



Hunted Pack (Her Vicious Pack #7)

Author: *Layla Heart*

Category: Romance

Description: After their mission and movie date both went into unexpected directions, Vera and her pack now have a brand new mate, a bunch of kids and more new information about the Hearts than they know what to do with...

The previous night was supposed to be easy: Mathew and Riley would go on a mission, Vera and Jorge would go on a movie date to keep their mind off of things and Caleb was going to get some more work done on their new living room.

It ended up very differently after Mathew found more than just the seeds they were supposed to steal when he entered the lab and when Vera snuck off to track down a new scent match, she caught people from the Hearts transporting a group of kids.

Vera's emotions are all over the place. The new scent match, a Beta man called Luca, has been traumatised by the Hearts for years, making it hard for him to be close to Vera, Mathew or Caleb. It's even worse when all she wants to do is to hide him in her nest until he feels better again and that's the one place he can't be.

So, instead, she focuses on the other things that have to happen: find safe places to live for the kids they rescued, protect Luca's family and get information out of the three unwilling 'informants' they caught last night.

One thing becomes clear very quickly, the Hearts have been close on their heels for a while and they seem ready to jump...

This is the seventh out of twelve novellas following Vera and her mates in the Her Vicious Pack serial, a dark contemporary reverse harem/Why Choose romance set in a sweet Omegaverse world about a criminal found family empire with dreams of 'expanding the family'.

This novella may include any of these elements: steamy scenes, 'I need tissues NOW' moments, cries of 'why, oh, why' and cliffhangers that make you bite your nails (and curse the author).

This serial has MF, MM, FF and group scenes.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Vera

My head and heart are all over the place as I lean in the doorway to the garage, watching Mathew and Riley hug our new scent match, watch them hold him, comfort him. While I'm all the way over here...

He's got soft brown hair, in that shade that's not dark or light, more of a true medium, that likely gets beautiful highlights in summer. He's got a slim built, but I don't know if that's natural or because of how he's been treated.

His caramel pheromones are filled with bitter notes, reflecting the pain he's been under while the Hearts had him. Reflecting all the shit that they've put him through.

Everything about him makes me want to protect him. Makes me want to protect my precious mate. I want to hold him, keep him close, cherish him.

But every time he catches a sliver of my pheromones, he has a panic attack.

I don't know what has happened exactly, but I have some idea, based on his reaction. Torture, of some kind. Something that has made him fearful of his own scent matches.

There are few things more evil than torturing someone so much that they can't be around their fated mates, but that's why some people do it... Because it's so effective...

I swallow hard, trying not to get even more upset. Trying to stay calm.

Mathew disentangles himself from the other two, coming over to me, his face pale, his skin clammy. Oh, that's not good. I know what that look means, I've seen it plenty of times in the last weeks.

"Bathroom?" I start walking ahead of him, checking if the downstairs bathroom is available.

His fingers grip onto the back of my dress as he follows me. Like he'd get lost without me, even though he's been living here for a decade. But I know it's more out of comfort than anything else, simply needing to be near me, letting my pheromones soothe him.

Luckily, the downstairs bathrooms are empty and I hold the braid I put in his hair only a few hours ago, as he retches over the sink. Nothing comes out, though that's not strange, I don't think he's had anything to eat since last night's dinner.

After a couple of minutes, he slowly lowers himself to the floor, pulling me down with him, his face slowly regaining colour.

I sit next to him and he puts his head on my shoulder, wrapping his arms around my waist, pushing his nose closely against my neck. I reach up and slowly undo his braid, rubbing my fingers over the back of his head, massaging him, and he lets out a sound that's almost like purring.

For a guy who's as scary as Mathew, he's like putty when he's around his mates. Especially when he curls up with us, when he needs to be held and comforted, have his Omega instincts met. I have no idea how he survived for so long without his mates around all the time.

Although, that might be why he's extra needy now.

Tonight has been quite the night.

Mathew and Riley went on a mission to ‘retrieve’ —steal— some seeds from a biotechnological research complex and apparently that didn’t entirely go according to plan.

Though, what I understood from slivers of conversation from the guys on the teams that went with them, there were very few casualties, fewer than expected, so that was a positive.

But when Mathew was in the lab, things went a little differently than expected as they found a ‘security guard’ at work when the lab was supposed to be empty.

Double strange was that he seemed to be doing experiments when he was wearing a security guard outfit, though one that didn’t fit him, not his own.

So, they took the seed samples they were there to grab, the ‘security guard’ and all of his stuff, back with them. The fake security guard is currently in a room in the training complex, waiting until we’ve got time to deal with him.

The two guys that Caleb, Jorge and I took back with us are in the rooms next to his. Each guy in his own room, for security and safety. It’s often hard to anticipate what they might do when they realise that they’re not getting out of there, not alive anyway.

Jorge and I were supposed to go on a simple movie date, take our minds off the mission that Mathew and Riley were on and get some time alone together. With a pack, it’s hard to get one-on-one time, so this had been a pretty good idea.

That was, until I caught wind of Luca’s pheromones and —not wanting to leave a new pack member out there in the world, especially not one whose pheromones

smelled like they were in big trouble— I started following him.

I found him, together with three guards, accompanying a group of young kids through dark and dirty alleys, well past the kids' bed time. That was the second reason I couldn't let it go.

It looked wrong and I'm not that good with injustice, at least not when it's against kids or people I love.

One thing led to another and everything ended with one of the guards dead, two of them currently in the training complex, waiting for questioning, and the kids getting ready to go to sleep in an upstairs room.

And, of course, Luca.

Our beautiful, but broken, Luca.

Our troubled and traumatised Beta.

After he told us how the Hearts used threats against his family to keep him in line, Caleb and Jorge —together with Derrick and some others from Mathew's organisation— immediately went over to Luca's parents' house and are now bringing his parents and siblings here.

So they're out of harm's way and we can protect them, keep them safe.

I've not seen my family in six years, not since Caleb stole me out of the car that was supposed to take me to my wedding to a local pack's Alpha.

But that doesn't mean I wouldn't try to protect them at any cost, if they ever were in danger and we could keep them safe.

I might not like them, I might not want to talk to them, but that doesn't mean I want them to be harmed.

So, I fully understand why the first thing that Luca worried about once he realised the Hearts really had no control over him anymore, was to make sure his family was safe. That he had to be sure that the Hearts couldn't hurt them either, couldn't punish them for him getting away.

Mathew lets out a soft groan, his arms tightening around me as he leans against me more.

"You should eat something small. It will settle your stomach." I don't really want to get up, but staying here isn't going to make things any better either.

He slowly shakes his head. "Everyone's too busy. I can wait until things settle down." He pulls me into his lap, wrapping himself fully around me. "And as long as I stay here, close to your pheromones, everything will be fine."

I let out a soft laugh, turning my head so I can kiss his jaw. "I can get you something. And you really should eat and get some fluids in you. This isn't just about you, it's about the baby inside you too. Tonight has been stressful enough, we don't need to add any more to it."

He grumbles, but then his grip on me lessens. "I guess you're right. And I can't stay in here for hours either. I've got too much to do for that." He's about to get up but I hold onto him, making sure he stays seated.

"Work can wait ten minutes. You need to take care of yourself first. You're not allowed to leave this room until you've had food.

" I stand up, running my fingers through his hair, enjoying how soft his long hair

feels against my skin.

“Unless you want to join me in the kitchen? That’s the only other place you’re allowed to go right now. ”

He looks up at me with that soft smile that makes my insides melt. “I guess I’ll join you in the kitchen, if my stomach allows me to.”

Well, we won’t know until we try.

But I have the feeling that the moment I take my eyes off him, he’ll go back to work and he’ll forget the whole ‘resting for a few minutes and get something in his stomach to replenish his energy’ until halfway through the day, at which time, he’ll feel even worse.

Not on my watch!

The kitchen is quiet, as expected. It’s too late for any of the other kitchen staff to be here and Eli is upstairs with the kids we rescued from the Hearts.

I sit Mathew down at the small table on the far end of the kitchen as I put four pieces of bread into the toaster and go through the fridge for some peanut butter. We both need to eat something that’s not going to upset our stomachs but will still give us energy.

The others should eat too, but I can only do one thing at a time and making sure Mathew and I have food in us is the priority, especially since he’ll get really busy as soon as he steps out of here.

I’m quite comfortable in the kitchen. I tend to go here for midnight snacks and sometimes help Eli with baking.

Eli doesn't just let anyone into here, not even his own pack is allowed to do more than sit at the table, not allowed to touch anything.

But I've apparently 'proved' myself that I can be trusted in here on my own.

To be fair, the commercial kitchen is very impressive and with all the different tools, many of them really expensive, I probably wouldn't just let anyone in here either.

With the toast and the peanut butter ready, I go back over to the table and put everything between us.

"Your stomach still doing okay?" I eye Mathew.

His morning sickness has been getting better lately, but that doesn't mean that it's really gone, as what happened just now made clear. It's simply better than it was a few weeks ago.

He nods, picking up a piece of toast and starting to nibble on it. He seems to finally relax, his shoulders no longer pulled up so tight, his eyes slowly starting to unfocus, the line between his eyebrows disappearing.

If I—or anyone else from the pack— doesn't step in from time to time, Mathew would work himself to exhaustion. And while he might have gotten away with that in the past, it's not good to keep going like that now, especially not since he's pregnant.

We've got a lot of things to do tonight, way too much, really, but it's better to do that on at least some energy from food.

Running on adrenaline alone isn't going to make us last for very long and while that could be doable for a single day, I feel like dealing with everything that happened tonight is going to be a multi-day thing.

“We’re on our way back.” Jorge’s voice comes over the earpiece. “We’ll be home in about an hour.”

My heart jumps and I can’t help my smile. Next to me, Mathew is smiling too, his eyes bright.

At least something went right tonight. It might not have been something we’d planned on doing, but at least something went right.

Mathew pulls me into his lap, his arm around my waist as he leans his chin on my shoulder. “We’re going to have a full house.”

“Yep.” I hold a piece of toast in front of him. “So we’re going to need all the energy we can get.”

He chuckles, taking a bite. “With you around, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

I kiss his cheek. “With our whole pack together, it’s not going to be a problem.”

Because being part of a pack means helping each other out, and that’s so much easier than trying everything on your own, even if it means dealing with so many different personalities.

But I guess that’s all part of it.

I wouldn’t have it any other way anymore.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Mathew

I'm glad I'm running on more than adrenaline right now, because I won't have time for sleep —or really time to eat— for the rest of the night and probably all of tomorrow. The hours after we return from a mission are already busy enough normally, but with the night we just had, it's even worse.

I'm sitting behind my desk in the renovated office, the monitors in front of me filled with all sorts of programs as I keep an eye on everything from here. Security footage of the house, notes from people about the mission, data from the mission, all sorts of things.

Vera is sitting in my lap, laptop in front of her, as she's chatting with Erika.

Erika and her pack —or, at least, some of her pack members— will be coming this way tomorrow or the day after.

They have much more experience with kids who've been rescued from the Suits Syndicate and they've got a whole network set up to deal with it.

From finding a safe place for them to stay while they look for any family members, to finding them a family to take them in long-term if they're orphans, to getting them new identities, things like that.

I've helped a couple of people get away from the Hearts over the years, but most of them were older teenagers or in their twenties, not young enough to still be going to primary school.

Letting a couple of people in their late teens stay over and help them get an education so they can learn to stand on their own feet is very different from kids who still have most of their schooling, and most of their growing up, ahead of them.

And while I'd probably be able to figure something out under normal circumstances, with what I found out during the mission, the situation with Luca and his family and finding out that the Hearts are much closer to us than I'm comfortable with, I don't have the energy or the people to dedicate to it.

Especially not if we know people who are much more knowledgeable about it, and who have systems in place for protecting and taking care of rescued kids that have been running for decades.

I'd rather rely on Erika's knowledge and expertise and know for sure that the kids will be in good hands than fumbling through it myself and potentially making a much bigger mess out of it all.

A notification on my phone lets me know that the guys we captured are now all awake and not very happy, but that they're all restrained in the training complex and that they don't seem to have any lasting injuries. Which makes me feel conflicted.

On the one hand, it feels like these bastards got off too easy if they're mostly unharmed.

But on the other hand, if they're doing as well as could be expected in these circumstances, then that means we'll be able to spend a lot more time getting information out of them, which I'm looking forward to.

Miles knocks on the wall to get our attention as he lingers near the door.

Since he's taken on the role of head of personal security of the pack, he's gotten a lot

more responsibilities and he seems to be taking to them well.

Which is good, because relying on Derrick and Timothy all the time isn't fair on them or their family, and Miles is the first person who impressed them enough that they're happy to give him more work to do.

"The kids are settled in, Riley and Luca are with them." He stands up straight, which he only remembers to do after speaking.

Vera's pheromones spike when he mentions Luca, a mix of longing and pain and she holds onto my shirt, her grip tight. I pull her closer against me, trying to let out a soothing rumble. It's not as good as an Alpha's, but I'll try what I can.

"Thanks for letting me know. We've got more guests coming.

Could you make sure that a couple of rooms upstairs are ready for when they arrive?

Ask Eli which rooms would be good. There should be supplies in the training complex that you can use, grab whatever they'll need.

If you see anyone not doing much, put them to work. "

Miles gives me a quick smile before he nods. "Will do." Then he turns around and leaves the office.

I keep Vera close as a couple of people come in to report on whatever tasks I gave them. Usually, Derrick deals with this, but with him still on his way back here, I'm back in charge myself. It's been a long time, but after such a chaotic evening, having something like this to ground me feels good.

When things quiet down for a few moments, I kiss Vera's shoulder, nuzzling her

neck. “What’s going through your mind?”

She glances up, giving me a sad smile. “Will Luca ever be able to feel safe here? Or would it be a better idea to send him away, keep him out of danger?” She’s quiet for a few moments.

“Have I put him in even more danger than he was already in?” She shakes her head, her pheromones filling with more pain. “I should have ignored his pheromones. I should have let him be. It’s my fault he’s in danger now. It’s my fault his family is in even more danger.”

I take her chin, making her look at me. “It’s not your fault what happened to him. It’s not your fault.” My heart hammers in my chest as I try to keep her gaze. “The Hearts are at fault. All of this,” I move my hand around, motioning to our general surroundings, “is their fault.”

After what Luca told me about how they treated him once they realised he’s one of my scent matches and how they used him to find even more of my scent matches, I’m more convinced than ever that so much of the shit we’ve been through —the last years, but especially the last months— is fully the Hearts’ fault.

All of it, all their attempts to hurt me, all their attempts to ruin everything around us, is because they were the ones who made a mistake a decade ago and sent me out when I was too close to my heat. They’re trying to hurt me, hurt my pack, over something that was their fault from the start.

“He’s right.” Luca’s quiet voice is muffled.

When we both look up in surprise, he moves awkwardly, rubbing his hands over his arms, avoiding our gazes.

He's wearing a pheromone blocking mask, probably borrowed it from Riley.

It helps keep out most of the pheromones, though it doesn't keep all of them out.

The way his bitter caramel scent spikes with each breath, he's clearly still struggling.

