



Knot My Omega (Stuck in a Rut #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I used to think I'd never find a place where I belonged, and now that I have, they want to take me away.

Life was so much easier when I knew my place, when I understood that I would never be more than a servant, a lowly omega. That was before I was rescued from my pack. Now, I'm living a life of freedom, respect, and friendship. Everything I could ever dream of, right? Some days I wonder.

At least I have the farmer's market. Every week, I help sell our pack's goods, eat delicious food, and chat with customers. It's the highlight of my week. That is until three alphas show up and proclaim that I am theirs.

I turn them down. I can't risk it. I know how omegas are treated, and I'd rather have a life of loneliness than one where I'm second class. They accept my rejection, sort of.

Every week, one of them shows up with a gift, a kind gesture, a smile. They call it wooing; I call it a pain in the ass. Only, truth be told, I kind of like it.

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Lily

The curtains billowed in the wind. My wolf picked up on the slight shift of temperature. The mornings were getting a tiny bit chillier as summer waned and fall arrived, time for all my favorite things.

I didn't express those things before. Denied them, even in my own mind.

Omegas in my last pack were meant to be neither seen nor heard. We served. We were of service. They decided that was our only use since we didn't exhibit the traits of a female alpha.

Now I knew better.

Omegas were to be treasured. Treasured the way Rumor was by her three mates.

I pulled another jar from the water bath and shimmied my hips, lining them all up. There was something satisfying about having things in order.

The farmer's market wouldn't know what hit them this week.

I'd added a few new things to my inventory.

Cowboy candy and pickled onions. Hot pepper molasses jam.

I would still have the old favorites, the ones that sold out week after week.

Apple butter. Boysenberry jam. Pickled okra and vegetable medley.

In fact, I had pre-orders for the first time.

Wilder had pitched me the idea and helped me set up a system for it, but I was sure it wouldn't work.

That was, until the first few orders came in.

Half my products were sold in advance. Such a good feeling.

As I took the last jar out of the steaming water, I heard humming. Rumor was out and about. She had never been a hummer before becoming a mom, but the sound soothed Bernadette, especially when the sweet babe lay against her chest.

Bernadette was probably the closest I would ever get to having a daughter, and I loved her as much or maybe a bit more than I did Rumor.

Not that I would tell her that.

While the jars cooled, I decided to go and pick some peaches. Rumor and her pack gave a lot of the bounty of stone fruit to neighbors and even had a basket of them at the farmer's market for free.

"Good afternoon." I passed Rumor collecting quail eggs while Bernie napped in her carrier.

"Good afternoon. Something smells good. What have you been up to?" she asked, tucking a few of the cream-colored eggs spotted with splotches of brown and black into the basket she carried. Her mates had recently gotten her another quail, which she named Bernadette because pack.

“I’ve been playing with some new recipes. Shaking things up. Are we still on to make the new treats for Saturday?”

Rumor and I had a journal full of ideas. The boys said we had more of them than time, but I was thrilled to be working for myself after so many years of exhausting myself for others. There was no end to my energy. Excitement would likely dwindle after a while but, for now, I was charged.

“We are so on. Need some help?”

“I’m off to pick peaches. What if one falls and hits Bernie?”

” I asked. While I was genuinely concerned for the little one, I also had come to covet my time alone.

I’d never had that before. Even in the rare times I got a breather, I was listening, trying to intercept anyone’s needs before they became demands.

People didn’t realize how precious silence was.

Sweet, peaceful silence. Devoid of expectations or goals. Just being me in the stillness of life.

Healing wasn’t always about running; sometimes it was about standing still.

“I’ve got her.” Penn came around the side of the house. “You two can go to the orchard. It won’t put a dent in the harvest, I hate to tell you.”

Rumor cocked her head to the side. She and I knew each other and, though our relationship had changed from caretaker and friend to only friends, I was still getting to know myself. “I think Lily needs some private time.”

I sighed. It was still hard to admit that wasn't a waste or unfruitful. "Sorry."

"Don't you dare. You've been serving others for years. Here. Take the basket." I had intended to make a container from the bottom of my T-shirt but a basket would do.

I gave my friend a hug and her daughter a kiss on the top of her head. "I'll be back later. Thanks."

"I've always got your back."

I walked away but turned before reaching the tree line.

Rumor had done it. She had her happily ever after that included a pack and a pup.

She had purpose and meaning. Mates that loved her and whom she adored.

This was everything I wished for her but not for myself.

What she had now always seemed out of reach for someone of my station.

I was truly over-the-moon happy for her.

Still, I craved love. I didn't want that love to include control or losing my independence. Rumor had something unique in her mates. They cared for her as she was and encouraged her sovereignty.

A rare bunch.

I was lucky they'd taken me in. Built an apartment over the garage for me to have my own space. Let me run part of their business. Encouraged me. Treated me as an equal. Those things were priceless.

As I plucked peaches from the trees, I daydreamed. I didn't do that often, since it usually left me sad and hopeless. Me with a pack who loved me. The whisper of a family. The blanket of safety and security only one tug away from covering me always.

Wanting those things made me feel ungrateful. I'd been given a second chance at life, and here I was, wishing and wanting for more.

Shaking my head, I forced my thoughts to the present. Rumor and I had discussed several things to use the peaches and other produce for, but our new venture would be the most fun.

I did make a killer peach cobbler.

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Benji

“Any luck?” I asked, leaning against the greenhouse frame. My packmate, Roan, was trying so damned hard to grow things. He envisioned a life for us that included self-sufficiency like other packs, but we had a steep learning curve.

I gripped my coffee cup like the lifeline it was. I worked nights not because I liked it but because that was when life was quiet.

I got more work done in two hours then than eight hours of the day.

“There are yellow flowers. Flowers mean tomatoes. I’m reading up on picking off the suckers. It’s supposed to make the fruit produce faster.”

“Suckers on tomato plants?” Now this I had to see.

“Look here where this new stem is starting between the two others? We have to pick those so the nutrients are filtered straight to the existing flowers.”

“Got it.” I didn’t mind helping Roan. He had a wistful way of hoping for the best for our pack, and it was light through the cracks of my dark cynical nature. I called it acceptance as a balm.

In truth, there wasn’t much hope for us as a pack.

We were bastards. Born out of the promise of mating bonds and vows, never meant to exist, to thrive. Shouldn’t wish for happiness.

Roan did. I envied him for it.

We picked suckers and then I listened as he went on about what he wanted to plant for the fall.

“How is Harlan coming along with his projects?” I asked. My coffee had gone cold, but there was a fresh pot on. One of my packmates always made one about eleven when I woke up. Dawn was my dusk. When the world awakened, I sent myself to bed.

“I don’t know, but I smell lunch. Have you eaten?”

I shook my head. “Let’s go see what he’s cooking today.”

We walked back toward the cabin, and I took a moment to soak in what we had instead of damning what we never would.

We’d invested in land away from other packs and built our cabin here.

It was a far cry from my father’s castle-like alpha house, but to him and to shifter society and ranks, he wasn’t my father despite my physical characteristics painting me as his clone.

Inside, I had to fight to not be like him, a mean and stern leader.

His pack members feared instead of loved and respected him.

He banished anyone who didn’t agree with his antics.

Screamed. Raged. Scared his mate. I’d heard she was a shell of herself as my mother was.

Rasputin didn't want a mate, instead demanding submission and obedience.

When he offered me and my mother an obscene amount of money to go away quietly, I mourned the loss. My mother was overjoyed. She was finally free.

"What's cookin', good lookin'?" I asked Harlan as we walked into the cabin.

"Stop saying that. It's weird. And I'm making some BLTs with leftover sides from last night."

"Sounds good. How can I help?"

We all pitched in and, in no time, lunch was served. I missed breakfast foods, so we often had them for dinner as well.

"How are your tomatoes growing, Roan?" Harlan asked. We were all we had and, as a pack should, we wanted the best for each other. Roan's garden was important to him.

"We will have a harvest this time. I hope. I picked a few cucumbers this morning and put them in the fridge."

"Progress is progress."

Harlan teetered on the line between positivity and realism. He was more balanced of the three of us.

I asked Harlan about his projects. He smiled and told us they would all be ready for the farmer's market.

We fell into a silence as we gobbled up the delicious lunch.

“Nothing from the app?” Roan asked.

I shook my head. “There are tons of matches, but none my wolf calls out to. I’m thinking it was a mistake. Packs like ours can’t find our omega in the usual way.”

Harlan sighed. He pretended to be unbothered by our lack of a mate, but I knew better.

He and I were already a pack when we met Roan in his wolf form.

He startled us as we were looking at this very piece of land.

Then he shifted, and we knew all three of us were a pack.

All that was missing was the pivot to glue us together. Our omega.

We already had a room for her.

We’d built it in the early days when we were still excited about finding her, but hadn’t touched it in ages. The door was not only closed but locked, the bed stripped, the windows dirty. Dust coated the furniture.

We parted after lunch. Harlan had more projects to finish and cleared the lunch dishes then planned to take a nap.

Roan, with slumped shoulders, made his way back outside.

Said he was researching getting chickens.

“Chickens are easy,” he mumbled. While everyone was out of the house, I walked up the stairs and down the hall to the bedroom reserved for our fated mate.

It was meant to be her space—her nest. The soft blankets and sweet decorations sat on closet shelves, still in their original packaging.

I fumbled above the door for the key and unlocked the room.

It scented like it always had. Of lingering cleaning products and the paint on the walls. We'd put a scent in the paint so as to not offend our future omega, but that floral bouquet had long faded. This place once filled our heads with promise. Now, it was a reminder of the what-if-never.

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Lily

“I printed a sample label. Check it please, Lily?”

We were in the main house. Rumor’s house. Her kitchen was six times the size of mine, and we had a lot of new things to make for the market tomorrow.

Wilder set the label on the counter. Rumor and I gathered around it and checked everything. I spelled each word out loud. I didn’t want any misspellings on our products if we could help it. Wilder usually didn’t make a mistake but everyone did.

“It’s good,” I said, sliding the label over to him. “Thank you.”

“Should I print them in bulk, or do you want to test this at market first?”

“Can you just print enough for these batches and then we’ll see how they do?” I asked. Every request still felt like begging but, more and more, I was coming into my own voice. It was okay to ask for help.

“Of course. It smells great, by the way.”

“Thanks.” The pair shared a kiss, and I turned away. It was still a bit weird to be in their space when they had been mated less than a year, but they told me I was welcome. They had saved me from the other pack. They didn’t have to. Plenty of people would’ve left me behind.

Peach cobbler baked in the oven, along with honey cinnamon granola. Once they

were cooled, we could put them in the jars with the clamp lids. The cherry cheesecake in a jar and peanut butter brownie mixes would go in regular ones. We had everything planned out.

Rumor and I stood shoulder to shoulder and washed dishes while everything cooled, and it was then that I noticed her scent was different. I turned to her and gasped. I knew the woman next to me almost better than I knew myself. “That didn’t take long,” I said, tsking.

She sighed and tossed the sponge into the sink. “Bernadette is eight months old. Besides, wolf shifters heal faster. And my heat was really powerful this time.”

I snorted and bumped her with my shoulder. “You’ve been planning this conversation.”

“Are you disappointed in me?”

“What?” I reached to turn off the faucet. “This is your life. As long as you are happy, then I’m happy. Your mates didn’t pressure you to have more pups quickly, did they?”

“You know better. They would never push me into anything except resting and eating more.”

I put my hand to her belly. I wouldn’t do that to any female but Rumor. “I’m excited for you. Are you hoping for a son?”

She nodded. “I am. I think everyone else is too.”

“I’ll send a prayer to the goddess. Speaking of pups, I haven’t seen Bernie today at all.”

“Vargas has her. They are gardening. Aka, Bernie is sitting in the dirt, probably pulling out plants faster than he can get them in the ground.”

Each of Rumor’s mates spent time with her and loved on her, hugging and kissing as much as possible. As an infant, she didn’t sleep anywhere but in someone’s arms. They were bonded as any parents should be to their children.

They wanted their family to be the opposite of how they had grown up—doing a good job at it too.

“Should we get the labels on first?” I asked once the dishes were done.

“Yes.”

We talked about the new baby while we prepped the sterilized jars. Some of the labels were crooked, making us laugh, but what was inside was way more important.

We used to make these recipes on demand for Rumor’s previous family. No. They were never a family. They were a pack who bred for status and power. No love was between those heartless people.

Now, we made them for our own income. They tasted better.

“How much for the peach cobbler jars? I haven’t even thought about prices.”

Our prices would be scribbled on a chalkboard the morning of the farmer’s market. But we really did need to decide in advance. I pulled out my cell phone, purchased by Rumor and her mates, and opened the notes app. A phone of my own. Imagine that. It was the little things.

“Let’s make a list so we don’t forget. We can ballpark how much they cost to make

and then double that value.”

“Did anyone return the jars last week? I forgot to look.”

I nodded, opening the pantry. We’d cleared out a shelf for the jars we used. “Yes. Once we put up the sign that gave people a discount for returning their jars, most of them came back. That cuts our costs a bit, more than the discount we give them.”

“Gosh.” Rumor sat down. “I never thought our skills would translate to an income. An income that helps my family.”

I huffed out a laugh. “I never thought I’d have my own money or my own bank account. I can’t thank you and your mates enough for saving me.”

Rumor reached across the bar and took my hand. “You were there for me through the worst parts of my life. How could we not?”

I sighed. “Okay. Enough. How much for the peach cobbler? I don’t know about you, but that stuff is worth gold to me, especially with the homegrown peaches.”

“Four bags of gold!” Rumor laughed.

“Did we strike gold, mi amor ?” Vargas came in with a filthy Bernadette on his hip. She was growing like a weed. I swore an inch each day at least. That was a shifter baby—always hungry. Always growing.

“No. But our peach cobbler should have a public trading code.”

“That it should.”

Vargas bundled Bernie off for a bath, calling over his shoulder that he was tempted to

bring her back outside and stick her under the sprinklers.

Rumor was blessed. I wished I could find one mate. I didn't dare wish for three. And one babe. That would be the picture of my dreams.

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Harlan

I flipped my helmet up with a jerk of my neck and turned off the torch. The last of the projects was officially done. Sure, I had to grind down some sharp edges but the hard part was done. The cutting. The welding. The shaping.

No clue whether or not these would sell, but the internet seemed to think so. My website had blown up, and I had huge sculpture commissions booked out for over a year, but these little things might catch the attention of local shoppers.

Plus, they were practical.

I'd made a variety of things since I had no idea what people would like. A small tool box. A window planting box. Spoon flowers. One coatrack. A few simple book stands. There were more, and Roan was already packing them into the truck in crates.

My welding pulled in money for our pack, but the way the commissions came in, I could have one huge paycheck every six to eight weeks. While all income was good for our pack, I wanted a steadier stream.

Because steady meant we were stronger as a pack.

And a strong pack could take care of an omega.

Welding was really the only thing I was good at, so I had to make this work.

“Where is the canopy we bought?” Roan ducked his head into my shop. It was a barn

when we moved in, but I claimed it as my work area.

“It’s over there. I never took it out of the box. Haven’t had time.”

“That’s fine. I’ve got it.”

Roan was a good worker but hadn’t really found his niche. He did medical billing, but the screen time was killing him slowly. A wolf like him didn’t want to be cooped up all the time but, for now, it was how he contributed.

If I could make this work, perhaps Roan could stop the computer work and help me. Or really invest more serious time in endeavors that made him tick.

While I lined up projects ready to be packed, I thought about our conversation from the day before.

Benji put stock in the app he’d insisted on us downloading.

He was sure we would find our fated omega in seconds.

We had that damned thing downloaded for months.

Nothing. My wolf didn’t howl about a single female.

I’d deleted it from my app over a month ago and simply didn’t tell them about it.

I wanted to meet my omega, our omega, the old-fashioned way. Run into her shopping in town. A chance meeting in an unexpected place.

I wasn’t picky about the way we met her, only that it happened soon. My wolf was antsier lately.

None of us were getting any younger. Besides, we'd heard about the DarkShadow Pack finding their omega. The rumor was, they'd paid for her, but that was of no consequence. I'd give my life savings for my omega if presented with the opportunity.

Plus, someone selling an omega? She was clearly surrounded by assholes before them.

"What else do we need, Har?" Roan shouted from outside the barn. I had a list here somewhere, but it was either buried under something, or I'd burned it up somehow. Wouldn't be the first or the last time.

"I need the stickers for the prices, and didn't we buy some tablecloths? Do we even need those? I mean, it's not a dinner. Why did I buy those again?" My face heated. My chest tightened.

Roan came into the barn. "Because you thought the black tablecloths, and other colors as I remember, would set off the metal? Make it stand out?"

I took a long, deep breath. "Oh yeah. That's right."

"Harlan, can I tell you something?"

I let out a humorless laugh. "Sure. Go ahead."

"We're okay, financially. And your work is going to sell. Have some faith, will ya? I can feel your stress from here."

"You have more faith than me."

"I'll lend you some."

We laughed and took a breather to get some lemonade. While we were in the kitchen, Roan insisted I make a list of things we needed to bring with us. It was our first farmer's market. I wanted everything to be perfect so we could sell a lot.

