



Lost and Pound (Love Sync Mates: Season Two)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Nico is an omega, on the run from his home pack and the old alpha they were set to mate him to. Hoping to escape his intended mate in an attempt to get into Canada, he finds himself at the end of a pole prod and thrown in the county pound on the slate for euthanasia.

Shilo is a sociable sort, even for wolves, a lover of pack and family, but never seemed to find anyone to settle down with. When a bad address for a truckload of dogfood leaves his shipping company on the hook for ten grand of beef tidbits kibble, he knows just the animal shelter that could use it. And what he finds in that sad end cage waiting for the big sleep is truly heartbreaking.

With his old pack on the lookout, only another alpha's claim can supersede his father's demand. So, when Shilo is faced with potentially losing Nico, his claim is cemented—after all, he's got the adoption papers free and clear.

Total Pages (Source): 16

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:22 am

Nico

I stood in wait before the wolves of my pack as my father shook hands with the Silvermoon alpha. Such a simple gesture for such a huge decision—for me, at least. To them, it was nothing more than the sale of goods. Property.

It'd been fifteen years since the forced trade of omegas was outlawed, but my father didn't care. He was too old and stuck in his ways to change the process, and the council held him in too high of esteem to curb him. Honestly, I didn't care, either. I'd be on a train out of town before midnight, the second they had their backs turned. Frankly, I thought they'd let me run, too.

If the way my intended, Branden, kept ogling one of his beta enforcers with sad, pining eyes was any indicator, he wanted me about as much as I wanted him. All I needed to do was skip town before they had us exchange bites and rut that night. No big deal.

Under the full moon, before my people, I was ordered to shift, to be gifted the first of my mating gifts—a collar. So, stripping bare and holding my chin aloft, I presented myself as the perfect omega, shifting into my sleek gray wolf. I preened and canted my head slightly, showing off the natural lines of my fur and perfect form. If I was anything, I was pedigree among omega stock. My father came from a long line of pack alphas, descended from the first clans, a true Wolfson, as our name declared. My omega pater came from an arctic wolf pack in Canada, but I'd never met him, as he'd disappeared when I was young, escaped back to his home pack.

My father wasn't the greatest, but as far as pack alphas, he was fair—ish. I certainly

held little stock in his leadership skills as Branden's father, Horace Silvermoon, took the honors of presenting me with probably one of the most offensive gifts one could give a shifter of any pedigree—that stupid thick-chained collar.

I darted my gaze to my father, who nodded once, his light hair silvery in the evening light. He could almost pass for graying. Though, I knew better. The hard lines of his face were earned, not given with time. For a shifter, he was young.

I sat and preened, lifting my head as Horace bent down, securing a chain collar around my neck, steely jewelry engraved with who knew what. The weight of it bore down and made my fur itch.

With another gentleman's handshake, my father and Horace exchanged a grin and, were I in skin, I'd have turned beet red. A loud click jostled my collar in time for me to glance around and look up at my intended. Branden stared at me with disdain, resigned sadness, blame. Whatever grudge he held was not my fault, but I couldn't tell him at that moment, for he was in skin and I in fur.

With a tug of the leash, I followed, watching my father and fellow packmates leave, wary eyes casting concerned glances my way. Generally, nobody ever put a collar on a wolf, nor did they leash one. To do so was an affront, but rules often got forgotten when it involved something an alpha's peen could play with. Even if I was a sentient, intelligent, living, breathing being—I was still someone's dingaling warmer.

Fuuuuuck.

From the meeting spot, we didn't run in the woods as we did most full moons. The Silvermoons packed up in their cars and trucks, tucking me neatly in the back of someone's work van. The scent of mildew and cleaners assaulted my nostrils. Bouncing fat hoses surrounded me. Carpet cleaning...

“I really am sorry. I—” Branden stared me down as he climbed in with me, sitting amid the hoses.

I tried to shift, and a shock shot through me, the pain from which caused me to yelp.

“Yeah...” Branden offered a hand to pet me, but I stepped back, snarling.

How fucking dare... I’d never seen a collar that could stop shifting before. Heard of, sure, but experiencing it was a whole new level of evil. Their pack had a sigma wolf’s magic at hand, or they’d hired one.

I tried to shift again, my inner beast in panic as I scrambled and fell, tangling amid the hoses and biting at them in shock. Again, I tried and again I failed.

Again, and the lights danced behind my eyes.

“Hold still—” He reached for me as his beta boyfriend climbed through the back, arms loaded with a few bottles of water. Stumbling, he dropped them all over the floor before picking them up.

“Here, give this to him.” The beta studied the bottles for a moment before handing one to him and sitting one beside him. “Guess your dad wants him real hydrated for the all-night fuckathon he expects from you two.”

Still, Branden reached for me while glaring at his beta.

I snapped at Branden, his pale skin nearly glowing in the leaking moonlight from a window up front, cast in circles over him through a grate. His dark hair flopped over his face, obscuring his forehead with errant strands. Even damp, they hung stick straight—thin. Even his wolf had that trait—scrawny, color common.

I had a more cohesive gray coat with a lighter underbelly and facial frosting—a trait from my omega father, one that would be prized for the beautiful pups I could make. If his family's wolves were any indication—he needed the genetic diversity.

I growled at him, each breath leaving me in a whimper as the heavy chain collar tightened.

I wanted up.

I wanted out.

Only darkness came.

I prayed to the goddess of three—the mourning sisters—of daybreak dusk and dark.

Make them pay.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:22 am

Nico

I had woken with a pounding headache, stumbling through six inches of snow on the side of a deserted highway. I was still in wolf form, my paws crunching in twice-frozen snow.

I coughed and blood sprayed from my mouth onto the crystalline scape, smattering it in a Rorschach shape.

From this angle? I tilted my head, the muscles uncooperative. Looks like a dick and balls.

It didn't really, but my mind was in tatters, and when I tried to shift, an ice pick of pain went through my brain, drawing forth another cough and spray. Another Rorschach—I glanced down at it, squinting as it swayed in double vision. A million stars blanketing a dark sky, or a flock of birds taking flight.

Yeah. Birds.

I stumbled a few steps and the clank of a chain drug through the snow. At the end of it? I stared down as the frozen, stiff, and hacked end of a human hand lay clutched to the end.

Nope! Fuck!

A jagged shard of yellow bone stuck out amid flesh almost black. The skin pale and white, blue gray in other areas. It stank of wolf, one not of my pack. A Silvermoon.

I didn't think, just ran, yelping through the snow. It seemed like a reasonable thing for my wolf to do, but the sensible part of me screamed for my inner beast to stop. No matter how hard I ran, dashing through the snow, that hand bounced along the ground, rattling the chain after me.

I screeched in panic until I ran face-first into the side of an overturned van, the one I'd been in.

The coppery, thick scent of blood met my nostrils. Piss and voided bowels. No heartbeats called to my ears. No scent of breath.

I wished I'd known what happened, but I was tired again, and a warm trickle from my snout graced my muzzle like a soft kiss.

The scent of human wafted about me, and I didn't even have time to fall into the snow before I was carried off again, too tired to fight back.

I whimpered.

"Shh, buddy. You'll be okay ." Sweet words lulled me amid chaos as I took in horror and flashing lights.

Doubt it.

The electronic buzzing of a lockout gate echoed over painted cinderblock.

An icy breeze whipped around my feet, making me curl and tuck them. The canvas cot beneath me that stank of dog piss creaked as I whimpered.

When I moved my head, the chain anchored to my neck rasped loudly against the concrete floor, still damp from the last time they blasted the floor with a cold hose.

Barking surrounded me, varying degrees of canid panic, childlike in its complexity. Something about domestication made dogs dumber. Happier, but dumber. Feral wolves could have entire conversations, complex discussions, and tame interactions.

Domesticated dogs?

Help! Scared! Kill you! Defend!

Varying degrees of threats of violence, declarations of fear, and hunger all cried out at once around me. Barring nothing else I could do, I raised a mournful howl as I periodically did, as I had much to say.

In my howl lay calming words, the ancient tongue of all things afraid. Calm yourselves, little ones. All will be well in this life and the beyond. This too shall pass.

Silence, blissful and sweet, came in response to my howl, but that was all the comfort it was, momentary silence. In minutes, another hopeful human would peruse through us all, looking from dog to dog, deciding which one it'd grant the reprieve from death. And eighty-seven dogs would respond in kind— pick me! I will love you! In the best way they knew how.

Wasn't really an option for me. Every human that'd walked by had seen the wolf dog tag on my pen and passed me by. No sanctuaries in the state would take me. And nobody could get the collar off. I'd tried. Several others had tried. The metal, for all appearances, had been welded and the metal was too thick to cut without specialized tools. I should know—I'd sat there listening to one human after another puzzling over how I got into the damned thing.

Short of finding the appropriate tools—it'd take a sigma wolf to undo the seamless binding of the metal.

So, frankly, unless someone wanted to “adopt” me, I wasn't getting out. My only out was at the end of a needle, just another number in a fucked-up system.

I wondered how many other shifters had met their end this way—trapped in an animal shelter. Other packs tagged their members with RFID chips for that exact purpose, but my father's pack didn't. It was too expensive .

The alphas got it done, though. Some betas the alpha deemed important enough.

A lone employee walked by, their beige uniform swishing as they did. I tracked them, ears perking when they stopped. With a gentle sigh, they stared at me, a baleful expression lingering. “Wish I could keep you, buddy.”

Wish you'd make that mistake. I'd kill to be put in someone's backyard for five minutes.

The lonely clipboard that hung on the wires of my cage rattled as she checked the papers, flipping through them. “Today's your day. Got any last requests?”

I glanced up at her. I couldn't tell her that death was preferable to the life that was set before me. That is, I didn't mean I wanted to die, but if death was my only option... I couldn't fight it. I could attack and kill a human, try to escape when they opened my cell, but without thumbs, I couldn't open a door. Without the right kind of pedigree , they wouldn't even show me to humans that would be dumb enough to leave a gate unlocked.

“Mickey D's burger it is.” She huffed and opened a Velcro pocket on her cargo pants and pulled out a cold, stale, paper-wrapped burger. Not only was it so cold it threw

off only the barest of scents, but it also reeked of freezer burn. Likely a donation bag of burgers they kept on hand for this occasion. What I wouldn't give for a fresh, warm one.

As she held the burger up to the grate, my nose betrayed me, twitching rapidly. It'd been a long few weeks of horrible kibble and tepid, barely potable water. Long few weeks since I'd seen a bath or toothbrush either.

I climbed to my unsteady paws and loped the four or so feet to the metal grate, eyeing stains of unfathomable origin and rusted spots peeking past the industrial beige paint. A barely audible whimper escaped my maw as I opened my mouth and neared the burger. There, I inhaled the scent of bread, cheese, and—debatably—meat. My gums stung with the tang of my salivary glands, tongue outstretched. And, at the last possible minute, she jerked the burger away and turned, distracted by a rhythmic pounding on a metal door.

Fuck! No! Get back here last meaaaaal! I whimpered and buried my face against the grate, biting at the air, tongue outstretched.

And then it hit me, a scent over the burger. Alpha.

I glanced over just in time to see the employee, stale burger still in hand, turning in the hallway, tailed by well over six feet of beautiful, broad, and sweet-scented alpha.

Unmated. Powerful. Backed by a pack.

Worth the risk.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:22 am

Shilo

Take over your grandfather's shipping company, they said!

It'll be easy, they said!

Lies. Fat fucking lies.

I sat at my desk at the butt crack of dawn staring at a slew of emails telling me nine kinds of ways that I was fucked, on the hook for an entire load.

In the middle of a merger and bankruptcy, a pet food company had lost track of a shipment of dog food. The damn thing was hauled across nine states into my warehouse, only to be told the company had nowhere to send it. Nor would the company be getting paid for it. Not only that, but I owed gas, wages, tolls, and taxes for...third-rate kibble.

It was always something, and during the winter parts of the year when business was slow, post holidays, it was a loss I hated to take. But... I glanced at another email with his accountant. Taxes needed to be done, and it was still early enough in the year to manifest a delightful write-off .

He checked the local shelters, thumbing through a few before he called.

The first one had too many numerical menus for me to truck with. The second one yielded more controversy than I wanted with a simple internet search, and the third, they answered on the first ring.

“Wallama County Animal Shelter, Ruth speaking.” A tinny voice on the other end had a hopeful quality to it.

“Hey! Hi, hello!” I fumbled the phone as the woman paused. “Hey, this is Shilo Warren from Warrenline Freight. I just got an abandoned shipment of dog kibble in and nowhere for it to go. You wouldn’t happen to—”

“We can’t buy it if that’s what you’re—”

“No, no, no! I wanted to know if you’d take a donation. If you have the room for it, I can drop the container and leave it there to unload, or you can hold on to the container until you’ve cleared it—”

“Oh my god. Please.” She sighed in relief and a pause stretched on, punctuated by doors opening and closing. “Yeah, and I think we have room in the storage if we pour it into the barrels in back. I’m the only one here today so—”

“I’ll bring someone. Can I come by now?” I checked the clock and my schedule. I didn’t have much of anything planned for the day. Overall, it was a great time. If nothing else came up, I could likely go home early for the day.

Write-off and a half day off. Win-win.

I grabbed the keys to the loaded truck and jogged out, pointing at my mechanic. “Blake, come on! You’re with me; we’re dumping the kibble off on the county shelter.”

“Righto, alpha. By the way, the missus wants to know if you’ll be home for the full moon party tonight. Kenny’s turning nine.” Blake, a wiry beta that’d been in a pack down south a few years back, stood and dusted himself off, stained hands brushing over equally dingy jeans. His ashen-brown hair stuck up at all angles. They’d left

their pack when their son showed omega potential, wanting a better future for him.

“Wouldn’t miss it. If I get off early, I can run by the bakery and grab his cake.” I waggled my eyebrows at him and earned a sheepish shrug.

“Ain’t paid for it yet.”

“I know. I can grab a prezzie while I’m out, too.” Blake sagged a little in relief. I paid him well enough, but things were tough, still paying off his fees to his old pack, buying out his lot. Leaving a pack was expensive. Joining one even more so, but it was a little-known fact that mine didn’t cost. The land we lived on was in trust, a small packland, built out into a subdivision. We had no big projects or stakes or fancy resources for our members like some packs. We cared for one another, had a community center, childcare, swimming pool, and a free rein of the nature reserve to the south.

The shipping company paid for most of it, and we could give jobs to a lot of pack members. The only downside? I had to work, and I lived like everyone else, as an equal. To most alphas, that’d be a downside. They lived like mafia kings and followed whatever rules they felt like.

I ran a hand through my hair and stretched, making my way out to the truck, Blake at my back. “He still into dinosaurs?”

“Nah, he’s into those digital pet things now.” Blake chased me outside and hopped into the other side of the rig.

“Like what we had when we were kids?” I got into the driver’s seat and started the truck, letting the engine warm up.

“Nah, it’s some new thing now. They got clothes and come on phone apps.

Miniatures and stuff.” Blake sighed heavily. “They’re cheap, so I like it.”

“That’s all you can ask is for cheap happiness. That, and snow days.” I laughed and put the truck into gear.

“You can call the cake his gift?” Blake elbowed me.

“Nah. Kids don’t understand that. What size shoe is he in?” I turned onto the road and made my way out. I didn’t need the GPS—I knew the general area and smelled the place a mile away.

“Three and a half.” Blake checked the mirrors and rested a hand on the dash, checking for something, a rattle or vibration.

“Better get a four, then. I’ll get him some cool shoes. Can’t go wrong with cool shoes.” I nodded, and Blake bobbed his head from side to side. Shoes could get expensive, and the name-brand ones were popular with kids, always. Any little thing that could help.

It didn’t take that long to get to the shelter, pulling into the cracked lot on the industrial side of town. Blake’s face seemed like it’d be a mirror of my own, twisted with disgust. The smell alone could choke a man.

I pulled up to the back door and put the truck in park while Blake went round to open the back to unload. While he did that, I jogged up to the back door to give it a few haphazard knocks.