"It's not your fault for finding me. I'm really grateful you followed me and rescued us. The Hearts are the ones who've been causing all the mess and all the pain. None of it is your fault." He finally looks up, but his voice is tight and he's gripping onto his arms hard.

"Without you, these kids would have had their childhoods cut short. Their lives would have turned into a living hell. But, because of you, they might actually have a chance at a somewhat normal life." He covers his mouth and nose with a shaking hand. "I'm sorry." And then he flees from the office.

Vera jumps from my lap, her eyes wide, her pheromones fluctuating between pain and confusion. "Wait!"

Luca's footsteps on the stairs are loud.

She glances at me, tears in her eyes and I nod in the direction of the door.

"Go after him. See if you can maybe have a conversation with him on the balcony or somewhere else where there aren't so many pheromones around." It's been clear from the start how much they want to be together, even if it hurts them.

The Hearts may have tried to traumatise Luca so that he wouldn't be able to be with his pack, but they clearly underestimated him.

They clearly underestimated how headstrong the guy is, even if it means hurting

himself.

We're going to have to keep a close eye on him to make sure he doesn't push himself too far, that he doesn't accidentally hurt himself in ways that can't be healed.

Though, to be honest, that's a balancing act most people in our pack struggle with.

Vera leans close, giving me a soft kiss. "You come too?"

I touch her cheek, shaking my head. "I've got work to do and I think it's more important that you talk to him first." I've already heard more than enough for one night.

It's more important that Luca and Vera get used to each other first now.

Explore how close they can get before things break down, so that we can help Luca get better in ways that work for him.

"Okay. But I'll be back soon to check on you."

"I know. I know that you will." I kiss her again, longer this time, before I let her go. "See if you can talk to your new mate, get to know each other."

Her fingers linger on my chest for long seconds, like she's thinking something over, but then she nods decisively and gives me a tight smile. "I won't be long."

"If I need you, I'll know where to find you." Then I reach up, touching my earpiece. "And I'm always here if you need me."

She glances from me to the door and back, and I nudge her with my knee. "Go on. Go find him. His family will arrive soon and things will get a lot more hectic then. Make

use of the time you've got, while things are still relatively quiet."

"Right." She glances back at me one last time, her hand on the wall next to the door, before leaving the office.

My chest hurts as I look after her.

The Hearts may not have fully succeeded breaking Luca, making sure that our pack will be in a lot of pain once he joined us, but that doesn't mean that we won't have a long road ahead of us, before everything is settled.

And in that time, I'll have to watch my mates struggle, breaking my heart every minute, until we get there.

I take a couple of long breaths, trying to release the tension in my shoulders and back, as I look at the screens in front of me.

Anger keeps rising in me when I don't make an effort to suppress it.

With Vera around, it's easier to control, but now I'm alone, it comes back to the surface.

I put my hand on my lower belly.

I'm sorry, baby. Your father is not the composed man in charge of a massive organisation that some people in the pack seem to think I am.

Right now, I'd give anything in the world to go back to the brothel where I used to 'work', where they held Luca, and kill every single person there.

Rip out the throat of every bastard there, with my teeth, making them suffer as long

as possible before they die.

Letting them know why I'm doing this, letting them know it's because they hurt my mates, my pack.

And once I'm done with that, I'll hunt down every one of their family members and take them out too, take out every person connected to them, take out the roots of the evil they bring into the world.

I'm sorry, baby. Your father is not a good person.

I hope that you'll never have to see this side of me and I especially hope you'll never have to meet the person I am right now. Someone with only death and destruction on his mind, filled with fury at the vile things some people think they can get away with because nobody stands in their way.

I want you to live a happy and good life, without knowing about any of this pain.

But that means I'll have to take the Hearts down first, so I'll have to be a bad person for a while longer.

Just a while longer.

Just a little while longer.

Once you're here, I hope the world will be a little less evil.

I'll make sure of that.

I promise.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Caleb

The first thing I do when we get back to the house is to check where my Omegas are.

Being away from them after what happened tonight was horrible, but Jorge and I were the only people from our pack who were in any state to go pick up Luca's family. So we did what we had to.

I'd already spotted Vera with Luca on the balcony as we drove up, so I know where one of them is, and she seemed pretty good too, though tired. She even gave me an enthusiastic wave when she caught sight of me.

That leaves Mathew.

The house is full of activity as I make my way to his office, generally the best place to start looking for him, and closest to the garage.

The door to the office is open and I barge in, not wanting to wait any longer.

Mathew is sitting at his desk, his eyes dark, his body tense and a strange scent floats through the space. It's not very strong, but the deadly intent in it is clear, making my stomach churn.

That's not good, at all.

When his eyes fall on me, they widen in surprise, his face flushing, before he seems to really focus, his mind temporarily out of whatever dark place it was in.

I slam the door shut behind me, pulling a chair in front of it so nobody can get in, before I cross the space over to Mathew's desk and pull him up, taking him in my arms. He tries to push me away for a moment before his arms come around me and he pulls me against him too.

Fucking hell.

I have no idea what happened here, but it's clear that he's not in a good mental space.

"Your pack is home." I let out soothing pheromones, though that doesn't seem to help much, as he lets out a growl, trying to push me away.

"I have to stop them. I have to go after them and stop them." His voice is hard, his pheromones like knives, though luckily not directed at me.

"We will stop them. We'll go after them together."

"I have to go now . I can't wait."

"Yes. You can. You can wait." I walk him back, trapping him between me and the wall so it's easier to keep him in place. I don't have the time or the energy to talk in circles with him tonight, so I try a different strategy.

"You promised Vera that you wouldn't go on your own. You promised that we'd all go together."

"That doesn't have to mean all the time.

That just means that we have to go together when we go take them down, not when I'm only going to collect some information and maybe take out a few people.

” The way his words come out, how they seem to be stuck in a pattern, it seems like he’s been having this exact same argument with himself already.

But I’m not letting him go. “You made the promise to Vera. You’ll have to ask her if she meant only when we take them down or if she meant also for information collection and things like that.” If there’s anyone he listens to, it’s her, and he knows it too.

“I don’t have time to ask her.” He struggles against my hold, trying to get away, and I flood my pheromones around him, showing him how much I care for him, how much I want to protect him.

“Mathew.” I drop my voice, using my Alpha powers.

I’ve had enough of tonight; everyone is exhausted and running on anxiety and adrenaline. I would prefer if we didn’t make things worse by making choices we can’t undo.

He stills in my arms, his hands against my chest, his eyes closed, waiting for my next command. I hate how he starts to tremble against me when I do this, but I didn’t see another way. I have to get through to him.

“Not tonight.” I take a deep breath, softening my voice.

“Tonight, we have to make sure our pack, the people around us and the people from your organisation are all safe and sound. We can’t keep rushing ahead. If we become sloppy, we’ll start making mistakes and that could cost us our lives.”

And more than that, if Mathew dies, the Hearts will have an easier time doing their creepy and vile shit. His organisation is keeping them somewhat in line, if that stops, things will get much, much worse.

He slowly nods, leaning his head on my shoulder. “They hurt Luca . They used me. They used you and Vera. All to hurt him.” He growls, but it’s a sound of pain and frustration, no longer one of anger.

I have no idea what exactly happened to Luca, but I had a suspicion that it had something to do with Vera and me, with how he reacted to our pheromones earlier.

That could explain some of the strange things we found about the pack Vera was supposed to marry into, or not.

But that’s for later, not right this moment.

“We’ll get them for that. But all in good time. Tonight is not that time.”

Someone bangs on the door, startling us both.

“Why is the door closed?” Jorge’s voice sounds tight, stressed, as he bangs on the door again. “Mathew? Is Riley with you?”

Riley?

I glance at Mathew, who looks up at me in surprise before shaking his head. “We don’t know where she is. Why?”

We’ve had enough to deal with tonight without one of our pack members going missing...

“She was supposed to grab something from the kitchen for the kids, but she’s not there. Open this freaking door already!” Jorge seems to almost want to break through the door with his fists.

Mathew glances at the monitors on his desk, before turning them off with a single movement, the way he's holding his body changing, becoming alert. "Fuck. I'm pretty sure I know where she is. Let's hope she doesn't do something she's going to regret."

He quickly crosses over to the door, giving me a pointed look as he pulls the chair out of the way, and then rips it open.

This startles Jorge, who stumbles back, just in time to get out of Mathew's way, as my Omega runs down the hallway. Luckily, Jorge recovers quickly and runs after him, while I follow the two.

As Mathew pulls the door to the outside out of some poor guy's hand, I realise where he's going. He's going to the training complex!

Where the guys we grabbed tonight are being kept.

Oh, no.

I agree with Mathew, let's hope she hasn't done anything she's going to regret yet.

I tap around on my phone, connecting my earpiece just to Riley. "What are you doing?"

It's quiet for a while, before Riley's voice comes over the earpiece.

"Collecting information." She sounds very calm, which I don't know if it's a good thing or not.

She's used to using dubious methods to get information out of people, and if it's to protect her pack, I'm sure she'll do whatever she needs to, just like what was going

through Mathew's mind earlier.

"Location?" We've nearly crossed the distance between the house and the complex.

"In the back." She's still calm, which is making me more nervous now.

Mathew reaches the door to the training complex first and doesn't seem to need any directions as he immediately rushes down the hallway, to the back.

In the back you've got two places to go, on the one side, there's the shooting range, and on the other side is a hallway that leads to rooms that are used for 'various things'.

In one of the first days we were here, I'd explored the complex to see what was what, and I'd noticed that the walls of these rooms were unusually thick and that they were easy to clean...

It didn't take me much to imagine what the 'various things' were that the rooms were being used for.

My chest tightens.

Please, don't let Riley be doing something too extreme.

Please, let her not do something too violent.

I glance at Jorge, who's very pale, bordering on green, as he's probably aware of where we're heading.

If Mathew and Riley both made sure to keep him mostly out of the bloodier and more violent parts of their jobs, then it wouldn't be unexpected if they kept the more

dubious parts of the 'information gathering' from him too.

Knowing that something is being done is of course very different from seeing it being done.

Fuck.

As we reach the end of the hallway, just past the doors to the shooting range, I grab Jorge's shoulders, making him stop. "Wait here. I'll take a look first." He's seen enough blood for one night. He's seen more than enough of his mates' violent side for one night.

He opens his mouth to say something but then gives a quick nod and leans back against the wall, taking deep breaths.

I walk down the hallway that goes off the main hallway, following the sounds of raised voices, until I reach a door that's slightly ajar.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Mathew's voice is hard and I hear metal scraping over stone floor.

That can't be good.

I barge into the room, finding one of the guys we picked up, the fake security guard, on a chair in the corner of the room, half naked, his eyes wide in terror as he stares at Riley and Mathew.

In front of him, on the floor, are what look to be the remnants of his gear, cut into small pieces.

"I was making sure he couldn't be tracked here.

” Riley wipes her hands on her legs, picks up the knife that’s halfway across the room and goes back over to the guy.

“We can never be too sure that they didn’t sew a bug into his clothes.

Those Suits Syndicate bastards can be very calculating at times. ”

She reaches out to the guy’s back, apparently wanting to continue her methodical cutting away of his clothes, but Mathew grabs her wrist before she can touch him.

“No.” His voice is quiet, his eyes dark, dangerous. “Don’t touch that fucking bastard. He doesn’t deserve it.” He slowly takes the knife out of Riley’s fingers, but when he turns to the fake security guard, his gaze not easing up, I step in.

Why did I think that Mathew was going to stop her? Of course, he’s just going to continue what she was doing.

The problem wasn’t the cutting away of the clothes of the terrified man, the problem was that Riley was touching the guy. Mathew was being possessive, that’s all.

“Both of you. In the hallway. Now!” I use enough of my Alpha powers that I’m sure they’ll listen.

They both grumble, but then hang their heads, following my orders. They know that I’m being serious and that if I have to, I will use more of my command, which will be a lot less fun for them.

As they pass me by, I hold out my hand, motioning for Mathew to give me the knife. With an unhappy glare, he hands it to me.

I follow them, closing the door behind me.

If I don't keep my eyes on them the whole time, I feel like I'm going to be putting out fires like this for the rest of the night.

Which isn't something I feel like doing...

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Vera

I keep the kids entertained as Luca reunites with his family. From the corner of my eyes I can see them in the hallway, embracing, tears flowing. They've been apart for years and his family has a lot of questions for him.

He told me some of his story while we were out on the balcony, a very condensed version, I'm sure. But every word out of his mouth made me want to wrap him up in blankets more and more, keep him safe for the rest of his life, make sure he'll never have to deal with anything bad ever again.

I have no idea how he survived for this long. The Hearts put him through tremendous horrors, all to make sure that they could keep him under control, while they were making plans how to use him to take down Mathew.

Luca reacting to Caleb and my pheromones a year ago seems to have been the moment that they started to finalise their ideas, set things in motion. And I hope that whatever the Hearts had planned, that us finding Luca last night will set them back for at least a little while.

If it wasn't part of their plan from the start... That us finding him and 'rescuing' him wasn't all part of their plan.

No.

I have to stay positive.

I have to believe that this wasn't planned.

I have to believe this wasn't planned and that they'll have to move to a plan B or C.

Because otherwise, I don't know how to survive, mentally.

I'm sure they've got backup plans for what to do if Luca managed to get away or if they couldn't use him for some other reason. I'm sure.

But not having him under their control anymore must be inconvenient for them, right?

Right?

"This is Vera, she rescued us." Luca's voice breaks through my thoughts and when I look up he meets my gaze, a light blush on his cheeks. "Without her, we would all have been in a much worse situation right now. Two of her Alphas, Caleb and Jorge, were the ones who brought you here."

An older man comes over to me, tears in his eyes as he grabs my shoulders, pulling me in for a tight hug. "Thank you so much. Thank you, so, so much." His voice breaks and I can't help my own tears. "We had no idea where he'd been all this time. Thank you so much for bringing him back."

I nod, not able to say anything, as other members of Luca's family crowd around me.

I'm suddenly very aware how special this is, not just for Luca's family, but for Luca too. From what Riley told us before, no matter what you're being told, if the Suits feel like it, they'll get rid of your family, and you wouldn't even know about it.

Luca finally has his family back and they have him back. Something that Mathew or

Riley will never be able to get.

“Please, let us know how we can ever repay you.” An older woman touches my arm, her voice wavering. Their pheromones are strong, flooding around us, their emotions so clear, so painful. Relief that they’re all reunited, darkness for all the time they’ve been apart and will never get back.

“I’m just glad that you’re all okay and safe and that you’ve found each other again.” I push the words past the lump in my throat. “I know that this is all a shocking change. But we want you to be safe. That’s all we care about.”

“Mum, Dad.” Luca pulls their attention. “They prepared some rooms for you. Just until they find a safe place. Shall we move to them? I’m sure Vera would like to get the kids to settle down for the night.” His voice is quiet but insistent.

“Of course.” The older man lets me go, giving me a soft and apologetic smile that reminds me of Luca immediately, making my pheromones flare with longing.

The man looks from me to Luca and back, frowning, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Let’s get out of here so the kids can go to sleep.

They must be exhausted too and I know how hard things get when kids don’t get enough sleep. ”

He picks up the young boy they brought with them, Luca’s sister’s son. The man looks at me, nodding. “We’ll talk more tomorrow. Again, thank you so much.”

