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Remy poked his head inside Kael's family room, unsure of his welcome despite the curtain being drawn open. Soft music of a kind he wasn't familiar with came from the back where he couldn't see. "Wyatt? Shall I come in?"

The music stopped. "Yes, please."

Remy walked through the front of the room and over to where the pallet lay. Wyatt sat propped against a mound of pillows with something that looked like a large fiddle across his lap. Uncertain of what to do or say, Remy approached the other boy slowly. When Wyatt gestured toward a large pillow lying beside the pallet, Remy sat cross-legged and stared at the floor.

"It's okay," Wyatt said quietly. "I won't shatter if you talk to me the way you normally would."

Remy lifted his eyes. "I'm sorry...about the pup." He blinked back tears. It was important to be strong for Wyatt, not add to his emotional burden.

Wyatt put his hand on Remy's knee briefly. "Thank you. Everyone has been so kind." He looked away, his own lashes fluttering. "The healer says that I'll go into heat again soon and that losing this pup doesn't mean I'll lose any of the others. Do you think she's right?" he asked, staring once more at Remy.

Flustered about being asked for his opinion about something so important, he didn't know what to say. Then the words came to him quickly and obviously. "She's the healer. She understands things like this better than we do, than we ever can. I think you should trust her to tell you the truth."

“I guess you’re right.” Wyatt plucked the strings on his instrument, making a nice sound that belayed the heavy grief that hung in the air. Then he strummed all of the strings in a harsh tone and stopped. “I didn’t want it! I mean I didn’t want to breed. The whole idea that I would be forced to by my nature angered me. All of this stuff about my being a shifter and an omega to boot came to me in a sudden rush of information. There was no time for me to process what it all meant before my body betrayed me.

“It was only because of Kael’s strength and love that I was able to accept it all and even that was after I ran away from him.” Tears rolled down his cheeks. “Do you think the Gods are punishing me, waiting until I’d fallen in love with the idea of whelping a pup to snatch it from me?”

Alarm shot through Remy. He wasn’t the right shifter to help Wyatt with such matters. He started to rise to find someone, then settled again. Wyatt didn’t need an explanation. He was looking for someone to simply reassure him. He licked his lips. “I’m not very smart about most things, but I don’t think that’s how the Gods work. I’ve known plenty of shifters that deserved punishment and didn’t get it. I think maybe they don’t bother with us as much as we think. And...no one would be that cruel. You don’t deserve this sadness.”

Wyatt said nothing for a long while. He just sat there looking at Remy with tears still streaming down his cheeks.

Remy unfolded his legs, knowing he hadn’t said the right thing after all. “I’ll find Kael for you.”

Wyatt stopped by clutching at his calf. “No. Please don’t go. I’ve only just convinced my mate he could go back to his duties. I don’t want to take him away and besides,” he added running a hand across his face. “You’re plenty smart about this. What you said makes sense. Please stay a while.” He strummed his instrument nicely again.

Happy to have helped, Remy settled again. “What is this you’re playing?”

“A guitar. Haven’t you seen one before?”

Remy shook his head. “No. There wasn’t much music in my old pack. The alpha didn’t like it. One of the older sigmas had a violin. This looks like a bigger version of it.”

Wyatt cocked his head. “I suppose they are from the same family of musical instruments. I’ve always found peace and happiness in playing. I’m lucky that Kael allows me to have it and Alpha Graydon encourages music in the longhouse after the evening meal.”

“I’m not surprised. Kael obviously wants to make you happy. He’s a good mate.”

Remy felt a pang of envy. He longed for such a life himself, except the one dominant he could imagine making a family with was determined to reject him. It was unfathomable to him. The time they’d spent and the pleasure they’d shared had convinced Remy even more that he and Dane were fated to be together. The beta hadn’t been obligated to use his mouth the way he had. Remy knew about that kind of pleasuring. He’d caught sight of it a time or two, but always it was a dominant who was receiving such attention. It was mind-boggling that a beta would do such a thing for a servient. Maybe it was because of who Dane was—a caring shifter who could be both gentle and strong. Remy certainly couldn’t imagine anyone else bothering to pleasure him that way.

Wyatt picked up the pace of his song. “Yes, Kael is the best of mates. I’m lucky. I know that even though it’s still hard for me to accept his dominance over me.” He grimaced. “I’m not great at following orders. Kael is good at making it seem like he’s including me in decisions even though he’s making them.”

The confession surprised Remy. He'd always done as he'd been told without questioning whether he could refuse. "I'm different, I guess. I like not having to be the one to figure out what's best and follow orders without even thinking about it."

"That's because you were raised to be a good servant. I wasn't. My human parents taught me to think for myself." Wyatt shook his head. "Kael is the perfect mate for me because he understands the human world better than most. I really am fortunate in the life I have with him. It's just hard to hold onto that with so much grief consuming me. Music helps."

"That's good. Will you play me something?"

Wyatt smiled for the first time. "I'd like that."

Resting his chin on his hand, Remy settled into listening and enjoying his visit with the other omega. He wanted to help but he also welcomed the distraction. His wolf was growing more restless and the tension inside him that had been so relieved by what Dane had done to him the previous night was building once more. Focusing on Wyatt helped him beat back his growing fear of what was to come.

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Remy woke abruptly with his heart hammering and his body feeling as if it were on fire. He sat up, disoriented at first until he saw Wyatt lying beside him on the pallet. At some point during his visit, he'd yawned so much and blinked so often to keep his eyes open that the other omega had scooted over to give him space to lie down. He hadn't intended to fall asleep. Now he felt as if something horrible had happened without his even knowing it.

He clasped his shaking hands together. "What's happening?" He couldn't help whimpering and squirming from the unbearable itching deep inside his ass.

Wyatt covered Remy's hands with his own. "It's your heat. Time for you to be bred. I know it's scary but you'll get through this." He crawled over Remy and stood. "I'll get help."

"No! You shouldn't be up." Even in his misery he knew it was wrong to burden the very one he was supposed to be caring for.

"I'm fine. Take deep breaths and try to stay calm."

Remy slammed his eyes shut to attempt to follow Wyatt's advice. He concentrated on taking deep breaths in and out. It helped slow down his heartbeat but did nothing for the agonizing need growing inside him. His wolf pounced around frantically under his skin, whining. A deeper echoing bark helped calm them both.

Then there were lots of footsteps and voices. A familiar scent hit him as someone crouched beside the pallet. Merida. He forced his eyes open and stared into his sister's concerned face.

"You'll be fine, Remy. Please don't be scared."

A breath whooshed out of him. "I need...I want..."

"I understand. This came more quickly than I hoped it would. It's time for you to be bred. You have to pick a dominant to mount you. Not a mate," she added hastily. "Alpha Graydon said you can decide on that later. For now, it's only about the breeding."

A sharp pain made him cry out. "Can't I just wait for it to go away?"

Merida's sad expression gave him the answer. "It doesn't work that way. I'm sorry, little brother. This is one thing I can't protect you from."

Remy tore his gaze from his sister's and looked frantically around. The alpha was there, as was the alpha mate, Kael with Wyatt in his arms, and the gamma, Conan. Where's Dane?

Merida turned and gestured toward the gathering. "Conan is here for you."

"No!" Mindless now with need, he clutched his sister's arms. "I want Dane. Where is he?" Remy had never been so bold, so demanding. It wasn't his place to command anyone for anything. And yet whatever plagued him inside had cast aside his normal nature. He felt out of control, as if he would break into pieces at any moment. His wolf howled as he'd never done before.

The answering howl instantly calmed his wolf. And then there he was, Dane, striding through the crowd and replacing Merida by his side. Remy cried out again and flung himself into the beta's arms.

"Please help me?"

"Hush now. I'm here and I'll make it all better." Dane gently pushed Remy to an arm's length and stared seriously at him. "Is this truly what you want? For me to mount you? I won't be staying Remy. I just...can't. You deserve to be bred by the dominant who will become your mate."

"It has to be you." Remy got the words out in barely a whisper. The need in him was growing to a point where thinking and speaking were becoming impossible.

Dane hesitated only a moment more before scooping Remy into his arms and carrying him out. With closed eyes, Remy clung as close to Dane as he could. He didn't even question where they were going or what was going to happen. He only knew that Dane was going to make the pain go away.

He found himself on his hands and knees, inhaling the scent of both of them as he pressed his cheek against the pallet. Big, strong hands separated his legs, then the cheeks of his ass and took hold of him at his waist. Warm skin pressed against his heated one. A bite of pain was followed by his being filled with something thick and long. Remy cried out, this time from relief. He pushed back to help take all of Dane's cock. Heavy balls bounced against his own. He braced his forearms on the pallet and dug his fingers into the cloth as the beta began to thrust.

Remy came with a blinding rush that made him pant out cries. Dane's fingers wrapped around the back of his neck as the beta's seed flooded Remy's ass. The thrusting didn't abate. The relief of being mounted ebbed away, replaced once more with that fiery ache. Remy pleaded silently for it to be calmed. His wolf whined and howled. Then Dane's dick started to swell, pushing Remy's channel so much he thought he would split in two. More warmth coated his insides and he came again.

He went limp and let himself drift away.

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Dane pulled out of Remy as gently as he could. His knot had finally subsided enough for him to do so. The poor omega was deeply asleep, his heat mollified for now, but Dane's seed had not yet taken. No surprise there. It was a rare thing for a heat to be over with only one mounting.

He lay on his back, catching his breath and wondering what foolishness this whole situation was. Dane had no business breeding Remy. He should have taken off for the woods the moment Wyatt had raised the alarm that Remy's heat had come. He'd even tried to shift to do that very thing, except his wolf forced him back into human form. The unusual tie between his wolf and Remy's meant that their human half couldn't control matters. He'd had no choice but to run toward the omega instead of away from him. The boy's insistence on Dane being the one to breed him was something he

simply couldn't resist.

So here they were on the pallet that still smelled of what they'd done the previous night. That evidence alone made clear that it didn't matter what Dane wanted. He was fated to at least put a pup in Remy. What happened after that was going to be driven by Dane's own needs. He just couldn't bring himself to rejoin the very place where his shameful cowardice had overcome him. With Remy's heat taking precedence over all else, Dane had to ignore his own growing discomfort. It was getting harder to do so, however. He could only hope that his seed would take quickly.

He shoved those thoughts aside and rose to get the omega something to eat as well as water and a cloth to clean him. Mounting was messy business at the best of times. Remy's heat added extra sweat and the small room was too warm with stale air. He parted the curtain to let some freshness in and found everything he needed right outside. Someone had been kind enough to think ahead. Celia in all likelihood or perhaps the alpha mate. In any event, it made his life easier.

He brought everything inside and set about wiping Remy clean. He was almost afraid to look too closely at what damage he might have done. Heat notwithstanding, the boy had been small and tight. It was only Dane's desperation to alleviate the omega's suffering that had caused him to be quick and brutal in the mounting. And ah Gods, the intense pleasure wouldn't allow him to be too guilty or unhappy with this duty. He could have thrust into that snug channel forever, but for his knot forcing him to stop. The mere thought of the whole thing beginning again had his spent cock rising.

There was no blood and his efforts caused Remy to sigh softly. The boy rolled over and his eyes fluttered open. He smiled sweetly and shyly at Dane, and that small thing caused his chest to puff with pride and his wolf rose from its slumber to yip. Remy's responded in a sleepy voice.

"Is there water?"

“Of course.” Dane jumped to fill and bring a cup over to the boy. He helped him sit up to drink, careful not to press his rampant erection against the omega. There would be another mounting soon. This time was for Remy to regain his strength.

The omega bit off a strip of dried meat, then a chunk of bread, and chewed as if he were starving.

Dane stopped the boy from taking more until he’d swallowed the first mouthful. “Easy. You’ll choke yourself.”

Remy instantly slowed and allowed Dane to control the pace of his eating. “Thank you. I feel better. That won’t last, though, will it?”

“No.” Dane wanted to say more to comfort the boy but he really didn’t know what was going to happen. There was no value in saying anything that he wasn’t sure to be true.

Remy finished the water. “Are you...mad that I made you breed me?”

Hearing the worry in the boy’s voice, Dane made a point of rubbing his thumb across Remy’s cheek and smiling. “I could never be mad at you and this was my choice. You didn’t make me do anything.”