A square-chested woman with short dark hair and a uniform so new it creaked opened the door, giving me a bright grin. In her hand was the saddest-looking fast-food burger I’d seen in a long while. As she pushed the door all the way open, the scent of fear, dog piss, and bleach slapped me in the face. “Ruth?”

She nodded.

“Just about to give this lil fella his last meal here before he gets put down, ’less you wanna adopt him.” She waved the burger at me and gestured at a cage with a shivering dog—no, wolf in it, chomping at holes in the fence, desperate for a taste of that awful fucking burger.

“Last meal? Put down? No! I mean, one sec. Yeah, I’ve actually been looking for a dog I j—” The dog met my gaze, mouth half open, mashed up against the grate. His tongue slowly retreated into his maw. “Yeah. I—he looks friendly.”

He didn’t smell afraid, the wolf in the cage. He smelled thickly of depression and acceptance. As he pulled back, mouth slowly closing, a thin string of drool stretched from the bar to his maw before snapping. A lone drop stretched from his maw and hit the floor.

I dropped my gaze to his chain, and attached to that a collar, one that had been outlawed for years.

He sat politely, watching me with cautious blue eyes. Maybe a little embarrassment, if not sheepishness.

“What’s his story?” I approached the cage and waved her burger off as she offered it to me to give to him.

“Found on the side of the road next to a terrible car wreck. Someone’s hand was still stuck to the end of the leash. Can’t get the damn thing off and nobody has the tools to do it.” She held the burger up to her face and sniffed it before wrinkling her nose.

“I have the tools.” I put my hand to the grate wall, and the wolf pressed his nose to my palm, his breath warm and steady.

“Need to have at least an acre for him to run or we can’t adopt him out.” She twisted her lips. “But I can fudge some paperwork. A home is a home.”

“I have an acre. Yeah, get the paperwork started. Here’s my ID.” I fumbled my wallet out, hands shaking as I handed the plastic to the woman.

The gray wolf inside the cage perked up, his ears lifting hopefully, head tilting in the cutest little tic. Those icy-blue eyes blinked sweetly before he licked my hand. A tiny whimper caught in his throat.

“I’ll get you outta here. I promise.”

“Ay, boss, where does she want this load of kibble?” Blake stuck his head in and froze, eyes wide. His watery brown eyes widened, the gold in them brilliant as he registered the wolf in the cage licking my hand.

As the father to an omega, the sight must have struck him hard. His mouth opened, and I raised a hand to silence him. “Blake? Go help her unload the truck. I’m taking our new little friend here home.”

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Nico

So, there I was, jaw gaping, head tilted, tongue flopping between the filthy bars of the cage after the worst hamburger in existence as my death-row meal—in front of an alpha.

A hot alpha.

Fuck.

It was a rock-and-a-hard-place type scenario. On the one hand, I was going to die. On the other? The new alpha could send me back to my home pack, may auction me off, sell me, or just lock me up as his plaything.

Which is worse? The thought gave me pause until I processed the alpha's scent and just the slightest hint of his beta's. I couldn't detect the scent of fear, which was strange. Most betas feared their alphas. I stared up at him, taking in dark hair, not black but a brown with hints of auburn highlights. The way his face morphed into a kind but pitiable moue spoke volumes to his character.

“You got a pack to go back to?” The alpha leaned down, brow furrowed as he whispered.

I shook my head.

“Are you in trouble? I'll find out if you lie.” He stared me down.

Again, I shook my head. I didn't think so, at least. Who owned my contract had died, presumably. I was free to go as I'd never officially joined my new pack, I thought.

He nodded sagely and reached a hand in through the bars where I approached him, tilting my head into his warm palm. An involuntary shiver took me, exhaustion weighing me down, like I'd not slept once in the weeks I'd been there.

"You're coming home." His whisper cut the power to my body, the high-strung energy I had keeping me going left me like snapped rubber bands, sending my weight into his touch.

I barely noticed when he left with a clipboard, my mind a blur when the gate unlocked, letting me walk my way to the car on that humiliating leash. The rage-filled look in his beta's eye gave me pause, tail tucking.

"Nobody deserves to be on a leash," the beta said. "Least not an omega."

My luck seemed to be changing as the alpha hoisted me into a rig truck idling in the parking lot. He made a space for me between the two front seats, letting me lay on his jacket in a ball. "Wait here. Heat's on and we'll go get that off you."

When the door closed, I closed my eyes, sinking in the sensation of the idling engine and blowing heat, creating its own kind of silence drowning out the rough noises of whatever they were unloading and distant barking dogs.

I probably should have stayed awake, been prepared, readied myself to flee. Should have, but didn't. I relaxed instead, letting everything go. I could escape when I was less tired.

I recalled a warm hand resting on me, whispered apologies, and a rumbling road beneath. The events, as chaotic as they'd been, flowed seamlessly from one blink to

the next, where I sat in the same truck, surrounded by many smells, staring at a fresh, warm bag of some mom-and-pop burger-chain food. The beta was nowhere to be seen, but my stomach growled hard, distracting me.

“Chow down while I’m in the store and when I get back, if you’re still here, you can come home with me, and we’ll figure things out. I’d ask you not shift in the truck, okay?” He grinned and offered me a slow stroke to my head that I accepted with an involuntary groan.

“Now hold still. Alphas think their sigmas are the only ones with a touch of the blessing.” He snorted, and I froze. A sigma wolf was no different from a beta, really, but they had alpha power that had been warped, gifted with wild magic, magic like what kept my collar on.

He reached that hand toward my neck, fingers circling the raw skin there, the chain clinking as his thumb rolled over one link of the collar’s segments after another. “A mating collar. Ew.”

I pinned my ears and gave my head the gentlest of shakes.

“Nobody that truly loves someone puts one of these on an omega.” His broad face morphed into something hard as he met my gaze, eyes so very dark they reflected the pale blue of my own. “Lucky that I know an alpha has the greatest magic of all. Love.”

His warm hands traced the metal, and the collar fell, hitting the seat and sliding onto the floor. My mouth gaped open as I stared up at him.

“Cheezy, right? I didn’t think you were from a pack that’d teach you. Alphas can do sigma magic, just a bit. Takes a happy pack and a big ol’ heart. Now, wait here or don’t. You’re free. If I happen to bring back some pants or something for you, would

a medium work?”

I shook my head and dipped my nose down.

“Small?”

I nodded.

“Shoes? Size eight, up or down from there?”

Interesting game... I nodded up.

“Nine?”

Another nod up.

“Ten?”

I shook my head.

“Nine and a half?” He smiled hopefully, and I nodded in the affirmative.

“Okay. I got to pick up a few things. Get some rest.” He patted my head and slipped out of the truck, keys hanging in the ignition. The warm air blasted over me, a pleasant change from the kennel.

Had I wanted, I could have shifted, taken the truck, left, nudged the door open, pawed the window down. I could have.

I didn't. Sleep was my first and only priority. Well, that and the delicious burger-filled bag.

It wasn't too long later that a gust of cold air and the rustle of paper bags woke me with a start. I blinked over at the alpha when I realized I didn't even get his name, not that I could give him mine, either.

"I got a few things for you to wear. Want to hop into the sleeper cab in back and change?" He held up a bag before tossing it into the back and pulled the curtain closed. I slipped into the back while he loaded a few more bags and a creaking plastic container with a full sheet cake he slid under the curtain. "Leave the cake be. If you want, you can come join us later and have some."

I shook out my coat and stared at the paper bag, rooting into it before pulling out a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of thick track pants. A pack of underwear sat on the bottom with a six-pack of socks and glorious baby wipes.

It'd been weeks since I shifted, weeks since I'd stretched limbs that hadn't moved, and I dreaded the tingles I'd get in my legs. Not since I was a pup did I think I'd gone more than a day or two without shifting, and I groaned in my wolf form.

"I know, buddy. It'll shake out." The alpha in the front seat waited on me, keeping the truck still.

It would shake out, and I focused on my human form, fearful of the shock that would—had—come from the collar. Once I conquered the fear, it came easy, my body stretching, limbs lengthening—hair receding. Seriously, that was the worst part of the transformation. The sensation of a million hairs sucking back into my body... Every time, it made me shudder.

Bones cracked, skin stretched, tail shrinking into my ass—seriously? Ow!

By the time my shift finished, I stumbled onto my feet, stuck in a stretched position, ligaments aching. My back, arched and sore, tingled madly and I choked, gasping for

air in foreign lungs until I settled. Even still, I gave myself a moment longer before I made a stiff-knuckled grasp for the wipes.

As a wolf, I didn't precisely have body odor, but the lingering odor of dog hung about me all the same, thick in my hair, but other areas definitely needed a once-over. "Oh, my goddesses...you're a lifesaver."

As I scrubbed at my body, one wipe at a time, a delightful chuckle muffled through the curtain. "So, what's your name? I can't keep calling you—" Papers rustled. He paused for a moment. "Donner."

"Nico." I grimaced. It had been the holidays when I'd been nabbed, and all the dogs taken in got cutesy Christmas-themed names. I was one of eight reindeer...the last one on death row. "Yours?"

"Shilo." The name fit, as soft and smooth as his voice, as his temperament had been. So far, at least.

I wrestled into the clothes after vigorously rubbing a few wipes over my head. It didn't do much to clean my hair. It hung a little longer, a few weeks past needing a cut, but it did put enough of that artificial scent in it to ease the stink of wet dog and pound.

"If you're comfortable enough, you can use the shower when we get home." Shilo did something up front that made the truck jostle, and I climbed forward, parting the curtain while being careful of his other bags and the cake. "Hey!"

He turned in his seat and gave me a wide grin, his squared jaw shifting as sweet dimples creased the corners of his mouth.

His fit form shifted in the comfortable seat, legs filling out a perfectly worn pair of

jeans in a way that drew my eyes right to where they shouldn't be. "Nico?"

I glanced up, meeting his gaze with those deep, deep eyes. They'd seemed nearly black before, a reflective pool, but in the light filtering in, they were brown, striking in their own sort of understated way. Thick lashes swept in a blink. I swallowed hard as I stared. "Yeah?"

"Sit down. Hook your seat belt and tell me what's going on." He gestured toward the seat, and I obeyed, fastening myself in as I settled and the truck went into gear.

I fidgeted in my seat and glanced over. "I was arranged to the Silvermoon alpha's son. I think we wrecked on the way home and..."

"Goddesses...I heard of that." He wiped a hand down his face as the truck lurched forward, heading out of some big-box store's parking lot.

"I don't know what happened, but I woke up with someone's hand frozen to my leash, in the snow, and—yeah. I had plans to run away before we could seal the deal." I pursed my lips and Shilo filled me in.

"Guessing you got drugged. Driver was, at any rate. So, you got picked up and sent to the shelter... Nobody reported an omega dead or missing." He sank in his seat and sighed, shaking his head in disappointment.

"I am from the Wolfson's pack, but I was released to the Silvermoons and never got inducted. So, I'm a lone wolf." I sighed in disbelief. So many omegas would kill for the opportunity to be in my position, packless and debtless. Sure, the Silvermoons could claim me, but they'd be forced to admit their illegal behavior.

"Wolfson, eh? Phew, big pack. You're one of Godfrey's sons."

I shrugged and nodded. My father had too many kids to keep reasonable track of. We were tools to him, the omegas. The daughters, too. His betas were powerful tools and the few alphas he threw—they were problematic.

“Well, you’re welcome to stay in my pack. I assume we’ll need to look into getting your effects?” He glanced over and put his attention back to the road.

“What is your pack?” I glanced around at my surroundings. When I’d been handed over, we’d been on neutral territory, hours from my pack and theirs.

“Pine Warren. We’re small, about a hundred of us.” He turned onto another road and made his way out of the more crowded area of the city.

“Haven’t heard of you, but I’m not familiar with all the packs. I know the major ones.” I shrank in my seat. “I—can’t really afford to join a pack. I’d have to mate to join one.”

“Nah, I don’t charge people to join.” He turned onto a small road, the paving on it cracked and worn. “So, feel free to hang around awhile and get your stuff together. I know there’s tons of packs looking for omegas to join, or your father may want to know you’re fine.”

“He got his payoff, so he won’t care. If he did, he’d have let me keep my phone when I left.” I huffed and leaned back in the seat.

“Well, can’t argue that. So, your departure from the pack was registered? And you’ve not been registered to another?” He didn’t seem to be alarmed at all.

I nodded. I’d filled out the paperwork to leave, but to join, I had to be on packland and accepted by the alpha and interviewed by a representative of the council. Effectively, I was dismissed from my pack. “Yeah.”

“Awesome. Well, you’re welcome to crash at my place until we get you a job and things straightened out. We’ve apartments we can lease out to members once you’re part of the trust.”

“And it’s not an issue I’m alone, an omega?” I sank in the chair as we headed down a stretch of empty road.

“Not to me, it isn’t. I can’t promise every male is going to be a gentleman to you, but if someone crosses a line, tell me and I’ll kick some ass, okay?” He gave me a grin that held a note of his wolf in it, and I found myself rather curious as to what his beast looked like.

As interested as I was in what he looked like under the clothes in his fur... Without the fur raised questions, too.

“That sounds amazing.” I tore my gaze away. I couldn’t go about thirsting over the first alpha I met...but he did rescue me, so bonus points there.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:22 am

Shilo

A fucking Wolfson.

Containing my frustration was an act of patience and understanding that even the goddesses would have admired.

Why?

Things were about to get hairy, but not in the fun way... maybe the fun way.

Nico had wandering eyes, and it was impossible not to notice his sidelong stares, wandering gaze, and flushed cheeks. The omega had spent weeks in that shelter, and I wasn't a saint by any means. Omegas were scarce. Betas were plentiful, far outnumbering our fairer sex. I just had to figure out if he was desperate or interested.

Also, I had a child's birthday party to attend.

"I have an hour before I need to be at the community center. Want to get a shower while I badly wrap some gifts for one of the pack kids? If you come, I can introduce you to people and you can have some cake." I turned the rig down the main road, making my way to our little gated community.

"I don't know if I'll be great company... Screaming kids may not be up my alley at the moment." I rubbed my shoulder anxiously and earned a dark chuckle in response.

"Awesome. Keep that energy. We can use it to leave early," I said, giving him a

conspiratorial laugh. “Love them to death, but screaming kids aren’t my deal, either.”

Nico’s posture drooped a little from what I could tell from the corner of my eye, relaxing at the knowledge he didn’t have to stay. “Shower it is!”

I took another turn and pulled up to the brick gateposts before reaching up to prod the opener. The metal gates scrolled open, and I rolled forward. “Well, me casa, es su casa.”

Nico sat up and glanced around, eyeballing all the cookie cutter houses and up the street where the apartment complex had been built. Singles’ housing. It was also attached to the community center, giving it a somewhat industrial appearance.

“That one your house?” He pointed toward the complex, and I laughed.

“No, those are the apartments. I live there.” I pointed off to the side as I rolled in to the end of the road and up a roundabout drive. The only difference between my house and the others was the space for parking a rig and the plot. Since my lot was used for a lot of functions, it was bigger. Also, it gave the kids an area to run in that the other adults didn’t have to mow.

He stared at the house, brow furrowed, and I pulled up to the driveway and up the circle drive. “Go ahead and ask.”

“Why don’t— Sorry, I don’t want to judge...” He shrank and quieted, curling up small in the seat.

“Why don’t I have a big fancy house?” He chuckled. “And you’ll probably be shocked I have a job.”

His head whipped to the side, eyes wide.

“We’re not a traditional pack. I’m alpha enough to keep the council happy. We’re kinda a big family. Families have heads, not wardens. Alphas aren’t royalty. Besides, if I live frugally, it means there’s more for everyone else.” I relaxed in my seat and shot him a half grin. “I never got off on the whole alpha lord thing.”

The concept seemed to shock him, and I waited for the interest he’d showed in me earlier to fade away. Omegas wanted powerful and successful alphas—and I wasn’t the showboat of an alpha he’d come to expect. Frankly, it was the reason I’d not sought out a mate. The best chance an omega had at happiness was often at the hands of the wealthy and powerful. Though, as I studied his face, his posture and scent—under the cloying surface of baby wipe was still the slight interest.

