







# Ness's Wait (Arrowtown #9)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** There are times when being a legendary shifter is a plain pain in the butt, and this is one of those times

Farness Duncan, more commonly known as Ness or Nessie, had lived his life quite happily for more than three thousand years. An extremely rare kind of shifter, he lives simply, helping others through his funding foundation and traveling the world whenever he needed too. But at his heart, he called Arrowtown home. However in recent months Ness had been getting increasingly restless and even Doc couldnt help, although it was him who suggested Nesss beastie was getting ready to mate. The problem was, to who?

This has to be the most ridiculous version of winging it I've ever done.

Cyrus Marinus, gangster and great white shark shifter knew who Ness was to him the moment he saw him striding through the airport in Las Vegas. Fueled by his shark, he hunts the man down in Scotland, witnessing the most amazing transformation hed ever seen. But while the claiming part was easy, once Ness got over his shock, settling down and building a life together wasnt without its problems, especially when Ness learns early on the type of life Cyrus was used to living.

Everyone can change if they have the right incentive.

While Cyrus and Ness are happy with each other, other family members are not as pleased with their mating. There was also the little issue that Nesss beastie was aching for something more, but if Ness and Cryus gave into their instincts, then one of them was going to end up pregnant. For two accomplished businessmen with world wide interests, was that really the best idea?

Silly question, lol. Cyrus and Nesss story involves some unusual stains on the carpet, more than a few references to killing someone, family drama, mpreg, and an HEA because with a Lisa Oliver story, thats guaranteed.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

“Doc, please. Come on. I’ve been going through this for ages, and all you keep telling me is cryptic shit that doesn’t make sense.” Farness Bonham Duncan, known to his friends as Ness or Nessie, ran his fingers through his auburn hair, the frustration that he’d been feeling for what felt like forever bubbling up inside of him yet again. There were times it got so bad it made it almost impossible for him to speak, and this was one of those times. He was so overwhelmed and tired of feeling like he had no control over his body.

Doctor Nathan Faraday, known to everyone simply as Doc, seemed equally frustrated although he was better at hiding it. “I don’t understand why none of your kind ever explained to you the facts of life and the differences you might go through during your lifecycle, as compared to other shifters. Your kind is exceptionally rare, that’s a given. But that is even more reason for any of them to understand the importance of passing the information on to their younger generations.” Doc was an old shifter as far as shifters went, but nobody was as old as Ness in the small shifter town known as Arrowtown.

Put simply, the reason why Ness was in Doc’s office in the first place was that for the first time in his more than three-thousand-year existence, he was having trouble coping with the day-to-day functions of life.

He’d get on his plane and then his animal side would decide he wanted to stay home.

He’d go stomping down the street as if he had somewhere to be, but after two minutes Ness would realize he had no idea of his destination and usually ended up at the bar or the bakery.

He'd forget what he was saying during meetings, and his dick, that had been a perfectly compliant part of his anatomy for centuries, appeared to have a life of its own.

None of those things had ever happened to him before, and being a sensible man, Ness went to the doctor. And he kept going to the doctor until the point where it could be considered harassment. At least, that's what Doc was likely feeling, not what Ness felt himself. He just wanted answers.

"Look, Ness. I'm not being cryptic, I'm just not sure what you want me to say. I can't be more blunt. There's nothing wrong with you. I realize what you're going through is frustrating right now. But all of the symptoms you're describing - the agitation, the restlessness, the constant boners..."

How Doc managed to say that with a straight face, Ness had no idea, but he felt his own cheeks flush at any reference to his crotch region.

"The symptoms you're experiencing are all your body's way of signaling that you are ready to start finding a mate or a bond partner. It's all perfectly natural - nature's way of ensuring a species survives. That's why you have the urge to copulate, or to have sex, which is what most shifters instinctively feel when they get to this stage of their development."

"I know all about randy shifters when they're young. I have no doubt regular shifters are happy to copulate their way through their teenage years and no one seems to have an issue with that," Ness interjected. "This is different. It has to be. What I'm going through should not happen to someone who measures their age in the thousands of years. It's undignified."

"But clearly for your species, these symptoms are perfectly normal regardless of your age," Doc explained patiently. "You didn't feel like this at all when you were an

actual teenager, did you?”

“No.” Ness shook his head. “I was studying with my father from the time when I could walk, learning about trade and bartering. I was an only child, very common for our kind, and my parents wanted to make sure I could be independent from a young age.”

“There you go. Going through puberty is a natural part of every person’s development, even if for you, it’s not on the timeline most shifters experience. Your body is gearing itself up to procreate. That’s why you keep thinking about sex.”

“I don’t,” Ness muttered. He wasn’t going to mention he didn’t have a clue how that worked, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. His parents’ warnings from when he left home still rang in his head centuries after the fact.

“That’s why your dick is hard for no apparent reason,” Doc carried on, clearly ignoring Ness’s comment. “At the moment a stiff breeze or seeing someone eat ice cream will probably set you off. That’s just the way this phase of life is. It will continue to be that way until you start letting off some steam – one way or another. These feelings do settle down for everyone eventually, and they will for you, too.”

“But when?” Ness complained. “When do they start to settle down? When does a person start to feel normal again?”

“That I can’t tell you because none of your kind have ever been very forthcoming and documented your species life cycle for me to reference,” Doc said. “Believe me, I’ve checked every database known to shifters. I’m not saying anything bad about your forefathers. It’s likely most of your kind alive today were born before medicine became accepted in fact.” Twiddling his pen, Doc asked, “Is there any chance you can speak to somebody, your parents perhaps, or a relative, who could give you a better idea of how long these symptoms typically last?”

“I tried that after my last visit here,” Ness said, his cheeks heating to the point he was sure they were glowing as he recalled that pointless conversation. “I’d barely managed to get a list of my symptoms out and all I got was laughter from my father. Then my mother informed me that the issues I was asking about were not considered polite conversation and I should have more control over myself than to ever mention any discomfort in public. After that, I called my uncle on my mother’s side, and basically said I wasn’t feeling good. He asked me how old I was, I reminded him.” Ness sighed. “He laughed, told me to have fun, and hung up on me.”

Doc looked like he was trying to hide his own damn amusement. “All right then. So clearly you’ve come from a more puritanical branch of being than most shifters and that must be frustrating for you, too. I’m sure you’d rather hear about your kind’s procreating methods from someone with direct experience in those matters. All I can tell you is what I’ve been saying all along. What you’re going through is normal for you.

“The fact that you are going through puberty at your age is simply a byproduct of the way your species evolved. You are so exceptionally long lived when compared to other shifter types, that over the thousands of years your bodies have evolved for some reason in such a way that puberty, which most people go through in their teenage years, has been put off for a considerable length of time. A reason, I might add, that might not even apply in the modern world. But that evolutionary trait still exists. Remember too, that being a non-furry shifter, it is possible for you to be the one who could get pregnant, which I am sure you are aware if your partner turns out to be male.”

“Really?” Ness’s eyes widened. “I don’t have anything against male on male partners,” he said quickly in case Doc got the wrong idea. Doc’s relationship with Deputy Joe was an integral part of Arrowtown lore. There were countless other male-male matings in town as well. “It’s just I never thought I would get pregnant either. I think I’d worry I didn’t have the right bits.”

“I thought the same thing, and yet it all works out in the end. Besides, at the moment I think we're putting the cart before the horse. You don't have to concern yourself with that right now. What you've got at the moment is a dick with nowhere to go, alongside the frustrations that might bring, and hormones your body is getting used to. In my experience with humans and other shifters, their hormones seem to settle down in about three or four years, once they move into adulthood.”

“Three or four years?” Ness pounded the bed he was sitting on with his fist. “I can't put up with this for that long. My brain is complete mush. I have no idea what I'm doing. One minute I'm on a plane, then I forget where I was going. I go to a meeting, and I can barely function or even speak straight...”

Doc held up his hand, stopping what would've probably been a lengthy rant. Gods. Mother was right. I have to get myself under control.

“Have you ever considered that maybe you should just have sex with someone? You're an attractive man. I'm sure you get no-string type offers all the time. Just accept one of them. Once you've gone through your first time, and okay, there might be a bit of embarrassment because it is for most of us for our first time, but after that it will get easier. The release would help your agitation.”

“Our kind do not have sex outside of mating. It's too risky.”

Doc frowned. “Risky how? Physically, in your human form, you're no different from any other shifter. I wasn't suggesting your beastie give sex a try. Why should it be difficult for you?”

Swallowing a lump in his throat at the very idea, Ness tried to explain. At least the doc wasn't outright laughing at him. “Our beast is very large, therefore our strength in our human form is very intense. It requires - at least from what I've heard in those odd raucous stories overheard during occasional family gatherings - an awful lot of



control to be able to engage in those types of activities and not hurt anyone. Right now I rip my pants trying to get them on in the morning, I'm so fumble fingered. I wouldn't trust myself..." he trailed off. Doc was shaking his head.

"Believe it or not, a person's animal size has very little bearing on the amount of strength or force a person might exert when they're having sex." Doc probably thought he was being reasonable, but Ness had heard some horror stories when he was growing up, and he wasn't inclined to listen.

"The thing is," he said firmly, determined to get Doc to see having sex with a non-mate was out of the question, "if any of the stories I have heard are remotely true, even one tiny percent of them, the possible danger to another person..."

Doc held up his hand again. "I can see you don't want to heed that particular piece of advice and that's fine. I am not going to insist you go against what you believe are valid fears. No one should ever be forced to have sex for any reason if they don't want to. You are hormonal. Your body is moving into the next stage of your development. It takes a while, but your body will adapt.

"In the meantime, I suggest masturbating, working out at least once a day, and keeping busy will also be helpful. If you're forgetting things, then keep lists and maintain a daily routine because that will help as well. Spending time in your shifted form, especially because you are so big, will also use up a lot of energy, and that in turn will reduce the anxiety and frustration you've been feeling in your human form."

Ness nodded. Those were good ideas and things he could do.

"I can give you a shifter-safe sedative if you like, something to help you sleep if that's an issue."

"I don't want to take anything unnecessarily. I just need for this phase, this stage of

my development as you call it, to be over so things can get back to normal.”

Doc chuckled. “In the grand scheme of things, five years is barely a blink. Are you heading out of town again?” He pointed to Ness’s overnight bag.

“Yes.” Ness sighed. “At least my beastie will get a swim while we’re away this time. I’ve got to make a flying stop in Nevada to sign some papers, then onto Scotland to do my bit to keep our legend alive up there.”

“You’re kidding me. There really is a Loch Ness Monster?”

Ness shrugged. “It was my granddad’s idea. None of us have lived in the loch for decades, but the people there rely on tourists for their income. Everyone in the family takes turns. I’ll be up there for three to five days, swim in the mornings and late evenings, giving any of the believers a chance to get their blurry photos, then onto...damn, I can’t remember what I’ve got to do after that, but I’m sure there’s something.”

“I actually think that’s a really cool thing to do. I remember reading when paranormals came out that there was a big hue and cry that the Loch Ness Monster must’ve been a shifter, which was why none of the scientists with their submarines and drones could ever find one, but none of the locals there wanted to believe that.”

“The problem is when the paranormal world did reveal itself their presence explained a lot of the legends non-paras seemed to love.” Ness planted his feet on the floor and stood up, picking up his bag. “Some people, they miss the days when they could tell stories about the mysterious shapes they saw in the night sky or on a loch when it’s covered in mist, without some random shifter or something else holding up a hand and saying ‘That was me, guys. Sorry.’ They like the mystery. My family and I do our little bit to keep that one particular mystery alive.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for the news articles.” Doc laughed as he stood up, too. “Safe travels. I’m sure we’ll see you back here when we do. In the meantime if anything else happens, you’ve got my number. Just keep busy and keep yourself open to the idea your mate could be just over the next horizon.”

Ness was on his way to the door, but he stopped. “Why would you say something like that? Have you added being a seer as one of your doctor’s skills?”

“Nothing like that.” Doc laughed. “It’s just that in my experience our animal sides seem to have a sixth sense about a lot of things, including meeting a mate. With your body on high alert like it is, maybe your beastie is readying you for the idea that your mate isn’t far away.”

“Well, they don’t live in Arrowtown, that’s for sure. I know everyone here.”

“Which is why it’s a good idea you travel so much.” Doc grinned. “Maybe a sweet lady Nessie will already be at the loch when you get there.”

Ness snorted as he shook his head. “If that’s the case it means I’ve got my roster dates wrong. Any lady up there will not be sweet, especially if they catch me shifting. It would either be my mom or my aunt. I knew a long time ago my mate would be a different species.”

Doc was still laughing when Ness left his office, but as he got into his car, parked conveniently outside, tossing his bag in the back, Ness had to adjust his dick in his pants, again. There are times when being a legendary shifter is a plain pain in the butt, and this is one of those times, he thought as he started the car and headed for his private airstrip. Knowing what was wrong didn’t bring Ness half the comfort he thought it would, but it was a start. Face it. I wouldn’t know what to do with a mate if I did find one. I haven’t even been on a date. And that was another anxiety Ness did not need.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

“Mr. Greg Sheffield, you really don’t expect me to sit here and just listen to your shit as though it was the gospel, do you?” Cyrus Marinus didn’t have to snap. If anything, his words were calm and measured as the man himself. His pose was casual as he sat behind his vast desk, his chair back far enough he had plenty of room to rest an ankle over his knee. Cyrus regarded the sweating hulk in front of him, keeping his face expressionless.

“You asked me to explain.” Greg scratched behind his ear, tugged at the lapel on his ill-fitting jacket, and then glanced around at the door. He’d find no salvation there. Jon and Roman were like two statues framing the door and just as immovable. “I just had a run of bad luck. I’m sure you see this a dozen times a day. I just need a bit more to...”

Cyrus held up his hand and the man’s mouth snapped shut. “You are right. You are one of many who think it’s acceptable to sweat your desperation all over my brand new carpet. It’s becoming tedious. You’d think after all these years gamblers would understand how Lady Luck is fickle. It’s part of her charm. One night she places you high on the mountain and kisses your feet, and then the next, she plunges you into the abyss with no way out. My issue with you, the issue that has you sweating all over my carpet, is your lack of money problem is not the only baggage your brought to my hotel, is it?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Mr. Marinus. Your men have been holding me for hours, from the moment I left my room. I thought you wanted to see me about the money owed the casino and I’m good for it, I just need...”

The urge to wrinkle his nose at the stench of Greg’s lies and fear was strong, but

Cyrus would never show a weakness like that. Instead he clicked his fingers, stopping Greg's lies midstream.

"You made a deal with my floor manager for two of my girls to attend you in your room last night. Correct?"

Greg was running out of places to look. He must've decided the carpet was the least likely to be glaring at him. "I'm not sure I remember," he muttered. "I'd had a lot to drink. I vaguely recall saying something to one of the men in a suit, but by the time I got to my room I was exhausted and just crashed on the bed. If anyone knocked I didn't hear them."

"You are in room 2214, yes?" Leaning forward, Cyrus picked up a piece of paper and leaned back in his chair.

"Er...yes, I think so." Greg fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a key card. "Room 2214, yes, that's it."

"You are aware we have cameras in every hallway in our hotel, aren't you? The information about that was indicated on the registration printout you're given when you first collected your key."

"Oh, I didn't read that. I mean, I was in a hurry to get onto the casino floor when I arrived." Greg's gulp could be heard by everyone in the room. "I figured that was just fine print and no one reads that stuff, am I right?"

"The information is provided for all clients as a safety precaution for all guests and staff when they check in." Cyrus sighed. "You're really going to make me spell it out for you, aren't you Greg? Unfortunately, I don't have the time." He stood up, buttoning his jacket. "Don't concern yourself though. The gentlemen behind you, Roman and Jon, are family, and they have a lot to say to you. You might have heard

their names mentioned last night in fact.”

Walking around the desk, Cyrus stepped into Greg’s personal space, his animal flashing in his eyes, causing the man to step back. “Roman and Jon are the brothers of Tina and Chloe, who crawled from your room two hours after they were seen entering it on the hallway cameras. If you’re at all concerned Tina is currently in hospital being treated for internal injuries, and my dear Chloe will likely never work again due to the scars left on her face.”

“I... er...it was an accident.”

“Don’t say another word,” Cyrus warned. “The money you owe me is a drop in the ocean to me. We could’ve made an arrangement about paying that back. I make deals like that every day of the week with schmucks who don’t know when to walk away from the tables. But when a scumbag like you dares to lay your hands in acts of violence against the people in my family, the people I protect and care for, any chance of a deal you might have had just went flying out the window. At the moment you’re a dead man walking, and you won’t be doing that for long.”

Greg might have whimpered, but if he did, Cyrus wasn’t moved. He made his way to the door. “Roman, tell them I will want the same carpet pattern when you get it replaced,” he said as Roman let him out. “You know how to contact me if you need to. When you’re done, both of you lay low, standard procedure. You know the rules. Spend some time with your parents.”

“Yes, Boss.” Roman nodded, and Cyrus heard the room door lock behind him as he made his way down the hall. The office was soundproofed, and Cyrus nodded and smiled at a few guests he passed as he made his way to the elevator. They would never hear a sound coming from his office even if they pressed their ears against the door.

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Two hours later, now dressed more casually in jeans and a button down gray shirt that matched his eyes, Cyrus wandered through the Harry Reid International Airport, the gateway hub for anyone wanting a fast and easy way to get to his casinos. His meeting had gone well. Cyrus didn't expect anything different. He had been a part of Las Vegas since the place was shacks alongside a dirt track. He'd long acclimatized to the dry desert heat, although he'd signed up very quickly when air conditioning had been invented.

Cyrus's huge animal was edgy, which was why Cyrus walked. Every local knew him, and many people ducked their head respectfully as he went past. I know you didn't get a bite in this morning, but think of the mess, he reasoned with his animal as he walked. They'd both been agitated, seeing the state of Tina and Chloe the night before – both covered in blood and visibly upset. Everything in Cyrus's nature demanded he break down that fucking door of room 2214, and tear the pathetic bully limb from limb.

But we're better than that. Roman and Jon have proven themselves to us before. They deserved the right to take vengeance for their sisters and restore their family's honor.

Keep walking. Cyrus almost tripped over in shock. His animal half rarely spoke to him with words. They had a long history with each other, and the most effective communications were done without words ever needed. Giving his animal side just a little more leeway, Cyrus let his steps be guided by his animal's instincts. It was almost as though his animal spirit was hunting, but Cyrus didn't see any dangers around them even though the place was busy.

He ended up standing by a large window, looking out over the area where many private planes were parked, including his own. Is someone messing with our plane? But no, his other half wasn't reacting to that. Taking his time, Cyrus scanned the view

again. There were very few people in what was a secure area.

His eyes focused more intently when he noticed a visiting plane he remembered seeing before. An Arrowtown plane in Vegas? I'm sure that thing was taking off when we landed there on our last visit. From the looks of the activity around the plane, it was clearly due to take off again. The refueling truck was there, and two other people with clipboards were checking every inch of the outside.

There. Look there. His huge beast was so agitated, Cyrus could almost feel his tail swinging from side to side. Looking where his animal side directed, Cyrus's eyes widened. A huge man, clearly a shifter, was striding across the asphalt making a beeline for the plane.

Ours. He's ours. Get him.

Cyrus looked around. It would take him too long to get to the plane before it took off. The shifter was already climbing the stairs into his plane. Reaching into his jean pocket, he hit a speed dial number. "Have the plane ready to take off in the next ten minutes. I'll inform you of the destination when I get there," he said before hanging up. He had good staff, and his plane was always ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Sauntering back to the closest booking station, Cyrus smiled at Lucy, the woman tending the desk. "You look like you could do with a coffee, pretty lady," he said sliding the hundred dollar note he'd palmed over the desk. "Any idea where that private plane, number six-four-two on the tail, is going?"

"You'll get me into trouble, Mr. Marinus," Lucy said clicking a few keys on her keyboard. "Flight six-four-two is on its way to Inverness in Scotland. The flight has four crew members, and the only listed passenger is Mr. Farness Bonham Duncan, the plane's owner."



“You deserve a steak meal, my lovely lady.” Cyrus added another hundred to the first. “Alas, I have to make a trip to Scotland, did you say, and can’t take you personally. I’m sure you and your husband will enjoy a meal on me.”

“Have your pilot file the flight plan, Mr. Marinus. You’ll be sixth in the queue to take off.”

“You’re the best.” Blowing Lucy a kiss, Cyrus hurried to the exit, pulling his phone out of his pocket again as he power walked. “File a flight plan for Inverness, Scotland.”

“Yes, Boss.”

By the time he was on the plane, doing up his seat belt, Cyrus had already located accommodations,, apparently it was the quiet season wherever this Inverness was, and a hired car in case he needed it. Sitting back as his plane took off, Cyrus chuckled quietly. This has to be the most ridiculous version of winging it I’ve ever done. But he couldn’t deny his, or his animal’s, excitement as the plane took to the air.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Ness hadn't been born in Scotland, but he couldn't deny the impact of the eerie beauty around the lake just before dawn. It touched something deep in his soul. There was a sense of timelessness in the place and as he prepared to shift, Ness felt a glimmer of peace – something missing from his life in recent months.

His trip had been uneventful. He answered business emails, double checking everything before he hit the send button. According to his schedule, after Scotland he was due back in the States to visit his candy making factory, something he always enjoyed. The company had started when Ness started experimenting with sugar decades before, and now he had a whole team of scientists/candy makers who were still experimenting on new tastes and textures in the candy industry.

The car was waiting when his plane touched down, allowing him to drive straight to the house his family owned, with very few people aware he was even in the country. Ness never worried about the arrangement his family must've had with the authorities at the airport – he just knew it worked. He didn't even have to show his passport. His crew had accommodations booked for them in Inverness, knowing they were free to have fun and enjoy their stay. Ness knew they'd be back at the plane in three days' time.

There was comfort in routine, just as Doc had suggested. Ness could see that as he made himself comfortable for his short stay in his family home. It was as familiar as his own back in Arrowtown. There was a couple who maintained the house, keeping fresh food stocked and making sure sheets and towels were clean, but in all his times visiting, Ness had never seen them. He'd suggested once to his mother, as a joke, that they must have house gremlins, but his mother's frown let him know his humor wasn't appreciated.

Maybe it was the time difference, or maybe it was the intoxication of the fresh Scottish air, but Ness slept surprisingly well. Ignoring his morning wood, because that bit was clearly the only part of his body truly awake, Ness ran through his morning routine quickly, the sky just starting to lighten through the windows. Dressed in nothing but a robe, he took the short walk down the private trail to the lake's edge, shivering slightly at the moist chill in the air. But the moment his feet were in the water, Ness's shift took over.

The world always looked different when Ness was in his animal form. His head was so much higher up for a start. Moving rapidly for such a bulky body, Ness was quickly submerged in the deep loch, confident he hadn't been seen. It's not like he would be stopping for photoshoots for tourists. The whole idea of being in Loch Ness was to give a little nudge to existing lore. That meant if any pictures were taken of him, they'd be blurry, out of focus, and exactly what the locals appreciated.

Swimming was something Ness had always enjoyed. The loch was as familiar to him as his own lake in Arrowsmith. There was just so much more of it. The loch was incredibly deep – much deeper than Ness's body of water. That meant there were rocky outcrops that needed exploring and caves to check out. Other creatures that shared the space were always respectful and happy when one of their larger visitors was there, brushing past his bulky body before darting away. Ness swam as much as he could, only remembering just in time that he needed to get out of the water before the mist was burned away by the rising sun.

This is what I needed, Ness thought happily as he made his way back to the shore nearest his house. A long swim. No other demands on my time. A hot coffee waiting for me back at the house. Sometimes it was the simple things that could make a day complete.

Popping his head out of the water, Ness shook his head, sending out his senses to make sure no one was waiting for him on the bank. Shifting as he waded out of the

water, Ness scooped up the robe he'd left on a tree branch, wrapping it around his shoulders as he disappeared along to the trail to that waiting cup of coffee. Breakfast would be a good idea, too, he thought as he whistled happily, enjoying the absolute peace and quiet.

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“Holy fucking shit.” On the other side of the loch, armed with a pair of binoculars because not even Cyrus's animal eyes were that sharp, Cyrus's mouth quite literally dropped open in shock.

There had been a few issues with the authorities when he'd arrived at Inverness. Scotland was very friendly to visitors, as he quickly learned, and the fact Cyrus had booked a hotel went a long way to supporting his claim that he was simply visiting. But the private plane and lack of suitcases caused a few raised eyebrows.

Cyrus simply smiled, nodded, spoke respectfully, even laughing with the officer talking to him about how he'd just wanted to come to Inverness on a whim. “I'll buy any extra clothes I need here,” he'd explained. The officer didn't seem to think that was unusual, and after about an hour Cyrus was allowed into Inverness itself. The car rental place was another delay, sorting out pesky things like driver's licenses and showing his passport again. By the time he'd finally gotten into the car and pulled up the local map to find his hotel, Cyrus was tired, and his animal side was edgy.

We will find him, but we just have to be patient. Cyrus soothed his animal side, even though he was as keen as his shark to catch sight of the tall man with the auburn hair. But between the fourteen hour plane trip and then the holdup at the airport, Cyrus wanted a decent meal, a hot shower and some sleep before he did anything else.

We already know he visits Arrowtown, he added as his shark grumbled at the delay. Shit comes to shove, we'll call Blade and get him to track the illusive Farness from

that side of the ocean.

It was his animal side who'd woken him up before the sun had fully risen. As it was his shark who'd been pushing to meet the man in the first place, Cyrus kept his grumbling to himself, making sure to grab a large travel mug of coffee from the hotel lobby before heading to the parking lot.

The streets were empty, it was like the whole corner of the world was asleep. I kinda wish I was, too, Cyrus thought, but he drove about half an hour out of town, letting his shark be his guide.

Park here.

Cyrus pulled into a rest area and eased the car to a stop. The place was in complete darkness when he turned off the headlights.

He's out there.

Where? Cyrus could barely see anything in the gloom. There was a layer of mist across the body of water and while there was a tinge of pink just peeking over the hills, it was barely enough to see anything. Grabbing a pair of binoculars that the rental agent had assured him was useful when spotting wildlife in Scotland, Cyrus got out of the car, his eyes scanning the water. You do realize you can't swim in this, he reminded his shark. It's freshwater.

But his animal side wasn't paying attention. Cyrus was encouraged to search the opposite shore for signs of life. Through the bushes he could just make out what looked like two lights shining from windows. So there is a house there...all right. In Cyrus's head that meant they were on the wrong side of a body of water, but his shark didn't seem to want to move.

And that's when Cyrus saw something – barely - through the mist. There was the dark shape of a man...a big man...his shadow breaking free of the bushes. Focusing his binoculars, Cyrus watched – quietly drooling and feeling like a stalker, but damn that man was fine - as the man just dropped his robe as if he was in his bedroom. You've got to love shifters.

But what type? Why was the huge man...? That thought was never finished. Cyrus could just make out the man's form stepping into the water, and then he shifted. One minute a man, and the next...

Yep, mouth dropped open. In his long life, Cyrus had seen many amazing and wonderful things. Some not so lovely things as well. But standing in the chilly air, in a remote parking lot, staring out across the water, Cyrus felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes at the sheer freaking beauty of the creature who was fast disappearing under the water.

He had no words. The creature wasn't a dragon. The coloring could be mistaken for dragon scales, the way they glimmered under the faint light. But this creature was too bottom heavy and had no wings. The neck was too elongated as well. So no, it wasn't a dragon.

Cyrus had no idea what type of creature he was seeing. He was just struck by the beauty of it. Something so big, so powerful, and yet the creature's entry into the water had caused barely a ripple.

"He can clearly hold his breath for long periods of time," Cyrus muttered, turning one way and then the other, scanning the surface of the water looking for unusual movements. Water was something he did know, but it was as if the creature was nothing more than a figment of Cyrus's tired imagination. There was no sign of him.

"But the robe's still there." Cyrus knew that when he shifted he could be in the water

for hours. Finding a blanket in the trunk of the car, Cyrus got comfortable sitting on the hood, cradling his cup of coffee, his binoculars tucked in by his side, enjoying the serenity of the morning. If my associates could see me now, they'd think I'd lost my mind.