“I’m glad. I can’t imagine doing this with anyone else.” He lowered his gaze. “I hope I didn’t hurt Conan’s feelings.”

Dane nearly laughed. “A dominant like Conan would never put his desires above those of an omega in heat. He’s disappointed I’m sure but that’s only because you are so beautiful. There is no dominant alive who wouldn’t want a chance to mount you.”

He could see some understanding enter Remy’s mind. And not a good one. A

memory perhaps or something worse. Because the idea that another dominant might have hurt or scared Remy before his sister could take him away infuriated him, Dane forced the thoughts from his mind. Now was not the time to dwell on such matters. Servicing Remy to the best of his ability was paramount.

“Do you want more to eat?”

Remy shook his head and moved to lie down on his back. “It’s starting again. I can feel it.”

“It’s all right. I’m here for you.”

“I know and it’s as wonderful as it is painful. But...is it possible for you to mount me face-to-face? I want to see you when you do it.”

Dane hadn’t thought he could desire this boy more. He’d been wrong. As he raised Remy’s legs and positioned himself between them, his cock pulsed with renewed urgency. When he cupped the omega’s ass to expose his beckoning hole, Dane stared into Remy’s eyes. He kept doing so as he breached the puckered ring and slid his cock home.

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“Please mount me again.”

Dane pried open his eyes and found Remy staring down at him. He was reaching for the boy to comply when a scent hit him. He stopped and let his arms drop to his sides. “There is no need. My seed has taken and you’re now breeding.” Disappointment overwhelmed him. He beat it back. This had never been about his pleasure.

“I know,” Remy whispered. “I still would like you to do it one more time just for me.

Please.”

Words caught in Dane’s throat, so he didn’t try to speak. Instead he gently rolled Remy onto his back and kneed his legs apart. Dane’s dick found the boy’s hole with practiced ease. He slipped inside the boy’s ass with a slow thrust that ended when he could go no farther. He fucked the omega as he’d always meant to, slowly and with great care. He could see the climax building in the boy and reached between them to clasp and jerk the swelling cock. The moment the first of Remy’s cum released, he gave into his own orgasm. He rocked them both until they were dry and collapsed over to the side.

Even though he knew he should quickly ween them both off their need for each other, Dane still gathered Remy into his arms to savor what time they had left. The soft, sweet boy melted into his embrace without hesitation. His steady, warm breath was like a balm to Dane’s maelstrom of emotions. Part of him was completely content to lie as they were, to stay inside the cocoon of their small room. But there was also a deeper, uglier ball of pain that threatened to erupt. With Remy’s heat and Dane’s own duty gone, the urge to flee the longhouse grew. He wanted to return to his den in the forest where he’d found a calm acceptance of his life. His wolf was too satiated to impose an opinion, although Dane knew that part of him operated on a simpler level. His wolf wanted Remy and the memories of what their life had been like before his sire had been killed had faded as was the way of the beast. Shifters lived with the dissonance of human nature versus that of a wolf. Normally there was not much conflict. In this situation, there was and the longer he stayed, the worse it would become.

Still, Dane lay with the omega in his arms until the boy fell back to sleep. With great effort, he kept his wolf quiet as he carefully extracted himself from Remy’s hold. He stared down at the exquisitely lovely omega, amazed that such a soft shifter had put his trust in a hideous, feral creature like himself. He ran his fingers down the scarred skin where his eye once was. It was baffling that Remy didn’t seem to notice the

disfigurement at all. Not once had he shied away from Dane's touch. The boy would make a wonderful mate for some lucky dominant. But not him.

Before he could change his mind or lose control over his wolf, Dane left the room and raced out of the longhouse. He stood for a few seconds breathing in the crisp, cold air, fists clenched against the power it took to stop his wolf from howling out to Remy's. This is what's best for him. Do you want me to hurt him? That admonishment reined his wolf in, although unhappiness blanketed them both. It was still best to leave now. Remy might be sad at his going, but if he stayed and left later, it would be worse.

"He's better off without me."

"You are a fool. And a coward."

Dane whipped his head around to stare at Graydon. "You are right on both counts. It doesn't change the fact that this is what's best for the boy."

Graydon shook his head. "You know that's not true. You are obviously fated mates. Everyone sees that...except you, apparently."

Dane bared his teeth. "You think I don't know that? Even without mating, our wolves can communicate. I want Remy more than my next breath."

Graydon stepped closer. "Then stay, brother. Have I not made myself clear that you are welcome back now?"

"You have been more than clear." Dane dropped his gaze. "It has been good to be back."

"But?"

Dane raised his gaze again and jabbed a thumb into his own chest. “It’s still inside me—the fury...and the fear. It’s like a sickness festering within and no chance of healing. Not fully. Too much happened.” He deliberated with himself before adding, “You don’t know how he was with me because he was careful to keep it from you. As was I.”

Confusion crossed his brother’s face. “I don’t understand. We both felt his heavy hand and went hungry when he deemed it necessary as a punishment.”

Dane grimaced. “He hurt me more and worse. Those times when I was confined in the shed alone, it was to hide the injuries he’d inflicted.” Dane raised one hand and opened and closed his fingers. “I can’t count the number of times these were broken. And that is only part of it, and just a physical one. He terrorized me every day.”

Graydon grasped the hand and held it. “Why you? I was his alpha heir. I should have received the worst of it.”

“That is exactly why you didn’t. He had to be careful not to risk his heir. Our mother was too soft a target and Wren was too valuable. That left me.” Dane extracted his hand and stepped back. “He told me that I needed to be as tough as he was because he feared you would be too lenient and would require my firm guidance to be the kind of alpha he wanted you to be. I was supposed to be the flea in your ear when he was gone.

“He even made me swear to conspire against you once you had an alpha son of your own if you didn’t live up to our sire’s standards. He wanted me to find a way to kill you.”

Graydon said nothing for long seconds. “I shouldn’t be surprised by this, and yet somehow I still am.”

“Because you are nothing like him. You could never see the world through his evil eyes. And because I was starting to, I had to leave. I had to run away to preserve myself and you.”

“You wouldn’t have become what he wanted. I’m sure of that.”

His brother’s words filled in a part of the dark hole lodged deep inside Dane. It felt good to finally speak the entire truth and knowing that Graydon trusted in him was more than he could have hoped for. “I wasn’t as certain about myself. Not then. The only future I could see was one where I turned out just like our sire. Now...I’m no danger to you. Of course, I’m not. The last vestiges of fear that you were more like him are gone. I am healed in that way.”

“Then stay! Become my beta and Remy’s mate.”

Oh, how Dane longed to do just that. He shook his head. “I trust you. Not myself. Not enough, anyway. Fury is still lodged deep inside me. Dread too. I’ve kept it under control so far, but it keeps trying to bubble up. Every corner I turn in the longhouse, I expect the old bastard to leap out at me as he used to.” He shook his head. “I can’t hurt Remy more by mating with him, then losing my control and fleeing again.”

“I don’t think that will happen. You are a strong shifter, brother. And we’ll help you.”

Dane tried for a smile. “I know you would try and I suspect Remy would forgive me anything. I won’t take the chance, though. He deserves to have a mate upon whom he and his pups can rely. You’ll see that he gets one. I’m sure of that.”

Before Graydon could talk him out of it, Dane shifted and raced for the safety of the woods.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Remy pressed the tip of his tongue to his upper lip as he worked the knitting needles and wool Celia had been kind enough to give him. Wyatt was visiting him in the small room that had become his home filling it with music. It otherwise felt empty now that Dane was gone. Not even Merida moving back in had helped. He'd cried when he'd woken to find the beta had left him while he'd slept. Not that he'd been surprised. The beta had no doubt thought that his leaving quietly would be easier on Remy. That just showed how even a beta could be dumb about some things. Not being able to say good-bye had been worse.

And I didn't get a chance to talk him out of it. Remy surprised himself with such thoughts. It wasn't his right to convince a dominant about anything, and he'd never contemplated such a rebellious thing in his life. There was something deep inside him that overrode his life-long training and natural reticence. That something might be the pup, except that he knew his desire and need for Dane had been there long before he'd been bred. Gods, I love him!

Remy dropped a stitch. "Darn. I'm not very good at this, but I have to do something for my new pack and my pup will need clothes."

Wyatt stopped his strumming. "You're better at it than I am. I worked in the harvesting and preservation of the food before the cold set in. Now, I can't do anything," he added in a soft voice.

Remy's own concerns faded in an instant. "Does being here with me bother you?"

"No." Wyatt shot him a smile. "I like being with you. You're so...I don't know."

“What?”

“I don’t want to insult you, but you are the most uncomplicated shifter or human that I’ve ever met. Guileless, I’d say.”

Remy put his knitting on his lap and frowned. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s a good thing.”

“I’m not very smart.” Remy looked down, blinking away sudden tears.

“No!” Wyatt was next to him in an instant and wrapped his arm around his shoulder. “That’s not what I meant and you’re not dumb in any event. You’re simply open in your manner and see everything with a good heart. Being with you is kind of like sitting out on a warm, sunny day. It’s hard for me to feel bad when I’m visiting you.”

Remy sniffed back his tears. “Really? In my old pack, everyone used to get impatient and mad at me.”

“This is not your old pack. We love you here.”

Remy opened his mouth to thank Wyatt for saying so. He burst into tears instead.

Wyatt hugged him tightly as Remy cried out his misery as he’d never done before. He’d always been admonished by Merida to hide his sadness, and he’d tried to do so this time too. It wasn’t possible. The pain of losing Dane overwhelmed him.

“I want him back!”

“I know.” Wyatt rocked him as one might a pup, not trying to tell him he was being silly and to get over it.

Remy cried until there were no more tears left. Exhausted and disheartened, he lay his face on Wyatt's shoulders. "My wolf keeps trying to call his and there's no answer. It's like Dane has gone far away."

"I doubt that he has. He cares about you too much not to stay close enough to keep watch over you."

"You think?" Remy didn't dare hope so. "If he's worried about me, I don't understand why he can't stay and be my mate. I know I'm only an omega, but it doesn't make sense to me."

"Nor to me. Not really. Kael told me that the old alpha was very cruel to all of his pups. I'm lucky to have escaped that. Dane has a lot of really bad memories of this place. I think it hurts him too much to be here and that's overriding his desire to be with you."

"We don't have to live in the Strongblood compound." Remy raised his head and slid aside to be able to look Wyatt in the eye. "If we were somewhere else, maybe it would be okay for him to mate with me."

"Hmm. There are other packs you could live with because they have a treaty with the Strongbloods." He frowned. "But not now. You can't go anywhere while you're breeding."

"Why not?" Remy mentally kicked himself when the answer became evident in the next instant. Asking such a question of someone who had recently lost a pup had been cruel. He touched Wyatt's knee. "I'm sorry. That was dumb of me."

Wyatt shook his head. "No, it wasn't. And I'm not saying you'd be risking your pup by traveling. It's just that it's cold and snow comes unexpectedly. The alpha would never allow it and I bet Dane wouldn't, either."

Remy grimaced. “If he’s so worried about me, he should be here to tell me what to do.” He placed his palm against his still flat abdomen. “My pup needs a sire.”

“Yes, it does. And so do you. Graydon won’t force anyone on you, but he won’t let you stay unmated for long. Maybe he’ll wait until after you’ve whelped and weened your pup. The pack will give you everything you need, so that’s not a concern. Eventually, though, you’ll go into heat again and someone will have to breed you.”

Alarm shot through Remy. “What? I thought maybe after this first time, I could...control it better. The sigmas do, don’t they?”

“They don’t breed as often because they’re sigmas. It’s built into their biology. We omegas are destined to produce lots of pups. That’s our job.”

“If my destiny is to bear a dominant’s pups, then I want Dane.” In his mind, he was screaming it. His voice was barely above a whisper, though. He knew he had to keep his thoughts quiet.

“I know. And I’m sorry. There are other dominants to choose from. Conan is a nice guy.”

Remy shook his head. “I don’t want him.” Being petulant wasn’t in his nature. Somehow, he couldn’t help himself when it came to his pup’s sire.

Wyatt patted his knee again. “You have time.” He moved to pick up his guitar.

Remy did the same with his knitting. As he busied his hands, his mind whirled with thoughts of Dane. An idea started to take shape, one that he had no right to contemplate. Still... “You said you ran away after Kael bred you. How did you manage that?”