“Have a good night. Try to get some rest.” I give them my best smile, even though it hurts and I have no idea how much actually shows.

Automatically, I follow them to the door, until I realise that I'm now right next to Luca.

Fuck.

No matter how much I instinctively want to be near him, I can't. I really can't.

But, before I can move away, Luca hooks his pinkie around mine, holding me like that for a few moments.

My heart races and no matter how much I try to suppress it, my pheromones flare.

Internally, I curse myself for not paying more attention to what I was doing, wishing I could pull the pheromones back inside. But it's too late.

Luca's face pales and I quickly step away, breaking our connection.

No.

Fuck.

No.

A whine catches in my throat, not even letting out a peep, but from the way Luca looks at me, he doesn't need to hear it. He knows what's going on.

"I'll help my family settle in." His voice is soft, wavering, his pheromones full of pain, fear, and underneath it all, deep longing.

I nod, blinking fast to keep my tears away, but failing as I watch him walk down the hallway, glancing back at me every few steps, as I close the door between us.

The moment the ‘click’ of the door reaches my ears, the tears start streaming down my cheeks. I suppress the new whine in my chest, the wail I want to let out, the desperation of needing to be with my mate.

One of the kids brings me a napkin and I give them a watery smile. “Thank you.” I wipe my eyes, though the tears keep returning.

Luca is here .

He’s only a few rooms over.

It’s not like he’s far away. He’s right here.

But right now, it doesn’t really matter, not if we can’t be in the same space.

It might even be worse.

So close and so far at the same time.

My eyes shoot open as burned caramel reaches my nose. Luca!

But when I become aware of my surroundings, I realise it’s Jorge, trying to put a shirt with Luca’s pheromones over my shoulders.

I’m in the nest, my mates’ clothes, including the shirt that Luca gave me for the ride home, clutched against my chest. I’m gripping them so tightly that my hands are all sore.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to wake you.” Jorge sits down next to me on the pillows, letting his cedar pheromones mix into the air, soothing me.

“How long have I been asleep?” I look around, but can’t find my phone or other way to tell the time and it’s still dark outside.

“Half an hour, at most.” He leans closer, kissing my cheek. “You should go back to sleep. At least one of us should get some sleep, so someone can keep everything running tomorrow.” He lets out a soft laugh.

“I can’t. We’ve got too much to do. I just...” I glance to the room with the kids, though mentally, I’m in the rooms behind it, the rooms where Luca’s family is staying.

“Do you have family out there?” The words slip from my lips.

Jorge stills, his gaze guarded.

“I’m sorry. Never mind. You don’t have to answer.” My heart races.

I hadn’t planned on asking about it, since none of us really talk about our families. We all have less-than-great relationships with them, alive or otherwise.

“No. It’s fine. I grew up in the area, so I see my family from time to time. When we pass each other by on the streets, things like that. But that’s it.” He lets out a long breath, his pheromones filling with something heavy, not so much pain but sadness. “I don’t talk to them voluntarily.”

I understand that feeling. I’ve not spoken to anyone from my parents’ pack since I left.

Luckily, we’ve not been anywhere that I could accidentally run into them, so I’ve not had to think about them much. But by now, I also have no need to be in contact with them.

After forcing me to marry Hubert and then not stepping in when he sent people after us, which they were fully aware of... They lost any rights to be considered my family.

“You should try to get some more sleep.” Jorge plays with his fingers over my shoulder, his touch soft.

“I can’t.” I sit up and look at the ball of shirts in my lap. “We have too much to do. I can’t sleep now.” We have so much to do that I’m trained for, unlike Jorge or Luca...

“The kids are asleep. I think at least one of us should stay on a sleeping schedule with them so that someone is awake enough to look after them.” He smiles at me.

“Sounds like a perfect task for you.” I grin back, grabbing his shoulder to get up, but he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me into his lap, making me quickly cover my mouth with my hands so that my squeak doesn’t wake the kids up.

He nips at my shoulder, letting out a rolling laugh. “I was thinking we could do it together.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I’d love to, but my skills are needed for other things. I think it would be best if Luca and you look after the kids. Luca can’t be around me, but he’s also the only adult they know.”

I glance to where Luca and his family are staying, trying to keep my heart under control, my tears. It feels unnatural, not being able to be close to my mate. It takes over my whole brain, making it hard to think of anything else.

“He’s not in the rooms with his family, he’s in the hallway.” Jorge’s voice is careful. “He’s sitting in the hallway right outside the kids’ room, because he can’t be away from you. When I checked on him, he asked me to bring you his shirt.”

Jorge holds me in his arms, keeping me close, his pain at seeing our distress making my tears even worse.

I wish I could drag Luca over here and hide him in my nest.

Hide him in the nest until everything is over.

Until his pain is gone and everything is good again.

I wish I could take his broken pieces and heal him, make him whole again.

But right now, I only bring him more pain.

Being around me hurts him, and I don't want that.

So, no matter how much it goes against my own feelings, my own instincts, I need to let him keep his distance as much as he needs.

Jorge stands up and puts me on my feet, wrapping Luca's shirt around my shoulders. He lets out a soothing rumble that vibrates through his chest, instinctively making me lean against him more.

I want my whole pack together, everyone in the nest at the same time. But I have a feeling that that might take a while.

Until then, I'll have to stay strong and be patient.

I can do the first, I'm not so good at the second...

But I'll have to try. For Luca, for the pack, for our future together.

I'll have to try.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Luca

I feel like I'm being torn apart on the inside, split into two. I'm so happy that my family is safe and that they're here and that I can see them and hold them and talk to them.

For years, I lived with the fear that even though the Hearts told me that they were still alive and that they would stay safe, as long as I did everything they wanted me to, that those were all lies.

For years, I didn't know if my family, if everyone I loved, was alive or dead.

I didn't know if they were out there, living happy lives, or if they were...

I swallow hard.

No. No going there anymore!

They're here. They're safe!

I can finally breathe again, stop carrying the pain of the unknown.

But also... My pack. The pack of contradictions and impossibilities.

A pack with a dangerous but cute female Omega, a dangerous and strong male Omega, a controlled and protective male Alpha, a female Alpha who seems to understand me without me having to tell her anything and a male Alpha who looks

out of place with the others, though fits in with them perfectly at the same time.

From the moment I reacted to Mathew's pheromones all those years ago, I already knew that if I ever found my fated mate or mates, that things would not be easy. Life for people who get away from the Suits is never going to be easy, never without danger.

What I didn't expect was how dangerous and complicated things would become.

I never expected that I wouldn't be able to be around some of my mates, not for some 'expected' or 'common' reason, but because of things that the Hearts did to me.

I never expected that the Hearts would purposefully harm me in ways that would not just hurt me in the short-term but that would keep hurting me, years if not decades later.

And not just me. That would hurt my pack, including Mathew, for a long time even if I ever did manage to get away from the Hearts.

There are so many people caught up, so many people hurt, just so the Hearts can get 'back at' Mathew for leaving them over a decade ago...

I have no idea how some people can be so cruel, I've never been able to understand it.

The door to the pack's bedroom opens and I jump to my feet, feeling awkward for sitting in the hallway like some lost puppy. Even though I feel exactly like that, a lost puppy who doesn't know where he belongs, where he's supposed to be.

Vera steps into the hallway, her puffy and red-rimmed eyes falling on me, a short spark brightening them, until she glances away, her gaze dulling. She looks guilty,

like she's somehow the one who put me through all of this horror, when she's as much a victim of the Hearts as I am.

It's not her fault. None of this is her fault. This pain I feel is not her fault...

I reach out to her, wanting to hold her, desperate to hold her, take away the agony in her eyes.

But when her soft honey pheromones reach me, darkness settles in my mind and my heart races in terror, my pheromones going even deeper bitter, my body shaking.

How can I want to be with her, be as close as possible to her, and so afraid of her at the same time?

It hurts.

It hurts so much .

"I'm sorry." Her quiet words reach me and I want to tell her again that she's got nothing to apologise for, but no words come out. My throat constricted.

I hope she understands that I want nothing more than to be able to be close to her, that I want nothing more than to be able to hold her, without everything going wrong.

When we talked out on the balcony, before my family arrived, I could be near her, even if it wasn't close enough to touch her, but it was still nice. But inside the house, pheromones are stronger, more concentrated, which means we have to keep more distance... We can't even be in the same room.

The only two people from the pack that I can be around without problems are Riley, the female Alpha who seems much too familiar with my situation, and Jorge, the

male Alpha who immediately wrapped me in his pheromones when we first met.

Mathew too, in some ways, but that's more because he lacks pheromones. When I do catch them, they might not set my fear off like Vera and Caleb's do, but it still isn't good for my mind. Too many memories, too much pain, too much trauma.

Someone comes up the stairs and I automatically take a step back, trying to go up into the walls of the hallway—an automatic response from years of training—until I notice it's one of the Alphas who helped my family, the less scary one of the two in charge.

Vera goes up to him, alert. "Any more information?"

"Not that I know, but check with Mathew or Derrick, I've mostly been shackled to my computer since we came back.

" He looks to me, slightly smiling. "Which is why I'm here.

I've got a new phone for you. It's clean.

All of our numbers are already on it." He comes over, holding out a brand new phone, much newer than the model I used to have.

"Thanks." I force the word out as I stare at it, not really believing it yet. "What about..." I gave my old phone to Eli, the Omega who helped get the kids and me to the house, he said that he needed to make sure I couldn't be tracked through it. That is was for our safety.

The Alpha nods. "Of course, you'll get the old one back too. As soon as I've got time, I'll make sure that it can't be used in any malicious way, and you'll get it back."

I quickly shake my head. “I don’t need it back. But there are...” There are things on it that I don’t want to lose.

“I’ll sit down with you to get anything you want from it. Does that sound good?”

“Yes. Thank you.” I glance up, finding Vera staring at me.

Wait, if her number is on the phone, we can talk without having to be near each other.

I swallow hard. That’s actually...

That’s actually good!

I unlock the phone, trying to locate the messaging app, but not spotting it.

“This one.” The Alpha points to one of the icons, then he steps past me. “I’m going to check on your family. I’ll get them clean phones as soon as possible too.”

I nod, tapping on the app he pointed at and a whole bunch of names appear. Looking through them for Vera’s number, I spot the name ‘Timothy’ and realise that’s the name of the Alpha who gave me the phone. I should probably try to remember that.

Timothy is the slightly less scary one, Derrick is the scary one. And Eli is their Omega. I think I got that right.

Then I click on Vera’s name and then send a simple message, feeling embarrassed. ‘Hello.’

Vera’s pheromones flare, making my hands shake, and I stumble back a step. I’d almost calmed down. Between Timothy’s steady cinnamon scent and Vera sending out soothing pheromones, I’d almost calmed down, but I’m now back on high-alert.

Fuck...

‘Welcome home.’ Her reply makes my heart skip and brings tears to my eyes. When I look at her, she’s quickly wiping at her cheeks.

She’s so cute.

Fuck the Hearts, for messing me up like this.

‘I’m going downstairs. They need me. But feel free to message me whenever you feel like it.’ She gives me a small wave before going down the stairs. Her footsteps stop and a new message comes in. ‘I want you to message me. I want to be able to talk to you, no matter how. I want it.’

Then her footsteps fade away, just like her honey scent.

Instinctively, I take a step after her, but then stop. It’s no use trying to follow her when we can’t be near each other. Messaging is a much better idea.

She’s right. If this is how we can talk without things going bad, then this is how we’ll have to talk for now. It’s better than nothing, and it’s definitely better than either of us having to be in pain.

‘I will.’ I smile slightly, remembering how she looked wearing the shirt I just gave to Jorge. ‘You look cute in that shirt.’

My cheeks flash with heat, and I quickly put the phone away. Well, no matter how badly I react to her pheromones, that doesn’t stop my body from reacting to her in much more positive ways when her pheromones aren’t involved.

I follow Timothy to the rooms where my family is staying. My parents, two of my

siblings and my little nephew.

Before tonight, I had no idea I'd become an uncle. While I don't want to bring this up to my sister, I'm pretty sure I know who the little boy's father is.

My sister had gotten involved with some bad people. Her kind heart abused by them, especially by one of them. I tried anything to get her out, but in the end, the only way I could was by giving myself up instead.

That's how I got involved with the Hearts. They had their grip on my sister, their control over her tightening day by day, and the only way to protect her, to make sure that they would never contact her again, was to offer myself up.

Now, knowing she was already pregnant at the time, I'm more glad than ever that I did. I don't want to consider what they would have done to her if the Hearts had found out about the pregnancy back then.

My older brother comes over, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

"I'm so happy you're alive and look well.

After all those years, I never wanted to believe that.

.." He swallows hard, letting out a tight breath.

"I'd always hoped we'd find you some day.

And here you are." He pulls me tighter against him and I lean into his embrace.

I want to tell him how glad I am that they're all alive and that they seem to be doing well, but no words come out. Not that Leo needs words, he simply holds me tightly.

“We looked for you everywhere. The police got involved. The media. We posted about you on social media. But nobody could find you. You were gone. Vanished without a trace.” His voice is lower, quieter, making sure only I can hear him. “What happened? Where were you?”

No guilt. No accusations. A simple plea for explanations. For closure. For something to make sense of the situation.

I was right here, under their noses, but the Hearts are great at making you disappear if they don’t want anyone to find you. They did station me at a few other locations over time, but most of the time, they kept me in the same place I’ve always been, the same city.

And, once they found out I was a scent match for Mathew, they kept me in the same exact building I’ve been in for years. I was never far. Which made it all the more painful.

I want to explain everything, but at the same time, I don’t want to relive any of it. From how Vera, her pack and some of the people working for Mathew have reacted, they know what I’ve been through. Or at least enough that they don’t ask questions.

But my family has no idea. My family doesn’t have any connection to that world. And I want to keep it that way.

I don’t want them to know all the painful things.

I don’t want to hurt them.

I’ll come up with something, some explanation, a softer version of the truth. But not tonight.

Not tonight.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Riley

The moment Caleb used his Alpha powers on Mathew and me in the training complex was the final straw.

I'd been running on basically no energy and even less emotional control for well over an hour.

But Caleb ordering us out of the room with the fake guard, when I was simply trying to be productive, was too much.

Jorge noticed what was going on and helped me to get to my room with as little interference as possible. It was kind of funny to watch him glare and growl at anyone in our way, his arm around my shoulders, as he escorted me through the house.

I'm really glad that I've got my own room and that it's on the other side of the house from our pack room. The side with our pack room is really busy right now, with the kids and Luca's family, and I desperately need my calm.

Once Jorge had made sure that I was comfortable in the corner of my closet, he brought over some clothes with our pack's pheromones, especially from Vera and Mathew, and then carefully closed the doors behind him. Surrounding me in dark and quiet, finally letting my brain slow down.

I was already running out of energy when we were leaving the research complex, and I wanted nothing more than to go home and hide with everyone in the nest.

But then everything else happened.

So, I'm well past my limit now.

My tears won't stop and my emotions ping-pong between anger and relief, with a constant sensation of guilt running through it all.