As an omega, his instincts would tell him to yield to me, and he did. “That’s so nice.”

I grinned. “My pack thinks so.”

He followed my lead and hopped out of the truck, sliding from the height to walk on unsteady feet. I circled around and offered him a hand, pleased when he leaned on my arm for a moment before righting himself. “Thanks.”

I guided him toward the front door, opening up for him before I went back into the car to get the gifts and cake. When I brought them back in, he stood in the entryway, frozen with uncertainty, as I gestured him toward the bathroom. “Feel free to use anything in there.”

We parted ways, and I had to admit I gave him a subtle look up and down as he slipped by me. Likewise, I think he glanced my way a little, pale eyes darkening over his shoulder. If he had any skill at seduction, he wasn’t flaunting it, but the shy interest heated me more than any sort of salacious flirtation an educated omega could give.

“Thanks again, really.” He gave me a shy smile and closed himself off in the restroom, and within moments, I could have sworn I heard a grateful moan when the water turned on.

I had gifts to wrap... Well, to stuff in bags with some tissue.

Glancing around my home, the place neat and clean, as I paid one of the disabled pack members to tidy up when she was having good days. It helped her immensely, and I didn't have to live in chaos. Admittedly, it did have its downsides—like not knowing where my fucking scissors were.

It must have taken a while, but by the time I found my scissors, Nico stepped out of the bathroom, blond hair laying flat, and ended up curling. The towel around his shoulders surrounded him like the ruff of his wolf.

Nico approached me without caution, a sign of his trust as he took the scissors from my hand to snip a tag. The shoes I'd found had a hang tag stuck to them and far more glitter than any shoe I'd ever wear. A coy smile stretched his lips as he helped me bag the presents and pack tufts of tissue into the right places. Admittedly, it was far better of a job than I would have done, and it made me smile. “Thank you. I'm sure Kenny will love it.”

“A boy?” Nico frowned, and I nodded.

“Yeah. Cutest little brunette. Parents joined the pack two years ago to give him a better start. Loves glitter, the little magpie.” The cake had a substantial amount of pink icing on it, but I didn't draw attention to it. Kenny liked pink, and while some of the kids at his human school poked fun at him about it, the wolves didn't. Sexuality, gender, and identity had little to do with colors. Also, his reason for it was rather more in tune with his wolf.

As if on cue, my front door opened and excited little boy footsteps charged through. Blake walked behind him as Kenny raced into my kitchen, eyes wide, face split into a gap-toothed grin.

“Pink!” At nine years old, Kenny could scream at a pitch that made my ears ring. I winced as he danced around excitedly. “Meat-colored caaaaake!”

Aaaand there the crux of it lay. Wolves liked meat. Meat was pink, for the most part.

The reaction curbed when Kenny spied Nico, little nose twitching as his freckled face stilled. “Hi! Who’re you?”

I snorted a laugh and reached over to snag Kenny into a hug. “This is Nico. He’s visiting me for a while. And, Nico, this is Kenny.”

“An omega...” Nico blinked in shock and waved a polite hello. “You must be a really special little boy for your alpha to get you all this.”

Kenny gave me a shy smile, cheeks pinkening. “Not really. Shilo buys all the pups presents.”

Nico’s expression went thoughtful, brow furrowed with the barest of confusion. Likely he’d never seen an alpha care about his pack’s children. Maybe his father only cared if another alpha had been born as potential competition—an omega as chattel, or a sigma as a resource. I cared. My father hadn’t much, but I thanked the goddesses he was never put in charge. My grandfather cared, though, and handed alpha title to me because of it.

“Maybe he’ll buy you presents, too.” Kenny beamed at Nico.

“He already did.” Nico gave me a polite smile.

Kenny reached up, hand outstretched, fingers grasping the air for his hand. “C’mere, Nico! I wanna show you the hole I dug in the yard the other day. It’s real big.”

Blake rolled his eyes, and I snickered.

“Are you supposed to be digging holes?” Nico followed with an encouraging nod from Blake and me.

“No!” Kenny beamed, appearing pretty proud of himself as they scooted out the back door.

Blake shook his head and eyed the two as they wandered around to one of the holes Kenny’s pup had dug, going after some sort of subterranean rodent. “So, what’s his story?”

I stared after them as Kenny led Nico by the hand. “Your old pack bought him for Branden.”

Blake hissed under his breath. “Not good.”

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Nico

“That is quite the hole.” I stared down at what must have been a foot-and-a-half-deep indentation in the soil inundated with the scent of vole. “You catch it?”

Kenny shook his head, toeing the dirt at the side. “Keeps getting away.”

“I think you need two people to get this kind.”

“It’s so itty-bitty. How do I need two people to get it?”

I knelt down and scrutinized the holes exposed in the soil, drawing my hand over the dead grass around it. I sniffed, upper lip curling, as I searched the grass for a hidden hole. Finding it, I pointed to the hole. “You get one pup to go in and snuff in the hole and the other waits here.”

“What happens?” Wide eyes stared up at me.

“Wanna see?” I gave him a conspiratorial grin and glanced toward the window where we were being watched.

“OMG, please!” Kenny jumped up and down.

“Ask your dad and I’ll show you. I’ll snuff it out and you catch, ok?” I grinned and Kenny ran off, shouting.

A minute later, I received a thumbs-up from Shilo, and Kenny came bounding back,

shifting as he tossed his clothes on the way.

In a blink, a leggy pup appeared in step, its coat a familiar pattern, something I recognized as a common one in the Silvermoon pack. Even his scent was familiar, and I knew right away that I might know his mother. I didn't know Blake, but he may very well have been a transplant to the community, granted pack status by rite of mating.

I stripped and shifted in a fluid motion, bringing out the gray of my wolf with a shake. Undressing among shifters wasn't a sexual thing. Bodies were bodies. A few stray hairs flew about, my scent hitting my nose as I groaned in satisfaction.

Cleaaaaan. And breath? Minty.

Perhaps not for long, though. The thrill of the hunt had me by the tail as I nosed at the undisturbed hole and motioned for Kenny to stand in wait and ran to the hole he dug, snuffling and digging into the open hole of a tunnel.

The scent of vole hit my nose, fresh little rodent piss and pheromones all in there. I took a deep breath, shoved my muzzle into the hole, and huffed with a soft woof.

A shrill squeak preceded a scrambling noise and the frantic scrabbling and snapping of a pup victorious in the hunt. A soft growl and a shake of his head later and the offending rodent was no more.

Kenny barked excitedly and ran to the fence line before tossing the creature onto a bare patch of earth. He ran back, panting happily as he made for his clothes. I tilted my head curiously as he shifted and dressed, prompting me to do the same, being mindful of the dirt on my hands.

“Why'd you take it over there?”

“I didn’t want to waste a kill and voles taste yucky. So, I leave it for the owl.” He beamed, and I huffed a half laugh, following him back inside.

Shilo met me at the door with a damp paper towel, wordlessly catching my chin with the sweetest smile before wiping my nose and lips. “There.”

Had I been naked, I’d have raised more than questions when my breath hitched, and cheeks heated.

“You’re a natural,” he said, the husk in his voice rough and low.

“Sorry. I—it was my favorite thing as a pup, hunting and digging. We had gophers where I lived, though.” I offered Shilo my best smile, and his lids hooded, his dark eyes darkening further, pupils barely discernible from iris as they expanded.

“Don’t be sorry, he’s been after that critter for a week.” Blake laughed and ruffled Kenny’s hair. “You wanna head on to the community center? We can tell Mom you finally caught it.”

Kenny jumped up and down excitedly before Blake grabbed the cake and headed out.

“That’s our cue,” Shilo said, tugging my sleeve. “I think you’ll learn to like it here. Kenny likes you.”

I already liked it. A lot.

Shilo didn’t push things, letting me walk at my own pace as he gathered gifts and escorted me into his garage, where the rolling door opened to the touch of a button, bathing the space in graying light. A lone utility vehicle, one of those off-road golf carts of an aging variety, sat in the corner next to a worn pickup. The back of it held the gifts easily when Shilo dumped them, and we quietly climbed in.

It started on the second turn of the ignition, purring to life before we lurched out and drove down the road.

The house I'd originally thought was his, which turned out to be the community center, was already bustling with people milling about. Kids hustled, chucking a basketball at the wall of the building at a hoop. Adults milled around, some holding gifts, others with food items. I felt a little self-conscious that I didn't have anything to bring, but I supposed it was okay since I'd only just met the boy.

When Shilo parked outside, people waved to him casually. Nods of respect followed him, but no fear or deference. Shilo was another wolf—the one that called the shots—but a wolf all the same. My father would have never stood for it, and I found it refreshing.

As I followed Shilo into the building, I carried one of the bags for him to feel like I was doing something and was pleasantly surprised to see some cheap decorations plastered up, a well-used bouncy castle swayed in the corner, and Kenny's shrill laughter came from it as well as another pup's.

A few banners and streamers lay about—some reusable balloons. Everything looked like it'd been used a few times, like Kenny had said earlier. The alpha did something for all the kids' birthdays.

We put the presents on the table and, lacking anything better to do, I followed Shilo around. I didn't feel too excluded as he spoke to the odd man and woman, giving a few hugs. A few curious gazes flitted toward me, coy smiles with insinuations hidden in them.

A woman I recognized from my tour of the Silvermoon pack some time ago met my gaze, her face a mirror of Kenny's. I thought she'd been a schoolteacher at the time. She seemed to mirror my recognition, finger bobbing as she furrowed her brow in

thought.

“Nico,” I supplied helpfully.

“Nico! I don’t think we were ever introduced. I’m Hannah. Weren’t you set to mate Alpha Silvermoon’s son?” She gave me an up and down look. “I think I like this arrangement better, honestly. Shilo is a very good alpha.”

Heat shot across my cheeks at the mention, and I stuttered, mouth opening and closing before Shilo rested a hand on my shoulder. “There was a car accident and Horace’s son didn’t make it before they were mated. He’s here for a while to figure out where he’s going.”

“If you ask me, you can’t do better than Shilo, then.” Hannah gave me another look up and down before turning, running into her mate. Blake leaned over her shoulder to whisper in her ear, winking at me before patting her back.

Her eyes brightened. “You helped Kenny get that damned vole. He’s been after it for a week. Thank you. I couldn’t keep him out of that dang hole for the life of me.”

“I’m sure he’ll find another one to go after.” I patted at one of my cheeks a bit, trying to rid myself of the flush.

Shilo kept his hand there and chuckled. “I dunno about that. Nico is a Wolfson and very attractive. He could have any number of more influential alphas.”

“That’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” I couldn’t help leaning into Shilo’s touch. “Besides, I really—I think I want something real, not an arrangement.”

“Well, fate has funny ways.” Hannah reached over and squeezed Shilo’s arm before sauntering off to gather people for cake.

I waited around as Shilo helped to round up the kids and adults. Kenny had to open presents and for a small pack, he got nice things. Games and toys—shoes. Everything was well thought out, and Kenny squealed happily with each item.

“The shoes are a little big,” Kenny said, wiggling his feet as the glittered things caught the light.

“You’ll grow into them, and they’ll last longer. Wear an extra pair of socks in the meantime.” Shilo ruffled Kenny’s hair and shuffled over to the table with the cake to pop the plastic lid off the pink confection.

“Whoa! Kenny got a meat cake!” A little beta boy with mousy-brown hair that stuck up at all angles ran up, blue eyes bright and wide.

Cheers for the meat cake ran about as Hannah cut a prime slice for Kenny and doled out slices to everyone as they made a line. I stood back and waited, unsure of when I should go, but Shilo solved that for me. When he approached with a slice of cake on a plate, I settled.

Strawberry cake, cherry frosting, and I was relatively certain a raspberry filling. So much pink, but it did have a meat-like appearance-ish. I took a bite and exhaled sharply, overwhelmed by the flavors. “This is a lot.”

“Yep, but it’s what Kenny wanted.” Shilo took a bite and grinned, pink staining his teeth.

“Party pup gets what he wants!” One of the kids ran by, pink streaked over his face as an adult chased them with a napkin.

I chuckled, snorting as I held a plastic forkful of the pink abomination. But it seemed like the kid’s parent wasn’t the only one looking out for stray icing. I jumped when

Shilo leaned into my space and brought a napkin up to my chin, gently wiping with such a slow and gentle motion. “There we go. All clean.”

When the evening progressed and the party games ran thin while Kenny broke in his new toys, the adults with kids coaxed the kids into rounding up for a run through the neighborhood. Under the dim light of the full moon coming out, they’d grow tired and be easier to put to bed.

As for the adults?

Full moons were sacred.

“You’ve been wolfed out for far too long. If you don’t want to run, want to make an excuse and head back home?” Shilo offered me a hand, and I took it.

“But you need to run with your pack and—”

He held up a hand and grinned. “I wouldn’t mind sitting at home and watching TV just this once.”

“What if I want to run, too? I’ve been cooped up.” Besides, the sugar from the cake coursing through me hadn’t had real food to balance it out in a while.

“Then feel free to join us.” He wrapped his arms around his waist, crossed as he grabbed the hem of his shirt. Lifting, his chest blossomed before me and if I wasn’t smitten before, I was then. That heat returned to my cheeks with a vengeance. His eyes drifted down my frame. “May want to step around the corner to shift. Ahem?”

The traitorous erection I sported warranted me tugging on my shirt discreetly. “Fair enough.”

Wolves held no qualms with our bodies, nor attraction. It was natural, and as an alpha, it was only instinct that I be attracted to him in that way. I'd been aroused by Branden the first time I met him, our wolves crossing paths as our fathers bartered blood. This was different though. Shilo had stronger blood and was so much larger than other alphas I'd sniffed out. Far more tanned and tattooed over his chest with a pack marking I'd never seen before.

Wanting to match his energy, I slipped away with a polite cough, going around the corner of the building to stash my clothes some place safe and shift into my wolf. Then, on four feet, the world blossomed into view of evening colors, sepia tones spreading as light became easier to see. Smells bloomed around me, the scent of cake and pups all around me. Above that, though? Thick, bestial alpha. I inhaled deeply and strode forward, my breath catching as I made eye contact with my alpha's dark eyes, which had gone more silvery, his coat a striking brown black and light-gray saddleback, indicating that he too may have had some arctic blood in him. I couldn't tell by scent alone.

He stepped forward toward me, making my tail involuntarily wag in a submissive gesture, ceding to my alpha. My alpha. The thought gave me pause. I didn't know if I viewed him as my keeper or mine in the visceral sense.

Beautiful. The word rang through my head as I stared Shilo down. Not my own.

My ears twitched, and I matched his step, dismissing the word as an intrusive thought.

My omega. I must keep. Earn trust. That thought was not my own, I was certain.

I tilted my head. Thinking, my mind buzzed with his presence. Your omega?

The stern set of his eyes widened, tail lifting. You hear me?

I nodded, dipping my head once. I didn't feel like addressing his declaration of ownership, for alpha wolves could have one-track minds, couldn't they? A thought of mine could mean anything. I believe so.

His tail wagged madly as he approached, stroking his side along my body, an exchange of scent as if I were already pack. He'd shown me sigma magic earlier, taking my collar off. My father had never spoken to me like that before, nor had our pack's sigma. You will stay. I will treat you well when you are ready.

I leaned into his scenting and rubbed my muzzle into the ruff of his fur. His scent, sharp and leafy, like fall and the first pounce into a fresh leaf pile, enraptured me. I curled my tail, careful of scenting him, as an omega did not mark an alpha as an alpha marked those they protected. To my surprise, he didn't hesitate to lean into me, forcing my scent onto him with a groan of appreciation.

And in the way of playfulness, the instinct of wolves told me he was safe, and not only safe but trustworthy and playful. So, in testing it, I glided against him again, nipping at his ear playfully, earning a yip and playful growl in response, mouthing at him happily.

He whipped around and nosed at me until he tripped me up, licking at my face. Say you will stay.

I wanted to avoid saying I would, wanted to wait and see, but his hot breath nosed over my ear. There, rather than a nip, he nuzzled into the shell and licked before waiting to see my reaction. As I froze, he licked once more. Eventually, I went limp to his licks as they grew more purposeful. I'll stay.