“Why are you asking?” Wyatt’s voice held suspicion.

Remy shrugged. “No reason.” He didn’t dare look at the other boy.

“Hmm. Okay, I guess. I learned the sentries’ movements and avoided them. They’re supposed to keep others out, not pack members in. It was a dangerous thing for me to do, Remy. I was lucky that Dane tracked me and made sure I got home to my human parents safely.”

“I bet it was far away, though.” He didn’t intend to travel much of a distance at all.

“Pretty far, yes.” Wyatt stopped playing. “Don’t even think about leaving, Remy. We omegas aren’t meant to be on our own for any period of time, even when we’re not breeding.”

It took only a few seconds of deliberation within his own mind before he did something he’d never done before—he lied. “I won’t.” He gave Wyatt the best smile he could. “I promise.”

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“This is a bit awkward, heh?”

Remy lifted his chin to look into the kindly face of the gamma, Conan. “I’m not really used to eating with the alpha and his family, either, if that’s what you mean, sir.” He couldn’t help blushing at the attention and dropped his gaze once more. With Dane gone, he’d assumed he would be relegated to one of the dining mats for unmated servients. Instead, he found himself seated next to Wyatt. For some reason, his presence eased the omega’s grief and the alpha, as well as Kael, was inclined to give the boy anything he wanted.

Conan smiled. "I mean our being seated together."

The arrival of the gamma to sit by his side had surprised Remy, but not very much. It was obvious that everyone from Merida up to the alpha and his mate was trying to force a bond between him and the gamma. Although there were a few dominants for him to choose from as a future mate, it was obvious that Conan was the preferred choice of the pack. And if Remy weren't in love with Dane, he would agree if only because he'd always done as expected of him.

Remy searched for something polite to say. "I'm honored by your interest, gamma." He shoved a piece of meat in his mouth to give him an excuse to say nothing more. His words rang hollow to his own ears. How much worse did it sound to someone smarter than he?

Conan chuckled softly and leaned closer to him. "And I'm honored that the alpha trusts me with a breeding omega. It's not a status most gammas would dream of obtaining."

Remy heard the but in the shifter's statement. He dared to look Conan in the eyes again and speak his mind. "You don't want me." His observation was made in a whisper, such was his fear that others would hear his insolence and punish him for it. Alpha Graydon might be kinder than his old alpha, but there had to be limits of conduct even here. He held his breath waiting for a response.

Conan's kind expression eased his worry. "I wouldn't put it that way, exactly. You are beautiful and sweet. Any unmated dominant would want you. It's just that..." He shrugged. "You're not my fated mate. We both know that and I was kind of hoping I could hold off on mating until I found her." His gaze darted to the left where far across the room, Merida sat with other gammas.

As if Conan had called her name, Remy's sister turned to look at them. She gave

Remy a quick smile before returning her attention to her dining companions.

Remy eyes widened. “My sister?”

Conan’s cheeks reddened and he shrugged. Saying nothing more, the gamma concentrated on eating.

Relief washed over Remy and knowing that Conan wanted Merida and not him gave him the encouragement he needed to follow through on the scary plan forming in his mind that he couldn’t shake. If he ran away to Dane, he wouldn’t only be satisfying his own selfish desires. He would be helping his sister find a happiness that she deserved. Her whole life had been a struggle to find her place and to protect him. For once, he had a chance to do something for her.

A sudden sense of unease shot up his spine. He recognized the feeling because he’d felt it his entire life. Sensing when he’d attracted the unwanted attention and anger of a dominant had been necessary to help keep him out of trouble. He knew just where to look, too. When he lifted his gaze, the alpha was staring back at him. Remy had been the recipient of many furious glares. This time it was different. Alpha Graydon looked more pensive than mad. The feeling of dread that Remy had braced himself for didn’t arrive. Instead, he felt almost confident, as if the alpha were measuring his worth and finding him acceptable.

The moment passed quickly. In a matter of the span of a few breaths, the alpha turned to his mate to speak about something. Remy could almost believe he’d imagined the scrutiny. He slowly relaxed, secure in the knowledge that he wasn’t going to be punished and more convinced than ever that what he intended to do was the right thing.

The meal passed quickly with even Conan paying him little attention. When it was time to leave, Wyatt gave him a tight hug and whispered into his ear. “Forget what I

said earlier. Follow your heart.”

Puzzled, yet happy with the advice, Remy couldn't keep the smile off his face as he followed Merida back to their room. He shifted his nose briefly to inhale as he entered, the scent of Dane and the passion they'd shared still detectible to him despite the thorough cleaning sigmas had given it. At Merida's sharp glance, he shifted back to his fully human face and sat meekly on his pallet. To give himself an air of obedience, he picked up his knitting.

Merida stood with her fists on her hips. “I have perimeter duty tonight.”

Remy kept his gaze on his needles as he tried not to drop a stitch. His sister knew him as no other did. “Yes, I remember.” He dared to glance at her. “I'll be fine.”

She tapped one foot. “Hmm. You're different.”

Alarm shot up his spine. Putting his knitting down, he palmed his abdomen. “I know. I'm breeding now. It wasn't my idea,” he added, unable to keep some of the lingering resentment from bursting out. Besides, the sudden change in his life was a good topic to distract her from whatever she might be worrying about. She can't possibly know what I'm planning.

“That's not what I meant.”

“Then I don't understand.” He played with the ball of yarn lying by his knee. “I've always tried to be an obedient boy. Have I done something wrong?” He tried to remain relaxed while waiting for the answer to a question he shouldn't have asked. It was ingrained for him to learn from others what mistakes he'd made because he seemed to make so many. Life often perplexed him when all he wanted was to be happy and make others so as well. Only when he was with Dane did he finally feel truly right.

Merida sighed. “No. Of course not. You’re always a good boy, Remy. I only want what’s best for you, but our lives have changed so quickly, it’s hard to adjust.”

“It is for me, too. But this is better, isn’t it? Before was bad and dangerous. Now we’re safe. Aren’t we?”

Merida smiled, something she rarely did. “Yes. We’re safe and our lives are going to be not only better, but the best a shifter’s life can be. I have to go.” As she reached the doorway, she turned to look at him from over her shoulder. “Be careful, Remy.”

He blinked rapidly at her. “I always try to be, just as you taught me.” He tried for his own smile, once more having an uneasy feeling that his sister knew what he was going to do. No way. She would never let me leave.

Merida left without another word. Remy sat with his knitting in his lap. He tried to occupy his time by picking it up again, but he simply couldn’t concentrate. Instead, he lay down and let images of Dane and the passion they’d shared dance in his head. He wasn’t surprised, not now that he understood the workings of his body when he became aroused. He touched his dick briefly but dropped his hand again. That part of him, like every other, belonged to Dane. Waiting for the beta to pleasure him was the right thing to do. Plus, there was something nice about leaving the arousal to build.

When he judged he’d waited long enough, Remy stood and taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, he summoned the courage to leave. He crept slowly through the longhouse, not daring to use a lantern. He’d learned enough about the lay-out of the building to feel his way along the corridor as he headed for the nearest exit. It was a good thing that he and Merida were both newcomers and relatively low in the pack hierarchy because it meant their room was closer to the back.

At each turn, he stopped and listened and sniffed to detect anyone else around. Encountering no one, his last careful step was to glance around outside before

stepping through the doorway. Bitter cold iced his skin immediately. He wasted no time in shifting to his warm fur. The night was moonless, a boon that he hadn't been aware of. He'd spent a lot of time considering whether it made sense to leave on a night when Merida was acting as a sentry. On the one hand, it meant he could be sure she wouldn't be in the room. On the other, no one else was more likely to scent him than his sister. In the end, it made more sense to flee when she was going to be unaware of his leaving until morning. No doubt, the alpha would send her or others to fetch him once they realized he'd gone. He could only hope that a night with him would change Dane's mind about the two of them. He had to at least try.

Remy had never been out on his own. Not really. Merida had left him for short amounts of time to hunt game for them, but this was different. He crept slowly into the woods, using his ears and nose to detect danger as she'd taught him. Not knowing anything of how sentries worked, he kept scanning for dominants in all directions. He remembered the path they'd taken to get to the compound from Dane's den, so it was easy to retrace his steps. It was slow going because he slid along the brush and hid behind trees as much as possible. There were no sounds other than those of the forest at nighttime. And no shifter-like shapes loomed in the darkness. Still, his heart tripped so fast, it felt as if it would pop right out and he panted despite the easy pace.

Once he was sure he'd passed the perimeter of the Strongblood lands, he straightened to his full height and raced toward Dane's den. With his short legs, he worried it would take too long to reach his destination. He had to arrive before dawn to give himself a chance to seduce Dane and make him realize they were fated to be together. Such boldness was new to him, yet his love for the beta overrode all other training and emotions. It was as if he'd taken on some of the dominant's strength.

By the time reached his destination, he was exhausted and it had started to snow. Fat flakes landed on him and stuck to his fur. He shook them off as he sat to regain his energy and gather up the courage to go inside the cave. On legs shaky from fatigue and nervousness, he walked over to the dark hole in the steep rock before him. Before

he arrived, however, a towering figure bolted out. Remy stopped in mid-stride, excited and fearful in equal measure.

A magnificent Dane stood with legs braced and a thunderous scowl on his face. His cock was fully aroused, glistening even with flakes starting to gather on it. If Dane felt the cold, he didn't show it. His erection didn't flag and he didn't flinch as his skin started to drip with melted snow. The same could not be said for Remy as he shifted in order to speak his mind. He started shivering immediately, although it wasn't only from the cold. Now that he'd arrived, he feared he wouldn't be welcome after all.

"Remy! What are you doing here?" The beta whipped his head around. "Are you alone?"

Remy could only nod in response. There was so much he wanted to say, yet the words wouldn't form on his tongue.

"Of course, you are," Dane muttered. He gave Remy a hard stare. "You ran away." It wasn't a question. "How did Graydon let this happen? How did your sister...or any of them, for that matter? Keeping one little breeding omega safely in the longhouse shouldn't be so hard. What were you thinking?" This last question came out nearly in a roar.

Remy took one frightened step back before stopping himself. This was Dane. He wasn't afraid of the beta. So he planted his feet just as firmly and ignored the cold. The words finally started to tumble out of his mouth.

"I missed you! I love you. How can a beta be so dumb as to not know that?" He caught his breath at his audacity and nearly apologized before stiffening his resolve as much as his muscles. "If you send me back now, I'll only find a way to return. No matter where you are," he added with the sudden fear the Dane would simply run away to avoid him. "I only want a little time with you. Please."

Snowflakes settled on Remy's lashes and turned Dane's hair white as the beta stood for long seconds saying nothing.

Then the beta rushed forward and gathered Remy up in a hug with a speed that left him breathless. "You foolish, foolish boy. What in the name of all the Gods are you doing here? Never mind. Let's get you inside before you freeze to death." With that, Dane lifted him in his strong arms, the heat of his massive body engulfing Remy.

It wasn't exactly the declaration of love that Remy dreamed of, but he would take what he could get. He clung to Dane's broad shoulders, laying his head in the crook of the man's neck as the he carried him out of the cold and into the warmth.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Dane feared his head might explode from the contradictory thoughts and feelings swirling around like the blizzard that was threatening to arrive outside. Having Remy in his arms again gave him a feeling of pure bliss. He'd never been so happy—hadn't even imagined that it was possible to be so. But thoughts of what could have happened to the sweet omega as he'd made his journey here on his own made him furious with terror. He wanted to both hug him close, murmuring his affection, and shake him with a blistering lecture.

His wolf had no such conflicting reactions. He pranced and howled with abandon at the arrival of who he wanted most in the world. It had been a struggle for Dane to keep his wolf quiet and under control since they'd left the compound. Each time Remy's wolf had sadly called out, Dane had been forced to shut his wolf down and bury him deep within. He'd never before exercised such dominance over that basic part of himself. He hadn't even dared shift for fear that his wolf would race right back to the longhouse. The last few days had been a greater torture than anything his sire had ever devised. The relief of being able to set his wolf free and indulge both of them in the comfort of Remy's presence nearly brought him to his knees.