After the list, we had all the projects and tables and other items in the truck in less than an hour. Because it was going to pour that night, Roan backed the truck into my shop and cut the engine.

"How are your tomatoes coming along?" I asked. He had spent his afternoon helping me with my passion. The least I could do was ask him about his.

"I think they're going to do well. I just wish I could do more."

"You will. We're all a work in progress."

After a pack dinner of sloppy joes and Tater Tots, we retired for the evening, and Benji started his work.

As I lay in bed that night, I was nervous about how my work would be received by the locals but there was more. My wolf was agitated, like he was anticipating something happening, something big.

Maybe we had big money coming to us.

Yeah, that had to be it.

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Lily

The boys backed off once the booth was set up. They tried to help. Bless them, they did. If Rumor's mates had their way, they would line up all the products and yell, "Come and get it."

We had a better way. Because females.

"Where are the new shelves we ordered?" I asked. Online ordering was a new thing for me. Rumor and Wilder showed me how and set me up with my own account, but unless I really needed something, all my money went into savings.

No way would I ever rely on someone else to feed and clothe me. Never again. Reliance made a person a servant.

I'd done enough serving for a lifetime.

"They're right here." Penn leaned down and pulled some cute wooden shelves from a box. They would stagger the jars so the customers could see everything clearly. He placed the shelves on the table instead of handing them to Rumor.

"I can lift things, Penn." Rumor giggled as he tickled her sides and kissed her temple.

He must've realized what she was saying and turned to me. "Umm..."

"I already know." He released a sigh and we all laughed. "I'm so happy for all of you. Really."

He cringed. “Even if it’s really soon after Bernie?”

“Not my body,” I replied. “The best thing about me? I don’t judge. Or I try very hard not to.”

“Your support means a lot to us. We think of you as one of the pack.”

I nodded. “Thank you. Plus, I’m kind of the midwife, so…”

Everyone laughed. Even little Bernie, perched on Vargas’ hip, gave a giggle. Cutest baby ever.

Rumor waved her mates out of the booth so we could finish picking up. “This is where the peach cobbler jars go?” She fumbled with the jars, almost dropping one.

“Yes. That’s where we said they would go.” Instantly, I heard the snap in my voice. “I’m sorry. Shit. I’m so sorry.”

She put her arm on me. We’d been together for so long and as many times as I had to console her after her family did bad things to her, she soothed me now as I learned who I was in the aftermath of abuse. “What’s going on, Lily?”

I let out a long breath. “I don’t know. My wolf was unruly last night and this morning, she’s insane. Anxious, even.”

“It’s going to be okay. Are you taking your suppressants? Something going on with your wolf?”

I shrugged. Rumor had filled me in on all she’d learned about being an omega, and we had more books from her mates than I could read in a lifetime on the same subject, but this wasn’t covered in any of those texts.

“I’m on my suppressants. I don’t miss a day.

And I’ve got all the sprays and powders and scent...

other things covered. I probably don’t even smell like an omega anymore. Which is a good thing.”

“Maybe you just need a run. Happens to all of us.”

“You’re right. Let’s finish getting set up. Thanks, Rumor.”

“Anytime, babe.”

The farmer’s market was a great success. By noon, we’d sold out of most of our offerings. The peach cobblers and cheesecake jars sold like hotcakes. Everything else did as well. Wilder sat behind us and said the pre-orders for the next week were already piling in.

We had ourselves a business. A successful one too.

And it was ours. No one else’s.

“What are they ordering?” I asked, sitting down for the first time since we arrived. Rumor sat down as well and immediately a lemonade and scone were delivered into our hands by Penn. I chuckled a little.

“What?” Rumor asked. Her mouth was already full of cinnamon-blueberry scone.

Some females got morning sickness during the first part of the pregnancy.

Rumor? She got morning starvation. By the time lunch came around, she’d have

eaten three breakfasts.

I loved it for her. I loved that she'd found this life.

She deserved every minute of it.

“Nothing. You sit down. Scones and lemonade are served.”

Giggling, she raised one eyebrow. “Hey, what can I say? I’m spoiled rotten.”

“As you should be.”

The farmer’s market ended at two, so we only had two more hours left and only a quarter of the inventory. “How about we take down the two side tables and move everything to one? That way, we can pack up faster and go home.”

“Good idea, Lily.” Penn was the first to start taking tables down. We had a system of putting things away so that our process moved as efficiently as possible. “Hold the monster, please.”

The monster was Bernie. Penn called her a monster and had taught her to growl pretty early on. “Hello, Monster. I haven’t gotten to hold you all day. That’s a record.”

“She’s in a clingy phase. All she wants to do is be held by her daddies. I’m just the milk supply.”

While the boys were putting tables away, and Rumor worked on her snack, Bernie and I stood up to greet two males approaching the table.

“Hi, can we help you? We have a lot of different things. All homemade. Except the honey, the bees make that.”

One of the men was tall and lean, almost willowy. He had blond hair and piercing blue eyes. The other was a bit shorter and definitely stockier. Bordered on chubby, but both of them were equally handsome.

“Bernie, I don’t think they want to buy anything.” I pretended to bite her neck.

My wolf howled inside me. Not at Bernie, either. My wolf loved her.

My animal...she wasn’t really howling at two males, was she?

Better not be.

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Roan

“Does this look right to you two?” I asked, standing back, almost running straight into a family in the process.

Sometimes good things weren't pretty.

“We need a sign. Everyone has a sign.” Benji looked around with his hands on his hips.

“That's it. We didn't order a sign.”

All three of us threw our hands up. A sign.

Harlan marched to one of the crates. “Okay, but we have business cards and info cards. At least we have those.”

“At least there's that.”

All morning, my wolf had been restless. I'd run him until almost midnight the night before after lying there in my bed, not able to sleep. He was pushing all kinds of emotions at me. Excitement. Nerves. Happiness.

It could be the farmer's market? Maybe he was excited to get out of the house but the emotions were so erratic, that it was hard to pinpoint the reason.

No matter the reason, he needed to calm the fuck down.

“What else can we help with?” I asked. Harlan had everything arranged, and already someone was at the table perusing his display.

“I’m good if you two want to roam around.”

“Come on,” Benji said, clapping my shoulder. “There are corn dogs. I fucking love corn dogs.”

We made our way to the area where all the local food trucks had made a semicircle.

All of them had delicious-sounding food, but Benji got us a corn dog each as an appetizer.

It cracked me up. Benji was the son and heir, if he were legitimate, of one of the most powerful alphas in the shifter world.

Some would consider his father royalty. And here he was, fawning over a deep-fried hot dog.

According to other shifters, our pack and our existence couldn’t be more shameful, so why not?

Eventually, we settled on cheese-steak sandwiches and sat at a picnic table to enjoy them. I thought feeding my wolf and walking around would give him some relief from his antsy disposition, but it only furthered his unease.

Something was going on with him. I knew it had been a while since I let him run freely, but I’d gone months in the past and he was fine.

“Maybe it’s all the people,” Benji said. His eyes widened. How did he know what I was thinking?

“What?” I asked. “Maybe what’s all the people?”

“I don’t know.” He rubbed a circle with his fist in the middle of his chest. “My wolf has been weird the last few days. Mostly yesterday and now today. Maybe he doesn’t like being around all these people.”

“Did he act this way the last time we came to the market?” I purposefully left out the part where my wolf was right in the same place as his wolf. We were a pack, but there was a marked difference between me and other wolves.

My wolf could be a bit...brooding.

Rightfully so. By his calculations, we should be not only mated to our omega by now but have cubs running around every corner of our home.

To him, we were running behind, and he gave me shit for that fact every chance he got.

“No. Huh.”

Funny. I had no answers for how my beast was acting either.

“Let’s go walk around some more.”

We picked up a few things while perusing the booths.

I bought some heirloom fall seeds in hopes that my fall garden would fare better than the summer one.

I tried. I did. Lately, I read more articles and watched more videos about gardening and farming than anything else, but the harder I tried, the less my plants produced.

We saw a booth selling chicks. Maybe chickens would be more my thing, but there were endless booths selling chicken eggs here. I needed something no one else sold.

I chuckled to myself. And something I was actually good at.

Sure, I contributed to the pack with my day job, but working at a desk sucked the soul right out of my wolf. It may have been silly of me to think, but there had to be more for us. A way for my animal and I to be happy.

“Roan.” Benji hit me in the abs.

“What?” I asked, smacking him back.

I looked at my packmate and was surprised to see him pale. The back of his neck had turned red. His breaths were shallow. “It’s her.”

“Who?”

I followed his line of sight to a booth a few down from the one we were at. A female stood there.

Not just any female.

A breathtaking, heart-stopping omega.

Auburn hair. A smile that could light up the whole world.

“You know her?” I choked out. My throat had gone dry.

“I want to.”

I wanted to as well. My wolf roared inside me so loudly that I almost clapped my palms over my ears to drown it out.

“Let’s go over there,” Benji said. “What if she’s...”

“Okay.”

Sure, we could be attracted to a female. There were loads of beautiful females, but a pack knew their omega by scent. Her scent would tame the most feral of beasts. Make a rogue feel like he’d found home.

I’d never really felt at home. Not with my mother. Not as a child. Even now, we had a home, but there was something missing.

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Lily

“She’s beautiful,” the taller male said. He ticked his chin toward Bernie who was fisting my shirt and then releasing it. Practicing her grip. Strong little female.

“She is. Anything you want to sample?” My face and chest flushed. “The, um, peach cobbler, perhaps?”

Goddess, I had to get a grip on myself.

“Sure. Everything looks great.” The other male smiled at me.

It was warm and, while some males tended to be creepy in smiling at women, this man’s grin calmed me.

His scent overpowered all the food and herbs and flowers being sold at the whole market.

Cinnamon. Pumpkin. Vanilla. Honey. Smelled better than any pumpkin pie I’d ever baked or tasted.

I had to stop myself from leaning in to get a better draw of it.

“Um, sure.”

Rumor got up and came to stand next to me. “Come on, Bernie, let’s let Aunt Lily work.”

“Aunt Lily?” the taller one asked. “That’s your name? Lily?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but she’s not really my niece. It’s...never mind.”

Why in the world was I willing to give out information to strangers?

I opened one of the jars of peach cobbler and handed them each spoons. As I handed over the glass, the brooding one took it from me. Our fingers brushed and my wolf preened, whined inside me.

They took bites of the peach cobbler and from the moans, they liked it. Rumor giggled a bit behind me. “I think they like it.”

“You made this?” the taller one asked.

“We. We made all of this. Kind of the point of the booth.”

They chuckled and so did Rumor and the guys behind me. Even Bernie let out a little squeal of joy. “It’s really incredible. Thank you.”

“Anything else you want to try?”

Rumor snorted a bit. I turned around to see her blushing. She tried to cover it all up with a cough, but I heard her. I widened my eyes and mouthed, “Stop it!”

“Is this everything you have?” the brooding one asked.

“Yes. We sold everything else.”

“We have a friend running a booth but we’ll come back before closing and buy everything you have left.”

Interesting. “Okay. If we’re still here, that’s fine.”

The shorter one stepped forward, almost running into the table. “Are you leaving early?”

“We leave once we sell out.”

“We...” The other looked to his taller friend. “When you close up, we would like to come and talk to you. Would that be okay?”

“About what?” I asked.

There were several snickers behind me.

What in the hell was going on?

My wolf wanted them to come back. She thought they were devastatingly handsome. She sent me images and feelings I didn’t dare entertain. Maybe I was just horny. Then again, if all of this was one-sided, why did they ask to talk to me?

“We’d just like to get to know you better, Lily.”

I sighed. “Sure. I’ll be packing up but...sure?”

“Great,” The taller one said. “By the way, this is Roan, and I’m Benji. It was really great meeting you. See you later.”

They walked away, and I watched their backs until they were lost in the crowd. I hated to admit it, but I was gladder than ever for my scent blockers. Those two would make any omega swoon.

I shook myself from the trance and turned around to find Wilder, Penn, Vargas, and Rumor all staring at me. “What?” I asked.

The boys put their palms up and Rumor shook her head. “Nothing.”

“What?” I asked a bit louder.

“I said nothing. Maybe we should, um, try some pear cobbler for this week. Want to brainstorm?”

Was my brain still working? A little. Even though they’d walked away, I couldn’t stop thinking about those two males.

And they wanted to come back and talk to me?

Why?

I was so torn. A part of me wanted them to come back and talk. More than talk.

But giving in to this feeling meant things I didn’t want to think about. Already, my mood had changed based on them coming back. I was anxious.

I was giving my power away and we’d only had a conversation.

“Yes. Brainstorming. All the business things.”

I sat down with Rumor, and we both got out our phones. Next week, we wanted to try a pear cobbler and, since the sweet and spicy jams sold the fastest, we would need to double up on those. Not to mention everything that was preordered.

The pickled onions? One man bought seven jars of them.

Letting the customers sample things worked wonders.

“Do you think they’ll come back?” I asked Rumor once our ideas settled. We made list after list for the next week. One day, we might have a master list for everything to go more smoothly but for now, we were finding what worked and what didn’t.

“Who?” she answered, pursing her lips to stop from smiling.

“You know who. What do they want, anyway? Maybe they’re coming back to buy some things. Maybe they forgot their wallets or something.”

“Could be,” she replied.

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Benji

“We have to tell Harlan.”

“Where do you think we’re going?” Roan’s legs were moving faster than I’d ever seen them.

“Harlan!” we said in unison as we approached the booth.

“Look!” he said, holding up a plastic tote. “This is all that’s left, and someone showed interest but said they wanted to pay by some online service I don’t have on my phone. I told them I’d bring it back and have that app on my phone for next week.”

“You sold out?” I asked.

“I did. Isn’t it great?”

I nodded. “We have something better to tell you.”

Harlan scoffed. “Better than selling out? The only thing better than that would be if you two ran into our omega while you were wolfing down lunch. By the way, you didn’t bring me any.”

Oh. We hadn’t.

“Well, then we have something better to tell you,” Roan said.

“What?” Harlan dropped the tote, making a clamor. Several people around us stared but who could blame him? “Where? Where is she?”

“We were walking around shopping and we saw her. She has a booth with some other people. I’m not really sure of the situation but there was another omega and three males. She was holding a baby but it wasn’t hers. Harlan, she’s gorgeous.”

“How can you be sure?” he asked. “Her scent?”

“Like home and autumn, and everything Christmas all bundled in one.” I opened my mouth to add my two cents but Roan was right. Lily smelled like everything bright and calm in the world.

And everything I wanted.

“Where is she?” My other wolf packmate craned his neck, looking for our mate.

“She’s at her booth. She was selling things. We asked her if she wouldn’t mind talking to us later and she agreed to.”

“I need to know,” he said.

“Over there.” Roan pointed toward her booth. “I’m not going to describe her. I want to test it out. See if you scent her first.”

We half worked, half watched as Harlan made his way over. In no time, he was at Lily’s booth and speaking to her. He made her laugh. I was the tiniest bit jealous.

Then I watched the smoothness. Harlan was a genius. Sure, I intended to buy some things later on, but Harlan, well, he bought all of it. No. He left a few things. Genius. Otherwise, she might leave.

He did a lot of talking too.

He came back with two huge cloth bags full of stuff and a big-ass smile on his face.

“Well?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m hers. We’re hers. She’s ours. Whatever. Lily is our omega.”

All of us stood there, making a stupefied triangle of shock. We’d found her.

“What in the hell are we going to say to her?” Roan said. “We can’t just say, hey, you are our mate. Come live with us.”

I laughed. “We have to court her.”

Harlan put his bags in the back of the truck. “No. We have to ask her permission to court her. Everything is in her court. Get it?”

We did, but he wasn’t making us laugh.

“By the way, I got the shop’s business card. That’s the DarkShadow Pack. I met them a while ago but I had no idea they sold things here. That’s their omega, the other female, and their pup.”

“What if she says no?” I kicked my toe into the dirt and shrugged. “We are from another bastard pack. Omegas don’t want to belong to a bastard pack. Our reputation precedes us. Hell, I’m surprised we even sold anything today with the rumor mill in full swing.”

Roan turned around to look at Lily. “Darkshadow is a bastard pack too. She’s there with them. Maybe things are changing.”

“Things don’t change that much. But we have to talk to her. I’ve waited most of my life for this female. I’m not letting her go so easily.”

“You’re already planning on getting rejected?” I asked. “We can’t do that. If we have even a whisper of a belief in Fate, then we have to believe Lily will listen to us.”

“She is my omega,” Harlan said with new resolve. “Did you two notice she’s on blockers?”

“Yes.” Her scent was faint, but it was there all the same and nearly knocked me to the ground. I couldn’t imagine how we all would be impacted if she weren’t on blockers. “Probably on heat suppressants as well.”

Harlan hung his head. “This is wild. One minute, I’m selling things and thinking about getting home and making more and the next...” He looked up at Lily who hadn’t looked at us once, I’d noticed. “She’s my world.”

“Sappy motherfucker,” Roan grumbled, trying to break the tension.

“Oh, just you wait.” Harlan shoved the bear a bit. “We’re all going to be sappy, melty, gooey puddles in the end. I’m ready for it.”

“Let’s pick up everything and keep busy until then.”

We folded the tables and put the cloths away. Harlan really did need some signage, and we would order that this week.