Cyrus had learned a long time ago that patience would pay off, and about an hour later, with the sky a lot lighter and the mist slowly evaporating, his patience was rewarded. A small blue head broke the water's surface and slowly the rest of the body emerged. Cyrus had just a split second to see the creature in its entirety before the creature was gone, a naked man standing in its place. The man didn't even look around as he made his way up the shoreline, grabbing his robe and wrapping it around his shoulders before he disappeared into the bushes again.

Another light coming on in the windows of a house Cyrus could barely see gave him all the information he needed. Where's my map. I need that address.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

It had been a quiet morning. Showered, fed, and having consumed enough coffee to sink a ship, Ness was stretched out in the small conservatory at the side of the house. His inner animal was peaceful – he always was after a big swim. Ness had his feet up, an open book resting on his knees, but he was basically looking out the window watching plants grow.

I need to do this more often, he decided. No people. No business. Ness gave a passing thought to his laptop that was charging in the office. Just that thought was enough to cause a spark of stress – remembering the work he should be doing, work people were expecting him to do. But this time Ness squashed it down. I'm not playing that game today. He chuckled quietly. After centuries of doing business, surely a man deserves a vacation.

Vacations were not something that were valued or appreciated by any member of the Duncan family. Ness remembered his father as a hard working man who had no time at all for people he declared lazy or lacking ambition. To Ness's father, that lack of ambition was the key thing wrong with the world today...something he'd been ranting about since about the fourteen hundreds. The man had never seen the good in anything, not even his wife.

Ness, on the other hand, had eagerly researched and pursued all the new technologies as they'd come into being. He was fascinated by the quirky, the interesting, and unique ideas that so many talented people had. While he never considered himself an "idea man," he was a go-to person for someone who had a good idea and simply needed the capital to see that idea come to life.

Father never approved of me doing that either, although it had proven really lucrative



to Ness over the centuries. Letting out a long sigh, Ness closed his eyes. The pale sun was warm on his legs through the glass, and he focused on his breathing, enjoying the quiet.

My dick's hard again. Ness wasn't opening his eyes for that. For fuck's sake, if the damn thing kept popping up without invitation then Ness was just going to keep ignoring it. When he wasn't pressuring himself to do anything, when he was just sitting in the moment being thankful for the sun and the quiet...

A loud knocking on the door had Ness's eyes flying open. Who the heck can be here? he thought as he put his book aside and got up from his chair. It can't be for me. No one knows where I am. Maybe it's a lost tourist. Ness couldn't remember ever being disturbed in the family home by a visitor before, but then there were more people around now – everywhere – and no one thought anything about knocking on a stranger's door.

Making sure he was covered – no need to frighten anyone – Ness unlocked the front door and opened it. “Can I help you?”

The man standing on the doorstep wasn't a delivery guy, or a lost tourist, although he was carrying a package. Ness had never seen a delivery guy in designer clothes. The man was an inch or so shorter than Ness, slender with that shifter-strength aura about him. He had black hair trimmed close to his skull on the sides and longer on top and piercing gray eyes that met his. A small smile hovered around surprisingly full lips. He was holding a large basket that smelled deliciously of cooked meat.

“Why yes, Farness, I believe you can help me. The name is Cyrus Marinus. I thought I'd bring you food as a way of introducing myself. In case you haven't picked up on it yet, I'm your mate.”

“Mate?” Ness felt his knees wobble as his cock started throbbing. As soon as he said

the word his whole body was tossed into chaos. His beast was surging forward trying to get free. Ness was desperately pushing it back – there was no room for his shifted form in the entranceway of his family home. Black spots danced in front of his eyes as his brain struggled with both the beast’s instincts and his belief that what the man was saying had to be impossible. His animal side was screaming it was true, and the man himself sounded so certain. In the end the struggle was too much. “Doc was right?” He whispered as he fell to the floor in a dead faint.

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Chuckling, Cyrus assumed he would be allowed in, stepping over Ness’s prone body, looking for somewhere to put the food basket. The entranceway was small, and Cyrus found the kitchen quickly enough. Depositing his offerings on the counter, he went back to where his mate was groaning and rubbing his head.

“I probably should’ve caught you,” Cyrus said, shoving his hands under Ness’s arms and helping him to his feet. “But I genuinely hate wasting food. Are you all right?” He reached up, rubbing at his mate’s head. Ness’s hair was redder where the sun hit it, and up close the man was stunning. Cyrus realized he’d only seen Ness’s back view up until now. The front was worth appreciating.

“I feel like such a fool.” The words were soft, but there was a strength there that Cyrus’s body responded to. “What must you think of me?”

"A lot of things, if you want to know the truth, but how about we save that conversation for after we’ve eaten.” Cyrus widened his smile. “I’m not that crass, or that young, that I’ll start stripping you in the hallway, although I’d love to, and that’s all I’m going to say about that for now. You’ve had a shock. I totally understand. It’s not every day a mate comes knocking on your front door. Let’s go through to the kitchen.”

He put a gentle hand on his mate's shoulder and steered him through to the kitchen. "Here, you have a seat," he added, leaving Ness by a bar stool before going around the other side of the counter. The man was just so tempting, so it was better that way. "You can direct me on where to find plates and cutlery, if you'd like. Do you have any coffee made? I'd kill for a cup right now."

"I can make a fresh pot."

Glancing over his shoulder, from where he was looking for plates, Cyrus smiled again and shook his head. "You just stay on that side of the counter, mate of mine. I can't promise I won't jump you and take you to the floor if you're on this side with me."

Ness's cheeks were almost as red as his hair. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"Did my accent give it away?" Chuckling, Cyrus found the fixings for the coffee pot, and quickly got that set up before searching for plates and cutlery. "I'm originally from Sicily, and I travel all over, although I spend most of my time in Vegas."

"How did you end up in Scotland, or more specifically, here?"

"Through a set of random coincidences, definitely orchestrated by the lovely Fates I believe. I saw you at the Vegas airport – you were just getting on your plane. I knew then, or rather my shark knew, that you were the one for us, and as I wasn't inclined to go running down the runway trying to get your plane to stop, I had to think a bit more strategically. One of the lovely people at the check-in desks let it slip who you were and that you were heading here, so I canceled my appointments, fueled my plane, and here I am."

"The Fates, right." Ness's voice sounded a bit wobbly. "That also explains why you

called me Farness at the door.”

“Is that a problem?” Cyrus turned, putting the plates he’d found on the counter between them. “What do you prefer to be called?”

“Most people call me Ness or Nessie. I don’t mind either way.” The big man’s blush couldn’t get any sweeter.

“Don’t be surprised if I start calling you darlin’.” Cyrus busied himself collecting up the cutlery and taking the covers off the food he’d brought with him. “So yes, I tracked your plane, followed you here, but then with customs and everything else, we lost you at the airport. As I didn’t want to turn up on your doorstep in the middle of the night, looking like a disheveled madman I got a hotel. My animal side woke me this morning – isn’t it just amazing that our animal spirits have a connection already?”

“They do?” Ness tilted his head to one side and then nodded. “I guess they do. Sorry, go on. You were explaining how you found me.”

“All my animal side. I got woken up before first light and went for a drive until my other half encouraged me to park in this little remote place by the side of a body of water. I have to tell you that I’ve never been so glad to be up that early in my life. I got a ringside seat of seeing the most incredible shifted form I’ve ever seen. And from there that’s how I found your house. Ta-da.”

“You saw me? All of me? In both of my forms and you still came here with food for me?”

Ness’s hands were gripping the side of the counter, his knuckles white.

“Hey.” Reaching over, Cyrus stroked over the back of Ness’s hand. “Why wouldn’t I

follow you? I know we're mates and all I could think since I saw you at Vegas was how much I wanted to get to know you in every way." Cyrus hoped he didn't sound like too much of a sleaze, but that was the biggest truth that had ever left his lips.

Ness stood up, both hands pointing at the substantial length only partially hidden by his baggy shorts. "Most people see this, and they run the other way. My bulk in either form is intimidating to people."

Cyrus licked his lips and swallowed. "I'm not most people, darlin'. Please sit down again, or this food is going to go to waste, for sure."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

It's true. It's damn true. Why didn't anyone tell me I could feel this way? Ness's parents were not mates. There were only three known families in the whole world that were the same species he was and back in his parents' time, like bonded to like. There had been talk, roughly five hundred years before, about Ness matching up with another female from one of the two family lines that wasn't his, but the woman concerned rejected that idea before Ness could. The women of his line had very dominant personalities, and Ness didn't want to fight with someone for the rest of his days - the way his parents did. Ness had been quietly relieved to be let off the hook, even if his mother had been furious at what she considered a slight against their family at the time.

Fated mates, according to Ness's family, were a myth. A legend – something more ludicrous than the idea of a monster living in a lake – and the irony of that wasn't lost on Ness. Ness remembered his father saying once that fated mates were an excuse lazy men used so they could sleep around without ever committing to anyone. But my mate is serving me food in our family home. He knocked on the door.

“What is it you do?” Ness was struggling to think of what he could say. Cyrus hadn't stopped smiling, and while he might have been a virgin, Ness wasn't totally oblivious. He noticed the heat in the man's eyes. I could be in bed with another person before dinner time. Ness wasn't sure if he was excited or terrified. Best to start with small talk.

“I tell most people I'm a businessman, and that's true, but at heart I'm a gangster. A made man, I believe is the term people use these days.” Cyrus handed Ness a plate. “I'm the head of a family based in Vegas, although I have casinos in eight cities. Aside from the two I run in Vegas, I have another six in Europe. What about your

sweet self? What do you do?"

Ness had to swallow fast so he didn't spit the first mouthful he'd taken back at his mate. "You're a criminal?"

"No." Cyrus burst out laughing, almost choking on his food. When he'd swallowed he added, "To be a criminal, I'd have to be charged and found guilty of doing something illegal, and that doesn't happen. And before you go worrying your sweet self that I'm going to end up in jail for something, please don't. Things might have been a bit hairy back in the nineteen thirties and forties, but believe me, we're a lot more civilized now."

"My apologies. That was rude of me." Any more shocks and I'm going to be the first shifter in existence to have a heart attack. The small talk wasn't going the way Ness thought it would. "You mentioned you're the head of a family, so I am guessing you're bond mated? Do you have children?" Oh my goodness that's worse. How could he be with me if he's already mated?

But Cyrus didn't seem to think the question was unusual, or that Ness was strange for asking it. "No bond mate. No one special in my life." Cyrus shook his head. He was still standing on the other side of the counter, eating his food, apparently seeing nothing peculiar about their situation at all. "I have a son and recently a new grandson, which was a huge but welcome surprise. You might already know them in fact because they live in Arrowtown. It's where I first saw your plane, although I didn't realize the significance of it at the time. You must've been taking off somewhere while I was arriving for a visit with them. Blade and Hal and their new baby Ethan Cyrus. Do you know them?"

Ness dropped his fork. It made a clatter on the plate, and Ness hurriedly picked it up as Cyrus chuckled. Ness could tell he wasn't being mean. Maybe it amuses him to shock people. "I know them, yes." He nodded and then felt he just had to come right

out and ask. “What happened to Blade’s other parent? Can I ask that?”

“My life is an open book for you, my mate, and only you.” Cyrus placed his hand over his chest as his smile widened. “Look, this is going to sound worse than it actually was, and please believe me the situation was mutually advantageous to both of us...”

“Please don’t tell me you just went out and bought a baby?” No. There was no way Ness was going to be able to eat after thinking something like that, and he put down his fork and pushed his plate to one side, but Cyrus’s smile didn’t drop for a second.

“I can see you’re going to keep me on my toes.” He chuckled. “I love how your mind just automatically jumped to me buying a person. It makes me wonder what you think gangsters do.”

“I don’t know a lot about that way of life.” Ness ducked his head, mentally cursing himself. You talk to people all the time. Get your head together.

“I think that’s adorable. As for Blade’s mother, the lady and I, another great white shark, had a mutually beneficial arrangement. Sharks are solitary creatures as a rule, and she was no exception. She did not want anything to do with me, beyond what was necessary for conception to occur. Great white sharks carry their young for a whole year. I took care of her during that time.

“To be honest, I genuinely thought she would leave the moment Blade was born, and that was our agreement. In the wild, great whites don’t have anything to do with their young after they are born, and while I understand how different that is for shifter sharks, she and I both felt that was what would happen. However, she surprised herself and me and waited until Blade was four or five before she told Blade it was time for her to go, which she did. She was well set up, I took care of her well after she left our home, and she still stays in touch with Blade and me to this day, although



she has since found her fated mate and is really happy with them. You have to remember, this was also a hundred and ten years ago.”

Cyrus shrugged. “I thought the Fates had forgotten me, but no. They’d sent me someone reclusive instead, so it just took me longer to find you. How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking. You’re clearly an adult, but it’s always handy to know these things to help keep things in perspective in relation to histories.”

Ness looked down at where his plate had been and wished he hadn’t pushed it away. He’d dearly love something to keep his hands occupied. “Three thousand and twenty-six,” he said in a low voice.

“That’s a long wait for a mate.” Cyrus whistled. “You make me feel like a youngster, and not many people can say that. I’m only six hundred and fifty years old. But you’re in luck. I’m not the type of man to call anyone ‘Daddy.’”

Ness wasn’t sure what Cyrus meant but he nodded anyway. You have to tell him. His animal side was still pushing to get to the claiming side of things and Ness knew he’d have to explain his little difficulties before that could happen. It was the only fair and right thing to do. “You’re clearly a man of the world,” he said slowly. “I mean, you have a kid and a grandson already, and I’m sure that Blade’s mother wasn’t the only person you’ve been with intimately.”

“Is that a problem? Because I’m sure you can say the same.” Cyrus cleaned off his plate and then pushed it aside and reached for Ness’s hand. “What’s happened in the past has no relevance to fated mates when they meet, surely you know that. But I am sensing some apprehension coming from you, so you clearly have something bothering you when this is meant to be a time for celebration. Share your trouble with me and we’ll solve it together, before we get onto more pleasurable activities.”

Are all shifters so pushy about the claiming business? But he already knew that

answer. Ness might not have felt the sheer tsunami of need he was feeling before, but he'd heard thousands of stories about it over his years.

"I'm sorry, but yes, there is something you should know about me before...before anything else," Ness managed in a rush and quickly moved on. "My animal side is really happy – I've genuinely never had this sort of reaction to another person in my life before."

Inhaling sharply, Ness said, "But your assumption was wrong, when you mentioned about my sexual experience. I went to see the shifter doctor in Arrowtown..." It all came pouring out – the stress Ness had been under, the unfamiliar feelings in his body, the agitation, not being able to think straight, and how he'd struggled to keep his various businesses running.

"Doc laughed at me when I first went to him with my symptoms," he explained. "But they didn't go away, and I kept going back because I genuinely didn't have a clue what was going on. Finally he told me that basically my body is going through puberty – at three thousand years old, can you believe it? He even suggested I engage in sex with someone to relieve the stress..."

"There'll be no one else darlin', not now I'm here."

"No, no, you misunderstand." Ness really didn't want Cyrus to get the wrong idea. "I told him my kind didn't have sex until we were married or bond mated. Because of, you know, with how big I am down there... I don't know how to get you to understand. Look. This is what happened. The elders in our clan sat me down and told me when I was about twenty years old, that because I was a big shifter and my junk is so big, that I could hurt someone if I went near them that way, so I never have. Do you understand me? I never have."

Ness looked at Cyrus's face. The man was blinking – once, twice, three times. "Are

you telling me, my amazingly unique mate, that you're a virgin in all things? After three thousand years?"

Ness nodded. His cheeks were flaming hot. "I know that must sound ridiculous to a worldly man like yourself..."

But Cyrus put up his hand. "No. Do not put yourself down like that. Ridiculous is not the word I would use at all. Am I pissed at your elders for putting that fear into your head when you were little more than a baby? Damn right I am. And I suppose they never expected you'd have a male mate, either."

"I don't think anyone in my family line has a same sex bond mate, but then no one in my family has found a fated mate either."

"They probably never even looked for one. I'm guessing you didn't either which is why you were a little weak-kneed seeing me at the door. I understand now." Cyrus was looking deep into his eyes and Ness couldn't look away if he tried. "The question is what do you want to do about us now? I'm not leaving you. That's not an option and I think your animal side would chase me down if I tried."

"Probably." Such deep dark eyes.

"I am more than happy to court you, if that would help you feel more comfortable being around me. Take you out, date you, woo you like they used to do back in the day. Or..." He trailed off and Ness couldn't help himself. That sounded lovely, but so time consuming as well, and Ness needed...he hadn't a clue what he needed, but the feeling was intense.

"What's the second option?" Am I sounding breathless? The intensity of Cyrus's gaze was making Ness's heart rate stutter, and his lungs were working overtime.

“Option number two is that I could take you to bed, make love to your amazingly large body, show you that your dick size should never be a barrier to giving or receiving pleasure, and fuck you until you can’t stand up. If you’re up for it. Whatever works for you.”

Studying his new mate – the man’s eyes were mesmerizing - but there was something else there and Ness came to a stunning realization. “You’re always going to look out for me, aren’t you. Protect me. Care for me. Consider my interests.” It wasn’t a question, but Cyrus nodded anyway.

“It’s what I do, darlin’, and everything I’ve done in my life for others will mean one hundred times more when it comes to you. When you accept me, you’ll stand above all others in my life. You will always be cherished, you will always be cared for, and I’ll kill anyone who harms you without a second thought.”

And that right there is the difference between a predator and a prey animal. Despite his size, Ness’s animal spirit was a giant gentle soul. “Take me to bed,” he whispered. “Just don’t let me hurt you, please.”

“Nothing but pleasure between us, darlin’. Nothing but pleasure.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Cyrus had always been an equal opportunity player. There had been times in his life when there had only been males around, and he had what he considered a healthy sex drive. At other times, a woman caught his eye for a while, and his time with them was equally enjoyable. But Ness was a first in a lot of ways.

For one thing, his mate was a shifter, and most shifters didn't see Cyrus as a viable fuck buddy. Shifters were either scared of his power levels or distrustful of him because he was a shark. Then there was the point about Ness being untouched in every way. Cyrus commended himself on not fist bumping the air and shouting "hell yes" when he heard that little tidbit.

But that meant that Cyrus had some nerves to deal with, on Ness's part of course, but it wasn't something Cyrus had ever dealt with before. His shark was incredibly sensitive to vibrations, and the minute tremors coming through his mate's hand spoke volumes. He kept pace with Ness as they made their way through a lovely house, upstairs to a room that was slightly smaller but more comfortable than others he'd seen.

"I've used this room since the house was built." Ness was looking around. "I know it's probably not what you're used to..."

"Hey, hey, hey, there have been times when I've slept under hedges, darlin'." After kicking off his shoes, Cyrus spun around so he was facing his mate, hands resting on a broad chest. He could feel a solid heart beating slightly faster than normal and the smell of Ness's arousal was sweet and hung in the air.

"Have you ever dreamed of what making love to another person might look like?"

Keeping his voice low, Cyrus leaned in a bit closer, making small stroking motions with his hands, getting Ness used to his touch.

“They always make it seem easy in books and movies.” Ness was watching Cyrus’s hands although his own were by his side. “One minute they’re kissing on the couch and the next minute they’re naked in bed together.”

“Did you want to go downstairs? We can make out on a couch first, if you like.”

“Seems a bit pointless when we’re already where the bed is.”

“You’re not wrong.” Cyrus chuckled. “It is said that shifters are well used to nudity even around other people. But I’m guessing you’re like me and probably shifted alone for the most part.”

Ness nodded and then he frowned. “You’ve never shifted with anyone else either? That’s so sad.”

“No one seems to want to shift with another creature that could eat them, especially if they don’t know that person very well,” Cyrus said simply, his hands moving down the sides of Ness’s torso, reaching for the bottom of Ness’s t-shirt. “You and I both know it would never happen, but instincts in animals are the core part of their survival and you can’t discount that either. Let’s make this easier on ourselves for a start and get naked. That way, there’s no messing around with clothes getting stuck where they shouldn’t in the heat of the moment.”

He lifted the edge of Ness’s shirt up, and after a split second of hesitation, Ness lifted his arms and Cyrus stretched to get the shirt over Ness’s head. “That’s one bit. Now the pants.” Cyrus’s hands were back on Ness’s hips. “Just keep watching my eyes,” he added as he heard Ness’s heartrate increase. “All we’re doing is removing clothes.”

“You’re the one removing my clothes.”

“You can do mine in a second.” Cyrus shoved at the elasticated waistband of Ness’s shorts, but of course the damn material got hooked up on Ness’s dick, which was a healthy size. “See what I mean about clothing getting snagged,” he said with a laugh as he unhooked the material without any fuss or unnecessary touching because he was hoping Ness would feel more comfortable that way. The shorts fell to the floor. Cyrus held out his arms. “Now you can remove mine and we’ll head to bed.” Please, let’s get to bed soon.

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Cyrus made it all seem so easy. Clearly he had experience when it came to intimacy, but rather than be upset about it, Ness took confidence from it. Cyrus was a man who knew what he liked, had the certainty to go for what he wanted, and had no problem expressing himself. Ness wasn’t going to think about the fact that he already knew his mate’s son and his family – how was that for coincidence? But family thoughts had no place in his bedroom. Not when his mate still had that grin playing around his sexy lips.

I can do this. Ness kept a close watch on Cyrus’s face, hoping his animal would let him know if he was doing anything that made his mate uncomfortable. He just couldn’t let Cyrus’s designer labeled jacket fall on the floor, but he did manage to throw it onto a nearby chair. Unbuttoning Cyrus’s shirt, Ness’s breath hitched as the back of his fingers brushed over the skin on Cyrus’s chest.

“Keep going darlin’, you’re doing great.” It seemed like Cyrus knew just the right time to say something.

Seeing Cyrus shirtless made Ness want to suck his belly in. The man was sleek, like his animal side no doubt, and yet there was a raw harshness of his muscles that had

Ness conscious of the softness of his own body. “If we all looked the same, we’d be a boring bunch,” Cyrus said softly. “I certainly love looking at you in all your naked glory.”

Pants come next. That meant Ness had to look down, finding the button at Cyrus’s waistband. But as he fumbled, it was like it hit him what he was actually doing. I’m stripping the clothes off my mate. I’m going to be naked with someone who wants to fuck me.

That was a huge deal – life changing for Ness. Tugging at the zipper, maybe some of the material ripped. It definitely sounded like it. But Cyrus’s chuckle was like a warm caress, stoking Ness’s need. The pants slid down powerful legs and Cyrus’s cock was suddenly bobbing near Ness’s face. I have to touch.

Looking up, Cyrus’s grin had widened although his eyelids were half closed – watching him, studying him, Ness realized. “You can touch, darlin’, I’m as much yours as you’re mine.”

Ness knew how he liked to touch himself. He ran his palm up Cyrus’s length, and the man groaned. Precome left a smear on Ness’s fingers, and he did it again.

“We need that bed now, darlin’.” Cyrus’s hands were gripping his shoulders. “I want to feel your skin all over mine.”

They landed on the bed with a thud. Cyrus’s body was blanketing his and Ness barely had time to gasp at the sensation of having someone else’s skin against his own before strong hands cupped his face and Cyrus’s lips were on his. My first kiss.

Cyrus’s lips teased his as his strong fingers turned Ness’s head one way and then the other. Ness let himself be moved that way, his brain had switched off and was now in firm vacation mode. Or maybe he had a newly found sexy mode, because while



Ness's brain was glitching, his body was running on instincts.

Ness's arms were around Cyrus's back, holding the man close with a desperation Ness had never felt. One of Cyrus's legs was hooked around his, their cocks were smushed together and as they rocked and moved together, Ness couldn't even take a breath – and he wasn't sure he wanted to. Kissing Cyrus was the best thing his lips had ever tasted.

But Cyrus broke off, gasping heavily as he bent his head, nipping down Ness's neck. "You've got me so worked up." His hips thrust against Ness's. "I'm not going to be able to get inside you our first time. On three, bite me."

Bite? But Cyrus was already counting. "One...two...three." Sharp teeth sliced the side of his neck, and while Ness's brain was still trying to catch up, Ness's animal was right there with the shark it wanted forever with. His teeth sunk into Cyrus's neck on the opposite side and groaned around his mouthful as everything hit him at once. His orgasm, the feel of Cyrus's spunk mixing with his between them. The pain of the bite and the bliss that followed so quickly the pain was barely a blip. But more than the physical connection, it was the snap he felt in his soul. How, in that instant, Ness felt his mate in his head – smug, satisfied, and so damn happy.

Withdrawing his teeth, and licking over the wound, much like Cyrus had done for him, Ness was like "How...how? We've claimed each other? I thought you had to be inside of me for our bond to take."

"Or you inside of me," Cyrus reminded him, his voice quiet and firm. "I want to do that, believe me I do. I was just going with my instincts and I'm thinking the Fates are looking out for us. It did cross my mind that we need to have a bit of a chat before we go sticking our dicks in each other."

"I do know it requires prep and lube before that can happen." Ness was stroking

Cyrus's hair, and his shark didn't seem to mind.

"Ah ha, and there's also a little matter that neither of us are furry shifters."

Yawning, because apparently stroking a man's hair after having an enormous orgasm could be very relaxing, Ness said, "How is that a problem? We're not having sex in our shifted form. That wouldn't work. I've got legs in my animal form – you don't."

"Did you forget? Both of us are capable of getting pregnant, darlin'. Probably not the sort of thing we want to do on our first day? I'd say that's why our bond took, even though we haven't done that side of things yet."

Cyrus's words were like someone had thrown a cup of cold water on Ness's face. "Does that mean we can't ever have anal sex?" Admittedly, it wasn't something he'd ever considered doing, but somehow not being able to even explore the idea seemed unfair.

"It means we should probably talk to your doctor about birth control the next time we're back in Arrowtown," Cyrus suggested. "I don't know how you feel, but personally I'd like to get to know the wonderfully unique man I'm with before we start thinking about raising a family together. Unless you're in a hurry to get pregnant? In which case, where's your lube? I don't know about you, but I'm raring to go again."

For the first time since Cyrus knocked on the door, Ness laughed. In that one speech, Cyrus showed himself as the mate he would be – caring, considerate, practical, and yet ready to change his plans on a dime if it made Ness happy. "No kids. Not yet. We've got so many other things we have to work out between us first."

"The practical stuff like where we would live, shift, work, and things like that we'll sort out later," Cyrus promised. "Right now, can you point me to the bathroom."

We've made a hell of a mess between us, and I want to clean you up so I can dirty you up all over again. What do you think about oral sex?"

"That I want to give it a try?" Ness suggested. "You'll have to show me how it's done."

Somehow he didn't think Cyrus would mind.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Cyrus was unbelievably happy, and he rarely used that term to describe himself. But after a long afternoon and night getting to know his mate in almost every intimate way possible, he'd been treated to a meet and greet with Ness's shifted form earlier that morning. Ness was a very responsible shifter, and even though they'd barely had any sleep, he insisted he had to go and do his bit for the area lore. Which meant they had been down by the lake while the sun was starting to rise and the mist still lingered across the waters. It was just like the day before, but this time Cyrus was on the same side of the water as his mate.

Ness's creature was the most fascinating animal Cyrus had ever seen. In a lot of ways he resembled a colorful brontosaurus with flippers. To the touch, the skin, which Cyrus was sure was scales, was more of a leathery hide, but it was as if it was holographic, shimmering where the pale light caught it.

"No wonder people think you're magical," Cyrus murmured, cupping the large head before letting the creature go. Ness had explained to him the legend of Loch Ness over their early morning coffee, before his swim, and Cyrus could totally understand anyone's urge to pull out a phone and capture a picture of the creature moving through the mist before disappearing in the depths below.

Ness hadn't stayed under the water as long that morning, and Cyrus liked to think that was because they didn't want to stay away from their mate for too long. Cyrus sat on a blanket on the shore his animal side attuned to any possible danger, and kept seeing Ness's head pop up above the waterline every now and then, always looking in his direction. Cyrus would wave and then the head would disappear again, and he was there waiting when Ness emerged and shifted, quick to fold his mate into his robe. Cyrus's shark wasn't keen on anyone seeing their mate in animal form or naked.