Remy's wolf yipped in response to Dane's call and the boy sighed once they were in the den. Dane tried to ignore all of them as he went about the practical need of making sure Remy was okay. He set the boy on his pallet and wrapped a furry hide around him. Then he went to stoke the fire to increase the heat it threw out. He made sure the flap he'd fashioned to close the entrance was as firmly in place as possible before turning back to stare at the omega. He wanted to be stern but the sight of the small shifter huddled within the make-shift blanket melted all of his anger away.

Dane sighed. "Remy, what are you doing here?"

The omega blinked owlishly at him before answering in a low voice. "I thought that was obvious. I wanted to see you, be with you, if only for a little while longer. You seem happy enough to have me here," he added with a bit of slyness to his tone that was so unlike him.

Dane grimaced as he looked at his waving cock. "Never mind that. I'm always hard these days." It was all too true. Since returning to his den, he'd been hard and achy constantly. And every time he'd gone to relieve himself, he'd stopped. His hand was no substitute for Remy's luscious body and if he couldn't have the omega...he'd do without and it was no more than he deserved. He should never have gotten as close to the omega as he had.

With a shy smile, Remy lifted the edge of his covering. A slender dick peeked out. "So am I."

Dane couldn't hold back the grunt. The sight of the omega's arousal was like a punch to the gut. His cock pulsed with the urge to go and mount the boy. He held himself in check with a strength he hadn't known he possessed. "It doesn't matter what our bodies want. It's our nature trying to take control. The fact still remains that we are not mated and you shouldn't be here."

Remy dropped his gaze. "Are you going to take me back?"

Dane hardened his heart. "Yes. But not now." He scrubbed his face with one hand to clear his head and work off his frustration. Behind him, the flap to the entrance snapped. "The snow is starting to accumulate already and the wind has picked up. I think it's going to be a significant storm and even in our wolf forms, the journey back won't be good for you."

A smile crept up Remy's face. "That means I have to stay until tomorrow at least."

Dane grimaced again. “Yes.” He knew there was no way he’d be able to keep his hands off the boy for such a long period of time. And Remy, naughty omega that he’d become, would be of no help. He’d offer himself up at every opportunity. That much was clear. Ah well. There was no real harm in it, unless one counted the blows to his heart that would come from having to give the boy up again. Remy was both breeding already and not yet mated, so the mounting didn’t technically break any shifter laws. And damn Conan anyway for not wooing the boy properly and while he was handing out silent recriminations, how had Graydon and the others let an omega run off anyway?

Giving over to more practical concerns, he went to the pile of food that Celia had delivered to him after he’d left. “You need to eat.”

“I am hungry,” Remy admitted in his usual agreeable tone.

Dane crouched to sift through his stores for what would be the most filling and nutritious. He brought a jar of pickled potatoes and some salted sausages, placing both on a stiff piece of hide that served well enough as a plate. Handing them over to Remy and watching the boy tuck into the food with enthusiasm caused a swelling of pride. He’d done nothing of note yet couldn’t help feeling that he’d fulfilled an ancient duty to provide for his mate.

He’s not mine! Scowling at his own foolish thoughts, he left the omega again to heat up a cup of herbal tea. Plain cold water was all he needed, although he’d appreciated his mother’s gesture when he’d found the bundle of dried herbs. Now he was happy to have the extra luxury. Remy would benefit from something warm and appreciate something flavorful. It wasn’t much, but when he handed the steaming cup to the boy, his reaction told him he’d done the right thing.

Remy sipped at the tea to wash down a bit of meat. “Hmm. It’s delicious. Thank you.” He looked at Dane from over the rim of the mug with eyes moist from

something other than the water vapor rising from the tea.

Dane sat heavily on his ass. "It's not much. You'd be having better at the longhouse."

Remy jutted out his bottom lip. "You're not there so it wouldn't be as good."

Dane closed his eyes briefly. "Remy..."

"Why did you leave without saying good-bye?"

The hurt in the boy's voice tore Dane to shreds. "I thought it would be easier."

"For you, maybe." Remy buried his face in his mug.

"For both of us." Why do I feel so guilty? I did what was right.

Remy put his mug aside. "I get that you're the beta and know better than me, but..."

"But what, Remy?" Dane couldn't resist putting his hand on the omega's knee.

"I was really hard waking up and finding you gone." Tears welled up in the omega's lovely eyes and spilled over onto his cheeks. "I cried because I'm not as strong and smart as you."

"Oh, Remy." No dominant with any decency could ignore the pain in those words and the abject sadness of a crying omega. He moved without thinking, knocking the remnants of the meal out of the way and hoisting the omega onto his lap.

He stroked the boy's damp hair and cuddled him as he softly cried. It wasn't loud or obvious, except for the wetness that dripped on Dane's chest and the muffled sniffing. Remy had learned to be quiet in his misery and it infuriated Dane that an

omega had been forced to placate dominants that way. He didn't dwell on it long, though. Remy's soft skin pressing against his along with the sweet smell of the omega's arousal pushed out all rational thought and all emotions other than a deep need to sink his cock into the boy.

Despite his urges, Dane held himself in check. Remy's needs came first and what he needed at the moment was comfort, nothing more. That changed sooner than Dane would have expected. The tears dried up and the sniffing turned into low moans. The omega crawled up higher onto Dane so that his arms were around Dane's neck and their hard cocks brushed against one another. Dane couldn't hold back a groan. Better still, Remy made little mewling sounds and bucked his hips to increase the friction. It was maddening.

His control snapping, Dane rolled them both over so that Remy was on his back with his legs splayed and Dane was nestled happily between them. "You drive me to distraction, omega."

Remy gazed at him with wide eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." That was all the warning Dane gave before capturing the omega for a long kiss. He devoured the soft lips and licked his way around the sweet mouth. Remy hadn't forgotten what he'd learned from their time breeding. He gripped Dane's shoulders and sent his tongue chasing Dane's. The boy also bent his knees to give Dane better access to his ass. The invitation couldn't have been any clearer and Dane was neither sufficiently noble nor restrained to resist. Lifting one of the omega's legs higher by cupping the back of his knee. His demanding dick found Remy's hole unerringly. Dane groaned long and loud into the omega's mouth as he sunk himself balls deep into the welcoming ass.

They both came without a single extra thrust. The scent of the boy's cum spurring Dane to great arousal, he didn't bother to dwell on that first release. Instead he

bucked his hips to fuck that tight channel, barely keeping his restraint. The omega wasn't any help in that respect. The boy lifted his hips to allow Dane to thrust even deeper and egged him on with mews of delight and sending ropes of cum up his abdomen without Dane having to help with his hand. Knowing that he had such a powerful effect on the omega—someone entirely innocent of mounting only days ago—filled him with a sense of unbridled potency. He pushed them both to climax again and again until they were exhausted and drained.

They fell asleep with Remy curled within Dane's embrace. Nothing had ever felt so right.

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“Wow, look at all the snow!”

Dane raised his satiated body onto his elbows and smiled at the sight of Remy peering beyond the flap. “Is it still coming down?” He knew the answer already. When a shifter lived feral for as long as he had, he got good at reading the weather. He figured the storm would last the rest of the day and into the night. Come morning, it should be safe to return the omega to where he belonged. The idea of it made his heart heavy. That was tomorrow, however. They still had today and tonight together. He would make the most of it and live with the memories for the rest of his life.

Dane heaved himself off the pallet. “Close the flap and come back here. You should eat more.”

Remy obeyed without hesitation, although there was a longing in his expression. “Can I go outside and play afterward?”

“Play?”

Remy shrugged. "I love playing in the snow. Don't you?"

"I guess I did when I was still a pup." Even as he said it, he wondered if he'd ever been that carefree. He built up the fire again. "We can go out after we eat. So long as we play gently. Neither of us are pups anymore and with the one you're carrying, we have to be careful."

The omega sat on the edge of the pallet. "Yes, sir."

"Don't call me that. I'm Dane. Remember?"

"I can't forget given that I can feel you inside me even though you aren't."

Dane jerked his head in the boy's direction. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

The shy smile the boy gave him allayed his fears. "Of course not. You never do. You make me feel...wonderful."

Dane preened at the compliment. He simply couldn't help himself. And once more, as he laid out a meal for the omega, his sense of duty well-done swelled within him.

This time, he ate too, ravenous from the vigorous mounting. The entire den reeked of their spendings. He would have heated water to wash them both, except the snow would take care of that and he'd bank the fire while leaving the flap open to air the place out.

They made quick work of eating, Remy obviously keen to go out. Dane had to admit he was looking forward to it as well. Opening the doorway, he said, "Change."

Remy was in his fur within a blink of an eye. He was such a biddable boy that he'd both shifted and waited for permission to leave the cave. Dane didn't so much say it

as led by example. He shifted, then bounded out into the snow. Remy was right behind him and this time, didn't wait for any overt permission. Instead, the omega frolicked through the powdery snow, his glee obvious with every prancing paw.

Dane enjoyed the sight for a while before giving into the temptation to join in the fun. He trotted through the snow, digging his nose into it to scent the freshness of it as well as having the pleasure of licking the melting, cold water off. Remy came over and crouching down, he yipped, before dancing away again. He looked over his shoulder as he did so, the challenge clear. Dane chased after him, slowly, so as to not overexert the omega. They rambled around the thick trunk of a nearby tree before Dane caught up to Remy and nipped at his tail. The omega immediately rolled over in submission. Dane nuzzled his belly before barking for him to get up. He led the omega on a slow walk around the immediate area, but as the snow hadn't abated, it was getting too cold for them to stay out any longer.

Dane led Remy back into the cave and shifted back to human to close them into the den snugly. When he turned around, Remy remained as a wolf, his dark fur coated in white.

"Change," Dane ordered as he went to get a soft towel his mother had used to cover the travois laden with his provisions. He used it as a softer alternative to the fur hides to rub Remy dry.

The omega sat compliantly as Dane cared for him. "Will you mount me again?"

Dane coughed out a laugh. "What a bold boy you've become." And while his cock loved the idea, he needed to be the sensible one. "Later. You need time to recover."

"Oh. I feel fine, but you're the beta and know best."

Dane turned to Remy so that they sat face-to-face. "Yes, I am, although being with

you makes it hard for me to think clearly.” He winced inwardly. He hadn’t intended to reveal so much of his feelings to the boy. “You deserve better than me.” Once again, he’d let out more than he’d wanted.

Remy lifted his hand to trace a finger lightly down the scar where Dane’s eye had once been. “I know I don’t know very much, but you seem perfect to me. For me.”

Catching Remy’s hand, Dane pressed his lips to the palm. “It’s not that your feelings don’t count, it’s simply that others need to think about your future and that of your pups. A dominant well-established in the pack will be the right mate for you.” He took a deep breath. “Conan…”

“Likes Merida. I think they’re fated mates.”

Dane couldn’t hide his surprise. “What? Conan told you that?” When he returned Remy to the pack, he was going to have a talk with the gamma.

Remy shrugged. “Not in so many words.” He cast his gaze downward. “Everyone is trying to help me feel comfortable with him, and I do like him.”

“But?”

“He’s not you. I can’t help feeling the way I do.” He threw himself against Dane and hugged him tightly.

Dane embraced him back and kissed the top of his head. “I know. Let’s not talk about it anymore. For now, we’re here together and we have to find something to occupy us for the rest of the afternoon. That does not involve mounting.”

“Okay, what would you normally do if you were alone?”

Think of you. “Read, I suppose.”

“You have books and can read them?”

“Sure. I found some on my own and my mother gave me more when she packed the food. I know one you’ll like.”

Dane rose to sift through the stack of worn books until he found one that he knew would capture Remy’s attention. It was for pups, really, but the story was a sweet one, perfect for an omega, and had sketches for him to look at. He closed his eyes briefly, remembering how Ceilia had secretly obtained the book and had read it to him. His sire hadn’t even realized his mate could read and would never have countenanced such a foolish waste of time, especially as it was a human skill that shifters had chosen to adopt. Yet, it was one of the few happy memories he had about his puphood and was touched his mother had given it to him now.

Returning to the pallet, he set Remy against his side and showed him the cover. “This is one of my favorite stories.”

Remy snuggled close and peered at the colorful picture. “Is this what it’s about?”

“Yes, it tells the tales of the adventures of these three friends.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. There’s a fox, an owl and a squirrel in a tiny boat. Owls come out at night and they and foxes both eat squirrels. How can they be friends?”