I hated to say it, even in my head, but I was exhausted. Once we talked to Lily, I hoped the guys wanted to go straight home. I hadn’t slept since the day before and it was starting to affect my energy.

When we shut the truck and turned back to the booth, Lily and her other pack had nothing left to sell. She had the baby back on her hip, and I couldn't help but imagine how she would look with our young there one day.

Or maybe she didn't want to have any children.

It would all be up to her, of course.

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Lily

There were only two loaves of rosemary garlic sourdough left and one jar of peach jam. The flow of customers at the farmer's market had died down, and most of the vendors had either packed up and left or were in the process.

Including the males who said they wanted to talk to me once everything was over.

I still didn't know what they wanted to speak about.

Okay, I had an inkling but refused to believe it.

There was no way. They were all handsome and smelled like the best desserts in the world, but that didn't mean they were my alphas.

I didn't even know if I wanted alphas.

I'd just gotten my freedom, and I'd be damned if I gave it up for anyone.

Then again, they didn't seem mean. Not like the alpha who once ruled over me and nothing like those assholes who rejected Rumor for her twin.

And Wilder, Vargas, and Penn blew my idea of what an alpha male was right out of the water and into outer space.

Still, they were the exception to the rule. They were rare and unique. Most men were like Rumor's rejected mates.

I sighed and tried not to look their way. My gaze roamed over there several times anyway, but the more they did, the thicker my resolve became.

“I’ve already got sandwich plans for those two loaves,” Rumor said, standing next to me.

“You always have sandwich plans.”

“That’s true. Oh…” She drew out the last word and her eyes bugged a bit. She looked at me and then beyond me.

“What?” I asked, whispering since I had no idea what was going on.

“They’re coming over. And there are three of them.”

My turn to get all bug-eyed. “Let’s go before they get here.”

Rumor snorted. “It’s too late.”

“Hello, Lily.”

Fuuuck. I knew that voice even though I’d only spoken to the male once. He’d bought nearly all our products, asking if I’d made them myself.

I turned around as my heart thrummed a mile a minute. They smelled so good. I was glad I went with the slick-wicking panties today. “Hi.”

“If you’ve got everything picked up, can we speak to you privately, please?”

My heart sank. I dreaded this moment. It was too soon. I’d only begun to get to know myself.

“Um, sure.” My wolf spoke the words, I was certain. She wanted to do a whole lot more than talk to them, and my scent proved the point. If I could sense it, they probably could too. I walked around the last table and off to the other side of our truck. “Talk.”

Benji, the tallest one, stepped forward a bit. “We’ve already introduced ourselves. All three of us are a pack. We haven’t come up with a name yet, but we are. We...we think you are our omega.”

Yep, it was happening.

My ears began to ring. Droplets of sweat popped from my hairline and on the back of my neck. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

Roan nodded. “We would like to ask your permission to court you.”

“Court me? What does that even mean?”

“It means, we spend time together. Get to know each other. Dating. Everything in courting is your decision.” Harlan’s deep voice made my core tighten and my tummy flip-flop. All of them did. Goddess, I was in trouble.

I wanted to say yes. I did. Having a pack and a family called to me.

But what didn’t call to me? The loss of control over my life. The lack of choice. Everything that I’d become, stripped away.

Not a chance in hell.

“My decision?” I asked.

“Yes.” Benji nodded. “We, of course, would love for you to say yes. To let your pack court you, but we would respect any choice you made.”

I doubted that. Seriously.

“Then my answer is no.” Saying the words physically hurt me. My chest tightened into knots that I was sure would never unravel. “I reject your proposal. I won’t be anyone’s omega. I won’t ever allow myself to be treated like shit again. By anyone. No one will ever own me.”

How dare they.

They thought they could walk over with their good looks and panty-melting voices and declare I was their omega and I would just swoon in a puddle of slick.

Fuck that.

“Lily!” Rumor called. Holding Bernadette, she caught up to me and asked what was going on.

I shook from the inside out. My wolf wanted me to run back. To throw myself into their arms and trust what they were saying. That I belonged to them. I was their omega. Meant to be with them.

That they would respect my choices.

They were just words.

Alphas spewed lies all the time.

Or even if they meant it now, their respect would erode. Inch by inch, they would

gain control over me like a frog in a slow-boiling pot. I wouldn't know I was being cooked until it was too late.

Not this omega.

They didn't call after me.

Didn't say my name or try to stop me.

I got into the back seat of the truck and shut the door behind me. Rumor didn't come in. I was glad for it. No one needed to see my tears.

Despite my resolve, my wolf knew they were my pack. I'd rejected them. It hurt. Constricted my lungs. Burned in my veins.

My wolf howled and clawed inside me, begging me to go back.

Run to them.

Let them be mine.

Saying no was the hardest thing I'd ever done.

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Harlan

Lily's words echoed in my head.

"I reject your proposal. I won't be anyone's omega. I won't ever allow myself to be treated like shit again. By anyone. No one will ever own me."

What had our female been through to make her think for one second we would mistreat her or try to own her in some way?

Who had hurt my omega?

"Goddamn it," I said, scrubbing my hand down my face.

Roan and Benji fell silent.

"We scared her," Benji said. "We somehow scared her? That's all I can think of. Did we say something else wrong?"

I patted Benji's back. "I don't think it's us."

"What do you mean?" Roan regained some of the color in his face. Not all of it.

"Don't you feel it? There was pain in her reaction. Someone hurt her. Someone treated her badly. Abused her. I don't know."

"Are you three okay?" One of the DarkShadow pack, Wilder, came up to speak to us,

followed by the others. Their omega and their pup stayed near the truck, near Lily, but she didn't make a move to get in.

"Not really. Our omega just flat-out rejected us."

Wilder nodded and glanced over at the truck. "Are you sure she's the one?"

"Not a doubt in my mind."

Penn, another one of the pack, came forward. "Did you say something to her? Something out of line? Lily is the sweetest person."

"We would never." Benji balled his fists at his sides.

I felt his frustration.

First, that other males clearly knew our mate better than us. Stupid considering we'd just met her, but my alpha was a beast sometimes.

Second, that he would think for one second, that we would ever purposefully hurt her or say something awful.

"Benji, they're just protecting her. She's their friend."

He nodded. "Yeah. I-I guess we have to go. Please take care of her."

"That's it?" Wilder asked. "You're giving up on the mate you've been waiting for your whole lives?"

"We are respecting her rejection," Roan said. "What do you expect us to do?"

“That’s not for me to say. Do you...I shouldn’t do this, but you know where we live?”

I nodded. I hadn’t been there personally, but everyone kept loose tabs on where the other bastard packs lived in case we needed help. “Somewhat.”

“Good. Here. Take our card. My number is on there. We have to go now.”

“Thank you.” I took the card from him. “We have to go as well.”

We stood there and watched while they all piled into the truck and drove away. Getting rejected was a horrible knife to the chest, but watching her drive away ripped my heart out.

Once she was out of sight, we got into our truck and I began to drive home. My wolf threw a fit. He wanted me to follow them. Find our omega. Beg her to let us have a chance.

Life didn’t work the way wolves thought it should.

Our very existence was proof of that.

The three of us were silent most of the ride home. We were all broken in varying degrees. Hurting. Shocked. Hollow.

“What do we do now?” Roan asked.

“I don’t know.”

We got home and, for the rest of the day, were shells of ourselves. No one ate dinner. Benji grumbled something about not working that night. I parked the truck in my

shop but didn't put anything away. Just left it there.

Roan went to his room almost immediately, and we didn't see him for the rest of the night.

As the sting of the rejection faded somewhat, reality settled in. Our poor omega. The more I replayed our interaction, the worse I felt for her.

Did she think that we wanted to own her?

She would never again be treated like shit?

I wanted to get to the bottom of whoever abused her, but I might not ever have that chance. She rejected us.

And there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

I lay in bed into the wee hours, thinking of all kinds of things. How we could have approached her in a softer way. How angry she was. Her pain. It hurt me now, even hours later.

A small part of me still thought we had a chance.

Maybe there was a way we could earn her trust. Show her we weren't like other alphas. Show her we could be mates she could feel safe with. Mates who would treasure her for the gift she was.

There was a chance our fate wasn't sealed in being alone.

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Lily

I did exactly what I promised myself I would. When the three alphas approached me, I didn't cower and submit. Nope. I stood up for myself and didn't take the bait. I walked away.

It was everything I told myself I'd do in the situation.

Rumor might have the perfect dream life here with her mates, but she was not the rule. She was the magical unicorn of omegas.

We didn't live in a world filled with DarkShadow Packs. If anything, my pack was the one others aspired not to be. Forgetting that was easy to do. I lived a good life here, but that didn't change the fact that omegas were treated horribly everywhere else.

I refused to let myself become complacent simply because Rumor had this perfect life, one she willingly shared with me.

A false sense of security could lead to darkness taking over my life again.

These alphas might act like they would take care of me and treasure me the way Rumor's did her, but that's all it was, an act.

I was staying here...with them.

End.

Of.

Story.

There was no reason to chance it. Back before Rumor took me in, I'd have risked everything to get out of there. But that time was behind me now.

I was no longer forced to do hard labor without food or sleep, no one beat me anymore, not for mistakes I made or for the mistakes of others, my pack smiled when they saw me, and I never had to help clean the wounds left by a whipping on someone who "stepped out of line." This was a good pack, the best pack.

And they accepted me into their fold and treated me like I was important.

I had a good life, better than I ever dreamed possible. And, more than how they treated me, this was a family. I had cubs around me, both Bernie and Rumor's growing baby. Cubs bring packs to life, and being part of that, even as an auntie, was everything.

"Where did you go?" I'd been finishing up cleaning the jar returns for hours now and wasn't any closer than when I started.

And this missing dishcloth was the third of the day.

At this rate, I was going to be in the kitchen for a decade.

But that was fine. At least those alphas weren't here trying to woo me with their sexy smiles and delicious scents.

"Argg." They needed to leave my head already. They weren't paying rent. I was evicting them.

Maybe I needed to stay away from the market for a while.

My wolf tried to tear through me and take my skin at the thought of skipping market days. That wasn't happening. She needed to chill out.

He did have a point, though. Selling my goods gave me a purpose, bringing money into our pack. Allowing those alphas to push me out of there was just as bad as falling for their courting offer. Right?

Or maybe I'd been too harsh, shutting them down without hearing them out.

"Argggg." I stomped my foot like I was three. Second-guessing myself wasn't going to help my situation. I needed to cut it out.

I did the right things for myself. Full stop. I didn't decide in the moment and go by feelings. I had a plan, and I stuck with it.

So, why did I feel so completely shitty?

It didn't help that my wolf was madder by the second, pacing around inside me, growling, growling, and then growling again.

Most days, I could ignore her if she got pesky, but when she got this worked up, it ate away at my resolve and, eventually, she'd win.

I went back to the dishes, grabbing yet another clean dishcloth. My beast growled louder, catching me off guard and I ended up dropping a jar. It didn't break, but that didn't mean the next one wouldn't.

"What the heck was courting anyway? Stupid wolves acting like stupid humans. Courting? Ha! I'm not a human. Why were they acting like I was a human? Did they

have to come to my table and ruin my perfect freaking life?”

No. I refused to allow them any control over me.

I ran outside, ripped my shirt off, and barely got my jeans free of my legs before my wolf tore through me. I lost a pair of underwear in the shift and my best bra. Ugg.

My beast pushed me back, taking over completely, howling like in the horror movies when all the wolves look to the sky, see the full moon, and decide to—I didn’t know what they did, because I always turned them off, but it was something not good.

My wolf jumped to the grass and ran to I didn’t know where, not letting me in on her little plans. She was barely letting me share her eyes to see where we were, not risking me regaining control.

But then Bernie squealed with delight in the distance, and my wolf stopped short, turned around, and ran back to our youngest packmate. We found her sitting on a blanket and grabbing at bubbles Rumor was blowing in her direction.

“Is that the kind of day you’re having?” She looked my wolf dead in the eyes.

I jumped up and grabbed a bubble, ignoring Rumor and focusing on making Bernie smile.

She giggled louder.

“You can’t hide from all this forever,” Rumor said. She blew another wand full of bubbles. “They’re not all bad. Trust me. I know. You do too. I’m not saying you need to agree to anything or everything or whatever. But they’re not all bad.”

I wanted to argue, but my wolf wasn’t allowing me to regain control just yet.

My wolf stood on her hind feet and batted at some more bubbles that were coming her way. Bernadette crawled over and pet me. She might not know what was happening, but she knew exactly what my beast needed...told me I belonged in the way only she could.

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Roan

The three of us sat at the table, plates of scrambled eggs in front of us that were a combination of burnt and raw—thanks to our inability to focus enough to scramble a fucking egg.

The toast wasn't any better, a delightful shade of black.

There wasn't enough butter in this county to make it edible.

But that didn't matter. We weren't hungry. None of us were.

Never had I truly thought we'd find our mate. Hoped? Yeah. But believed? Not really. And now that we had, she didn't want any part of us.

That broke something inside me.

Inside all of us.

"I'll do the dishes." Harlan stood up.

"No. Sit." I was being pushy, but I didn't care.

Lily was our omega. Done. And not doing anything about it was going to turn the three of us feral.

Our human side might understand her rejection, but our wolves never would.

Understanding didn't equate with it not hurting though.

Gods, it hurt so bad, a deep wound unlike anything I'd ever experienced before.

I dropped my fork, the metal clacking on the plate, startling Benji enough that he shot a piece of the egg-tastrophe across the table.

"Tell me if I'm wrong...Lily's ours." If they weren't going to bring it up, I was.

A growl built in Harlan's chest and he closed his eyes. He was fighting with his beast—I could scent it—and I gave him the time to get it under control before beginning again. Once we sprouted fur, we were going to bleed each other, our wolves too worked up for it to go any other way.

"We've been waiting for her all this time." When they didn't add anything, I continued, "We can't give up. But we can't push either. She's right. She deserves better than that."

Whatever led to her reaction to us had to have been horrible. She'd been carefree and all smiles when I first saw her and then suddenly, there was a shift and that woman was gone.

"I-I don't think it's us she's scared of." I'd been thinking a lot about it, and the more I did, the more I realized her reaction wasn't about us at all.

"Yeah, I got that too." Harlan pinched the bridge of his nose. "When she talked about omegas, her fear was palpable. Someone hurt her."

"Then we need to rescue her." Benji started to stand up, and this time, it was me who growled, and he parked it back in his seat.

“As if it is as easy as that, asshole.” Harlan wasn’t having it.

“The people she was with, the DarkShadow Pack aren’t the problem.

Do I like her being around other males? Obviously not.

But they’re mated, and I don’t know how she’s connected to them.

” I didn’t want us accidentally turning the three mated alphas into our enemies because of jealousy.

If anything, we owed them for keeping her safe.

As terrified as she had been with us, she felt at ease with her pack. They treated her well.

We’d treat her better. She’d been carefree and our everything.

“She said she wasn’t really the aunt, but she acts like sisters with the other woman—Rumor.” Benji had a point I hadn’t considered.

The DarkShadow Pack had bought their mate. Did they buy Rumor too? That would make sense if both women came from the same shitty pack. Or maybe I was reading far too much into this all as I tried to figure out a way for us to win our omega’s heart.

“Roan, you’re focusing on the wrong things.” Harlan gave my shoulder a squeeze. “What we need to do is figure out a way to get her to open up to us, so she can see we’re not awful.”

“I know.” Benji leaned in closer. “We can bring her gifts. The DarkShadow Pack

isn't that far away. We can just spoil her until she loves us. I can't wait to treat her like a princess—no, scratch that, a queen—but not in the real sense.”

Benji's life before our pack was the definition of complicated and it included a crown or two.

“That'll work.” I was down with buying her all the fancy tools she needed for her canning or jewelry or maybe making her a bookshelf for her cookbooks. If she used cookbooks. There was so much we still didn't know about her.

Harlan barked out a laugh—one very much not filled with amusement. “Do you two know anything about females? Do you know anything about omegas?” He glared. “Do you know anything?” He was not impressed and rightfully so.

“We cannot go to her place. We cannot go to her territory. We cannot approach her pack about her. If we do, she'll never trust us.” Harlan picked up a piece of toast and then put it straight down. “And we will not cook for her.”

His attempt to lighten the mood, didn't. How could it, with our mate so close and yet so far away?

“The gift idea might not be bad.” Roan was much better at being diplomatic than I was. “What if we bring her gifts without pressure, and maybe, over time, she'll forgive us and give us a chance?”

We spent the next hour talking about possible gifts and how to do it, and ways to approach her that wouldn't make things worse.

We also set a list of boundaries, which added up to not going full speed ahead without permission on anything. She needed to be the one in control. Because if she wasn't, we were no better than those she feared.

And if I ever found those fuckers, I was going to bleed them until they met the goddess. Or I hoped she'd reincarnate them as fucking bugs.

They get stepped on.

Or a really awful animal everyone hates.

I wasn't picky as long as they suffered.

Lily

My alarm went off, and I groaned in frustration.

I'd already been lying in bed for three hours, wishing for sleep to come.

It never did. Not that it should've come as a surprise.