My pack is out there, taking care of people, still working, even though they're as exhausted as I am, but I'm the only one hiding away.

I wipe at my cheeks, but it's no use. It's been a while since I broke down like this. But then, it's been a very long time since I was this exhausted, that the day simply wouldn't end, no matter how hard I wished for it.

'How are you doing?' Vera's message lights my phone up and I smile as I reply to her.

'Not sure yet. How are you?' I don't have energy for much else.

As long as I stay in my little cocoon, I can be somewhat communicative with people, through messaging, but that's basically it.

'All over the place. Do you need me to bring you anything?' While I would love to have Vera in my arms right now, get her pheromones from the source, I also know that she won't be able to sit still and I need the calm and quiet.

'I'm good. Thank you.'

I've never been this frustrated about having a meltdown before.

Maybe the time that Jorge came over after a mission that went sideways is the closest.

But back then, I simply had to recharge and I knew that the next days would be quiet and easy. That I could go at my own speed to recover.

But, this time, I won't be able to do that.

Tonight is busy enough as it is, and it's not going to end any time soon. I know that the next days, even the next week, will be filled with activity and lots of people. I won't have the time —or space— to really recharge, so I need to do the best that I can.

Which means, hiding away and trying to relax as much as possible and getting as much sleep as I can between doing other things. Anything to recharge myself as efficiently as possible, taking things one day at a time, and hoping that I can keep up with it until I can really relax.

Hoping I won't break before then...

'Do you want me to get you anything from your place? Vera asked Mum for help with the situation with the kids. I can grab a few things from your place if you want me to.' I blink the sleep from my eyes as I stare at Nathan's message, taking a few moments to understand what he means.

Vera asked Nathan's mum, Erika, Caleb's ex, to help with the kids. Okay, that part makes sense. Erika deals with relocating people after they've been rescued from the Suits all the time, she's got a whole network set up for it, so it makes sense that Vera would ask her.

I reread the message two more times before my brain finally clicks all the elements in place. Nathan, and probably the other two guys from his pack, are joining Erika on the trip.

And he's asking if I want things from my apartment.

Okay.

I sit up straight as I push the closet door open, letting in light from my room. Someone —probably Jorge— closed the curtains last night, so it's not too bright.

'Give me a couple of minutes to wake up. How quickly do you need an answer?'

Nathan sends me a laughing emoticon. 'We won't leave for another couple of hours. I don't know the details. Mum and Logan are calling around to see who might be able to take in some of the kids. I don't think we'll leave until they've at least finished calling around.'

Logan is one of the other Alphas from Nathan's pack, a good kid, and a very sociable one too.

He's a lot like Jorge, always ready to diffuse any situation and try to make people smile.

He's a good counter-balance to Nathan's intense emotions, though, Nathan also relies on him a little too much at times.

Though, with their past, that's not unexpected.

As I watch Nathan's messages come in, I finally feel like I'm waking up. I've not had enough sleep, not at all, but my stress levels have lowered and I've got some more energy than I did before I fell asleep.

'Can you check something for me?' Now I've got him anyway, I can ask him something I've been meaning to ask Erika for a couple of days, but hadn't gotten

around to yet.

‘Sure. What do you need?’

‘What do you know about a plant-based pheromone compound that can be used to influence Alphas and Omegas? Probably used in the clubs, but it might be used in other locations too. At low levels, it lets Alphas and Omegas feel like they’re surrounded by the pheromones of their mates, but at high levels it can be used to mate Alphas and Omegas who aren’t scent matches.

’ With how far the research was that we saw last night and how interested the Hearts have been in it, I’m sure the others from the Suits Syndicate have also been interested in it.

‘I haven’t heard about something like that. But I’ll ask my dads and check if there might be something in our databases. Sounds fucking creepy though.’

‘Thanks. It might be quite new, so I don’t know if it’ll be easy to spot. But I would appreciate it if you could send me anything you find.’

‘Of course. I’ll let you know anything I find. If you let me know what you want from your place.’

I would like to get our databases synced up so that I can search both Mathew’s database and Erika’s database at the same time, but I feel like that might be too much to ask. At least at this moment in time.

Maybe we can discuss it when everyone is here and has finally met face-to-face.

And nobody has killed anyone...

Nathan and the two other guys from his pack have been helping Erika more and more over the last years. Nathan grew up always being aware of what his parents did for a job, saving people from the Suits Syndicate, and he's always wanted to follow in their footsteps.

He met Logan when they were teens and Logan pretty quickly became part of the whole mission too. And, finally, Jace, he's been with them for less than a year but when you see them together, it feels like it was never any different. He's kind of their big brother.

Erika and her pack saved me from the Diamonds and one of her pack's family members took care of me until I was old enough to start living on my own.

I owe my life to Erika's pack. Nathan and his siblings are like cousins to me, and being the eldest of twelve, it was easy for me to fall into the older sister/cousin role.

For years, after Nathan and Logan lost one of their other Alpha pack members—mere months after Logan joined them—I feared that they would never recover, that they would never be able to move forward again.

But, for the last year, Nathan seems to be on a better path.

And to see him interested and excited about life and the world again feels good.

I quickly wipe at my cheeks, trying to get the tears from my eyes so I can reply to him. 'I don't have the energy to think what I might want or need. Sorry.'

'It's okay. I'll take Jace to check out your apartment and see if something stands out. Don't worry about it. You've got other things on your mind.'

'Thanks.' I pocket the phone and stand up, checking myself.

First step, change into clean clothes.

Second step, check on the kids.

Third step, check where the rest of my pack is.

I have no idea how much energy I've got today and how useful I might be, but I'll take it one step at a time. Even if I won't be able to help anyone out there, I can still take my laptop in here with me and help them out from the corner of my closet.

It's all about using what you've got and this is what I've got today. My brain feels pretty clear, the main problem is that I still can't regulate my emotions and that my body probably won't hold up all day. But I can work with that. I've been working with that all my life.

Dressed in loose pants and a blouse, both of the softest fabrics we could find but that would also not be too hot in this summer weather, I make my way over to the room where the kids are.

Let's hope they got some sleep, though, with how stressful last night was, I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't get much sleep.

The door to the room is slightly ajar and when I push it open further, I find Jorge and Luca sitting in the open doorway to the balcony, quietly chatting as most of the kids are still asleep in a makeshift nest in the corner of the room.

Jorge has one of the kids in his lap, while Luca hands the kid pieces of fruit. Another kid is walking around on the balcony, looking out over the fields, all quiet awe and excitement.

A lump forms in my throat and tears spring in my eyes as I take in the sight. They

look so peaceful and I can imagine them sitting exactly like that, a couple of years into the future, with our own kids.

It's beautiful.

This quiet peace is what I want our future to be like.

This exactly.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Jorge

Luca stops talking and looks to the door to the room in surprise. When I follow his gaze, I find Riley staring at us, eyes filled with tears as her pheromones fluctuate through the room, her love and tenderness clear.

She looks a lot better than she did a couple of hours ago, though I'm sure she's not recovered yet.

She was really down and at the end of her energy when I helped her to her room.

I've not seen her that worn out before, but knowing how long it normally takes for her to recover, she's going to need much more time than this.

I motion for her to come over, not wanting to raise my voice much above a whisper, trying to let the kids sleep as long as possible.

She quietly crosses the room and sits down next to me. She looks at the sleeping kids and then at the girl in my arms, before looking at the boy on the balcony. "How are they doing?"

Since Luca has more experience with kids and knows them better than me, I wait for him to answer.

"They're doing okay. The fact that they can get some sleep in, and feel safe enough to do so.

And that they don't constantly wake up with nightmares is a good sign.

It hopefully means they'll be able to leave this horrible stretch of time behind them at some point.

" He glances at us and then outside, not comfortable with meeting our gazes.

He had been getting better at it over the last half hour while I was talking to him, but he seems to have become shy again with Riley here. At least he's getting there and that's what counts.

What I understood from Luca, these kids haven't been with the Hearts for very long and they definitely haven't been 'put to work' in too bad situations.

He said that the Hearts treat the kids that have been 'put to work' —in whatever capacity, not just sexual, even simply being messengers— differently.

These kids were probably being moved around, to hide them from anyone looking for them, before they got any jobs.

While some of them will have parents, or families, who want them back, not all of them will be that lucky.

That's how the Hearts got hold of Mathew, he was a street kid, no parents, nobody to look after him, nobody to worry about him.

The other group they tend to target are kids in the system, a system so overworked and under-funded that some of them slip through the cracks, especially when those cracks have been purposefully kept open by organisations like the Hearts...

I hope that the last days, or weeks, or however long they've been with the Hearts, will

be nothing more than a nearly-forgotten nightmare for these kids, a bad dream that they barely remember. That they'll feel loved and cared for from now on, that they'll have brighter days ahead.

Riley's phone buzzes and when she reads the message, her pheromones flare in anger before she calms them down again. "Are the others awake?" Her voice is low but tight.

"They should be in Mathew's office or the library.

" I've been avoiding them, since they're doing things that I prefer not to know too much about.

I know that things like getting information out of people is part of their job, but that doesn't mean I want to be there when they do it or when they discuss what they found.

I know it's hypocritical, avoiding having to face their darker sides while still working with them or while still making use of the information that they find.

But I don't know how else to deal with it all.

I have other specialities, things that they also don't always want or need to know the details of. Sometimes, not knowing is easier.

Sometimes, not knowing is how we stay alive.

"Did Vera or Mathew get any sleep?" Riley glances to the nest room, which is clearly empty, and our pack bedroom behind it.

"Vera got a couple of minutes in the nest. I don't think Mathew slept at all. Unless

they managed to slip in a nap at some point. But I doubt it.” I know Mathew well enough for that and as long as Vera manages to keep moving, she’s not sleeping either.

“You?” She looks at me and then at Luca.

“I might have gotten an hour or two, and then one of the kids woke up and couldn’t fall back asleep.” Comforting the girl so that she didn’t feel so scared and alone was much more important than getting more sleep myself.

“Same.” Luca pulls up his shoulders. “I’m also still too wound up. It’s hard to relax enough to sleep.”

Riley rubs her hand over her arm, her pheromones filling with nerves, as she glances at Luca and then away. “If you want to sleep somewhere that has some pheromones from your pack but not too many. You can sleep in my bedroom or the ‘nest’ in my closet.”

She swallows hard. “There are some pheromones from the others, but they’re mostly mine. I know that they...” Her voice wanders off.

My big bad Alpha, trying to help, trying to be helpful to someone she cares for, but not really knowing how to. It probably doesn’t help that she’s still exhausted, that probably makes her nervousness worse and the words harder to find.

Luca’s pheromones flare in surprise and slight confusion. But then he quickly nods. “Thanks. I might take you up on that offer.”

“Okay.” Riley stands up, her cheeks slightly pink, holding up her phone like it explains her behaviour. “I’ve got some information that the others need to know about. I’ll talk to you later.”

She quietly leaves the room again.

“She’s very protective, isn’t she?” Luca stares after Riley, softly smiling.

“She is. She might be a bit awkward about it at times, but she’s very protective, and thoughtful.

” In many different ways. From things like this, trying to make people’s lives easier and predicting what they’ll want or need ahead of time, to more direct ways, like killing people without a second thought just because they’re a danger to those she cares about.

He nods, looking at his hands as his pheromones fill with sadness.

I don’t know what’s going through his head, but after a couple of moments, he looks up, blinking away tears as he gives me a tight smile.

“I think I might take her up on that offer for a place to sleep. See if I can get a nap in before the rest of the kids wake up.”

“Sounds good.” If he wants to talk about whatever’s on his mind, he’ll do that in his own time and once he feels safe to do so, but he’s clearly not ready for it yet. “If you go past the stairs, her bedroom is on the right. It’s hard to miss, once you open the door, it’s full of crafts.”

That makes him smile more. “Thanks. You can message me or send someone to get me once the kids wake up. I don’t want you to have to deal with all of them on your own.”

“I’ll be fine. You go take a nap.” Because he needs it much more than me.

Luca walks over to the sleeping kids, pulling the blankets over them more, before he gives me a nod and makes his way down the hallway.

I hope he gets some sleep. I really do.

Because I feel like we'll be doing a lot of 'sleeping whenever we can' for a while, better to start now.

The kids are all having breakfast on the balcony, chatting happily as they look out over the fields. I'm very glad that the front of the house looks out over the fields and trees and not any of the other parts of the grounds that Mathew owns.

The training complex and other buildings are on the other side, which means that the kids don't have to see any of the people in gear or anything they're getting up to.

Which is also the reason we're keeping them up here and aren't letting them go downstairs, less chance of them seeing or hearing something they're not supposed to.

Luca's family have joined us, partially to help look after the kids, but mostly because they don't have much else to do and at least they've got other adults to talk to here.

Caleb and I explained some of what was going on last night, on our way back here, but we didn't want to scare them too much or make them worry. So, we're trying to keep them away from the more dangerous things as much as possible, which they seemed to understand.

Finding out that your child or sibling was being kept hostage by some criminal organisation and meeting kids who were in a similar situation, probably makes you willing to wait for any more detailed answers until things have settled down. I hope so anyway.

Luca's family still seems quite confused, but also pretty patient when it comes to waiting for answers.

Hearing that their lives were in real danger also made them more willing to listen to what we were saying and not question things too much.

Now, let's hope that we can figure out a new safe location for them, somewhere that they can live without worrying about being targeted again. Or, at least, without Luca having to worry about them being targeted again...

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Vera

‘Can I come into your room?’ I message Riley as I walk up the stairs, a tray with sandwiches and some bottles of water in my other hand. Having been a waitress comes in handy at times, for example, letting me text while bringing my sweet Alpha something to eat and drink.

‘Sure. Just try to be as quiet as you can.’ Her reply makes me smile. Well, yes. That was the plan. I wasn’t planning on making a lot of noise.

Even though the door to the kids’ room is closed, I can still hear voices, laughter, chatting, coming from there. It’s muffled, but not very quiet, so I totally understand why she’s hiding in her room.

After last night, with everything being so busy and running on very little sleep, hiding away in a quiet space sounds great to me too.

Riley got some information from Erika earlier this morning, but as soon as she’d told us what she knew, she grabbed her laptop, a tablet and went back to her room. That’s probably going to be her base of operations for the day.

Well, we did make sure to kit her closet and any comfortable areas in her room out specifically for this purpose, so...

I open the door to Riley’s room, dim warm light greeting me as I step inside, and close it behind me, a sound that’s barely audible.

She's got thick and soft carpet on the floor, the door closes basically soundlessly and the windows are covered with two sets of curtains, one to keep out the light and one to simply dim it, which are the ones closed right now.

It makes it easy to see in the room without having to turn any lights on, but it's still easier on the eyes than no curtains at all.

There's a light breeze and I spot the quiet fans that are angled so that air moves through the room but if you sit at the desk, lie in the bed or curl up in the closet, you're not actually in their streams. It's enough to control the temperature in the room and to keep the air moving, without any physical sensations, apart from the quiet hum.

Since she's not at her desk or on her bed, she's probably hauled up in her closet, possibly the quietest place in the whole house, especially right now.

One of the doors of the closet is open, the other closed and I carefully look around the corner.