Dane couldn’t help smiling at the question. “Humans liked making up stories about improbable things. These creatures don’t care that they aren’t supposed to be together. And they can talk.”

“Oh, so they’re shifters?”

“Not really. They never change shape.” Dane turned to the first page and began to read. He wasn’t used to doing so out loud. It took a while for him to find his voice and cadence. Not that it mattered. Remy seemed enthralled from the first word.

They spent the afternoon snuggled in the den as the storm continued, reading and snacking on roasted nuts and herbal tea. Each time Dane took the time to cater to Remy, he took pride in doing so. For this short period of time, he could pretend that the omega was his mate. Remy started yawning toward the end of the story. Once he’d closed the book, Dane insisted that the boy take a nap.

Remy didn’t hesitate to lie down, although he pleaded in his innocent way for Dane to join him. Dane was aroused—had been the entire time since their frolic in the snow—so lying with the boy pressed against his hard dick was torture of the best kind. He drifted off with visions of what the night would bring.

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Remy pried his eyes open, knowing that he would see Dane’s broad chest when he did so. The beta had him in a loose embrace with Remy’s face snuggled under his arm. The large, warm body was hard as the rock den they lay in. But like water, he knew how to force the mountain to make way for him, bit by bit. All he had to do was be slow and clever in his approach. He could conquer all of that power and make it do his bidding. And perhaps he should be ashamed to be such an impudent servant. But like the owl, fox and squirrel he had to be bold if he were to get what he so very much wanted.

He started by running the fingertips of one hand down Dane’s torso, barely a whisper of a touch. The man stirred slightly yet didn’t open his eyes or speak. Encouraged, Remy swirled his fingers around the line of coarse hair that led to the cock that

bobbed over Dane's abdomen. The beta had been hard the entire time they'd sat, then lay, curled together. Not once had he tried to mount Remy, or even pleasure him in other ways. It had been disappointing, but the beta knew better than he what was best so he hadn't kicked up any fuss. Now, however, he was aroused too. His own dick strained into Dane's firm hip and slick was seeping out of Remy's hole.

He pushed up as he took hold of Dane's shaft and swung and straddled the beta's legs. Although his fingers couldn't quite wrap entirely around the thick cock, he did his best to pump it while he maneuvered himself over it. By feel alone, he positioned the dick under his hole and lowered himself onto it. He gasped at the sudden widening of his channel. Even with the slick easing the way, it always felt as if his ass were being split in two for the few moments it took to adjust to the invasion. It was worth it. That pleasure spot within in him sent a spark up his cock. He closed his eyes to savor the climax.

Nothing happened. A tight grip on the base of his shaft choked back the orgasm. Prying open his eyes, Remy stared at Dane. "W-what are you doing?"

"Making it better."

Remy shook his head once. "I don't understand. Isn't coming a good thing?"

Dane chuckled. "It is. But sometimes it's not about how often, but how intensely. Trust me."

"I do." The cock embedded in him moved a little.

"Ride me, Remy."

He didn't need to be told twice or require a tutorial on what to do. Placing both palms onto the beta's chest, he rose up and sat down again. Once again, pleasure shot

through him. With Dane's grip, though, nothing happened to ease his arousal. He repeated his movements, up and down, faster and faster. Making Dane come first would undoubtedly give him relief as well.

He was wrong about that. Dane's dick swelled and coated Remy's channel with warm cum. It didn't deflate, however. Rather, Dane bucked his hips in encouragement to keep going. Twice more, Remy made the beta come. And still his own climax continued to be thwarted. Remy and his wolf both whimpered and whined, begging to be let go. Finally, as Dane came once more, he loosened his grip on Remy's dick and jerked it.

Howling as he'd never done before, Remy came with blinding intensity. He collapsed on top of Dane even as he continued to be emptied. When it was done, Remy could only pant and lie boneless on his hard, warm pallet.

Dane ran his fingers through Remy's hair. "How was that?"

"Amazing," he managed to say. "I can't believe I didn't know how wonderful mounting can be."

"With the right shifter, it is." Dane's voice sounded sad.

Remy pushed up enough to look at him. "Am I the right one for you? Because you are for me."

"Oh, Remy." Dane cupped his cheek. "You are perfect in every way, but I'm not the one for you."

Tears pricked his eyes. "Why not?" He shuddered with the effort not to cry. "Why can't you be my mate?" A lifetime of lessons learned hard couldn't hold his tongue. The thought of losing Dane caused him more pain than anything ever had before.

Dane quickly reversed their positions, leaving Remy on his back and the beta staring down at him. "Because I'm not a proper dominant." He looked away for a moment. "I'm damaged."

Remy raised a hand to touch the ruined part of the beta's face. "I don't care."

Dane grabbed his hand and held it tightly. "I don't mean my lost eye." He moved Remy's hand to press it against Dane's chest. "Here. Inside me. Part of me is broken and I don't trust myself to stay in control. I don't want to hurt you."

Remy shook his head. "I'm not afraid of you. You're nothing like the dominants in my old pack. Even if my judgment can't be trusted, Merida says I'm safe with you. She always knows what's best for me."

Dane's expression turned fierce. "I don't mean that I would ever harm you physically. I'm not my sire. If I were, I'd have never left the pack in the first place." He hung his head. "I'm afraid being back home in the pack, living in the longhouse, will prove to be too much and I'll run away again."

Remy didn't understand. No one was stronger or braver than Dane. He didn't believe for one moment that the beta would ever abandon him once they were mated. Then again, most everything seemed to confuse him. "I wish I were smarter so that what you're saying made sense to me."

Dane pulled him into a hug and lay down beside him. "Don't ever think you aren't clever, Remy. You see the good in the world, that's all. It's hard to see the bad when you have such an open heart. There is a shifter out there who will guard it for you and cherish you always for who you are. I'm just not the one." He kissed Remy's forehead. "I'm sorry."

But I love you! Remy held his tongue. Even he was smart enough to know there was

no point in saying the words out loud.

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“Stay here.”

Remy swallowed his bite of food as he looked at Dane. He was only eating for the sake of the pup, sick to his stomach at what was coming. “I will. I promise.”

Dane peered down at him with a grimace. “Can I trust you not to run and hide?”

“Where would I go? This is the only place I want to be. Besides, I would never disobey you, Dane.”

The beta searched his face, looking for a lie. Satisfied, apparently, he nodded once. “Good. It will take me the better part of the morning to get to the compound and bring back a travois sturdy enough to carry you safely.”

Remy thought it was silly to bother with the contraption. The forest floor was covered in fairly deep snow, yet he was sure he could walk back okay on his four short legs. Dane had decreed otherwise and Remy didn’t want to argue anyway. Having a few more hours to pretend he was living in their den would give him some memories to cherish for the rest of his life. As soon as he returned, Alpha Graydon was sure to order him to mate with someone to force him to stay put. Remy knew there was nothing he could do to stop it. He wouldn’t pick Conan, though. He could do that much for Merida after all she’d sacrificed for him.

Remy merely nodded. There was nothing more to say. Dane left without a backward glance. Remy finished his breakfast and set about tidying the den. It was the least he could do and the work was a welcome distraction. He opened the flap to air the place out, even though he enjoyed the scent of the pleasure he and Dane had shared most of

their last night together. When he found the book the beta had read to him, he traced the picture on the outside with a fingertip. It had been such a nice story. The lines that formed the words confused him. He wondered if his mate—whoever that turned out to be—would teach him how to read. Then he could teach his pups. Maybe they'd be smarter than he.

As he was putting the book with the others, the sound of paw steps caught his attention. That was fast. His heart was heavy, but he wasn't going to hurt Dane any more than he had by pressing him to mate. The beta's misery had been obvious. As bad as his own, if he were truthful.

Despite the bitter cold that the storm had left, he stepped out of the den in his human skin. There was no Dane to be seen or anyone else, so he went a little farther.

“There he is.”

Alarm shot through Remy even before he looked in the direction of the voice and saw the very shifter he'd been running from.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Dane loped his way to the Strongblood compound at a pace that in human form would be called dragging his feet. His wolf was unhappy in the journey, constantly trying to turn back to the cozy den he'd made with Remy. Keeping the beast on track was an act of monumental effort. Never before in his life had his two halves been at such odds. And it wasn't merely his two halves but more like one quarter versus the rest because his human side was also in conflict. His time with Remy had given him the greatest happiness he'd ever known—more than he'd ever thought possible. But it was also impossible to ignore the kernel of fear and distrust in himself. He simply couldn't be sure of his own ability to cast aside the past and embrace a future free of doubt. Letting Remy go was what was best for the omega, his own desires be damned.

I love him. It was okay to admit it here while he was totally alone. Truth was something that shouldn't be denied, not when the only person who could be hurt by it was himself. He took solace in the knowledge that while he was never going to mate with Remy, he also wasn't going to leave their den. For the rest of his life, he would be there, watching the omega and their pup from afar. He could permit himself that amount of happiness. And if Remy took a dominant from another pack, like the Rogues or Green Mountain, he would relocate. It didn't matter where he lived. Remy was his home.

He stopped abruptly when he caught a couple of familiar scents. Not surprisingly, Merida and Conan emerged from the low-lying fog that blanketed the forest floor. Remy's absence would have been noticed by morning and they would have had to wait until the snowstorm had passed before venturing out. As valuable and vulnerable as omegas were to a pack, no member was worth risking the lives of too many others when the pack wasn't also in direct danger. He could at least give them comfort that

their decision hadn't been the wrong one. He shifted and stamped his instantly cold feet. The others did the same as they approached.

Merida was the first to speak, a frown on her face. "You've left Remy alone?"

Dane held out his hand. "He's safe in my den."

The female huffed as she smacked her arms to keep warm. "Well, we know that already because we followed him there."

"You did?" Dane was surprised to learn that. Remy had arrived before the snow had started falling in earnest. Why hadn't they made themselves known to bring him back?

Conan grinned, seemingly indifferent to the cold. "Of course. You didn't think we'd missed the omega leaving the compound, did you?"

Dane frowned as he considered that question. At the time, he hadn't really questioned Remy's running away too closely. "I had wondered and was furious with all of you for letting him get away. I suppose I was so concerned about getting him safe and warm that I hadn't given it much thought as to how he'd accomplished it."

Conan's grin widened. "Getting him onto your pallet, you mean." The gamma shrugged. "We were watching him closely because Wyatt had told Kael he was worried that Remy intended to leave."

"So you let him go?" Dane practically roared with fury. "Into the dangerous forest alone!" he added as if his concern wasn't obvious.

Merida scoffed. "He was never alone. We trailed him the whole way and once you had him, we backed off. Naturally."

That last bit took Dane by surprise. “Why did you do that?”

“Because Remy obviously wants you and no one else as his mate. We can all see that, except you, apparently.”

“I see it well enough.” Dane’s tone lowered with his misery. Why did everyone keep pressing him on that matter? “He’s better off with someone else. We should all want what’s best for him.”

Merida stomped in a circle before speaking. “You think I don’t? My brother has always been a good boy, giving no trouble to anyone ever. That fact that he broke the rules so egregiously for the first time by making the decision to leave on his own is all the proof I need that you are what’s best for him.”

Conan nodded. “We were kind of hoping that we’d have to spend even more days out here because you wouldn’t be able to let him go.”

Distracted by the first part of that statement, Dane asked, “You’ve been out here the whole time?”

“Of course.” Merida sounded insulted. “As if I’d go before knowing Remy was truly settled. I’ve wintered outdoors plenty of times. It’s easy.”

“And more fun when there’s someone with you.” Conan yelped when Merida punched his arm, then simply stood grinning...like a fool in love.

Dane permitted himself only a moment of jealousy at how simple the shifter’s happiness seemed to be. “It’s good that you did. You can come back with me now and escort Remy to the longhouse where he’ll be safe.” And I’ll be free of temptation.

Merida opened her mouth with an expression that told him she had more to say on

that topic. If words had come out, he hadn't heard them. The sudden yowl of Remy's wolf hit him like a gust of cold wind. He staggered from the force of, then recovered quickly. He was already shifting as he turned and bounded back the way he'd come.