My back leg kicked, body slackening. Weeks of stress had taken its toll on me, and the oddness of what was happening didn't faze me as much as the friendly way other wolves came by to sniff and greet me in a polite way while Shilo lavished me with

affection.

Good. You belong. With a final lick, Shilo had me limp and complacent.

For the time, Pine Warren would do.

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Shilo

I'd known he was a striking wolf the moment I saw him in that cage. When I saw him showered with Kenny, I'd seen his paternal side, and how he looked when clean.

Standing among my pack as pups played, scenting his mild interest, my wolf agreed within me that he was ours. My omega.

In a moment, I realized how fortunate I'd been for not entertaining sexual thoughts. He heard me. He heard me and responded.

He had to be mine. A mate, a match, meant for me. He had to stay, and I told him so, my wolf affirming it as we rubbed against one another, trading scents. I buried my thoughts as my wolf repeated one word over and over again. Mine! Mine. Mine, mine, mine!

The scent of the kennels hadn't completely left him, but beneath it lay the sweet scent of omega, the beautiful scent of a happy omega, one who didn't fear me. I considered it a mark of pride that none of my pack feared me. So, when Nico ceded to me so easily, without any authority behind my demand, I couldn't leave any of him ungroomed.

He didn't have to fuck me. He didn't have to move into my bedroom or take my bite—he only needed to stay. If he would stay, I could show him I was different. I would be the alpha he needed if only my meager lifestyle could please him.

When I nipped at his ear and allowed the pack to come back, sniffing him in greeting,

a territorial urge rose within me. Half of me wanted to chase my own pack members off, but I suppressed the urge. He was mine and nobody could change that, nor would anyone I considered pack put claw or fang against him.

As we always did, we ran together, slipping between the buildings to funnel toward the nature reserve we bordered. Winding through the trees made my heart sing as we howled toward the moon. Nothing else made me feel better.

When an alpha met their ideal mate, that little bit of sigma magic that came from true love and the love of their pack—as my grandfather had taught me—would let the match speak to one another as wolves, making them a formidable pair.

Wolves could speak to one another in the ways of animals, could communicate things as needed, but to hear a voice so clearly...it was preordained. He was the male I never wanted to lose.

He joined me in a howl as we hunted the night prey, chasing the odd rodent about the leaves of the forest floor, the scant few with too little sense to hibernate. Even when we found them, he signaled the pups to come and chase first, enticing them to chase and hunt. So good with pups. Also, I'd never seen someone huff into the tunnels to get the mice to move.

As the night went on and the pups tucked out, little ones following parents out of the woods, we found ourselves licking one another again, rubbing against each other. Our tails wagged; ears pinned back while we nuzzled until he shifted in a breath.

There, away from others, my flesh manifested as well, and we pressed into one another, lips brushing sweetly until our mouths clashed. He didn't scent close to a heat, so we'd be safe, not that it mattered. He was mine. I was certain. We ground our hips together, cocks stiffening and leaking. Nothing in the world mattered more than uniting, more than rutting and knotting.

He whimpered into my mouth as I caged him in with my arms, pushing him into a bed of moss. The chilled weather meant nothing to us as the heat of our bodies reigned supreme. Breath caught in my chest as I restrained my urges long enough to obtain consent. “Nico, you want to? You can say no.”

“Hell yes,” he said in a shaking breath, pulling me in for another kiss.

I had no power over him. He was neither my pack nor my ward. He was free to leave and owed me nothing. When I inhaled deeply, all I scented was arousal, no fear. The stink of fear made me ill, and I had no idea how other alphas tolerated it. I refused to.

Nico didn't let me stew in my thoughts long before he reached down, wrapping a hand around my leaking cock. “You smell so good, and your wolf is beautiful.”

The compliment went right to my balls, tingles running through my thighs as he stroked. “And yours is gorgeous, too. Arctic mix?”

He squirmed beneath me, irritated by conversation, but humored me all the same with a half-cocked grin and nod. “You too.”

The warm chuckle that died out in my throat went searing hot as he leaned in to lick a stripe up my neck. “My father is half.”

I gasped as he squirmed beneath me, legs spread wide as his thighs hooked over my hips. “No wonder you smell so good.”

Like sought like. He groaned, and I drew my hand down his side, over the ripples of his belly, the cut of his groin. His cock left a slick streak up my arm as I buried my fingers behind his balls and rubbed, seeking his slick hole.

Less for his pleasure than easing my way, I plunged a finger in to test his tightness.

With a single stroke, he relaxed, accepting a second finger until I reached that spot. I wasn't certain I had it until his core tightened and a wounded cry burst free of his lips. His cock jerked between us, and I took advantage of his pliancy, the dripping wetness, his eagerness. I withdrew my fingers and guided my cock home, rocking the tip into him with a hiss of delight.

A gasp of pleasure lifted from his lips as I speared him. Sheathed, I groaned and placed one hand on his shoulder, the other between us to grip his dripping cock.

I stroked with a firm grip, the slick still coating my fingers making his cock glide through my digits. There, I watched as my hips moved, burying myself into him, over his perfect dick, smooth chest, chiseled jawline. When I locked eyes with him, those pale blue, I fell into their gaze, lost in the pleasure. "Nico."

He groaned and arched his back, letting me thrust into him again, sinking deeper as my hand jacked him gently, matching pace to my own jerky movements.

When his back bowed, I buried myself deep, waiting for the agonizing beats of my heart to pass as my knot filled out. As if the pressure of my knot gave him permission, he announced himself with a cry of pleasure and shot over my hand, slickening my slowing strokes. My own release came after, my core tightening, belly tingling, thighs shaking. Pressure mounted at the base of my cock and the eventual release left me spending in thick surges within him, shooting to the same rhythm as his inner spasms, milking me dry.

I released his cock and caged him in, breath shaking in haggard splutters, the cool evening chill taking my breath in a whisper of fog.

"Alpha." The tender way Nico said that word made me melt, my muscles relaxing until I draped my body over him, sniffing gently into his hair to take in his lust.

“Call me Shilo. Please. It’s awkward being buried to the knot in you and still being referred to as alpha.”

“Sorry, it’s a habit.” He sighed and relaxed beneath me, grunting when I eventually pulled out.

“One that I expect you to get over.” I sat up and stretched, glancing over at Nico, taking in his wrecked form. Pride shuddered through me as the urge to bite and mark him rose within me. “Goddesses, you’re beautiful.”

“Hmm, you too.” He grinned up at me and ran a hand through his hair before scooting onto his haunches and stretching. My cum drizzled down his thighs and marked him with my scent. I knew we’d be taking a shower later and the scent would fade, but for the moment, I could pretend he was already mine.

When he shook his head, the motion flowed seamlessly into a shift as he flicked his tail in my face and darted into the woods once more.

I’d follow that fuzzy little ass anywhere, and I did.

I shifted and barked with excitement, chasing his heels as we made our way back to our clothes.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:22 am

Nico

I woke the next morning curled into the searing heat of a raw, masculine form. Fallen leaves and soap inundated my senses, and I shuddered, stretching myself to full awareness. Shilo.

No fear. No unease. I'd been with betas before, an alpha once, but it hadn't felt like this, so raw and safe. It felt like scratching an itch every other time. With Shilo, it felt like more. The itch was scratched, and I still wanted, and I wanted to be there even without that scratch .

“Good morning, handsome.” Shilo's husky morning voice made every hair on my body stand on end and a tingle of lust shoot along my spine. Morning wood became morning steel in a heartbeat. His eyes dipped as if he could see through the blankets, but his thigh pressed in between my legs, letting me grind against him with a pleading motion.

“Morning.” I stifled a yawn as I turned my head away, not wanting to force morning breath on him. He didn't seem to mind, though, stealing my personal space to slip in for a kiss that lingered. Breathless and groggy, I let him guide me through lazy pleasure.

He fisted my cock in a familiar way, rolling his wrist with each pleasant pump. Instead of preparing me for fucking, he slipped under the covers, kissing his way down until wet heat wrapped around my cock with a soft, “Mmmm.”

“Oh fuck.” If I wasn't fully awake before, I was then. I gasped and rolled my hips,

stilling when he pressed me down. He sucked, rolling his tongue around the head of my cock, over the wet slit. Until then, I wasn't sure if I had a drop of cum left inside me after the night we'd had, but the sudden urge to get off told me differently. "Gonna make me cum..."

"That's the point," he muffled over my cock from beneath the blankets.

I fisted the sheets and writhed, his mouth doing unspeakable things that made heat rise in my cheeks as that familiar tingle took hold of the base of my spine. I gasped and swore, body jerking and twitching. "Gonna..."

He choked as I announced myself, swallowing each pulse of my pleasure away. Idle fingers traced their way between my cheeks and gently rubbed through the slick there. Though, it didn't make me want to go again. The touch seemed almost apologetic, as if he were soothing my ring. I needed nothing more in that moment than to let the ache of arousal and humming bliss take me away, and Shilo had no problem letting me have it.

"Coffee or tea?" He pushed his way up, head lifting the blankets as they fell around him, drawing up the scent of him and fabric softener. Clean bed. Respect.

I judged a partner for their bedsheets.

"How about I return the favor?" I offered Shilo a grin as the final shivers of lust slipped away.

"You're absolutely insatiable. I'd love it, but maybe let me save it for tonight? Tomorrow? If you feel like it, of course. I'm starving and I need a shower. I wouldn't make anyone put their mouth on me right now." He pushed himself off and dipped back in for another kiss.

“Coffee, then.”

“How do you take it?” He fished around in a drawer and pulled on a pair of pajama pants before tossing me a pair as well.

“Black with extra sugar.” I rose and followed him into the kitchen while tightening the pajama pants enough to stay up.

“A man after my own heart.” Shilo fiddled with one of those standard cheap coffeepots, loading it with a store brand of coffee. “It takes a minute. Share a shower? Hot water doesn’t last that long, but we both could use a rinse.”

I couldn’t argue and followed him into his ensuite for what turned out to be a rather platonic shower and some very pleasant exchange of back scrubbing. An omega could get used to treatment like that.

I idly wondered if my father had ever been as sweet with any of his partners. None had been his mate, so I assumed his ministrations were for his own relief and the eventual peopling of his genes.

As we exited the shower, we dressed. The clothes he’d gotten me the day before were enough of a fit to last me, so I casually wandered back into his kitchen. In my wake stood a younger, pale woman, her posture stooped as she stared me down with wide eyes. “Oh. I’m sorry!”

“Megan! Hey, it’s okay. This is my—friend.” Shilo rushed out of the bedroom behind me and ran comforting hands over my shoulders. “Nico, meet Megan. She’s a pack member who cleans for me.”

Ahhh, and there the alpha part comes in. He had pack members tending his home. It made sense, especially with how neat everything was. I had almost wondered if he’d

had a female or an omega with how things were.

The scent of fear rose sharply, and she stepped back, her gaze trained not on Shilo but me.

“Nico, go back in my room a second. Please? We’ll talk in a few.” Shilo gently guided me into his bedroom, and I resisted protesting. The attitude didn’t appear like he was hiding a secret, shame, or anything else. He gave me a soft kiss before closing the door and walking away, his soft words muffled on the other side.

The higher-pitched tones of the woman answered, placated by whatever Shilo had to say. Then the back door opened and closed and Shilo returned, his expression grim. “Sorry. Megan is afraid of people and it’s hard for her to leave the house. Several of us pay her to come clean our homes at quiet times so she can get by. It makes her feel useful.”

Every time I think I have him pegged, he surprises me.

“We’ll do a slow introduction when she’s having a good day. She’s a rescue, kept in her wolf form for far too long as a child.” His sweet smile told me all I needed to know. She wasn’t a burden to him, nor was she a duty.

As alpha, he found a place for her, and she served a purpose to him. His only real duty was to ensure she was free to do her work. He was a good alpha, nothing like I’d ever known before.

“I have pack duties to see to today. Feel free to settle in and relax. There’s a phone and I’ll unlock my computer for you so you can do what you need, and feel free to log into my shopping list and buy yourself what you need to last you. A week’s worth of outfits should do. Keep it under a grand, yeah?” He stroked a hand down my arm and warmth nestled in my belly.

“You don’t have to do all this. I’m sure I can—maybe my father will want me back or—” His grip tightened just a bit on my arm, silencing me. When his expression went from hard to hurt in an instant, my heart ached.

“See to it you have your ID, any documents you need, order copies. Do you have any bank accounts or anything we need to get the address changed on? A phone?” His change of subject threw me off. He wanted me to stay at his own expense.

“Okay. I don’t have a bank or anything. No phone. I have a birth certificate and ID but I think it may have been in that van—my father handed it over.” I stumbled over my words as he loosened his fingers, stroking over my skin there apologetically.

“Hmm. Your father really did set you up without a safety net.”

I nodded. He was cautious about his omega sons. When shifters outlawed servitude and nonconsensual matching of omegas to alphas, my omega father left that day, leaving me behind. I was so little.

“I’ll take care of you. You’re mine now, Nico. I protect what’s mine.” Shilo leaned in, scenting me lightly with a groan of delight. I couldn’t have been more attracted to him if I’d tried. I’d submit and join his pack.

“Yes, alpha,” I whispered so softly.

“I’ll let that slide.” A soft growl petered out in his throat as he nuzzled into my neck, teeth grazing my pulse point. Every muscle in me tightened as he threatened my most vulnerable place. A single nip would have me claimed, would have him united to me as well.

A scary thought crossed my mind.

I wished he would.

I'd let him.

Shilo

It took me two days to get in touch with the council and Alpha Wolfson. Godfrey seemed to be surprised that Nico was alive, pleasantly so. It was not the sigh of relief a parent should have had, though.

“Well, that’s great,” he said, his voice smooth and low. “And he’s staying there?”

“I hope he will.” I resisted playing my hand and telling him that Nico was my mate. Godfrey didn’t seem like the sentimental sort. “I’ve taken financial responsibility for his needs.”

He made a noncommittal noise and ended our pleasantries with a promise to touch base over things later. He was busy, after all. It turned my stomach how unmoved he’d been. Were Nico my son, I’d have wept tears of joy.

A day after that, I got a call from Horace Silvermoon, a man with far more sadness in his voice than I’d expected. My phone rang, buzzing across my home office desk. “So, the omega lived?”

“Nico. And yes, he did.”

A choke of sadness cut off the line for a moment before Horace let me know that they’d assumed his son had run away after the wreck because he didn’t want to be mated. He’d forced his son to take a mate in desperation, sought out the best because Branden was in love with his beta enforcer. A common pack guard. With them finding out Nico was okay, it meant the charred remains inside were Branden and his

lover.

“My deepest sympathies. I’ll refrain from lecturing you about omega trade but know that it’s illegal for a reason.” I stifled a growl in my throat out of pure diplomacy.

“Well, you can send the omega over. We’ll initiate him and introduce him to my other sons or myself, if he’s interested. I’m not beyond a younger omega.” His tone slipped into something lacking conviction. “I already paid his pack-severing fees to Godfrey.”

“He’ll stay here,” I said, putting firmness behind my voice as I paced my office and turned my attention to the darkening sky outside my window. Rattling dishes from the kitchen met my ears as Nico petered about, cooking for us.

“Is that so?” A tone of threat with no force behind it perked me up. A knee-jerk reaction he likely would have had to an alpha challenging something he viewed as his.

“Again, I am sorry for your loss, Horace. He belongs to me.” The slip made me cringe for a moment. He was mine, but Nico seemed to shy away from the topic of our wolves speaking. His aloof mannerisms over it made me question if he even knew. In any case, it wasn’t my place to tell Nico. “He’s my mate.”

A distinct lack of clattering in the kitchen registered as I looked up and noticed the shadow of feet at the foot of my door. Fuck.

“I see. Well then, have a good evening.” His tone grew icy, but I didn’t answer, only hung up as I rose and made my way to the door, opening it to face Nico who stood there, eyes wide and apron rumpled.

“Nico!”

“I’m your mate?” Nico’s breath shuddered. “We barely know one another... Unless my father gave his consent?”