The same thing happened when I went to bed in the first place—watching the clock, counting imaginary sheep, doing the weird breathing exercises Rumor taught me years ago.

All the tricks of the trade, and nothing helped. Nothing.

I'd had maybe two hours of sleep total all night, and that had been interrupted. Slapping at my phone, I eventually reached it and turned off the stupid alarm. No need for snooze when I'd been awake for so long. It was freaking time to start my day. May this one be better than the last.

There wasn't really a ton on my to-do list for the morning. I made sure to fill my time, though. If I slowed down too much, I was going to be thinking about my alphas. No. Not mine. The alphas I already rejected, the ones I was better off without, the ones who wouldn't leave my head.

I started with the chickens. They loved me best right now because I was the one feeding them.

Talking to them couldn't hurt. Was it weird to have chickens as some of my main confidants?

Absolutely, yet there they were. I tossed them their feed and some dehydrated worms as I regaled them with the story of how I looked so terrible and about my lack of sleep.

"You're lucky I remembered to feed you." If they didn't care what I was saying, they sure cared about their food and me opening up their henhouse for the day.

We didn't think wild foxes and such would come this close to the house with wolves aplenty here, but better safe than sorry.

It only took one animal to decide it was an all-you-could-eat buffet and destroy our flock.

Chickens done, I set about weeding.

I weeded.

Then weeded some more.

Patches currently growing, patches we were planning to plant next season and were currently resting because corn zapped them or were brand new.

And when those were done, I worked along the foundation of the structures.

Anything and everything I could yank out of there, I did.

Why? Because it was mindless, and at the end, I had a big pile that made me feel productive.

My wolf pushed for me to spend my time hunting, but I knew better.

She didn't really want to hunt. She wanted to see if we could pick up on the scent of those alphas.

She didn't understand how bad that would be, how this life here was so much better than anything we could find outside of her pack.

She didn't understand that I was scared.

About lunchtime, my stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten at all today. I dropped the last of the weeds into the compost pile and went to my apartment to clean up and make food.

But as I got to the door, I saw a truck pulling up to the house. And not just any truck. In this one sat an alpha, one of the three from the market. I didn't know his name...any of theirs. If they told me, it had gone right by me as I focused on getting rid of them. And now, one of them was here.

I moved quicker than I ever had, getting inside my apartment and shutting the door with the hopes I managed to be unseen. And then I did something I hadn't done since my early days here; I locked it.

He pulled up to the main house and headed for their door, not mine.

My heart raced. Rumor and the guys wouldn't send him my way, would they? Not that they would need to for him to find me. If he wanted to, he could easily follow my scent. I'd be so easy to track, too.

I didn't bother with the blockers when I was home. Why should I? I was safe here. This was my pack.

He shouldn't even freaking be here. And yet he was.

I squatted behind the door, holding my legs to my chest, trying to disappear, so that if he came and looked in any window, he wouldn't be able to see me.

Moving as little as possible, I listened for his footsteps, voice, or beast. Instead, I heard something better, the rumble of his truck driving away.

It took time, but when my heartbeat slowed and I could breathe again, I peeked out the window to make sure he was really gone. It looked like he was, but I didn't trust that he was gone, gone, and I crawled around the apartment so I was lower than the windows and pulled the curtains shut.

I didn't leave the house again, scared that if I did, he wouldn't be far enough away and he'd see me.

Instead, I climbed into bed, pulling my covers over my head like I was a five-year-old scared of a storm.

Hours passed, and I must have slept in there somewhere, because it felt like I lost segments of time. My body was so in hide mode that it was difficult to know what had happened over those hours. But it worked. No one found me.

If they were even looking.

I finally risked going outside, knowing that I had to, at the very least, put the chickens away for the evening.

Rumor was walking around, Bernie on her back in a carrier, almost asleep but fighting it hard.

“What are you doing?” she asked me.

“Checking on the chickens.”

“No, I meant hiding. That’s where you were, right? Hiding.” She knew me so well. We’d been through a lot together, so it was no surprise, but still...it was embarrassing.

“Maybe.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine. I was. But I saw the alpha pull in and...” And what? I freaked out and hid under the blankets?

“And they left you a hat. A sun hat.”

Why was she smiling?

“They didn’t even ask to see you. Just said that they saw that you needed this before the next market day. And then he left.”

“He just left.” That didn’t make sense. Weren’t alphas all possessive and controlling?

“He didn’t try to see me?”

“Listen,” she said, “they’re trying to give respect you and accept your rejection.

But they also feel this need to protect and take care of you.

And I’m not saying it’s easy for you. I can see from the bags under your eyes and the tension in your shoulders to know it’s absolutely not, but it needed to be said. ”

From anyone else, I'd have second-guessed every part of her assessment. But this was Rumor. She'd never be dishonest with me, and she would protect me with her life—she already had.

“I know you won't believe this, just like I didn't believe it about my alphas at first, but these alphas aren't like most of them. They aren't like what we knew before. I don't think they'd ever hurt you. I don't think they could. Let me go grab the hat.”

She went away without letting me respond, or maybe so I couldn't respond—to give me time to think about what she'd said, before she came back with the beautiful sun hat.

He could've found me. He could've pushed in so many ways, including a note, or waiting until market day and blindsiding me. But he didn't. He went to the pack house and left this for me.

Rumor might well be right. They might be nothing like the other alphas.

But I was staying here. My life was too good to leave. I couldn't risk it.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:07 pm

Benji

The week passed slowly, although everything we had to do should have made the time fly.

Ordinarily, it seemed as if I woke up, raced through the day, and before I knew it, I'd be crawling back into bed, exhausted and ready to rest. Not that I minded.

Our “pack” was a labor of love, and we were building it slowly.

Seeing the DarkShadow Pack's lands was an eye-opener, according to Harlan.

They were also trying to make a life, but their alpha female, Rumor, was the glue that held them together.

They were also growing, and I looked forward to going to the farmer's market again and seeing Lily, who lived with them.

I would have preferred to go right away and see her, but we agreed that pushing her too hard wouldn't get us anywhere and might have the opposite effect. Harlan's visit was enough for this week, no matter how hard it was to accept that.

But I did have a project to work on. My wolf demanded that I bring a gift to our mate to show our good intentions.

He was a big believer in showing that we would provide, but the images he placed in my mind were not likely to be ones she would appreciate.

At least not in human form. A fresh kill, still dripping blood, heart warm and just stopped pulsing... A perfect gift in his eyes.

I thought more along the lines of jewelry, designer bags, or other over-the-top items to show my esteem, but I'd learned in the past that such a display of wealth put people off.

Why? I had no idea, but I could observe reactions.

And that meant, if I didn't want to misstep, I needed to come up with something that showed our preparedness to provide but did not have our mate gagging over the presentation.

I wandered the house for a while, trying to decide, coming up with ideas and discarding them. It would make life so much easier if I could just use my money without causing resentment.

Standing in the kitchen, wondering just how bad a cake would taste if I made it, I was startled by Roan's arrival. He marched to the pantry and opened the door. "We out of jerky?"

"I don't know. Are we?"

"Someone's going to have to go to the store and get some." He grabbed a box of crackers and a jar of peanut butter and a knife and left, grumbling under his breath. "No jerky."

We didn't have jerky, but I had an idea.

Grabbing my phone, I searched and found what I sought.

Self-reliance demanded we find a better way to do things, and making beef jerky didn't look hard at all.

My wolf appreciated the idea of giving our mate food, and I hoped that a handmade offering would soften her toward us.

It wasn't as easy as I'd hoped for, though.

Cutting the meat thinly enough, applying just the right amounts of salt and other seasonings and cooking until it was done enough for shelf stability but still tender enough to chew.

Somehow I'd always thought it was a simple process that could be done by anyone with a campfire, and maybe it could.

But it probably wouldn't taste very good.

On the day of the farmer's market, we set off together, but I had my gift for Lily in my pocket. A half pound or so of freshly made beef jerky in which I took more pride than I would have if I'd bought her a diamond tennis bracelet.

The Darkshadows' booth was set up when we got there, Rumor with her baby in a wrap on her back, and our mate, wearing the hat Harlan gave her, helping her arrange some jars. The two females were laughing over something together, and I hesitated to approach them, afraid of interrupting.

But something must have caught Lily's attention because she looked in my direction, her cheeks blooming with color. I took courage from her reaction and headed over to greet her. "Hello. You have so many things on your display today. I'm Benji by the way."

She smiled, straightening a jar of jam so the label faced forward. “We’re trying our best.”

“I wonder, that is, I brought you something.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the foil package only now wondering if in avoiding being showy, I’d gone too far the other way. But she’d seen it, and there was no going back. “Here.”

She accepted the package from my outthrust hand. “What is it?”

“It’s—”

“Open it and see,” Rumor urged, saving me from having to explain. “I’m curious!”

“All right.” She set the packet on the table behind her beautifully labeled brownie mix and unfolded the sides. “Oh, jerky!”

“I made it myself,” I said, wanting her to know that it wasn’t just something I’d taken out of a packet from a rack at a gas station. “It’s teriyaki flavor.”

“Thank you.” She closed it again and set it behind her. “I appreciate all the effort, but it doesn’t change anything.”

“It’s okay. I wanted to give you a present.”

Customers showed up then, and she moved away from me to serve them.

I needed to buy her another gift. What would she like?

Something that said I noticed what she did and appreciated it.

My gaze landed on a booth a few yards away, and I was over there like a shot.

They had handmade baskets in the most beautiful colors.

She could carry her jellies in it or maybe even use it for a display on the table.

Boosted by the fact she'd accepted my first gift, jerky—what was I thinking?

—I hustled back over to the booth with my prize.

It was something a female could appreciate.

Useful and pretty. But when I got there, I caught her sharing a strip of my homemade teriyaki jerky with Rumor and overheard some very complimentary words about my seasoning and the fact that it was a good texture.

Not that it had me strutting up to the table. Not too much. “Lily?”

She jerked her hand behind her back as if caught doing something naughty. Which put naughty thoughts into my head. “Oh hi.”

“Is the jerky okay?”

She brought her hand forward, blushing again. That did things to me. “It's...it's very good. Thank you.”

“I wanted to give you one more thing before I go.” I set the basket on the table. “I thought it would be nice to show off your jars in maybe?”

“It would.” She picked it up and turned it this way and that. “Such bright colors will really show off the jellies and jams.”

“Would you go on a date with us?” I blurted, surprising even myself. But there was

no taking it back.

“I’ll think about it.” She replaced the basket on the table and began to stack jars of strawberry and apricot preserves. “I really will.”

Lily

“I can’t go on a date with them.” I’d said it so many times, it was starting to sound weird, a jumble of words that made no sense. “The whole idea is crazy.”

How could I even consider a situation like that? Dinnertime at the DarkShadow Pack was such a warm, cozy experience, one I was honored to be a part of. Sure, I tried to make myself useful, but they didn’t have to treat me like family in addition to pack.

Rumor bustled in from the kitchen with a platter of meat loaf, followed by Penn who had probably cooked the actual food.

Not that Rumor couldn’t, but her mate enjoyed it so much, and he was very good at it.

“I think this is all of it. Dig in everyone,” she sang out.

“Bernie will probably be looking for me for something in about a half hour, so I need to eat while I can.”

Her mates would also be glad to see to their daughter, but Rumor took a lot of pleasure in everyone sitting down together, no phones, no tablets, no talk of business during our meal.

As soon as the two of them took their seats, we passed around the meat loaf, the bowl of creamy mashed potatoes with the pat of butter melting in the middle, biscuits, and baby peas picked this morning from the garden.

There would be dessert, too. I knew because I'd baked the pie myself and was hoping my crust would taste decent and be at least a little flaky.

As soon as plates were piled high and everyone was digging in, Vargas, the alpha of the pack, fixed me with a benevolent look. "Lily, what were you saying before we started? Something about a date?"

I had to learn not to blush; my cheeks were going to break out in a rash or something from the constant heat. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Rumor cut in. "Lily, I know how it looks from my perspective, but I'd like to hear yours."

"What is your perspective?" I asked. If she told me, then maybe I'd understand mine.

"You're smarter than that." Rumor, my biggest supporter, who understood me best, fixed me with a stern glare. "I've already explained it to you, and you only have to look around to see how much I have benefitted from giving my males a chance.

"That doesn't mean you have to go out with them," she went on.

"I'm just saying that if you think you see something there, it would be tragic not to give them a chance.

Just in case. When I think of the possibility of missing out on my mates...

"She swiped at her eyes, and Wilder, in my opinion, the sweetest of the three, leaned closer and put a supportive arm around her shoulder.

She leaned on him, her smile returning. "See what it can be like?"

“Can anyone be as lucky as you?”

“You’ll never know until you try. I think they seem nice, but I am not the one who would be dating them.”

We went back to eating, then, and I hoped that the subject was closed for the moment.

I didn’t know what to do. Sure, they seemed nice to me, too, but I had trust issues, and by staying here and being part of this pack, I didn’t have to put myself out there and take chances.

My days were really pleasant, making products for the farmers market, playing with Bernie, laughing and chatting with Rumor.

With all these thoughts churning in my head, I carried a load of dishes into the kitchen and returned with the chocolate cream pie I’d made for dessert. Rumor’s mates applauded and dug in as soon as I passed them slices. What would it be like to have my own mates enjoying something I made so much?

“So it’s all right?” I asked, shamelessly begging for compliments.

“It’s amazing. How many did you make?” Harlan asked.

“Oh, only one. I’m sorry.” I should have thought of their big appetites and made at least two.

“It’s fine.” Rumor shook her head at her mates. “There’s enough for them to have seconds and then they can dream of it until next time. Your pie is so delicious and creamy!” She licked the last of the cream off her fork. “So good.”

“Thank you all.” Standing, I stacked plates, but this time, my friend’s mates took them out of my hands and carried everything to the kitchen. They were gone for a few minutes, and when they returned, Vargas remained on his feet.

“Lily, we were talking in the kitchen just now, and if you’d like to get to know these males but also have a degree of safety, then I have a proposition for you.”

“A what?” I’d sat down next to Rumor while they were gone, and I remained there, not sure what was going on.

“If you want to go out on a date with these males, we’ll go with you and drop you off and then wait until you’re ready to come home. Then we’ll drive you back.” “But this is no pressure,” Pen added. “Only if you really want to.”

That night, I tossed and turned again trying to decide what to do. I appreciated their thoughtful gifts, but all alphas were nice at the beginning before they got mean.

In the morning, I’d reached a decision.

I’d go out with them one time. If I could find their number because I didn’t have any way to call them and tell them. Maybe it was for the best.

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Roan

After what felt like a thousand years, it was finally our favorite day of the week again—farmer's market day.

After Harlan went and had a conversation with Rumor, we understood the misstep we'd made by encroaching on her packlands. We had originally thought stopping by and dropping off a gift would be fine...sweet even. We were wrong.

Harlan was watching as the curtains on her apartment closed with no person visible. She had been hiding from us. He had scared her into hiding by being there. We wouldn't make that mistake again and if there had been a way to rewind time, we'd have done anything to do so.

Rumor had been very blunt that day. She told Harlan we needed to be respectful and listen to our mate's words.

Harlan hadn't planned on doing anything but dropping off his gift, but Rumor couldn't have known that.

He assured her we weren't going to cause any problems and apologized. And we planned to keep that promise.

He wasn't sure if Rumor had known about the hiding when she spoke to him or not. And really, it didn't matter. She was protecting her friend and giving us much-needed advice.

As hard as it was to witness, watching those curtains close was something my pack needed. It told Harlan that our mate's distrust of us ran so much deeper than any of us initially realized. Possibly than even her pack knew.

And that's how we ended up making farmer's market day our day.

She wore the hat he left for her, that had to be something. And last week, she accepted Benji's jerky and the basket. We might not know exactly what we were doing, but we were going in the right direction—or at least not in the wrong direction.

Today was my turn to give her a gift. When I got to the market, I wanted to race to her, but just as we needed to keep her packlands a safe space for her, we needed to do the same for the farmer's market.

Not in an identical way. We weren't going to stay away, but going to her table?

We needed to read the area first, look for signs of her nervousness or possibly fear.

My beast didn't like that our mate might be scared of us. I didn't think it was us she was scared of specifically, but what we stood for. She thought of alphas as the problem. And culturally speaking, she was right to be leery. The way omegas were treated was horrible and shockingly not criminal.

We would never, could never be like them. And we planned to show her how true that was. I could only hope that one day she would trust us enough to share about her past, and what led her to be with her pack—the only single omega, so strong and independent.

At least, that's how I saw her. The way she looked at Rumor, as if Rumor was the one who could answer all the questions for her, had me questioning whether she saw how strong she really was. Based on her reaction to us, I tended to think not.

As I walked around the corner, I stood next to a table selling potholders and potato jackets, watching my mate from the short distance and waiting for her to notice me.

And she did.

She blinked, her eyes closed a little too long, and I nearly turned around.

But when she opened them again, she waved to me, a small smile on her face.

She was once again wearing the hat Harlan had given her.

It looked good on her. He'd made the right call.

It protected her eyes and also helped people see her in that crowd, which in a setting like this was great.

I walked up to the table holding the gift I'd prepared for her in my arms. She was already getting low on her goods. People loved her food, especially her cowboy candy, and they lined up quickly to buy it.