It was just as much fun showering with his mate before they made their way down for breakfast. Cyrus was perfectly capable of cooking, but Ness pulled out a frying pan and started making breakfast. Cyrus kept himself busy refreshing the coffee pot, moving around Ness as though they'd been together for years. It was very domestic and comfortable between them and something Cyrus realized he'd missed in his life. Not even he and Blade's mother had shared simple things like making breakfast together, and despite him being the head of a "family" for the want of a better word, Cyrus had still lived alone and guarded his privacy furiously.

Once the breakfast dishes were out of the way, Ness had asked if Cyrus minded if he checked his emails. The sweet blush on Ness's cheeks as he asked had Cyrus thinking "to hell with the emails, lets go back to bed instead," but he understood responsibility and checked the messages on his phone while Ness went through his emails.

"What is it you do exactly?" Cyrus asked, after making sure there was nothing going on anywhere that needed his urgent attention. "What type of business had you visiting Vegas the other day, for example?"

"I fund startups." Ness looked up from his screen. "People come to me with ideas. I've always been keen on supporting innovation in all types of businesses. If I think the idea is a good one, and has a commercial viability, I put up the capital. Sometimes that money is used so they can expand something they're working on to appeal to a wider market, or I might provide the funds needed for other people to bring their concepts to life."

"That gives us another thing in common." Cyrus was pleased. "I've helped a number of people get a start in having a business of their own and when people are struggling, they always know they can come to me."

"Perhaps my Vegas opportunity should've come to you. Then he wouldn't be giving me a headache." Ness was frowning at his computer. "I was there a few days ago, as

you know. Anyone who I invest in has to sign a contract with me. I imagine you expect something similar from the people you give money to. The contract outlines what's expected on both sides of the agreement, benchmarks, deliverables, deadlines, progress reports, that sort of thing."

"Hmm." Cyrus leaned back in his chair. "My lawyers and accountants insist on that sort of thing, understandably, I know. Although I miss the days when a handshake meant something."

"Back in the good old days?" Ness smiled at him. "I know what you mean, but back in those days everyone knew everyone else, and scammers and grifters were run out of town or shot."

"Definitely the good old days." Cyrus grinned, remembering a few such occasions when that had happened in his past. "People didn't try and fuck you without lube fifty years ago. Now..." he shrugged. "I've been burned a few times over the years and learned not to take anything said to me at face value unless I fully trust the person talking."

"You don't come across to me as a man who trusts that often. Unfortunately, it could be that some people see my quiet personality and assume I'm a pushover." Ness indicated his screen. "I heard about these two brothers three months ago. They approached me through my website. They have an idea for creating a device that could accurately detect cancers in humans a lot sooner than typical blood tests do. The idea is solid and could save a lot of lives, if they can get it into the market. That's where they needed my help."

A little warning bell went off in the back of Cyrus's skull. "I assume you've met these people, verified their claims, things like that?"

"As best as I can." Ness groaned, leaning back in his chair and running his hands

through his hair. “The issue with a lot of modern technology is that it’s not like a person can fashion a prototype device out of fence wire and pieces cobbled together from old machinery. Some of the hardware for this project apparently has to be designed and manufactured before a prototype can be made, and the software can’t be tested fully until that prototype is finished.

“All I’ve seen is a stack of paperwork a mile high and a bunch of projections. I’ve met with these guys twice, and while I’m not scenting any deceit as such, some of the things they’re asking for now... We were supposed to sign the contract when I flew to Vegas a few days ago, but now they’re asking for changes. Expensive ones.”

“What’s your stake in this company if they sign the deal?” That alarm bell was ringing louder.

“Ten percent.” Ness must’ve seen the shock on Cyrus’s face although he tried to hide it. “I know most financiers would want up to fifty percent for a risky startup like this, but pretty much all I would be doing is putting up the money. The brothers would be doing the work.”

Or running off with your money. Cyrus kept that thought to himself. Ness was a lot older than him and had been conducting business since before Cyrus was born. “Are they wanting another meeting with you? Only if they’re in Vegas...”

“They’ve not mentioned it. I think they just want me to initial the changes and then send the document back to them for signing.” Sitting forward again, Ness checked the email. “The contract was meant to be paid out in three equal parts. Initially they wanted the money all in one go, citing that manufacturers would trust them more if they already had full funding. But that’s not how I work and ironically that part of the contract is the only thing they haven’t changed.

“They’re looking for an increase in the first payment from me – for the prototype – of

twenty-five percent. Which is steep considering in their financial projections they had the cost of the initial manufacturing of the parts they needed at only ten percent of the overall cost.

“They also want the first deliverables date – again this is just the prototype – to be pushed out to a year after the initial payment, instead of the six months deadline. However, they insist they would still need the second installment at the six month mark to cater for any unforeseen expenses. There’s more, a lot more, but you get the gist.”

Cyrus got the gist completely. His mate was getting scammed. “Significant changes to a contract shouldn’t just be initialed and signed off on without a discussion at least. Another face-to-face meeting would probably be a good idea.” Especially if I go with you. Ness hadn’t mentioned who the brothers were, but Cyrus knew a lot of people in Vegas, and it wouldn’t be long before he knew everything there was to know about the scammers. “It’s not like traveling to Vegas is a problem for us, and it sounds like the most sensible thing to do.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right.” Ness sighed. “It means I’ll have to push back my meeting with the scientists at my candy factory, and I was really looking forward to doing that.”

“You have a sweet factory?” Cyrus chuckled. “Why am I not surprised? Is that one of your own ventures, or another one of your investments?”

“The candy business is mine.” Again with the pink cheeks. “I’ve been fascinated with sugar since it was first used commercially. I have a team coming up with new ideas now, but candy creation was one of my full time jobs for quite a few years until the investment side of things started taking up more of my time.”

“I can see you in a white lab coat playing with sugar products.” Cyrus knew his eyes



were gleaming because Ness's blush deepened.

"I'll write to these two and let them know I'll be back in Vegas... when would work for you?" Then Ness shook his head. "Look at me making all the plans without even discussing it with you first."

"I'm happy to go back to Vegas with you tomorrow, as you'd originally planned to leave here then. After your morning swim of course. I can send my plane back now, and I'll travel with you." Cyrus pulled up his pilot's number and typed a quick message. "That will give me a chance to show you my Vegas base, we can get the wrinkles in this contract business of your ironed out, and then make plans on where to go from there."

"We should probably go to Arrowtown sometime soon as well." If Ness's cheeks got any redder they'd burst into flames. "Chat to the doctor there, possibly meet up with Blade and the others, if you wanted to let them know we're mated..."

"I can't wait to see Blade's face." Cyrus burst out laughing just thinking about it. "I have spent a hundred and ten years watching that boy grow up, and I admit his childhood was harsh, but necessary. But when I met up with him, after Ethan was born, ah, that boy of mine had finally grown up. I'm so proud of him, and as I'm equally proud I have you in my life, I think it will be fun. Blade has a saltwater pool, so you can meet my shifted form there, too, if you like."

"I'd really like that. So, today's Tuesday, we can meet the brothers on Thursday in Vegas?" Ness asked. "It will give us time to get over the flight and time zone differences."

"And then we can head out to Arrowtown for the weekend." Cyrus pulled up Blade's number and hit the message icon. "I'll let Blade know to expect us sometime over the weekend. Look at us, meshing our schedules together already."

“It probably helps that we’re both used to traveling frequently and dealing with businesses on a worldwide scale,” Ness said, typing quickly. “Are there any future appointments you have that I can add to my calendar?”

“Barring any unforeseen emergencies, nope.” Cyrus hit send on his message to his son, and then checked his calendar. “France next month, and then New York. Those are just casino inspections so I can fit them in anytime.” Looking up, he added, “It always helps to keep the staff on their toes if they never know when I’m going to turn up.”

“I can imagine you cause a stir no matter where you go.” Ness ducked his head. “Did you fancy going out for lunch?” He asked quickly and Cyrus’s heart gave an extra thump.

“Yes, my darlin’, let’s go and explore this afternoon. Play tourist. You can show me around Inverness, and then we can come back and explore each other a bit more.”

Ness just nodded, but Cyrus was sure the man was typing faster. He grinned and sent off another couple of messages to his staff back in Vegas. He wanted everything to be perfect for his mate when they got there.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

The air in Vegas was hot. To Ness, the only redeeming grace was that Vegas had a dry heat. A hundred plus degrees temperature would be unbearable for him if it came with a high humidity. “Doesn’t the temperature bother you?” He asked Cyrus as they made their way out of the plane, heading toward two cars Cyrus had arranged for them.

“Nope.” Cyrus was looking crisp and sharp in his suit, having changed his clothes just before they reached US airspace. “I’ve learned to adapt to most things over the years. A big part of my training, I suppose you can call it, when I was a lot younger involved becoming immune to aspects such as changes in temperature, dealing with injuries, various torture techniques. Nothing special. I have found over the years that training makes it a lot easier for me to deal with whatever people throw at me now, and I never worry about the weather. A hundred above, a hundred below, it’s all the same to me.”

I was only asking about the weather and in temps a hundred below you’d be dead. Since when did torture come into it? That wasn’t the first time Cyrus had alluded to a harsh upbringing. When Cyrus caught his hand and started swinging it as they walked along, Ness wondered if he should have a serious talk to his mate about it, because to Ness, those offhand comments sounded terrifying.

He truly appreciated that Cyrus was apparently being open to him about everything. His only experience with ‘family men’ came from watching movies, and none of those gave him any tips on how people like Cyrus moved through life. So far, he’d never seen Cyrus raise his voice, or threaten, or anything like that, and while Ness reasoned that as Cyrus’s mate, Cyrus would never speak to him in such a way anyway, he was curious to see how Cyrus would act now they were on his home turf.

Apparently PDAs were fine. Ness had seen that in Inverness the day before. It was as if Cyrus walked through the world totally uncaring what anyone thought about him or his actions. Ness was simultaneously aroused and quietly worried about it. He didn't have that confidence.

"I've arranged for your plane staff to stay at my hotel," Cyrus said easily, holding open the back passenger door of the first town car waiting for them. "I hope you don't think I was being overly controlling organizing that for you. I appreciate you probably have systems in place for your own staff. But I promise, my staff has been informed to look after yours, and of course, anything they want or need during their stay will be taken care of."

"Controlling? You?" Ness chuckled as he slid into the back of the car. His overnight bag had already been stowed in the trunk by the driver. "That was thoughtful, thanks."

"I'm sure you know what it's like." Cyrus hopped in beside him, sitting close enough their thighs touched as the car started to move. "You would be well used to managing things. It's second nature for both of us."

"It's nice not to have to think about things like that all the time, though. Hopefully I can do the same for you at other times."

"Having my own hotel has its uses." Cyrus hummed happily as the car started moving through the streets. The airport was only fifteen minutes' drive from the Strip, the city itself rising up out of the desert like a mirage. "I never stay anywhere else when I'm in town. Where do you usually stay when you're here?"

Ness laughed again. He was beginning to get a handle on Cyrus's competitive nature. He named a hotel on the outskirts of town, one off the Strip as he preferred to rest in somewhere a little quieter than the bright glittering hotels downtown.

“Not a bad place.” Cyrus nodded. “It’s owned by Florence and Georgio from the Catalan family. Not shifters, obviously, but they’re good people. The place is clean and efficiently run.”

“I’ve never met the owners, obviously.” Ness was quietly amused at how Cyrus spoke about somewhere he’d stayed at infrequently. “But the night manager, Brutus, is a vampire. He was always friendly and attentive.”

“Hmm.” Cyrus gave him a look Ness couldn’t decipher. “Be sure to let him know you’re mated when we see him again.”

Considering Ness doubted Cyrus would be keen on him going anywhere alone in Vegas, he didn’t see that as a problem. In the meantime, the car had pulled into an underground parking lot of one of the biggest and brightest hotels on the Strip. “Is this one yours?”

“I own the block.” Cyrus wasn’t bragging, he was stating a fact. “Sturgis will take your bag up to our suite, but I just want to call into the office first and make sure there’s nothing needing my urgent attention.”

As Ness would’ve done exactly the same thing, he walked alongside Cyrus as they took an elevator from the parking garage up twenty-five floors. The elevator opened with a soft sigh, and Ness was faced with a wide hallway that had doors interspersed on either side. There was silver embossed wallpaper on both sides, and the carpet under his shoes was plush and a lovely shade of silver gray.

“Shades of your shark?” Ness murmured indicating the walls and carpet. There was something about the hall colors that gave the impression of quiet elegance.

“Only on this floor.” Cyrus grinned, stopping outside a door that looked like any other. “My other floors are more traditional, but very few people can afford the suites

up here, so the foot traffic is minimal.” Pulling a card key from his inside jacket pocket, Cyrus swiped his card and then opened the door, indicating for Ness to go in first. “This is the hub of my operations... Shit.”

Cyrus grabbed at Ness’s arm, but Ness had already got a whiff of the scent of blood and refused to fall back, moving into the room, his nose wrinkling. Cyrus’s eyes were wide as he followed Ness in, closing the door quietly behind him. “I can explain.”

This is who my mate is, Ness reminded himself firmly as he took a seat to the side of the room. “Trying a new decorating technique?” he asked as calmly as he could, indicating the body-sized patch of congealed blood in the carpet. Inside, his heart was racing, and his animal side was ready to come out, but that wasn’t going to help. The danger, whatever it was, had clearly passed, but someone – Cyrus? – hadn’t done a very good job of cleaning up after themselves.

“Give me a minute. I need to make a call, but I swear I can explain.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Cyrus pulled his phone out of his pocket so fast, he almost dropped it. A quick scroll through his contacts, and he hit Roman's number. "I'm in my office. Is there something you forgot to tell me?" He said in Sicilian.

"Boss." The shock was evident in Roman's voice. "I didn't realize you were due back yet. I thought...I got told..."

"The carpet." Cyrus didn't give a damn what Roman thought or was told. The process for dealing with assholes who hurt the family was very clear – make the kill quick, clean, and ensure no sign of the act was ever left for anyone to find. Even a child could remember something so basic.

"I tried, Boss, but Jimmy's on holiday for two weeks. He won't be back until Monday."

Silently fuming, and conscious of Ness watching him intently, Cyrus said, still in Sicilian, "You didn't think to remove the carpet that needed replacing, or did you think it was amusing to leave my office looking like a crime scene?"

"It was only until Monday, boss. It's not like anyone goes in there except you."

"Is that right?" Cyrus growled. "I'm standing in here right now with someone very dear to me."

There was an audible gulp heard over the phone.

"You've let me down, Roman. Grab Jon and fix this, now." Cyrus went to end the

call when Roman's voice came out in a rush.

"We can't come near the hotel, Boss. I think the police are looking for us. I didn't think we needed to tell you, because you told us to lay low, and we are, but there was a problem with Jon's van when we were getting rid of the body, and then Tina called and said Chloe had gone on the run because she was so upset about her face, and then Mama called and she wanted Tina and Chloe home with her... Jon and I left the van in Rusty's garage that got raided for drugs yesterday, and they impounded the van with the body in it, which was not our fault but..."

"Holy fucking kraken's dick. You couldn't have cocked that up any more than if you'd taken that asshole down to the middle of the casino and offed him on the roulette table." Cyrus quickly glanced at Ness who was sitting with the same stony expression on his face. His mate was a shifter, he'd be able to hear Roman as clearly as Cyrus could. Which was why they were both speaking in Sicilian. "The whole lot of you need to get on my plane within the hour – everyone, Mama included. Get your asses back to Sicily and await my instructions."

"But Mama's got her bingo this afternoon. She's going to be so upset..."

"She's going to be even more upset if I take you out. You've got one hour, or I'll come after you myself," Cyrus said bluntly. "You begged for the chance to avenge your sisters' honors. I understood. I granted you that favor so you could look your mama in the eyes again. And this is how you repay me? With your incompetence? I trusted you not to mess things up. Report to Stefan in Sicily and do not let me down again because it will be the last thing you do."

Disconnecting the call, Cyrus gently blew out a long breath. "My apologies," he said calmly in English. "There has been an issue. It happens in families sometimes. Perhaps we could go to my suite, and I can explain the situation more thoroughly?"



“What more needs to be explained, do you think? The way you discussed someone’s murder in front of me, or the fact that the men who did it were avenging their sisters’ honor?”

Cyrus’s mouth dropped open. Everything Ness said was spoken in flawless Sicilian. “Yes, I know the language. After three thousand years, there are very few dialects or languages I don’t know.”

Well shit. But Ness hadn’t finished. “I believe your first concern should be getting someone in to remove this carpet, right now in fact. I’m sure you have people who can do that. Then I want lunch, during which you can tell me the truth about your family and how the actions of your family aren’t considered criminal in your eyes. Because if you recall the day we met, you told me you definitely didn’t do anything illegal, and yet the last time I checked the law statutes in Nevada, I’m fairly sure being an accessory to murder is a criminal offense.”

For the first time in a very long time, Cyrus felt a shaft of fear – not about being caught for anything criminal, but because of the lack of expression in Ness’s voice. “Are you going to leave me?” he asked, barely believing he was asking the question, but they were the first words that spilled out of his mouth.

Ness shook his head. “That’s not what mates do to each other. But I do believe, as your mate, I have the right to hear the truth about the man I’m bound to for life, don’t you?”

All Cyrus could do was nod. He quickly lifted his phone again, tapping the number for his housekeeper. “I need a forensic clean of my office in ten minutes. Use the emergency code. Thank you.” Disconnecting as soon as he heard a positive response, Cyrus gave orders to the pilot to get his plane ready and then sent a text over the secure family network to Stefan in Sicily, letting him know ten packages needed picking up in eighteen hours’ time.

Through it all, Ness just sat in silence, watching him. “Is there anything in particular you want for lunch?” Cyrus asked, his finger hovering over the button for the kitchen.

There was a flicker of something – some emotion Cyrus couldn’t identify – that passed over Ness’s face. “I’d like one of your finest marbled steaks, medium well, dressed with a creamy mushroom sauce, a baked potato with garlic butter, and a side salad of apples, yellow peppers, and zucchini with no dressing. Thank you.”

Considering Cyrus wasn’t sure he’d be able to eat anything, he ordered two of the same meal to be delivered to his room as quickly as possible. “If you’d like to come with me, I can show you our suite.”

Ness gave a pointed look at the stain on the carpet before standing and following Cyrus to the door. Cyrus had a feeling that all of the mistakes he’d ever made in his life were about to bite him squarely on the ass.

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Ness didn’t hold his hand on what felt the endless trip back to the elevator, in the elevator, and up to the suite. Cyrus decorated the whole top floor of his hotel for his personal use. If someone asked for a penthouse suite in any of his hotels they were always situated on the second to top floor, regardless of how high the building was. In Cyrus’s head, it was another way of proving his status to others, but he didn’t get any pleasure at the sight of his ornately decorated entranceway or the feeling of the softness of his plush carpet as he removed his shoes at the door. It did warm his heart, a little bit, when Ness did the same, setting his shoes next to Cyrus’s.

“The master bedroom is down the hall that way,” Cyrus pointed to his right. “There’s also a gym and a private pool down that way. The living quarters are this way, along with a full kitchen, but I usually find it easier to order meals from the downstairs kitchen. Dry cleaning and laundry is picked up at eight each morning when we’re

here, and the household staff comes through every afternoon between one and two. I'm usually out that time of day, allowing them to work uninterrupted."

Ness nodded, but was still silent as they went through to Cyrus's dining room. Ness took a seat at the table, but Cyrus was still on edge and went into the kitchen. "I'll put some coffee on," he said, grabbing some mugs and switching his machine on. "What do you think of this place? We get a lot of light with the wide windows, and it's all fully soundproofed so that the noise from the Strip and the casino downstairs is never a problem."

"It's very stylish," Ness said quietly. "The lack of blood on the carpet is a bonus."

O-kay. Ness clearly wasn't in the mood for small talk. The problem was that Cyrus, for all his animal's instincts in being able to sense emotions and vibes from people ten, twenty, or even fifty feet away, couldn't get a handle on what Ness was thinking or feeling. It was as if his ancient mate had managed to block him in some way, and that was making Cyrus nervous.

The coffee was made too quickly. Cyrus kept reminding himself that Ness was his mate. He just needed to be introduced into Cyrus's world slowly. At least, that's what Cyrus had thought while they were in Scotland. Yes, Ness needed to know, and over time he would come to understand why Cyrus lived by the code he did. But the blood-splattered carpet was like slapping Ness around the face with the type of life Cyrus found perfectly normal.

"I'm sure there have been times in your life when you've gone through or experienced torrid times," he said, keeping his voice even as he put the coffee mugs on the table, and sat opposite his mate. His shark wanted closeness, wanted to pull the bigger man into his arms, but with the whole mental/bond blocking thing going on, Cyrus needed to see Ness's face.

“My first memories were of poverty, death, and the importance of family honor. My late father was someone who didn’t believe in sparing the rod, and I learned five different ways of how to kill a man before I learned to read or write. Shifters weren’t out then, so we had to hide who we were, which meant using weapons to instill respect in others.” Cyrus shook his head at the memories. “For the longest time, I honestly believed everyone was raised that way.”

“I imagine you were born in Europe and definitely there was a sharp class distinction during the Middle Ages that defined how a person lived,” Ness said quietly. “If your family was of the laborer class, you wouldn’t have had a lot of opportunity to do much else but work the land unless your late father was skilled in a trade.”

“Yes, well, I am not sure where you were during that time, but believe me, when you’re living on a small island, the impact of the outside world was minimal, at least where I lived. The late Middle Ages is when the whole idea of the mafia was born, and believe me, it was alive and well where I lived.” Cyrus made a conscious effort to push the bitterness out of his tone. “Ancient history so they say, and it was, at least to me. Let’s just say I was raised to believe that family was everything, and that there were two forms of governance – one that sought to suppress the commonfolk and one for the families.”

“I understand that,” Ness said, leaning forward, his elbows on the table, “but from all I’ve read about the mafia and similar organizations over the years, why did they have to be rooted in criminal activities?”

“How else was a man expected to retain his independence and still put food on the table?” Cyrus shook his head. “I’m not saying it’s right. But I know there was not one child raised in a criminal family who went hungry. How many people could say that throughout history?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Ness was well aware he'd lived a life of privilege. Even back before paranormals were known to the population in general, he came from a strong and respectable family who had always been associated with people in power. Whether it was being the adviser to kings and warriors in times of old, or living as a family of influence in remote areas around the world, Ness's family had always been well-off compared to the standards at the time. They were people who used their long lives to see and capitalize on trade routes as the world slowly opened up.

Wealth brought privilege. In the days before technology, it was easy for Ness's father to move his family from one area to another when the lack of aging became problematic, carrying with him letters of recommendation that introduced him to other society leaders. There had never been a time when Ness had to struggle for anything. He'd worked hard – he still did. His father instilled in him a strong work ethic, to the point Ness worried if he took a week off. But he'd never struggled. If one plan didn't work, another one would, and Ness had learned over the years how to cut his losses before they got too great and move on.

The only issue Ness had during his very long life was the fact he had to keep moving every ten to twenty years. But then, just fifty years before, paranormals came out to the general population. Although Ness was from a very rare species of shifter, he could and did move his main base of operation to a shifter town, Arrowtown, and generally didn't have to worry about his lack of aging anymore.

In all of the time Ness had walked the earth, he never expected to be faced with a mate who'd come from the other side of the tracks, someone who'd spent their years pulling themselves up from nothing, and genuinely making something of himself. Ness couldn't deny that Cyrus had the same work ethic he did – he'd seen examples

of Cyrus keeping track of his many businesses just in the short few days they'd been together. But Cyrus didn't work alone the way Ness did. He had a family behind him, or underneath him – Ness wasn't sure of the dynamic just yet. But there was no denying his mate had a made family who could see Cyrus ending up in jail if he wasn't careful.

“I have this urge to apologize for what you went through in your life, even though your upbringing had absolutely nothing to do with me,” Ness said slowly. “I'm going to believe that you don't randomly go around killing people just for shits and giggles. You wouldn't have been blessed with a fated mate if you were evil to the core, and I don't believe you are. My concern about what I saw in your office and heard during your call presumably to the person responsible for the mess in your office,” he added, meeting Cyrus's eyes, “is that your strong ties and loyalty to the people you call family could get you into considerable trouble, causing issues for you and me as a couple.”

“I've never killed anyone who wasn't trying to kill me first, and I've never authorized a kill unless the person due for death hadn't physically hurt someone in my family first.”

“Which is really no different to how any shifter sees the world in a way.” Ness nodded. “Most shifters will protect their loved ones and see nothing wrong with killing someone who harms them.”

Cyrus eyed him, his black eyes intense. “You don't see things that way?”

“It's never been our way – my species, I mean.” Ness chuckled. “In reality, that's probably why there are so few of us left. Our beast is passive. We tend to be solitary, we prefer to live in remote areas, and we are a lot happier when people leave us alone. I'm not saying I wouldn't fight for you, I'm saying I'd always hope I wouldn't have to. In my family, there were more ways of getting at a person, particularly a

non-para, than by taking their life. Ruining their businesses, taking them to court...but...but...I'm saying this from the perspective where no one has ever physically attacked me before."

Ness could see Cyrus didn't understand, and with the brief stories Cyrus had mentioned about how he was raised that was understandable. Talking in abstracts wasn't going to help. He needed for Cyrus to see how the morning's events impacted them personally. "I'm not saying that you did wrong in any of this. I don't need the details. You didn't make the kill. Instead, you allowed two men...?" He trailed off, looking for confirmation.

"Roman and Jon, they're brothers. Two of their sisters were badly abused by a paying client at the hotel, causing lasting physical injuries. That is unacceptable to me, and as you heard, their mama, as well, who is a very strong and well-respected older woman within the family."

"I'm sorry the two women went through that," Ness said, and he was being sincere. Ladies of the night had been an established part of society since man learned what his dick was for. Ness had always maintained that anyone, regardless of gender, who sold their bodies should have the same rights to protection and feeling safe as anyone else. "My issue is with the state of your office and the way we found it."

There was a small bell sound, and Cyrus nodded. "Hold that thought. The food is here." He got up and left the dining room. Ness heard the sound of the door opening and the soft sound of voices before the door closed again. Seconds later Cyrus was back.

"Did you want to eat first, talk while we eat, or should I put this in the oven to stay warm while we talk?"

His mate was still nervous, Ness's animal side let him know that. And while it was

tempting to just let the whole matter drop, Ness genuinely believed they were at a crucial point in their mating. He could either turn a blind eye and just pray Cyrus kept himself out of trouble, or he could make a concerted effort to be an honest partner in Cyrus's life. Honesty won out.

"I can talk and eat. I was the one who said I was hungry, and that food does smell good. Thank you."

It took a few minutes to get things organized – minutes Ness used to get his thoughts in order. "The way I see it," he said once Cyrus was eating as well, "the issue is that you trusted your men to follow a certain procedure, I assume, related to their killing someone, and those men let you down."

"On multiple fronts, from what I understand. I'm still going to have to get in touch with my contacts and find out what sort of a mess the body being found in that garage is going to cause. There's also the little matter of someone dealing drugs out of a garage in my territory, which is not something I allow."

There was a certain menace in Cyrus's voice that Ness shouldn't have found exciting, but his dick perked up as if someone flicked a switch. Ness forced himself to concentrate on his food and their conversation.

"I believe that might be one of the problems with having such a large territory and a family you're responsible for. If we take the body being found, for example" – I can't believe I am having this conversation while I'm eating – "if something had happened within this hotel such as a fire, flood, issue with the sprinklers, or whatever else, and people in authority needed access to your office, then you just know someone would be taking DNA samples from that carpet, tying you personally to a dead body found in a drug dealer's garage."

"Which is why Roman and Jon and the rest of their family are on their way to Sicily."



Cyrus sighed. “I can’t believe they fucked that situation up so badly. I would’ve noticed it earlier, obviously, but I disappeared to Scotland that same day.”

Again, Ness didn’t feel Cyrus was assigning blame or anything else, just stating his facts. “What type of paranormal are Roman and Jon?”

“Human, and before you ask, the paying client who met a grisly end was human, too.”

That was surprising and even more worrying. “I think this is where we have a problem, mate of mine,” Ness said bluntly. “The laws pertaining to humans criminal behavior are drastically different from the justice administered by the paranormal council. You facilitated a situation where two men killed another in cold blood, in your office. The reason why, in a human court of law, isn’t going to mean shit to them. What the media and prosecutors would try and turn that case into, because there are still pockets of resistance to a shifter’s existence overall, is a case where a predatory shifter encouraged two humans to take out a defenseless man, again it doesn’t matter why,” he added as Cyrus opened his mouth to speak.