Even in the heat of summer, Riley's sitting in the back corner of the closet, propped up against a bunch of pillows, two soft and fluffy blankets pulled up almost to her neck.

The only parts of her visible are her arms and head.

She beams up at me and puts her laptop to the side, on the little shelf so it won't get lost in her 'pile'.

"I've got some sandwiches and something to drink." I keep my voice low. "Do you want me to give you the whole tray or just hand you individual things?"

She glances around, thinking. “Individual things, I think.” She meets my gaze, still looking exhausted, but definitely looking more at ease now. “Can I get a bottle of water first? I forgot to take one up with me.”

“Sure.” I put the tray on the floor and hand her one of the bottles, before I look around the room, spotting one of the big pillows and putting it against the open closet door so I can sit there.

I could use a bit of quiet with one of my Alphas before I go back into the fray. A few moments to recharge.

“How are things downstairs?” Riley takes a few sips of her water.

I let out a long breath. “Calming down. The ‘post mission’ stuff is done. Mathew is sending people to bed to sleep in shifts. We’ve not really gotten much out of the guys yet, but that’s only a matter of time.

” Getting everything and everyone settled was more important in the short term.

Plus, it’s only useful to start asking questions if you know what you want to ask, asking them just random things won’t get us anywhere.

“Good.” Then she gives me an awkward smile. “Is Caleb still angry?”

“He isn’t. He wasn’t angry before either.

You were putting yourself and other people in danger and he was trying to keep everything together.

He was trying to keep everyone safe.” I hold out one of the sandwiches to Riley.

“Do you know where Luca is? He wasn’t with Jorge and I’ve not seen him in a few hours. ”

He’s hopefully just asleep somewhere, but I would still like to know where, keep the pack together and all of that. Make sure he’s okay and not feeling like crap all alone in some dark corner.

Riley puts a finger to her lips as she puts the sandwich to the side, her eyes glittering in the low light. Then she lifts the blankets next to her slightly, revealing Luca, fast asleep, curled up on top of and around a bunch of our clothes.

I stare, barely able to believe what I’m seeing. I thought she just had a lot of pillows in her ‘pile’ but I had no idea that she had a whole person under there. Now it makes sense why she’s keeping her voice so quiet and why she’s staying so still, she’s trying to let him sleep.

She carefully lowers the blankets again, making sure not to disturb Luca too much.

“He was here when I came back. And he fell asleep while I was working.” She smiles sadly.

“No matter how much they messed with his head, he can’t deny his instincts, he can’t be away from his pack now we’ve found him. ”

I wipe at my eyes, overwhelmed with emotion, and probably from exhaustion. Luca looked so cute, so sweet, asleep against Riley. Like he finally felt safe enough to fully relax, possibly for the first time in years...

Luca lets out a soft sound and moves around under the blankets, making me break out in a smile. He’s so cute. I can’t keep my eyes off where he’s hiding, not wanting to leave him alone. I don’t care if I can see him or even touch him, being near him is

good enough.

“If you would like to take a nap, grab some more pillows and make yourself a little nest there.” Riley lets her warm rose pheromones flood around us, comforting, soothing.

“But... What if my pheromones disturb him?” I don’t want to disturb Luca when he’s finally resting.

“He’s under the blankets with me, he’s mainly getting my pheromones, he won’t get much of yours if you’re not under here with us.” She says it in a calm way that makes it feel like she’s making a lot of sense.

“I guess I could do that.” I guess I can take a nap, or maybe even just get comfortable here until I get back to work.

I grab a couple more pillows from Riley’s bed and make a bigger ‘nest’ right outside her closet.

It’s just big enough for me to curl up on, I can’t stretch out, but I don’t care, I’ll take anything right now.

I don’t grab a blanket, the heat of the day is bad enough, I don’t need to boil myself alive.

Settling down in the pillows, I look at Riley, who’s eating a sandwich and reading something on her tablet, already back to work.

Taking deep breaths, trying to let go of some of the tension in my body, I’m about to close my eyes when I spot movement at the edge of the blankets, Luca’s hand crawling out from under it, moving in my direction.

I stare at his hand and then at Riley, who looks surprised too, before softly smiling.

“Vera?” Luca’s voice is muffled, but hearing him say my name makes my heart race all the same.

“I’m here.” I push my pillows closer and then put my hand over Luca’s. “I’m right here.”

He weaves his fingers through mine, rubbing his thumb over my hand, before his grip relaxes. I think he’s back to sleep already.

My heart hammers in my chest, tears in my eyes, as I stare at Riley, not able to fully believe what’s going on. Luca is holding my hand!

I try to get comfortable in the pillows without moving my hand too much, not wanting to break this little connection between us.

This is...

Luca, who can’t be near me without having a panic attack from my pheromones, is holding my hand.

We’re touching!

The small gesture, the small proof of trust, breaks something inside me and my tears won’t stop anymore.

All the tension and stress leaves me as the tears and the sobs keep coming, as I quietly break down, no longer able to keep it all inside.

My phone buzzes, waking me up, and I look at the lit screen in front of me. It’s

Nathan.

I blink, trying to stretch, when I notice that Luca is still holding onto my hand. Oh, right. That happened. A bright feeling flutters in my chest as I softly squeeze Luca's hand, happy he hasn't let go yet.

Then I look up more and notice that Riley is asleep, curled up on her side, her face finally relaxed.

I have no idea how long I've been asleep for, but while my eyes feel puffy, my head feels much clearer and my heart feels lighter. The miracles of a good cry and a good nap.

With my empty hand, I push myself up and move my phone to read Nathan's message. 'Don't be too alarmed. Jace found new bounties, posted less than an hour ago.'

I sit up more, breaking my connection with Luca, and the motion seems to wake up Riley too. Either that, or possibly my spike in pheromones.

Nathan is typing out more, but I don't want to wait on him. I can't. My heart is already hammering enough and I don't want my mind to come up with a million reasons why he'd be telling me this.

Before he finishes typing, I call him instead, already standing up and crossing Riley's room to the hallway. I don't want to have this conversation around Luca.

The moment the call connects, I need to know. "Who are they for?"

"Your whole pack." Nathan's voice is tense. "Mum is on the phone with Caleb right now. She's got more information about it. I just know the broad strokes." He takes a

quick breath. “I wanted to let you know so you...”

The door behind me opens and Riley wraps her arm around my waist, pulling me against her as she puts the call on speaker. “I just saw your messages. Is Jace sending everything to Timothy?” Riley’s pheromones are strong, in control, focused.

“Yes. Of course.” Nathan stumbles over his words and I realise that he’s scared. He’s scared for us. That’s why he messaged us, so we would know about it before Caleb or any of the others would dump everything on us. He wanted to give us a head’s up.

“Good.” Riley nuzzles my neck, her pheromones softening slightly, though still focused, she’s gone into work-mode. “Anything else you can tell us? Any other new names?”

“A few that we didn’t recognise. Everything is being sent to Timothy and his team right now.

” Nathan seems to calm down from Riley taking control over the conversation.

“I did notice that there were a couple of people with the same last name, a range of ages, looks to be a whole family. We’ve not found them anywhere in our system before.

Their listings went up at the same time as the others, so we presume they’re connected. ”

There’s movement in the doorway to Riley’s room, Luca staring at us, his eyes wide, confused.

“Here I have it. Damen. Does that ring a bell for you?” Nathan’s words sound too loud as Luca’s face goes deadly pale and Riley and I grab for him at the same time.

Oh, fuck.

Fucking hell...

Those bastards!

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Caleb

I stare at my phone as Erika walks us through what Jace found. Bounties on our whole pack, Luca's family, the three guys we grabbed and the kids.

They fucking put bounties on the kids!

I'm going to take these bastards down.

I'm going to take them down once and for all.

"Caleb? Caleb!" Erika's voice barely breaks through the fog of fury and destruction in my head. "You can wallow in your rage later. I need you to focus first."

I look around the library, glad I'm only in here with Timothy and some of his tech team, who are currently staring at me in shock and silence. Just because I can usually keep my calm, doesn't mean I can't lose my temper, especially if I'm spread too thin already.

If Riley or Mathew hear about this...

That's going to create a whole other mess, better get ahead of that.

"I'm here." I try to control my voice, my pheromones, my emotions.

"We're sending you everything we've got right now. But once we're on the move, our connection will be spotty. So, once we leave, we probably won't be able to do

much until we've landed."

Erika's quiet for a couple of moments, her voice composed. "This isn't the first time this has happened. We've seen this happen before. It's not uncommon for the Suits to put bounties on the kids who escape from them, especially not when they know who to target for it."

I let out a humourless laugh. "I was furious every time it happened before too. I'm just too tired to hide it this time."

"And the combination of having the kids and Luca's family both on the list, it's too much."

Luca's family doesn't have anything to do with the Hearts apart from being used to threaten Luca into compliance. ..

It's hard to control my anger if I let my mind wander for even a single second.

"I'll check with Mathew and Derrick, but I would feel better if we could bring some of our security team with us. To boost your numbers. I'm not worried about our own safety, and I'm sure Mathew's team is great, but I would feel better if..." She lets out a long sigh. "Just for a short while."

I meet Timothy's gaze, who shrugs. The more people the better, but having people from multiple packs and organisations in a single location for more than a couple of days might also lead to tensions that we really can't use right now.

Timothy crosses over to where I'm standing. "We've got two houses where your pack and any other people can stay for a while. It's at the edge of Mathew's property, still within the secure perimeter, but not too near the main house."

He looks at me. “The option is there, if the others agree to it. We’ve got enough on our hands as it is, getting some outside security might not be the worst idea, as long as everyone gets along.”

“How are we going to bring this to Mathew?” I glance to the door of the library. “We’ve got about another minute or so, max, before he’s going to barge in here. Because that’s how his ‘something’s up’ senses work. Way too well.”

“I’ll talk to him.” Timothy looks to the guys from his team, thinking. “You go talk to Vera, Riley and Jorge. Let them know what’s going on. See if you can get them caught up about everything going on without worrying the kids or Luca’s family.”

“Sounds like a plan.” And it’s less likely to get me in that destructive headspace again, at least for a while. “Erika?”

“I heard. You go talk to the others. We’ll talk to Mathew.”

I nod. Well, let’s do this, then. I really don’t feel like it, but I also know that it’s better to let everyone know as soon as possible.

Oh, also... I don’t think Jorge knows yet that Erika and some of her people are coming over. With how he’s reacted to her name or even any reference to her in the past, that’s also going to be fun . Let’s hope that jealousy has lessened now we’ve been a pack for a while, but I have no idea.

Erika and Mathew’s organisations getting along might not be our biggest concern, our pack members might pose a much greater risk to all of this going well...

Fuck.

It turns out, my worries were misplaced, mostly.

As long as I don't use Erika's name or even refer to her by something related to me, like her being my ex, Jorge won't growl. I can call her Nathan's mum just fine or even Vera's friend. So, that's... somewhat helpful, for now.

What I should have been worried about was some of our pack members already knowing about the new names from the bounties and dealing with their own things.

When I got to the floor with our bedrooms, there was a strange mix of not-good pheromones coming from Riley's room, a blending of Riley, Vera and Luca. Knowing that that was going to take a while to deal with, I decided to get Jorge first instead.

I worried that getting Jorge out of the room with Luca's family and the kids without raising any suspicion could be tricky.

It turns out, telling them that we need him for 'important work stuff' and asking for them to please not worry too much and promising them that everything is going as expected, worked just fine.

At least, all the adults wordlessly agreed to pretend that everything is normal so that the kids wouldn't catch onto any nervous energy.

Getting Jorge to Riley's room also wasn't too complicated because as soon as he stepped into the hallway, he sensed their pheromones and rushed over.

Turns out, Riley, Vera and Luca already knew what's going on and getting Jorge up-to-date wasn't too complicated either.

I should have guessed as much, especially since I knew that Nathan was in contact with Riley and Vera through the day, it makes sense that he would tell them as soon as he knew about the bounties.

What I hadn't accounted for was Luca's terror when he's around Vera and my pheromones, but also his inability to let her go or Vera's strong instincts to protect him.

And trying to get the two on opposite sides of the room to try to at least lower how much pheromones Luca gets didn't work either, that only got very protective growls from Riley and Jorge.

Good to know that everyone seems to be on the same page about Luca's status, he's part of our pack. But it's not helpful that any solution I come up with gets at least someone in the pack very upset.

How the fuck am I supposed to resolve this? Their mix of pheromones is starting to mess with my head too and there's only so long I can stay in control.

Getting Mathew up here isn't going to help either. He's going to be affected by everyone's pheromones but won't be able to use his own to calm things down.

"Jorge?" I try to get the guy's attention as he's staring at everyone.

"Can you use your pheromones to flood everyone, try to calm them down?" The only two people whose pheromones Luca doesn't react negatively to are Jorge and Riley, and Jorge is the one with the clearest head out of the two right now.

I try to suppress my pheromones as much as possible, so I won't be adding to the problem, but the moment Jorge sends out his —much too tense— 'calm down' pheromones, everyone else seems to get even more distressed.

Fuck.

This is very, very bad.

“Vera?” I reach out to her, which makes her pheromones flare and sets off everyone else’s too. “Vera, talk to me.” I don’t use my Alpha powers, I purely use my own voice, relying on the bond we’ve had for years, trusting that I can get through to her. “What’s going wrong?”

Riley is holding our broken Beta and troubled Omega, trying to create a pheromone bubble around Luca, while Luca and Vera’s fingers tightly entwined.

Vera’s voice is muffled against Luca’s back. “My pack is in danger.” A sob punctuates her words. “I need to protect my pack, but I can’t because that puts my pack in more danger.” Another sob. “And then. And then.”

Her breath comes out harsh as she reaches her other hand out to me and I take it. “And now we’ve put his family in even more danger than before. And it’s all my fault. And I can’t do anything about it.”

Vera’s worries are easy to understand and I wish that I could hold her close and tell her over and over that she’s not at fault, but she’s in no position to hear that right now.

I’ll need to break the worry and protective loop they’ve got going on before she’ll be able to really hear any reassuring words.

I look at Riley, but her whole focus is on the two people in her arms, protecting them, guarding them. If I can get Vera and Luca to calm down, she should calm down too.

Then I turn to Jorge, who seems to be reeling from what he’s just been told, his pheromones all over the place, but mostly stuck in ‘scared’ and ‘pained’. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought him in here, but once he noticed their pheromones, that choice was pretty much out of my hands.

Luca's pheromones are as clear as day, conflicted. Desperate to be with Vera, desperate for their connection, but also terrified of her pheromones, and mine.

Fury and destruction flares in me when my brain helpfully reminds me why he can't be near her, why he can't be near me, why our pheromones, which should comfort him only bring him more pain. My head starts to cloud again, blood red fury taking over my mind.

Fuck! Fuck!

No!

I can't get lost in that right now, no matter how tempting it is with the other pheromones storming through the room.

I try to remember the way Vera and Luca looked when I came home, sitting on the balcony, talking, looking mostly happy. That's what I need to work towards. That's what I need to make happen. Calm and happy.

"We'll get them." It's Riley's voice that breaks through, both the fog in my head and the looping pheromones. "We'll get rid of every person in the Hearts."