I stood behind an older man who had a basket filled with empty jars.

He set them down and told her they were returns and he needed to stock up again.

Their interaction was typical—he told her what he wanted, she told him how much it was—but still, I watched with fascination as my mate explained the new product she had. And then she upsold him for some honey.

And finally, he was gone. And it was my turn.

“You’re...you’re Roan, right?”

“I... Yeah. I brought you something. It was my mom’s, and, well, I...

” I set down the old crock. It had been in my house my entire childhood and was the only thing I still had from there.

But I didn’t bake. The guys didn’t either, at least not bread.

This would be useful for our mate. It would be a way for her to have a piece of me.

“It was her sourdough crock. I’m sorry I don’t have any starter in there. I haven’t used it.”

“But this was your mother’s?”

Was she asking or telling me? I nodded.

“And you want me to have it?”

“It works really well?” It came out as a question. Was she upset about the gift? Was she happy about it? Why didn’t this mating thing come with instruction manuals?

She lifted the lid, looked inside, then closed it again.

“Hey, miss, how much is the crock?” A man, who was very much too city for this place, had come in from the side. I hadn’t noticed him or if I did, I hadn’t paid any attention, but now that he was there, he had my beast pretty frustrated.

“It’s not for sale. It’s a family treasure.” She picked it up and hugged it to her. “I think there’s some crocks two rows over, about halfway down.”

And she turned from him, crock in hand, and set it on the chair behind her,

completely dismissing the man. And when she turned around to face me again, she said to me, so quietly I wasn't sure if I imagined it at first, "Okay. We can try."

"Try? You mean—"

"Yeah. I mean, we can get to know each other. And you can court me."

I gave her my number and those of the other two alphas. She gave me hers. We were going to do this.

"We either need to be on my packlands or I'm bringing my packmates with me."

"Of course," I said. "I would be shocked otherwise."

She was pack. And pack was protected. At least, in any pack worth their salt.

"We'll earn your trust," I promised.

"I hope so," she said. "I hope."

Lily

We agreed on a date at their home. I was just too nervous to be out in public, surrounded by all kinds of people, so we were going to have dinner at their home. It would give me a chance to get to know the three of them a little bit and see if I wanted to go forward with the whole thing.

I'd changed outfits at least six times before leaving the house, which was very tricky considering I didn't have that many actual sets of clothes appropriate for a date and had borrowed pieces from Rumor and done mixes and matches to come up with them.

In the end, I'd gone back to the first thing I'd put on, a simple dark-blue sundress sprinkled with tiny pink flowers.

In case the evening got cool, I had a white hoodie.

Then I'd had to make hair decisions. I'd moved past being nervous—at least for a while—and into stress over whether I looked good enough for the evening.

Without Rumor, I'd never have had the guts to even go, but she pushed me out the door, loaning me her mates as bodyguards for the evening. They were going to hang out in the car while I had my date, just to make sure I felt comfortable. If I wanted out, to go home, they were there for me.

As I left the car and started up the walk, I glanced over my shoulder, feeling guilty about Rumor's mates giving up their evening like this, but not quite guilty enough to

tell them to leave.

It had taken just about everything in me to go on this date, and only their presence outside was making me feel safe enough not to turn and run.

Before I got to the door, it opened, and the three males stepped out onto the porch.

They were even more intimidating than before, all tall, all broad shouldered, and good-looking in their own way.

I'd never drawn the attention of males like them.

What were they looking for in me? I understood fated matings, and I was drawn to them in a way I'd never dreamed possible.

But once we got to know one another a little better, would they even want me?

Or, worse, if I did mate with them, would they exert their rights to treat me as most alphas treated their omegas?

I glanced over my shoulder, seeing the car with Rumor's mates in it and was tempted to run back to it before everything went to hell.

"Lily?" Harlan, the one who'd dropped off the sun hat for me, stepped aside. "We're very glad you came."

"Thank you." I stepped past them and inside the house, so afraid my knees were knocking but determined to see it through. In three hours, maybe even two, I could go back outside and leave. Would an hour be rude?

Unsure what I expected to see, I took in the cozy scene before me.

Bachelor wolves, in my past experience, generally lived a spartan life at best, a slovenly, disgusting one at worst. Rumor's mates being the exception.

The entry area's row of hooks supported light jackets and hoodies, a few canvas bags for shopping, and below, a mat that would serve as a parking space for muddy boots as needed.

For now, it was immaculate. Even generally tidy people would not have such a clean mud mat, unless they were expecting company.

Like me. The living room was equally clean, the coffee table glowing, and a hint of ammonia and lemon hanging in the air to tell me how much effort they'd put into my arrival.

Not that anything indicated they lived anything but decently.

The walls were a soft cream, free of smudges, and the curtains, while plain beige, hung neatly over the windows.

An afghan hung over the back of the sofa, perfect for cuddling in front of the fire on a cold night.

My throat swelled with longing for a home of my own.

Rumor and the guys had given me my own space and shared theirs with me in great kindness, but watching them together had awakened something I thought I'd fully tamped down.

Being alone was safe, and I thought I'd been prepared to accept that before my current living situation.

And then I'd decided that living on the fringe of someone else's happiness was more than I'd ever expected anyway.

But when I walked farther into the house and got a glimpse of the dining table in the next room with a vase of multicolored lilies in the center of it?

My throat swelled nearly closed and my eyes moistened with tears I'd promised myself never to shed again.

"Lily? Are you all right?" Benji came up next to me. "Oh no, you've seen the empty table. I told you we should have cooked."

"We didn't know what she liked," Harlan said from behind me.

"It's okay, we don't have to have dinner." Although, I thought that was what they'd invited me for. It wouldn't be the first meal I'd missed. "Just water is fine."

"We would never—" Roan began, but the chime of the doorbell interrupted him. "I'll get it."

I turned to see a line of at least half a dozen delivery people holding bags and boxes. Roan and Harlan took them and, once the door was closed, carried them into the dining room. "What is all this?"

Benji shrugged. "We told you we didn't know what you liked, so we tried to order some of everything. Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Thai... More than that, and we just hope you like something."

"I like everything. The flower and a glass of tap water would have been enough. I didn't have—omegas weren't... You didn't have to do all this."

“Yes, we did. Come and eat.”

The table was laden with foam containers, bags, cardboard boxes, and the biggest pizza I’d ever seen. Enough food for twenty people, and I hoped they wouldn’t be hurt if I didn’t do justice to it.

“We know we overdid,” Roan said, passing me a plate. “But we don’t mind leftovers.”

I ate far more than usual because everything was so good—so much of it entirely new to me, and while we ate, they told me their backstory, how they got here and formed their own pack, touching my heart and allowing me to share mine as well.

We carried laden plates out to my bodyguards, who were enthusiastically pleased by that, and then settled on the couch to talk some more.

Benji

The scent of fur filled the air. I wasn't the only one seeing red, at hearing the horrors Lily had gone through. My mates and I were holding our beasts in the best we could, but it wasn't good enough. Roan's eyes weren't quite human, and all of us reeked of our animals.

I'd never been one for taming my wolf. We were shifters, not people. And maybe if my beast was a house cat, I might feel differently, but wolves were wild animals, not domestic creatures. Pretending they weren't was denying a piece of who we were.

But watching Lily tense up, biting her bottom lip, her foot tapping, her eyes looking slightly above us—our lack of control was freaking her out. I refused to let that continue.

I grabbed Roan's and Harlan's legs, extending my claws into them, not enough to cause damage but enough to sting.

We needed to reel it in and not scare our mate.

She'd been so brave, telling us everything that had happened in her life—or at least gave us the broad strokes.

We couldn't destroy the trust she so graciously gave us because we couldn't control our anger toward those who'd harmed her.

No wonder she turned us down. I would have too, in her position. She'd never been

treated as the goddess she was. Quite the opposite; they made her feel subhuman.

How could she be willing to share a space with us with her history, having experienced that kind of hatred? What a kind, forgiving soul she was. It'd be so easy for her to blame Rumor, for the horrors her family put her through. Instead, they were like sisters.

People like them were the worst. Acting in public like they were above doing the actual acts they did behind closed doors.

And then to dress up their selling of their daughter as some weird-ass matchmaking process.

Fuck, that's DarkShadow Pack not buying into the societal norm bullshit and honoring the goddess' gift of a true mate by making sure Rumor felt safe and loved at all times.

We wanted that for Lily.

I pushed my beast down until he finally caved and submitted. The other two must have done similarly because the air started to clear.

What I longed to do was to bid her farewell and then go hunt those fuckers down and bleed them dry—along with every single one of the people who came to buy her friend, Rumor. Those kinds of alphas? Yeah, none of them deserved to share the same air as us.

I'd had a respect for Darkshadow already, but it was multiplied now.

Not only did they treat their omega the way omegas should be, allowing her to thrive and be her own person, they'd taken care of our omega.

They gave her a home, the freedom she needed to grow, and the safety she needed to do so.

All this after rescuing her in the first place.

We owed them far more than we could ever repay.

“I... Do we... Should we?” She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and as she let it out, opened them up again. “I didn’t want to make you mad.”

“We’re not mad at you,” Harlan said. “Not mad at you at all.”

He was very careful of his wording. He’d told her the truth but held back from offering more because we were livid, and telling your scared mate you want to bleed others wasn’t the best way to make them feel safe.

We wanted to seek revenge, get justice for our mate. True. But I didn’t think it was possible to be angry at her.

“You look mad,” she said, tensing up. “Please. Please don’t lie.”

Half-truths were too close to lying, no matter the reason. I’d have done the same as Harlan. But Lily was right to call us out. We needed to do better—to be better.

“I promise you, we’re not lying. We’re not mad at you.” For someone who was resolved to tell the truth, I was getting this all wrong. Consequently, she was getting more agitated by the second.

I was grateful when Harlan took over. “You’re an omega.

You’re supposed to be treated as the precious gift that you are.

We're very mad...livid and ready to bleed out some shifters.

But we are not mad at you. We want to destroy everyone who has ever harmed you.

I don't mean to scare you, but you said you wanted the truth. "

Tears were forming in her eyes, a couple escaping as she tried to blink them back.

"In this day and age, I can't believe they would do that to you." I wanted to take her into my arms, to comfort her.

"I'm an omega. That's my status."

"No," I said a little too forcefully. "You are not your designation. And your designation does not make you less than."

"I don't know if you came from another planet or have been sheltered, but omegas are the property. Some are owned outright, becoming servants of some kind. And honestly, at least then there are no pretenses, you know?"

She rolled her neck.

"Some are all but owned by being sold to alphas. We aren't precious. We don't have choices. Why do you think I'm here, in the situation I'm in? Because Darkshadow isn't like any other pack."

And I crossed everything, that being DarkShadow Pack would help her see that we weren't like those other packs either.

"I know they're not. But they are like us. Not exactly, of course—they have a name." Harlan chuckled. "We really need to get on that whole naming thing."

She watched him, not saying a word.

“Lily.” I waited until she was looking at me. “Would you agree that Rumor is treated well...the best, even?”

She nodded.

“We plan to treat you even better,” Roan said.

Her jaw dropped open and snapped closed. “How do I know that once I come, you’re going to still believe the same? You’re not going to let societal norms come back?”

“Because hurt people don’t hurt people. It is as simple as that.” And obviously it wasn’t that simple, but saying the words we, as a pack, had told each other when we first scented her felt right.

Her life hadn’t been good. And neither had ours. But maybe, together, our lives could be amazing.

“We’ve waited all our lives for you. And we’ll wait as long as you need. But when you’re ready, when you decide you want this, too, we’ll be here, with open arms.”

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Lily

When they walked me out to the car a few hours later, I was carrying more food to take home.

Each of them solemnly kissed me on the cheek before I got into the car and drove away. Vargas asked me about my evening, and I said, “It was perfect,” because it was.

I didn’t hear from the alphas for a couple of days, in which time my anxiety crept up.

Maybe they didn’t have a good time? I could have called them, but what would I say?

Sorry I was a dud with all my sob-story stuff?

They had also had a rough start, but they’d flipped their hardships into success.

Without having to lean on another pack for support.

By the time the first text came in, I’d convinced myself they were just being nice and I’d never see them again.

My wolf wouldn’t hear of it, howling inside me in demand that I act.

But what could an omega do? How had I thought for an instant I was worthy of the three hottest, sweetest, best alphas I’d ever met.

No shade on Rumor's mates, to whom I owed so much, but Roan, Benji, and Harlan were in a class all their own.

We were in the kitchen, Rumor and I, making a trio of cookie mixes in a jar, when my phone chimed. I froze, holding a bag of flour.

"Aren't you going to see who it is?" she asked.

"Yes. No. Maybe."

The corner of her lips twitched. "How about picking one. Want me to check for you?"

I sucked in a breath, searching for courage I did not seem to have. "No, you already do too much for me." I set the flour carefully on the counter and picked up my phone. "It's Roan. He says he had a really nice time and hopes to do it again soon."

"How lovely." She lined up a row of jars and put the wide-mouthed funnel in the first one. "And polite to send a note like that."

"Yes, I guess it is." This text was followed within the hour by one from each of the others, making me think they'd decided just how long to wait before sending me something. Not wanting to pressure me. It was lovely.

Later that evening, a call came from all three of them, and we spoke for a few minutes before Roan asked, "Would you like to come over again and spend some time together?"

This time, I didn't take a carful of bodyguards with me.

Rumor offered her mates, but all I asked for was the use of the truck for the evening.

And when I arrived, I parked in front of their home, and before I turned the engine off, all three were outside and headed down the walk.

I tried not to let my heart lift too much—my walls shouldn't be falling so quickly—but their smiles and the bounce in their steps? How could I resist smiling back?

They escorted me inside, where they had snacks waiting: a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of brownies that made me wonder. “You didn't buy our mix, did you?”

“We did.” Benji held the tray out to me. “Don't hate us if we messed them up.”

I took one and bit into it, savoring the fudgy chocolatey goodness. “Oh, you took them out at the early stage.”

“Is that okay?” Roan asked.

“Yes, if you cook them more, they get cakier, but I like it this way.”

Their mutual sigh of relief had me grinning again. We sat around the living room for a while, eating brownies and drinking lemonade, just talking about our weeks in the most comfortable way possible, but after the brownies were gone, I sat up straight, and the air in the room changed.

“Is something wrong?” Harlan asked.

“No, but I want to ask you something.” Unease crawled up my spine, but I'd spent a lot of time avoiding people and things. I didn't want to avoid them.

“Go ahead.”

“My wolf and I, we were wondering”—I was in over my head, but I kept going—“if we can meet your wolves.”

“That’s it?” Roan chuckled. “My wolf is about to burst out to meet you.”

We went out onto the back porch, their yard very private with high trees all around, and they undressed quickly and shifted. White wolves, all of them, with the most gorgeous fur, and when they turned away, I knew what they were offering—space for me to shift privately if I wanted to. To join them.

“My wolf will never forgive me if I don’t.

” I took off my clothes and shifted, joining them in the yard.

I had so little experience, having avoided shifting around anyone before I joined Darkshadow, but the guys began to chase one another back and forth, frolicking in such a lighthearted way that when Roan bumped me with his nose, I let myself be drawn in.

But their treatment of me was different, gentle.

They were rolling one another over and bouncing. Then they’d prance next to me, nuzzling and making little growling woofs that had my wolf preening, stretching out, and prancing. Such a flirt.

But I couldn’t bring myself to be upset about that.

Especially when I could see the looks of admiration in their eyes.

Having never seen my wolf, never shifted anywhere near a mirror or thought to look in a body of water for my reflection, I still had no doubt she was lovely.

She was too wonderful to be anything but.

When we'd shifted back, though, we were all quiet, and soon I said my goodbyes and drove home. Reflecting how our first shift together had gone, I wondered if they were so careful because they thought I was fragile. In reality, I was anything but.

I'd never have gotten this far if I were.

Harlan

As beautiful and wonderful as shifting with our mate had been, our time together in our fur couldn't last forever. And all too soon, our beautiful wolf was at her apartment, and we were at our house without her.

It physically hurt to be away from Lily.

Rowan, Benji, and I all felt it. It was a dull ache, one I couldn't shake but also couldn't fully describe.

The thought of her suffering, even for a second, for any reason, was too unbearable.

Even considering that she might be struggling the way we were had my stomach in knots.

We were the alphas and should be the ones shouldering all her pain.

I called the guys to a meeting. We weren't formal like that normally, but what I wanted to discuss felt important enough to make it so.

It was time to do something about the room we'd made for our mate.

We'd said we needed to wait until our omega agreed to be with us.

And at the time, it felt like the right timeline.

But now that we knew Lily, it needed to be ready for her.

Thinking of her ready for her nest and us not having it done on time... My beast couldn't handle it.

I couldn't handle it.

It was time we made that decision.

They both sat at the table with me. Benji's shirt was misbuttoned, and Rowan hadn't even bothered with one.

"What's up?" Roan leaned back in his chair, his feet in front of him, attempting to look nonchalant and failing miserably.

"I think it's time we fixed the nest." Pussyfooting around the issue wasn't going to do us any good, so why bother. "We started the room and then locked it tight. It's time to open it up again. We need to be ready. Her wolf needs it. We need to be ready."