“I didn’t mean for you to hear that. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you knew, what with how you reacted. Our wolves talking—that’s a mate thing. Your father had no say. He knows you’re here.” I stumbled over my words and reached out to him, hooking our fingers together. He didn’t fight me, but his posture and face were far from neutral. Complicated.

“I have a choice. You said so.” Nico stepped back, pulling his hand from me.

“You do. I promise. One hundred percent. I just recognize you as my mate. Please, Nico.” I reached out to him again, but the one thing I prayed I’d never scent on an omega came to pass. Fear.

“But... How can you say I’m yours and—I don’t— Why didn’t you tell me?” Too much white showed in his eyes, the mark of fear in canids. It made me sick deep inside to feel that.

“Because you didn’t know. It’s not something you exactly just fling onto someone! By the way, you’re on the run from a shitty situation and here I am the first alpha in your way, and I tell you that you’re my mate? Hell, it was all I could do to keep my wolf from biting you.” I ran my hand through my hair and huffed. “I never wanted to take the choice away.”

“But you told Alpha Silvermoon... What if I had wanted to go there?” Nico took another step back.

“Then you’re free to go. I didn’t want Horace coming here loading you up without your consent!” Rather than chase him or invade his space, I did the only thing I could and sat on the floor, pulling my legs in, tailor fashion. It halted him in his step. No

threat.

The stink of fear lessened, and his shoulders relaxed, but the scent of something burning rose above that as he turned and ran to the kitchen. “Shit!”

I didn’t precisely follow, but I scooted to the doorway to lean against a wall until he returned, staring me down. Instead of challenge or more hostility, he matched my energy, scooting down the wall to sit cross-legged facing me.

“I’m being emotional. I’m making assumptions when you’ve showed me nothing but positive things.” He stared me down, expression hard. I melted under those blue, blue eyes.

“I wouldn’t dare say that—out loud.” I offered him a smirk and earned a sneer and roll of eyes.

“Right. So. Mate?” Nico stared me down, nostrils flaring.

Since he sought the truth, I couldn’t hold back. I refused to lie. “Right. Your mind and mine are very compatible. It’s the only magic an alpha really has, usually. The love of the pack gives more, but different. Those stupid collar locks are nothing.”

“Okay. So why didn’t you bite me? I know you’ve wanted to a few times.” He folded his arms over his knees and leaned forward.

“Because it was too soon. If you’d have realized, I would have asked or waited for you to ask.” I folded my hands in my lap. “It’s a big thing to drop on someone.”

Nico grunted noncommittally.

“You’re free to stay in another room, an apartment, or to leave...” I stared at my

hands in my lap and waited, afraid to look up.

“Eh. The dick’s too good. I’ll stay.” He sighed and climbed to his feet, his shadow sliding away on the floor. “Besides, you need an omega. I’ll wait on the bite though. Besides, you may change your mind after you taste the spaghetti I just made.”

I sniffed and glanced up, wrinkling my nose. “Takeout?”

“Nope. You’re gonna eat it.” He smirked, and I stood to follow.

Worth it.

Nico

Shilo didn't have much use for me at his work until I had my paperwork in. My ID was supposedly in the mail, and against my better judgment I'd made his address mine. It did make me feel better that he set me up with a salary, a bit of money and a job to do—managing the community center.

Several females in the pack stayed on rotation to care for kids after school, but they needed someone dedicated. It was only eight or nine kids, but they needed supervision. Getting to spend time with Kenny was nice, though. The other pups took care of him as best they could—omegas were precious. Instinctively wolves knew that.

As I went about gathering up the toys to dunk in a sanitizer bucket for the day, the last two kids straggling with an evening snack, I registered male voices down a hall from the playroom near the communal kitchens. There, a few nights a week, several pack members made dinner for us all to share. I really like these evenings.

With that night being dinner, I could barely make out the scent of strangers above the spices of taco night. And the two pups I watched lay on mats getting their evening nap in, twins under a year old. Both their parents worked late on Tuesdays, so it was no problem. I loved keeping an eye on the little girls and putting bows in their blonde curls.

One woke with a grunt of displeasure and squealed for a breath before settling back on their own, and I put my bucket of sanitizer down right as three males walked in. My father, Alpha Silvermoon, and some older male I didn't know.

“Nico. There you are.” My father’s curt tones drew my attention first as I stared at them with confusion.

“Father?” We’d never been close. An alpha’s pups were raised and loved more by betas than the alpha himself.

“Horace and I had some time to discuss things and came to an agreement that you can wait for his other alpha son to come of age.” He rocked on his heels and gave me this expectant look, as if I were supposed to nod and do as I was told.

“Oh, sorry. I’m staying here, Father. I’ve already been accepted into Pine Warren.” I gave a polite nod as his expression went hard, as if the news were a new thing, but he didn’t disagree with me.

“We did have an agreement, Godfrey,” Alpha Silvermoon said, giving me a long stare.

“As I reminded the two of you, the agreement you made was not in the best of faith. Need I remind you two that arranged matings are frowned upon.” The male behind them spoke in quiet tones that made my father stiffen but not rebut. The strange alpha raised a hand holding a folder and shook it.

“And as I stated before, he was willing and signed the papers. He had already consented to be made Silvermoon.” Horace cleared his throat and earned a doubtful glare from the third male.

My father’s light features were a mirror of some of my own, save for his golden eyes. I got those from my omega father. Alpha Silvermoon was all mealy brown—spread thin. Nothing about him seemed substantial, all plain features reminiscent of the shallow gene pool I imagined. The third male was clearly arctic. He had strikingly dark hair, jet black, and eyes far icier than my own. I wondered, idly, if we shared

blood.

“I didn’t sign anything.” I blinked up and earned a glare from my father before Alpha Silvermoon turned his head to him angrily. “I verbally consented to be mated to his son and join the pack. In that order, I’d imagine. I was never mated to his son, so...”

“It was an expectation of you to join after I released you.” My father said, each word grinding out tersely.

“Apologies, Father, but I’ve met my mate. Also, it would have been hard to sign anything as I was stuck in my wolf fo—” I started, but he tensed and huffed sharply as Alpha Silvermoon cowered. It was too late as the third male growled low.

“Let me call Alp—Warren...Shilo. My—we’ll be mates soon.” I pulled out my phone and strode past the men to the hall, waving down one of the women on her way to the kitchen. “Can you watch the pups? Pack business. They need to wake and eat in about...thirty.”

My father’s presence didn’t do me any favors, but the anger emanating from the new male and the crazy look of Alpha Silvermoon, who had all the markings of a cornered beast, made my insides crawl. It was all I could do not to shift and submit.

She nodded and patted my shoulder as I gestured the men into the hall. I called and Shilo answered on the second ring. “I’m on my way. I know. Do not leave with them—unless you want. I mean—”

“Yeah. Don’t want.” My wolf whimpered in my mind.

“Good. Three minutes.” He hung up, and I stuffed my phone back in my pocket.

“This is a very poor pack, Nico. Are you sure you can be happy here?” My father’s

low tones gave me the encouraging sort of warning a parent would use to get their way. But since he wasn't my alpha, had already excised me—it wasn't my issue.

"I'm very happy, Father. Alpha Warren—Shilo is very kind to me. He is different from other alphas." I smiled and earned a scoff of doubt from Alpha Silvermoon.

"I can tell. He lives in a hovel, has no security for his packland and no progeny. A lone alpha might as well come in and—" Alpha Silvermoon started.

"And what?" Shilo rolled in, his face a storm of emotion as his gaze locked on the third male. "Councilman Ares."

"Shilo." The new alpha nodded in return, and they shook hands. "It appears you've found a male that interests you and the Silvermoon pack is contesting it."

"I never signed any paperwork to join—" I raised my voice and flinched when Alpha Silvermoon raised a hand sharply to silence me, a gesture that would have finalized with a slap if I were any younger or part of his pack. I knew right then and there if I eventually went with him, I'd become intimately familiar with the back of that hand.

"I have paperwork here that says otherwise," the stranger, Ares, said as he opened his folder and handed a sheet of paper to Shilo, like his word decided my fate.

Shilo's brow furrowed as he tapped the paper. "He couldn't have signed this."

"How so?" Horace stiffened and Shilo offered the paper back to Ares.

Godfrey stood a little taller.

"Neither you nor Godfrey have seen him since the wreck." Shilo glanced at me to confirm, and I nodded. "Also, you didn't even know he was alive on this date."

“I’ve known he was here since the day after the incident. I’m not sure why you’d dispute that.” My father gave Shilo a warning glare that warned of war and violence.

“But he wasn’t here,” a familiar voice spoke up, inundated with bitterness. “He was stuck in a fucking dog pound.”

“Blake,” Shilo warned, but Blake had his phone out, flicking through something.

He held up his screen and on it was a rather pitiable picture of me in a piss-soaked cell, my gray fur streaked with foulness. My first instinct was to swat the phone away to hide the indecent picture, but Shilo circumnavigated the other alphas and rested a hand on my arm. “Do you want to be here or go home and wait for me to handle this?”

I swallowed hard. “I’ll stay.”

“And do you want to stay here? On my land, with me? For me to be only yours, and you mine?” Shilo leaned in and his lips brushed the shell of my ear. His warm breath made me shiver.

“Yeah. I want that.” Shilo pulled back and looked me in the eyes before flicking his gaze toward Councilman Ares and back to me.

“Unless we’re mated, it may be a bit of a fight for this, or may get expensive.” Shilo met my gaze and leaned in, making my heart flutter over the softest of kisses.

The gravity of what he asked didn’t hit at first as he ran his lips over my cheek to my ear. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” My whisper cut short as, in a flash, he pushed his face into the tender line of my neck, mouth opening. I had the barest warning before half-shifted teeth bit down

over my neck. I cried out with sharp pleasure and trembled.

I'd heard mating could be intense, that the union would make us stronger, give us power. It made alphas calmer, omegas stronger, and packs more loyal. He was no longer a single, unmated alpha leading the many, but a male lifted by his mate, given something to build and protect. My breath petered out in a soft whimper. "Oh goddesses..."

"You can't just—" my father shouted, earning a snarl from Alpha Silvermoon.

"You have any idea how costly of a mistake you just made?" My father pushed Shilo away from me and tensed his shoulders, but he hadn't been a dominant brawler in many years. Shilo was young, still in his prime, and something neither of the others were—mated.

"Tell me, Godfrey. Explain to me how I have slighted you. Explain to Councilman Ares—" Shilo turned, his lips tinged red, fangs still out as he licked his lips.

"I can wait for that explanation. What I cannot wait for is an explanation of what exactly happened. The report we received stated that he'd been in Shilo's care for months." Ares stifled a growl in his throat.

I shivered on the spot, my knees weak as Shilo pulled me into his side and gave me a soft kiss. "Blake, take my mate to the kitchens. Councilman Ares and I have some talking to do. And I imagine I'll be making a peace offering to one of these two misinformed alphas over this communication error, correct? I'm sure nobody purposefully lied or broke the law."

Alpha Silvermoon paled as my father's jaw clenched. Long seconds passed before he relented with a short nod. "Perhaps there were a few miscommunications we could rectify. I certainly wouldn't want to be in bad standing with the council. Nor would

you, Horace.”

“Cool. You four talk it out. Maybe talk to Alpha Silvermoon about his policies on omega pups and find out why he’s so desperate for them.” Blake sneered and took my arm, muttering something along the lines of training omegas and the cost he still bore, paying for their departure.

As they led me away, I glanced back, my mind spinning. Shilo gave me a nod and the brief glance I caught of the councilman’s face told me something grim.

We stormed our way to the kitchens, where Blake handed me off to another beta, determination in his gaze.

Shilo

“A pound. A fucking pound? Your son spent time inside of a goddamn pound?” Councilman Ares, who was somewhat of a cousin to me, wheeled on Godfrey—my new father-in-law. Much to my chagrin.

“I thought him dead.” His father’s expression, deadpan, told me all I needed to know about his feelings for Nico.

“I need a thorough explanation. Your son is dead?” Ares wheeled on Horace, and he winced, nodding as his face twisted into disgust and sadness.

“They had an accident on the way back to the pack after we picked up Nico—” Godfrey halted when I snarled.

“You didn’t just pick him up . You carted him off like an animal on a fucking leash.” I took a deep breath and calmed myself, my breath hissing between my teeth. But I wasn’t done. When I started, I couldn’t stop. I told them about the shelter, the weeks he sat in there in his own filth, the fact that he wasn’t chipped as had been council standard for years , just in case things like that happened. To keep the vulnerable from being locked up and shifting in shelters or getting discovered.

I told Ares about the phone call I’d made, and how they’d left him with me for weeks since then. He’d started a whole new life in as long as they’d kept their distance, and I wanted to know why. My question went unanswered, though. Blake returned, sending a shock of anger coursing through me. He was meant to be guarding my mate. But in a way, he was.

“Add this to their list of fuckups.” Blake caught Ares’s attention and thrust the leash and collar toward him. The heavy links clanked ominously, and Horace paled while Godfrey kept his expression schooled and flat.

Ares turned the chains over in his hand, upper lip curling. Like me, he didn’t view betas as beneath him. His job was to promote unity and uphold council law and rule. What he held was a threat to our moral codes. “I see. And this was on his neck in the shelter? Where anyone could have seen it?”

Ares turned it over again, eyeing the etchings along the links. “Is it enchanted?”

“Of course not. It’s symbolic. Why would we need that?” Horace spluttered. “It’s our tradition to gift an omega a collar for our pack... And Alpha Warren has no sigma, so how did he get it off intact? It’s symbolic, really.”

“Show me.” Ares thrust the chain into my hands. Horace had been right; without sigma magic, the thing was near useless, but I had that little spark, as did Ares.

“If Alpha Silvermoon doesn’t mind?” I gestured the collar toward him, and he sneered hesitantly before offering his neck, confident that it wouldn’t latch. I leaned forward, wrapping the chain about his neck before tapping the ends of two links together with my little spark. It clicked and Horace stiffened, all the blood draining from his face.

Godfrey sneered at the display as I handed Ares the end of his tether and shoved my hands in my pockets. Nico’s father kept a decidedly blank face and took a deep breath. “Goddesses...”

Ares jerked the chain and bared fangs before dismissing Blake. “Dinner almost ready, Shilo?”

I nodded. “Taco night.”

“Good. Get us some plates and a place to sit down and discuss things.” Ares followed my gesture down a hall toward my official office. The thing sat relatively unused, as I spent most of my time in my home office.

As we made our way down, footsteps fell sharply, the stink of fear inundating the hall, making my stomach roil. I couldn’t handle fear, but I refused to react. Ares cut his gaze toward me, lips twisting. He knew my detest.

Horace’s chain rattled as we stepped into my office, breaking the silence. The scent of disuse and cedar overwhelmed the scent of fear, and I sidled over to my desk to sit. Three chairs sat before me, and I folded my hands on the blotter as they settled in.

Ares leaned back in his seat, throwing his feet up on the desk. The chain draped lazily across his thighs, boots crossing. I gave him a look that he returned with the flick of a brow, daring me to say anything. I satisfied myself with enjoying the scene of Horace on the very leash he’d locked Nico in. “So. Nico’s doing well here?”

I nodded, sending a text to one of the women in the kitchen for four plates. “He’s got a job he enjoys, his own bank account, money, freedom—well, maybe not that anymore. Needs must and all that.”

I picked at the corner of my mouth with my thumb before inspecting the light crust of blood still there. Godfrey’s expression hardened, and he was either good at hiding his emotion or less concerned with his son’s placement than he was the potential profit. Him, I could probably bargain with—Horace? It was yet to be seen.

“I see where it was necessary. I didn’t scent fear on him until these two numb-nuts showed up. So, he must like you.” Ares tugged on Horace’s chain with a gentle warning.

“I should hope so. He speaks to my wolf.” I made a show of brushing my fingers off, relishing the bitterness growing on Horace’s face. “And he is a wonderful male, so kind and well-mannered. You outdid yourself, Godfrey.”

Nico’s father nodded sagely. “I don’t habituate myself to children. My young are often raised by pack and are a reflection of my people as a whole.”