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Remy kept his gaze cast downward as he worked to keep the trembling from sending him crashing onto the ground. Henry, the alpha son, had finally caught up to them—him. It was a comfort knowing that Merida wasn't there because the two gammas who'd come with their future leader would have torn her to pieces immediately. He was sure of it. As it was, they remained in wolf form, glaring at him as Henry walked around him.

The alpha son sniffed loudly. "You're breeding. I had hoped to trigger your heat myself and teach you what it means to be an omega personally. Losing that right makes me very angry. No matter. When I punish you for running away, I'll beat the pup out of you. Then, I'll plant my own seed. You're going to whelp me a pack's worth of pups before I'm finished."

Remy's body tightened with the vile promise, not for his own sake, but for the pup already inside him. His love for it made him bolder than he'd ever been "You won't hurt my pup!"

The slap made him stagger, but he held his ground and glared at Henry.

"You've learned some bad manners, I see." He glanced around. "Where's that traitorous sister of yours?"

For the second time in his life, Remy lied, although he felt no guilt about this one. "She's dead." He dropped his gaze again, afraid Henry would see the truth in his eyes.

The alpha son grunted. "So, she got no more than she deserved. Dumb sigma that she's always been. And some feral dominant found you...except he didn't mate with you, did he?"

Remy didn't have to feign any emotions as he sadly shook his head.

"Good, that means I don't have to waste time waiting for him to return so that I can kill him. Maybe he'll try to follow, and that would make me happy. For now, we leave. Change!"

Remy's body shimmied with the first moment of shifting in an automatic reflex before stopping abruptly. He pulled his human features back into place with unheard of ease...and surprise. He'd never tried to resist such an order before, let alone succeed in doing so. He took a step back. "No."

A furious Henry stepped right up to Remy's face and screamed, "Change!"

Remy shook his head and stepped back again. "I won't."

Henry's face twisted with outrage. "You are an omega. Do as you are told, bitch."

Remy blinked back tears that threatened to fall, but he felt oddly calm. "Only Dane can tell me what to do."

"Dane? The feral who plowed your ass, you mean? And where is he now to give you orders?"

There was a crashing sound and a great, dark beast with one eye raced toward them.

Remy couldn't help smiling and pointing. "There." Then he stepped all the way back so that he stood in the den's doorway. He knew a fight was coming and that as an

omega, he would only get in the way. He should have been frightened, yet he wasn't. The outcome was not in doubt.

Dane hurled his massive body at Henry before the alpha son had even shifted. It would have been a quick battle given how easy it was to tear flesh. But Henry had already shifted by the time Dane landed on him. And while the disgusting male was an alpha in waiting, he and Dane looked evenly matched in size. Certainly, the beta launched into the fray with a viciousness that Remy had never seen before. Fights among members of his own pack had been encouraged by the alpha as if it were some kind of game. But nothing compared to what he saw now. Dane chomped and slashed with dizzying speed and without any appearance of worrying about his own safety.

Behind the dominants fighting for him, Remy saw Merida and Conan engaged with Henry's companions. He knew them both to be as cruel as their leader, yet they also had no stomach for a fight they were at risk of losing. Loyalty had always been in short supply within the pack. Members were motivated by fear and greed. It was no surprise when first one, then the other of the gammas broke off their fights and fled back where they'd come.

Henry paid scant attention to the defections. He charged, bleeding from gashes in his hindquarters and muzzle, at Dane. Crouching low, Dane caught Henry's belly in mid-flight with his head and tossed him into a tree. A moment later, he had his teeth clenched around the dazed shifter's throat.

Remy found himself stepping forward and calling out. "Don't kill him."

Dane went still, his jaws not quite fully clenched. Then he let go and danced away. Shifting, he kept his one eye on his opponent. "Why not?" His tone was gentle.

Remy surprised himself again with his answer. "Because if you do, his alpha sire will be honor-bound to avenge him. Let him go and he'll make up some tale of how he

found my dead remains to save his own honor. It was his pride that kept him searching for me all this time. And you've beaten that out of him. His gammas will be so embarrassed by their own cowardliness that they'll back any story he tells.

"Isn't that right, Henry?" Remy was bold enough to frown at the shifter.

Instead of answering, the alpha son stayed in his wolf form and with a baleful look, raced away after the others.

Dane snapped his fingers at Merida and Conan, who took off after Henry, before coming over to Remy. He cupped Remy's face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." Now that the danger was over, he started trembling again and sagged into Dane's waiting embrace. "I was scared but I knew you'd come."

Dane hugged him tightly. "I shouldn't have left you alone."

"I'd thought maybe they'd given up. I don't know why they bothered to keep after us."

"I do." With a kiss to the top of Remy's head, Dane set him back and peered at him once more. "Are you sure he didn't hurt you?"

"Yes. He wanted to once he forced me to leave with him, but I refused to shift."

Dane laughed even as a look of rage flitted across his face. "Did you now? I would have stopped him no matter how far he'd gotten with you. But the idea that you would have been in his clutches even for a short while..." He hugged Remy again, his pounding heartbeat easy to detect through his cold skin and his broad chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. "What a brave little omega you are. And very clever, too. You're right about letting him go."

“I was, wasn’t I?” Remy grinned as he rubbed his cheek against the beta’s hard pec. “I guess I’m smarter than I thought.”

Dane shook him gently as he held Remy at arm’s length once more. “Don’t ever doubt your intelligence again. Being sweet is not the same as being dumb. Now, let’s get you back inside. Your skin is like ice.”

Remy gladly let Dane guide him to the pallet and fuss over him. The chill that had seeped into his bones was rubbed away with the fur skin before Dane wrapped him fully in it. With quick, sure movements, the beta went about making more tea. The scene was so beautifully domestic that Remy felt sufficiently bold to dare to make his mind known.

“I’m never going to mate with anyone else.”

Dane looked at him while stirring the herbs in the hot water. “You can’t know that.” The man’s voice was gruff.

Remy resisted the impulse to retreat to his servient posture. “I do, though. If Henry wasn’t strong enough to force me to change, no dominant will be. None except you. I told him as much,” he admitted.

Dane didn’t say anything more until he came over with a mug of tea. He handed it over to Remy. “The bond you’ll form with your mate will be stronger than anything you can imagine.”

Remy took a sip of the hot liquid and closed his eyes briefly at the lovely feeling of it sliding down his still chilled insides. He let his wolf do the talking by yipping out their feelings of happiness. Dane’s wolf responded in kind. “How can it be more than what we share right now?”

Dane grunted before sitting heavily beside him. “I honestly don’t know. I’ve never had this...connection before with another shifter. I don’t think it’s normal outside of a mated couple.”

Sensing a break in the beta’s resolve, Remy went for broke. “I love you, Dane.”

“Damn.” Dane closed his eyes, then heaving a sigh, he opened them again and stared hard at him. “What am I supposed to do with you?”

His encounter with Henry must have affected him even more than he’d thought because he couldn’t help blurting out what he wanted more than anything. “Love me back.”

Dane’s gaze softened in a way that Remy had never seen in a dominant. “That’s the easy part, baby. I already do.”

Remy inhaled sharply with surprise and his eyes popped and froze wide open as he worked to convince himself that he’d really heard what he thought he had. Finally, he blinked and let his breath out in a whoosh. “You do? For real? You aren’t teasing me are you?”

Taking the mug out of Remy’s hands, Dane set it aside so that he could move closer. He cupped the back of Remy’s neck. “I would never do such a thing.” He pursed his lips briefly. “I thought it would be too hard to admit my feelings, but now that I have, I find it was easy. Perhaps the easiest thing I’ve ever done.”

Remy relaxed with the soothing feel of the beta’s hold. “If you tell me to go back to the longhouse, I will. Of course, I will. Obeying you is not something I have control over. But...”

Dane gave him a nod of encouragement. “What? I want you to always speak your

mind with me, Remy.”

“Please let me stay here with you. At least until I’m ready to whelp. I’m so happy here.”

Dane sighed. “I know.”

Whatever more the beta intended to say, he let go of Remy abruptly and stood facing the doorway. Merida and Conan loped in, shifting as they did so. They both wore an expression of grim satisfaction.

Conan sniffed toward the firepit. “Is that tea?”

“Help yourself,” Dane said gesturing toward the pot. “I assume the fuckers are far away at this point?”

Merida nodded as she accepted a mug of tea that Conan handed her. “We followed them to the river. They’d already crossed it and were well away from the bank on the other side.” She took a sip, then handed it back to Conan with a shy smile that surprised Remy.

The gamma returned the look before sipping some tea himself and once more giving it to her. “We figure they’ve learned their lesson but we’ll keep a look out for a while longer just in case. We’ll come back with you, Dane, once we’ve all returned Remy to the longhouse.”

Remy’s heart sank at Conan’s words and his wolf howled in sadness.

“He’s not going back. Not yet anyway.” Dane knelt beside Remy and pulled him into a sideways hug. “He’s going to stay here with me for the winter. I’ll have him back before his time to whelp, of course.” The beta’s wolf chuffed with satisfaction.

Merida and Conan exchanged glances between them much as they were doing with the mug of tea. It was Remy's sister who spoke. "You're going to mate with him." It was a statement, not a question.

Remy tensed, but Dane gave him a reassuring rub on the arm.

"Of course. He deserves no less respect than that. We're both more comfortable here—for now."

Merida nodded before draining the mug. "Well then. That's all right." She smiled at Remy, looking truly happy and relaxed for the first time.

"I'd like you to stick around tonight for extra precaution. Tomorrow, if you would please let Graydon know my plans and bring back supplies. Remy needs more comfort—clothing, blankets and extra food. Celia will know what to organize."

Remy's tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. This was what he'd longed for and it was hard to believe it was actually coming true. He forced himself to relax and ask for something more. "And books, please." He smiled at Dane. "Maybe you could teach me to read?"

The beta nodded. "And books."

"We'll leave you to your privacy. If you need anything, just howl." Conan shifted and waited for Merida to do the same.

She didn't do so right away. Instead, she came over and knelt before Remy. "I am truly happy for you, brother."

Remy grabbed her hand. "Thank you for taking care of me. Seeing Henry again, reminded me of what you saved me from." He lunged at his sister to hug her,

squeezing his emotions into the embrace.

It was Merida who let go first, backing away and shifting after one last smile.

When she and Conan were gone, Remy snuggled against Dane. “What do we do now?”

Dane tipped his chin up and kissed him with great tenderness. “We eat, rest and eat some more. You might not realize it but you need all of that more than anything right now. That was a taxing ordeal you just went through.”

Even though he longed to do something else, something more exciting, Remy didn’t argue with the dominant who would rule over his life from this day forward. He trusted that Dane knew best. He also figured it didn’t hurt to ask questions. “Then what?”

Dane’s answer started with a kiss. At first, it was a slow, gentle brushing of their lips. It soon turned into an embrace where his mouth was invaded and their tongues clashed. By the time Dane broke it off, Remy was panting and achingly hard. So was Dane.

“That’s enough of that.” Dane laughed at Remy’s whimper of disappointment. “Patience, baby. Tonight I’m going to shower you with pleasure and show you how much I love you.”

“Waiting his hard.”

Dane laughed again and chuckled Remy’s chin. “So it is, but it also makes it even better in the end.” He left to rummage through the stores of food.

Remy tried not to pout as he pulled the fur skin around him. Watching Dane doing

anything was fun for him. And he resolved to be patient. Dane had said it would make their mating a more wonderful experience. He was sure the beta was right—in everything.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

It had been hard for Dane to keep himself in check for the rest of the afternoon and early evening. Once he'd let go and admitted his love for Remy, his old worries had faded into the background. They weren't gone entirely. He knew it would take time for him to heal the emotional wounds from his puphood much as it had with his physical injuries, including the one that had left him with only one eye. He'd shrugged off the strength it had taken, accepting as natural for a beta to deal with such pain and misery. It had taken him longer to recover from his anger and distrust of everything and everyone. Now, through his interactions with omegas—Wren, Wyatt and most especially, Remy—he'd been able to regain a sense of normalcy and build a belief that he was nothing like his sire and life could be good for him.

Deciding to mate with Remy had been easy once he'd seen another dominant trying to take the boy from him. The furious possessiveness had risen unquestioned within him. And Remy's pragmatic thinking on letting that fucker go had been able to cut through the haze of rage that had overtaken him once he'd engaged in battle. That sweet voice had struck right to the core of Dane's heart and he knew now that he would give the omega anything he asked for.