"Are you saying we need to be ready?" Roan stuck his tongue out.

"Not helpful. No need be a dick," I told him. "And yes, we do." I was not going to feel bad for not being eloquent enough. "So, can we take a vote on it?"

"Nope, don't need—" Benji stood up. "We've been itching to do this since we first built that room. Let's get it done."

When we unlocked the door, mustiness slammed into me, and I sneezed. It was worse than I expected. "Cleaning first, it is."

We opened all the windows in the house and set up a couple of fans.

Airing it out would go a long way. That's when the cleaning began.

Once upon a time, people did spring and fall cleaning, and I was not sure what the occasions were that humans used for deep cleaning where they would wash walls and ceilings, not just do everyday-type cleaning.

But that's exactly what we were doing.

We started with the ceiling after we saw a cobweb because one was too many. From there, we cleaned all of the walls and the floors then got out the sheets and blankets from the closet and made up the bed.

By the time we were done, the nice, clean room looked like it belonged in a freaking hotel.

"We need to do better," I grumbled.

"Yeah, we do," Roan agreed.

We made a list of things we wanted for the space to make it comfortable for her, including more blankets, pillows, rugs, chairs...those kinds of things. And curtains. She definitely needed curtains.

List in hand, we headed off to the closest city to find everything on the list.

We were able to get everything pretty easily, including a chair that was like a cross between a hammock and a bao bun.

It looked uncomfortable, almost like you might get mushed inside, but the salesman insisted we each try it out.

Really comfortable. And the shape gave it a nest-like quality which made it perfect.

We managed to fit everything in the pickup truck, grateful that we didn't have to wait for delivery. Our animals weren't going to allow us to rest until it was complete.

It took longer to shop than it did to put everything in place. The finished room was nice. But it wasn't her nest yet. It needed something else.

We decided to look at it again the next day and then decide if it needed more or maybe less. But fresh eyes were needed.

The other guys went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. This needed more than what we gave it and until I figured out how to make it the nest she deserved it to be, I wasn't going to be able to sleep.

I went out to my welding tools, dug through all my supplies, and found a bunch of silverware I'd picked up in a lot.

I spent the entire night playing around, welding pieces together until I had a bouquet of flowers and a vase—all of it made out of silverware.

And by bouquet, I mean, I made a bunch of lilies. They turned out beautifully.

When we all decided it was time and went into the room to see what adjustments needed to be made, I set my vase of flowers beside her bed.

Roan looked around. "I think this is it."

"Same." So did Benji.

Leaving only me left to agree and I did.

This nest was beautiful, but more importantly than that, it shouted Lily. It was her space, when she wanted it. If she wanted changes, we'd facilitate that. If she wanted to move in tomorrow, we'd help her. We were on her timeline, as it should be.

Lily

One night, I woke in the small hours. Nothing new for me, but generally I could trace it to a bad dream or a worry of some sort. After a while, in most cases, I could eventually fall back to sleep; that was not going to happen on that night. I wanted my alphas.

A brand-new feeling had overtaken me, one I didn't know how to cope with but also could not make it stop.

There was no question of my just waiting for morning as I'd done when sleep did not come back in the past. I was up and dressing and heading for the main house before I could even consider the ramifications.

I tiptoed inside the kitchen and was looking around for a piece of paper and a pen when Vargas appeared from the living room. I jumped.

"Everything all right, Lily?"

"I need to go to my mates."

"I see." He reached for the keys on the hook. "Let's go."

"I can't ask you... I was just going to borrow the truck and leave a note."

"Well, I need the truck in the morning, so if you're comfortable being dropped off, I got you." He probably didn't want me tearing across town alone in the middle of the

night. At a guess.

“I’m grateful.” Because I was feeling feels entirely new to me and I might not be the best driver. My wolf was inches from taking over, demanding to get to our mates. “Very grateful.”

“Want to get dressed?”

Cheeks burning, I dared a glance to see what I actually wore. Fortunately, it was a long sleep tee, and my biggest issue was bare feet. “I’ll be right back.”

This whole situation was getting out of control, like a runaway roller coaster, but I didn’t know how to stop it or even really want to. At this point, all I could consider was seeing where it took me.

And I needed to see my alphas.

Now.

Vargas pulled up in front of the house and let me out, but he waited until Benji answered the door before driving away.

“I’m so sorry I woke you,” I said, starting to feel a little foolish. “I don’t know what came over me, but—”

“You don’t have to apologize, Lily.” He put an arm around my shoulders and guided me inside. “You’re always welcome here. And I was awake anyway, doing some work.”

“Okay, but I should have called first.”

His nostrils flared, pupils dilated, and I suddenly realized what this alpha was reacting to. Something else I should apologize for, but I wasn't sure if that would help the situation. I'd always been warned not to forget my suppressors.

And I had.

"Omega, it's okay." He stepped back, though, and waved me ahead of him. "This way."

I hadn't been past the main living areas, so I hesitated at the stairs. "I don't know."

"It's okay," he repeated. "I have a place for you to rest, and nobody will bother you."

Considering I was oozing scent, it was reassuring, but I could only hope they had more self-control than I did.

I climbed the stairs and Benji passed me on the landing and led me to a closed door.

He opened it and reached inside to flip on the overhead light with such an air of anticipation, I didn't know how to read it.

But I stepped inside. The room was stunning.

Everything about it was selected with such care, I didn't need to ask who it was for.

A comfortable chair with an ottoman sat in the corner, a lamp with a Tiffany stained-glass shade next to it, along with a little table where a few paperbacks lay.

Moving closer, I saw there were a selection of books that someone might pick for a woman whose tastes they weren't sure of.

A romance, a cozy mystery, an autobiography of a reality-TV star... and a psychological thriller.

I would only imagine how it would be to sit there and read one of those, or all of them. “These look so great!” I picked one up and read the back. “Ohhh.”

“We didn’t know what to pick,” he said from the doorway. Like the food that other night. “So we took a guess.”

“I love to read, but I usually just grab whatever is around. These look great!” I set the volume down and took in the rest of the space.

The bed covered with a quilt worked in diamonds of blue and cream and yellow.

Lightweight curtains moving in a gentle breeze.

The furnishings were light-colored wood, beautifully polished, and the pillows were so full and fluffy.

“What a beautiful space.” An art piece, flowers created from metal, drew me over to examine it more closely. “Is that...was it silverware?”

“Harlan made it.”

“It’s lilies, isn’t it? I love it.”

“Do you think you can sleep here?”

When he asked that, everything changed. Suddenly, it wasn’t just a special room; it was one that reflected both their personalities and mine. This was for me. This was home. My throat tightened, but I forced the words out. “Yes, I can.”

“Good.” He took a step back, grasping the doorknob as if he was going to leave.

“Wait.”

“Yes?” He stopped. “Do you need something else? Water? Maybe something to eat?”

“No. Nothing like that. But...do you think you could sleep here with me?”

“Of course.” He stepped into the room for the first time since I’d been in there.

“Anything for you.”

This alpha knew just what to say to reach my heart. I curled up under the covers, and he joined me, pressing a kiss to the top of my head before closing his eyes.

I’d never known home before.

Harlan

When I woke up in the morning, something was different.

At first, I couldn't put my finger on it, but when I left my room, heading down the hallway, the door to the nest was open, and a peek inside had my jaw dropping.

She was here, our omega, and Benji lay next to her, an arm around her shoulders, her head cradled on his shoulder. I couldn't believe it. He held a finger to his lips, and I nodded, but what I wanted to do was jump up and down and cheer.

Her scent filled my nostrils, meaning, she hadn't used her suppressors.

I wanted that to be a message that she was ready to mate with us, but I cautioned myself not to jump the gun.

She and Benji were both dressed; the covers were pushed low enough for me to see their shirts.

Also, I was pretty sure if anything more happened, my wolf would know.

And I would be fine with it, but we weren't there yet.

Still, our mate had shown up sometime during the night and had not only slept in the nest we'd readied but with Benji holding her.

It was a leap of trust I'd only dared dream of.

Tiptoeing down the hallway, I held my thoughts in check.

One step at a time, and the first one I could see was making the best breakfast ever for our mate.

When Roan showed up, I had bacon frying, waffle batter made, a fruit salad half prepared, and coffee perking. “What did I just see?” he asked. “Am I dreaming?”

“Not unless we both are.” I flipped bacon. “It seems our mate came for a sleepover, and Benji happened to be the one awake to greet her.”

“To think I’ve tried to talk him out of working late into the night.” He shook his head and grabbed for an apron. “I guess our job is to spoil her.”

“Working on it.” The light went green on the waffle maker, and I opened it. “I hope she’s hungry when she wakes up.”

“What can I do to help?” Roan tied the apron in back and looked around. “Should I set the table?”

“Good idea. And then you can chop the rest of the fruit for the salad. I’m thinking we need to scramble eggs, too?”

We settled in to work together, and before long, Benji appeared in the kitchen doorway. “Smells great in here.”

“Not as good as it does upstairs. No suppressors.”

“I don’t think it was deliberate, but it sure is intoxicating.” He grabbed a mug and filled it with coffee. Sitting at the counter, he cradled it between his hands. “She liked the nest.”

With waffles cooking, I got out the eggs and broke a dozen into a bowl, added milk, salt, and pepper and beat them to a froth.

The bacon was done, so I laid the strips on a paper towel to drain and made use of the fat for cooking the eggs.

“Someone get out the butter and syrup? I hope Lily wakes up soon because this is all going to taste better while it’s hot and fresh. ”

“She was going to take a shower,” Benji said, “but she should be down soon.”

“I’m here.” Her voice preceded her appearance in the kitchen. “You guys sure eat a big breakfast. Is that a waffle iron?”

I opened the lid and removed four only slightly burned waffles. “It sure is. Do you like them?”

“I never considered that they could be made at home. Only something you get at a diner. Wow.”

“Sit down and we’ll get it all dished up.” Roan pulled out a counter stool. “A little of everything?”

She flicked a glance around the kitchen. “I guess. I usually skip breakfast or maybe eat cereal.”

“You don’t have to eat to please us,” Benji said. “If you’re not hungry.”

“I’m starving. How could I not be when everything smells so amazing.”

It certainly did, if everything referred to our mate.

I took a plate and filled it with a waffle, a scoop of eggs, a little overcooked but hopefully okay, and three strips of bacon with singed edges. Roan filled a small bowl with fruit.

“Coffee?” Benji offered.

“Yes, please.”

We placed the dishes in front of her and stepped back. We’d worked hard, but as I looked at it all, it was so unworthy of her. Our mate deserved perfectly prepared food, and nothing we made could be described in that way.

However, Lily dug in, tasting each item before pronouncing it all delicious and eating every bit we’d put on the plate. Then she sat back and took in the kitchen. “Looks like you all worked hard.”

I followed her gaze to see the total disaster. Eggs burnt to the pan, waffle batter all over the counter, eggshells in the sink, and just about every pot, pan, and utensil used to make breakfast. “Yeah, but we didn’t mind.”

She slid off the stool and approached Benji. “You make me feel so welcome.” Tipping her face up, she rose on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. “Thank you for last night.”

Roan was next to receive her gratitude and a kiss, then she turned to me. “Breakfast was wonderful.”

“It wasn’t. But we tried.”

“Nobody has ever gone to so much trouble just for me.” She rested her palm on my chest and kissed me, soft lips firmly against mine before she stepped back. “You are

all amazing, but maybe I'm needed here."

"You are." Benji gave a firm nod. "But on your time."

"What do you think... I mean, would it be all right if I spent a few days here, just to kind of see how things go?"

"If you're ready, we're all in."

We decided to take Lily to pack up enough clothes and things for a few days, but I hoped we'd soon be going back for all the rest.

Lily

After I explained to Rumor and her mates that I would be staying with Roan, Benji, and Harlan for a bit, to kind of test the waters, my friend helped me pack up some of my things.

Considering I didn't have a whole lot, the two duffels she loaned me ended up holding most of my personal items. But I wasn't giving up my little apartment just yet.

Having it there if I needed it gave me the confidence to try out life with this pack. I'd never had such security or so many people who wanted me for me, not just to use me. It was a heady feeling but also frightening. What if something changed? I'd known bad for much longer than good.

Then, as I was closing the second duffel, I heard them outside chatting with Rumor's mates. Their friendly tones and laughter drew me to look out the window and see them there, the six big males, and three of them wanted me.

I'd seen how Rumor's treated her, and I'd been willing to accept that they were the exception that proved the rule. All others treated omegas terribly, except them. The odds of my finding mates as wonderful as Rumor's had to be infinitesimal, and finding even better males?

Impossible.

Yet, I thought I had.

“Ready?” Rumor moved to pick up one bag, but I quickly lifted them both. She didn’t need to be doing that in her situation. “Lily!”

“I’ve got these. We’re going to have to figure out how to get ready for the market if I’m not here.”

“How about for this week I’ll just do what I can, and when we see you at the market, we can make more plans. I think what you’re doing today is enough for today.”

“Sure?”

She hugged me hard and kissed me on the cheek. “Lily, go and be happy. If you’re not, you come back here immediately. I will send my mates for you any time of day or night.”

The tears I tried so hard to hold back spilled down my cheeks at the love I’d experienced here with Rumor and her alphas.

And, of course, once I started, my hormonal friend followed, and a few minutes later, all six men, Vargas carrying Bernie, came upstairs to see what we were up to and found us crying in each other’s arms.

I felt guilty as we drove away. Bernie did not need me getting her upset, even if she told me it was okay.

“You all right, Lily?” Roan asked. He was driving, and I sat in the passenger seat, the other two guys in the back.

“Yes, I will be. Are you sure you want to take on a mess like me?”

“You’re not a mess,” Benji asserted. “It’s not easy to try on a new life. But we hope

you won't regret it."

"I'll be all right."

Harlan patted my shoulder. "You need a good night's sleep. Things will look clearer in the morning."

"The bed is very comfortable in the room I slept in last time."

"That room is for you," Benji said. "It always has been, so if there's something you don't like, just say so and we'll change it right away. No questions asked."

I protested, but they insisted, and when we got to the house, Roan and Harlan carried my bags up while Benji put a frozen lasagna in the oven.

The en suite in my room was as nice as the bedroom, as I'd discovered the first morning when I showered in there, but it also had a big, deep tub, and while dinner heated, I took their advice and spent an hour soaking in the warm water with towers of bubbles.

There were a number of bath products at my disposal. These alphas thought of everything.

Dinner was lovely, and we sat together in the living room and watched a movie.

Although Roan and Benji sat on either side of me, they didn't try to touch or kiss me, giving me time and space.

They'd told me more than once that anything between us was in my time.

Up to me. It was so strange, not the way things usually were, but I was starting to

trust them.

When I began to yawn, Roan turned off the TV and helped me to my feet. “Bedtime, I think. If you need anything, just call out and we’ll hear you.”

They all walked me upstairs and left me at my door. I changed into a sleep tee and crawled into my ever-so-comfortable bed, prepared to go right out.

But then I didn’t. I lay awake and feeling as if something was wrong. A strange place, of course. I’d been here one night, and it must just be that it was in general unfamiliar. Finally, I gave up trying and went downstairs for a glass of water.

I made it as far as the sofa and sank down, pulling the afghan over me and inhaling the scents of all three of the alphas. Sleep overtook me almost instantly.

I woke to the sound of the front door opening and shot to sit upright. Benji and Roan were entering, pulling on their shirts. They’d mentioned going out on perimeter runs at night.

“Lily?” Benji came over and sat beside me. “What’s wrong? Couldn’t you sleep?”

“No, and then I came down here and your scents made me relax, I think.”

“We don’t want you down here on this uncomfortable couch.” Roan leaned on the chair across from the sofa. “Can we do anything to make you feel better in your room?”

I chewed on my lower lip before asking, “Would you mind, one or all of you, coming to sleep with me? Just for tonight?”

“Omega, we will all stay with you tonight and any night if you welcome us.” Benji

stood and drew me with him. “Let’s go upstairs, and we’ll get you tucked in.”

Along the way, they rapped at Harlan’s door and brought him along with us. They undressed partially, crawling in beside me in their boxer briefs, after asking me if that was all right.

It was all right.

More than all right to have them beside me in bed all night, their breaths mingling with mine.

Roan

When market day came, I drove Lily to town. She had promised to help Rumor with their booth at the farmer's market, and they had to figure out how to continue their business while not living in the same house.

Over the past several days, we'd spent our days with Lily and our nights sleeping in her room.

It was very difficult not to take things further, but we never would until she was ready.

This was made even harder by something we'd noticed in the past couple of days.

Watching her hug Rumor and take the baby to cuddle in her arms.

She looked so natural with little Bernadette, bouncing her gently and making the baby giggle.

"How are things going?" Vargas approached me where I watched the women getting the stand ready. "Should we expect Lily back soon?"

"Don't even think it. She seems to be settling in with us, but we aren't fully there yet."

"Be patient," he said. "It takes time with someone who's been through so much. We were surprised when she moved in with you"—he held up a hand—"even if she isn't

admitting it's forever. Lily is a really good person with a good heart who deserves a happy life."

Our mate was currently filling the basket we'd given her with jars of honey.

She set each in so carefully, as if it mattered.

It was the way she did everything. From making breakfast, a task she'd taken over after we burned the bacon a second time, to telling a joke.