I didn’t like that one bit, but it made sense. “It makes him appreciate the individual attention quite a bit more, at least. Easy to please, grateful for even the smallest things.”

Ares snorted at the last remark.

I eyed him with dry disapproval before I set my gaze on Godfrey. “So. Misunderstandings aside. I’m sure that it was an oversight that Nico didn’t have a chip.”

“It must have escaped notice. Our pack is quite large.” He tilted his palms up and shrugged.

“Oversights happen. Fortunately, fate had Shilo in the right spot.” Ares nodded in agreement.

“So, what would you accept as his dower? I know those things are custom still in older packs. I’m young and haven’t had the luxury of that sort of example.” I turned my full attention to Godfrey, earning the first positive reaction since he’d arrived. “I want to be amicable, but he is my fated.”

Fated mates were such a powerfully important thing that their discovery trumped any and all. No matter the alpha’s say, if Nico was mine, he’d have to let them go without a cent. It was only courtesy that I offer to pay his fees as a gesture of goodwill.

“Eleven thousand.” Godfrey stared me down, and I nodded. “But I would prefer an alliance.”

“More than reasonable. It’s my understanding that Horace charges sixty thousand for an omega to leave his pack.” I gestured toward Horace, who paled and had Ares sitting up straight. “I have a family here from your pack. Twenty each for a beta couple and sixty for their child, and you graciously allowed them to leave if I guaranteed it.”

Ares uncrossed his legs and planted his feet on the ground in a gesture of interest. “Really? How much have they paid off of it?”

Horace set his jaw but didn’t answer as Godfrey turned his attention to him, feigning interest. He had to have known.

“That’s far beyond what’s allowed for adults unless there’s debt owed on property... And children typically don’t incur fees when they’re leaving... It’s not illegal but highly frowned upon. Answer the question.” Ares tensed his hand on the chain and waited for an explanation.

“I—It’s expensive to run a pack, and members leaving costs us—omegas are rare and—” Horace stuttered as Ares tightened the chain over his knuckles.

“How much have they paid?” Ares’s voice went sharp.

He stammered, unsure of who paid what, but I knew. “Thirty-eight thousand, or a little more, last I checked.”

“And how much did you pay Godfrey for Nico?” Ares took a deep breath and settled himself, the ice in his eyes as arctic as his spirit.

“Nothing. We had an alliance. His firstborn alpha son to my Nico. There are certain business ventures we wished to unite on, but blood doesn’t appear to have won out. It’s a shame.” Godfrey sighed and sagged in his chair. “You own a shipping company. We own significant amounts of land with oil and coal. We could work something out, though.”

I nodded sagely. Oil money was good, but I didn’t have drivers that were hazmat endorsed. “I’ll need some time to get my drivers certified, but I can certainly work closely with your pack. Any idea what that would look like?”

I turned my attention away from an increasingly frustrated Horace. The male had lost from all angles and would leave in council custody unless he was able to make some pretty damn good excuses and accommodations.

“Well, we currently contract with a bear sloth... Sometimes iguanas...” He sighed heavily. “The latter has a problem with lot lizards .”

Wasn’t sure what the last part was, but I nodded. “Well, we may not be the cheapest—we pay our employees very well. Burnout is low and turnover is near zero.”

“We can negotiate at a different time. Now is the time to see that my son is where he needs to be.” Godfrey sat up as the door to my office opened without a knock, one of our women in the way with four stacked paper boxes full of tacos.

I waved to her politely as she dropped off a few bottles of beer with it and left just as quickly. Ares, to no surprise, dug in, while Horace stared at the fare in moderate disgust. Godfrey took a box, sniffed, and decided it was good enough—that or he thought it was rude not to eat.

“So. You’re a very small pack,” Godfrey said between bites, brushing his fingers off

on a paper towel stuffed in the box's side.

"We are. I'm not much for power. We have small resources, but I value strength in happiness." I didn't see any reason not to, since Ares and Godfrey were eating, so I ate, too.

"I can tell. And your home—you do not have any other omegas or females?" Godfrey gave me a hard look.

"Not at all. I'm more the sentimental type. I'm not looking to expand, just to thrive. My people can do the expanding." I took another bite—chicken. Yum.

Godfrey frowned. "How bad off is this pack, financially?"

"Well, if he's not lying on his council taxes—they're doing about the same as Silvermoon. They're flush," Ares said through a mouthful of taco. "And all their pack members are flush, too. Nobody's in poverty. Not a single member is on government benefits."

Godfrey sat up, brows raised. "Really?"

"Don't want the government in pack business," I said succinctly. While the general public at large didn't have any idea about shifters—the government had their hands everywhere.

Grunting in approval, Godfrey nodded and took another bite, finishing a taco with a prim brush of his fingers. "That settles that, then. Happy pack. Happy pup. Good resources. Delicious food. Ares, you said they're honest people, yes?"

Ares nodded, more preoccupied with his taco box. "Yeah. Only pack that's never had a violation in a generation. Always pay taxes on time, happy members. I only think

two members left in the last twenty years...”

“One of them came back. Brought his mate,” I reminded Ares, and he nodded happily. “But it helps that I don’t charge to join or leave the pack. They just have to ask my approval for the release. Everyone knows it.”

“Never expelled a pack member, either,” Ares added.

“Oh, not since my grandfather’s days when he got rid of this old drunk who kept hitting his wife and kids.” I waved my hand dismissively. “We don’t put up with that.”

“And the kids look safe and happy.” Godfrey’s eyes wandered off toward the direction of the communal cafeteria.

“Get this. He buys a present for and comes to the birthday of every kid in the pack. Just any kid he’ll let come talk to him, and they feel safe to. Nothing goes on in this pack without him knowing about it. Do you even have enforcers?” Ares turned his attention to me, and I shrugged.

“I have Blake, but he’s less of an enforcer than he is backup. I don’t have dissent or anything. Anything crops up, it gets fixed, or we talk it out, generally. I guess I really lucked out when it comes to easygoing wolves.” I stretched in my chair and Godfrey remained quiet; expression lost in thought as he continued to eat.

“This isn’t a pack, it’s a trailer park!” Horace finally spoke up and sat up straight.

“Best damn trailer park this side of the Mississippi. Ask any of them out there.” I gestured and Ares snorted.

“Call my son back in. Ultimately, my approval means little. Deals were made and

broken.” Godfrey closed the box of his food and sat it on the desk.

I pulled out my phone and stared at it, not really ready to face Nico.

Nico

The kitchen was moderately busy, with a handful of people cleaning up while pack members stuffed their plates from the taco bar.

Blake left shortly after dropping me off in the corner, sitting alone in a chair they reserved for the odd naughty kid that needed an extra eye on them. I felt somewhat like a scolded child myself. Especially with Carlin watching me. I didn't know the beta too well, but he had twin boys that were really sweet little things.

I stared at the floor, my heart racing as someone carted off food for them. The sting on the side of my neck told me that they couldn't take me away, but it didn't mean that my father or Alpha Silvermoon wouldn't demand recompense far beyond what I was worth, or worse, make things difficult for Shilo, challenge him for pack ownership. I put my hand over the wound until one of the ladies, Nadine, dish towel in hand, came to kneel beside me. She handed it to me with a bright grin.

"So, you're staying?" She tilted her head to stare at the mark before I put a towel over it. He'd done it so fast he didn't have time to lick it clean.

"I guess. We didn't really get a chance to talk about it." I huffed, giving a half laugh as I slumped.

When I told Nadine, she frowned. "We all knew you'd be staying. I think you did, too. He's not keen on losing you, aren't you the same?"

"I do want to stay. Our wolves are great together." I felt childish, tucking my hands

into my lap. “They’re mates. We’re mates.”

“Well, duh.” Nadine put her hands on her hips and scowled. Her nose twitched, and she sniffed at the air in distaste. “And they have you stinking up the place, scared. I bet Shilo hates that.”

I glanced up. “I stink?”

“Of fear. That many alphas in one room all after you? Shilo can not handle a wolf in fear. It drives his beast batty.” She patted my head and told me to grab a plate. Food didn’t sound great, but there were some cookies for dessert that I scrounged up and scarfed a few of.

Halfway through a third cookie, my phone rang, making my pocket buzz. I fumbled the cookie and answered. Shilo.

I answered with a hesitant tremor in my voice that I fought to silence.

“Come on to my office. It’s okay. I promise.” His voice, a soft whisper, brought me less comfort than I wanted, but I still rose all the same. And when I went to pick up my dropped cookie, Nadine beat me to it, shooing me off to meet my fate.

Some part of me thought I might be angry at Shilo, but I couldn’t muster it. We’d spoken of it not long after I arrived, and infrequently since. I wanted to stay, but my resignation came from what my father and Alpha Silvermoon would be capable of. I didn’t want to harm him, deprive his pack of resources or cause chaos.

I made my way all the same, though, pulling the dishcloth off my neck to see if it still bled. It didn’t, so I made my way into his office, clutching the spotted rag nervously. “Al—Shilo?”

I did my best not to look at the other alphas, despite the fact that the councilman had Alpha Silvermoon on my leash.

“C’mere, Nico.” He welcomed me with an arm open and I approached, sidling into his open embrace. “They’ve some questions to ask you, I think. Are we good or—”

I stared him down for a long few seconds before I nodded. “We’re good. It’s been a long time coming. I just didn—Father, please don’t make things difficult for Shilo.”

“Do you like him?” My father met my gaze, his face hard and posture bored. I never could read him on the best of days, but at that moment, I was more lost than ever.

“I do. I really do. Our wolves speak to one another. I—he makes me comfortable. I sleep well when he’s there.” I tried to meet his gaze, but those golden eyes always pinned me.

“Does he make you comfortable? Financially, are you well? I noticed you were working when we arrived. I won’t leave you with an alpha that cannot support your every need.” He kept that bored posture and leaned back. “I provide for all my omegas very well, and I expect my children to be well cared for by their mates.”

Polygamy was frowned upon by the general populous, but pack alphas always seemed beyond the societal norms. Part of me never realized how much I hated it, and how much I always expected to be one of the many omegas in orbit around a pack alpha, sharing my body and heats but nothing else.

“Very comfortable, and money was never an issue. Pups needed sitting, and I was available. I do not think Shilo would be comfortable with more than a single omega, as he places value on other kinds of connection, so I do not worry about a future where I have to share and compete for an alpha’s attention and beg for a night in his bedroom.” The jab didn’t seem to register with his father. He cared little about the

omegas in his possession save for that they were unharmed and available to him when he wanted them. Alphas have needs , and all that. Shilo had needs; none of them involved anyone's holes.

"I can see that. Housing spare omegas would be an issue for him, seeing his current setup. I suppose he is rather dedicated." My father gave Shilo a hard stare.

"I mated him, didn't I?" Shilo gestured toward me and my cheeks grew hot.

"But will you accept his mark in return?" The councilman, who up until then, had been preoccupied with a lunch box full of tacos, raised half of a hard-shelled taco up, lettuce raining down.

"You know I will, Ares. For Goddesses' sake." Shilo gave him a dirty look.

"Do it." Ares flicked a brow suggestively before taking another bite.

"Until it's reciprocated, it's not recognized by the council. If you'd hear me out, I can make a better offer for him." Alpha Silvermoon spoke so coldly that it sent chills down my spine. He flicked the leash. "There's no need for this."

My heart raced in my chest as my fear response kicked in. Too many alphas in one room. The councilman's daring glare combined with Alpha Silvermoon's insistence. My father's menacing presence. All I wanted to do was bury myself in Shilo's arms and hide until they were all gone.

"I don't want to go with Alpha Silvermoon," I said as a flush of heat rose to my cheeks.

"You could come with me? I'd treat you nice," Ares, the councilman, said through a mouth of tacos.

“No, I’m...I’m good. Thanks.” I stepped back from him and Alpha Silvermoon, accidentally bumping into my father’s chair with a yelp.

“Leave the poor boy be. I educate my omegas to expect and be complacent with orders. It was my understanding that you understood and were prepared to do what was expected of you.” My father sighed heavily and slouched in his chair. “This is why I asked you several times if you were okay with it, if you understood what was expected.”

“That was before I realized you’d matched me with someone who had no interest in me at all. He viewed me as a punishment! And by the look his partner kept giving me, I assumed I’d be forever watching my back.” I clenched my jaw shut, holding back from saying more as my father’s expression went dark and tense.

“The goddesses work in mysterious ways. The van’s driver had tons of GHB in his system. Somehow, I think that was meant for you,” Ares said, wiping crumbs off his lips. “Best we can figure, some bottles got swapped around. Driver wasn’t supposed to get messed up. Wrecked. We tested the water bottles in the truck and...yeah.”

Alpha Silvermoon paled.

“The beta that was driving brought in a bunch of bottled water for me during the drive... He said you gave it to him for me.” I hesitated, thinking back to that night.

Ares halted in his scrounging for taco crumbs at the bottom of the box and glanced up. “Did he, now?”

“I did no such thing.” Alpha Silvermoon’s voice trembled.

“Whether he did or did not is irrelevant. You lost your first alpha son, did you not?” Ares stared at the bottom of the box before eyeing an unopened one in front of Alpha

Silvermoon.

He didn't answer Ares.

Ares, for his part, seemed more preoccupied with the box of tacos and helped himself, making a noise of satisfaction when Shilo gestured for him to take it already. He lit up and opened the box, chowing down on another while my father leaned over Alpha Silvermoon who sat between them and gestured. Ares handed over one of the tacos in the box and my father happily ate.

Shilo met my gaze. "Good tacos, right?"

"Hadn't had one yet. Kinda regretting it, now." I watched the alphas eat and Shilo offered me one of his, but I declined. I supposed I was too nervous to eat. He did, however, coax me into his grasp for a one-armed taco-scented hug.

"We'll get you some on the way out in the kitchens. We'll make sure they're still hot."

"Well, I think I've seen enough." Ares sat up and placed the empty box on Shilo's desk. "Godfrey?"

"I have, too. Tasted enough as well." My father licked his fingers and met my gaze.

I hesitated, my heart skipping a beat.

Shilo snuck his hand out and wrapped an arm around my waist, giving me a comforting squeeze. I wanted nothing more than to fold into his grasp and hide away.

"Horace?" Ares tugged the chain on the leash.

“Why ask me? He’s mated and of no use to me.” Alpha Silvermoon glared but did nothing, to my great relief. My fate lay solely on my father’s word.

“I am disappointed that there won’t be blood uniting the Wolfsons and the Silvermoons. Though, seeing how Horace handled the entire situation, I cannot say that disappointment will last, especially with what Shilo can offer us.” My father slouched in his chair. “And the food is worth coming back often for a visit.”

I froze in place, a tremble caught in my chest.

“Shilo, I understand you are happy with my son. And, Nicolas, are you happy? I will bring you home and we’ll search for a more fitting union if this isn’t to your liking.” My father brushed invisible crumbs off his chest.

“I’m very happy with Shilo.” I swallowed hard, my nerves on edge.

“And I am eternally grateful for having met him.” Shilo rubbed my back gently.

“Then it’s settled. The Wolfson pack is now allied with Pine Warren. I look forward to doing business with you. And please—do my son a favor and look to expand. It looks good on me when my omega sons are spoiled.” My father stood and extended a hand toward Shilo, catching his palm in a tight squeeze.

“Sounds good to me.” Ares stood and jerked the leash. “Congrats, you two. I’ll fill out the paperwork necessary and send to your email, Shilo. I’ll wait a few days for the reply.”

“And, Nicolas, you represented the Wolfsons when you set foot on this land. And you represent them still in name before the Pine Warren and all they interact with.” My father stared me down, and I nodded.

“You did me proud, son. It may not be the mate I chose for you, but it is a good match. Fate has good taste, it seems.” He nodded and turned to leave. I didn’t know if I’d see my father in any emotional capacity again, not that he’d been abundantly so before, but having his approval felt nice.

“You good, Nic?” Shilo’s hand slowed and slipped down to palm my bottom the moment my father was out of view.

“I think so. I really do.”

“Welcome to the pack. Want to go home and initiate you?” Shilo wagged an eyebrow at me, and I couldn’t think of a reason to say no.