“An eye for an eye and a death for harming a loved one are shifter concepts upheld by the paranormal council and relates to paranormal on paranormal cases. Human laws are very different.”

“The brothers had a right to their vengeance,” Cyrus said around a mouthful of potato.

“Fair enough. But why was that vengeance carried out in your office? The ladies went to their client’s room, yes? Why wasn’t the man killed in his room once you found out what he’d done? Better still, why wasn’t that same man spirited away from the hotel and killed in the desert? Why was it here? Why in your office? From what you’ve told me, you’ve had over seven hundred years’ worth of experience when it

comes to killing people and disposing of bodies. What possessed you to let something like that happen in your office, which you said yourself was the hub of your organization?”

“You’re upset with me because of where the man was killed?”

There was a lot of surprise in Cyrus’s tone, but Ness was working up to a full head of steam. “Damn straight I am. If you have to do anything like this for any freaking reason, then doesn’t it make sense to do it in such a way that you won’t get caught? The man’s body was probably found with his hotel keycard still in his jacket pocket or something ridiculous, and that’s without the DNA issue. You might just have well taken out an advertisement and said you and your men were responsible. For fuck’s sake!”

Ness blew out a long breath and then picked up a forkful of food and stuffed it in his mouth before he said anything else. Killing was not an effective way of dealing with problems and not the kind of thing Ness wanted to encourage in his mate, although his mind had already come up with a list of a dozen ways the situation in Cyrus’s office could’ve been avoided.

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My mate has hidden depths. Cyrus was annoyed not because Ness was wrong with what he was saying, but because he was right. And it wasn't Ness that Cyrus was annoyed with, it was himself. He was stunned that Ness hadn't demanded he give up his family, give up his way of life immediately. In truth, if Ness had done that, then Cyrus would have to comply. Mates came before all else in a shifter's life.

But no, Ness hadn't done that. In fact, as Cyrus finished off his steak, he could almost see the spreadsheets and lists in Ness's brain, cataloging his murder mistakes and coming up with a list of solutions so it wouldn't happen again. It was Ness's way of protecting him, and viewed in that light, Cyrus felt doubly special.

Pushing aside his plate, Ness had already finished his meal and was nursing his coffee, Cyrus held out his hand, hoping Ness would take it. He did. Just that simple touch sent a huge sense of relief cascading through Cyrus's body.

"I've clearly made some fundamental errors and allowed other mistakes to be made in this situation. What would you suggest I do now, given how the death was a human-on-human matter and will likely be investigated by the regular law enforcement officers? You mentioned the keycard and that does bother me, but Roman and Jon are likely in the air by now, so it's not like I can call and ask them if they thought to collect it."

"It's not like I've even run a murder-for-hire business or ever considered the ramifications of a revenge killing. This is far more your expertise than mine." Ness shook his head. "But if you're asking, assume the keycard from the hotel is in the dead man's pocket. Have his personal affects been left in his room?"

Cyrus pulled out his phone with his free hand, unwilling to let go of Ness, thumbing through his hotel reservations and checking on the room status. “The room is still showing as reserved in his name. He’d booked to stay here for a week, so housekeeping won’t even try to access the room until Saturday.”

“What do you do in cases where a person has stayed beyond their booking time and their things are still in the room?”

“If we can’t get in touch with the client, which does happen sometimes. The whole point of a casino is to encourage people to lose track of time. But if it happens, then the room is cleared out and the personal belongings are held in a secure locker in the basement until someone comes along to claim them.”

“Sounds logical.” Ness was clearly still thinking. “The room will already have someone else waiting for it, and the fastest way to encourage someone to get in touch with you to pay their account would be to move their things.” Ness was quiet for a moment, stroking Cyrus’s fingers. Cyrus wondered if his mate even knew he was doing it, but it felt nice.

“The van isn’t connected to the hotel in any way?”

Cyrus shook his head and then frowned. “I imagine it’s in Jon’s name and he is listed as an employee of this hotel, which isn’t going to look good.”

“No, but you are a rich shifter business owner who has numerous hotels and businesses and likely thousands of employees. You can’t be expected to know what they all get up to. Provided no one knows the brothers and their whole family escaped the country on your private plane, the situation could be written up as a case of two rogue hotel workers and some unfortunate client who lost his money in Vegas. Nothing to do with you.”

“No one will know they are on the plane.” Cyrus was certain of that. No passengers were ever listed on any trips to or from Sicily. It was a habit from the old days when the mafia ruled Las Vegas, but it was a rule that proved useful on occasion. “Anything else?”

“Maybe next time something like this happens, at least make sure the deaths don’t occur on hotel property. It’s not good for business.”

Cyrus had to chuckle over that. “You’re determined to look out for me in your own way, aren’t you?”

“You said yourself it’s what mates do. I did not go into this mating wanting to change you. My parents tried to do that to me for centuries, and I hated it. Is there anyone else in your made family who is paranormal, too?”

“No.” Cyrus sighed. “Blade left the business as soon as he could to build one of his own, so that’s a definite no, my darlin’. Everyone knows to stay away from a shark doing business. Even before they knew what I was, many people got that sense there was something ruthless about me and were understandably wary around me.”

“And you capitalized on that, which is not a bad thing,” Ness hastened to add. “I imagine you don’t have any trouble getting respect from others, whereas I’ve not always been as lucky in that. I’m not saying it’s easy, either, having a family who is all governed legally, by a different set of laws than us. But it is something you need to keep forefront in your mind.”

Yawning, Ness added, “Is there anything else I should know about your business that might slap me in the face at a later stage and you believe I need to know now? Only I don’t know about you, but even though it’s only lunchtime here, I didn’t get a lot of sleep on the plane...”

The look Ness gave him was accusing and heated all in one go. The perfect combination as far as Cyrus was concerned. “I’ll show you our room, give you a tour of our suite, darlin’. I’ll even tuck you into bed, if you like.”

“Like you won’t be under the blankets with me.” Ness laughed, and as his mate was right, Cyrus just smiled and showed Ness his bedroom.

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It was quite a few hours later and Cyrus and Ness were still in bed, limbs entangled, just enjoying their physical closeness. The room had dimmed, although not completely. Despite the window coverings, the sky in Vegas seemed to get brighter at night, and Cyrus didn’t believe he’d ever seen it truly dark.

Outside of the room didn’t matter at that moment. Cyrus felt a lot more settled. Ness was the type of man who wouldn’t let a person touch him if there was anything unusual or uncomfortable between them. And there had been plenty of touching on both sides. Cyrus was dithering, thinking about getting up to go and eat or to order more room service and have dinner in bed when Ness stirred.

“What’s it like having anal sex?” His mate’s voice was warm, deep, and full of sleep.

“I’m probably not the right person to ask, darlin’. It’s been five hundred years or more since I’ve been on the receiving end of someone’s dick, and when it came to penetrating others...” Cyrus trailed off. No shifter liked to talk about past partners or hear about them. “From what I have heard from others, everything’s different between mates, with senses and sensations heightened. I can believe that because the blow job you gave me earlier is more exciting to me than anything I’ve shared with others before. With you, a simple kiss is enough to rock my world.”

“I think you’re flattering me.” Ness turned in his arms, and Cyrus marveled at how

easily their bodies fit together, legs entwined, Ness's hands falling naturally on Cyrus's chest and his hip. "I can feel the bond between us." He tapped Cyrus above his heart. "I know we're joined at a soul and physical level, but it's as if my beast knows there's more. Is that just my puberty hormones talking?"

Cyrus shifted his arm so he could stroke his mate's unruly hair. "No, darlin', my shark feels it, too, and I started puberty at twelve years old and was finished with it..." Cyrus cut himself off – he could remember the moment and the person he ended his puberty with. "I was fourteen when things settled down."

"Slut," Ness teased.

"I did it on a dare and times were different back then. It wasn't a time of my life where enjoying yourself was encouraged." Keen to move on, Cyrus said, "We're heading to Arrowtown for the weekend. We can talk to your shifter doctor there about birth control."

"But will it work?" Ness looked genuinely worried. "He's probably going to recommend condoms, but I've never heard of a shifter brand of condom, and I feel... I have an ache inside, deep in my belly..."

"You're worried your beastie needs my spunk inside of you to feel truly claimed?" There was no other way Cyrus could say it.

"I don't know. I've never heard of a male of my kind getting pregnant, but then it's like I said, none of the living beasties I know of, and there truly aren't that many, but they are all in male-female bond matings."

"Is that something we can ask your doc about, do you think? Maybe, because there are so few of your kind, maybe you can't get pregnant and it's only me who could?"

“I thought that was possible in all non-furry shifters and other paranormals.”

“I think you’re right, darlin’. I was just clutching at straws because I want to do that with you, and yes, I mean both ways, more than you can know.” Cyrus cupped his mate’s strong face, stroking his thumbs over Ness’s cheeks. “It’s just a few more days. We’ll get this meeting of yours handled, make sure there’s nothing going to cause problems for the hotel with that other business we’d dealt with today, and then fly out to Arrowtown and see the doc as soon as we can. Agreed?”

“I’ve never felt this way before,” Ness confided quietly. “It’s disconcerting and makes me feel bad as well. I mean, what does it say about me that you wring the most amazing toe-curling orgasms from my body, and I still feel something’s missing between us when the pleasure subsides? Something that genuinely makes me ache inside.”

Cyrus wasn’t going to dismiss his mate’s concerns. From the sounds of it, the doc did that for long enough before finally telling Ness he was likely going through a hellishly delayed puberty. And then a thought hit him. “You said, back when you first opened the door to me, and I told you who I was, that Doc was right. Was that about finding your mate.”

Ness frowned as if remembering and then said, “Yes. Doc had tried to find out how I got to adulthood without going through such an important developmental stage. I mean, if you look at it, if any species fails to become sexually aware or ready to procreate, then that species would die off.”

“And you genuinely never thought about sex until recently? Not in all that time?”

“The world doesn’t revolve around sex. I was busy working, and my life was full enough.”



“I didn’t mean to upset you, darlin’.” Cyrus realized Ness was feeling defensive and understandably so. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to live for more years than most people could comprehend and never think about sex. “You said Doc believed you might be going through puberty now - thinking about sex, getting urges you’ve never had – because it was your body’s way of preparing to meet your mate.”

“Doc is another unusual shifter – he’s a Komodo dragon – and what a lot of people don’t know about him is that he spent years, decades even, studying the possibility of our animal spirits knowing we’re due to meet our mates before that person even comes into our sphere of existence.

“Apparently he knew about his mate, a bull shifter who works as a deputy in Arrowtown, a good couple of years before they claimed each other. Admittedly, they were living in the same town, but Doc mentioned once that he believed the urge to move to Arrowtown after his previous bond mate’s death was because his animal side knew Joe would be there even though it never crossed his mind to keep an eye out for his fated mate.”

“Fated mates have always been ascribed to...well the Fates, but then we’ve never known why some people are born with their dual spirits of man and animal, when so many other people aren’t. Do you think it’s possible our animal sides are more in tune with the Fates than we give them credit for?”

“I don’t know, but anything’s possible.” Ness chuckled. “How did our conversation go from me describing a physical ache to us discussing the meaning of life as a shifter?”

“I think they’re related,” Cyrus said gently, pressing his forehead against Ness’s, breathing in the essence that was uniquely Ness. “I think, given that you come from a species where the total number of your kind is less than a hundred, that your animal side was not only preparing to meet me, but to breed as well.”

“The mind boggles at what a mix of you and I would look like in their shifted form,” Ness said after a long minute. “Shall we go out for dinner? You can show off your casino. I’m fairly sure I haven’t been in this one.”

A conversation to be continued on another day, Cyrus thought as he gently kissed his mate.

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At first glance Hank and Ron Vine looked like two overgrown college kids. Blond hair flying in all directions, thin black-rimmed glasses, giving them a studious air, and dressed in casual t-shirts and ripped jeans.

Ness had never considered what a person looked like as a barometer for how many ideas they might have or how hard they worked. Looks were often deceiving, and Ness had made a lot of money out of businesses forged by people with greasy hands and a lack of social skills.

It had gotten to the point that Ness would often be more cynical and distrusting of those who wore the sharp suits and spoke in a constant stream of buzzwords. Yes, he was interested in a product that met a gap in the market, but more important was the passion the inventors had for their ideas and how they wanted them used.

Waiting for the brothers the next morning, a few minutes before Hank and Ron were due to arrive, Ness was alone in the conference room. It was a new-to-him space, one of the many meeting rooms in Cyrus's hotel, a couple of floors down from Cyrus's penthouse suite. Cyrus suggested he use it, and Ness didn't see any problem in agreeing. Previous meetings with the brothers had been at the other hotel he'd stayed at during earlier trips to Vegas, so in a way his upcoming meeting wasn't going to be any different.

He was surprised Cyrus hadn't accompanied him, not that Ness needed him there. But after spending every minute with his mate since Cyrus had knocked on his door, Ness felt weird...slightly off. Cyrus had gotten a text message just as they were making their way downstairs and said he had something to do in the main lobby. He assured Ness he'd be there shortly before hitting the elevator button for the ground

floor.

I'm sure I'll freaking survive without him for five minutes, Ness chided himself. This being mated business was still something he was getting used to.

A quick tap on the door and Hank and Ron came in, nervous energy only partially hidden by bright smiles. Coming over to the table, they both held out their hands, which Ness shook, before taking a seat.

"Mr. Duncan, you really didn't have to make another trip out here just over a few contract matters," Hank said. He always gave the impression he was the more confident of the two brothers, and Ness figured he was probably a few years older than Ron. "We could've handled all this via email."

"I had other matters to attend to while I was here, so this was no bother," Ness said, opening up the folder in front of him which had a copy of the contract and the email the brothers had sent asking about the changes.

"Yes, but here?" Ron said, looking around as if he thought the walls were going to fall in. "This isn't your usual haunt."

"The location fit in with my other meetings. Now, I'm sure you'll both agree the extensive number of changes you're wanting in our contract comes across as a red flag by itself." Ness tapped the email printout. "We had a meeting barely more than a week ago, one where you outlined your projections and forecasts, and this contract was written up accordingly. What's changed?"

The two brothers looked at each other, and the anxiety in the air increased. Ness's animal side wasn't the most astute in picking up those cues – in comparison to a wolf or bear shifter for example - but surviving for so long came with perks.

“We’re thinking we might have to change manufacturers,” Ron said just before the silence became uncomfortable. “A newer company approached us, and over the long term, their offer seemed more beneficial to us.”

Ness glanced through his papers although he already knew what he was looking for wasn’t there. “Do you have a copy of that new offer?” he asked, looking up and meeting Hank’s eyes. “I must’ve forgotten to print out any of the attachments you added to your last email.”

“Oh, no, we didn’t attach anything to the last email,” Hank said. “The offer is still at the verbal stage at the moment, but it’s looking very promising.”

Resting his elbows on the table, Ness smiled, channeling his mate’s inner shark. “When do you think an agreement with this manufacturer will be finalized?”

“Not more than a week or so.” Ron joined Hank in the nodding head department. “Once the contract for the finance has been signed, the manufacturer has agreed he will put our order in a priority queue.”

“I had wondered about that.” Ness tapped the email. “In here you want to adjust the first deliverables for this agreement from six months from date of signing to one year. I’m failing to see how this can be beneficial to your company, when someone could easily come along with a desktop CNC metal cutting machine in the meantime and make the parts for themselves. At least enough for a prototype.”

“Part of the initial funding will go toward applying for patent protection,” Ron said.

“As for the deliverables, we discussed in our last meeting that we wanted to give ourselves a buffer when it comes to the timeline. All good businessmen factor in those little ‘life happens’ contingencies into their plans. The new manufacturer felt our six months’ timeline was too optimistic and after long consideration we agreed.”

Hank was being overly bright in his tone. “It’s vitally important that we get every stage of this process right from the start.”

“Fair enough.” Ness didn’t need to be a wolf or a bear shifter to know he was being shit on from a great height. “I respect that you have more expertise in that particular area than I do. However, the one thing I do know about is financing. I will be happy to agree to a change of manufacturer, after you’ve sent me the company details – you can just forward them to my email if you don’t have them with you. The last thing we want is to give your company money to a manufacturer on the brink of bankruptcy.” He laughed, and after a moment, Ron and Hank chuckled as well.

“I’m also concerned about the increase in funding required for the first installment, especially if this company you plan to work with is supposed to be bettering the offer you sent in with your original proposal. But we can decide about that once I know the company you’ll be working with.” Ness looked up. “I have a lot of business contacts myself, so once I’ve seen the offer, I might be able to arrange something more cost effective for you.”

“It’s not just about the cost,” Ron said after Hank elbowed him. “Business relationships are about finding the right fit for the vision of our new company.”

“I agree, but anyone going into business without considering the cost factors are fools. They’re the ones who end up filing for bankruptcy and leaving a lot of other businesses and individuals out of pocket. We don’t want that, do we?” Ness grabbed his papers between both hands, tapping them onto the table. “All right, so the situation we have at the moment is that you need to send your manufacturer’s details to me so I can do a check on that offer, make sure there’re no little fine print details that could mess things up. We’ve been through this before...” he added.

“Er...that’s the problem, Mr. Duncan,” Ron jumped in quickly. “The new manufacturer won’t give us a contract until we can prove we have the financial

backing in place. That's why we needed the signed loan agreement from you."

"Hmm." Ness tilted his head to one side. "All right, I can see why they might do that and it's not a problem. Give me the name and contact details of the person you've been dealing with, and I'll have a chat with them personally. There's nothing wrong with putting my reputation to work for us. Now, with regards to the finance installments..."

There was a sharp knock at the door and when it opened, Cyrus wandered in looking very sharp, followed by two men who looked like they ate bricks for breakfast, who quickly closed the door and framed either side of it.

"Cyrus?" Ness smiled, although the stench of fear suddenly filled the room, and it wasn't coming from him. "I'm just about finished with my meeting. Is something wrong?"

"Not with you, darlin'. Never with you." Sauntering around the table, Cyrus dropped a kiss on Ness's head, before facing the two men sitting across from him, both of whom looking as though they were about to shit themselves. "These two however... Are you going to tell Mr. Duncan what's actually going on, or shall I?"

"Mr. Marinus, sir. How...why...This is a private meeting." Ron went to get up from his chair, but Cyrus growled – a low and very sexy sound that had Ron fall in his seat again.

"Try again."

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In the old days, like two weeks ago, Cyrus would've handled things a little differently when faced with a situation of two known scammers trying to ply their trade on someone he knew. He would've still stormed into a similar meeting, although he wouldn't have kissed the person being taken advantage of – that was a Ness special. But he would've gone in, complete with his own guards, pulled the scumbags from their chairs, shaken them down for everything they had on them, and then he would have them driven out to the desert and leave them to find their own way back. And good luck with that.

But Cyrus liked to think he was now an improved man. The conversation he had with Ness the day before had him remembering that the two men trying to scam his darlin' were human and Ness would not be happy if he had to get the carpet stripped out of another room in his hotel.

"I'm waiting." It was like watching two fish on the end of a large hook, dangling from a long line. Ness had leaned back in his chair, apparently happy enough to let Cyrus take the lead.

"We have a really good business idea, Mr. Marinus," Ron insisted. "Mr. Duncan was prepared to finance us, and if we can get this off the ground..."

"Correction." Cyrus held up a finger. "You stole a really good business idea that someone else has just gone to prison for because she did exactly the same thing you are trying to do – steal funds from unsuspecting investors for a great concept that hasn't got a shit show of working. But go on" - Cyrus's shark was present in his eyes as he glared at the two men - "explain to me how your idea was any different to the one that was outlined at length in a documentary, cable television series, and likely a



movie as well.”

There was a long silence, although the stench of fear and nerves hadn’t abated any. Finally Hank said, “Well, clearly we’re at an impasse. We genuinely thought the idea would work. The research we did on this project…”

“It wasn’t your research.” Cyrus was holding onto his temper by a very thin thread. “Let me tell you why I’m late for this meeting, shall I? My receptionist alerted me that you two entered these premises – a place you’re banned from – thanks to the facial recognition software I have running behind every camera in the building. Now, there’s a solid use of technology for you.”

“We weren’t here to drink or gamble,” Ron mumbled.

“You’re not allowed to step foot on any of my premises for any reason,” Cyrus reminded him grimly. “However, rather than drag you out by your sorry asses, which was my first intention, I decided to do my own bit of research. I called your Aunt Jessie. She used to work for me years ago, until she had to stop work and raise you two. Very lovely lady and so helpful.” Cyrus leaned his arm on Ness’s shoulder.

“You’d think with young men like this who were wanting to be at the forefront of innovative medical technology, that they’d think to password protect their laptop and clear their browsing history. Shall I tell your prospective financier where your research came from, or will you?”

Ron pressed his lips together, but Hank said, “It was very solid research.”

“How would you know? Your research consisted of a couple of papers written by one of those paper mills on the internet. The sort of place who makes up garbage for lazy students who couldn’t be bothered to do their own assignments. All you had to do was add your name to the top. All acquired for the princely sum of twenty dollars a

page, although Aunt Jessie told me you got a discount, Ron, because you're a return customer. It's very clear how you got your degree."

"I wasn't aware places like that existed," Ness said quietly.

"That's because you're decent and you take people at face value. These two have been running one scam after another since they were ten years old. The original manufacturing proposal came from a legitimate company, but there was an email from them on Ron's laptop advising our intrepid duo here that the parts they'd ordered could be sourced readymade from another supplier at a fraction of the cost. The friendly customer service rep there even provided a link."

"I don't recall getting a copy of that correspondence." Ness flicked the papers in front of him.

"They were after your money, darlin', and they were so close to succeeding." Cyrus grinned showing his teeth. "If you two idiots hadn't tried to renegotiate the contract so that you got more of the money agreed upon upfront, all because you got greedy, my dear Ness here would've probably wired you the money without a second's thought."

"I'll be sure to show my appreciation later," Ness said, ripping the papers in front of him in half and dropping them in a handy trash can. "Are your guards here to escort these two from the hotel?"

"They're not my guards, darlin'. Apparently these two have another appointment directly after this one, with one of the other casino owners here on the Strip. Mr. Dogra was a little concerned Ron and Hank here might be late for their meeting, so he sent across two of his men to make sure they didn't get lost going from one casino to another."

“Mr. Marinus, please.” Hank started sweating, his face bright red. “Mr. Dogra will kill us. We’re already late with our payments, but we’ve been trying really hard to get the money together.”

Cyrus wasn’t moved, although he felt a shift through the air and knew Ness was affected by the display. “I would’ve believed that if Aunt Jessie hadn’t also told me you’ve spent most of the last month playing online casinos and anytime you did get a win, according to your browsing history, you were paying cam girls for flashes of their pussy. Mr. Dogra was a little concerned that your priorities weren’t in the right place, that’s all, but I’ll let him talk to you about that.”

“Mr. Duncan, I don’t know what connection you’ve got with this shark,” Ron said bitterly as he stood up, “but he’ll fuck you over faster than you can say shit. Don’t say you weren’t warned.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Ness said firmly. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

“I told you when we met him we should’ve tried seducing Duncan instead of scamming him. Look, he took up with a shark, so he’ll clearly go with anyone,” Hank whispered to Ron as they headed for the door. “It would’ve been a lot less hassle, more enjoyable, and the guy would’ve been paying us for the rest of our days.”

“Did you just... Get out. Get the fuck out!” Cyrus roared and even the guards jumped as the four men left the room. “I’ll kill them. I’ll fucking kill them both...”

“No, you won’t.” Ness was there, on his feet, smothering Cyrus with his scent and body as he hugged him tight. “You can’t go killing anyone, not today. Jimmy the carpet guy’s not back until Monday. If you have another one of your rooms with bare floors, people will think you’re running out of money.”

“Wait, what?” Cyrus was shocked out of his anger, even though he was probably

holding onto Ness a bit too tight. “I can’t kill them because Jimmy the carpet guy is still on vacation?” He burst out laughing. He couldn’t help it. Ness looked so earnest, so sweet, so damn innocent, and yet so serious all in the one go. “You’re incredible, did you know that? So incredible.”

“So are you,” Ness said warmly. “And to say thanks for saving me an incredible amount of money today, the least I can do is buy you lunch.”

“Kiss me first.” The urges Cyrus had, wanting to claim his mate all over again inside and out, were going to have to wait. He’d have to settle for a kiss and a burger.

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“Ness.” Doc looked up at him in surprise. “Honestly, are you psychic or something? I was genuinely just about to call you. Come in, you and your new friend.”

By mutual agreement, Ness and Cyrus decided Doc’s office had to be the first place they visited once the plane touched down in Arrowtown later that day. Lunch had been a sexually charged affair with innuendo dripping like sauce in everything said. It seemed the Vine brothers’ comments as they were escorted from Cyrus’s casino had triggered something primal in the shark who had a strong need to “Claim” his mate with a capital C.

Orgasms grabbed in the back of the plane – Ness was just thankful he had a separate bedroom, otherwise the staff would’ve had a free show – hadn’t done enough, and Ness didn’t even bother stopping by his house, but drove them straight into town. Evening was falling over the shifter town, but Ness knew Doc would be available.

“My new friend is Cyrus Marinus, he’s my mate, Blade’s father, and Ethan’s grandfather as luck would have it.” Ness led Cyrus into Doc’s office, making sure to close the door. “Have a seat, Cy. Doc, what were you getting in touch with me for? Did something weird show up in my blood work?”

“Nothing more than I expected – a surge of hormones which we’d already discussed, but no.” Doc perched himself on his stool. “I wanted to ask a favor and borrow your plane for a day or so. I know it’s a big ask...”

“You can use it,” Ness broke in quickly. “Cyrus and I had planned to be here for at least the weekend and possibly longer, so whatever you need. Did you and Joe have to take a trip?”

“Not us.” Doc sighed. “I’m sure I’m not speaking out of turn if I mention Rocky has been having some issues lately.”

“Rocky’s the sheriff here,” Ness explained to Cyrus. “A wolf shifter with a love of sweet things.”

“Yes, well that love of sweet things has escalated into a full scale obsession. Cam caught him breaking into Fergus’s bakery the other night, well after it was closed. I don’t need to tell you if this news becomes public then Rocky will be out of a job. Mal was in tears. He and Cam had to bodily drag Rocky in here, and he was kicking and fighting the whole way. I had to sedate him. All Rocky could go on about was a display cake Fergus had left on his counter.”

“That’s not natural behavior for any wolf shifter,” Cyrus observed quietly.

“Exactly.” Doc nodded. “The only thing I can think of is that something’s interfering or skewing Rocky’s natural wolf instincts somehow. Unfortunately the only two magic users we have in town, Seth and Kee, they can’t pick up anything unusual about Rocky, but then neither of them have known Rocky for that long, compared to Mal or Ra for example. Mal swears there’s nothing about Rocky’s recent behavior that’s normal, and Ra agrees, but no one can think why he’s behaving the way he is now. They all agree that he’s getting worse, and I have to agree.”

“How is having access to my plane going to help? Did you need my pilot to go and pick up a specialist of some kind?” Ness asked. He knew and liked Rocky and Mal. When they turned up in Arrowtown, along with Ra, Simon, Liam, and Lucian, a few years before, the whole town benefited from it.

Ra was now the town mayor – elected with an almost one hundred percent majority. The same applied to Rocky who was voted in as sheriff. Simon had become the town’s legal expert and Liam and Lucian were both mated and settled in town as

well, with Liam working as a deputy sheriff, and Lucian owning a bookshop in town.

“I’ve reached out to one of my colleagues in New York,” Doc explained. “He specializes in magical curses on shifters.”

“You think this wolf of yours is cursed?” Cyrus sounded intrigued. “I have heard of such things happening in the old country, but it’s very rare.”

“Rare enough for me to think that’s what happened in this case,” Doc nodded. “So if it was possible for Rocky and Mal to use your plane? Rocky will have to be sedated, but even then there’s no way I can guarantee the safety of any passengers on a regular flight if some kid is eating a bag of candy or something. Simon and Darwin will go as back up, and Seth’s offered to keep an eye on Simon and Darwin’s twins in the meantime.”