She was not good at telling jokes, but she tried so hard, we laughed anyway.

And sleeping with her—we had to believe one day we'd do more than sleep, but for now? Being close to her was incredible. But she was going toward heat, and she didn't seem to realize it. Harlan and Benji and I were fully aware of it, however, and we didn't know what to do.

"Vargas, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"You can ask, but I don't know if I can help." Rumor bent to pick up a box of jars, and Vargas went over to help. "Be right back." That was how we wanted to be for our mate too. When he returned, he said, "What was your question?"

"We're starting to see hints of heat in our mate. But she's not acting as if she knows. And we don't know what to do."

"I see." Vargas kept his gaze fixed on his mate and what she was up to. "That's a tough one. If she's just beginning, then you need to talk with her now while you can. I'm not sure how much you know about what a female in heat is like."

"Honestly? I've never been close to one. You know how omegas are usually kept

hidden away at such times. And Lily is so special. We don't want to do anything to hurt her. She has trust issues."

"Come with me." Vargas led the way to a table under a tree, where we still had a view of the stand but our omegas with their shifter hearing were unlikely to be able to hear us.

"When heat kicks in, your omega will not be thinking clearly, and she won't be able to make good decisions, so you need to talk with her now.

Find out what she wants to happen during her heat.

Otherwise, it's possible something will happen which she will initiate but will not really be doing with informed consent. "

"Thank you. I appreciate the advice, and we're going to have that talk."

When the market shut down, I brought Lily home, but I'd been talking to the other guys via text, so they were ready for our conversation over dinner.

We'd brought home some meatball subs from a local place and as we all sat around, the scent of her heat was stronger.

We'd almost waited too long to have this talk.

Lily still seemed completely unaware of what was going on, enjoying her sandwich and chatting about her day at the market, but when there was a natural break in the conversation, I said, "We need to talk."

She paled, and I cursed myself for my choice of words. "What did I do?" she asked.

“I’m so sorry.” I took her hand and held it between mine. “Nothing. We just have noticed something and we think we need to talk about it a little. I think...you’re in heat.”

She tugged on her hand, reeling back. “I’m not. I can’t be. Everyone says when you’re in heat you can’t think straight, you’re crazy for sex, and chasing your mates around the house demanding it.” She held her head up. “I don’t see me chasing anyone.”

Benji choked at her words. “That’s not exactly...no, you wouldn’t...”

He didn’t have a lot more experience than me, I didn’t think, but after spending the afternoon with Vargas, I’d begun to realize how many myths there were around heat. It was a seriously intense state, but not the caricature my mate had been presented with.

“Omega,” I began, “maybe tomorrow you should talk to Rumor. Get the female side, but it’s not quite like that, I believe. But what’s important for now is that we know how you want us to handle your heat.”

In the end, she told us she wanted us to help her ride it out. She didn’t want to do this if she wasn’t marked.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:07 pm

Benji

I wasn't one of those people who was glued to their phones. I hated that I had to carry it around with me and kept it perpetually on silent with the exception of one number.

As grateful as I was to be out of my old life and here with my pack and our mate, I'd never been able to go completely no-contact with my former pack. I tried. Goddess knew I tried. But despite my best attempts, I held onto this stupid phone.

I didn't know why I couldn't push through and walk away for good, but something always felt uneasy whenever I tried.

But every time I was about to make the leap and toss it out the window while driving on the highway or running it over or using it in the fire pit, I physically could not bring myself to do so.

I talked to Roan about it once when we first settled in here. This place was supposed to be our new start, and clinging to the past was the opposite of that. At least, that was how it seemed to me.

Roan was smarter than me and said exactly what I needed to hear, that holding onto my phone was the equivalent of a child's favorite stuffie that they could never get rid of. When it was time, I'd know. Until then, I shouldn't stress about it. For the most part, I didn't until today.

Lily's heat was coming. All the signs were there, giving us time to discuss it before her heat took away rational thought from all of us.

So, of course, that's when the phone rang the one ringtone that cut through no matter what. Tyrone.

Tyrone was the closest thing I had to a friend growing up.

His family worked for mine, and we were more like cousins or brothers than friends.

He hadn't called me since everything went down.

He knew the boundary that was raised and the danger contacting me would be for all involved.

If his number was ringing, I had to answer.

I looked up, trying to figure out how to tell Lily that something else was taking precedence over her.

The conversation the four of us were having was important and also not one we could put off while I figured out how to deal with my family shit.

But also, the family shit in question had to be important.

It shouldn't have been a surprise that Roan had my back. His eyes were wide. I didn't know if he understood fully what was happening, but he knew it was serious and that I wasn't hovering my finger over the "accept" button on a whim.

"Benji, if you need to answer that, do it. No one here will think less of you." His words were exactly what I needed to hear.

I stood up, answering the phone as I walked across the room, my heart hating every second what was happening. I did too, but if I didn't listen to what Tyrone had to say,

my gut said I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

"Tyrone?

"Tyrone, is everything okay? Please speak."

Silence had never been his gift, and that had my stomach ready to revolt. It had to be bad. Really, really bad.

"I have some news about Sylvia." His voice was low, nearly too quiet for me to hear even with my shifter hearing.

Sylvia was my half-sister, the "bastard demon child" of the family who I wasn't supposed to know existed.

Her omega mother died when I was a young teen, and she'd been dropped on our doorstep.

Tyrone had been the one to find her that day.

We were still so young, but we both knew my father and what would happen to her if he found her.

We'd done our best to protect her, but ultimately failed.

She was taken from us years too soon, in the dead of night, and I wasn't even allowed to mourn her or say her name out loud ever again.

The time I did... Let's just say that's how I got the scar on my back.

My stomach dropped. "Did they catch the bastards?" I'd always assumed it was my

father, but years later, I heard rumblings it was his enemies and the real target had been me, making her death my fault.

“I don’t know about that, but I think she’s alive.”

I opened my mouth to ask how, but nothing came out.

“If my intel is right, the window to get her is short. Meet me where we said. I’ll call you back.”

I turned back to face my pack. Lily’s heat was coming. She needed us. She needed me to be needed.

But my sister might be alive. Might be another terrifying variable in play. I dared not get my hopes up too high. The wounds from her loss were still so close to the surface. I didn’t think I could bear losing her again.

“Benji, what is it?” Lily grabbed my hand. “Your face is telling me... Your eyes, your scent are all telling me a million things, and I can’t decipher any of it.”

“They think Sylvia is alive.”

Roan and Harlan both gasped behind her, and Lily for a split second looked like her heart was breaking in two.

“She’s my half-sister. One my father never wanted to exist. Everyone thought she was dead. We had a funeral. But she might be alive and, if so, she needs help.”

“You need to go get her.” There was no hesitation in Lily’s voice.

“But your heat is coming. You’re my mate, I am supposed to put you above all

others.” It was a vow I’d made to myself.

“Benji.” Her hands were on my cheeks, holding me so that I was watching her. “I was once an omega in need, and I was rescued. You’re a good man, an amazing alpha, and I love that you want to be here for me, but your sister is more important. You need to go to her. I need you to go to her.”

She dropped her hand and pulled her shirt collar down over her shoulder.

“Mark me. Mark me now. Your promise to me that you’ll come back with your sister safe at your side. And it’ll be my promise to you that I’ll be here when you return and that nothing between us will have changed. I will be yours and you will be mine.”

The phone rang again, and this time, before I answered it, my beast lunged forward, taking control of my human form. My canines elongated and then latched onto her shoulder—marking her as mine.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:07 pm

Lily

When I first came to stay in the house with the guys, it had felt wonderful.

Like home, and while there was a strong attraction there, it wasn't such that I was willing to tear down my walls for sex with them.

It was still too scary to complete the connection with mating.

I'd almost convinced myself that we could go on just as we were, if not forever, for a long time.

But as the days went by, after our conversation about heat, I began to get more aware of them.

When we slept together in my bed, I didn't sleep all that much, too conscious of them, of their bodies and their breathing and their scents.

They had always smelled amazing, but now it was as if I couldn't be anywhere in the house without it filling my nose.

I was constantly looking around to find them, see where they were.

Finally, one afternoon, I shut myself in my room for a nap. I tossed and turned because my sheets held their scent, but finally I drifted off, into a series of erotic dreams that ended when the door opened.

“Lily?”

I blinked my eyes and saw Harlan, my down-to-earth guy. “Hi. You wanted me to wake you up to run to the store?”

“Could you come hold me?” I didn’t even know I was going to say it, but suddenly I couldn’t stand not touching him. “Please?”

“Anytime, omega. There’s nothing I like more than holding you in my arms.” He left the doorway and came in, sitting on the side of the bed and gathering me to him. “Is anything wrong?”

“No. Lie down with me?”

“Of course.” He slid down to lie flat with me half on top of him. “Did you have a bad dream, sweetheart?”

“Something like that.” My cheeks flamed. I thought I’d gotten past that since we’d been sleeping together. “They were actually kind of naughty dreams.”

“Was I in it?” He winked at me, but then smoothed his hand down my cheek. “Tell me what you need from me, sweetheart. Whatever you need.”

“Touch me?” I wasn’t even sure exactly what I was asking for, but I needed something. “Just please touch me.”

“Are you sure?”

We’d agreed they’d help me get through the heat, but we weren’t mated yet. Not marked. And sometimes I wasn’t sure why I’d been holding back. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Harlan kissed me then, at first sweetly, but when I parted my lips, his tongue delved in to explore, and I sank into the sensations.

While he kissed me senseless, his hands wandered my body, over my clothes, at first, but it wasn't enough for me.

I had been marked by one of them, and I didn't want to take things all the way with any of them without marking by them all.

All I knew was I ached for them, and Harlan's gentle strokes and deep kisses were sending me into a frenzy.

I opened my shirt, bringing his hands to my breasts and arching my back when he cupped them.

His lips moved down to the curves exposed by my demi bra, then the front clasp fell away, and I was exposed from the waist up, nipples peaked, breathing harsh, and limbs trembling.

He continued to kiss and suckle at my skin, drawing my nipple into his mouth while his hand crept down and into my leggings, where his fingers encountered the slick his touch brought on.

I held his head to my breasts, while he stroked me between my legs, circling my clit, bringing me closer and closer to orgasm.

He knew just what to do, what to say, how to whisper things against my skin that made me crave more.

And then, as waves of pleasure crashed over me, I tipped my head to the side and invited him to mark me. The piercing of my flesh made me come again. If this was

what it was like with a simple touch, with one of them, how would I survive making love with all three?

Mating them would kill me.

Lily

A week later, after the afternoon nap with Harlan, my heat was coming hard and fast. No longer could I convince myself that I was going to make it through this whole heat thing unscathed or unmated.

I was pacing through the house, talking to myself and more or less ready to hump anything that moved.

My nest was suddenly wrong. I needed it to be different and until it was, I could not rest. As I roamed, I found things that belonged in my nest and took them there.

The afghan from the couch, a pillow from Harlan's room.

I pulled everything off my bed and remade it. Properly. It had to be right.

How could I have ever been satisfied with the way it was.

Sure, the guys made the room nice for me, but it wasn't how I needed my nest to be.

When had I started thinking of it as a nest?

I had no idea. Maybe an hour ago or yesterday, but it was that now, and it was the place I would mate with my alphas.

I'd always scoffed at the things that made an omega different, but as heat crashed over me in waves, I kept adding and deleting things from my room, from my nest.

Maybe the mattress belonged on the floor.

No, that was wrong. Unless maybe it belonged in the corner?

And that was good for location but not for height, so I pushed it away and worked the platform into that spot, wrestled the mattress back on top, and made up the bed. And it was the wrong corner.

When Roan showed up in the room, I was coated in sweat, hair sticking up all over my head, and panting in frustration. “Lily? Omega? What is going on?” In arranging my bed, I’d pushed the other furniture around as well, and the room was a total disaster.

I fell to my knees, sobbing. Feverish. Exhausted but enervated at the same time. “I can’t do it. I can’t get it right.”

“What can’t you get right?” He lifted me to my feet and turned me to face him. “How can I help?”

“I don’t know. But it’s so wrong.”

“We can do it together.” He brushed my tears away and took me into the bathroom. “Let’s get you cleaned up a little first, okay?”

I sniffled. “All right.”

Roan dampened a washcloth and wiped my face then held the cool cloth on the back of my neck. I didn’t see how that would do anything, but then it helped. My breathing came more under control, and the heat dissipated a little. “Better?”

I nodded, letting out a long sigh. “But I need the nest put back together. And right. It

has to be right.”

“Then we’d better get to work. Because if I’m not completely wrong, you’re going to want to use it. You’re all the way in heat, mate.”

“My underwear is soaked.” It sounded awful even to me, but it was a fact. “And I feel awful. My hair hurts. If this is heat, it’s the least romantic thing in the world.”

“I think you’re right.” He pulled my sweaty hair back and braided it, fastening it with a hair tie at the bottom. “But we’re here for you. All of us.”

“I’m so tired. I don’t think I can move the mattress again. Or the dresser.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “I’ve got this. And if we’re not done when Benji and Harlan get back, they will join in. What do you want me to do first?”

To my everlasting shame, I let him move every piece of furniture in that bedroom, in my nest, for over three hours. If I’d ever doubted this alpha’s dedication and devotion, I couldn’t now. Finally, he moved the bed into the exact spot it had been to start with and I yelled, “That’s it. Stop.”

“Like this?” The entire room was back as it had been, with the exception of the afghan and extra pillow. “You sure?”

“I’m more than sure. It’s perfect.” I threw my arms around his neck, wanting to thank him, but the moment my body came into contact with him, the fever was back in full. “Oh, I shouldn’t touch you.”

“Or maybe that’s exactly what you should be doing.” He kissed my forehead, my nose and cheeks, and finally my lips. I melted into him, our tongues tangling, his hands dropping to my bottom to lift me against him.

When we parted, panting, I cupped the back of his head and drew him down to my throat. He knew what I wanted, his fangs scraping my skin before sinking into my flesh. It hurt this time, since I wasn't in mid-orgasm, but I didn't care. All three had marked me. All that was left was knotting.

And I wanted it now.

Lily

I wanted all of them, the moment Roan lifted his fangs from my throat, but two of them weren't home. And with the heat searing me from the inside out, waiting was not an option. I flung myself onto my bed, my nest, and tore at my clothing, needing my skin bared to my mates' gaze.

All three of my mates.

"Roan, where are Benji and Harlan?"

"I don't know. They are out somewhere but—"

"Get them. Now." My snarl sounded more like my wolf than my human self. "Go!"

"I'll call them." He didn't argue, didn't chastise me for treating an alpha with so little respect. They weren't like that to start with, but an omega in heat is in total control of the situation. Not herself. Not her body. But the situation? Yea. I got that now. I was learning things all the time.

A sheen of sweat covered my skin, as I lay on the nest, ready for my alphas to take me.

Doubts, hesitations, everything was gone.

They were supposed to see me through the heat, and I realized now we'd never said what that meant.

But we'd built up a trust between us and they were my mates.

I retained enough brain power to know that, possibly with my wolf's help, and if they didn't get here soon, I was going to find them.

Roan returned from wherever he'd gone to make his calls. "They will be back in about five minutes. I told them the situation, so maybe sooner."

"That's so long!" It felt like forever. "What can I do?"

"I've got you, omega." Roan pulled off his shirt and climbed onto the bed next to me. "Until the others come."

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:07 pm

Roan

From the second I scented my mate, I knew she was going to change our lives.

And when she agreed to let us court her, I didn't think I could be happier than I was in that moment.

But then she'd allowed us to mark her, and the joy that filled me was beyond anything I ever thought possible.

I had to remind myself I wasn't living in some sort of a dream.

And if I was, I never wanted to wake up.

And all of that didn't hold a candle to how I felt waking up with the three of us together in her nest, after knotting her and helping her ride out her heat. Our pack felt like a true, honest-to-goodness pack for the very first time.

I'd expected mating Lily officially would change our bond. How could it not? She was becoming officially ours. What surprised me was the way it changed, my bond with the alphas of my pack stronger and my beast hyperaware of their animals as well as that of our mate.

It was wonderful, peaceful, and perfect as well as exhausting.

Benji and Harlan were snoring. Lily was too, but I'd never admit that out loud. She'd probably laugh it off, but for some reason, it felt cruel, like I was picking up on her

faults. Safe to say, this mating thing had my mind working in weird ways.

I carefully got up and tiptoed out of her nest. My stomach rumbled and, after a quick shower, I headed to the kitchen to cook breakfast. I was not a gifted chef, but I'd watched Lily enough, helping on occasions, to make an acceptable meal. Not fancy by any means, but it would do.

Eggs were hit or miss for me, success wise, so I opted for oatmeal.

Lily had taught me a foolproof way to make it and, if all went well, I wouldn't somehow botch it up.

While it was on the stove, on low, I set up the little buffet of toppings to go with it.

I'd always thought oatmeal was gross before eating Lily's. Now, I loved it.

I placed butter, brown sugar, honey, raisins, dehydrated fruits from the garden, and some nuts in the center of the table. And because I didn't know Sylvia pretty much at all, and in my mind, I still pictured her being a pre-teen, I put some sprinkles on there as well.