Shilo

I took Nico's hand, and we headed out, passing by Ares on the way, arms crossed outside the door. Horace sat across the parking lot, head down in Ares's car. The leash had been wrapped a few times around the headrest of the car.

He leaned toward me as I halted, eying my golf cart as the fastest mode of transportation between the rec center and my bed.

"He got pretty worked up in there. I know you get sick over fear, so pay attention to that scent coming off him." He elbowed me and it finally registered with me that the fear I hated had morphed into something sweet and alluring.

Any omega sufficiently trapped by an alpha or driven to panic had one defense mechanism... Estrus. Nico had been driven to heat by sheer panic.

"Fuck," I whispered.

"Exactly. Get to it." Ares slapped my back and marched off while Nico gave me a sidelong glance.

He didn't look behind him, not at his departing father, nor at Ares or Horace. In a way, it made me sad for him. Though, I'd not been very close to my own father before he went off on his own. As a beta, my father had worked hard to stand in place of pack alpha. It was rare and my grandfather allowed it, but he never cared. He never showed the potential I did. "If only my grandfather were here to see this."

“Sorry for your loss,” Nico said, but I laughed.

“No, he’s on an extended vacation in Alaska with Grandma.” Shilo laughed. “He handed control over to me. My beta father just wasn’t leadership material.”

“Because he was beta?” Nico halted in step, and I halted too, turning to face him. His expression twisted into something sad.

“No, because he had no loyalty to family or pack.” I snorted a half laugh.

“What did he do?” Nico frowned.

“Knocked my mom up and skipped town to join the military. Grandpa raised me. My mom comes to visit every now and then, but we’re not super close. Alpha pups need an alpha in their lives and Mom’s family was all betas.”

“My father has a few females he spends time with, but he mostly goes for omegas, so he doesn’t have many beta kids at all. A handful with the women.” Nico pursed his lips in thought. An alpha and female could make any gender, but an alpha-omega pair only yielded alphas and omegas. Two betas could make omegas occasionally, which is why there were often slightly more omegas than alphas who liked omegas. In a way, alphas having a few omegas was a kindness. But I always suspected that societal pressures kept more betas from seeking omegas.

“I don’t like harems. I’m glad you know I won’t go that way. My grandfather taught me better. Any alpha is welcome to look down on me, and I know my pack is small, but we’re happy and there’s a lot to be said for happiness.” I drew Nico to me once more, inhaling his scent deeply. I hated fear, and I hated that his body decided to resort to heat as a defense.

“Your pack is wonderful. I had every opportunity to leave if I wanted. I really want to

stay, though. And I want to return this bite, Shilo.” Nico rested a hand on his neck and flashed teeth with a little of his wolf in them.

“I think all those alphas threw you. You scent of heat, getting stronger.” I nosed through the hair atop his head.

“Shut up and get me home and do me, alpha.” Nico snorted and nuzzled into my chest. “Like you can’t afford a pup. Pft.”

“I think you’ll be a fine father if you want.” It’d been my dream for a while to have a family, to snuggle with my mate and a pup...pups. Multiples were far less common to shifters than our wild counterparts, but I wanted family.

“Hopefully. Now, take me home and make me yours.” Nico pulled away, grabbing my wrist as he insistently pulled me toward the golf cart.

“Hold on! Are you really su—”

“Hurry the fuck up or we’re fucking on the golf cart, Shilo.” His sharp retort had my cock waking up, twitching in my pants with more than interest.

“What if I’m not ready?”

“Then I’m going home without you and getting started. You can join in when you finally lose it.” Nico huffed and smirked before swinging into the cart and sitting back in a rather inviting pose. No, not inviting. Any pose he had would be inviting, with that scent permeating the air around him.

I climbed into the driver’s seat and started it with a twist. “High-ho, my sex chariot!”

“Your noble steed is more of a mule...” Nico picked at a spot of flaking paint and

laughed.

“And this mule is why Kenny will probably go to college.” I gave his thigh a squeeze and his teasing stopped there.

“And why I respect you.” Nico quieted and bit his lower lip as we took off across the pack grounds and cut through some yards. I had an omega to ravage.

If my cart could have gone any faster, I’d have spun out in the driveway, drifting into place, but as it stood, I bumpily trundled as fast as the grinding motor could take us and parked with a jerky push to the brakes. With little effort, I hit the garage door closed button and pulled Nico out with me, struggling to hold him in my arms in a full bridal carry, giggling with every awkward step.

“Make me yours, alpha.” His breathy voice made my core tighten.

“You’re already mine. I have the papers from the pound and everything. Now I just gotta go get you chipped and your vaccines.” I snickered. We had a local vet that would fudge the paperwork for his neutering that we’d promised the shelter we’d do. In any case, our pups would never end up in a shelter.

“Corny,” Nico said, leaning up in my arms to kiss the underside of my jaw.

“H, not C. Horny.” I grinned and elbowed a few doors open until I unceremoniously tossed him onto my bed.

I’d scented heat before, made love to an omega or two—not that I kept some ceremonial tally of my bed partners. I’d also been with females, though they lacked a certain thrill that an omega did for me. In heat, though? I’d never had that with an omega before. Part of me loved it, and the rest of me had feral instinct snarling at me in the back of my head to fuck, knot, and nut as fast as possible. My wolf brain

agreed.

Slowly, take time. Enjoy it, I thought, to calm my instincts.

I pinned Nico on his back, thumb hooked in his waistband, circling to flick his brass button. The stiff, new jeans slid down his hips, exposing the soft nest of hair I adored to run my fingers through. He'd offered to shave for me, and maybe someday I'd take him up on it, but for the time being, I relished the brush of it against me. It highlighted his form and held the strong scent of his omega nature, inviting me for scenting all the time.

I'd been cautious with him since he'd arrived, a gentle lover taking my time, but I had the desire for some expediency. When his cock sprang free, dripping with need, foreskin pulled back already, I descended on him, drool basting my lower chin before I even had him to root. There, I relished the startled cry of pleasure he stifled beneath me with a squirm.

He was sweet. I'd never tasted something so addictive, his nectar drawing me in like a bee to a flower. Nature had me by the balls and I groaned with a desperate suck. My tongue writhed in my mouth rolling along his shaft. Every drop I could coax from him seemed more important than the next, and a fevered haze had me until his whimpers of protest brought me back to consciousness in time to taste the sweet spill of his release.

I pulled back, letting him bathe my tongue and swallowed with a thick groan.

"Shilo, please." Nico's breathless whimper drew my gaze. His chest heaved, rising and falling to the tune of his own need. Sweat trailed his brow, though the house was probably in the sixties.

"Please, what?"

“Fuck me.” He struggled, kicking at his legs to get his jeans off. I aided as best I could, kicking my own pants off, cock achingly hard as it met the cold air.

He wasted no time in rolling over, presenting his ass for me, though I rarely took him that way before. Despite my urgency to thrust into him, I took my time, kissing up the back of his thighs, licking over the globe of one cheek before trailing my lips to his crease where I tasted his welling slick. If I thought his spend was sweet, his slick was sweeter, pure honey drawing me in for a possessive growl. “Fuck, you taste so good.”

“Can your dick taste?” His tone matched my own growl.

“No,” I chuckled, lapping a streak over his twitching hole.

“Okay, then. Cock, now.” His demand had me lap at his hole once more, tongue pushing inside to see if he was pliant already. I was used to him needing more prep work, but he yielded to me. So, satisfied, I glided my way up and over his body, bracing one hand on the bed as my other guided my cock. I used my knee to tap his legs apart a little and pushed the head against his fluttering hole.

He sighed with utter bliss, pushed back, and took that leap for me, grinding his hips back with insistent urgency. As worked up as he was, he likely needed a knot far worse than I needed to give one. His body craved that for completion. I circled my hips to give him some of the missing sensation and leaned down to bite his shoulder. “Like this?”

His chest shuddered, and I reached around to stroke his softened cock. Barely a few heartbeats passed between softness and peak, and he was there again, firm against my fingers. His inner walls squeezed over my cock, and I relished the sensation before snapping my hips back and forth to test his resolve.

He grunted and moaned, body shaking. Again, I thrust, and again he welcomed me,

spurring me on to a fervent rut. “Omega mine. I want nothing more than to wake with you of a morning and run on moonlit nights. I want your mind and your body, in good times and dire. And if I have my way, I want you carrying my pups, no other.”

My words seemed to have an effect on him, and he keened, accepting me deeper as his back dipped and hips flexed. His cock bucked in my hand. “I want you, Shilo. I want you as my alpha, my all. I’ll be at your side through it all and if it is the will of the goddesses, I’ll bear your pups. Give it to me, alpha. Fill me, please.”

His whispered pleading made my cock ache, knot tingle, and body sweat. The orgasm started at the base of my spine, rising along every vertebra with an explosion of pure pleasure. I locked my hips, brought my hands to his side, and held him down as my knot filled, locking him to my hips with overwhelming purpose.

A knot for an omega in heat was different. It was harder, bigger. I locked in as my balls emptied themselves with pulse after pulse to the depths of his heated core. We cried aloud in tandem as sharp streaks of cum littered the bedspread until we fell to our sides, locked together. No knot would last me longer; no knot had before.

He swore under his breath, leaning his head back to draw me over his shoulder, my lips brushing the back of his neck so close to my mark. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

He hummed and luxuriated in the sensations, rolling his hips to keep me on the edge of pleasure, shooting into him with spend I didn’t know I had left to give. I wanted nothing more than to lay locked with him like that forever. “You feel good, too.”

He hummed and squirmed, keeping my knot achingly sensitized to his motions. Instinct would have him keep me that way until it was certain my seed was sufficiently in there. “Nico?”

“Hmm?” He turned his head over his shoulder to catch my gaze awkwardly. “What’s

up?”

The hazy glaze of lust in his eyes made my heart stutter. It was a shame I couldn't kiss him. “I love you.”

He reached over to cup the back of my head and hold me there. We couldn't kiss, not in that position, but he raked his fingers over my scalp as he worked his hips in purposeful tugs. “I love you—too.”

He punctuated his words with a grunt, my knot popping free of him as he turned to face me in bed. “Kiss me.”

And I did.

And I'd kiss nobody like that ever again.

Nico

Far worse things had happened in my life than being terrorized into a heat. And in the days that turned into weeks after, we avoided the subject, though with each passing day, I felt more certain that we'd done it.

I had the day off, a Friday morning that Shilo took off with me to finish the paperwork with the shelter. They needed proof of my spaying and vaccines—none of which I'd actually get. The pack doctor, a veterinarian by trade, handled the paperwork on it—and the chips.

We rolled out of bed and dressed, shuffling to the kitchen for our usual coffee. The smell of it was off-putting to me, but I sipped a few mouthfuls politely. But it didn't escape his notice. Still, we said nothing about it. It seemed like it might jinx the suspicions.

We loaded up into his daily driver, a pickup truck a dozen years old with barely any miles on it, though it did have a lot of wear. He said that pack members used it to move and haul when they needed. What was the alpha's was everyone's, he said.

The vet had my paperwork ready, declaring Donner sufficiently spayed, registered, chipped, and vaccinated, but that could have been handled easier if he'd dropped it off. What we were really there for was my ultrasound.

Tests for omegas hadn't been exactly a high priority in the shifter's scientific community and human pregnancy tests could be unreliable. What wasn't though?

Dr. Finnegan walked me into a back room and sat me on a cold metal table and tossed a pillow for me as I leaned back and pulled my shirt up and pants down to a few inches below my navel.

“Shilo, you’re an animal, I swear.” The doctor shook his head, his jet-black hair, a finger’s length overdue for a haircut as it swayed. “He treating you nicely, Nico?”

Cold gel hit my belly, and I twitched as the even colder probe pressed in. “Treating me very well, thank you.”

“Mm-hmm.” He stared at the screen, moving the wand from below my navel and down, grinding down into what I thought was my womb.

“Nothing...” Shilo’s words came out in a whimper as he stared at a large vacuous space.

“I should hope not.” Dr. Finnegan snorted and angled the wand. “If I found a pup in his bladder, I’d be very concerned and impressed.”

“Oh.” Shilo’s voice held a note of embarrassment that I ignored as I watched the doctor search out what he needed.

“Aaand, here we go.” Dr. Finnegan grinned, his teeth a tiny bit too sharp to be human, eyes a cheeky gold as they glittered playfully. “You did it.”

I stared at the screen as Shilo leaned down to eye it closer. I could barely tell what we were looking at until he zoomed in and focused on a little bubble with a lima-bean shape hovering within. A flicker of life pulsed at the center of it, and he highlighted it on the monitor. “And the heartbeat is acceptable.”

“Can you tell the gender?” Shilo gripped my shoulder, shuddering.

I pursed my lips as the doctor gave him a scolding look. “Alpha, where the hell am I supposed to look to see a penis or a vagina on this, or count the segments of his sacrum to see if he’s omega or not. Omegas tend to have an extra segment. This is the size of a literal lentil. It doesn’t have a gender. It has a heartbeat and be thankful for that.”

Shilo held his hands up and I snorted in laughter. “Sorry! I—”

“And for that matter, does the gender really matter?” The doctor hit a few buttons, printing grainy pictures off for us while he chewed Shilo out. “It’s either an alpha or omega, most likely.”

Shilo tensed his shoulders and pursed his lips. “No, gender doesn’t matter. I apologize.”

“Good.” Dr. Finnegan wiped me down and then the probe before docking it a little firmer than necessary. “Now, are we good?”

I nodded. “Thank you, Dr. Finnegan. I don’t think the gender really matters to either of us.”

“Good.” He offered me a soft smile and shooed us out of the clinic, stuffing a stack of papers in my hand separate from the envelope we needed for the shelter.

We got back to the truck, and Shilo breathed a sigh of something other than relief.

“He was a bit cranky.” I stared out the window at him, pacing past the front desk with a clipboard in hand.

“He’s an omega.” Shilo watched with an almost-sad look before starting the truck. “He had an experimental operation to stop his heats, and it wasn’t reversible. His old

alpha turned him away. He wanted pups.”

“Oh goddesses... I’m so sorry. Why did we go to him? That’s so cruel.” I bit my lip and Shilo rested a hand on my leg.

“He’s okay with it. He is just touchy about omegas being equal. If he sees me treating you well, he’ll come around.” Shilo gestured at the papers and sighed. “Once we get onto the side road, duck down and shift so we can go visit.”

I huffed and did as he told. Donner had to make an appearance, and Ruth would mark us in compliance. Joy.

Though, my wolf had a sudden hard craving for hamburgers.

Preferably cold.

A short while later, we hopped out of the truck, strolling across the parking lot to the pound. I trotted in step behind him, foregoing the leash as we made our way into the front office. Shilo carried the paperwork in hand and sat it on the counter in front of a bored-looking volunteer who glanced from me to Shilo a few times. “Okay?”

“I’m here to see Ruth. She in?”

The volunteer, a teenage girl in the world’s baggiest clothes, stood with a sigh and shuffled toward a door leading into the kennels. When she opened the metal plate, a barrage of scents—ammonia, urine, feces, and the sound of eighty-seven dogs barking for attention blasted out. “Ruth!”

I pinned my ears back and Shilo visibly flinched.

“They’re always like that.” She sighed, staring out the door as a quiet retort issued back. “She says five more minutes.”

We shrugged and meandered around the front waiting area, catching sight of a front room with a dozen cats kept in cages—one of which was hanging from the bars wide-eyed and howling in an earsplitting screech.

It stuck a paw out, swiping at the air as the girl turned, staring at it. “That cat gives me the creeps. Always makes eye contact.”

Shilo gave me the side eye and shuffled off to the room with me at his heel.

I waited outside the room, as a wolf may have startled the cats, and for Shilo, that seemed to be the case, too, as cats retreated to the backs of their cages and hissed, all save for the wild-eyed tabby swiping out from between the bars.

“Holy shit...” I heard Shilo mutter under his breath as the cat howled again. “Yeah, yeah. I know. Getting you out. Be nice for them and we’ll get you a bath and out of here so you can contact your clowder.”