Yes, we'll get them. We'll take the people who caused this situation down. We'll take them down and make them regret ever laying their eyes on any of our pack members.

And to do that, we need to stay in control now and protect everyone.

My fury doesn't go away, it merely slides into the background, creating determination and drive.

If we want to take the Hearts down, we need to be at our best and we all need to be

together for that, our whole pack needs to be together.

I move closer to Vera, trying to wrap my pheromones around her without Luca getting too many of them. “We’ll protect Luca’s family. We’ll make sure they’re safe, that they’ll never have to worry about any of this ever again.”

“How?” Her voice is quiet, her grip on me still tight, not ready to believe.

“Mathew doesn’t have a whole organisation for nothing, and neither does Erika.” I ignore Jorge’s growl. “We’ll figure out a way. You know that we can. You know that we won’t stop until they’re safe.”

Riley’s pheromones change, just a little, more focused, determined, still very dangerous. “And until then, they’ll be safe here. Protected by everyone. We won’t let them out of our sights until we know that nobody will ever put them in danger ever again.”

She moves, touching Luca’s cheek tenderly before hugging both of them close again. “And I’ll ask if Sam can come with them. He helped me when they rescued me from the Diamonds. He’s got experience with adults who’ve been held by the Suits.”

Of course. I hadn’t even thought about that. His problems won’t be solved in just a few days, but we can make a start. If he gets the right help, we might be able to deal with the worst of it and take a bit of stress off everyone, especially off Luca.

Riley’s words and change in pheromones seems to ease some of the tension in the room. By far not enough of it, but it’s a start.

“We’re safe here.” I kiss the top of Vera’s head. “We’re all safe here, in the house. As long as we’re all together, we’ll be safe. All of us, including Luca.”

Vera slowly nods, her pheromones softening as she glances at me.

Everyone is on edge, nobody feels safe, and since everyone is also at the end of their energy, exhausted, wrung out, emotions and pheromones are running high. Making everything so much worse, making every curve up into a peak and every curve down into a crater.

It's dangerous, but then, dangerous is basically the norm here, so I'm sure we'll make it work.

Somehow.

Hopefully without too much blood and no dead bodies...

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Mathew

“How many times has it happened since Vera and Caleb got here?” I stare at the laptop screen, my mouth open, ice running through my veins as Timothy shows me clips of what he calls ‘blips’, strange static in the security feed.

“It happened a few times between when Hubert first came here to hire you and when they arrived. And has happened a couple of times since then.” Timothy’s voice is tense, trying to avoid clearly answering.

“How many?” I look straight at him, I need exact numbers.

“Twenty-one times in total. Multiple people went over the footage, it’s twenty-one times, no more”

That’s not ‘a few times’, that averages out to more than once a week. “And you didn’t tell me about this, why?”

“You had enough—” When he sees the look in my eyes, he reaches out to another laptop and clicks around.

“I set up a second set of cameras and other security measures around the perimeter, on a separate system. That system has been working fine the whole time, no interference, no blips, all clean. I’ve been using the second system for our security, and I’ve been running a program on the first that acts like we’re still using it, in case it’s being monitored.

I didn't tell you about it because I first wanted to be sure what was going on. ”

He turns to me. “When we realised that something was up the night Vera and Caleb arrived, I immediately beefed up our security. At no point before or since then was our security ever down. And nothing unusual has happened on any of our other systems.”

“Apart from the ‘blips’ on our perimeter security...” Which are a pretty big deal.

Timothy nods. “On the system we’ve been keeping running but haven’t relied on.” He puts extra emphasis on the last words. “Our security is still good.”

“And how are you so sure that they’re not aware that you’re running a secondary security system on the perimeter?” The Hearts, or whoever are doing this, aren’t dumb, they understand how security works.

I really wish Timothy had told me about this sooner because I suddenly feel a lot less sure about our safety, especially now there are a lot of people here, not just us, but also Luca’s family and the kids we rescued.

“They only tapped into the system on our perimeter, not any of the ones that are closer to the house or other buildings. We run the systems separately for this exact reason. This also meant that we were able to set up new cameras and sensors that could keep an eye on both what the perimeter system is supposed to look at and keep an eye on the cameras themselves.”

He pulls up a different program. “The new system fully runs from a generator, so there’s no difference in our electricity use, in case they’re also monitoring that.

And we’re buying fuel for the generators with cash when we’re in the city for something else.

I know that you told us to replace any cameras and systems that could have been affected the night Vera and Caleb arrived, but that seemed like a waste of time and energy.

This way, I could keep an eye on what's going on while still keeping the security up.
”

“Much good that has done you. You still don't know what's going on.” I generally don't immediately involve myself with the runnings of this place, unless I really have to, trusting that Derrick and Timothy will handle it, so I can focus on the running of the organisation instead.

“I know that I've been distracted since Vera and Caleb arrived, but I would have liked to have known about this before finding out that there's a bounty on my whole pack, the family of one of my pack members and a whole bunch of kids, who are all living in my house at the moment.”

I sit down, my head spinning and my stomach is starting to become unhappy. “Tell me you've got good news?”

What's done is done. It's better to focus on something productive instead. I understand why Timothy did what he did, even if I don't like it. It was his call and I'm sure he made the right call, even if it doesn't make me happy right now.

“I might not know what causes the ‘blips’, but I do know that they're monitoring that system. The blip might simply be a problem in their monitoring software that I've not found yet. There are...” He eyes me, stopping.

“I'm sure that they're monitoring us. At this point, I'm also pretty sure it's the Hearts. All they've seen for the past months is that we upped our patrols after Vera and Caleb came here—which they'll have expected—, but that's all, at least from the system

they're monitoring."

"And that's good news, why?" Because I'm not seeing it.

"It means we can show them fake footage. Even if they catch on that it's fake footage, they'll still not have access to the original footage, so won't know what we did during that time. We can use that against them. And we can also see if they try to fake footage our way."

I sit up, very alert. That sounds bad. "They can fake footage onto our feeds?!"

"They shouldn't be able to. But I put in some redundancies so that even if they attempt to, we'll catch it immediately."

"I would hope so." I give him a level look, my heart rate only slightly going down. "Because it's not just my pack you're putting on the line if things go wrong."

"Hey! Don't fucking threaten—" Derrick, who's been keeping quiet the whole time, steps forward, towering over me, anger rolling off him.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you." I tap my knife to the inside of his thigh and he quickly takes a step back, out of danger.

"I didn't mean it as a threat, I'm sorry it sounded like that.

I meant that we've got a lot of people under our protection, that's a lot of responsibility, a lot of people who trust us. I don't want to break that trust."

"The system is safe. You know that I wouldn't put our people needlessly in danger." Timothy meets my gaze head-on, not flinching one moment.

“Good.” I try to go over everything that Timothy and Erika told me before she got off the call. She’s coming here to help us get the kids into safe situations, to help Luca’s family make a new start and she offered part of her security team to help us out for a while...

Which is how Timothy and I got into the whole conversation about our current security system ‘situation’.

I let out a deep sigh, exhausted.

“What are you thinking?” Derrick moves, leaning against the table, making sure to stay out of my reach, his eyes guarded.

“That you two have the right idea.” I motion in Timothy and Derrick’s direction.

“I need to learn to delegate more, even when it comes to stuff about the organisation. You two run my technical and my physical sides of the security at home and are in charge of the missions. But when it comes to running the organisation itself, it still falls all on me. We’re dealing with multiple situations here, most of them are connected but not always overlapping, I really shouldn’t be doing all of that on my own. ”

Timothy lets out a quiet laugh as he shakes his head.

“What?!”

He pulls a face. “I agree with you that you shouldn’t be doing everything on your own.

And you’ve now got a pack to help you out, even though you’ve barely made use of them until now.

But as your pregnancy progresses, things will become a lot more tricky.

Right now, we're mainly dealing with the Hearts throwing a tantrum and putting bounties on everyone. We've dealt with that before."

"Plenty of times." The bounties actually worry me the least, of everything that's happened in the last day. Bounties I know how to deal with. It requires tighter security, but we also know what to expect.

"Right. But what happens if your clients, or the wider world, find out that you're pregnant? What will happen if you're at the end of your pregnancy and can't go waltzing all over the place, meet with people, because that has physically become much too hard on you?"

I snort. "That presumes that I'll still have clients once people find out I'm an Omega.

That presumes that people will still want to work with me.

Who says that they'll still want to do business with our organisation, even if someone else takes on the leading role?

Even if I, a 'weak' Omega, would step back and someone else would be the face of the organisation.

There's no guarantee anyone will still want to work with us. "

Timothy gives me a look that tells me I'm being way too defeatist. "At some point in the not-too-far future, you won't be able to go on missions, that will become physically not a good idea.

Going out for client dinners will also become a bad idea.

Not just for security reasons, but plain-old ‘physically being up to it’ reasons.

Derrick and I can try to help you however much we can, but you’re not the same guy you were before, your life has changed and that means making changes to how you run things too. ”

“I know. It’s not like I haven’t thought about that before. It’s just hard to...” I move my hands jerkily. “Hard to figure out.”

Timothy shrugs, looking back at the guys from the tech team. “You’ve got some time to figure it out, but not a lot. You don’t want to be forced to make choices with options you don’t like. Just make sure you stay ahead of things.”

He sighs deep. “Talking about staying ahead of things, I’ll tell Eli that we’ll have a lot more mouths to feed soon and that we need to get the spare houses ready for Erika’s people.

Unless you need me here for something else?

” He gives me a look, clearly wanting to get out of here, away from my grumpy mood.

I shake my head, letting out a long breath. “Thanks. I should have been the one to tell Eli earlier... So, thanks.”

“No problem.” Timothy jerks his head so his guys follow him out of the library.

When the door closes behind them, I look to Derrick. “We good?”

“We good.” He rubs between his legs, like the memory of the knife being there makes him feel it physically. Then he eyes the door Timothy just left through.

“Let Caleb take care of things on the pack side, together with Jorge, they balance well and Jorge’s not good with the darker sides of the organisation.

Spread organisation things between yourself, Vera and Riley.

Vera has picked up a lot of admin and communication tasks already, and she’s good at them.

Riley knows the more practical side of your job.

She might have to get used to working in a team, but I don’t see a reason why that won’t work. ”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Are you now telling me what to do?”

“No. I’m confirming what you already know. I believe we’ve known each other long enough for that.” He grins. “And, if not, you can always just get rid of me.”

When I don’t say anything, Derrick lets out an impatient sound.

“You’re not protecting them, or yourself, by not relying on them more.

Hell, it took me way too long to appoint Miles to a higher position.

But now that he’s taken over a lot of your and your pack’s personal security, I suddenly have time for other things again.

Things like my family , my pack , my mates . Things that are important in life.”

My mates...

I suddenly have a family to worry about.

And I can't do that alone.

And I definitely can't protect them on my own.

Why are these things so complicated?

And why do I dread even thinking about sharing some of my responsibilities with the rest of the pack?

Well, I know why.

I like control too much.

And that's a flaw, not a virtue, in this line of work.

Vera

“Can I help you with dinner?” I lean against the counter as Eli is chopping cucumbers.

There’s a big stack of vegetables and meat on the counter on his other side. The other kitchen staff are here to help him, but even then, that’s a lot of food to prepare and I want to do something that doesn’t require too much from my brain right now.

He turns to me, smiling, though it’s tired. “Do you want to chop or cook?”

“Chop.” It means less thinking and less chances of me accidentally hurting myself by touching something I’m not supposed to, and I don’t want to hang over a pan that might make me feel sick or even warmer than I already feel.

“Grab any of the veggies, chop small. You know where everything is.” He watches me grab what I need and then goes over to the other staff, checking in with them.

I go for the courgettes first, they’re nice and easy. I stack them next to my cutting board and start cutting them into small cubes. First, slicing into disks, then stacking the disks to cut them into strips and then cubing those strips. It’s simple work that I don’t have to think about.

By the time I’ve done four of them, Eli comes over, putting his cutting board next to mine, moving onto tomatoes. “How are you keeping up?” His voice is quiet, though it’s not like it’s easy for the others to overhear us in the noisy kitchen.

“I don’t know. There’s a lot going on and I haven’t had time to really think about all of it.” I throw some more courgette cubes into a bowl, taking a few moments to stare at them.

“And your pregnancy? Going okay today?”

I nod. “I’ve mostly been fine.” I let out a soft laugh.

“I’m glad that the baby doesn’t seem to mind blood, or last night would have been a lot worse.

” I don’t want to imagine what would have happened if I’d also gotten sick on top of the rest of the mess in that room... That would have been horrible to clean.

That makes Eli smile too. “I guess the baby takes after Caleb, because Jorge isn’t that good with blood.”

I flash him a grin. “Or maybe my genes are more dominant.”

“With you, I wouldn’t be surprised by that either, you have a habit of taking over places. And I mean that in the most loving way possible.” Eli laughs and then looks at a point behind me.

When I follow his gaze, I find Mathew in the doorway, wearing summer suit pants and a light dress shirt that shows the shadows of his tattoos underneath. His long black hair is still damp from the shower, so it reaches well past his hips, and he’s barefoot.

Eli steps closer to me, leaning in conspiratorially, making Mathew glare.

He drops his voice so only I can hear him.

“Like you’ve taken over Mathew’s life. Before, he would never have walked around the house barefoot, or have worn a dress shirt that didn’t fully hide his tattoos.

It might not look like much, but these are good changes. ”

Heat flashes in my cheeks and I can’t help the way my pheromones flare, making Eli laugh.

He steps away from me and returns to his chopping. “Are you here for a reason, or are you just going to stare at your Omega from the doorway? I would prefer if you didn’t do the latter, it tends to make the other kitchen staff nervous.”

“Pretty sure it’s my house...” Mathew strides inside, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me against him, possessive, claiming me.

“And I’m pretty sure that you put me in charge of the kitchen.” Eli doesn’t even take his eyes off the tomatoes, he keeps talking while he works. I guess he’s used to working with distractions, from how often I’ve found his Alphas sitting at the kitchen table, chatting to him.

“Fair enough.” Mathew lets out a short laugh, his arms around me relaxing a fraction. “I’m here for my Omega, I need her for something. You can have her back after, if she feels like it.” Mathew nuzzles my neck, making me melt against him.

“She knows she’s always welcome.” Eli turns to me, winking.

“Thanks.” I smile, glad that mates being possessive are just another expected occurrence in Eli’s daily life, and turn in Mathew’s embrace. “What do you need me for?”

Mathew lifts me up and carries me out of the kitchen, crossing his office and then sits

us both down in one of the chairs outside, me in his lap. He leans slightly back, pulling a face, like it's painful.

“What's wrong? Do I smell bad?” I don't think that any of the scents from the kitchen—from the food or the pheromones—are things that Mathew doesn't react well to right now. I try to slide from his lap, but he quickly grabs hold of me, keeping me in place.

“No. You smell amazing.” He kisses my shoulder before he leans his head against it, letting out a long sigh. “Promise not to laugh?”

“Not sure I can, not after a request like that. Especially when you look like you want to disappear into the ground.” I lean against his head, letting out warm pheromones. “But I'll try.”