“Of course, Doc, whatever they need.” Ness nodded. “I’ll contact my pilot now.”

“I have an apartment in New York that’s currently vacant,” Cyrus offered. “It comes with a car and a driver if that’ll be of any assistance.”

“Being a gangster’s certainly paid off for you, Cyrus?” But Doc was grinning. “Yes, I’ve heard about you, but we don’t judge here. It’s how you treat the people that counts in this town, not what you might do outside this town’s borders. And that would be appreciated, thank you.”

“Let me send off a few texts and thanks for letting me know.” Cyrus winked at Doc as he pulled out his phone. In a remarkably short time, Simon, Darwin, and Mal were on their way with an unconscious Rocky to the airport.

“Honestly, you’ve been a godsend, Ness, and you, too, Cyrus.” Doc slumped his back against the wall. “Fingers crossed the issue with Rocky and Mal will be resolved, and

life can go back to normal. But now that's all done, what are you doing here, Ness? I was sure that after our last conversation, meeting your mate would solve the problems you'd been having."

"It has...to a point." Ness looked at Cyrus who just smirked at him. "Somehow we managed to claim each other without having penetrative sex, which I didn't think could happen and wasn't strictly intentional, but it just happened."

"It doesn't happen like that as a rule." Doc peered at Ness. "Can you show me your mating scar?"

Ness pulled back the collar of his t-shirt and Doc's eyes widened before he nodded, and Ness let his collar go. "Have you got one, too, Cyrus?"

Cyrus's movements were almost lazy and definitely sensuous. Ness felt his blood heat as his mate showed off his mating scar.

"You're definitely claimed, then. I'd say that's because of you, Ness. Yet another wonderful anomaly of your species. I do wish we knew more about your kind. But all right. You haven't had penetrative sex and that's because...?"

"We didn't want to get pregnant. Neither one of us is furry. I know you'd probably suggest condoms and we did think about that, but there's something going on inside of me, and... You're going to think I'm totally loopy." Ness sighed.

"Don't go saying that about yourself," Cyrus said, sitting up and reaching for Ness's hand. "The thing is, Doc, I can understand my need to fuck my mate until he can't stand. Perfectly normal. But we're both businessmen, we both travel extensively, and we both agreed that we weren't ready to think about having children yet. We've only been together a few days.



“What my Ness is trying to explain is that we’re concerned that simply using condoms still won’t be enough for him. He’s starting to physically ache, even directly after orgasm. My shark’s of the opinion that Ness’s beastie, who is the most beautiful creature in existence, is preparing to breed. In which case, how effective are condoms going to be?”

“If your animal sides are already decided, then it’s unlikely a condom is going to work at all.” Doc thought for a moment, swiveling himself from side to side on his stool. “An animal’s instinct, above all others, is about survival of the species and your species, Ness, is well below the scientific extinction level. Would it be so bad if you did have a child?”

“I don’t mind other people’s kids. I’ve really not considered having one of my own, but I’m not against the idea. There’s so much to consider.” Ness could feel himself slowly unraveling. “If I got pregnant, what would our little one shift into? I’m a freshwater shifter and Cyrus is a salt water. We can’t even swim together in the same water in our shifted forms. What happens if we put our little one in the water and it’s the wrong type? Would they die, get sick? What would happen?

“And then...and then...how long would I even be pregnant for? You can bet, if I ask anyone in my family how long they were pregnant for... I can’t even remember the last time any one of them had a baby it was so long ago. Sharks are pregnant for a year – for all I know, I could be pregnant for ten years or ten days. No one knows. No one in my lot will ever say anything and our whole species could end up dying out simply because people like my mother can’t be bothered to have one uncomfortable conversation. It’s ridiculous, I tell you. The whole situation is ridiculous. All I want is to have regular sex with my mate the way any other shifter does with their mate, and I...I...”

“Breathe, mate. Just breathe.” Cyrus was standing in front of him, holding Ness’s head in both hands. His dark eyes looked almost black, and Ness could feel the

shark's concern. "Breathe with me, slowly in...slowly out...that's it. One more time. Slowly in...slowly out... It'll be all right, darlin'. No matter what happens it will be all right."

"How can it be all right when what I feel about you is like Rocky feels about sweets? I feel so bad at suggesting for a second you don't satisfy me, because you do in every way, and yet my beastie is getting pushier and pushier. The ache in me is growing more each day, and I don't know what to do. A lot of this stuff wouldn't feel so scary if I just had more details. I need more details, more facts, more..."

"Right now you need to breathe."

Ness did his best to relax, letting his animal side come forward enough to tune into their bond, far more effectively than Ness himself had been able to do.

So when Doc asked quietly, "What are you feeling right now, Ness?"

"Disconnected." The word just fell out of Ness's mouth. "I'm so sorry," he added because Cyrus didn't deserve to hear that from him. "This can't all be just because you've not stuck your dick up my ass. Doc, please. What's wrong with me?"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

“Let’s deal with your physical symptoms first, shall we? Ness, I need you to lie up on the bed. You can stay, Cyrus, but I swear if I see your teeth coming anywhere near me, I’ll knock them out of your head.”

Doc got up, going over to the examination table, that looked remarkably comfortable. “I want to check your insides, I’ll use the ultrasound machine. It’s something we’ll use if and when you do get pregnant, but for now it will work to give me a benchmark on what your insides look like. That way we can rule out anything physical that might be causing the aches you’re describing.”

“This should be interesting.” Cyrus helped his mate get settled, making sure Ness was focused on him. “I have to say I’ve never seen the insides of another person before, at least when those insides are still inside. Body organs and stuff like that are usually just messy if they’ve been pulled outside of the body they were intended to be in.”

“Is that your idea of a joke?” Ness asked, the confusion he was going through still showing in his eyes.

“You’re smiling, so it must be.” Cyrus widened his grin, and then he quickly covered his teeth again. “Can’t let the doc see my teeth,” he mocked whispered to Ness. “Can you imagine a gummy shark? I’d never live it down.”

Ness chuckled and Cyrus took that as the win it was.

“Just scoot your top up please, Ness.” Doc grabbed hold of a trolley that had a large square machine on it and rolled it closer to the bed. “And then show me the area of your belly where the ache is the most intense.”

The pink on Ness's cheeks was like shark-nip to Cyrus as he hurriedly did what the doc was asking. "It's more here," he said, indicating his lower belly, pushing down the waistband of his trousers. "There's no lump or pain or anything, just a dull ache."

"And it get's worse after orgasm?" Doc was fiddling with his machine and applying a gel to a wand device that was attached to the same machine.

"Just keep focusing on me," Cyrus said as the wand touched Ness's stomach. Cyrus bit the inside of his gum, tasting blood. The doc's hands were too damn close to Ness's bits. "When do you feel the aches the worst, darlin'?"

"After we've finished." There was that sadness again, Cyrus could feel it through their bond. "It's not anything you're doing or not doing, Cy, it's just me."

"Hey, hey. Did you forget who you're mated to? I know how close we are, even if you struggle to feel it sometimes. I don't want you to worry about my ego. I can smell how happy I make you every time we're touching each other."

"I'm not seeing anything in your insides that shouldn't be there, so that's another worry off your list." Doc broke into what should've been a perfect moment as far as Cyrus was concerned, but the words were welcome in terms of content. "No lumps, bumps, or growths. Everything looks perfectly normal. You can wipe yourself off and cover up again."

He handed out some white tissues that Cyrus took before Ness could get them, wiping over Ness's belly, making sure his fingers were trailing over any parts where Doc's scent might have transferred itself onto his mate. Doc snorted and turned away, wiping off his equipment, but Cyrus wasn't going to be embarrassed. Shifters didn't like their mates smelling of anyone else but them.

After helping Ness sit upright, Cyrus perched his butt on the side of the bed next to

him. “So what’s your verdict, Doc? Is this ache caused by something missing in our bond, or is this just Ness’s beastie’s way of letting us know they want more?”

“There’s still so much about the impact our animal sides have on our lives we need to learn,” Doc said. “Unfortunately, it’s not an exact science. I should point out, I never suggest that a couple should have children before they’re ready. That is a foolhardy thing for anyone to do.

“I should also point out, purely from a scientific standpoint, that even if you do engage in anal sex there’s no guarantee you’ll get pregnant – either one of you – at least not right away. But hoping you won’t get pregnant while you’re doing the very act designed to create new life is not a foolproof contraception method.

“Basically, when it comes to shifters there is no such thing as a foolproof contraception method beyond what you’re doing now.”

“Which isn’t working for either one of us.” Cyrus held onto Ness’s hand.

Doc was silent for a moment, and then he said, “Ness, I got the impression that one of the reasons you’re concerned about getting pregnant at all is that you’re worried about what your baby might shift into and concerns about the length of pregnancy and things like that. Would that be right?”

Ness swallowed hard enough for Cyrus to hear and nodded.

“And, I’m just guessing from this visit and our previous conversations, that reaching out to your family for more information wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“My parents grabbed hold of the puritan lifestyle when it first became a movement and never let it go.” Ness sighed. “I guess we just have to work this out for ourselves.”

Cyrus didn't like hearing the defeatist attitude in his mate's tone. That was not how a mating should be. "You do a lot of good, financing other people's innovations and helping bring new technologies to the human world. If we accept that whatever will happen will happen, think of the good you could do for the shifter medical profession, for researchers who study near extinct beings..." Cyrus trailed off, looking to Doc for assistance.

"Oh, my goodness, yes, Ness." Doc looked positively animated for the first time since they'd entered his office. "To actually have a documented case of a male shifter pregnancy from a species so rare we don't have a name for you would be so beneficial to anyone else in a similar situation.

"And with regards to worrying about your care and how long you could be pregnant for, if it makes it easier for you, we can start taking measurements with the ultrasound from the first week your animal lets you know you're carrying. The growth is likely going to be minute from week to week if yours proves to be a long pregnancy, but after about a month to six weeks' worth of growth recorded, I will be able to give you an expectation of how long your pregnancy might be."

"We don't live in the Middle Ages, that I was born into," Cyrus added. "You already have a doc who's skilled and has decades of experience looking after shifters. There're equipment and tools that can make things so much easier..." Cyrus was winging it, but Ness was looking more hopeful.

"I know you're concerned about what your baby might shift into as well, but that really doesn't matter," Doc said. "In every hybrid baby birth I've attended, when it comes down to it, they are babies. They need love, warmth, food, and shelter. I worried myself sick, terrified the people in town would find out about my Komodo dragon when my little ones were born, and it turns out the townspeople knew and didn't care. And can you think of any weirder combination than a dragon like mine and a bull shifter?

“There are so many hybrid babies in Arrowtown, of all types. They are all loved, and no one gives a shit about what they shift into, and they don’t care if the baby can’t shift at all. Mrs. Hooper from the store said it best when she said we were building a new breed of shifter or paranormal in this town – children who were accepted for who they are. I agree with that woman one hundred percent.”

“From what Levi, who would be my step-grandson I think you’d call it, but what he told me when Blade got pregnant, my son honestly thought he’d end up a stomach full of baby sharks who would all eat one another until one emerged the victor and ate his way out of Blade’s stomach.” Cyrus grinned as he nudged Ness’s shoulder. “I don’t think we’ll be that bad.”

“See, there’s a thought,” Doc nodded. “That boy will be graduated soon and working here full time as well, so any possible pregnancy will be a family affair. Levi has a good head on his shoulders.”

“I’ve been silly, haven’t I?” Ness glanced at Cyrus, his smile shy. “I’ve always told myself to live in the moment, and here I am fretting about things that haven’t happened yet.”

“It never hurts to plan or prepare for things, darlin’.” Cyrus quickly kissed Ness’s forehead. “Let’s leave Doc to spend some time with his family and go and find some dinner. Then you can take me out to your place, and we’ll take each moment as it comes. How does that sound?”

“I’ve got food at the house. I can show you around town tomorrow.”

And yep, there were times when Ness had their connection wide open, and Cyrus was filled with a want that wasn’t all his own.

“Nice to meet you, Doc. I’m sure we’ll see you again real soon,” he said, grabbing

Ness's hand, jumping off the bed and power walking out of the office. Ness still beat him to the car.



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Ness had been fighting the ache he'd had since Cyrus claimed him back in Scotland. But as he drove toward his house – heaven help any bunnies who thought it would be a good idea to play chicken with him, because he wasn't stopping – Ness leaned into the ache, allowing it to seep through his body, fueling his need.

Cyrus was on board. He could feel that through their bond and the fact his mate had Ness's trousers down and was teasing his cock with those talented fingers. There was a point when Ness thought he was going to have to pull over, otherwise there was going to be one hell of an accident, but it was as if Cyrus sensed every time he was close and slowed his touches. But even the featherlight trails of Cyrus's fingernails on his shaft had Ness's butt muscles clenching.

He'd never been so pleased to see his house in his life before. Swinging the car into his parking area, Ness barely managed to engage the brake and turn off the engine before Cyrus was in his lap. Strong fingers had his hair in a vice as Cyrus's lips hit his, biting, nipping, kissing – it was as if Cyrus was finally showing his need in full for the first time.

Ness had no idea how they got into the house. He was vaguely aware his pants were still on the driveway along with his shoes, and Cyrus's shirt was probably in the garden from where Ness had tossed it. Stop. Think. I need the code. Four number taps – Ness had to do it twice, but finally when he wrenched the door handle, it damn near came off in his hand. But the door was open.

Stumbling inside, Cyrus still attacking his chin and throat with that delicious mouth, Ness swept his mate's feet off the ground, bouncing off walls as he carried Cyrus to his bedroom - a spacious room that took up a full quarter of the floorplan. He

collapsed on the bed, Cyrus still in his arms.

“Tell me you have lube, some kind of slick.” Cyrus kneeled over him, ripping his pants down the seams to get them off. His cock fell against Ness’s abs, as Cyrus leaned forward and ripped Ness’s top from his body. “Lube, darlin’. Concentrate.”

“Concentrate?” Ness grabbed Cyrus’s cocky face and sucked his lips as if he was starving. His cock was already primed, and it would take barely a whiff of Cyrus’s breath to set it off. But he wasn’t allowed to feast for long because Cyrus jerked away, bounding off the bed and pulling at the drawers in Ness’s bedside cabinet.

“We need lube. Lube. Vaseline, lotion, oil, I don’t care. We need something.” Cyrus was like a man possessed, which would’ve made Ness laugh on any other day, but as he was equally needy, he rolled on the other side of the bed and pulled his lube out from behind his alarm clock.

“Where should I put it?” he said, taking off the top of the tube. “Is it just around the outside of my butthole, or does some need to go inside me, too?”

“Gimme, gimme.” Cyrus jumped back onto the bed, looking a world away from the sophisticated businessman image he usually projected.

“Should I roll over?” Ness went to do it, but Cyrus was shaking his head.

“I want to see every expression that flows across that beautiful face of yours as I’m loving on you, darlin’. Lay back and pass me a couple of pillows.”

Ness felt relief as he sunk back into his comfortable mattress. While his gentle beast hated the idea that Cyrus had been with others before, there was something so damn comforting, and arousing about being taken care of by someone who knew what they were doing.

“Gods, I could eat you all up.” Cyrus mumbled happily trailing his chin down Ness’s chest, taking a moment to blow on first one nipple and then the other. “Seeing you like this... knowing you’re about ready to blow. Hmm, and you smell so damn good.” Cyrus’s nose was down by Ness’s cock, sniffing in against his balls. “Don’t worry if you need to come, we won’t be stopping, so let it flow, and I’ll keep going.”

Is he talking about driving or pouring a glass of water. Ness couldn’t help the way his mind worked at times, but his brain went completely offline as Cyrus’s mouth sucked in the head of his dick. He couldn’t think. He was too busy coming down Cyrus’s throat.

“There, that’ll make you feel a bit better.” Cyrus leaned back when Ness’s balls had finally emptied, licking his lips. “Still achy?”

Ness nodded. Speech was impossible.

“Roll with it, darlin’. If what we think is actually true, then that ache is going to make this so much easier on you.”

Ness’s eyes widened as his legs were hoisted and spread wide over Cyrus’s shoulders. “Time to get acquainted with your delicious looking hole.”

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Cyrus wasn’t someone who got off on fear or anxiety. He’d never been one of those power fuckers who used their dick like a weapon. He never saw the point. If he hated someone he killed them, and if he cared about them, then Cyrus would pleasure them for as long as they both liked and then zipped up and walked away.

Ness was different. They were mates. Their connection had been born the moment Cyrus spotted Ness’s shifted form disappearing into the loch in Scotland. Even before

that if truth be known. Cyrus's shark had connected with the unique shifter from a random glimpse of him at the airport.

And now he's laid out for me like the most sensuous buffet. Cyrus loved a buffet – he was greedy by nature. Resting his head on Ness's belly, his fingers found the spot he was looking for, circling it gently with his middle finger. Ness's breath hitched as he rubbed his finger in small movements, but Cyrus kept his movements firm and deliberate.

Lube was an amazing invention. Cyrus had made do with spit before, but honestly, it wasn't a pleasant experience for him or the one on the receiving end of his dick. Lube was silky smooth, and Cyrus groaned as he kept up the massaging, gently coaxing Ness's muscles to relax and let him in.

The moment the end of Cyrus's finger dipped inside, Ness's body tensed up and Cyrus chuckled softly. "It's perfectly normal, darlin'," he said. "Just breathe with me, let your hunky body relax."

It took a bit, but Cyrus wasn't a quitter. Ness's groans and the way his thick length straightened over his belly were clues enough that Cyrus's touch was welcome, but that ass wasn't letting anyone in without a dinner date and a diamond necklace first.

One finger in, Cyrus paused, flicking his tongue out and catching Ness's cock to keep him distracted, while his other hand gently rolled his mate's balls. When Ness groaned, his whole body trembling, Cyrus worked on getting a second finger in...then a third, and finally a fourth, because first times were important.

His shark was impatient, even though they didn't want to hurt their mate. But when Cyrus looked down, seeing Ness's hole stretched by all four of his fingers on one hand, he wanted to shower his mate with everything he owned and worship that sturdy hole for a lifetime.

“Ready mate?” The hole wasn’t ready to give up his fingers, but Cyrus pulled them free. He quickly rubbed the excess lube from his fingers onto his dick, using his body to keep Ness’s legs apart as he sat up on his knees. “How’s the ache?”

Ness just blinked at him, slow blinks, his mouth half open, his nostrils flared.

“Awesome, exactly the response I was looking for.” Cyrus lined up, focusing on Ness’s eyes. They truly were the window to the soul, and Cyrus saw everything beautiful in that moment. Despite his work, he still had to thrust quite hard, keeping hold of the base of his cock so he didn’t blow the second the head of his dick pushed past the ring of muscles.

“Breathe out, long and slow,” he muttered as his cock hit resistance. “Push out, let me in.”

Inch by inch, Cyrus kept working on getting Ness’s body to accept him. He knew it would – mates were made for each other. But the connection was heightened by the look in Ness’s eyes. It was as though his mate was wordlessly reaching out to him, his animal side glowing with approval. Ness’s human body was the one doing the adjusting, but that beautiful beastie was well on board with what Cyrus was doing.

“You feeling me, darlin’? Because, by the Fates I am feeling you.” Cyrus dropped the hand that had been keeping his cock in check and pushed in that last inch. “Breathe with me. Feel how we’re joined. Feel my cock throbbing inside of your heat.”

Ness’s eyes fluttered closed, and Cyrus was hit with a barrage of emotion. Relief, joy, pleasure...and a need to come. Every hit was sending Cyrus’s need higher and he knew he had to move. “Let’s start this slow and steady.”

Rocking gently, back and forth, Cyrus kept his hands on the inside of Ness’s legs, stroking up and down, teasing his mate’s cock every now and then for variety. Ness’s

breathing became labored, his chest rising and falling. Cyrus could tell the second Ness let go of the last of his inhibitions and started to try and move back against him. There was a hint of fangs peeking from Ness's lips, and Cyrus's gums tingled in response.

I need to get closer, because yes, another bite was on the menu. Scooping his hand under one of Ness's legs, Cyrus leaned forward with the whole top half of his body, keeping his weight off Ness's chest so he could keep his hips moving. Ness's hands, which were lying on the mattress, came up, gripping Cyrus's torso, as they found their rhythm.

How could I have thought I could do without this? Cyrus wanted to groan and shout and yell with the sheer pleasure of being inside his mate at last. Yes, it had only been a few days, and he and Ness hadn't been celibate together. But in that moment Cyrus understood the ache Ness had been talking about. He hadn't felt it in his gut, as Ness had, but he had felt something lacking, and now they were finally joined in the way the Fates intended, Cyrus could see the difference as clearly as if it had hit him in the face.

He thought he had to be the responsible one, talking about the issue of having children as if it was something they could avoid. Truth be known, Cyrus had always lived with the knowledge he'd been a crap father to his son, Blade, raising him in his own image, which was nothing to be proud of. But as their rhythm sped up, he was seized with an urge he hadn't had before. Cyrus hated the term 'breed,' which some men used when fucking their partners, but there were some powerful instincts flooding his body, and in that moment Cyrus knew if Ness ended up carrying his child, or he was carrying Ness's, then they would make it work. Ness wouldn't let him mess things up.

"Bite!" Ness's voice, a half scream, pierced Cyrus's thoughts, causing his movements to stutter for a moment. But Ness wasn't letting him go and with a final hard thrust,

Cyrus dipped his head, sinking his teeth into the mark he'd left in Ness's neck the first time. Ness had the same idea, biting him in return. It was as if time stopped in that moment, mid orgasm, teeth embedded in Ness's neck with Ness's fangs in his, Cyrus felt another layer of connection flood the emotions they'd shared before.

Releasing his teeth, Cyrus held his mate close. Ness was a mess of emotions, pinging all over the place. But he clung tight to Cyrus's body, and Cyrus figured his mate would be all right. Going through a first time after three thousand years wasn't something Ness would just flip off and light a cigarette over. Besides, he was kinda dealing with some new sensations of his own.

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It was many, many hours later. The two men had more sex, food, then more sex again before relaxing in a long bath together. But even after all that, Ness wasn't quite ready to sleep. Slipping out of bed, leaving Cyrus sprawled and snoring, Ness didn't bother with clothes as he made his way outside, walking a path he'd taken a hundred times or more before, to his own lake.

His beastie, who'd been very patient, waited until Ness's feet were submerged in the water before coming through, slowly gliding, floating, paddling his way to deeper waters. Turning back so he was facing the house, the beastie stared up at the stars, and then at the lights left on in the house.

And then, he started to move.

The beastie bobbed one way, then he bobbed the other way. His flippers swished through the water, keeping in sync with the bobbing. His long neck twisted and turned, head still bobbling, the big beastie danced to music only he could hear.

Sometimes a beastie just had to have some fun and this particular beastie had

something to celebrate. So, safe from prying eyes, the beastie danced. It was the perfect end to a hectic and amazing day.



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You look very good with him. Ness smiled at the flurry of hands as Hal signed at him. Hal was a handsome lion shifter who'd had the horrific misfortune to lose his tongue at the hands of a now-deceased psychopath. Cyrus had explained that Blade met Hal when Hal was taking a break from Arrowtown, and had gone traveling to find himself. Instead, at the first town he stopped at, Jackson, Hal found Blade instead. They'd had a few ups and downs, but eventually Blade had seen the value in moving to Arrowtown, and now most of the time they could be found around their pool – at least that's what Cyrus had said.

The visit had started in a flurry of hugs, exclamations of “oh, my gods, another Arrowtown man,” from Blade, and shy signing from Hal, which Ness and Cyrus both understood. But the star of the show, in Ness's opinion, was their young son Ethan who was at the crawling-almost-walking stage. The young one had latched onto Ness from almost the first minute they arrived, an action that touched Ness's heart in a way he struggled to describe.

“Do those two often closet themselves off?” Ness asked, tilting his head toward the house where Blade had dragged Cyrus off to after the initial pleasantries were said.

No. Hal smiled ruefully and shook his head. I thought Cyrus would have headed straight for the pool. You haven't met his shark yet, have you?

“Not yet. My critter is a freshwater beast, so my lake is freshwater, which wouldn't be suitable for my mate at all.” Ness looked down at where Ethan was sleeping in his arms and almost missed Hal's reply.

I think Blade's concerned about you. Not you personally, you understand, but anyone

being Cyrus's mate. Blade's opinion of his father is not... Hal's fingers fluttered as if in agitation before he added, not the best. I think things were difficult for Blade when he was growing up.

"You're not telling me anything I didn't already know," Ness said kindly. "Honestly, when Cyrus told me at our first meeting about having a son, I thought he'd bought a baby. It was the way he'd described the whole thing as being mutually advantageous with Blade's mother – I couldn't help it. My mind just went there."

Hal covered his mouth with his hand, making an unusual noise that sounded a lot like a laugh. It was easy for Ness to laugh with him, but then Hal's face turned serious, and he signed again.

If you don't mind me asking, how is it, being mated to a gangster?

"Cyrus is so much more than a gangster." Ness paused for a moment as Ethan wiggled and settled again, seemingly happy to use Ness's lap as a mattress. "Cyrus told me within an hour of us meeting that he was a made man, a family man, and I didn't understand what it meant at the time. My buying a baby comment was one example. But at heart, I think Cyrus has had to be a deeply private man to maintain his reputation, but that in turn has meant he's incredibly lonely. He is so loyal to those people he considers family, to the point of risking his own life and freedom at times.

"I didn't understand until Cyrus explained a bit about his past, but now I can say with confidence that Cyrus's morals were formed at a time and through life experiences the likes of which you and I wouldn't understand because we've not lived like that. But underneath it all is the need to protect those around him, and me most of all. What mate is going to object to that?"

Hal nodded, but Ness got the impression he wasn't so sure. "I can't imagine life

would've been easy for Blade growing up. If you'd rather we leave..." he said softly, but Hal was already shaking his head.

Blade has father issues. He had them when we met, and it's clear he still does even now. I can't blame him. He spent a lifetime wanting to create a successful life for himself, away from his father's influence, and that hadn't been easy for him. But, I think, under it all, Blade just wanted his dad to be proud of him.

"Cyrus is hugely proud of Blade, and you, Levi, and Ethan. We didn't just come back to Arrowtown to see the doc and check on my house. Cyrus was really keen for me to meet his son. You guys are his only blood family from what I can tell."

Hal nodded and he was smiling, but his hands flickered yet again. You and I know that. Levi and Ethan probably know it, too. Blade has had a hundred and ten years trying to prove himself, and never believing that he actually hit the mark. It's hard for him to let go of a way of thinking that governed his whole life until he met me.

"I can't imagine what that must be like, and honestly, if you're uncomfortable with us here, we can..." Ness raised his head, listening as the sound of shouting came from inside the house. He could tell Hal had heard it, too. "Here," he said, standing up carefully and carrying the sleeping Ethan over to Hal. "I'll go and see what's going on. I doubt they're physically fighting, or that it would come to that, but there's no need for Ethan to have his sleep interrupted." Without waiting for a reply, Ness strode into the house.

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"How the hell did you end up with a mate? You're a crook." Cyrus would like to say he was surprised at Blade's outburst, but in truth he wasn't. When he'd said he'd never been a decent father, he knew that was a fact. Not one he could change – the past had already happened. Cyrus just wished his son hadn't left it until his first visit

with Ness to decide to bring him to task for things that happened a long time ago. It's not like he hadn't already visited twice before.

"I imagine I got my mate the same way you did yours." Cyrus knew it was vital to stay calm. "I saw him, tracked him down, introduced myself, and we've been happy ever since."

"Does he know about you? Does he know about the things you've done?"

"Does your lovely Hal know everything you've done over the years?" Cyrus wandered over, picking up a picture showing Blade, Hal, and Ethan just after Ethan was born. "You were given a chance to have a family of your own, which you grabbed with both hands. You found a reason to live beyond making money, and my heart warms knowing that you have the happiness you've lacked in the past. Why is it impossible for you to understand I might want the same thing?"

"What about your precious family?" There was a definite sneer in Blade's tone. "Are they all going to shut up shop in Vegas, Sicily, and anywhere else you've sunk your roots into and be happy living in a shifter town?"

"Definitely not." Cyrus chuckled as he put the picture back down again. "As my darlin' Ness reminded me, all of my found family members are human. They have no place in a shifter town. Ness and I have a plane each. Traveling is hardly a problem." Turning, Cyrus faced his son. "Stop beating around the bush. I raised you to speak your truth. Tell me what is on your mind. Honestly. Man to man. Shark to shark. Son to father."