The cat silenced, eyes going wide in pure relief. Shilo patted the bars of the cage and slipped out just in time for Ruth to come jogging out, eyes wide and mouth stretched into a pleasant grin. “Shilo!”

“Ruth!” Shilo caught her hand in a jovial shake and pointed to the envelope of papers on the counter.

“Awesome! Dr. Finnegan does good work. Hey there, little guy.” She glanced down at me and offered me a hand to sniff. I sat primly and offered a paw to shake, instead. If I was off leash—I’d best play the part of a well-trained pet.

“All trained up! Who did you take him to?” Ruth shook my paw and grinned.

“Nobody. Came pre-trained.” Shilo grinned and jerked his thumb toward the cat cages. “What’s the story on the crazy one?”

“They found him in a bank vault. Dropped out of the ceiling. Damndest thing. Someone had opened up all the grates and was trying to break in and I guess kitty wandered over there. There’s a chip, but the number’s out of service and he’s closing in on his date .” She eyed the cat with a suspicious gaze. He was back on the bars again, clutched to them and shivering.

“I like him. Donner needs company.” Shilo stuck his thumbs in his pockets and glanced down at me. I wagged my tail because that seemed like the thing to do.

“No fees to take cats. We’ve got so many kittens on the way that we were having to move arranged dates up and we’re short on help. Not many volunteers want to work here.” She sighed miserably. “But hey! I was meaning to talk to you since you’re driving. Can we make some sort of arrangement for you to transport a few pups to bigger cities when you have runs? I want to team up a bit and get these guys into no-kill places.”

Shilo rubbed at his jaw and nodded his head from side to side. “Sure, shoot me an email with the details and a list of cities you’re looking for matches on.”

Ruth sighed in relief as she pulled out a clipboard for Shilo and went about packing the cat into one of those cardboard pet carriers. She walked in with a stick and loop paired with one of those leather gloves that went up to her elbow. “He’s spicy!”

“Lemme handle it. I have a way with kitty cats.” Shilo sighed and walked in as the cat bristled and stared her down. I kept my distance, not trusting cats, even shifters, as far as I could throw them. And, under Shilo’s glare, the cat hunkered down and

tucked his tail when Shilo scruffed him before putting him in the cardboard box.

“You have everything you need for a kitty cat at home?” She beamed.

“Yep. He’s in good hands.” Shilo hefted the box under one arm and fished out his wallet for a business card. “Also, lemme see about getting you a volunteer or so.” The masked concern on Shilo’s face told me all I needed to know.

Her face lit up and with a final pat to my head, we left, and he placed the cardboard box on the back seat as we peeled out. The scent of tomcat and alpha filled the truck over my mate’s scent. Fuck.

“You, kitty cat. When we get off the main road, shift and explain. There’s a bag of clothes on the floorboard back there.”

A sheepish head popped out of the box with a light mew.

A literal cat burglar.

Shilo

We redirected our route to Dr. Finnegan's clinic as the cat in my back seat shifted. Where there was a robust little tom, sat a haggard male with salt-and-pepper hair, an unkempt but reasonable beard, and dark circles under his eyes. The rest of him? I was a little jealous. The guy must have had an eight-pack.

"The name's Shilo. I'm alpha of the Pine Warren pack. You?"

"Emry. No clowder affiliation." His raspy voice muffled as he wrestled into a pair of jogging pants and sweatshirt. "Thanks for that."

"Wanna tell me why you were—"

"Exactly why you think. Was robbing the place." He ran his fingers through dark-brown locks, the silver at his temples almost a stripe back.

"And should I trust you?"

"Probably not, but I'll not trouble you further. Thanks for the bailout. I was going to wait for them to pull me out and knock the tech unconscious, but they kept having kids tend the cages and I don't hurt kids."

"Well, you have some morals," I said, reaching a hand over to Nico, who ducked down to shift and cover himself as quickly as possible.

"I ain't Robin Hood, but I don't steal from people who can't afford it, so ya know."

Emry cleared his throat and slouched.

“What were you after?” Nico asked.

“Deeds. I got a hold of a good list of unclaimed boxes—usually I can steal those, and they don’t even get reported because most banks realize reporting it will only hike their insurance rates. Sell the valuable stuff and if a few loner shifters get a cheap house—so be it.”

“Sounds exactly like Robin Hood.” Nico nudged my arm, and I shrugged.

“Nah, he’d have given it away for free.” Emry gave us a sharp-toothed smile that I peeked at through the rearview mirror. “Cat’s gotta keep himself in catnip and affordable shoes, ya know?”

And a gym membership. Holy fuck. I pulled down the road for Doctor Finnegan’s clinic.

“I guess. Let’s get the doctor to see what’s up with your chip and—”

“If he could put a new one in, that’d be great. Maybe take this old one out.” Emry rubbed at the back of his neck. “I forgot to update it. My mate’s number doesn’t work anymore.”

He cleared his throat and got quiet. The amber glow of his eyes dimmed a bit.

“Sorry if it’s a touchy subject,” I said. He waved me off.

“Nah, he passed on a few years ago. I kept meaning to update things, and I lost the password and—yeah. Pneumonia.”

It had to have been pretty bad for a shifter to have passed, so I didn't press the issue.

"Sorry to hear."

"Me, too. It's been eleven years, and I still miss him. He was human, so we always knew I'd outlive him. I tell you, if I'd have been thieving sooner, he might have gone to the doc. Money was tight, aaaand now I ain't got shit to hold me back. So, I go for it. Yolo." He snorted and slouched as we pulled into the parking lot.

That explains a lot.

We unloaded, and Emry followed us, stepping into the facility. His face wrinkled with a little distrust. "Even in my human form, I still don't like vets."

"And I still don't like you." Dr. Finnegan stepped out, brow furrowed. "And I don't even know you."

"Fair." Emry grinned and gave Dr. Finnegan a slow look up and down.

"Sorry to bother you, Paul. We went to drop off that paperwork and we found a straggler. Kitty here needs some paperwork." I jerked my thumb at Emry, who made an effort to smooth his hand through the mess of hair atop his head.

"And a shower. You two head on back to the pack. I'll take care of the kitty." Dr. Finnegan waved us off and took Emry by the arm in back with a few halfhearted words of protest from me.

"Bank robber," I finished, earning a careless swat of dismissal.

"You think they're gonna f—"

“I know they’re gonna fuck.” I shook my head and grabbed Nico by the sleeve and sidled out. We had a full moon coming up in a day and a half and an announcement to make.

Later that night we ran with the pack with howls of joy at our announcement. An alpha was only as strong as his pack and when an alpha grew his family, he was regarded highly. A little pup would be on the way, sure to join us in full moon runs and community center birthday parties. A little alpha or omega most likely.

We made plans for a puppy shower, but in our pack, we did things differently. Every couple expecting a pup was bought one bigger thing by the pack, a swing or furniture or the like. After, the item was put into a storage room at the community center and when the next couple was expecting, we contributed another item. So far, the only thing necessary for pack members when they were expecting was disposables.

I took Nico to the closet later that evening and let him rummage through the things we had. One of the pack women walked through the area with him, telling him all the useful things that she’d learned with her pups. Though, I was fairly certain that he knew a good deal of what she was telling him already, as he’d cared for pups both at his old pack and since he’d come to Pine Warren.

It wasn’t until he’d found a little fuzzy baby coat with cute little puppy ears on it, that he broke down with happy tears and forced me to stare at the little thing. I didn’t see what the big deal was about it, but I smiled and hugged him all the same.

Hormonal omegas were kinda cute.

Nico

The nursery was set, the house was puppy-proofed, and everything I'd wanted had been moved from the storage room and positioned then repositioned like a dozen times to suit me. Our little pup, definitely male, had kept his little behind turned at an odd angle, and Dr. Finnegan didn't seem too keen on figuring it out. It was alpha or omega, he could tell me that much, but neither I nor Shilo wanted to press the issue or cared enough to know. A healthy baby was all we could ask for.

As if to remind me he was there and healthy, he kicked me right in the diaphragm and stole my breath before deciding to stretch out and continue my discomfort. "Ugh..."

Shilo peered into the nursery and glanced around, his eyes hooding. Keeping me out of his bed had been a hard feat the past few days, pretty much telling us both I was cutting things close. I was ready to be done with it anyway. I was fat, hot, tired, and every part of my body ached.

"You okay, Donner?" Shilo winked at me, using that awful name the pound had given me a year ago nearly on the dot.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm trying to figure out where to put that fancy baby swing my father sent." I put my hands on my hips and stared around. There were so many things in the room already that everyone assured me I'd need. I was happy with what I had for my little brothers: a rocking chair, a good bassinet, diapers, bottles, and an unreasonable amount of receiving blankets. They truly were the all-in-one item for all babies.

“Put it in the living room. If they’re going in the swing, they’re probably being fussy, and you may want to sit down to relax a bit.” Shilo shrugged, and I nodded in agreement.

“I know baby stuff tends to spread, so I was hesitant to—”

“This is our home, our baby, and our life. Feel free to spread out, love.” Shilo picked up the swing, and I reached for it, dead set on doing everything on my own.

He turned away from me and waltzed off. “Nope. No more lifting for you.”

“Fine!” I huffed and crossed my arms while he went to place the swing. He also came back and snagged one of the bassinets I had.

My brow furrowed, and he hoofed it to his office, placing it by his desk. “There, when Papa needs some me-time and naps, I can watch the baby in here.”

“Oh, you won’t have to do that. I’ll take—”

“No, I’ve told you a dozen times. Half of this baby is mine. I’ll take equal part in raising.” Shilo rolled his eyes and put his hands on my shoulders. “You. Are. Not. Alone. I do not have a stable of omegas I’m breeding with. I can handle my children. I’m not your father. My time isn’t rationed out like favors.”

I hated when he pulled that card, and I gave him my fiercest glare over it. Of course, he wasn’t my father! He was everything I never knew I needed. He was perfect.

Wordlessly, he scooped me into his arms and toted me off to the living room. I assumed he wanted to watch TV or fool around, but when he tucked me in and kissed my forehead, I blinked in surprise. “I want to order some takeout for us. What’s on your mind?”

The thought of food made me blanch, and it was clear that he understood my reaction. My increased appetite for lust, the nesting, my lack of desire for takeout—it all meant one thing. Shilo wouldn't let it go unsaid.

"I'm texting Paul," he said, holding up his phone with Dr. Finnegan's name clear on it.

I scoffed and settled down on the couch. I'd seen omegas in labor before, and the process went by so quick that oftentimes, there wasn't time to get professionals involved. It was more of a call the pack doctor when it's done kinda deal.

Sitting down didn't suit me, and I rose shortly after, pacing back and forth. Standing in place seemed to make my anxiety rise, and Shilo was gracious enough to give me my space.

As I spent my time pacing from one room of the house to another, I had an inkling that my wolf was driving things. It wasn't until I was collecting quilts from our bed and pitching them into the nursery closet, did I realize what I was doing, fully.

Of all the things. I had a full bedroom, huge bathroom, an entire nursery, guest bedroom, garage, office, and screened back porch. I had anywhere in the house, and of all places, I wanted there. Such was life for an omega, without rhyme or reason that we were conscious of. I'm sure there was some philosophical or scientific reason we chose the places we did, but it was merely a whim of the wolf, at the end of the day.

I stripped, each article of clothing constricting me in ways I found repugnant. My shirt brushed over the swell of my belly; the pants hugged my ass too tight. My socks squeezed my perpetually puffy feet.

That didn't matter as I ripped it all away and bundled myself in the dark confines of the closet amid all the things my baby would need. A contraction rippled through my

belly then, something I'd been doing my best to ignore as it hadn't exactly hurt.

As I willed the pain away, bundling myself tighter, I closed my eyes and tried to rest.

Soft laughter drew me out of my fugue and I opened a single eye as a growl pushed free of my throat.

Shilo. His gaze met mine and the scent of another omega milling about drew my attention. Dr. Finnegan. I supposed it wasn't as quick for me as it had been for my father's other omega consorts. Stepparents? It said a lot that I didn't even remember half their names.

Everything seemed so dreamlike in the confines of my safe little hideaway. Shilo's warm arms surrounded me from behind and I lay on my side, a leg propped up, knees bent. Dr. Finnegan knew what he was doing and thankfully, everyone stayed quiet. I dreaded the questions and comments to come, but it all appeared so superficial at that moment.

I bore down as the urges came to me, pushing through my tightening belly as I ignored Dr. Finnegan's low murmur and Shilo's answer. If that's what birthing felt like, I didn't think I'd mind doing it again. Though, the crying-pup phase would be the test.

I pushed again, and my previous thoughts about the process being tolerable went out the window and I cried out. My entire belly ached, knotted up in the world's worst charley horse. I vaguely held on to awareness long enough to stifle my swears and not draw claws at those trying to help me.

Shilo's warm hand cupped my belly, held me tight, and whispered sweet, unintelligible things through the contraction and long push.

Time lapsed, sweat pooled despite the cold outside and the moderate heat inside. I

should have been chilled, but my nest of blankets in the warm confined space with Shilo's body heat kept me stable. I should have been screaming. But I couldn't. Aside from the initial cries and swears of shock, my instincts said to keep quiet, to defend my nest and pups with silence. I was vulnerable. Too much so.

When I finally pushed again, my body flowered open, if my sensations were to be believed. My insides spread, becoming my outsides—I tried my best to ignore it. Again, I pushed, and again, the agony becoming my normal. I could bear it. A thousand- thousand omegas before me had bore the pain of birth. A thousand- thousand more to come would, too.

“Doing good,” Dr. Finnegan said, my awareness coming in and out.

“You'll see your baby soon. Our baby, Nico.” Shilo choked a sob, and I surrendered my body to the pain and bore down, unrelenting and unapologetic for whatever mess I surely made.

Emptiness met the sudden sensation of relief. Breaths I didn't realize I couldn't take came back to me, and my entire body went limp as I opened my eyes to look at the most beautiful pup covered in birthing fluid.

“He's got so much hair...” I vaguely recalled saying as I reached a shaking hand out. My father's pups had always been born bald as anything, but not mine. Lightly colored locks of hair stuck up at all angles, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was the shivering cries of protest. He was crying. He was alive. He was probably cheeseburger scented, because by the goddesses, I'd eaten so many while pregnant. Always cold.

Shilo held him first, arms grouped around the small, bundled child as Dr. Finnegan saw to cleaning me. “No tearing.”

That seemed like a good thing, I was certain. I flinched when cold hands pressed on

my belly and tissue passed. Then the little one was in my arms and I was crying tears of joy.

“Got any names planned?” Dr. Finnegan sat back on his heels and fastidiously wiped at his hands on a rag while gathering trash and soiled items. “Guess you’ll need to know the gender for a name.”

“There’s no difference between alpha and omega names to me.” Shilo laughed and reached into my field of view to stroke a finger over a plump little cheek.

“Reese.” My voice cracked as his little mouth opened and chased my finger, looking for sustenance.

“Fitting name for a sigma.” He grinned and my heart skipped a beat. “We can just pretend he’s an alpha until he’s showing his gift.”

Sigmas were a rare thing, but Shilo didn’t jump in surprise. “Fated mates and happy packs make magic. I told you. Love is powerful.”

It explained why the doctor was hesitant to tell us gender. I wasn’t sure how they differentiated sigma from alpha, as they were physically identical to the naked eye, but he’d known.

As I stared down at the little pup in my arms, I did my best to ignore the pain on Dr. Finnegan’s face. But if it bothered him too much, he didn’t let it last. I wished he could have his family, but if it was healing he needed, I spoke. “I think you’ll be very important to our pup. You’re the most capable omega I know, and I hope you’ll be there to help him learn and love.”

He stared at Reese, expression melting. “Yeah. It takes a pack to raise a pup, and it doesn’t matter what wolf whelped them, we’ll all be there to nip him into place.”

“As every pup in this pack is mine by heart, so all of my blood-borne pups will be everyone’s too. In every little way, they’ll all be mothers, fathers, pappas, and zazas to our little one. A pack makes their alpha.” Shilo leaned down to kiss the top of my head.

And to think, a year ago, I’d been staring down death in search of a cold, stale, cheeseburger.