“My nipples are sore.” He lets out a low grumble. “They've been sensitive lately, but they're sore now. With the heat today, I've been sweaty and they've been rubbing on the inside of my shirt. Now they're sore.”

I can't help my smile, not because it's funny or amusing but because of how grumbly he is about it, and also because the mental image of his nipples constantly rubbing against his shirt all day is kind of sexy.

“You grabbed me from the kitchen to complain about your nipples?” I can't help the laugh in my voice and Mathew pulls me against him more, nipping at my shoulder.

“No...” He lets the o roll for a while. “I grabbed you from the kitchen because I've barely seen you all day and wanted to spend some time with you. My nipples are a separate issue.”

“Okay.” I kiss his hair, taking in slivers of his scent, enjoying his closeness.

“I put bandages on them, but now it feels even weirder. Now I’m constantly aware of them, and it’s making me hard.” His grumbling doesn’t stop and I push his head up, making him look at me.

“Do you want to grumble about it or do you want me to resolve it?”

“Both.” He flashes me his best replica pout, trying his hardest to hide his smile.

“Okay.” I open the top buttons of his shirt before he grabs my wrists, holding them in place. “I’m just going to take a look.”

“You’re not allowed to do anything weird, this is strange enough as it is.”

“What do you take me for?”

“You.” He levels me a look and I can’t help my grin. “Someone who’s much too interested in seeing how many ways you can find to turn me on.”

I want to tell him I’m not that bad, but he’s not wrong, that is one of my favourite things to do. “Fair enough. I won’t do anything weird, I promise.”

He lets go of my wrists and I open his shirt the rest of the way, letting it fall open.

Fuck, he looks so sexy. His body exposed, his muscles and tattoos on full display, his body tight in anticipation.

I reach out, itching to trail my fingers over his stomach, down his abs, before I remember that I promised not to do anything ‘weird’.

He’s covered his nipples with skin coloured bandages, which makes sense, he wouldn’t want them to stand out under his shirt. But the bandages aren’t tight at all,

so with every flex of his muscles, they'll move around, giving even more sensations than before.

“Don't you have an undershirt you can wear? Something tight-fitting? It might be warm, but it will probably feel a lot better than this.”

He looks down at his chest, frowning. “Do you think that's a better idea? Won't that rub even more?”

“Not if it's tight enough not to move around. I know plenty of women with small chests who do it all the time. Some can get away with a simple tank top or anything else tight-ish that gives an extra layer between their nipples and their outer clothing.”

“That makes sense.” He reaches up, tugging at the corner of one of the bandages. “I guess I should take them off?”

“I think that's a good idea, yes. Do you want to do it yourself or should I do it?” I turn in his lap, straddling him, giving me a better view of things.

He laughs, dropping his arms around my waist. “You do it, you seem to want to.”

I don't reply, instead leaning in to kiss him, as I quickly pull first one and then the other one off. Mathew groans into my mouth, his arms around me tensing, his dick straining in his pants between us. This close, I smell the flare of his wisteria pheromones, his arousal.

Even after I've put the bandages on the table next to the chair, he won't stop kissing me, every kiss becoming more and more desperate, making my head spin.

As I'm starting to run out of breath, he finally breaks the kiss, putting our foreheads together, our breathing hard.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” His words are soft, quiet, tender.

I don’t really know what to reply, not when the mood’s so charged. Anything I could say feels too light or too heavy.

Luckily, or maybe sadly, that choice is taken away from me as my phone rings.

Mathew feels around under my dress until he finds the pockets in the shorts I’m wearing, using the moment to feel me up more. Then he gives the phone to me.

Spotting the name on the screen, Erika, my heart starts beating fast.

I connect the call, my breathy voice no longer from the kissing, but from the nerves. At this moment, a call from her could mean anything, good or bad news. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s okay. I didn’t mean to worry you. I tried calling Mathew, but he didn’t pick up.” Erika’s voice is light and I give the man in question a look, because he’s close enough to be able to hear her too.

He pats his pockets, not finding his phone anywhere. So he pulls me against him more, his dick trapped between our bodies, his lips brushing against my jaw even though he really doesn’t need to be this close hear Erika or to be heard by her. “Is there a reason you need me?”

“Hey, there you are. I guessed I had about a fifty-fifty chance that calling Vera or Caleb would get me directly in touch with you. I hit the jackpot on my first try.” She falls quiet for a moment as I hear a conversation on her end, but not clear enough to make out any words.

“Right!” She’s focused on us again. “I’m calling to say we’re about to get on the

flight. We should be at the airport on your side of things in a couple of hours. I already sent the details to your phone.”

Mathew nods, his eyes serious, in work mode. “Derrick is going to send some people to pick you up, right?”

“Yes. A group of us are coming today and then a second group is coming tomorrow. We couldn’t get everyone on this flight and the next one isn’t until tomorrow morning, so we split.”

“I understand. We’ll see you in a couple of hours. Have a safe flight.”

I quickly say something too, before Erika can hang up. “Have a safe flight.” Even though it’s not for the happiest reason, I’m looking forward to seeing Erika again.

“Thank you. See you soon.” She disconnects the call and I put my phone on the table.

“I want to pick her up from the airport.” I’ve not seen Erika and her pack in a long time and I kind of want to be there when she arrives. And it will hopefully allow us to chat for a bit before things get all business-like.

Erika has been my mum-friend for years and I have a lot to talk about with her and ask her, stuff that I don’t need any of my mates to be around for. Relationship stuff. Pregnancy stuff. Even ‘running an organisation’ stuff, something I never thought we’d ever have in common.

Mathew frowns slightly. “I don’t know if that’s the best idea, security and all.”

I give him a disbelieving look. “You’re sending Derrick and most of your best security people to pick them up, even though, as far as we know, Erika and her pack are in no danger at all.” I think for a moment. I don’t need to be there at the arrival

gate, I just want to spend time with her...

“What if I promise to stay in the car? Nobody will notice me if I’m in the car waiting for them. I don’t even have to get out. I can just stay hidden.”

He gives me a look but then nods slowly. “But you’re not going alone, I’ll go with you. I want to meet the lady who manages to run an organisation even more complex than mine. And who helped keep you safe for years.” He kisses my cheek, looking all excited.

Wait, wouldn’t that make the security needs even stricter?

Me going with them to pick Erika up requires maybe one or two extra people, but if Mathew also goes... That’s going to require a lot more people.

Which means we’ll need more cars and that means more of a hassle coordinating everything, which will all fall on Derrick.

I’m sorry, Derrick, I hadn’t really expected Mathew to also want to go, and now my selfish impulse is going to create a lot of extra work for you.

Whoops.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Luca

The room next to the one where the kids are staying in, the one furthest away from the stairs, now has a bunch of tables and chairs, so my family, the kids and Vera's pack can all eat in here without getting in anyone's way and without hearing or seeing things they're not supposed to.

I've never been in a house this big before.

This place has so many rooms and most of them aren't in use, which feels strange.

But, what I've understood from Jorge, that's mainly because their pack is still very new and they've just redone basically this whole floor.

They simply haven't gotten around to filling up the rooms yet.

Which explains why the paint is still so perfect and why they have perfectly usable rooms available for so many people to stay in at such short notice. Though, no furniture, so my family is sleeping on camp-beds and everyone has a mix of sleeping bags and blankets to sleep in or under.

I noticed that Vera and Caleb's pheromones are a lot weaker now than earlier today and that someone put a diffuser that attempts to mask pheromones in the corner of the room.

It seems to make things easier for a lot of people, not just me, but no matter how considerate they're trying to be, it doesn't solve the issue with my brain.

“You should eat something.” Mum hands me a plate with a salad and some potatoes on it. It looks and smells really good, but even though my stomach is grumbling, my throat feels too tight to swallow.

“Thanks.” I accept the plate, holding it awkwardly in front of me. I’m not near a table or something else stable and flat enough to secretly put it aside. So, awkwardly holding it is.

“Let’s step outside. The fresh air will help.” She puts her hand on my back and pushes softly.

I follow her guidance, stepping out onto the balcony, finding a table there to put the plate, before I lean against the railing, looking out over the fields.

I know that Mum wants to ask me a lot of questions, wants to know what happened, where I was in the last years. I’ve been able to avoid the questions all day by always being busy or finding excuses to get away, but with everyone here, having dinner, finding excuses is much harder.

“Can I ask something?” She keeps her voice quiet as she leans next to me, her familiar pheromones soothing, but also making me tense, because I don’t want to bring her more pain than she’s already been through. And with the look in her eyes, I’m sure her question isn’t going to be a fun one.

When I don’t say anything, not really sure how to reply, she goes on, “what these people, this pack, are doing isn’t exactly legal, is it?”

I shake my head. No, most of what they’re doing is definitely not legal. And before I learned about the Hearts and the whole Suits Syndicate, I would have condemned them for what they’re doing.

Now? ‘Legal’ and ‘right and wrong’ are two very separate and much more complex concepts. The world is not as easy to define as ‘legal is good’ and ‘illegal is bad’.

Mum thinks for a few moments, before turning to me more, her eyes on my face, ready to read my every reaction. “Are they good people?”

Crap. How do I answer that? “I’ve only known them two hours longer than you have, I don’t know them that well. But I think it depends on your definition of ‘good’.”

What I do know is that they have no problem killing people, they steal things either because they feel like it or because they’ve been hired to do it and they kidnap people—though, not for the same reason as the Hearts do, but still, kidnapping is kidnapping.

If I’d go by all of that, I wouldn’t call them ‘good’.

But they also rescued the kids and me from the Hearts, immediately jumped into action to make sure my family would be safe when they heard the Hearts could harm them and they’re doing their best to find new and safe places to live for the kids and my family...

All of those are genuinely good things, no matter how you look at them.

They care . They genuinely care about people around them and want to do good.

They want to take down the Hearts and whatever other parts of the Suits Syndicate that they can, people who are very obviously ‘bad’ and do ‘bad’ things, no two ways about it.

“Do you trust them?” Her quiet question surprises me, but I don’t even need to think before I reply.

“Yes.”

“Because they’re your scent matches?”

I stop moving, my breath caught in my chest, until I remember to breathe. Fuck. That was definitely not how I thought this conversation was going to go. “Why do you think that?”

“Because I’ve got eyes, and a nose. It’s clear something bad has happened to you that makes it all very complicated. But the way you look at them, you can’t hide it, everyone can see your connection.”

“I trust them not because they’re my scent matches.

” Though that definitely makes it easier.

“But because I haven’t had a reason not to trust them and many reason to trust them.

They are who they are, they’re clear about their intentions, I don’t see a reason to doubt them.

” Everything I’ve seen from them has been out in the open from the start, why they do things, how they do things, they’ve always been pretty open about it.

Are there things I might never be comfortable with? Sure. But I know that and they also already know that about me. It’s not a secret.

“I’m sorry they’re not telling you much right now.”

“We understand. We’ve been plunged into a world we know nothing about.

A world that's probably pretty scary. We understand why they're trying to shield us from it.

It's getting to Leo, he doesn't like not knowing everything, but that's normal for him.

"She laughs quietly and I can't help my own smile. Yes, that's what he's like.

Then her face falls. "I know they're going to move us somewhere else, give us new names, new identities.

Does that mean we'll never see you again?

"Her pain suddenly flares in her pheromones and I quickly wrap my arms around her, not for the first time becoming aware of how thin she's gotten, how much losing me has aged her.

"You'll still be able to see each other." Riley's voice is warm as she sends her dark red rose pheromones ahead of her. Mum tenses in my arms, until she notices the sincerity in Riley's pheromones.

"They'll give you new identities and people from your old life won't get to know about them, for your and their safety. But you'll still be able to meet with Luca and you'll still be able to talk to him. They won't rip your family apart, not now you've finally found each other again."

Riley stays a couple of steps away from us, looking slightly awkward, like she regrets speaking up out of nowhere.

"You... Ehh..." She rubs her hands together, her pheromones losing the earlier confidence.

“If you want to know about getting new identities and things like that, you can ask me. I’ve helped with it a couple of times.

I might not have many answers about the past or right now, but I can talk about what’s going to happen in the coming weeks, what to expect. ”

Mum turns to her, smiling softly. “I would like that, yes. Thank you.” Then she looks at me, nodding to the plate I put aside. “Make sure you eat something. You can’t keep going on an empty stomach.”

“I know. I’ll try.” I pick up the plate and sit in a chair, putting the plate in my lap.

Outside, in the fresh air, with a lot fewer pheromones, it’s easier to breathe, easier to think.

I listen to Riley explain to Mum what’s going to happen and share funny stories, the rolling cadence of their voices lulling me to sleep.

There’s one thing I need more than food, and it’s sleep, apparently.

“Here, these might come in handy.” Caleb puts a stack of masks on the table near the door.

“They work better than the one Riley gave you earlier and are still comfortable to wear. They’ll filter out most of the pheromones.

More complex ones will work best of course, but these are a little ‘friendlier’ and are easier to wear. ” He gives me a reassuring smile.

“Thanks.” I stare at the tall Alpha in surprise. This is the first time I’m somewhat alone with him. He’s been keeping himself really busy since he got back and while

I've seen him a few times and spoken to him, it was always with others around.

"No problem." He's about to leave again, but I don't want him to.

"Wait." I take a few steps in his direction, his deep forest pheromones getting stronger, making it harder to breathe.

In two long strides, he's at my side, putting one of the masks on my face, before stepping back and keeping a respectable distance.

"Thanks. Again. " I adjust the mask so it's more comfortable and keep glancing his way. Caleb is very quiet and unassuming for someone of his size, the guy is tall and broad , you'd expect that he'd constantly stand out, but he doesn't.

He nods, calm, patient. Very different from the guy I first encountered not even a day ago. He was a lot more imposing at the time, though, part of that might have been because he looks even taller next to Vera and because he was protecting his Omega.

Our Omega?

My face heats up as I realise that this isn't just 'their' pack, this is also my pack now.

Caleb chuckles, giving me a quick smile as I glance his way. "You'll get used to it. Becoming part of a pack shouldn't be rushed. You can take your time."

He looks about to say something else, when Riley appears in the doorway, her hair wild around her. "I'm going with you to pick up Erika and the others too! I'm not being left behind."

There are loud footsteps in the doorway, and then Jorge is pushing Riley aside. "I'm not letting you go without me to pick her up." He's too far away from me to be sure,

but from the way he's holding his chest and head, I'm pretty sure he's letting out one of those possessive Alpha rumbles.

Caleb steps closer to them, looking confused. "Who told you that I was going? Derrick is going with some of his people, that's all I know."

"What?!" Riley looks surprised. "But Mathew and Vera are going. They're getting ready right now. I thought that meant that you were going too."

"No, none of us are going. We shouldn't give Derrick even more work if we don't have to." With a sigh, Caleb takes one last look at me. "You good?" When I nod, he pushes past Riley and Jorge, going down the hallway, probably looking for the two Omegas.

The other two Alphas look at each other, confused, before they both give me a quick wave and follow the tall Alpha, raising their voices as they start bickering.

While the pack seems to be mostly focused on the Omegas, everyone looks to Caleb for guidance. There are some interesting dynamics going on that I'm sure I'm not even seeing yet.

Are they 'good' in the strict 'following the law' definition? No.