Blade came closer, his fists clenched. "You're going to be living here in Arrowtown."

Cyrus had already guessed that was Blade's issue. "It's possible. Ness and I haven't discussed that yet."

“From all accounts Ness has been here since Arrowtown was formed. It’s at his lake where the kids play during the summer months, his plane that was the reason the airport was originally built just out of town. Apparently it was his money that financed the build.”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” Cyrus admitted. “But Ness and I have only been together a matter of days – barely a week. There’s a lot of things we still need to talk over and decide.”

“This is a good town, full of good people.”

“I know that, son. The doc told me about that yesterday when we visited him. He also made it plain that provided I didn’t do anything to hurt the people here, I would be made as welcome as you were.”

Cyrus was missing Ness, and he could feel through their bond that his lovely beastie was getting anxious for him. “Look, Blade, there is no point in my apologizing for the shit childhood you went through. It’s not going to help you.”

“How would you know? You’ve never tried it. In your whole life you’ve never apologized for anything.”

That stopped Cyrus for a moment. “Actually, I have, but only very recently. You are right in that I’ve never apologized to you, and that’s frankly because I never thought I had a need to. But, seeing as it’s apparently important to your happiness now, Blade, my son of whom I am very proud, I am genuinely sorry for all of the wrongs you believed I put you through in the years since you were born. Hand on heart. I’m sorry.” He waited a moment, studying Blade’s face, and then added, “Did that make you feel better?”

“No. Damn it.”

“Was I right? Yes, I was, and that’s because I’ve got five hundred years on you, boy. I know past actions can’t be erased. I’m more aware than most that hurt feelings scar the soul in such a way they can never be fully healed. I still carry the same feelings about my father that you probably feel about me, and my dad’s been dead for centuries, not to mention the word sorry never came out of his mouth. Some shit can’t be changed. But the Fates saw the good in both of us, don’t you get it?” Cyrus pointed in the direction of the window.

“Out there are two good men, making small talk while they worry about us. Two men with golden souls that shine with their innocence and their generous hearts. The Fates believed those men were perfect for us. A chance for both of us to build new lives, decent lives, raising kids with our mates.”

“Don’t tell me you and Ness are planning to have kids? Surely not. Look what you did raising me.”

Cyrus’s patience had its limits. “What did I do? Tell me. You’re tall, healthy, strong, a successful businessman in his own right, with a loving mate and a gorgeous son. What’s wrong with any of that?”

“You sent me to kill a man when I was ten years old. You put the knife in my hand.”

“The same knife that saved your life when you were set on by the Devante family brats when you were twelve because you were getting too close to their baby sister. That was the way life was back then. From memory that same knife saved you four times between the ages of twelve and twenty. Forgive me, oh blessed son, for giving you the skills and the tools to survive your childhood. Your friends, Juno and Frank, weren’t so lucky, were they? But you survived because of me and the things I taught you.”

“I wouldn’t have had to kill anyone if it hadn’t been for the life you were already

living. If you'd lived among decent folk..."

"What did you know about decent folk? For fuck's sake, you were raised in a village on an island, not a country estate in merry old England. You were raised to survive and thrive, and to me, that was more important than anything else. And guess what, you've done that. So tell me again how wrong I was."

"Ness isn't going to understand your skewed view on life." Blade snarled. "He'll see through you in an instant."

"My Ness..."

"Cyrus, no." Ness's voice coming from the doorway had both men turning. "You don't owe Blade an explanation of how you lived your life, and while I believe Blade owes you an apology for his disrespect, now is not the time. It's time to leave."

"Ness, you don't understand what this man put me through growing up," Blade said urgently.

"I understand more than you know," Ness said calmly. "I do believe, when you stop seeing the past through your own narrow prism and start seeing what life was like back when you were born, you'll understand better as well. I am not saying it is right or wrong, but the past is what it is, and you need to resolve your differences because both of you are living lives that are very different now. But as I said before, now is not the time."

"Cy, babe, I need you to call for your plane, seeing as mine is being used. I still want to meet your lovely shark, and as I don't feel comfortable infringing on Blade and Hal's hospitality a moment longer, we'll fly somewhere else. Blade, tend to your mate and son – Hal is worried about you."

“But he...” Cyrus and Blade both spoke together and in that moment he realized how much Blade was like him. We both want to be right.

“Now, Cy, and you too, Blade. It was nice meeting you, and I truly appreciated spending time with Hal and Ethan. You have a family to be proud of, but if you’ll take a word of advice from someone who is far older than you and your father put together – there comes a time when you let go of the past and move forward. Everyone can change if they have the right incentive. You’ve already proven that, Blade. But doing that doesn’t give you the right to take the same chances away from your father, no matter what he’s done in the past.” Ness held out his hand. “Cy are you coming?”

“Yes, darlin’.” Crossing the room, Cyrus took his mate’s hand and followed him out of the house, stopping for only a minute to give Hal a hug and brush his hand over Ethan’s hair before they went out to the car.

They were on the road, heading back to Ness’s house before Cyrus said, “I feel I should apologize, but I’m not quite sure what for.”

Ness glanced at him and then back at the road. “I’m sure your chat with your son has been a long time coming. He’s just being protective of his family and what he perceives as his territory, the same as you are of me. You’ve taught him well in that regard.”

“I did think he would be happy for me, finding a mate just like he did. That’s usually grounds for a celebration.”

“I hate to mention it, hon, but my family isn’t going to welcome our mating either,” Ness said with a grin. “And they’ve been known to hold a grudge a lot longer than your Blade will. How many times have you visited Blade over the years?”



“Only twice, both times since Ethan was born. My boy was always trying to build a successful business without gangster connections, so I did my best to stay out of what he was doing. Not always easy for me,” Cyrus added. “You don’t worry that when we have kids, that I’ll ruin them too, the way Blade believes I ruined his life?”

“I’d probably be happier if our little one was apprenticed with Jimmy the carpet layer than learning how to use a knife to kill a man at ten years old, but that’s because being a carpet layer is a useful skill, in my opinion. There’s more call for that type of trade. But there’s a huge difference between when you raised Blade and how we might raise our little one. And I’m not just talking about time and the culture at that time.”

“You’re talking about your influence, aren’t you?” Cyrus was delighted because he knew he was right. “You’d never teach a boy to kill at aged ten, oh, and I bet you’ll teach them to read and write from the moment they can use a device.”

“Probably, although a paper and pen are better if you want them to be able to write nicely.” Ness gave him another one of those glances again that always seemed to make Cyrus feel special. “Between your life experience and mine, no one will be able to say any child of ours wouldn’t grow up to be well-rounded. But enough about kiddies. I want to meet your shark. Where’s your favorite place to shift?”

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It turned out that while it wasn't Cyrus's favorite shifting spot, a beach on the coast between Los Angeles and San Diego was what Cyrus considered the most convenient spot. "The water's slightly warmer than farther up the coast," he explained, and San Diego had a decent airport which meant the two men didn't have to drive far. Cyrus was obviously organized and had made the trip countless times before because there was a car waiting for them when the plane landed, and Cyrus seemed to know where he was going.

The trip had been quiet, mostly on Cyrus's part. Ness had tried to make conversation a few times on the plane, but Cyrus just leaned his head on Ness's shoulder and had a nap. So much for that. But Ness could understand why Cyrus was feeling subdued. After all they'd both worried about whether they should have kids or not, and what might happen if they did – which was now a real possibility – Cyrus clearly hoped Blade would welcome the news of his father's mating and desire to extend his blood family.

Families are not necessarily like that. Ness knew that from personal experience. Thinking of which, Ness took his phone out of his pocket, taking care not to disturb his napping mate, and opened his email program. There was nothing from his family, but he didn't expect anything. Since he'd been rejected as a bond mate by the woman his mother had high hopes about, Ness was lucky if he heard from his immediate family more than once a year.

Ness hesitated a moment, his last conversation with his mother still ringing in his ears from six months before. The way she had shut him down so quickly when he asked what he thought were perfectly normal questions a person might have about procreation and feeling like crap, which he had at the time.

His uncle's laughter hadn't been helpful, but his uncle wasn't cruel, and there was a good chance his father had seen the same joke his uncle had. His mother on the other hand had made him feel as if Ness was some underhand, dirty deviant for even thinking about sex. That could be why I don't have any siblings.

What to say, though, that was the problem. No matter how Ness put it, his whole family was likely going to be horrified he had a male mate and worse had been claimed. It meant Ness's genetics were not going to be able to be used in a trade deal his parents might want to put in place further down the road. Honestly, that was how bonds were cemented in Ness's family and to his knowledge, always had been.

Keep it simple, clean, and to the point. Something his father had drummed into Ness's head since he was a child. There was also the snippet he'd told Cyrus back when they had been at Blade and Hal's place – You don't have to explain. Although, in Ness's head when it came to his parents, he shouldn't have to. A mate was a mate was a mate. That didn't need any explanation for ninety percent of paranormals everywhere.

Just thinking that made it easier for Ness to type.

Dear Mother and Father,

I trust this email finds you both in good health.

Good news, I have found and claimed my fated mate. He is a businessman from out of Las Vegas, previously from Sicily, named Cyrus Marinus.

He and I are very happy together and I am sure you will wish us well.

Kindest regards,

Farness

Ness read it over, snorting quietly in a few places. His parents would be in good health, because that was the life of a shifter. But when it comes to the news being good, Ness already knew his mother and father wouldn't see things that way. He was equally sure his family would not be wishing him and Cyrus well anytime in the next couple of centuries. But they can't say I don't tell them anything, he thought as he hit the send button, checked there wasn't anything else that required his immediate attention and slid his phone back in his pocket.

"We are very happy together, aren't we, darlin'." Cyrus's voice was sleepy, but Ness wasn't surprised his mate had been reading what he'd written. That shark wouldn't miss a thing.

"We always will be. We might have differences of opinions at times, but we'll always feel happiest when we're together. That's one of the joys of being fated mates. Other people's opinions don't dictate our joy or levels of it. It's only how we interact and treat each other that counts."

"Ooh, I love the way you weave a sentence. Sounds very sexy." Cyrus grinned as he stretched. "If your parents do come to visit us, I promise I will be on my best behavior."

"There's not much chance of that." Ness internally shuddered at the idea. "My parents don't leave their estate very often."

"Their loss. I can be wonderfully delightful in the right company." Peering out of the plane window, Cyrus added, "We're almost there. Are you going to come swimming with me, darlin'?"

"I can't shift on a public beach, Cy, especially not in the middle of the afternoon."

Mother would have a fit if something like that was reported on social media.

“Hmm, good point. We don’t want anyone chasing you for a touch of your marvelous skin.”

“I can paddle in the water or even swim in my human form for a bit while your shark has a decent workout, and I have no problem being stretched out on the sand waiting for you to come back. Just like you do for me.”

“I hadn’t thought of swimming with you in fresh water, with me on two legs. That’s a good idea. We must try it, the next time you shift in somewhere warmer than a Scottish loch.”

“My beastie would love that.” Ness could feel that deep inside. “But for now, let’s focus on your shark and give him a chance to stretch his fins.”

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Over the years, Cyrus’s shark had swum in every body of sea water on the known world with the exception of Antarctica. He liked his balls where they were, and there were huge whales at the bottom of the world. But he was familiar with every other sea, ocean, and inlet. He was nosy on land or in the water, and because of his size, his shark could travel great distances in a short amount of time.

Today was going to be different though. As much as Cyrus the man needed to feel that burst of speed through the water before he did something destructive or stupid – yes, he was pissed off at his son but knew how to hide it – the shark wanted Ness to feel comfortable with him. So chasing other sea life for shits and giggles and just because he could would have to wait.

Ness had changed into a pair of shorts that had Cyrus eyeing his mate with

appreciation as they walked down to the water's edge. "You know my shark won't hurt you, don't you?" Cyrus felt the point had to be made. He wasn't used to shifting with another person around.

"Your shark knows me on a soul level," Ness said easily, looking so sexy with no shirt on and his legs on view. The day wasn't freezing, but Ness was wandering around as if it was a hot summer's day. "Let him out, Cy. I trust you. I trust your shark. You've got so much tension caught up inside of you." Ness's hand brushed over Cyrus's chest. "Your shark needs a chance to get rid of some of this angst."

Cyrus nodded. Clearly he hadn't been as clever as he thought he was, hiding his feelings from his mate. They splashed into the water together, and yes, the water was cold. But Cyrus didn't notice when he had the warmth of Ness's hand in his.

"Go on," Ness urged when they were thigh deep in water. "Let your shark come through and swim for a bit. I'll linger here until you come back." He ducked down in the water, until it was covering most of his torso.

Cyrus's shark was like a battle tank when compared with Ness's colorful beastie, and Cyrus was nervous. But his shark wanted to meet his mate at last, and he took advantage of Cyrus's dithering and sprang free, causing Cyrus to stumble and fall face first into the water with a splash.

Shifting, for the shark, was the best form of stretch possible. His senses immediately attuned to the environment, scanning it for any possible threats to his mate, although there was none. But the shark wanted to be sure, and he swum off in a huge arc checking everything within a mile of the shore.

Convinced he was the only being capable of causing any damage in the immediate area, the shark swum back more slowly, flicking his tail in a lazy manner, wending back and forward in a zigzag pattern with his dorsal fin showing above the water line

so Ness wouldn't be surprised by his sudden appearance.

He was still swimming a bit fast. That was evident when he nudged against Ness's knee and the man went flying backward, landing back in the water with a splash. The shark immediately swung around, nosing under Ness's butt, nudging him upward so that his mate could breathe.

"You must've been pleased to see me." Ness was laughing. Not screaming in horror or yelling at him for getting splashed. Nope. Ness was wiping the water off his face with his hands and laughing loudly. "Come here, you stunning beast, so I can see you properly...slowly this time, that's right."

The shark was so glad he couldn't blush. How embarrassing. But Ness didn't seem to think anything was wrong. "Look at you, all sleek lines and so powerful. You're stunning."

Giving a bit of a wiggle, because the shark was so pleased, he swam around a few times so Ness could see him from every angle. "We have to get a saltwater pool of our own," Ness said, stroking gently across his nose. "We can put it in next to my lake at Arrowtown if you like, so our shifted forms can visit with each other. My beastie could even get in a saltwater pool with you, so long as I don't put my head under the water. Would you like that?"

The shark loved that idea, so sending those feelings through their bond, he swam off, just to have a race up and down the beach for a bit, to work off the sadness and rejection he felt by Blade's reaction to his mating.

Apparently there were a lot of feelings to process because by the time the shark made his way to the shore, the sun was setting. He could see Ness sitting on the beach, dressed, wrapped up in a blanket, reading something on his phone, with another blanket beside him. Ness looked up as he reached the shallower waters, a huge smile

on his face. Putting down his phone, he grabbed the other blanket and came hurrying down to the shore as Cyrus shifted back.

“Do you feel any better?” Ness asked as Cyrus splashed his way to the dry sand.

Cyrus couldn't speak. It usually took him a few moments to reorientate himself after swimming along on his belly for so long. But Ness's hug was warm as Cyrus was wrapped in the dry blanket, and he sagged against his mate's shoulder as they made their way back up the beach.

Thank you, he sent through their bond.

“Let's get you dressed and fed,” Ness said quietly. “It's been a bit of a day.”



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France was an eye opener for Ness, mostly because he felt he was finally seeing Cyrus in his element. Cyrus had suggested that they do a random spot check on his casinos in New York and France, and then they could go onto Ness's candy factory before making their way back to Arrowtown to oversee the saltwater pool project.

Rather than upset Blade, Ness got in touch with Hal via email to find out what company they had used for their new pool, and Hal was happy to forward the contact details along with a little note saying Blade was "processing but seeing things in a more positive light," which was a step in the right direction.

In the meantime, the men had places to be. Ness had always enjoyed New York, but he'd never stayed at Cyrus's casino. Cyrus said his apartment was a lot more private, but as that was still in use, they used his suite at the hotel. Ness truly didn't mind another penthouse suite that came with room service at any time of the day or night. After losing a couple of hundred dollars at the slot machines, which was the only form of gambling Ness would do in public, they'd had a thigh-trembling night in the suite together before flying out to France the next morning.

The casino Cyrus had set up in France was just outside of Paris, set in the grounds of a large chateau. "This place is beautiful," Ness said, completely stunned on the drive up to the main house. "You so rarely see a place with a functional moat anymore. It must cost you a fortune to maintain."

"It's worth every cent. This place is a classic example of a giant fuck you." Cyrus showed his teeth. "In case you didn't guess, there's a bit of a story about this chateau." He was dressed in another sharp gray suit and with his hair slicked back and his facial hair trimmed, he ticked all of Ness's boxes.

“Tell me about it.” Ness stroked the fine material on Cyrus’s trouser leg. “How did it come about that you own this fine chateau? I have a feeling it’s a bit more involved than you just going to a realtor and asking to see their most extravagant listings.”

Cyrus parked the car in a spot that was marked with a small crown right by the steps to the entrance. Turning off the engine, he turned to face Ness, the smirk on his face totally mischievous. “Think back to the eighteen hundreds,” he said. “Lords and ladies running amuck all over Europe, not content with just upsetting the regular folk in their own areas. One of them was particularly cruel – he totally believed that his money and title meant he basically owned the people around him, and he wasn’t someone who played nicely with his toys. I disagreed with his point of view.” Cyrus shrugged.

“I didn’t kill him,” Cyrus added as his grin widened. “You’d have been so proud of me that I didn’t kill him. But let’s just say the man was useless at cards, and I won this beauty here after I’d stripped him of everything else.”

Cyrus sighed. “Happy days. I didn’t want anything to do with the estate at first. It was enough for me that the arrogant ass was reduced to begging from his friends who wouldn’t have anything to do with him once it was known how much he’d lost. I mean, a man’s home is his castle, and the chateau had been in his family for hundreds of years. So he was shunned, and that was all the payback I needed, although I did right by the staff and paid them off. It wasn’t their fault their lord and master was a complete asshole.”

Looking up at the well maintained building it was now, Cyrus smiled fondly. “This pile of bricks and stones probably would’ve stayed a crumbling wreck forevermore and I wouldn’t have given it a second thought. But once paranormals came out, the European Paranormal Council approached me and asked me if I’d consider doing something with it. I suggested a casino, because that’s what I do, and they were more than helpful with the necessary permits and what have you.”

“Seems fitting that you won the place playing cards and have continued to make money from it even now.”

“I have to. I want to keep my darlin’ in diamonds and fancy suits.”

Ness cracked up laughing, looking down at his own more casual suit pants that he’d teamed up with a dark gray henley. “You can commission my beastie a fancy tiara or something if you absolutely have to splurge with your money,” he said, still chuckling, “but don’t ever expect me to wear anything flashy.”

“What an awesome idea. One with gems of every color to match your lovely beastie’s skin.” Cyrus’s eyes gleamed. “But come along my darlin’. Let me show you what I’ve done with the chateau.”

Ness had been through many historical buildings in his time – he’d lived in some at various points in his life. He agreed that Cyrus had kept a lot of the elegance and glamour of the French design elements, creating a very lush and expensive looking environment that was clearly popular with the patrons. Unlike the grays and silver of Cyrus’s Las Vegas and New York casinos, the décor was all in golds and red with splashes of black to accentuate the opulence of every room.

But it was Cyrus’s behavior that fascinated Ness the most. He cut through the crowds, like the shark he was, and more than one person fell back when they realized he was approaching. With his half-smile, as if he found the whole thing so amusing, Cyrus accepted nods as his due, and occasionally greeted someone by name as he kept moving. The receptionist’s face went white when she saw Cyrus move through, her hand reaching for the phone, making Cyrus laugh out loud.

“Can you feel it?” he whispered, nudging Ness’s arm as they made their way to the first of what seemed to be four gaming rooms that were well signposted. “That wave of realization that their boss is in the building.”

“There’s definitely a vibe in the room.” Looking around, Ness added, “I’m surprised there’re so many paranormals here. In your other casinos they were more of a rarity.”

“That’s because we’re in Europe, darlin’.” Cyrus waved his hand, indicating the crowds. “When paranormals came out in North America, people were scared and reached for their knives and guns. In Europe, it was as if the entire continent gave a collective shrug and said, ‘meh, tell us something we don’t know.’”

“European folklore is full of monsters and things that go bump in the night. The people here genuinely weren’t surprised. You won’t find a shifter town anywhere in Europe for that reason. They’re just accepted everywhere. Shifters can go to town in their furry form, and no one gets upset about it, and vampires have their own blood bars and clubs.”

“Vampires had them before paranormals came out,” Ness murmured.

“Ah yes, but they used to be private, all very hush-hush. Now they have membership cards, promotional events, and happy hours.” Cyrus stilled as a tall man in a suit came hurrying over.

“Mr. Marinus,” the man said in French-accented English. “We were not expecting to see you today. I thought you were visiting us next month.”

“Plans change, Charles, and it’s only a short visit, nothing to fret about. This is my fated mate, Farness Duncan. He will be accorded every courtesy during our stay.”

“Congratulations to you both.” Charles clasped his hands over his heart and bowed briefly, but Ness could tell the actions and the words didn’t match the emotion behind the voice. “I’ll let the chef know to prepare a sumptuous and romantic meal for you this afternoon and have it brought to your suite. If you need anything else...”

“We’ll let the front desk know if we need anything.” Cyrus patted Charles’s arm. “My mate and I are going to have a wander through the game rooms, and see what’s going on...”

“There’s been no trouble here,” Charles protested, rather unnecessarily in Ness’s opinion, but perhaps that was part of Charles’s nature. “Everything is running just as it should.”

“Hmm, I’d be inclined to believe you, however I see two of the table cameras have been disconnected.” Cyrus pointed to the far edge of the room. “Tables four and six. The camera lights aren’t on.”

Charles’s eyes widened and then he quickly regained his composure. “Those tables were booked by private parties, sir. They requested they be allowed to play in private, which I’m sure you’ll understand. Providing our clients a discreet and private place to play is what makes this place so popular.”

Cyrus didn’t need to stand any taller, or really do anything at all, but Ness could feel a sudden menace fill the air. Charles definitely felt it and a couple of people who were sauntering past suddenly quickened their steps. “What is the main rule of this establishment, Charles?”

“I totally understand the need to protect the establishment, Mr. Marinus, sir, but it’s Count Vanelly’s party at table four, and Lord and Lady Partridge are hosting a private party at table six.”

“Did they suddenly become shareholders of my establishment in my absence, Charles?”

“Not to my knowledge, Mr. Marinus, no.” Charles was starting to sweat and Ness amused himself watching the tables under discussion.

“Then what gave them the right to come in here and cheat. Or perhaps I should say who gave them that right?”

“It’s blatantly obvious, too,” Ness murmured as he watched one of the players on table six swap out a card from one he likely had on his lap. The uniformed dealer, clearly one of Cyrus’s employees had to have noticed but just kept dealing, keeping his eyes down.

“There, you see?” Cyrus flung out his arm. “My own mate can see it as plain as day, which means anyone else in that vicinity can too.”

“They wouldn’t cheat, Mr. Marinus. They’re respectable people who...”

“Call your security, Cy,” Ness said, keeping his voice low as the one who’d blatantly cheated cheered as he clearly had a winning hand. “Lord and Lady Partridge are passing acquaintances of mine. I’ll just go over and say hello, shall I? See how often they come here.”

“Oh, see, Mr. Marinus? If your mate knows them then I’m sure he’ll vouch for them being here, having their privacy respected.” Charles looked relieved, but it was short lived.

“That’s not what I said, Charles. Call security, Cy.” Ness stormed off in the direction of the tables. He was not a confrontational person. He hated conflict of any kind. But in that moment, watching someone blatantly steal from his mate’s establishment, Ness was wishing he had a flame thrower so he could blast some fire up an entitled person’s ass.

Walking around the back of the chair, where Percival Partridge was laughing in that annoying bray of his, Ness leaned his hands on the back of the chair. “Having fun, Percy? I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Farness Duncan, as I live and breathe. I never expected to see you in a place like this either.” No, when the man laughed he didn’t sound like a horse, but that was possibly the effect he was going for.

“I had some business here.” Ness nodded at the pile of chips stacked on the table in front of where Percival was sitting. “Had a winning day?”

“Percy always win when we come here,” another man at the table said with a laugh that was just as annoying. “We all do, it’s why we come here.”

“Sounds a bit more than luck at play then.” Ness smiled as if he was in on the joke, well aware that Percival couldn’t keep a secret to save himself.

“It’s classic. Honestly, the guy who owns this place is some gangster from god knows where, but he’s so busy fleecing the gamblers over in Vegas, he doesn’t realize that his head guy here in the penguin suit is charging a hundred bucks an hour per table to have the cameras turned off, letting us play by our own rules. Wink. Wink.”

“That can’t be fair on the other employees.” Ness flicked a glance at the poor dealer whose face was bright red, although he kept his eyes down.

“They get tipped enough and if they complain they get fired.” Percival and the other man at the table burst out laughing again, although Lady Fiona tapped the table with her cards.

“Shut up, Percy, honestly. We have to keep playing or I’ll never be able to afford that new Rolls I have on order.”

“You should pull up a chair, Farness,” Percival said. “A couple of hands here and you’ll have paid for your trip.”

“Not this time.” Ness straightened, looking straight into Cyrus’s eyes. “But maybe another time. How often do you play here?”

“Every damn week.” Percival was acting like he’d made a new friend, when Ness had never had anything but a passing acquaintance with him, for good reason. “Honestly, it’s the easiest way to make money short of robbing a bank.” He noticed Cyrus for the first time. “Hey, who are you? This is a private party, didn’t Charles tell you? No spectators allowed.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t know who this person is, considering you come here every week. Allow me to introduce Cyrus Marinus from Sicily and more recently Las Vegas. The man who signs Charle’s paycheck,” Ness said calmly. “He’s also my fated mate, and in case you didn’t get the reference, he is the owner of this establishment. If you recall, the one you called a gangster and a thief because of his business dealings in Vegas. The one you’ve been stealing from to fund your new Rolls Royce.”

Percival wasn’t a tanned man, but in that moment his skin went so white he could’ve been mistaken for a ghost. “It was all Charles,” he said quickly. “Charles will tell you...”

“Charles has been detained and is currently unavailable for comment.” Cyrus glowered. “I think it’s time we all had a nice friendly chat in my office, don’t you? After all, theft is a criminal offense even if it is just you trying to pull one over on a gangster.”

“I’d call your Rolls Royce dealership, too, Fiona,” Ness added with a bite in his tone. “Your order is going to have to be canceled. Leave the chips on the table. They do not belong to you.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

“You didn’t kill anyone, that has to be a bonus.”

Cyrus eyed his mate, who was sitting in an armchair in his suite at the chateau. Not a penthouse suite - that wasn’t possible the way the house was designed. But Cyrus had claimed an entire floor for himself and to hell with the expense.

“They stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from me. I had every right to string bricks around their necks and throw them into the moat.”

Ness shook his head. “Throwing bodies in there would cause a stink and probably kill the fish. You did the right thing.”

“I’m not so sure,” Cyrus muttered glumly, tugging at his tie and dropping it and his jacket over the bottom post of the four poster bed which dominated the room. “The right thing, in my head, should never involve calling authorities, having those crap shits with titles arrested for fraud. And let’s not forget that asshole Charles. I considered him family. He’s worked for me for fifteen years!”

“My concern,” Ness said slowly, “and this is purely from an outsider’s point of view, but my concern is that Charles was expecting you next month, which was when you’d originally planned to visit France. I remember you telling me that our first morning together.”

Cyrus’s eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“You said yourself your visits were random – designed that way to catch the very things you saw today. All of the crew who work in your games rooms knew what was

going on, but they didn't dare say anything otherwise they'd lose their job, none of them thought they could come to you directly, for whatever reason. I'm not saying you're at fault here," Ness added quickly, "I just feel that it's possible that some people see the concept of family differently from you."

"I'm not seeing your point." Sitting on the edge of the bed, Cyrus kicked off his shoes and put them to one side.

"When you talk about your family, what does that concept mean to you?"