That included himself.

The den was still not the place to raise the coming pup, let alone the others that would follow. But he could make it a cozy home for Remy until his time came to whelp in the longhouse. After that? Well, Dane was just going to have to deal with his memories and learn to keep them in check. He believed Remy when he insisted that he wouldn't mate with anyone else. The biddable omega had a stubborn streak hidden within him that rivaled any dominant. Each time his heat got triggered, it would be up to Dane to breed him. The idea that the omega would be left to raise those pups

without their sire was anathema. Dane couldn't simply show up when mounting was necessary, then leave again to lick his old wounds. He wasn't such a coward to do so. This new situation was nothing like the one he'd run from. It was time to bury the past. Remy needed him and that overrode everything else.

He finished banking the fire for the night and made sure the covering to the doorway was secure before joining Remy on the pallet. The omega was leafing through the book Dane had read to him, tracing the drawings with his finger and peering at the words Dane would soon teach him to read. He liked the idea of helping his mate with something other than merely mounting. Learning to read would be a skill to benefit Remy even if Dane was no longer with him for any reason. And Remy could teach their pups. It was a way to live on forever in a sense. It was also going to be a nice way to spend the long winter months. He could only mount the boy so often in a day, much as his dick thought otherwise.

He was drippingly hard as he approached, his cock leading the way and telegraphing his intent. Not that it was a problem. With a coy smile, Remy moved the book to show that he too was aroused. They had both been in such a state off and on throughout the day. Not mounting the omega even as they'd rested together earlier had taken all the strength Dane possessed.

He knelt in front of Remy and took the book from him. "Are you ready?"

Remy bit his lower lip as he nodded. "Yes. Although..."

"What? You can tell and ask me anything."

"Will it hurt? When you bite me, I mean."

Dane furrowed his brow, trying to think of a good answer. He went with the truth, of course. "I think so. A little until my saliva makes you calm. That's what I've heard,

anyway.”

“That makes sense. I’m ready.” He gave Dane a firm nod.

The boy’s expression of resolve was so sweet, Dane nearly laughed. Instead, he gathered the boy into his arms and lavished him with the kind of pleasure that would make any pain inconsequential. He started by lowering the omega onto his back. When the time came to consummate the mating, he would need Remy to be facing away from him. For now, though, he wanted to gaze at his beautiful face and savor the boy’s open expression as he brought him pleasure.

Dane ran the pads of his fingers down one of Remy’s cheeks. “Close your eyes, baby. Let me show you how much I love you.”

With a quick flutter of his lashes, Remy did as told. Dane continued to touch the omega’s soft skin—rubbing his thumb across the plump, moist lips, his fingers down the slender throat and cupping one small pec with his palm. The nub was already hard and Dane felt he’d never given enough attention to something so tied to physical pleasure. He stroked it with his thumb before squeezing it lightly. The moan that vibrated out of the omega was immensely gratifying. As was the way the boy arched into the touch.

Dane continued to play with one nipple while he leaned down to capture the other with his mouth. He sucked gently before grazing the hard nub with his teeth. The shiver that went through the omega was punctuated with a sharp inhalation. Dane froze for a moment, gauging whether he was going too far too quickly with the all-but-completely-innocent boy. The look of wanton pleasure he saw on that adorable face gave him all the encouragement he needed. Settling himself on his side, he returned to lavishing attention on Remy’s pecs with his lips. He slid his hand down to spread his fingers across the omega’s still flat abdomen.

My pup is in here.

He was overwhelmed for a moment with the surge of pride and possessiveness, surprising himself. This wasn't what he'd ever imagined for his life or even wanted. Now, he couldn't live without it. His destiny as a dominant was being fulfilled. He would sire a small pack of shifters within the Strongblood one and it would be his duty to protect and provide for them. Not long ago, he'd turned away from thoughts of such responsibility. That would never happen again. This was the life he craved now.

Dane slid his fingers into the fold between Remy's balls and leg, rubbing along that sensitive spot without touching the hard dick jutting out. The omega wiggled his hips and made a pleading mew. Ignoring Remy's effort to speed things up, Dane swallowed the noise by kissing the boy. Remy opened his lips to welcome him in and shyly chased Dane's tongue with his own. Dane loomed over him as he deepened the kiss and positioned one finger to slide between the omega's small ass cheeks. The path was slick from the boy's arousal. The scent of it swirled around them, making Dane's cock jerk and strain with need. He inserted his finger, intending only to goose the omega's arousal. Instead, he pushed the boy over the edge with that simple invasion.

Remy cried out his release into Dane's mouth. Warm cum pulsed from the boy's dick, splashing onto Dane's arm. The potent scent along with the visceral proof of his efforts, drove Dane to the breaking point. He reared up and flipped the omega onto his stomach with as much care as his desperation to claim the boy permitted. He spread Remy's legs and lifted his ass with one continuous motion. His cock found the omega's hole before he'd even finished and thrust deep inside.

With his eyes slammed shut, Dane threw back his head. "Gods!" Nothing had ever felt so good, so right. In that moment, he realized that Remy was his home. As long as he could seek refuge in the omega's welcoming body, nothing could hurt him ever

again. He grit his teeth and clasped Remy's hips as he worked to regain control. He had to do this right. It had to be as good for his mate as it was for him. Merely thinking that word nearly caused him to lose that control once more. Keeping himself embedded deeply inside Remy, Dane hunched over the boy. He moved aside the curtain of the omega's dark hair to expose the back of his neck.

Dane began to thrust with ever increasing speed, feeling the slick channel swelling and tightening around him. Remy moaned and lowered his head, giving Dane a clear path. "I love you," he said before swooping down to sink his teeth into the tender skin. The flow of blood bursting across his tongue made his body seize for a moment before he came in a blinding rush.

His wolf howled out his possession of the omega and the boy's wolf joined in a gleeful duet.

The instant of pain faded almost before it began. Remy came again, the intensity overwhelming, as was the sudden languid feeling that made him collapse onto the pallet. As used to having his wolf communicate with Dane's as he was, it still surprised him how every part of him now felt tied to this dominant who had become his mate. There was no barrier between them. Never again would he be able to hide anything of what he was feeling from Dane. And that was okay. He wanted that connection, wanted to be filled with the dominant every moment of the rest of his life. Nothing he'd ever heard or knew of before had prepared him for this sense of belonging to another and knowing that he never had to worry about anything ever again.

Dane will always take care of me.

Remy didn't have a chance to dwell on the happiness he felt because Dane's thrusting continued even though his warm cum coated Remy's ass. The dick inside him swelled again, pressing against Remy's still sensitive tissue. It didn't matter. His own

cock hardened once more without really having deflated. With each thrust, his mate's dick dragged over that amazing spot within him. Soon, Remy was panting as if he were doing all the work. Then he came again and what little strength that had remained fled.

He must have slept because the next thing he knew, he was lying on his back, being washed by Dane. "My mate." He smiled at the strangeness and wonder of that word.

Dane returned the smile and ran his fingers through Remy's hair. "It's hard to believe, isn't it? But my wolf and I have never been so happy. I hope the same is true for you and yours."

Remy reached for the dominant's hand and pressed it to his lips. "Can't you feel it?"

The beta closed his eyes for a moment as their wolves shared some soft yipping. "Yes, I can." He opened them and gave Remy a fierce look that made his cock jump.

"I think..." He gnawed at his lower lip, unsure of whether he was permitted to ask for what he wanted.

"Go on. Never be afraid to speak your mind with me, Remy."

A delightful shiver ran through him. "I think I'm ready for more mounting."

Tossing the cloth he'd been using to wipe away the remnants of their mating, Dane smiled more broadly. Then he clasped Remy's hardening cock. "I can see that." He squeezed the shaft and swiped his thumb across the slit on the head.

"Oh!" Remy's whole body jerked. "I'm definitely ready now."

"Hmm." Dane nodded his head before slinging one leg over Remy's. "I don't think

you realize how much I've mounted you already. The arousal masks the discomfort but when I finally pulled out, I could see that your hole was a little raw. I'm going to leave it alone until you've had some rest and a chance to shift."

Disappointed, Remy nevertheless did what came naturally to him—he acquiesced as a good omega should do. "Yes, Dane."

His mate chuckled. "Don't sound so downhearted, baby. There are other ways for me to pleasure you."

Remy barely had time to register what the beta meant before he bent down and sucked Remy's cock into his mouth. Remy closed his eyes on a moan. This he did love. It wasn't quite as wonderful as his ass being filled by Dane's cock, but it was a close second. And he was no more able to hold back his release this way than the other. With his dick cocooned in his mate's mouth, the man's tongue relentlessly licking the shaft, he couldn't hold himself back. He cried out and bucked his hips while Dane sucked his cock dry.

He lay panting on the pallet, unable to move and in amazement at how much his life had changed in such a short while. "Will it always be like this," he wondered out loud.

Dane moved to lie on his side next to him. "It will be if we want it to. If you've taught me one thing, Remy, it's that we can make our own destinies." He gathered Remy in his arms. "Now, sleep. We have many days ahead of us to find our limit of passion. If there is one," he added with a chuckle.

Remy snuggled closer. "I don't think there will be." With that, he yawned and dropped off.

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The wind howled outside the cave. Remy didn't care. Inside it was warm and they had everything they needed. And wanted. Merida had returned with Conan a few times with more supplies. On each occasion, she'd queried him with her eyes to make sure he was okay. He always reassured her because the truth was he couldn't be better. Being Dane's mate and having the pup inside him made him whole. His life was perfect. He didn't even mind that come spring, they would return to the longhouse for him to finish the remainder of his pregnancy and whelp with the healer in attendance. For a while, Remy had harbored a fear that he would lose the pup as Wyatt had done. So far, all was good and he'd let himself relax and let his worries drift away.

Dane brought a cup of tea over and sat heavily beside him. "How's it going?"

Remy grimaced at the words in front of him. "I thought learning to read might be easier than it is." He sighed. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised given I'm not the smartest shifter."

His mate cupped his chin and swiveled his head to give him a hard stare. "What did I say about your believing you lack intelligence?"

Remy stared into those hard eyes, knowing there was nothing for him to fear lurking within. "I'm sorry, Dane. I forget stuff sometimes."

The beta's expression softened. "You're doing great, Remy. At everything. Including reading. What are you stuck on?"

They bent their heads together as Remy pointed at the word he was stuck on.

"That's 'weird', baby."

"Huh!" Remy picked up his mug and sipped some tea. "That's fitting because it's a

weird spelling.”

“The rules are complicated on that.” Plucking the book from Remy’s hand, he put it aside. “Give yourself a break.”

Remy happily snuggled against his mate, enjoying the warm slide of the tea down his throat and the immense peacefulness of new life. Sometimes it didn’t feel real. He rubbed his cheek against Dane’s shoulder and inhaled his scent. That always calmed any nervousness he had and gave him an extra sense of security. Dane was a wonderful mate and would make a great sire to their pups.

A prick of doubt entered his mind. Placing his palm against his slightly swelling abdomen, he spoke his worry. “Do you think I’ll be a good father? I’m afraid I won’t know what to do.”

Dane squeezed him close. “You’ll be the best father. I’m sure of that and that’s one of the benefits of living in a pack. There are mothers and fathers there to help you learn to care for our pup and to step in whenever you need them. You’ll never be alone again, baby.” He kissed the top of Remy’s head, something the beta seemed inclined to do to show affection.

It was true. His old pack had been a scary place. He couldn’t have imagined bringing pups into that environment. Not having known anything different, he’d thought living in constant fear of making mistakes and taking punishment for them was a natural part of shifter life. The Strongbloods had taught him differently. Even without having Dane as a mate, he knew his life would have been wonderful. Now with the beta by his side, he had everything he could ever want.

Being held by his mate had the usual effect on him. It was still amazing that he’d gone almost his entire life without knowing the pleasure in store for him. “Dane?”

“Not now.” The man’s tone was firm, yet kind. “I’ll mount you again later.”

Disappointed, but not surprised, Remy sighed. “Yes, sir.”

His mate was a bit too careful with him, in his opinion. He wasn’t going to argue the point, however. Not only would it be pointless, but he also trusted his mate to know better than he in everything. And his hole did get a little sore from the vigorous mounting they both enjoyed so much. It was easy to ignore the discomfort when chasing the pleasure.