But they're real and true and I can appreciate that a whole lot more.

Especially because it's so clear that they share a lot of love and care and that makes up for a lot of things.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

Jorge

Like hell I'm going to let Caleb and the others meet up with her when I'm not there. I don't like that they're going to be staying at our place for I don't know how long, and nobody else seems to be bothered by it, but I don't like it.

"We're not going to go with Derrick to pick up Erika. Derrick is going with a small group of people, just to drive the cars over and to keep them safe. That's it." Caleb looks exasperated. "We're not joining them." He gives Vera and Mathew a level look. "We're not."

Vera shrugs, like whatever Caleb is saying doesn't apply to her.

"I haven't seen her in months and months.

She's my friend, of course I'm going to pick her up.

It would be rude not to. And once she's here, it's going to be all about work and responsibilities again, I just want to chat Omega-to-Omega for a while.

" She slides a thin jacket over her shoulders.

If Caleb thought that he could stop his cute little Omega with reasoning, he's very wrong. And I wonder why he even tries because it's obvious she's not going to listen right now.

"And she's staying at my place, she's here because I invited her, it would be rude not

to be there to greet her. I've got to be a good host, make a good first impression." Mathew finishes brushing his hair and puts his brush aside.

"We're not going. We're staying here ." Caleb lets out a deep sigh, but it's clear that he's given up going against his Omegas and I wonder if he's giving in so easily because it's his ex they're going to pick up, if he might still have lingering feelings for her.

"Jorge!" Riley pushes at my shoulder. "Stop being a kid." It's then that I notice the growl in my chest and the note of anger in my pheromones. "Seriously."

Then she turns to Caleb. "I owe Erika a lot and she's the one who sent me here in the first place. Plus, Nathan's bringing some of my stuff over, it would only be right for me to at least help them carry some of it."

Caleb looks at me. "So, we'll be staying here with Luca and the others?"

"Like hell." I shake my head. "If they're going, I'm going too." I'm not letting anyone from my pack meet her without me there. Even if Caleb isn't going, I'm not letting any of the others meet her alone either.

"You're acting like a kid, Jorge." Mathew gives me a tired look.

"I don't want to hear that from you. You're younger than me." It's only a few weeks, but he is younger than me.

I know that me reacting like this to Caleb's ex is childish, but I can't help it. From the first time Caleb told me about her , this fiery and angry sensation has bubbled up in me and I can't help it. It makes me act in ways that I'm not used to. In ways I don't even recognise from myself.

And knowing that she's going to stay here for a while is making that feeling even worse.

"Fine. I'll talk to Derrick, but if we're going, we're not going into the airport.

We're going to wait in the car so that Derrick doesn't have to take ten times the number of people he would otherwise have to take.

Good?" He looks around to each of us and we all nod.

"Okay. Stay here while I talk to Derrick. No going anywhere! If he says no, the whole plan is off."

He stomps down the stairs as Luca appears in the doorway to the pack bedroom, wearing a mask and looking pretty good for being around Vera and Caleb's pheromones.

"Do you want to come too?" I step closer to him, kind of not wanting to leave him behind if he's the only one of our pack who'd be staying here, but if he's not going then I might be convinced to stay too.

"I know today has been really busy and all over the place, so I understand if you'd just want to go to bed and sleep. "

"You're going to meet the person who's going to help my family, right?" He looks at me and then at Riley, who nods. "Then I'd like to properly greet her and thank her."

"Then it's settled." Mathew takes Vera's hand and on his way out of the room he grabs Luca's hand too, dragging the two after him as he races down the hallway. "Let's gooo!"

I glance at Riley, who's still giving me an annoyed look.

"If you do anything to embarrass or upset Erika, you will regret it. Understand?" Her pheromones turn spiky, an anger I don't usually get directed at me.

"I understand." All my pack members being so protective of someone who isn't even part of our pack does bad things to me. I don't like it.

But I guess I'll have to learn to deal with it.

I'll do it for my pack.

The airport is super quiet, which isn't unexpected, it's nearly midnight and there aren't a lot of planes arriving or leaving at this time. The airport isn't super big, so most of the larger planes use the airport four hours away.

The other people waiting for arrivals are all keeping their distance from us, which I don't blame them for.

We've got our pack, including Caleb and Riley, who are both pretty intimidating, and Derrick's security team is basically two people for every one of us.

Though, as I count again, actually, it's two and a half people for each one of us.

If I wasn't part of our pack, I would also keep my distance from us. We look fucking scary and imposing like this. I guess I now understand why Caleb didn't want us to go. We attract a lot of attention, something we kind of shouldn't do right now.

I guess I'll have to make it up to him later. He was right that all of us being here would make Derrick's job a lot harder.

Not that Caleb had much of a choice. By the time he was done talking to Derrick, we were all waiting in one of the vans, strapped in, Mathew behind the wheel. We were going to the airport, no matter what Derrick was going to say.

“Ohh!” Vera bounces up and down next to me. “Their baggage is now coming out, they’ll be here soon!” She’s so excited that I nearly forget who we’re here to meet. She rarely gets this excited over people who aren’t part of the pack.

I quickly suppress my growl, but not fast enough as Riley jabs her elbow in my side.

I know I’m acting like a jealous bastard. I never act like this normally. I’ve never acted this way around Mathew’s sex partners. I’ve never acted like this around some of the people Riley’s been intimate with. This isn’t normal for me either.

The doors open and we all hold our breath, but the two men in suits that come out keep walking to the exit, too deep in conversation to even notice us.

Well, that was anti-climactic.

The doors open again and a pack with young kids come out. The kids keep glancing behind them, their eyes wide, until they notice us and their eyes somehow go even bigger.

A group of older people call their names, possibly their grandparents, and they quickly make their way over to them. The parents talk to the grandparents in hushed tones, before they make their way to the exit as quickly as possible while still being polite.

They’re technically not fleeing, but they’re definitely fleeing.

I wonder what’s going on, until the doors open again and don’t have to wonder any

longer.

Three guys in the same outfits as Derrick's security team come through the doors first, quickly followed by a short woman in a dress that looks comfortable, but—having known Vera and Riley long enough—I know that the fit allows her to hide multiple weapons underneath it without anyone noticing.

She's flanked by two tall guys, both probably in their late teens, one of them has the same sharp eyes as the woman. Behind them are another younger guy and three guys around the same age as the woman.

Finally, more people in similar outfits as Derrick's team, a mix of men and women, step through the doors. They all look like they could kill you with one glance.

Oh. Wow.

Wow.

Vera lets out a squee and starts racing at the older woman, whose face lights up, opening her arms to catch my Omega.

For a moment I worry that the three security in front are going to stop Vera and I notice that Miles and Derrick have both moved into position so they can protect Vera instantly.

But the three security step aside automatically, smiling softly, before they focus their attention on the rest of the arrival hall, and then on us.

When I lock eyes with one of them, a chill goes down my spine.

Fuck.

I've known everyone from Mathew's security team for years, so I don't think much of it, but these people are pretty freaking scary. Damn.

I don't even know how else to describe it. They definitely make an impression, and they're not only for show, these people are deadly.

The group comes over and everyone starts greeting the short woman, until she's in front of me.

"You must be Jorge. I've heard so much about you. I'm Erika." She holds out her hand and I can only stare at her, lost for words.

Erika is nothing like what I expected. She's short and soft in the same way as Vera is, but she holds herself with the same confidence as Riley or Mathew, which probably means she's just as deadly as those three.

But, above all, she looks warm and welcoming, protective.

She makes you want to trust her but also feels like she'll never break that trust.

Then I become very aware of how quiet things have gotten around us, and from the corner of my eyes, I notice everyone's eyes on me. Crap. "Jorge." I stumble over my own name... "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too." She lets go of my hand but keeps my gaze for a few moment longer. "I'm not as scary as you thought I'd be? No longer scared I'm going to steal your pack?"

My face heats up in embarrassment and I quickly cover it with my hands. "Please, kill me now."

She lets out a warm laugh, her hand on my arm. “I won’t. That would make some people who are very dear to me very sad.”

Riley wraps her arm around my shoulders, leaning close. “Things better now?”

“Yes.” I grumble. “I know I was being childish. You don’t have to remind me.”

“I’m not.” Her dark rose pheromones are filled with understanding and comfort. “Alpha instincts can be tricky and unreasonable. Now, let me introduce you to the rest of her pack, and the next generation.”

One of the younger guys makes a scoffing sound and Riley rumbles her happy deep laugh. She’s so easy around them, like family, which I’ve never seen Riley like before.

But, before we can do much more introductions, Derrick starts herding us in the direction of the exit and so does Erika’s security team. Their eyes constantly shifting around, focused on each person, on every entrance and exit.

Right.

We can’t stay here too long. There’s too much danger.

Luca walks next to me, Erika on his other side, as the two talk about about all sorts of things, mostly about how Luca has never flown before and Erika explains that she’s flown more than she would prefer, but that seeing other parts of the world is also special.

I’m constantly aware of the potential for danger around us, how we attract a lot of attention and that the Hearts could be on their way here right now.

While people seem to be keeping up light conversation all around me, I can't join in, my mind too focused on our surroundings, too focused on the danger, too focused on getting home safely and in one piece.

This is weird, and scary, and I wonder how Mathew could always be so nonchalant about going out for dinner with me when he knew there was a bounty on him, how he could take it so lightly.

Because I don't like this. Not at all.

I don't like being hunted.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:23 pm

This series takes place in a contemporary Omegaverse setting, which is also sometimes called a non-shifter Omegaverse setting, as it takes certain elements from paranormal shifter romances, but takes out the shapeshifting bits.

Every author has their own take on the concept, and even that might change between different series from the same author.

Hence, this primer, which only applies to this specific series/world .

Alphas/Betas/Omegas, what and how and all of that...

Every person in this world has two genders, their primary gender (male/female), which they're assigned at birth, and their secondary gender (Alpha/Beta/Omega), which only starts to appear during puberty.

Sometimes, a person's secondary gender can be guessed based on certain traits when they're younger, but it only really shows once they hit puberty.

Blood tests are often used to confirm the second gender.

The second gender is also sometimes called designation or status , depending on context.

The following descriptions are generalisations and not applicable to each individual, but they're a useful place to start from.

Alphas

Alphas tend to be taller, broader and more muscular than their Beta and Omega counterparts. They also can have a bit of a nasty temper and don't always react well to being told what to do. They're also very protective, of their own family and even random strangers at times.

You often find Alphas at the head of companies or in government but also in places where their protectiveness is an asset, like bodyguards, the army and other things like that.

All Alphas can impregnate female Betas and male and female Omegas and can go into rut when their Omega is in heat.

Male Alphas are well-endowed and when their Omega is in heat, they can form a knot at the base of their cock.

Female Alphas are able to grow a cock with a knot when their Omega is in heat, though, in all other sexual situations they simply have a slightly enlarged clit (they're growers, not showers...).

Betas

Betas are the most similar to 'normal' humans. They're of average size, tend to have a more even temper and don't usually act out too much.

You often find Betas in manager roles, general work force (in things like office jobs) and places where their even temper is an asset.

Male Betas don't get a knot and also don't go into rut, not even when their Omega is in heat, but are able to impregnate female Betas and male and female Omegas.

Female Betas don't go into heat, and can be impregnated by male and female Alphas and male Betas.

Omegas

Omegas are usually smaller and more delicate than Alphas and Betas.

Their temper tends to be even but if they or their loved ones are put in danger, they might be more dangerous than some Alphas.

Because of their body size, they're often seen as weaker or more frail, but I would argue that being able to carry and birth a child makes them pretty fucking strong.

When Omegas work (which isn't accepted in all corners of society), you'll often find them in carer roles like teachers and in the medical field, though they also regularly make up the bulk of staff in jobs that are easy to combine with childcare.

All Omegas can get pregnant from male and female Alphas and male Betas, will experience heats and create slick when they're turned on, so penetration is easier.

Male Omegas grow a womb during their puberty and their semen doesn't contain any sperm, which means they can't impregnate anyone.

Female Omegas tend to be curvier than female Betas and male Omegas. Their heats tend to be more intense than for male Omegas and they're very fertile during it.

Pheromones

Everyone in this world creates pheromones , which are personal scent signatures. Alphas and Omegas tend to have stronger pheromones and also react stronger to them, while Betas have weaker and more neutral pheromones.

When someone's pheromones spike, especially unexpectedly or at high levels, it's called perfuming , which can be awkward and uncomfortable.

Openly smelling someone's pheromones, especially when you do it from well within their personal space and the other person isn't someone you know well, is seen as very rude (and it's still rude even if you do know them well).

Scent match/fated mate

A scent match is when someone's pheromones are so attractive that you can't walk away from them, finding your scent match is also referred to as finding your fated mate . This is the person that you 'belong' with.

A scent match isn't required for a relationship but is often seen as desirable especially for Alphas and Omegas.

Pair bonding/pack bonding

People in this world live as pairs (two people or in rare cases three people) or in packs (which can range from four to eight or more people).

Most people tend to stay with the type of family dynamic that they've grown up with, as that's what they know, but they don't have to.

A pack can be made up of any combination of Alphas, Betas and Omegas.

If someone becomes part of a bond type that doesn't match well with them, they suffer mental and physical distress.

An Omega who's best suited for a pack bond but is in a pair bond might struggle to calm down during a heat because there aren't enough bonds for them, while an Omega who's more suited for a pair bond but is in a pack bond will often push their body past their limits to accommodate the extra bonds.

Scent matches or fated mates are more important for pack bonds as clashing scents

often leads to infighting among Alphas, which can have deadly results.

Bonds between Alphas and Omegas are usually made official when the Alpha bites the Omega, often called a bond mark or a marking bite .

Breaking a bonded pair causes distress for both parties involved (and in the case this happens within a pack also for the other pack members), poor mental and physical health that can last a lifetime and can in extreme cases result in death.

Heat/rut/knots

Omegas go into heat , which means that their bodies are primed to be impregnated. This lasts multiple days and during that time their pheromones are unstable and they usually won't want to leave their nest.

Alphas go into rut , a state where their only focus is on impregnating their Omega (though, anyone will do in a pinch if they're desperate).

Most of the time, an Alpha's rut is triggered by their Omega's heat, but they can happen randomly, especially during their teens or if they've been away from their Omega for too long.

While an Alpha is in a rut, they can knot someone, which locks them together and will increase the chances of a pregnancy.

Outside of a heat, the chance of an Omega becoming pregnant is negligible and if an Alpha doesn't knot an Omega their chances of impregnating them are similar to a Betas.

Suppressants/pheromone masking

There are various suppressants on the market that help people hide their second

gender (often by changing the intensity and type of scent they have) and, for Alphas and Omegas, that help them suppress their heats or ruts.

Depending on the severity of the suppressant, these might have negative side effects, ranging from a stuffy nose or slight discomfort to permanently altered heat or rut cycles or a total lack or overwhelming severity of pheromones.

Pheromone masking items are often used by Alphas and Omegas when they're trying to hide their designation. These aren't as strong as suppressants, but also carry fewer side effects.

In general, these come as shampoo, body wash, deodorant, perfume and things like that but there are also for example pheromone masking cigarettes. People use what they're most comfortable with.