"You know what the word means." Cyrus still didn't have a clue what his mate was getting at, and that was just increasing his frustration. "A family is a group of people who are deeply loyal to each other, share the same values, work together with other family members to ensure everyone in the family is well looked after, succeeds in what they are doing, and protects each other."

"Okay, well that definition doesn't come close to the family I grew up with, but fair enough. This is your idea of family that stemmed from back when the mafia as an idea was born?"

"At the start, mafia families were originally only blood related members. Of course, as their reach expanded they had to involve more people. Members got married, other people proved their worth and loyalty and were included as trusted members. But the values behind those families never changed."

"But people have – the way people think has changed." Ness leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Our societies are different, cultures are different, the way we communicate has all changed over history and you know that. You're an extremely intelligent man. You've seen and adapted to those changes and been very successful because of it."

“The only thing I see you being stuck in the past about is your reliance on and your trust in people who clearly don’t feel the same way you do anymore. Charles is one example, actually taking bribes to turn off the cameras, knowing those patrons were going to cheat your casino. Your gaming room staff is another because they were the ones dealing the hands. Roman and Jon back in Las Vegas are two other examples of people who haven’t behaved the way you expect your family members to conduct themselves. They totally disregarded what their actions or lack of actions could do to your safety from prosecution or at least some heavy-handed questioning by authorities.”

“The gaming room staff didn’t do anything wrong. They didn’t want to lose their jobs. They spoke up quickly enough, filling in the details for the authorities as soon as they realized they weren’t getting fired. I can’t fault them for that.”

“No, but that’s the thing. Your staff didn’t think they could come to you about their concerns, either. No one dared send you an email, or text, or a message of some kind and say, ‘Hey, Charles is allowing people to scam and cheat at your casino, and firing anyone who speaks up about it.’”

Ness wasn’t wrong. Cyrus scratched the back of his head. “The gaming room staff aren’t family per se – they’re employees,” he said slowly. “They’re going to have a natural respect for me in my position as their overall boss, but they don’t report to me directly.”

“It’s not respect if they’re letting you get cheated,” Ness said bluntly. “Again, I’m not saying they’ve done anything wrong. It’s as you said when we met, a man or woman for that matter, will do what they have to do to feed their family. But by putting ‘family members’” - he used air quotes - “in positions between yourself and your staff, you’ve created a barrier that allows family members the opportunity to cheat you with very little chance of getting caught. Charles was a classic example of that today.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right, and fuck, I feel like I’ve been wandering around with my head up my ass, because I never saw any of this mess coming.” Cyrus flopped himself back on the bed. “I don’t know what you expect me to do about it though, except make random checks a lot more often and don’t tell anyone apart from you that I’m doing it.”

“That’s my main concern.” Ness had come over, lying on his side on the bed next to him, a hand resting heavy on Cyrus’s chest. “Who knows where you’re going except people you consider family? More specifically, how did Charles know or anticipate that you weren’t expected here until next month?”

Cyrus’s mind immediately flew to the people who he might have mentioned his plans to. Apart from Ness, he couldn’t think of anyone. He’d lived his life never answering to anyone. “It can’t be anything connected to the plane,” he said, still thinking through the possibilities. “Otherwise we wouldn’t have had two tables worth of cheaters in the casino today. And no one has access to my calendar – that’s on my phone and I don’t share that with anyone.”

“Can I look at your phone for a minute?”

“Of course. I told you from the beginning my life is an open book to you, darlin’.” Even frustrated, Cyrus wouldn’t deny Ness anything. Reaching in his pants pocket, he pulled out his phone, unlocked it and handed it over. “Are you thinking there’s some super spy attachment on it, some sort of tracking software that someone is monitoring from anywhere else in the world? Because I have to tell you, I already have software on my phone to stop anything like that happening.”

“I figured you would have, just the same as me.” Ness glanced up from Cyrus’s screen and smiled. “Your calendar history is interesting though.”

“I can’t think why.” Cyrus wasn’t worried Ness was seeing any evidence of dating

history. He didn't have any.

"It tells me you're a creature of habit." Ness grinned up at him. "If I glance through your five year history, just scanning it, I can see you visit this place in August, January, and May. You also visit your New York casino in the same months, every year like clockwork. In September and March each year you visit Greece and Berlin. You seem to spend every July and December in Las Vegas, and then..."

"Are you telling me I'm predictable?" Cyrus sat up in shock, grabbing the phone from Ness's fingers, staring at and then scrolling down the screen. "My gods, I am. How the hell did that happen?"

Ness smirked. "It does explain why your various casino managers seem to know when you turn up for your random visits each year." His smirk was fast turning into a chuckle.

"It's not funny. I'm getting cheated and ripped off..." Cyrus couldn't help himself. There was something about how Ness was sitting there, his fist shoved up against his mouth and his big shoulders shaking as he tried to hide his laughter. "Fine. It's funny." He shook his head. "At least I don't have to worry about being tracked or anything ridiculous like that. I've been thwarted by my own predictability. Just for that, we're going back to Greece and Berlin as soon as we've visited your candy factory."

"You only went there last month." Ness was on his back now, laughing his head off.

"I know, but they could be ripping me off from now until September." Cyrus threw himself over Ness's body. "You are taking too much pleasure out of my misfortune," he mock growled over Ness's face.

"We'll talk about concepts such as profit-share and joint ownership another time."

Ness was never sexier when his eyes were sparkling. “Kiss me.”

Which Cyrus did, because while he might have proven to be predictable, he also wasn't stupid. And when it came to Ness, he was probably proving to be predictable in that respect as well. But as Cyrus reached for Ness's pants button, he really didn't care, so long as Ness kept kissing him.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

The visit to the candy factory wasn't as joy inducing as Ness would've liked, although he did his best to hide it from everyone around him. Cyrus was fascinated by everything. He kept saying, "You have an actual factory and your own research department," as if that was so far out of his frame of reference he struggled to comprehend. He spent hours asking questions of the scientists, wanting to know about the sweet making process, and how they came up with their unique flavor profiles.

Ness had wandered around, making a point to speak to each of his workers, who were all pleased to see him. But when one of his tasters asked him if he wanted to try a new combination they were trialing, Ness felt queasy for two hours afterward. Not a pleasant experience. But by the time they headed back to another one of Ness's houses, Ness ate double helpings of dinner he was so hungry.

Berlin and Greece passed like a blur. Ness typically loved travel and had never had a problem with adjusting to time zone differences or changes in cuisine. Cyrus was the best of company whether they were out and about or when they were curled up in bed together, no matter what town they were in.

But something wasn't right. And it was only a matter of time before Cyrus picked it up. "Do you need somewhere to shift, darlin'?" He asked as they were having breakfast in a hotel just outside of Athens.

"I'm not sure," Ness admitted. He looked up and met Cyrus's eyes. "I haven't been feeling good for the past week, maybe. Is there any chance I'm...you know..." He willed Cyrus to fill in the blanks, but the man just looked blank. "Pregnant," he hissed.

“Oh.” Cyrus’s mouth dropped open.

“What’s the oh for?” That was not the reaction Ness expected. “Doesn’t your shark know?”

“Doesn’t your beastie?”

That’s not helpful. “My beastie’s been happy since the first time we had sex. I thought he just liked being with you.” Ness groaned. “I felt sure you or your shark would know. You’re supposed to be attuned to vibrations in the atmosphere. Surely creating a new life would create a unique enough vibration for your shark to recognize it in me. You already have a son. You’ve been through this before.”

Ness hadn’t even realized he’d raised his voice until Cyrus was out of his chair and kneeling by the side of Ness’s. “Hey, hey, darlin’. I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to minimize anything.” He stroked Ness’s arm. “Blade’s mother sent me a note when she worked out she was pregnant. It’s not like she let me go anywhere near her during that time. She was living in a totally different part of the house. But here, lean back a bit. I’ll get my shark to tell us.”

“We’re in a public restaurant.” Ness glanced around, although most people were glued to their phones. That didn’t stop him wishing he’d waited to say anything until they’d got back to their room.

“I don’t give a shit what other people think, darlin’. This is worrying you, so we’ll find out now.” Cyrus’s hand was resting on Ness’s belly. “Honestly, I could’ve probably checked you out last night, but when my hands end up on your delicious naked body, I’m attuned to a whole different sets of vibrations.”

“Cyrus.” Ness was back to hissing, although he knew it wouldn’t do any good. His mate lived to the beat of his own drum.



“How long have you been feeling off, darlin’?” Cyrus asked, moving his hand across Ness’s torso in a back and forward motion.

“About a week. Since we visited the factory. I thought it was caused by one of the sweets one of the researchers asked me to try at the time, but the queasiness has been coming and going ever since.”

“Okay.” Cyrus looked up at him and Ness could see the shark in his mate’s eyes. “Up here” - he moved his hand up to under Ness’s ribcage - “this is you digesting breakfast. Down here.” His hand moved to rest just above Ness’s crotch. “This part of your body is busy getting rid of last night’s food. And here...” This time Cyrus’s hand was resting right above his belly button.

“Here? What’s here?” Ness was shocked to see a single tear run down Cyrus’s face. “Cyrus?”

“Here’s new life,” Cyrus whispered. “New life. Made by you and me. Your beastie had every reason to feel happy darlin’ and it looks like I’ve got a reason to call you Daddy after all.”

“It’s true? You mean it?” But Ness could feel the truth through their bond. “Are you sure you’re happy about it?” He reached out and brushed Cyrus’s tear off his chiseled cheek.

“Don’t let me be the asshole dad I was to Blade or the way my dad was to me,” Cyrus said, his voice low. “Please darlin’, I’m going to need some help to break that cycle.”

“We’ve both got some lessons to learn,” Ness said, blinking quickly as he thought about his lonely childhood. “But we’ll be doing this together, and that’s going to count for something. We’re going to be parents together , promise.”

Cyrus looked at him intently for a long minute, and Ness kept their bond open, showing his truth in every way he could. Suddenly Cyrus jumped to his feet and grabbed his hand. “We need to go back to our room,” he said, dragging Ness out of the chair. “Quick. Quick.”

“Why?” Ness managed to grab his phone that had been left on the table before being towed along. “What’s the hurry?”

“No one but you should ever see me happy dance,” Cyrus said firmly. “No one but you. And then we’ve got to get you back to Arrowtown, ASAP. We need an appointment with Doc.”

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Ness napped on the plane, but Cyrus couldn’t sleep. His mind was cataloguing every mistake he’d made raising Blade. He’d been determined to have a son, someone who could take vengeance for his death if anyone took him out. Honestly, that was the only reason I had at the time. What a damn fool I’ve been.

Blade never knew, and no one else did either, but Cyrus had loved his son from first sight. As soon as he saw that squished up face, that mop of dark hair, and the way Blade screamed in anger every time he thought he should be fed, Cyrus used to grin and turn his head away. His son was strong, and back at that time, Cyrus believed that was the only thing that was important.

I know now how much of a huge fucking mistake I made. Emotions had been frowned on by society at the time, especially among the people he associated with, so Cyrus squashed his and never let them show. And yet look at Blade with Ethan now. That had been a huge eyeopener for Cyrus when he’d first gone to visit. He’d fully expected to see Hal looking after the baby, with Blade just handing out cigars and showing off.

But Blade genuinely loved Ethan. He picked him up, soothed him when he was crying, or made silly faces so Ethan would laugh. Cyrus felt his tears threaten all over again and he quickly glanced down, making sure Ness was still sleeping. He'd never done that – never hugged Blade, not even after he came back from making his first kill. He'd just patted him on the back and told him, “well done.”

I was such a fucking idiot. Although, when Cyrus thought back to his most recent conversation with Blade, he still held with what he said. Times were tough back then. Cyrus never knew when he left the house if he'd be alive long enough to come back to it. He raised Blade to keep himself safe, and the boy had done that.

Looking around at the opulence of his private plane, Cyrus mentally chuckled. I've come a long way since then. And while the thought of being affectionate with a baby, toddler, or child a year ago would have had him swimming in the opposite direction at top speed, Cyrus recognized he could and had shown affection to Ethan. He was affectionate with Ness all the time.

Ness is my missing ingredient, he thought fondly, stroking down his mate's cheek. With him I've got the chance to be an actual parent.

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“I really like your house. It’s got a lovely cozy and lived-in feel about it.”

Ness risked a quick glance over at his mate who was sitting with a contented smile on his face, watching the scenery go by while Ness was driving. They had flown into Arrowtown the night before and were on their way to an appointment with Doc. “I hear a but in there somewhere,” he said with a chuckle. “What’s the matter? Are you missing room service already?”

“No, no.” Cyrus shook his head. “I’m perfectly capable of cooking and things are easy to find in your kitchen. I even know how to use a washing machine and dryer, shock horror, I know. But I’m not averse to doing my bit around the house.”

“What is it then?” Ness turned onto the main road heading into town. “Are you thinking about where we’ll be living going forward? Actually, that’s a thought. You never mentioned how much time running your businesses takes in a week. Do we need to be thinking about splitting our time between Vegas and Arrowtown?”

“Would you be upset if we did?”

That was shocking enough Ness had to check his mate’s face again. “What makes you say something like that? Have I said or done anything to make you feel your life and business aren’t important?”

“No...but you are a bit of a homebody, aren’t you?”

“Why?” Ness laughed. “Did you get that impression because my house looks lived-in, as opposed to the penthouse hotel suites we’ve been staying at that belong to

you?”

“I’ve got houses, too.” But Cyrus was chuckling, so Ness knew he was just teasing. “It’s just...we do need to be thinking about things like this so our little one can have a settled upbringing.”

Warmth flooded Ness’s body like a hug. He’d caught Cyrus scrolling through a parenting site on the para website when he’d come back from the bathroom that morning. “We both travel for work and pleasure, so I think it would be really weird of us both to just give that up. With two private planes at our disposal, I don’t think taking our young one with us anywhere will be an issue either.

“I do agree traveling less often would be a sensible idea. It’s not so bad between here and Vegas, because both places are in the same time zone, but going to Europe or Scotland would have to be longer trips away. Perhaps if we did that less often?”

“That’s a good idea. We can do that.” Cyrus was tapping something into his phone. “What do we think about having a nanny?”

“No.” Ness didn’t even have to think about that one. “When I was little, I saw my parents once a week on a Sunday evening. My father didn’t start spending time with me until it was time for me to learn how to trade. I hated it.”

“No nannies, then.” Cyrus flashed him a grin. “I guess little ones have to sleep sometimes, so we will still get some alone time every now and then.”

“This is where cultivating friendships comes in,” Ness said, pulling into the parking lot next to Doc’s house. “Especially in Arrowtown, people here are really friendly and will likely offer to look after our little one overnight on the odd occasion when we need some quality adult time. I’ve seen that time and time again here, and it works.”

“Where do you run your business from?” Cyrus asked after some more tapping on his screen. “Do you have a main office somewhere?”

“Nope.” Ness turned off the car and flicked his finger over at the back seat. “My office is in my laptop. I have a website where I take funding applications. It’s a three phase process – phase one is done online, phase two involves my lawyers and accountants, and then if they pass those two phases, I usually travel to meet the applicants personally in their own place of business, if they get that far.”

“Hmm. We probably don’t want to be doing that with a little one in tow.” Cyrus thought for a moment, and then did some more tapping. “I’ll set you up with an office space in my hotel in Vegas and we can do a couple of days there a month, or whatever, so your prospective money grabbers can come and visit you there, if that works for you.”

“I fund inventors and new business owners with good ideas. They are not money grabbers,” Ness protested although he was pleased Cyrus was being supportive of him working despite the baby. “Having an office would make things easier, thank you.”

“I just want to make sure I do everything right with being a parent this time.” Cyrus slipped his phone back into his pocket and then reached for Ness’s hand.

“We’re doing it together and face it” - Ness raised Cyrus’s hand to his lips and kissed his mate’s knuckles - “we know what not to do, so that’s a start. Now, let’s move.” The kiss to the hand was followed up by a quick kiss on Cyrus’s lips. “Let’s see what Doc’s got to say about our latest development. Don’t get nippy if he wants to give me an ultrasound again. Remember he’s helping us, and he’s mated to a deputy sheriff.”

“Making friends, not killing people. I know.” Although Ness was sure he could see Cyrus’s shark in his eyes.

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Doc didn't have a lot to add beyond yes, Ness was carrying their baby, and yes, it was still in the very early stages. Cyrus expected a lot more. From the things he'd been reading, there were foods that pregnant people shouldn't eat and long posts about vitamins and things like that. But when Cyrus asked Doc about the advice, the damn man laughed and told him that shifters know their own bodies best, and that was that. Doc insisted he wanted to see Ness every week for at least the next month, so they could all get an idea on how fast their little one was going to grow and warned them it was likely going to be a long pregnancy.

Afterward, they left their car in the parking lot, Ness taking Cyrus's hand as they slowly walked up the main street. "It has a nice vibe, this place," Cyrus observed, taking in the bar, the bakery, a general store, a hardware store, and a couple of specialty shops, including a computer repair business. "Everyone seems to know everyone else."

"They do pretty much. If you hide yourself away here, people tend to view you with suspicion. However, everyone also gathers around when things go wrong." Ness pointed out the freshly painted sheriff's office. "That place was bombed a while ago, back when Doc met his mate, I think. Bad blood between some bull shifters and the rest of the town. The bull shifters have since been banished from town completely, but the whole town got together, clearing away the rubble and building the new office."

"Didn't Doc say he was mated to a bull shifter? A deputy sheriff?"

"Yep." Ness nodded. "Deputy Joe was the only good one in the bunch. Apparently, and this is just part of Arrowtown lore, when Joe's relatives heard he'd gotten a male mate and kept his position in town, one of his uncles completely trashed his house, complete with dead bodies. It's said, and I wasn't there so I can't say for sure, but

apparently what was left of that uncle would fit in a shoebox after Doc got finished with him.”

“I’m liking the doc more and more.” Cyrus’s respect for the doctor grew.

“Have a bit of respect for Joe, too.” Ness laughed. “He watched it happen, apparently there was blood and gore everywhere, and all he did was offer Doc some dental floss because there were some bits stuck in his teeth.”

“Okay, I’m warming up to this town.” Cyrus looked in askance as Ness stopped outside of the general store. “Did we need some groceries, darlin’? Are you having cravings already?”

“No, I want to introduce you to someone, but this is where I need for you to be on your most honest behavior.”

“You’ve seen me with people, darlin’. I’m charm personified.”

“Mrs. Hooper is one of this town’s oldest residents, next to me. She knows everything about everybody’s business, and she doesn’t take shit from anyone. She’s a Texas Longhorn shifter, and she rules her sons with a rod of iron.

“But if you get her seal of approval, she’ll make sure you always get what you need. She’s one of the people who make up gift baskets with baby necessities when there’s a new birth in town, and when Joe’s house needed a complete renovation after the uncle business, she was one of the main people behind that. Be yourself,” Ness added, as he opened the door. “Mrs. Hooper,” he said in his friendly tones as he stepped inside the shop. “How are you doing this lovely day?”

“I’m doing good, Nessie, thanks for asking.” The woman had a strong voice. “What’s this, you bringing a shark into my place? He’s a bit far from the sea, isn’t he?”



“This is Cyrus Marinus,” Ness said, and there was so much pride in his voice Cyrus would’ve swooned over it, if he’d been a swooning type of guy. “He’s Blade’s father, baby Ethan’s grandfather, and my fated mate.”

Mrs. Hooper folded her arms across her chest. She was a big woman of indeterminate age. And Cyrus was genuine with his indeterminate assessment. The woman was older than most, not as much as Cyrus, he guessed, but he wouldn’t lay money on it. “Hmm, the gangster. We won’t stand for any of your racketeering in this town, boyo.”

Cyrus was shocked enough to laugh out loud. “Mrs. Hooper, I can swear in all honesty, no one has ever called me a boyo before. On days when I am feeling my age, I’m going to remember your comment and smile about it. Thank you.” He gave a deep bow, complete with flourish. “As for the racketeering,” he added as he stood up, “Doc has already told me it’s fine, provided I don’t do any of it in town. So when I’m here, consider me on a racketeering holiday.”

“Make sure you do that.” Unfolding her arms, she reached across the wide counter and pulled out a basket. “I got a few meals for the two of you. When you’re busy with the little one, you can order them by the week but consider these a mating present.”

“Mrs. Hooper, thank you so much.” Ness hurried over to take the basket, while Cyrus stayed smiling by the door. “We’ll definitely remember about the meal ordering,” he said, his cheeks bright pink. “You know, when that sort of thing happens.”

“You were seen coming out of the doctor’s office.” Mrs. Hooper shook her head. “As if you haven’t already ‘happened’ enough. You’ll find a couple of bottles of ginger pop in there, too. Take that when you get the queasy tummy. Now, get on with you, and remember what I said about the racketeering, boyo.”

“If I feel the urge to racketeer, I’ll come and see you directly so you can whack me

over a head with a wooden spoon.” Cyrus opened the door for Ness. “I’m sure you’ve got one somewhere in this marvelous store of yours, ma’am.”

“He’s all right, Ness,” Mrs. Hooper said as they left the store.

“All right?” Cyrus took the basket and sniffed. The food smelled terrific. “I got an all right?”

“That’s the highest compliment you’ll get from Mrs. Hooper.” Ness tucked his hand around Cyrus’s arm and turned them in the direction of the parking lot. “It means you’ve been accepted.”

“I think I like that.” And Cyrus meant it. That feeling of contentment stayed with him for the rest of the afternoon.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

“My beastie’s keen for a swim tonight,” Ness said, getting up from where they’d been lingering over their after-dinner coffee. At least, Cyrus was drinking coffee. Ness was drinking herbal tea. “I won’t be too long.”

“I’ll come for a swim as well, if that’s all right?” Cyrus got up too, stacking their plates – the containers left from Mrs. Hooper’s delicious food – and taking them over to the kitchen counter. “Unless you’d rather be alone...?”

“Er...no, my beast would love it if you came. I’m sure you can feel that through our bond.” Ness ducked his head. I can’t say no. “Just...er...it’s a full moon tonight.”

“It is darlin’. That will make it easier for us to see each other.” Leaning against the sink counter, Cyrus said, “Is the full moon significant for your beastie?”

“Not in a traditional way, or any way you might be thinking. But there could be dancing.” Ness couldn’t even meet Cyrus’s eyes – he was sure he’d die of embarrassment, although his beastie was so happy Cyrus wanted to come with them.

“Dancing? The townspeople come and dance around your lake under the full moon?”

Ness shook his head. “No, no one else around I hope. It would just be my beastie dancing in the water.” He sighed and tried to explain. “My beastie likes to move around in such a way that could only be described as dancing sometimes. Such as when they’re happy about things. We had the doctors today and got to actually see our peanut and...”

“We did see the peanut, we did. We have something to celebrate and there’s no way

your precious beastie should be dancing alone.” Cyrus whipped off his shirt, chucking it over the back of a kitchen chair and collected his phone. “I’ll bring the music and a glass of wine for me and juice for you, shall I?”

“I’ll get us a couple of towels.” It was impossible not to get excited when his beastie and Cyrus were there already.

The walk down to the lake was always something Ness enjoyed. The trees surrounding the area gave the place an otherworldly feeling, especially at night. The moon gave everything a grayish silver glow, reflecting beautifully on the still lake.

Cyrus was quiet until they reached the shore. “You go and shift, darlin’,” he said, taking the towels from Ness’s arms. “I’ll set up here and join you in a minute.”

A month or so ago, Ness would never have allowed anyone to see him naked. But Cyrus made the whole idea of being naked before shifting, or when going to bed, or even when taking a nap in the afternoon seem so normal, Ness barely thought about it anymore. He stepped out of his shoes and dropped his pants, smiling as Cyrus wolf whistled.

Stepping into the water, his beastie waited until the water was up to his knees before coming forward. For Ness, it always felt as though his whole being expanded, which in a way it did. His animal side was so much bigger than he was, and he wasn’t a little man. He paddled his way out to where the water was deeper before looking around for his mate.

Cyrus was naked as well, waiting by the shore, his big smile illuminated by the moon. “I’ve got some music for us, beastie. What sort of music do you like? Listen and let me know.”

Ooh, beastie liked this game. He shook his head to classical music and shook it even

harder when something else blasted out of Cyrus's phone that sounded like a truck or a train rumbling down a track. There was some music that was people singing slowly with lovely acoustics, but that wasn't the mood beastie was in. But then some bright, happy, electronic sounds with a strong beat rang out across the lake and beastie immediately started nodding his head. It wasn't something he'd heard before, definitely not something Ness would listen to in his quiet moments, but beastie loved it.

"You like house music. I totally didn't expect that, but if that's what gets your body moving, let's do this." Cyrus's laughter could be heard above the music. He rested his phone on the towels and came hurrying back down to the water's edge. "Don't you go laughing at me, beastie," he said, splashing into the water. "I'm a useless dancer, but you should have a partner when you're showing off your moves."

Beastie was quick to agree. He was bobbing, his neck swaying his head from side to side, his whole body wiggling to the upbeat music. Waist deep in water, his skin shining under the moon, Cyrus was waving his arms around, his head moving from side to side, keeping time with beastie and the music.

One song flowed into the next and the two of them danced, and finally as the music died down, Cyrus swam over, and beastie sank farther down in the water, so his mate could wrap his arms around his neck. "You have the best moves, beastie," Cyrus said softly. "Thank you for the dance." Beastie would've blushed, if he was able, when Cyrus pecked a quick kiss on his neck, but he knew it was time for Ness to come through again. Kissing was a human thing, although beastie was still glowing from the connection and the fun of the dance, as Ness's form came through.

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Cyrus felt as though he could fly. Dancing with no one watching him but his lovely beastie filled his heart, and for the first time in his life he felt like he belonged – he

belonged with his beastie, he belonged in Arrowtown, despite what Blade might think, and more importantly he belonged with the man who was in his arms.

“I love you, darlin’,” he said roughly. “I’ve never said those words to another person, but you have got my heart in a vice, and...and...I just love you so much.”

“I love you too, Cy.” The response was immediate and if Cyrus thought he was flying before, now he was racing for the shiny moon. “My dashing gangster who dances under the moon...”

Ness might have wanted to say more, but Cyrus had to kiss those lips – those precious lips which spouted words Cyrus never realized he needed to hear. Their kisses got heated quickly, their naked bodies slipping and sliding against each other with the help of the water.

Cyrus had never had sex in the water. He rarely even swam in his human form. There wasn’t any need. But with his cock hard and his blood heating, the press of Ness’s body against his, he wished he’d thought to bring some lube down from the house with the wine.

But Ness was there with him, feeling his need through their bond, and before Cyrus had a moment to suggest they needed to get back to the house, he was flat on his back in the water, supported by Ness’s strong arms, with his cock being swallowed by his eager mate.

“Fuck, yes! Oh, darlin’ you’re spoiling me.” Cyrus was gripping Ness’s waist with one arm, the other one sweeping through the water, doing his part to try and float and keep his head above the water.

If I’m going to drown, this is the way I want to go. Ness had learned so much in their time together, and one of the things he enjoyed the most was using his mouth – as

Ness called it. The man had no gag reflex, and Cyrus felt as though his cock was being sucked from his body – the enthusiasm, Ness’s breathy moans around his length... “Oh, darlin’. Oh, darlin’.” Cyrus’s hand slid down to Ness’s butt, his fingers seeking to tease Ness’s hole.

Ness widened his legs, just a fraction, but enough that Cyrus could get his fingers deep inside of Ness’s crack. Cyrus’s orgasm was brewing, he was doing his best to keep his nose out of the water, and yet he wanted to bring his mate pleasure, too. He could feel Ness’s cock bobbing against the side of his body, but he could feel so much more as well. The pleasure coming through their bond – Ness’s joy at sucking him, the pleasure Cyrus was feeling, Ness’s arousal heightened by Cyrus’s finger – round and round, it was like a loop – feeding each other’s arousal and love, because Cyrus could feel that, too.

No man could last long under an onslaught of pleasure. Cyrus clung to Ness as best he could as his orgasm rocked through his body, his cock pulsing deep inside Ness’s mouth. Ness moaned again as he slurped up Cyrus’s release and as he pulled off Cyrus’s cock with a pop, Cyrus felt his mate’s legs tremble and a warm splodge land against his water-cooled skin.

“Oh, gods, oh gods.” Ness let Cyrus’s legs drop and Cyrus wrapped his arms around his mate, his feet finding the ground so he could take his turn at supporting his mate’s weight. “I never thought of doing that in the lake before.”