We were having pack breakfast. That was, if Sylvia wanted to join us. We were letting her take the lead on everything. I couldn't even imagine what she'd been through, and, since she hadn't been able to speak to us, I wasn't going to learn much more—at least for a while.

I felt bad that her welcome had been so rushed, although maybe she needed that calm time alone. Because Benji had offered to stay with her and she denied him, saying she wanted to sleep. Only she didn't say it out loud; she showed us like it was charades.

The oatmeal was almost ready when I heard the first telltale sign I wasn't the only

one up...

footsteps. I shut the pot off and brought the cast iron pot to the table, setting it on a trivet I bought from one of the tables near Lily's at the farmer's market.

I bought it more to be physically close to her than because I loved it.

It's a good thing that Lily was the one and only omega I'd ever court because I'd been shitty at it.

And yet I still won her over, so thank goddess for that.

I pressed start on the coffee pot and double-checked the table. It was good to go.

The first person down was Benji, which was no surprise. He had to be worried about his sister. None of us knew the full story yet, but it wasn't good. How could it be?

A few minutes later, Sylvia joined us too.

It was hard to believe she was with us. We still didn't know most of what happened when Benji went for her, but he'd tell us when he was ready.

There had been so much going on at the time, and he'd just warned us not to expect her to speak.

Whatever she'd been through, he'd never be able to just let it go.

I half wondered if she'd been waiting for him to come down. She watched her brother and for a split second, it looked like she was about to hug him, instead, stepping back and giving him a nod.

Not knowing what else to do, I offered her breakfast. She looked to her brother and then to me, then to her brother again.

“Did you want to take yours outside?” I offered, wondering if it was the mating thing that had her nervous.

She bit her bottom lip and nodded a couple of times.

I gave her a bowl, letting her pick what she wanted.

She did pick the sprinkles and I was glad.

Being the only unmated omega in a space wasn't easy under the best of circumstances and this wasn't that.

If sprinkles could make her day, I'd be sure her brother had them on the going-to-town list.

“I'm Roan,” I told her. “I share a mate with your brother. She's really nice. You'll like her.”

I had no idea if that was true. The nice was, but her liking Lily?

The odds were yes, I couldn't imagine anybody not liking Lily.

But also, the only thing I knew about his sister aside from her being dead and then not, was what Benji briefly told us last night, and it wasn't happy happy by any means.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, and left, not looking back.

I watched the door and waited for it to click back closed before speaking to him.

“Benji, was that okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. You didn’t act like she wasn’t understanding you, just because she couldn’t hear. That was good.”

Lily had suggested we do that and she’d been right.

We didn’t get to talk much more about anything, the others making their way to eat. Lily came down next, with Harlan right behind her. Her hair was still messy. She looked absolutely adorable.

“Coffee?” she mumbled, and sat in her seat.

Benji was the quickest to move, and he got it for her.

I made her a bowl of oatmeal the way she loved it. “It’s probably not as great as yours, but it’s hot.”

“It looks delicious.” She stirred it around. I put a spoonful in her mouth, making yummy sounds. “You need to try this.”

She held a spoon out for me, and I leaned forward, accepting it. Any gift from my mate was worth keeping.

But as her hand moved close to my nose, I scented it for the first time—she was pregnant. At least I thought I did. I had to be sure before saying anything, not wanting to cause any disappointment.

“Lily,” I said, my mouth still full.

“See? I told you it was good.”

Harlan flanked on her left, as Benji sat on her right.

“Scent our mate,” I told them.

Now she was looking at me, her cheeks red. “I didn’t shower yet. I was hungry, and I’m sure I smell sweaty and gross.”

Poor thing thought I was saying she stank. Far from it.

“Lily, you could scent like us all day long, every day, and we’d never complain.” I spoke for the three of us. “That’s not what I’m talking about. Guys?” I needed to know if they agreed with my assessment before continuing.

They both gave me a nod, their faces beaming.

“Lily, you’re pregnant already.”

Her eyes went wide, and she laughed. The most beautiful, brilliant laugh to ever laugh. Her hands went to her belly. “Heat’ll do that to you.”

“You’re as happy as we are?” Harlan asked.

“I thought Bernie was the closest I’d ever get to being a mom. And now, now I have three mates and a baby on the way and a sister. Of course I’m happy.”

That comment about Sylvia caught me off guard, but when I looked up, she was standing in the doorway, a small smile on her face.

My mate’s words seemed to be exactly what Sylvia needed.

And for not the first time, I wondered how Fate decided I was worthy of such a mate.
But there were no backsies. I marked her and she was mine.

Lily

I'd spent so much of my life believing I'd never be a mom.

There had been also pockets of time that had been so dark, I feared being a mom, knowing it would be the cruelest thing I could ever do to a child.

All of that was before I met my mates and discovered that true love didn't just exist in fairy tales.

Rumor always seemed like an outlier to me. Sure, she had an amazing life, but that made her the exception that proved the rule. That was why it took me so long to let my mates in.

That time was behind me now. But because I hadn't expected pregnancy to be part of my life, I also was very ill-prepared for what pregnancy would be. I knew the typical pregnancy woes like being nauseous, tired, and everything aching. But my perfume being altered? That one took me aback.

A few times I caught my new scent, and it wasn't unpleasant—but it also wasn't me.

My mates disagreed. They said it was the most alluring scent in all existence and showed me just how true that was to them.

Not once did I feel undesirable. As I grew wider, and wider, and then freaking wider, they looked at me like I was the most delicious snack they couldn't wait to get their hands on.

And I loved it.

The one thing I didn't love about pregnancy was missing my wolf.

That was the hardest part of this pregnancy, bar none.

Some shifters took their fur or scales or feathers throughout their pregnancy.

Some just for the first few months. But my wolf had been firm.

She didn't believe it was safe for us to do so, and I trusted her.

She was the one who'd protected me the most in my life, and even when she wasn't allowed out during the darkest of times, she never once blamed me.

She never went feral, a fate that was the end of man omegas.

If my beast thought staying in my skin was safer, I would.

And now that my belly barely fit through the doorway, the longing to shift was starting to get bad. I told my mates about it. That had been huge for me. I didn't like worrying them about things they couldn't control, and this was one of those. Or so I thought.

And what did they do? They offered to not shift too. As if I could ever let them suffer simply because I was having a hard time.

We came up with a compromise where the three of them would be in their fur as much as possible. They always snuggled in my nest, sat on the couch beside me, and when I went for a walk, they flanked my side. It had helped. A lot.

And now that the pregnancy was nearly over, I was getting impatient, beyond excited to meet our new little one.

But also, I was enjoying my pregnancy. There was something empowering about carrying my mates' child inside me.

Protecting their young the way my mates protected me.

It was probably just hormones. Pregnancy hormones were no joke.

I stepped out onto the porch, needing some fresh air after cutting enough onions for not only the orders we had coming up at the farmer's market but also for back stock.

I was trying to get ahead for when the baby came.

I planned to take time off from doing the canning but not much time away from the farmer's market.

I loved it there, and if I could keep going through my maternity adjustment, I planned to do that.

I was hoping to catch one of the guys, but they weren't to be found. So, I did what every omega would in my situation—and I said the magic words, "I'm hungry."

Because no matter where I was, once I said that, someone showed up. They loved to feed me.

What surprised me was that this time, it was all three of them walking out of the welding shop, smiling bright as can be.

"What are you up to?" I never trusted them when they got this smiley. They were

always up to something. Never anything bad but always something.

“We’re coming to feed you,” Roan said.

“You know, I just said that to see where you were.”

“Yeah, we know, mate.” Harlan kissed my cheek and then told me to close my eyes. I did, and they guided me straight to the place they just came from. No surprise there.

But what was a surprise was when I went inside and saw a wolf made of scrap metal sitting on the table. It looked almost fluffy at first, the details stunning.

“Did you make this?” I looked at Harlan.

“We all did. We figured our little one would want a piece of us nearby.” He wrapped an arm around both Roan and Benji’s shoulders.

“You welded?” I looked right to Roan, who had tried a couple times and...it hadn’t gone well.

“No, I painted. But Benji did something too.”

Benji went over and gave a long pet to the nose of the metal wolf and it started to play the most beautiful lullaby.

My mates had worked together to make a special present for our baby. My eyes blurred, the emotions so high. Maybe from the pregnancy, maybe from the beauty of it all, but all I could give them was a broken, “Thank you,” because the words weren’t coming.

“I think we broke her,” Roan said, wrapping his arms around me from the back. The

other two did the same from each side, and I was officially the center of my mates' embrace, one of my favorite places on this planet.

“No, you didn't break me, alphas mine. You made me whole.”

Lily

Whoever said omegas will know when they're in labor was a liar. I'd already been wrong twice. After no baby came, I didn't trust myself anymore. I needed backup.

I called Rumor and asked her if she could stay with us until the baby arrived. It was a huge ask, between Bernadette being in her toddle everywhere and get into everything stage, and Evander still adjusting to being on this side of the womb, and Rumor still adjusting to being the mom of two.

Her answer had been an immediate yes. Her mates brought her over an hour later, her little ones with her, along with everything she would need for at least a week.

My mates were never far behind, but they understood something was telling me I needed to be around Rumor.

So that's where they wanted me to be. They were so understanding like that.

Sylvia stopped by a couple of times. She very much stayed to herself, and that was fine.

Whatever made her happy was exactly what I wanted her to do.

The kids loved her, and they always had her smiling, so I was thrilled each time she showed up at the door.

Learning about her had taught me so much about her brother's kindness and loyalty.

That morning, when I woke up, something had changed. I didn't feel it as much as I could smell it. My scent had morphed...again. I woke Rumor, and she noticed it instantly.

"I don't think that happened to me," she said, which wasn't instilling confidence. "Go get your mates."

I didn't have to go far. They were all asleep in wolf form on the porch, protecting the house from imaginary foes, I imagine.

When I came outside, they too noticed right away, shifting and coming in close.

They asked if I needed the midwife, and I didn't think I did.

But also, I was scared not to have one, in case the scent thing was an issue.

We sent for her, and Rumor had her mates come and get the kids because we were pretty sure it was go time.

I'd only met the midwife a couple of times. There were not many who acknowledged our pack, partly because we still hadn't named it, and mostly because there were those who thought us less than. We were a bastard pack, after all.

I still didn't understand how our world could be so cruel to anyone, much less men as kind as my mates.

Two hours later, I still didn't feel any contractions, but my scent morphed another time, making it the third scent in less than as many days: my pregnancy scent, my wake-up scent, and now this one.

Rumor held my hand tightly, telling me it was fine and that if there was something to

be concerned about, the midwife would be here soon.

And finally, the midwife showed. She was old and not just could be my grandmother old, but possibly the oldest person I had ever met old.

“Why do you look so worried?” she asked when she walked up to me.

And before I could even explain, she smiled, her eyes falling to my belly. “You probably should have told me there were three in there.”

“Excuse me? Three babies?” Three babies. How had I not known that? I mean, I was a lot larger than Rumor ever got. I’d attributed it to mates who fed me every chance they got, not growing an entire litter. Three babies? Whoa!

The looks on my mates’ faces were priceless. It was Harlan who said, “Good. Three mates, three sets of arms, three babies.”

“There are four sets of arms,” I reminded him.

“Nope. You’ve already done the hard work. You need to be spoiled from now on.”

Rumor made a gagging sound, and rightfully so. As if I wasn’t spoiled twenty-four hours a day.

The midwife put her ear to my belly, grabbed me in all sorts of places I’d rather no one but my mates touched me, and then decided I needed to drink some special tea.

And I drank it trustingly, not asking what it was.

I’d still have taken it, even if I had known.

She was the midwife. She knew better than I what needed doing, but a warning would've been nice.

It didn't ease me into labor. Nope. It was a jump-start.

I hadn't even finished the entire cup when my water broke, and then, when the last drop was down, the contractions started, hard and fast. So hard that I worried.

I wasn't foolish enough to believe labor wouldn't involve pain, but I'd expected it to ramp up, not slam into me.

I wanted to have our babies in my nest, and going from the kitchen to there had taken the help of all three of my mates, and Rumor. But once we were inside and settled in, I was grateful. Because they were coming.

Harlan and Benji sat on each side of me, holding my hands tight. And Roan? He shifted, resting just above my head so I could feel his warmth and fur. Rumor helped the midwife, who assured me that this wasn't too fast, and that everything was going as it should.

But even if I wanted to argue, what could I do? Nothing. Because this was happening.

We weren't in my nest five minutes when the burning began.

Then she and Rumor told me to push. And I pushed. And I pushed, and just when I thought I couldn't do it anymore, our first baby, a daughter was born.

I didn't even get a chance to look at her pretty face when the urge to push came again. Rumor cleaned up my daughter as the midwife guided me through the second birth, a son. And the third baby came in the same rapid succession, our second daughter.

And soon, I had two babies on my chest, having their first meal, and a third being doted on by my mates.

“We don’t have three names.” I looked down at their sweet faces, feeling like I’d already let them down.

“No, but we have two.” Roan kissed the top of my head.

Our first daughter we named Calla. My mates insisted, saying that she needed to be a flower as beautiful as their omega. I rolled my eyes at their sappiness but also loved it.

Our son we named Ryder, for no other reason than we had liked the name.

And then it was time to name our second daughter. I looked at Benji. “What do you think of the name Rose?”

His sister was Sylvia Rose, and I didn’t want to take a name that she might want for her own child someday, but also, it was a name dear to my heart. I was going to defer to my mates on this one. “My mom’s middle name was Rose.”

Harlan picked up our sweet daughter. “You look like a Rose. The name is perfect.”

As I looked at my three beautiful babies and my three amazing mates, the name wasn’t the only thing that was perfect in my life. Not by a long shot.

Lily

Having three babies when I was expecting one had been a huge adjustment.

All the plans I'd made from furniture to schedules to sleeping arrangements had been tossed out the window.

We'd had to purchase additional baby gear from cribs to car seats to carriers.

I'd planned on wearing our little one from the beginning, but I couldn't carry all three.

Maybe, if I had help, I could manage to wear two, but three wasn't going to happen.

I thought about getting a stroller, but didn't love the idea. Not with our terrain.

So we did the only rational thing we could think of—we bought a baby carrier for every adult in the family, including Sylvia.

We'd never ask her to do child care; she had enough wounds without feeling like we were using her.

But as their aunt Sylvia, it felt fitting that she had a baby wrap just like her brother's.

Our sweet babies were rarely put down, and they were thriving.

Today was our first day at the farmer's market since I gave birth, and I was excited. I

wanted to see everybody, let them know that I was back. I didn't need anybody finding new places to get their canned goods. But also, I wanted to show off the babies.

The last time I was there, everybody, including me, thought there was only one little one on the way. They were going to be as surprised as I had been. Maybe not as surprised, but pretty close.

My mates set up my table, each of them wearing one of our sweet babies on his back. It was the hottest, sexiest thing I'd ever seen. I loved watching them go full-on dad mode.

While we were deciding to finally name the pack, I teased that we should call it The Three Papas? That was a hard pass for them. I still kind of loved it.

We ended up compromising. And by compromising, I meant, I didn't really have a say. They decided we were going to be Flower River Pack.

"It sounds like a bakery gone wrong," I protested.

"Nope. You're wrong." Benji shook his head. "It's as beautiful as our mate." There was no getting around it. We had the silliest pack name to ever exist.

But also, it did sort of fit. So much more than Rumor's pack, Darkshadow. They were neither. They'd been the sunshine in my world for a long time and would continue to be Rumor's sunshine for the rest of their lives. There was nothing dark about them.

I sat down at our table, taking Rose from Harlan so he could set up his art.

He didn't have very many pieces this time, and I wouldn't be surprised if his time at the farmer's market was coming to an end.

He'd been picking up more and more commissions, and he loved those.

He loved that he was able to create exactly what someone needed out of things that others discarded.

He'd still come, maybe have a few things, but his income base was definitely shifting.

Today was Sylvia's first time venturing out to the farmer's market.

She was still in the van but had insisted she wanted to be here in case we needed help with the babies, which we probably would.

We might have outnumbered our three little ones, but they knew how to keep us on our toes in the very best of ways.

The market wasn't even open yet when I had a line at my table. I could pretend all day long that they missed the few weeks I was gone and wanted my pickled onions and applesauce, but they were there for the babies 100 percent.

They oohed. They aahed. They told us they were the most adorable babies on the planet, which was fact. But between my three and Rumor's two, it was baby-and-toddler admiration central.

Quite a few of the booth owners dropped off baby gifts as well. Some were homemade like the items they sold, others adorable onesies and stuffed animals from the local store, but all of them given with love and acceptance.

I hadn't expected it. I knew that this place meant a lot to me, but I didn't realize I meant a lot to this place.

I was sold out by noon, as was Harlan, but we stuck around, taking new orders and

talking to everyone. By the time we went home, I was done. Ready to go to sleep for at least a year.

So were the kids, all three of them falling sound asleep on the way home.

We brought them upstairs and set them in their cribs, shocked when they stayed asleep, but also grateful. It meant we had some time to be together, the four of us.

We took off our clothes, shifted, and climbed into my nest then snuggled together in our wolf form. Together as a pack, in the truest sense.

My pack.

The Flower River pack.

Home.