Something deep inside him tickled. Startled, he sat straight up and gasped. “It think it moved!” He turned to his mate, grinning and with his eyes wide. “The pup. I felt it. Maybe.” He deflated a little with a frown. It was still early days and although shifter pregnancies progressed pretty quickly, it didn’t seem possible that the pup had grown enough to make its presence known. Yet, the sensation wasn’t that yearning need that came from wanting to be filled by a dominant. This was decidedly different.

Dane placed his larger hand over his. “Really?” He shook his head. “I don’t think it’s possible for me to feel from the outside yet.” He turned Remy so that he was pressed against his chest. “I’d accepted the fact that this family life was not for me. Now...I can’t imagine it any other way. I love you, Remy.”

His breath caught. He’d never tire of hearing this from his mate. “I’m glad.” It didn’t seem nearly the right thing to say. “I didn’t dare hope that you ever would, but it’s better this way, isn’t it? Our loving each other?”

Dane rested his chin on Remy’s head. “Yes, it is.” His wolf barked out his agreement.

Remy’s wolf joined in with a yip and there was another tickle as if the pup did as well. Remy had no words to express his joy. Instead, he pondered what their future would be like. “What kind of shifter do you think we’ll have this time?”

“Probably a beta if it’s a boy or a sigma if it’s a girl.”

Thinking of Merida, Remy asked, “Do you think if I whelp a girl she could be a beta?”

“I know she can. I answered too quickly based on my upbringing. The Rogue Pack has a beta female. As feral as I was, even I heard the news as it spread among our kind. I’m sure she’s not the first. It’s merely that their alpha is more open-minded than most of our kind.”

“Like Alpha Graydon is with Merida.” It still amazed him how his sister had found her place in the pack, making her happy in a way he’d never known her to be.

Dane nodded with a serious expression. “Just one of the ways he’s shown me how different he is from our sire. I want to be a good beta to him.”

“You will be.” Remy had no doubt about his mate’s ability to return to his pack and pull his weight.

Dane cupped his chin to turn his head in order to give him a soft kiss. “When you say things like that and look at me as you’re doing now, I believe I will succeed in everything. And, who knows what our pups will turn out to be. Lorcan’s first pup is an alpha female.”

Remy gasped. “Really? How is that possible?”

With a shrug, Dane turned him completely around so that they sat face-to-face. “I don’t know but I think what’s changed is the way our kind has started to really catch up with human thinking. It won’t be long now before our two species openly mix.”

“That sounds scary.”

“I promise you and our pups will be safe no matter what.”

“Of course we will. You’ll protect us.”

“You see life with a clarity that most don’t and with an enviable openness. Never think it’s because you’re not smart. You are an innocent, Remy, and I would wish you to remain so for the rest of our lives.”

Remy’s cheeks heated. “How can you say that I am an innocent given that you’ve bred me?” It wasn’t only his face that felt warm. With Dane touching him and gazing at him with such love and desire, Remy didn’t think he could wait for later. His slick pooled around his hole.

Dane’s nostrils flared. “I don’t mean in that way, of course.” He maneuvered Remy onto his back and slid his cock inside him with a swift thrust that caused him to cry out with the intense pleasure. “It’s you, not your body, that is innocent. I wish you to always see life through those eyes.”

Remy raised his legs to take his mate deeper inside him. “With you there to guide me, how can I not?”

Then he closed his eyes and let his mate make his body sing. All those years he’d never known this was what awaited him. Deep down, he’d always believed life could be wonderful. Now, he knew. Dane had shown him the way.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm*

Dane kept the pace back to the Strongblood compound slow, mindful of his mate being heavy with their pup. Spring had come later than expected and to be truthful, he'd kept his family within their cozy den longer than he should have. The time spent in the cave with Remy—showing the omega how much he loved him and seeing their pup grow—had given him the most peace and happiness he'd ever known. It was hard to give it up, and yet now was the time to make sure his mate was in a safe place to whelp.

His trepidation over returning to the pack for good was still there, however. It nestled deep inside his mind, prodding at him when he let his guard down like a dull ache. If he allowed it to, the feeling would overwhelm him, so he kept it under control. His days of running from his past were over. The moment he'd first seen Remy, his fate had literally been sealed. Their tie through their wolves couldn't be broken so long as they both lived. And he was determined to make sure that their time together would be long and fruitful. Remy deserved that kind of stability and happiness. Dane was determined to give it to the omega no matter the cost to himself.

He caught Merida's scent before she appeared through the thick stand of trees in front of them. Conan followed, as the two gammas seemed to have become inseparable. He and Remy had speculated how a mating between two dominants would work out, but there was no denying that they would all soon find out. With a yip of greeting, Merida came up to flank her brother. Conan did the same with Dane, and the four of them finished the journey to the longhouse together.

He was relieved to see that no welcoming party waited for them outside mostly because there was still a damp chill in the air and he didn't want his mate shifting into his human skin until they were inside the warm building. It also gave him a few more

seconds to tamp down the instinctive unease that crept into his mind. But the opportunity was no more than a moment in time because just inside the great doors stood Graydon, Celia, Ethan with the alpha heir in his arms, and others ready to greet them.

Dane shifted and gave an encouraging nod to Remy to do the same. The boy's complete trust in him and his judgment bolstered his own confidence. Before he could even ask, sigmas rushed forward to wrap the omega in a soft blanket. The boy thanked them in a low tone before moving closer to Dane. He put his arm around his mate and hugged him to his side.

Graydon took a step closer. "Welcome home, brother." He nodded at Remy. "And welcome to my brother by mating. We are glad to have you back and look forward to the new addition to our family."

Dane put his free hand over the bump under the blanket. The pup inside wiggled at the touch, the feel of it causing Dane's heart to swell with extra pride. It had been so from the first time it had happened. "Thank you, Alpha. We appreciate the greeting and...are happy to be home." The words weren't as hard to say as he'd expected. "Our time in my den was a good one but we'll both be happier for the healer to confirm that all is well with my mate."

"Of course. She awaits your visit after you've had a chance to settle into the new room we've built for you and your family."

Dane couldn't stop from showing his surprise. He'd assumed they would be quartered in the one allocated to Remy and Merida from the beginning, the one where their pup had been conceived. Dane expected he would have to build a bigger den himself during the summer months. Apparently, Graydon had ordered something done over the winter.

Before he could ask any questions, however, Wyatt rushed in with a squeal, Kael hot

on his heels with a look of exasperation.

“Remy!” The visibly breeding omega threw his arms around Remy’s neck, tugging him out of Dane’s embrace. “I’ve missed you. Are you well? Can I see?”

With a big smile, Remy parted the edges of his blanket to expose his swollen belly. “Everything’s perfect.”

Wyatt giggled. “That pup’s nearly as big as you are.”

Remy reached out hesitantly, his hand hovering over Wyatt’s abdomen. “You’re breeding again, too.”

Wyatt’s expression of joy only dimmed somewhat. “Yes, it didn’t take long for my heat to come, and so far, everything’s fine. The healer says not to worry, to rest whenever I feel the need to. I’m trying to listen to her. And him,” he added jerking his chin toward Kael. “It’s hard.”

Remy pulled the other omega into a hug. “Let’s go see the healer together.”

Wyatt nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, that’s a great idea. Now?”

Remy turned to Dane with a silent question.

Although he instinctively balked at being separated from his mate, he realized it was best to give the omegas a chance to comfort each other without the worry of dominants stepping in to meddle. “Go on. I’ll come fetch you later after the alpha has shown me our new room.”

Remy’s face lit up. “Thank you, Dane.”

Kael sighed. “I’m okay with that plan, too, for whatever that’s worth.” The beta shot

Dane a grin over the boys' heads.

Ethan turned to Graydon. "I need to satisfy your son's voracious appetite, but please show Dane what you had built for him. Be sure to pay attention to his reaction because I want a full account when you're done."

Graydon kissed his mate's forehead. "I will." He looked at their mother as Ethan left. "Shall we?"

Celia shook her head with a smile. "I think it best for you and your brother to do so alone." She looked at Dane. "Our evening meal will be a celebration feast. It's good to have you home."

Dane couldn't speak past the sudden lump in his throat. He could only incline his head and watch her leave. Then he was alone with his brother. "I didn't expect you to do anything special for us, but I thank you all the same."

Graydon clapped him on his back. "I would do anything to make your homecoming, and staying, easier. Come and see. I won't be offended if you want to change anything."

Dane doubted he'd care enough to alter what had been done, but Remy might want something different. It was critical that the omega feel comfortable as he waited for the whelping. He was surprised, however, as he followed his brother farther into the longhouse than he'd expected. The living quarters were adjacent to the front portion of the communal spaces, yet they went well past them into the area near the kitchen and storage places. When he judged they were as far back as the wooden structure went, Graydon stopped them in front of a door at the far corner.

"We—our mother, Ethan and I—thought you'd be more comfortable away from the main portion of the longhouse. It's quiet here." He flung open the door and stepped aside for Dane to enter first.

He nearly gasped. His family had gone to a lot of trouble to not only build a two-room area with an open arch, but to also make the large space feel cozy with fur rugs scattered around the hard-packed dirt floor, a wide pallet in the far room that had a rock wall, and lots of pillows. There were tables with oil lamps already lit, giving the space a warm glow, and cubbies with clothing neatly stacked inside. And there was a shelf with books. It was like being in their den, except it was all lodged deep inside the safety of the longhouse.

Dane walked in slow circles, taking it in. “You did all of this while I had Remy and me in my forest den?”

Graydon scratched the back of his neck. “Well, I did the planning. The rest was done by others. Everyone had ideas about the details.”

“It’s amazing. Thank you, brother.” Dane pulled Graydon into a hug without thought. His heart raced with emotion and...shit, he had to blink back tears. When he had himself under control, he pulled away.

It was possible, but probably more a trick of the light, that the alpha’s eyes looked a bit shiny. “I wanted to make it as easy as possible for you to remain.”

Dane heaved a large breath. “I’ll never leave my mate and pups.”

“I know. Still, you can’t be expected to put all of your past behind you so quickly. That’s why I insisted on this.” The alpha went to a thick hanging on the wall and pushing it aside, revealed another door. He threw back the deadbolts and opened it, then moved away for Dane to see.

Dane went to stand at the threshold and looked out at the back corner of the compound. A few bounding steps and he’d be at the tree line...and freedom. He turned away from it. “You thought of this?”

Graydon shrugged. "I imagine you might need the opportunity to go for a run on your own quickly. This way you don't have to travel through the longhouse or go far from your family. It's the best of both worlds, I hope."

Dane once more had to work to get himself under control. "It is," he finally managed to say, his voice rough with emotion. "Just knowing I can straddle the two worlds will be helpful whenever I get..."

"You won't fail Remy or any of us, I'm sure of that. But we all wrestle with our past. Celia wears dresses some days, still. And I have to control my impatience at wanting to breed my mate again. Our pup isn't ready to be weaned entirely and Ethan loves nursing him so much, yet all I can think of is filling the pack with my pups." He shook his head. "It's hard to unlearn the lessons of our puphoods, but we are better than our sire. Our families will have happy lives. We can give that to them. I'm sure of it."

Hearing his brother's own doubts helped his own somehow. Dane shut the outer door and bolted it. It was there if he needed it, but he would try not to. "I want to see my mate. Not having him by my side is making me twitchy. He will love this, by the way."

Graydon grinned. "Of course. He's such a sweet omega."

"He is that."

Graydon peeled off in a different direction once they left the room. Dane had no trouble finding his way to the healer's room. Laughter met him before he even entered. Remy and Wyatt were sitting with their heads close together on a waiting pallet.

The healer nodded to Dane. "All is well, beta."

“Dane!” Remy bounced up as quickly as his bulk would allow and would have run to him if Dane hadn’t closed the gap first. “Our pup is fine. So is Wyatt’s. Everyone’s healthy. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Dane hugged him close. “It is. And wait until you see the den the pack has given us.” He cupped Remy’s face with his hands. “We’re going to be happy here, baby.”

The omega’s face lit up. “Of course we are because we’ll be together. That’s all we need.”

Dane kissed him gently before pressing his cheek against his mate’s soft hair. “You’re right. My sweet and smart omega.”