“I think it’s fitting. Water’s our element and doing that was the perfect end to an incredible day.” Cyrus cupped Ness’s jaw with his hand. “I love you, darlin’.”

Turning his face slightly so he could kiss Cyrus’s hand, Ness said, “I love you too. But we need to head to the house.”

“Of course. Are you feeling queasy again, or getting chilly?”

Ness's stomach answered for him. "I'm ravenous. Your spunk is barely an appetizer when I'm eating for two."

"I'll make us a fry-up," Cyrus said as they splashed their way to the shore. "It's the quickest meal to cook."



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Roughly eleven months later

“There’s going to be blood. Your mate’s blood. If you can’t handle it...”

Cyrus held up his hand. Deputy Joe was a handsome, solid man with a quiet but firm manner – a man clearly devoted to Doc. Him and Liam, who was standing on the other side of him, had become friends of sorts in the weekly visits Ness and Cyrus had been making to Doc’s office since Ness had his pregnancy confirmed.

It had been a relatively easy pregnancy – at least for Cyrus. Ness had struggled in the last four weeks with the increased weight, and not being able to move around as much as he wanted. But he’d kept his good humor, something Cyrus knew he would never be able to do as well as his Ness did.

“I’m going to cope with it, because Ness wants me to,” Cyrus said firmly, meeting his mate’s smile with one of his own. “My mate’s put in the hard yards. All I have to do is keep my teeth to myself so we can share this special moment.”

Ness was already lying on the bed, his face flushed with the effort it had taken just to do that. It had been a very long year – one where barely anything happened for the first six months and then all of a sudden Ness woke up with a cute belly, cravings, and mood swings that tested their relationship. One minute Ness would be all over Cyrus like a rash wanting sex three to six times a day, and the next he’d snap if Cyrus went to hold his hand. It was frustrating at times, and yet there were so many positive moments too.

Ness’s pregnancy had to have been the most documented male pregnancy in history.

Doc charted growth, Ness's symptoms, took blood once a month to make sure Ness was staying healthy in all ways, and making a point of recording the mood swings as well, because as he said, a person's mood played a huge part in a successful pregnancy. So there was all that.

For his part, Cyrus started making the changes Ness suggested with his business and the "family" associated with that. The profit sharing ideas Ness thought would help reduce the incidences of cheating in his casinos was working far better than Cyrus had ever anticipated. His profit was up over twenty percent from the year before – and he shared that with the staff who made that happen.

It appeared when employees had a vested interest in the success of a business, they worked harder to ensure that happened. Cyrus also put in a dedicated email address where employees could report on anything concerning, without any fear of losing their jobs if they were genuine in their concerns. Cyrus, being a shifter, helped weed out the troublemakers because it was so easy for him to scent a lie. Overall his businesses had never done as well.

Jimmy the carpet guy could finally retire – something he'd apparently wanted to do five years before. Cyrus instigated new rules for dealing with grievances toward and about his family members. There had even been a five day visit to Sicily where Cyrus met with other family heads and discussed his involvement going forward. It was decided Cyrus wasn't going to retire as such – it was more him stepping away from the day-to-day because he had more important things to do.

Like look after Ness and their baby that was minutes away from being born. The one issue neither Cyrus nor Ness had been able to resolve was their relationships with their own blood families. Ness had contacted his parents again via email when he was three months pregnant and had never received a reply. Likewise Blade would nod if he saw Cyrus or Ness in town, but they still hadn't spoken.

That was upsetting, at least for Ness. Three times during his pregnancy Ness had broken down, crying and yelling, angered at how much his parents didn't care about him and apparently never had. Then, when Cyrus would comfort him and remind him they weren't going to parent that way, Ness would start crying all over again because Cyrus was missing out with Blade not talking to him. Fun times, not. With Ness's encouragement, Cyrus learned to open up a bit more and be more approachable with people in town who were friendly and supportive, which did help Ness.

"I love babies," Liam confided as they waited for Levi and Doc to start. "I've gotta admit those first weeks were really hard – getting barely any sleep and wondering if we'd ever have time to ourselves again. I'm not sure if me or my mates would want to have anymore. But this moment, this point in time when your baby is first welcomed into the world..." Liam fanned his face. "Makes me tear up every time."

"I just need for them to be okay – my mate and my baby. That's all I want or need." There was only one baby. That was all they knew. No one had any idea if the little one would be a boy or a girl, despite Ness having over forty ultrasounds.

As the scent of Ness's blood hit the air, Cyrus focused his eyes on Ness's face, his mind taking him back down memory lane. He hadn't been present at Blade's birth. That wasn't done in those days. Cyrus had been in a business meeting when he was notified that Blade's mother had given birth and that he had a son, and after thanking the messenger, Cyrus went back to what he was doing.

Now, I'm here...I'm seeing... Cyrus's jaw was so tight he thought his teeth would break. His hands were fisted at his side, and he was conscious of the tension in the men flanking either side of him. Cam, from the bar, and the town's resident honey badger was standing by the door frame, while Brutus, a bear shifter, and Ra, a tiger shifter were on standby in the waiting room.

Our friends... Cyrus realized as Levi and Doc worked quickly. People who were

prepared to stand by Cyrus's side and make sure he did nothing to ruin what was the start of a whole new chapter in their mating. Yes, those same people cared deeply for Doc and Levi as well, but they could've insisted he wait outside. Instead they stood by, ready to stop Cyrus from making a fool of himself, if needed... and they won't be.

"And we have a baby girl," Levi said with a wide grin as a blood-streaked baby appeared in his hands. "Just wait another two minutes, Cyrus, please. Let's get Ness sewn up again and the baby cleaned up..."

"A girl? We have a daughter?" Cyrus felt his knees wobble and Joe quickly grabbed his arm. Why had I assumed I'd have another son? "Ness, darlin'. Are you all right with that?"

They'd talked about genders, like prospective parents did. Ness had explained one long night when he couldn't sleep about how most of the women in his species were extremely dominant and seemed to lack any sign of a caring gene, and for that reason he would've preferred to have a son. But those concerns were clearly history because no one could deny the joy on Ness's face.

"We have our own precious hybrid. Species standards and behaviors need not and will not apply to our baby." Tears were pouring down Ness's face as he cradled their daughter to his chest. "Cy, look at her. She's beautiful."

Cyrus already knew that. As he made his way to the bed, all he could do was stare at the mop of bright red hair, two shades lighter than Ness's. The face was scrunched up, chubby in that way a healthy baby's could be. Cyrus couldn't see his daughter's eyes as they were closed, but just as he had when he'd seen Blade for the first time, Cyrus fell in love.

"Wanna hold, Daddy?" Ness held their daughter up for Cyrus to take. "I don't want her jostled while they're taking care of things down there."

“I’ll take her, darlin’.” Taking the baby carefully, waiting until Doc wrapped a blanket around her quickly first, Cyrus held his daughter against his chest. “You’ve given me everything, darlin’,” he said softly, looking over her head at his mate. “I love you. Are you feeling all right?”

“I need to shift.” Ness sniffed and wiped over his cheeks. “I feel as though I could sleep for a week, but I also feel like I could conquer the world in this moment as well.”

“Heightened emotions are all perfectly normal,” Doc said brusquely, writing more in his notes. The file he had on Ness’s pregnancy was at least two inches thick. “Spend a few weeks at home, at the bare minimum, before you start thinking about flying off anywhere again. Take that time to bond, settle into a routine that works for all three of you, and bring your lovely young lady in to see me in a week’s time so I can make some final checks on her weight and all those technical bits and pieces I need for my paperwork.”

“A baby’s a good look on you, gangster,” Cam said as he straightened off the doorframe and went to leave. “Congratulations to you both. If you need a hand with anything, Nessie, call Fergus – I’m lousy at giving advice.”

“Yes, I’d better go, too.” Liam cooed at Sofia and dropped his arm over Cyrus’s shoulder quickly before dropping it again. “My mates are going to think I’m broody again, if I hang around too long. We’ll drop by and visit later in the week.”

“Cam still hasn’t forgiven us for what happened when his Fergus gave birth.” Joe chuckled as Cam and Liam disappeared. “We wouldn’t even let him in the building. He fought us so hard. You did good, Cyrus.”

“I did it for Ness and Sofia.” Cyrus stroked a fingertip over his daughter’s head. They’d decided on the name a month ago, even though Cyrus had thought he was

having a son. But it fit. The name fit her. Sofia Duncan Marinus.

“I’ve got to admit,” Levi said, as he quickly sorted stuff on a tray that had been used during the birth. “I’m a bit stuck with this one. Did I just assist in the birth of my aunt or my cousin?”

“It was a family birth,” Ness said with a yawn. “But technically, if you want to be specific, Cyrus is your step-grandfather, Blade is your stepfather, and Ethan is your stepbrother. As our Sofia is Blade’s sister, just a hundred and ten years apart give or take, that makes her yours and Ethan’s aunt.”

“Cool,” Levi said happily. “Let’s get my new aunt into some clothes, shall we grandpa? And then you can take Ness home so he can shift. I assume you can’t do that in here.”

“I’m far too big to do that.” Ness said, wincing as he tried to sit up. “Yep. I’m going to need a shift to heal that business up.”

“Here, let me help you, darlin’.” Cyrus handed Sofia over to Levi, making sure the young doctor had Sofia secure and was supporting her head before hurrying to Ness’s side. The scent of Ness’s blood still hung in the air, but it was dissipating fast. But when Cyrus went to help Ness sit up more comfortably, his mate held him in a grip around his torso.

“We did it.” Ness was crying and laughing, his whole body shaking in Cyrus’s arms. “Oh, Cy, Sofia’s finally here and she’s perfect.”

“You did the hard yards, darlin’,” Cyrus said softly. “I’m so proud of you and I love you so much.” He kissed Ness’s forehead. “We might not have much alone time for the foreseeable future, so I figured you needed to hear that about now.”

“As if I’d forget. I love you, too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

A month later the new family had settled into a semi-routine. Sofia's sleeping habits ruled the household, but Ness and Cyrus took days about where one of them was solely focused on her, while the other one took care of household and business chores. Mrs. Hooper's ready-cooked meals were a blessing, as even with a division of chores, both men were suffering from a lack of sleep. As Ness found, it was impossible for him not to wake up for Sofia's night feed, even if it was Cyrus who was getting out of bed to tend to her. Cyrus had the same problem, but an afternoon nap helped them most days.

Ness had gone through a couple of days of private reflection after they'd come home with Sofia for the first time. A shift took care of his physical healing, and it was truly sweet that Cyrus bundled Sofia up in a blanket and stepped out into the water, for beastie to have a sniff.

Two days later Ness did the same for Cyrus's shark, because with Sofia so young, it was still impossible for them to know what Sofia might shift into, or when, and they were both determined Sofia would know their animal sides from day one. As for what she would grow into, it was enough that Sofia smelled of them both. Only time would tell the rest.

But Ness did have a few moments when he was ready to bang his head against a cushion or scream into the void. Carrying Sofia had been physically taxing, and Ness had been so focused on making sure he stayed healthy and that Sofia was safe in his body, the mental side of being a parent had been pushed to one side apart from a few meltdowns.

A body did what a body needed to do, but the mind was a totally different animal,



and Ness's mind had fluctuated from sheer euphoria over having a child of their own to outright panic that they were going to do something as parents that would cause Sofia to hate them for the rest of their lives.

In the end it was Cyrus who pointed out that they weren't living in isolation. They had regular visits from so many people in Arrowtown, all keen to have a cuddle with Sofia and to impart advice if Ness or Cyrus asked. "She's being raised in the most positive village imaginable," Cyrus said. "You know darn well that if Mrs. Hooper thinks I'm doing anything wrong with our precious, she'll be after me with a wooden spoon and a dose of reality."

That helped. Ness knew his issues stemmed from his family's continued rejection, but he didn't have the time to wish for something that would never happen, not when Sofia just had to grab hold of his finger in her sturdy grip to make his heart sing.

"You've got another six applications from money grabbers." Cyrus held up a sheaf of papers. They were having breakfast, and Ness had just finished giving Sofia her bottle.

"Have they passed the shark-sniffing test?" Ness carefully took the bottle out of Sofia's slack lips and lifted her up onto his shoulder, gently rubbing her back. He'd learned the hard way if she didn't burp after feeding, she'd be screaming the house down about an hour later.

"You can't deny that my nose has worked." Cyrus grinned. "Going with your gut instinct the moment you read the application could save you so much in lawyer and accountant fees down the track. Take this one." He flipped one page to the top of the pile. "This husband and wife team claims to have developed a household robot."

"That's not unusual." Sofia gave a hearty burp and Ness smiled. "There's my angel. You're such a good girl. A robot's not something I'd typically invest in though. What

makes this one different?”

“Well, apparently it will not only cook, clean, and pour the hard working souls a drink at the end of a busy day, it also comes with an built-in protection device.”

“Definitely not something I’d invest in.” Ness chuckled. “That sounds like something only the rich would ever be able to afford to buy. I prefer to support products and ideas that have a wider beneficial appeal to the general public. It says so on my website, so I don’t know why they bothered to approach my company. Just send them the standard apologies and say no.”

“I think we should go and see these two.”

Ness looked across at his mate to see Cyrus’s typical smirk, and his shark in his eyes.

“What have they done? What’s set off your shark senses?”

“Well, you remember those protective elements – the ones built in this robot...”

Ness nodded. “What about them?”

“They’ll warn you if a paranormal is trying to gain access to your home. According to the supporting information their robot can detect most forms of paranormals, such as shifters, vampires, and the presence of magic on any person within five yards of the device. A boon for any non-para household who is concerned about undue influence from devious beings.”

“Oh no. They actually typed that in the application?” Ness couldn’t help laughing. He received requests along a similar vein at least twice a year. “I suppose you’re just curious to see if the robot actually works?”

“It could be fun. We should get them to bring their prototype to Vegas next time

we're there." Cyrus nodded eagerly. "It could be a very enlightening interview, don't you think?"

"Just remember Jimmy the carpet guy has retired." Ness tried to see what Sofia was doing. "Is she asleep?"

"Yep." Cyrus put the papers down and reached over, plucking Sofia off Ness's shoulder. "I'll go and put her down for a nap, while you set up an interview time for this couple. I really want to meet them. Like really, really want to."

He's still a gangster at heart, Ness thought fondly as he went to find his laptop. Apparently he'd left it on the living room coffee table. A knock on the door had him diverting course, and he went to open it, his head tilting and his heart rate increasing as he saw who was standing there. "Hal. Blade. It's lovely to see you both. Did you want to come in?" He stood back from the door, opening it wider so they could both come in.

"Cyrus is just putting Sofia down for a nap. Come on through to the kitchen. We've just had breakfast, so you'll have to excuse the mess, but the coffee pot's hot."

"Thank you." Blade seemed stiff and unsure of himself, but both men followed Ness into the kitchen.

"Have a seat. How's Ethan doing?"

Ness glanced at the table to see Hal signing. He's growing so fast and gets into everything. Levi is looking after him today so we could come here.

"It's nice to see you." Ness said, turning back to the coffee pot. "Your contacts for the pool were really helpful. I never realized it was such a process, getting one put in."

“My mate said to tell you that you have yours in a lovely spot,” Blade said. “Does it have a deep and shallow end? It looks bigger than ours.”

“Yes, we made ours double the size because Cyrus was hopeful my beastie could join him in the water too. We do that occasionally. My shifted form can stand in the saltwater shallows for a short while, but after a time it gets uncomfortable on their skin, and we can’t breathe under saltwater the way we can in freshwater. Cyrus and I work it now that one of us will shift, and the other one will swim in human form in either the lake or the pond. Sofia hasn’t decided which one she likes yet – she seems happy to splash in either the pool or the lake, but it’s very early days yet.”

Taking the coffee pot over to the table, Ness quickly refreshed the milk in the milk jug and got some sugar from the pantry along with another couple of mugs. “So why are you here, not that it’s not lovely to see you, because it is. But...”

“I owe you an apology.” Blade met his eyes squarely. “I was rude and made assumptions about you and my father the last time you visited the house. As my mate has reminded me constantly, I changed considerably from the man I was before I met my precious Hal, and it was wrong of me to not give my father the same opportunity.”

“That took a lot of balls to say.” Ness studied his stepson. Blade was more like his father than he realized. “I appreciate it. Thank you. As far as I’m concerned it’s water under the bridge and I know both Cyrus and I would love for your family to be a part of our lives going forward in any way that works for you. But I sense that you have more to say to Cyrus, because when it’s all said and done you barely know me at all. Hopefully we can change that in the future.”

He tilted his head toward the doorway. “Your father is getting Sofia settled. Go left down the hallway, third door on the right. Take as long as you like. Hal can update me about Ethan and Levi while you’re gone.”

Blade gave his mate a long look, and Ness imagined they had a mind link. For a moment he was quietly jealous, an emotion he quickly swept away. He and Cyrus could have a mind link of their own, but that same action could result in Cyrus getting pregnant, and as neither one of them were ready for that yet... Never say never, though.

As soon as Blade had left the room, Ness grinned at Hal. "So...baby Ethan? I guess he's not a baby anymore. He's probably walking by now. You said he's moving around and getting into things. What sort of things do I have to look forward to with our Sofia?"

Holding up his hand, Hal reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. I've got pictures, he signed, clicking on his screen.

"Oh, wonderful. I can't wait to see." Scooting his chair around, Ness peered over Hal's shoulder as he clicked into a folder on his phone. "Thank you Hal," he said softly in case other ears in the house could hear.

Hal's smile was all the response he needed. "Oh, my goodness, what has Ethan got into there? He's covered in what looks like green flour. Was he trying to bake a cake?"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Cyrus knew the moment Blade walked into the house. His son had a similar vibrational frequency to his own, and while there was a part of him that wanted to rush with Sofia still in his arms out to the kitchen to hear what was being said, Ness exuded calm through their bond and was apparently happy. So Cyrus inhaled sharply, let that breath out slowly and quietly crooned to his daughter as he cleaned her little butt, changed her into a comfortable onesie, and then picked her up again, sitting in the large rocker they'd put in the nursery with his daughter in his arms.

"Your brother will always protect you," he whispered in a low tone. "As soon as he sees you, your brother will want to protect you. Blade learned my skills and went out into the world and forged a life of his own, surpassing the master, you might say." He chuckled softly. Sofia's eyes, which were as dark as his own, slowly started to close. "That's right, you sleep my precious girl. Know that you will always be safe, always cherished, always loved."

The door opened five minutes later, and Cyrus met his son's gaze with a half-smile. "Have you come to meet your sister, Blade? As you can see, she's a real beauty."

Blade closed the door behind him, softly Cyrus noted. "I never, in my whole life, I never expected to see you like this."

"Messy?" Cyrus chuckled and plucked at his jeans. "It might have appeared I lived my life in suits, but our young lady here has no respect for fine material."

"Well, yes, that, but I never thought I'd see the day when I saw you cuddling someone." Blade came closer. "You never did that with me."

“Much to my regret.” Cyrus could see Blade’s flash of shock before Blade tried to hide it. “You would scent it if I was lying and that’s not something I’ve ever done with you. From the moment I saw you, I loved you and that has never changed.”

“Okay. I never expected to hear that, either.” Blade scratched the back of his neck and then, looking around, he sat cross legged on the floor, which was the best choice. Sofia’s crib likely wouldn’t take his weight. “Why? How can you do this with her, when with me...?”

“Hmm, that’s the hundred thousand dollar question, isn’t it.” Cyrus pondered his answer. “I know when we talked last time I mentioned how times were different when you were born. It’s not like your mother and I loved each other, although I like to think we’ve stayed friends over the years. It might be harsh for you to hear, but you weren’t born in love. I wanted a son to avenge what I thought was my inevitable death at the time.”

He registered how wide Blade’s eyes were. “Yes, I know. I was an arrogant bastard at the time, and some would say I haven’t changed, but that’s the truth of it. That’s why you were conceived in the first place.”

“So that’s why you taught me to kill from when I was a kid?”

“Yes and no. I meant what I said last time we talked. I needed you to survive. I told you, not then but now, that I loved you from the first moment I saw you, and that’s the god’s honest truth. I would’ve raised hell on earth if something had happened to you. Remember, most kids in our area died before they were six.”

Looking down at Sofia, Cyrus chuckled. “I had no idea how to be a parent back then. I still don’t. But somehow I raised an adult who was strong, confident, could look the world in the eye and take no prisoners. A son who could find a loving mate, and create the loving family he wished he had growing up. I’m not going to apologize for

that. Even if my methods were questionable, the results speak for themselves.”

“I apologized to Ness.” Blade looked down and then back up again. “He didn’t deserve to be drawn into the issues I had from my past, especially when I’d never met him before that.”

“I appreciate that, and I know Ness would’ve done, too. But you know, I thought about it afterward, after my Ness dragged me away like a junkyard dog so I wouldn’t keep fighting...”

Blade’s chuckle matched his own.

“I realized you were already protecting your stepfather, even though you didn’t know him. Admittedly, you thought you were protecting him from me at the time, but I couldn’t fault your instincts. I hope in time, you’ll extend those protective instincts to your sister as well.”

“I won’t let you teach her to kill a man by the time she’s ten,” Blade warned.

“Ness has got this idea that reading and writing are more important than knife skills. Can’t think why, but sometimes we just have to go with the flow.”

“Uncle Stefan messaged me recently, letting me know you had basically retired from the family activities back in Sicily.”

“Eased back, stepped back.” Cyrus waved his hand back and forth. “Ness has got this business where he extends loans to people for little to no interest, so they can bring their inventions to life or get their product to market. Money grabbers, I call them, plain money grabbers. So I have a lot going on, doing what I can to protect Ness’s interests because he’s just so trusting.”



“I hear your casinos are working on profit sharing?”

“Ness told me you’d done that with your casino in Jackson.” Cyrus beamed at his son. “What a really great idea. I wish I’d thought of it. My profit went up another twenty percent just in the past year and I do a lot less work. Admittedly, I share a fair amount of that money with my staff, but life is so much easier this way.”

“Yes it is.” Both men stopped talking when Sofia snuffled, rubbing her face with her little hand before settling again. “I wish my life had been different growing up. I wish I’d known I had a parent who loved me.”

“I think your mother did in her way, but she was likely protecting herself because she always knew she would leave. I’m the same though. I still hate the way my late father raised me and the way he treated me,” Cyrus admitted. “Don’t get me wrong. What my dad did to me doesn’t justify what I did to you. Not in any way shape, or form. But somehow, here we are. Mated. Happy. Loving and not afraid to show it. Both of us are new fathers now, with a chance to make a difference for our children.”

Blade nodded, and then glancing over his shoulder to check the door, he look back and whispered, “Thank goodness we have such amazing mates.”

“I know. We are so lucky.” Cyrus stood up, carefully maneuvering Sofia to her crib, making sure to stroke down her back until he was sure she would stay sleeping. “Now, if the house schedule according to your delightful sister holds true, we have about twenty minutes before she wakes up. Do you fancy a quick shift in my new pool? There’s room for both of us.” He reached out his hand, and Blade took it, using it to stand.

“We’ve never shifted together before,” Blade said, but he wasn’t saying no.

“I know. But there’s a first time for everything.” Cyrus gave his son a quick hug –

nothing mushy, but hopefully enough for Blade to know he cared. “I’ll race you.”

“I’ll always be faster than you, old man,” Blade said, reaching for the door handle.

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“It’s been a long day. Are you doing okay, my darlin’?” Cyrus crawled onto the mattress where Ness was already half asleep.

“Hmm, a fun day. Sofia worked her charm on Blade and Hal.” Ness rolled over, opening his arms and Cyrus snuggled into his embrace. “How was it, swimming with another shark? Blade’s not quite as big in his shifted form as you are.”

“I’ve got over five hundred years on him.” Cyrus inhaled deeply, taking in Ness’s scent. “It was...unusual...having another creature swimming so close to me, sharing my space. I’m glad I did it. I think it did a lot for Blade, too. But I much prefer shifting when it’s just you and me.”

“Me, too.” Ness yawned. “Oh, I emailed those robot inventors you mentioned this morning. They’ll bring their prototype to Vegas in two weeks to demonstrate it.”

Cyrus snickered. “That is going to be so much fun. The only thing is, if it does identify we’re paranormal, do we just flat out deny it and tell them their robot doesn’t work? Or do we let the realization of who they are asking for money from sink in for them first?”

“Let’s see what type of people they are first,” Ness suggested. “They could be perfectly lovely and just a little misguided.”

“You keep thinking that darlin’.” Stretching, Cyrus hooked his leg over Ness’s. “Did you notice Blade and Hal have a mind link?”

“I guessed it, yes.”

“You know, it’s said that shifters get a mind link with their mates when they’re double claimed.”

“Uh huh. I did know that.” Ness chuckled. “Doc told me all about that.”

“Do you think we could...you know...one day...”

“One day I think it will be a wonderful experience.” Ness’s arms tightened around him. “But you know why we have to wait.”

“We could do it now,” Cyrus suggested. “It might not make me pregnant and even if it did, it would be another year before baby number two came along. I feel bad about making you wait for something our sons already share.”

“Cy, mate.” Ness’s hand was warm on Cyrus’s cheek. “I waited three thousand years for you. I can wait a few more years for that . I don’t need a mind link to feel special. I can feel your love deep in my soul every day.”

“I do love you, darlin’ . You know that I do.” Cyrus tilted his face up. “How long until Sofia wakes up, do you think?”

“About half an hour until her next feed.” Ness wiggled against him. “Why? Did you have something you wanted to show me?”

“It’s not only your soul that can feel my love for you, darlin’,” Cyrus said as he leaned in for the kiss Ness was happy to share.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:01 pm*

Way back in Ness and Cyrus's story, I mentioned that Rocky and Mal were going with Simon and Darwin to New York. So in effect, their story will start from that point and moving forward in a parallel to the timeline in the story you've just read. Here's a tiny snippet.

"You should leave me. I'm a fucking mess."

Mal was jolted from his doze by Rocky's voice. "Hey there, you're lucid. How are you feeling?" he whispered, peering over his shoulder at where Simon and Darwin were curled up on another seat toward the front of the plane.

"Mal. Listen to me." Rocky was gripping his hand tight, his eyes desperate. "You need to leave me. You need to let me go."

"Don't be silly. I'm never leaving you. You saved me, remember?"

"There's something wrong with me, Mal." Rocky started to pant, and Mal could see he was struggling. "I can't feel my wolf. I don't know how much longer I can go on."

"You can't give up. I won't let you," Mal said urgently. He knew things had been bad, but if Rocky was losing his wolf...and yet, he couldn't be because Mal could still sense it. It was more that Rocky was losing his mind. "Rocky, you're my whole life. I know we're not mates but..."

"Don't say that. Don't say that." Suddenly Rocky's eyes were filled with tears. "You're the only one I ever wanted as a mate." He panted again, his eyes glazing over, and then as if he was shaking off a fog, they were clear again. "Mal, you need to

know... You remember all those times when you thought I was off fucking someone else.”

Mal swallowed the lump in his throat as he nodded. That wasn’t something he liked to think about.

Rocky’s hand came up, gripping his collar and pulling Mal’s face down to his. “I never did anything with those people,” he rasped. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Mal whispered, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

“Because I’m not going to make it.” Rocky shook his head. “That compulsion is coming again. I can feel it creeping through my body. It’s like a devil’s sitting on my heart. Mal, you have to let me go, let me die. I can’t live like this.”

“You’re going to get well.” Mal searched one handed through the bag Doc gave him. “You hear me? You’re going to get well, you’re going to go back to dozing off in your fancy office, letting me cover your work for you. You’re going to keep running with me, caring for me, and when you’re well, we’re going to have a long damn discussion about why you kept letting me believe you were sleeping with other people. But you’re going to live, do you hear me? Live.”

“Mal, I can’t. It’s coming. The blackness is coming again. I need that fucking cake!”

“No!” Syringe in hand, Mal stabbed into Rocky’s chest, pressing down the plunger, tears falling down his face, as Rocky’s body arched up and then slumped back down. “I’m not letting you go without a fight, you stupid wolf. Don’t you know how much I love you?”

Tossing the empty syringe aside, Mal grabbed Rocky’s limp hands and held them, sobbing as though his heart was breaking – because it was. The plane couldn’t land soon enough.